

## *Fifth Global Ethic Lecture*

# **The contribution of Islam to a Global Ethic**

*By Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Shirin Ebadi  
at the University of Tübingen on October 20, 2005*

Dear President(s), Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am very glad to be with you today. The participation in this event is a great honour for me. I would like to thank all of those responsible at the Global Ethic Foundation and the Eberhard-Karl University of Tübingen and all those who went to so much trouble and took so much care to ensure that this meeting could take place.

My dear friends!

We all believe that on this earth, which is here for all of us, many different people live, with many different cultures. People have different ways of living, and their cultures differ from each another. People speak different languages, and religions guide people in different ways. People are born with different skin colours and different traditions give their lives its "colour". People dress differently, and different guiding principles help them adapt to their respective different environmental conditions. People express their opinions and convictions in different ways; their music, art and literature follow different styles. Yet, despite all these differences, all people share something basically in common. They are all human beings; no one is more than a human being and no one is less.

And different cultures also have something basically in common. People everywhere in the world, whether in the East or in the West, people of every skin colour and race, every religion and conviction have the same needs in common.

One proof of this allegation is the astonishing similarity of the myths of different nations. They are the bedrock for the different cultures, which are later formed based on these myths. Moreover, philologists tell us that the roots of many words are very similar, as though a single person or group of people had created them.

If then, there are such common or even identical roots of life on this earth for all persons and groups of people, why should we doubt that there are also universal rules and values, which are valid for all mankind?

Different cultures can also go in search of what they have in common while maintaining their own distinctive features and discover their common needs, setting up the same rules for them and adhering to them – all of them.

Every culture and religion respects the life, dignity and property of persons. In contrast, terror and violence against people and their humiliation are considered reprehensible by every society and in every order of society.

Around 60 years ago, that is, just after the end of the Second World War, jurists and scholars from different nations and cultures came together and attempted to determine the basic common needs of mankind and to list them. This formed the basis for the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which, in its turn, depended on a Global Ethic. As this ethic is the basis for laws, no state can now violate human rights by invoking the principle of non-interference in internal affairs and laws.

Those who refuse to comply with human rights, citing cultural differences and the relativity of values are in truth antiquated oppressors who hide their tyrannical nature under the mask of culture and, in the name of a national or religious culture, wish to oppress and terrorize their own nation.

The world will only become peaceful and the peace will be of longer duration when human rights are applied comprehensively and universally.

But when considering a Global Ethic it is important to draw attention to certain points.

First, it is necessary to note that, in jurisprudence, no law is eternally valid. Laws play a similar role for society as clothes do for people. It is clear that the clothes worn by a person at the age of ten will no longer fit when he is twenty years old; he can no longer wear them. At the age of twenty he must wear other clothing. In law and, even more importantly, with ethics it is the same. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, to give one example, slavery was customary and widespread. The beating of slaves was not considered behaviour which violated ethical norms. And naturally it was not against the law. Can we still say today, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, that slavery is permissible and legal? Certainly not!

Another example. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, many civil and political rights were considered as not applicable to women, and many people considered this to be right and proper. Women have subsequently been able to obtain some of their rights through their own efforts and their feminist struggles.

Ethics and thus the law are not static. They are dynamic and capable of development. Thus, when the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was proclaimed in 1948 as constituting the ideal rights for all mankind, then today we can say that,

when we consider the problems of environmental protection and the increasing gap between the richest and the poorest countries and many other problems, this Declaration represents the minimum rights of every person. A review of the Declaration with the intention of extending it is necessary.

The second point is that the relativity of cultural norms and values must not be used to justify the violation of human rights. We cannot refuse to comply with human rights by invoking religion. For, as I already explained, there is no religion, which condones oppression, war, discrimination, the murder of innocent people or the looting of national property, etc.

Sadly, non-democratic Islamic states avail themselves of this excuse and believe that, since the people in their countries are Muslim, the state must enforce and apply the laws of Islam and that compliance with human rights is only possible, insofar as human rights are compatible with Islamic law. In cases where there is a contradiction, for example with regard to women's rights or democracy, an Islamic state cannot and should not comply with human rights. Such states only recognize their own interpretations and constructions of Islamic law. Interpretations by other Muslims are not accepted and rejected in their entirety. Everyone who does not share their interpretation and construction of religion is, in their eyes, an apostate and has forfeited his life. Or these states impose an extensive censorship whereby such a person is not permitted to promulgate his thoughts and ideas.

