

# The Journal of Social Encounters

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Volume 3  
Issue 1 *Special Issue: Religion, Politics, and  
Peacemaking*

Article 4

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2019

## The Conflicts that Pave the Way for Peace: Lebanese Poet and Philosopher Mikhail Naimy

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### Recommended Citation

Naimy, Suha (2019) "The Conflicts that Pave the Way for Peace: Lebanese Poet and Philosopher Mikhail Naimy," *The Journal of Social Encounters*: Vol. 3: Iss. 1, 13-20.

Available at: [https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/social\\_encounters/vol3/iss1/4](https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/social_encounters/vol3/iss1/4)

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**The Conflicts that Pave the Way for Peace:  
Lebanese Poet and Philosopher Mikhail Naimy**

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*Mikhail Naimy is a twentieth century Lebanese author and philosopher whose writings verge towards the mystical and the metaphysical. Naimy's philosophy is a synthesis of his own life conflicts and his built premises and drawn conclusions that trivialize materialism, following the steps of Christ. Among Naimy's first conflicts was leaving of his hometown Baskinta and its highland Shakhroub for Nazareth to continue his education, and the estrangement he felt that was alleviated by a touch of God. Some of the other conflicts in Naimy's life were the love affairs that yielded to the understanding that true love should be beyond change, and therefore, beyond the sensual enchainment that confines the metaphysical meaning of love. An added conflict that paved the way for peace was Naimy's conscription as an American soldier in World War I, at the Normandy front. He witnessed the ugliness and absurdity of war, and this experience led him to believe God lives within humans, never without. As Naimy returned to New York, after World War I, he realized he was held captive against his will in the buck race, a race where humans run after the dollar to make a living, so they end up being enslaved to a currency they deem essential for their survival while they as humans are the primary elements of their own being. As a result, transcendence was the only remedy; this transcendence was through finding the higher cause of existence, embodied in loving and expressed in writing. Finally, Naimy perceives that conflicts are blessings and pave the way for peace through love, faith, and transcendence.*

**Who is Mikhail Naimy?**

Mikhail Naimy is a renowned author and thinker who has forty-one published books translated and spread around the world. He is one of the three pillars of the twentieth century Lebanese and Arab literary Renaissance movement. The two other pillars are, in chronological order, Ameen Rihany and Gibran Khalil Gibran. Together with Gibran Khalil Gibran and eight other members, they founded The Pen League in New York in 1920. The League hosted brilliant new minds of the land of Canaan in the spheres of literature, poetry and philosophy.

Mikhail Naimy's writings verge towards the mystical and the metaphysical. Of his own writings, Naimy's favorite book is *The Book of Mirdad* which he first published in 1948, and the book is now translated to more than thirty languages worldwide. In an interview documented in Naimy's book *Ahadeeth Ma'assahafa*, meaning *Interviews with the Press*, Naimy explained how his favorite book, among all others is *The Book of Mirdad*. "If all my other books get accidentally burnt, the one book I would want to save is *The Book of Mirdad* since it enfolds the epitome of my philosophy" (Naimy, 1989, p. 68).

Mikhail Naimy was born in October of 1889 in Baskinta, a village in Lebanon, at the foothills of Mountain Sannine. He grew up in the sphere of Baskinta and its highland Shakhroub that were the world from which he stepped to the outside life. His first travel beyond the borders of Baskinta and Sannine was when he was thirteen to Palestine, back then, to continue his

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education. Then from Palestine, now Israel, he moved to Russia to further his education, from Russia to the United States of America, then back to Lebanon in 1932 to stay in the bosom of his beloved land, a hermit-like figure meditating the greatness of the creator mirrored in the beauty of nature, humankind, and the multi-layered reality of life and its vast interpretations.

