CONCLUSION

Advancing Human Rights Dialogue

Even though the relatively recent concept of "human rights" is not native to traditional religious texts such as the Qur'an, the pervasiveness of human rights as a subject of discussion among Islamic traditionalists suggests that even the most conservative thinkers modify their discourse to incorporate compelling extrareligious ideas. In part because Maududi, Qutb, and Soroush have accepted the relevance of human rights to Muslims and share the common subject of Islam, they are able to engage in dialogue with each other across time and space concerning the appropriate role of religion in human rights.[1] Variances in geography, history, and the Sunni and Shi'ite traditions expand the possibilities within Islam for relating to human rights. Moreover, their similarities and differences with regard to Islam help to fuel not just intra-Islamic discussions about the role of religion and human rights. Human rights have emerged as part of dialogue both within and outside of the Islamic scholarly community.

The discussions by Soroush on democracy, toleration, and human rights stand out as the most compatible with current Western notions of human rights. Although Soroush is critical of the liberties that Americans and Europeans take with regard to their freedom, he nonetheless espouses a method of seeking truth that meshes easily with Western standards of freedom. His belief that the ultimate truth is found through open discussion and consideration of multiple points of view, even those seen as derogatory toward one's own, is echoed in American First Amendment protections of freedom of speech, belief, and assembly. Soroush's openness toward religious dialogue in the public square perhaps even exceeds

the limits on speech dictated by the constitutional separation of church and state in the United States. His willingness to endure the disappointments that inevitably arise with freedom encourages cross-cultural dialogue. Most important, Soroush's belief that there are many paths to God enables him to engage in a dialogue with followers of different faith traditions and to examine more generally the role that religion can play in promoting human rights. At times, internal dialogue within the Islamic tradition seems to present a more difficult political challenge for Soroush than external dialogue with non-Muslims.[2] His efforts to open up dialogue within Islam, particularly in the context of the contemporary Iranian government, have been met with much frustration.

The case for cross-cultural and interreligious dialogue becomes far more difficult with Maududi and Qutb. Although Maududi makes explicit his desire to open up dialogue within Islam, both he and Qutb take pains not to engage with the West.[3] Their efforts to restrict freedom of and access to information indicate more than an understandable lack of trust in Western culture. Given their attempts to release Muslims from the legacy of colonialism, which includes limiting exposure to the humanistic and social scientific products of the West, the prospect of dialogue with Westerners appears bleak. Nevertheless, the inconsistencies in their arguments suggest that their strategies for eliminating Western influence cannot endure in the long term. Maududi and Qutb appear to distrust the ability of Muslims to determine for themselves cultural, political, and economic boundaries. Although they argue that Islam supports democracy, freedom, and toleration, they do so with severe restrictions. In the face of their admittedly challenging perspectives, there are encouraging indicators of the possibility of conversations with the West over human rights. For all their fears of Western cultural hegemony, Maududi and Qutb have nonetheless claimed the general concept of human rights as valid within Islam. They have shown at the very least a rhetorical acceptance of the validity of human rights in a traditionalist Islamic context. They also understand Islam as a democratic tradition that demands the active pursuit of social and economic justice.

The complex and diverse views of Islam presented by Maududi, Qutb, and Soroush contradict assumptions made by such scholars as Ignatieff and Donnelly on the contributions that Islam, and religions more generally, can and should make toward human rights. Although Ignatieff and Donnelly are correct to point out the horrific ways in which religion has been used to deny people their rights, they fail to point out the numerous ways in which religion has motivated people to provide others their human rights. Civil rights, women's suffrage, abolition, health care, and literacy have all benefited from the contributions of religion. Almost

needless to say, the very existence of the UDHR depended on the inclusion of religion in the discussions on human rights.

Ignatieff's concern that religion offers mainly quietist ways of dealing with human rights abuses ignores the practical ways in which religion contributes to larger efforts. In addition to providing spiritual guidance, religion motivates believers to act for justice. Religion, like politics and economics, touches on many aspects of human life. Religion does not only take place in a mosque, church, synagogue, or temple. Maududi, Qutb, and Soroush show how the life of a Muslim extends beyond ritual practice. Islam requires the struggle for just government, material equity, toleration, and respect for the conscience. Although they disagree on how these struggles should be carried out, they agree that Islam demands more than prayer.

Shue's clarification of the role of duty in human rights provides a way in which religious and nonreligious thinkers might successfully converse with each other. In pointing out that the focus on rights ignores the complementary and necessary role of duty, especially in ensuring basic rights such as subsistence, security, and freedom, Shue offers a model that adapts easily to the language of duty found in Islamic texts. The command to enjoin the good and forbid evil, which supports many of the arguments offered by Maududi and Qutb, could be used as a starting point for cross-cultural dialogue on human rights.

