

## **Cross-Cultural Approaches of Reconciliation**

### **Ameen Rihani and H. G. Wells**

#### **Abstract**

**In a world of growing ethnic conflicts and extremist movements, the call for human values and cultural dialogue with an attitude of tolerance and reconciliation becomes evermore indispensable and crucial. Writers around the world who voiced this ideal point of view were more concerned with the human being than the political and social environments that may, or may not, serve humanity best.**

**The purpose of this paper is to show the similar human concerns of the two writers, Ameen Rihani and H(erbert) G(eorge) Wells, in spite of the fact that each one of them came from a different cultural background and dealt with the issue from his own perspective. This paper asserts that the relationship between Rihani and Wells is based on a common ideal of internationalism that requires the recognition and the acceptance of the other individual or group of people. The two writers wrote about each other and about this common cause. Both of them discussed those political and social concerns that would give rise to a friendly and understanding spirit among the nations of the world. Both of them contributed, at different levels, to the cause of a just and human internationalism and globalism.**

#### **Introduction**

A significant understanding of the Orientalist literature is the consideration that it is not always a movement friendly with the East. Internationalism, or globalization in a modern term, seems to be, in a way, a new political diversion neglecting the proper value of smaller nations and ethnic groups around the world. As much as technology is trying, willingly or unwillingly, to combine efforts around the planet, politics is ending up, with or without planning, by dividing these efforts and trying to re-enforce economic power over poor and weak nations. In the middle of this conflict, that started more than a century ago, a voice from the East called, as early as 1922, for an “Orientalism that is not anti-European,” an Orientalism “that is cradled, on the contrary, in European thought, and [for] an internationalism that is willing to concede temporarily to the nascent nationalism of the world, both extending, moreover, in a converging direction.” (Rihani, *A Fellow Correspondent*: 3, *The White Way and the Desert*, MS).

In order to focus on the subject of East and West, Rihani took the issue as a case study to raise a significant question that could be the key for the discussion. He asks: "How long will it remain, in the solution of our foreign problems, a question of East and West. When will it become, in other words, a question essentially of justice, if not also of ethics." (A Fellow Correspondent: 3) It is obvious here that Rihani wanted to shift the issue of East and West, as a real example of internationalism, from the political level to the moral level, from a cause of ethnic interest to a cause of human values. In other words a true reconciliation of East and West cannot be a political settlement; it must be an ethical and intellectual rapprochement if it wants to be a true, solid and long living cordiality. In this sense a mutual intellectual understanding between two poles, a proper communication on the highway of knowledge, becomes absolutely necessary for any aspect of adjustment between two beliefs, two nations, two cultures related to different geographic and historic regions around the world. In this sense it becomes a matter of conduct and discipline for each to recognize the other<sup>(1)</sup> and to build a powerful bridge of understanding and love in order to reach the one on the other side and, sometimes, on the other far end.

### **Perspectives of Reconciliation**

One of the historical interpretations of tolerance and reconciliation was directly related to religious and political liberties. The British Prime Minister William Ewart Gladstone spoke out in 1883 supporting freethinkers and confirming:

**I am convinced that upon every religious, as well as every political, ground, the true and the wise course is not to deal out religious liberty by halves, by quarters, and by fractions but to deal it out entire, and to leave no distinction between man and man on the ground of religious differences from one end of the land to the other.** (William Safire, *Lend Me Your Ears*, 1992: 764)

To be tolerant, therefore, is to believe in religious and political liberty that allows no partition and no separation of the principle of liberty itself<sup>(2)</sup>. To be tolerant is, also, to practice no discrimination between individuals or groups of people based on their cultural differences. Discussing tolerance, therefore, is discussing liberal-minded individuals and liberal-minded groups of people.

