

Burbank Leader

In Theory: Can Islam and democracy coexist?

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Q. The pro-democracy uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt have resonated around the world, with even the Wall Street Journal going so far as to headline one column, “The Arab World's 1989?” Hosni Mubarak's resignation from his position as president of Egypt has resulted in the installation of a military government there that is promising reform and free elections, but is dogged by further protests, which are now spreading to other Middle Eastern countries.

But can democracy take root in an Islamic society? With the Muslim Brotherhood's involvement in the protests, there seems to be a danger that even though the protesters may get what they want in terms of elections, they may end up trading secular rule for religious theocracy.

Is Islam, which in the West is inextricably linked with authoritarian rule such as that in Saudi Arabia, compatible with democracy? Is there anything American faith leaders should be, or could be, doing to influence this change?

Answer:

In terms of whether it is possible for Middle Eastern countries to embrace democracy, I believe we must recognize that the question is essentially secular rather than religious. The nations in this area of the world have experienced centuries of unrest having to do with ethnic relationships and history, not just religious beliefs. What we are now witnessing are the growing pains of countries that have recognized that some of the old ways need to be changed — never an easy process.

And what we do not need to do is assume that we have all the answers, answers that we should impose on them — an act that would justifiably increase their anger at the West. After all, the colonialism of Britain and the paternalism and support of autocratic rulers by the United States, not great democratic models, are still vivid memories for many in the Middle East.

Nor is Islam a single, monolithic entity. It comprises a wide variety of beliefs and ways of being in the world. Not all Muslims are fundamentalists, just as those in other religions are not in complete agreement with each other about their beliefs. As Karen Armstrong, a noted scholar of world religions, reminds us: “Some Islamic fundamentalists have resorted more and more frequently to terror. But in so doing, they utterly distort the faith that they purport to defend. Every single major world faith, including Islam, teaches an absolute respect for the sacred rights of others.”

None of these understandings justify the reality of the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade center and Pentagon, of course. But, as people of faith, I believe we must encourage all people to educate themselves about Islam and other non-Christian religions so that we can separate the actions of fundamentalists of all religions from a belief in democracy. They are not the same.

The Rev. Dr. Betty Stapleford

Unitarian Universalist Church Of the Verdugo Hills

La Crescenta

Of course there can be a Muslim democracy. Look at Turkey. Also, have you considered Indonesia, where I think the majority of the world's Muslims are located? (I do not know what form of government Indonesia has, but we certainly haven't heard much from that part of the world these days.)

It is quite provincial of those of us in the West to assume that since some Muslim states are autocratic, they all must be. It is also quite chauvinistic of us to assume that "they" haven't evolved as far as "we," therefore "they" wouldn't know what to do with a democracy if "they" had one.

A bigger question for us in the West to answer is this: What if the Egyptians (or anybody else) actually choose, in an open and legal and democratic way, to be governed by some group such as the Muslim Brotherhood? Would we support that choice? I say that we had better, if we say we believe in democracy.

Otherwise, we're bigger hypocrites than those in charge in Tehran.

The Rev. C. L. "Skip" Lindeman

La Cañada Congregational Church, United Church of Christ

La Cañada

It's so easy to speculate about current political transitions, and, in this instance, about which religious groupings may or may not be compatible with democracy. And yet freedom is a concept about which people are increasingly cognizant, with significant increases in education and a growing middle class in many parts of the world, where the populace feels increasingly empowered. While many questions about the future remain, advances that may not have been achievable previously also are possible, despite fears of sliding backwards.

The endeavors of those who cherish freedom will be successful to the degree that emerging leaders and their citizens express the loving intelligence that comes from God. I was reading an article about Moez Masoud, a popular Cairo host of English and Arabic broadcasts about Islam, who, in an interview with the BBC, spoke about the spirituality of the Egyptian people — that is, their spiritual, and not just their religious, attitudes. That's forward thinking.

The freedom underpinning democracy constitutes a quality of God, Spirit, to which we all have a natural connection, which we can all realize is ours to cherish as we consider world events. In the Old Testament we find this declaration: "The battle is not yours, but God's." Setting aside fears and concerns and letting ourselves be guided by divine wisdom is possible, and it's a form of prayer in which we support not only our own well-being, but also the prospects for better governments everywhere, regardless of religious or cultural backgrounds.

