



The Elijah Institute

**Religions and Repentance –
Growth in Religious Traditions, Facing
a New Era**

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Tawbah and Istighfar

According to Islamic belief, repentance has a main role in the development of the human soul in its journey toward God. The Arabic word for repentance is *Tawbah*, literally meaning "turning toward". The act of repenting means turning ourselves toward God and asking Him to cover our shortcomings and to help us to overcome them. While the English word "repentance" expresses more an inner disposition of the soul, *Tawbah* necessarily implies both the intention to repent and the actions that are necessary in order to limit the consequences of our past transgressions. From this point of view, the Arabic word is quite similar to the Greek *metanoia*, alluding to an inner revolution which contains both the attitude of the penitent and the implied reparation.

In Islam, sins are classified as those committed against the rights of God, and those committed against the rights of human beings. When the divine rights are violated – e.g. by not raising compulsory prayers, by not performing a compulsory fast, by breaking a vow, it is necessary to fill the vacuum by the performance of some expiatory rite; when performing this rite is beyond one's possibility, one must try to do what is possible, being sure that – as the Quran says – "Allah is the Most Merciful of those who have mercy".

On the contrary, when one has violated the rights of

another human being, repairing the misbehavior has an absolute precedence, even over other acts of worship. If the wronged person seems not ready to forgive us or to accept compensation, we must go on striving to obtain his acceptance. Obtaining Allah's forgiveness is, in a certain sense, easy, since the all-encompassing mercy is a permanent attribute of the divine Essence, while human beings can in some cases be not to incline to indulgence.

Another linguistic difference between the Western notion of forgiveness and the Islamic concept of *Tawbah* is that the first is unilateral, while the second is reciprocal. Saying that "God repents toward a human being" has obviously no sense at all, while in Arabic one says that "if a human being makes *Tawbah* toward God, God makes *Tawbah* toward him." As soon as the creature turns toward God in repentance, God turns toward him and is ready to forgive him. According to a tradition contained in the collection of Imam an-Nawawi called "Al-arba'in", the Prophet Muhammad narrated that God says,

"As soon as My servant makes a step toward Me, I make two steps toward him; as soon as he comes to Me walking, I come to him running."

In this sense, in Islam it is said that a believer must make *Tawbah* not only after sinning, but also after performing good deeds. If we simply translate *Tawbah* with repentance (as we are compelled to do in most of cases), this inner sense simply gets lost. Turning toward God after performing a good deed means that we attribute to Him the same creation of good deeds which are acquired by us, and ask Him to forgive our limits in abiding by His will.

Moreover, *Tawbah* is immediately associated with *Istighfar*, the request of forgiveness. The traditional formula we have received from the Prophet Muhammad is "I ask forgiveness from Allah, the Magnificent, the One except Whom there is no God and turn toward Him". This invocation must immediately be recited after realizing having committed a sin, but can also be repeated with no direct reference to a certain action, as a daily supplication, since it is believed that it represents a protection against those sins we are not aware of. The Prophet Muhammad used to say, "Twice in each day, I ask God's forgiveness seventy times."

Interceding for Others

If it is not possible to make *Tawbah* for the sins of others, we have the opportunity to make *Istighfar* for them, that is to say, to ask Allah to forgive those sins of theirs they have not yet repented from. This request of ours can be a fruitful intercession, and a good means to prepare the path for their complete repentance. This request can also be associated with an invitation to reflect upon the attitude of God toward His creation, so that the sinner understands how much he will benefit from repentance. In the Holy Quran we have examples where the Prophets of old used rational arguments to lead human beings to *Istighfar*. About Noah we read:

"He said, 'My Lord, I have called my people night and day, but my calling them hath only made them flee from me all the more; and every time I called them that Thou mightest forgive them, they put their fingers into their ears, and drew close their garments, and persisted in their iniquities and were disdainfully proud. Then I called them to righteousness openly, then preached to them in public, and appealed to them in private and I said, "Seek forgiveness of your Lord; for He is the Great Forgiver; He will send down rain for you in abundance, And He will grant you increase of wealth and children, and will cause gardens to grow for you and will cause rivers to flow for you. What is the matter with you that you hope not for greatness and wisdom from Allah? And He hath created you in different forms and different conditions. See ye not how Allah has created seven heavens in perfect harmony, and hath placed the moon, therein a light, and made the sun a lamp? And Allah hath caused you to grow out of the earth as a good growth. Then He will cause you to return thereto, and He will bring you forth a new bringing forth. And Allah hath made the earth for you a wide expanse, that you may traverse the spacious ways thereof".'" (71, 5-20)

