

The Gaeia Manchester Sermon 2015:

The Waltz Between Faith and Doubt

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The Waltz Between Faith and Doubt

Hello, it's very nice to be here this evening. Thank you for inviting me to speak, I am truly looking forward to hearing your thoughts, questions and critical comments at the end.

I am a storyteller. I see, perceive and interpret the universe through stories. I find it magical that with one alphabet—a limited number of letters—we can obtain an infinite number of words and meanings. Sometimes in my dreams I see myself writing and rewriting sentences, paragraphs. Sometimes I see blank pages, which I don't find intimidating, only exciting, full of possibilities.

As much as I am captivated by stories, I am also drawn to silences—the things we can't or don't talk about; the secrets, the taboos, the hidden. To give a voice to the voiceless, to make visible the invisible, to bring the periphery to the centre, to empower the disempowered, to build cultural and intellectual bridges, to increase knowledge about the unknown... all these efforts are close to my heart. And God, despite all the books and conferences and lectures and sermons we have had throughout the centuries, is in many ways still our biggest Unknown.

So I would like to start by saying what I was planning to express at the very end. I am not a religious person. In truth, I am a non-religious, non-practising person who happens to be deeply, sincerely, passionately interested in God. God as an idea, God as flowing, all-embracing, creative, transformative energy. God as Love with a capital L.

God as a Story that we are all writing together, page by page.

God as a Storyteller who Himself doesn't know how the story will end.

My interest in God—or Rab, one my favourite words for Him in Islam, etymologically from the Arabic language, meaning Cherisher, Nourisher—started off as an intellectual journey. In Turkey, the land where I come from, people tend to assume that if you are reading extensively on God and religion, then you must be pious and if you are not religious, why should you be interested in such subjects in the first place? I have always found this dualistic approach simplistic and problematic.

I am *curious* about God. I think of God as a fascinating puzzle waiting and demanding to be solved.

And it is this curiosity that often guides me. I love reading and thinking on this subject and I deliberately keep my reading lists as eclectic and multidisciplinary as possible. Categories are no more than mental boxes at the end of the day. As a novelist I don't think I should solely or primarily read fiction. In truth, I read everything and anything as long as it speaks to my heart and mind: theology, philosophy, poetry, politics, history, folk tales, graphic novels, song lyrics.... Through all these channels one can ask fundamental questions about the existence or the absence of God.

The Austrian-British philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein once said, 'I don't know why we are here, but I'm pretty sure that it is not in order to enjoy ourselves.' He also raised crucial questions about our relationship with logic and language. "Are we even talking about the same thing?" he wondered. If we apply Wittgenstein's query to the discussions on God, "Are we even talking about the same thing when we talk about GOD?"

What exactly do we mean by God? A strict Father? A meticulous clockmaker? A vindictive and revengeful ruler who wants to see one side win against the other? Is God transcendental and aloof and beyond our mundane world? Or is He here-and-now and within us and struggling perhaps, just like all of us? East and West, across cultures, we all seem to be using the same word, more or less, but our definitions differ radically. And those differences, those linguistic nuances must be called to attention if we want to understand better this universal puzzle called God.

But I won't be telling you the entire truth if I don't confess that my quest for God is not solely an intellectual one; it is also emotional, and dare I say, spiritual. As much I try to keep away from organized religions of all sorts, because I do not like the way they divide humanity into "us" versus "them", I am intrigued by spirituality, especially by mysticism. I am captivated by the dance, the waltz between faith and doubt. As human beings we need both faith and doubt. We need their contrast, their seeming clash in order to be able to think

deeper. How boring would it be to have absolute faith and not a speck of doubt. How equally, if not more, boring would it be to have absolute doubt and not a morsel of faith.

There is something about absolutism that frightens me, in truth, no matter where it comes from. Undiluted, unconditional, unwavering belief, whether in God or in science or in reason, are equally problematic in my eyes. Dialectics is the core of life. Yin and yang. Day and night. Dark and light. This is how we make progress. Therefore, the dialogue of faith and doubt, however difficult and challenging, is more conducive to intellectual and spiritual growth than the monologue of faith or the monologue of doubt alone.

On both sides of the Atlantic today, particularly in academic circles, it has become highly popular to organise debates between an atheist thinker and a theist thinker. I have listened to dozens of such debates and I find them, after a while, quite repetitive. Both sides arrive at the meeting knowing exactly what they believe in, determined not to change their mind, and bent on gaining supporters from the audience. They don't really listen to each other. Because listening is an act of love. It is the surrender of the ego, even if briefly. To listen to someone is to sign an unwritten contract that says, "I am opening my ears and my heart. I am ready and willing to change." A true dialogue, in the sense Socrates would have liked to see the concept being put to use, is based on an exchange of energy, inspiration and ideas. It is a dialectical interaction in which every new answer generates further questions. When we enter into a dialogue we are a different person by the time it is over; something in us has shifted.

This is not the case with the ongoing debates on God. Both atheist and religious scholars start the debate defending one position, they finish it all the more convinced that they are in the right.

