

FROM FUNDAMENTALISM TO HUMANISM

MILESTONES OF MY PERSONAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL JOURNEY

By [Dr. Khalid Sohail](#)

Dear Ladies and Gentlemen, I would like to thank Humanist Association of Canada specially Kathy Meidell for arranging such a wonderful seminar. I feel honored to be invited to share my story, my dilemmas and dreams and the milestones of my personal and philosophical journey from fundamentalism to humanism. I hope it would give you people some insight into the struggles of all those men and women who grow up and live in traditional, conservative and religious Muslim families, communities and cultures. After my book *From Islam to Secular Humanism* was published I was invited by many Muslims to have dinner and a heart to heart talk with them. They shared with me that in their hearts they were atheists, agnostics, humanists or free thinkers but they were afraid to share their truth publicly as they were nervous of the negative reactions of their religious families and communities. They were afraid of the prejudice, punishment and persecution. During those meetings I realized that there were many closet atheists in the Muslim community. I was struck by the reality how religion can suppress and silence people and even living in a free and secular country like Canada they had to hide their true self. How sad!

During my discussions I encouraged them to become members of the growing community of free thinkers. Some of them were surprised that I was so open about my secular views and humanistic lifestyle. Many of them identified with me and one of them told his wife, "Sweetheart, we have been married for 11 years and we have 4 children. You always ask me how I became an atheist. I am not a writer. Please read Dr Sohail's book. His story is not different than mine". I was glad that my story resonated with many open minded and non-traditional Muslims who wanted to leave God and Religion, become free thinkers and adopt a humanistic lifestyle. Some of them said that before reading my book they did not know that they were humanists. So my story will give you an idea of the story of many others who are still not ready to share their stories publicly.

I am quite aware that it is not easy to share the story of dilemmas and dreams of 40years in 40 minutes but I will share some of the highlights and discuss some of the milestones of my existential journey. At the end I would be more than willing to answer your questions or respond to your emails to elaborate on the issues you would be interested in.

When I reflect on my past struggles I can easily divide my journey in four stages.

First stage...Following a Religious Tradition

Second Stage...Following a Spiritual Tradition

Third Sage...Living in a Spiritual No- Man's land

Fourth Stage...Following Secular Tradition and embracing Humanism

Let me share the highlights of each stage.

1. KILLING IN THE NAME OF GOD

There was a time

...I believed in holy war

...I believed all non-Muslims were my enemies

...I was willing to give my life for a holy cause

and

...I was willing to kill in the name of God..

Now when I think about those years, a cold chill runs down my spine and I feel ashamed and embarrassed.

How could I think like that?

How could anybody think like that?

How can anybody believe in a merciful God and then be as cruel as to take a human life?

How can anybody kill a human being and then consider his cause noble and holy? (Ref 1)

Now when I ask myself, "How did I become a holy warrior when I was a teenager?" I think of a number of factors in my personal, social, political and religious lives that might have contributed in developing such a violent psyche.

2. BIRTH OF PAKISTAN...OUTPOURING OF RELIGIOUS AND POLITICAL VIOLENCE BETWEEN MUSLIMS AND HINDUS

My parents used to live in India that had become a British Colony. The resistance against British Rule that had started in 1857 had reached its climax in 1940s. My parents and their families lived in Amratsar that had seen the tragedy of Jalianwala Bagh in which a British Army General had opened fire and killed many innocent unarmed civilians. The wave of resistance, independence and freedom became stronger with the passage of time. On one hand the British used the old colonial tactics of divide and rule, but on the other hand Mohandas Gandhi, the leader of Indian Congress Party, and Mohammad Ali Jinnah, the leader of Muslim League could not resolve their conflicts peacefully and there were violent confrontations between Muslims and Hindus, killing thousands of innocent civilians. It was the religious and political violence at its worst. The peaceful dream of freedom was turning into a violent nightmare. One glimpse of that violent confrontation is presented by Larry Collins and Dominic Lapierre in their book *Freedom at Midnight*, vividly describing what happened on August 16, 1946,

“At dawn Moslem mobs howling in a quasi-religious fervor came bursting from their slums, waving clubs, iron bars, shovels, any instrument capable of smashing in a human skull. They came in answer to a call issued by the Muslim League, proclaiming August 16 ‘Direct Action Day’ to prove to Britain and the

Congress Party that India's Moslems were prepared 'to get Pakistan for themselves' by 'Direct Action' if necessary.'

' They savagely beat to a pulp any Hindus in their path and left the bodies in the city's open gutters. The terrified police simply disappeared. Soon tall pillars of black smoke stretched up from a score of spots in the city, Hindu bazaars in a full blaze.'

'Later, the Hindu mobs came storming out of their neighborhoods, looking for defenseless Moslems to slaughter. Never, in all the violent history had Calcutta known twenty-four hours as savage, as packed with human viciousness. Like water-logged logs, scores of bloated cadavers bobbed down the Hooghly River toward the sea. Other corpses, savagely mutilated, littered the city streets.'
(Ref 2)

The conflicts between Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs escalated and finally in August 1947 Pakistan came into existence and thousands of Muslim families left their homes in India and went to Pakistan to save their lives. My parents and their families were part of those refugees.

