**Iran Must Democratize its Theocracy –**

**And Will Need the Help of Women to Do So**

The death of 22-year-old Kurdish-Iranian Mahsa Jina Amini on September 16th after having been taken into custody by Iran’s notorious Guidance Patrol for “not wearing her hijab properly” has set off a protest movement unique both in its being aimed squarely at the religious leadership of that country as well as having been led from its outset by women. Also known as Iran’s “morality police”, the Guidance Patrol has in recent times been upping its effort to counter a growing resistance movement by Iranian women whose more and more open defiance of the hijab law, put into effect in 1979 as part of the Iranian Revolution that ended the reign of the Pahlavi dynasty begun by Reza Shah (1878-1944) and inherited by his son Mohammed Reza Shah (1919-1980), is increasingly being understood as a rallying cry for the democratization of Iran by its people, one which places women front and center as principle agents of radical social change.

Reminiscent of Liberia’s Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace movement begun in 2003 and which led to the resolution of the nation’s Second Civil War, women across Iran’s ethnic and religious spectra have been uniting to face up to a religious autocracy whose policies and stay in power have been antithetical to the welfare, happiness, and economic and social development of women, arguably stunting the economic development of the nation as whole while doing great harm to the nation’s position in the world.

Just how to push for democracy in a country such as Iran is a sticky question. For it is a theocracy, which is commonly assumed to be non-democratic. Even some Western Catholics sometimes smugly insist that the Catholic Church, also a theocracy, cannot be a democratic institution, giving reasons such as that the laity does not get to vote for popes, or that its doctrine is not determined by majority rule. But these reasons are red herrings, since neither majoritarianism nor universal suffrage are essential features of what makes an organization democratic. The defining feature of democracy in any organization is not formal but intentional: a culture of universal ownership, shared, maintained, and cultivated genuinely from top to bottom and from bottom to top. Any organization, therefore can therefore be democratized, not by scrapping its entire constitution and starting all over from scratch, but rather *in situ*, by mere (although radical) change of attitude: from alienation to reconciliation, from autocracy, which operates blindly and deafly without the benefit of the eyes and ears of its own constituency, to a community of universal proprietary interest, which thrives off its unmistakable advantage of candid and free communication up and down the hierarchy, in which all recognize their stake in the organization and the role they must play in its decision-making processes, beginning from free and open expression of opinion in the public forum on up into the representative ranks. Representative democracy can only be such with effective ongoing communication between representatives and their constituents; otherwise, it collapses by default into oligarchy.

At any rate, we must wonder why it is that we have lived so long with the sloppy assumption that theocracy cannot be democratic. The opposite of democratic culture is nothing more than a culture of alienation, the bane of social existence, which once set in tends to spread like gangrene, killing off effective organizational action and life. More pointedly, what would make us think that democracy should be anathema to religion? Assuming, as we will for the remainder of this reflection, that God exists, what should God have against democracy? In particular, is there anything about the Abrahamic religion: Judaism, Christianity, Islam, etc. that forces opposition to democratic culture? Should we worship God as divine autocrat? Does God prefer autocratic government? These are embarrassing questions to ask, because although when forced to answer them, we can see the inanity of answering any of them in the affirmative, in the darkness of our confusion about religion and our relationship with the supernatural, we have tacitly been doing just that down through the generations.

Nor is it a mere mistake that it is women now at the vanguard of a democracy movement where autocracy is at its worst. As in Aristophanes’s Lysistrata, the men have somehow gone missing in the struggle, either dead, jailed, conscripted, bought in, or sold out, leaving women holding the bag. It is easier for a man to walk away from a bad situation than for a woman. Women are the preferred targets of violence and tactics of brute force control, more likely to be tied down by children and family as caretakers and therefore easier to hold over the barrel and exploit. To be sure, as Aristophanes insinuates, it is ultimately the men speaking according to the law of large numbers, who are enslaved by their own ideologies and ambitions. But this enslavement takes them paradoxically out of the limelight, leaving women to fight the real fight for democracy - in the minds of men, where democracy is most lacking.

In what follows I argue, drawing upon sources from the Old and New Testaments as well as from Islamic theology, first that Abrahamic religion, although long hampered with gender separatist traditions, in fact does have democratic roots it can draw on, and secondly, that the partnership between men and women as peers is at the core of what democratic culture is and what makes it real in our world. What is happening in Iran now should be taken as the harbinger of a worldwide democracy movement based on the reconciliation between men and women everywhere as peers and co-equals, “protectors of one another” (Qu’ran, Surah 9, verse 71).

First, let us finish our discussion of why it has been so widely taken for granted that a theocracy must be non-democratic. We have already mentioned the mistaken identification of democratic culture with majoritarianism and universal voting. There are many democratic processes in which one or the other of these does not factor. What we are speak of here is the many ways of compromise. Democratic culture is not essentially bound to any one particular way. My marriage is a democracy, but we never vote; nor does majority rule apply.

A deeper reason for thinking that theocracy must not be democratic can be expressed in the following argument:

Supposing God exists, God should rule over us.

That God should rule over us implies the preference of non-democratic government.

Therefore, supposing God exists, we should prefer non-democratic government.

The acceptance of this argument essentially pits believers against non-believers in such a way that democratic government is the mark of the unbeliever with theists opposed – a dire situation for all those struggling for peace in the world. If we push for democracy under this pretext, we are pushing against religion, which will only exacerbate any democratic struggle against a theocracy, by motivating the opposition to dig in their heels all the more. In fact, the argument is faulty based on its second premise. That God should rule over us says nothing about the earthly form of government we should have. We don’t have God on earth sitting on a physical throne issuing physically audible commands. The recommendation that God rule over us must, then, be carried out somehow by the mediation of earthly government, putting us back at square one regarding this question.

