

Ivan Vyrypaev

THE IRAN CONFERENCE

a play

translated by Cazimir Liske and Boris Wolfson

In loving memory of my late friend Cazimir Liske

HAMLET

...what have you, my good friends, deserved at the hands of fortune, that she sends you to prison hither? GUILDENSTERN

Prison, my lord! HAMLET

Denmark's a prison. ROSENCRANTZ

Then is the world one. HAMLET

A goodly one...

(William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*)

Do we then make void the law through faith? God forbid: yea, we establish the law.

(St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans 3:31)

Where is it floating, this boat, with no one in it, oarless, aimless, all alone? The river's current is carrying it; it's coming for you. Stay where you are and wait.

(Shirin Shirazi, *"That Is All"*)

I am grateful to Aleksandr and Natalia Utkin for their support of this project.

Dramatis Personae

PHILIP RASMUSSEN, fifty.

Professor and Chair of International Relations at the University of Copenhagen, Division of the Humanities.

DANIEL CHRISTENSEN, forty-two.

Professor of the Humanities at Aarhus University; activist of European Islam, an international movement.

OLIVER LARSEN, sixty.

Professor of Theology at the University of Copenhagen.

MAGNUS THOMSEN, thirty-five.

Political analyst, staff writer at *Politiken*, a daily newspaper.

ASTRID PETERSEN, thirty-three.

Freelance journalist who covers global hot spots.

EMMA SCHMIDT-POULSEN, forty

Wife of the Prime Minister of Denmark; president of InterAction, an international charity. In the past, a well-known TV host.

GUSTAV JENSEN, forty-two.

Danish author and philosopher.

FATHER AUGUSTINE, fifty.

Priest of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark. Professor of Theology at the University of Copenhagen.

PASCUAL ANDERSEN, ninety.

Principal Conductor Emeritus at the Danish National Symphony Orchestra.

SHIRIN SHIRAZI, thirty-eight.

Iranian poet and public figure; laureate of the Nobel Prize in Literature.

Denmark. February 15, 2017. A conference auditorium at the University of Copenhagen. Up on stage there are nine seats, one for each of the presenters. The tenth, set up somewhat apart from the rest, is reserved for the chair of the panel. Downstage left, closer to the audience, there is a speaker's lectern with a built-in microphone. Downstage right is a free-standing microphone for the question-and-answer period.

One by one the conference participants enter and take their places; the last to appear on stage is Philip Rasmussen, who will chair the proceedings.

PHILIP RASMUSSEN

Ladies and gentlemen, good evening and welcome to today's event, which we've decided to designate as a conference on the "Iran Issue." That designation, of course, is somewhat arbitrary. Our conversation will, naturally, focus not so much on Iran per se as on the causes and contributing factors of this — very complex, practically unresolvable — conflict in our modern-day world. This, um, confrontation, this clash of two utterly different conceptions of the Universe and the human being's existence in that universe. And, indeed, we must bear in mind that today we are witnessing a clash not so much of political forces and business interests — though of course that too. But first and foremost we are witnessing a clash, I would say, a clash of two utterly different civilizations, a clash of two worlds. I won't use the terms "the East" and "the West" to describe these two worlds, because these days those concepts have gotten too fuzzy. Today the so-called "eastern world" and "western world" comprise so many nations, with such different political and religious make-up, that drawing any clear distinction between the East and the West is no longer possible. So I'd describe the "Iran Issue" as a confrontation between two diametrically-opposed worldviews. Two completely different takes on the development of humankind. I'd call it a confrontation between two fundamental principles: *religious traditionalism* and *humanistic rationalism*. Or as one of my Belgian colleagues once quipped, it's a battle between two great powers: the Allah and Coca-Cola. That's just a joke, of course. And yet, as one of the characters in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* puts it — this is Polonius: "though this be madness, yet there is method in't." But — I'm sorry — I should wrap up my opening remarks. On behalf of the conference organizers I'd like, once again, to extend greetings to everyone who made time to take part in our discussion today, both as presenters and as audience members. As you may have noticed we have a few microphones set up throughout the auditorium, so if there's a question you'd like to ask, feel free to come right up and use one of them. We welcome your input and hope that the dialogue will prove constructive. Especially given that we have such a well-informed and well-respected audience gathered here today. We're delighted that Prime Minister of Denmark, Mr. Nicklas Poulsen himself, has honored us with his presence today by joining us as a member of the audience. We welcome you, Prime Minister, thank you for your support of our conference. Well then. Welcome everyone, our conference on the "Iran Issue" is now in session. And it is

Aarhus University, Mr. Daniel Christensen. Mr. Christensen, go ahead.

Daniel Christensen rises from his seat and crosses over to the lectern.

PHILIP RASMUSSEN

While Mr. Christensen is getting ready to present, let me say a few words about him. Daniel Christensen has been working with Iran for about twelve years now, in his capacity as a representative and activist of the European Islam movement. It's an organization that works with European nationals who have converted to Islam or are in the process of converting. Also, they provide assistance to immigrants from Muslim countries, including Iran, who currently reside in Europe. The organization offers solutions for some of the basic problems, helps them adapt to the milieu in which they now find themselves, and, uh, with some other things, too, of course. In other words, Mr. Christensen knows a thing or two about Iran from first hand experience and what it is, he understands the mentality of the Iranian population, he is knows how to navigate that landscape, and, as I understand, is himself a Muslim. Is that right, Mr. Christensen?

By this point Christensen is behind the lectern.

DANIEL CHRISTENSEN

No, no, I'm not Muslim, not at all. Though this is not the first time I've been asked about it. Obviously, *something* got mixed up by *somebody*, *somewhere* along the way — and so this rumor about me got started. I do work with Muslims a great deal, many of my best friends are Muslim and I deeply admire the wisdom of that great religion. But I am not a Muslim myself, you're inaccurate there.

PHILIP RASMUSSEN

In that case, my apologies, Mr. Christensen. It's true, such rumors do circulate about you. But I shouldn't have trusted those rumors. Again, I apologize.

DANIEL CHRISTENSEN

It's quite alright, I don't find anything offensive in it if someone thinks you're Muslim. Even if you're not a Muslim.

PHILIP RASMUSSEN

Mr. Christensen, I didn't mean to say that it is offensive for someone to think someone else is a Muslim. I asked for your forgiveness not for thinking that you were Muslim, but for trusting rumors about you. It's for the rumors I'm apologizing, not for referring to you as a Muslim.

DANIEL CHRISTENSEN

I see. So then, may I begin?

PHILIP RASMUSSEN

By all means, Mr. Christensen.

4

DANIEL CHRISTENSEN

Honored guests! Colleagues! I'd like to tell you about a feeling that arose somewhere inside me two years ago. And it's been with me ever since. This feeling was arosed as a result of a certain tragic incident. I'm not going to share with you what happened, because it's very personal, but something did happen. And as a result of that incident I was suddenly able to perceive the structure of my life. I want to draw your attention to the word "structure," because that's what I'm going to talk about here: structure. So two years ago I began to perceive my life as a structure of sorts. That is to say, I observed myself dispassionately just as I would examine a structure. I saw myself as a kind of mechanism, a kind of formula, if you will. I saw that my "self" is not just what we call a "personality," it's really a kind of model, but I find the term "structure" more fitting. Because a "structure," you see, is like a design. It's like a drawing, a pattern. A pattern that holds some kind of meaning. My structure encompasses my attitude toward the world around me, and to everything surrounding me. My structure is my being, my essence, which manifests itself and unfolds in time and space. It's like a piece of software. Ok! That might be a more accurate image. A computer program. A piece of software. An app. You install it, then you open it on your computer or your phone and the app starts working. But this app, it has its own structure: a subject and a purpose. So you can have a travel guide app, or a freehand drawing app, or a music player app, or a messaging app. And so on. And so, two years ago, a certain very tragic event resulted in my finding myself in a condition in which I was able to look at myself as if I was this sort of app. I saw that I have my own structure, like all objects in the Universe. Because everything has its own structure. Everyone knows this, of course, and modern science in particular has established this, but at that moment, there and then, I acquired that knowledge in the form of my immediate personal experience. It happened quite spontaneously. It was completely unexpected, and in fact it all transpired very quickly. But in the time it took to transpire I was able to establish what, exactly, my structure is like, and what, in the end, I am, so to speak. And what I saw—what I found out about me — had such a profound effect on me that it changed my life forever, changed my attitude toward myself, toward the world around me, toward the fundamental categories governing that world. It changed my attitude to everything. Everything! It turned my entire life paradigm inside out. And now I'm going to try to describe to you my structure as it was revealed to me then, two years ago, and as it continues to reveal itself to me to this day. Because these states of being in which I can perceive my structure — they recur, from time to time. I know that what I'm saying to you right now might sound entirely unscientific. You know, my son is seven years old. And so a few days before Christmas I decided to tell him about Jesus, because after all Christmas — though we Danes have long forgotten about this — Christmas is, actually, a celebration above all — or rather

should be above all — not of Santa Claus, but of Jesus, after all. Because after all it's his birthday. So I told him, as best I could, I told my son about Jesus Christ. And you know what he said when I was done? He said he doesn't believe in Jesus Christ. You know why not? I asked him, "why not?" And he said — because that's not scientific. And I said—but is Santa Claus scientific? And he said — Yes. Because he saw Santa Claus last year when Santa came to visit him at his daycare. Jesus, on the other hand, has never come for a visit.

A few of the conference participants laugh.

5

PHILIP RASMUSSEN

Well, your son has his whole life ahead of him.

Widespread laughter.

DANIEL
CHRISTENSEN

M-hm, perhaps. But I'll continue. So: what *did* I see? I saw that my structure has one very specific mechanism, one very sharply-defined drive. That drive is toward constant acquisition of — whatever. I saw that I am composed — almost entirely — of just one insatiable desire. I constantly want to take and to receive. I *am* that boundless desire to take. All the time, I want to take things. That's my life: "I take." "I want to take." To take this for me, take this for myself. My entire structure is a structure of acquiring things for me. I want to live. I want to be healthy. I want to have a wife that will be a good match for my personality, my temperament, my taste, my convictions, my sexual preference. I want to have the kinds of friends who share my interests and whose emotional energy level suits me. I want food that is good *for* me and at the same time *tastes* good. I want to have the right to express my opinion freely, I want to have the right to practice my religion, I want to have the right to freedom of movement. I want people to smile at me when they cross paths with me. I want waiters in restaurants to be courteous, I want police officers to be courteous, I want politicians to be honest, I want low taxes and a high salary. I want my children to be obedient, I want my wife to love me. I want to appeal to the other women I encounter on the street. I want my boss to appreciate the work I do. I want the weather to be good. I want terrorists to stop killing. I want all wars to end. I want the whole world to accept basic democratic principles. I want people to be pleased with me, I want to be valued. I want my soup at lunch not to be too salty. I want it to be not too cold in the winter and not too hot in the summer. I want for harmful insects to refrain from biting me. I want there to be no rats in restaurants. I want there to be no global ecological catastrophe, no air pollution, no dumping tons and tons of oil into the ocean. I want terrorists not to take hostages, I want innocent Syrian civilians not to perish, but I do want

the terrorists to perish. I want children to never be killed, anywhere. I want my slacks to not get smudged when I brush my leg up against my car. I want my jacket to not get wrinkled during air travel. I want always to receive my food without delay. I want always to be able to get at least seven hours of sleep a day, I want to be guaranteed the right to have two days off a week, and one month of vacation per year. I want the right to be alone when I wish. I want to have the right to own private property. I want no one to enter the territory of my home without my permission. I want no one to dig through my things without my permission, I want no one to eavesdrop on my telephone calls. I want people to respect me, to be considerate with me, to pay attention to my views, never to hurt my feelings or deceive me. I want people to trust me, but when I make a mistake, I want people to forgive me. I want my steak to be done well, but not overdone, and also not too rare, I want it cooked just right. I want the water temperature in the swimming pool to be just right. I want the water temperature in the sea to be just right. I want the temperature outside to be just right, for my tea to be steeped not too long and not too little. I want my clothes to be nice, but not too expensive. I want my fruit to be fresh, with no pesticides, but not too expensive. That is, I want to eat, drink, sleep, live, feel pleasure, I want respect, I want an interesting job, I want love, I want knowledge, I want my new boots not to give me blisters. I want my colleague not to smell of sweat, that unbearable smell of someone else's sweat

6

—I want to never experience it, ever. I want the person speaking to me not to have bad breath. And for the Pope to formulate more clearly his position in the discussion about the spread of Islam in Europe. I want my hotel to have air conditioning. I wanna, I wanna, I wanna. My whole life, every second of my life, it turns out, is woven into this structure of receiving what I want. The structure of receiving. I always want to receive things. That's what makes me tick. That's what I'm made of. I am made of a deep need to receive. My structure is the structure of receiving. I receive. I want to receive. I am driven by a desire to receive. And so when I do *not* receive something, my entire structure is unsettled. When I do not receive, I begin to suffer because some kind of deeply-rooted, fundamentally-important processes that transpire inside of me are being disrupted. You see, when I read in the news that somewhere out there in Russia freedom of speech is being curtailed, my structure — accustomed as it to benefitting from the right to practice free speech and to observe basic democratic principles — my structure begins to signal to me that I'm not receiving something. You see, when women in the Middle East are compelled to wear a burqa and are not allowed to share a dinner table with men, my structure, which is accustomed to being the beneficiary of gender equality, does not receive that freedom. And then I begin to feel ill and I become upset. And I begin to focus all of my efforts on returning my structure to its customary state of peace and contentment. Because contentment and peace are what my entire structure rests upon. My structure is nothing more than the desire to acquire peace and contentment. Peace and contentment — that's my structure. To acquire peace and security — that's my structure. To receive. I want to receive. And there you have it, that's what I saw in myself. And I saw this not as an abstract concept, not as a philosophical argument, not as a moral principle, not as a psychological phenomenon, I saw it as I might see my genome,

you see? I saw it as a diagram, like a drawing of the spirals of the human genome. I saw how I am built, built of these molecules and atoms, striving to receive, molecules dedicated to acquisition...how I am literally...