Mikhail Naimy starts his three-volume autobiography, *Sab'oon* (meaning 'Seventy' in the Arabic language, since he wrote his autobiography when he was seventy years old) with his mother Lateefeh teaching him as a five year old how to pray, addressing the prayers to 'the Father in heaven': "Pray with me my son, 'Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name'..." (Naimy, 2011, p. 18). Lateefeh, Mikhail Naimy's mother, would tuck her son in bed and would make him repeat the 'Our Father' prayer every night. This memory is among the first that Mikhail Naimy recollects.

As Naimy's eyelids get heavy with sleepiness, he imagines the father in heaven, whom he learnt about from his mother, a huge father and a God (Naimy, 2011, p. 19). And, like every night, the mother would continue her prayer: "Repeat after me my son: God, please, help my father in America; when he grabs the soil in his hands, let it be transformed to gold" (Naimy, 2011, p. 19). And the mother continues, "God do this, God don't do that" (p. 19). Clearly, God has miraculous powers and can transform things as He pleases: he can change the soil to gold! He can also hear his mom's prayers from Baskinta all the way to heaven, and God can hear other people's prayers as well. God the superpower! (Naimy, 1911, p. 20).

Mikhail Naimy's father, Youssef, who was a farmer, travelled to the United States to improve the living conditions of his family. Youssef traveled in 1889, in the year that Naimy was born and was still an infant. The father stayed in USA for six years (from 1889 to 1895) and returned to Baskinta, Lebanon, equally penniless. Mikhail Naimy depended on 'the Father in Heaven' during the absence of 'the father in America'. During his childhood in Baskinta, Naimy was nicknamed 'the silent lady'. He favored silence to words, and it was through this silence that he gave his imagination of God its free wings. Inspired by this silence, he wrote later on, in his favorite book *The Book of Mirdad*, in the chapter "On Creative Silence", "Speech is at best an honest lie" (Naimy, 2015, p. 68).

### **Mikhail Naimy and the Russian Caesarian Society**

Mikhail Naimy's first experience in learning was at the village school which he first attended when he was six. When Naimy turned ten (in 1899), he joined the school that was founded by the Russian Caesarian Society of Palestine. He excelled in his scholastic years, so after three years, he received a scholarship, from the same line of schooling, to travel to Nazareth and continue his education over there. In September 1902, it was time to leave his world of Baskinta and Shakhroub for the outer world. He was almost thirteen years old. In his autobiography *Sab'oon*, Naimy describes his world of Baskinta and Shakhroub as different wombs metamorphosing into different layers of life (Naimy, 2011, p. 149).

For their son's departure to Nazareth, Naimy's parents Lateefeh and Youssef, were able to provide him with seven Bishliks that were equivalent to one dollar. (A 'Bishlik' was part of the Ottoman Empire currency back then; it was an Arabic term for the Turkish coins [Qurush] used in Lebanon which was mandated by the Ottoman Empire from 1516 to the end of World War I.)

Two Bishliks were given to the care-taker, so Naimy was left with less than a dollar as pocket money.

For the first time in Naimy's life, he was away from the wombs in which and through which he was growing, the wombs and the lights of Baskinta and Shakhroub. For the first time, there was immediate contrast between his silence and the sounds of the new world outside. For the first time, he experienced the capital Beirut and all its hustle and bustle as opposed to the peace and the quiet of his village and its highland. For the first time ever, he saw the sea. For the first time ever, he heard different dialects, different languages, saw different faces, different costumes, all related to the one God he prayed for every night. No parents, no money, alone, that was a major conflict, a schism, between the world outside and Naimy's world inside.

Naimy described his experience on board of the ship *Jolie* that took him from the Beirut seaport and anchored in the Haifa seaport as follows:

For the first time ever I experienced the feeling of being estranged, and that feeling pierced through my heart... Tears filled my eyes and were about to roll down my cheeks... I was overcome by fear at the sight of the racing boats from the city towards us, where our ship had already anchored. Those boat men appeared to be like vultures about to seize their prey. There they were, climbing the ladder of the ship looking like demons, and I was waiting for my turn to be devoured by one of them.  
(Naimy, 2011, p. 161)

Naimy continues in his autobiography, "At this particular junction of time, I felt a hand holding mine, and a voice speaking to me: 'Are you alone my son? Are you not accompanied by anyone, any of your parents?' Instantaneously, the feeling of estrangement left me, and peace crawled in my veins as the voice of that gentleman penetrated my ear" (Naimy, 2011, p. 162). That gentle total-stranger took Mikhail Naimy to his home, gave him food, and asked his coachmen to drive him to the station from which travelers would go to Nazareth. Naimy was emptied from all to be filled by The All.

