

The Story of A Leaf on the Branch

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1.

For me Islam, the faith I belong to, means piety first of all. Whenever I talk about the central features of Islam, I always try to interpret this faith above all as a great universal call to piety, to surrender to God. And piety is not some sort of a sacred hobby for killing boredom or a holy recreation for its own sake. Piety is a call to morality and the good. In this limitless world we cannot make a limitless number of steps. But piety and morality teach us that the steps we make should be along the path of the good and be moral.

The entire Qur'an is a sublime Divine saga about how behind this visible, enormously large world there lies moral assurance, the eternal foundation, the Source to which in the end everything will return. In a way, piety is an obligation to watch over man's morality, to watch over constant remembrance of God, that omnipresent basis and texture of the world, that pulse of the world. On the other hand, piety and morality remind us of the man's primordial essence, which is that he/she is God's creature.

In the traditional Sarajevo madrasa, an old seat of Islamic learning, I was always taught that, as piety, Islam sets two important tasks before man. First, that man should preserve the Divine spark God has breathed into every person. Second, to watch carefully so that the spark in man becomes more brilliant, more dazzling. In fact, I was taught that piety is an eternal return, an unceasing return to one's source. Just as man's prayer is return to the Creator, it is also a return to man. Piety is there, prayer is there, to remind us of our creation.

It is as if at the moment of our creation we became detached from our Source, so that

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we have to return to it during our life. Our life unfolds in the midst of a great multiplicity of things and beings. Our piety is a constant search for the Unity that underlines everything.

This is the very essence of piety. In the beginning of his *Mathnawi*, Maulana Jalaluddin Rumi writes about a reed-pipe. The sound of the reed is its prayer with which it wants to return to its Creator. For the believer of Islam, in fact for the believer of every faith, piety is an opportunity for an eternal return to his/her Creator. Islam is a call to that eternal return, one not found in Nietzsche's philosophy.

But, I say to my collocutors today that each piety has its own context in which it expresses itself and is experienced, has its own time against which it measures itself. An important context for today's piety is machines and technology. Technology and machines give us a false sense of power, of becoming someone else, some sort of competitors with God. Machine is an extension of man's natural capacities for acquiring ever more *quantitative power*, for greater control of time and space. Machines increasingly extend man's desires, even provoke them. That is why I cannot speak of my piety and my faith without mentioning technology at least for a moment.

With the age of technology we have also entered the age of the *powerful man* and these two ages co-define my answers to the following questions: How do I believe? Why do I believe?

I believe with a still strong and beautiful baggage of traditional faith. I believe performing the acts of faith (prayers, fasting, giving alms, etc). In doing those acts I often ask myself: Have I perfected my faith if I believe in God and confirm my faith by spreading peaceful and pious words, by disciplining myself with fasting, by giving away whatever I can from my wealth?

"God is nearer to man than the jugular vein"¹ as the Qur'an reminds us. This means that with every new beat of our heart God extends our life in this world. Islamic mystics would say that our heart's beat is our heart's prayer. As long as our heart "prays", we continue living in this world! Between two beats there is a silence of the heart. The heart obtains and acquires something with its beats, while with its breaks it gives up something.

That is why the rituals of our faith represent giving up and acquiring: we give something from ourselves, we get something from God. Thus understood, our rituals become pure, free from interest and greed. There is no good in boastful piety. "Humility in piety is part of piety", says a Bosnian proverb. Today, as in old times, through piety one ought to remain within the fold of the calm and enduring traditional faith, within the fold of a faith which is far from market places where trade takes place; within the fold of a faith which is far from politics which itself always constitutes a whole sale trade!

In the present age when the world is all too marked by man and his products, it is hard

1 Qaaf, 50:16. Unless otherwise stated, the translation of Qur'anic verses is mine.

to live the traditional faith which listens to Nature as a collection of multifaceted signs of God. For centuries man's pious whispers and prayers have in a way complemented winds, flowers, the roaring of rivers, the murmuring of brooks, the singing of birds. For centuries mystics of all faiths believed and sensed that stars "believe" with them, that hills and clouds "believe", that stalks of grass "believe".

Today that traditional faith is disappearing, becoming ever more insignificant as man is increasingly surrounded by the products of his technology.

2.

As for the question: why I believe in God? – I could say briefly this: I believe because I am surrounded by this immense world!

I believe, because no matter where I arrived after a long journey, I always found the encompassing sky above my head!

I believe, because I cannot accept that this huge universe is sending me no message about God!

Islam teaches us that Nature is not God; nature and Universe are signs of God. With His signs God expresses Himself as that internal expanse, as love, kindness, assurance, hope, longing; as a light which permeates glass. As it does, light remains light and glass remains glass!² Qur'an incessantly calls for looking at these signs of God. Moreover, according to the Qur'an every man, even entire mankind, is one big sign of God.

Thus, Qur'an encourages us to understand each other. God is our only creator, God is the mediator between His creatures. The Qur'an has a powerful message: God is the creator of all worlds (*rabb al-alamín*). There must not be a mediator between a creature and the Creator!

But, between a creature and a creature God is the best mediator.