Pause. For a few seconds, Christensen is lost in thought.

...or maybe this will suffice. This, then, is what I believe we must understand and keep in mind, esteemed colleagues, as we begin our discussion of the "Iran issue." And now I'd prefer to respond to any questions you might have.

A question from the audience. We hear a voice, but do not see who it is coming from.

THE VOICE OF MATHILDE
HANSEN

Actually, my question is a very simple one.

PHILIP RASMUSSEN

Could you introduce yourself?

THE VOICE OF MATHILDE
HANSEN

Mathilde Hansen, University of Copenhagen, Department of Natural History.

PHILIP RASMUSSEN

Go ahead, please.

7

THE VOICE OF MATHILDE
HANSEN

So what does all that you were just talking about have to do with the "Iran Issue," which is what we're discussing?

DANIEL CHRISTENSEN

Because if we want life to truly work out for us, we've got to learn to give back, do you understand that? We must give back. Truly give back. And what does it mean to "truly give back"? It means you must give up not what you want to return anyway, but what others wish to take from you. Do you see? That's what it means to truly give back. To give back not what you want to let go of, but what others will take. Do you see? I want to

give a beggar a dollar, but a thief takes my wallet with all my money — that's what I must give up. You see? I want people to smile at me, but they are rude to me—that's what I give up. I want them to let me say anything I want, but they put me in prison, that's what I give up, you understand? I want to hear certain words, but I am told other words, I am told words I don't like to hear— that's what I must accept. To give something up means to accept, you see? To accept and to give up are one and the same. I want to go to the right, but they put me in a car and drive me off to the left, and I accept that. I want praise but people humiliate me and walk all over me. I want my neighbors to respect my privacy, and they blast their music at full volume at half past midnight. I want my new car to work smoothly, and it breaks down three days after I bought it. I want Arab teenagers to respect my country, the country they have come to live in, and they spit in my face. I want to be left alone, and get beaten up a few steps away from my own front door. I want to live, and am getting killed. I love my mother, and she perishes in a car accident right before my eyes... Before my very eyes. That's what I give up.

Christensen closes his eyes for a moment, collecting his thoughts.

I look at this body, no longer warm — my mother's body — and I understand that the time has come to give her up, give her up forever. You see? I'm not the one who gets to decide what I have to give up. You see? When I truly give back, I don't decide what I give up, you understand?

PHILIP RASMUSSEN

Who decides, then?

DANIEL CHRISTENSEN

If you're Iranian, Allah decides. God, that is. God decides everything.

THE VOICE OF MATHILDE
HANSEN

And developing nuclear weapons — does God decide that too?

DANIEL CHRISTENSEN

Yes. God decides everything.

THE VOICE OF MATHILDE
HANSEN

Thanks, I have my answer.

PHILIP RASMUSSEN

I'm sorry, but what do we need that kind of god for? A god who decides to develop nuclear weapons?

DANIEL CHRISTENSEN

Ha! Right! There, ladies and gentlemen, right there is the main problem I wanted to talk about today. I was waiting for this question, and there it is, the question. Thank you very much, Mr. Rasmussen, for this long-awaited question. Let me try to explain, using this example, where the crux of our principal misunderstanding lies. The primary cause of "our" failure to understand "them" — it lies in what you just said: that you don't need a God like that. What follows, then, is that you'll be the one to decide what sort of God you need and what sort you don't? So, you are going to choose yourself a God, and naturally you'll choose a God who's going to suit you. Right? And if you don't find the kind of God that suits you, you'll just end up with no God whatsoever, like the majority of people who populate the Western world today. You cannot abide a god who makes women wear burkas. You cannot abide a god who doesn't allow men and women to eat at the same table. You cannot abide a god who jails people for their political views. You cannot abide a god who allowed the Holocaust to happen. You cannot abide a god who lets religious wars take place. You cannot abide a god who sanctioned the layoffs of thousands of workers. You cannot abide a god who lets people misbehave in public. You cannot abide a god who didn't hook you up with a better job; a god who didn't make it possible for you to find your true love. You cannot abide a god who gave you such a stupid boss, such a stupid president, such a stupid prime minister, such a rude waiter.

You cannot abide a god who sold you such uncomfortable shoes, a god who designed such awkward turnstiles in the subway, a god who created such cold winters, a god who allows such unbearably hot summers; you don't like a god who dresses the lady who lives next door in such a hideous dress; a god who produces all that vulgarity on television; a god who undercooks his kebabs. And finally, you can't abide a god who permitted the pavement to crack in such a treacherous spot that the heel of your shoe got stuck in it and broke off. And so it turns out that it's pretty hard for you to choose a god for yourself because the god that sanctions the creation of nuclear weapons, the god that tolerates that crack in the pavement, and the god that created humanitarian aid organizations, Western-style democracy, and — oh yes — *you yourself* — all that is — you see — the same God. Do you see what I mean? And it's the very same God who said "Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword." That's what I mean by "giving something up," ladies and gentlemen. And that is the perspective from which I would like to approach the "Iran Issue:" the point that we, the people of Western Civilization, when it really comes down to it, do not understand what it means to give God that which God demands of us. Thank you.

Christensen steps up from behind the lectern and returns to his place.

PHILIP RASMUSSEN

Many thanks, Mr. Christensen. Look, we are just getting started, and our discussion is

already taking a surprising turn. Your point of view is clear, Mr. Christensen. And actually, by way of unfolding some of the themes you just touched upon, in particular the question of how the role of God is understood in contemporary Iranian culture, I'd like to call upon our respected colleague, Oliver Larsen.

9

Oliver Larsen gets up from his seat and walks towards the lectern.

PHILIP RASMUSSEN

Professor Oliver Larsen is a scholar of religion. He has written several well-known books, and contributed to *Middle Eastern Religion and Philosophy: a Reference Guide*. A few years back this book topped bestseller charts not only in Europe, but in many Eastern nations. I understand that in Japan, for example, it had a gigantic print run.

At this point Oliver Larsen is already at the lectern, and responds from there.

OLIVER LARSEN That's right, our guide went through several printings in a number of countries. And I'm very happy about that, though I would add that my involvement in that project was very modest. I contributed only three articles out of the total of three hundred sixty-four.

PHILIP RASMUSSEN

Yes, but what remarkable articles these are — they are among the most interesting and memorable in that book.

OLIVER LARSEN

They're really not that different from the rest. But thank you, Mr. Rasmussen. I think I'll go ahead and start then. But if you don't mind, I'd like to begin with a few words regarding the presentation of my colleague Daniel Christensen. I'd like just to offer a brief comment, just a couple of words. The thing is that the word "God," which you, Mr. Christensen, kept on using — this word, for most people, means absolutely nothing. I'd guess you're aware of that. I mean, what is God? I'm certain that the vast majority of people in our society associate the concept of god with something puerile and, to put it mildly, outdated. For most of us here, after all, there's just no god there. And for those of us who might be willing to countenance that idea, God is still something very vague. If God does exist, it is what awaits us after we die, something we might come to know someday, but certainly not now, certainly not while we're living. The best we can do while we're alive is believe in God's existence and try to follow God's decrees and fulfill God's commandments. But any direct contact with God can only come to pass later, only after death. And here I'm talking about people who consider themselves religious. Whereas most people don't acknowledge any God whatsoever. The idea that it's vitally important to give up our most prized possessions to some god up there will seem like sheer lunacy to them. And so in order to understand this principle of "giving things up" that my colleague just spoke about,

we first have to come to terms with the God principle.

We have to establish clearly: to whom are we giving ourselves up, and why? I'm not saying that we must immediately start believing in God. I'm not even saying that God exists. Of course I'm not yet so crazy as to present a paper about the existence of God at a scholarly gathering.

PHILIP RASMUSSEN

These days, Mr. Larsen, you hear the darndest things at conferences.

10

Widespread laughter.

OLIVER LARSEN

Be that as it may, the focus of my presentation today is on something quite different. The goal of today's talk is to describe, in broad strokes, the workings of the worldview in which God exists. Because for Iranians there is a God in the universe. There's Allah. And to understand the logic driving the behavior of these people, out there in Iran, we must try and understand the logic of a person for whom there is a God in the universe. What is this God principle? What does it entail? That's what I'd like to talk about today. And I'd like to begin with a quick story about something that happened a few years ago to a close friend of mine. This close friend of mine is a scholar, a very old-fashioned kind of guy, very conservative. He was never comfortable with using word processors to do his writing. He always wrote everything out by hand, with a pen, and then had it copied into a computer file. And nothing would convince him to change his ways. Of course, working that way took much longer, but this friend of mine, I'll say it again, he was very old-school; he came of age as a scholar when there were no computers around. Now, as we all know, typewriters *did* exist then, but this friend of mine refused to use typewriters as well. Even then he wrote out everything with a ballpoint pen first, and then hand it over to a typist. OK, so not long ago my friend finished writing a big book that was very important for him. This was truly something that meant a lot to him — I don't know what the book's broader scholarly significance was, but for him personally it was of extreme importance. Just so you understand how much it mattered: this was truly the apex of his life's work. You know, we do something all our lives, but then time comes when you feel that you just produced something towards which you've been moving your whole life. That *this is it*. It is *it*. And so for this friend of mine, this project, that was *it* for him! The pinnacle of his life's work. And of course, as always, he wrote this text out by hand, with a pen, as he was used to doing all his life. And from there everything happened just like in a movie or a novel. There was a fire. His house burned down and everything that was inside, everything got incinerated, including of course his manuscript. And I mean, forget about the house — the fact that his book had gone up in flames, that was the real blow for him. Of course all his other papers were destroyed as well, but they already existed in electronic versions, they were already up online, but this book, his magnum opus, it was

gone. And it truly felt like it was stranger than fiction. A fire! How could a fire happen, these days? Out of the blue, like that? I mean, how many people in our social circle whose houses have burned down? Even now, as I'm saying this, it doesn't seem real. It's like some novella, right? But the thing is, it really did happen. And my friend lost his house, his manuscripts — the manuscripts that contained many years' worth of his experience, his life's work. And this made my friend very sad. Very, very, very sad. He became depressed. Not because of the house. First of all, the house was insured, and secondly it just wasn't that important, that old house.

His wife had died many years earlier, his children were grown up and gone. He wasn't that upset to lose house, or maybe just a little. Whereas the loss of his book was a source of genuine grief. He had spent many years on writing it. Many years... Yup...

Pause.

