

God is greater

And you never ask questions when God's on your side. (Bob Dylan)

Sometimes God is small. A modest experience within myself. Sometimes God is small because people confine the divine as if it were a football field with lots of lines, stripes, and dots. And yes, on that tournament field, they also want to fight it out. Unfortunately, the confinement to their own little hole of faith is sometimes great: "with God on our side." Especially between the Allah-appearance and the Christian Yahweh-form, things can occasionally get messy.

If there's one place where God can appear great, it's when I'm surrounded by nature. Around me and therefore not preoccupied with my own worries, let alone the screen of a phone. I do this looking while walking in nature, sometimes alone or sometimes during the silent walks I help organize.

In 2018, I walked with my son Joshua through the nature of the Rila Mountains south of Sofia, the capital of Bulgaria. Because I'm having some knee problems, we decide to split a very long descent into the next large valley in two. This requires us to deviate from the international hiking trail E4 and become dependent on even worse markings on a path that was supposed to lead us to a Bulgarian mountain hut. Sometimes the path could only be found by lying flat on the ground and spotting a path profile under low, dense brush.

Walking along a descending ridge, according to the map, we should have encountered the hut almost automatically when we passed the 1720-meter contour line. The map indicated the hut was supposed to be at that altitude. My son, who was using the map and GPS, remarked at one point that the hut was hanging above us. A bit further away, but at this altitude. Based on the map, the hut must be hanging there in the sky, right in front of us. Finally, after a lot of trudging through nettles, brambles, and dense brush, our hut came into view at a much lower altitude than expected.

A typical Bulgarian trestle, a half-finished, 10-story, pre-Wende building, flanked the simple hut. According to the convivial group of Bulgarians gathered around the table in front of the hut, the trestle was once intended as a luxury holiday resort for apparatchiks of the Russian-dominated old regime. Meanwhile, the apparatchiks had made way for a new regime, that of the European Union. Interference is still often characterized by its relative ineffectiveness in daily life. As part of the renovation of the water system, an EU-subsidized plumber was working in the hut. But for whom, exactly? Not for the European tourists. Given the sorry state of the path and markings, we wondered whether anyone had found their way to this hut before or after us. The people present all came from the town in the valley below the hut. On balance, you could say, somewhat smugly, that our encounter with these Bulgarians would foster the European mentality in its primary form. Perhaps our visit alone was worth it.

Nothing was spared to please us. All sorts of food was offered to us, interspersed with all sorts of alcoholic beverages. We were also allowed to observe the blueberry processing at the bottom of the Apparatchiks's stakes, which at least had some purpose. If I understood correctly, an alcoholic drink offered later was the end product of this process. Meanwhile, the conversation was largely limited to mentioning football players' names, as there was little common language, other than gestures and other body language.

However, in this hut, suspended in the sky, people were interested in our further travel plans. So we enthusiastically unfolded our map on the large table between the hut and the Apparatchiks's stakes and pointed to a hiking trail marked on the map further into the valley. The Bulgarian men

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immediately indicated with grand, crossed hand gestures that this was a no-go. Unfortunately, we didn't understand why that would be so disastrous. We suspect a somewhat pessimistic view of our hiking and survival skills. We had already hiked a difficult and difficult path that day. We didn't consider adjusting our plans, let alone slogging our way back up the same overgrown path, following the advice of the locals. For now, we set up our tent and settled in for a good night's sleep.

The next day, a large four-wheel drive arrived with, as we understood, the area's ranger. He had been called in to advise us once again not to hike our planned route. Ultimately, we understood, it was all about our hosts confronting him with his neglected responsibilities. The path would hardly be...

The path was difficult to navigate, markings were rare, and obstacles were numerous. Well, we still saw it as more of a challenge. After all, the path was clearly marked on the map, so we figured it would be doable. Right?

One of our hosts at least tried to contribute to our well-being and decided to take us under his wing for the first part of the trip. After that we'd have to figure it out for ourselves, we read on his face. Along the way, he occasionally pointed out how faint the markings had become, sometimes indistinguishable from the also blue-white bark tree bark fungi. He urged us to only continue on when we spotted the next marking later, when resuming the route. At that point, we were still on a double-track path, sometimes a bit overgrown, but nevertheless still reasonably easy to find if you kept your eyes open. Until, at one point, paying close attention, a much smaller ascending path turned off that was barely distinguishable as such, but indeed, it did have blue and white markings. Here, our angel companion also said goodbye, and we were once again entirely dependent on our own father-son turbo drive. And on God, you might say, but I kept that thought to myself for a moment. And what's in a name? For both of us, I think nature was like God himself, the source, the creation. God doesn't always make things easy for us, even in this wild natural paradise.

The markings were becoming rare, long ago established, and therefore difficult to find. We usually divided the tasks so that I stayed behind at one marking, while my son, acting as a scout, went ahead, searching for the next in a sort of semicircle around the last marker we found. When we arrived at a stream in a very sharp side valley we encountered along the way, it became very difficult, and we briefly considered descending along the stream. A potentially very difficult exercise, navigating challenging passages and overhanging natural forces. However, it was an exercise that would ultimately lead to finding some kind of habitation. We decided to continue searching for waymarkers. The terrain was opaque, with plants, trees, boulders, and everything else. I had to call out loudly to my son every now and then. It would be very frustrating if we lost each other as well as the "path." I was occasionally afraid of that. Fortunately, after half an hour, he finally found a waymarker, and we were able to take another few steps. And so it went on. On this mountainside with its rugged rock formations, walking straight ahead using GPS wasn't an option.