In an answer to Rihani's question, "If the liberal-minded Orient ... looks toward Europe for help, what have you left to give it?", Wells replies: "The technical sciences." To this common answer Wells adds a substantial significance by linking science with another dimension based on a fundamental human factor: freedom. He considers that national and social freedom depends on economic

freedom which can only be attained through the mastery of sciences. Rihani agrees with Wells on linking the political freedom with the economic and social ones, however his Oriental heritage makes him aware of the lack of spiritual values in the Wells approach. "He saw no spirituality nor the need of it", Rihani comments. (A Fellow Correspondent: 4)

Perhaps it is interesting here to observe Wells's material and economic mutual understanding versus Rihani's moral and intellectual reconciliation. Both may be political but each one coming from a different perspective. This could be elaborated by taking the example of their two contradictory statements on poetry in the East: Wells remembers "something about the Orient suffering from too much poetry" (A Fellow...: 4), and Rihani observes the "poetic and prophetic rhapsodies... and the spirituality of the Arabs [that] looms up in a crude splendor beside which refinement is but a thing of culture, a commonplace, indeed, of art." (Rihani, *The Lore of the Arabian Nights*, 2002 [posth.], Chapter 1: p. 22) It is clear how Wells's reconciliation is non-spiritual contrary to Rihani who, in spite of his materialist tendency and realistic approach, could not resist the influence of the spiritual Orient as part of his cultural and social heritage. However if reconciliation is a political issue to Wells and an ethical issue to Rihani, to both it is a clear and basic human cause, a cause characterized by accepting the different "forms"<sup>(3)</sup> of the relative beliefs.

## **A Devilish Dialogue**

Imaginary dialogues between two contradictory poles usually represent the relativity of truth which leads to sarcasm and irony<sup>(4)</sup> in our interpretation of the world. A fascinating ironic plot and a similar form of expression were used by both writers: a dialogue between God and the Devil or Satan. To Rihani the dialogue with the Devil, written by Wells, was a "brilliant performance. Mr. Wells has created a most interesting devil, a devil with a knowledge of evolution and a fine sense of humor." (A Fellow...: 5) Rihani describes the Wellsian Devil as an "honest" creature whose "genius has a scientific, modern twist." (A Fellow...: 6) But one might ask what does the devil have to do with the idea of reconciliation? Rihani considers that Wells's devil stirs up things for God's benefit. In other words his role is to stimulate our interest in the other party, or to redirect the current in the direction of the other side. How is that done? Rihani has two key words in answer to that question: science and humor. In Wells contemporary novel *The Undying Fire* (1919) Satan says:

**If it had not been for me [Man] would still be a needless gardner...  
Think of it... Perfect flowers! Perfect fruits! Never an autumn  
chill! Never a yellow leaf! How bored he would have been! How**

**bored! Instead of which, did I not launch him on the most marvelous adventures? It was I that gave him history. (*The Undying Fire: 7*)**

The reader can pinpoint the spirit of evolution in these words, the spirit of adventure, stimulation and provocation as a process of history making. A similar spirit could be traced in Rihani's Satan when he wrote in 1935 an essay in Arabic entitled "رسالة الشيطان" or "Satan's Role" saying:

**I have to complete the work of God by assisting Man in illuminating the pathway of continuous evolution and ongoing development. My duty is to warn Man, provoke him, excite him and seduce him... My duty is to stir up whatever is rigid and stiff in the spirit of the human being. (*Ar-Rihaniyat, The Rihani Essays, 10<sup>th</sup> edition, 1987: 379-380*)**

Satan elaborates his role at the end of this essay by explaining:

**If Man cannot please himself, then God and myself are unable to please him. We, three, are partners in the same work, we are the sacred three corner stones of life: God, Man and Satan... We will work together to renew the youth of the World and revive the hope in life. We will open the door for Man's new endeavor and reform. (*Ar-Rihaniyat: 398, 401*)**

In a final comparison between the two Satans, of H. G. Wells and Ameen Rihani, it may be noticed that the first Satan came from the West wearing the two hats of science and humor as a means of reconciliation. Sixteen years later, the second Satan came from the East with a romantic sensation, a poetic flavor, a scientific and humorous touch, guiding us into an inquisitive journey to the world of curious spirits; a journey reminding us of Al-Ma'arry's "*Letter of Repentance*" (*Risalat ul Ghufuran*) رسالة الغفران that Rihani admired and inspired<sup>(5)</sup>. Both Satans were far-sighted, using both eyes to see the other face of the coin, the other side of the Mountain, as a better means for tolerance and reconciliation.