11

I'm sorry. I'm taking too long to tell the story. I just want you to understand the sort of state my friend was in. And he was in terrible shape, I mean, it was horrifying. His depression got worse and worse. He stopped going to work. He was no longer doing anything at all. And then one day, he was sitting on a park bench, just sitting there in the park, watching people walking their dogs, watching men and women jogging with their little music devices and headphones. And suddenly he very clearly heard a voice. Someone's voice. Not a voice from the heavens, more like a voice from inside himself, someone inside of him said, "But is this truly important?" And that thought suddenly just struck him like a bolt of lightning. Was it really, truly important?! And then he suddenly realized that there was something of more importance than what happened to him. There was something that mattered more than his manuscript. This is tricky for me to convey to you in words. But there is something else, something beyond what we take to be essential right now. There is something more important beyond what we see with our own two eyes. And it isn't even an idea; it's a sense. That's the most important thing. A sense. A sense that everything around you isn't *truly* important, that there's something *else* that matters more. Something more valuable. My wife is dead, but there's something more important, something more important in my heart. More important than death, more important than separation from a loved one. And that sense — that there's something in the world more important than what I see, than what happens — that feeling of something more important, *that* is the God Principle. God is something more important than anything else. God is something always present *within* you as something more important than anything else you possess. A woman is in love with you, but there's something more important in that. You are robbed, but you are left with something more important. You are attacked and beaten up, but something more important remains unharmed. You are offended in a check-out line, but I've got something more important than that. You get disenfranchised, but they can't away something more important—something that is always with you. You receive an award, but that's not as important as what you already

had to begin with. You live under a totalitarian regime, but there's something else to think about, something more important. They want to fire rockets at you, but even that is not the most important thing in our lives. You die, but there's something else waiting for you, something even more important than death. You are afraid, but you can overcome fear, if you are in touch with something more important. There always is something more important than whatever is happening to us. And that more important thing, it's always with us. Is scholarship truly important? Yes, of course, it's important, nobody's doubting that, but scholarship contains within itself something that is more important than simply engaging in scholarly activity. And this sense of a presence in everything that surrounds us, in all our lives, this sense of constant presence, the presence of something more important in our lives — *that* is the central principle of the so-called religious consciousness. And *that* is precisely what brings together all religions and belief systems in the world. Without understanding that principle — or even, I'd say, without coming to *sense* and experience that principle — we simply cannot begin to examine seriously the topic as complicated as religion and religious consciousness. Because any disquisitions about the Divine are meaningless, unless they are derived from the personal experience of coming to know the Divinity. And I'd like to emphasize that in particular — our sensory experience, not just our rational comprehension. Because to truly “understand” something means to hold it within, like a lived experience. And — this is key — without sensing that constant presence of something that is more important than anything else, without experiencing that presence in our

12

hearts, we have no business working on resolving any kind of international conflicts. We have no right to attempt to solve any issues related to Islam if we don't *really* understand the meaning of “religious consciousness.” Because if that's the case, then we fail to understand that neither basic democratic principles nor the fundamental tenets of humanism are integral to these people's way of thinking. And their way of thinking gives rise to societies with a fundamentally different culture, with completely different ethical tenets. We have to understand that neither Western democracy nor Western Protestant humanism are compatible with the worldview of a vast number of people on this planet. So before we drop everything and run to try to save these people from the totalitarian regimes under which they live, we must try to understand the logic according to which these people live. Thank you for your attention.

Oliver Larsen steps away from the lectern and starts moving back to his seat but a question from the audience makes him stop. A woman's voice.

THE VOICE OF KATRINE
JOHANSEN

Excuse me, Professor, I've got a question for you. My name is Katrine Johansen, I'm from the Aarhus University Divinity School.

Larsen returns to the lectern.

OLIVER LARSEN

Sure, go ahead.

THE VOICE OF KATRINE
JOHANSEN

You talked about sensing the presence of something more important. But if you're unable to sense that presence — what do you do then?

OLIVER LARSEN

People like that shouldn't be working on the Iran Issue.

THE VOICE OF KATRINE
JOHANSEN

Except those are precisely the people who work on it, as you well know.

OLIVER LARSEN

But as far as I understand your question, it isn't about that, is it? You were asking about...

One of the other conference participants, the journalist Magnus Thomsen, stands up and quickly approaches the on-stage microphone.

MAGNUS THOMSEN

But — excuse me, Professor — you would probably agree that very few of the people who work on the problems in the Middle East today sense the presence of God within themselves. And yet among those people there are some truly outstanding politicians, journalists, scholars, and other professionals. What is this obligatory presence of the divine that you are talking about? Have you lost your mind?!

13

Widespread laughter.

PHILIP RASMUSSEN

That's Magnus Thomsen, a political analyst, for those who don't know him. But then, who here doesn't know Magnus Thomsen!

MAGNUS THOMSEN

Thank you, Mr. Rasmussen. And hello everyone, forgive me for not introducing myself. So then, Mr. Larsen — do you realize what you are doing by proposing that we lower

the level of discourse here to one in which things like “sensing the Divine within our hearts” is acceptable?

OLIVER LARSEN

I believe I do realize what I’m talking about here, Magnus. But let me first respond to the previous question. You see, Katrine, we’ve arrived at a very complicated and delicate matter. Yes, it’s true, anyone who has not experienced contact with the ultimate mystery of existence, anyone who has not experienced this mystery of supreme presence within oneself, will of course take my entire talk for another typical example of waxing romantic about purely esoteric matters. Because what I’m talking about can be defined with a single simple word: Knowledge. And either someone has access to that Knowledge, or one doesn’t. Either someone Knows it — or not. It’s like one Near Eastern scholar from Moscow once said to me, in all seriousness, that after reading the poems of the great Sufi poet Saadi Mussani he always wanted to drink some good wine, because Saadi Mussani wrote so much and beautifully about wine. He knew, naturally, that for Mussani wine stood for God, and that Mussani was writing about God and not about alcohol. But when we read Mussani, what do we feel? That’s the question. Is it a desire to drink a great glass of Bordeaux or a desire to be truly alive?

That’s what the question is. What do we feel? You see, it is truly a massive problem that the people working today to redeem our world have a purely rational understanding of that world, and for those people all this talk of the Divine sounds fake and even vulgar. And to be honest I don’t know how to answer your question, Katrine. Though maybe I could answer it with a few verses by Saadi Mussani, whom I just mentioned — even if that risks lowering even further lower the level of our discourse, in Mr. Thomsen’s eyes. I’m joking, Magnus, please, no offense meant. Here’s Saadi Mussani, fifteenth century A.D.:

Why are you silent?

Because you wait for words to appear. How do words appear?

They emerge from out of darkness.

When the poet, drunk on wine, falls silent and lowers his head That means the time has come for words of love to be born.

Here are those words:

“God writes out man’s fate to the accompaniment of the music of tears.”

Thank you for your attention.

PHILIP RASMUSSEN

Thank you, Professor. And now it gives me great pleasure to introduce our next speaker, an esteemed Danish journalist who covers various global hot spots: Astrid Petersen.

Astrid Petersen rises from her seat and goes to the lectern.

PHILIP RASMUSSEN

Actually, I don't think Astrid Petersen really needs an introduction. Last year Astrid received the Pulitzer Prize for her novel *Constraints*. This is a documentary novel about a European journalist being held captive by the terrorist organization Islamic Liberation.

The book left a really strong impression on me personally. I don't think I remember feeling anything like that after reading any other work of literature. And of course you know that Astrid herself spent three months in captivity in Iraq and suffered terrible hardships. In fact, her book is very much about...

Petersen is already standing at the lectern.

ASTRID PETERSEN

Thank you very much, Mr. Rasmussen. I'd like to begin, if I may.

PHILIP RASMUSSEN

Naturally, Astrid — please.

ASTRID PETERSEN

Esteemed colleagues, before I launch into my talk, I would also like to respond to the remarks that preceded me. And, well... I have to admit that the conversation that has been taking place here pretty much drove me up the wall. There was a moment when I was ready just to get up and leave. Because I hate, more than anything in the world, the discourse that has emerged here today. Both of the previous speakers, Mr. Christensen and Mr. Larsen, each on his own — or maybe not, I don't know — turned the endlessly complex issue of the Middle East and of Iran specifically, before our very eyes — into some kind of — I beg your pardon — snot-nosed excursus into the esoteric realm to the tune of “know thyself, find the kingdom of God within you, and then go ahead and attempt to solve the world's greatest problems.” And this tone is being adopted — this pseudo-academic and downright romantic tone, if you'll pardon my saying so — in discussing the profound problems posed by a place like Iran, one of the most complex regions of the world. Forgive me, dear colleagues, but a story about some acquaintance's incinerated manuscript, followed by his realizing that “there's something more important than his life,” or about our dear colleague here realizing, as a result of an accident, that he always wants to spend and to take — when viewed against the backdrop of the tragedy that is unfolding today in the Middle East, in Syria, in Iraq, in

Afghanistan, et cetera — all of this comes off as insulting and repulsive. It's insulting to those who live there now, and not here in Copenhagen. To those who are now dying of hunger, horror and violence, while here you're proposing that you can always find something loftier and more important, and that, like it or not, God will decide whom to kill, whom to rape, and whom to make president of the United States of America. Do you not realize how insulting and revolting that is?

15

Pause.

I'm sorry. Let's get back to Iran. Here's a discussion topic for us all, my dear friends. Last month alone, Iranian courts sentenced over one hundred young women from around the country to public flogging for the "excessive" application of cosmetics. 694 people were executed in just one year. On average, about three people per day are executed in Iran. And death sentences are handed out, among other things, for innocuous remarks vaguely critical of Islam. Women are flogged for attending a party at which men are present. Last week one woman received seventy-four lashes for inviting a few men to her fortieth birthday party — fellow workers from her job at a television station. She was flogged simply for celebrating her birthday in the company of men. And another woman, who offered medical assistance to a man, was stoned in public, because she violated the law. A week ago a group of teenagers got together for a secret party at which there was one bottle of whiskey to be shared by the seventeen of them. Now a prison term and severe corporal punishment await them. For a sip of whiskey! Human rights in Iran are being violated in the most tragic way. Human beings are humiliated, beaten, tortured. Young women are degraded through shaming.

Homosexuality is considered a terrible crime punishable by death. Any form of free expression is suppressed in the most horrific manner. And if, esteemed colleagues, you wish to say that in order for us to understand why this is happening we must first understand "what God is," there's no telling how far we go with that. And so I'm asking you: let's come back down from the heavens to our real, terrifying life. And go on with our conference in a manner befitting an academic event.

Petersen pours herself a glass of water and drinks. Pause.

MAGNUS THOMSEN

(yells from his seat) Bravo!

ASTRID PETERSEN

Thanks, but I didn't do anything. Colleagues, first I'd like to give you a thumbnail sketch of the problem I'm going to be speaking about. Here it is. Regardless of whatever culture human beings live in or whatever religion they subscribe to, whatever their color of skin, human beings remain human. Humans are living, breathing, beings capable of rational thought and easily susceptible to change. To be sure, these are beings shaped by the

culture in which they live. But I would like to emphasize — actually, my next book is precisely about this — I'd like to emphasize that a human being is not identical to a culture, a race, a civilization or a social function; a human being is not a father not a mother, not a priest, not a president, not a master and not a slave. A human is a free, living being. A human is an element of the evolutionary process. A human is a process. And so every human being, regardless of culture, race, gender, or religion, each human being from the moment of birth has so-called "universal rights." Now take note, not social rights, not cultural, not religious — universal. A human is a living being, birthed by the universe and endowed with fundamental universal rights from the moment of birth. What are they? I'm going to list them for you — there are only four. Not so many, is it? Just four. Here they are. The right to life. No one has the right intentionally to take someone else's life. The right to life is a right we receive from nature at the moment of birth. The next right is the right to acquire knowledge. A human being

16

has the right to know. To be curious, to ask questions and to get answers. And no one ought to deprive a person of that right. The right to know, to study, to acquire knowledge, to analyze — these are inalienable human rights. The third right is the right to have an unique world view of one's own. A person has the right freely to choose beliefs, religions, the right to an opinion of one's own, a personal stance on any issue. And finally, the fourth right — the right to sexual orientation. A person has the right to possess whatever sexual orientation befits that person's individual nature. And no one else may dictate whom to love and whom to sleep with. And listen, that's it. Just four rights. Just four. Not that many, right? Four. Just not that big a deal, right? Only four fundamental universal rights. To live, to learn about the world, to think freely and to love. That's it. And when we talk about Iran we have to bear in mind firstly that, that nation is inhabited by people. That is to say, the same kind of people as anywhere else on the planet. Not *Iranians* — that's just it — but *people*. And secondly, because they are indeed people, they also have a right to exercise these four rights. But in that country, people are deprived of all four of them. Every one of them. And there you have it. This, dear colleagues, is the kind of discourse that befits our conference. And I suggest that we use what I've just described as the starting point, and that we begin from it our journey, the trip from point A to point B. And now, I'd happy to answer your questions.

Pause. Astrid takes a sip of water. Oliver Larsen approaches the microphone to ask a question.

PHILIP RASMUSSEN

Oliver Larsen, go ahead.

OLIVER LARSEN

I'd like to clarify something, Astrid. You just said that one of the universal human rights is the right to acquire knowledge. Would you mind explaining what exactly you mean when you say "knowledge"? What is this knowledge?

ASTRID PETERSEN

I'm sorry, I don't understand your question.

OLIVER LARSEN

You just used the word "knowledge." What do you mean by that? What is knowledge?

ASTRID PETERSEN

Knowledge is the acquisition of information. What exactly don't you understand?

OLIVER LARSEN

So you would say that "information" and "knowledge" are the same thing?

ASTRID PETERSEN

Well sure, of course. Aren't they?

OLIVER LARSEN

I don't think they are.

17

ASTRID PETERSEN

And what would you say is the difference? OLIVER LARSEN Well, information is what a person receives from the outside. It's what comes to us

from others: from other people, from mass media, from books, from science and philosophy, but, as a rule, none of this is derived from our personal experience — it's just information we are given from elsewhere. Whereas knowledge is first and foremost our personal experience. Knowledge entails living through something and forming our personal understanding of the essence of that insight. We know something definitively because we experienced it personally. So we know that it is what it is. And while we accept information as a matter of trust or belief, knowledge, by contrast, constitutes our unqualified reality. Information can sometimes be unreliable, especially these days.

Whereas knowledge is what you know beyond a shadow of a doubt. To know is to experience. It means to exist within that experience. Knowledge is that which we sense with our being, it is what happens to us. In a word, knowledge is us, and we are it. Is that clear?

