

Humanity or Religion?

By Norman “Nourollah” Gabay

Edited and Translated by Payman Akhlaghi

لطفاً نسخه فارسی این نوشتار را پیشتر در صفحه نخست این فایل ملاحظه فرمایید.



The Fruits of the Tree of Humanity: Freedom of Spirit, Tolerance, Smile, Patience, Loving Kindness, Loyalty, Honesty, Peace, Friendship, Benevolence, and Helping others.

I think the present article will prove to be a most stimulating essay. First, I point out two painful recent incidents. According to the news, the ISIS admitted that two members of the organization — indeed, two insane, wild beings — with bombs wrapped around their waists, walked into a big crowd in the quiet and peaceful city of Kerman, Iran, and exploded themselves, thus killing, injuring or terribly handicapping more than 200 of the very honorable people of this city. Such are truly a bunch of deranged individuals, who akin to the notoriously stubborn donkey

of the Persian lore, take revenge on the owner by throwing themselves together with their load down the steep valley! Or rather, they're even lowlier than the donkey. The ISIS has a considerable number of supporters and followers in some circles, and it has proclaimed itself to be Muslim and the so-called leadership of the Islamic world. Let's not forget, however, that the poor people who were murdered in that atrocity, that is, the Iranian people, were Muslims too, and they followed the same religion, book and prophet, as the members of ISIS did. Thus we observe that two or more groups, all of whom claim to be following one and the same book, prophet and God, are killing each other, because each belongs to one or another sect.

It should be noted that even though we've ended up today with two Irans — one that of the Middle East, and the other consisting of an international Iran, with a 7 million growing population, who've earned themselves a world of honors — fortunately, the absolute majority of both Irans pay no attention to the nonsense purported by the ISIS and the likes. They are first and foremost Iranians, and secondly, the followers of various religions or sects. And the essence of being an Iranian consists of the principle formulated in so few words: “Good Words, Good Thoughts, Good Deeds.” This adage promotes humanity; and together with practicing the command of the *Torah* pertaining to *ve-AhavtA le-re'achA kAmochA*, that is, “Love your neighbor as you'd love yourself”, it can change the world.

At any rate, it's evident that religion has not been able to nurture people uniformly, that is, as people who believe in one faith, who adhere to the right principles, and are in one word “humans”. Speaking in general, religion has strayed from its original path; and as we can see, each religion has branched into hundreds of sects and groups, who are always at war with one another. The said problem

also applies to Christians, and especially to the followers of its two major branches, namely, the Protestants and the Catholics. They too have been at war, not only in the earlier centuries and the era of the Crusades, which lasted for hundreds of years in Europe and elsewhere, but also as ever before, as late as the last century, e.g. in the form of the conflicts between the Northern and Southern Irelands. They too have been divided into many opposing groups who have been killing each other, not in the thousands but in the millions, and more or less, they continue to do so even as we speak. As such, religion has not been able to fulfill its fundamental duty, and there's no reason to think that it could prevent the wrong deeds of such wretched people as the followers of the ISIS. The only substitute that can raise people uniformly, at peace and with intelligent minds, it's "humanity".

Fortunately, this concept of "humanity" is inherent to every person, and it's known as the "conscience"; and the informed conscience of people is the very thing that can make them fulfill humanity in all their deeds. With a bit of research, we can see that who has humanity in them, they know that their individual identity is but the humane identity shared between them and all other people in the world. Such an interpretation can in itself nurture much more useful people.

It's only fitting to ask when and where such an idea can be realized. They say that "a single day for God is a thousand years for us." A man prayed to God and said, "Oh, the Almighty! I just have a tiny wish to ask of you! Please be so kind as to grant me by your own cup just a tiny bit of all that infinite abundance in the world!" God responded, "Sure, my good subject! You'll just have to wait for a couple of days!" Who knows, maybe it'll take our rather self-evident idea merely one God's day to be realized!

