

# **“More than Tolerance: Rihani on Intercultural Reconciliation”**

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“Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and right-doing there is a field.

I’ll meet you there.”

-Jalaluddin Rumi

“I want to live without hatred, to love without jealousy, to rise without arrogance, and to advance without delaying those who are beneath me or envying those who are above me. This is my norm, and the others may adopt a norm that suits them.”

-Ameen Rihani, *Extremism and Reform*, p. 74

FIRST DRAFT

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## **One World, Many Worlds: The Challenge of Diversity**

As we scan the horizon of the world today, we find that it is hard to be certain if our world is coming together or coming apart. The context of international affairs has shifted. We have moved from a world of empires to a world of states, and from a world of states to a world of peoples. The ideal standards of international politics have shifted as well, such that it is no longer viewed as acceptable that one people should rule another, yet the international norms that we have developed are honored as much in the breach as in the observance. We have created the institutional forms of international cooperation and global governance, but have not yet succeeded in forging a sense of global political community and human solidarity that might provide these forms with substance and life. We find ourselves caught in the tension between precept and practice, without sufficient reserves of trust, goodwill, and mutual appreciation to accord to others the same rights that we demand for ourselves.

This basic dilemma – the gap between ideal norms and realities of practice – may be approached from many angles. Viewed from a political angle, the world lacks both consistent moral leadership and a dynamic balance of power among co-equals, either of which might help to generate stable, principled cooperation among diverse – and often fractious – states. Viewed from an economic angle, the world does not even appear to be one world. Well over one billion people live in absolute poverty, while others reside in material affluence. Viewed from a cultural angle, our world reveals still more fault lines, among the ethnic groups that constitute multi-national states as well as among the macro-cultural conglomerates that we refer to as “civilizations.” Globalization has created a new reality of functional interdependence much more quickly than it has produced global citizens.

What we experience today, then, is a simultaneous existence of “one world” and “many worlds” – of an emergent, global frame of reference for human life and a world of differences and conflicts. We find ourselves in need of a new, overarching narrative, yet know that any attempt to artificially construct such a narrative is doomed to failure. We find ourselves searching for a common binding culture, but recognize that, insofar as such a culture can truly exist, it must grow organically from the shared experiences and interactions of diverse peoples. A global outlook,

narrative, or culture cannot be imposed or created by a committee. It must be an authentic expression of a new way of experiencing the world, of finding unity amidst diversity.

In this search for a positive, global vision, we find ourselves in need of exemplars as much as exegeses. We need something more than an abstract set of intellectual ideas. At the same time, we need a concept of coexistence that moves beyond the “negative” notion of tolerance developed in the course of the European Enlightenment. To “survive and become human,” we need to need one another. We need to benefit in some way, large or small, from the existence of “others.”

Tolerance alone suggests the acceptance of things that we do not like. It can create space for difference, but it cannot build community. To be tolerant is to respect the right of another to disagree, to diverge, to dissociate, and perhaps even to infringe on our own cultural, personal, or ideological comfort zone. Though useful in the case of disputes among people who hold different opinions yet share a common sense of identity, efforts to constructively deal with *major* cultural differences require aspiration toward intercultural reconciliation, in which areas of both common ground and complementarity are actively sought amidst diversity.

In our search for a positive approach to reconciliation amongst cultures, we can derive important inspiration from the thought and practice of the Lebanese-American writer Ameen Fares Rihani (1876-1940). In his life and outlook, we can find a compelling model for a new way of being human – a way that is simultaneously cultural and multi-cultural, integrated and dynamic, particular and universalistic.

This paper advances the thesis that, for Ameen Rihani, the reconciliation of cultural differences involved more than just the reasonable toleration of differences in values, political ideas, metaphysical belief systems, folk customs, symbols, and forms of ritual worship. In this respect, Rihani went beyond the Western enlightenment paradigm of toleration as espoused by such exemplars as Voltaire, and developed his own approach to reconciliation as an existential search for a way of being that transcends but includes opposites. For Rihani, reconciliation was a matter of both the head and the heart, requiring both clear thinking and an expansion of personal identity

– a capacity to be more, tolerate more, and appreciate more through the development of an intellectually grounded but deeply felt sense of magnanimity and generosity.

### **Rihani on Tolerance and Reconciliation**

Rihani’s approach to intercultural reconciliation is best understood as an outlook and practice that developed gradually, over time, in a way that reflects the development of his own identity. Though he was quick to develop an intellectually critical attitude toward all forms of intolerance rooted in traditional cultures, the evolution of Rihani’s thinking did not stop with the celebration of free thinking and the espousal of forms of national unity that renounce religious confessionalism. Inspired by Western transcendentalist writers as well as by Middle Eastern Sufi literature, Rihani came to seek a broad, inclusive outlook – a “both/and” view of the world that was spacious enough to accommodate seemingly contradictory elements: Easterners and Westerners; dervishes and stockbrokers; Turks, Armenians, and Arabs; Muslims, Christians, and Jews. It is in his efforts not merely to *transcend* narrow and dogmatic parochialisms, but also to *include* different but complementary ways of being in his own personal synthesis, that Rihani’s orientation toward reconciliation can be discovered. Rihani perceived that to accept more, a person must *be* more, and that the foundations of coexistence and reconciliation are both intellectual and experiential.