My parents had an arranged marriage in 1950 and I was born two years later in 1952. In 1954, when my dad passed his Masters Examination in Mathematics, he was offered a job at Government College in Kohat, Pakistan. At

the age of two I moved with my parents from Lahore to Kohat, not only to a different city, but also a different province and culture. People all around us spoke Pushto while my parents did not understand a word of it. I can imagine the difficulties they must have had to adjust to a traditional tribal culture, especially when my mother rarely, if ever, left our home.

3. FATHER'S BREAKDOWN

The difficulties, struggles and challenges became so stressful that my father had a nervous breakdown and was admitted to hospital when I was about ten years old.

I remember the day when, after frantically pacing back and forth in his room throughout the night, he finally lost control. My mother called one of his friends who took him to the hospital. He was so out of control that required restraint. His hands and feet were tied to the bed. While the doctors and the nurses were trying to control him, I remember sitting on a windowsill in the next room praying to God for help. After a few days, his struggles lessened to the point that he was sent to Lahore to be with my mother's family who looked after him day and night for months. They had planned the nursing care in four-hour shifts so as not to leave him alone, because he surely would have done himself serious injury or fled, never to be found. The unfortunate thing was that the family would not let me see him, as they were apprehensive he might hurt me. Yet, my love for my father was more powerful than their wish to keep me away. I used to sneak into his room quietly. He used to hug and kiss me and talked to me so very

affectionately with tears in his eyes. How could I know fear from this kind man?

When he finally recovered a few months later, he was a changed man. He had gone through a mystical transformation. Everybody thought he had experienced a nervous breakdown while he believed he had a spiritual breakthrough. A non-religious person had become a deeply religious man.

Looking back now I sometimes wonder whether my father's illness played a significant unconscious role in my choosing the profession of psychiatry, developing compassion for people with emotional problems and a special interest in understanding the mysteries of human mind.

After the mysterious transformation of my dad I remember both my parents

- ...reciting Quran daily
- ...praying regularly
- ...observing fasts every year
- ...paying zakaat (charity)

and praying to go to Mecca to perform Haj, the pilgrimage. Both my parents tried their best to provide a religious atmosphere for my upbringing. My mother started teaching me Quran when I was only four and encouraged me to fast and pray when I reached the age of seven.. By the time I was eleven I had finished all the thirty chapters of Quran in Arabic. They succeeded in making me a dedicated and devoted Muslim like themselves.

4. WAR WITH INDIA

In 1965 Pakistan had a war with India that lasted for seventeen days. Blackouts became a regular feature every night. I saw bombs dropped that murdered and mutilated innocent people in villages.. People became very religious and fanatic and developed a burning hatred for Hindus that has not abated even today. I was so affected by the war myself that at the age of thirteen I used to fantasize about joining the army and becoming part of the Islamic Armed Forces. I was taught that Hindus were our enemies and it was sacred to kill them as we were fighting a jihad, a holy war. We were also told by religious leaders that anyone who is killed in the holy war is *shaheed*, a martyr, and goes directly to heaven.

Looking back now I remember the days when I believed in a Personal God, Prophets and Scriptures and never questioned miracles and angels. I had blind faith in all of them. For a while I even joined a religious group called *Tableeghi Jamaat* that, like Jehovah Witness People in Canada, went from door to door preaching the teachings of Islam and inviting people to mosque for prayers and religious sermons. Many times I arose at three a.m. in the darkness of early morning to offer special prayers and pray to God to convert the entire world to Islam.

Now that I think of those years in my life I find it hard to believe that I was not only a dedicated and devoted Muslim, I was also militant and was a religious fundamentalist. I feel embarrassed thinking about those years when I had blind

faith and was brainwashed by social conditioning but that is a reality and I have to humbly accept that. Reflecting on those days helps me communicate and have a dialogue with all those men and women who are still religious fundamentalists and believe in holy wars. They not only try to convert others but are also willing to die and kill in the name of God and Religion.

5. QUESTIONING BLIND FAITH AND STUDYING SCIENCE...EXPERIENCING AN INTELLECTUAL NIGHTMARE

When I started studying science it introduced me to rational and logical thinking that questioned the blind faith of religion. The more I developed critical and analytical thinking the more I experienced a conflict between teachings of religion based on divine revelations and logical thinking of science. That ongoing painful conflict led to sleepless nights and I went through a turbulent phase in my adolescence that I identified as an 'extended intellectual nightmare'.