From the Quran we also learn that it is even possible to make *Istighfar* for our enemies, for those who oppose us and persecute us because we invite them to *Tawbah*. When our father Abraham invited his father to accept the monotheistic faith and to forsake idol worship, his father reacted in a very violent way, and even threatened to kill him. Abraham's immediate reaction was to pray for his father, so that he could be led to repentance; he did not refrain from doing so, until he understood that there was

no opportunity for his father to convert. We read:

"And mention in the Book the story of Abraham. He was a truthful man and a Prophet. Behold, he said to his father, 'Why dost thou worship that which heareth not and seeth not, and can avail thee aught? O my father, there has indeed come to me knowledge such as hath not come to thee; so follow me, I will guide thee to a straight path. O my father, worship not Satan; surely, Satan is a rebel against the Merciful. O my father, indeed I fear lest a punishment from the Merciful seize thee and thou become a friend of Satan.'

"He replied, 'Dost thou turn away from my gods, O Abraham? If thou desist not, I will surely stone thee. Now leave me alone for a long while.'

Abraham said, 'Peace be upon thee. I will ask forgiveness of my Lord for thee. He is indeed gracious to me'." (19, 41-47)

A further example is found in the story of Joseph and his brothers. We read:

"And when they came before Joseph again, they said, 'O noble chief, poverty has smitten us and our family, and we have brought a paltry sum of money, but nonetheless give us full measure, and be charitable to us. Surely, Allah does reward the charitable.'

"He said, 'Do you know what you did to Joseph and his brother out of ignorance?'

"They replied, 'Art thou Joseph?'

"He said, 'Yes, I am Joseph and this is my brother [Benjamin]. Allah has indeed been gracious to us. Verily, whoso fears Allah and is steadfast - Allah never suffers the reward of the good to be lost.'

"They replied, 'By Allah; surely Allah has preferred thee above us and we have indeed been sinners.'

He said, 'No blame shall lie on you this day; may Allah forgive you! And He the Most Merciful of those Who show mercy', " (12, 88-92)

May Allah help us to learn those words, and repeat them frequently about our brethern. Insha Allah, this is our vow for the New Era, a responsibility on our shoulders in front

of Him and toward His creatures. We want to thank each one of you for the opportunity of offering it in front of you all.

The Test of Faith

Being ready to admit the sinful nature of many of our deeds is not so easy at all. It represents a real test, since it means to admit that we are not able – by ourselves, with our fragile nature – to develop a positive answer toward God Who is calling us. Repentance always represents a test. The Quran says:

"Do men think that they will be left alone on saying, 'We believe', and that they will not be tested? We did test those before them, and Allah will certainly know those who are true from those who are false." (29, 2-3)

Let us reflect on this point. The One we claim to love tells us that without testing our faith He will certainly not accept our claim. Tests coming from Him are nothing but a manifestation of His love, although we are not always ready to accept them as such. Those who claimed to have faith, those who professed to love and adore Him will surely be tested by Him, and the effectiveness of their claim needs to be proven under hardship.

Obviously, God does not need to examine us, for He knows the secrets of our hearts, and nothing is hidden from Him. He tests us only to prove our faithfulness in the eyes of the other, who is both "the stranger" and "our neighborhood". He does so to show the world the truthfulness or falsity of those who claim to love him.