Astrid Petersen ponders this for a moment.

ASTRID PETERSEN

To be honest, no, it isn't.

OLIVER LARSEN

What don't you understand?

ASTRID PETERSEN

I don't understand your question. What exactly is it?

OLIVER LARSEN

I wanted to establish what you mean by the word "knowledge," and I have my answer. I don't have any further questions, thank you very much.

ASTRID PETERSEN

So then do you disagree that human beings have the right to acquire knowledge?

OLIVER LARSEN

On the contrary, I agree. And information — human beings have the right to obtain information, too. I agree with everything. I got my answer. Thank you.

ASTRID PETERSEN

Alright. Thank you for your question, any other questions?

Emma Schmidt-Poulsen approaches the microphone.

EMMA SCHMIDT-POULSEN

Hello. I'm Emma Schmidt-Poulsen.

18

PHILIP RASMUSSEN

We all know Emma Schmidt very well in her capacity as a television personality, very famous here in Denmark. But almost two years ago Mrs. Schmidt-Poulsen left her job on TV to head up InterAction, an international charity organization that provides assistance to the residents of so-called "third-world countries."

EMMA SCHMIDT-POULSEN

Actually, I can't stand the term "third-world countries."

PHILIP RASMUSSEN

I don't care for it much myself, Mrs. Poulsen.

EMMA SCHMIDT-POULSEN

I prefer "nations with adverse economic conditions." But let's not get off topic. Because—you know, I came up here to the microphone above all to thank Astrid Petersen very much for her talk today. It's very important from time to time to be reminded of these things, and you did that with such clarity and precision. Thank you, Astrid. Really, what you said is so, so important.

ASTRID PETERSEN

Thank you, Emma.

EMMA SCHMIDT-POULSEN

My question for you, though, is not a very pleasant one. But I can't not ask it. Forgive me. Two weeks ago, on your Facebook page, you spoke up, forcefully and in no uncertain terms, in support of sentencing to death Muhammed Al-Jariza, who, before being recently apprehended by NATO forces, had been a chieftain of the terrorist group Islamic Liberation. Do you believe that the death penalty is the appropriate form of punishment in this case?

Pause.

ASTRID PETERSEN

Quite honestly, I'd rather not answer that question.

EMMA SCHMIDT-POULSEN

Well, I'm sorry if we've ventured out of your comfort zone, but you yourself just now were talking about the human right to life. And, I would like to know: what are we supposed to do? What is our European civilization to do? Execute criminals? String them up like Saddam Hussein? But, that was truly hideous. We all remember how that went down. And then later, when that video of his execution was posted on YouTube... Oof! I still can't get over that event, even though it's been quite a long time. Savage barbarity perpetrated by our own civilization! And so, I'm curious about your opinion. Do you support the death penalty for those who have committed grave crimes?

Pause.

ASTRID PETERSEN

No. I do not support the death penalty. I think people must stop killing other people. As for my Facebook post, that was just an emotional outburst. The thing is that the man you referred to held me in captivity for three months, and unfortunately, I got to know him very closely. So it seems to me I've earned a certain personal right to wish for that man's death. But that was just an emotional outburst, and the next day I deleted that post from my page. Of course, that is not my view. No one should kill anyone. We should bring justice and healing. Thank you for your question, Emma. And thank you everyone for your attention. Excuse me.

Astrid steps away from the lectern and heads back to her seat.

PHILIP RASMUSSEN

Thank you, Astrid Petersen.

Emma Schmidt-Poulsen moves in the direction of her seat, but the panel chair's words stop her.

PHILIP RASMUSSEN

And now, as it happens, I'd like to turn the floor over to Emma Schmidt-Poulsen, president of InterAction International Charitable Foundation. And, um, as we all know, Mrs. Schmidt-Poulsen is also the wife of the Right Honorable Nicklas Poulsen, Prime Minister, who, as we see, has demonstrated genuine interest in our discussion and is in attendance here today as an ordinary audience member. For which I am personally grateful to you, Prime Minister. And now, please welcome Mrs. Emma Schmidt-Poulsen.

EMMA SCHMIDT-POULSEN

Thank you so much for the opportunity to speak before such an esteemed audience. As you know I am not a Middle East expert. I've been television journalist all my life. But over the past two years I have been involved in humanitarian issues, and, in particular, with problems faced by citizens of nations with adverse economic conditions. And, if I may, I'd like to share with you a recent experience. It so happened that I spent a month living in a tiny village in Latin America, to be specific in Peru. A typical Peruvian village, with a population of about five hundred, situated in the very heart of the Amazon, on the Ucayali River. It's a village with which our organization has been working, and I had to spend an entire month there. I won't go into details about what I was doing there, it's not that important—we were assessing the effectiveness of a recently-developed humanitarian program geared toward elementary education in these sorts of poorly-developed regions, and since I was one of the program's designers, I was there along with several of my colleagues to evaluate it. But, what I want to share with you is about a certain sensation I had. A very important kind of experience I had that, I think, bears directly on what we're talking about here today—and first and foremost on the Iran Issue. At least so it seems to me. You see, the thing is, my colleagues and I came to this village to help these people. The poverty in this village is truly dire. Houses put together

using wooden planks crudely nailed together. Most of them had no walls at all, just a roof. There's very little food, very little decent drinkable water, and they only use water from the river, which is extremely polluted. Elementary schooling is rudimentary at best: children literally just learn to read,

20

write, and more or less how to count, and that's that. But what you notice immediately is that these people are almost always in a very upbeat mood. They are almost always content with everything. And over the course of the month that I spent there observing these people, I suddenly saw that these people — you know what? — they're truly happy. And you know, I suddenly became aware that I was — for the first time in my life — I was looking at a community of truly happy people. Because nowhere — not in the flourishing countries of central Europe, not even here in our thriving Denmark, not in our neighboring Sweden, not in Holland or Norway, not even in California in the USA, nowhere have I witnessed such a profound feeling of happiness in other people. Smiles — sure. A positive, friendly attitude — sure. But this kind of deep-seated feeling of happiness — this was something I had encountered very rarely. And now, I want to ask that you understand me correctly. It's very important that you hear me right. I'm well aware of that Western neurosis of ours, this Western habit of praising, idolizing and romanticizing Asian, Middle- Eastern or Latin-American mindset. I know that I was there for only a month, that I come from a place that does not know starvation, and those people only seem happy to me because I didn't really live their lives and confronted their problems. Or, if someone asked me whether I would like to stay there forever and exchange the cozy, much-loved house in a suburb of Copenhagen where Nicklas and I live now for a house made of scrap wood in the Peruvian jungle — forever! — honestly, I would say no. And I say again, I know that we Europeans love to ascribe a special kind of spirituality to small indigenous peoples. I'm aware of that. However, notice that I haven't said that these people have no problems. They have a ton of problems. I didn't say that I saw no irritation, or pain, or even a certain amount of indignation. No, no — all the usual human weaknesses and shortcomings are in evidence there as much as they are anywhere else. Or rather—no, not quite like anywhere. In that village, all the qualities of humanity are manifest through the sensation of happiness. Does that make sense? Happy people starve, happy people are outraged and get angry. But the people doing those things are happy. They have happiness. They know what it is. And the more I looked at them the worse I felt. I became suddenly aware of some unimaginable void inside me. I felt terribly lonely. I peered inside myself and there was nothing there— nothing but a ton of cultural baggage. There was nothing inside me beyond politeness, tolerance, humanism, upbringing. Inside of me there was love for my children, concern for my parents, loyalty to my country, but what was *not* inside me was that unwavering, unearthly joy that I saw in those people. That happiness that was in those people—it wasn't inside me. And the worst part! I don't know, maybe I'm making some kind of mistake here, saying this. I hope my husband doesn't take it the wrong way. But inside me, I did not see the kind of love I saw in them. I looked inside myself and, quite frankly, I couldn't even figure out — what am I living for? I keep reading all these books about evolutionary development, about unity with the cosmos, about how we're all part of one great whole. But the joy in my

heart does not increase. I love my family, my children...

Pause. Emma ponders something for a moment.

...my husband. I enjoy visiting our parents' houses, and spending evenings together with our whole family—but that's not the happiness I saw there in those people. Or — here you go — recently I saw a Facebook post: an American friend of mine writes about how after meditating he suddenly felt a part of the divine design. And then he goes on and describes

it in all these colorful details. How he blossomed, how he 21

felt love for every living thing. But what are you writing about that on Facebook for? To what end? And I look at his eyes in those photos of his and I can sense: that's not it, something here isn't right. By the way, I've also experience a similar ecstatic feeling of universal love and oneness. But that's not it. I realized that's just not it. It's just a sort of euphoria, and nothing more than that. And that's a very fine line — between truth and euphoria. But I could see that difference only there, only when I was witnessing that truth. I recalled that before I left for Peru we had a farewell dinner, and invited our parents and some very close friends. And it was so heartfelt, so warm, so lovely. And then, when everyone left, my husband and I said to each other: what a lovely evening, what a beautiful evening, how happy we are. And I remembered that evening there in Peru and suddenly it felt —forgive me, Nicklas — it suddenly seemed so superficial to me. It was warm, cozy, charming, but it had no depth of genuine interaction and true cosmic joy. And you know I lived there with those people and the more melancholy I grew, the more I became aware of the presence of happiness and joy in these people. And I tried to understand, to explain to myself the secret of that happiness. And finally, it seems to me, I understood. And this is what I wanted to talk to you about.

A brief pause.

You see—the secret of these people's happiness is that they — it's like they possess a sort of knowledge of something impossibly important and marvelous yet hidden from the naked eye. It's like — if a beggar has a million dollars in savings, but he just sits on the street and keeps begging — he may do it but there's a different expression in his eyes, because he's got a secret. And it's like all of them had a secret. I watched them, I watched their children, their elderly, their women, who all live such hard lives — and I saw that they all had some kind of one shared secret... and that this secret made them happy. And, by the way, I recalled that I saw a look like that back in Serbia. Many Serbs have something just like that in their gaze — like they know a secret. I remembered this there, in Peru. And when you asked me to speak, Mr. Rasmussen, and of course you asked me to speak because I'm the Prime Minister's wife, so that he would be here — why else ask a former TV personality to speak at a conference on the Iran Issue, what could I possibly have to say on that topic — not much, right? No, no, I'm not reproaching you — there's absolutely nothing wrong with that at all. On the contrary, I'm very glad to be here. I see that a very interesting discussion has suddenly developed here. And I'm very glad I was able to say all this to you. Because I'm certain that we developed nations

are trying to solve the world's greatest global problems, but the great majority of us don't know what the secret is. But there is a secret, you see? Not enlightenment, not evolutionary development, not the Cosmos, but a secret. We don't know what it is. And Iranians, actually, are precisely the kind of people who also display that knowledge in their gaze. Iranians, it seems to me — it seems to me that they have this secret in their mindset, they do. Whereas when I look around at our eyes — forgive me — I very rarely see it. And so we who do not know the secret, are trying to help those who do know the secret. That's about all I have to say on the matter of the Iran Issue. Thank you for your attention.

Pause.

PHILIP RASMUSSEN

Hm. And so are you going to tell us the secret, Mrs. Poulsen?

22

Laughter in the audience.

EMMA SCHMIDT-POULSEN

That's not a question for me, Mr. Rasmussen. I'm a journalist! We journalists are not used to answering questions, only asking them.

Magnus Thomsen approaches the microphone.

MAGNUS THOMSEN

I'm sorry, Emma, but doesn't it seem like you've just reduced this entire discussion to a banal opposition of "us" vs. "them"? People who know "the secret" and people who don't know "the secret"? The age-old hackneyed line about the "godless" and overfed "us" and the rich-in-spirit, poor-in-money "them." The Russians, as far as I can tell, really love this whole line, can't get enough of it.

EMMA SCHMIDT-POULSEN

I understand what you're saying very well, Magnus. We've known each other a long time, after all. Magnus and I were in college together, majored in the same program. We've known each other, what — about fifteen years? And I—forgive me, but I've never noticed, in your eyes or mine, any sign that either of us knows the secret. Also I myself can't stand all that infantile nonsense about nations that are spiritual and those that are not. And that's not what I wanted to talk about. I love my people and I thank God that I was born here and live here. But were you listening to what I just said or not? Magnus—do you know what the secret is?

MAGNUS THOMSEN

What friggin' secret, Emma? Wake up! Stop doing so much DMT, Emma, that's the goddamn secret.

PHILIP RASMUSSEN

Hey! That's enough. Magnus Thomsen, you'll have to cede the floor immediately. You're out of line. Apologize this instant.

MAGNUS THOMSEN

Excuse me. Friggin' seekers of secrets.

Magnus Thomsen steps away from the microphone and returns to his seat.

PHILIP RASMUSSEN

I'd like to apologize to our audience. My apologies. Our discussion got heated and one of the participants lost his temper. It's alright, these things happen. Emma, please, forgive us.

