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Embracing a diverse doxology

Humanity's religious and cultural differences should provide cause for celebration, not bloodshed.

By Patrick J. Halloran '07

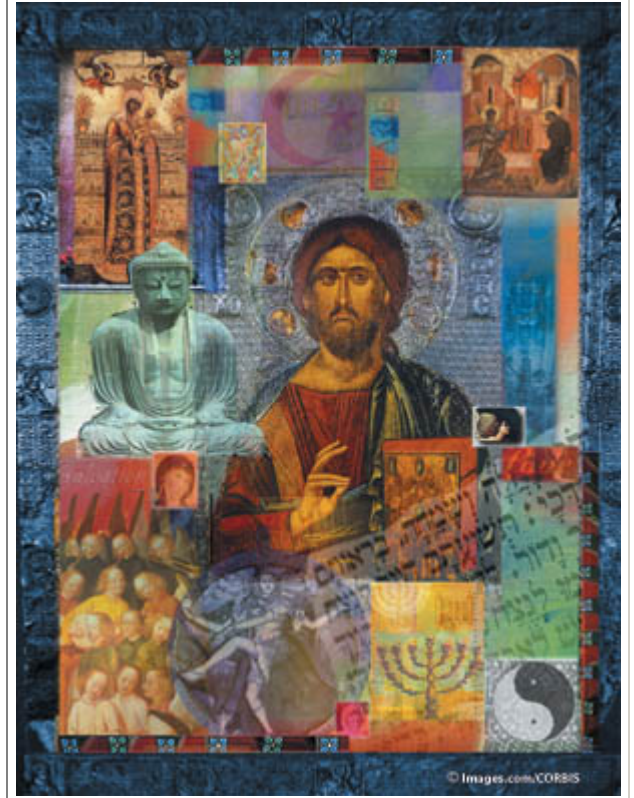
The year is 1984. Tensions in Amritsar are at a fever pitch. The black smoke from burning Gurudwaras can be seen from Delhi. After the assassination of Indira Gandhi, fear alone rules the lives of all Sikhs. Innocent children have their heads shaved, and then their throats slashed with a rusty blade. Loving mothers are raped in the streets, beaten, and then thrown away as if they were rubbish. Gentle grandfathers, revered for their kindness, are doused with petrol, and set ablaze. The perpetrators of these horrible crimes failed to see innocent children, loving mothers, and gentle grandfathers. They only saw something which was "different" from them.

The fires of 1984 were fueled with ignorance and hate. The smoke from these fires cast a symbolic shadow across the religious plurality the world had achieved. The shadows were so black, even today the global community has not escaped them. Sadly, 1984 is just one example of religious violence due to ignorance. Religious hatred has littered human existence since the dawn of recorded history. Since 1984, religious violence has been exacerbated. 9/11, Northern Ireland, Palestine, Ayodhya. It must stop. It is now time for a new day to dawn. That day is today. It is a day in which religious diversity will not be a wall between religions; rather, it will be a bridge to better understand our diverse human existence.

I have a theory: It is inherent in our human nature to classify the world in opposites. Big, small. Happy, sad. Up, down. I believe we enjoy the daytime because we have stumbled to try to find our way in the darkness. We like firm ground because we have gotten stuck in the mud. We are fond of warmth because our teeth have chattered in a harsh winter wind. I believe I define you as much as you define me. Without you being who you are, I cannot possibly be who I am. Without the darkness, we fail to appreciate the light.

The world is a cornucopia of races, ethnicities, religions, and cultures. Such a myriad of traditions and ways of life make our planet interesting. A diverse life is one worth living. Imagine eating a dish of food, and the cookbook calls for one ingredient. Sure it would be easy to make, but would you enjoy eating it for breakfast, lunch and dinner the rest of your life? It is the combination of all the herbs, spices, meats, vegetables, and sauces that give the food its flavor. To quote the great Swami Vivekananda: "Difference is the sauce of life; it is the beauty, it is the art of everything." Diversity is the spice of life! If all the ingredients merely tolerated one another, you would get a bland, unappetizing chunk of life. Because the ingredients work well together, you get a fantastic flavor unlike any other. This unique flavor of races, cultures, ethnicities and religions can only be achieved by constructive and active engagement with those who are "different."

What exactly does "constructive and active engagement" mean? Shalom. Hola. Konnichiwa. Hello. Bonjour. Namaste. Or simply smile (it means the same in every language). These simple greetings are a good start. The mere fact that you can relate linguistically lays the groundwork for the building of the bridge between cultures. Learning the "language" of diversity introduces inter-cultural dialogue instead of idealistic monologue. Although it would be nice if all the world's problems could be solved with a simple "howdy," they cannot.



"The bridge of diversity must be crossed from both directions in order for it to achieve true meaning."