## **Criticism and Attraction**

The two writers first met in Washington during the Conference for the Reduction of Armaments in 1921. From the very beginning Rihani had to criticize H.G. Wells. Wells, according to Rihani, used to write his daily articles without coming to the State Department or the Navy Building for the news; he

accepted without a qualm of conscience the 'feature' piece of a New York newspaper. He also accepted the invitations of Washington society ladies, who, under different circumstances, might have...lifted to him...the lorgnette of curiosity and condescension." (A Fellow...: 1)

In spite of this criticism Rihani confessed, at the same time, that he "was drawn to [Wells] by the fact that he voiced an ideal, a political and social ideal, which I was also voicing in another language and for a world different from his own." (A Fellow...: 1-2) They were different in more than one way, at least three on the surface: Arabic and English, East and West, business background and teaching background. However they had a few common concerns: both were, in their own way, advocates of evolution, socialism, internationalism and futurism.

The evolutionary writer overcomes the traditional ethnic and political barriers; the socialist writer challenges the social and economic difficulties, the internationalist writer overlooks the national boundaries and the futurist writer builds a bridge between today and tomorrow. This intellectual attitude becomes possible by recognizing the other person and clarifying with him a common vision leading to a real reconciliation with the day to come, with "**A Fellow Correspondent**"<sup>(6)</sup> and with *The Shape of Things to Come*. With this approach we understand Rihani's reconciliation of East and West and Wells's concept of a modern World State. Both principles are different versions of the same international tolerance and global understanding and cooperation for a common human cause. However it is significant, here, to note that this intellectual attitude of both writers is more idealist than realistic, more visionary than real, and more of a wishful thinking than of a factual and practical mind.<sup>(7)</sup> But, after all, isn't this the role of any visionary leading writer and thinker?

### **Rihani in the Eyes of Wells**

H. G. Wells mentions Rihani three times in his book *The Shape of Things to Come* (London, 1933). The first occasion is related to an imaginary international conference held in Basra in 1965, thirty-two years after the publication of Wells's book. The conference, according to this literary work, took place to discuss proposals for the "modern World-State". Wells describes it referring to Rihani and focusing on age, gender and intellectual background. He says: "It was a young gathering; the average age estimated by Ameen Rihani is about thirty-three, and five or six women attended in the social and educational branches." (*The Shape of Things to Come*: 285)

The second set-up is very similar to the first one except for the age group of the new conference members who gathered in the same place after one decade. The author adds to his previous description the political affiliations of the people involved.

**The average age, says Ameen Rihani, [according to Wells] was a full ten years higher. Young men were still coming into the Fellowship abundantly... older men had been radical and revolutionary leaders in the war period... Moreover, the great scheme of the Modern State had now lost something of its first compelling freshness. (*The Shape...: 313*)**

The third time Wells mentions Rihani was in a different and interesting context. This time Rihani is not only an observer or a descriptive reference but a political analyst. Discussing political assassinations and executions at the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Wells refers to Rihani who "estimates that more than seven per cent of these were carried out upon anonymous, circumstantial, or otherwise unsatisfactory evidence. Most were practically sentences by courts martial." (*The Shape...: 350*) The following and last sentence of this paragraph is comprehensively and strongly critical to the extent that the reader can hardly tell whether it is meant to be referred to Wells or to Rihani or to both. It condemns that contemporary period of history by stating: "The millennium arrived in anything but millennial fashion." (*The Shape...: 350*) This is a clear disappointment that could be equally true for both writers.

It is significant that the theme of a modern World-State carries with it the seeds of tolerance and reconciliation. For in order to succeed, as Wells and Rihani advocate, any global movement has to recognize local cultures and ethnic differences. Grasping these differences is absolutely necessary if we strive for internationalism and globalization. Why the condemnation of the millennium by, supposedly, both of the two authors? Why this common point of view, according to H. G. Wells, and the support of a thinker from the East in condemning our modern time? The answer perhaps is that the two thinkers overcame their different backgrounds of East and West, at the political level, and called for a common human cause that requested a sincere attitude of tolerance and reconciliation. They were disappointed with growing movements of fanaticism and regional wars which were far from accepting the other person and the other point of view. Does this mean that they were defeated? If politically the answer is yes, philosophically it only carries the taste of Socrates' defeat and the shadow of Jesus' Crucifixion. Wells and Rihani had a common vision seeking the salvation of humanity. They both were disappointed with the lack of patience and the absence of harmonization among peoples and between nations.

