

# Islam and democracy

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- *A Comparative Approach  
to Islam and Democracy*

- *At the Threshold of  
a New Millennium*

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## **A Comparative Approach to Islam and Democracy**

Religion, particularly Islam, has become one of the most difficult subject areas to tackle in recent years. Contemporary culture, whether approached from the perspective of an-

thropology or theology, psychology or psychoanalysis, evaluates religion with empirical methods. On the one hand, religion is an inwardly experienced and felt phenomenon, one mostly related to life's per-

manent aspects. On the other, believers can see their religion as a philosophy, a set of rational principles, or mere mysticism. The difficulty increases in the case of Islam, for some Muslims and policy-makers consider and present it as a purely political, sociological, and economic ideology, rather than as a religion.

If we want to analyze religion, democracy, or any other system or philosophy accurately, we should focus on humanity and human life. From this

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perspective, religion in general and Islam in particular cannot be compared on the same basis with democracy or any other political, social, or economic system. Religion focuses primarily on the immutable aspects of life and existence, whereas political, social, and economic systems or ideologies concern only certain variable social aspects of our worldly life.

The aspects of life with which religion is primarily concerned are as valid today as they were at the dawn of humanity and will continue to be so in the future. Worldly systems change according to circumstances and so can be evaluated only according to their times. Belief in God, the hereafter, the prophets, the holy books, angels, and divine destiny have nothing to do with changing times. Likewise, worship and morality's universal and unchanging standards have little to do with time and worldly life.

Therefore, when comparing religion or Islam with democracy, we must remember that democracy is a system that is being continually developed and revised. It also varies according to the places and circumstances where it is practiced. On the other hand, religion has established immutable principles related to faith, worship and morality. Thus, only Islam's worldly aspects should be compared with democracy.

### **What Does Islam Offer as a Form of Government?**

The main aim of Islam and its unchangeable dimensions affect its rules governing the changeable as-

pects of our lives. Islam does not propose a certain unchangeable form of government or attempt to shape it. Instead, Islam establishes fundamental principles that orient a government's general character, leaving it to the people to choose the type and form of government according to time and circumstances. If we approach the matter in this light and compare Islam with today's modern liberal democracy, we will better understand the position of Islam and democracy with respect to each other.

Democratic ideas stem from ancient times. Modern liberal democracy was born in the American (1776) and French Revolutions (1789-99). In democratic societies, people govern themselves as opposed to being ruled by someone above. The individual has priority over the community in this type of political

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system, being free to determine how to live his or her own life. Individualism is not absolute, though. People achieve a better existence by living within a society and this requires that they adjust and limit their freedom according to the criteria of social life.

The Prophet says that all people are as equal as the teeth of a comb. Islam does not discriminate based on race, color, age, nationality, or physical traits. The Prophet declared: "You are all from Adam, and Adam is from soil. O servants of God, be brothers [and sisters]." Those who are born earlier have more wealth and power than others, or belong to certain families or ethnic groups have no inherent right to rule others.

## Power Lies in Truth

Islam also upholds the following fundamental principles:

1. Power lies in truth, a repudiation of the common idea that truth relies upon power.
2. Justice and the rule of law are essential.
3. Freedom of belief and rights to life, personal property, reproduction, and health (both mental and physical) cannot be violated.
4. The privacy and immunity of individual life must be maintained.
5. No one can be convicted of a crime without evidence, or accused and punished for someone else's crime.
6. An advisory system of administration is essential.

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***“God will not change the state of a people unless they change themselves [with respect to their belief, worldview, and lifestyle].”***

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All rights are equally important, and an individual's right cannot be sacrificed for society's sake. Islam considers a society to be composed of conscious individuals equipped with free will and having re-

sponsibility toward both themselves and others. Islam goes a step further by adding a cosmic dimension. It sees humanity as the “motor” of history, contrary to fatalistic approaches of some of the nineteenth century Western philosophies of history such as dialectical materialism and historicism. Just as every individual's will and behavior determine the outcome of his or her life in this world and in the hereafter, a society's progress or decline is determined by the will, worldview, and lifestyle of its inhabitants. The Qur'an says:

God will not change the state of a people unless they change themselves [with respect to their belief, worldview, and lifestyle]. (13:11)

In other words, each society holds the reins of its fate in its own hands. The prophetic tradition emphasizes this idea: “You will be ruled according to how you are” (Kanz al-‘Ummal, 6:89). This is the basic character and spirit of democracy, which does not conflict with any Islamic principle.

