

THE FAREWELL SERMON AS A CHARTER OF HUMAN RIGHTS:A COMPARATIVE STUDY WITH CONTEMPORARY INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS THOUGHT

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Abstract

Human rights are considered among the most important subjects of modern intellectual, political, and legal discourse. Although the formal codification of human rights is generally associated with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), many scholars maintain that the foundations of justice, equality, dignity, and social responsibility had already been presented in earlier religious traditions. Among the most remarkable examples is the Farewell Sermon of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, delivered during the Farewell Pilgrimage in 10 AH / 632 CE.

This article examines the Farewell Sermon as a charter of human rights and compares its principles with contemporary international human rights thought. The study focuses on themes such as sanctity of life, equality, women's rights, racial harmony, economic justice, and social accountability. Using analytical and comparative methodology, the article argues that the Farewell Sermon articulated universal principles of justice and human dignity centuries before the emergence of modern international human rights frameworks. The study also highlights important similarities and differences between Islamic and secular approaches to human rights.

Keywords: Farewell Sermon, Human Rights, Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Equality, Justice, Islamic Law, Human Dignity

Introduction

Human rights occupy a central position in contemporary global discourse. International institutions, political organizations, legal scholars, and social reformers continuously emphasize the protection of human dignity, equality, justice, and liberty. The twentieth century witnessed the emergence of formal international human rights instruments, particularly the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), adopted by the United Nations in 1948. [1] However, the concept of human rights did not originate exclusively in the modern West. Religious traditions, philosophical schools, and ancient civilizations discussed issues relating to justice, equality, dignity, and social welfare long before the development of modern legal frameworks. Islam, in particular, introduced a comprehensive moral and social system in the seventh century that emphasized the sanctity of life, equality of humanity, social justice, and accountability before God.[2]

One of the most important declarations in Islamic history concerning human rights is the Farewell Sermon of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ. This sermon was delivered during the Prophet's final pilgrimage at the plain of Arafat in 632 CE before a gathering of more than one hundred thousand Muslims. [3] The sermon summarized the essential teachings of Islam and emphasized justice, equality, women's rights, racial harmony, and economic fairness.

The Farewell Sermon emerged in a society deeply affected by tribal conflict, racial discrimination, social inequality, and economic exploitation. Pre-Islamic Arabian society was largely organized around tribal superiority, revenge culture, and social hierarchy. Women were denied inheritance and social dignity, while weaker groups frequently suffered injustice and oppression. [4] Through the Farewell Sermon, the Prophet ﷺ challenged these practices and introduced ethical principles based upon justice, equality, and human dignity.

Several modern scholars have therefore described the Farewell Sermon as one of the earliest declarations of universal human rights. Muhammad Hamidullah argues that the sermon established fundamental principles concerning equality, property rights, and social justice that later became central themes in modern human rights discourse. [5]

This study aims to analyze the Farewell Sermon as a charter of human rights and compare its teachings with contemporary international human rights thought. The article also explores the relevance of the sermon in addressing present-day social and moral challenges.

Literature Review

The subject of human rights in Islam has attracted considerable scholarly attention in both Muslim and Western academic circles. Scholars have examined Islamic teachings concerning justice, equality, freedom, and social welfare from theological, legal, and comparative perspectives.

Abul A'la Maududi, in his influential work *Human Rights in Islam*, argues that Islam recognized universal human rights centuries before modern international law. According to Maududi, Islam granted rights such as protection of life, property, honor, and equality to all human beings irrespective of race or nationality. [6]

Muhammad Hamidullah also emphasizes the constitutional and human rights dimensions of early Islamic teachings. He maintains that the Farewell Sermon and the Charter of Madinah provided practical examples of legal and social justice in Islamic civilization. [7]

Mohammad Hashim Kamali discusses the Islamic understanding of rights in relation to modern legal frameworks. He explains that in Islam, rights are closely connected with duties and moral accountability before God. [8]

Western scholars have also studied Islamic contributions to human rights discourse. Ann Elizabeth Mayer notes that Islamic human rights discussions are rooted in religious ethics and differ from secular Western models in terms of philosophical foundations. [9]

Contemporary research articles have further explored the Farewell Sermon in relation to modern human rights principles. Abdul Razaq and Muhammad Usman Khalid compare the Farewell Sermon with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and conclude that many modern human rights principles are reflected in the sermon.

