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Let Our Image of God Unite Us

By Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf

Americans are divided. That's not a new phenomenon. We're divided over immigration policy, foreign policy, refugee rights, civil rights, health care, Supreme Court nominees. The divides are deep enough to make me ask: Who are we?

All we can agree on is that we are divided. What a great story it would be to draw the headline "Americans United in Common Cause!" When was the last time we saw something like that? When will we see it again?

On Thursday, religious leaders will gather at the University of Pennsylvania for a symposium on one such divide, concerning contested religious spaces in urban settings. Buddhists, Christians, Muslims, and Native Americans will share insights on local actions we've taken to preserve our traditions and our sacred spaces in complex environments.

But our religious traditions are not all about the local. They aspire for us to see ourselves from a larger perspective. Some of us remember the cosmic address cited in the famous play by Thornton Wilder, *Our Town*. One of the characters recalls the mailing address on an envelope that progressed from the town's name and state to Western Hemisphere, Earth, the Universe, and finally "the Mind of God." The character marvels that a letter so addressed would reach its destination. But the mind of God is pretty much where our religious traditions would take us.

Sometimes our local view of ourselves exhausts our perspective. That's typically true at sports events. What self-respecting Philadelphian roots for the New York Mets when they're playing the Phillies here in Philadelphia? But religion is not a competitive sport. The only competition the Prophet Muhammad endorsed was in doing good. We should "race toward God's forgiveness and a Paradise whose space is as large as the cosmos" (Quran 3:133).

The Quran also says: "We have ... made you nations and tribes that you may know one another" (Quran 49:13). We must deeply understand our common humanity. Our differences in language, culture, ethnicity, and religion are diversities within a common oneness. (Maybe that's how Major League Baseball's commissioner thinks of his family of competing teams.)

If I adopt a constricted, self-promoting view of my religion, I reduce it. I lose sight of its wide scope even within its own particular history. I raise a wall between my own in-group and everyone else, who become the dispensable “other.” At its most extreme, the in-group works to liquidate the outgroup, as the Nazis did and now ISIS strives to do.

But the religions are buoyant. They bounce back under attack. Christianity outlived the Roman persecution of it. Judaism emerged from the ashes of Nazi Germany. Today, Sunni and Shia survive the brutal attacks that each Muslim camp makes on the other.

Governmental policies that discriminate against a religion cannot succeed. The religions are bigger than any political effort to constrain them. The Prophet Muhammad implied this when he discouraged his followers from trying to outperform his own religious practice, as though to master Islam. We do not master genuine religions. They master us. Or rather, God masters us through them. And as He does, He humbles us into the affirmation of the humanity we share.

We are caught now on a divide between self-affirmation and affirmation of those different from us. Is my ultimate address Philadelphia or the mind of God? Are my neighbors only other Muslims or all created in the image of God? — that would be all humanity, as both the Prophet Muhammad and the Bible teach. Our charge as religious leaders is to remind us all that no ethnicity, nationality, or religion is our ultimate address. God is.

We’re all mesmerized by the divides among us. They play out dramatically in the courts, the town halls, the streets. I would not claim that one side of the divide represents God against the other. But those of us who respond to the immigration bans by saying, “That is not us,” or “That is not America,” are pointing to the mind of God.

So here’s my call to all of you: Identify your ultimate address in this great cosmos of ours. Let our knowledge of the image of God we are unite us. Know who you really are.

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