How else would man establish a true link and relation with another man, with men and women, with distant stars, with the myriad dimensions of this world, if there was no the Creator, one and only, in whose embrace all of us, His creatures, are?

Acts of piety set that delightful atmosphere in which we witness God's presence, God's fulfillment of our peace, our fears and hopes.

In my family, from an early age, I was taught that God is this internal home of everything, of all the creatures. Many years later I learned about Islamic mystics who sang in their homilies: stone is God's creature. A stalk of grass is God's creature. I am God's creature. You are God's creature. Partaking in the destiny of God's creature, that, too, is piety. Protecting other creatures from ourselves, that is morality. Whenever I participate in interfaith dialogue today I always emphasize this guiding thought of Sufism.

It is hard to speak of God's embrace in this way today, in the age of machines and technology. Today it is difficult to uncover the richness of faith. For this reason I often ask myself: what are the chances of our piety at a time when we are being tested with the *great power* the machines offer us? Isn't that great power the opiate for masses of today? I pose this question with apprehension, because our present day homelands are less and less the wonderful landscapes of Nature of which the Bible and the Qur'an speak, and more and more the machines that have become a world unto itself.

3.

But, in spite of the world of machines, we must speak of piety, of spiritual richness which faith bestows on us, and which we bestow on ourselves and others from out of our piety and faith. While doing so, we acknowledge in great resignation that it is hard to convey any news about God to the *powerful man* of today.

Although the *powerful man* continues to have in him everything the people of ancient, preindustrial civilizations had, and even though the *powerful man* suffers death, sickness, sorrow, floods, wars and earthquakes, the *powerful man* of today has revived the myth of Prometheus, strengthened it, and started the adventure of imitating the Creator. For example, although it is clear that by cloning a being he also clones its mortality, the *powerful man* is not giving up the intention of stealing the very secret of God's act of creation. He wants to steal from God the recipe for eternity.

As if eternity can be a subject of experiments in the test-tube or the retort!

But, if we look at the technology with the eyes of piety, we do not see that man, through technology, has taken off any of the ancient, primordial burden. We still die, we still suffer, there are still "ten thousand things stronger than us", as Lao Tze would say. On the contrary, with technology (and its particularly dreadful side: cloning, genetic engineering, atomic, neutron and hydrogen bombs, etc) man has added a huge weight onto his shoulders.

Qur'an commentators have registered a story of piety about an old man who was carrying a load of fire-wood on his back. He kept going along a path, becoming breathless and tired. Then he angrily took off the load from his back shouting: "My death, will you come to me for once!" At that point death appeared before him: "Man, I am death. You have called me." The man said in a terrified manner: "Yes, yes, I called you to help me lift this load on my shoulders, so that I may get home on time!"

But, death was awaiting him at home and it was on time. It carried out its task and the man left for the Hereafter. That load remained for another man to carry it.

The frightening side of today's technology, the negative one, remains for the future generations to handle and is comparable to the load from the story conveyed from the pages of the Qur'an commentaries.

4.

I often remember many parables from Qur'anic commentaries, especially when I see people launching space rockets into the vast skies. Regardless of how many rockets men have launched into the unreachable skies, faith still addresses us with the question of whether we have achieved something great with that launch? Have we become something else?

I do not think that Neil Armstrong's steps on the surface of the Moon are necessarily great steps for mankind. On the contrary, for me Hölderlin or Goethe's poetical longing for sky or the full moon represent a greater step for mankind.

Although technology is man's invention, a sort of man's revelation he has been sending himself since the Industrial Revolution onwards, we keep hearing from God one question only out of our conscious and heart: have we overcome death with a single product we have made? Have we abolished a single of the "border situations" Karl Jaspers talks about by sending so many space ships into the orbit?

Whenever I discuss faith in God today with my friends, I like to remind them that theology, with all its disciplines, has become a resigned, sad science.

There are less and less wonderful debates about the Near God and the Distant God. There are less and less debates about the limitless universe around us. There is no more that old and marvelous theology of nature. Today theology of nature has become reduced to sobbing and crying over the ecological catastrophe. Today theology is forced to speak of the evil deeds of man. One could even say: today the *powerful man* has squeezed both God and Satan out of theology. The powerful man and his machines, those are the great themes of theology today.

5.

What is piety? Why do I believe? What are the internal treasures of my faith today? What has faith given me, what would I wish to present from my faith as a gift to others?

In answering these question it is good to remember the forefather of Jews, Christians and Muslims - Abraham.

The Bible mentions Abraham expressing the meaning of piety in a nut-shell: "Now behold, I have ventured to speak to the Lord, although I am but dust and ashes." (Genesis, 18:27)³, (*Innī qad šara'tu ukallimu l-mawlā, wa ana turāb wa ramād*)⁴ – says Abraham. With regard to a story about Abraham (Ibrāhīm) the Qur'an explains piety through a short

3 This quote is taken from King James Version according to <http://biblehub.com/genesis/18-27.htm> (visited 11 June 2013).

