

A CULTURAL DIVERSITY IN RELIGION 2

Subtitled: A Universal Quest for God-(for January 9, 2011)

(A Position Paper on Diversity and Spirituality)

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There is perhaps no subject that transcends the thoughts and emotions of man, as religion does and of all that can be discussed in the name of God. With its similarities and diversities come cultural cohesion and solidarity alike, making an amalgam of his beliefs as vast as the heavens.

All of this begins a point of departure in what shall be referred to as *diversity in religion*. Without attempting to make a comparative evaluation, this message or oration to the sympathetic: understanding of the people of other cultures explores both the similarities and differences in religious traditions. Further, it is an attempt to get a glimpse of our inner selves-who we are religiously. It identifies the wider company of God-seekers in an eye-opening and panoramic setting.

Long before I became enthralled with Huston Smith's 'Why Religion Matters,' I often wondered aloud why we were all different and if we were not all different, what made us the same and in what way? I have reluctantly concluded that the crisis the world finds itself in as it swings on the hinge of this new millennium is located in something deeper than anything else it has had to face.

Today I begin with this offering of heartfelt contemplation or thought by acknowledging one of my greatest challenges, which come to grips with my personal studies and the introspection as a student of religion (for many years) that coming to terms with genuine pluralism, is the most important agenda facing religious leaders. The question comes to mind as to whether we are going through a single common crisis whose cause is the spiritual condition of the modern world? If it is so, that condition is characterized by loss-the loss of religious certainties and of transcendence with its larger horizons. The nature of that loss is strange but ultimately quite logical. When the world lost its human dimension, that is, its ebb and flow of continuity rather than what constitutes

diversity, the stature of humanity started to diminish and we began to lose control of it.

In the introduction to the book *'The Protestant Mystics'*, W. H. Auden, writes, "All religions begin not with the present but the past for, when we ask a question about the meaning of the existence of ourselves and the universe, we and the universe are already in existence; all religions must therefore begin with cosmogonies, theogonies, and created myths. In addition, what we call, with delectable snobbery, the Higher Religions base their claim upon some event in historical time which has already taken place at such a time, and that this historical revelation is, for all future time, divine and redemptive."

Imagine for a moment, Yemenite Jews in a Synagogue in Jerusalem; dark-skinned men sitting shoeless and cross-legged on the floor, wrapped in the prayer shawls their ancestors wore in the desert. Can you see them, morning and evening, swaying back and forth like camel-riders as they recite their Torah, following a form they inherit unconsciously from the centuries when their fathers were forbidden to ride the desert horse and developed this pretense in compensation? Herein is their quest for God-a spiritual journey toward fulfillment. It becomes for them a path toward the light.

Visualize a Muslim completing his months Ramadan fast, praying five times a day prostrated toward Mecca? Somewhere in a tiny hut along the Ganges River, at the foot of the Himalayas-or a modest East Side New York apartment, a Swami will not speak today, religiously choosing to continue devotional silence, which with the exception of three days each year, he will keep for several years. The quest is to follow the teaching of the Quran in tune with Allah. It is a continual search for the meaning of existence beyond the placebo of religious thought-a journey nonetheless.

Consider the Buddhist who sat from four to six this morning, before the world broke upon him, he too was alone with the eternal privacy of the Buddhist shrine adjoining his home in Rangoon, here or Anytown, USA. At that, picture a couple of Zen Buddhist monks in Kyoto, ahead of our Buddhist worshipper by one hour.

They have been up since three this morning, and until eleven tonight will spend most of the day sitting cross-legged and immovable as they seek with intense absorption to plumb the Buddha-nature that lies at the center of their being. All of these are on a spiritual journey. All they have is their faith, especially in a day where religion-or rather, arguments over religion-divides us into even more entrenched and frustrated camps.

My mother and father gave me faith as a child. They were clue-less as to what I would become, yet I was never stifled as it related to learning. So I am now continuing the development from indifference to tolerance to genuine pluralism, which is a long, subtle, and perhaps a never-ending, process of growth corresponding to making something separate and distinct from others.

This is diversity in religion indeed. This description is of a strange fellowship. It is just another look at religion, not so unlike whatever you and I practice. Those I have mentioned are the God-seekers, lifting their voices in the most diverse ways imaginable to the God of all men.

How does it sound to Him? Is it some ridiculous babble or in some mysterious way does it blend into harmony? Does one faith carry the melody or the lead? Are there parts sharing in counterpoint and antiphony when not in a chorus?

It may be safe to say, that *"religious diversity is an important component of cultural diversity, which educators are now taking seriously in the science or profession of teaching. However, cultural diversity and religious diversity are often evaluated quite differently."*

Diversity, being defined as a *state or an instance of difference*; unlikeness has found its way into the mainstream of the world's thinking. Not by accident, but by incident, this word has also found its way into the pattern of communication, which understands the socialization of the world and its people.

