

# Editorial: The Politics of Dignity

By *M. Ali Lakhani*

For us, democracy is a question of human dignity. And human dignity is political freedom.

*Olof Palme*

Human dignity is the same for all human beings: when I trample on the dignity of another, I am trampling on my own.

*His Holiness Pope Francis, Message for the Lenten Brotherhood, 2014*

A passion for justice, the quest for equality, a respect for tolerance, a dedication to human dignity — these are universal human values which are broadly shared across divisions of class, race, language, faith and geography. They constitute what classical philosophers, in the East and West alike, have described as human 'virtue' — not merely the absence of negative restraints on individual freedom, but also a set of positive responsibilities, moral disciplines which prevent liberty from turning into license.

*His Highness the Aga Khan, Columbia University, 2006*

**T**he Aristotelian proposition that Man is a political animal rests on the view that human beings have a *social interdependence* and reasoning nature which causes them, in the pursuit of 'the good life,' to cooperate in matters of governance. Yet, beyond any rationalistic or expedient justifications, politics also rests on a more profound metaphysical understanding, which conceives of human beings as having a *spiritual interdependence* and supra-rational, compassionately intellectual nature, which causes them to pursue the common good, as stewards of creation. It is in our better nature, our inherent dignity, to care for one another and to pursue honourable ends. To be true to one's humanity means to be aware of a shared sacredness, of a core ground of being which is

the basis of all worth. We are, in the words of Wordsworth, 'Bound each to each by natural piety.' As the epigraph from Pope Francis suggests, it is by virtue of our unifying substance, our shared humanity, that our personal dignity entails respecting the dignity of all. This is the true foundation of our human 'rights' – the mutual right to be cared for and to have one's dignity respected – and the corresponding duties attendant on those rights which, in religious parlance are summed up in the law of loving one's neighbour and, in ethical parlance, in the Golden Rule. Dignity rests, therefore, on a foundation of inherent unity and goodness, of connectedness and caring. This is the basis of what can be termed 'the politics of dignity.'

Politics ennobles when it elevates human dignity. If it ceases to adopt the lens of inner worth, it risks losing its moral compass and, as Sa'di states in his famous 'Bani Adam' verse, undermining what it means to be human. By focusing simply on external elements around which special interests and group identities coalesce, politics can become more tribalistic than humanistic. Without dignity, liberalism, for example, can devolve from protecting the freedom inherent in humanity to simply a way of justifying individualistic or narrow interests over the common good. Similarly, conservatism can become a means of conserving outer values such as wealth or power rather than inner values aligned to dignified ends. Traditional thought encourages a more humanistic perspective by viewing politics through the lens of its metaphysical foundations which connect political and humane values ontologically, rather than simply by focusing on external interests and identities. Any examination of politics in terms of the broader perspective of inner worth and our common humanity therefore requires an understanding of the vital connection between human nature and dignity.

In the traditional understanding, human dignity is the presence of that which is sacred in Man. It is the immanent substance within Man which is derived from a transcendent source termed 'God' or 'Truth' or the 'Absolute,' and known by the many hallowed names of the various faith traditions. Man's nature is inherently good because he has been created in the image of God (*Genesis*, 1:27; *Surah At-Taghabun*, 64:3), and formed in the 'best of all designs' (*Surah Al-Tin*, 95:4), and is thereby endowed with a spiritual nature which is the basis of his dignity. Hence, the Quranic saying, 'We have conferred dignity on the children of Adam'

(*karramna bani Adama*) (*Surah Al-Isra*, 17:70). What is instilled within Man is the universal Spirit or, symbolically, the ‘breath of God’ (*Genesis*, 2:7: ‘And God formed man from the dust of the earth and breathed into his face the Spirit, and man became a living soul’; see also the Holy Quran, 15:29, 32:7-9, and 38:72). The Spirit which binds all beings to each other and to God thereby constitutes the normative nature of the soul (what the Holy Quran refers to as ‘*fitra*’, ‘the natural disposition which God has instilled into man’ – *Surah Ar-Rum*, 30:30). The substance of the individual soul, the Spirit, is the ontological connection of Man with God (the ‘*abd i’Llahi* or ‘bond with God’, referred to in *Surah Al-Baqarab*, 2:27) and thereby with all creatures. To be aware of one’s true nature is thus to be aware of one’s sacred interconnection with all creatures, of our shared spiritual substance and its sustenance in the divine matrix.