I find it odd that Americans can be stuck on the notion that democracy is ungodly when at the heart of the founding ideology of this nation is that of a divinely complemented democracy. On the back of the U.S. dollar bill is the image of a pyramid with its top lopped off and in its place a triangle with an eye in it. The pyramid stands for representative democracy; its top is lopped off to indicate the absence of an earthly monarch or autocrat, with God, represented by the all-seeing eye, reigning instead at the top, standing over the government and blessing it. The inscription below translates as “New Order of the Ages” , which ironically refers to democracy with separation of church and state – a separation applying only to any established church and not to God. Finally, the inscription at the top translates roughly as “He (God) approves of what has been undertaken”. This is clearly a nod to the notion that theocracy should be associated with democratic government, not its opposite.

The theism of Sacred Scripture also leans democratic. Consider the I Samuel 8, in which Samuel the prophet, prays to God, distraught that the people of Israel have asked for a king:

**6**But when they said, “Give us a king to lead us,” this displeased Samuel; so, he prayed to the Lord. **7**And the Lord told him: “Listen to all that the people are saying to you; it is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king. **8**As they have done from the day I brought them up out of Egypt until this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so they are doing to you. **9**Now listen to them; but warn them solemnly and let them know what the king who will reign over them will claim as his rights… **10**Samuel told all the words of the Lord to the people who were asking him for a king. **11**He said, “This is what the king who will reign over you will claim as his rights: He will take your sons and make them serve with his chariots and horses, and they will run in front of his chariots. **12**Some he will assign to be commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and others to plow his ground and reap his harvest, and still others to make weapons of war and equipment for his chariots. **13**He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. **14**He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive groves and give them to his attendants. **15**He will take a tenth of your grain and of your vintage and give it to his officials and attendants. **16**Your male and female servants and the best of your cattle[[c](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1%20Samuel%208&version=NIV#fen-NIV-7386c)] and donkeys he will take for his own use. **17**He will take a tenth of your flocks, and you yourselves will become his slaves. **18**When that day comes, you will cry out for relief from the king you have chosen, but the Lord will not answer you on that day.”

**19**But the people refused to listen to Samuel. “No!” they said. “We want a king over us. **20**Then we will be like all the other nations, with a king to lead us and to go out before us and fight our battles.”

So, God, though disappointed, relented and eventually anointed Saul as their first king. This new form of government clearly brought trouble, and after Solomon, their third king, the people of Israel divided into two kingdoms, never to be reunited. It is clear that much of the trouble and loss they experienced was exacerbated if not caused by the new form of government they had chosen over the previously more democratic form of rule by judges.

Genesis 1:27 lays out in the clearest of terms, even repeated terms, what the relationship between God and humankind is, expressly mentioning man and woman in the formula as mutually indispensable for knowing God and relating to God:

“So, God created mankind in his own image; in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.”

This reveals to us, first, that God created us to be his peers, not his underlings – for we are created in his image! Moreover, this scripture makes it just as clear that the full and balanced appreciation of God’s image in us requires a full a balanced appreciation of men and women as peers. To be the peers of God belies the sensibility of being underlings to some earthly ruler. Moreover, the gender-balanced depiction of the image of God suggests strongly that no human endeavor, especially not government, can succeed without being based on a balanced appreciation of men and women.

Isaiah1:18 furthers the imagery of man’s relation to God as democratic dialog between peers:

“Come now, and let us reason together, saith the Lord: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool.”

Our redemption by the grace of God comes by his invitation to have enter into and maintain an ongoing dialog with him.

In the New Testament, John 15:15 picks up on the notion of God’s relation to us as to friends, democratically, and not as servants, autocratically:

“I no longer call you servants because a servant does not know his master’s business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you.

Galatians 3:28 drives home the egalitarianism to complete the message:

**“There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”**

Muslim scholars are also attuned to the democratic intent of Islam, in which, as quoted above, women and men are depicted as one another’s protectors. This cannot be the case unless men and women are peers. Non-democracy is based on not all of us being one another’s peers; but if men and women are to be considered peers, what case is left for denying some humans peer status with others?

In fact, like Christian theology, Islamic theology seems unsure about how to relate religion to democracy. But let there be no doubt about it but that among the range of opinions in the mainstream are those advocating Islam as democratic. Bangladeshi Islamic scholar Khondkar Abdullah Jahangir put it simply:

“Those who say it is anti-Islamic to say people are sovereign and they are the source of all powers, I do not agree with them. People’s participation and share is mandatory in Islam which makes it democracy.”

We should not be too surprised to hear that even among the highest rank of prelates in Iran’s Shi’ite Islam - The Grand Marjas - are some who advocate for democracy. Most notably, the Grand Ayatollah Asadollah Bayat–Zanjani, a longtime critic of despotic rulers, in the follow-up to the [killing of Mahsa Amini](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Killing_of_Mahsa_Amini) ,decried the Guidance Patrol as “not only an illegal and anti-Islamic body, but also illogical. No part of our country’s laws assigns any mission or responsibility to this vigilante force,”

In short, there is no reason for the religious leader of Iran to hide behind religion as a reason to avoid the turn to democracy. The idea of democratic theocracy is reasonable, viable and mainstream – even in Islam. We ourselves here in this country where democracy is also under assault should learn from the great and brave women of Iran that for democracy to be spawned and cultivated requires us to see it as it really is: our only option. Democracy is the only way for us to flourish, whether in nations and states, in organizations, and even in organized religion.

This does not entail the massive rewriting of constitutions, business plans, and other founding documents. It just means we must not allow anyone to make us give up ownership of our own country or other organizations to which we belong. It is that sense of ownership which motivates people to act democratically and oppose those trying to extort this inheritance from us for their own unlawful and undemocratic gain.