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“CONVERSATIONS ON PLURALISM in a City of the World”

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As we mark the opening of our wonderful new facility in London—and strengthen our commitment to education as the best way to increase global awareness—I’d like to begin by recalling a visit that two Syracuse University professors, Tazim Kassam and Gustav Niebuhr, made to London last November with a delegation of American religious leaders and scholars from the Chautauqua Institution.

They came to join international representatives from Jewish, Christian, and Muslim communities in a conference at The Ismaili Centre on “Building Civil Society: Faith, Diversity, and Pluralism.” It was a new step in a collaboration to encourage dialogue and understanding between three major faith traditions that share a common ancestor in the patriarch Avraham /Abraham / Ibrahim.

This “Abrahamic Initiative,” a program at the Chautauqua Institution initiated some 10 years ago, is a work in progress, a seedbed for international, interfaith, inter-cultural conversations. These conversations seek to discover how people reconcile their own faiths and cultures with the reality and validity of pluralism and how they can point the way forward to the building of a new generation of pluralistic communities and civil societies.

The spiritual leader of the Shia Ismaili Muslims, the Aga Khan, who has been a strong partner with Britain in many projects of global urgency, has also spoken profoundly and eloquently on why pluralism is fundamental to world peace and prosperity for all of us, no matter what our faith community or our home. Nearly a year after the shock and horror of

the September 11th attacks, he told an audience in Amsterdam that: “the strengthening of institutions supporting pluralism is as critical for the welfare and progress of human society as are poverty alleviation and conflict prevention. In fact the three are intimately related.”²

He then went on to make the critical link to education: “The problem,” he said, “is that large segments of all societies—in the developing and the developed world—are unaware of the wealth of global cultural resources, and therefore of the need to preserve the precious value of pluralism in their own and in other’s societies.”³ Because we often do not perceive that cultural pluralism is a critical element of well being, he said, we may fail to realize that the world’s cultural heritage is a public good, its preservation just as crucial as sustaining the natural environment.

As the Aga Khan has seen so clearly, “without cultural identity, social cohesion gradually dissolves, and human groups lose their necessary reference point to relate with each other, and with other groups.”⁴ Cultural identity is *the basis for*, not a hindrance to, inter-cultural exploration and the construction of common ground.

In light of the numerous ethnic and inter-faith conflicts around the world today, the notion that education can create constructive inter-group experiences by affirming pluralism requires some deliberate reflection and argument—and that is what I will try to do, briefly, today.

Global Awareness and the “Looking-Glass Self”

At the heart of education is a *conversation* that individuals have with the world in which we affirm “who we are”—that is, achieve some modicum of self-understanding—by recognizing that we can not exist without others. Appreciating ourselves is linked to appreciating others. We learn that others have different views, faiths, traditions, answers, and in so doing we sharpen our intelligence and refine our understandings.

In my field of social psychology, a central principle, with roots in early 20th century writings, is that individuals come to understand themselves through interaction with others and with the world. Following on the concept of “self-esteem,” coined by the great American psychologist William James, Charles H. Cooley used the metaphor of the self as mirror, or *looking-glass self*, to illustrate how we see ourselves largely through reflections from others.⁵

Other people are important to self-understanding. Yet we must also ask: How open are we to “seeing” them? Or, to ask the question differently: When we look in the mirror, do we see only familiar reflections? And when we happen to see difference, do we stretch to make a self-connection? Global awareness requires that stretching, but it isn’t guaranteed to happen, even in a setting as cosmopolitan as this one. That is why we must *teach* to engage pluralism.

Micere Githae Mugo, distinguished Kenyan poet and scholar, and chair of African American Studies at Syracuse, recently made a related point to me. She noted the urgency of deliberate dialogues among diverse peoples, rather than depending on the benefits of mere exposure alone. For the more deliberately we engage, the more likely we will experience a (self-)connection to those who otherwise remain as “others.” When we do engage, as Professor Mugo says: “we look other peoples and their cultures in the face and *see* in them the mirroring of our own humanity.”⁶

Sarah Ryman, an honors student at Syracuse who spent an eye-opening semester in Ecuador working with villagers whose family members were missing or detained in the U.S., described her transition from “tourist” to “family” in a speech to her peers upon her return to campus. She said, at the end of her time in Ecuador: “My clients no longer viewed me as an outsider because we were connected by our humanity. ... Before traveling to Ecuador, I defined a person as being globally aware if they had an appreciation for the diversity of other cultures. Now I view a person as being globally aware if they understand that they are connected to the rest of the world on the basis of our humanity.”⁷

But how do we make these connections?

