

Exclusive Interview with Iranian Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Shirin Ebadi

„Light the Fire of Peace“

Mrs. Ebadi, why don't you, a convinced Muslim, wear a headscarf here in Austria?

Because I don't have to! In Iran I do because it is required by law. This is the law I want to change, because I think the government is not to be in charge of forcing women to cover their heads. We'd much rather teach women to use their heads to think!

- Are you free to say in your home country, too, what you say here?

I am a lawyer and I know how to deal with words. In Iran I say it in a different way...

- Talking about headscarves: Some countries like France and Germany have passed a law denying women the right to wear a headscarf at school. Do you agree with that?

No. Because I reject any kind of force. Every woman should be free to decide what she wears and why.

- To many the headscarf is a symbol of oppressing women in Islam. And at our schools you are dealing with self-determined, conscious young people...

If in your countries the veil is considered a manifestation of fundamentalism you would have to abolish the teachers' long beards, too, for the long beard is also regarded as a symbol of it. The truth is that prohibiting the headscarf actually bases on a prejudice against Islam, and prejudices are dangerous. For they bar the view to the rest...

- Excuse me, but the plight of discrimination against women in Islamic countries is a fact!

Yes, but the origin of this suffering is not found in Islam, it lies in patriarchy. There the ruling groups interpret religion in a way that always puts women at a disadvantage. Those people really have to stop misusing Islam for their own corrupt and pernicious interests! For they rule against the people's will. The majority of the Iranian people wants to have peace and reforms.

- What do you answer to somebody stating that Islam and human rights are incompatible?

That he is wrong. Islam is a religion of equality. Islam is a peaceful religion. It condemns dictatorship, violence, and terror. In the Islamic countries the human rights are violated for political rather than religious reasons.

- But it is exactly this system which provides a good foundation for extremism and terror.

I deeply regret that selected Islamic groups do display this readiness to apply violence. But saying that violence is a characteristic of Islam would make things too easy. Did you forget already what happened in Bosnia and what is happening in Palestine? Did you forget Bush's high-handedness when he tried to legitimate his war against Iraq with references to the Bible?

- How does a Nobel Peace laureate feel in a world where children are taken hostage, relief organizations' staff are abducted and decapitations of foreigners in Iraq are shown live on television?

The Drama at Beslan has shaken me in such a way that I was not able to sleep for 48 hours. I just couldn't make myself believe that something like that would happen in the 21st century. I was asking myself: Where does all this lead to?

- The answer?

The answer lies in injustice, in that social imbalance which constitutes the root of terror.

- How can the spiral of violence be stopped?

Listen to the voices of the oppressed peoples. Stop ignoring those who have neither opportunities nor any kind of future in this world. As long as we do not manage to understand this there will be no world peace.

- Is the desire for peace not just wishful thinking anyway?

In times like these it may be utopia, and you and I might not live to see that anymore. But a long time ago abolishing slavery was utopia as well. If people had not been fighting for it tirelessly it would never have become reality. This applies to peace, too.

- In Iran you were forced to resign from your position of judge and imprisoned several times due to supposedly "staining" the public opinion. Is this the price you have to pay for your activities?

Every day I receive threats from fundamentalists. When I give speeches in Iran they are disturbed by fundamentalists. They regard me as a heretic--but I am a convinced Muslim.

- Isn't the battle you are fighting futile?

Oh no. I feel like somebody who runs a marathon while carrying a torch...

- What kind of fire is that?

It is the fire of peace that has been lit here. With this fire I pass everybody who blocks my way. I don't know yet when I will pass on the fire, and I don't know who to. I only know that I have to keep running...

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Mother Courage of Islam

In 2003 the Iranian lawyer and human rights activist, visiting Austria at the moment, was the first Muslim to be awarded the Nobel Prize in Peace, which exists since 1891. She was also the first female judge in the history of Iran but was forced to resign in 1979 after the revolution. Since then she has been fighting especially for children, women and refugees.

The convinced Muslim is considered the voice of reformers, a „Mother Courage“ of Islam. Ebadi is advocating a new interpretation of this religion--an interpretation compatible with fundamental human rights and freedom. She wants to give Islam a more open face.

The German publishing house Herder-Spektrum has published a fascinating portrait of this woman and her dramatic battle: „Gott ist mit den Furchtlosen“ (*God Is with the Fearless*) by Katajun Amirpur.