In 1980, the Universal Islamic Declaration of Human Rights was proclaimed in Cairo at the Islamic Conference of Foreign Ministers. If we take this Declaration as a sign among Muslims that internationally applicable human rights should be complied with, there is no problem. But it would be wrong to perceive this Declaration as a counterpart to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Because if Muslims wish to exclude themselves from the applicability of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights with the excuse that they are Muslims and set up their own rules based only on their religion (which is based on the interpretation of Islamic states), then they would naturally also have to grant the same right to other religions. Under these circumstances, we would end up with as many declarations of human rights as there are religions in the world, in other words, with around 5000 declarations. This would be tantamount to an obliteration of human rights. And Islamic states would suffer more from this, because they are not strong at an international level.

The truth is that a correct and dynamic interpretation of Islam allows a person to be both a Muslim and to respect and comply with human rights.

But the significant problem is the following. Non-democratic Islamic states are, for various reasons, not prepared to allow an interpretation and concept of Islam, which would be compatible with democracy and human rights. Such an interpretation would

rock the foundations of their dictatorial rule and shake them to its core. So far, no dictator in the world has voluntarily agreed, without pressure from the masses, to a limitation of his own powers.

The non-democratic Islamic states are hiding behind the name of Islam and justify their oppression by abusing the name of Islam. Admittedly, the abuse and misuse of religion and, generally speaking, the abuse of ideology is not limited to Muslims. The Middle Ages was an apogee of oppression on the part of the Roman Catholic Church. The Roman Catholic Church also claimed that it was applying and carrying out Christian precepts and commandments. And how could we forget the terrible internment camps in Siberia under Stalin's rule or the blood bath among the students on Tiananmen Square in Beijing. There too, it was claimed that Socialist principles were being applied and implemented.

We need to shine the light of knowledge on the religion used as a shield or, more generally, on the shield of ideology behind which states hide, to ensure that everyone learns the truth, so that everyone will know that religion is being abused. The establishment of a "united front" of Muslims from different countries to fight against totalitarian states while adhering to the holy values of Islam is good news for the liberation of Muslims. This "united front" has no name, no leader, no headquarters and no offices. Its place is in the consciousness and spirit of every thinking Muslim who respects democracy while preserving the religion of his forefathers and ancestors, who does not wish to act on unethical teachings and does not tolerate violence and oppression.

Another point, which must be considered is the manner in which the Global Ethic is adapted to national ethics. Let us assume that something would finally happen and all laws and regulations would be drawn up on the basis of human rights. In many societies it will become apparent that people are not able to immediately accept these cultural changes. They might even rebel against them. In Afghanistan, for example, the wearing of a burkha was an unconditional obligation laid upon all women. Moreover, the Taliban did not permit girls to go to school. Taliban rule has ended, but despite the fact that several years have passed since then, many Afghan men sadly still do not permit their daughters to go to school and still force them to wear a burkha.

We should not forget that cultural changes and changes of ethics require time. What is important is the necessity for cultural change and the striving for a Global Ethic, that is, after the basic principles of human rights. Let me give you an example. During the first years at school, a child learns the four basic arithmetical operations. The child slowly learns to solve simple mathematical problems. In the last years at high school the child is capable of solving difficult and complex problems. The subject

taught was always referred to as mathematics. But there is a big difference between adding up two numbers and solving complicated mathematical equations.

The same applies to the cultural development of a society. We cannot apply Sweden's laws for women to Saudi-Arabia overnight or laws based on democratic principles in all African countries. What is important is the development of a society towards a higher culture, and in this context laws play an important role. One of the functions of the law is its role as a spearhead. The law must stand above culture, one step ahead, in order that it can help develop and elevate the culture. If we take the example of Afghanistan, we would have to teach the people that education is a requirement for everyone. It would be necessary to ensure that families whose daughters go to school would benefit, for example through receiving cheap loans or preferential hiring for governmental positions. After a certain time, forbidding children to attend school or forbidding women to be educated would be declared illegal. A punishment would have to be devised for fathers who forbid their daughters to attend school. This means it will be necessary to proceed slowly, step by step.

A further point, which needs to be pointed out when developing and elevating a culture, is that this development must not take too long. This means that it is necessary to attempt to reach international standards as quickly as possible. Proceeding too slowly in the direction of international standards must not become a means in the hand of non-democratic states of obtaining more time for themselves.

And finally, I would like to state that invoking democracy and human rights must not be misused. One cannot take democracy as a pretext to attack a country. It is not possible to bring human rights to people with bombs. Nor is it acceptable to take the struggle against a dictatorship as an excuse to rob a nation of its resources. Democracy and human rights can only be achieved together with and in accordance with the will of people and not against it.

A civil society and freedom-loving people must take up the struggle against dictatorship and take their fate into their own hands. Only in this way can a society become peaceful and achieve a lasting peace.

I wish the German people and all people in the world an enduring peace.

Thank you for your attention and patience. I am now ready to enter in a discussion with Professor Küng.