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Diversity is Divine Will - An Essay on spiritual and Religious Pluralism and Inclusion

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Societal Inclusion in the 21st Century Series

Diversity is Divine Will

An Essay on Spiritual and Religious Pluralism and Inclusion

Effenus Henderson and Khaled A. Beydoun, Esq.

This essay is intended to serve as a tool for helping facilitate discussion and dialogue about religious and spiritual differences at home, in work teams, at school, and communities. Its key theme is one of seeking to understand and appreciate, not disparage others because of their differences.

It is not intended to be an in-depth resource on the topic but a background paper to help initiate discussion and learning, and to build intercultural and religious understanding

- Effenus Henderson

08 April 2010

Diversity is Divine Will

By Effenus Henderson and Khaled A. Beydoun, Esq.

Background



This essay, inspired by a conversation with a young Islamic Scholar at Claremont College and co-written by a young Arab-American Attorney raises the question about the concept of divine will and diversity. To make the essay richer and to broaden perspective about this issue a number of noted scholars and thought leaders were asked for input which is reflected in this essay.

If mankind is to advance societal and global inclusion in the 21st century, each of us has to critically examine our own personal and cultural attitudes and biases about spirituality, religious differences, and cultural heritage. We must strive to move beyond deeply held stereotypes and fear of one another if mankind is to survive. We must seek to understand and then to be understood. Regrettably, too many of us have a very narrow view and respect for the religious and spiritual differences of other people and societies. "As we strive to remove global commerce barriers, we cannot fail to realize, as English poet and preacher John Donne eloquently wrote, that "no man is an island, entire of itself."

Introduction

If you believe in God or *Allah* as the creator of humanity, you must also believe that human diversity is far more than simply an earthly circumstance, but divine will. The globe's rich diversity, multiculturalism and breadth are the manifestation of his divine purpose and will. So ask yourself: And, can I carry out the higher goal of harmony, cooperation, and peaceful co-existence espoused by many different philosophies, if I don't have love and respect for my brothers and sisters? "Agape" love must also extend to non-believers.

Pastor Don Mackenzie, Rabbi Ted Falcon and Sheikh Jamal Rahman, in the introductory chapter of their book, ***Getting to the Heart of Interfaith*** write: *"It's a matter of survival. We will survive only if we learn to treat ourselves, our neighbours, and our planet with greater wisdom, compassion, and caring. We will survive only if we learn to replace the current climate – of fragmentation, suspicion, and self-interest that has our planet warming, countries warring, and loving relationship waning – with more hopeful vision".*

"Can I truly love God and carry out his divine will, if I hate and disparage my fellow man?"

Diversity has been a cornerstone of human evolution. Not only did God shape human beings with different skin complexions and tones, he also allowed them to disperse across the globe thus

creating linguistic and cultural markers of difference. Diversity, therefore, transcends ethnic or racial identity, but also encompasses a vibrant milieu of perspectives, values, and ways of life. The broad spectrum that is humanity stems from a common root – and to me that root is a heavenly one. Diversity should therefore be embraced as part of our nature rather than a baseline for competition, let alone a source for disparagement. The latter is sacrilege since it is my belief that every person is made in the image of God (Hunter). However, diversity without an inclusive mindset is meaningless and dangerous.

Inclusion of Non- Believers

While there are many who profess a belief in God, secular humanism (non-belief) is an aspect of diversity that needs to be respected as part of the full spectrum of beliefs according to Dr Georgette F. Bennett, president and founder of Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding. As an organization that specializes in diversity, Tanenbaum knows that non-believers are often discriminated against and subject to a hostile work environment. We also know that non-believers can adhere to values that are as significant as religion-based values.

One contributor wrote: I have no religious or spiritual beliefs. As far as I'm concerned, we should all be free to believe as we wish, as long as we do not impose those beliefs on others or use them as an excuse for negative statements and actions (as the Pat Robertsons and Osama bin Laden's of the world do).

