

The Bible, If Read at the Right Time, Even Makes the Koran Easier to Understand*

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Norbert Varga:

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There is a short story that happened in the long life of the monk which he always remembered. Once, a wise fellow monk living in the secular world visited him, who, upon seeing his poor conditions and that he had nothing else but the Bible, gave him a Bible commentary. When one year later the fellow monk returned, he asked: “Father, has my book helped you to better understand the Bible?” The old monk replied in surprise: “On the contrary. I had to use the Bible to understand your book.”

When I read the voluminous paper by Norbert Varga based on his doctoral dissertation, I felt the exact opposite of this story that presumably did indeed happen a long time ago. I did not need to re-read the Bible or the Koran to understand Varga’s conclusions, but I believe that his observations might lead us to new interpretations.

It is indisputable that the topic of Varga’s paper is justified, since today around half of the world’s population lives within the reach and under the influence, as regards their culture and values, of the three monotheistic religions, the Jewish, Christian and Muslim churches. These religions share the same intellectual roots, since their followers all accept the Old Testament of the Bible. The latter two are missionary religions, that is, they are inclusive, while Judaism has not been very inclusive in the past two thousand years. That is why it has remained the smallest religion assessing the world in relation to itself.

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In ancient times, whether one was considered Jewish depended on their father's ancestry. This was a rational ethnic policy, since mothers can be seized, while fathers hardly. However, later on, during the various tragic hardships they endured – for example population decline, slavery, captivity – Jews changed their attitude towards others. Initially, for centuries, inclusion was regarded as important, that is, Jews were willing to admit peoples into their group who could be made to conform to the Jewish way of life. Later, discrimination and seclusion were put to the forefront. Today, as a result of the Rabbinic tradition, the Halacha, Judaism is inherited on the mother's side, which contributes to exclusion and isolation. Even the laws of the State of Israel reflect this attitude.

Evidently, this state of imbalance is in part linked to the liberal desire, which has been around since the Enlightenment, and which is most readily acceptable for the monotheistic religion with the smallest number of followers, the separation of the church and the state. But it is also evident that there is another reason for this: in Europe, the Jewish church was not able to form close ties with the state until the 20th century. It is peculiar that in the State of Israel, which has existed by virtue of the international law since 1947, the church and the state have not been separated. And only a few Islamic countries have made this separation, while fundamentalism is gaining support there as well. Meanwhile, in traditionally Christian countries, the separation happened everywhere, in fact, the detachment of church and state is becoming ever greater. There is a huge country with European roots, the United States of America, where the church and the state have never been merged, even though the country was founded by European Christians. It is true, however, that this happened at a time, towards the end of the 18th century, when there were calls in European culture for the separation of church and state, and a movement laying the foundation for a financial, intellectual and political alliance, Freemasonry was starting to stream out of Europe, and it discovered fertile ground in the New World, which was still trying to find itself. Even the map of Washington, D.C. bears testimony to this.

It is more of a legend than fact that the three monotheistic world religions have the same roots and that each of them can be linked to the patriarch Abraham in Mesopotamia. Still, monotheism and the acceptance of the Old Testament are indisputably present in all three. Even if the cultures, values and ideas within the reach of these religions originated from the same place, when observed closely, they are as remotely related as humans and monkeys. Despite the common roots, the similarities are only superficial. All three religions have followed a different evolutionary path. In practice, the actions and behaviour of their followers and even comparable traditions are often irreconcilable. Just like their experiences of each other.

This does not mean that we have to stop looking for their common roots, and give up the approach of natural sciences for examining social and cultural similarities and differences. Varga's research that reaches back to the ancient roots of the monotheistic religions is about the organisation of society and economy (public life). He tries to find out how the value crisis of the 20th and 21st centuries arose, and searches for a common solution for sorting out this muddle we created together.

If I did not know that Varga has studied theology, history and political science, I would blindly say that he was educated in natural sciences. His ability to navigate in both time and space suggests that. Unless, of course, we consider theology to be the mother of all sciences, in the face of those who claim this about mathematics.

The author's remark that the passing of time can be perceived as the space for action is perfectly clear. That is why it is logical and important to underline in the context of the Old Testament's spacetime that the past becomes tomorrow's reality in light of the present. We have to say that even if the teleological reading of this idea suggests predestination, because in this case, it does not encourage idleness, but action. We should do whatever we can to fulfil our contract with the Almighty about the future. Not our idleness, but our actions should determine the Lord's decision on salvation.

Freedom and free will, which are treated differently in the three monotheistic religions, need to be interpreted in this context.

For Jews, the limits of free will are defined by God's leniency, because, according to one of the principles in the Contract, He represents truth and authority. People's acts are evaluated and even classified as sins based on this. In the (alleged) spirit of the Contract and in the interest of fulfilling it one can do anything, it will not be a sin.

Muslims believe that only the omnipotent God knows eternity, and each person is responsible for their deeds. But according to the teachings of the Koran, nobody bears the burden of other people's sins, which means that even if someone commits a sin, the person inciting them might be the guilty one. This belief, which can be traced in many religions, might be summarised as follows: "My opponents are making me commit mistakes – I am sorry."

