

Inter-religious Tolerance: Ameen Rihani's Key to Religious Reform and Political Unity

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Abstract

Despite his bitter criticism of religion and the clergy, Ameen Fares Rihani (1876-1940) was not an atheist; although his understanding of God was unique and 'unorthodox'. To him, God is not frightening, angry, or vindictive but rather good, compassionate, and merciful. God is one, and all religions lead to Him, so people of different religions and sects need not fight over the way they worship Him. To find God, the Ultimate Truth, Rihani urged people to shun the clergy, reflect on God, and contemplate His creations, particularly nature whose laws drive and regulate the universe. By reflecting on God, using the power of the mind, people can sift through the religious baggage, reject worn out dogmas, accept only what the mind deems logical, and exercise inter-religious tolerance. Only then would people evolve and progress. Thus, Rihani's criticism of religion was a reaction to people's divisive and illogical beliefs; and his call for religious tolerance, the ethical antidote with which he hoped to reform religion and bring about political unity.

Keywords: Ameen Rihani, inter-religious tolerance, Christianity, Islam

Ameen Fares Rihani (1876-1940), a Christian Maronite from Freike, Lebanon, known as the father of Arab-American literature, in the opinion of some lived decades before his time (Said and Funk 2004) and produced work that 'is fresher than nearly all the writing from that period' (Hottinger 1981, p. 107). Rihani was a visionary politician in his call for Arab unity; a reformer in his struggle to develop his homeland, and a judicious leader in his appeal for tolerance of opposing cultures, politics and religions. Of these 'visionary' concerns, none is timelier today than religious tolerance, which has recently become a global concern due to

the rise of religious extremism. Rihani advocated religious tolerance in many of his works, particularly in *Ar-Rihaniyyat* (1910; henceforth cited as *The Rihani Essays* translated by R. Baalbaki, 2010). This collection of essays includes a speech entitled “Religious Tolerance” (pp. 26-46), which Rihani delivered in the year 1900 at the Young Maronite Christian Association in New York. In his speech, Rihani bitterly criticized the confessionalism prevalent in his homeland, which had been carried to America, and warned his people against division and discord caused by narrow-minded sectarianism. He pointed the way towards religious reconciliation by encouraging the adoption of tolerance towards different beliefs. This paper will give a brief historical overview of the time Rihani lived in; discuss the religious practices and beliefs he rejected and the religious philosophy he lived by; and finally, explain the rationale behind his call for religious tolerance.

Several circumstances in Rihani’s lifetime were instrumental in developing his strong reaction, or rather revolt against religion and religious practices exercised in the Syrian nation* in general, and in Lebanon in particular. In his early years in Freike, a Christian village, Rihani was raised as a Maronite. He imbibed the teachings of the church, observed the reverence with which his countrymen regarded the clergy, noticed the role superstition and fate played in their lives, and witnessed the fear they held of divine punishment. Religious practice in Freike was not idiosyncratic; it was typical of religious practice in Syria and Lebanon in the nineteenth century. People’s ignorance, the distorted practice of religion, and the clergy’s lust for power culminated in intellectual stagnation and blind submission to the clergy (Aoun, 1983).[†] Moreover, the Lebanese Christians of various denominations in particular felt threatened by the Ottomans, who – it is traditionally believed by Lebanese Christians and Arab nationalists - consumed Lebanon’s resources, causing oppression and economic tension (Rafeq 1988; 2002).³ Driven by the deteriorating economic conditions in Lebanon at the time, Rihani immigrated with his uncle to the United States in 1888 to start a family business.

The U.S. played a major role in Rihani’s intellectual and spiritual development. He noticed the Americans’ appreciation for knowledge and hard work and reveled in the fact that the United States’ population, then over eighty million, actually lived together peacefully and enjoyed equality, justice, and freedom despite the different religions they belonged to (Rihani 2010, p.32). He realized that religion did not interfere in the political and national affairs of

the U.S. and learnt ‘the value of detachment from all kinds of authorities: especially religious, academic, and political ones’ (Nash 2013, p.68). Impressed by the Americans, Rihani immersed himself in their culture, imbibed their values, and read the writings of Emerson, Thoreau⁴, Whitman⁵ and Carlyle⁶ among others, who shaped his personality and endowed him with rational, liberal and non-religious perceptions of his traditional heritage. Indeed, Carlyle’s lecture ‘The Hero as Prophet’ raised in Rihani ‘the hope that Christians and Muslims might unite in their common love of the Arab homeland (*wataniyyah*)’ and awakened in him ‘a sense of mission toward the Arab culture’ (Nash 1994, p. 38), a mission of Pan Arabism developed in his auto-biographic novel, *The Book of Khalid*.

