

Islam and the West on Universal Human Rights

What is the appraisal of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which mainly reflects the Western notion of human rights; is it in fact acceptable as such or does it need particular revisions?

Both Western and Islamic systems of human rights strongly insist on human dignity, honor, fraternity and equality, but when we compare them with each other, we find that the Western system is not as deep and thoughtful as its Islamic alternative. To put the matter otherwise, the Islamic system of human rights is established upon some certain foundations that the Western system lacks. To demonstrate the principles of dignity, honor, fraternity and equality, Islam resorts to some scientific, divine, intuitive, philosophical and primordial factors and facts that are taken into account in Western philosophies of human rights. Western scholars may argue that they also rely on ancient cultures and religions and that they have also spoken of man in the same way we do. If this is so, I would be glad to announce that we have a genuine ground for unity.

The Foundations of Human Equalities in Islam

According to Islam, there are twelve kinds of equalities between human beings:

1. Equality in Relation to the Creator

All human beings have been created by a transcendental being who is the Creator of all creatures. The existence of a Divine Being has already been demonstrated by several reasons and his being the Creator of all creatures is a self-evident reality. By understanding this equality, all human individuals could recognize that they all are equally subjected to Divine Love unless they deprive themselves from this divine bounty by means of committing evil acts.

2. Equality in the Wisdom, Will and Law of the Creator of All Human Beings

As seen in Islam, the holy prophets and distinguished human beings have been created in accordance with the same law, will and wisdom that other human beings have been created based upon. In the case of holy prophets, who have possessed inherent characteristics and qualities for the endurance and tolerance of their mission, however, it can be stated that God has bestowed them with special features. As for general values and merits, on the other hand, all human beings have been created based on the same

basics and fundamentals.

3. Equality in the Original Material Used for Their Creation

All of us human beings have been created out of the same kind of material (earth), as stated in the following verse of the Holy Quran:

We have created you mankind from the earth and we will return you to the earth, and on Ressurrection Day, we will bring you out from it once again.

(Taha 20:55)

We must now see what “earth” means here. Does it really imply earthen materials and the elements existing in the earth, or does it in fact refer to a canal for the human self to pass through? Of course, this issue calls for research and debate, and indeed it has been dealt with in various forms of knowledge and philosophies and highly significant theories have also been presented in its regard. Therefore, in the following poem by Sa’di:

*Human beings are members of a whole
In creation of one essence and soul.
If one member is afflicted with pain,
Other members uneasy will remain.*

He probably intends to imply that everything in the realm of nature has been created from the same material. In other words, Sa’di may be conveying that all human souls have been secreted out of a single, general one. In any case, there is no doubt that all human beings have been created out of earthen material. As the Holy Prophet of Islam (PBUH) has stated:

All of you people originate from Adam, and Adam was created out of earth.

As a matter of fact, it has been stated that all human beings are descendents of Adam, and that Adam was created out of earth.

Therefore, no one human being is preferred to another, as reiterated in the following verse of the Holy Quran:

O you men! surely we have created you of a male and a female, and made you tribes and families that you may know each other; surely the most honorable of you with Allah is the one among you most careful (of his duty); surely Allah is knowing, aware.

(The Apartments 49:13)

As a result, we see that human beings have no superiority over one another when it comes to their essence and soul except for piety.

4. The Equality in the Origin of Human Generations

The generation of mankind originated from a man and woman called Adam and Eve, may peace be upon them. This origin of generations is the same for all human beings; we cannot find a human being who has been produced by two men, two women or two angels or jinns! These generations have conituned to progress, and now, the birth of

human beings is still the result of a man and a woman, and the process of generations still goes on. Therefore, there is no preference in human beings over one another in his aspect, either.

5. Equality in General Nature and Characteristics

This form of unity is of extreme importance, for all human beings possess brains, mental faculties, comprehension, knowledge, powers of association, will, intellect, reason, the ability to discover and hundreds of other characteristics and forces, all of which are points they have in common with one another.

Of course, due to varieties in environments, systems of education, approaches to upbringing and cultural differences, the truths mentioned above may be activated in various ways, but a human being on this side of the world has comprehension, talent, knowledge and all of such crucial truths, as does a human being living in the most remote parts of the world. Therefore, the fact that human beings are equal and like brothers is an extremely original point rather than being an emotional, subjective remark.

6. Equality in the Ultimate Telos

As a matter of fact, God has allowed all of us human beings, regardless of our differences and without any preferences toward any of us, to participate in the progress along the path toward a single, supreme goal, which is no other than being attracted by divine perfection and becoming drawn into the rays of divine light. No human being is regarded as an exception of this progress. As God has stated in the Holy Quran:

I did not create Jinns and men with any other goal and ordain for them any other duty but to worship me. (The Scattering Winds 51:56)

The above verse is applicable to both creatures – jinns, who are hidden, and human beings, who are at large and visible to all.