To put it more bluntly, I am worried about by what I see as, "The Hegemony of Certainty".

This is how Certainty speaks: "I am a Muslim, full stop." "I am a Catholic, full stop." "I am an atheist, full stop." The Hegemony of Certainty is not in the statement but in that tiny, little dot. The moment we put a full stop to anything, we close the door on learning. Better to use a comma or a semicolon, or better yet, an ellipsis, triple dots, to indicate that the sentence is open, the search ongoing, the journey alive.

I find it frightening when people are sure of the ground beneath their feet, sure that it's solid and stable. Personally, I always feel more comfortable next to people who are less certain, more confused, modest. I call them The Perplexed. The Learners. The Searchers. And these are the people, whom I believe will be asking the most significant questions on faith in this new century. Not the atheists, but the agnostics. Not the religious, but the spiritual—those who wholeheartedly welcome the waltz of Faith and Doubt.

The way I see it, mysticism is a personal, inner-oriented journey that helps us to “unleash the beautiful wild forces” that St. Francis of Assisi talked about. I love this expression: *To unleash the beautiful wild forces* that are already present within each of us. The universe is expanding. Then why should the human being, who is the embodiment of the universe should also not expand his or her mind?

In a world increasingly defined by collective and collectivistic identities, in a world of imaginary clash of civilizations, true mystics, just like novelists, have no “us” and have no “them.” Through their eyes every individual, regardless of race, sex, age, ethnicity and such, is a microcosm—the reflection of the macrocosm. The Sufis, the Islamic mystics, for instance, call the human being, “the travelling book” or “the talking book”. So there is a holy book, yes, but they also say it is possible to read the human being as if he or she were a book. This is a humanistic, human-centred approach to faith that sadly today has been abandoned in many part of the world.

A mystic is a traveller. A commuter. A nomad. A bird of passage. A spiritual gypsy. A bridgemaker. A peacemaker. At home everywhere but also in exile. The mystics, just like writers, are solitary individuals.

There is a poem by Ibn Arabi that I must have read over and again so many times, at different stages of my life. Ibn Arabi was a philosopher, poet, sage, mystic. Born in the 12th century Moorish Spain, which back then beautifully combined the best of the three Abrahamic traditions: Jewish, Christian, Islamic. Ibn Arabi himself was incredibly prolific, he left behind more than 350 works, but his name and his humanistic legacy is today, unfortunately, for the most part, forgotten, erased, suppressed. Either deliberately or out of sheer ignorance. His poem went like this:

My heart can take on/any form:

A meadow for gazelles/ a cloister for monks.

For the idols, sacred ground

Ka'ba for the circling pilgrim,

The tables of the Torah,

The scrolls of the Quran.

I profess the religion of Love;

Wherever its caravan turns along the way,

That is the belief,

The faith I keep.

When I read these verses for the first time as a college student it was the imagery that aroused my curiosity. Ibn Arabi talked about his heart as if it were made of water. Flowing water. Not static. He spoke about the human heart as though it were a caravan on the move. Ever-changing. But it was the expression he used that made me stop and think more carefully. He said, I profess, I affirm my allegiance to “the religion of Love.”

I was puzzled when I read this. What did that mean? Was there such a thing? Religion of Love! Everything in life came with its opposite, did it not? If there was a Religion of Love, what then could be its opposite? Religion of Hatred? Religion of Fear? Religion of Ignorance? Religion of Bigotry?

Time passed. I forgot the questions that had flocked into my mind. Back then I was young, leftist, idealist, fast and furious. I wanted to change the world. Myself, I didn't think I needed to change at all. It would take me long years to understand that any change for the better had to start within me. Inside my own soul.

All throughout my life my best tutors were books. Many doors were opened to me via books. So it was in a book that I came across another valuable teaching years later. This, too, was a poem by a Muslim poet and it went like this:

“Since in the religion of Love,

There is no blasphemy or faith.

When in Love, body, mind, heart and soul don't even exist.

Become this, fall in Love, you will not be separated again.”

These words belonged to Rumi—the great 13th century Sufi poet. Rumi's voice transcends cultural and religious frontiers. He is one of the most popular poets in America. His work has influenced countless minds, but he is still unknown to the majority of people.

When I read this poem I began thinking: Is it a coincidence that Rumi used exactly the same expression as Ibn Arabi and mentioned the *Religion of Love*.

I began remembering things from my personal life. I recalled the summer I turned seven. My parents had separated a while ago but only recently they had officially got divorced. For some reason unknown to me, it was decided that I would spend half of that summer in Izmir, Smyrna, next to my paternal grandmother, and the other half in Ankara, with my maternal grandmother. Little did I know that this experience would leave a big impact on my soul, shaping my relationship with all matters related to faith and God.

I arrived in Izmir with a suitcase full of books. *Alice in Wonderland*, *Robinson Crusoe*, *Little Women*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, *Little Prince*, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. As a single child raised by a single mother books were my best friends. They still are.

