

The Superiority of Western Values in Eight Minutes

By: Ibn Warraq

*In a public debate in London against Tariq Ramadan, Ibn Warraq was given eight minutes to argue the superiority of Western values. Here is his defense of the West, which forms the basis for his new book, **Why the West is Best: A Muslim Apostate's Defense of Liberal Democracy**.*

The great ideas of the West—rationalism, self-criticism, the disinterested search for truth, the separation of church and state, the rule of law, equality before the law, freedom of conscience and expression, human rights, liberal democracy—together constitute quite an achievement, surely, for any civilization. This set of principles remains the best and perhaps the only means for all people, no matter what race or creed, to live in freedom and reach their full potential.^[1] Western values—the basis of the West's self-evident economic, social, political, scientific and cultural success—are clearly superior to any other set of values devised by mankind. When Western values have been adopted by other societies, such as Japan or South Korea, their citizens have reaped benefits.

Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness: this triptych succinctly defines the attractiveness and superiority of Western civilization. In the West we are free to think what we want, to read what we want, to practice our religion, to live as we choose. Liberty is codified in human rights, a magnificent Western creation but also, I believe, a universal good. Human Rights transcend local or ethnocentric values, conferring equal dignity and value on all humanity, regardless of sex, ethnicity, sexual preference, or religion. At the same time, it is in the West that human rights are most respected.

It is the West that has liberated women, racial minorities, religious minorities, and gays and lesbians, recognizing their rights. The notions of freedom and human rights were present at the dawn of Western civilization, as ideals at least, but have gradually come to fruition through supreme acts of self-criticism. Because of its exceptional capacity for self-criticism, the West took the initiative in abolishing slavery; the calls for abolition did not resonate even in black Africa, where rival African tribes took black prisoners to be sold as slaves in the West.

Today, many non-Western cultures follow customs and practices that are clear violations of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948). In many countries, especially Islamic ones, you are not free to read what you want. Under sharia, or Islamic law, women are not free to marry whom they wish, and their rights of inheritance are circumscribed. Sharia, derived from the Koran and the practice and

sayings of Muhammad, prescribes barbaric punishments such as stoning to death for adultery. It calls for homosexuals and apostates to be executed. In Saudi Arabia, among other countries, Muslims are not free to convert to Christianity, and Christians are not free to practice their faith. The Koran is not a rights-respecting document.

Under Islam, life is a closed book. Everything has been decided for you, the dictates of sharia and the whims of Allah set strict limits on the possible agenda of your life. In the West, we have the choice to pursue our desires and ambitions. We are free as individuals to set the goals and determine the contents of our own lives, and to decide what meaning to give to our lives. As Roger Scruton remarks, "The glory of the West is that life is an open book."[\[2\]](#) The West has given us the liberal miracle of individual rights and responsibility and merit. Rather than the chains of inherited status, Western societies offer unparalleled social mobility. The West, Alan Kors writes, "is a society of ever richer, more varied, more productive, more self-defined, and more satisfying lives."[\[3\]](#)

Instead of the mind-numbing certainties and dictates of Islam, Western civilization offers what Bertrand Russell called liberating doubt.[\[4\]](#) Even the process of politics in the West involves trial and error, open discussion, criticism, and self-correction.[\[5\]](#) This quest for knowledge, no matter where it leads, a desire inherited from the Greeks, has produced an institution that is rarely equaled outside the West: the university. And the outside world recognizes this superiority of Western universities. Easterners come to the West to learn not only about the sciences developed in the last five hundred years, but also about their own cultures, about Eastern civilizations and languages. They come to Oxford and Cambridge, to Harvard and Yale, to Heidelberg and the Sorbonne to acquire their doctorates because these degrees confer prestige unrivalled by similar credentials from Third World countries.

Western universities, research institutes, and libraries are created to be independent institutions where the pursuit of truth is conducted in a spirit of disinterested inquiry, free from political pressures. The basic difference between the West and the Rest might be summed up as a difference in epistemological principles. Behind the success of modern Western societies, with their science and technology, and their open institutions, lies a distinct way of looking at the world, interpreting it, and rectifying problems: by lifting them out of the religious sphere and treating them empirically, finding solutions in rational procedures. The whole edifice of modern science is one of Western man's greatest gifts to the world.[\[6\]](#) The West is responsible for almost every major scientific discovery of the last 500 hundred years, from heliocentrism and the telescope, to electricity, to computers.

The West has given the world the symphony and the novel. A culture that engendered the spiritual creations of Mozart and Beethoven, Wagner and Schubert, of Raphael and Michelangelo, Leonardo Da Vinci and Rembrandt does not need lessons in spirituality from societies whose vision of heaven resembles a cosmic brothel stocked with virgins for men's pleasure.

The West gave us the Red Cross, Doctors without Borders, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and many other manifestations of the humanitarian impulse. It is the West that provides the bulk of the aid to beleaguered Darfur, while Islamic countries are conspicuous by their absence.

The West does not need lectures on the superior virtue of societies where women are kept in subjection, endure genital mutilation, are married off against their will at the age of nine, have acid thrown on their faces or are stoned to death for alleged adultery, or where human rights are denied to those regarded as belonging to lower castes.^[7] The West does not need sanctimonious homilies from societies that cannot provide clean drinking water or sewage systems for their populations, that cannot educate their citizens, but leave 40-50 percent of them illiterate, that make no provisions for the handicapped, that have no sense of the common good or civic responsibility, that are riddled with corruption.

No Western politician would be able to get away with the kind of racist remarks that are tolerated in the Third World, such as the anti-Semitic diatribes of the Malaysian leader Mahathir Mohamad. Instead, there would be calls for resignation, both from Third World leaders and from Western media and intellectuals. Double standards? Yes, but also a tacit acknowledgement that we expect higher ethical standards from the West.

The Ayatollah Khomeini once famously said there are no jokes in Islam. The West is able to look at its own foibles and laugh, even make fun of its own fundamental principles. There is no Islamic equivalent to *Monty Python's Life of Brian*. Can we look forward to seeing *The Life of Mo* anytime in the future?

The rest of the world recognizes the virtues of the West in concrete ways. As Arthur Schlesinger remarked, "When Chinese students cried and died for democracy in Tiananmen Square, they brought with them not representations of Confucius or Buddha but a model of the Statue of Liberty."^[8] Millions of people risk their lives trying to get to the West—not to Saudi Arabia or Iran or Pakistan. They flee from theocratic or other totalitarian regimes to find tolerance and freedom in the West, where life is an open book.

[1] Bruce Thornton. "Golden Threads: Former Muslim Ibn Warraq Stands Up for the West," *City Journal*, August 17, 2007.

[2] Roger Scruton. "The Glory of the West is that Life is an Open Book," *Sunday Times*, May 27, 2007.

[3] Alan Charles Kors, Can There be an 'After Socialism'? in [Social Philosophy and Policy](#), 2003; 20 (1) pp.1-17 .

[4] Bertrand Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy*, London: Williams & Norgate, [1st edn.1912] Chapter XV.

[5] Roger Scruton, "The Defense of the West," A Lecture given at the Columbia Political Union, New York, Thursday, April 14th, 2005.

[6] Caroline Cox & John Marks, *The 'West', Islam and Islamism: Is Ideological Islam Compatible with Liberal Democracy?* (London: Civitas, 2003) pp.12-13.

[7] A.M.Schlesinger, Jr. *The Disuniting of America. Reflections on a Multicultural Society* (New York: Norton, 1992) p.128.

[8] Ibid., p.129.