On the importance of being 'emptied', to be filled by God, he writes in *The Book of Mirdad*: "A God-bearing cloud is Man. Save he be emptied of himself, he cannot find himself. Ah, the joy of being empty!" (Naimy, 2015, p. 192). Naimy concludes in his autobiography, "Actually, every time I meditate on the conflicts I had had in my life, I perceive how perfectly knit they are in place and time, and how these conflicts helped in weaving the resolution of the 'I' that I know at the present time" (Naimy, 2011, p. 164).

Being in Nazareth, Naimy was aware of the greatness of the fact that he is in the place where Christ lived, breathed, walked, preached and had his life of mankind. "You are here ... in a world of magic, blessings, and abundance ... You are here in the presence of the Master. This is how I would talk to myself every time I was alone" (Naimy, 2011, p. 181). Then Naimy continues to explain, "The deep religious feeling I carried with me from Sannine fermented deeper in Nazareth ..."  
(Naimy, 2011, p. 181).

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God the father, who can do all and hear all, is fermenting with Naimy's growth, so in times of conflict, it is faith that heals.

The moment we reached the wilderness, my friends started playing while I excluded myself from the group, sneaking to a faraway rock. There I kneeled where nobody could see me, and I started praying so fervently to Jesus Christ to help me solve a conflict I was not able to resolve. I finished my prayers, and the burden that was weighing heavily on my heart lightened up. As soon as I returned to school, the conflict got settled in the blink of an eye. (Naimy, 2011, pp. 182 – 183).

Naimy received another scholarship from the same Russian Caesarian Society to continue his education in the Spiritual Seminary in Poltava, Russia, today Ukraine. In Poltava, Mikhail Naimy, nicknamed as Mischa, fell in love with Varia, a married woman, thirteen years his senior. Inspired by this love and enchained by it, he wrote his early poems in the Russian language, among the first is *The Frozen River* which highlights the conflict of love and of being. The frozen river was Sola, and the conflict was between Mischa and his maturing relation with Christ on one hand, and between Mischa and the growing love with Varia on the other.

'The Frozen River' was a personification of Mischa's layers that were as frozen as River Sola. Naimy, like that iced river water, is enchained: the yesterday, today and tomorrow force him to be there, imprisoned in that reality, but the self yearns for a higher freer realm. The temporal is mortal since it is continuously changing and the meta-temporal is immortal since it is beyond change. Professor Nadeem Naimy analyzes, in his documentary about Mikhail Naimy: "Seeing beyond is the peaceful truth of an Eternal Light that does not change and is not chained by any 'here and now'" (Naimy, 1978, p. 14).

Mischa and Varia tried to run away together, but their attempt failed. This failed attempt, along with other factors, pushed Mischa to leave Russia after finishing his studies in the spiritual seminary. He was aiming for France but ended up in the United States of America. What appeared to be a 'failing attempt' was actually a blessing, as Mischa sees it later, 'beyond the physical eye' as elaborated in *The Book of Mirdad*,

Not with the eye, but through it must you look that you may see all things beyond it . . . It is the inaudible in you made audible, and the invisible made visible; that, seeing, you may see the unseeable; and hearing, you may hear the unhearable. (Naimy, 2015, p. 38)

One must understand and read events beyond the obvious, beyond the mortal and the changing.

Naimy elaborates further in *The Book of Mirdad*, "And what is hid from you is always manifest to the Omniwill" (Naimy, 2015, p. 104). So, it is the father in heaven, the Omniwill, the providence, taking care of Mischa.