## The Futurists

Another way of looking into the notion of reconciliation is through time and place, a kind of tool that could be of a common concern to humanity. John Paul Lederach considers that reconciliation essentially "represents a place, the point of encounter where concerns about both the past and the future can meet... [It] suggests the acknowledging of the past and envisioning of the future... for re-framing of the present." (Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies: 1977)

Along these waves it is noticed that both Rihani and Wells were futurist writers. Both considered that the future of the human kind must be the center of gravity for our suggested solutions with which we challenge the present.

In *The Shape of Things to Come* Wells draws a visionary world of the future in three steps, first, when

**traditions of nationality had to be cleared away for good, and racial prejudice replaced by racial understanding... Next a lingua-franca had to be made universal and one or other of the great literature-bearing languages rendered accessible to everyone... And thirdly, [the] issue had to be joined with the various quasi-universal religious and cultural systems..." (The Shape of Things to Come: 385-386)**

In shorter terms Wells saw in the future a world uniting nations, languages and religions in one Modern State.

Thirteen years earlier Rihani wrote an article, in 1920, imagining how the year 1950 was going to look. He saw

**a peaceful revolution of the American and British workers, a movement that is going to face the governments of the two countries and call for a united peace where other workers from France, Germany, Russia, Austria and Italy can join." (Ar-Rihaniyat, The Rihani Essays: 264)**

He saw a "United Nations," established that year, and "able to control all the military powers of its members." (*Ar-Rihaniyat*: 265) In an attempt to explain this imaginary move Rihani clarifies and elaborates his understanding of the Labor Government.

**It is the fourth link in the chain of human Governments. From a paternal government with its wise rulers, to an arbitrary**

**government with its kings of absolute powers, to a constitutional government with its rich aristocratic rulers, to a socialist government, the government of the laborers, and till tomorrow my friend, till tomorrow." (*Ar-Rihaniyat*: 265)**

The difference between the two futurist writers is the fact that one calls for the unity of nations, in the case of Wells, and the other one calls for a United Nations, in the case of Rihani. The latter defends small nations<sup>(8)</sup> in the face of great powers, as in the following plea:

**Preach people the value of a small nation. For a nation may be small except in its justice, limited except in its goodness. It is an ethical nation with spiritual values where nothing prevails except what is right, and nothing proves superior than what is honest, fraternal, and peaceful. The rulers of a small nation are the princes of wisdom, philosophy and art... (*Ar-Rihaniyat*: 403)**

If Wells's futurism is based on natural and social sciences, Rihani's futurism is founded on ethical and intellectual sciences. Both may be far fetched, but both are seeking a real and sincere solution to our political unsound attitude all over the world. Both have seen, at an early stage, a possible coalition among the nations of the world for a better future for the human race.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has attempted to show that, although tolerance and reconciliation were common objectives for the two writers from the East and the West, each followed a different approach to solving the problem. They ended up with two opposite visions for the future of humanity. Wells anticipated a single modern government for the whole world, a government that carries with it a unity of nations, religions and languages disregarding all kinds of cultural and ethnic diversities. This world government seeks a social and economic utopia with the 21<sup>st</sup> century that will help clarifying for us *The Shape of Things to Come*.

Rihani, on the other hand, placed his hope in the revival of small nations where different cultural backgrounds are enhanced and enriched. He believed that the best way for a tolerant and reconciling attitude is to allow the other person, or group of persons, to exercise their ultimate concepts of a social commitment that could be different from the ultimate concepts of other people. The keynote in Rihani's approach is ethics, not only in the sense of moral values but, equally important, in the sense of political values where the other idea, the other belief, should be accepted as a condition for implementing the principles of justice, freedom, "pacification, unification and equity".