Even though the word *cultural* precedes diversity, if by cultural is meant, having or pertaining to culture or a culture, then key words such as *acculturation*,

assimilation, cultural awareness, and cultural sensitivity has its place in spirituality as well.

Spirituality or as this noun implies, is the *quality or state of being spiritual, spiritual nature or character*. How we look at this term and its relationship to diversity cannot be separated from that which is cultural. Therefore, to address *diversity and spirituality* is to address it as *diversity in spirituality* as well.

When we turn to the question of which views are most important in diversity-the guiding principle has been relevance to the interests of the ethnic origin or orientation of those in question. Such relevance has been determined by weighing three considerations. Allow me to suggest: The first is sheer numbers.

There are some faiths with which every alert world citizen should be acquainted, simply because of the hundreds of millions of persons who live by him or her. Second, there is the question of relevance to the modern mind. Because the ultimate good that might come from a presentation such as this, even beyond that of world understanding, is a help to the reader or listener in ordering and quickening his own life. Thus, priority has been given to these religions' contemporary expressions. The third consideration is universality. Every religion is a blend of universal principles and local setting. The former principles, when lifted out and made clear, speak to man as man, whatever his time or place.

Religious diversity is and has long been a fact of social life. Having spoken to you today in such manner, my question for you is: What should the liberal religious person's response to religious diversity be? In the covenant of some Unitarian Universalist churches, it has been recognized that the importance of going beyond tolerance in relation to the diversity that exists.

As an African American, I have realized that African Americans practice the three main monotheistic religions as well as Eastern and African religions. The predominant faith is Christian; the second largest group of believers accepts the ancestral religions of Africa-Verdun, Santeria, and Myal; and a third group of followers practices Islam. Some people within the African American community

also practice Judaism and Buddhism. In the circles where there are so-called atheists, that is, among African Americans, there is perhaps some explanation regarding unbelief in a deity. If a belief rests in a longing, it could be argued that faith in God reflects nothing more than our longing that there should be a God. Yet it could be argued that a belief that there is no God rests on exactly the same basis - a hope and desire that this is, in fact, the case. Therefore, atheism is as much a matter of faith as Christianity. Herein lies another particular diversity; it is devoid of spirituality.

In the African American community "being religious" may be nothing more than having faith in a higher power on which they depend as the first, last, and only source of help in coping with seemingly unmanageable problems, sicknesses, disease, and so forth. This had been my teaching. Others may equate it as being a "spiritual person" -they view religion and spirituality as so closely intertwined that the two concepts blend as one. However, many significant religious influences in African American communities, once known as "the Black church" no longer have the same meaning as it did 50 to 75 years ago, hence, a dichotomy of a sort.

The religious community offers more than a "nice extra." It is a vital factor promoting physical, spiritual, and emotional well being. Because the human individual was created to live in harmony with other people and with God, the religious or faith community has an important responsibility within the healing dynamic. Many factors affect entire congregations. A spiritual community can hear the needs of its members and feel compelled to respond. There is a need for direction in spiritual leadership to mobilize an initial response to those needs. The spiritual dimension is not a frill; it is basic to good health care-soul, mind, and body. The living relationship of extended spiritual care causes a community to be strong, loving and wise.

Understanding the role of religion in the lives of people of diversity perhaps should be looked at from another point of view. This point is summed up in the church of public opinion. Diversity in religion can be misleading. That is to say,

when it comes to religious beliefs, people say one thing and do another. Would you agree?

The question of *one religion being as good as another* has little to do with spirituality. However, religion with its diversity is an issue that intrigues and perplexes modern men with a new intensity now that we live in a globalized community where direct contact is common. I must admit here, time is not a friend. I can go no further.

In conclusion, religion is not primarily a set of beliefs, a collection of prayers, or a series of rituals. Religion is first a way of seeing. It is the search for the presence of God and the difference that presence makes in our lives. That is a sublime idea. It cannot change the facts about the world we live in, but it can change the way we see those facts, and that in it can often make a real difference. Churches, synagogues, temples and mosques are the result of human efforts to bring that sublime idea down to earth, and are as imperfect as their human creators are.

True religion goes beyond making sense. It does not offend reason it transcends reason. Religion can disagree and still be true because people's spiritual needs come in different forms. If religion, according to Karl Marx, "*is the opium of the people*", then the state of its euphoria fits into a macrocosm of belief beyond what is known as God. Thus, spirituality however diverse becomes relevant to the basic tenets of that religion. Although, religion is the quest for God, the human effort is to transcend life's limits through a relationship with the divine, and demands some spirituality if nothing more.

The *god of this world* has successfully used religion in its subtlety to counterfeit spirituality; therefore, diversity has become its most powerful tool, and personal freedom and institutional diversity have made the modern world a very different place to be. ***Churches do not make religious people; rather, religious people make churches-and diversity in spirituality.***