I believe that critical to achieving a perception of others as human, sharing with us a common fate, is the cultivation of *empathy of mind*—the ability or proclivity, if you will, to get in the heads of others, to see their worlds and hear their stories as if they were ours, all the time reflecting—in a looking-glass sense—on our own stories. To cultivate empathy of mind, we must be prepared, as Peter Leuner, director of Syracuse’s London Program, has said: “to approach and cross borders both literally and metaphorically.”⁸ And we must be prepared to construct environments, settings, in which that boundary crossing is both possible and encouraged, so we may leave our “safe” spaces, venture forth to explore and learn, and return enriched.

That is, of course, what global education does at its best. That is what Peter Leuner and his colleagues have been nurturing. Their new setting, importantly nestled within this city of the world, will enable even more. But it will be work, because we—both universities and cities—begin as “communities of strangers.”

Empathy of Mind in Communities of Strangers

I borrow the phrase and the metaphor of “community of strangers” from Ramesh Thakur’s description of the United Nations, one appropriate to any discussion of global awareness and pluralism. Thakur, an assistant secretary-general, writing in the *International Herald Tribune* on the occasion of the U.N.’s 60th anniversary, said:

Despite bureaucratic rigidity, institutional timidity and intergovernmental trench warfare, the United Nations is the one body that houses the divided fragments of humanity. It is an idea, a symbol of an imagined and constructed community of strangers. It exists to bring about a world where fear is changed to hope, want gives way to dignity and apprehensions are turned into aspirations.⁹

I think it does not stretch the idea too far to say that in our world there are many models for a “community of strangers.” Great universities and great cities of the world all house the divided fragments of humanity and work to build communities on a base of pluralism constituted of strangers.

Thakur’s characterization is useful because it puts emphasis on three facets of central value to our work. First, it implies a rich tapestry of difference. Second, it warns us of the potential, therefore, for estrangement—we begin as strangers and we can always walk further apart. And, finally, it calls out for us to achieve community by recognizing interdependence across that difference. That is our task—to encourage empathy of mind across what can otherwise grow as intractable differences and divides.

And, as Vartan Gregorian, president of the Carnegie Corporation of New York, warned recently, in an era of technology, “connectivity does not guarantee communication.”¹⁰

Education is extremely important because it creates empathy of mind that is deeper and more lasting than the empathy that might be created simply by proximity, because educated empathy is rooted in communication.

London: City of the World, “Roost for Every Bird”

A character in Disraeli’s novel *Lothair* observed; London is a “roost for every bird.”¹¹ It is thus a perfect setting to consider how we educate by looking in the world’s mirror, to paraphrase Professor Mugo. And actually seeing our own humanity, how do we cultivate empathy of mind from those reflections?

It may seem odd or even ironic to make this claim for London, the former seat of the far-reaching British Empire and a former anchor of the triangular Trans-Atlantic slave trade between Europe, Africa, and the Americas. Both the empire and the slave trade stand as enduring examples of the lengths to which nations have gone to overcome others, eradicate pluralism, and build anything but empathy of mind.

Yet historically, and in contemporary times, it is more complicated than that, and the awareness of these contradictions is fertile ground for constructive reflections on pluralism and interdependence. I asked Professor Mugo to reflect on London’s history of contrasts and contradictions and this is her description:

The same site (of the Empire whose sun never set) bred the early abolitionists and the Romantic Poets. It was in London that Mary Prince claimed her freedom from enslavement and became the first enslaved woman to publish a “slave” narrative in 1831: *The History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave, Related by Herself*.¹²

It was the capital of the colonial Empire that turned a whole people’s history into “a chapter” entitled, “The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger,”¹³ when it did not silence them altogether.

