TRANSCRIPT

Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa

Middle East Scholar Jamsheed Choksy Retraces the Roots of the Western Belief in Good and Evil.

Much of Western culture and religious beliefs are grounded in a bifurcated notion of an epic power struggle between dueling forces, often defined as “good” and “evil.” This underlying premise influences how we parent, how we practice faith, how we choose vocations, and how we vote. In this episode Jamsheed Choksy, chair of the Department of Central Eurasian Studies at Indiana University Bloomington, provides surprising historical context for how the West’s construction of these binary elements evolved.

Fred Lawrence: This podcast episode was generously funded by two anonymous donors. If you would like to support the podcast in similar ways, please contact Hadley Kelly at hkelly@pbk.org. Thanks for listening.

Lawrence: Hello and welcome to Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa. I'm Fred Lawrence, Secretary and CEO of the Phi Beta Kappa Society. On this podcast, we feature conversations with leading scholars who are part of our Visiting Scholars Program. They travel to colleges and universities around the country and deliver public talks on their specialties. To attend a free lecture, visit pbk.org for a full schedule.

Today, I have the pleasure to welcome Professor Jamsheed Choksy, a distinguished professor and chairperson of the Department of Central Eurasian Studies at Indiana University Bloomington. His work explores one of the enduring questions around the very nature of being human. Why do we perceive a struggle between good and evil in so much of what makes up our very existence, and by extension, how do those beliefs and practices shape our lives and our actions?

Professor Choksy is also an authority on the Arab conquest of Iran, Iraq, the Persian Gulf, and Central Asia, the spread of Islam and the impact of faith on politics, international relations, and security. Welcome Professor.

Jamsheed Choksy: Thank you.

Lawrence: It's hard to imagine a more topical set of issues that you've been working on for all these years in terms of Iran and Iraq and that whole area of the world. And I do want to spend some time talking about those things, but first I want to talk about your journey a little bit. You were born in Mumbai and then your family brought you to Sri Lanka, where you grew up, right?

Choksy: That's correct. I happened to be born in Bombay, at that time called Bombay, now Mumbai, because my mother grew up there and she went back to Bombay for better health care to make sure I came out kicking and screaming.

Lawrence: Apparently it worked.

Choksy: Yes, so it did indeed and ... But no, I have no memories of being born, maybe that's good. But grew up in Colombo, Sri Lanka, so K through 12.

Lawrence: And what was your education like in Sri Lanka?

Choksy: It was a British-style education in fact, because my family was a minority background. My distant ancestors left Iran about a thousand years ago. Part of that was that I ended up traveling through Europe a great deal as a child.

Lawrence: Did you think about attending university in South Asia, Sri Lanka, or India?

Jamsheed Choksy: Interestingly, I was sort of, from the get go, the assumption in my family was that I would go abroad. In part, because I came from a long line of attorneys, but I did not want to be an attorney. Something that I'm sure you feel I strayed from, but-

Lawrence: Well, it could well be a good choice. So, was either of your parents educated outside of South Asia?

Choksy: No, they were all educated in South Asia. Both of them were attorneys and one of my youngest brothers does continue that line. He is the sixth generation going as an attorney, yeah.

Lawrence: Six generations of attorneys.

Choksy: I was the one who strayed.

Lawrence: But interestingly, your parents assumed, and you assumed, that you'd be educated in America, necessarily, or just abroad?

Choksy: Just abroad, in part because in high school I always envisioned myself doing the sciences and in fact when it came down to college, I applied to do biology, in specific, molecular genetics. I applied to the United States, which I felt would be the best training, got into Columbia University, figured I'd love New York. As I think I mentioned to you, the flight into New York brought me right up from the tip. I saw the entire New York stretch out and I said, "Hey, this looks like home." I'm not referring just to the city.

Lawrence: The first time you were in the United States was when you came to Columbia.

Choksy: Correct.

Lawrence: So what was that experience like coming to the United States for the first time as an 18 year old, I assume, and about to start your studies at Columbia College?

Choksy: A great adventure. I recall no trepidation, no fear. It was essentially, I guess, at 18, 19, one is pretty ... One feels at least pretty indestructible. And that's exactly what it was. I was in New York for about a month before Columbia began. Sure, I mean you sort of adjust to college life and you adjust to taking courses, but it was a great place to go to college.

