

Book Reviews

Islam and the Challenge of Human Rights

Abdulaziz Sachedina

City: Oxford University Press, 2009. 249 pages.

In *Islam and the Challenge of Human Rights*, Abdulaziz Sachedina calls for a new conversation between religious and secular forces to achieve an “overlapping consensus” on human rights and its underlying principles. According to him, developing a firm foundation for human rights in Islam is key to reaching such a consensus. Thus after critiquing the contemporary human rights regime and the traditionalist Muslim approach to it, he tries to develop such a theological foundation. Although showing a keen awareness of the numerous tensions between the international human rights framework and the Muslim world’s cultural, social, and political sensibilities, the author posits that some form of notions of individuality, human agency, and human dignity are compatible with the Islamic revelation. Recognizing this provides Islam and the human rights project important “common moral terrain.”

Chapter 1, aptly titled “The Clash of Universalisms,” highlights the critical need to develop a foundation for human rights in Islam. Chapter 2, which argues that Islamic epistemology has traditionally overemphasized the judicial sciences and law, proposes that Muslim leaders and international human rights activists approach human rights via Islamic moral and ethical theology. In chapter 3 he revisits Islamic theology and theological ethics to link Islamic natural law and human rights, and in chapter 4 he derives a human rights-consistent reading of women’s rights and gender equality from Islamic sources. A fascinating discussion of the various dimensions of the individualism versus collectivism worldviews underlying much of the tensions between the Muslim world and western human rights forces over human rights is undertaken in the fifth chapter. In the conclusion, the author assesses the right to freedom of religion and conscience using the theological framework developed.

Sachedina recognizes that “there is no unequivocal language of human rights in Islamic sources” (p. 85). Nevertheless, he locates the foundation for universal dignity, human moral agency, equality, and, by extension, univer-

sal human rights in several key theological principles. Foremost among these is the idea of *fitrah*, which, he contends, should be understood as human conscience and ethical cognition – every person’s innate ability to discern right from wrong. Among the numerous other principles invoked are “the duty to institute good and prevent evil,” God’s trust in humanity (*amanah*), human dignity (*karamah*), the Qur’anic notion of equality in creation, and the ideal of achieving justice as the core of Islamic theology.

One key issue is that of locating universalism at the core of the human rights paradigm within a religious tradition that seemingly applies exclusively to its own adherents. Sachedina maintains that there are key instances in which Islam addresses all of humanity, not just Muslims. *Fitrah* is human nature that exists independent of or prior to an individual committing to any religion. Furthermore, it endows every person with a moral knowledge that stems from reason, thereby enabling them to determine what is moral and immoral independent of direct divine guidance. He therefore advocates following the tradition of Mu’tazili and Shi’i theologians, who recognize the role of human reason in determining moral action as a key link to arriving at a minimalist notion of universal human rights in Islam.

While the author is clearly invested in revisiting Islamic epistemology and ontology to uncover common ground with the human rights regime, he believes that reconciling human rights and Islam also entails secular international human rights advocates adopting a new approach to Islam and acquiring a better understanding contemporary Muslim world dynamics. He argues that these advocates, which include the drafters of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, have “severed God from nature and reason” (p. 10). Making human rights an exclusively secular project has, in turn, made the relativist challenge from religious forces inevitable. Sachedina argues that human rights advocates should recognize that the traditionalists’ primary problem with the human rights framework is its secular bias and that they will not easily embrace a framework that seeks to push Islam to the private realm. Thus, instead of trying to relegate Islam to the private domain in an absolute manner, they should seek to negotiate particular manifestations of Islam within the public realm in accordance with human rights precepts. Sachedina maintains that there can be a place for Islam in the public domain, but that it should not be in the Shari’ah-driven form traditionalists advocate; rather, it should play a more spiritual role by providing broad guidance (not strict governance) designed to establish justice. More specifically, human rights proponents should adopt the view that modern notions of human rights can coexist with Islamic understandings of religious obligations and collectivism.

Although many of the theological arguments are known, one feels that Sachedina is breaking new ground simply by compiling, relating, and presenting them as such a coherent and comprehensive framework. Further, while he, like numerous other human rights proponents, points to the contradictions and self-serving appropriations of relativist arguments by traditionalists in the Muslim world, he moves beyond them by trying to highlight and address those relativist claims that warrant more serious engagement. Finally, the book is clearly enhanced by Sachedina's command of both Islamic theology and human rights discourse, a unique insider-outsider status as an individual with both a seminary and a secular western education that enables him to combine of exegesis and a more academic analysis. In each of these ways, *Islam and the Challenge of Human Rights* makes an important contribution to moving the religious-secular debate over human rights and Islam in a more advanced and potentially more reconciliatory direction.

One topic that the author fails to cover, however, is the compatibility of Islam and "rights" specifically. Although he suggests in chapter 4 that human rights advocates take more of a capabilities-oriented, rather than rights-based, approach to gender equality in the Muslim world and proposes achieving a better balance between rights and duties elsewhere, he does not otherwise undertake any sustained discussion of whether and to what degree "rights" can be rooted in Islamic theology. Instead, he uses "justice" as a surrogate. While there is ample scholarship on how the two concepts are intimately related, it is sometimes argued that in the Middle Eastern context they are often viewed separately and that there is more interest in achieving justice than realizing rights.

In many ways, this book opens a more serious and expansive project of identifying and assembling a theological foundation for human rights in Islam. It offers a wealth of insights and strategies for moving the discussion forward. But in the end, readers are left wondering whether the theological formulations puts forth can really sway traditionalists in the Muslim world. It would be fascinating to see his project presented to both the ulama and Islamists and to hear their reactions to it. *Islam and the Challenge of Human Rights* is suitable for scholars and graduate students following this overall debate within the disciplines of law, political science, and religious studies.

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