

# Beyond Western Conservatives and Progressive Liberals: A Moderate Islamic View

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In a paper entitled “Bioethics and Culture: Understanding the Contemporary Crisis in Bioethics,” (Solomon 2014, 87-117) Professor David Solomon explores the debate ongoing among U.S. bioethicists on the relationship between bioethics and culture. In particular, he examines the divisiveness and incivility of the responses to the Bush Bioethics Council. His paper provides up-to-date information on the cultural conflicts and divisions that afflict bioethics in the U.S. It appears that conservative Christians wish to establish a Western account of bioethics based on their religious view of dignity. In contrast, progressive liberals argue that bioethics, which is chiefly a product of modern Western intellectual discourse, should be based on pure reason or rational arguments, and not shaped by the features of any particular religion or culture. Accordingly, progressive liberals in the U.S. regard mainstream Western bioethical ideas as globally applicable, regardless of local cultural or religious differences.

In this commentary, I argue that the progressive liberal view of bioethics is inapplicable to non-Western parts of the world. With specific reference to Muslim culture in my home country, Bangladesh, I contend that the bioethics practiced in a particular country cannot and should not be developed independently of national culture.

In one sense, the cultural conflicts and divisions that afflict bioethical debate in Bangladesh are very similar to those in the United States. Bangladesh is primarily a Muslim society. However, two distinct groups preside over bioethical debate in Bangladesh today. Most of the country’s Muslims are moderate; they wish to maintain the core values of Muslim

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culture while benefiting from the modern development of science and technology. They regard religious dignity as one of the core values of Muslim society. Religious dignity directs individuals to behave collectively and cooperatively rather than individualistically or independently. With regard to biomedical issues such as organ donation and transplantation, free and informed consent, privacy and confidentiality and truth telling, for example, it is widely held in Bangladesh that the traditional hierarchy of the family should be respected and collective decisions should be made for individual members. Such collective decisions are regarded as protecting individual interests in an appropriate way rather than depriving individuals of their right to make decisions; indeed, such a right has never been part of Muslim culture. However, moderate Muslims in Bangladesh acknowledge the benefits of modern science and technology. Computers, modern transplantation technology, X-ray and ultra-sonogram machines, etc., are the outcomes of scientific and technological development. Moderate Muslims believe that these modern technologies have been developed and customized to protect the interests of people worldwide. For example, the transplantation of human organs has now taken place in Bangladesh and moderate Muslims acknowledge that such practices can help to save the lives of their family members, despite the general lack of support for biomedical treatment in traditional Muslim law. Therefore, moderate Muslims support some of the changes made to Bangladesh's cultural and religious setting. They argue that modern science and technology do not contradict the central tenets of Islam and Muslim culture.

However, a small group of progressive liberals have also been vocal in the debate on bioethics in Bangladesh. Influenced by modern Western traditions, they seek to establish a national moral philosophy based on secular reason. In short, they wish to establish the Western approach to equality in Bangladesh. They argue that equalitarianism is universal, despite originating in the West. According to Western values, people are free, autonomous, independent and rational individuals. This gives individuals the right to make their own decisions regarding organ transplantation, truth telling, free and informed consent and abortion. Bangladesh's progressive liberals argue that this approach can be implemented in any society worldwide, regardless of particular local cultural or religious beliefs. They claim that humans should be treated equally, that individual freedom should be the basis of all national activities and that biomedical practices should be guided by the Western emphasis on individual freedom and equality. They seek to create a new cultural setting in Bangladesh by establishing a universal bioethics free of cultural and religious characteristics. However, this individualist Western approach is at odds with the country's Muslim culture, which prioritizes non-individualist values.