Discussions concerning the role of Islam in the West, particularly in such a diverse culture as the United States, have in recent years become increasingly important. The desire to understand the relationship between Islam and terrorist activity in particular has fueled people's interests in what many see as a foreign, oppressive, and violent tradition. Because public schools do not teach about religion and relatively few Americans learn about Islam through a balanced and thorough media, ignorance and uncharitable imaginations run rampant. Yet, Americans realize that religions, particularly the Abrahamic traditions, play an important role in formulating public policy. Several of the most significant policy issues today, ranging from the stabilization of Iraq to human cloning, command both political and religious attention.

Although three thinkers should not represent the faith of more than one billion Muslims living in the world today, their influence, prominence, and geographic diversity suggest that cross-cultural discourse between Islam and the liberal West is both possible and necessary. Moreover, human rights, embodied in the notions of democracy, freedom of conscience, and toleration, serve as a common subject matter for dialogue. Gadamer suggests that "to come to an understanding about the subject matter" requires both imagination and reciprocity.[4] Participants

in conversation focus on and attempt to re-create the other's words, phrases, and ideas in such a way as to make sense to oneself and to come to eventual agreement on a subject matter. This process of moral imagination in dialogue is severely restrained when persons conversing about basic human rights are not encouraged to speak about religion. To come to an understanding about the subject matter of human rights requires an ethic that allows for religious expression.

Moral imagination in cross-cultural dialogue requires reciprocity.[5] In order to have a dialogue or to have a conversation, all persons involved must be willing and capable of translating the expressions of each other. Thinkers such as Maududi and Qutb recognize that Westerners for the last few centuries have not reciprocated the practice of moral imagination. Rather than view Muslims of Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia as capable of contributing to dialogue, colonialists objectified their subjects and required them to participate in civil life under foreign terms. Maududi and Qutb, while asserting an Islamic foundation for toleration, argue that for historical reasons they must not tolerate the West until Muslims recover their own voice. Soroush, as suggested by his understanding of truth, expresses concern that the silencing of non-Muslim voices confuses Islam as finite identity rather than as universal religion. Soroush asks Muslims to partake in dialogue in order to understand better the truths that Islam holds.

The attempt to understand Islamic thinkers in their diversity is to practice moral imagination. Human rights function in many ways as an ideal mediating text for discourse. A complex set of ideas, and significant in their implications, human rights, like religion, inspire passionate conversation because they speak to the most basic values of humanity. To fail to engage religion fully into our conversations about protecting human rights would be to deprive us of understanding the contributions that religion and human rights make to the other. Only in such an environment will our moral imaginations flourish.

Ignatieff validly asserts the importance of practical approaches to human rights. In his opinion, this includes careful consideration of the political and economic aspects of implementing human rights. One need not dismiss political strategies and economic support of human rights, however, in order to accommodate religious belief. Religious reasoning, including the use of religious language, provides the validation and motivation necessary for the success of practical aspects of human rights. Moreover, the absence of religious reasoning in human rights discussions adversely affects attempts to improve both understanding and tolerance. Because people unfortunately sometimes exploit religion as a justification to oppress others, religious believers who champion human

rights should be afforded every opportunity to voice this alternative view of religion. A human rights policy of dismissal with regard to religious reasoning fails to acknowledge the fact of religious reasoning in public, political dialogue. With such approaches, believers of different religious traditions and nonreligious persons remain purposefully uninformed about the decision-making process of other members of their community. Rather than perpetuate ignorance, frank discussion broadens possibilities for finding common human rights goals among admittedly diverse populations. Human rights activists and thinkers should keep in mind the ways in which religious belief contributes to social justice.

Religious traditions offer resources for thinking about profound social problems. Religious beliefs and other comprehensive doctrines help to place into perspective the information provided by other forms of analysis. Religion can help to safeguard respect for the sanctity of life even when other indicators, whether statistical, economic, or otherwise, may encourage its violation. Religious beliefs also provide a basis for identifying and critiquing social ills. Movements for social equality in communities marred by racial and gender discrimination often find their origins in churches and support in religious texts. Martin Marty points out that in "the civil rights cause, the movements for women's rights, and human rights in general, as well as in debates over population and development, war and peace, the record shows that religious forces played constructive roles."[6]

