Muslim, My Neighbor – Part 3

Does God divide children and humanity along the lines of names, customs, and religious boundaries that we ourselves have drawn? In the final part of this trilogy, we question the image of a stern God who demands blood and punishment, uncovering instead the face of a Father whose unconditional love casts out fear, bridges our different paths, and recognizes in every human being —believer or doubter alike—a beloved child and a neighbor.

Some (Theological) Questions for Christians and All People of Goodwill

When Jesus said, *"Let the little children come to me,"* did he have in mind only the children of his own nation and religious tradition? In those days, Jerusalem and Judea were remarkably diverse, so there were surely children of many different backgrounds in the crowd. Everything suggests that Jesus's love for children could never be confined by skin color, ethnicity, family religion, or the social status of their parents.

Even though the answer seems obvious, there are still those today who believe that God's tenderness belongs exclusively to "our" children. Yet the truth is that Jesus's invitation is universal: every child is welcome. It is a timeless warning to all of us not to stand in the way of the love, goodness, and hope that children carry within them. For every single one of us, from the moment of birth, bears the image of God and that divine spark of life—a spark meant to be nurtured and encouraged, never stifled by human divisions.

With this in mind, it is worth pausing to ask ourselves honestly: **Is a child who prays in a mosque just as precious to God as a child who is baptized in a church?** Does a name, a family tradition, or a religious heritage make one child closer to God than another? If children leave this world before they can even grasp complex theological concepts, isn't it only worthy of God to embrace them equally, with the exact same boundless tenderness—both little Petar and little Alija?

If this question makes us feel uneasy, that is a good sign that we need to re-examine the image of God we carry within us. God is not a bureaucrat dividing children along the borders and labels that we humans have invented.

The same holds true for us as adults. Our names, customs, and rituals cannot in themselves guarantee closeness to God. Imagine an adult Petar who lives convinced that being baptized and born into a Christian family is enough, yet never personally responds to the call of unconditional love for his neighbor. Now imagine an adult Alija who grew up in a different tradition, yet never opened his heart to that very same love. If both live their lives locked inside their own egos and prejudices, what matters most in the end is not what they were called or which community they belonged to, but how much love they allowed to flow through their hearts.

The message is simple: God knows Petar and Alija not by their religious labels, but by whether they have responded to the quiet, persistent call of love, mercy, and goodness that God extends to every human being. Those who answer that call are born into a new reality. In that divine nearness—which some call the Kingdom of Heaven and others Jannah, a reality that begins right here and now—there is room for everyone who lives in love. Those doors remain open to all people, without exception.

Letting Go of the Image of a God Who Demands Blood and Punishment

Many of us—Christians and Muslims alike, as well as those who consider themselves atheists because they rejected a cruel image of the Divine—grew up believing that God is a stern judge whose wrath must be appeased, or whose justice demands a price, punishment, and the shedding of blood.

However, when we dive deeper into the essence of our sacred texts, we discover a completely different face of the Creator. In the story of Ibrahim (Abraham), God stops the hand raised above the child at the very last moment and provides a ram as a substitute. The point of that event is not that God needed blood in order to be satisfied—quite the opposite: **through that act, God put an end to the practice of human sacrifice forever** and showed that He does not desire death, but a surrendered, open heart.

We see this very same truth in the life and death of Jesus (Isa). God did not send Jesus to be killed in order to pacify His own wrath or satisfy some cosmic legal requirement. In Jesus, God showed us what a life completely surrendered to love, non-violence, and forgiveness looks like. His death on the cross was not God's demand for blood, but the consequence of human cruelty, fear, and the rejection of that love. Jesus did not refuse to fight because God demanded a sacrifice, but because **love never retaliates with violence**.

When we grasp this, the walls between us crumble. We see that God has never been thirsty for our blood, nor has He ever demanded expensive rituals in order to forgive us. God has always loved us unconditionally. What He expects from us is not blind obedience driven by the fear of hell, but our free response to His love —a willingness to "die" to our own ego, hatred, and selfishness, and to come alive in caring for our fellow human beings.

One God, Different Paths of Understanding

This text is not a call for anyone to abandon their culture, nor is it an attempt to declare one religion superior to another. We ourselves have spent years learning, making mistakes, and freeing ourselves from our own misconceptions and narrow-mindedness within the Christian tradition. That is why today we approach our Muslim brothers and sisters with humility, fully aware that none of us holds a monopoly over God.

There is no "Christian God" and no "Muslim God." There is only one Creator and Source of love, whom all of us try to understand through our own languages, symbols, and traditions. More often than not, our problem has not been with God, but with our own limited, human images of Him.

Wherever a person chooses mercy instead of judgment, peace instead of revenge, and wherever in another person—regardless of how they pray or whether they pray at all—they recognize their neighbor, God is already present there, and salvation is already taking place.

An Invitation That Stands for Everyone—Including Those Who Doubt

In this conversation, we must not forget those among us who call themselves agnostics or atheists. Often, these are the very people who have rejected not God Himself, but that distorted, cruel image of a God who punishes, divides people,

and demands blood—an image that, unfortunately, religions themselves have often offered them.

If you are among those who do not believe in religious dogmas, yet you believe in goodness, justice, compassion, and love for humanity—then you are already living what matters most. God is not vain and does not need our formal labels in order to love us. Right now is always the right moment to open ourselves to that love—not out of fear of some punishment in eternity, but because it makes us whole, free, and truly human right here and now.

Looking into the Face of the Father

When we finally lift the veil of prejudice and fear, a completely new horizon opens before us. Then, overwhelmed with joy and wonder, we do not even have time to feel ashamed of our past ignorance and our old divisions.

We realize that God was never standing on the sidelines waiting for someone to "pay a price" before He could love us. He has always loved us with infinite worth, patiently calling us, waiting for us to recognize that love, and gently drawing us into His embrace—not by force, but by the power of a goodness that the human heart ultimately cannot resist.

When we look a little closer through all the fog of our human dogmas and fears, we see the face for which every human soul has always longed. We joyfully recognize the face of the **Father**—the Source of all life and grace—and in Jesus (Isa), we see the clearest reflection of that very same unconditional, self-sacrificial love that calls us to be brothers, sisters, and true neighbors to one another.

And the very moment we recognize in God the face of a Father who does not divide His children, the greatest miracle happens right here on earth: beneath every veil of our old prejudices, names, and traditions, in the neighbor standing beside us—whether his name is Petar or Alija—we finally recognize the face of our brother, our sister, and our true neighbor. And right there, all fear ends, and love begins.