Uniquely among creatures, Man is able to know the Spirit that connects the soul, vertically to God and horizontally to the world. For this reason, Man is the steward of creation, God’s vicegerent or *khalifah* (*Surah Al-Baqarab*, 2:30), and has dominion over it (*Surah Al-An’am*, 6:165; see also *Genesis*, 1:26). Through the innate ability to apprehend God (*taqwa*) as the sacred origin and ontological substance of creation, Man possesses both a moral and a social conscience – ‘the criterion (*fur’qan*) by which to discern the true from the false’ (*Surah Al-Anfal*, 8:29) – and the fiduciary duty of care (*amanab*) which obliges each to act in accord with that conscience (*Surah Al-Abzab*, 33:72). Conscience is therefore the basis for the soul’s intrinsic conformity or connectedness to the divine norm, and for its extrinsic conformity or connectedness to creation, expressed through caring and ethical conduct. These elements – a moral and social conscience rooted in human nature and its ethical expression to act in the common good – are the foundations of Man’s political obligations, consonant with the religious aims of knowledge and love. They constitute what one Muslim leader, the Aga Khan, has referred to as ‘the ethics that uphold the dignity of man as the noblest of creation.’

Through the politics of dignity, the inherent aims of religion and politics coincide. While religion is concerned with the salvation of the soul it is also concerned with ethical human behaviour, because, for the soul to merit salvation, its conduct must be dignified, conforming it to its spiritual nature. This is the basis of ethics and also for the human

governance which is the subject of politics. Both are rooted in human nature. A deeper appreciation of one's underlying nature, and its integrating connectedness, promotes a deeper caring. Just as knowledge can lead to empathy, so self-knowledge can lead to enlightened conduct – an idea reflected in Polonius's advice to Laertes (in *Hamlet*), that by being true to oneself one cannot then be false to any man. In theological terms, as our love for God deepens, so our love for our neighbour expands. The central praxes of religion are therefore *knowledge* – knowing the Real from the unreal – and *love* – merging with the Real. In Islam, for example, the doctrine of discernment – that the soul is one with the transcendent Spirit – is found in the first part of the *Shabada* ('there is no reality but the Real'), and its concomitant ethical implication – that the soul's perfection lies in the prophetic archetype of the Spirit – is exemplified in the second part of the *Shabada* ('the Logos/Muhammad is the spiritual model of Reality'). Muslims are therefore required, first, to cultivate a sense of the sacred (through faith, *iman*), second, to conform the soul to its integrating reality, the Spirit (through submission, *islam*), and, third, to reflect its spiritual resplendence through virtuous behaviour (through beauty and virtue, *ibsan*).

Although the politics of dignity requires an inner alignment with its sacred foundations, the conditions of modernity do not permit any overt alignment between politics and religion – nor is this necessary. Centuries of history have validated the need to institutionally separate 'Church' and 'State' and have raised legitimate concerns about reducing politics – or religion, for that matter – to theocracy. What is needed instead is an inner alignment, a focus on humanistic values in line with sacred principles, of connectedness and caring, of a humane ethics, of honourable living and acting in the common good, with a focus on the sacred link between human nature and human dignity as the foundation of political rights and responsibilities – in short, a sense of the sacred. Here, the faith traditions have something valuable to offer. While religions are not themselves exempt from tribalistic theological disagreements, their core teachings are universal and perennial. They emphasize Man's common humanity founded in dignity, the need to guard one's God-given humane nature from moral corruption, to situate freedom and equality within the normative bounds of dignity, and to honour political pluralism in ways that meld hierarchy and harmony within those bounds. We will briefly touch on each of these.

