

Stanford Report, June 20, 2001



## Moosa: 'Humanity is global and not continental'



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### News



*This is the text of the Baccalaureate Celebration address, titled "Globalizing the Humanum: The Continuous Struggle for Justice," given June 16, 2001, by Ebrahim Moosa, visiting associate professor of religious studies and associate dean for religious life.*

Today, Youth Day is commemorated in my native country, South Africa. Exactly 25 years ago on June 16, 1976, a momentous event took place in the history of South Africa. It was the day when the youth took the struggle against apartheid to the streets. This came to be known as the "Soweto Uprising." This event set the momentum for the accelerated demise of racism, legal segregation and political injustice and culminated in democratic elections 18 years later in 1994.

### People



### Events



On this occasion I do not only want to recall the heroic deeds of those brave men and women who faced the guns and bullets of apartheid. I also wish to remember and honor the countless men and women who supported the struggle against apartheid around the world. Many people describe the success of the largely nonviolent struggle against apartheid to be a "miracle." It is indeed true. But the unsung heroes were also those nameless men and women whose own lives were untouched by racial conflict, yet they felt compelled to act against racism. They were people who never suffered a single day of poverty, hunger or racial humiliation, but who showed solidarity with the people of South Africa and shared their wealth and resources generously for that cause. This global movement came to be known as the anti-apartheid movement.



### Opinion



### Classifieds



There are several lessons to be learnt from this group of diverse people who volunteered in this global movement for justice. Firstly, they maintained an awareness of justice against the ravages of forgetfulness and expediency. Secondly, they understood that justice itself required that words be matched with deeds. Justice, they believed, was a global concern. If they did nothing about oppression elsewhere in the world, they felt that they would be diminished as humans. They truly believed that evil flourishes when good people do nothing. Thirdly, they used the power of peaceful protest to pressurize governments and corporate institutions to divest from South Africa.



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Thinking about the anti-apartheid movement, we realize that globalization does not only mean the traffic in wealth and instant communication.

## Releases

Globalization has much deeper significance. Just as the movement against slavery was a great victory in retrieving our humanity, so too was the struggle against apartheid a means of globalizing our humanity.

When I use the word humanity, I am, of course, engaging in a strategic essentialism. I wish to draw attention to the essential humanity within us, the *humanum*, that which makes us "human" and also "of human beings."

Unfortunately, globalization in most of its current guises is taking the ugly form of a Procrustean bed. The bandit from Attica was known as "The Stretcher." He had an iron bed on which travelers who fell into his hands were compelled to spend the night. His humor was to stretch the ones who were too short until they died, or, if they were too tall, to cut off as much of their limbs as would make them short enough. The Procrustean bed has become a byword for cruelty. One of the morals of this story is that Damastes, the bandit, just could not understand that humans could be different. He wanted them all to be the same.

The challenge that most of us encounter today is to be able to claim the right to be different and to also claim the right to be the same. Here it is a complex conception of justice that allows us to be different as well as to be the same. It is not Procrustean justice.

In the previous century we human beings paradoxically acquired both a reputation for retrieving the *humanum* within us as well as utterly debasing it. We saw the rise of the human rights movement and the spectacular but incomplete struggle for women's liberation. We witnessed the end of colonialism as we knew it. Happily, we began to nurture a caring attitude toward the environment. But the 20th century also carries the ugly scars we inflicted on human memory. When we look back at that century, there will be much to be proud of, but there is also much that frightens us and posterity. It gave us the horrors of grand-scale genocide in Europe, Eastern Europe and Africa. It was the century in which we saw the first use of atomic weapons in war, the nuclear arms race, followed by gruesome and unwanted wars in East Asia and elsewhere.

Therefore, as we enter the 21st century, we have a collective responsibility as an international community not as a single nation or a regional power but as a collective of human societies to consciously commit ourselves to pursue the trajectory of advancing the *humanum* and to resist the culture of barbarity. We have the choice as to which legacy we are going to bequeath to the unborn and born. Together we also have the responsibility to contest the legacy of the 20th century.

I have come to love and respect the people of this country and chosen it as a home for my family and myself. Therefore, what I have to say next, I say as friend. In my professional life I maintain extensive contacts with people from different cultures and backgrounds. And it is by living in America that one also becomes painfully aware of some deeply disturbing aspects of the international political culture. Together with a growing number of Americans, I want to say that self-critique in some very vital areas of this nation's moral and political culture is sorely required. Especially, the treatment of other nations and cultures at the hands of U.S. foreign policy requires a great deal more attention and reflection.

