

Graduation 2011

Oration for Honorary Graduand Baroness Haleh Afshar

Chancellor, the senate has resolved that the degree of doctor of the university be conferred on Baroness Haleh Afshar.

It is particularly fitting for the University of Essex to confer this degree on Baroness Afshar, because we both share a strong commitment to the values of equality and diversity, and to the struggle for everyone to enjoy their rights. For many years, Haleh Afshar has furthered those values and that struggle, as a professor in politics and women's studies at the University of York; and as a contributor to UK public life, including service as Deputy Chair of the British Council's Gender and Development Task Force; Chair of the British Association of Middle Eastern Studies; and Commissioner on the UK Women's National Commission. In October 2007 she took those values and that struggle to the House of Lords, when she was created Baroness, and took her seat as a cross-bench peer; one of a new group of so-called 'people's peers', wearing ceremonial robes when required, but concerned with the well-being of the ordinary person, especially those experiencing discrimination on grounds of sex, race and religion. She describes herself as a feminist and a Shi'a Muslim.

Like many of you here today, Haleh Afshar, who was born in Iran, came as an overseas student to a British university; for her BA, to the University of York, and for her PhD, to the University of Cambridge. She went back to Iran to work at the Ministry of Land Reform, and as a journalist; but later returned to an academic post in the UK, and marriage to a British academic; and subsequently became a British citizen. Her contribution to the UK is testimony to the value of maintaining the openness of our universities to students and academics from overseas. The recent tightening of visa regulations will make it harder for us in the UK to enjoy such benefits in the future; and is a matter of deep concern to many of us.

I first met Haleh when we were young researchers, and she was Convener of the Women and Development Study Group of the Development Studies Association (another instance of her public service). I was impressed by the way in which she was able to analyse the denial of women's rights without ever presenting women as passive victims. She was always able to see the ways in which women were resisting and striving for something better, even in the most difficult circumstances. I have since learnt that she had valuable lessons from her mother, who had campaigned for the vote for women in Iran.

In the fifteen years from the mid 80s to the end of the century, Haleh Afshar produced an impressive stream of books and articles on women and development, while at the same time raising two children. She became one of the leading researchers in this field and became an inspiration to many young women overseas students who undertook PhDs under her supervision.

During this time, it was her identity as a feminist that was at the forefront, and she was fearless in her challenges to abuses of women's rights in Iran and elsewhere. She has said 'as far I was concerned, I was a cradle Muslim', born into a Shi'a Muslim family; and 'until 9/11, I never actually described myself particularly as a Muslim'. It was when Muslims were being depicted as 'the enemy within:

terrorists, murderers', that Haleh Afshar decided that she must challenge this abuse too. She reminded us all that she is a Muslim as well as a feminist, and became active in combating Islamophobia. She spoke out in many interviews on radio and TV, putting right misconceptions about Islam, and about 9/11; and emphasizing the importance of celebrating the diverse ways of being a British citizen. In 2002, she helped found the Muslim Women's Network, of which she was Chair, and is now President. She served on Home Office Working Groups to ensure that the voices of Muslim women were heard. In 2007-8, she was a member of the Home Secretary's Academics and Theologian's Roundtable. It was this kind of public service that led, first to an OBE in 2005, and to her appointment to the House of Lords in 2007.

There are those who would see feminism and Islam as incompatible, but Baroness Afshar argues that this is not the case; and that Islam does provide a framework that enables its adherents to expand the choices on offer to women, pointing to improved access to education as an example. Central to this framework is an emphasis on the right of all Muslims, women as well as men, to read and interpret the Qur'an for themselves. She argues that neither feminism nor Islam should be understood as monolithic, but as encompassing multiple practices and understandings. She currently belongs to an Interfaith group in Parliament, that highlights our common humanity and areas of commonality in what all faiths teach.

Baroness Afshar is concerned about the obstacles faced by Muslim girls in the UK. She reports that many British Muslim women have encountered teachers who assume that Muslim girls have no future prospects except an arranged marriage and have low expectations of them, and fail to provide career advice. She herself is an excellent example of how wrong these assumptions are; and is an impressive role model for such girls. Not surprisingly, she was named in 2009 as one of the twenty most successful Muslim women in the UK. She is also an excellent role model for all of you graduating today in the way that she has combined success in her chosen career and family life with her service to the communities that make up this country; and in her fearlessness in challenging abuses of peoples' rights wherever she finds them.

Chancellor, I present to you Baroness Haleh Afshar.