

Editorial

An Anchor and a Vehicle: A Muslim's Reflection on His Faith

This editorial was first published in Dutch in 2015 as part of a collection of reflections on faith (“Anker en voertuig,” in *Geloven - Spirituele denkers uit de hele wereld getuigen*, ed. Jürgen Mettepenningen (Tiel: Lannoo, 2015), 73-78. Forty-six scholars of diverse religious backgrounds around the world were sent a set of questions: “What Are the central features of your faith?” “How is your belief in praxis?” “Why do you believe (belief)?” “What is the richness of faith?” and “What has faith given to you? How can it be meaningful to others?”. As the style was “conversational,” all references were omitted. I obtained the editor’s written permission to publish the English version.

Faith of the Heart

The central features of the Islamic faith (*īmān*) are belief, with the heart, in the existence and oneness of Almighty God as the sole creator of the universe; confidence, in one’s mind, in God’s omnipotence; and sincere reliance, with one’s whole self, on God’s mercy and lordship in managing all that exists.

Although in Islam belief is all about God, other theological components play indispensable roles, among them belief in the existence of angels and their roles; belief in each and every messenger and prophet of God; belief in the truth of His books and scriptures; belief in the Day of Judgment; and belief in His decree (predestination), whether good or bad. These are stated in Q. 2:177, 2:285, and 4:136 and in Prophet Muhammad’s tradition. Without the theological components, belief in God, important as it is, remains utterly meaningless. Every Muslim accepts that these constitute the essence of faith.

Worship in a Broad Sense

As a Muslim, my faith in God is multi-dimensional. I believe in His oneness in terms of His lordship and sovereignty. As He is the only creator of this universe, He manages and directs all of its affairs and sustains it according to His will. Thus, as I live in this world going about my business, I believe that it is

He who ultimately makes the final decisions as to what I will or will not do, what I will or will not accomplish. God is too great and elevated to micro-manage my affairs, and yet He still controls all of my dealings through His prior decree and the agency of angels and other human beings. I am the only one, however, who is ultimately responsible for what I do.

I also believe in God's oneness in terms of worship. As He is the only being worthy of my worship, I direct it only toward Him. This is in contrast to some traditional belief systems that feature the worship of ancestral spirits and deities. Basing myself upon this belief, I do not engage in any act toward any human being (no matter what his/her socio-political status) that could be perceived as resembling worship, such as bowing my head, kneeling down, or seeking blessings. To worship that which is not God is tantamount to disbelief and polytheism, an unforgivable act as far as Islam is concerned.

Islam views worship as transcending such prayer-related ritual acts as prostration, bowing, and supplications (which lose their spiritual significance and become unacceptable when directed toward that which is not God). *Worship includes any good deed done with the intention of attracting God's pleasure.* In this scenario, what qualifies for an act of worship and an index of faith is the role of God as the motivational factor. For example, my feeding the hungry in order to please God is an act of worship and a symbol of faith, whereas rescuing an abandoned dog for the sake of impressing my father-in-law is not. While still admirable, the latter act would be considered a form of polytheism and a sign of a diminished faith in God, since it was not done only for His sake.

Another dimension is my faith in God's unique character and form. As a Muslim, I believe that nothing resembles God in any way, shape, or form; that He cannot be perceived by the human intellect; and that His beautiful names, as presented in the Qur'an, are close representations and not actual portrayals. My belief in His unique attributes stems from the fact that He is unique in His essence and quiddity. For example, His names "the compassionate," "the merciful," and "the sustainer" are unlike the compassion, mercy, and sustenance possessed by humans. Therefore, Muslims invoke God's names and attributes to praise Him and show their faith in Him. This, in a nutshell, is the nucleus of my faith.

A Faithful Professor, if God so Wills

Anything I do as a human being while relating to another part of God's creation (animate and inanimate, Muslim or non-Muslim), or as a worshiper fulfilling my religious obligations, serves as a practical statement that validates

and solidifies my faith in God. I believe that nothing I do escapes God's knowledge (*'ilm*) or can be outside of His volition (*mashi'ah*) and guidance (*hidāyah*). Therefore, as I can do only that which He has decreed, I will also be held accountable for it. *Hence I am clearly conscious of the need to always be diligent and effective, fair and just, honest and sincere.* These are some of the consequences of my belief in God that, in turn, shape all aspects of my life. In other words, my faith is put into praxis every minute of my life. If such practical dimensions did not exist, my faith would be meaningless.