The issues of living organ donation and transplantation amply illustrate the cultural conflicts between these two groups of people. The laws and practices relating to living organ donation and transplantation in Bangladesh are family-oriented. According to moderate Muslims, living organ donation and transplantation should not be prohibited, but their use should be limited to family members. In Islamic culture, it is generally forbidden to violate the human body, whether living or dead. The Quran provides no explicit answer to the question of organ use. As Syed (1998, 158) points out, the Quran contains many religious principles and moral guidelines but does not offer clear rulings on every aspect of modern life. Particular solutions can be reached by reasoning based on the Qur'anic verses and the sayings of our Prophet Muhammad in the Hadith. Ultimately, Islamic Sharia waives the prohibition on bodily violation in two key cases, necessity and saving human life. According to our Prophet Muhammad, as quoted by Moazam (2006, 77-78), "the best beloved of God is one who is one who loves his family the most." Riffat M. Zaman explains, as quoted by Moazam (2006, p.80) Muslims "confide in and trust family members rather than strangers". Moderate Muslims argue that in many Muslim societies, saving a family member's life is equivalent to saving one's own life and those family members are happy to donate their organs to other family members. Accordingly, moderate Muslims in Bangladesh argue that this family-oriented practice contradicts neither the Islamic laws nor Muslim culture. However, they do not support the extension of organ donation and transplantation to strangers. They are concerned that such an extension will make families vulnerable, eventually diminishing the integrity of the family, and that organ trafficking will increase. In short, they argue that family-oriented laws and practices regarding modern biomedical technologies can protect Islamic religious dignity and at the same time save family members' lives. Indeed, these views are reflected in Bangladeshi's national law on organ donation and transplantation (issued in 1999).

The progressive liberals hold profoundly different views. They argue that as long as people abstain from doing harm, they should be permitted to donate their organs to anyone they choose. They claim that modern Western organ donation and transplantation laws and practices, which allow anybody in the West to donate their organs freely to anyone else, should be universally accepted. These progressive liberals are egalitarians who emphasize individual freedom and equality and thus argue that organ donation should be a matter of individual choice rather than limited to family members. They urge Bangladesh government to follow the example of the West and introduce laws that facilitate individual-directed biomedical practices and enable the donation of organs to both family members and strangers.

I believe that the arguments made by Bangladesh's progressive liberals are inappropriate to Muslim society. As emphasized by moderate Muslims, the protection of religious dignity is a core Islamic value and the welfare of the family is the foremost priority of Muslim culture. The Western secular values of individual liberty and equality in biomedical decisions are at odds with the Islamic emphasis on religious dignity and the Muslim tradition of collective decision making. Muslim culture prioritizes collective harmony rather than individual liberty and equality. No attempts should be made to establish the secular Western approach promoted by progressive liberals in the Muslim society of Bangladesh, as such values would cause enormous social and familial problems. As moderate Muslims argue, individualist laws and practices would make families more vulnerable and a robust sense of individual liberty and equality would eclipse familial bonds in biomedical and other health-care contexts. The Western individualist approach maximizes patients' freedom of choice and self-interest, whereas the collective biomedical decisions made in Bangladesh prioritize familial affection and love. Eroding the integrity of the family would damage both social order and individual wellbeing. There is also good reason to believe that individualist organ-donation laws would encourage organ trafficking for profit. Moreover, most of the people in Bangladesh are moderate Muslims, whose first priority is to protect the core values of the Muslim religion. Should they not have the right to do so? Progressive liberals claim that their version of bioethics is independent of any particular culture or religion and is thus the only rational choice for implementation in any society. However, I argue that even an approach truly independent of culture or religion would not necessarily be of greater value than the views held by Bangladesh's moderate Muslims. As both sides promote different substantive moral values and have different commitments, it remains unclear which approach more justifiably dictates the implementation of bioethical decisions and practices in a particular country. Of course, I do not claim that moderate Muslims have the final word on bioethics in Bangladesh simply because they form the majority. Progressive liberals have the right to argue that the modern Western approach of individual liberty and equality is universal to all cultures. However, they do not have the right to force people to accept this approach. They need to recognize that the country's moderate Muslims have the right to establish their preferred biomedical laws and practices. The progressive liberals should also acknowledge that moderate Muslims have the backing of national religious tradition, which has been accepted by the people of Bangladesh throughout history and remains vibrant today. Although this does not give their views the status of truth, it does mean that their voice should be heard when decisions are made on bioethical laws and practices.

As Professor Solomon points out, “[t]he consumer side of the problem of bioethics and culture then is essentially the problem of how the aspirations of contemporary bioethics to provide a set of universal norms for guiding the most fundamental practical decisions of patients, researchers and practitioners within contemporary biomedicine can be reconciled with the deep cultural differences among those whose actions the norms are designed to govern” (Solomon 2014, 92). It seems to me that Bangladesh’s progressive liberals are unreasonably ambitious in attempting to establish universal bioethical norms for the entire world regardless of cultural differences.

## 參考文獻

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