

# Ameen Rihani and the Unity of Religion: The Politics of Time and the Politics of Eternity

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In a world that is shaken daily by violence, hatred, and destruction, we are drawn to reflect on the urgent need for reconciliation and mutual understanding between nations if such atrocities are to be avoided in the future. It is sobering to reflect that Tomáš Masaryk's words, written in *The Making of a State* (1925), remain as pertinent as ever over seventy-five years later: "Chauvinism, racial or national intolerance, not love of one's own people, is the foe of nations and humanity. Love of one's own nation does not entail non-love of other nations (435)."

Masaryk, the first president of a country that was later split into its components—Czechs and Slovaks—after a little more than eighty years, had much in common with Ameen Rihani, one of the strongest and subtlest advocates of understanding between religions and between peoples,

especially those of different traditions who share a common homeland. Rihani's messages of tolerance, spiritual quests leading members of various faiths toward one God, and loving respect for one's fellow humans are more important now than ever, as the potential for destructiveness increases with the proliferation of new and terrifying weapons.

Rihani was modest and unassuming by nature. This remarkable man—poet, essayist, novelist, and philosopher—believed implicitly in the truth of the Arabic motto, "say your word and go away," placing his considerable gifts at the service of mankind without differentiating between Christian, Jew, or Muslim. He was a passionate believer in the oneness of the world's religions and the brotherhood of all nations, devoting his entire life to promoting the cause of East-West understanding.

Virtually able to claim dual nationality, Rihani assimilated two widely differing cultures to an unprecedented extent, retaining, despite his links with the West, a deep attachment to the rich cultural heritage of his homeland of Lebanon and of the wider Arab civilization. Politically, he was a dedicated liberal, but his idealism was tempered with a highly practical recognition of the need for an ordered, disciplined society; and while firmly opposed to blind fanaticism, extremism, and bigotry, Rihani always retained a healthy respect for tradition.

Ameen Rihani was born to

Maronite Christian parents on 24 November 1876 in Freike, Lebanon, a few miles northeast of the country's capital, Beirut. He died sixty-four years later in his native village on 13 September 1940, after long periods of moving between East and West, especially between Lebanon and his second home, New York, traveling widely throughout the Arab world.

Like his contemporaries Kahlil Gibran and Mikhail Naimy, Rihani was indebted throughout his life to Lebanon for an abiding love of her nature and landscapes, typified by the sacred cedar groves and snow-capped mountains. He had a profound appreciation of the richness of a land in which three languages and cultures—Arabic, French, and English—existed side by side, and he also had a powerful apprehension of the dangers likely to arise, should such coexistence become imperiled.

All three men were Christians. Gibran and Rihani were Maronites, and Naimy was a member of the Greek Orthodox Church and was educated in a Russian seminary. All three felt they understood Lebanon's mission—the shaping of a model interreligious society, a multi-faith community in which diversity of belief would be celebrated and respected by all alike, irrespective of individual affiliations. They also had no difficulty in proclaiming their new perspective: a belief in the spiritual unity and recognition that no religion represents God's final word to mankind and that

divine revelation is continuous, that religious experience is progressive, and that all religions are, essentially, one.

Gibran stated, "If we were to do away with the [non-essentials of the] various religions, we would find ourselves united and enjoying one great faith and religion, abounding in brotherhood" (*Secrets of the Heart* 135). Naimy similarly wrote that "if all those belonging to a religion were to understand its essence and ultimate purpose, the world will have but only one Faith."<sup>1</sup> Ameen Rihani declared,

I counsel you to heed every new light. And know that a heart full of many lights is better than a mind full of much knowledge. For in each one of the World's Faiths there is a light that shines for a while—and that "while" may extend to three or four, or five thousand years. But no light vanishes before a new light appears in its place.<sup>2</sup>

Another related characteristic of Lebanon from its earliest times has been the adaptable and adventurous nature of its sons and daughters. Ever ready to venture all over the world as

1 Mikhail Naimy, during an interview with Suheil Bushrui, Beirut, 1972.

2 Ameen Rihani, *Will and Testament* (Beirut: The Arab Foundation for Studies and Publications, 1982), 24. Citation and text corresponding thereto translated by Suheil Bushrui.

mariners, traders, and emigrants, they engaged in dialogue with the peoples they encountered, sharing their beliefs and customs.

