

## **Understanding Peace through Rihani's Spirituality**

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### **Introduction**

The old ways of thinking are losing ground. The walls that separated groups of people from one another are collapsing, as are our concepts of time and distance. What will divide us in the twenty-first century, leaders, scholars, activists wonder? We are told that we will be divided as believers, pitted against those with presumably opposing beliefs. We are, to this view, hurtling inexorably down a religiously based clash of civilizations.

Yet this proposition is old thinking. It comes from a position of scarcity: there is not enough truth, greatness, beauty, nobility, and creativity to go around for all of us to be stakeholders. Either I have it or you have it, but not both. Wedged into this thinking is the reified "us" and "them", as fundamentally different beings, with different essences, dreams and needs.

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1. Collapsing borders, compressed time and space, increasing recognition of our deep interconnectedness and interdependency reflects a parallel transformation taking place in human consciousness, as our ways of thinking begin to adapt, and make the space necessary to include and incorporate the proliferating multiplicity of life, culture and being. This transformation suggests a shift from a religious perceptual framework to a spiritual one. The difficulty this transition poses for us, and the responsibility of facilitating this change entails, cannot be understated. We appear today to be most divided as "you are either with us or against us," along apparently religious fault lines.

With the shrinking of the attraction of "universal visions", including communism and other secular ideologies, spirituality can play an important role. The challenges facing us demand a new set of answers, rising from a new pattern of faith and belief. Those values must be spiritual in nature.

The emphasis on transcendence, the spirit's quest for ultimate reality, is one of the purest, oldest, and most mysterious aspects of human spirituality, and has been the source of strength for humanity to achieving grace under adversity, balancing power with humility, and for connecting with a larger meaning and purpose. Moving from a religious to a spiritual framework allows us to relocate our most basic, inherited assumptions in ways which can free us to untangle ourselves from our present circumstances and move toward our shared, collective destiny.

2. The term spiritual is more appropriate than the term religious. Although these terms are often used somewhat interchangeably, there is a distinction between them. The term religion refers to an institutional framework within which a specific theology is

pursued, usually among a community of like-minded believers. Spirituality, on the other hand, transcends the boundaries of religion, suggesting broader human involvement that comes from the inner essence of a human being. At the level of the individual, it refers to action borne of a commitment, which may or may not be informed by allegiance to a particular religion.

3. A spiritual framework involves understanding that we come from a place of abundance, not scarcity. We are not speaking about material resources (although in our society today we have the means to meet the basic human needs of our entire population), we are talking about the human spirit: here, your win is not my loss, your greatness is cause for my celebration and marvel. Our dialogues are not characterized as one party being arrogant and insensitive while the other feels defensive and insecure.

4. Moving from a religious to a spiritual framework breaks down the ‘us’ versus ‘them’ dichotomies that no longer fit the neat conceptualizations of old systems of power and ways of thinking. These were fictions that could only be upheld through physical separation and deep existential anxieties that arose from entrenched positions of scarcity. It is precisely this ‘either – or’ dichotomy which empowers fundamentalist opportunism, and undermines the discrimination required for individuals to create and direct their own community. In the old way of thinking, a ‘just cause’ depended largely on who you are, distorting and undermining our essential sense of responsibility to one another.

From a spiritual perspective, First, Second, and Third Worlds (also known respectively, as the industrial North and the Global South) are recognized as a single world. The oppressor and the oppressed are seen simply as people, experiencing life with its vicissitudes. A spiritual perspective frees us from our preconceived identity commitments, and our rigid adherence to metaphors and symbols that are all too easily appropriated in ways entirely different than their original intentions.

A spiritual framework which no longer frames rightness or wrongness based on ‘us’ or ‘them’ frees us to grasp the real meaning of interdependency and mutuality. When we see anger and outrage we hear human dignity’s response to fear, and we must be secure enough physically, and mature enough spiritually, to hear it. Where concerns for human dignity and social responsibility are manifest as global values, the exclusivism of religious extremists is defused.