At one point, through swampy meadows, some habitation appeared. So we fixed it. Tired, we looked for a bivouac. When my son went looking for water and it seemed like he was going to be gone for quite a while, I felt the worry about his long absence creep back in, a feeling that had already gripped me several times that day.

The next day, we quickly arrived in the main valley between the Rila and Pirin mountains. We collapsed onto a terrace and, to our surprise, were addressed as public figures. Ah, apparently, our hosts at the floating hut had put us on Facebook with a gripping story about the failings of the nature reserve's management. The ranger, who enjoys speeding around in his sturdy four-wheeler,

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was confronted with his lack of attention to maintaining the trail markers. A little later, my son received a message from what we suspected was a local journalist who wanted to write a story about us. Anyway, through my son and Facebook, we exchanged the necessary information, along with accompanying photos, and from a rather deserted hotel, we were able to await the further publication. My son was very tired and could just be dragged to the restaurant an hour away. In the gathering darkness on the way back, we saw a few of those Pre-Wende stakes poking eerily into the damp and misty darkness of the evening. The journalist was very curious about what we wanted to do next; perhaps he could cover that too. "Perhaps you have an idea," we asked. It turned out his mother lived in a Christian enclave, Kovachevitsa, where he himself had been raised. The enclave was hidden deep in the mountains and served as a refuge for Christians who had fled cruel and intolerant Muslim regimes in bygone centuries. We understood it was an interesting place and decided to go there. How we were supposed to find his mother remained rather unclear until our arrival by bus and taxi in the village, wedged between hope and fear. We settled into the village pub. As we left, a woman approached us. We didn't realize it at first, but it turned out to be the journalist's mother. We were very much taken aback for an evening and night. We received a friendly welcome, and the mother was also greeted with pride for her deceased husband, who did hold a prominent place in the village. He was immortalized as a statue at the chapel towering over the village.

Here, too, we discussed our hiking plans for the day ahead. We explored a stretch of path that, according to reports, wasn't easy and wasn't the usual route to the outside world (which was very long). A friend of our hostess explained everything. The best option was to walk to the next Christian village, which was also a kind of pilgrimage site.

In principle, it was also possible to walk in a straight line along a few mountain ridges to the larger town. This would, however, involve passing through a few Muslim villages. She, upon second thoughts, advised us against this. In a tone of "I don't discriminate, but meanwhile," she indicated that she suspected it would be too strange for us. We wouldn't understand those Muslims, and vice versa. That wasn't the kind of story to scare off a Zander couple.

So, off we went. After the European-subsidized trail, the wilderness and the obscure paths returned. Along the way, we passed a few Muslim villages where, upon our kind request for water, we were offered ayran from their own kitchen to fill our water bottles. In short, the locals were very hospitable. We had to cross a few substantial mountain barriers without a map, fortunately with the help of villagers and our GPS. Around sunset, we arrived at our destination for the day, also a Muslim village. It was also quite isolated and, like the Christian village, not on a main road. Everyone there lived on the streets, and they were clearly not used to onlookers. And yes, for a moment it felt a bit strange, and we decided to find our bivouac spot a bit outside the village. We put on our sturdy hiking boots and asked if we could camp in a field somewhere. With the help of elementary school children who interpreted, we got some directions. And after asking again if we could be in the field with the horses, we were assigned a spot in a much better field without horse dung. We had barely pitched our tent when someone approached with a plastic bag. I sensed something coming. And yes, in stark contrast to "Christian" prophecies, they also believed here in encountering God in fellow human beings. And this, of course, is expressed here with a friendly greeting and, above all, food from their own village. And because it couldn't be finished, or rather, the food could be finished, the same thing happened again the next morning. When I woke up, I found a bag containing our breakfast hanging from the barbed wire fence.

So God doesn't care about some kind of fictional distinction between Christians and Muslims, was my optimistic view of the event. The sequence of our visits to a Christian and a Muslim enclave astonished me and struck me as strange. God did have a hand in this, as if something had to be

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made clear to us about the all-encompassing love that extends far beyond the confines of earthly beliefs. The next day we learned that the story the journalist had written wasn't for a local newspaper, as we initially thought, but a national Bulgarian daily. Just before we took the slow train to Plovdiv, we picked up two copies of the magazine at a gas station and discovered, as a second surprise, that we covered a full page. All in Cyrillic, of course. With Google Translate, we were able to follow it somewhat, and it turned out to contain a significant portion of text from my son's text messages. We were a little proud, but I thought to myself: God is great, I am blessed with this bond with my son, despite the misery I've experienced with my daughter. God is greater than these human stupidities, God is greater than just Christians. The God of Christians is too small, the God of Islam is too small, the light of Buddhism is too small.



The journalist had planned to publish this final piece of the story, essentially a sequel. After all, he had received so many positive reactions to his first piece. He didn't; I couldn't figure out why. He returned on LinkedIn with a number of unfollowable links from which I apparently had to extract an answer? Perhaps it was because Joshua, at my request, had mentioned that I also have a daughter who was deprived of these kinds of adventures with her own father. Was that too much for the ideal father picture the journalist had painted in his first article, or is my assessment colored by my own experiences? In any case, this story is also a miracle in progress, but no less of a miracle for that, of course.