Life in the secular city of New York made Rihani crave to be free from religious authority (Nash 1994, p. 68). In *The Book of Khalid*, his protagonist Khalid was tempted by atheism, experimented with Bahaism, shifted to Wahhabism then ended up rejecting these beliefs in favour of a non-sectarian spirituality. Spirituality held many attractions to Rihani. It ‘encompass[ed] the various religions and sects of the East [...] allow[ed] faith to become a unifying factor’ (Mawlawi Diab, 2011, p. 370), and made Rihani’s Pan Arabism project possible, for the ‘lack of firm theological footing was the price to be paid for the human oneness the stage of the technopolis brings within our reach’ (Nash 2013, p.71). Moreover, it allowed westerners to embrace ‘workaday spirituality’ (Rihani 1970b, p.26) by simply doing good for good’s sake, without expecting anything in return. Lastly, spirituality prompted people to be ‘religious without religiosity’ (Rihani 1970b, p.26) and gave them freedom to worship God without the assistance of mediators or specific religions:

No Crescent nor Cross we adore;
 Nor Budha nor Christ we implore;
 Nor Moslem nor Jew we abhor;
 We are free
 (Rihani 1970a, p. 106)

However, despite Rihani’s appreciation of American values and intellect, he did not fail to notice the materialistic nature of Americans. He was dismayed that they sought gratification in their life-time, not in the after-life, and were mainly interested in cash registers, rather than in good deeds (Rihani 1970b). Rihani, as expressed in *The Book of Khalid*, yearned for the mysticism and spirituality of his homeland.

Rihani's ten-year experiences in the U.S. opened his eyes to the social ills of his homeland upon returning to Lebanon in 1897 to convalesce from a respiratory illness. He was shocked by the underdevelopment of his people and disgusted with their old conventions and adherence to dogmas. He blamed religious teachings in general, and the clergy in particular, for his country's underdevelopment. His staunch belief that the poor understanding and practice of religion was behind his people's stagnation and his country's backwardness was the main reason that made him incorporate the call for religious tolerance into his programme for national renewal (Rihani 2010, p. 281). Rihani took it upon himself to awaken his nation from its slumber and shake the off chains that tied it down, starting with sectarianism. In his introduction to the second volume of *The Rihani Essays*, he states the goal he had set for himself:

Even though I was born a Christian Maronite, I have an intention [i.e. personal involvement] in the rest of the religions and sects that are tearing apart the limbs of this nation; [...] I aspire to remove the barbed wire that exists between them and break the chains of traditions to bring them closer together (Rihani 2010, p. 283).

Rihani's return to Lebanon provided him with the opportunity to read the works of Arab writers, poets and reformists who called for the adoption of western sciences and development of Arab nationalism. Rihani was particularly fascinated by Abul Ala' Al Ma'arri (973-1057), a sceptic and a rational Arab poet whose non-sectarian religious ideas and his belief in a God that loved all people irrespective of their religion, provided Rihani with a model to combat sectarianism in his homeland (Hassan 2008). Moreover, Al Ma'arri's writings were the ideal means to introduce the West to an eastern model of rational non-sectarian religious thought that combined the mysticism and spirituality of the East with the logic of the West (Hassan 2008). This spurred Rihani to translate *The Luzumiyat of Abul Ala'* into English in 1903.