First, integral humanity. Tradition teaches that there is a vital link between integrity and dignity, whose loss undermines our common humanity. The humane bond on which the politics of dignity is based is central to the teachings of faith. Religions emphasize that there is a sacred and unifying core within reality, as can be seen, for example, in the Hindu teaching, '*tat tvam asi*', 'that art thou', and, in Islam, in the Quranic concept of *tawhid* or metaphysical oneness. Existential illusion impedes this integral vision; this is the concept of *maya* or separative refraction in Hindu and Buddhist terminology, and *ghafla* or forgetfulness in Quranic terminology. This disjunctive vision is experienced as a 'Fall', a cognitive schism which gives rise to a concomitant moral crisis. The cognitive schism is evoked, for example, in the Biblical metaphor of the two Trees of *Genesis* – the Tree of Life representing integral vision, and the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil representing fragmented vision. The traditions caution against the loss of integrity through illusion or corruption because a sense of disconnection leads inevitably to a loss of humanity, characterized as 'sin' or moral decline. Related to this idea of illusion and forgetfulness is that the centrifugal influences of modernity – of accelerating change and peripherality – themselves exacerbate moral degradation and disintegration so that, in Yeats's famous phrase, 'the centre cannot hold.' In consequence of the soul losing its sense of wholeness, or 'holiness', it is rendered morally vulnerable to the usurping influences of its ego and corrupting passions, and becomes susceptible to the infernal seductions of 'the world, the flesh and the devil' ('*caro, mundus, diabolus*'). When human beings cease to feel deeply connected with one another or with the world, they cease to care – not only about other creatures but, ultimately, about themselves. The traditional antidote to this crisis is to cultivate a sense of the sacred, an awareness of the integral nature of our humanity, of its unifying spiritual bond, the connectedness and caring that are vital to preserving human dignity. In the words of Mahatma Gandhi, 'The dignity of Man requires obedience to a higher law, to the strength of the Spirit.' The political implication of this is that the *polis* is not based so much on our affiliation in terms of proximate borders or identities – whether of state or social groupings, or of religion, ethnicity, race or gender – but on our ontological proximity, the Wordsworthian bond of 'natural piety,' of dignity, which is the basis of our humanity and community.

Second, human nature and moral corruption. To found politics on dignity therefore requires a basic understanding of human nature and of the causes of its corruption. Political philosophers speak of human corruptibility and the need, therefore, for political restraint. Plato's brother, Glaucon, tells the story of the Ring of Gyges, where the ring-wearer's gift of invisibility leads him to commit all manner of deceptions and crimes - 'For all men believe in their hearts that injustice is far more profitable to the individual than justice' (Plato's *Republic*, II: 360d) - suggesting that human nature is inherently corruptible and in need of external restraint. Similarly, Dostoevsky's adage about moral conscience - 'if God is dead, then everything is permitted' - suggests that deterrence may require more even than external political regulation; it requires an engaged conscience, an internal restraint deriving, in his view, ultimately from faith in God and the inevitability of His judgment. These views on human corruptibility and the need for outer or inner restraint raise fundamental questions about the compatibility of human nature with the goals of dignity.

Tradition teaches that Man possesses an inherently good nature, which must be protected from corrupting influences, whether of the ego or the world. The Holy Quran therefore describes one of the central aims of religion as the obligation to guard one's God-given nature from corruption. It states (verse 30:30 of *Surah Ar-Rum*, cited earlier):

And so, set thy face steadfastly towards the [one ever-true] faith, turning away from all that is false, in accordance with the natural disposition (*fitra*) which God has instilled into man: [for,] not to allow any change to corrupt what God has thus created - this is the [purpose of the one] ever-true faith; but most people know it not.

In the quoted Quranic passage, Man is exhorted to guard his dignity against the influences of corruption or change, echoing the Biblical teaching of laying up 'treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt' (*Matthew*, 6:20). In all traditional teachings, the means for cultivating spiritual character are Intellection (the discernment of God through His 'signs' in the Revelation), Prayer (remembrance, or the conscious participation of the soul in the Spirit), Love (the expansion of the Heart through the grace of remembrance), and the conforming effort of Virtue (the actualization of Love through goodness) whose flowering is Beauty (the beatitude or sanctification of the soul).

