Atheism Has Made Me Love My Faith

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I think it would be fair to say that I am not a believer. I think it is highly unlikely that a divine power created this universe and think it is even less likely that this divine power has any care, or role, in the life of myself or any other organism. I wouldn't say that I am certain of this. I wouldn't say I am sure of anything do with the origins of life and the universe but, then again, no one who has ever lived is. I do not say God definitely does not exist but, until I encounter verifiable poof of the existence of such an entity, I will withhold my belief. I know I shall never encounter such proof and, therefore, know that I will be withholding my belief for the rest of my life. One thing I do know is this: my feelings and thoughts on God have nothing to do with my religion.

I was raised in a Muslim family. Or, should I say, a family that happened to be Muslim. The former statement implies that religion was an essential part of the lifestyles of my parents and that Islam was the thing which defined our identities. It wasn't. It is a remarkable thing, is it not, that discourse on minority communities often presents features which distinguishes them from the majority, such as religious belief, as somehow vital aspects to their self-definition. There is no such thing as the 'Muslim Community'. Not all prescribers to the Islamic faith are the same (in basic theological belief, let alone anything else) and attempts to homogenise individuals, when their religion may be the only thing they have in common, is not only wrong but dangerous. It creates a cultural binary and brings significance to the fundamental tenants of cultural 'difference'- which totally ignores the nuances that personal belief offers. By reducing individual, spiritual conscience to crude and arbitrary theological splits, be it Muslim and Christian or believer and non-believer, no space is left for consideration of a personal engagement with religion and, perhaps most importantly, an understanding for how this informs an individual's identity.

I wouldn't say my upbringing was religious. I wouldn't say it was entirely without faith either. I certainly would not argue it was atypical. My upbringing was like that of any individual raised in a family whose parents do not explicitly reject faith, nor who seek to actively press it upon the minds of their children. I was raised to think of myself as a Muslim, but was never raised to unquestioningly subscribe to a set of beliefs without question. Intellectual engagement was a key tenant to my upbringing, as indeed was an appreciation for my religion and culture; the two are not mutually exclusive and neither need to be the only aspect of one's theological engagement. I never prayed five times a day, yet have always gone to the mosque twice a year on Eid. I don't observe strict rules about halal meat, yet never eat pork. I don't fast for every day throughout the month of Ramadan, yet enjoy attending the Iftar (breaking of the fast) with my extended family. I do not believe in the Islamic scriptures, yet was taught to read Arabic and have nothing other than love for the Koran. I am no longer a believer, but would not hesitate in calling myself a Muslim.

You may think this is a somewhat implausible position. That I am deceiving myself into believing that I have a connection with a faith that I have long since moved away from. You may even argue that what I am describing is affinity with Islamic culture, but not with the Muslim faith. This is not the case. Since I am not a believer, it follows that I do not think that the Koran was literally delivered to the Prophet Muhammad, by the Angel Gabriel, and that the Islamic faith was externally revealed to mankind. Rather, I think that the Islamic faith (like all religions) developed as the result of an anthropological process- arising as a result of shared values and beliefs. Therefore, to make a distinction between religion and culture is nonsensical- religions are defined by the cultures in which they arise and cultures are infused

with the faiths to which they subscribe. My cultural heritage and identity is defined by a religious appreciation.

You may then argue that, since I am acknowledging the fact that the faith I subscribe to is entirely the result of man-made societal processes, it is somewhat strange to respect a religious code which I have already acknowledged is anything other than divine. Therein lies the central point. I fully recognise that there is no Godly reward to being a believer and that the only benefits which can accrue are a sense of cultural belonging and individual comfort. Which is precisely the reason I call myself a Muslim, or at least an 'Islamic Atheist'. What I gain from my faith is entirely based in the 'real world' as it were; I don't hold out any hope of going to heaven, not least because I do not believe there is such a heaven to be rejected from. What I gain from my faith is the ability to feel connected to a shared bond with my family and community; to feel part of a heritage that informs my identity and upbringing. I love performing the Islamic prayer rituals on the celebration of Eid, not because I believe I am worshipping an actual God, but because it allows to participate in a key communal celebration that has always been a part of my life. I love learning about the history and teachings of the Koran, not because it allows me to enhance my belief in a non-existent God, but because it enables me to appreciate the heritage and past of one the greatest religions that mankind has ever been lucky enough to have.

You see, rejecting my belief in God was not the end of my religious journey. It was only the beginning.