

Islam and Human Rights in the contemporary World: Some Reflection of Ostad Muhammad Taghi Ja'fari's Philosophy of Human Rights

By Hisae Nakanishi, Ph.D.

Professor of the Graduate School of Global Studies, Doshisha University

It is no other time than today that the concept of human rights have been contested among academicians, policymakers, and civil society organizations in the world. A binary idea that human rights in the West and Islamic human rights has caused much debate about universal approach and cultural relativism in the application of human rights. Those who hold the view of universalism consider that "Universal Declaration of Human Rights" in 1948 should be applied globally regardless of cultural differences. On the other hand, those who hold the idea of cultural relativism maintain that consideration of cultural values among different cultures should be recognized and thus that the universal application of human rights should be questioned though the west has taken it for granted. It goes without saying that the former view has been dominant and has imposed Muslim world to comply with "Universal Declaration of Human Rights."

The emergence of "Islamic State" (IS) that is active in Syria and Iraq and is expanding the territory of its influence has complicated the world view about the relationship between Islam and human rights. The more media covers the act of atrocities done by some members of IS, the more people have started to believe that killing innocent people and raping women may be intrinsic to Islam. It goes without saying that Islam prohibits suicide, killing innocent people, and raping women. Yet, in the age of pervasive use of Information Communication and Technology (ICT), visual images of killing people are so strong and some people are attracted to such images even though such insane acts are nothing to do with Islam and those who commit such crimes should be questioned if they can be called Muslim or not.

The other problem revolving the application of human rights is the politicization of human rights. When a so-called "human rights

violation” becomes an issue in international politics, the accusation of the violation has not been equally made. In the case of the above-mentioned crimes committed by IS members, the western media utilizes them as a justification for “war against terrorism.” When America started to propagate its decision to wage war against Islamic State, CNN and BBC broadcasted some scenes in which the atrocities of IS were visible. What is to be noted is that those scenes transmitted in the media are a virtual reality. We generally believe what is available through youtube is reality. Yet, it is possible that youtube images are fabricated and placed onto the internet system. By arguing it here, I am not in the position of saying that IS did not commit such crimes and that those images are not real. I simply argue here that what is broadcasted and covered in the media is highly selective to serve some specific purposes of those who transmit images and utilize them. For example, the impact of unilateral sanctions that have been initiated and imposed by the United States on Iran’s economy and on Iranian people has not been covered in the media while nuclear negotiations continued. Part of the sanctions led to the situation in which shortage of medicine occurred in Iran and Iran Air’s planes suffered from the shortage of parts that eventually caused a few accidents at the time of landing in China. These are truly humanitarian impacts of the sanctions. The shortage of medicine in Iran was hardly reported outside Iran in the media. The plane accidents were reported in the major news but the connection of the accidents to the Sanctions were not touched. In the above-mentioned contexts of human rights discourses prevailing in the world, it is important for us to shed light on Ostad Muhammad Taqi Ja’fari’s works on human rights. Among many statements he made in his book entitled “Human Rights viewed from the West and Human Rights viewed from Islam,” I would like to emphasize his statement that real human rights should be only established in a solid foundation in which human beings are granted the fundamental right of existence equally yet that what reward one should enjoy is influenced by his or her achievement in education, virtue, wisdom, piety, and social contribution. If we apply this idea of Ostad Ja’fari’s to what has been done by IS, some questions should be raised naturally. The very foundation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is that everyone is equal

and has the same rights to be protected. But, should IS members be considered equal human being to other people? Is the international community responsible for the protection of human rights of IS members equally?

As I stated previously, the expansion of ICT has influenced what people believe whether or not what is available as information is true or not. What is globally happening and impacting on people's behavior by the use of ICT are "hate crime" and "bullying" other people through internet. In the internet space, some people write irresponsible statements that hurt people who are targeted. Here is a question of the right of expression. If we presume that everyone has the right to express whatever he or she thinks, it would be difficult to limit or prohibit such hate crime and bullying people in the virtual space. To set a criteria for limiting and/or prohibiting people's right to expression is extremely hard in reality. At the same time, capturing those who commit hate crimes and bullying on the internet is also a challenge. What is worse is the fact that hate crimes and bullying acts in the internet space is expanding because of anonymity that reinforces people's irresponsibility.

Here, it is worthwhile to pay attention to what Ostad Ja'fari maintained about freedom of thought, and expression. He said that those people who have knowledge and wisdom are responsible for spreading such knowledge and wisdom to other people so that other people can benefit them. On the other hand, he also emphasized that those who do not know the value of knowledge and those who hurt themselves and other people by spreading knowledge and/or information should not be given their access to knowledge and information. By insisting this, Ostad Ja'fari did not mean to deny the right of education as education is tool through which people can gain knowledge and information. The point here is that Ostad Ja'fari criticized those who abuse the right to knowledge. He also criticized propaganda that would hurt people and questioned if the right of expression can be guaranteed limitlessly even if one's pursuing right of expression causes social illness.

Thus, what Ostad Ja'fari stated in his book holds much significance in the context of the above-mentioned contemporary emerging problems. In this sense, his philosophy contributes much to us to

reconsider vital questions of what is real human rights and how human rights should be really protected for the sake of protecting human dignity.

My meeting with Ostad Muhammad Taqi Ja'fari was very short but I have a great memory about him. He honestly showed his anger when he vigorously criticized egoistic acts of irresponsible politicians. On the other hand, I can not forget his warmness and sincerity when he preached his idea of what human dignity really means for ordinary people. His philosophy is lofty but he was a man of wisdom knowing how to communicate with people. In this sense, he was not only a philosopher but also a great professor (Ostad).

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