Lawrence: So New York was your campus, not just Morningside Heights?

Choksy: Exactly. And that's something to you, I think, particularly, I would say this is true for most urban campuses. It tends to be that one ... The town or the city really is the entire... the campus. And New York is a magnificent one. And as a result, it was a much wider education. And what of course ended up happening is I didn't stick to molecular genetics. We both know where I ended up, studying the Middle East and Central Asia.

Lawrence: Right. So take us along that path a little bit. What's the route from genetics to studying the area studies you wound up doing?

Choksy: It's interesting because if I had stayed in South Asia or if I'd gone to a European university, even a British university, one tends to be tracked into a particular discipline and then stick to that through your bachelor's degree, your master's, Ph.D., whatever. In a sense you're stuck in it. What was really wonderful about an American university education, this is true, I would say whether it's a large campus, a small campus, whether it’s private, public, is the liberal arts education. And that's what I really valued at Columbia. That permitted me ... In fact I really did a large number of courses in chemistry, in physics, in biology, but I was also able to not just take Columbia's core curriculum but also take courses in history, languages, and I found increasingly, it sort of came to graduation time. And I remember thinking sort of actively what do I want to do? And I said, "Okay, what is it that'll hold my interest?" In a very crass sense, I thought,

"Okay, what's going to make me want to get up every day, get dressed, get out, even when I don't want to do it?" And that's when I realized, "Hey, you know what, I like studying people."

Lawrence: So from Columbia you go to Harvard for your Ph.D. and by that point you are focused on history and religions and in the Near East region, right?

Choksy: And in the Near East and Central Asia studying both modern languages and a lot of dead obscure languages, integrating the languages with the history, with the religion, with the cultures, and also getting the opportunity to actually travel around the region. I was actually able to do that as an undergraduate at Columbia through fellowships that Columbia gave, and then in graduate school as well.

Lawrence: Do you remember a particular visit to the region when you were in Columbia that was influential?

Choksy: Well, one that really sort of stuck out in my mind was I was ... This was the summer at the end of my junior year and I was doing field work in what was then and is still now Pakistani Baluchistan. One evening, the SUV we were traveling in took several flats. So with the flat tires, we had to hitch a ride. I ended up in the back of a truck with what were then pro-American Mujahideen fighters who were fighting the Soviets and the Russians. And so anyone coming from the U.S., even though I was also known as a Sri Lankan, this went far. But I remember sort of riding back with them and they were talking about their weapons and, shall we say, at that time a great fondness for the United States because we were helping them push out the Soviets. But I remember thinking "What lies ahead for the region once the Soviets, once the Russians are gone? And what sort of society will take hold, will it be democratic?" And nothing that I could see indicated it would be. So I kept wondering how deep will American values actually reach?

Choksy: I think we now have a better idea.

Lawrence: That they didn't reach all that deeply.

Choksy: Exactly.

Lawrence: This is the same Mujahideen who were, as you say, pro-American then, turn out to be our adversaries a generation later, less than a generation.

Choksy: And it's because they see sides have switched.

Lawrence: Interesting.

Choksy: Yeah.

Lawrence: So the project that grows out of your time at Harvard and really has occupied you now in the ensuing decades is this extraordinary interdisciplinary set of projects, but in part starts at its core about religion and religious beliefs. So let's start there and in particular, there are areas that you study that I think it's probably fair to say most Americans don't know that much about. So give us a little thumbnail education about Zoroastrianism and Manichaeism and what should every educated American know about those, as well as Islam, where I think there's a little more knowledge among Americans now but even with that, this is your chance to educate America. What do you think everybody ought to know?

Choksy: I think the first thing every American should know is that whenever they see an American politician, particularly an American president, it doesn't matter whether it's a Democrat or a Republican, stand up and say, "We are fighting a good war. God is on our side." That all goes back to the Central Asian Steppe, maybe somewhere between 1500 to 1800 BC or BCE, to an individual called Zarathustra, known in the West as Zoroaster, gives us the religion called Zoroastrianism, who looked at his own society, tried to explain it, and explained it by bifurcating the word into good and evil. Good people, bad people, good creations, bad creations, a good divinity, who creates, and an evil spirit, who destroys. So you end up with essentially, a wise lord from whom all good flows and an angry spirit from whom all evils flows.