* * *

The painful event in Kerman also sheds light on certain aspects of October the 7th, 2023 catastrophe, when the savage and ruthless attack against Israel took place on its border with Gaza. As you recall, on that day, a bunch of beasts invaded Israel, murdered 1200 innocent people most brutally, and kidnapped about 250 people, whom they took as hostages into the Gaza Strip. The abominable acts of these monsters on that dark day was beyond imagination for most people around the world, so far as even some journalists and politicians, despite their professional experience, had become visibly sick after seeing the evidence of those atrocities. Among their many crimes, it should suffice to mention that the beasts had torn open the belly of a pregnant woman, and had murdered both the mother and the baby; they had burned some of their victims alive; and or they had severed their heads. In committing such indescribable crimes, they had not had mercy even upon the infants, the elderly and the handicapped. My reverence for the victims, and the sanctity of the written word, bar me from citing more of the heinous acts of those savages. As I write this essay, a large number of the hostages, including women, children and adults, remain in captivity; many of them have been killed or murdered; and despite liberating or exchanging some of them, little or none is known about the fate of the others.

In the calamity brought upon Israel, unlike that of Kerman, we're altogether faced with the matter of two peoples having two different religions, although some of the victims of this atrocity were Israeli Muslims. From this standpoint, here's a religious war, rooted in religious hostilities, which rise from the slander found in the religious books. By examining these two events, we come to an important conclusion: Religion has not been helpful, neither to those of the same religion, nor to those who think differently; and once more, we realize that the only effective way is but to promote humanity.

In this regard, and to confirm my assertions, I point out two other historical cases: First, the silence of the Vatican in the face of the Armenian genocide committed by Turkey, around 1915, during which 1.5 million Armenian Christians were murdered most ruthlessly; and second, the silence of the Vatican in the face of the savage genocide of 6 million Jews during WWII and the calamity of Holocaust. In the first case, the victims of the crime belonged to a branch of Christianity other than Catholicism; in the second case, the Jewish victims belonged to an entirely different faith. It's tragic that the Vatican, this powerful spiritual authority, in neither of the two cases intervened to save the lives of those people, and thus, it trampled its most fundamental moral and humane duty. As a Persian proverb goes, "They salt anything so it wouldn't rot; crying out loud when the salt itself is rotten!" Martin Niemöller, may he rest in peace, was a German priest, who ended his support for Nazism, became one of its most ardent critics, and spent many years in the Nazi prisons. He said, and I paraphrase, "First, they took away the Communists, and we remained silent, for we weren't Communists. Then they came for the so-called incurably sick and the handicapped, and we remained silent, because we were not sick. Next they took away the Jewish people, and we still remained silent, for we were not Jewish. Until they came for us, but no one had remained to defend us." (Paraphrase, based on several English versions made available on Wikipedia)

Some say that religion is necessary for humankind. I do agree. But by that we mean a religion that is combined with humanity, because the very aim of religion is to promote humanity. Certainly, humanity takes precedence over religion, for after all, there must be humans to have any religion! Where there's no humanity, there is nothing. And the most dangerous person on the earth is the bigoted religious believer, who has not known a shred of humanity.

* * *

We all saw what horrible crimes were committed by those barbaric monsters at the border of Gaza and Israel; and yet, many across the globe have remained silent, or have even been criticizing the Israeli government's response in its pursuit of the terrorists, and the absolute right of the country in defending itself. All the while, alongside the Israeli soldiers, the world has been surprised by the discovery of the enemy's hidden and terrifying military structures in the Gaza. It's incredible that these terrorists, instead of improving the lives the people of Gaza, instead of building roads and factories, universities and scientific institutions, they had spent so much money on digging more than 700 kilometers of underground tunnels some as deep as 50 meters, like some desert rats, through which they meant to attack Israel! How cruel and ignorant things can get! As a Jewish person, I also feel the pain of those people for the oppression they've suffered, and I say, "Damned be war, and twice as much the warmonger!" When it comes to war, this abhorrent heritage of the ages of ignorance and savagery, no side ever comes out the winner. For when it's a matter of murdering a human being, *winner* and *loser* shed all meaning: Humanity has lost. I'm reminded of the late Golda Meir, former Israeli Prime Minister, who said, and I paraphrase, "Over time, we may forgive our enemies even though they killed our children, but we'll never forgive them for making us kill their own children."

May I emphasize again that it were the enemies, who by their outright provocation and savage crimes, forced Israel into its defensive response.