Mary Baker Eddy, the founder of Christian Science, wrote in "Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures," "One infinite God, good, unifies men and nations; constitutes the brotherhood of man; ends wars; fulfills the Scripture, 'Love thy neighbor as thyself.'" We can acknowledge each individual in these various countries as having God-connected qualities of insight, balance, hope and love that will help shape improved futures for their respective countries, including the paving of the long road to real democracy that doesn't emerge overnight.

Graham Bothwell

First Church of Christ, Scientist

La Cañada Flintridge

Democracy is a political system based on consensus or the will of the people. As Islam's teachings emerged in seventh-century Arabia, it laid the foundations of civil society. The Koran teaches that the affairs of public life are based on "shura," the Arabic word for mutual consultation (Koran 42:38, and 3:159). Shura contains three essential elements: equal rights for all citizens, majority rule for public policy, and the promotion of justice and human dignity.

Similar to Prophets David and Solomon, the prophet Muhammad was the head of a state. Among Muhammad's first acts as a state leader in Medina was to draft a constitution. The constitution of Medina provided a pluralistic framework involving the due rights and protection for all people who were governed. The signatories and contributors to the constitution included the religious minorities in Medina. Jews, Christians and pagans retained their own identity, religious customs and internal governance, thus guaranteeing freedom of religion for all.

The prophet Muhammad did not prescribe a theocratic political system. In fact, on his deathbed, he refused to appoint a political successor, sending a clear message that it is up to the people to decide how they wish to be governed. After the prophet's death, shura was used to elect the next head of state, Abu Bakr.

These principles served Islam and humanity in 11th-century Spain in an exemplary fashion. Muslim egalitarianism and pluralism formed the basis of an impressive civilization based on knowledge, rational inquiry and tolerance, eventually becoming the precursor to Europe's Renaissance and the democratic revolutions of the 18th and 19th centuries in our country and Europe. Fast forward to 2002, Turkey has successfully implemented a modern secular democracy that honors its Islamic heritage.

There is nothing special about democracy per se in Islam, but it's a means to implement higher principles of social justice and human rights. Winston Churchill said democracy may not be the best form of government, but all other forms have been tried and they have failed. Islam is pragmatic in worldly application, with higher principles that are divinely inspired. The prophet Muhammad characterized believers as people who accept wisdom no matter what the source is.

With this background in mind, not only can democracy take root in Islamic societies today, but it should, as an authentic and practical outcome of Islamic teachings. What we see in the recent pro-democracy revolts is the natural desire for freedom and the people's right to choose their political leaders in the Muslim World. What started in Tunisia and Egypt is now spreading to Libya, Bahrain, Iran, Yemen and other parts of the Muslim World.

The 2011 wave of democracy is a unique opportunity for Muslims to remove authoritarian dictators and monarchs committing grave injustices and to restore the Islamic concepts of shura and societal justice. This will show the authentic Islamic character of their societies by rejecting extremism and authoritarianism of countries like Saudi Arabia and Iran. In Egypt's case, Hosni Mubarak used the Muslim Brotherhood's peaceful participation as a boogey man to justify his oppressive 30-year rule.

This wave of democracy is also a unique opportunity for our government to be on the right side of history and to be a respectful catalyst for democratic reform internationally. Our foreign policy needs to be aligned with the global quest for freedom and the political rights of people in all countries, and not solely based on special-interest groups like the oil industry and foreign government lobbies like Israel and Saudi Arabia. We must not sell out our American principles of democracy and human rights by the narrow and short-sighted policy of

supporting dictatorships and monarchs. This long-term vision will produce a credible partnership to fight Islamic extremism and promote a stable and peaceful future.

Levent Akbarut

Islamic Congregation of La Cañada Flintridge

As a faith leader, my prayers and actions toward events anywhere are focused first on human rights. God created each of us, and as such we are all persons of sacred worth, entitled to live with freedom and dignity; to have access to resources that satisfy basic needs; to speak and worship freely; and to live in peace and safety. Now that the Egyptian people have raised the profile of human rights in the region, U.S. faith leaders should be demanding that the U.S. government focus its influence on an end to human-rights violations, including torture, corruption and military crackdowns on peaceful protestors. We should be active in building support for the redirection of U.S. foreign aid, away from military support and toward education and jobs. We should be working for peace in the region, which includes negotiating a just resolution to the Palestinian issue.