Lawrence: So as opposed to a Judeo-Christian--

Choksy: Exactly.

Lawrence: ...of a good God, but there are other forces in the world, but the good God as it were, has a rooting interest in goodness and justice prevailing. This is a world that's got multiple powerful forces.

Choksy: Exactly. So if you look at, let's say, if you take the Judeo-Christian and Islamic tradition, essentially you have a monotheistic deity who is capable and from whom ultimately good and evil originates. The system followed by Zarathustra, there's a fundamental dualism. It's a spiritual and a material dualism. And so you have a good God who is trying to make sure the world remains good and an evil spirit who's involved in trying to undermine affairs. And what Zarathustra did was attempt to give humans a very definite role. It was for Zarathustra, the role of humans who fight on behalf of the good God. That in a sense, fight the good fight on behalf of good against evil and what Zarathustra in a sense started there, permeates, eventually this would reach Judaism. It would enter Judaism after the Babylonian exile.

So if there's something the American public should know, it's that this goes back to a religion called Zoroastrianism. Zoroastrianism became the predominant

religion of ancient or pre-Islamic Iran. After about the year 700, it declined as Iranians became Muslim, but there still are Zoroastrians in Iran, in the Indian subcontinent, to which many of them migrated, and then from both Iran and the Indian subcontinent global migrations in the 19th and 20th centuries. So there are about 10,000 or so Zoroastrians in the United States.

Lawrence: I may even be talking to one right now. Is that right?

Choksy: Indeed.

Lawrence: So one of your visits for Phi Beta Kappa, I think it was Texas Tech. Your host said that before meeting you, she had never met a single Zoroastrian and then apparently in the airport meets another and said, so the number I'd met had doubled overnight.

Choksy: Indeed.

Lawrence: So Zoroastrianism sounds actually very similar to Manichaeism. Or are there differences I'm not seeing?

Choksy: Well, let me add a few more things about Zoroastrianism.

Lawrence: Please.

Choksy: One other thing that the American public should know is that Zarathustra, Zoroaster, in conceiving his religious universe also laid out the notion of life after death, reward or punishment of the soul based on one's deeds, the notion of heaven and hell and the notion of a final renovation, so a final refreshment after which there's heaven on earth. I think those words should sound very familiar-

Lawrence: They do indeed.

Choksy: -to a very substantial part of the world population.

Lawrence: But these notions were ones that he did not inherit and pass on, but really ones that he created.

Choksy: Ideas of afterlife had existed. Ideas of good and evil had existed. What Zarathustra really did was put them together, tried to focus them on each individual's role and then, shall we say, hang out sort of the reward aspect. Not quite convinced that humans would do good for its own sake.

Lawrence: Right. So having, having a benefit waiting for you on the other side.

Choksy: There you go. Exactly. So this aspect of reward and punishment being brought in, but also shall we say, this fundamental notion that at the end of time there will be a final judgment, and then a final refreshing. He used a word called frashokereti, fresh or direct cognate of the English fresh, refresh. So “to make fresh.” Make fresh the world on after which there'll be sort of a blissful existence.

Lawrence: And the notion that in our time is thought of as the resurrection.

Choksy: Exactly. Exactly. And this notion of the resurrection and of heaven on earth.

Lawrence: In terms of knowledge within the United States in particular of Islam, I think it's probably fair to say that more than two decades ago the knowledge base was fairly low among most people.

Choksy: Correct.

Lawrence: I think there's been a pretty significant engagement with Islam in the last two decades. Some of that for the good, some of that less so. What is your sense about the awareness level and where are the gaps in terms of what Americans ought to know about Islam?

Choksy: The awareness level clearly has skyrocketed, skyrocketed unfortunately not because of positive events. Where the gaps I think are is a perception that all Muslims are monochromatic in terms of their beliefs. Another misperception is that Islam is rooted in violence, which it is not. Those would be some of the fundamental misperceptions. It would be valuable for us to realize that while 90% of Muslims are what are called Sunnis, they follow the customs set down by the founder of the religion, the Prophet Muhammad, that a 10% minority who are Shia who believe more in sort of a chain of authority that goes from the founder of the religion through his descendants.