Yet, it is the same London of Hyde Park’s “Speaker’s Corner.” And it is the capital where the 1945 Pan African Congress, leading to the decolonization of Africa, took place.

She went on to say, “In terms of identity, citizenship, race and class, London provides an excellent model for a study in contrast as well as sharp contradictions.”¹⁴

A model that, of course, we also see mirrored in our own history in the United States, which has prompted Peter Leuner to say of the experiences here at the Syracuse London Program: “Our students come, in part, to be informed and educated about London, about things British and European, and also to gain a perspective on the USA as seen from a distance.”¹⁵ They look in the mirror, and the contrasts and contradictions of London reverberate with what they have seen at home. This reverberation allows a connection to be made that prompts self-reflection.

Visible Pluralism: Ground for Empathy or More Walls?

The experience of looking in London’s mirror can be vital to both education and global awareness if the observations on its contrasts and contradictions, historical and contemporary, first jolt us out of our own stories, if you will, and into the lives and minds of others. To learn from others, we have to open our eyes, take off, if possible, some of our cultural lens to see others. Then, empathetically, we can self-reflect.

This leads me to ask: What do we see today in London that might prompt reflection and conversation on difference, and then a move toward common ground?

I want to begin with what we see quite *literally*, the people and buildings that attest to what Professor Gustav Niebuhr—who is director of Syracuse’s Religion and Society Program—calls “the *visible pluralism* that has accompanied the new, varied patterns of immigration that have enriched Britain and the United States by adding sizeable communities of citizens from Africa, the Caribbean, Latin America, South Asia and East Asia, and the Middle East.”¹⁶

Riding the tube makes this pluralism visible, and so does the permanently altered and invigorated architectural landscape of London, from the Swaminarayan Hindu Mandir in Neasden and the Sri Singh Saba Sikh Gurdwara in Hounslow to the Ismaili Jamat Khana and Centre in South Kensington.

As our architecture students who study here know well, these buildings do more than simply house various faith and cultural communities within London society. They reflect quite vividly the dialogue that we all must have between affirmation of culture, of group identity—so critical to self-determination and a sense of belonging for immigrant populations, whether new or long-standing—and the push for common ground. Our physical spaces say so much about who we are and what we can become.

This dialectic between affirmation and interdependence was very much on the minds of both the Aga Khan and of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher when they dedicated the ground and then opened the building of The Ismaili Centre embedded in South Kensington among some of London’s most distinguished public buildings. In the groundbreaking ceremony in 1979, the Aga Khan drew attention to the architectural challenge in building this center in this location—a challenge that is a metaphor for much more.

He said: “The mass and silhouette of the new structure are therefore strong and simple and in no way attempt to compete nor interfere with varied and imposing facades of the neighboring buildings. The Ismaili Centre being designed for a Muslim community must reflect, even if only discreetly, an Islamic mood whilst being sympathetic to the character of its surroundings.”¹⁷

The success of The Ismaili Centre, as a distinctive and yet sympathetic presence, attests to the possibilities for visible pluralism to build empathy. As the demographics of our communities diversify, we see visible pluralism everywhere. It is important, therefore, to ask ourselves how this presence can strongly signify belonging, without sacrificing integrity and without building walls that divide.

Pluralistic Presence: Devolving the Monolithic Other

Here, again, London may provide some worthy lessons. What sets London's evolving landscape apart from many other cities is the degree to which it serves, as Professor Niebuhr suggests, as a "concentrated home to so many within Britain's diverse religious groups." As he notes, "More than half of Britain's Hindus live in London, as do 40 percent of its Muslims and Buddhists, and one-third of its Sikhs. One in 11 Londoners is a Muslim, one in 25 a Hindu, proportions that ensure that religious diversity is an everyday fact of life for anyone on the City's streets."¹⁸

Perhaps as importantly, the sizes of its many ethnic and faith communities are large enough to produce the critical mass necessary for cultural pluralism to thrive. The traditions and resources of these many communities have a strong presence, for example, throughout the major cultural institutions of London. These institutions are embracing and advancing knowledge about the cultures of Asia and Africa in exceptional ways. The British Museum has a superb Islamic collection, the India Office Records in the British Library offers scholars and students a wealth of information, and a trip to the Royal Festival Hall on the South Bank might include Kathak Dance, while the tales of the Muslim mystic, Jalaluddin Rumi, are narrated at the Nehru Centre.