Rihani's experiences in both the East and the West led him to believe that despite the stark differences between these two worlds, they had one thing in common: they both had strayed away from the essence of religion and were in dire need of true religious guidance. Thinking of himself as a citizen of mankind, Rihani felt himself in a position to offer this guidance through familiarizing the two worlds with the best values of each in the hope of accomplishing 'a future synthesis of civilizations' (Hassan 2008 p. 255). It is with this

historical background in mind that one can understand Rihani's efforts to delineate the religious and secular realms in his society. Although other Syrian Christian intellectuals such as Ahmad Faris Al-Shidyah, Gibran Khalil Gibran, Mikhail N'aimey, and Na'oum Moukarzel, who each immigrated to the U.S. in the nineteenth century were also influenced by western romanticism and criticized sectarianism and the powers of the clergy (Hassan 2008; Nash 1994), Rihani's attack was the most caustic. So what aspects of Christianity did this Lebanese 'prophet' criticize?

As a reaction to people's submission to the teachings of the church and the clergy, Rihani challenged some key religious beliefs that were uncontested among Arab Christians in his time. One example is his rejection of the erroneous notion that addressing religious issues is the prerogative of the clergy. Rihani knew that unless he opened the door for consideration and interpretation of religious concepts, the Christian Lebanese would remain under the oppressive power of the church and the clergy (Al-Ahdab 1971, p. 38). He argued that the clergy could not be expected to speak unfavourably of religion because 'No man realizes his own drawbacks nor criticizes the profession on which his livelihood depends' (Rihani 2010, p. 26). Moreover, Rihani contested the common belief, purported by the clergy, that people needed mediators to get close to God, and that the clergy were the means to gain God's favour. Rather, Rihani maintained that the clergy manipulated believers and robbed them of their money in return for blessings and forgiveness of their sins. Thus, he considered church services, sermons, confessions, and other religious rituals and practices as means exploited by the clergy to subdue the people and keep them scared, helpless, and dependent.

Rihani's criticism of Christian beliefs are particularly noticeable in his early writings, *The Trilateral Treaty in the Animal Kingdom* [1903] (1989b) and *The Muleteer and the Monk* [1904] (1989a) where he goes so far as to reject the doctrines that characterize the Christian faith, namely the divinity and miracles of Jesus, and the virginity of his mother Mary (Aoun 1983, p.61). *The Trilateral Treaty in the Animal Kingdom* is a fable that criticizes religious concepts through narrating the events of a meeting held between animals to discuss the status quo of the Church and to reach a treaty between the different religious sects. Religions and sects are represented by animals as follows: Jesus (lion), Prophet Muhammad (camel), Catholics (donkey), Orthodox (horse), and Protestants (mule), while Rihani (the fox) plays the role of a reporter who denies the godliness of Jesus and considers him

a human being whose mental, spiritual, and physical powers are superior to those of other humans [...] In the eyes of the Creator, him and I

(Rihani) are equal in that we get our reward and punishment after we are judged and our deeds are weighed by the scales of justice (Rihani 1989b, p. 88).

In that same fable, Rihani also rejects Mary's virginity based on his absolute belief in the laws of nature which deny such a possibility, 'According to the laws of nature, birth denies the existence of a maidenhead' (Rihani 1989b, p. 110). In addition, Rihani doubts the miracles of Jesus and rejects the theological evidence the disciples of Jesus provide as he considered the disciples illiterate with 'weak powers of discernment' (Rihani 1989b, p. 117). Such criticism of major doctrines of Christianity was so antagonistic to the Christian beliefs prevalent among his people at the time that they infuriated the church, the clergy, and their supporters. As a result, Rihani was labelled an atheist and a blasphemer and was excommunicated from the church (Rihani 1980, pp. 83-84). But was this the case?

Analysis of Rihani's literary works clearly reveals that he was 'constitutionally incapable of denying God' (Rihani 1973, p.87). An atheist by definition is someone who does not believe in the existence of a deity altogether, whereas Rihani considered the creation of Man as evidence of God's existence. This belief is reflected in his prayer titled 'Supplication',⁷ in which he pleads:

O Eternal Fountain,
 From whence well forth the lights of love,
 From whence gush the streams of life and well-being!
 I open unto Thee my heart and my mind,
 And lay bare my soul before Thee.
 Deny me not, then, Thine overflowing bounties,
 Nor remove me from Thy copious fountains
 ...
 Thou art my Lord and there is no God besides Thee

And God responds,

I am the pulse of life within thee,
 The spirit of love within thee,
 The light of wisdom within thee,

Be thy faithful thereunto

For they are the reality of Divinity, whether thought as Truth or Religion

(Funk and Sitka, 2004, p. 150).