All in all, the contributor wrote, “it is not clear to me whether the total impact of religion on human existence has been positive (by stimulating acceptance, charity, etc.) or negative (by stimulating hatred, rejection, war, etc.). It is apparent that religious beliefs fill some human need; if they didn't, they wouldn't be so pervasive.” (Kravitz)

Secular humanism is a humanist philosophy that espouses reason, ethics, and justice, and specifically rejects supernatural and religious dogma as the basis of morality and decision-making. Like other types of humanism, secular humanism is a life stance that focuses on the way human beings can lead good, happy and functional lives.

I would be the last to condemn the thousands of sincere and dedicated people outside the churches who have laboured unselfishly through various humanitarian movements to cure the world of social evils, for I would rather a man be a committed humanist than an uncommitted Christian.

~Martin Luther King, Jr., *Strength to Love*, 1963

“And if thine eyes be turned towards justice, choose thou for thy neighbour that which thou choolest for thyself” - (Lawh'i 'Ibn'i Dhib, “Epistle to the Son of the Wolf” 30 Baha'i).

Free Will and the Golden Rule

Our collective free and adherence to principles espoused in the “golden rule” will be very instrumental in humanity’s long-term survival. I believe God willed in humanity the ability to think, plan, and reason in different ways. Yet, the range of ways shares a common purpose and outcome; whether for love, safety, survival, peace or legacy. The creator built an inclusive world with the “Golden Rule”— treat others as you would treat yourself. Tolerance, as well as respect, is important to peace, and the development of civilization. Even more, if we could learn to love and learn from one another, our differences would build our maturity and capabilities (Hunter). This love must extend to those of different faiths and to non-believers as well. Echoing that sentiment is a foundational Baha’i proverb, which states: *“And if thine eyes be turned towards justice, choose thou for thy neighbour that which thou chooseth for thyself”* - (Lawh’i ‘Ibn’i Dhib, *“Epistle to the Son of the Wolf”* 30 Baha’i).

In parts of humanity, I believe God created a sense of adventure and exploration for humanity to utilize as a means of stepping outside of geographic boundaries and comfort zones. Through adventure and exploration, God wanted us to bear witness to the beauty and joy his other



creations bring to human life, and the world at large. Fundamental to this enjoyment is the ability to allow the other to be different. Too often we prefer those who think, value and act as we do (Kirby), and are quick to dismiss novel perspectives or unique views.

Through divine will, God created those with extremely rational and inquisitive minds, whose penchant for solving complex problems helped facilitate the advancement of mankind. Over the course of history, innovation, and intellectual contribution arose from different points of the globe, testifying that many societies played a vital role in the advancement of civilization.

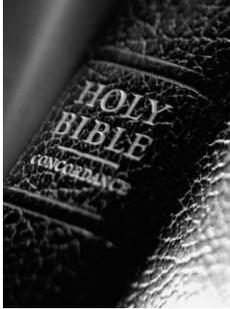
“Not one of you is a believer until he loves for his brother what he loves for himself”

Fortieth Hadith of an-Nawawi 13; Islam

Segments of mankind were created with a desire for order, control and protocol, so that life could be less chaotic and adversarial. The overriding goal was one of harmony. Process, rules, and the details of daily living were advanced by the efforts of these proponents of stability and organization. However some religious leaders believed that rules came directly from God and without human intervention.

Part of the goal of harmony is that many will not have to abandon the universal claims of their religion or non-belief in order to live in love and respect of others. One can believe that he has “the only way” if he at the same time is humble about his belief or is at least not pushy or manipulative about converting others (Hunter).

Dreamers were created who could craft a vision, and pursue a life dedicated to contemplation and thought. I believe these dreamers were those not satisfied with the status quo, and thus, dedicated their lives



contemplating better ways to affirm God's higher purpose, and motivating us toward his divine will. Hopeful, forward-looking and highly engaged, these dreamers shaped the

context for the evolution of human life.