The young Ameen Rihani was no exception. At the age of twelve he left Lebanon for the United States with his paternal uncle 'Abdu; they were accompanied by Rihani's teacher 'Na'oum Mukarzil. The three rented a simple basement lodging at 58 Boston Street, in Lower Manhattan, where Rihani was able to attend a neighborhood school. Two years later, a bright if truculent pupil, Rihani left to work as a chief clerk, salesman, and interpreter in the merchandise business run by his father and uncle. He continued his education on his own by negating the tedium of his working life through the words of his favorite authors—Shakespeare, Victor Hugo, Rousseau, Washington Irving, and Carlyle, who were to be major influences on his development as an author in both English and Arabic.

His education was proceeding rapidly. In his preface to *Muluk al-Arab* ("Arab Kings," published in 1924), Rihani freely admits,

As a child, I knew little about the Arabs, and what little I knew was derived from what mothers tell their children about the Bedouin in an attempt to frighten them into behaving properly ("Shush, the Bedouin is here"). Consequently, when I arrived in America I had nothing but fear for those whose

language I speak and whose blood runs in my veins. The only other culture I knew anything about was the French, and this only superficially, my information being derived from the French school I attended in Lebanon which taught me that France was the greatest nation in the world, the noblest, the richest and most advanced; the center of civilization, beauty and light; a peacock among nations, strutting majestically among the domestic fowls of the world's barnyard. . . . After arriving in America, I became an admirer of the vitality of the American people, of the freedom they enjoyed in their thought, speech and deeds, but at the same time grew to fear their intense materialistic activity, their acquisitiveness.<sup>3</sup>

He was therefore developing a reverence for the Western traditions of democracy and freedom of speech and thought, together with a perception of the deficiencies of American society at a spiritual level. He was particularly concerned about the harsh materialism and crude jingoism of the Theodore Roosevelt era, in which greed for profit for its own sake jostled aside humanitarian concern for those who, through no fault of their own, had suffered the effects of global economic depression.

<sup>3</sup> Rihani, *Will and Testament*, 25–26. Citation and text corresponding thereto translated by Suheil Bushrui.

The callous disregard for the plight of the dispossessed and the living conditions they endured were described in *The Book of Khalid*, the first novel to be written in English by an Arab. Philosophical and largely autobiographical, the book represents a passionate plea for the reconciliation of the material and the spiritual, of East and West, of Christianity and Islam, recounting the picaresque adventures of Khalid, an irreverent and sometimes even blasphemous young Arab from Ba'albek, who, with his companion Shakib, travels from Lebanon to New York and back to the Middle East. The book's three sections correspond to the three levels of the spiritual quest for awareness, and the book bears the dedication, "To my Brother Man, my Mother Nature and my Maker God."

But before there can be any question of addressing the possibility of religious unity in the city to which Khalid comes by way of the Via Dolorosa of the emigrant, he must confront the perilous spiritual state of the people among whom he finds himself. In a passage vividly recalling Rihani's own early experiences in New York, Khalid and Shakib rent lodgings in a cellar "as deep and dark as could be found," which shortly afterward floods. This incident leads Khalid to observe,

Think you that the inhabitants of this New World are better off than those of the Old? Can

you imagine mankind living in a huge cellar of a world and you and I pumping the water out of its bottom? I can see the palaces on which you waste your rhymes, but mankind lives in them only in the flesh. The soul, I tell you, still occupies the basement, even the sub-cellar. The soul, Shakib, is kept below, although the highest places are vacant. (42)

Yet despite his dismay at the crass materialism around him, Khalid/Rihani still asserted his faith in the vast potential of the American people, provided they could tame their acquisitive lust. Even in prison, Khalid continues to declare,

[T]he Americans are neither Pagans—which is consoling—nor fetish-worshipping heathens: they are all true and honest votaries of Mammon, their great God, their one and only God. And is it not natural that the Demiurgic Dollar should be the national Deity of America? Have not deities been always conceived after man's needs and aspirations? . . . Change the needs and aspirations of the Americans, therefore, and you will have changed their worship, their national Deity, and even their Government. And, believe me, this change is coming; people get tired of their gods as of everything else. Ay, the time will come when a man in this America

shall not suffer for not being a seeker and lover and defender of the Dollar . . . my faith in man . . . is as strong as my faith in God. And as strong, too, perhaps, is my faith in the future world-ruling destiny of America . . . in these United States the well-springs of the higher aspirations of the soul shall quench the thirst of every race-traveller on the highway of emancipation; and from these United States the sun and moon of a great Faith and a great Art shall rise upon mankind. . . . Ay, in this New World, the higher Superman shall rise. . . . He shall be nor of the Old World nor the New; he shall be, my Brothers, of both. (111–12)