As one Syracuse University student reported, after taking a course in the London Program on the religiously inspired sacred music of South Asians: "I have never been in a city as multi-cultural as London. I feel that in the U.S., we would never have found so many religious centers so close in proximity. I have also learned to look at the music of South Asia in a totally different way and to appreciate it for what it is."¹⁹

This is important, very important, as a city moves from being one culture's home to being the home of many traditions, faiths, and groups, to all of whom it now belongs.

And, when we *see* this strength or presence built from a critical mass within pluralism, something else very important happens—the monolithic impressions that we all share, particularly across the East/West cultural divide,²⁰ begin to break down and become enriched with the nuances of variation within each group, each culture, each faith tradition.

There is already much ignorance in our perceptions of other cultures, groups, and faith communities, especially our misperceptions of *monolithic otherness*. Militants, fundamentalists, and extremists on any side tend to talk far louder than ordinary citizens, and too often they have an agenda, which is neither wisdom nor knowledge. Unfortunately, it is they who, all too often, draw the most media attention for all the wrong reasons.

That is why Professor Tazim Kassam, an Islamic scholar and Professor of Religion at Syracuse, encouraged our London Program to mount a symposium recently, *Encounters with Islam*, embracing the richness of Muslim cultural life and identity as it has found expression in London. What made it successful was its delicate, nuanced, and balanced combination of Muslim voices clearly and deeply reflecting on the diversity and complexity of issues around religious and cultural identity. Such a success brings into focus why we consider it extremely important on college campuses not to put individuals in isolated or "token" positions in which they somehow end up becoming representatives of their racial, ethnic, or faith group.

In addition to the problems of tokenism, misperceptions of monolithic otherness are also perpetuated when we are isolated physically, living totally apart with little or no opportunity for daily interaction. We have certainly seen the tragedies and sadness that results—be it because of "white flight" from many American cities to the suburbs or patterns of isolation in immigrant enclaves such as those that recently erupted in the suburbs of France and shortly before that in Birmingham, England. It can make it very difficult to get to know each other when we never have opportunities to *see* each other, in the fullest senses of that notion.

When groups are isolated from each other, it is extremely difficult—if not impossible—to enjoy and appreciate pluralism. This was very apparent in the debates that followed the recent riots in France in November.

When 200 members of the French Parliament called for legal action against several rap musicians, blaming them for the riots in November, the rappers replied that they just want respect and a place in French society.

Amir Kegeri, a 17-year-old of Algerian origin who goes by the stage name Ace, told NPR correspondent Sylvia Poggioli that his lyrics are “more than just a message. It’s a state of mind. It’s a culture. It’s alive, and I want to say that to everybody.”²¹

Although the inter-ethnic and inter-faith and inter-group conflicts of our times usually reflect the fundamental despair of poverty and powerlessness that dash the hopes of many groups and pit neighbors against neighbors, near and far, the flames of these conflicts are also often fed by monolithic perceptions of the “other” that make it easy to see them as enemies. When we do not know each other, it is all too easy to blame the conditions of one’s life on a monolithic, evil “other,” dehumanized by group stereotypes.

After September 11th, there were many in the United States and elsewhere who wondered why a group of extremists was taken to represent an entire global community of Muslims who inherit so many different languages, histories, cultures, and interpretations of Islam. As Professor Kassam writes in a published article, “Scholars such as myself are left wondering if we are fighting a losing battle in our efforts to make Muslim societies, their aspirations, cultural richness, intellectual traditions and modern challenges intelligible to a wider audience.”²²

If, instead, the richness of cultural and religious and ethnic pluralism is reduced to nothing more than homogeneity and “otherness,” then our communities of strangers fall apart, and either we walk further away into different gated communities, or we fight, or both. As the Aga Khan said of the so-called clash of civilizations: “The clash, if there is such a broad

civilisational collision, is not of cultures but of ignorance.”²³

Global Education: Building Bridges that Collapse Walls

To borrow a metaphor from Angela Davis, education—which replaces ignorance with experience—can turn a wall into a bridge,²⁴ and that is what we hope to achieve here in London, as well as at home in Syracuse. We want to use Faraday House as a point from which to venture, a home without walls, sending students and colleagues out to sites and events not necessarily on the tourist circuit, from Shepherd’s Bush Market to the Notting Hill Carnival to the Commonwealth Centre where the world’s pluralism takes root in London and the circle of citizenry, as Professor Mugo calls it, gets widened. But, as important as the “looking-glass mirror” of pluralism is, we also want to push for more deliberate dialogues and exchanges that can serve as the pylons of those bridges.