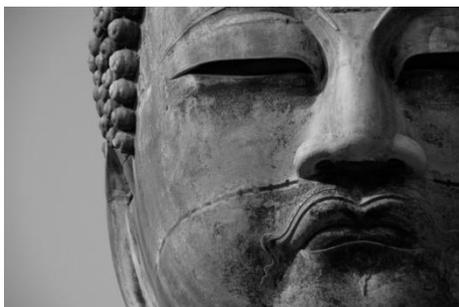
What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbour: that is the whole of the Torah; all the rest of it is commentary; Talmud, Shabbat 31a Judaism).

Human Gifts

Paul in the New Testament speaks of the diversity of human gifts in his words to the people of Corinth. He speaks of the diversity of gifts all working together ¹to advance God's divine will, *"But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to each one for the profit of all: for to one is given the word of wisdom through the Spirit, to another the word of knowledge through the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healings by the same Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another discerning of spirits, to another different kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually as He wills."*

Yet in God's divine purpose, the ultimate challenge of humanity's carrying out His divine will was highlighted. It is the challenge articulated in many tenets of the Ten Commandments, the Holy Koran, the admonishments of Buddha, and countless others holy books – even in the minds of non-believers. It is the challenge to love one another, to respect one another, and to help and collaborate with one another - even among those considered as, "the least of us." *"Not one of you is a believer until he loves for his brother what he loves for himself" (Fortieth Hadith of an-Nawawi 13; Islam).*

Harmony



respect and salvation (Nevez)."

Buddhism is a philosophy that reveres, nurtures, and harmonizes the diversity of all living beings, and holds that all living beings have the innate potential of becoming a *Buddha* - a being awakened to the power of the Mystic Law (*dharma*) in their life and in the Universe. In the *Lotus Sutra*, the historical Buddha, teaches that all beings are equally endowed with this Buddha nature (*dharma*), and therefore each individual being is worthy of "fundamental

So even in parts of humanity that do not believe in God or *Allah* (monotheism), they possess an innate belief in a greater power or universal consciousness. I believe they are carrying out his divine will in their own way. Yet as humankind has sought to carry out this divine will, many have sought to convince civil society and their followers that it can only be carried out by strict adherence to the doctrines or views espoused by generations of religious and political leaders. As a result, this divine will gets buried in religious ideological dogma and cultural or national bias and resentment. Many of us believe that many paths have been opened to lead different people to the divine will of the creator. Indeed, "We must learn to respect the different ways to God" (Kirby).

*Hurt not others in ways
you yourself would find
hurtful. --- Udana-Varga,
5:18 (Buddhism)*

Beyond Group Narcissm



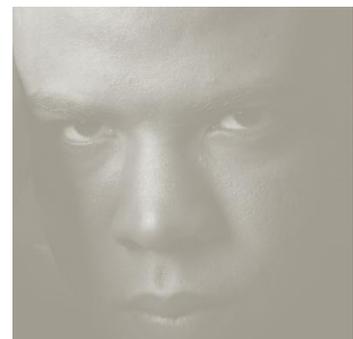
The danger is group narcissism – that is, the belief that one's own group holds a monopoly on truth. This belief leads to apocalyptic scenarios in which the world is divided into children of light versus the children of darkness. Once a person is labelled as one of the children of darkness, it is easy to disparage and dehumanize "the other" through verbal violence that ultimately leads to physical violence. Consequently, religious grandstanding leads to division and rifts are created between communities. And that is what we are seeing in today's sectarian conflicts (Bennett). Personal, organizational, and governmental gratification becomes the objective, or better yet, the will of an exclusive society bound by such traditions. The line of sight to God gets blurred in the end. *What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbour: that is the whole of the Torah; all the rest of it is commentary; Talmud, Shabbat 31a Judaism).*

The divine will of God becomes politicized, marginalized and restricted to the narrow vision of biased dreamers or capricious opportunists. In addition, it becomes hoodwinked by the analytical prescriptions of self-righteous rationalists and becomes trapped in the protocol and order of those favouring process over outcome. Each fostering attitudes of exclusion and of doctrinal demands as prerequisites to attaining God's divine will. *Treat others as thou wouldst be treated thyself. --- Adi Granth (Sikhism)*