**After the Russian Caesarian School:  
Lebanon, Palestine, and Russia from 1895 to 1906, and America from 1912 to 1932**

Varia was Mikhail Naimy's first love, in Russia. Later, when he travelled to the United States of America (from 1912 to 1932), he met two women that he fell in love with, consecutively, who were again married. In his autobiography, Naimy named his second love 'Bella' with whom he stayed for five years, and he called his third love 'Nyounia' with whom he had a relationship of three years. Naimy's relationships with these two women, along with where he stood in time and place, were a major inspiration for his book *Memoirs of a Vagrant Soul, The Pitted Face*.

The story is about a 'pitted face' man who slaughtered his wife on their first nuptial night. After that incident, the pitted-face man lost his memory – total amnesia – and started working as a waiter in an Arabic café in New York. The pitted-face man kept a diary, his memoirs, which is the content of the book. Naimy concludes in the end of the book, "I have slaughtered my love with my own hands because it is far more than what my body can endure, and it is far less than what my soul aspires" (2011, p. 134).

Love entails a physical rapport between the two lovers. However, this rapport is more than the 'pitted-face' body can handle. Simultaneously, this love is less than what the soul yearns for: what the soul longs for is the infinity of purity and light, God. So, the pitted-face slaughters his love to maintain the Light and the Yearning, since he refuses to be contaminated by the body and its limitations.

Naimy clarifies in his autobiography, "I created *The Pitted face* in my mind, but it soon became more than a mind-creation. Many are the times we stayed up late together, walked together and nurtured each other" (Naimy, 2011, p. 108).

While leaving America for Lebanon (in the spring of 1932), Naimy recounts in his autobiography:

And that bouquet of white roses [. . .] was an omen of good faith to start the new phase of my journey with, without the dominance of the sexual desire boiling in my blood, but with the reign of the soul that uplifts both male and female to where they become the perfect unified stronger human, beyond any physical desire. (Naimy, 2011, p. 454).

It was through the conflicts of falling in love repetitively with married women that Naimy was able to read into his life the essentiality of abstinence, an abstinence – in Naimy's perspective – designed by the 'Father in heaven' for Naimy, and that would take him to the Eternal Light, beyond the enslavement of the physical needs that pull the soul down.

Naimy writes in his autobiography *Sab'oon*,

Actually, it was Life that changed my plan, so Life pushed me to strive, to struggle, and to experience. And this is because Life has a clearer vision and aim than mine; it has equipped me with what is best for me, in order to reach a higher end than the one I have set for myself. (Naimy, 2011, p. 451).

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**More Conflicts While in the United States of America**

While in The United States of America, Naimy conscribed in the army and was deployed for the Normandy front, in France, to fight the Germans. He felt totally ashamed of the human race, where humans have the heart to kill their fellow men and women, who are all equal creations of God. No reason would be valid enough to justify the illogical, monstrous aspects of war: “War is so ugly that even a monster would feel ashamed of it” (Naimy, 2011, p. 155). This imposed truth of the war and of the ignorance of mankind and the indifference towards war instigated in Naimy an urge to write his poem ‘My Brother’, where one brother talking to his brother, defeated morally and physically by the war, sick of the different politics that feed on the lives of people, spurs his brother in the last verse of the poem to inter the living beings.

The world putrefied with us, the living  
As it putrefied with our dead.  
So, come my brother, give me the shovel and follow me;  
Let us dig another trench  
To hide and to bury our living. (Naimy, 2015, p. 12)

Naimy was appalled by the man-made atrocities and devastation of war, but the presence of God was soothing, as he illustrates in his autobiography:

The feeling of God, as a power residing in me, emanated comfort and security. God is within me; God is not outside. The war made me realize that there is no distance between the creator and the creatures. God is not external; God is internal. (Naimy, 2011, p. 101)

