

AN ISLAMIC VIEW OF SPIRITUALITY

By HESHAM EL-ESSAWY

TEARs FOR BOSNIA. CRIES OF PAIN and despair for a community torn, lives lost, women raped, houses razed, children burned alive, and a nation of great dignity turned into a nation of refugees. Living, again, is the sense of shame brought upon us all, lovers of freedom, justice and compassion, by the nationalist bigots of Serbia and Croatia, spilling innocent blood to gain a few extra inches of dust.

Has history ever witnessed such horrors? Answer: Yes, and worse.

The city of Cordoba, Andalucia, Spain, where lived a mixed community of what God called 'the People of The Book': Jews, Christians and Muslims, living under Muslim rule as a shining example of tolerance, justice, compassion and, yes, great prosperity. All destroyed by the nationalist bigotry of Ferdinand and Isabella, whose murderous zeal did not stop at the Muslims' doorsteps, but went beyond to those of the Jews and, naturally, other Christians, with the infamous Inquisition.

What I greatly lament, and find discouraging, is that, having spent my life working for the cause of tolerance, I have seen a community in Bosnia turning against itself, after a life of extreme tolerance, where people of differing faiths wore no labels or identification marks. They lived together as Slavs, human beings, sons of Adam, citizens of the world, brothers. A dream destroyed by the work of the gun and the blind hearts of the gunners. What future, I now ask, has tolerance? For what purpose is interfaith dialogue and understanding? I shall attempt to answer my own question.

When justice fails, all else falters, and life becomes of no avail. Justice is not an end, it is a beginning. Start there: go everywhere. Start elsewhere: go nowhere.

My definition of injustice is, violating the dignity of the innocent. It is for the preservation of the dignity of man that God sent prophets and messengers to humankind, starting with Noah, and ending with Mohammed. God did not send the messengers in order to divide the human race into warring factions driven by greed, lust for blood, and lust for dust.

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Can interfaith dialogue help put a stop to that? Well, before Bosnia, I would have said, maybe, but after Bosnia I would say no, not without putting into effect the old slogan of right becoming might not might becoming right. Is not that what the United Nations is here for?

I am not for an interfaith dialogue that aims at showing you how right I am and how wrong you are, or vice versa. I am for one that emphasizes our oneness despite our differences. I am for one that recognizes that, agree or disagree, we still are brothers in Adam's family. And as such, we have rights upon each other that must be recognized and respected. And as to the differences, leave them to God to sort out. It is not our business to be spiritual judge, jury and gaol-keepers of each other.

I am for exchanging ideas and convictions vigorously, but politely, and with the utmost respect for the right of the other to hold a different belief, and without violating his dignity as my brother by thinking of him as inferior to myself. You and I might hold different beliefs, but no matter how divergent our beliefs are, our mutual interests and rights as brothers in humanity must always converge.

This is not just what I want, this is what God wants. Or else, how can we understand 'Love thy neighbour as thyself', or 'Love thy enemy', or the great number of Qur'anic verses that make it an absolute injunction on Muslims to accept 'I do not worship what you worship, and you do not worship what I worship . . . You have your religion and I have mine', or 'Whoever wants to believe, let him believe, and whoever wants to disbelieve, let him disbelieve', or, 'Let there be no coercion in religion', or, 'Argue not with the people of the book except in the way that is best', or the prophet Mohammed's injunction upon his followers, 'He who bothers a Christian or a Jew has bothered me personally'. It is in that spirit that I lived my childhood and early youth.

I was born and brought up in Egypt. My father was a Muslim scholar and preacher. The Coptic priest in my city was a frequent visitor to our house where he and my father frequently exchanged jokes over sips of mint tea and home-made Egyptian pastry and cakes. Both of them were present side by side in weddings and in the funerals of the dead of both religions. Christian families habitually presented samples of their baked cookies in their religious festivals to their Muslim neighbours and friends. Muslims, in their feasts, did the same. It was, and still is, shameful not to do so. It was, and still is, a city life shared and greatly enjoyed. That is what God wanted to see: an exchange of cookies, not bullets.

When the ball bounced from my prep-school play ground onto the neighbouring building, which happened to be a Franciscan nunnery, I

was often chosen by repentant and fearful schoolmates to go and ask for it back. That feeling of sorrow that overwhelmed me as I approached did not come from the thought of the nuns wielding a big stick at anyone who dared to come near, for they did not. It came from the way we were brought up as Muslims to treat the Christians and Jews with the greatest of respect. That attitude was not our offering to the community out of a national duty, it was our religious duty to God. He told us that he expected nothing less.