The prejudice against, and the unfair treatment of Israel, and indeed of all Jews around the world, remind me of Vaclav Havel, the late playwright, thinker and former President of Czechoslovakia, who said, in effect, "We can measure a civilization by the way its people treat the minorities among them." I doubt if who

remained silent in the face of the incessant crimes of the terrorists, and who now protests against the rightful response of Israel, has been truly speaking from the standpoint of civilization. Otherwise, the world would not have kept silent before Bashar ol-Assad, the Syrian President, who killed 500,000 of his Muslim subjects, and made another 6 million into homeless refugees. I'd like to remind the reader that according to the Jewish religion, and as I believe, "To save one human life is to save the world." If you too believe indeed that human life is precious, then why didn't you protest against the killing and homelessness of the Syrian people, whereas you're shouting against the defensive response of Israel to frustrate the murderous criminals? Mr. Assad killed a large number of people, and destroyed the lives of countless others: so that he would remain. To his opposite was the late Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, the king of Iran, may he rest in peace, who despite having the fifth most powerful army of the world at his disposal, ignored his hold on power, as well as those of his family and his immediate circle, yet didn't open fire on his people. These two fully opposite historical cases truly deserve to be compared and studied at the most prominent academic institutions around the world.

* * *

All religions, religious sects and the factions thereof claim, "God is one", but they each consider this God to be only theirs! Interestingly, however, despite their many hostilities and conflicts, all religious groups do pursue a common goal: accumulating wealth, and recruiting as many members as possible! Behind a clerical cloak and a spiritual appearance, religious institutions and foundations worldwide enjoy exorbitant incomes and colossal financial power. In this regard, as the American papers reported in recent years, just through one of the pathways in use such institutions have been reaping as much as 82 billion dollars per year!

I should point out that, as I've said many times before, all religious books and their commands need to be revised, at least once every few years, systematically and fundamentally. Fortunately, the Jewish religion itself has granted such permission to the Jewish people, as we read in the *Torah* (Deuteronomy, 8 to 17) where it even guides the people how to carry out such revisions. And as it happened, more than 2,000 years ago, and during the first congress of the sages known as the *Sanhedrin*, which was chaired by Hillel, 323 of the 613 commands of Judaism were effectively removed, since they did not agree with the contemporary understanding, and had simply expired. Have not many other such writings expired, as well, in the 2000 years since? Alas, however, factionalism and a range of divisions have often hindered this task from being realized seriously and pervasively. Let's keep in mind that the widespread distribution and petrification of the religious books, and that applies to various religions, have been relatively new phenomena, as they often go back to the invention of the printing machine by Gutenberg in 1440 CE. At that point in history, the first books to be published were those simply at hand, and which have ever since continued to be published as "holy books"! Despite that basically, many such so-called holy books lack authenticity and are short of any evidence of their origins, and in spite of their sometimes jaw-dropping content, they have assumed an air of prestige and credibility by merely appearing in print, and thus have been viewed as "divine revelation" in some circles for centuries! We should all put aside bigoted prejudice and baseless traditions, evaluate and revise the content of these works according to the today's standards, and discard all that has expired.

There's no doubt that all religions, and not just one particular faith or sect, must revise such so-called religious texts. Also I should emphasize that to revise the old or ancient sources, and to correct or abandon the backward traditions, it wouldn't

mean a loss of religious identity, but to the contrary, it would lead to a strengthening of it. Indeed, the tumultuous history of Judaism, and that includes the authoring of the *Mishna* and *Talmud*, tells us that time after time, where Life had taken away their power, and when the outside pressures made Change inevitable for Jews, this religion and culture was the more purified for it, and consequently, certain positive aspects of the Jewish culture and morals were brought into sharp relief. We dare say that basically, one reason for the Jewish survival over the thousands of years, and for the modern Jewry to exist as it does with its progressive thoughts, it has been but the *galout* or the Diaspora in Exile, which could mean living under enemy rule with all its hardships. As the Iranian Jewish author, the late Nourollah Kharrazi, may he rest in peace, put it succinctly, “All kinds of food get softer as they’re cooked, except for the egg; and the Jewish person is like the egg, as he or she gets tougher under pressure.” A living evidence of this statement in our time is the current Israeli government, which over the past few months, and for the first time in 75 years, has finally achieved a united cabinet, because the people are in a difficult position, and the country has the more need for unity. In other words, the Jewish history proves the claim that Judaism *despite* and *because* of such pressures, has remained the stronger. Let’s not forget that following WWII and the crimes of the Holocaust, during which 6 million innocent Jews perished, people thought that Judaism would disappear; yet to the contrary, as we saw, not only it stayed, but also it regained its national and political independence after thousands of years, an achievement that had been set in motion few decades earlier in Basel, Switzerland, and during the First International Congress of Zionism, by the Hungarian Jewish journalist, Theodor Herzl.