Mary Francis Winters, a well known global diversity expert comments: *For me "inclusion" is divine will....diversity is divine creation. In other words we are each unique, divinely created with different purposes, skills talents, etc but it is the divine will of God for us to live inclusively valuing, respecting and loving each other (agape love).*

Leadership Narrow-mindedness

Diversity, God's divine will, becomes shattered by the will of such religious leaders and non-believers in secular society. Believers become polarized and his purpose for humanity becomes a pawn for the self-righteous whose path to God is the only way.



Trust is abandoned. Faith comes with a personal expectation that is void of hope. Love turns to bitterness, resentment, and fear. Such fear promotes the *zeitgeist* of terror, annihilation and genocide. Non-belief or secular humanism is an aspect of diversity that needs to be respected as part of the full spectrum of beliefs.

Recently, Minister Pat Robertson spoke of the wrath of God being waged on the innocent people of Haiti. He admonished us to think that the people of Haiti are cursed by God because they “made a pact with the devil.” Pat is not only wrong, but his allegations are inhumane. Perhaps the divine will of God, being levied on the sacrificial lambs in Haiti is a reminder of his awesome wonder and power. Perhaps the souls lost in this devastating event are blessed as the chosen ones to advance God’s ultimate purpose to love and to reach out to the least among us. And it is a reminder that if we are to survive, we must learn to love and respect one another. Indeed, the aftermath of the earthquake in Haiti conveyed how racial, religious, and national boundaries were momentarily dissolved, and every community extended its hand to aid their Haitian brothers and sisters. Although human beings are segregated by divisions during times of normalcy, these divisions tend to dissipate during times of crisis when a communal and humane spirit is vital. Without question, the global support for Haiti’s earthquake victims testifies to this. It is also a reminder that in times of calamity and death, his true and divine spirit emerges in expressions of love, support and comfort.

"It is at the same time ironic and logical that human solidarity should be most manifest during periods of crisis or suffering. It is ironic because happiness and contentment can paradoxically lead to an egocentric isolation, with the seeds of alienation ever present in a focus on material satisfaction. And logical because crisis and catastrophe strip away the ephemeral and make us concentrate on the essential elements of life - and of it's questioning in death. By the same token religious belief is at its most acute in such times. How unfortunate that we cannot take the learnings from moments of crisis and express the same degree of solidarity and compassion in our mundane daily lives: living in a permanent state of crisis could have its advantages in this respect" (Stopford).

It is clear that the answer to religious bigotry, is religious pluralism; the answer to religious violence, is religious peace; the answer to religious dogmatism is religious pluralism. It is only by revelling in our religious diversity that the peoples of the world will know peace.

- Reza Aslan

Religious Pluralism

One writer found it ironic the way religious fundamentalists of all kinds can find a rationale in their hatred. For example, the way the Southern Baptists during Jim Crow or South Africans during Apartheid found a biblical explanation for their bigotry. The current use of scripture as a justification for homophobia or heterosexuality, or the twisting of the message of the Koran by extremists, or for that matter, the hatred of Arabs by Jewish extremists or Arab hatred of Jews who, in the early *suras* of the Holy

Quran are described as “pigs and monkeys” and are described the same way in some Arab media re all vivid examples in recent history.

Bigotry in the name of God is still bigotry (Ross). As God or Allah has written the script for the journey toward his divine will for humanity, he calls for us to draw on the richness of our diversity. This divinely inspired reason for existing is instructive and purposeful in solving our challenges of sustainability, peace and ultimately global survival. *Respect for all life is the foundation. --- The Great Law of Peace (Native American)*

A man should wander about treating all creatures as he himself would be treated. ---

Sutrakritanga 1:11:33 (Jainism)