EMMA SCHMIDT-POULSEN

No worries. I understand him. I too, when I was sitting there in Peru watching those people, sometimes I also felt these bouts of uncontrollable rage. Sometimes it even felt oddly curious: — where was all this rage coming from? I hadn't felt anything like that rage since my childhood. And there, then, it just came flowing out of me.

23

Thank you once again for the opportunity to speak. It seems that we're actually having a lively discussion, like we've never had before. Thank you.

Emma heads back to her seat. Magnus Thomsen returns to the microphone on stage.

MAGNUS THOMSEN

I want to apologize to everyone assembled here. And to you, Emma. I did lose my temper. I beg your pardon, Mr. Rasmussen. I was wrong. However... would you allow me to say a few words about this? I think now might be just the right time for it.

PHILIP RASMUSSEN

Well, it's not actually your turn right now, but if you think it's absolutely necessary, and if it helps to clear the air... But please, I beg you, refrain from saying anything aggressive.

MAGNUS THOMSEN

Exactly! That's exactly what I wanted to say—something that will be very pleasant for all of us to hear. Because — you, Emma, were just saying that in Peru you met people who were happy. But do you not know that Danes, according to a recent major research study are among the happiest nations in the world? Our concept of *hygge* is a shining example for the rest of the world. This is the expert determination based on statistical evidence. But even *that's* not the point. The point is that we are truly happy. We are kind, we raise our children in the spirit of valuing the family, we don't need very much, and so we lack for nothing. Danes care for other people, grateful to their parents and their teachers. We are friendly. We enjoy spending time surrounded by our families. We live in close contact with nature. I mean, who am I talking to here?! There are a few Danes here, right?! Don't we know who we are, that we are a truly happy people?! That is precisely why I got so angry, Emma! And — since I've already cut in line and am speaking out of turn — I'll just go ahead and state what I was going to say. I prepared a very different talk. But at this point the talk I prepared is no longer relevant, because our discussion here has moved in a different direction. So this is what I want to say. I often hear the word “spirituality.” Spirituality, spirituality... Spiritually-rich people, spiritually- impoverished people... And what is it, this spirituality?! Blabbing on about God? Religiosity? And so what if somewhere out there in Russia people think of themselves as “spiritual”? So what?! What are they, *more spiritual* than us Danes? Russia, with the highest rate of physical violence towards women on our whole continent? They have drunkenness, corruption, violence, aggression, cruelty, abandoned children. Dirt! Where's the spirituality?! Where? How does it manifest itself? And we — the spiritually-impoverished Europeans with our concern for the elderly and the ailing, with our human rights, with our educational system — we toil relentlessly for the freedom of choice, for the equal rights for people of all sexual orientations. That spiritually-impoverished Germany — it has now taken in more than a million refugees. The very people from Syria and Iraq — these highly-spiritual people with a secret in their gaze, as Emma would have it — who proceeded to blow up and rape the people who let them in, and run them over with their cars. These spiritual nations—they kill us, they despise us, the spiritually-impoverished Europeans, who have no secret on the inside.

Isn't that right Emma?! Am I right, for frick's sake?!

24

PHILIP RASMUSSEN

Magnus! Watch your language!

MAGNUS THOMSEN

Oh yes, I'm sorry. But I think there's something I don't understand about this spirituality of yours. Spirituality is—what? Can somebody tell me? Huh?!

Father Augustine speaks up from his seat.

FATHER AUGUSTINE

Yes, I can tell you.

PHILIP RASMUSSEN

Father Augustine, would you mind stepping up to the microphone.

Father Augustine heads toward the microphone.

PHILIP RASMUSSEN

Professor of theology at the University of Copenhagen, Father Augustine.

Father Augustine reaches the microphone.

FATHER AUGUSTINE

The word “spirituality” is a Christian term derived from the concept of the Holy Spirit. You’ve been listing human qualities here: kindness, empathy, attentiveness to other. All of these can result from spirituality. But spirituality itself denotes a contact between the human heart and the Holy Spirit. It is a mystical act, not a social one.

Father Augustine returns to his place.

MAGNUS THOMSEN

In other words, *Allahu Akbar!*

Laughter in the audience.

MAGNUS THOMSEN

You see? No need to elaborate on this, a spokesperson for religion has said it all himself. And everything’s clear as day! And you know what, Emma — I think that your depressive condition, your self-doubt, all of that is just our typical European sickness. I think it’s all just a Western European virus that originates in Central Europe but has made its way over into our region. Or some Swedish thing, or some kind of depression-bearing bug from the outside — but it definitely does not originate here. Because in fact we Danes live in a wonderful country and we are happy. That’s all I wanted to say. And in Iran people cannot consider themselves happy, because all four of the main human rights that Astrid Petersen spoke about here, are violated. And as far as them knowing some kind of secret. What secret, Emma?! Love your parents, respect your kinfolk, take care of the world in which you live, derive joy from your interactions with nature and with people, know how to

have fun and how to grieve. Do not harm other peoples, do not be immature, in short, take responsibility for your life — that's what happiness is. We are happy, Emma. Secret? What are you talking about—what secret?! Thank you for your attention.

Pause.

PHILIP RASMUSSEN

Ummm... Mrs. Poulsen, do you want to respond in any way to the very agitated Magnus Thomsen over here?

Emma Schmidt-Poulsen shakes her head 'no' to indicate that she doesn't care to answer.

PHILIP RASMUSSEN

In that case, it's my pleasure to announce our next speaker, the author, essayist, and philosopher Gustav Jensen. I'm sure that there's no need to introduce Jensen to the general public, since we all know him from his books, and especially from his most recent book *The Illusion of Being Free*, which caused quite a stir here. It's precisely for that reason that we invited Mr. Jensen to participate in our conversation — because in his latest book he touched upon the very questions that have already been brought up today. Mr. Jensen, please.

Gustav Jensen gets behind the lectern.

GUSTAV JENSEN

Good afternoon. Thank you for the invitation and for the opportunity to speak at such an interesting conference. The fact is that the so-called "Iran Issue" is first and foremost a question of what we, the people of Western Civilization, ought to do as we observe the life and works of people from Iran and similar nations. How we should behave, not how *they* should behave. That's how the question is being posed. Because actually the issue is not with Iran, it's with us. What are we to do given the injunction, out there in Iran, against women appearing in public with their heads uncovered? What ought we to do when a married woman is subjected to public humiliation and harsh punishment for taking a selfie in which her uncovered wrists are showing, and putting it up on Instagram? What are we to do when women are banned from riding bicycles, or when a world-famous film director is sentenced to twenty years of prison for a few innocuous critical remarks regarding the Qur'an? What ought we to do when we see a clique of fanatics who run the country, holding in subjection the entire population, people we find so likeable? What do we do about all this? We are all searching for a solution to this problem, which we are calling the "Iran Issue," but which, as I already said, is in fact our own issue. So our problem is that we can't sleep at night because an enormous number of people on this planet are being deprived of four universal rights: the right to life, the right to receive information, the right to practice the religion of their choice and possess a personal worldview, and the right to choose a sexual partner. There's the issue, and that is the

reason we have gathered here today. And now, if I may, I'd like to tell you my personal view of these four universal human rights. I repeat: what I'm about to say is my personal, subjective opinion, the right to which was granted to me today by the Universe in the person of Astrid Petersen. So then, with your permission. The human being, as we know — and by "us" I mean educated people whose behavior is informed by science and a sober view of things — anyway, the

26

human being appears on this earth not as a matter of personal volition but as a consequence of parental intercourse. My parents wanted each other, they slept with each other, and I arrived. My older sister, by the way, was conceived by my parents while on LSD and by candlelight, but be that as it may, this was not her choice or mine. And not even Astrid Petersen's.

Laughter in the audience.

None of us choose the moment of our birth, just as none of us can to choose the moment of our death. When will you die? You don't know. When will your child die? Your parents? When will Astrid Petersen die? Of course the right to life functions as a denunciation of violent death, a proclamation that no one can take another life. But I believe death, just as birth, arrives when it must, and not when you want it to — or not. And if you aren't blown up by terrorists in some café in the center of Paris, then cancer will finish you off, or a car accident, or you'll stick it out into old age with the gift of Alzheimer's. We can't issue conditions to death and demand that it not come for us — that's absurd. Life is a chaos of coincidences, and the right to life cannot be vested in a human being. Especially since, as far as I know, Astrid Petersen is not a vegetarian. According to her, then, cows and pigs do not have a right to life, because they are beings of a lower order compared to humans. And as far as the right to receive information, or knowledge — I admit I'm kind of lost here, despite Mr. Larsen's valiant attempt to clarify things for us: "information," "knowledge" — I'm a bit confused; but no matter, anyway — yes, of course, we do want to know. And we have a right to know. The only question is — what do we want to know? Today, in the age of information warfare, we have all got the point, I think, that the more information of various sorts we consume, the less we know what is actually happening. Information actually deprives us of knowing things — that's just a fact! Who, for example, is to blame for what's happening in Syria? The answer will depend on the news outlet you're using, and not on what is actually happening there. And, come on, does a single, uniform reality exist in this world — something that is identical for everyone? Oh yes, the Earth is definitely round, it spins on its own axis and also revolves around the sun, and every person has the right to know that. So what? So what — now you know that, dear Astrid Petersen, and so what? So what if you know about all these molecules and atoms, about all these scientific hypotheses and theories — so what? Can you really say that you know how everything operates here, and thanks to that knowledge your life has truly changed? If that's what you think, you're deeply misguided, because the fact is — you know nothing. Because the main question — the meaning of your life — remains a mystery to you, and you will never get an exhaustive answer to the question about the

meaning of your life because, odds are, your life simply doesn't have any ascertainable meaning. You're simply born, you live, you die, that's it. And that brings us to the greatest human misunderstanding of them all — the freedom fallacy. Now, here we are, you and I, highly respected academics, university professors, teachers, educated people witnessing this conversation — don't we know that human life is derived from two main sources: genes and the social environment? You and I are the genes of our forebears, plus the environment in which we grew up. That's it. Where does personal freedom fit into that? What is this personality you're even talking about when your personality is your genes and your upbringing? All I am is whatever my ancestors implanted in me and whatever developed in the milieu and under the conditions in which I grew up. No one here makes any choices — the choice is made as a consequence of the fundamental

27

disposition imbedded in us from the start. The choice I think I'm making is actually dictated by my upbringing, my mood, my general state of health, and the situation in which I find myself at the moment. There is no such thing as a right to freedom granted to human beings by the universe, and there cannot be, because everything is overdetermined. Because our parents conceived us without our consent, because we perpetuate our kin group, we're just a sack of all of our ancestors' genes. The biologist Richard Dawkins does a masterful job of writing about this in his dazzling book *The Selfish Gene*. We are genes. And these genes, incarnate in our body, fall under the influence of whatever milieu that body develops in — and, take note, the milieu the body did not choose. So I can't seem to find any room here for any of these universal rights of yours. Rights? For whom? For a sack of ancestral genes cultivated in the state of Denmark?! And the same goes for your fourth right — the right to sexual orientation, which is determined by the arrangement of chromosomes during the formation of a new body, as well as by one's cultural milieu. And these days certainly much more so by the cultural milieu — primarily so, in fact — under the influence of so-called "cultural liberalism." And that's that.

Astrid Petersen approaches the microphone.

ASTRID PETERSEN

Excuse me, but I can't just sit there and be silent, I have to say something. I see that in today's conversation, right from the very beginning and all the time, one speaker after another posit, and then advocate for, this idea that human life does not matter and there is no such thing as human freedom. For one of the speakers human life isn't important because there's something *more* important — some god up there; for another one, a human is an assemblage of molecules overdetermined by by culture and upbringing. Furthermore, for you to say that homosexuality is a product of cultural liberalism, and to emphasize that idea, you are intentionally —

GUSTAV JENSEN

I did not emphasize that, Astrid.

ASTRID PETERSEN

Yes you did, Gustav, you did. I know you in and out, I see right through you. You're a sly dog, and also, unfortunately, a talented one. And as you act out the part of an eccentric-but-charming celebrity author, you deliberately work to emphasize the particular details that you need for your own purposes. You know how to sway other people's opinions, we all know that very well, or at least I do. I see the determination with which you are trying to establish the claim that human beings are cowards. Your point is that humanity is afraid to look truth in the eyes, and so it invents all sorts of new life rules that cannot be reconciled with the realities of nature. A human being is a nonentity, a human being is a pathetic coward, which is why humans invent things like tolerance and democracy— only to make life more comfortable for themselves and get even further away from reality. That's why you're a homophobe, Gustav.

GUSTAV JENSEN

I'm not a homophobe, Astrid.

