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Harmony Through Difference and the Dialogue Among Cultures

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The New Humanism hopes for intellectual and moral solidarity for Humanity.

As physical barriers, walls, collapse they seem to be replaced by thicker walls made of fear - fear of the *other* that is in front of us, that has become close, but whom we are unable to see. The global spread of Western viewpoint is seen to represent a threat to some or many. Conflicts between cultures seem to be on the rise. The fear for loosing cultural identity is growing. In such context it is not enough to be a tourist in another culture. Real cultural communication is essential for *sight* to be transformed into *insight*.

A Unesco tenant sees “that a peace based exclusively upon the political and economic arrangements of governments would not be a peace which could secure the unanimous, lasting and sincere support of the peoples of the world, and that the peace must therefore be founded...upon the intellectual and moral solidarity of mankind.”

Confucius having been asked: *"Is there any one word that could guide a person throughout life?"* The Master replied: *"How about 'reciprocity'! Never impose on others what you would not choose for yourself."* This principle from the 5th-6th century BC is beneficial to all people at all times. Just as Confucius's teachings are a Chinese example of humanism, a form of Humanism in other cultures has something to offer to all Humanity.

Cultural dialogues are an effective means to transmit timeless wisdom between peoples. Timeless wisdom that can benefit Humanity at large. Such universal timeless wisdom should be sought in all cultures. Perhaps we need to build a cultural **bank of wisdom** where we can deposit ancestral knowledge from each culture in the world and this **bank of wisdom** could become a resource for the world. In that way no one culture holds the truth alone. Truth is shared and may come in different forms.

Knowledge and understanding helps dissipate fear. Cultural dialogue helps bring knowledge and understanding. There seems to be a need not to just recognize difference, but to celebrate positive difference and integrate it with other positive differences. Also a need of the integration rather than the absorption of differences. It is important not to see similarity as the only connecting factor.

I would like to talk about my most recent experience as a model of experimentation: an exhibition project called: *Beauty and Belief : Crossing Bridges with the Arts of Islamic Culture*. This is not a religious exhibition. It is about culture. An exhibition of Islamic art from the 7th century to the present day. To give you an idea of the scale: it includes over 250 objects of different media - ceramics, metalwork, works on paper etc . And these objects came from collections all over the world.

The host institution is Brigham Young University Museum - BYU in Provo, Utah. The exhibition which opened in Utah on the 24th February 2012 travels to four museums in the United States from the East to the West Coast.

For this project to take place in Utah within the context of the LDS community is not expected. For the three and a half years and still now I've been constantly asked: 'Why the Mormons?' The fact that this cultural dialogue takes place where it is not expected is effective for the actual bridging aspect of dialogue itself. Brigham Young University itself with its Museum is a serious institution with intellectual achievements. But the fact that a dialogue with Islamic culture can take place within the Mormon Community, itself an often misunderstood and misrepresented community makes the dialogue all the more powerful here.

And why America? There is certainly a need to redress the balance in terms of representation of Islamic culture. Such types of cultural projects as this are an invitation to meet somewhere, somehow. They are part of working towards achieving harmony through differences. There is a need to communicate this for we have a responsibility towards hope.

During the actual making of the *Beauty and Belief* Exhibition - the experience of three and a half years - the harmony between difference through cultural dialogue was affirmed and reaffirmed on so many occasions. I myself knew nothing about Mormon Culture and this was a learning experience, as it was for my colleagues about Islamic Culture. Discovering the different ways in which the same moral and intellectual values are expressed in our two different cultures was fascinating. This has been a journey of learning for all involved. The making of the exhibition itself reflected what the project was trying to achieve.

Without going too much here into the treatment of the subject, I would like to give specific examples of dialogue between different cultures that create harmony.

First, the diverse objects from different centuries, different countries from Spain to Central Asia, were brought together and they united to speak about Islamic culture in a coherent voice. The exhibition aims to communicate part of the essence of Islamic culture and it is therefore across the path of unity. What makes Islamic culture *Islamic*. It is what connects the various parts of the Islamic world and so, transmitting that communicates something of the essence of Islamic culture.

The emblem of the exhibition a calligraphic piece which says in Arabic *Allah khaliq Kulla shai* (God the Creator of everything) encapsulates the interconnectedness of everything even in its graphic form: the whole phrase is written in a continuous unbroken line. Religions share the idea of God and so this becomes a connecting factor in the journey of the exhibition to this dialogue with difference from the introduction. We enter this different world through a familiar door. Watching visitors interact with the exhibition reflected the power of cultural dialogue.

In what we called “The Education pavilion” children are engaging with the exhibition in relation to their own culture. The Mormon community has its own traditions and are serious about practicing them. In this education wing, through creative workshops the children look for parallels and differences in their own culture.

To use a specific example - without going into a curatorial debate here - one of the things we did is explore the aspect that God has 99 names in Islamic culture. Itself an illustration of diversity in unity. The unity of God holds differences. God holds paradoxes: he is the Avenger (*al-muntaqim*) but he is also the Merciful (*al-rahim*). He is not just called *Allah* standing as an alien entity - THAT Muslim God. The word *Allah* is simply the Arabic word for God.

Around three brass pieces, types of crests, each of them containing one of the names of God and dating from 17th century Iran, we created a virtual installation of the 99 names of God that ran high up all along the wall, and which changed whereby each of the names of God appeared in Arabic then English then Arabic. This gave the visitor to the exhibition a visceral experience of that different sense of seeing the world.

Cultural sharing should be more than presenting and viewing the arts, but should truly communicate a different conceptual way of seeing the world. To invite people to stand where the other is standing. To have a real experience of a different world.

A culture’s principles, structural concepts, construct a coherence of the world, essentially an architecture of meaning which provides a safe space where the world makes sense. To be presented with a different architecture of meaning, a different architecture of coherence could come across as threatening to the meaning we have constructed for ourselves. Communicating the nature of that conceptual architecture is helpful in bringing about the respect needed for each architecture of a world coherence.

Communicating the nature of cultural difference is essential - not just in terms of cultural practices, rituals and what people do for food, music etc. but communicating a different way of seeing the world within a different culture is also important.

Healing conflict cannot be addressed by only talking about conflict and bridging doesn’t happen just through examining the precipice. To talk about Beauty and Goodness in different cultures is to create meeting places. These meeting places reveal to us another essential side to the story. Talking about beauty and goodness in different cultures also shows the different forms that these can take without disconnecting from the overall source of Beauty and Goodness.

In the case of the experience of *Beauty and Belief*, redressing the balance in terms of the representation of Islamic culture is achieved through providing an actual visceral experience of beauty and peace that is integral to the Islamic aesthetic, that is a direct voice of Islamic culture. That aesthetic is a powerful testimony. And so it was very important that the *Beauty and Belief* exhibition is truly beautiful and peaceful in itself, from color to design etc having a coherence that reflects the essence of the culture. The project is a gift from Islamic culture. It presents Islamic culture for the specialist and the layman.

When I was a child I asked my grandmother, ‘why does God have 99 names?’ She answered, ‘It is so that we call upon the name we need for what we need according to the situation we’re in.’ *Beauty and Belief* exhibition ends with one of the names of God ‘The Healer’. It appears that Humanity needs to go through healing to enable the creation of the New Humanism. For that healing, there is a great deal of ‘unlearning’ needed in relation to Islamic culture. Celebrating positive differences and recognizing the place of other cultures in the Heritage of Humanity is one way the rainbow of Humanity can reveal itself.