For example, my belief in God as omniscient motivates me to engage in positive deeds, whether they are mundane, secular, or otherwise. Thus I strive to earn His pleasure by doing good deeds as well as by having good intentions. His omniscience serves as a continuous deterrent from engaging in unacceptable deeds. So I endeavor to avoid His discontent by fully analyzing myself and my deeds before undertaking any activity.

How does my faith practically inform my teaching responsibilities? Even though I get paid as a professor, my faith in God still requires that I impart my knowledge to the students to the best of my ability; that I insist that they understand the content fully; and that I show no prejudice and/or preference when grading their exams. As a person of faith I do all of these because God wants me to do them, not just because they are the "right things" to do as regards my professional responsibilities. I do them because God knows what I should be doing and will ultimately hold me accountable for how I performed my duties. This concept is expressed as "judging one's self before one is judged" by God. A faithless professor or a professor who has faith in something other than God may also feel and carry out his/her teaching duties as I do. The difference between us is the motivation behind our tasks. He/she may do it out of altruism or a sense of duty. For me, while not discounting other motivations (like a sense of duty, keeping my job, or being fair), my faith in God undergirds my professional and social responsibilities just as it does my religious obligations.

My belief in God's volition is also crucial in informing the practical dimension of my faith. Being able to do only what God wills me to do gives me great confidence in whatever I end up doing. So I pray for His guidance and depend on Him as my indefatigable guide. As I can possess only what God wills me to have, I feel no sense of desperation and despair. So I seek only His blessings and bounty as my boundless sustainer. As nothing happens in my life without God's permission, I am reassured of His protection and consoled whenever I face an ordeal. *So I request His fortification and empowerment as my indestructible shield.* With all of this in mind, a true believer who declares his/her intention to do anything must add "if God so wills."

I Cannot Live without Faith

For me, faith is indispensable, inescapable, and unavoidable. The role God plays in my life as the principal actor makes my faith in Him central to my being. My conviction that He guides me to whatever I do, protects me, and provides me with sustenance dictates that my life is inextricably linked to my faith in God. Without my faith, I would be lost, hopeless, and vulnerable, regardless of all my social, professional, and other achievements.

This conviction may be seen from my attitude toward this particular project. Being invited to contribute to this “book of faith” is undeniably an honor that many scholars would cherish as much as I do. Although the editor was appreciably responsible for extending the invitation, it was actually God who wanted me to be part of this project in the first place. From why I was identified as a potential contributor to how I was located and contacted, from my agreement to write this piece to actually producing it – all is in accordance with my deep faith that God orchestrated everything. Therefore, if one’s life is based on this kind of conviction and faith, without such faith it inevitably becomes meaningless.

I also see the indispensability of my faith through the prism of God’s omnipotence. Thus God can do, and actually does, anything He wills, the way He wills, and to anybody He wills. Nothing or nobody is beyond His reach and control. From this perspective, *faith in God means aligning one’s self with the most powerful being, the only one whose actions truly matter and make a real difference in anyone’s life.* On the one hand, using one’s faith in God’s omnipotence as a vehicle means that no task is too great to be accomplished, no “mountain is too high” to be climbed, and no boss is too intimidating to be approached. On the other hand, using God’s omnipotence as an anchor leaves me unfazed by any failure, unhindered by any obstacle, and unmoved by any threat. I am reminded by a faithful declaration of Imam Muhammad al-Busiri (d. 1296), a medieval Egyptian scholar famous for his piety and dependence on God. In his ode *al-Burdah*, he states: “God’s protection (*wiqāyat Allāh*) is more effective than any layers of armor, or the highest of fortresses” (Muhammad ibn Sa‘eed al-Busiri. *Qaṣīdah Burdah Sharīf: The Mantle Ode* (Gujranwala, Pakistan: Abbasi, 2002). Given that this is my mindset as well, any diminishment of my faith, not to mention the total loss of it, would be a total disservice to myself. Hence the indispensability of faith in my life.

Having strong faith in God has another benefit: Victory and winning are always anticipated as God’s support, and failure and losing are contextualized and put into perspective either as a test or simply a decree. This context appropriately manages, and sometimes completely eliminates, any acute anxiety.