### **Rihani’s East and West**

As a young Lebanese immigrant coming of age in the United States, Rihani found himself suspended between two worlds. At one extreme was the “East,” his homeland of Lebanon, Syria, and the larger Arab world – a land that, in his mind was possessed of numerous virtues and vices. His East was soulful, spiritual, full of heart – and yet also stagnant, occupied, and bound by repressive traditions. At the other extreme was his new reality, the “West” as represented by America, the “Eldorado across the Atlantic.” In the West, Rihani encountered not only cash registers and commercialism, but also of enticing ideas and systems of knowledge – freedom, equality, science.

To be sure, Rihani’s experience of being somehow “out of place,” or alternately attracted and repulsed by conflicting realities, is commonplace among migrants and

displaced persons in every era. What was uncommon about Rihani, however, was his affirmative response to this condition, marked by a drive for understanding and synthesis. While most “culturally hybrid” individuals are, through a process of situational compartmentalization and adaptation, willing to live with multiple and imperfectly integrated identities, Rihani did not accept fragmentation. Rihani refused to live a divided life, and it is in his refusal to submit to the culturally polarized habits of thinking which surrounded him that we may locate the true dynamism behind Rihani’s intellectual outlook and paradigm for reconciliation.

For Ameen Rihani, “East” and “West” were more than points on a compass or tired categories used by apologists for European imperialism. They were poles of his being. While for many European and North American writers the “East” was a reality that could be regarded with disdain and, in duller moments, idle romanticism, Rihani experienced the “East” as an integral part of his own identity. Similarly, while for many Lebanese migrants the “West” was primarily a land of commercial necessity or opportunity, it, too, was a place to which Rihani felt a deep and genuine bond. Despite the baggage that these terms carried – or perhaps because of it – they were functional for Rihani, and he employed them to explain the tensions and contradictions of his own experience and inner life.

### **Aspects of Rihani’s Worldview**

#### *A Progressive Outlook*

As a young, iconoclastic writer living alternately in New York City and Lebanon at the turn of the century, Ameen Rihani developed a strong affinity for Western intellectualism. He advanced a way of thinking that bore the stamp of the European progressive tradition, with equal emphasis on such revolutionary ideals as liberty, equality, and fraternity. His early universalism appealed to the power of science to reshape traditional worldviews and to the appeal of universal ethical principles, which he sought to trace to both Western philosophical and Eastern prophetic traditions. He developed a passion both for reforming Arab culture and for instilling it with a new sense of solidarity beyond the confines of creed and sect, as well as a highly critical attitude toward all forms of intolerance and obfuscation. To this end, he showed no mercy for hypocrisy or injustice of any variety – be it “oriental” or “occidental” – and espoused an ideal of toleration that was substantively akin to the Enlightenment

definition, with its emphasis on affirming human freedom and accepting the legitimacy of differences in values and belief systems.

This “Western” aspect of Rihani’s writings is at its most pronounced in his early writings on political freedom, religious reform, freedom of thought (*A Treatise on the French Revolution, The Triple Alliance of the Animal Kingdom, The Muleteer and the Monk*). In these works, Rihani offered a potent critique of traditional culture and the boundaries it imposed upon the human mind. He found a precedent for his own outlook in the works of the blind Arab poet Abul-‘Ala, whom Rihani viewed as an authentically Arab voice for reason, freedom of thought, and tolerance predicated upon humanism and skepticism. Though new elements would soon enter Rihani’s field of interest, his affirmation of humanistic universalism and toleration remained constant. In his essay *Extremism and Reform*, Rihani affirmed religion but denounced every form of denominationalism, sectarianism, or clannishness – every “small human thought which removes itself from the greater circle of humanity, so it rarely gives credit to anyone other than its sons and rarely wishes well to anyone other than its sons” (pp. 56-57). “I am certain,” proclaimed Rihani, “that tolerance, even if you did not benefit from it, is better than fanaticism, even if you profited from it” (p. 63).

In brief, Ameen Rihani affirmed tolerance and denounced fanaticism until the end of his life, and pursued a critical, analytic mode of thinking as far as it could take him. But existentially he needed something *more* than tolerance – an affirmation, a way of being that was both intellectual and soulful. He found this way of being by turning his face toward his “East.”