One way for us to build these educational bridges is through storytelling, sometimes in structured inter-group dialogues in which vulnerabilities and conflicts can be safely aired, and all of a sudden “your” story turns out to be “my” story too. This is what is happening now around the world, from dialogue groups in Israel,²⁵ to community-wide dialogues on racism organized in Syracuse by the Inter-Religious Council of Central New York or the inter-faith conversations promoted by many from major institutions such as the National Council of Churches and the American Jewish Committee and the Chautauqua Institution, to more grassroots organizations such as the Women Transcending Boundaries²⁶ in Syracuse. Whether formal or informal, these exchanges can disarm conflicts largely by humanizing the other, as voices across a divide begin to sound a similar note.

Which brings me to music and cultural/artistic expression of all sorts as an active medium of *communication*, not just connection between peoples and traditions.²⁷ Artistic exchanges have a compelling

immediacy and authenticity that can draw people to each other across many deep divides, and even when otherwise there is little love lost. People can listen to the music of other groups and traditions with respect, even when they can't understand (or perhaps don't want to hear) their voices. Moreover, once the listening and respect start, reciprocal communication is often not far behind.

Yo-Yo Ma, the world-class cellist, captured this power of artistic exchange in his five-year-long "Silk Road Project," a musical collaboration named after the "legendary network of trade routes from ancient times connecting West and East," which he calls "the Internet of antiquity."²⁸ The Silk Road Ensemble came together willingly, of course, sharing their traditions and expertise and producing music that Ma describes as having a powerful "humanizing effect." As he says: "It's all based ultimately on human contact and human empathy either for a tradition or for each other. ... It comes from life and turns into music—but it's about life."

Ma goes on to say: "What we want to do is to create not a homogenized world, or McWorld, but rather a kind of specific world that actually contains global elements. So the idea is that the more you dig in the local tradition, the more you will find global elements."²⁹ That is what we want from global education.

Conversations, Empathy of Mind, and Shared Freedoms

When we (and our students) immerse ourselves in this great city of the world, and soak up its visible and concentrated pluralism, we want to do more than reflect on a community of strangers. We want to take from the contradictions, the sights and sounds of freedom side-by-side with oppression, of the affirmation of pluralism against the disintegration of peace, the possibility of conversation, and all that can follow from it.

Real conversation, as the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Rt. Rev. Rowan Williams, wrote in an essay on "Charity," creates common good, not just a contract of mutual respect. He says: "It is an acknowledgement that someone else's welfare is actually *constitutive* of my own. ... Conversation is foundational for society."³⁰ Such conversation puts us in the minds of others, gives us a sense of responsibility for what we see in the world—not just for our own corner of action—and reminds us that our freedoms are only meaningful if shared with others. It stretches what we have to worry about because, even with the best of intentions, we may impact others adversely. Or, through our ignorance, we may indirectly foster estrangement.

Against the community of strangers housing the divided fragments of humanity, let us juxtapose a community of learners who Professor Mugo hopes will "cultivate a humaneness that creates a global society with an ethos reflecting the spirit of the Shona greeting: "How are you?" Response: "I am only well if you too are well."³¹

Empathy of mind. It can flourish here.