28

ASTRID PETERSEN

You're a homophobe, Gustav. I was married to you for a few terrible years, and I know what you're thinking. But that's not the point. I just want to respond, dear Gustav. I want to respond to you because the ideas you keep putting out there in public with such single-minded dedication are becoming extremely popular today, thanks unfortunately to people like you, and I view this as a threat to human freedom. I will be brief. So then, my darling. If we turn to science — to actual modern science: modern psychology, modern medicine and biology — and ask, what is a human being, and what meaning is there for human beings, we get a very clear answer. It sounds something like this: the meaning of a human life is contained in the life itself. The meaning of life is to live and progress, by means of evolutionary development, from a lower entity to a higher one. Life itself is the meaning of life. To live in this world, to live in this cosmos—that is the meaning of human life. What is a human being? A human being is life. I am alive. I can love, I can hate. I can desire. You believe, Gustav, that my life is overdetermined by my genetic code and my social milieu. Yes, that's right, and precisely for that reason I am completely free in my choices. Because I am that genetic code, and I am that social environment. I create this life, I am this life. This life manifests itself through me. In Saudi Arabia I execute people for homosexuality, and here in Denmark, I respect the sexual freedoms of living beings. I make the choice to transition from a lower stage to a higher stage of development, Gustav. I change, and the world changes. And there is a choice. The choice lies in the changes that occur. Because I am that choice, I am those changes, I am that evolution, I am the cosmos. I reveal myself in the multitude of my manifestations. I am the molecules, I am the atoms, I am the universe, I am the rules, I am the law, I am consciousness itself. I am life and death. I am freedom, bravery, courage, gratitude and love. There!

Widespread applause.

ASTRID PETERSEN

Thank you. And forgive me for taking up too much of your attention today. And by the way, my dear Gustav, I've been a vegetarian for two years now — so I do recognize the animals' right to their lives.

Astrid Petersen returns to her seat.

Pause.

PHILIP RASMUSSEN

Would you like to offer anything in the way of a rebuttal, Mr. Jensen?

GUSTAV JENSEN

No, nothing at all. It seems to me that Astrid simply let things get personal just now — as you heard, we were husband and wife for a time. But I have nothing to offer in rebuttal, because we all reason in accordance with who we are. Astrid Petersen is Astrid Petersen, and reasons the way Astrid Petersen does. And she ascribes to me thoughts and ideas that I do not hold — or at any rate, that she does not understand correctly, because she sees whatever reality she wants to see and can see depending on her character. I believe I am someone quite different, not at all the person that Astrid Petersen sees me as. And this goes for everyone. Nobody knows anybody and nobody sees anybody, because everyone looks at the world through the

prism of their own individual predispositions. And all the scandals around me and my books are bred only by the fact that, by contrast with the great majority of people, I allow myself to express my opinion openly — without, I would add, without forcing it on anyone, as Astrid Petersen would have it. All I am doing is openly reporting what I think—that's all. And *that*, more than anything else, is what drives today's liberal society bonkers — the liberal society that, due to its weakness and cowardice, hides from itself, seeking cover in ideas of unified cosmic unity, tolerance, and this sort of utopian universal personal freedom. A person can't be free, because the concept of personhood itself is already a prison. However, there's one point on which I would agree with Astrid Petersen — yes, people do create themselves and others in their image. Iranians create their intransigent Islam, the Russians their corrupt authorities, the English their Brexit, the Americans create the American president they've got themselves now. But no one has any choice, because everything comes out exactly as it comes out, because we are exactly who we are, period. Thank you for your attention.

Gustav Jensen starts to leave, but a question from the audience makes him stop.

THE VOICE OF PATRICK
NIELSEN

Excuse me, Gustav. I'd like to ask you something.

GUSTAV JENSEN

Yes?

THE VOICE OF PATRICK
NIELSEN

Patrick Nielsen, head librarian at Aarhus University.

GUSTAV JENSEN

Pleasure to meet you, Patrick.

THE VOICE OF PATRICK
NIELSEN

At the beginning of your talk you mentioned that the Iran Issue is actually our own issue, and you said that we were here because we didn't know how to live with this issue. So how *should* we live, Mr. Jensen?

GUSTAV JENSEN

Two years ago my older son committed suicide. He hanged himself in his room. He was eighteen years old. On the wall in his room, big black letters spelled the words "I'M GONE." He listened to too much of that damned black heavy metal music. And I think he was gay — though he never came out to me or my wife, apparently because he thought that I disapprove of it all, though that's entirely not the case. Anyway, that's not the point... How should we live, Patrick? You have to face the truth, and no matter what, never betray your convictions. Don't call white black if you see that it's white — stand your ground, even if your convictions are at odds with the convictions of the whole society. Something like that, perhaps.

PHILIP RASMUSSEN

And what are you calling "white," Gustav?

30

GUSTAV JENSEN

What I am calling "white" is what is, to me, white, Mr. Rasmussen. To each his own truth.

Jensen wants to head back, but is again stopped by a question — from Oliver Larsen, who has

approached the microphone.

OLIVER LARSEN

Mr. Jensen. I have a question. I have read your books, including the latest one. And I just can't get my mind around one thing. I understand what you're writing about — I can't say I agree with it all, as is the case with some of the things you've said just now. But I'm interested in a lot of the things you write about. Only I can't quite put my finger on your purpose — I don't know how to put it clearly... What is your purpose, or what for you is the meaning of life? I know that you're an atheist, but you write about spiritual matters. So what does life mean for you?

GUSTAV JENSEN

Oh, that's a very personal question, I'm afraid. And there's no connection to the Iran issue. Are we perhaps going off-topic a bit here?

OLIVER LARSEN We've been getting off-topic all this time, so I don't think there's any problem

there. Especially since this actually has some bearing on our discussion. Because I've been listening to you here, I'm listening, and I can't figure out — to what end are you saying all this?

GUSTAV JENSEN

I'm saying this to no end whatsoever. Absolutely none. I was invited to speak, and I accepted the invitation. And what's the meaning of life for me? To be honest, I don't believe there is one, Mr. Larsen. I'm flattered to know that a man as serious as you reads my books. But it seems to me that all my books are precisely about the fact that there is no meaning whatsoever. Just as there's no freedom of choice. Life simply flows.

PHILIP RASMUSSEN

That would make a good title for your next book, Mr. Jensen. *Life Simply Flows*.

GUSTAV JENSEN

Thank you for the idea, Mr. Rasmussen.

PHILIP RASMUSSEN

You have Oliver Larsen to thank for that.

GUSTAV JENSEN

Thank you, to all of you. And forgive me if I've offended anyone. I swear that was not my intention.

Gustav Jensen returns to his seat.

31

PHILIP RASMUSSEN

Thank you, Mr. Jensen. I would like to emphasize, however, especially considering that the Prime Minister is here with us today, that the conference organizers do not share all the views of the invited speakers. But that's exactly where the value of our democratic tradition lies, in the opportunity to express one's opinion freely, even if it's unpopular or contradicts society's fundamental moral values.

Daniel Christensen approaches the microphone.

DANIEL CHRISTENSEN

Mr. Rasmussen, I have a question for you personally. What was your goal in organizing this conference?

PHILIP RASMUSSEN

Oh yes! Great question. Thank you for that question, Mr. Christensen. Because that's exactly where I wanted to express my disagreement with our dear author Gustav Jensen. You see, dear Gustav, we've gathered here not only because the violations of universal human rights in Iran and other nations keep us awake at night, as you put it. We are probably here first and foremost because after the war in Syria, after the string of terrorist attacks in Europe, after the wave of refugees, after everything happening now in the U.S. and the E.U., we are finally becoming aware that all these events affect us, too. We all live in one world, we are all in the same boat, a boat which it seems to me is leaking a bit — or maybe not just "a bit," maybe the water is gushing through the breach and we're all headed for rock bottom, all of us together I'm saying, including even Australia and New Zealand. Not for nothing have the governments of these countries become so actively involved in the current political process. Also, Mr. Jensen, we are losing sleep at night not only because Iranian women are being jailed for taking selfies with bare wrists showing, but above all because that nation may very well soon be in possession of a nuclear weapon, which it is threatening to drop on Israel at the very first chance it gets. We can't sleep and we are worried because conducting a dialogue with Iran's leadership is a pretty difficult undertaking, due to the fundamental difference in human values — our "Western" values, and theirs. The same goes for Russia. It can't *not* worry us here in Denmark that the politicians in control of such a mighty nuclear power as Russia are people who operate on a value system than is fundamentally incongruous with ours. In the Russian value system, what comes first is not the human being and human rights — what comes first is force and power. And that can't not worry us, just as it can't not worry the rest of the civilized world. *That* is why we're here — to talk about Iran not from a political perspective, but from the perspective of values. The objective of our conference is to understand whether spiritual and moral values actually exist in countries like Iran — values that we are perhaps simply incapable of wrapping our minds around. Maybe we

really don't understand something about them? But is that actually the case? Or could it be that people in Iran and Russia simply find themselves under the influence of formidable propaganda, and they are overcome with fear when confronted with freedom of any kind. Because the slave is always scared by freedom, because freedom demands that the slave stop being a slave and become himself — and that's unfamiliar and scary. Or perhaps I'm mistaken, and I am misunderstanding something about these nations and their politics... But the goal of our conference, Mr. Christensen, is to sort all this out.

32

DANIEL CHRISTENSEN

Thank you, Mr. Rasmussen. I asked that question about the goal of our conference because *goal* is a concept I've been quite preoccupied with recently. The idea of having a goal. What it means. What a goal is. Because I mean — if we have no goal, where are we headed? If I'm headed to the city of Aarhus, for example, I leave my house knowing where I'm headed — I go to the train station, because I want to get on a train that will take me to Aarhus. And if, on my way to the station, I run into a friend and we stop somewhere for coffee, then the time I spend with him is governed by the fact that I need to get to the station on time and make the train. I'm drinking coffee, I'm chatting with my friend, but I also keep looking at my watch. Because I'm animated by a goal: to get to Aarhus. The goal is what determines movement. The goal gives meaning to everything. And what is our nation's goal — Denmark's overall goal? The prosperity of its citizens? Maximally favorable conditions for the flourishing of the arts? Maximally favorable conditions for economic development? But all of these goals cover the social side of life. And what is the goal of our life overall? What is the purpose of human life? Loving your family, being kind and caring? To serve the nation? What is it? Or, as Astrid Petersen formulated it, is it to create the conditions in which the potential for freedom that is imbedded in each of us can be realized? Though here, actually, I'll probably have to agree with Gustav Jensen, as much as I don't want to. But I have to admit that humans are unlikely to possess any kind of freedom of choice in this world, where everything is completely overdetermined and predestined. Everything we do depends on our genes and our upbringing. So then, does that mean our goal is merely to live a comfortable life? Let's call this thing what it is. The goal of Western society — of which human beings and their rights are the true measure and proper foundation — the goal of that society is human comfort. Comfort is the be-all and end-all of our civilization.

Whereas for an Iranian that central purpose is Allah. Forgive me for impinging on someone else's time. Thank you.

Daniel Christensen goes back to his seat.

PHILIP RASMUSSEN

Well! This seems like the perfect moment, I think, to turn the floor over to someone who can speak on behalf of religion.

Laughter in the audience.

It's my pleasure to introduce our next speaker, a pastor of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark, Father Augustine.

Father Augustine heads towards the lectern.

PHILIP RASMUSSEN

Father Augustine is a fairly well-known figure here in Denmark. He owes this fame in particular to the scandal surrounding a punk rock concert held at the Church of St. Paul, where Father Augustine was serving at the time. Or rather, he owes his fame to his protest against the concert. To remind you, a few years ago, Black Mass, a Danish punk rock band, decided to hold a concert in solidarity with the Russian

33

punk rock group Pussy Riot, when lead singers from that ensemble were jailed for their performance at the Russian Orthodox cathedral. So Black Mass, our own punk rock group, decided to hold their own concert at St. Paul's. But Father Augustine, in his capacity as the church's rector, did not allow the group to enter the church and prevented them from performing — even though the Bishop had granted them permission to do so. This even led to Father Augustine being dismissed from his position at that church. And I think we all remember the whole thing very well. It was in all the papers, it was a topic of conversation at the dinner table. And so the majority of Danes know Father Augustine due to that case. And I hope you won't be offended, Father, if I say that your reputation even beyond that particular incident with the punk rock band is still pretty scandalous. Which is why I'm very glad to introduce the Reverend today not only as a priest who espouses some pretty radical views, but — first and foremost — as a distinguished scholar. Because besides serving Holy Communion, Father Augustine is a professor of theology at the University of Copenhagen. He is the author of a superb monograph on the history of the medieval icon, and co-authored of a comprehensive almanac, *Christianity in Scandinavia*. Last year Father Augustine took part in an international conference on Christianity in Syria. The conference itself was held in Damascus, and was attended by the Syrian president and the country's top Muslim clerics. I was also present at that conference and I had occasion to hear Father Augustine's presentation, and I will tell you that it was one of the most powerful and memorable talks I heard. And as far as I know, as I was told afterward, that speech proved to be a major influence on the president of Syria and helped resolve many key problems faced by Christians in that troublesome region. Father Augustine, you have the floor.