Christians relate in the most complicated and intricate way to freedom and free will. If everything happened in line with God's intentions, there would be no sin. But people become sinners out of free will. That is why absolution and conversion make sense, because people are fallible. Luther, however, contends that people do not have free will, because everything is predestined. One might even conclude that man has committed no sin apart from the original one, which is washed away by baptism. In contrast, Unitarians teach that a person's responsibility grows in

direct proportion to their free will. Therefore, people have free will so that they can make responsible decisions.

These are fundamental differences between the three monotheistic religions, which are clearly detectable from their intellectual heritage. Varga's work indicates this wisely without explicitly stating it. But the mere hint and the fact that he reads between the lines are important, because he uncovers all the real or deduced traditions that influence, or even determine, our present values and behaviour.

While studying the ancient and perhaps common roots of the three monotheistic religions, Varga subtly indicates that the first great fracture in the age of the Old Testament was the Babylonian captivity. It not only influenced the behaviour of the Jews but also laid the foundation for their (we could say xenophobic) isolation from foreign peoples. Eventually, this undermined brotherly love. More than half a millennium had to pass before love appeared again, as a value and a measure, and that was the dawn of the New Testament. Perhaps the philosophical roots of the lines in the "Admonitions" by King Stephen I that differentiate between aliens and newcomers (guests) can be traced back to these two value systems.

In one of the stories about Jesus there is a lost sheep. This is considered by Christians, that is, the followers of Jesus, to be a symbolic message, although its roots might very well be material and go back to the Old Testament. It possibly originates from the age of King David, because at that time it was reckoned, as Varga points out based on the Exegesis, "that saving an animal in distress should be much more important for every Jew than the hostility of the animal's owner".

Animals, livestock not only meant riches but also supported their owner. And this is still true two thousand years later. It is not by accident that in Hungarian the word for cow (*marha*) used to signify the animal and also wealth. This is not only a matter of economic perspective, but it was (and still is for today's farmers) one of the conditions of survival. It is no coincidence that the story of the seven fat cows that appeared to the pharaoh in his dream and were eaten by seven lean ones was interpreted by Joseph (the son of Jacob) – who is also mentioned in the Koran – as seven years of abundance followed by seven years of famine. The austerity programme ordained for the seven years of abundance almost calls to mind a planned economy as well as an economic and state administration strategy, which might also be attributed to Joseph.

It often seems that people back then had a very different notion of what should be considered important, insignificant, settled or outdated, than we do today if we look back to the past.

One such event is the destruction of the Temple, which had only one economic significance: rebuilding it cost money. But its repercussions for identity and keeping

the Jewish population together were much more severe. Curiously, that was not the first time the Temple was destroyed: it had already happened in the part of the Old Testament prior to Christ's appearance, during the Babylonian captivity. But after the Jews escaped from captivity (in present-day Iraq), they rebuilt the Temple. The Jewish population recovered, but at the same time became exclusionary and closed. However, the second destruction of the Temple, in 70 AD, sealed the fate of the Jews for many centuries. The second Temple has still not been rebuilt.

The dispersion that started in about 130 BC, during the time of King Bar Kokhba, who was declared a messiah by Rabbi Akiva, defined the life of the Jews for more than two thousand years. At the onset of this horrible era for the Jews something happened that had far-reaching consequences for world history, too.

When first visiting Jerusalem as an adult, Jesus, who had been born in Bethlehem, went to the (second) Temple that was still standing at that time. The religious and economic leaders of the Jews in Jerusalem were on good terms with the Roman governor. Today, we would say that they had bargaining power and that they were primarily concerned with their own interests. This situation is well-known to us in the modern Hungarian context ever since 1920. Since then the politicians in the territories detached from Hungary have been doing a balancing act before the Czech, Slovakian, Romanian, Serbian, etc. authorities trying to represent communal and personal interests at the same time.

But let us see what Jesus did. Thirty years after being born, Jesus, a Zealot, arrived to Jerusalem and immediately locked horns with the local Jews in the Temple, of all places. Nobody would have thought that this event, at the dawn of the 2000-year long Christian history, would have an impact on world history. Back then it would have been unimaginable that the story of the New Testament which followed, or as some believe, supplanted the Old Testament would start here. The fierce competition between the two alliances continues even today.

But let us see what really happened. Nothing more and nothing less than that Jesus flew off the handle when he saw that in the Temple, the most sacred of places, money changers, merchants selling animals and all kinds of peddlers were doing business. Local Jewish leaders doubtless made handsome profits from these dealings, and the Roman governor turned a blind eye to all this.