The inclusion of religious voices promotes true diversity in politics. The ability to incorporate ideas and texts from a particular religious or cultural tradition into public life lends to the diversity of a community. Kathryn Tanner argues that unless participants in public debates acknowledge distinctive religious traditions, they dangerously deny the "fact of pluralism."[7] People's identities include not only ethnic and gender components but also a vast array of other distinguishing qualities that inform the ways in which we live. Religious beliefs should count as a characteristic of identity. People do not formulate opinions on matters of public debate simply by virtue of the gender, ethnicity, class, or other more commonly cited categories of identification. To ignore or suppress the multifaceted, integrative nature of a person's character would only lead to a limited understanding of human nature. When people share religious views on a matter, they give their audiences the opportunity to learn not only about their particular understanding of their faith traditions but also about the complexity of individuals. Incorporating religious views into one's understanding of persons makes stereotyping difficult and encourages people to look beyond the superficial.

Allowing persons the opportunity to present religious reasons for public, political action may prevent future harms associated with political

oppression. When communities discourage free expression, including religious expression, numerous ills arise. People become discontented if their ideas cannot be expressed as they so choose. Even if a community decides not to endorse the ideas of a particular person or group, that person or group of persons has the satisfaction of knowing that they possess the opportunity to offer their ideas through sanctioned means to the public. Reasonable members of a democratic and pluralistic society understand that their ideas coexist with other ideas. With this understanding, they acknowledge that society will not endorse only their ideas all the time. They should expect, however, that they will be given the chance to present their best case possible. Although avoiding or disguising religious language in public discussion may be a politically savvy way to avoid alienating potential supporters, such tactics should be left up to the individual or the representative group to exploit. These tactics may be encouraged, but they need not be a prerequisite for participation in political dialogue.

Religious speech at times appeals to the emotions as well as to reason. Ideas in public spaces appear in multiple forms. Speech, like art or an art in itself, presents form and content as inextricable from each other. People experience the power of religious speech through not only its distinctive content but also its particular cadences, styles, and formats. The unique diction, rhythms, and imagery sometimes found in religious speech contribute to its content. The mesmerizing speeches of Martin Luther King Jr., for example, appealed to people through emotion, reason, and politics. Nonreligious speech, even if the message or ultimate goal may be similar, may not present its argument as effectively.

Such scholars as Ronald Thiemann argue that the emotional aspects of religious speech, although acceptable, should not be encouraged in the public sphere. Thiemann believes that people should be "free to offer public arguments that appeal to emotion, base instincts, and private sources of revelation, but democratic societies should encourage citizens to resist such appeals as incompatible with fundamental values of a liberal polity."[8] Although Thiemann and others understandably want to divorce emotional appeals from political decision making, they falsely label decisions based on emotions as necessarily bad. Emotion in the form of empathy, for instance, may in many situations convey more appropriately why a person stands in favor of or opposed to a particular decision. Concern for the plight of others awakens both the emotional and rational capacities of persons. Religious traditions offer various means by which to elicit concern for others and provide justifications for those concerns.

Religion should play a role in human rights discussions. It can not only contribute to our understanding of why human life and safety are inviolable but also offer practical ways to implement human rights. Religious language and reasoning are often persuasive where nonreligious language has no effect. The use of religious reasoning, particularly the use of religious language, does carry the danger of alienating some nonreligious thinkers or believers of other faith traditions. The burden in such cases lies with the users of religious language to make as clear as possible to those who do not share their worldview why they believe as they do. Although the most fundamental aspects of faith and belief may not be translatable, there are parallel concepts—especially among human rights thinkers and activists—that are similarly ineffable. Belief in the dignity of humans, the principle of justice, and the value of helping others are arguably "foundational" beliefs that are as difficult to rationalize as belief in God. Nonreligious thinkers who want to focus solely on human rights without regard to these axiomatic beliefs should nonetheless be informed of them, particularly if they insist on the universalism of human rights. They must be clear as to which aspects of human rights are universal and why they are universal in order to engage fully in human rights discussions with skeptics who view human rights as a form of Western cultural hegemony.

The works of Maududi, Qutb, and Soroush suggest that the incorporation of Islamic thought into the perpetuation of a universal human rights ethic is important. The precedent of a variety of Islamic voices in the human rights debates prior to the signing of the UDHR stands as proof of how Islam can contribute to the wide acceptance of human rights, even in territories that had been previously colonized by key members of the UN. Accepting a diversity of Islamic voices and engaging them in dialogue help to break down barriers that assume Islam's hostility to human rights. Although some interpretations of Islam, such as those posed by Maududi and Qutb, pose difficulties to American and European ideals, to dismiss those voices altogether would be to worsen the problems that plague people of diverse faiths in the name of human rights.