I wondered often, in my university days, why it was that my best friend, who happened to be Christian, was using pretty much the same religious jargon as I was, prayed in a church, and I in a mosque, both, presumably, to the same God. Both he and I called God by his name: Allah. How could God, the One, make many religions?

It was with my Coptic Christian university friend that I encountered my first interfaith dialogue. He and I believed in Jesus, but differently. At times he said that Jesus was God, and at others he said he was the only son of God. He told me that God is one yet he is also three. I could not understand that, neither could he. He told me that it was a mystery that no one could understand, let alone adequately explain, and that, according to his priest, he should not think about it too much otherwise he would go mad. The priest said, my friend told me, that because it is such a well hidden mystery, it must come from God and it must be true.

I thought at the time that what my friend believed was what Jesus said in the Bible. So, some years later, I bought my first Bible to find out for myself what Jesus really said. It was an Arabic translation of a Greek copy that roughly corresponds to the King James Version. (Why not from the Aramaic Jesus actually spoke?)

I read the Gospels with great interest. I recall my feelings clearly. I vividly remember jumping out of my bed with joy, having discovered that there was not one thing that Jesus said that I, as a Muslim, quarrelled with or even failed to admire. It was obvious to me that Christians have sharply misunderstood Jesus. Never did Jesus claim to be God or the only begotten, not made, son of God. Never did Jesus claim that God, the One, is also three. Had he believed he was God or the son of God, he would have demanded that his followers worship him there and then, but he did not. Instead, the Gospels record that Jesus himself worshipped God in great humility.

That is how I saw it to be. There is no contradiction between the religion that Jesus preached and Islam. I cried with joy at the discovery. My Islamic belief that Jesus, the Messiah, was a very great and honourable man, messenger of God, born miraculously as a sign to the

people of Israel, without a father just as Adam was without a father or a mother, son of a great pious virgin daughter of Adam, whose virginity was not just that of the flesh, but of the spirit too, was vindicated by the Gospels themselves. Like Moses and Mohammed, Jesus preached Islam.

From my experience of meeting with them, it seems to me that some Christians agree with my reading of the Gospels, but many read the Gospels differently. That is their concern. It is also God's concern. It is not my concern beyond making my views known. No one has the right to ask anyone else to account for religious beliefs. That is what God said in the Qur'an.

Jesus taught his followers in parables. But, simple as it was, it was often above their heads. The Gospels record how the disciples often wondered what Jesus meant. It might come as a surprise to a Christian to realize that Muslims feel perfectly at home with the teachings of Jesus. Incidentally, had I not believed in Jesus the messenger of God, I would have failed the definition of being a Muslim.

My family name actually means, 'The follower of Jesus'. Many devout Muslims call their children Issa (Jesus), Mariam (Mary), as well as by the names of all the other messengers of God. There is nothing strange about that, for to be a Muslim one must believe in all of God's messengers. They all came with the same message, so how can one believe in one and not another? Believe in one and all, or believe in none at all, is how I see it as a Muslim.

Moses, Jesus and Mohammed carried the same message: God is one, repent your sins to earn God's forgiveness, do good and refrain from doing evil, so that you may attain to eternal bliss in paradise and avoid the eternal torments of hell. The rest are details.

I believe that it is the Christian Creed, not the teachings of Jesus, that stands between Christians and Muslims. I understand from reading the Gospels only that Jesus is Unitarian, not Trinitarian. In another encounter of interfaith dialogue, this time with Clifford Longley, then of *The Times*, I asked him what he thought Jesus' message was. He said he did not think that Jesus was here to do as much as to be. It pains me to note that Jesus' magnificent teachings were ignored, and emphasis was placed almost exclusively on something that, at least to Muslim eyes, he never said and never was.

With the Muslim view of God as strictly Unitarian, I think it demeans Jesus to think of him as a sacrificial lamb and it demeans God to think of him as requiring what is essentially the pagan practice of human sacrifice in order to be satisfied to the degree of showing mercy and compassion. It is abhorrent to the concept of justice, be it human or

divine, to take one person's life for the sins of another. Yet, these rather confused and ungodly concepts are exactly what the Church promoted for many centuries, as I understand its teachings. With education and critical appraisal there came the inevitable consequences: the Church has gradually lost its followers to other religions, mainly atheism.