One of the tragedies was that my teachers of science had little interest or in depth knowledge of religion and scriptures, and the religious leaders I knew had no sound knowledge or understanding of the fundamentals of science. Science and Religion were two banks of the river in the cultural flow I grew up in, existing opposite to each other but never coming together. I was desperate to find a bridge between religion and science and resolve my intellectual and emotional conflicts. When I was disappointed in my parents, teachers and religious leaders as they could not answer my questions, I approached the

libraries and became an avid reader myself. I realized that I had to find my own answers to my special questions.

The more I studied science the more I felt comfortable with the disciplines of logical, rational, analytical and critical thinking. I learnt that the universe ran according to the laws of nature and the more we understood those laws the more we could solve the mysteries of nature. It was such an exciting and wonderful experience. I realized that those laws were objective and universal and I do not have to rely on the will of a Personal God to understand the natural phenomena. I remember the day when hundreds of people gathered in a big mosque of Eidgah and I asked an old man why they were praying. He said they were praying for rain. I wondered how prayers could bring the rain. When it did not rain for weeks I went back to him and asked him why it did not rain. He said the people who prayed were not good Muslims and God was angry with them. His comments made me aware of an angry and punitive God that produced feelings of guilt and fear in my heart.

6. STUDYING MEDICINE

When I went to medical school I studied science related to human illnesses and their treatments. I realized that by studying medicine I could help the sick people and relieve their suffering. It was a great feeling to know that science offered a healing promise to humanity.

While studying medicine I was also fascinated with embryology. That was the first time I was introduced to Darwin's Theory of Evolution and I could understand that by studying human embryos we could understand how the journey of millions of years of evolution is passed in a few months in the mother's womb. I was amazed to see how human embryo in the first few weeks was similar to the embryos of other animals. Darwin's theory was the beginning of understanding life on planet earth in a scientific way. I was so excited learning all those wonderful things in the medical school.

7. STUDYING LITERATURE

Alongside studying science and medicine I also had a keen interest in literature. I studied poetry and fiction and plays and started writing poems and stories and essays that were published in my college magazines. I was pleased to see my creative writings being liked and appreciated. Of all the Urdu writers I studied the one that impressed me the most was Saadat Hasan Minto. He had written some wonderful short stories about the tragedies of 1947 killings. In one of his stories he wrote, ' Why do you say that one hundred Muslims went to heaven and one hundred Hindus went to hell. Why do you not say that we lost two hundred precious human lives?' Minto helped me question the religious dogma and tradition and accept that we are all human beings first and Muslims and Hindus later. Looking back now I realize that he was the first humanist writer I read although I was not aware of the philosophy of humanism at that time.

8. STUDYING QURAN SERIOUSLY

After developing a serious interest in literature I thought I should study Quran seriously. Since I did not understand Arabic, like millions of non-Arab Muslims, I brought a number of Urdu and English translations and studied Quran from the first to the last verse, from the first to the thirtieth chapter and read all the interpretations. The more I studied Quran the more I realized that some scholars offered a literal interpretation, while others offered a metaphorical interpretation. When I studied the books of Maulana Abul Ala Maududi, Ghulam Ahmed Pervaiz, Mohammad Iqbal and Abul Kalam Azad and many others, I realized that they had not only different but also contradictory interpretations.

...some scholars translated Quranic term *farishtay* as angels while others as laws of nature.

...some considered heaven and hell as places while others said they were 'states not places'.

...some believed in theory of evolution and translated Quranic expression *nafs-un-wahida* as a unicellular organism amoeba while others translated it as Adam and thought theory of evolution was absurd.

...some believed in four marriages while others believed it was only allowed in special circumstances like war

...some believed that husbands could beat their wives if they disobeyed while others thought only the state could punish the citizens.

...some believed in a theocratic state and Political Islam while others believed in

Spiritual Islam and thought that religion was a private matter.

The more translations and interpretations I read the more I realized that in 1400 years every Muslim sect had created their own interpretation and there was no way for any human being today to have the correct interpretation of Quran until they had a direct 1-800 line to God.

Gradually I realized that Quran, like the Old and the New Testament and other holy scriptures of the world, was part of folklore and wisdom literature and could be read to have insights in the psyche of Middle Eastern culture. I realized it was dangerous to use the scriptures written hundreds of years ago as a foundation to write constitutions and create theocratic states.

The more I studied Quran, the more I felt sad to realize that different sects had used different Quranic verses to support their political and religious agenda and declared holy wars on other religious sects.

I remember the days when Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto was contesting election in Pakistan. He had won with overwhelming majority in the provinces of Punjab and Sindh but he lost to Maulana Mufti Mehmood, a religious cleric in Peshawar, because his followers, *the taliban*, had gone from door to door with a copy of Holy Quran asking people whether they would vote for Bhutto or the Holy Quran, which meant Maulana Mufti Mehmood. I lived with *the taliban* far before the world

knew about them. After coming into power in 1970s they had banned alcohol and music in the province and restaurants were closed in the month of Ramadan.