Thus all of my activities, be they religious (e.g., attending a congregational prayer or donating to a mosque project), social (e.g., playing with my children or making friends), or professional (e.g., getting promoted by my university or being evaluated by my students) are engaged in through the prism of faith. It is impossible for me to think or analyze things in any other way.

Confidence, Stability, and Happiness

Faith can provide confidence to the faithful. Life is replete with difficulties and challenges. As a person of faith, I am always confident that I can handle whatever life throws at me. Although I may not always be successful in the manner I handle things, the confidence with which I tackle my problems either reduces my apprehension or neutralizes my anxiety. On the other hand, the sense of confidence I have as I approach positive and pleasant issues stems from the fact that God has already decreed them, and thus they will benefit me, my family, and/or my community. There is also an opportunity to be grateful to, and appreciative of, God or any human being He uses as agent of my successful endeavor.

With hard work and without a sense of complacency, I believe that whatever is meant to reach me will do so, regardless of the distance and improbability, and that whatever is destined to be mine will eventually come into my possession, irrespective of my efforts and networking. Knowing this, I feel stable rather than erratic, calm rather than panicky.

This feeling of stability comes with a sense of certainty as far as faith is concerned. Again, with strong faith and without being presumptuous as to what God will do, as a faithful person I become, nonetheless, certain that God will not abandon me. In case of misfortune, my confidence in God does not decrease. That is how rich my faith is. *My faith provides me with happiness insofar as I remain confident, stable, and reasonably unconcerned about adversity in all aspects of my life.* In other words, my faith makes me a happy person because it guarantees stability, confidence, and absolute dependence on God. Its richness can also be felt as I make sure to treat people nicely, respect them, give them the benefit of the doubt, and always exhibit a positive attitude. The fact that meeting any person with a “smiling” face (an effortless gesture) is considered a sign of faith in Islam shows how rich and contagious the results of faith can be. It certainly makes other people happy.

The richness of my faith is such that it serves as the anchor and vehicle in, and has a pervasive influence on, all dimensions of my life (religious, social, professional, or economic). In short, its indispensability is a sufficient indication of how rich and real faith is to me. The richness of faith may be seen in several dimensions.

This Issue

We begin the first issue of 2017 with Paul Shore's "An Early Jesuit Encounter with the Qur'an: *Ignazio Lomellini's Animadversiones, Notae ac Disputationes in Pestilentem Alcoranum.*" Shore examines Lomellini's understanding of the cultural and religious underpinnings of Qur'anic Arabic, especially his lexical choices, along with the intended audience, the resources upon which he drew, and the manuscript's relationship to the Jesuits' broader literary and missionary efforts. Finally, he asks why scholars, particularly those who study the Jesuits' history, have ignored this manuscript and its author.

Next is "Not Without My Daughter: Resurrecting the American Captivity Narrative," by Hossein Nazari. Nazari sets out to illustrate how this "memoir" functions within the paradigm of America's well-established captivity narrative literary tradition. He shows how the text constitutes a site wherein this tradition's three subgenres converge and then analyzes the conceptualization of captivity as a condition that transcends the boundaries of the spatial and the physical. Nazari reveals how the book's production and reception were conditioned by its construction within this particular parameter and by what came to be known in the West as the "Iran Hostage Crisis."

Farhan Mujahid Chak's "The Post-Enlightenment Moral Crisis and the Emergence of Secular Tyranny in the Middle East" explores Europe's post-Enlightenment ethical transformation and assesses its impact upon the origins and development of secularism. He also investigates how secularism was introduced into the Middle East and explains why it achieved nothing resembling what the West had experienced, particularly as regards its purported aims of social reconciliation, industrialization, and modernization.

We close with Tauseef Ahmad Parray's "Exploring Nejatullah Siddiqi's Contribution to the *Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah* in Urdu Literature." Parray examines the contribution of Siddiqi, India's renowned Islamic economist and scholar, to the *maqāṣid* discourse; describes and analyzes his approach and methodology, especially its understanding and applications vis-à-vis contemporary issues; and focuses on this scholar's stance on the modern-day concerns related to, and discussed within, the context of Urdu literature.

I hope that our readers will find these papers not only thought-provoking and stimulating, but also sources of inspiration and motivation for their own research.

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