It was a Church without Jesus that vilified Islam for many centuries. In these relatively more open and enlightened times, the left-overs of this unholy crusade of many forms must stop. Had it stopped earlier, the tolerant Bosnian neighbourhoods may have been spared one pretext that the criminals use to ignite the horrors of war. The warring factions in Bosnia would not have fought each other if they did not suddenly see each other as 'different' and in such a villainous manner. How different are human beings prepared to be before jumping at each other's throats?

Having said that, however, and despite the lines of division following religious lines, I must say that Muslims do not see the conflict in Bosnia as one of a Christianity versus Islam, and in truth, it is not. The greatest support for the Bosnian Muslims, be it material or moral, has indeed come from Christians and Jews. Support also came in droves from atheists. We can all be proud at least of that.

In contrast to today's bankrupt leaders of the veto-waving western world, the might of the media, which Muslims have often accused of anti-Muslim bias, has come down very strongly on the side of the Muslims. With their devotion to factual reporting, a great many media notables have identified the Muslims, especially European Muslims, not just in Bosnia, but in high democracies such as Germany and France among others, as the threatened rather than the threat. Like many Muslims, I am as surprised as I am grateful for that massive shift in position by the media, which seem to have become the conscience of the western world in recent years. Some good can come from something so bad. It is amazing how flowers can grow in rotten beds.

The reason that I said what I did about the differences in beliefs between Christians and Muslims is to make the point that both religions, as preached by their respective messengers, are one. If the difference is seen for what it is, i.e. difference of religion, then it would, I hope, cease to be a cause of war. For to God, there are only two religions: belief and unbelief. God calls the Jews, Christians and the Muslims, the people of the Book, not of the books. The Book of God is one. The People of God are one. To God, the religion of a true Jew or Christian is Islam. It was the prophet Ibrahim (Abraham) who gave it its name, not the prophet Mohammed. When asked, 'Which is the best religion?', the prophet Mohammed replied, 'Tolerant Unitarianism'.

Islam is, by definition, the acknowledgement of the Oneness of God. All of God's messengers acknowledge this. That is why we believe they are all Muslims. Islam is the name of the religion that God said was theirs, even though their followers called it by different names. It will help the believers of all camps to call themselves by their real and appropriate name: believers. Only then will they start to climb the all-important, and thoroughly enjoyable, spiritual ladder.

The first step on that spiritual ladder is the acknowledgement of the Oneness of God. It is the foundation of the faith that qualifies one for the name 'Muslim'. But a Muslim may recognize the truth, but not always act in accordance with it.

The next step on the spiritual ladder is that of being *Mou'men*, one's deeds must largely correspond with one's words. A *Mou'men* is a person who trusts God as his guide and leader, and will stand for what God stands for. He will feed the poor, care for the needy and the orphaned, free the slaves, balance the scales, act and speak in truth and justice, and bear true witness for the sake of the Lord against any erring person, even if that person is his nearest and dearest. A *Mou'men* will rise against aggression and injustice, will defend the innocent and defend the earth from the threat of corruption. He will be, meanwhile, forgiving and compassionate. For compassion is the godly force that irons out the creases of any system of justice, and can correct its built-in fallibility.

To demonstrate this point, imagine a main road in a rush hour, adjoined by a small road with a long queue of cars waiting at the 'give way' sign. The law, or justice, demands that cars on the adjoining small road should wait till there is no oncoming traffic. Compassion comes in to iron out this 'fault' in justice; some of those who have the right of way will voluntarily give way to those who are stuck in a side road. Those who exercise their compassion in that way experience the uplifting feeling when compassion overrides justice.

To qualify for the next step on the spiritual ladder, that of a *Taqi*, one must have enough fear of the Lord to avoid all forms of disobedience, big or small. A *Taqi* is one who refrains from doing deeds that incur God's wrath. Only the God-conscious will find the wisdom to do that.

A *Taqi* would not be unjust in the least, for he knows that an injustice to others is an injustice to himself, for he will have to account for it on the day he meets his Lord. A *Taqi* poses no threats to his neighbours or his co-citizens. Imagine life in a city where every one is a *Taqi* and you will be imagining a city where the crime rate is zero – a feat not achievable by any other means.