Similarly, Muhammad Omar Farooq argues that the Farewell Sermon universalized human inviolability and established principles transcending tribal and racial boundaries.

Despite these studies, there remains a need for a comprehensive and academically structured analysis comparing the Farewell Sermon with contemporary international human rights thought in a balanced and scholarly manner. This study seeks to contribute to that discussion.

Research Methodology

This research adopts analytical and comparative methodology. Primary Islamic sources, including Hadith collections and classical Islamic literature, are consulted to examine the content and historical context of the Farewell Sermon. Secondary sources such as books, journal articles, and modern human rights studies are also used. The comparative section evaluates the teachings of the Farewell Sermon alongside contemporary international human rights frameworks, particularly the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The study maintains an academic and descriptive approach while avoiding polemical or emotional language.

Historical Background of the Farewell Sermon

The Farewell Sermon was delivered during the Prophet Muhammad's ﷺ final pilgrimage, known as *Hajjat al-Wada'*, in the tenth year after Hijrah. Historians report that more than one hundred thousand Muslims gathered during this pilgrimage. [10]

The sermon was delivered at Mount Arafat on the ninth of Dhul Hijjah. The Prophet ﷺ addressed the Muslim community and summarized the essential teachings of Islam concerning faith, morality, justice, and social relations.

Ibn Hisham and Ibn Kathir record that the Farewell Pilgrimage represented the culmination of the Prophet's mission, during which Islam had already spread throughout most of Arabia. [11] The social conditions of Arabia before Islam were marked by tribal warfare, economic exploitation, racial discrimination, and oppression of weaker groups. Women possessed limited rights, tribal identity determined social status, and revenge often replaced justice. [12]

The Farewell Sermon challenged these conditions by establishing universal principles of equality, justice, sanctity of life, and social responsibility.

Sanctity of Human Life and Property

One of the central themes of the Farewell Sermon is the sanctity of human life and property. The Prophet ﷺ declared:

“Your blood, your property and your honor are sacred.” [13]

This declaration established the principle that human life possesses inherent dignity and protection. The Prophet ﷺ compared the sanctity of human life with the sanctity of the sacred month and sacred city, emphasizing that violating human rights constitutes a grave moral offense.

Modern international human rights law similarly recognizes the right to life as a fundamental human right. Article 3 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that every individual has the right to life, liberty, and security of person. [14]

The Farewell Sermon's emphasis on human dignity anticipated many later developments in human rights discourse. Khurshid Ahmad observes that Islam introduced the principle of inviolability of human life long before modern legal systems formally codified such rights. [15] The sermon also protected property rights by prohibiting unlawful appropriation and exploitation. The Prophet ﷺ emphasized that individuals are accountable for the property and rights of others, thereby promoting social trust and economic justice.

Equality and Elimination of Racial Discrimination

Another significant principle presented in the Farewell Sermon is racial and social equality. The Prophet ﷺ declared:

“No Arab has superiority over a non-Arab, nor a non-Arab over an Arab; neither white over black nor black over white except through piety.” [16]

This statement directly challenged the tribal and racial prejudices of pre-Islamic Arabia. Islamic teachings rejected superiority based upon race, ethnicity, lineage, or wealth and replaced it with the moral principle of piety and righteousness.

Modern human rights discourse similarly emphasizes equality and non-discrimination. Article 1 of the UDHR states that all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. [17] Muhammad Hamidullah notes that the Farewell Sermon established racial equality in an era when slavery, tribal superiority, and ethnic discrimination were widespread across many civilizations. [18] This principle remains particularly relevant in the contemporary world, where racism, ethnic nationalism, and discrimination continue to create social and political tensions.

Women's Rights in the Farewell Sermon

The Farewell Sermon also addressed the rights and dignity of women. The Prophet ﷺ instructed Muslims to treat women kindly and reminded men of their responsibilities toward them. [19] In pre-Islamic Arabia, women frequently suffered social injustice, lack of inheritance rights, and limited legal recognition. Islam introduced reforms concerning inheritance, marriage, consent, and family life.