Those are the Shia and Shi'ism is the predominant religion in Iran now. So in some sense you can use the religious angle to focus on even political differences between Saudi Arabia, which champions itself as the upholder of Sunnism, and Iran that sees itself as the safeguard of Shi’ism.

Lawrence: So there's a connection between a political battle and a battle motivated by religious belief.

Choksy: By religious, by, shall we say, divergences of religious belief that goes all the way back to the founding of the Muslim community in seventh century. So a long history there. Another major misperception is we tend to equate Islam to the Middle East, and one thing we should keep in mind is that there are more Muslims outside the Middle East, in South Asia and Southeast Asia.

Lawrence: Indonesia has an enormous population.

Choksy: Exactly. Indonesia, Malaysia, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, far outnumber the number of Muslims, Sunni and Shia, in the Middle East.

Lawrence: So we've been talking about some ancient times and ancient practices and things that motivate, but as we're sitting here, Iran is dealing with what appears to be potentially cataclysmic events and change and certainly more violence than we've seen in that country in 40 years or so. So this is a major area of expertise of yours. In fact, some time ago, 2012, you wrote an intriguing piece called “Are the Mullahs Losing their Grip?” Well, now it's 2019 and into 2020. Are they losing their grip and what lies ahead for Iran?

Choksy: They are losing their grip, but it's not going to be an overnight process as we can just see from the time between, from that article to now. It's a very gradual process. Let's keep in mind, the Islamic Republic has endured for over 40 years. The revolution occurred in 1978, 1979 so it's been around for quite a bit and you have a second generation of not just mullahs, but Iranian politicians allied with the revolution. The recent problems, they stem from economics. The, shall we say, the final straw was the hiking of gas prices. Iran, like much of the developing world, has a problem where governments subsidize the basic necessities, whether it is food items like rice or sugar, and in this case, gasoline. Right away your listeners will say, well, Iran produces a lot of oil. They produce a substantial amount of crude oil. However, in part because of American sanctions, but also in part because of just infrastructure and neglect, Iran's oil refining capacity is rather low. In other words, Iran is a major, was and will continue to be a major exporter of crude oil. They, however, are a net importer of refined gasoline. So the government has to make sure that the population can afford to pay for gas, for their cost.

Lawrence: So their gasoline is actually not coming from their own production. It goes out of country-

Choksy: Exactly. Not all of it. Over the last 40 years, Iran has been working quite steadfastly to improve their refining capacity. However, because of the technological gap and the limitations of them acquiring technology, they have not been able to, shall we say, reach parity.

As a result, they are a net importer, and so the government had been subsidizing the purchase of gasoline for automobiles. The government, for sheer economic reasons, had to scale back, which provoked public outrage. That outrage then moved from the economic dimension to the political dimension and shall we say, the global geopolitical dimension: questions of why is Iran spending money on subsidizing Hezbollah in Lebanon or subsidizing the Assad regime in Syria rather than spending the money at home. From the Iranian

government's point of view, they're doing so because they want to extend their global influence. However, from the domestic population's point of view, they'd rather see the money spent at home. This may sound familiar to our own audiences in modern times, right?

Lawrence: The challenge between what you do abroad, what you do at home....

Choksy: Exactly. There you go.

Lawrence: But as you look down the road, where do you see this heading for Iran?

Choksy: Well, you saw what happened. It was very wildly quashed. The violence this time was open. So where does this go? I doubt the regime is going to collapse overnight. No. But the question is in the long run, what happens? Particularly what happens when the current supreme leader Khameini passes? That's going to be the next opening to see whether Iran ... The fundamental question is, 40 years after the revolution, does Iran really need a supreme leader? Clearly what is happening is you can see this rising resentment in the population that wants essentially their social economics to prevail and let's move from Iraq and look a little bit around the region.

Lawrence: Right.

Choksy: Because if you look at Iraq, we've seen protests-

Lawrence: Right across the border.

Choksy: -and again, the triggers have been water supply, electricity, transportation. So once again, economic issues that then have sparked outrage against both the incumbent government and the government's foreign allies. We've had riots and we've had the entire Arab Spring, and again, those were economic triggers, and one of the reasons underlying all of this is across the Middle East, whether it's Iran, whether it's Iraq, whether it's Egypt or whether it's Saudi Arabia, is we're looking at populations that are relatively young. More than 50% of the population tends to arrange under the age of 25 or 30. So these are individuals who have received a state sponsored university education, who cannot find employment, who expect better from their government and from their nation, and who are connected to the rest of the world and know there are opportunities out there.