The next step is that of the *Khashi*, or the person who enjoys greater awareness and appreciation of the awesomeness of the might of the

Lord, so much so that when the Lord's name is mentioned, one's heart will tremble and skin cringe from the fear of the Lord. We get that feeling when we happen to face, say, an animal of exceeding ferocity; our mind's eye visualizes the awesomeness of the situation, hence the trembling of the heart and the cringing of the skin. Because God is unseen, the ordinary faithful person, let alone the one of no faith at all, may not be aware of the awesomeness of the Lord. A person so knowledgeable about the divine as to have reached that stage is unlikely to commit any sins no matter how small, whether openly or secretly.

The ultimate step on the spiritual ladder, achieved only by climbing the rest, is that of *Al-Muhib* or the one who loves God. To understand what loving God means, think of your love for a human being. The Egyptian proverb puts what I want to say clearly and succinctly: *darb el habeeb zay akl el zebeeb*. When my beloved beats me, it feels as if I am eating sultanas! Love-bites do not produce in one the same response as when the word love is removed. It means that no matter how severe the test that God puts one through in this life, it will still feel as if one is eating sultanas.

The person who fears God would be sad but patient in the face of adversity, praying God to remove the affliction. The person who loves God, on the other hand, would turn to him in adversity with a joyful face and say, 'If that is what you want, give me more'. Adversity matters not to the one who loves God. It does not provoke in him the same feeling of desperation it evokes in another. He has indeed defeated adversity, he who loves God. To reach that stage of spirituality means that one has arrived.

On the 'down' side of that, imagine you have fallen in love with a person who has everything, lacks for nothing, and is perfect in every way. How will ordinary fault-ridden people and objects look then to you? I will tell you. Life will then look incidental, insignificant and, in itself, boring. And as your gaze becomes focused on the one you love, you will become oblivious to all else. This is what some Sufis (of whom I am not one) call *zuhd*: a strong desire for nothing of this world. This is not, however, the will of God, for he wants us to enjoy the world, but to enjoy it in truth, justice and compassion. He loves us to enjoy our portion of this life as well as that of the hereafter.

We are told that we are on earth for a brief period of testing during which we are employed as God's deputies, servants, vicegerents. We have a job to do and we must do it, not dislocate ourselves from our responsibilities. True Islamic spirituality is deeply rooted in the world we live in. We are on earth to do a particular job, and that is to make the

earth good and protect it from evil. Apart from our own personal satisfaction in a job well done, continuous assessment is taking place and success or failure will depend on it. By that I mean paradise and hell.

Many do not believe in life after death, but just as I have no difficulty believing that, having manufactured cars today, a car company can manufacture cars tomorrow, so I have no difficulty believing that the Mighty One who created this vast world is able to do it all again.

I have no difficulty believing in hell, for I know that it is under our feet. The thin skin of the earth that we live on can sometimes obscure the fact that the earth is such a massive fire-ball. It is so wonderfully miraculous that we are able to live on it at all. Having tasted the delights of this world, I have no difficulty believing in God's heavenly paradise. As in science, the proof for the unseen can be derived from that which is seen. That is an answer through reason, but faith and reason go hand in hand in Islam.

In Islam, there is no schism between what is material and what is spiritual. The material in itself is not bad, and is not the opposite of the spiritual. Two men each pay out a pound, one to a poor person and the other to gain an illegal 'favour' from someone in authority: are these two pounds the same? Two men each pay out one pound to the poor, but the first is himself poor, and the other a millionaire: are these two pounds the same?

Spirituality is a value that is strongly attached to a 'material' deed. That is why there is no schism between what is spiritual and what is material in Islam. Spirituality that has no foundation in the material world falls down at the first philosophical huff.

To understand one's love for God, the Immortal, I have taken the hypothetical example of loving a mortal. But, I tell you, there is a very significant difference. I might fall in love with the ugliest woman on earth, yet, to my eyes, she will seem the most beautiful. My loving eyes will tell me lies. That is why I regard the emotion of 'romantic' love we experience here on earth as more a flawed than a divine experience, because it is often unreal, false, exaggerated, oppressive, tormenting, and can have such a coarse pulling force. It is also driven by tiny molecules we cannot see called hormones.

Loving God, on the other hand, is not controlled by hormones. It is controlled by the intellect reaching out for the ultimate in understanding and appreciation of God's infinite mercy, compassion, majesty, perfection and, yes, God's beauty. Loving God is an experience that cannot be described to the one who has never experienced it, just as you cannot describe the colour blue to those born blind, or the taste of honey to someone who never actually tasted it.

