

# BENNINGTON COLLEGE COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS

by  
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## **Islam, Democracy, and Human Rights**

*President Elizabeth Coleman, distinguished Trustees, families, friends, students, and dear graduating class:*

It is a pleasure to address the kind of people whose support for international peace and democratic norms is a source of inspiration for human rights activists throughout the world. I wish to express my deep gratitude for being invited here and declare in no uncertain terms that the honor you have bestowed upon me personally must be seen as a way of honoring all those who risk their freedom, even their lives, to advance the cause of human rights. More particularly, I am delighted to be on the campus of Bennington College, an institution famous for its innovative approach to learning and responsiveness to the interests and aspirations of individual students. The newly launched Democracy Project at Bennington is a clear example of how concerned this college is to address the urgent need for national and international civility. In practice, the concept of democracy has evolved to the point that it is assumed to be based on universal human rights and charged with protecting an all-inclusive civil society. It is no wonder, then, that supporters of peace throughout the world find it imperative to promote the culture of democracy. The most effective way to promote the culture of democracy in a non-partisan and non-ideological fashion is to integrate it into the curriculum of educational institutions, at all levels of learning. Since college community is the place where dialogue about critical issues facing collectivities can flower and bear fruit, I wish to devote my speech to a central question of our era, the relationship between religion and democracy.

As you are all well aware, philosophers and thinkers have long debated this question. Some have maintained that since God created human beings, we only have certain duties to fulfill, not rights to enjoy. When such preachers acknowledge the existence of 'rights' in their discourse, they limit the applicability of the term to relationships among individuals, not to the state or religious authorities. They claim that people lack the ability to make morally sound decisions; only those who possess specialized knowledge can guide them toward righteous paths. Followers of this viewpoint do not tolerate any opinion divergent from their own and end up envisioning the world through atavistic eyes, insisting all along that our contemporary problems can be solved by utilizing the real or imagined wisdom of the distant past. This group does not concede that the elected representatives of people and their parliaments have the right to legislate. In their minds, the legitimacy of a parliament is limited merely to rendering divine rules into civic laws. In short, the parliament does not have the right to legislate independently of divine ordinances.

The European Renaissance challenged this perceived incompatibility between democracy and religion and initiated a course of development toward the institutionalization of such principles as popular sovereignty, political equality, and majority rule. In some nations, particularly in the Islamic world, the thorny relationship between religion and democracy is yet to follow the European experience. Consequently, some observers mistakenly attribute the current obstacles to democracy in most Muslim countries to the religion of Islam. The view of Islam they have in mind is what despotic states define as the religion of their people, which, in fact, is a state ideology defying the interpretations and preferences of the vast majority of ordinary Muslims. In reality, the entrenched rulers have created a state religion



with little concern for what the ruled feel and think. The guardians of state religion brand those who oppose them as infidels or enemies of Islam. Using this rather convenient ploy, they try to force their political opponents into silence and rob them of their spirit to resist. They assume that common people can be more easily intimidated if they are made to think that rejecting the claims of their governments is equivalent to opposing the religion of their ancestors.

The efforts to expose the deceptive nature of dictatorial governments in the Islamic countries are, at the present time, largely the work of Islamic reformers and intellectuals. These individuals and groups, regardless of their nationality, are potentially a united front against the despots who justify their rule in the name of Islam. The formation of this multi-national coalition, equipped with valid jurisprudential interpretations and inspired by the spirit of the holy Quran, promises to free Islam from its self appointed custodians and pave the way for democratization of Islamic societies. This united front has no name, no leader, no central headquarters or branches, and yet it is ingrained in the minds of enlightened Muslims, who, while safeguarding their ancestral faith, choose democracy, reject rule by fiat, and refuse to follow the misguided proclamations of state supported religious authorities.

Islam, like other Abrahamic faiths, is, in its essence, a religion of equality and compassion. The spirit of Islam is open to pluralism and does not permit the privileging of one segment of the population over others. The problem of intolerance and arbitrary rule in Islamic societies cannot be attributed to the nature of the Islamic faith, but rather to certain cultural propensities and opportunistic rulers who concoct precedents and instrumentalist interpretations of religious doctrines in order to deny the rights and equality of their citizens. Thus, what is needed in Islamic societies, in addition to facing up to the arbitrary acts and claims of those controlling the state, is promotion of reform in the political culture and attitudes of the populace. We need to transform our political and cultural norms in such a way that they remain compatible with the spirit of Islam while responding to the challenges of modernity and human rights standards. The populace have to feel secure about being the citizens of a democracy and remaining faithful, if they so wish, to their religious beliefs.

At a time when despots ruling in the Islamic world characterize their native critics as 'apostates' or hostile to Islam and treat those who dare to resist them with brute force, Muslim intellectuals should try their best to connect with their populace and try to familiarize them with dynamic and inclusive portrayals of Islam. They need to articulate a political critique of their state that resonate with the hopes and sensibilities of their general publics. We should bear in mind that criticizing the policies of self-proclaimed Islamic states will not effect most people unless the critics can point out how the actions of the ruling elite have violated the core foundations of Islam. In the contemporary world, all nations need democratic governance. The rulers who use the pretext of cultural relativism against the demand for democracy are, in fact, reactionary bullies who attempt to rationalize their illegitimate exercise of power under the guise of national or religious traditions.

