

## Robin Wright<sup>1</sup>

**Subject: A Shi'ah Encounter with Modernity and Democracy**  
**Nationality: American/ Major: Journalist/ Dialogue Date: 1994**

**Wright:** I have two questions to ask:

- 1- How does Islam approach modern political ideas and what is its general view of political thought?
- 2- What is your view of Islam and democracy? Are these two compatible with each other or not? What is your idea of the theory that says "democracy cannot reach Eastern cultures"?

**Ja'fari:** To conceptualize Islam's approach to modern political ideas, one firstly needs to have an exact understanding of the ideological features of the religion. Shi'ah Islam is constructed upon five pillars: 1- articles of faith, 2- morals, 3- life affairs and phenomena, 4- elementary prescriptions and 5- secondary prescriptions. Now I shall explain them one by one, as without the articulation of this fundamental structure, we cannot make any remarks in regard to Shi'ah Islam.

**Wright:** I have already studied some books on the ideological makeup of Islam. If it is possible, kindly put them in a nutshell because of the lack of time.

**Ja'fari:**

- 1- **Articles of Faith:** Since these articles are based on human reason

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and conscience, they never change. Although people are benefited from these articles in proportion to their reason and conscience, in any case they are unalterable, like monotheism, eternity and prophecy.

- 2- **Morals:** Moral principles are grounded in conscience, human spiritual beauties and *humane* relations of individuals with each other. The moral principles, however they may differ in some cases from one land to the other, are unalterable. For example, we all appreciate gratitude or philanthropy as moral values, although an American or a European may have a different notion of them than that of a Moslem.
- 3- **Life Affairs and Phenomena:** Islam has assigned all life affairs to Moslems themselves. To put it otherwise, Moslems are free to manage their own life affairs unless one wants to commit prohibited deeds like the production of narcotic drugs, social conflicts and so on and so forth.

Except for harmful matters, all other life affairs have been assigned to man himself to decide on in the so called democratic spirit. There is no objection here to use the term democracy. For example, the acquisition of knowledge has been underlined as an obligation in Islam, but the structure and shape of universities, schools and laboratories have been totally assigned to people to decide on. Man is free to choose the form of whatever is necessary for him.

**Wright:** Who recognizes the harmful nature of these activities? Is it the laity or religious authorities?

**Ja'fari:** This discernment is of two types:

- I) The discernment of subjects, which concerns the professionals and seasoned experts of the society.
  - II) The basic needs, which have spiritual and metaphysical aspects, concern religion and embody the fourth pillar that we shall now turn to.
- 4- **Elementary Prescriptions:** These prescriptions concern human existential needs in the world and man's relationship with God. These prescriptions never change and man has no authority to modify them like daily prayers, fasting, or Hajj and others, which are obligatory and represent human basic needs. The prohibited phenomena that cause material and spiritual corruption are also subjects of these elementary prescriptions. Of course, believers can perform these prescriptions according to their possibilities in emergency situations, but in normal conditions, these principles are unchangeable.

**Wright:** Isn't this the very act of cautionary dissimulation (i.e., *taqiyyah*)?

**Ja'fari:** No, these prescriptions are necessary for man for him to pass through the passageway of life – as we regard this world as a passageway that leads us to eternity – and reach spiritual evolution as far as he *can* perform them. In other words, these prescripts are necessary as far as their performance does not cause any loss to the individual and the society.

To state the matter differently, as you know, Islam does not regard this world as being the last station of life, for it has determined a goal for man's life. Thus, Islam has decided a series of obligations for the human soul so that man can fulfill his evolutionary ideal. These obligations, such as abstinence from homicide, gamble, oppression, promiscuity and so on and so forth, are like mathematical axioms that have to be taken for granted in advance. Said otherwise, the individual accepts Islam with these conditions and these prescriptions are unchangeable.