I was shocked to see how Sunnis and Shiites, Ahmedis and Wahabis were treated by other sects. I was utterly disillusioned when my Ahmedi friends in medical school were the victims of religious prejudice and persecution. People had thrown garbage on their doorsteps. The state of Pakistan, rather than protecting them as respectable citizens, declared them non-Muslims and robbed them of their human rights by declaring them a minority. That was the time I realized that Pakistan had turned into an Islamic Republic of Pakistan. Those were the days I became acutely aware how religion can harm people when it marries politics and creates a theocratic state. That was the first time in my life I realized that if I stayed in Pakistan I would either land up in prison or a mental asylum.

9. STUDYING PHILOSOPHY AND PSYCHOLOGY

After reading a number of Eastern writers and philosophers, I found books of Western philosophers in the library. I was particularly impressed by Bertrand Russell and Sigmund Freud. Russell was of the opinion that all religions were dangerous for human civilization. He was open and honest in expressing his dissenting views,

"I think all the great religions of the world...Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity,

Islam and Communism---are both untrue and harmful. It is evident as a matter of logic that, since they disagree, not more than one can be true.” Ref 3 p v

“In the so-called ages of faith, when men really did believe the Christian religion in all its completeness, there was the Inquisition, with the tortures, there were millions of unfortunate women burned as witches, and there was every kind of cruelty practiced upon all sorts of people in the name of religion...I say quite deliberately that the Christian religion, as organized in its churches, has been and still is the principal enemy of moral progress in the world.” Ref 3 p 21

While Russell focused on the social and political aspects of religion Freud focused on the psychological aspect. He brought to our attention that religious beliefs had such a hold in people's cultural psyche that if people criticized or challenged those beliefs with logical and rational thinking they would be punished, penalized and persecuted. He expressed his views in these words,

“When we ask on what their claim to be believed is founded, we are met with three answers, which harmonize remarkably badly with one another. Firstly, these teachings deserve to be believed because they are already believed by our primal ancestors, secondly, we possess proofs which have been handed down to us from those primeval times, and thirdly, it is forbidden to raise the question of their authentication at all. In former days anything so presumptuous was visited with the severest penalties...’ Ref 4 p 26

Freud was optimistic that as science enlarged its territories, religion would have no choice but to withdraw. He was hopeful that in the long run logical thought would triumph over blind faith. He believed religion was a phenomenon of the past while the future belonged to science, psychology and philosophy.

After studying the European writers I read South American and African writers and was impressed by their analysis how different political, economic and

religious ideologies have negatively affected their culture. Wole Soyinka, a Nobel Prize winner, wrote,

'Taken together, therefore, the history of African people provides us with two principal enemies of their authentic traditions and their will to cultural identity. One is European Imperialism, the other Arab-Islamic penetration and domination of significant areas of the continent. Ref 5 p 124

'...Freedom remains an antithesis of power, that historically proven corollary of enslavement. Obviously power can only be made manifest with the act of enslavement of some other. What then of the Third World, captive and client of the two ideological estates...socialism and capitalism...even as it has been, and still holds itself in thrall to two other alien contending religions, Christianity and Islam? Both these religions in their turn operate globally in mind-boggling, fluctuating alliances with the two main ideological scaffoldings, left and right, yet constantly strike out in their own specific authoritarianisms, often of the most destructive, anti-humanist nature" Ref 5...p 210

10. SAYING GOODBYE TO RELIGION

The more I reflected on the psychological, social and political effects of religion the more I felt ready to say goodbye to religion. I realized that the institution of religion was used by my religious and political leaders to exploit and manipulate innocent and vulnerable people.

11. FOLLOWING SPIRITUAL TRADITION

Even after saying goodbye to religion, there was a time I believed in God and the spiritual tradition. I believed that each human being could make a personal connection with God and strive for spiritual enlightenment. In that phase I was quite impressed by mystic poets who were critical of the hypocrisy of religious clerics and the social control of religious institutions but still considered God as a source of spiritual inspiration.

Whether it was Bulley Shah, a sufi, Kabir Das, a sant or William Blake, a saint, they were all mystic poets who had created wisdom literature and I was quite impressed by them. While studying mystic poetry I became aware that mystic poets accept the ultimate challenge of describing the indescribable, giving form to the formless. They ask themselves:

*How do we talk about a world
Where sounds turn mute?
How do we write about a world
Where words lose all their meanings?
How do we discuss a world
That transcends every logic?
How do we describe a world
That has no boundaries?
How do we conceptualize a world
That defies any form?
How do we understand a world
That is beyond words and sounds
and colors and space and time and logic and....?*

And answer it in the words of Rabindranath Tagore,

"I dive down into the depths of the ocean of forms, hoping to gain the perfect pearl of the formless."

J Krishnamurti said, "Truth is a pathless land"

I realized that God of the clerics was like a punitive father, while God of mystics was like a loving mother who was kind and caring and compassionate and forgiving. In mystic tradition God becomes the beloved and can be seen by following the spiritual path. Kabir Das shares how that path can be followed and the face of the beloved God can be seen.