In 1921 Rihani published *The Path of Vision*, a collection of essays in English illustrating basic differences between East and West, and between Christianity and Islam, especially in philosophy and way of life. He recognized that these differences must be acknowledged before there could be any hope of true rapprochement between the two religions, and that each must be willing to learn from the other in order to achieve a harmonious relationship. The book contains several references to Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman, and much of it is imbued with their transcendentalist philosophy of the unity of existence, in particular man's oneness with nature as well as the spirit of Emerson's

observation in his journals: "if you cannot be free, be as free as you can" (*Emerson* 205).

In the essay "Change and Exchange," Rihani writes of the importance of tradition in both East and West:

[E]ven a thick layer of traditions, which may be productive, among better things, of tropic indolence and fatality, is better than no tradition at all. And as between a modern Oriental who has lost his attractive qualities, his native virtues, who has relinquished the purer spiritual heritage of his race, and an Oriental of the old type, however steeped in superstition and religious cant, I for one, prefer the latter. (123)

But both will find new inspiration and power, if they turn not to the gods of materialism, not to the masters of the machine, but to the torch-bearers of intellectual and spiritual progress lighted by the higher mind and fed by the purer spirit of Europe and America. This is the noble tradition, which, in every social and political upheaval, should be preserved and upheld. It is a tradition that never becomes effete; and though only a few uphold it in times of stress and storm, ultimately it never fails its purpose.

The same collection contains "Of Church and Mosque," in which Rihani contrasts the calm and spaciousness of a mosque with the purse-proud,

self-important atmosphere of a church in New England, where greater importance seems to attach to the material fabric of the building, with its ugly and expensive stained-glass windows provided by self-proclaimed “philanthropists” and its pews like society drawing rooms—the prerogative of the wealthy to enclose and divide the worshippers by effectively shutting out those not privileged to belong to this elite community.

Rihani concludes with an appeal to his “Christian Brother” to join him in the simple, reverent atmosphere of the mosque instead. Yet this is not an attack on one religion’s traditions or practices but on stifling and unquestioned customs that debase religion into a form of social observance and control and block the true seeker after God from a closer approach to the life of the spirit and from his human brothers and sisters.

Rihani wrote frequently and trenchantly in Arabic on the subject of religious intolerance and bigotry, but he wrote comparatively little in English, confining himself in *The Path of Vision* to ironic comments on ultra-conservative doctors of Islamic law confounded by the coming of modern transport to the Arab world and denouncing it from the pulpit if they could find divine sanction for railways and airplanes in the sacred texts.

In 1921 Rihani also published *A Chant of Mystics and Other Poems*, a collection of verse in English expressing

his essentially spiritual, Sufi message of longing for mystical union. The following lines from the title poem embody one of the essential features of the Sufi way and also echo the main theme, not only of *The Path of Vision* but also of many other of Rihani’s writings:

We are not of the East or the West;  
No boundaries exist in our breast:  
We are free.  
Nor Crescent nor Cross we adore;  
Nor Buddha nor Christ we implore;  
Nor Moslem nor Jew we abhor;  
We are free. (15)

When, in September 1931, Rihani came to compose his *Will and Testament*, he declared a similar belief in the unity of all religions:

I am a believer in the unity of religion, for in its mirror, I see reflected the images of all Prophets and Messengers—Confucius, Buddha, Zoroaster, Socrates, Moses, Jesus, Muhammad and Bahá'u'lláh. . . . They have all come from one source, and their faces merge and unite and become reflected in one unified face, a most holy symbol, representing the face of God Himself. I counsel you to adhere to this unity. In theoretical terms, religion is that luminous living link between man and his one and only god. In spiritual terms, religion is the joy derived from discovering, without mediation,

the mysteries that lie behind that unique link. In practical terms, religion is, above all, recognition of the Divine Truth spoken by whoever has taught a single letter taken from the book of love, of piety and of charitable deeds. It is also in following the example of these teachers and emulating them in thought, word and deed; each of us attaining this according to his capacity; for God has burdened no soul with more than it can endure.<sup>4</sup>