Lawrence: And they know there's something different.

Choksy: Exactly.

Lawrence: So we spent a lot of time halfway around the world. Let me bring you back home to another capacity that you've served in and that actually has a strong

Phi Beta Kappa resonance. Phi Beta Kappa was one of the institutions that was essential to the founding of the National Endowment for the Humanities, National Endowment of the Arts in the early 1960s and you, until recently, served on the council, the National Council on the Humanities, which oversees the NEH. So tell us a little bit about what that work was like and what you see the opportunities and role for the National Endowment for the Humanities in our time.

Choksy: So, from a personal perspective, it was a great honor, a great privilege, and it really made me understand the notion of serving a nation. Most people when they think about the National Endowment for the Humanities associate it with grants to scholars, to academic institutions, maybe the occasional sponsorship of public broadcasting movies, but the public really doesn't understand that this is a superb reinvestment of their tax dollars. The NEH budget never, or rarely ... I don't think it ever has exceeded $150 million a year.

Lawrence: Our hope in the next fiscal year is that it's much higher.

Choksy: Yes, I know.

Lawrence: Another issue for another podcast.

Choksy: Another podcast to discuss. But-

Lawrence: That's the range. About $150-$160 million.

Choksy: If you think $150, $160 million out of the entire U.S. budget, it's not even a drop. However, that little drop doesn't just go to universities or museums. It permeates across the nation. Over 40% of that goes directly back to each of the states, to the Humanities Councils of each and every state and goes to every public library. Whether it is books, whether it is museums, whether it is educational sessions, it permeates every aspect of American life and that's what I did not realize until I served on the Council. During one of their budget crises when they were thinking of lopping down the NEH, I did speak in Congress. What I pointed out was, I said, "You can take the entire NEH budget and it is a couple of predator drones. If you look at the return to the nation from that investment in the NEH, or even the NEA, the National Endowment for the Arts, it's much greater."

Lawrence: It's about .50 cents per person.

Choksy: Exactly. Phenomenal.

Lawrence: And has played a major role in the nation.

Choksy: Major role in every aspect of who we are, what we do, how we think across communities, across ages, across economic boundaries.

Lawrence: You have studied all over the world, you've lectured all over the world, and then as a Visiting Scholar, we sent you to a number of schools. I'm quite sure there were ones you had never been to before, some of you may never have heard of before. Do you have a favorite couple of stories from your year as a visiting scholar you could share with us?

Choksy: I think I mentioned to you a little while ago that if I could do it all over again, I would because-

Lawrence: I think what you actually said is that you would-

Choksy: I would pay to do it.

Lawrence: You would pay me for the honor of being a Visiting Scholar and I think I told you I accepted that.

Choksy: Yeah, I know you did, but you noticed I rephrased it because unfortunately, I couldn't fund it all myself. If I could, I would, because here's the thing, these are challenging times. Not just domestically, but globally and from each and every visit what I realized was the phenomenal impact of education on the United States. It didn't matter whether it was in upstate New York or at the end of the High Plains in Texas, or on the foothills of the Cascade Mountains or at Ole Miss. You saw and I just viscerally felt the impact of a broad education and the role that, frankly, Phi Beta Kappa was playing in this.

Lawrence: We're delighted you could be part of it this year-

Choksy: Thank you.

Lawrence: And I'm going to take you up on your offer to stay involved. You're a member of the Phi Beta Kappa family.

Choksy: Thank you.

Lawrence: Thanks so much for spending the time with us today.

Choksy: Great pleasure. Thank you.

Musical interlude

Lawrence: Thank you. This podcast is produced by Lantigua Williams & Co. Paola Mardo is our sound designer. Hadley Kelly is the PBK producer on the show. Emma Forbes

is our assistant producer. Our theme song is Back to Back by Yan Perchuk. To learn more about the work of the Phi Beta Kappa Society and our Visiting Scholar program, please visit pbk.org. Thanks for listening. I'm Fred Lawrence. Until next time.

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