I shall make

My body into

A clay-lamp

My soul, its wick

And my blood, oil

Ah, the light

Of this lamp

Will reveal

The face

Of my beloved

To me

(Ref 6)

12. GOD IS A METAPHOR

It gradually dawned on me that God was a metaphor and each person and culture had made its unique interpretation. Concept of God over the centuries had become part of our cultural psyche and mythology.

In some cultures we have a male God, in others we have female Goddesses.

In some cultures God is fatherly and punitive, in others, God is motherly and nurturing.

In some cultures God is abstract, in others God appears as man-made statues and idols.

In some cultures God is perceived as a Creator and is believed to exist

outside the universe. In others people say *All that Exists is God*.

In some cultures people believe God lives within all of us, and we do not need to believe in Him to know and experience Him.

In some cultures people believe we are all Gods in the making.

After studying different theologies and mythologies, I came to believe that rather than saying Man was created in God's image, it might be wiser to say that God was created in Man's image and that the qualities assigned to God or Allah or Bhagwan or Great Mystery are reflections of the human psyche of that era and culture. There are no two human beings or cultures in the whole wide world that have a similar concept or experience of the reality. For those who project their fears and insecurities, God becomes a psychologist's Rorschach Test, and for those who project their fantasies, dreams and ideals, God becomes a Santa Claus.

There is a time human beings as children believe in Santa Claus, but then they grow up and learn to buy their own toys while they fulfill their own dreams and follow their own ideals.

When I studied human history I found out that the concept and belief in God has also faced many challenges over the centuries. The biggest threat to blind faith in God was the tradition of rational thinking developed by Greek philosophers, and the most fatal war that God had to face was with science and

philosophy. That holy war had different outcomes in different communities, countries and cultures. Octavio Paz, a Mexican Nobel laureate compared God's war in the Christian and Muslim worlds. He believed that in the Christian world science and philosophy won and God lost while in the Muslim world God won and science and philosophy lost. He wrote, *"God, our God, was a victim of philosophical infection, the Logos was the virus, the cause of death...we Christians have used pagan philosophy to kill our God. Philosophy was the weapon, but the hand that wielded it was our hand. We are obliged to go back to Nietzsche's idea: within the perspective of the death of God, atheism can only be experienced as a personal act—even though this thought is unbearable and intolerable. Only Christians can really kill God....Islam has experienced difficulties similar to those Christianity has undergone. Finding it impossible to discover any rational or philosophical ground for belief in a single God, Abu Hamid Ghazali writes his Incoherence of Philosophy; a century later, Averroes answers with his Incoherence of Incoherence. For Moslems, too, the battle between God and philosophy was a fight to the death. In this instance God won, and a Muslim Nietzsche might have written: "Philosophy is dead; we all killed it together. You killed it and I killed it."* (Ref 7 p114)

Of all the Eastern and Western philosophers that dealt with the belief in God and its impact on humanity, I would like to quote two that impressed me the most, J. Krishnamurti from the East and from the West, Karen Armstrong. Armstrong in her book *History of God* discusses the crisis of faith. She highlights

that the belief in a traditional and Personal God faced a serious dilemma in the twentieth century, especially after the tragedy of the Holocaust. Many traditional believers had to review their philosophy and ideology. She wrote, ‘ *One day the Gestapo hanged a child. Even the SS were disturbed by the prospect of hanging a young boy in front of thousands of spectators. The child who, Elie Weisel recalled, had the face of a ‘sad-eyed angel’ was silent, lividly pale and almost calm as he ascended the gallows. Behind Weisel, one of the other prisoners was forced to look him in the face. The same man asked again, “Where is God now?” And Weisel heard a voice within him make this answer: Where is He? Here He is...He is hanging here on the gallows...*

‘...Many Jews can no longer subscribe to the biblical idea of God who manifests himself in history, who, they say with Weisel, died in Auschwitz. The idea of a personal God, like one of us writ large, is fraught with difficulty. If this God is omnipotent, he could have prevented the Holocaust. If he was unable to stop it, he is impotent and useless, if he could have stopped it and chose not to, he is a monster. Jews are not the only people who believe that the Holocaust put an end to conventional theology.’ (Ref 8)

On the other hand Krishnamurti highlights that belief does not stop people from committing all kinds of violence. When he was asked, “Belief in God has been a powerful incentive to better living. Why do you deny God? Why do you not try to revive man’s faith in the idea of God?” he responded, “*Let us look at the problem*

widely and intelligently...I know you believe and I know it has very little meaning in your life. There are many people who believe, millions believe in God and take consolation. First of all, why do you believe? You believe because it gives you satisfaction, consolation, hope, and you say it gives you significance in life. Actually your belief has very little significance, because you believe and exploit, you believe and kill, you believe in a universal God and murder each other. The rich man also believes in God; he exploits ruthlessly, accumulates money, and then builds a temple and becomes a philanthropist.

