

The Voltaire Prize for Tolerance, International Understanding and Respect for Differences in 2019

Acceptance speech from Prof. Dr. Ahmad Milad Karimi

Dear Mr. President,
Dear esteemed colleagues,
Ladies and gentlemen,

With humility and gratitude to the University of Potsdam, the distinguished jury, and the Friede Springer Foundation, I accept the honor of the Voltaire Prize, to which I do not feel myself to be equal. Yet for me this prize represents more a mandate for the future than it does an appreciation of the past. The actual charm of an acceptance speech, however, is that I may express in words the gratitude with which this honor completely fills me. A successful life is defined by gratitude. Since our flight from Afghanistan, I have repeatedly been surrounded and supported by people, mostly by my teachers from the various schools I attended, who always saw more than a nameless young man without a past in the face of a fifteen-year-old refugee who could not even speak German. Who is a refugee from distant Afghanistan? We currently face global challenges in the form of crises that have forced millions of people to flee their homes. In truth, there are not 60 million refugees, nor hundreds of thousands, or even thousands; there is only one refugee, one child, with a name, with an age, with a face, and with a history. Each of them braved war, above all the inner conflict in which all wars assemble, all of the scars and memories, all of the losses and desires. Experiences with refugees represent one of the moving experiences that we in Europe are going through again, now, after decades. We go beyond virtual reality by becoming part of a reality that we otherwise banish from our lives. Refugees were always those who were somewhere else. War unfolded on our television screens. It is therefore a surprising turn of events that flight has come home to us, that it has taken hold of us. Moreover: we are becoming aware of our responsibility and freedom in a vivid, penetrating way. Have we become somewhat weary of our freedom? We value it, but as a condition alongside other things around which we circle in everyday life. Yet freedom knows no alternatives, and flight is not just a negative moment of freedom, to name the highest ideal of the Enlightenment to which Voltaire was supremely committed, as a liberation from the claws of fundamentalism, dictatorships, war and violence. In positive terms, freedom means, in the same breath, the freedom to live, to create, to the future, to design new things. This is a European idea. Europe, however, is overburdened with the European idea, at least challenged, whenever we view refugees not first as people, but rather as a problem requiring administration. When we speak of caps and how high or low they should be set, we are talking about the quantification of human beings. What is Europe doing with the person who is no longer allowed to come here because the limit has been reached? Will this person have a name, a history, a face? Isn't this person's name Walter Benjamin, Stefan Zweig, Bertolt Brecht, Herta Müller, Thomas Mann, or Alfred Döblin? It is in crisis that a transcendence emerges that cuts across every border. Will Europe leave this person to stand before a Kafkaesque law? Never before has man taken possession of reality in such an intensive and dense presence. And never before was the degradation of people as refugees such a deeply shocking reality as when a refugee child lies dead on the sea shore, waves lapping at its body. No border is worth protecting unless human beings are protected first. Flight actually has a secret name, encircled by the culture of the Enlightenment: the human being. Discovering your own flight is challenging, because we all flee from our own tasks, goals and dreams. When we discover our inner refugee, care for him and let him live, we can open up our own stance towards the others, who are always ourselves. This is because self-respect arises from respecting others. Indeed, the

Enlightenment was not some ephemeral epoch of intellectual history that once existed and that we remember from time to time. The Enlightenment is a *culture*, because it cultivates humanity, goes to the heart of everything, speaks of man's dignity, his unconditionality, his freedom, his self-determination, and in such a way that we will never get over it. If being human is a narrative, then the human being is a story that never ends.