In another verse of the Holy Quran it is said:

"Did ye think that ye would enter Heaven without Allah testing those of you who fought hard and remained steadfast?" (3, 142)

And:

"Or do ye think that ye shall enter Heaven without such trials as came to those who passed away before you? They encountered suffering and adversity, and were so shaken in spirit that even the Messenger and those of faith who were with him cried: 'When will come the help of Allah?' Verily, the help of Allah is near!" (2, 214)

In some significant cases, the test of faith seems to be

contradictory in its nature. Hating what we know for sure is a sin, and what is openly recognized as wickedness is, as such, no test at all. The example of Abraham's test is highly enlightening. He is compelled to choose between love for God and love for his father, for his family, for his country, and this notwithstanding the fact that honoring one's father is among the significant aspects of faith. Even so, when the test becomes harder, we must show that we love God more than we love our father and our mother, more than we love those with whom we are intimate, more than our co-religionists, more than our religious identity. In such cases the trial becomes terrible.

Whom Do We Love Most?

The commands of two beloved ones are contradictory in nature. The orders of one are completely opposite to those of the other. If you obey one, you go against the wishes of the other. It is impossible to obey both at one and the same time. If you accede to the wishes of one beloved then the other is displeased. In such a case, the orders of the beloved you obeyed, the one whose wishes you preferred, will be those of the beloved who is dearer to you. Everyone undergoes this experience daily, although not in such a dramatic way. Someone tells you to do something, while someone else asks you to do exactly the opposite. You will only obey the one whom you love the most. You will not care at all for the displeasure of the one whom you do not love, or comparatively, love a little bit less.

Believers should daily put their hearts to this test. They should search their souls and then say honestly whether they really love God more than anything else in the world. The demands of wives, parents, brothers, sisters, relatives, acquaintances, friends and officers (including those we consider as our religious leaders) can in some extreme cases be contradictory to the commands of God. Likewise, the demands of our own souls too are contradictory. And these very same claims and desires of our souls are the most dangerous ones.

"The human soul is certainly prone to evil, unless my Lord do bestow His mercy to it." (12, 53)

Impulses of the Human Soul

Unless it is purified through Divine intimacy, the human soul is stimulated by three kinds of impulses:

- The first kind is the craving for apparent sins, those that are admitted as such by our intellect and constitute the less insidious risk.

- The second are the cravings of the soul for latent or hidden sins. These are even more dangerous than the first kind. The reason is that a person who commits visible or apparent sins is not conscious of being a wrongdoer, and this is the main obstacle in the process of repentance. Notwithstanding this, at least people condemn the sinner, and the fear for his honor or the fear of condemnation by others may prevent a person from committing sins, or it may at least curtail his activities to some extent. On the other, hand a person who indulges in hidden sins does not consider himself to be involved in deviation. Among such sins are love for wealth, lust for power under the garment of religion, arrogance, haughtiness, jealousy, hypocrisy, etc. A victim of these evils does not consider himself to be a sinner, and in some cases can even be convinced of his justice. Thus these evils are more dangerous, as these are the sins which hide themselves inside the heart. Many diseases of the body depend upon the need to cure a disease of the heart. Furthermore, the third reason why these sins are so dangerous is that it is very difficult to give them up. People suffering from such hidden ailments have the outward appearance of very pious men

- The third types of sins are those deceptions of the soul, which, because of a suggestion coming from Satan, are presented in the guise of worship, justice and religion. The Quran says:

"Verily, in the creation of the heavens and the earth and in the alternation of the night and the day, and in the ships that sail the sea with that which profits men, and in the water which Allah sends down from the sky and quickens therewith the earth after its death and scatters therein all kinds of beasts, and in the change of the winds and the clouds pressed into service between the heaven and the earth - there are indeed Signs for the people who use their understanding. And there are some among men who take for themselves objects of worship other than Allah as equal to Him, loving them as they should love Allah. But believers are stronger in their love for Allah."
(2, 164-165)

The test of obedience, as a renewal of the Abrahamic itinerary, asks us today for the sacrifice of what we love, even when this love completely agrees with natural order

and is directed toward those who preceded us and/or toward our descendants. In this case, God asks us to love Him more than we love our children, more than we love our ethics, more than we love our faith, more than we love our confessional preeminence and our literal dogmatism. Our intellect is instinctually stimulated to differentiate between what is included in our comprehension and what is remote from it, but even the remote ones, notwithstanding their being excluded by logic and law, are included in God's mercy before being actually created. By His grace, when the believer forgives those who were hard to him, justifies their shortcomings because of our common defective nature and makes *Istighfar* for them, he is honored with the servitude of the Merciful, and this is the reason why the Prophet Muhammad, blessings and peace be upon him, said, "The best names for calling a human being is 'Slave of Allah' ('Abdullah), or 'Slave of the Merciful' (Abdur-Rahman)."