An atheist also does not pray. Rihani did, as demonstrated above, but in his own way and he appealed to people to glorify God, ‘Let us kneel in worship of our God and give Him glory’ (Rihani 2010, p. 37). Moreover, Rihani revered Jesus and considered him ‘the greatest philosopher that set foot on Earth and the best teacher under the sun’ (Rihani 1989b, p.99). He also endorsed all the values that Jesus preached, such as love for humanity, justice, freedom, peace, and good will (Rihani 2010, pp. 150-154). Thus, Rihani’s writings are testimonials of his belief in the Deity and his respect for Jesus and his teachings. In response to a friend’s letter, Rihani clearly stated his opinion of religion by saying: ‘To man, religion is an obligation and a must; [...] If blasphemy means shunning fanaticism, then blasphemy is a must to the East’ (Rihani 2010, p. 293).

So why did Rihani reject basic Christian doctrines? One explanation is his early exposure to western transcendentalism through reading the works of Emerson and Thoreau who considered that humans have the divine in them and they can nurture their spirituality through being close to nature (Dunnavent III 2004). Also, Jesus is a ‘friend of man’ whose virtuous conduct inspires ‘the religious sentiment’ and demonstrates that God lives in the souls of virtuous people (Goodman 2014). Thus, if people consider Jesus God, they would have denied their ability to nurture the divine in themselves. Another reason is the rational thinking Rihani acquired from his scientific readings which led him to value the power of reason and rendered him incapable of accepting beliefs that do not agree with the mind; thus his argument that ‘[e]ach doctrine, whether religious, philosophic, or political that keeps humans weak, ignorant, and indolent must perish. Each law that is incompatible with science must be destroyed’ (Rihani 2010, p. 234). Perhaps the best comment on Rihani’s understanding of religion is that of Iskandar Azar who said: ‘This man believes in his God no matter who He is [...] Let him be. You do not worship what he worships, nor does he worship what you worship; you have your religion, and he has his own’ (Rihani 1959, p. 135). Believing that he is the source of life, love, and wisdom, Rihani called on people to establish a direct relationship with God, as their only means of salvation. To achieve this goal, Rihani sometimes employed aggressive means depicted in his abovementioned attack on the clergy. At other times, he applied positive motivation by demonstrating through his own conduct, speech, and writings, the religious philosophy he lived by, a philosophy characterized by four

major doctrines: the belief in the unity of religions; the unity of God and his creations; the power of reflection; and the limited powers of humans.

To start with, Rihani affirmed the unity of all religions: all believe in God and his mercy, '[w]e all unify God and do not return in the end to anyone else. We are the children of monotheistic religions and Moses, Jesus, and Mohammad are but apostles to one God, apostles of monotheism' (Rihani 1997, pp. 67-8). Rihani believed that God loves all his children equally, so there is no need for conflict between religions, for 'All [...] are speaking the truth' (Rihani 2010, p. 37). Moreover, influenced by Emerson and Thoreau (Dunnavent III 2004) Rihani argued that people could understand God by contemplating his creations, particularly nature, for it is a manifestation of God on earth. Nature represents God's beauty, serenity, and generosity:

I see in nature around me the divine essence whose primary source we call God or the Maker. [...] The more the wise man studies nature, the closer he gets to the primary law that resides in every part of it. This approach to the law is what I call 'man's union with his Maker' (Rihani, 2010, p. 256).

Rihani searches nature to find truth and his experience there brings to mind Thoreau 'in the placid solitudes of Walden woods' (Rihani 1970, p.94). For Rihani the more one delves into nature, the more he/she appreciates the greatness of God and his wisdom, which appears in the interconnectedness of the natural elements. During his walk in the Valley of Freike, Rihani is struck by this interconnection, 'What prompts thinking and kindles the sight and insight is that fate extends its care to those delicate creatures [in nature] and allays imminent dangers and fears' (Rihani 2010, p. 57). He describes a white daisy standing in the middle of a road between two rocks and covered by a third rock which acts as a ceiling and is amazed that 'Nature and fate have erected this hermitage in the middle of the road under the hooves of the cattle that tread back and forth on the left and the right of the aesthetic daisy, never touching it once' (Rihani 2010, p. 57). Rihani concludes that God protects his creations but then perceives a need to explain the natural disasters that regularly occur.