As Islam holds individuals and societies responsible for their own fate, people must be responsible for governing themselves. The Qur’an addresses society

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***“If a corrupt, sinful one brings you news [about others], investigate it so that you should not strike a people without knowing.”***

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with such phrases as: “O people!” and “O believers!” The duties entrusted to modern democratic systems are those that Islam refers to society and classifies, in order of importance, as “absolutely necessary, relatively necessary, and commendable to carry out.” The sacred text includes the following passages:

“Establish, all of you, peace” (2:208); “spend in the way of God and to the needy of the pure and good of what you have earned and of what We bring forth for you from earth” (2:267); “if some among your women are accused of indecency, you must have four witnesses [to prove it]” (4:15); “God commands you to give over the public trusts to the charge of those having the required qualities and to judge with justice when you judge be-

tween people” (4:58); “observe justice as witnesses respectful for God even if it is against yourselves, your parents and relatives” (4:135); “if they [your enemies] incline to peace [when you are at war], you also incline to it” (8:61); “If a corrupt, sinful one brings you news [about others], investigate it so that you should not strike a people without knowing” (49:6); “if two parties among the believers fight between themselves, reconcile them.” (49:9)

To sum up, the Qur’an addresses the whole community and assigns it almost all the duties entrusted to modern democratic systems.

People cooperate with one another by sharing these duties and establishing the essential foundations necessary to perform them. The government is composed of all of these foundations. Thus, Islam recommends a government based on a social contract. People elect the administrators and establish a council to debate common issues. Also, the society as a whole participates in auditing the administration. Especially during the rule of the first four caliphs (632-661), the fundamental principles of government mentioned above—including free election—were fully observed. The political system was transformed into a sultanate after the death of Ali, the fourth caliph, due to internal conflicts and to the global conditions at that time. Unlike under the caliphate, power in the sultanate was passed on through the sultan’s family. However, even though free elections were no longer held, societies maintained other principles that are at the core of today’s liberal democracy.

Islam is an inclusive religion. It is based on the belief in one God as the Creator, Lord, Sustainer, and Administrator of the universe. Islam is the religion of the whole universe. That is, the entire uni-

verse obeys the laws laid down by God, so everything in the universe is “Muslim” and obeys God by submitting to His laws. Even a person

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who refuses to believe in God or follows another religion has perforce to be a Muslim as far as his or her bodily existence is concerned. His or her entire life, from the embryonic stage to the body’s dissolution into dust after death, every tissue of his or her muscles, and every limb of his or her body follows the course prescribed for each by God’s law. Thus, in Islam, God, nature, and humanity are neither remote from each other nor are they alien to each other. It is God who makes Himself known to humanity through nature and humanity itself, and nature and humanity are two books (of creation) through each word of which God is known. This leads humankind to look upon everything as belonging to the same Lord, to whom it itself belongs, so that it regards nothing in the universe as alien. His sympathy, love, and service do not remain confined to the people of any particular race, color, or ethnicity. The Prophet summed this up with the command, “O servants of God, be brothers [and sisters]!”

### **Islam Recognizes All Religions**

A separate but equally important point is that Islam recognizes all religions previous to it. It accepts all the prophets and books sent to different peoples in different epochs of history. Not only does it accept them, but it also regards belief in them as an essential principle of being Muslim. By

doing so, it acknowledges the basic unity of all religions. A Muslim is at the same time a true follower of Abraham, Moses, David, Jesus, and of all other Hebrew prophets. This belief explains why both Christians and Jews enjoyed their religious rights under the rule of Islamic governments throughout history.

The Islamic social system seeks to form a virtuous society and thereby gain God's approval. It recognizes right, not force, as the foundation of social life. Hostility is unacceptable. Relationships must be based on belief, love, mutual respect, as-

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sistance, and understanding instead of conflict and realization of personal interest. Social education encourages people to pursue lofty ideals

and to strive for perfection, not just to run after their own desires. Right calls for unity, virtues bring mutual support and solidarity, and belief secures brotherhood and sisterhood. Encouraging the soul to attain perfection brings happiness in both worlds.

Democracy has developed over time. Just as it has gone through many different stages in the past, it will continue to evolve and to improve in the future. Along the way, it will be shaped into a more humane and just system, one based on righteousness and reality. If human beings are considered as a whole, without disregarding the spiritual dimension of their existence and their spiritual needs, and without forgetting that human life is not limited to this mortal life and that all people have a great craving for eternity, democracy could reach its peak of perfection and bring even more happiness to humanity. Islamic

principles of equality,  
tolerance, and justice  
can help it do just that.

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### **At the Threshold of a New Millennium**

As every dawn, every sunrise, and every upcoming spring signifies a new beginning and hope, so does every new century and every new millennium. In this respect, within the wheels of time over which we have no control, humanity has always sought a new spark of life, a breath as fresh as the wind of dawn, and has hoped and desired to step into light from darkness as easily as crossing a threshold.