Believe it or not, Jesus doesn't actually explicitly recommend democracy as the way to run the kingdom of God. He says a lot about justice, and he has plenty to say to oppressive authorities who care more for power than people. He lifts up the poor and the voiceless and he heals the sick, always actively bringing the least and the lost from the margins of society back into relationship with the human family and the family of God.

A government that attempts to address similarly the common wellbeing of all people could be one like the U.S.A's, though I would never be so bold as to suggest that this is the only option. Like most readers of this column, prior to the recent uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt, my attention to the culture and governments of these countries was very limited, perhaps shamefully so. Part of my responsibility as a faith leader is to get better educated on the compatibility of Islam and democracy, and on the state of human rights in the Arab world. My words and actions should not be the parroted statements of media personalities with their own agendas, but thoughtful, prayerful interactions that reflect care for each God-created person.

The Rev. Paige Eaves

Crescenta Valley United Methodist Church

La Crescenta

Several years ago, I read the book, "The Great Upheaval: America and the Birth of the Modern World, 1788-1800," by Jay Winik. The book's focus was on revolutionary fervor during the 12-year period from 1788 to 1800. It chronicled the success of the American Revolution, the failure of the French Revolution, and the success of Russia's Catherine the Great in resisting revolution. None of these results came about without much bloodshed and the clash of diverse ideologies, and they set the stage, in part, for the modern world.

The ultimate outcome of any revolution is not certain for some time. Despite winning the Revolutionary War, the American Revolution could have failed. The Russian Revolution in the early 20th Century was actually several revolutions, with the Bolsheviks finally winning. Some revolutions have ultimately led to democracies (i.e., Philippines and Chile), while others have led to theocracies (e.g., Iran), dictators (e.g., Cuba) or oppressive regimes (e.g., U.S.S.R. and China).

Can a Muslim state have a successful secular government? Turkey has been a secular republic since 1923, and

Iraq is in the early stages of a type of democracy. So yes, I believe it is entirely possible for a democratic Muslim state to exist and be successful. However, as demonstrated in Iraq, there are many forces that wish to see such a state fail.

Turning to Egypt, Hosni Mubarak is gone, the military is in control and elections, one may hope, will be forthcoming. Unfortunately, there is a lack of organized political parties in Egypt, with the possible exception of the Muslim Brotherhood. As noted recently in a Wall Street Journal editorial, the Muslim Brotherhood is promoting itself as a peaceful organization, but it has yet to renounce its motto, which is, "Allah is our objective; the prophet is our leader; the Koran is our law; jihad is our way; dying in the way of Allah is our highest hope."

At this time, Egypt's outcome is uncertain. Our hope and prayers should be that Egypt's leaders will chart a course that will lead to a stable, democratic state that recognizes both the importance of religion and the separation of state and religion, and is an example for the future.

Rick Callister

Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

La Cañada

I'm no expert in Islam, so I don't know if it is inherently contradictory to democracy. Around the world we see different Islamic sects with differing approaches to how people should be ruled. But from what I observe in modern Muslim-dominated countries, the practices of freedom of religion and expression would be severely limited if a group such as the Muslim Brotherhood stepped into power in Egypt. We would do well to remember what happened in Iran after the Shah was removed from power and Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini stepped in.

American faith leaders should focus on practicing their faith. Of course, we're speaking about non-cohesive faith groups that actually worship different gods. Speaking from the perspective of the Christian faith, believers should be involved in heavenly kingdom building and not democratic-empire building. Jesus told Pilate that his kingdom is not of this world. The most important and effective change occurs only when a person hears the good news about Jesus Christ, repents of their sin and receives him as lord. Paul spoke about this in 2 Corinthians 5:17: "Therefore if any man is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come." The only true way for people to experience the highest degree of freedom is to let Jesus Christ rule in their hearts.

Pastor Jon Barta

Valley Baptist Church

Burbank

If democracy cannot co-exist with Islam, then what does that say of Islam? Some may retort, "that's the point." Others want to believe the two are not mutually exclusive. If democracy means government by the people and for the people, does it necessarily follow that this is impossible in the context of a religious framework and religious people?

It seems that the modern world looks at the situation as though only a blank slate of irreligious secularists can

bring about an ethical government, but then, from where would ethics derive? With what would religious beliefs be replaced? Why is non-faith preferable to the morality of religious people? I'm not saying that Islam is especially moral, nor that it is the best option in the current situation, but I look at our own country and realize that our Christian foundation must be given credit for America's choice of laws and our nation's sense of right and wrong. Had we begun as a nation of pirates or atheists, our code of law would have looked a lot different, and nobody, but nobody, comes at this with perfect neutrality. The fact that we rebelled against the British dictatorship, I mean, monarchy, and won our democratic independence, has gained for us a free republic without rival. We've done pretty well for ourselves, yet our biggest woes are probably in those areas where we have most strayed from our Pilgrim past.