The Dilemma of Justice

The human being is, now as before, in front of a repeated dilemma: on one hand are the inscrutable orders of God and on the other are father and mother, wife or husband, children, relatives, teachers, religious authorities. Whom are we going to listen to? This is our daily test, and the question we are called to answer.

If we consider ourselves as religious men, we must necessarily include justice among our qualities. Therefore we have to wish for our brethren what we desire for ourselves, and avoid empathizing those theoretical tools and those interpretations, which can be used to defend existing privileges and lasting unbalances.

The same idea of justice requires that we apply to each other the criteria by which we judge ourselves, and treat the monotheistic religions in an equitable manner. No community can demand for itself and for its space, privileges that it is not ready to recognize for others. If a certain religious leadership claims for itself a position of hegemony over the shared space, this is the sign that the path of *Tawbah* and *Istighfar* has found an obstacle barring its way. Every Community should look for an equilibrium between its different components and schools, and each man of religion should try his best to show his community some essential guidelines about the

fields where repentance becomes an urgent need.

Repentance for Today's Islamic Community

Concerning the Islamic Community, we think that contemporary Muslims are mainly called to exercise *Tawbah* and *Istighfar* in the following domains:

1. Inner dignity of the human being. The human being is always a goal in himself, and never a means. We are called to reflect upon all those cases where empathizing the role of collective interests has reduced the space for individual rights, and this is especially happening in those countries whose regimes claim to be "Islamic" and interested in the application of the "Islamic law". As soon as religion is used as an instrument of power, the totalitarian approach reduces the individual to an insignificant element of a collective asset. The Qur'an – on the contrary – teaches that every single life is sacred and deserves being duly protected:

"On account of this, We prescribed for the Children of Israel that whosoever killed a person - unless it be for killing a person or for creating sedition in the land - it shall be as if he killed all mankind; and whoso saved a life, it shall be as if he had saved the life of all mankind. And our Messengers came to them with clear Signs, yet even after that, many of them commit excesses in the land."
(5, 32)

2. The equality of man and woman. Islam introduced the principle that women are subjects in the field of social life, economy, work and education, deserving a special protection and enjoying rights which are even wider than those admitted for men. The diffusion of Islam was – from this point of view - a radical reform, since in the pre-Islamic Arab milieu women were understood as a private property of the head of the family. It is narrated by Imam al-Bukhari that the Prophet Muhammad said, "The best among you are those who treat their women in the best way." In "Futuh al-Makkiyyah", Shaykh Muhiddin Ibn Arabi answers those who criticise scholars for accepting a female teacher by say, "Do not be veiled by your misunderstanding, since the Prophet Muhammad said, "Women are equal to men."

By the passing of time, the prevalence of ethnic traditions regained its influence, and discrimination against women is in frequent cases justified "in the name of Islam". Experts of Islamic law of old used to receive the

interpretation of the prophetic sayings (ahadith) from women, and Ayshah ranked among the highest jurists in the first generations. On the contrary, nowadays, there are those who deny women their right to religious and secular education, and this is a good reason to exhort them to sincere *Tawbah*.

3. The protection of sacred space. Islamic law includes detailed rules about the status of holy places, and especially about the Sacred Mosques of Mecca, Medina and Jerusalem. While the haram area around the Sanctuary of Mecca is off-limits for non-Muslims, such a status was not extended by the Prophet Muhammad to Medina (where he received a Christian delegation from Najran within the Mosque) and by 'Omar to Jerusalem (where he granted Jews and Christians free access to their respective holy places).