We can only speculate as to when the original man and woman appeared on Earth, which is equated with the Heavens due to the divine art it exhibits, its ontological meaning, and its value largely coming from its chief inhabitant: humanity. According to the calendar we use today, we are at the threshold of the third millennium after the birth of Jesus, upon him be peace. However, since time revolves and advances in a helicoidal relativity, there are different measures of time in the world. For example, according to the measure of time that currently enjoys global acceptance, the world is about to cross the threshold of a new thousand-year period. According to the Jewish calendar, we are already in the second half of the eighth millennium. Within the Hindu timeframe, we are living in the Kali Yuga era. If we follow the Muslim calendar, we are approaching the end of the first half of the second millennium.

We should remember, however, the fact

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that each measure of time is nothing more than a relative measurement. While a 100-year period is assumed to be the measure for a century, the idea of a 60-year century, based on the life span of an average person, is also worth mentioning. From this point of view, we are already in the fourth millennium after the birth of Jesus, upon him be peace, and third millennium after the *hijrah*, which is the starting point of the Muslim calendar. I bring up this issue due to the spiritual discomfort engendered by the terrifying auguries believed to be associated with the upcoming millennium, especially in the West.

People live in perpetual hope, and thus are children of hope. At the instant they lose their hope, they also lose their “fire” of life, no matter if their physical existence continues. Hope is directly proportional to having faith. Just as winter constitutes one-fourth of a year, so the periods in a person’s or a society’s life corresponding to winter are also small. The gears of Divine acts revolve around such comprehensive wisdom and merciful purposes that just as the circulation of night and day builds one’s hope and revivifies one’s spirit, and every new year comes with expectations of spring, and summer, so too the disastrous periods are short and followed by happy times in both an individual’s life and a nation’s history.

This circulation of the “Days of God,” which is centered in Divine Wisdom, is neither a fear nor pessimism for those with faith, insight, and genuine perceptive faculties. Rather, it is a source of continuous reflection, remembrance, and thanksgiving for those having an apprehensive heart, inner perception, and the ability to hear. Just as a day develops in the heart of night, and just as winter furnishes the womb in which spring grows, so one’s life is purified, matures, and bears its expected fruits within this circulation. Also in this circulation, God-given

human abilities become aptitudes and talents, sciences blossom like roses and weave technology in the workbench of time, and humanity gradually approaches its predestined end.

Having stated this general view, which is neither personal nor subjective but rather an objective fact of human history, it should not be thought that we welcome either winter or winter-like events

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***“Unless God hampered some (of you) with some other (of you), the mosques, monasteries, and synagogues in which God is worshipped would have fallen into ruins.”***

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that correspond to sorrow, disease, and disaster. Despite the general fact that disease eventually increases the body’s resistance, strengthens the immune system, and drives medical progress, it is patholog-

ical and harmful. It is the same with terrestrial and celestial disasters. From a theological and moral point of view, they result from our sins and oppression, which are enough to shake the Earth and the Heavens, and from engaging in deeds that have been declared forbidden and despised by law and ethics (whether religious or secular). Even though they awaken people to their mistakes and negligence and provoke developments in geology, architecture, engineering, and related safety measures; even though they elevate the demolished belongings of believers to the level of charity, and the believers themselves to the level of martyrdom, these disasters cause much destruction and harm humanity.

In the same way, we read in the Qur’an:

Unless God hampered some (of you) with some other (of you), the mosques, monasteries, and

synagogues in which God is worshipped would have fallen into ruins. (22:40)

In other words, God would be so little known that men and women, who are inclined not to recognize anything superior to them and believe that their deeds will not be questioned in the Hereafter, would completely go astray, thereby making Earth unsuitable for human life. There is also the divine decree:

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***Human beings are mirrors for God's Names and Attributes, and therefore are distinguished from the rest of creation with the honor of being responsible for making Earth prosperous in His name.***

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You consider something as evil although it is good for you; you also consider something else as good although it is bad for you. (2:126)

For example, war is permissible. Although wars based on specific principles and with the intention of improving the existing situation may have benefits, they should not be demanded, since they bring harm; they leave behind ruined houses, destroyed families, and weeping orphans and widows.

Anyway, realities of life cannot be neglected, nor should they be ignored. Human beings are mirrors for God's Names and Attributes, and therefore are distinguished from the rest of creation with the honor of being responsible for making Earth prosperous in His name.