In his book, *The True Nature of Spiritual Idolatry*, by Steven Lambert, the author says that “*spiritual idolatry which bona fide believers are most guilty of committing even routinely, though unwittingly, is the idolatry of holding to false and contrived ideas about God that in fact are wholly incongruous with what He Himself has revealed in His Word concerning His Divine Nature, Will, and Ways. When it is all distilled down, idolatry is the ultimate form of arrogance and self-righteousness, for it supplants God and His Word, Will, and Way, and puts in His place a false, humanly formed and fashioned god, one made in our own image and after our own likeness, to affirm and hallow our own humanly contrived ideas and concepts. Thus, idolatry, in my view, is the ultimate offense that the human heart can commit against a Holy and Sovereign God.*”

Spirituality and the Environment

In some cultures, e.g., Buddhism, there is a deeply held belief in the interconnectedness of humanity and environment. This connection reinforces the concept of harmony with nature and our natural settings. We believe that this is not in conflict with the divine will of the creator. While some may argue that nature’s evolution was not a result of God’s divine will, this bio-diversity as a scientific and biological imperative has to be considered. \

Charles Darwin, the noted scholar who travelled the world by ship examining the sweeping richness of our planet’s natural life, identified the importance of variations and differences among specific organisms.

Through these observations on variations, he was able to gain insight into the “Great Blueprint of Life” or “God’s Creation,” a term he called evolution, i.e., change in a population of life over successive generations. Darwin’s theories have been supported by modern techniques in mapping the “atom of life,” the human genome (Nevez).

God’s Creations

Now, DNA and genetics has unravelled that variation is coded into the fabric of life itself. We are learning how environmental conditions combined with genetics plays an important role in

determining our diversity. For instance, scientists have demonstrated that skin pigmentation, a focus for racial differences, is a simple genetic adaptation to the environment over thousands of years depending on exposure to the sun near or away from equatorial climates for UV protection and vitamin D production (Nevez).

So the divine will goes beyond human diversity and incorporates an appreciation and respect for bio-diversity. Nevertheless, God's answer for achieving his divine will is inextricably bound to the richness of human diversity. The challenge is in overcoming centuries of bias, war, plundering, environmental degradation, genocide, and hate of those who are different. He reminds us that arrogance, greed and self-righteousness are not keys to his kingdom. *A man should wander about treating all creatures as he himself would be treated. --- Sutrakritanga 1:11:33 (Jainism)*

Warriors of the Rainbow

One reviewer, reflecting on her aboriginal background commented: There are different manifestations of the Great Spirit of the only and Wise Creator that in different ways, gives to the human beings the opportunity to choose their own path. She believes that *"There would come a time when the "keepers of the legend, stories, culture rituals, and myths, and all the ancient tribal customs would be needed to restore us to health. They would be mankind's key to survival; they were the "Warriors of the Rainbow". There would come a day of awakening when all the peoples of all the tribes would form a new world of Justice, peace, freedom and recognition of the Great Spirit."*

The "Warriors of the Rainbow" would spread these messages and teach all peoples of the Earth or "Elohi". They would teach them how to live the "Way of the Great Spirit". They would tell them of how the world today has turned away from the Great Spirit and that is why our Earth is "Sick".

The Warriors of the Rainbow would teach the people of the ancient practices of unity, love and understanding. They would teach of harmony among people in all four comers of the Earth.

In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets. ---

Matthew 7:12 (Christianity)

The Opportunity

The opportunity is in developing higher levels of thinking and collaborating with one another so that we all feel respected, included, engaged, loved and valued. It is an opportunity to *"keep an eye on the prize of his high calling."* *This is the sum of duty: do naught unto others which would cause you pain if done to you - The Mahabharata, 5:1517 Hinduism)*

God reminds us that our days are numbered as living souls. Many believe his will is already ordered. Our ability to aspire to his divine will is deeply embedded in our individual and collective choices about each other.