Among the crises that confront us around the world today, we must include – as Voltaire emphasizes in his “Treatise on Tolerance” – religious fanaticism, especially in the name of my religion, in the name of Islam. It would be childish to claim that all of the cruel, inhumane, misogynistic and destructive campaigns, violent deeds and terrorist attacks have nothing to do with Islam. The fear of this Islam is justified: it seeks to regulate and rule all areas of life, in a totalitarian manner, often with Muslim victims as well. Of course, Islam as it actually exists is also trapped in cultural spaces that often suffer from cultural poverty, a lack of educational opportunities, a lack of security in everyday life, economic hopelessness, crumbling infrastructure and the absence of peace. Islam is neither the solution to all of these problems, yet nor is it the cause of all of these problems. This totalitarian claim, however, that extends over political, judicial and social life and does not distinguish between culture and religion, marks the most primitive, the most instable way of reading Islam, in the form of Islamism. Islamism does not interpret religion in ideological terms; it reads its ideology as a religion. When Islam becomes Islamized, then the Islamists have dispensed with religion. This degrades Islam to an instrument of politics and ideology. They are not living in a way that issues *from Islam*; they are living *with Islam*. This fine distinction is immensely important. Muslims who live their lives in consonance with their religion see an open space between themselves and the Koran, a gap that I call the *third space*. This third space means that I cannot hold myself to the Koran to the letter, but only to an understanding of the Koran, to the spirit of the Koran. The third space between me and God's revelation is the space of understanding, the space of plurality, the space of doubt, the space of rectification, a space to quarrel with God, a space of tolerance. Whoever practices understanding admits in principle that someone else can understand the same thing differently. The rigid idea that someone could adhere to the Koran without recourse to this third space is not only a religious sin (blasphemy), it is also a hermeneutic error that is contrary to the Enlightenment. This contradicts the reality of an Islam that was always shaped traditionally by ambiguity and a variety of views, interpretations and readings that, in an argumentative competition for reasonable plausibility, were fought over and existed side-by-side, all the while striving for mutual regard. With the openness and all of the plural and polyphonous character of Islam, it is a religion with clear, unmistakable and uncompromising conditions: the most striking examples are justice, peace, protection for the suffering, equal treatment of human beings regardless of their skin color, of their sex, of their sexual orientation, of their national affiliation, protection of the freedoms of speech and religion. So whoever allows this third space to waste away, or whoever completely dispenses with it, lives as if the blood of God flowed in his veins. We can therefore show no tolerance for this attitude, because tolerance would betray itself in this case. What is missing here the most is an insight into one's own fallibility, and thereby the first basic rule of tolerance according to Voltaire, who wrote: “What is tolerance? It is the consequence of humanity. We are all formed of frailty and error; let us pardon reciprocally each other's folly – that is the first law of nature.” What distinguishes the culture of the Enlightenment, in an Islamic sense, is its *epistemic humility*. It is even more important to make this differentiation. Because in the moment in which we no longer distinguish between Islam as a pluralistic religion and the ideology of Islamism, to trace *the* Islam to Islamism, we accept the worldview of those whose worldview we decisively reject. Crises and challenges are not unusual in the history of humanity. According to Hegel, world history is “not the soil in which happiness grows. The periods of happiness in it are blank pages.” As the wonderful Chinese curse puts it, “may you live in interesting

times.” Today, more than ever, we live in an “interesting time” in which wars, climate catastrophes, poverty, intolerance, fanaticism, nationalism, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia and especially fascistic populism are celebrating a boom. The virtues of differentiation, circumspection and consideration in thinking and action, and respecting difference are therefore no longer a matter of course, because a right-wing populist narrative has become socially acceptable that proclaims the impotence of precision to be a virtue. The reasons for this narrative empowerment of reality are certainly diverse, but, following Voltaire, we can state that all of the aforementioned virtues are everything but self-evident. I am speaking here not about the epoch of the Enlightenment, but of the culture of the Enlightenment, because culturality means incessant work, described by Immanuel Kant as “arduous,” as well as mediation, which we owe to the younger generations. This is why Kant also negates the view that there was once an enlightened age; instead, there is only time or times of Enlightenment that know no alternative, because it does not want to turn the Enlightenment into a new ideology; instead, it wants bondage where freedom is offered; simplification when a sense for complexity is required; repression where self-determination is needed; and contempt where seeing eye-to-eye is necessary, to call it by name and reveal its instabilities.

The culture of Enlightenment can counter populism and right-wing populism in different ways. But university education displays the most elegant and long-term effective form for opposing them. This is because the university is characterized and sustained by learning about complexities and diversities that we rarely encounter. This makes the university an outstanding place for sensitizing, cultivating and the particular appeal of dealing with complexities and living with them. In this spirit, the freedom of research and teaching, to put it briefly, is that scholarship is a good, of value in itself, uncompromising and uncorrupted. Whenever we talk about Europe today, we are speaking of a Europe based in knowledge and culture, meaning the culture of the sciences as well. And if Europe has a foundation in scholarship, then this body of knowledge is fundamentally shaped by Muslim tradition – in mathematical, natural scientific, and above all philosophical terms. In the course of establishing Islamic theology as a discipline at German universities, the question has arisen as to the intellectual situation of Islam. This is an explosive question because Islam is seeking with determination to rediscover itself in the European context. The proper place for Islam to be elevated as a religion in the course of its academic self-interpretation to theology, is the university. If the university is a place that produces autonomous individuals and world-citizens, as the educational ideal of Wilhelm von Humboldt anticipates, then we must inquire into the criteria that guide the creation of these predicates. An autonomous individual should be an individual who attains self-determination and maturity through the use of reason. The world citizenry is that collective group that brings together autonomous individuals, regardless of their social and cultural socialization. Humboldt described it so: “Life, in the higher sense of the term, means to transform as much of the world as possible into one’s own person.” Efforts should aim to work as comprehensively as possible on the world and there to unfold as a human subject. University education – above all whenever religious thinking is at issue – should fulfill the condition that plays a constitutive role in every science: the freedom, described by Humboldt in 1792, as “the first and indispensable condition” of education. The university-based discipline of Islamic theology can therefore be understood as a counter-project to populist and fundamentalist movements by addressing the basic questions of religion, in a historical and systematic way, and inscribing the results into life, creating understanding, and promoting religious maturity. Yet the voice of understanding, the voice of respect, is often quiet and gentle, without agitation; it requires a deep breath, just as scholarly activity requires a long genesis and maturation. This is why the inventory of the culture of the Enlightenment includes quietly shaping the third space that arises out of epistemic humility, in order to prevent tolerance from being worn out. But the future cannot lead to

tolerance in the rush to build bridges, but to become a bridge oneself in a responsible gesture that goes beyond tolerance.

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