To arrive at a reasonable explanation Rihani proposed that God gave humans minds with which to reflect on issues that may not be perceived by their senses. Hence, instead of seeking the assistance of the clergy to understand God- who is the Ultimate Truth - Rihani, like Emerson, urged people to exercise individual effort to understand their connection with God; to use their minds to contemplate extraordinary occurrences and beliefs; and to reject all

that the mind deems illogical. Rihani followed his own advice, as seen for example in the prayer he composed in which he wondered:

The theologian tells me that You – blessed be Your name – are omnipotent. But my mind which is a small piece of the Eternal Spirit realizes that diseases, hurricanes, storms, and wars do not happen with You standing watch. Which is truer Lord? ... Give me some strength to find the middle ground between these two opposites. All I need is a drop of the sea of Your knowledge, so I can escape those who trade in the after-life, those same people who spread corruption all around. [...] If I am wrong in questioning, and if I have blasphemed in my prayer, then I stand in front of You, repentant (Rihani 2010, pp. 76-77).

Rihani's doubts and questions, therefore, are only a means by which to test his mental powers in the search for certitude. His glorification of the mind is a natural outcome of his belief that the human mind is but one fragment of the Cosmic Mind that drives and controls the world (Aoun 1983, p.88).

In another article, after contemplating nature in the Valley of Freike and spending hours reflecting on it, Rihani finds an explanation to natural disasters which is: everything in the creation is connected, so what may be lost by one creature or object is gained by another:

True, winds and tornados wreak havoc on people and their occupations, but who says God created everything just to serve man's material benefits? That theory is maintained by religious teachings, yet nature seems to believe otherwise. I personally maintain that storms' compensation to man is manifold, for what it takes away in private possessions is returned to nature, thus making loss but relative. This truth is evident to all those whose moral and intellectual development has reached the extent at which the human soul is intermingled with the prevalent spirit of nature. Those few individuals do not stand to lose the eternal entity, nor gain any transient substance, for nature and what it contains is everlastingly theirs as they are hers (Rihani 2010, pp. 54-55).

However, Rihani also realized that reflections on nature and contemplation of the world may not provide all the answers people seek because humans have limited powers. Accordingly, the human mind may reflect on the Ultimate Truth, but never fathom it in its entirety. Rihani asked people to 'be tolerant in matters of religion for we do not know' (Rihani 2010, p. 36). Admitting lack of knowledge is better than concocting irrational explanations to phenomena

that we do not understand. Moreover, people's limited ability to understand God and religion would not demean them in the eyes of God, for Rihani staunchly believed that

All those who go by natural scriptures in doing good and avoiding evil just as their reason dictates shall not perish, even if the true meanings of religions are not revealed to them. For God is merciful and His mercy is boundless (Rihani 2010, p. 34).

Rihani's spiritual philosophy might be said to be encapsulated in the following passage:

If by religion we mean spiritual awareness and the connection between Man and his Maker; the origin of love and affection and beauty and sanity, the spiritual tie in its highest form without a theologian or a prophet as a go-between; then this is the solid proof of the development of mankind. Nations can never progress unless they follow that kind of religion. Messengers and prophets are in agreement about the purpose of religion. According to Buddha, Christ, Zoroaster and Mohammad, there are no differences except in the inessential details. Hence, if we take only that which is agreed on and rise spiritually to the Almighty, the source and origin of love, affection, beauty and sanity, then we steer away from our differences and the misery and discord that are caused by them (Rihani 2010, p. 293).

The aim of Rihani's spiritual philosophy was to encourage people to forget their differences and exercise religious tolerance which he defined as 'the esteem and respect that we are called upon to display towards the other sects that our fellow compatriots hold, even if those sects contradict our own' (Rihani 2010, p. 29). This call for religious tolerance served three purposes: ethical, religious and political, each of which will be discussed below.

