

## REMARKS OF ABDULLAHI AN-NA'IM\*

I want to start by saying that we have to be clear about distinguishing the forest from the trees. Culture is very fundamental, and none of us can ever escape it, whether it is the culture that we were born with or culture that we acquired. It is always there; it is in this room; it is in all our minds, in all our hearts. So the issue is not to have or not to have culture.

Religion is also fundamental and universal and is not going to go away either. So the choice is not whether or not we can have religion.

What is at issue, I think, is whose views of religion and culture will prevail. This is the notion of contestability of culture and contestability of religion.

As a Muslim, I always make the heretical sort of statement that religion is secular, which may appear like a contradiction in terms. But the fact of the matter is that there is no way we can access, we can relate to, we can be influenced and formed by religion, except through human agency. Our human agency is definitive of our religion. In that sense, religion is secular, religion is human-made.

The point here is to emphasize this secularity of religion, and as such, to make it political—to make it a political asset. This concept applies equally to culture. When I speak of religion and culture, I speak in the same vein, in the sense that they are both human-made, are both human-remade. In the immediate wake of America's midterm elections, it was very interesting for me to see, as a foreigner living in this country, how so-called American culture was manipulated, used, and abused in the campaign. What we see now in the outcome is a triumph of a particular view of so-called American culture.

The question for women's rights advocates and reproductive rights advocates is not whether or not religion and culture are relevant, but how to take control and manipulate them. In other words, the goal

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for women's rights groups is to see religion and culture as a medium and as a vehicle of change, not necessarily as something that is inherently antagonistic to reproductive rights and the rights of women.

There is the mistaken impression that all we need to have is a rights paradigm or a system of rights. The issue is not simply a question of rights, it is a question of ability to use rights, to the extent that rights can make any difference anyway. Beyond legal and rights paradigms, there is a whole world of women and men and social, cultural, and religious activities, which are deeply rooted and very inaccessible. One of the problems that we have with negative religious and cultural phenomena is that they are so inaccessible, and that even the victims are co-opted into perpetuating those practices.

In my chapter seven of Rebecca Cook's book, entitled *Human Rights of Women*, that theme also is touched upon, addressing how to access those levels of consciousness and motivation, which are embodied in religion and culture, and to transform them at that level.

Why do we give fundamentalism such space in our thinking and in our media? The intellectuals, the liberal-minded human rights types of the Islamic world are so apologetic and defensive; they concede to the fundamentalists more than what the fundamentalists are asking for themselves. Most of all, they concede to the fundamentalists the legitimacy and the right and the ability to define the issues and to define the space of discourse. That is something that we have to question among ourselves. We are not simply dealing with someone who holds a counterview, but we are dealing with our own internal defeat, which gives that counterview more weight than it deserves. One of the issues that one finds in discussing questions of cultural specificity or relativism and religious fundamentalism is the fear that by engaging in a cultural or religious discourse you are conceding the platform, you are conceding the terms of reference to the other side.

My point is that it is not the mere fact of engaging in religious and cultural discourse, it is the manner that we concede the discourse to the other side. If we engage in discourse with a view that religion and culture are all defined for us, we are being co-opted; we are conceding the struggle before engaging it.

But if we engage in that discussion with a view to redefining or to start defining for ourselves what our religion and culture are, that orientation is what makes a difference.

It is not simply the ability of organized religion to control our lives—it is our inability to control our lives in the face of organized religion.