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Islam and we?

A mother and her child travel from A to B. The mother sits on a donkey as her child walks along, when a group of people appear on their path. They're appalled by what they see and start to laugh at the mother: "You must be the laziest mother ever! Look at your poor child, how can you let him go on foot like that? Who do you think you are anyway, the queen?"

The mother feels guilty, so she steps off the donkey and gives her place to her son. Now the child is sitting on the donkey as the mother walks along, when after a short while, a group of people appear on their path. They're appalled by what they see and start to laugh at the child: "How can a child sit on the donkey and let his own mother go on foot? Why should a mother be disrespected like that? Who do you think you are anyway, the king?"

The child feels stupid, he doesn't want to sit on the donkey anymore, he wants to get off ASAP. But the mother comes up with another solution. Now they both take places on the donkey as they continue their journey. After a short while again, a group of people appear on their path. Again people are appalled, they feel sorry for the donkey. "You must be the laziest of people! How can you abuse a poor donkey for your own comfort like that?"

Again mother and child feel very stupid, so they get off the donkey and continue their journey both on foot this time, when after a short while, another group of people appear on their path. But again they're being laughed at. "There you have a donkey," they say, "but neither of you uses it! You must be the dumbest of people!" (Turkish parable)

There is no "Islam," there is no "we," there's just the individual and his perception. Is there no reality whatsoever? Of course there is. When you get hit by a car, for instance, it hurts a bit.

Let me take you on a journey to the beginning of Islamic history, roundabout the end of the seventh century A.D., just after the death of prophet Mohammed. In those days there were numerous self-nominated prophets, like today, with whom people wanted to collaborate, or not. There was Aswad, for instance, a Jeminite who was murdered on the order of his wife. Aswad didn't believe in the difference between "truth" and "false," he also didn't believe in the difference between "good" and "evil." From his point of view, it was all a matter of integrity. A modern man he was, ahead of his time.

There was also Mosailima, the prophet of Yemama, who rebelled against Mohammed and his community. Mosailima was megalomaniac and yet willing enough to divide the dominion of the world with Mohammed. But Mohammed didn't agree with Mosailima's proposal, as Mohammed believed that the dominion of the world only belonged to God. Who *did* agree with Mosailima though, was the eloquent amazon Sadjah, a very promising prophetess. The cunning Mosailima is said to have seduced her with the words: "I am a prophet, and you also have the gift of seeing beyond sight. Who prevents me from marrying you?"

Sadjah, a Christian, liked the idea of bonding with the young and handsome Mosailima to gain power over the Arabic peninsula, so she married him. According to tradition, Sadjah

had a devastating poetic capacity she called "God," but she was also a talented politician. For a mythical thinker as she there was no difference between politics and religion. Her believers had to pray five times a day, but wine and pork meat were allowed; and Jesus was not the son of God but merely his spirit, like everything else. She gave away one meditation after another, in rhyme of course, like her example Mohammed. Sadjah was convinced she wasn't inferior to any male prophet, so she put herself forward as the founder of a new religion. A very driven woman she was, this Mesopotamian Jeanne d'Arc from Mosul (Iraq), who tried to rule the Arabic clans by mixing Islamic and Christian elements.

The marriage between Sadjah and Mosaïlima lasted for three days only, but it had consequences much bigger than that. After three days of vibrant lovemaking, rhetorical dispute and prophetic bla bla, Mosaïlima lost interest; he didn't want to have anything to do with Sadjah any longer. Perhaps he came to think a man and a woman were only to have intercourse when it was about reproduction only, not for the fun of it. What if his followers came to believe he was a mortal like them! He didn't want that to happen. Sadjah, on the other hand, lost the splendour and awe she used to have in the heart of her believers. Sadjah ended up in disgrace, and her believers sneered with regret: "Our prophet was a woman, we joined her hastily, but other people have men as prophets." Afterwards people always complain when it comes to light someone or something hasn't served their purpose. How would we learn from supposed mistakes otherwise, right? Sadjah wasn't cowardly at all, you see, her femininity suddenly became an obstacle so she could be cleared out. If Sadjah was a man they would have come up with something else to complain about—homosexuality for instance, which is even more controversial. Why am I telling you this story? I'm not certain, I leave that to people who thirst for certainty. Perhaps I just wanted to tell you a story. Perhaps it's because I believe the modernization of the face of Islam—not the Koran—has to come through women. Women like Sadjah defy the prototypical macho-Muslim, whose fat derrière is glued to the presumption a woman will never be able, let alone be allowed, to surpass man. "That is not the divine order the Great Ruler gave to mankind!" they say. They tend to believe Islam is perfect, and by believing that they also come to think they're perfect Muslims, as if Muslims are a divine people with no defects.

Let us be very sceptical about people who are certain of God's intentions. But let us not fool ourselves, there will be always interested parties who want others to believe reality is divided into ranks and classes, and there will be always common people like you and me who would die for such guesses, as if nothing else counts. People tend to believe a lot, they are made to believe in pompous analyses and think tank theories about clashing civilizations and religious hyper-sensitivity. Others say it's the verses of the Koran that are to blame. In my opinion, most of our problems are caused by the fear that our beliefs are not sustainable, because in the end nothing is. The less we wish to accept this, the more fanatic we become. It's the role-playing we perform and dramatize with great conviction since the beginning of time, in the hope of gaining control over the complexity of our own emotional universe, nothing more, nothing less, but to great cost.

It's not about Islam, it's not about religion, it's about controlling chaos, or even better the illusion of controlling chaos, because there is always chaos, whether we like it or not. Modernity doesn't offer sufficient moral security and requires a great deal of individuality and independence. But since a lot of the people in the world are merely followers and believers, modernity is almost an invitation to demagogues and tyrants to come up with simple, unambiguous "answers." With Christian fundamentalists it's under the banner of

Christianity, with Muslim fundamentalists it's under the banner of Islam, and in the Netherlands, where I'm from, paradoxically enough it's under the banner of Enlightenment.

For the present it looks rosy for Islam: it's expanding. Honesty bids me to say Islam has been expanding for the past 1,300 years or so. Not because it's violent, not because it's intolerant and unfriendly towards non-believers and women, but because of its ability to fit in with different situations and different minds. Most religions of the world have stood the test of time because of that, because of the human ability of interpretation, the ability to change, which is necessary for all evolution—otherwise life would become extinct. The problems we face today are because some people are not fond of the idea of a changing world—literally, they're dying for consistency and absoluteness.

Back to our heroine Sadjah, what has become of her? After her failed attempt to gain power she went back to Mosul. Nobody had threatened her, she drew her conclusion and disappeared from the arena. Some say she became Muslim after all. But what if she had been successful and she had gained even more power than Mohammed? Perhaps then we wouldn't have to fight for the emancipation of Muslim women today, although I think we musn't get too wild about female emancipation, since most women—at least the ones I know—Islamic or not, have the tendency to follow men and not women.