The men who dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima said God was with them, those who flew from England to destroy Germany said that God was their co-pilot. The dictators, the prime ministers, the generals, the presidents, all talk to God, they have immense faith in God. Are they doing service, making a better life for man? The people who say they believe in God have destroyed half of the world and the world is in complete misery.” (Ref 9)

Even in the contemporary world crisis both leaders, Osama bin Laden in the East and George Bush in the West, the biggest threats to world peace, both not only believe in God but also insist that God is on their side.

13. DIALOGUE WITH MY ATHEIST UNCLE ARIF ABDUL MATEEN

The more I contemplated about my relationship with God, the more I was getting ready to say goodbye to Him. So when my atheist poet uncle Arif Abdul

Mateen came for a visit to our home I told him that I wanted to have a heart to heart talk with him. He took me out to a hotel and while sipping green tea and eating snacks I shared with him that I was losing faith in religion and God. He listened to my story patiently and then said, "My dear nephew, in every community and culture there are two groups of people. The first group follows the highway of tradition. They are in majority. The second group follows the trail of their hearts. They are in minority. They are the poets and philosophers and reformers. They lead the caravan of humanity. Many of them are humanists and atheists. In your family on your father's side there are many non-conformists and non-traditional people. My uncle, your grandfather, had become an atheist when he was in his 60s, I lost faith in God when I was in my 40s and you are becoming a free thinker in your 20s. That is wonderful. Feel free to leave the highway of tradition and follow the trail of your heart."

14. SAYING GOOD BYE TO GOD

Alongside the mythological and philosophical aspects, there was a psychological dimension to my relationship with God. I used to believe he was omnipresent. Whether it was at work or at home, whether in the bedroom or in the washroom He was always watching me as if He had a camera. That made me uncomfortable as I did not like being watched. I felt he was intruding in my privacy. It made me feel like a child and He was the parent. Finally I felt that for me to be an adult I have to say goodbye to God that looked after me as a parent in my childhood and adolescence.

I vividly remember the night when I had a long discussion with God. It was not a dialogue; it was rather a monologue. I talked and He listened like a psychoanalyst. I was lying on my bed like patient of a psychoanalyst who practices free association while lying on a couch .I realized that all my life I talked to God and He never answered. After a long monologue and saying goodbye to God, I fell asleep and He left like an old Native Indian grandfather who leaves in the middle of the night when it is time to go and his family never sees him again. After that night I never again had a monologue with God or prayed to Him. He parted gracefully and respectfully. From a psychological point of view, now that I look back to that stage of my life as a psychotherapist and focus on my journey of personal growth and emotional maturity, I think that as the sun of my self-confidence started to shine in my heart, blind faith in God started to disappear like the morning fog. That was the time I started seeing with my own eyes, listening with my own ears, feeling with my own heart, thinking with my own mind and trusting my own encounters with life. It was a wonderful experience.

15. LIVING IN A SPIRITUAL NO-MAN'S LAND

After saying goodbye to religion and God I lived in a spiritual no-man's land for years. I knew what I did not believe in, but I did not know what I believed in.

I had a painful realization that after becoming an atheist life was not as easy as I had expected. Although I was successful in overcoming intellectual conditioning and had crossed many borders and unlearned many traditions but I was still controlled by emotional conditioning. I realized that religious traditions

had induced feelings of fear and guilt in my heart. Such a religious guilt was associated with the concept of sin. Gradually I overcame my feelings of fear and guilt about many aspects of life and started associating sex with love and affection rather than sin and guilt. I was amazed and amused how deep cultural roots were in my personality and how difficult it was to overcome religious attitudes and enjoy my life without feeling guilty.

16. COMING TO CANADA

After graduating from Khyber Medical College in Pakistan I went to Iran for a couple of years and then came to Newfoundland in 1977. I studied at Memorial University in Newfoundland and after receiving my Fellowship in Psychiatry, worked in Newbrunswick and then moved to Ontario in 1984. I worked in Whitby Psychiatric Hospital for a decade and then started my Creative Psychotherapy Clinic. In 1995. Gradually I built a bridge between my personal philosophy and my professional practice of psychotherapy.

17. EMBRACING HUMANISM

As time passed I became more confident in my philosophy and personality and I realized that I was ready to embrace the secular tradition of humanism but for me that tradition was more than a set of ideas, it had many dimensions. Over the years I have discovered 7 colors of my humanistic rainbow

A. FIRST COLOUR... HUMANIST PHILOSOPHY

Over the years I realized that to become a humanist I had to leave blind faith behind and study science and philosophy so that I could develop logical and rational thinking and use critical thinking to question all the myths and supernatural teachings of my family, community and culture. In this journey writings of Charles Darwin, Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, Bertrand Russell, Jean Paul Sartre and many other philosophers paved my way to my acceptance of atheism and humanism. I am glad that humanist philosophy helped me in making rational and responsible choices for myself and communicating with others who have a scientific attitude towards life.