Consistent with other faiths, this teaching exhorts the soul to focus on the Real ('set thy face steadfastly towards the [one ever-true] faith') and to turn away from the unreal ('turning away from all that is false'). This traditional teaching is echoed in the Hindu prayer, 'Lead me from the unreal to the Real' (*Bribadaranyaka Upanishad*, 1:3:28), which – through the soul's prayer to be led by the Spirit – also underlines the need for the soul to be receptive to the Spirit's grace. Therefore, traditional teachings distinguish clearly between the higher spiritual 'Self' and the lower psychic self: in the former case, the soul is receptive to the Spirit, willing to be guided by, and to identify with, its normative nature ('the natural disposition which God has instilled into man'); in the latter case, the soul is refractory and opaque, led by its whims and desires. Both aspects – *Animus* and *anima*, Spirit and psyche – are present in Man. Hence, the Scholastic dictum, '*duo sunt in homine*' ('there are two [natures] in man'). The importance of this distinction relates to the political understanding of selfhood and its dignity. Dignity is an attribute of the higher Self by virtue of its spiritual substance, and of the lower self only to the extent that its individuality – those unique qualities and attributes that each individual creature is clothed with by the grace of God – reflects and conforms to the substance the higher Self. Spiritual conformance is therefore essential to preserving the dignity of the individual.

In the traditional understanding, though each individual is unique, the outward qualities that differentiate each individual are an aspect of the ever-renewing theophany, and therefore our individuality does not derogate from our essential oneness or from the fact that humankind is created from 'a single soul' (*Surah An-Nisa*, 4:1). The soul's dignity resides in its spirituality – its ontological participation in the all-embracing Spirit – and not in the outer attributes identified with its ego. Individuality is therefore subsumed within the transcendent Spirit, just as a particular wave is within the Ocean. The distinguishing attributes of individuality, our features, our talents, and so forth, are merely our 'outer garments,' the graces of God, 'on loan,' as it were (Christ playing in ten thousand places, as Gerard Manley Hopkins says), and not integral to our intrinsic selfhood. When the soul identifies exclusively with its attributes through egoic 'attachment' to them, it supplants its true nature, its higher Self. Its true individuality is merely an aspect of

the higher Self, discernible by ‘detachment’ from the ego and its attachments, and the resulting transcendence is the source of its dignity. In this understanding, expressions of individuality are ‘natural’ only within the bounds of dignity – restated, individuality is normatively in alignment with our common humanity, and exists to serve dignified ends. This is important with regard to understanding two key ideas in political theory: freedom and equality, discussed below. In Tradition, these are subject to a harmonizing ‘balance,’ the Quranic *mizan* (*Surah Ar-Rabman*, 55:7-9), the normative limit of the nature which Man is proscribed from corrupting. Any transgression of this limit is not ‘individuality’ (which is normatively associated with the Pontifical Man, the bridge between Earth and Heaven), but ‘individualism’ (associated with the Promethean Man, who is subversive and defiant of the norms of Heaven).

Third, freedom and equality as aspects of dignity. Most political theories focus on freedom and equality as key political ideas, which are also core values of dignity. But if disconnected from their ontological source, freedom and equality in fact undermine human dignity. A brief discussion will illustrate the point. The human condition is characterized by a tension between interdependence and independence, and their disharmony can erode the foundation of dignity that is vital for a healthy political culture. People want freedom, yet live in a world of limitation where individual freedoms and their putative rights must coexist with those of others, based on the principle of equality. Freedom exists in tension with itself as well as with equality. These tensions derive, first, from the fact that, by its very nature, freedom opposes restraint and therefore one’s own freedom can oppose that of another. Plural freedoms also imply plural rights, and these can clash. Thus, one person’s freedom of expression may offend another’s freedom of religion. This raises a question about whether there is a pluralistic basis for harmonizing clashing rights and freedoms. Second, unbridled freedoms feed on themselves and tend towards their own destruction. This raises a question about the extent to which freedoms call for regulated restraint and whether there is an objective basis for such restraint. Third, transgressive freedom opposes the dignity which is the bedrock of both freedom and equality. This raises a question about the essential meaning of human dignity, its relationship with equality and its compatibility with freedom. And fourth, equality too can be transgressive where it seeks to homogenize society



or where consensus ousts principle and compromises dignity. This raises a question about the criterion for political authority, whether it is a matter of consensus or of principle; and, if the latter, there is a need to define the relevant governing principles. The four basic questions, concerning pluralism, objectivity, dignity, and authority, are interrelated, and centre on a metaphysical understanding of human nature, outlined earlier, and on placing the normative bounds of freedom and equality in dignity.