The claim to protect national security is another excuse for violating human rights. Fighting terrorism is a necessary and just cause. But this fight must be conducted in accordance with international humanitarian laws. At times, rulers exaggerate a real threat to society and use it to suppress the voices of dissent. They constrain the rights of their people by creating imaginary foes, seeing conspiracies behind the demand for freedom and becoming obsessive about the protection of social order. This kind of state behavior threatens civil liberties even in some Western countries, including the United States, and is oppressively prevalent in Islamic societies like Iran. Given the intimidating nature of such circumstances, it is deeply gratifying to know that international and national human rights organizations are more active and courageous today than ever before. Their purpose is to put the protection of human rights on the agenda of global politics. This is a goal worth fighting for. Doctors without borders, journalists without borders, scientists without borders, environmentalists without borders, and human rights activists without borders are all showing the way to a better future. In the age of globalism, it is only logical that we work for the expansion of a global community trying to make the world a more peaceful and equitable place.

My dear students, if such a world is possible, you have to be its architects. As you know by now, the search for knowledge is never-ending. Whatever our age, we ought to be open to call what we supposedly know into question. We should never cease to want to learn more. In the modern world, knowledge is embedded with rationalism. And an important principle in rationalism is skepticism. In the increasingly complex world we live in, we need to be skeptical about conventional thinking and search for more effective solutions to our problems. Skepticism is the key to progress and innovation. Be skeptical about what you hear or see on television screen. Do not accept the answers that



you have hitherto been offered. Seek better and more effective answers. Remember that today's scientists are the true children of Descartes, whose dictum—"I doubt, therefore I am."—has become immortalized in the history of philosophy.

Be skeptical about the news you hear or watch. Do not accept political news from only one source. Try to check the accuracy of news through alternative sources. The daily news is an effective means of shaping our political perceptions. If we leave our minds at the mercy of this or that group, this or that party, this or that ideology, this or that religion, we could become victims of the curse called dogmatism. Thus if you are committed to a particular belief or idea, study other beliefs and ideas as well. Ask questions, again and again, and evaluate the responses you receive, and only then choose the answer you find most convincing. If you are a member of a political party, learn about the positions or programs of other parties. Becoming dogmatic about one's belief or opinions freezes our intellect and imagination. Dogma is a threat to peace and civility. Be prepared that the view you hold might be wrong. Be ready to accept the possibility that the story you have heard is inaccurate. When it comes to news, particularly political news, never limit yourself to American sources; try to consult other sources, from other countries, listen to what they have to say. Compare the competing claims you receive and subject them to the rules of logic, evidence and common sense if you wish to have reasonable understanding of what is actually happening. Only then can you contemplate how we might influence the course of events, whether there is a different way of setting our priorities and pursuing our goals.

The images of the 9/11 tragedies will be with us for the rest of our lives. The heart of every soulful human being is pained by this calamity. I once again offer my condolences to those who lost their loved ones on that day, and wish them solace. But I do not want to stop there. I wish to take you back in history, about twenty years before September 11, the time prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union. It was then that the foreign policy of the United States relied on religious fundamentalism in the fight against Communism. At the time, U. S. policymakers assumed that religious dogma was instrumentally useful in the Cold War competition. Based on this view, American policy defended and cooperated with undemocratic governments and Islamist movements like the Taliban. America wished to fight its old rival and foe, the Soviet Union, which had occupied Afghanistan, through Islamic fundamentalism. It was then that Pakistan began to help with the creation of *madrasses* (religious schools) for indoctrinating the youths to become warriors against the occupying Soviet troops in Afghanistan. These *madrasses* were essential for the growth of the Taliban movement. Since the area was fertile ground for the rise of fundamentalism, the Taliban grew in a short time, and gradually began to conquer towns and cities. After the fall of Kabul, only a handful of countries recognized the Taliban. The Taliban went on to rule Afghanistan and what transpired in that country needs no retelling. In the years of their growth, the United States consistently supported the Taliban. When the nature of the Taliban regime was revealed, American attitude toward them soured and shortly after the theorists of the clash of civilizations began to propagate their fear-ridden rhetoric. Then came the calamity of September 11 and provided the clash of civilizations propagandists with a demagogic episode to prove their case. The fact that an overwhelming majority of the 1.2 billion Muslims condemned the crime and expressed sympathy for its victims did not seem to influence the contention that what happened on September 11 was a battle in a war between Western and Islamic civilizations.