When our individual and collective legacies are recounted by the creator, what do we hope he or she will find? *In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets. --- Matthew 7:12 (Christianity)*

The question for all of us is: *“Can I truly love God and carry out his divine will, if I hate and disparage my fellow man?”*

Effenus Henderson and Khaled A. Beydoun, Esq.
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About the Authors



EFFENUS HENDERSON, Chief Diversity Officer for Weyerhaeuser Company, Federal Way, Washington where he advises the CEO and senior management team on diversity related matters. He is an internationally recognized diversity thought leader and has been invited by numerous companies and organizations to share his expertise.

He has addressed members of the General Assembly of the United Nations on intercultural and interreligious diversity, and also addressed a high level panel of the Alliance of Civilizations in Madrid, Spain in 2008 and in Istanbul Turkey in 2009. He also participated in high level dialogue sponsored by the High Commissioner on Human Rights in preparation for the 60th Anniversary Celebration of the Universal Declaration of human rights.

He was named as one of the top diversity officers in corporate America by Diversity Best Practices / Working Mother Media and received its first Diversity Officer Leadership Award in 2007. He was among the finalists for the second annual global ORC Peter C. Robertson Award for Equality and Diversity Champions. He was one of 100 Global Diversity Thought Leaders invited by the president of the Society of Human Resource Management to a special forum in April 2008 to provide a perspective on the future of global diversity and inclusion.

He serves on numerous boards including the National Urban League Board where he currently serves as president of the Council of Affiliate Board Chairs. He is also a member of the Institute for Inclusion, a US based group studying diversity and inclusion trends. He is a graduate of North Carolina Central University and the Stanford University Executive Program.



KHALED A. BEYDOUN, FOUNDER AND CEO OF WRITE TRACK ADMISSIONS. Born in Cairo, Egypt to a Lebanese father and Egyptian mother, and lived in the Middle East until the age of four. In 1982, family migrated to the metropolitan Detroit area, home to the most concentrated Arab population in the United States. Earned undergraduate degree from the University of Michigan-Ann Arbor, majoring in Arabic & Islamic Studies and Political Science, and subsequently earned Juris Doctor from the

University of California-Los Angeles School of Law.

During law school, I served as the Editor-in-Chief of the *Journal of Islamic & Near Eastern Law*, and took on a leadership role with diversity and coalition-building initiatives on campus, particularly post-9/11. After earning his degree, commenced legal career with the *American Bar Association-Rule of Law Initiative*, and then worked for the *American Civil Liberties Union*, *Clifford Chance LLP* in Dubai, and *Jaafar & Mahdi PC*.

Earned a fellowship at the University of Toronto Faculty of Law where he focused on comparative and international law, and earned LLM in 2008. Has published timely articles addressing human rights, diversity, and law in a range of prominent journals, including the *Berkeley Journal of International Law*, the *Harvard Journal of Policy*, the *Michigan Journal of Race & Law*, and the *Journal of Islamic Law & Culture*.

Other Contributors

May God bless our efforts to make this world a better place for us all. Best wishes,

Right Reverend Dr. John Onaiyekan -- Archbishop of Abuja, Nigeria

Dear Effenus -- thanks for your note, for reading, and for your passion. I wish I could be of help but I'm simply overwhelmed with commitments and deadlines -- I can't read anything beyond the work before me. But I appreciate your note. – Jeff Sharlet

Other contributors and commentators:

- Syed Rizwan, Student, Claremont College School of Religion
- Sister Joan Kirby – Temple of Understanding
- Dr. Georgette Bennett, Founder and President – Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding
- Dan Nevez – Institute for Inclusion
- Michael Stopford – Deputy Assistant Secretary General Strategic Communications Services in NATO's Public Diplomacy Division
- Dr. Joel Hunter, member President's Advisory Council on Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships
- Dr. Reza Aslan, an internationally acclaimed writer and scholar of religions
- Howard Ross, Founder and Chief Learning Officer, Cook Ross, Inc.
- Mary-Frances Winters, President and CEO, The Winters Group, Inc
- Graciela R. Yanovsky, President of FANCV, Buenos Aires, Argentina
- Dr. David A. Kravitz, Professor in the School of Management at George Mason University

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