Out of mundane considerations, these rules are not applied with all of their implications, and in some cases are openly ignored and opposed. Free access is not denied, but limitations are enforced, even in the field of worship. Jews who access the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif are compelled to hide the fact that they are praying, and prevented from making supplications whose words are audible. A similar discrimination is faced by millions of non-Saudi Muslims who perform the pilgrimage to Mecca or visit the Prophet's Mosque in Medina. They are not denied access, but are strongly forbidden from performing those acts of worship which are acceptable and praiseworthy according to the Sunni belief, but opposed by Wahhabi literalism. All this happens notwithstanding the fact that Wahhabis are a sect that was only founded three hundred years ago, and the total number of Wahhabis, within the Islamic Community, does not exceed ten percent.

Visits to the grave of the Prophet are especially restricted. While Sunnis believe that Muhammad is alive in his grave, and visiting him in that condition is like visiting him while alive, Wahhabis – under the influence of materialism – deny that communication between dead and living human beings is possible, and accuse those who speak and make requests to the Prophet Muhammad of idolatry. Saudi policemen violently beat those Sunni pilgrims who are unaware of this sectarian approach. The call for the internationalization of Mecca and Medina, the liberation of the Holy Cities, is a goal to declare that these two Cities belong to the Muslim Community as a whole, and not to the Wahhabi sect

only. Those Muslims who are reluctant to join the campaign for the internationalization must be exhorted to make *Tawbah*, and to remember that honoring the holy places is an essential aspect of faith. The Quran says:

"The truth is that whoso honours the sacred monuments of Allah - that, indeed, proceeds from the righteousness of hearts." (22, 32)

4. The recourse to peaceful means to solve conflicts and controversies. The Quran orders Muslims to prevent inter-Islamic conflicts, to make peace among the conflicting parties or countries, and to proclaim an embargo against the partner who refuses peaceful mediation:

"If two parties of believers fight each other, make peace between them; then if after that, one of them transgresses against the other, fight the party that transgresses until it returns to the command of Allah. Then if it returns, make peace between them with equity, and act justly. Verily, Allah loves the just. Surely, all believers are brothers. So make peace between your brothers, and fear Allah that mercy may be shown to you." (49, 9-10)

Even about the hostility of an open enemy, the Quran says,

"And if they incline towards peace, incline thou also towards it, and put thy trust in Allah. Surely, it is He Who is All-Hearing, All-Knowing. (8, 61)

Although the order contained in this verse is unambiguous and self-evident, there are people who disguise themselves under the garment of religion and dare to claim that Islam prevents pacification between Muslims and their former enemies. *Tawbah* must be offered for those people, for the unlearned Muslims who are mesmerized by this absurd claim, and even more for those Muslim scholars whose duty should be to refute them, but who abstain from doing so out of fear or out of utilitarian considerations.

5. Abuse of wealth to spread fundamentalism. This is – in our humble opinion – the most painful disease which affects the contemporary Muslim world. A limited part of this world has huge resources at its disposal, while a vast part of it suffers from lack of means of survival, inadequate medical facilities, and insufficient educational

structures.

Islam asks the rich to spend his wealth to help the poor, but rich countries of the Muslim world are mostly interested in promoting the deculturalization of poor countries, so that backwardness and underdevelopment become a permanent reality. Charities are openly used as a means to propagate one school, so that it can replace the more ancient ones. Countries where the Sunni belief prevails are overloaded with books where the Wahhabi belief is propagated as the only true one, and Wahhabi schools and seminaries are opened in countries where traditional centers of learning are facing financial hardship.

Preaching fundamentalism and denying the validity of Sufism are two inseparable aspects of this project to change the face of the Islamic world. To become a useful tool in the hands of rich countries, whose main interest is increasing the disparity in the distribution of wealth, Islam must be deprived of its inner, mystical dimension, so that it can be reshaped as a contemporary totalitarian ideology.

By doing so, propagandists of fundamentalism try to appropriate religion as a mean to reach power, and the life of the hereafter is made completely subservient to mundane interests. This is the serious risk that Islam is facing in this era, and represents a real tribulation for Muslims. Overcoming this situation of stalemate is not possible, except by God's mercy, and by means of a radical renewal, involving both the individual consciousnesses and the Islamic milieu as a whole. We ask God, the Most High, to see soon the day when Muslims will find in their tradition and in the inner dimension of their faith the medicine to cure the ailment of fundamentalism, and other diseases that are necessarily connected to it.