I love God for what He is, and I love Him for what He does for me. He feeds me, clothes me, shelters me, and gives me the air I breathe. He does not want anything from me in return except the kind of behaviour that gives me the right to receive more of his bounty and blessings. He is more faithful to me than I am to Him, and I feel completely safe being in His hands. He calls me his servant, yet he expects me to wash no clothes of his, prepare no food, and polish no shoes. There is nothing that he wants me to do for him. There is everything He wants to do for me.

He counts my good deeds in multiples, and removes from my record my bad deeds when I say sorry. He is not envious or jealous of me, holds no grudge against me, and does not stab me in the back. He stays faithful to me even in the moments when I am not faithful to him. How could I not love him!

'By your majesty, I shall tempt them for as long as I am with them', said Satan to God. 'By my majesty, I shall forgive them as long as they ask me to forgive them', replied Allah.

Calling God father is a metaphor. It is to help us understand how he is towards us. As a father's affection always leans towards the sickest of his children, so does God's. As a father, his heart goes to the neediest, the weakest, the sickest, the oppressed. As a father, he is pleased beyond measure when a son, having erred, comes back to him and says sorry, or when a son turns to him and says thank you.

Allah is beauty in the absolute. Window-shopping, my eyes fell once upon the most beautiful pair of shoes. I found myself crying, 'Allah'. Surprised at my reaction of invoking the name of deity just because I saw a beautiful pair of shoes, I realized for the first time that my image of God is that of beauty. It is the beauty that comes from perfection.

We are told that when all matters are settled, God will ask the people of paradise, 'O my servants, ask me'. And they will say, 'What can we ask of you when you have given us everything. There is nothing more that we can ask for.' God will then order his veil to be removed, and will shine with the beauty of his face upon the people of paradise. Their gaze will then become transfixed on God's beauty to the extent that all pleasure will fade by comparison, and they will subsequently and eternally live in the joy that comes from seeing the beauty of the face of God. It is that particular moment that I aspire to. My life is a journey, and that moment is my destination. I can only get there by ensuring that my deeds are done according to the will of God. Like a beloved saying to his beloved, 'If you love me you would do what I want you to do', so it is with God.

Some strands of Sufism aside, Islamic spirituality has nothing to do with mystic experiences of escapism – no flights of fancy or sitting on

mountains of words that do not support one's weight. It is not the treading of imaginary paths or paths of the imagination, helped at times by trance-inducing hypnotic rituals. True spirituality must be based on truth.

Far from being a servant of the world, the believer uses the world in the service of the eternal. He realizes that the world is temporary and is therefore useless as an end in itself. He makes, or tries to make the world run according to the system manual of the creator. He does not use religion for political gain, as is now happening in Bosnia, and as has happened before all over the world. For he realizes that even if he gains ten times as much as the weight of the earth in gold, he will one day leave it all behind. For what purpose did the gatherers gather, I wonder!

I wonder, would the Serb gunman who took aim at a hospital or a block of flats, or a bus loaded with fleeing refugees, have done what he did had he realized that whatever dust he will gain, he will surely leave again? Will he still practise ethnic cleansing and strategic rape if he realizes the true might of the Lord and his awesome power?

It is not the truly compassionate Christian religious beliefs that have led the Serb aggressors to their aggression; it is the failure of these people to open the darkest recesses of their hearts to them.

The Serb gunman might be responsible for his deeds, but we are also responsible for ours. Whose responsibility is justice? I asked. It is ours. We are told in the Qur'an that if you sit idly by and do nothing to stop the aggressors, the entire earth will be taken over by evil and evil-doers. All that is needed for the fire of aggression to devour the earth is that the just do nothing.

Believers are enjoined in the Qur'an that if they see two groups fighting, they must try and make peace between them. But if one group oppresses the other, we must all fight the aggressor till he desists from his aggression, then make peace between them. That is the way of the Lord. UN, please take note. Aggression will never cease from the face of the earth unless the aggressor is made to lose, not gain, by his aggression. It will never cease unless the aggressors become sure that they will be fighting the world if they start on their aggressive paths. If self-interest is the drive for aggression, self-interest must be made the drive against it.

When the talking is over, and interfaith dialogue completed, the true believer, be it Jew, Christian or Muslim, must realize that there is some urgent work that needs to be done.