Here we may observe that Rihani's belief in progressive revelation and in the community of divine guidance suggests that he maintained an affinity for the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith, which receives extensive discussion in *The Book of Khalid*, and strengthens the belief that he was greatly influenced by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Whose visit to the United States in 1911 to 1912 received much publicity in the American press, and Who was hailed by Lebanese and Syrian communities there as "the Great Teacher from the East."

Rihani's association with the Bahá'í Faith bears interesting comparison to the relationship his friend and colleague Khalil Gibran had with the Bahá'í tradition. In 1912, in New York, Gibran met 'Abdu'l-Bahá and had the opportunity to draw his portrait. According to Gibran's own account,

<sup>4</sup> Rihani, *Will and Testament*, 25–26. Citation and text corresponding thereto translated by Suheil Bushrui.

'Abdu'l-Bahá served as the primary inspiration for Gibran's depiction of Jesus in his 1928 work, *Jesus, The Son of Man*.

Rihani and Gibran separately encountered the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith, and each was moved to produce a major literary work resonant with themes that were at least partly inspired by Bahá'í spirituality. The significance of this fascinating parallel between two great thinkers is revealed in the complementary but differing approach each took to encouraging social progress. To borrow the formulation of George William Russell, Rihani practiced the "politics of time" while Gibran dealt with the "politics of eternity." Rihani, as demonstrated by his concerns about American materialism, provided trenchant commentary on how the ills of society can be dealt with on the material/social level. Specifically, he believed that society needed to be more unified and less materialistic in dealing with the challenges it faced. For his part, Gibran's great concern was to highlight and cultivate those eternal spiritual attributes that can transform and empower the individual soul. He believed that the foundation of a just society was built on the human and humane virtues of individuals. The Bahá'í vision, one it has always shared with all those concerned with the emergence of a more perfect society, is to bring these two elements—the politics of time and the politics of eternity—together. The writings of Rihani and Gibran

can play an important, indeed inspirational, role in this effort.

Rihani's loathing of the materialism he found in New York was to be put to good purpose at a turning point in the history of the Arab nations with the discovery of oil—a new currency and source of undreamed-of wealth. With his newfound perception, Rihani could see only too clearly how oil wealth might become a nightmare source of conflict and covetousness. This awareness equipped him to emphasize the continuing importance of spiritual humanitarian values and to act as an ambassador through his achievements as one of the most distinguished representatives of Arab civilization in the twentieth century.

I would like to close with two passages that illustrate respectively Ameen Rihani's sense of tradition and his vision of the future, demonstrating the timeless nature of the quest for unity between religions and the blessings it can bestow. The first comes from his translation of the verse of the eleventh-century blind poet Abul al-Ala al-Ma'arri, published in 1918 as *The Luzumiyat of Abu'l-Ala*. Stanza LXII reads,

Now, mosques and churches—  
 even a Kaaba stone,  
 Korans and Bibles—even a  
 martyr's bone—  
 All these and more my heart can  
 tolerate,

For my religion's love, and love  
 alone.

Nine centuries later, in an essay titled "al-Tashul al-Dini" ("Religious Tolerance"), Rihani writes,

How wonderful it would be for Westerners and Easterners if they were to learn from each other what is beautiful in their faiths, proper in their traditions, sublime in their arts, just in their rules and laws, and perfect in their manners. The essence of that which is true and perfect in the cultures of East and West, unified and synthesized, is the only remedy for the religious, social and political maladies of our time. Western man can then return to God; while Eastern man can reduce much of God's burden.

(*The Rihani Essays* 216)

Faith, as theologian Paul Tillich writes, "is the state of being ultimately concerned" (5). By this definition, Ameen Rihani, with his earnest belief in oneness in its fullest sense and in the redemptive power of universal love, and with his consistency and unity of purpose, is not only a religious teacher and pioneer but a guide whose wise counsel is more vital than ever as we confront a new "age of anxiety," offering to a splintered world a lasting message of hope, healing, and reconciliation.



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