I cannot imagine us preferring dictatorships for any nation, since we are the example the world looks to for democratic values. By the same token, I am leery of the particular religious persuasion of the nations going through their own Independence Days because of how their beliefs have spilled out against others. But if the people have evolved well enough to throw out dictators, then perhaps they will also have the fortitude to throw out religious rogues. Pray it so.

The Rev. Bryan Griem

Montrose Community Church

Montrose

As I write this, "Turning Point in the Middle East" headlines the website of Freedom House, a much-respected organization studying and advocating for democracy around the world for 70 years. Given the volatility of events throughout the Middle East and North Africa, writing anything about democracy in Islamic countries for publication a week hence is quite a leap into the unknown.

Certainly, democracy will not emerge either easily or quickly there.

In our own case, participation in government, including voting, was initially limited to white, male property-owners. Freedom House does rate Indonesia, a Muslim majority country, as "free," and both Turkey and Lebanon, also predominantly Muslim, as "partially free."

Are they perfect models of democracy? Obviously not. They will struggle, just as U.S. women and African-Americans did for hundreds of years after our independence.

Most of Latin America lived under dictatorships until relatively recently, and it was commonly argued that their culture was incompatible with democracy. When have you last heard it said that Roman Catholics cannot handle democracy because they are blindly obedient to the pope? Probably never, unless you are past a certain age.

Democracy boils down to the people to decide; our faith must be in the people. It is disingenuous of us to condemn their decision, even if theocracy is the outcome. Our own record of supporting tyrants in the Middle East (eg., in both Egypt and in Saudi Arabia), is not a proud one, even going so far as to overthrow a democratically elected, secularist leader in 1953 in Iran. Our imperialist history makes me leery of the notion of our influencing other countries' affairs, unfortunately.

It behooves all of us of any or no religion, whether leaders or laypeople, to give as much support in whatever form we can to the incredibly brave souls in Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Libya, Sudan, Tunisia, Yemen and wherever this historic and mostly peaceful revolution for democracy next spreads.

Roberta Medford

Atheist

Montrose

I firmly believe that any society or people can embrace democracy if they truly want to. Islam may pose a challenge to establishing true freedom if the religion's tenets are intertwined with the institutions of government, but nevertheless, where there is a will, there is a way. A country like Turkey offers a hopeful example, for that nation has a Muslim majority but is nonetheless a secular state with a parliamentary democracy.

Over the past month, we have witnessed a monumental upheaval in North Africa and the Middle East; what began in Tunisia soon spread to Egypt, and in one country after another, people throughout the region are rising up against oppressive dictators to declare, "Enough is enough." As I write this column, yet another aging tyrant, Colonel Muammar Gaddafi, of Libya, is on the verge of falling from power and being relegated to history's trash heap of vile despots. We can all hope that the recent demonstrations in Tehran signal that Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Iran's current president, will soon follow Gaddafi so that Iran also will be given a chance to join the community of responsible, peaceful nations.

All of these developments are positive, since they provide a unique, once-in-a-generation opportunity for true freedom to take root in a part of the world which to date only has two democratic countries — Israel and Turkey. But serious danger is lurking behind the joyous celebrations of these successful revolutions. Islamic fanatics are waiting in the shadows for the right moment to pounce so that they can manipulate these vulnerable societies and introduce their abhorrent form of oppressive, theocratic government. It would be tragic if ruthless groups like the Muslim Brotherhood came to power through democratic means, only to subsequently dismantle the very institutions that allowed them to govern.

You can be sure that once the religious extremists took office, there would never be another election. We saw this happen in Gaza with Hamas, and there is a real risk of this taking place in other Muslim countries as well.

At this time, well-meaning faith leaders of all religions should publicly encourage the courageous people of these newly liberated countries to abandon hatred and prejudice and embrace love and tolerance. We should stress that the road to political liberty, economic prosperity and judicial integrity is defined by the moral values of open, democratic countries like the United States and Israel. And conscientious citizens around the globe who have felt inspired by these developments can all pray that these revolutions bring positive change to a region that has seen far too much suffering and strife.

Rabbi Simcha Backman

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