The Farewell Sermon emphasized mutual rights and responsibilities within marriage. Rather than treating women merely as dependents, the sermon recognized them as individuals possessing dignity and rights. Contemporary human rights frameworks similarly emphasize gender equality and protection against discrimination. However, the Islamic perspective differs in certain respects because it combines rights with reciprocal moral obligations and family responsibilities.

Riffat Hassan argues that Islamic teachings regarding women must be understood within their historical context, where Islam significantly improved the status of women compared to prevailing social practices. [20]

Economic Justice and Prohibition of Exploitation

Economic justice forms another major dimension of the Farewell Sermon. The Prophet ﷺ abolished usury (*riba*) and condemned economic exploitation. Pre-Islamic Arabian society often exploited weaker individuals through excessive interest and unjust economic practices. Islam prohibited such exploitation and encouraged fairness, charity, and social welfare.

The Prophet ﷺ declared during the sermon that all forms of interest-based exploitation were abolished. [21] Modern human rights discussions increasingly recognize economic and social rights as essential components of human dignity. International frameworks emphasize fair wages, economic security, and protection against exploitation.

The Islamic perspective on economic justice differs from purely capitalist models because wealth is viewed not only as private property but also as a social trust carrying moral responsibilities. Zakat, charity, and welfare obligations aim to reduce inequality and strengthen social solidarity. Maududi argues that Islamic economic teachings establish a balance between individual ownership and collective welfare. [22]

Brotherhood and Social Responsibility

The Farewell Sermon strongly emphasized brotherhood and collective responsibility. The Prophet ﷺ reminded Muslims that they were members of one community and should avoid injustice, oppression, and hostility toward one another.

The sermon discouraged revenge, tribal conflict, and social division while promoting honesty, cooperation, and moral accountability.

Modern human rights discourse similarly emphasizes peaceful coexistence and social solidarity. However, Islamic teachings connect social responsibility directly with spiritual and moral accountability before God. According to Syed Abul Hasan Ali Nadwi, the Prophet ﷺ transformed Arabian society from tribal fragmentation into a morally conscious community based upon justice and brotherhood. [23]

Comparative Analysis with Contemporary Human Rights Thought

The Farewell Sermon and contemporary international human rights thought share several important principles:

Farewell Sermon	Contemporary Human Rights
Sanctity of life	Right to life
Equality of humanity	Equality before law
Protection of honor and property	Civil and legal rights
Women’s rights	Gender rights
Economic justice	Social and economic rights
Brotherhood and cooperation	Human solidarity

Despite these similarities, important differences also exist.

Modern human rights frameworks are generally secular and grounded in political philosophy and legal theory. In contrast, Islamic teachings derive rights from divine revelation and moral accountability before God.

Another important distinction concerns the relationship between rights and responsibilities. Contemporary liberal frameworks often emphasize individual autonomy, whereas Islamic teachings balance individual rights with social duties and moral obligations. Ann Elizabeth Mayer observes that Islamic human rights discourse cannot be fully understood outside its religious and ethical foundations. [24]

Contemporary Relevance of the Farewell Sermon

The principles of the Farewell Sermon remain highly relevant in the modern world. Contemporary societies continue to face problems such as racism, social inequality, economic exploitation, violence, and moral fragmentation. The sermon's emphasis on equality, justice, racial harmony, and human dignity provides important ethical guidance for addressing these challenges.

Modern scholars increasingly recognize that religious traditions can contribute valuable perspectives to contemporary human rights discussions. The Farewell Sermon presents a model in which rights are integrated with morality, spirituality, and social responsibility. In a world marked by conflict and discrimination, the sermon continues to offer a universal message of justice, compassion, and human dignity.

Conclusion

The Farewell Sermon of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ represents one of the most significant ethical and social declarations in human history. Delivered in the seventh century, it articulated principles concerning human dignity, equality, justice, women's rights, economic fairness, and social responsibility. The sermon challenged tribalism, racism, exploitation, and oppression while emphasizing the sanctity of life and the equality of humanity. Many principles that later became central to modern human rights discourse are reflected in the Farewell Sermon.

At the same time, important differences remain between Islamic and secular approaches to human rights, particularly concerning the source of rights and the relationship between rights and moral obligations.

The study concludes that the Farewell Sermon should not be viewed merely as a historical religious speech but as a timeless ethical charter with enduring relevance for contemporary discussions concerning justice, equality, and human dignity.

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