The September 11 crime against humanity and its far-reaching consequences clearly demonstrate how globalism has made war, peace and terrorism a worldwide phenomenon. Without being party to a violent conflict, a country or community suddenly finds itself engulfed in its midst. The United States is at war with al-Qaeda and terrorists target innocent people in Spain. The causes of terrorism are too complex to be reduced to one or two factors, but we have to face the fact that U.S. alliance with dictators and its selective support or instrumental use of religious fanatics is a major source of anti-Americanism and terrorism originating in the Middle East. Contrary to the recent claims of the American administration, Washington continues its intimate connection with too many despots in the region. It is no exaggeration to say that defending or helping undemocratic governments has the potential, to say the least, to become self destructive, like pointing a loaded gun at oneself and playing with the trigger. It is my fervent hope that the United States and other Western powers find a way of ending their support and cooperation with the despots who arrogate to themselves the right to govern without the consent of the governed.

Yet, we ought to be aware that democracy is not a gift to be offered by one country to another. Modern developments in Europe and North America make it evident that democracy has to grow within each society and follow its own native path. It is naïve to assume that a powerful state can export democratic norms, even with the best of intentions, through bombing and military invasion. Nations in breach of human rights must be compelled to comply



with their international obligations through the decisions of the United Nations and pressure of non-governmental organizations. Only then external intervention for promotion or protection of human rights has legitimacy and promises to be effective.

Another crucial factor to keep in mind if promotion of democracy in the world is to be a serious consideration in the foreign policies of advanced industrial countries is to pay attention to the concrete consequences of globalization. For it is becoming increasingly apparent that globalization is a double-edged sword. It has brought us both costs and benefits and the vast majority of people in the world either pay the costs or see little tangible benefits from it. If promotion of human rights and democracy is to be more than a rhetorical game, it is essential that globalization reduces the deep gap between rich and poor nations. We cannot expect the world to become more humane or democratic if destitution is to remain a condition of life for a majority of world population. We cannot monopolize the benefits of globalism and expect the growing ranks of excluded to be satisfied with the status quo. We cannot speak of globalism and deny some people a share of knowledge. A strange negative consequence of September 11 has been the governmental pressure on the institutions of higher learning to deny acceptance to foreign students from several countries that plan to major in such technical fields as information technology, nuclear physics, and genetic engineering. It will be a very sad day and a victory for the likes of bin Laden if the concerns created by September 11 lead to a reduction of opportunities for students from Islamic countries to study in the United States. The errors of a few who engage in violence under the guise of Islam should not become a reason for frustrating the desire of youths from Islamic countries to study in Western universities and colleges.

Islam is not a religion of terror and violence. Let us not consider the wrong deeds of individuals or fanatical groups as the fault of their religion. Let us not hold Islam responsible for terrorism, as we did not hold Christianity responsible for the wrongful deeds of some individuals in the war in Bosnia. Similarly, the Israeli government's disregard of numerous United Nations resolutions concerning the rights of Palestinians has nothing to do with the Jewish faith. Let us separate the faults of individual human beings from the religions and civilizations they belong to. Cultures are not in clash, but in fact share many common points. Let us talk of our points of confluence, not of conflict. Let us never legitimize war, as no one emerges victorious from this cursed phenomenon. I am deeply saddened by the death of American soldiers in Iraq; I hope that with an end to the conflict, your children will soon return home, safe and sound. I am also deeply grieved and surprised by the news I hear about the treatment of Iraqi prisoners. I ask myself, how can American civilization and American civil society tolerate such behavior? I remind you that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was ratified with the extensive support of Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt. The efforts of this great American woman are immortalized in history; her name inscribed on the most cherished document of human civilizations. We should all be guided by the spirit of Eleanor Roosevelt in setting the goals and priorities of our nations or communities. This ought to be particularly the case for American policy makers because they are, more than any other group of people in the world, in the position of shaping the course of international relations.

I sound like a dreamer, I know. I am a dreamer when, in the midst of the turmoil in the Islamic world, I imagine a dynamic Islam that not only is entirely compatible with democracy and human rights, but can participate in carrying the banner of advancing the cause of peace and human rights in the world. I am a dreamer when I wish for the growth of a sustained global concern for peace and human rights. And yes, I am a dreamer when I think dreams are—have always been—an impetus of progress in history. The challenge facing us today is to think like dreamers but act in a pragmatic manner. Let us remember that many accomplishments of humanity began as a dream. Thank you.

*Ms. Ebadi, a lawyer and human rights activist was the first Iranian to receive the coveted Nobel Peace Prize, and served as president of the city court of Tehran from 1975–79. Ms. Ebadi is an activist for refugee rights, as well as those of women and children. She is the founder and leader of the Association for Support of Children's Rights in Iran. Ms. Ebadi has written a number of academic books and articles focused on human rights.*

*As a lawyer, she has been involved in numerous controversial political cases. She has displayed great personal courage, including being imprisoned—defending individuals and groups who have fallen victim to a powerful political and legal system that is, according to Ebadi, legitimized through a profound distortion of Islamic values. In her research and as an activist, she has unfailingly extended the reach of those principles that inform her life and work—freedom, democracy, non-violence, and human decency.*