If they cannot grasp the wisdom and purposes behind any good or evil that is sent their way by their Creator, they cannot escape despair and pessimism. For them, as is seen in the Existen-

tialist literature, life turns into a meaningless process, existence into a purposeless vacuity, nonsense into the only criteria, suicide into a meritorious act, and death becomes the only inevitable reality.

### **The Basic Nature of Humanity**

After presenting the issues that constitute the basis of this subject as an introduction, we can switch to our considerations regarding the third millennium.

Human history began with two people who constituted the essence of humanity and complemented each other. People lived a tranquil life during this time of the original mother and father and the families that descended from them. They were a united society that had the same views and shared the same environment and lives.

From that day on, the essence of humanity has remained unchanged, and it will remain so. The realities surrounding their lives, their physical structure, main characteristics, basic needs, place and time of birth and death, selection of parents and physique, innate characteristics, as well as the surrounding natural environment, have not changed. All of these require some essential and vital invariable realities and values. Thus, the development and alteration of life's secondary realities should be based on the axis of these primary realities and values, so that life will continue as a worldly paradise under the shadow of Heaven.

We mentioned above some issues that seem to be harmful and unpleasant. Similarly, there are human traits that seem to be evil at first glance, such as hatred, jealousy, enmity, the desire to

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***All human drives, needs, and desires should be guided and trained in the direction of the eternal, universal, and invariable values that address the fundamental aspects of humanity.***

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dominate others, greed, rage, and egoism. A human being also has other innate drives and needs that allow the continuation of his or her worldly life, such as the need to eat and drink and the drives of lust and anger. All human drives, needs, and desires should be guided and trained in the direction of the eternal, universal, and invariable values that address the fundamental aspects of humanity. In this respect, the need to eat and drink, and the desire associated with lust and rage, can be tamed and transformed into means of absolute or relative good.

Likewise, egoism and hatred can become sources of fine attributes and goodness. Jealousy and rivalry can be transformed into competition in charitable and good deeds. The feeling of enmity can be transformed into enmity against Satan, the greatest enemy of humanity, and against the feeling of enmity itself and hatred. Greed and rage can force one to perform good deeds without tiredness. Egoism can point out the evil aspects of the carnal soul (*nafs*), thereby seeking to train and purify the soul by not excusing its evil actions.

All negative feelings can be transformed into sources of good by training and struggle. This is

how one reaches the level of “the best of Creation,” by traveling the way of transformation from a potential human being to a real and perfected human being, to becoming the best symbol, model, and personal representative of creation and existence.

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Despite this fact, the realities of human life do not always follow these guidelines. Negative feelings and attributes often defeat people, pulling them under their domination to such an extent that even the religions that guide people to goodness and kindness are abused, as well as the feelings and attributes that are sources of absolute good. Human life, at the level of the individual and of humanity as a whole, is merely the summation of internal, personal struggles and their external manifestations. These tides make the personal world of the individual, society, and history an arena of battle, struggle, war, oppression, and tyranny. As a result, it is usually human beings themselves who suffer the consequences.

Men and women always receive the fruits of their deeds. In the first period of its history, humanity lived a happy life as a single society whose members shared their joys and sorrows. But, later on they bound their necks and feet with a rusty yoke composed of chains of oppression as a result of jealousy, greed, and coveting other’s rights and properties. The consequence was Cain’s murder of Abel. As a result of this, humanity entered the path of disunity. Despite the millenniums coming one after the other like days, seasons and years, this “cycle” still continues.

## **The Second Millennium**

The second millennium started with the Crusades and then the Mongol invasions of the Muslim world, which was like the heart of Earth and history at that time. Despite the wars and destruction, and despite the crimes committed sometimes in the name of religion and sometimes in the name of economic, political, and military supremacy, this millennium has seen the apex of the East's civilizations, based on spirituality, metaphysical, universal, and eternal values, and the West's civilizations, based on the physical sciences. Many significant geographical discoveries and scientific inventions have occurred.

However, the civilizations of the East and West existed separated from each other. This separation, which should not have occurred, was based on the former's retiring from the intellect and science, while the latter re-

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***Nations and peoples are more in need of and dependent on each other, which causes closeness in mutual relations.***

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tired from spirituality, metaphysics, and eternal and invariable values. As a result, the last centuries of this millennium have witnessed disasters that are hard to believe. Due to humanity's growing arrogance and egoism, arising from its accomplishments, men and women have had to live through worldwide colonialism, immense massacres, revolutions that cost millions of lives, unimaginably bloody and destructive wars, racial discrimination, immense social and economic injustice, and iron curtains built by regimes whose ideology and philosophy sought to deny the essence, freedom, merit, and honor of humanity. It is partly because of this and partly because of some auguries

from the Bible that many people in the West fear that the world will again be soaked by floods of blood, pus, and destruction. They are quite pessimistic and worried about the new millennium.