What draws our attention, finally, is the fact that each admired the approach of the other. As a result, Rihani became one of the heroes of Wells's "ultimate revolution" called *The Shape of Things to Come*, and Wells became Rihani's intellectual "**Fellow and Companion**", a symbol of a daring futurist, equally daring as an Eastern writer challengingly coming West.

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## End Notes

1) On February 9, 1900, Rihani addressed the Young Men's Maronite Association, in New York City, in his famous speech entitled "Religious Tolerance" or "At-Tasahul ud-Deeny" where he emphasized that the ultimate universal truth is the same in all the religions of the world. The full text was published originally in Arabic in his book *Ar-Rihaniyat* (The Rihani Essays), The Scientific Press, Beirut, 1910: Vol. 2, pp. 113-140. This address received several supporting or disagreeing reviews and comments published in the Arabic media in New York, Sao Paulo, Beirut, Cairo and other cities.

2) The complete text of Gladstone's speech, on April 26, 1883, in front of the House of Commons, included references in classical and historical authorities defending religious toleration and civil liberty. He goes on saying: "I say that, besides our duty to vindicate the principle of civil and religious liberty, which totally detaches religious controversy from the enjoyment of civil rights, it is most important that the House should consider the moral effect of this test." (*Lend Me Your Ears*: 766) Seventeen years later Rihani came from the East to write, in Arabic, and support similar principles.

3) Henry David Thoreau confirms that "I do not have any sympathy for the bigotry and ignorance that establishes arbitrary, partial and boyish distinctions between the beliefs of one person and another, or between the forms of these beliefs." (*The Journal: 1837-1861*, Denoël, Paris, 1986) Reference should be made here to Rihani's book *The Path of Vision* where Thoreau, Emerson and Whitman are vividly present in several essays of the book.

4) According to Octavio Paz "as soon as we understand that we should not withhold the ultimate truth and that all truths, particularly the political ones, are relative, we are ready, then, for irony." (*A Planet and Four or Five Worlds*, French translation by Jean-Claude Masson, Gallimard, Folio Essays, Paris, 1985) It is worthwhile to note, in this regard, that Rihani's literature was characterized by humor, sarcasm and irony.

5) To elaborate on the intellectual relationship between Rihani and Ma'arry the reader may refer to Rihani's translations of Ma'arry's poetry into English verse: *The Quatrains of Abul-'Ala'*, Doubleday Page and Co., New York, 1903; and *The Luzumiyat of Abul-'Ala'*, James T. White and Co., New York, 1918. The two books received a large coverage from the American media at the time, and reprints have followed in New York and Beirut.

6) Rihani wrote another article on Wells, in Arabic, entitled "The Travel and Conference Companion". This article is published in Rihani's Arabic book *Wujouh Sharkiyah Wa Gharbiyah* (Eastern and Western Figures), Arabic Collection, The Arab Institute for Research and Publication, Beirut, 1986, Vol. 9, pp. 520-535. It is worthwhile to have a comparative study of the two similar articles, written in two languages, by the same author and on the same topic: H. G. Wells.

7) Discussing Woodrow Wilson's campaign for the United States to join the League of Nations, Henry Cabot Lodge addressed the U.S. Senate on August 12, 1919 saying: "We hear much of visions, and I trust we shall continue to have visions and dream dreams of a fairer future for the race. But... the mechanical appliances of the rhetorician designed to give a picture... of a future which no man can predict are as unreal and short-lived as the steam or canvas cloud..." (*Lend Me Your Ears*: 274) Lodge was trying to make a case against Wilson's postwar foreign policy.

8) To better understand Rihani's defense for small nations the reader may go back to Rihani's theory of the "Great City" as written in his book *Ar-Rihaniyat* or (The Rihani Essays), 10<sup>th</sup> edition, Vol. I, pp. 136-141. For a study on the subject refer to Ameen Albert Rihani, *The Philosopher of Freike, Author of the Great City*, Al-Jeel Publishing House, Beirut, 1987, pp. 257-300. This study deals with the productive society, human rights, democracy, secularism and East/West understanding in Rihani's vision of the "Great City".

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