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Beyond Tolerance

In a guest post by Karima Ramji (a woman I much admire) on Aug. 15, she said that it's "through such respectful collaboration that we appreciate the diversity of humankind, and when we take that appreciation a step further by embracing it, we turn it into pluralism." The concept of many paths leading to one goal is attractive to many people who believe we should all get along, and who are looking for ways to further that relationship past simple tolerance between faiths and cultural backgrounds to something much more. We've made so much progress in the acceptance of diversity in the past few decades.

What's the next step?

Last year I had the good fortune of attending a talk given by Bishop Michael Ingham, a speaker during UVic Interfaith Service's Tough Questions series. He spoke of the basic categories of interfaith relations, and I'd like to paraphrase this part his talk, because it sheds light on this area that has so much to do with the acceptance of all cultures and peoples as equals. The first category the Bishop gave was exclusivism, which is as the name implies: my faith is the best and the only true faith. The second was inclusivism: all people are saved vicariously through the grace of the divine revelation that I follow. The 3rd is the category that Bishop Ingham himself and I suspect the great majority of the audience subscribed to – religious pluralism. The image was of a mountain, with many paths leading independently to the summit, representing all faiths leading to God.

I appreciate Wayne Codling's reservations on this last category – Is there an objective Truth? A universal goal? (Aug. 4 comments.) But my own reaction is that it's the best theory so far. It just doesn't go far enough. We need to add a new category: one that will bring us together in the here and now, beyond passive acceptance of diversity to actively embracing it.

I'll give some background for my line of reasoning. One of three core [Bahá'í](#) beliefs is the unity of religion, intimately linked to a related belief in the unity of God, the "Unknowable Essence". The rationale isn't complicated: all religions have one Source, and that Source has guided humanity in its spiritual evolution through the millennia through many Messengers (for example, Krishna, Moses and Jesus, among others). These Messengers have lived in various times and places, delivering Messages suited in their language and social teachings to those circumstances, and yet eternal in their spiritual components. Each brought humanity back to the straight path from which it had invariably strayed, giving birth to belief systems in the process, yet reinforcing the essentials (love, justice, harmony, etc.)

Most people follow one of those Messengers to one degree or another; some pay homage to all of them. For anyone who believes in the concept of divine revelation, it's logical to ask – how can the messages of those pure and selfless beings not fundamentally agree, if the Source is one and the same?

And if the Messengers are a means of gaining even a limited knowledge of God/the Absolute/the Great Spirit, or whatever other name we may use, why would we not study the lives and teachings of all of them? It would give more of a 3-D perspective, more depth, or at the very least a good cross-reference. Even better, let's go beyond study in the interest of tolerance, and give ourselves and each other permission to come to know and love all of them.

No religion has a copyright on the truth, and no culture has a right to believe itself superior – I think that much is widely accepted, at least in this small part of the world. In order to actively believe in our unity, though, it helps to have some way of explaining our diversity that also allows for our equality. The one I've found most useful is the separation of social and spiritual teachings. Aside from social teachings adapted to the specific social circumstances of each great faith (e.g. dietary restrictions, legal processes and so on), their spiritual teachings all overlap and repeat, each one reinforcing, illuminating and confirming the others.

So here's a fourth category, one taught to Bahá'í children: [progressive revelation](#). If we were to take the analogy of religious pluralism and rearrange it a bit to fit an historical rather than individual viewpoint, it would be this: the paths don't go straight up the mountain in equidistant lines. They spiral. They're connected. They form a long path from the base stretching upwards, changing appearance but not function. Our cumulative knowledge increases with time, although no faith, no matter where in the chronology of our history, is better or wiser or closer to God.

I wonder if we're at the point in our history where we can look back and recognize a pattern? Are we ready to believe that all of these great faiths, so seemingly separate, are the common spiritual heritage of all humanity? One of my favourite quotes from the Bahá'í Writings is, "This is the changeless faith of God, eternal in the past, eternal in the future." Far from losing my specific identity in the whole, that's where I found it – as a member of the family. One of the greatest gifts of the interfaith movement here in Victoria, since I belong to the newest faith of that family, was to be so warmly welcomed. It's a humbling experience. Other Bahá'ís, long persecuted in some parts of the world, have not been nearly so fortunate.