* * *

The present discussion takes me back to many years ago in Iran. Near the Grand Bazaar of Tehran, there was a place called Pachenar, where we parked our cars, and wherefrom we took a shortcut on foot to our offices in the Amir Chamber of the Bazaar. A gentleman named Asghar Agha used to have a grocery shop in Pachenar. A knowledgeable fruit vendor, he brought in premium produce, and of course, kept the best of them in the backroom of his shop. He also knew his customers, and would take the good customers to the back to pick for themselves from those excellent fruits. We happened to be among his loyal customers.

One day, I saw a woman with five children of different ages, besides a pile of old beddings and clothing, who were sitting next to the grocery at the Pachenar passage. She wasn't unlike a bird who had gathered her chicks under her wings. I asked the grocer, "Asghar Agha, what's the story? Who's this lady?" He said, "The moment the cruel landlord found out the woman's husband had died, and she had no money for the rent, he evicted them." I felt really bad, and couldn't stop thinking about them afterwards. A couple of days later, as I passed by the same spot, I noticed the lady and the kids were missing. Once more, I asked the grocer, "Asghar Agha, what happened to that mother and her kids?" He said, "You must know Hadji Mohammad Taghi, the merchant who's your neighbor in the Amir Chamber." The answer was affirmative. "The Hadji saw the lady and the kids, called over the realtor in Pachenar, and told the guy, 'Find me an inexpensive house for this family; I'll pay for it.' Fortunately, the realtor had a house available. He bought the place, and the Hadji paid for it and had the deed transferred to the lady. So the widow and the kids moved into their new house."

As you can see, this incident had nothing to do with religion. Such noble behavior speaks of the decency of that gentleman, who by the command of humanity, bought the house for that family, and by doing so, saved indeed the lives

and the very existence of the lady and her five children. Note that Hadji Mohammad Taghi, the benevolent merchant who bought them a house, as well as the “Hadji Jabbar” or the cruel “Scrooge” of a landlord who had evicted them, they were both Muslims and prayed every day. Yet, one good man followed the whisper of humanity, whereas the miser slavishly followed the call of the material world. To sum up, in this case, religion offered no help; but instead, it was the humanity of that righteous man with his kind spirit that made him do the right thing.

* * *

In this follow up essay to my recent article entitled *Humanity*, I tried to present and examine a number of documented cases, in order to show the independent roles of morality and humanity versus the problem of religion, the last of which has strayed from its principal course, and at the end of the day, would not solve our main issue. I may hope to have succeeded at the least to open a new window into this important matter.

I’d like to conclude this essay with a few verses from the great Persian poet, Saadi:

The human body is precious, because of the human soul;
This stunning garb isn’t the sole mark of humanity.
If to be human were about the eyes and the mouth, the ears and the nose,
Then humanity would be no different than a painting on the wall. [...]
If this savagery dies in your nature,
You’ll get to live a lifetime by the human soul.

Humankind can arrive where he would see no other than God;
Lo and behold the exalted rank of humankind!
You saw the birds fly: now shed the shackles of lust,
Walk free and see how humanity takes flight. [...] (*)

(*) *An original English draft by Payman Akhlaghi for the present essay.*

Thank you.

Norman “Nourollah” Gabay,

January 2024, Los Angeles

Final Revision: May the 12th, 2024

For free copies of this and other writings by Norman “Nourollah” Gabay, please visit his website at www.BabaNouri.com. The website is home to an archive of the author’s articles, essays, notes, and books in Persian and English, including *An Invitation to Reason*, *A Dictionary of the Kashani Jewish Dialect*, and soon, *Be Up to Date* (in progress).