After the war, Naimy returned to New York. He felt himself an alien in The Big Apple. Dr. Nadeem Naimy explains,

[Mikhail Naimy] came to live his own self, but he discovered that people do not live in New York; it is New York that lives through its people. As people enter New York, the city strips them from their own will, their own personalities, then blends them all, welds them, to one army with one will, that of its own. (Naimy, 1978, p. 30)

Preserving his own rhythm and his own self, defying the imposition of New York’s tempo upon him, Naimy redeemed himself through his own writings and through his own silence. An example of this refuge and redemption in writing and in silence is from his book *The Memoirs of a Vagrant Soul/The Pitted Face*:

Monday: People are of two categories: talkative and silent. I belong to the silent part of humanity, but the rest are talkative . . . I have realized the sweetness of silence and the talkers have not realized the bitterness of speech. This is why I am silent and the rest of the people speaks.

Wednesday: I am an ascetic among people, and being an ascetic among people is worse than being so among wild beasts. You can be close to a wild beast and gain its docility with love and lenience. But people think

your lenience and your love are signs of weakness. They do not touch your mortal body, scared of the laws they have made while they expose your eternal soul to the hither and thither. (Naimy, 2015, pp. 13 – 14)

Refusing to be enslaved by the buck, by the savagery of the people, and by the spinning pace of the city, Mischa yearned to transcend his New York status quo, to rise above it through his endless self. Dr. Nadeem Naimy describes this as “. . . a crossing from the limited man to the limitless one” (Naimy, 1978, p. 24). The limitless man is the man who loves, and the transcendental self is the self that loves. Mikhail Naimy recommends in *The Book of Mirdad*, “You live that you may learn to love. You love that you may learn to live. No other lesson is required of Man” (Naimy, 2011, p. 64). In other words, love is not material possessions, for it is beyond the physical and beyond the materialistic. Mikhail Naimy demonstrates this through his rhyming poem in *The Book of Mirdad*,

Less possessing – less possessed.

More possessing – more possessed.

More possessed – less assessed.

Less possessed – more assessed. (Naimy, 2011, p. 19).

Love is life and beauty, as Mikhail Naimy elaborates in his book *Till We meet*,

Years are born in the heart, and are buried in the heart. Those whose hearts are frozen with hate, miserliness, fraud, avarice, cruelty, and the lust for flesh, for riches and power, their years are frozen with famine, putrefaction, poverty, pain, and death . . . Those whose hearts are warm with love . . . their years are warm with peace and plenty, with fragrance and beauty, and with health and serenity. (Naimy, 2015, p. 239)

Finally, in order to live peacefully, one needs to kill the sensual pleasures, i.e. overcome physical temptations, embrace conflicts, and if one lives solely for the body, death of the soul, far from any promise of eternal life, is surely the outcome. “Die to live or live to die,” Naimy recommends in *The Book of Mirdad* (2011, p. 20).

In conclusion, according to Mikhail Naimy, conflicts (difficulties, insecurities, and schisms) through ‘God the Father’ pave the way for peace, since they are good for the soul and are setters of one’s path. Conflicts grind the self and force it to transcend beyond the physical. This transcendence is through faith, silence and love that beget peace. Therefore, conflicts pave the way for peace.

The best seal would be Mikhail Naimy’s poem from *The Book of Mirdad*:

God is your captain, sail, my Ark!  
Though hell unleashes her furies red  
Upon the living and the dead,  
And turn the earth to molten led,  
And sweep the skies of every mark,  
God is your captain, sail, my Ark!



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Love is your compass, ply my Ark!  
Go north and south, go east and west  
And share with all your treasure chest.  
The storm shall bear you on its crest  
A light for sailors in the dark.  
Love is your compass, ply, my Ark!  
Faith is your anchor, ride, my Ark!  
Should thunder roar, and lightning dart,  
And mountains shake and fall apart,  
And men become so faint of heart  
As to forget the holy spark,  
Faith is your anchor, ride, my Ark! (Naimy, 2015, p. 68).

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