Modernist values have lost sight of the sacred as the foundation of dignity, and are therefore characterized by a loss of verticality. This can be seen in equality's reductive egalitarianism which is skeptical of hierarchy and of pluralistic authority, and in freedom's penchant for individualism. Liberalist excesses, if not tolerated, are often simply countered by imposed norms which, though they might compel social order, are inimical to the political good. Where rulers seek to restrain individual behaviours through public regulation, there is a risk of their undermining freedom, individuality and human dignity. Both over-regulation and under-regulation can lead to undesirable outcomes. Too little regulation for the sake of preserving freedom can have the effect of licensing its excesses, while too much regulation for the sake of a homogenizing egalitarianism can corrode dignity by promoting the erasure of individuality. Liberalism, understood simply as the championing of individualistic rights and freedoms, and conservatism, simply as the imposition of uniformizing norms, can compromise dignity by failing to balance individual freedoms with the common good. The challenge, then, as the epigraph from the former Swedish Prime Minister, Olof Palme suggests, is to optimize freedom and equality by an equilibrium that upholds their dignity – and to do so, as we argue below, in dignified ways by seeking informed public discourse and civic participation in promoting the common good.

Politics is much more than the art of cooperative reciprocity and mutual restraint. More profoundly, it is about the reciprocity that derives not merely from expediency (as reflected in 'social contract' or utilitarian justifications of politics) but from caring. The empathic dimension of politics therefore transcends the simple calculus of cooperative behaviour; this is because, as we have argued, human nature has a metaphysical identity, an inherent unity and an ontological bond of human dignity.

This dimension of humane caring circumscribes and regulates both individualistic forms of freedom and homogenizing versions of equality. The regulation of dignity functions based on two principles that are instilled in our primordial nature: verticality and complementarity. Freedom's transgressive tendency of intrinsic exclusivism is normatively restrained by the principle of metaphysical hierarchy, or *verticality*, by which the lower impulses in Man (represented by the egoic and inciting soul) are restrained when the soul upbraids itself and heeds the call of its better nature (the Spirit), which is loving and compassionate, and, by yielding to it, attains peace. And equality's tendency of extrinsic exclusivism to reduce difference to sameness is normatively restrained by the principle of harmonization, or *complementarity*, by which the unique threads of our individuality are woven creatively into the tapestry of our common interests. Both these principles are rooted in the connectedness and caring that reflect dignity. Hierarchy therefore is subject to the fiduciary principle of *noblesse oblige* so that, stated in political terms, there is a reciprocal bond between the rulers and the ruled to achieve cooperative government for the common good. Harmonization, or the quest for 'wholeness,' for a normative 'balance' where 'the Whole is greater than the sum of its parts,' is subject to the principle of pluralism (discussed below) so that, stated in political terms, our differences become our strengths and all elements of the polity are incentivized to cooperate reciprocally for the common good.

These principles form the natural contours of the Spirit and are reflected in the religious order as in the normative social order. *Verticality* (the conforming of the lower to the prototype of the higher) is reflected in the adage 'as above, so below' or echoed in the phrase from the Lord's Prayer, 'on earth as it is in heaven,' which accords normative rights to the higher metaphysical order. This idea of hierarchic governance is expressed microcosmically in the Hindu/Greek metaphor of the charioteer, representing the Spirit/Intellect (*Buddhi, Nous*), who holds the reins of discursive reason to guide the unruly steeds of the senses (*Katba Upanishad*, 3:3-3:10; *Bhagavad Gita*, 3:43, Plato's *Phaedrus*, 246b, 253d-254e). This is the essential image of political hierarchy: that deference is due to the compassionate wisdom of the Intellect, reflected in the authority of the good ruler and the norms of government which respect human dignity, the common good and cooperative individuality.

Without hierarchy, the basis of a just order is lacking. In the words of Shakespeare from *Troilus and Cressida*, 'Take but degree away, untune that string, / And, hark, what discord follows!' Equally important to good order is reciprocal harmony. *Complementarity* (the outward expression of inward harmony) is reflected in the principle that 'opposites meet' (*coincidentia oppositorum*). This principle of equilibrium expresses the idea that diversity has a harmonizing matrix which is achieved only through collaborative mutuality. Reciprocity is crucial for political harmony where differences are not sought to be resolved coercively but through pluralistic cooperation. This requires a basis in caring that comes from an understanding of interconnection and wholeness - in other words, a sense of the sacred.