B. SECOND COLOUR... HUMANIST PERSONALITY

When I realized that people's behaviors may not be a true reflection of their belief system and their personality may not be in harmony with their philosophy, I started paying more attention to people's behaviors and personalities. Now I have come to the awareness that humanist personality reflected in a caring, kind and compassionate attitude might be seen in different people with different ideologies and philosophies. As compared to humanist personality some people have a fundamentalist personality that is very critical, judgmental and aggressive. People with such personality try to convert others and get into angry and bitter debates with their opponents. It is quite amazing for me to see how some religious people have a humanist personality while there are some atheists who have a fundamentalist personality. Over the years I have tried to develop a humanist personality alongside acquiring a humanist philosophy.

C. THIRD COLOUR...HUMANIST LIFESTYLE

After developing a humanist philosophy and striving to have a humanist personality, I realized that both of them had to be actualized in a humanist lifestyle. When I put my philosophy and personality in practice I realized that other humanists welcomed it but it created a tension with the traditional friends and religious families I knew. I had to learn to be tolerant and accepting of their truth. It was a struggle to accept the reality that my truth is *a truth* and not *the truth*. It was a test for me to accept that other human beings have the right to their ideology and philosophy as long as they do not impose it on me or stop me from practicing my truth. In this transition I lost some of my relatives and friends who could not accept my humanism and associated atheism with an immoral and unethical life. Now I have a circle of friends from different cultures and backgrounds who are respectful of each other's philosophy and are willing to have a meaningful dialogue. Now I realize that there are as many truths as human beings and as many realities as pairs of eyes in this world.

D. FOURTH COLOUR...HUMANIST PSYCHOTHERAPY

As I accepted my own truth and felt confident to acknowledge it publicly in my social life I also introduced humanist philosophy to my clinical practice. Reading the writings of Eric Fromm, Carl Rogers, Victor Frankl and Abraham Maslow helped me at a conceptual and philosophical level to accept my patient's experiences and truths and then help them decrease their suffering and improve their quality of life. Such a journey helped me create my unique clinical practice

of my Creative Psychotherapy Clinic and with the help of my colleagues Anne Henderson and Bette Davis write a series of books about my Green Zone Philosophy. Such a philosophy and practice has helped me in helping my patients to develop a kind, caring and compassionate personality. I helped them in trusting their conscience more than the religious traditions of their families and communities that contributed in their concept of sin and feelings of guilt.. Therapy also helped them either resolve their social conflicts with their religious relatives or dissolve their relationships with relatives and friends who have a fundamentalist personality. As therapy evolved they were able to create a healthy, happy and peaceful lifestyle. I feel very excited that now we have created a website

www.greenzoneliving.ca

and videos and books so that more and more people can benefit from a Green Zone Philosophy and develop a humanist personality and lifestyle.

E.FIFTH COLOUR HUMANIST EDUCATION

After I realized that my religious upbringing had negatively affected my personality and had introduced me to the concept of sin producing feelings of guilt about sex and many other things and it took me years even decades to unlearn those values, I tried to share with others that it might be wise to teach religious traditions of the world at homes and in schools as a part of history rather than a part of their faith. Parents and teachers have the responsibility to pass on collective knowledge and wisdom to the next generation so that children can

make rational and responsible choices for their own lives as adults. I had to share with parents and teachers that humanist values can be taught even without wrapping them in religious and faith based practices. It is encouraging to see that more and more parents and teachers are realizing that education based on secular values married to science, philosophy and psychology encourages children in developing a rational, critical and creative mind.

F, SIXTH COLOUR ...HUMANIST COMMUNITIES

Since I am a poet and a writer alongside a psychotherapist, I became involved in the social and political dialogues of different groups in Pakistan and Canada. It has been my experience that as more and more people become aware of the effects of religion on people and how different religious and political leaders exploit and abuse the concepts of God and Religion to create holy wars between different sects and different religions, it is important for free thinkers to try their best to raise social consciousness. Being a writer I have written many essays and books on these subjects and translated writings of atheist and humanist philosophers in Urdu so that we can promote humanism through education in Urdu speaking men and women. I receive many emails from Asia and Middle East from men and women who read my essays on website www.chowk.com and share their struggles. I feel that free thinkers need a moral support as they are in minority and need a group where they can share their struggles and get into meaningful dialogue while they are in search of their truth. Creating a secular community is essential part of humanism so that there is not only freedom of

religion but also freedom *from* religion. There are many communities all over the world that have very punitive traditions and persecutory laws against non-believers. In some communities atheists are afraid to be killed by religious zealots. Such an oppressive environment forces people to become hypocrites and not share their truth openly and honestly and lead a double life.

G. SEVENTH COLOUR...HUMANIST CULTURE

It is my dream that we reach such a stage in human evolution where we can see a humanist culture all over the world. I am of the opinion that the unresolved conflicts of class, gender, race, sexual orientation, language, nationality and religion continue to be the cause of human suffering and we need to work together to create a just and a humanist culture. Such culture will help all of us to become fully human individually and collectively.