FATHER AUGUSTINE

Good afternoon. It saddens me that my name has become famous as a result of the ridiculous scandal at St. Paul's. I know that even you, Prime Minister, were dragged into that business, so the whole thing is pretty unpleasant. And believe me I'd much rather not

get into all that again. So please don't worry: I'm not planning on using the time I've been allotted to rehash the past. But I do want to talk about something that does give me great worry, and I think what I'm going to say bears directly on today's discussion. This, then, my dear brothers and sisters, is what I want to say. A plate is a piece of tableware used to serve food. When the plate is concave, like a bowl, you use it for soup, and when it is flat you use it to serve salad or fish or spaghetti! Women use lipstick to add color to their lips! A shirt is something you wear on the upper torso. Shoes are worn on the feet! Beds are used to sleep on. Toilets are for pooping and peeing, and sometimes you can use them as a place to empty coffee grounds or a soup that's gone bad! A profession of love is something you address to someone you are in love with, even though in some cases this is a delusion! A lie is when you know you're not telling the truth. Sugar is sweet! A complete story has a beginning, a middle and an end. Plays are performed on a stage, novels appear in books that can be read, the earth revolves around the sun. A fox is not a wolf! A bear is not a duck. A circle doesn't look like a square. Thoughts convey meanings. A man inseminates a woman in order to have a child. Plants grow toward the sun. Water is a liquid substance. Churches are for worshipping God. At a rock concert, they play rock music. People swim in swimming pools. People get drunk from wine. Smoking is harmful to one's health. Eating too many sweets makes you fat, illness makes you ill. When you're chopping an onion, it can make you cry. A beef steak means a cow has been murdered. An abortion is the termination of a human life. A telephone is for calling. A bed is for sleeping. Or for lying around and watching movies, or, if you're a child, for jumping up and down³⁴

on! Trousers are worn on the legs, hats are worn on the head. All human beings are different from one another. All artists are different from one another. All art works are different from one another. Objects have boundaries. Each object has its own place and its own purpose. Boots are worn on your feet. Sunglasses are called sunglasses because they shield your eyes from the sun. Salvador Dali is distinguishable from Velasquez. Shakespeare from Chekhov. Panty hose are for women, condoms for men. The apple is a fruit, the trout is a fish, the wolf is an animal. Medicines are used to cure the sick. LSD is for reaching the trance state. Jokes are to make people laugh. Christ is Christianity, Buddha is Buddhism, Muhammed is Islam. "Hello" when you meet someone, "goodbye" when you take your leave. And precisely...! You see, precisely, precisely because Einstein gave us the theory of relativity! Precisely! Yes! Precisely, because everything is relative! Because in life everything flows and nothing is permanent. Precisely because God gave us quantum mechanics. Precisely because we have the multiverse theory, and the integral theory, and a whole pile of all kinds of theories. Because human perception is subjective and "there are as many opinions as there are people," because we are all different, because the universe is manifold variety and billions of variations, precisely for all these reasons, it was inappropriate for a musical group called Black Mass to perform a concert in a Christian church. An ensemble whose repertoire includes a song with lyrics like "We'll set Darkness free / And give Satan liberty" does not belong in a place of worship. Everything has its place. Each thing has its meaning. Everything has its intended purpose. Energy flows freely only when form and content are in harmony. The more fully the form matches the content, the more robustly will the life force flow within it. So the point isn't to look for new forms, but to create forms appropriate to content. It's not new forms we need,

it's the *necessary* forms. Not extravagant forms, but forms that can illuminate the content. Because form and content are one and the same. The form of a glass and the content of a glass are the same. There's no point calling something a book if you can't read it. There's no point in loving without love, being envious without envy, hating without hate, becoming mindful about something in the absence of mindfulness, praying without prayer. We've lost our minds, and under the guise of freedom we have turned life into an abstraction. In our fear of violating human rights, we are calling hot *cold* and blue *yellow*. Our new motto is "To each his perspective," and we've begun to believe that each thing has a great many functions. And most importantly we've come to believe that a human being has a multitude of purposes other than being a human. We've gone crazy! Because mango is a sweet fruit, coconuts grow on palm trees, rubber drain stoppers for bathtubs are sold in the store next door to my house, and humans were created to be human. And what does that mean—to be human? It means to fulfill one's intended purpose — the human purpose. The mosquito was created to fulfill the mosquito's purpose, the horse was intended purpose to be a horse. Humans must understand and execute the purpose that was intended for them in this life. And what is that purpose — the purpose of a human? As a priest, my answer has to be — God and only God. The goal and the intended purpose of a human is God. But on the other hand, who am I to tell you this? I'm a handful of dust, an eccentric, scandalous priest who kicked a satanic punk rock group out of a church, thereby violating the universal right of the artist to defecate wherever he or she pleases. I am nobody, I am dust, I have no right to talk to you about the meaning of life, although for me that meaning is clear. But I will allow myself to say one thing. You say that a human being has rights. But I say that a human being has responsibilities. You say that the universe is "Yes!" And I want to say that the universe is "No." Because only *no* gives life to humans. *No* gives Christian priests in Syria the strength³⁵

to be killed, to be violated, but to be brave and to be themselves. Every object has its own authentic meaning, its own intended purpose, its own essence, which is expressed through a corresponding form. And enough already of justifying our laziness, our desire to live in comfort, our lack of craftsmanship and know-how with a bunch of universal human rights to freedom. Did the universe really grant us the right to draw all those distasteful contemporary illustrations in children's books, with those toxic color schemes and soul-less, deadly figures? Was it really the universe that gave us the right to paint all these incomprehensible pictures in the guise of modern art, and make all those sickening, clinically disturbed movies? Did the universe actually grant us the right to stage plays in such a way that not even the most discerning audience member could tell Ibsen apart from Molière? A comedy from a tragedy? A phony imitation from freedom. Freedom, you say? Only slaves seek freedom, because they don't have it, and don't know what it is. And who told you that traditions are dead? Who among you has studied at least one single tradition and learned its practice? Traditions are rejected by those who have failed to understand them, who don't have them, and who haven't studied them. Those who have been brought up in a tradition, who have devoted themselves to serving one, who have mastered it through careful study —they know that it is the tradition that links the soul to the source of all things, because tradition insures unbroken continuity with our legacy. The essence of tradition, then, is the preservation of our connection to the source of all things! And that right there is precisely where we find the central

meaning of all we know — in the source of all things. And a genuine tradition — no matter how old-fashioned, dated or obsolete it might seem — a genuine tradition is what connects the human soul to that source. The source of all things! And only one who has come to know tradition, who has dedicated one's whole being to it, has grasped the craft, the meaning and the essence of a tradition and become a great master — only that one has the right to reform and change that tradition — and no one else. The world is changed by masters, and not by those who demand that their rights be observed. And finally! Freedom is when a child comes home, takes the shoes off, washes, sits down at a table crafted with care by a carpenter, up on a comfortable chair crafted by a carpenter, pulls up a deep bowl of soup, sniffs the soup and says "Mum, I don't want to eat this soup," and the mother answers "We don't have anything else for lunch — if you don't want to eat this, you're free to leave the table," and then the child thinks, and thinks some more, picks up his spoon, and starts eating. And suddenly, he feels how it tastes. And he feels his freedom. Because our freedom is our decision to say "yes" to the world that says to us: "no." Thank you for your attention.

Pause. Magnus Thomsen is at the microphone.

MAGNUS THOMSEN

So, according to you, most reverend Augustine, when a priest proposes to a ten-year-old boy that he "brighten up his solitude, as tenderly as only a child can, in exchange for the Lord's blessing" — those exact words, for godness' sake! — this boy, according to you, should say his spiritual "yes" to the priest, grab the priest's penis with his boyish hands and thereby acquire his freedom and become a saint. Is that it?

36

FATHER AUGUSTINE

The source of your suffering, Magnus, lies not in the fact that this happened to you but in your inability to let your suffering out. You should say "yes" not to that horrible priest but to the unbearable pain that has been living in your heart from the moment this happened to you, and which can never leave your heart because over the course of your entire life you are trying to pretend that there is no pain inside you.

MAGNUS THOMSEN

What should I do, then?

FATHER AUGUSTINE

The same thing as the rest of us — weep and love.

Pause. Father Augustine heads back to his seat.

MAGNUS THOMSEN.

Very well, Pastor, I will think that over. Thank you.

Magnus Thomsen returns to his seat.

Pause. PHILIP
RASMUSSEN

“Where is it floating, this boat, with no one in it, oarless, aimless, all alone? The river’s current is carrying it; it’s coming for you. Stay where you are and wait.” Contemporary Iranian poetry. Just came to mind, out of the blue. Ladies and gentlemen, I think it is a great honor for us all to be able to welcome to our conversation someone we all admire: Maestro Pascual Andersen.

Widespread applause. Pascual Andersen stands up and slowly moves towards the lectern.

PHILIP RASMUSSEN

Maestro Pascual Andersen is, of course, one of the greatest conductors of the twentieth century. The Danish state has bestowed upon him the honorary title of Distinguished Citizen, and he requires no introduction here. But I would like to mention one thing.

Earlier this year we celebrated Maestro Andersen’s ninetieth birthday. And the speech he gave at the ceremony during which he received from the hands of Her Majesty the Queen the Order of the Dannebrog, a very high honor — this thank-you speech possessed such wisdom and artistic integrity that it has since been added to the national school curriculum, as a required text. And so I, like all of you, I suspect, am really looking forward to hearing what our much-loved and deeply-respected Maestro Andersen has to say.

Pascual Andersen is behind the lectern.
Pause.

PASCUAL
ANDERSEN

Greetings, friends. I'm not going to say anything special. And I'm not going to talk for very long. Everything has really already been said about everything, and they did just fine without me. All of us here like to criticize obsolete traditions. Isn't that right, folks? What is dead must die off, it seems. And like all of you, I am, you know, for the death of Death and the life of Life. Except that, when it really comes down to it, the issue is not who is right and who isn't. The crux of everything is the one and only, authentic Truth, my dear friends. But do we know what this Truth is? Truth: has it been granted to us? Have we been able to experience it, if only fleetingly? The great majority of those present here, I suspect, believes, like Gustav Jensen, who spoke today, and like the majority of people in the Western world, that each of us has our own Truth and so there are many, many truths. Well, my friends— that's a mistake. Because there is only one Truth, concerning only one thing. Does that make any sense to you, what I'm saying? As for tradition, tradition can only be kept alive when at the heart of that tradition stands Truth. Truth is what brings tradition to life, Truth is what brings our lives to life. Truth *is* life. And don't ask me what I mean, don't ask me what Truth I'm talking about. Truth isn't something you talk about at conferences, you don't discuss Truth in formal debates. Truth is something you connect with. You strive for Truth, and then you are granted it. Truth *is* the goal. Truth is the main meaning of our lives. What is Truth? Truth about what? I can't tell you — and no one will be able to — because Truth exists far beyond the limitations of any words. Truth is something you can only feel in your heart. It's something you can only feel. Do you feel what I mean by that? — that is the main question. Can we feel it? Do we have some kind of central, sacrosanct human capacity for feeling deeply and truthfully? Some people seem to have it, and others seem to have barely developed that capacity at all, and still others just live on emotions and reason.

But I'm talking to you about sensing, about feeling. A feeling and an emotion are not the same thing. Emotions are external and superficial, and they blanket the world. Feelings go deeper, to the very depths. To feel something means to feel what matters most inside it. To feel means to draw near to Truth. It means to be given the chance to touch the Truth and to come to know it. For us to understand the role and meaning of tradition, my friends, we must first understand the purpose of our being. We must understand what we're living for, and why we gather at conferences such as this one, to discuss a nation we don't know much about living in a country we don't know much about with traditions we don't know much about. Truly, in full seriousness: *what for?* And finally. Dear friends! We absolutely must understand one very important thing. We have to understand what a *myth* is. And to learn how to make sense of it. We must understand that there's no Jesus Christ *besides* the one that walked on water, there was no Virgin Mary *besides* the one who gave birth without having slept with a man. We must understand that there is no Bible, Qur'an, Talmud separate from religion, that Zeus, Apollo, Christ and Buddha — all these are mythical reality. And mythical reality manifests itself before us through feelings, in a sacred and sensuous form. And that mythical form is truly, wholly sacred. A myth is not a fairy-tale, and it's not a web of neuroses lurking just below the threshold of our consciousness. A myth is the energy of the universe that speaks to you in a language you understand. Myths are the language of the universe. When we come into contact with myths we are in contact with the Truth contained within these myths. Myth is reality, and reality is whatever is happening to us in the present, and not in our memory. And a tradition is a tenet of life meant to uphold our hearts and minds against the deceptive

illusion of the freedom of the human

38

self. Because the only freedom given to humans is the freedom from one's self.
Thank you for your attention.

Pause.

Does anyone have any questions?

PHILIP RASMUSSEN

I do.

PASCUAL
ANDERSEN

Please.

PHILIP RASMUSSEN

What role, then, do you think education and science play in the spiritual development of a human being?

PASCUAL
ANDERSEN

We mistakenly think that we have two lives. Our worldly life and our spiritual life. In fact, there is only one life. Spiritual life. There is no such thing as non-spiritual life. Our worldly life is just an illusion of life, an imitation, nothing more. So worldly education carries no meaning whatsoever. A person doesn't need to be educated, he needs to be spiritual. Worldly and scientific education take us nowhere. Knowing that the earth spins around the sun, discovering all these molecules and atoms, inventing computers and smart phones, being able to fly to Mars, to defeat dangerous diseases and to lengthen our average lifespan — none of this will allow us to gain any true Knowledge and our lives won't become more real; instead they will continue to be what they are for the vast majority of people.