The leaders of the Jewish community had already heard about Jesus because he came to Jerusalem as a person carrying out divine orders, that is, as a messiah. Jesus was the last thing the leaders of the battered local Jewish community needed, especially because their king – who had been declared messiah about 150 years previously – brought only misery on them. This restless man was disturbing their circles, they only wanted to do business, make connections, create positions and

survive. This rings a bell. In February 1990, in the Prague parliament three Hungarian representatives introduced a bill for establishing the Jókai University in Komárom. Those most bitterly opposed to the bill were also Hungarians. We could list their names, but what would be the use? Let us hope that in twenty years nobody will remember them. Yet, at that time they were (for some reason they became) the ones managing the political transition after the fall of the Communist regime. They wanted to secure positions for themselves in the new circumstances, similar to the ones previously held by Communists in the old regime. They were the governor's men.

It is evident that the future fate of Jesus was fundamentally determined when he drove out the peddlers from the Temple. The local Jewish leaders decided to get rid of him with the help of the Romans. They had no way of knowing that this decision would usher in a new era.

This event sealed the fate of Jesus, but created a new system of values running through earlier ways of thinking as a dividing line. The expulsion of the peddlers from the Temple marks the true dividing line between the ages of the Old and the New Testament, and between exclusionary and inclusionary thinking.

Our uncertainty whether locality and universality are mutually exclusive or they complement each other started here. Did the expulsion serve the universality of God and hurt local interests, or was the universal right of the peddlers to trade limited by the locality, the protection of the Temple? To us, it is evident that locality (the particular) and universality (the general), just like the individual and the community can only exist in harmony. In this context, one must bear in mind not to substitute universality for globality or for unity. Universality means the loose or close cooperation, the coordinated movement or harmony of individuals or groups. Globality has no limits, and within its infinite space, the cosmopolitan masses may or may not meet.

Towards the end of his study, Varga indicates that there is an ever greater uncertainty in social organisation and leadership, as well as in selection and in being selected, because the belief in predictability is evaporating. This is obviously indirectly linked to free will (or its misinterpreted forms) as a human element, which in turn is an element of social organisation.

Varga, true to the vein of his study, searches for the answer in the holy books. He states that without knowing how man is depicted in the Bible and the Koran one cannot tell which is the right, traditional management attitude. According to the Old Testament, man is the likeness of the independent God. The Koran, however, denies this and depicts man as a deputy for Allah. Both holy books make the fall into sin evident through the story of Adam. The Koran shows a way out of the

predicament because it does not consider that state irreversible. But it is Paul the Apostle who writes in his letter to the Romans about the chance for grace that was given to humanity through Jesus' crucifixion.

Varga states in terms that are clear even to our modern minds that the ancestral sin creates a living space for man where one can rebel against the values of God. In fact, this space gives rise to the sovereign man whose personality cannot only be interpreted in the spirit of the holy books, because it includes Hellenistic, as well as ancient Greek and Roman intellectual and moral traditions.

All the holy books mentioned in the study regard God to be the source of both state power and economic clout. Varga cites Buber's "Prophetic Faith" when claiming that politics is actually a dialogue between the politician and God. Leaders can never abuse their power, and members of the elite need to become servants to the people. In this case, however, God does not mean the Almighty, but the representative of fairness, public good and natural limits. Due to the interconnectedness of public and political life, this needs to hold true for the whole economy. Which means that if the economy violates this agreement, it can cause a social crisis. Let us not forget that so far all conquests (territorial, political, economic) that upset the natural social framework were sooner or later met with natural resistance. Those who rebelled and tried to protect the natural laws were persecuted. Both the New Testament and the Koran suggest that being persecuted only makes sense when it is endured for a true goal: in the service of the people, the community.

The Old Testament evaluates the living-together of different communities from a loyalty perspective. As Varga writes in reference to the Book of Isaiah: politicians need to steer clear of extreme ideas and of extreme national outbursts. But what about the free market, the economy that disregards the interests of the community? If we returned to the laws of the Old Testament, only economic activities carried out for the community were acceptable. Does the free market represent community interests? Maybe this is the most profound difference between the Old and the New Testament. And this is what a 19th century Jewish joke illustrates:

The wife of a wealthy merchant says to her husband in panic: "They say in the city that the Messiah is approaching." "This is all we needed!", sighs his husband who had been busy planning how they would get richer. The woman, seeing the consternation of her husband on hearing that a 2000-year-old event is about to be repeated, starts to console him. "Don't be alarmed. Look at what our people have gone through: subjugation, slavery, pogroms. And we survived everything. With God's help we will somehow survive the Messiah, too."

In conclusion, the last (fourth) chapter of Varga's study is basically a political credo. It might be his own, but it can be recommended to young or practising politicians

and economic policy experts. But we know history (and the present) from either the Holy Books that were mentioned or from history books, and we see a very clear picture: there are only a few examples that should be followed and those disregarding them form a much bigger group.

To sum up, Varga's excellent study is a huge effort to show that during the known history of humanity, there has always been an urge to conform to the Absolute. Fortunately, this is well documented in the case of monotheistic religions. If these documents are available, it is almost incomprehensible why we do not learn from them. We always realise in retrospect how much we deviated from the behavioural norms that can be found in the Holy Books and that please God.

Finally, I would like to express my wish – with reference to one of the remarks in the study – that public figures maintain a dialogue with at least their communities, even if they cannot/could not find a way to God.