4 The Arabic quoting is given according to *Al-Kitāb al-Muqaddas* (Genesis/Takwīn, 27), Arabic translation of the Bible. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956).

command: "Say (o, man!): My life, my death belong to God, Lord of the worlds!" (*Qul: ...Wa maöyâya wa mamâtî li-llâhi rabbi l-'âlamîn*).⁵

As we can see from these two brief examples from the Bible and the Qur'an, piety is a simple remembrance that we are dust into which God breathed life. Therefore, that dust of ours, but also our life and death, all belong to God. We are permanently indebted to God. We do not owe him dollars, euros or rupees. We owe him gratitude for the life he breathed into us, we owe him piety. This, in brief, is the substance of piety in Islam.

My faith has given me the gift to feel as a creature. That feeling entails many consequences. I acknowledge other people as creatures of God, too; they are my equal and we have embarked on a journey with equal provisions.

Of course, piety is man's submission to God. Furthermore, piety is to acknowledge God as our Creator. Our parents gave birth to us, but God created us. The circle of piety is simple and Sufis often explain it by way of the following parable: each leaf on the branch of a tree needs to remember that the branch is linked to the trunk. The trunk, in turn, is linked to the roots. The roots are linked to the earth through its root hairs. And earth? No, earth does not float vainly in the universe. The earth and all the skies belong to God, are linked to God! This is the summary of piety.⁶

I always wish to present piety thus explained to others, as charity, as tranquility, as relaxation in life, as consolation in our brief earthly existence.

That charity of piety conveys a message: man is not a being by himself, he does not belong to himself only, but also to God, to earth, to other beings, other creatures. Man has in him so many gifts (spirit, love, reason, intelligence, freedom) that it would be dangerous if man was a hundred percent autonomous being.

In the besieged Sarajevo (1992-1995), when I lived in fear of getting killed or of my daughters, my spouse and my neighbours getting killed, I often thought about why there is God? What is piety? What is the purpose of our hopes in the immense depths of the sky blue?

At the time, in the streets of the city besieged by countless machines and technological killing systems I could see death up and close. In fear I would turn my gaze from the pounds of torn pieces of human bodies. It was clear to me that I was thinking of God out of numerous traps of fear. I could see that I was increasingly remembering God as I was starring in the jaws of the almost visible death. I was remembering God amidst a great disappointment in man.

At the time I also frequently asked myself:

5 Al-An'aam, 6:162.

6 We must not forget that during autumn and before winter the leaves fall to the ground, close to the roots from which it once grew.

What is the role of Judaism, Christianity and Islam in the present age?

What is the role of traditional world faiths on the world stage today?

What does Islam (the faith I belong to) mean to me today? Can Islam, can Muslims contribute to world peace today?

I am aware these are not mere questions. This was my trembling in the besieged Sarajevo, which in a way has not ceased to this day.

What is the purpose of piety today? Are there any chances in the contemporary world for piety within the fold of Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism and other faiths to experience a renaissance? And is it possible for that renaissance of piety to unfold in a peaceful manner, without revolutions, without charging the barricades, without attacks on believers of other faiths, without attacks on mosques, churches, synagogues, and pagodas?

6.

Gabriel Garcia Marquez wrote about "Love in the Time of Cholera". In the besieged Sarajevo, in the eye of the war storm, I thought about "piety in the time of technology".

I still ask myself: is today's man ready to accept the fact that there is the Creator? Is he ready to think, even for a moment, that his position is similar to the leaf of the above-mentioned parable?

Still, in spite of everything, I think that the *powerful man* today needs to be told about ordinary piety.

And what was ordinary piety?

To be conscious inside that someone outside us gave the roundness to our eye and to the Sun and the Moon, that is already piety? To think in silence that death is our first neighbour, that is also piety. To listen to the beat of our heart, that is piety. To remember our own grave, that is already piety. To marvel at the movement of clouds, or at the change of day and night, all that is a kind of piety.

If the technological power of our age, the power which is the greatest temptation of man today, has attacked these ordinary, pious questions, one should not give up asking them still.

7.

Finally, in our contemporary world we need to remember that each one of us human beings has soul. And that soul of ours is one. We are always aware of that soul, as well as of our self, which is also one. When asked who we are, we very well know the answer. We couldn't utter the "I" of ourselves if God had not given it to us in the first place. That answer comes out of the continuity of self in us which is secured by our soul.

If our soul is one, then our Creator is one, too.

Qur'an says that God never gives one person two hearts!⁷ In this regard, it is interesting that the Qur'an says that man's soul/spirit comes by the command of the Lord ("The Spirit is of the bidding of my Lord").⁸

Today it is necessary to balance our time, to cooperate with our soul at least for a few hours, the few hours that remain out of time spent on cooperating with technology and machines. In that way our soul will start commanding Divine things. In that way we will begin to remember God in a state of greater wakefulness of our self. In that way we will return to God in the company of our good and pious deeds.

And all the material things we make as people will remain on earth for a while before they vanish. Do we not see ancient ruins of many cities, fortresses and other remnants of old civilizations?

Qur'an reminds us that everything on earth is perishable, only the Face of God remains. And the good deeds of man.

7 Al-Ahzaab, 33:4.

8 Arberry, the Koran Interpreted, Al-Israa, 17:85.