7. Equality in the Path Human Beings Progress along to Reach Their Ultimate Telos

We have already mentioned the supreme goal in the previous section. Now we must discuss what course this goal is taking. If such a supreme goal is to be reached, there is no other way but to progress along the path of intelligible life. It is intelligible life that provides the road needed to be taken in order to achieve the supreme goal. God has shed light upon this path for man by means of reason, conscience as well as holy prophets. The path is quite clear and definite because not only does our common sense and pure conscience confirm it, but also holy prophets sent by God have also showed us what that path is by means of their own enlightened approaches of progress.

Progressing along this path is like feeling there is an immense rhythm created by God in

the world; in fact, we have become part of the rhythm in the form of moral laws and ethical regulations set for us by God in order to protect us from falling into evils, destructive paths, animal-like contaminations and other filthy perversions. By following these laws and regulations faithfully and sincerely, we will feel closer and closer to the supremem attraction every moment – this indeed is intelligible life.

8. Equality in Inherent Dignity

God has bestowed upon all of us human beings inherent dignity and greatness, as depicted in this verse of the Holy Quran in regard to humanity and the children of Adam:

Indeed we honored the Children of Adam and provided them with means of transportation on land and sea; we also provided them with lawful and pure sustenance and bestowed them priority above many of our creatures.

(The Divine Excursion into the Night 17:70)

In other words, all descendents and offspring of Adam have been “provided” with inherent dignity – unless, of course, as we have already mentioned, human beings eliminate their deserving this dignity and greatness by committing evil or perversive acts such as murder, which may deviate a society toward doom.

9. Equality in Having the Ability to Achieve Perfection and Optional Merited Dignity

In this regard, God has once again seen all human beings as being equal, i.e. the talent for achieving dignity and optional merited value has been instilled in all human beings equally. If one attempts to achieve merited dignity by means of piety, the talent to do so has been provided for him. No matter how much and to what extent human beings progress along this path, they will still achieve dignity and greatness. In other words, once again human beings are regarded as equal from this aspect as well, and they are by no means different from one another in any way.

10. Unity Having Achieved Perfection and Dignity

Such a form of unity will bring about supreme unity among all human beings. This unity can be represented by the formula $all=1$ and $1= all$.

There is no doubt that such a unity will be impossible through any philosophical theory or school of thought. It is in fact a blessing provided by God-given religions and in particular Islam – the completer of all religions and the basic context of the religion of

the Holy Prophet Abraham (PBUH) – which states that if human beings progress along the path of perfection and prosperity, they shall achieve supreme unity. In fact, there is a hadith that states:

Believers are like brothers; they are like the organs of a single body. If one organ moans with pain, the pain will also be felt by other organs as well. The souls of believers are also from the same soul and spirit. A believer's soul is connected to the Divine Spirit, and this connection is even stronger than the connection between sunrays and the sun.¹

11. Equality in Human Beings' Goals in Both Realms (Natural Life and Desirable Life) from the Viewpoint of Preserving Their Souls as Their Main Axis of Progress

All human beings are equal when it comes to natural life and intelligible life, and if we are to progress objectively and purposefully, “the protection and safeguarding of the essence and the soul” will be the main axis of our progress. As human beings, all of us protect our own souls and essences as “the principle of all principles.” Of course, our discussion in regard to the different forms of self-protection can be divided into three parts:

1. The self-preservation of the purely natural self
2. The ideal, desirable inherent self-preservation
3. The preservation of the evolutionary self and essence

We shall not go into more detail for the sake of brevity.

12. Equality in All Forms of Laws, Duties and Liabilities

Laws in this context include natural and positive laws that have been legislated for regulating natural and intelligible life.

13. An Equality beyond Natural Diversities and Unities

We now come to a truth which states that human beings regarded as a truth by God – i.e. from a supernatural point of view – as well. As stated in the Holy Quran:

For this reason did we prescribe to the children of Israel that whoever slays a soul, unless it be for manslaughter or for mischief in the land, it is as though he slew all men; and whoever keeps it alive, it is as though he kept alive all men; and certainly our messengers came to them with clear

1- Kolayni, Muhammad ibn Yaqb, *Usul Al-Kafi*, Vol. 2, translated and explained by Seyyed Javad Mustafavi, Vol. 3.

arguments, but even after that many of them certainly act extravagantly in the land.

(The Table Spread 5:32)

This verse eloquently describes human beings' transcendent unity. Whoever slays an individual is as if he has slain all men and whoever tries to culture an individual is as if he has cultured the whole of mankind. In other words, we may see the superficial aspect of nature as involving a large group of human beings, whereas beyond nature, they are all of one single heavenly unity in fact.

14. Equality in Collective Life

All human individuals have equal right to take part in collective life and it is their evaluative dignity that distinguishes them from each other. These are religion's proposed foundations for universal human rights.

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