The real, embedded meaning of our interconnectedness is mutual responsibility, and the implicit trust that your safety and well-being is directly related to my own, whether you are a believer in my particular faith tradition or not. Our sense of accountability must be expanded in tandem with our influence and reach. An emerging globalized ethic of spirituality embraces the unity we see in diversity, which finally gives us permission to celebrate both. In celebrating we find comfort in our individuality as one unique expression of a larger sameness. Only from this position do we possess the freedom to recognize that the parts reflect the whole.

5. A new perspective gives us permission to listen to and abide by our consciences, and cultivate an ever-emerging transnational consciousness, which is a meeting of the best of East and West, North and South. The transnational consciousness is not molded by the media, nor is it the creation of the elites and intellectuals: it is the cry for human dignity. It is an innate human expression. This transnational consciousness has the power to generate new metaphors, symbols, practices, models and resources that represent new values and goals beyond outdated, arbitrary, artificial boundaries.

6. We no longer have the choice of holding on to our habituated ways of thinking. Our metaphors and older ways of thinking and believing do not encompass the traditions, history, and experiences of the rest of the world on their own terms. Recasting the world in one image would prove a bloody, violent and vain enterprise. Instead, we have experienced a shift from separateness to connectedness, which is manifest in all the world's social movements.

There is also a shift in the location of authority from the external to the internal. We are relying more on our own inner wisdom and conscience while simultaneously discover the humanity and interdependence of all communities. We are witness to the affirmation of brotherhood and sisterhood as well as a passion for social justice and political participation. We are discovering in this process that cultural and human diversity is our source of strength and our greatest resource, as living expressions of the ultimate creativity. Then we do not see one another as rivals; indeed, we discover that the whole world needs the whole world. The West gives the East the best it has in exchange for the best from the East. We can begin to shift our perceptual focus and attention in our politics toward creating a just and peaceful global society.

7. It is then that we can redefine our conceptions and conditions of peace as not merely the absence of violence or conflict but rather a more spiritual definition that involves the presence of – the presence of justice, human dignity, freedom of expression and education, health, mutual dependency and well-being. A spiritual understanding of peace holds personal transformation as the model for and the catalyst of non-violent global change. Peace is not a goal to be realized. It is always in the making. It is a journey towards a place where there is trust, mercy and justice. We may not get there, but the journey is important and never ending.

The pursuit of peace is a dual process of being and doing. Peace is both task and experience. The task of peace is dealing with the structural conditions of violence. The experience of peace is self-knowledge. When we discover our authentic individuality we recognize the genuine uniqueness of others. We discover peace through inner experience and outer engagement, through a transformation of awareness. We discover peace through a change in our way of seeing and experiencing the universe and ourselves, and the relationship between them.

We discover peace through relearning, through seeing the world with fresh eyes and through acting and responding in new ways. We discover peace through remembering, through waking up to what we really are and to what we are capable of.

We discover peace through healing, through the restoration of wholeness by “pulling ourselves together,” individually and collectively. On the road to peace we get caught in a love triangle. At the top of the triangle is “thought,” at one bottom corner of the triangle there is “word” and on the other bottom corner there is “action.”

The love triangle shows how our thoughts connect with our words and actions. When our thoughts reflect love, our words are those of a lover and our actions are directed toward the Beloved. We are peace. When we live in love we are living in peace. Love is a dynamic force, not a state we possess. It is a force passing through us. To receive it we have to give it to others. Everything on the planet has an ecological function. Love is the ecological function for us humans.

Ameen Rihani became was in a love triangle. He thought love, he spoke love, and he acted love. He loved Lebanon. He loved the world. He may have even been the world’s first global citizen. He pledged allegiance to:

- The inextricable interdependence of all human communities which is central to today’s social movements
- Non-exploitative stewardship relationship to the planet
- Passion for social justice
- Yearning for human dignity
- The value of political pluralism
- The richness of cultural diversity
- Forgiveness, tolerance, coexistence, reconciliation

He takes the fusion of East and West as metaphor for the global citizen:

We are not of the East or the West;  
No boundaries exist in our breast:  
We are free.