Fourth, principled pluralism. Because diversity and difference are necessary aspects of existence, politics requires harmonious ways of addressing them. While traditional methods seek to apply objective principles to changing contexts by assimilating 'otherness' within the hierarchies of principality, modernist values, by contrast, lacking the perspective of the sacred, are subjective and relativistic and therefore tend to address conflicts reductively. The politics of dignity, rooted in the sacred values of connectedness and caring, views difference and individuality as aspects of a unifying, though planimetric, matrix, the all-embracing Spirit, and employs pluralistic discourse to curb relativistic and reductive tendencies and keep behaviour within the bounds of humane conduct. It therefore accepts not only the that there are diverse perspectives and changing contexts but also that there are different levels of perception, which need not be reconciled reductively by excluding other planes but instead by accepting difference as aspects - or rungs on a ladder - of a metaphysical hierarchy. Such an understanding calls for an appreciation of what Rabbi Jonathan Sacks termed 'the dignity of difference.' In view of that mutual respect, it also calls for a pluralistic dialogue among different viewpoints, and a quest for harmonizing intellectual principles rooted in the ethics of dignity. While metaphysical principles may be universal, their application in different contexts may vary and may even appear outwardly contradictory. Often the understanding of a principle's particular application will be a process of context-based discovery through engagement and dialogue. The politics and ethics of dignity therefore call for dialogue through which intellectual principles

reveal themselves through creative applications in specific contexts. The praxis of pluralism as a process thus requires the engaged and informed civic participation in political life of diverse stakeholders so that their respective interests can be represented, heard and, through creative engagement, harmonized. This requires mutual seeking and patient conversation rather than the push to convert or coerce. Above all, it requires a commitment to the common good. This is vital for the functioning of a sustainable democratic process.

Gilbert K. Chesterton once astutely observed, ‘When people begin to ignore human dignity, it will not be long before they begin to ignore human rights.’ The politics of dignity requires the assurance of integrity as the foundation for human rights, because ‘having a right’ is based not on a relativistic claim to entitlement but on ‘being right’ – and therefore on the ontology of truth. In other words, a human right is based on the common humanity that constitutes our inner worth. And, for the sake of dignity, the assertion of a right requires, as we have argued, a process of consultation and persuasion, of public conversation guided by rational and considerate discussions to internalize societal norms rather than having recourse to coercion to resolve conflicts, or to the imposition of non-internalized laws from ‘above.’ A normative politics is also incompatible with political indoctrination, media manipulation or mass distractions from ‘below’, which impede integral freedom. Where societies are subjected to undue influence, they will lack the political autonomy, or conditions for meritocratic participation, necessary for political legitimacy and sustainable social cohesion. While it may be easier to compel behaviour or appeal to self-interest to achieve political goals than to advocate the common good, this will inevitably lead to the decoupling of politics and dignity. And when politics is deracinated and operates primarily on the basis of self-interest – even aggregated self-interest, as in the case of democracies – instead of promoting dignity, it will tend to degrade society as a whole. It will become tribalistic and polarized, conflating rights with entitlements that are divorced from the common good. It will empower special lobbies coalescing around narrow interests and exclusivist identity politics instead of around humanistic ideals rooted in dignity. At its worst, it will abandon dialogue and decency and the goals of honourable living, and inevitably devolve into polarized conflict.

We have argued that politics must be wedded to human dignity. It must look beyond self-interest to the broader welfare of one's 'neighbour,' of those with whom one is privileged to share this world. For the sake of human dignity, one's concern for the betterment of one's own life should be expanded to seeking to better the lives of all – through mutual empowerment, the sharing of wealth to promote honourable living, fair access to resources and opportunities, and for the sustainable material, social, environmental and spiritual uplift of all. While we are far from advocating simplistically reducing politics to religion, which, as we have stated, can sometimes exhibit the same deleterious symptoms as deracinated politics, we should remember that both politics and religion have a common foundation in the sacred values that bind them: of connectedness and caring, of human kinship and the ethics of dignity.