Footnotes

- ¹ Address marking the opening of Faraday House as home to Syracuse University's London Program, January 10, 2006. Deep gratitude is extended to Professors Kassam, Mugo, Niebuhr, and Thomas for their collaborative contributions to the preparation of this speech, and to Director Peter Leuner for his fine work in London on behalf of Syracuse University.
- ² His Highness the Aga Khan, *Pluralism Key to Peace and Development*, Keynote Speech at the Prince Claus Fund's Conference on Culture and Development, Amsterdam, September 7, 2002.
- ³ *Ibid.*
- ⁴ *Ibid.*
- ⁵ Charles H. Cooley, *Human Nature and the Social Order*, New York: Scribner, 1902.
- ⁶ Professor Micere Githae Mugo, personal correspondence, November 30, 2005.
- ⁷ Sarah Ryman, speech on global awareness and study abroad to incoming honors students at Syracuse University, August, 2005.
- ⁸ Peter S. Leuner, Welcome to participants in: *Encounters with Islam*, Syracuse University London Program, November 14, 2005.
- ⁹ Ramesh Thakur, op-ed, "The UN at 60: The Place Where Humanity's Divisions Meet," *International Herald Tribune*, Saturday-Sunday, June 25-26, 2005, 6.
- ¹⁰ Vartan Gregorian, "The Pursuit of Knowledge: Grounding Technology in Both Science and Significance," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Dec. 9, 2005, B5.
- ¹¹ Felix Drolin in Benjamin Disraeli's, *Lothair*, ed., Vernon Bogdanor, London: Oxford University Press, 1975, 39.
- ¹² *The History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave, Related by Herself (1831)* ed., Moira Ferguson, Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1997.
- ¹³ Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart: A Novel*, New York: Everyman's Library, 1958, 191.
- ¹⁴ Professor Micere Githae Mugo, personal correspondence, November 30, 2005.
- ¹⁵ Peter S. Leuner, Welcome to participants in: *Encounters with Islam*, Syracuse University London Program, November 14, 2005.
- ¹⁶ Professor R. Gustav Niebuhr, personal communication, December 1, 2005.
- ¹⁷ His Highness the Aga Khan, speech at the Foundation Ceremony of the Ismaili Jamat Khana and Centre, London, September 6, 1979.
- ¹⁸ Professor R. Gustav Niebuhr, personal communications drawing on figures from the Greater London Authority's Data Management Group in an August 2005 publication from the British Census.
- ¹⁹ Tazim R. Kassam, "Teaching 'Religion, Ritual and Music of South Asia' in London," *South Asia Center Outreach Bulletin*, Syracuse, N.Y.: South Asia Center, Moynihan Institute of Global Affairs, Maxwell School, Syracuse University, Spring 2005, 4.
- ²⁰ Vartan Gregorian, President's Essay, *Islam: A Mosaic, Not a Monolith*, 2001 Annual Report, Carnegie Corporation of New York.
- ²¹ Sylvia Poggioli, "French Rap Musicians Blamed for Violence," Morning Edition, National Public Radio, December 14, 2005.
- ²² Tazim R. Kassam, "On Being a Scholar of Islam: Risks and Responsibilities," *Progressive Muslims: On Justice, Gender, and Pluralism*, ed. Omid Safi, Oxford: Oneworld, 2003, 128.
- ²³ His Highness the Aga Khan, keynote address delivered at the Governor General's Canadian Leadership Conference, The Canadian Museum of Civilization, Gatineau, Quebec, Canada, May 19, 2004.
- ²⁴ Angela Davis, "Walls turned sideways are bridges," *An Autobiography*, New York: International Publishers [reprint], 1988, 346.
- ²⁵ Dan Bar-On and Fatma Kassem, "Storytelling as a way to work through intractable conflicts: The German-Jewish experience and its relevance to the Palestinian-Israeli context," *Journal of Social Issues*, Vol. 60, No. 2, 2004, 304.
- ²⁶ For further information on Women Transcending Boundaries, see <http://www.wtb.org>.
- ²⁷ Vartan Gregorian, "The Obligation to Know: Pursuing Knowledge in an Era of Technology," *Chronicle of Higher Education Leadership Forum*, October 17, 2005.
- ²⁸ The Empathy of Musicians: An Interview with Yo-Yo Ma on the Silk Road Project, conducted by Thomas May for Amazon.com, 2005.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*
- ³⁰ Archbishop Rowan Williams, *Lost Icons: Reflections on Cultural Bereavement*, Harrisburg, Pa.: Morehouse Publishing, 2000, 77.
- ³¹ Professor Micere Githae Mugo, personal communication, November 30, 2005.