Active engagement means putting yourself into a “different” person’s shoes. It means going to a Christian church service, lighting firecrackers at Diwali, enjoying langar, eating a fig to break the Ramadan fast, or the most active engagement of them all, love. Love is something that is present in every religious tradition: to love another person is to see the face of God.

This active and constructive engagement is imperative to understanding two valuable things. You could call it the duality of diverse doxologies, but that is a mouthful. When you become a part of a different person’s life, you recognize two things: Number 1, they are very much different than you are, and number 2, they are very much the same.

Although it sounds elementary, this dichotomy is very intriguing. For example, if I, from an Irish Catholic background, celebrate Diwali with a Hindu friend, I might see nothing analogous in the celebration itself (I can only see the Pope enjoying a “Roman candle” if it were in St. Peters). But I could recognize and appreciate the celebration’s true meaning: the way families come together for the event, the joy on everyone’s faces, or the basic human need for a new beginning. Realizing my friend has the same values of family and happiness makes it easier to understand the celebration. And that understanding helps me to recognize my friend as a loving, caring, individual who happens to be different from me outwardly, but who is internally similar.



Patrick Halloran '07, above, is a history/religion double major. His essay “Diverse Doxology,” adapted for this article, won first prize in the Diversity Essay Contest. The competition was sponsored by the Sikh Coalition, founded 500 years ago by Guru Nanka, who wanted to encourage peace between warring Hindus and Muslims in India. Halloran plans to donate his \$1,000 prize to tsunami relief efforts. *(Photo by Marc Featherly)*

This intensive understanding and active engagement will change the world more than nuclear war, politicians, and money ever can. To use my previous example of 1984, it was easy to kill innocent children because they were objectified to the point where their killers could no longer see a human, only an outlet for ignorant

aggression and hate. To actively engage another human being is to verify their existence as being human. If the same murderous person looked at that innocent child and saw dreams of the future, a loving family, hobbies, favorite foods, and future loves, he would lower his rusty blade.

Why are we different? Why is my skin white and others brown? Is it my fault I was born white? What if I were born brown? These are questions that are far beyond my comprehension. But they are the questions that shape who I am, so I am forced to confront them. God made me white for a reason. He made others brown for a reason. “You people! We have created you from a male and female, and made you into nations and tribes that you might get to know one another” (The Koran 49:13). This is the world we live in. If God wished everyone to be the same, they would be.

Now, finally, some questions I can answer: “Whom should I despise, since the one Lord made us all?” (Guru Granth Sahib, Var Sarang) The answer is self-evident, we should despise no one. Can we be different and still be the same? Of course, we do it every day. Is it right for me to love a brown, black, or yellow person? It would be wrong not to love a brown, black, or yellow person. It would be wrong not to love any person because of age, color, creed, culture, nationality, sex, or ethnicity.

Religious pluralism goes far beyond tolerance. It means a willing acceptance of diversity. Embracing and willingly accepting religious pluralism means we will finally be able to rid the world of the dense shadows of hate which were cast so long ago. Plurality, multiculturalism, diversity, acceptance: all these words seem like such simple concepts, paradigms which are so easily achieved in our hearts, yet in our minds they seem so far away. The bridge of diversity must be crossed from both directions in order for it to achieve true meaning.

This is where the concept of a diverse doxology rules supreme. It will allow anyone to cross the bridge. Each religion has its own specific prayer praising God, a doxology, each unique and special in its own way. To finally cross the bridge, the world now needs a new doxology. A diverse doxology. What better way to praise God than enriching your life by actively engaging a person who is different from you. A diverse doxology would simply mean praising God through embracing the diversity we have been given. My own religion would not be put into jeopardy by practicing this diverse doxology, rather it would strengthen it. Doxologies from every religious tradition must be actively and constructively pursued, not forfeited. This diverse doxology will be more than mere words, it will be active participation in the lives of others. The Bible, Koran, Guru Granth Sahib, and Torah all tell the people of the Earth to love God. God has created all the people of the Earth, so wouldn't loving God be the same as loving all people on the Earth?

In his poem “No Difference,” Shel Silverstein once wrote, “Red, black, or orange, yellow or white, we all look the same when we turn off the light. So maybe the way to make everything right, is for God to just reach out and turn off the light.” Although Mr. Silverstein presents us with an intriguing possibility, I think he is wrong. I believe, ultimately, human beings must together share the responsibility of making everything right. To turn out the light is to ignore the problem, not to solve it. We must see the light as our diverse reality. We must open our eyes to the light. We can never turn out the light, because then we cannot enjoy the colors that we really are. As the title of his poem suggests, everyone on this Earth has similarities which can easily be overlooked. We are all human, we all inhabit a small planet, we have all been given brains to think and, most importantly, hearts to love. Religious diversity is not a wall between religions and people, but rather it is a bridge to fully understand our diverse human existence. You cannot achieve religious harmony with injustice, and it is an injustice not to achieve religious harmony. We should embrace diversity as a means to discover the beauty this Earth has to offer. The power rests within you and me.