#### *An Expansive Embrace*

The more Rihani matured in his experiences of the Arab world and America, the more he sought to transcend those habits of human thought which unnecessarily fragment our world, leaving irreconcilable gaps between “self” and “other.” By the time he wrote *The Book of Khalid* in 1911, Rihani had made transcending the avoidable “either/or” a lifestyle. By living within the tensions of his own composite, “East and West” identity, Rihani was able to avoid submitting to the “common sense,” “consensual reality” of any one culture, becoming a remarkably dynamic and authentic individual.

As a person who became familiar with the contrasting values and visions of two cultures at a very young age, Rihani was better positioned than most people to attain to a reflexive, post-conventional worldview. Over time, Rihani came to realize that enculturated groups of human beings, like individuals, derive a sense of coherent meaning and identity as much from what they exclude as from what they include. For example, the orientalist writings about “East” and “West” that Rihani discovered during his long sojourn as “vagabond on the highway of education” tell us as much about the “West’s” sense of identity and ideal cultural values as they do about the “East.” They tell us that the “West” is *more* civilized because it values reason, innovation, and progress, while the “East” is *less* civilized because it presumably does not. Orientalism, then, provided Westerners with a means of articulating a sense of identity *in contrast* to the identity of the Eastern “other.” This sense of identity, like most human thinking, was based on simple, either/or dichotomies that split the world into opposing camps by first positing two “pure,” abstract qualities and then elevating one above the other. The dichotomies framing ideal-type Western culture were (and are) numerous, including reason vs. passion, science vs. faith, progress vs. tradition, freedom vs. tyranny, democracy vs. authoritarianism, individualism vs. collectivism, culture vs. nature, and civilization vs. barbarism.

Rihani was excited by the appeal of many Western cultural values, but unwilling to accept the ways in which they had been articulated at the expense of the Eastern “other.” He recognized that, in the vanity of individuals and of nations and cultures, “others” are useful because they tell us what “we” are not. In our imaginations, they comfort us and flatter us. “You are great; I am degenerate.” “You are advanced; we are primitive.”

“Others” help us to reinforce our sense of individual or collective self-esteem and self-worth. They provide us with a sense of boundaries within which we can pull ourselves together and create a sense of unity by excluding that which we would prefer to disown or that which we have, as a group, deemed contemptible. Moreover, “others” provide us with excuses, and even with reasons for throwing our weight around in the world or denying our own power to effect change. Through processes

that psychologists describe as externalization and projection, they help us to live with blessed illusions – and even with lies.

Needless to say, Rihani was impatient with lies and distortions, and anxious to transcend to the limitations and deceits imposed by conceptions of the cultural “other.” He achieved this through a process that is both similar to and different from contemporary critiques of orientalism. He opposed, at every step along his way, concepts of innate cultural superiority – what we refer to these days as the problem of “cultural triumphalism” – while seeking to recast the presumed strong traits of his East and his West in ways that rendered the two macro-cultural tendencies *complementary* rather than dichotomous. In other words, he sought to counteract the *distortion* and *devaluation* of presumably Eastern traits, without seeking to deconstruct ideas of cultural difference altogether. In the process, he also overcame the false “reflect or reject” dilemma that has beset many individuals from more traditional (i.e., “non-Western”) cultures in their encounters with the West, again by maintaining his own intellectual and existential independence to define his own authentic identity and personality.

Rihani recognized that Western claims of individual autonomy and self-determination are only provisionally true, for culture tends to shape the individual more than the individual shapes culture. Following the example of the most free-spirited Westerners (Whitman, Thoreau, Emerson) and the most independent-minded Easterners (the prophets, the poets, and the Sufis), Rihani sought to affect his own breakthrough to integration and authenticity. He created his own hybrid identity and offered his personal experience as a model for bridging – and reconciling – cultural differences.<sup>1</sup> Implicitly, he recognized the East within the West and the West within the East: each was capable of the other’s strength, yet predisposed to another central tendency. America, after all, had produced the transcendentalists that Rihani so admired, and Arabia had produced Abul-’Ala, an exponent of free inquiry if ever there was one.

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<sup>1</sup> Some contemporary scholars may claim that the concepts of East and West that Rihani produced “essentialize” the two poles of his experience. Rihani himself might plead guilty to such an accusation, with the qualification that these were *his* East and *his* West: they were real enough in his own experience, and in that sense true.

Rihani retained his critical worldview and his valuation of tolerance, but went one step further than most humans are willing and able to go: he sought a prolonged engagement with “otherness” – an embrace of the poles of his own experience – so that he might be transformed through his own dialectical process of inquiry. Rihani found something to admire and something to criticize in each of his parent cultures, and forged his own compound identity in reference to what each had offered him through inherent strengths carried to the point of excess: spirituality and materialism, soul and science, heart and head. In the process, he reconciled the two cultures within himself, providing an example to others of a new way of synthesizing values and ways of being – a balance between the critical intellect and intuition, between the poetic and the practical, between the worldly and the spiritual. In the end, Rihani found that he was both “Eastern” and “Western,” yet neither. “We are not of the East or of the West/ No boundaries exist in our breast:/ We are free.”