PHILIP RASMUSSEN

Dare I ask — what *is* life for that vast majority of people?

PASCUAL
ANDERSEN

A tragicomic fallacy regarding the importance of personal freedom, and irrational fear of a bomb going off in the subway.

PHILIP RASSMUSEN

So then what about tolerance, personal freedom, evolutionary development — what are all these things then, Maestro?

PASCUAL
ANDERSEN

Your personal comfort objects, Philip.

Pause. Pascual Andersen returns to his place.

PHILIP RASMUSSEN

I just want to remind everyone here that the opinions of particular speakers may well not be in accord with the opinion of the conference organizers and those

39

attending. Because sometimes it seems to me that I hear things that I just can't wrap my mind around.

Pause.

Or maybe I just don't understand where it all goes after vanishing for good. These dreams — where do they go after I wake up? Where the hell are these birds flying, could it really be that they are headed in the direction of some mysterious "South"? And where is that strange boat headed, with no one in it, oarless, downstream? Could it be that the current carries it from my childhood memories to my unknown future? There are moments in my life when I simply cease to understand anything at all using my customary means of comprehension. That particular way of comprehending that I was taught by my parents, in school, at college — sometimes it simply ceases to work. And I truly don't know how I ought to make sense of this world, what means I can use to do that. Yes...

Pause.

Unfortunately, we are now approaching the end of our conference. We are going to have to wrap up our conversation. And, of course, it would not be right if we didn't give the floor to someone who actually represents the nation we have been talking about here. And, thank goodness, we have the opportunity to do just that. I am infinitely happy to welcome our guest of honor, the famed Iranian poet, author, philosopher, public intellectual and Nobel Prize winner, Ms. Shirin Shirazi.

Shirin Shirazi heads over to the lectern.

PHILIP RASMUSSEN

For those who don't know the story of Shirin Shirazi, I must say a few words. When Shirin Shirazi was seventeen years old she published a volume of love poetry, entitled *A Farewell to Proscription*, for which she received a Nobel Prize in literature. At seventeen! And this was truly great poetry. The poems have, by the way, been translated into the Danish language, among others. Unbelievably beautiful poetry. But in her country these poems were deemed blasphemous, and Shirin was sentenced to death. And this is when an international effort, joined by many countries and influential politicians, produced sufficient pressure to have the death sentence commuted to twenty years under house arrest. That sentence ended just three months ago, and Shirin was able to leave Iran and come to Europe in order to take part in a major conference in Berlin on the problems faced by Muslim women living in Europe. And I am so happy that Shirin Shirazi agreed to visit us as well, and to take part in our conference. Thank you, Shirin, it is such an honor for us.

SHIRIN SHIRAZI

Hello. Thank you very much for the invitation and the opportunity to participate in such a wonderful discussion. It's a pity, though, that such a conversation cannot take place in Iran itself, between the country's progressive forces and the authorities. But I can see that today's conversation has been very beneficial to a European society, and I'm glad that using Iran as an example has allowed you to touch upon such important questions as the ones you've been posing here today. As I was preparing for my presentation I thought a lot about what I should say. And to be40

honest I prepared my presentation on a topic on which I'm considered an expert, which is "Women and Women's Freedom in Muslim Nations." But listening to the different speeches today made me realize more and more clearly that what I really want to say is something else. So I've decided to set aside the talk on the above-mentioned topic and simply share some of my personal feelings with everyone here. These are the feelings of a woman, a Muslim, an Iranian, who lives in a country that everyone is talking about these days, not only at your conference, but around the world. And here's what I would like to say.

Pause.

When I first found out about true love I was fourteen years old. That's when I first met my Beloved. And when I found my Beloved, that very second, I understood that I was no more. I was terrified. Because I knew that from that day on there would be less and less of me, and more and more of my Beloved. I knew that soon a moment would come in my life when my life will have vanished completely, and there would only be His life. I was terrified, because I could feel that love was taking everything I had away from me, everything I was. I understood clearly that I would have to surrender absolutely everything to that love. I had to give my body, my thoughts, my secrets and my most private feelings. My freedom. When I was twelve years old I still had my own personal

freedom. This personal freedom of mine lived inside me. You know what, I'll tell you a secret now. I haven't shared it with very many people, but I'm going to tell you now.

Shirazi closes her eyes for a moment, as though asking herself permission to proceed, and, having received that permission, she goes on.

From the time when I was a very little girl, I would seek seclusion from the world in an out-of-the-way spot in our large house. I would close my eyes and think of whatever I pleased. I was quite honest with myself. And there inside me I always thought of whatever I wanted to. I didn't ever share my thoughts with anyone, because most of those thoughts in my society were criminal, they were forbidden. But deep within I wasn't afraid of those thoughts. I sat there with my eyes closed in a corner under the stairs and thought of whatever I wanted, however I wanted. I allowed myself to think as no one is allowed to think anywhere in my country. I thought about things no one is allowed to think of. I thought about things which for thinking about anyone in my country — not just a woman — would be harshly punished, and maybe even killed. And then, in those moments under the stairs, I sat with my eyes closed and felt that I was an absolutely free human being. I was free in my own eyes. I would do this almost every day. I would find a free minute, hide myself from everyone, close my eyes, and I was free. And those minutes of my personal freedom gave me unbelievable pleasure, almost ecstasy. That personal freedom in my mind behind closed eyelids turned into a real drug for me. In a country where a few carelessly-phrased words could cost you your life, I learned how to experience full, total inner freedom. I remember how I waited for that moment. And as soon as the moment came around I would run to my secret spot, close my eyes, and become free. I thought about everything! I didn't prohibit anything, because everything was already forbidden to me! So there in that inner world, I gave myself permission for everything. Everything, absolutely everything to the very end. Oh, God Almighty, what a pleasure it was to think of everything that you weren't supposed to! What great joy! What unbelievable personal freedom—not41

to be afraid of your own thoughts. Any thoughts whatsoever. All of them. And even now when I remember those days, I get goosebumps all over my body. But then when I turned fourteen and met the love of my life, in addition to experiencing immense joy from this feeling of tremendous love, I also felt fear at the understanding that I wouldn't be able to hide anything from my beloved, not a single secretive thought. And that from then on, from the moment that love took hold of my heart, from that very minute I had lost my personal freedom. Now all my thoughts, all my secrets, all of me would belong to him. And then I suddenly had this doubt — do I really want to part with my own freedom, and no longer be myself? There were moments, even whole days, when I thought I should say no thanks to this love, give everything back, restore everything to its place, and remain myself forever, hold on to the most precious thing I had — my freedom! At one moment, I even thought of killing myself, because it seemed better to me to end my life myself than to strip it of its freedom. But as my connection with my Beloved grew stronger and stronger, love itself grew and grew within my heart. And then, well, this day came along when I finally decided that I must give myself to my love completely. But before I did that, I decided once more, for the last time in my life, to hide in my secluded spot and

close my eyes. And that's what I did. I closed my eyes and allowed my thoughts again, for the last time, to flow through me like a river without shores. I stood there with my eyes closed and waited. That's what I always did. But this time, my free personal thoughts just wouldn't come. I waited for a long time, nearly an hour, probably. But not a single free thought came into my mind. There inside me now all I had was Him—my Beloved. Inside me now all I had was love. I could feel tears of joy rolling down my cheeks. From that moment on I never again felt that fear I felt about the outside world, the world I was hiding from in that hidden place, in order to be free. I stood there and cried. I could feel that only now, only just now I became truly free.

Because I had nothing to hide and nothing to be afraid of, since I no longer had to worry about what you're not allowed to do or think about. Now I realized I wanted only one thing—more and more love. And then I turned to my Beloved and gave myself to him, all of me, to the very end. And the more of myself I gave, the fuller and more meaningful my life became. I began to serve my Beloved, I became His servant, His sister, His companion, His wife. I gave Him all of me, and all of my life. And what I received in return was such a treasure, such joy, that no personal freedom of mine could possibly withstand a comparison. And then I understood that my personal freedom had been my prison, and my surrendering myself to my Beloved — that is my freedom. That is how my life changed, and I became a truly happy human being. And, um, then I wrote a slender book of poems about my love. It was called *A Farewell to Proscription*. The book was translated into English and became popular in Europe and the U.S. But the book attracted the attention of the Iranian "morality police." And it turned out that they completely misunderstood the meaning of those poems. In the end the book was deemed blasphemous by the Islamic Revolutionary Court and I was sentenced to death. At the time the verdict was announced I was in Europe, I happened to be accepting the Nobel Prize just then. Everyone around me begged me not to go back. But I decided to return. I relied on the strength of my love. And I went back to Iran. I was immediately arrested. But something truly miraculous happened, and though I was supposed to be executed, my sentence was commuted to twenty years under house arrest. And just three months ago the house arrest was lifted and I was even allowed to travel to Europe. Of course I must thank His Majesty the King of Sweden who personally called Supreme Leader Ali Hosseini Khamenei and pleaded that my death sentence be put aside. As well as the Nobel Committee, and the United Nations, and the

42

President of the United States, and a whole long list of people who stood up in my defense. But I know that in spite of the efforts of all these wonderful people, the main thing I owe my life to, and the reason why I am standing here before you, is love. And that's basically what I wanted to tell you. And I also want to say thank you very much for your attention to the Iran topic, and for wishing to make this world a better place.

PHILIP RASMUSSEN

I'm sorry, Shirin — I didn't know you were married. I didn't see anything about that anywhere.

SHIRIN SHIRAZI

I'm not married. I didn't manage to meet a man before my arrest. And after that no one would have dared take me as a wife. So I have never known a man.

Pause.

PHILIP RASMUSSEN

Dear friends, in inviting Shirin here we of course could not pass up the opportunity to ask her to read a new poem for us. Shirin very kindly agreed. She shared the text with us ahead of time so that we could get it translated. Go ahead, Shireen. Please.

SHIRIN SHIRAZI

I'll read a poem that I wrote immediately after learning that my house arrest was lifted and I would be allowed to travel to Europe. It's called "That is All." I will read it in my native language.

She reads the text in Farsi.

A translation is read out.

THAT IS ALL

Listen to me, that is all.

If the door is locked, you can stand by the window and look out.

Live and look out. That is all.

Where are these birds flying?

Are they really flying towards some kind of mysterious "South"?

Is there really a West and an East, a North and some kind of "South"?

Stand by the window and look out. That is all.

Where are you hurrying when you leave the house? Towards love, maybe? But your love must die in order to test you.

Try to discover first what it means to live entirely without love, — to live entirely without love, to understand how to speak your language.

Stop and be silent.

Know, just know that your language is dead.

Stand, just stand in your place and wait.

Wait for everything to die.

Let everything die.

Let all the words die, let the rain outside die, let that for which you live — die.

Stay, just stay where you are and wait.

Wait until there are no more words, wait until there are no more tears, stand there, wait and be silent.

Where are you flying?

You're falling down.

Just know that you are falling down right now.

Your mother no longer loves you because she is dead.

Your father no longer provides you with the strength to live, because he himself is gone.

Your love no longer gives you anything, because there is no more love.

In total stillness you're falling down and staying silent.

You're flying.

You're flying in the darkness.

You're falling down.

You see a conflagration.

You see this world burn.

And now it is burning for you.

Stay there, look at the fire, weep and love.

Where are you running?

Your boat is up there by the riverhead, you know nothing at all, nothing at all about it yet.

But it's there already.

But it's floating on the water, though you don't know about it yet.

Watch the madness of grown-ups murdering children, your boat is afloat, stay there,

weep and watch.

44

They won't let you talk.

They won't allow you to be who you are.

They have set you aflame, stoned you and thrown you down.

And now you're flying.

There's no love, no hope, no words.

Now you're silent.

Now you don't know where dreams vanish to.

Because you are asleep.

Now you're sleeping and flying.

Now you're falling down, it's a dream.

Sleep, keep falling down, weep and love.

How am I to love?

How am I to love when there is no love?

Just keep silent.

You demand too much, you yell too loudly, you make too much noise.

Now you have to keep silent.

Stay there, keep falling down, and keep silent.

Then you will come to know love.

Love is always just beyond the edges of dreaming.

There's only dreaming in a dream, there's no love in a dream.

Stay there, keep falling down, wake up, weep, and keep silent.

That is all.

Where is it floating, this boat, with no one in it,

oarless, aimless, all alone?

The river's current is carrying it; it's coming for you.

Stay where you are and wait.

Listen to me.

To Believe and to Know — that is our entire life.

That is all.

45

PHILIP RASMUSSEN Dear colleagues! Ladies and Gentlemen! Prime Minister! This concludes our conference. Thank you all very much. Goodbye.

Sri Lanka, Lankavatara Ocean Retreat Hotel, February 2017

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201746