I am well aware that these are the colors of my humanist dream but I also know that we all have to dream before the dream comes true. We need a critical mass of humanists who are dedicated and committed and willing to work together to create humanist traditions in their families, schools and communities. It is encouraging to read that in 1900 only 1% people publicly acknowledged that they did not believe in God and organized religions and in 2000 the number had increased to 20% internationally. As the numbers grow I become more hopeful that my humanist dream will come true.

18. HUMAN NEEDS FOR GOD AND RELIGION

One of the fundamental question that I reflect upon as a humanist

psychotherapist is to identify those human needs that are fulfilled by the concepts of God and Religion. When we study human history we realize that people all over the world have used their belief in God and Religion to cope with their problems. The more people feel emotionally insecure and the more they are facing social and economic crises, the more they rely on the concepts of God and Religion. Mao tse Tung used to say that China is like an old man who has a big burden of problems on his head and a cane of religion in his hand to support himself. If we ask him to let the cane of religion go, he is afraid he will fall. But if we help him in removing the burden of his problems from his head, he may not need the cane.. As a humanist I feel that it is the duty of secular scientists, psychologists, sociologists and economists to find solutions to the human problems. The more human beings will be able to feel confident that they can solve their problems in a logical, rational, creative and compassionate way the less they would rely on the magical thinking of religion. The more human beings can solve their problems on their own individually and collectively, the less they would rely on miracles and wait for divine interventions. It takes a lot of time to unlearn the social and cultural conditioning of thousands of years.

19.HUMANITY AT A CROSS ROADS

In the last couple of decades when I traveled in Europe, Asia, North America, Latin America and South Africa I realized that most of the people still have a tribal mentality and divide people as US / THEM based on class, race, gender, nationalism and religion. Whether they

are Hindus and Muslims in India, Shiites, Sunnis and Ahmedis in Pakistan, Catholics and Protestants in Ireland or Jews, Christians and Muslims in Israel, people are still fighting holy wars..

In the 21st century humanity is at a crossroads and is vulnerable to be crushed between Western imperialism and religious fundamentalism. In 20th century we saw the rising tides of Christian, Jewish, Muslim and Hindu fundamentalism in different parts of the world that have become threats to world peace, progress and prosperity. There are still so many men and women who are willing to give and take lives in the name of Religion and God.

It is amazing to see how Western powers especially America, that considers herself the symbol of freedom and democracy has played her role in the last fifty years to support dictators, kings and army generals. Whether it was Shah of Iran, Saddam Hussain of Iraq, Saudi King or Pervaz Musharraf of Pakistan they were all supported by America to get control on the economic resources and holy oil. To create free societies all those individuals and organizations who believe in democratic, secular and humanistic values need to work together.

20. CAN FOLLOWERS OF RELIGIOUS, SECULAR AND SPIRITUAL TRADITIONS WORK TOGETHER

One of the fundamental questions humanists all over the world face today is: Can followers of religious, spiritual and secular traditions work together? In my humble opinion I think they can. In my professional life as a psychiatrist I have

worked with many religious and spiritual colleagues who worked with me to achieve a common goal to serve our psychiatric patients and educate their families so that they can decrease their human suffering and increase their quality of life.

Similarly in my personal and social life I have worked with many religious and spiritual people to organize seminars on decreasing domestic violence and increasing human rights. We tried to create a respectful and peaceful environment where we can rise above our ideological differences and focus on common goals. The biggest compliment I received was from a Catholic woman who said, "I am so happy to meet you. You are a loving humanist and not an angry atheist"

I am quite aware that some atheists, agnostics and free thinkers keep a respectful distance from religious and spiritual people. I would encourage them to review their position. It is my observation and experience that many followers of religious and spiritual traditions are liberal people and are willing to work with atheists and humanists on common goals. I believe people:

...who respect human rights of women, children and minorities

...who are against religious fundamentalism and extremism

...who are against war and in favor of peaceful resolution of social and political conflicts

...who want to keep church and state, mosque and parliament separate

and

...who are in favor of free education and universal health care can work together to create secular humanistic communities.

One of the examples of followers of religious and secular traditions working together was in South Africa where Nelson Mandela, follower of a secular tradition, while staying inside the prison and Reverend Desmond Tutu, follower of a religious tradition, staying outside the prison worked together for the human rights of Blacks and finally brought a revolution that culminated in the free multiparty elections for all races, faiths and classes. Both of them received Nobel Peace prizes for their valuable contributions to humanity. In South Africa, religion became a private matter while the state was run according to the secular and humanistic values. In my opinion a cooperative relationship of Mandela and Tutu can become a source of inspiration for the leaders of other communities especially Middle East.

In the end I want to thank Humanist Association of Canada one more time to arrange such a seminar so that we can have a genuine dialogue about our values, dilemmas and dreams. Such seminars provide us with an opportunity to learn from each other and grow together and I believe growing together is better than growing alone..

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