### **Embracing “Otherness”: Lessons from Rihani’s Example**

“He drew a circle and shut me out;  
A renegade, a heretic, a thing to flout;  
But love and I had the wit to win –  
We drew a circle that took him in.”

--Edwin Markham,

cited in Rihani’s *Extremism and Reform*, p. 72

“I am a Lebanese, volunteering for the service of the Arab nation, and we are all part of it. Moreover, I am an Arab volunteering for the service of humanity, and we are all part of it.”

--*Extremism and Reform*, p. 69

Left unanalyzed and unexplored, our cultural concepts of the “other” deceive us, and permit us to live fragmented and – all too often – false lives in which certain dimensions of our human potential are stifled and repressed. Rihani’s brilliance lies in his refusal to accept compartmentalization, incoherence, or provincialism, and in his intent to draw upon the full resources of more than one culture to achieve his own personal integration as a human being. Even in his nationalism, Rihani sought balance and integration: his Arab nationalism was a *particular* means of achieving achieving a *universal* end: human dignity and self-determination. In his own paradoxical way, Rihani was a particularistic universalist, or a universalistic

particularist. Perhaps a better way of stating this is that he favored a *rooted* universalism – a universalism of extension, inclusion, and openness to others rather than a static canon of propositions and principles that others must accept. Rihani saw universalism not as an outlook emanating from any particular culture or locale, but rather as an outgrowth of the full flowering of human cultures through their interaction with one another. Never a defender of Western cultural triumphalism or an advocate of Eastern cultural autarky, Rihani proposed that cultural exchange can be a boon to humanity every bit as much as commercial exchange of more tangible commodities.

Three characteristics appear to predominate in Rihani’s model for reconciliation. First, Rihani pioneered a mutualistic outlook, in which the “other” is an ally rather than a foil. Second, he demonstrated the potential of spiritual aspiration, shorn of communalistic pretense, to actively bridge gaps between cultures in an all-inclusive search for truth, integration, and common ground. Third, he maintained an outlook that was simultaneously characterized by cultural empathy and political acumen.

The first characteristic, a mutualistic outlook in which the “other” is an ally, goes against the grain cultural and communal life. It requires independence of mind and moral courage to articulate an ideal of complementarity – “*Us and Them*” – as a counterpoint to the communal or sectarian outlook of exclusivity – “*Us and them.*” Such an inclusive outlook, however, is indispensable to every person who would be a seeker of truth beyond the pretensions and illusions of the collectivity – that is, to every person who would wish to truth know himself or herself by knowing the truth of the “other.”

The second characteristic, a spiritually motivated search for integration and reconciliation, is closely related to the first. The embrace of otherness must come from a deep and courageous space within the self – from a sense of identity that most cultures would regard as spiritual. Spirituality, in a Rihanian sense, includes willingness to face the cultural shadow, and to discover there something worthy of respect. This principle is eloquently expressed in Rihani’s stated aspiration to “live without disliking anyone,” and is responsive to a contemporary need cited by international relations scholars Abdul Aziz Said and Charles O. Lerche III:

A new ethic must allow humanity to experience itself as complete.... It must value acceptance of the self as a whole, embracing the unconscious as well as conscious. The integration of the personality at the individual level becomes a metaphor for the integration of humanity at the species level. (Said, Lerche, & Lerche, p. 292)

For Rihani, difference was an opportunity to learn another way of being human – not a problem. The intercultural encounter was a path of integration, and Rihani thrived on it, drawing observations from his intercultural experiences in the United States, the Middle East, Europe, and India into his writings.

The final characteristic of Rihani’s approach to reconciliation, his simultaneous utilization of cultural empathy and political astuteness, is also deeply imprinted in his style of expression and conduct. In his writings about contentious political subjects, Rihani was often a harsh critic of what he saw as the cultural vices of Arabs, Americans, petty despots, and assorted, garden-variety imperialist powers. At the same time, he resisted temptations to dehumanize adversaries, and sought to temper criticism with magnanimous affirmation and an appeal to the better nature of his counterpart. Culturally, he called for mutual appreciation and respect – indeed, for the empathic effort to enter the perceptual world of the other – and politically, he sought an equalization of relations among nations and cultures, a level playing field upon which each could become an asset for the other.

Rihani was a pioneer, and through his life he has offered us a model for intercultural reconciliation. Should we choose to follow his example, we might find that many of the contradictions that beset us today – for example between “Islam” and “the West,” or between America and the Arab world – begin to shift in their appearance and character when taken to a deeper existential level. We might discover completion in the midst of distinctiveness, and unity within our inescapable interdependence of fate.