5- **Secondary Prescriptions:** Due to the emergence of new developments in the conditions of human life, there is always the possibility of the appearance of new problems. In such cases, an Islamic judge can issue orders according to his discretion and when conditions return to normal, these orders automatically become irrelevant, such as the Tobacco Fatwa which was issued by Ayatollah Mirza Shirazi.

Every Shi'ah encounter with modernity must be done in light of these five pillars, and as modernity does not change, mathematical truths in the same way it cannot modify our articles of faith, either. It needs to be noticed of morals that, since we consider morality of a heavenly origin not driven from society, morality is thus unchangeable, or in philosophical parlance, pioneer and not pursuant. A pioneer morality has its roots in the primordial principles of faith and humanity.

For example, philanthropy as a pioneer moral attitude originates in a primordial understanding and sense of humanity according to which we must always respect and help each other as human beings without any extra-human consideration. Having said these, now suppose that a Shiah scientist discovers a medication for cancer. This primordial principle of morality requires that he needs to impart it with all human societies without any utilitarian considerations.

Modernity can merely change the forms of the application of these issues, but it cannot change their substance. For example, when a natural disaster occurs, modern appliances can help us perform our philanthropic duties much more easily. If modernity implies the promotion of primordial principles of faith and humanity through new methods and means, we will surely receive it warmly, but the principles are not negotiable.

As living things always dedicate themselves to the preservation of

their life, we have the same approach to our primordial principles. In the same way that the defence of life is significant for human beings, intellectual and spiritual evolution also has its own rules, which are regarded as vital. I think I have answered both of your questions.

**Wright:** I'd like to know the common parameters of Islam, modernity and democracy.

**Ja'fari:** This issue has been discussed at length by the late Mr. Rashid almost forty-five years ago, and numerous works have been published even in the West on this matter, and thus it is clear enough and does not need to be addressed anymore. The problem of the diversity of opinions, for example, is a notion that has been accepted by all scholars since the past and there is nothing new in it. Anyway, the basic principles of Shi'ism are the five pillars that I mentioned before.

**Wright:** Is the incumbent system in the Islamic Republic of Iran ideal? Since Islam is a flexible system, is there any room for modifications in future?

**Ja'fari:** There is no doubt that the Islamic governments that have emerged during the past centuries failed to successfully implement all Islamic rules. The major reason for this failure is the fact that Islam is based on human primordial nature and is against carnal whims. Most people always prefer to pursue their selfish ambitions and carnal desires in this world. As a result, the ideal context for the implementation of Islam's divine and human rules is hardly prepared. As to the future changes, I should say that every change requires to be conducted within the framework of the previously discussed quintuple primordial principles. Islam and the Islamic government are open to technology and communication with other societies as far as they do not harm the primordial harmony of life. To put it otherwise, the system is open as far as it is useful for human life. As history testifies, Islam is always interested in relations with the outside world provided that the principles of just coexistence and committed freedom are observed. There are numerous examples of such relations between Islam and other religions like Christianity and Judaism. According to my research on human rights, there is only a fifteen-percent difference between Islamic and Western notions of human rights. That is to say, *our agreements outweigh our disagreements*. Thus, we are ready to negotiate even these slim differences, too. My studies show that there are many grounds for peaceful coexistence among nations. Meanwhile, every nation has a series of particular rules that are not in conflict with the basic rights of life.

When I attend international symposiums and conferences on human rights in various parts of the world, I see that we can overcome even these minute differences.

**Wright:** I think it was a good beginning. It is indeed a start from point zero. I hope that in my future visits we can continue our discussions.

**Ja'fari:** Religiously speaking, we have all one father, i.e. Abraham (PBUH). Abraham is the forefather of Jews, Christians and Moslems. To have a better coexistence, we need to gather around our father and see what his view of life is, since the Torah, the Gospels and the Quran all accept him. I've discussed this with many of my Western colleagues, but I don't see why – despite such a grand common ground for coexistence – things still going wrong.

**Wright:** I agree with you and believe that Islam is more flexible than what I thought.

**Ja'fari:** I hope our efforts will be only for the sake of God, God-willing.