### **Our Expectations**

Modern means of communication and transportation have transformed the world into a large, global village. So, those who expect that any radical changes in a country will be determined by that country alone and remain limited to it are unaware of current realities. This time is a period of interactive relations. Nations and peoples are more in need of and dependent on each other, which causes closeness in mutual relations.

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***“If one person kills another unjustly, it is the same as if he or she has killed all of humanity; if one saves another, it is the same as if he or she has saved all of humanity.”***

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This network of relations, which has surpassed the period of brute colonialism and exists on the basis of mutual interest, provides some benefits to the weaker side. Moreover, owing to the advances in

technology, especially digital electronic technology, the acquisition and exchange of information grows gradually. As a result, the individual comes to the fore, making it inevitable that democratic governments that respect personal rights will replace oppressive regimes.

As each individual is like a species with respect to other species, individual rights cannot be sacrificed for society, and social rights should depend on individual rights. This is why the basic human rights and freedoms found in the revealed religions came

to be considered by a war-weary West. They will enjoy priority in all relations. At the head of these rights is the right to life, which is granted and can be taken only by God. To accentuate the importance of this right in Islam, a basic Qur'anic principle is that:

If one person kills another unjustly, it is the same as if he or she has killed all of humanity; if one saves another, it is the same as if he or she has saved all of humanity. (5:32)

Other rights are the freedom of religion and belief, thought and expression; the right to own property and the sanctity of one's home; to marry and have children; to communicate and travel; and the right to and freedom of education. The principles of Islamic jurisprudence are based on these and other rights, all of which are accepted by modern legal systems, such as the protection of life, religion, property, reproduction, and intellect, as well as equality of people based on the fact that all people are human beings, and the rejection of all racial, color, and linguistic discrimination. All of these will be—and should be—indispensable essentials in the new millennium.

I believe and hope that the world of the new millennium will be a happier, more just, and more compassionate place, contrary to the fears of some people. Islam, Christianity, and Judaism all

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come from the same root, have almost the same essentials, and are nourished from the same source. Although they have lived as rival religions for centuries, the common points between them and their

shared responsibility to build a happy world for all of the creatures of God make interfaith dialogue among them necessary. This dialogue has now expanded to include the religions of Asia and other areas. The results have been positive.

As mentioned above, this dialogue will develop as a necessary process, and the followers of all religions will find ways to get closer and assist each other.

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***Our old world will  
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Previous generations witnessed a bitter struggle that should never have taken place: science versus religion. This conflict gave rise to

atheism and materialism, which influenced Christianity more than other religions. Science cannot contradict religion, for its purpose is to understand nature and humanity, which are each a composition of the manifestations of God's Attributes of Will and Power. Religion has its source in the Divine Attribute of Speech, which was manifested in the course of human history as Divine Scriptures such as the Qur'an, the Gospels, the Torah and others. Thanks to the efforts of both Christian and Muslim theologians and scientists, it seems that the few-century-long religion-science conflict will come to an end, or at least its absurdity will be acknowledged.

The end of this conflict and a new style of education fusing religious and scientific knowledge with morality and spirituality will produce genuinely enlightened people with hearts illumined by religious sciences and spirituality, minds illumined with positive sciences, characterized by all kinds of humane merits and moral values, and cognizant of the socioeconomic and political conditions of their time.

Our old world will experience an excellent “springtime” before its demise. This springtime will see the gap between rich and poor narrow; the world’s riches distributed most justly according to one’s work, capital, and needs; the absence of discrimination based on race, color, language, and worldview; and basic human rights and freedoms protected. Individuals will come to the fore and, learning how to realize their potential, will ascend on the way to becoming “the most elevated human” with the wings of love, knowledge, and belief.

In this new springtime, when scientific and technological progress is taken into consideration, people will understand that the current level of science and technology resembles the stage when an infant is learning how to crawl. Humanity will organize trips into space as if traveling to another country. Travelers on the way to God, those self-immolators of love who have no time for hostility, will carry the inspirations in their spirits to other worlds.

Yes, this springtime will rise on the foundations of love, compassion, mercy, dialogue, acceptance of others, mutual respect, justice, and

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***We pray and beg the  
Infinitely Compassionate  
One not to let our hopes  
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rights. It will be a time in which humanity will discover its real essence. Goodness and kindness, righteousness and virtue will form the basic essence of the world. No matter what happens, the world will come to this track sooner or later. Nobody can prevent this.

We pray and beg the Infinitely Compassionate One not to let our hopes and expectations come to nothing.