In 1998 there was an international move to establish an International Criminal Court that will bring the perpetrators of crimes against humanity to book and hold violators accountable. In recent days it has been encouraging to see that international criminals were relentlessly pursued by the international tribunals and brought to justice from Bosnia to Rwanda. Already 33 nations have ratified the treaty to establish an International Criminal Court. But, unfortunately, the United States has steadfastly refused to ratify it. It is my hope that this will soon change and that the United States will ratify this treaty.

There is something odious when the strong try to insulate themselves against accountability, when it is the very standard they advocate for others to observe. In the language of politics this is called "double-standards." And in the language of theology such a trait in an individual is called "hypocrisy." No citizen of the world is above the consensus of the law, and no one can be exempt from prosecution and accountability for human rights violations.

For instance, it would be totally wrongheaded, if not immoral on my part, to think that anyone who disagrees with me must be reduced to a pathological "other." Yet this is the standard presentation of foreign cultures in the media and endorsed by the actions of some government agencies. And what is frightening is that an increasing number of people begin to believe this false propaganda. Only a sound and sophisticated education can counter the consequences of such harm.

Is it not perplexing to observe how some nations calmly justify the acquisition of weapons of mass destruction for themselves but when their opponents acquire the same, then they are described as rogues and terrorists? Anyone who possesses weapons of mass destruction is tainted by the immorality of such instruments of destruction and power. Arguments based on political and moral philosophy merely try to make the possession of weapons of mass destruction morally palatable. But there is no sound moral

argument to justify the existence and use of such dangerous weapons.

Jalaludin Rumi, the great sage of the East, appropriately reminds us of the virtue of humility:

*It is through humility that water avails against fire.*

*For fire stands up whereas water is prostrate.*

In different parts of the world there is great outrage at the double standards in world politics and economics. As more people's lives are affected by the disproportionate distribution of the world's resources, as well as the inequity of justice in international politics, all of us are exposed to extreme dangers on a daily basis. Even those of us who think we are safe and secure from the anger of the disgruntled and teeming millions can no longer be safe in our own homes and lands. We sleep uneasy if people are hungry and angry, even if they are continents away.

But there is no need to be despondent. We should not be deterred by those who believe that we have come to the end of history and that there is only one way to do things: the liberal capitalist way. That is the Procrustean bed that I spoke about. That is the cruel way. It is the way that makes enemies out of potential friends. This is the path that ends the right to be different. It is a recipe to end the richness of cultures and destroys the diversity of our humanity.

In my view there is a path of hope. In the same way that we had a global consensus against racism, we can also have a global consensus on the imperatives of justice and human rights. It is time that we contest the Procrustean version of human rights and understand such rights, in the way that it makes sense to ordinary people. Let the right-thinking and critically minded people of the world unite against those whose institutional machinations and power-mongering policies had undermined the sacred values for which generations before us had died.

The passage from the chapter of the Cave (18:10-15) in the Quran read in the Scripture readings eloquently reminds us of the courage and foresight of youth. The young people of South Africa took the lead 25 years ago and set their country on the democratic path of freedom and justice. Based on the impressive record of youth, we look forward to the contributions of today's graduands in furthering the cause of freedom, justice and human rights in their unique and diverse ways. As we recall the efforts of the global anti-apartheid movement, we are reminded that other struggles await our efforts. This is the struggle for an equitable and just world order; the need to promote nonpartisan human rights values and practices, the equitable distribution of the world's resources and the respectful use of the

environment.

We are compelled by the lessons of history to understand that humanity is global and not continental. Some of these struggles are within our reach, and I very much hope that we can make justice in human rights a priority item in our lives.

Don Mattera, the South African poet, urges us to depart from what we have become accustomed to, the place he called the city of injustice. In a poem called "Departure," Mattera says:

*I grow tired*

*And want to leave this city*

*Seething in unrest and injustice*

*I am leaving*

*No,*

*I have already left*

*Look for me*

*On the banks of the Nile*

*Or under some spreading tree*

*I shall be sleeping*

*The sleep of freedom*

*Don't wake me*

*Leave me to dream*

*My dream of departure*

*From a city*

*Seething in unrest*

*Void of pity*

*I grow weary of eating brine*

*And I hunger for desert fruit*

I thank you.