My paternal Grandma was a stern woman; tall, thin and as I would soon discover, very religious. When she opened my suitcase her face darkened with disapproval. My dresses were too short. Sleeveless. My shorts were improper. Girls should not wear shorts, she said. My books troubled her even more. What on earth was I reading? She took out *Robinson Crusoe* and flicked through the pages. In the Turkish edition there was a picture of Friday kneeling down before Crusoe. Mr Crusoe was dressed, Mr Friday was not. This, Grandma did not approve. Had my mother been a proper mother, she would have never let me read such things in the first place, she said.

I felt guilty. Because of me, Mum was being accused. So I quickly put everything back in the suitcase, which Grandma closed and lifted up on top of the wardrobe. I would get it back on the day I left, she announced, but not before.

Since I was cut off from my books, I decided to discover those in the house. There weren't many. There was the Quran, but I couldn't touch it as it was up on the wall, covered with a beautiful silken cover, but unreachable. There were books of hadiths, the sayings of the Prophet Mohamed. Another book teaching how to pray. And then there was a thick volume of Islamic Interpretation of Dreams. I decided to read the latter.

It was mesmerizing. Not a linear book, I could start in the middle, or the end, skip pages or peruse it forwards or backwards, to my heart's content. Best of all, whoever had written this book seemed no less confused than I. The Interpretation of Dreams was full of conflicts. For instance, if a person saw himself in a dream as mounting a horse, this could mean his status would rise. But it could also mean he would suffer serious financial losses. How confusing I thought, it could be this way or that way, everything depended on interpretation.

My Grandma's interpretation of Allah was based on fear. For her, God was a celestial gaze that never blinked. He observed us all the time, day and night, wrote down our sins to make us pay the price come tomorrow. I could not understand how He could see me through the roof, and it terrified me to think He could watch me in the bathroom. During the time I was in that house I refused to take a bath.

That summer I learned about sin. I learned about the Religion of Fear.

Then I returned to Ankara by mid-June to spend the rest of the summer with my maternal Grandma. This was a very different house. Neighbours coming and going, laughing and gossiping, "patients" pouring in since Grandma was a healer, of sorts. She healed people with skin problems, drawing circles around their warts and making them disappear. She read coffee cups, melted lead to ward off the djinn. Her universe was full of superstitions and irrationality.

Here, too, was a Quran. But it was on the shelf, you could reach it, touch it, read it. Next to it were several other books. The love story of Farhad and Shirin, the love story of

Joseph and Zuleikha, the love story of Layla and Majnun, the Adventures of Nasreddin Hodja, which made everything laugh and admire the wit behind.

When I asked my maternal Grandma if God was watching me in the bathroom, she said she was sure He had more important things to do. When I asked her if it was wrong of me to wear shorts, she shook her head and said, “we must keep our hearts clean, that’s surely better than fretting about our image”. She didn’t talk about flames and cauldrons boiling in hell. She talked about Love. And compassion.

These two women, both Muslim, both Turkish, both middle class, so alike at the first glance, read the same holy book but interpreted it in an entirely different way. The experience taught me a valuable lesson that would help me when I became an established author: The reader’s gaze was important. The reader was not a passive creature. Readers created the texts as they read along.

When I read on Islamic mysticism, when I delve into that ocean, I sometimes look around and I realize I have swum to the shores of Jewish mysticism. Then I dive again and the next time I look up I notice I am now in the waters of Christian mysticism. Because they are all connected. They are all One.

When I read the German theologian and mystic Meister Eckhart, it feels like I am reading Hafez, the Persian poet and mystic. When I listen to the Spanish Catholic nun Teresa de Avila, I hear the words of Rabia, the first female Muslim mystic and who, had she seen Basra, Iraq today would probably not recognize it. I savour the words of Isaac Luria or Abraham Abulafia, both Jewish intellectuals and mystics, and to me they speak the same language as Ibn Arabi. The Searchers/the Learners of each religion were brothers and sisters. Put them around the same table, I have no doubt that they would break bread together.

In today’s world, we are so obsessed with cultural differences and political debates, that we have forgotten this commonality. We belittle humanism but we have not replaced it with anything better, have we? Just like we have forgotten to ask questions about God. We became more interested in religion than in God. In fact, we became more interested in finding answers than in raising questions. But to the hungry mind, the questions are more precious than the answers.

Faith and doubt will continue to dance a waltz. Sometimes they will step on each other's toes, but they can still dance beautifully, passionately and in surprising harmony. We do not need to separate them. We do not need to freeze them in time. Let them evolve, flow, expand, together.

Sameness is dangerous. In this life if we are ever going to learn anything at all we will learn it from people who are different from us. I won't be challenged by the echo of my own voice. It is the voice of the Other that will challenge me. In a similar way, Faith will challenge Doubt and vice versa. We need this interaction.

At the end of the day, "spirituality that is open to doubt" is a language and like all languages it needs to be practised, it needs to be studied. It is a modest but powerful, ancient but imaginative, and universal language that people from all walks of life can speak without an accent, without any need for translation.

Thank you....