To start with, Rihani's call for religious tolerance was an ethical appeal that 'demands an openness to diverse systems of belief' (Rihani A 2004, p.17), which would ensure equal treatment, fair opportunities, and respectful interaction between all religions and sects. As stated earlier, having lived a good part of his life in the West, Rihani realized that liberal societies respect religious freedom and support the equal rights of people who belong to different religions. He also understood that respect cannot be forced by laws alone but must be supported by rhetoric that advocates pluralism and toleration (Nussbaum 2004), so he compared religious diversity in Syria and Lebanon to that in Europe in the early twentieth

century and gave the example of Catholics who lived peacefully in the British Isles, and of Protestants who were safe in Spain (Rihani 2010, p. 16) in order to demonstrate that diversity could be a source of strength, not strife.

Besides being ethical, Rihani considered his call for religious tolerance served a religious purpose. Although western scholars have been predicting the demise of religion for centuries now, rather than disappear religion has flourished and developed 'more fundamentalist variants' due to people's perceived need for the supernatural (Iannaccone & Berman 2006, pp. 112-113). By proposing religious tolerance, Rihani encouraged the Lebanese to unite under one belief and to join forces to better understand God and his creations. Adopting one religion would destroy sectarianism, which Rihani considered the mother of all evils. Sectarianism, he argues, divides a country into factions that put the interest of the sect before that of the nation and results in endless internal conflicts on the religious, social, and political levels. In condemning sectarianism, Rihani said, 'I am anti-sectarian, anti-denominational, yet I am more sincere in my faith than many cap wearers and more orthodox- if the terminology is correct- than many wearers of large turbans' (Rihani 1997, p. 71).

Finally, Rihani advocated religious tolerance because it promised political advantages. First, it fostered national unity. He argued that the Ottomans who had ruled Lebanon for over four hundred years oppressed both the Christians and Moslems who lived there; however, the Christians' conditions were worse by virtue of their religion. According to Sharabi they were a minority in a sea of Moslems and were ruled by a Moslem Ottoman Empire (Sharabi 1970). Sharabi described the Arab Christian self-identity as composed of two negative parts: first being Christians among Moslems; and second belonging to different sects: Maronites, Greek Orthodox, Greek Catholics, Armenian Orthodox, Armenian Catholics, Syriac Orthodox, Syriac Catholics, Assyrians, Chaldeans, Copts, evangelicals and Latin (Roman) Catholics (Lebanon 2011).⁹ The Christians' distinct religious beliefs promoted in them feelings of anxiety, alienation and up-rootedness. Thus, Rihani advocated religious tolerance to consolidate the Christians' presence in their land by uniting all the Lebanese, irrespective of their religion. It may be argued that since tolerance involves the acceptance of what contradicts one's beliefs, it may prove insufficient in a community that consists of different cultural identities, such as Rihani's homeland. In fact, Funk contends that countries with multi-cultural identities must not only tolerate each other's beliefs but must also reconcile their differences and establish common grounds that would bring them closer together, so they could live in harmony (Funk, 2004). This is what Rihani advocated. He strove to establish religious harmony among his people through proposing his own religious

philosophy, which invites people to respect their differences and empathize with each other as human experience is one.

Another political advantage of religious tolerance according to Rihani is that it promotes secular Arab nationalism, which Hajjar argues is ‘the only way to give Christians and other minorities an identity as citizens in a polity that accords equal rights and opportunities to all’ (Hajjar 2004, p. 141). Through endorsing religious tolerance as a remedy for the Arab world’s sectarian divisions, Rihani could call for the unity of Arabs under the banner of Pan Arabism rather than Pan Islamism:

[...] the first thing we need in this Syrian, Palestinian, Lebanese, Hurani, ‘alawi, and infernal country- the country that has numerous temples and theological institutes, and numerous schools and sectarian disadvantages- is that national feeling free from all sectarian and denominational defects - the pure, sound, and sincere feeling for the nation [...]. We should raise the homeland above religion in civil worldly affairs. We must forget when outside the synagogue, the church, the khalwa, and the mosque that we are Jews, Christians, Druze, or Moslems [...]. Yes, we must strive to form a comprehensive sublime nationalism whose first principle is national geographic unity and must strengthen this unity with deeds, not with words (Rihani 1997, pp. 57-59).

Thus, Rihani called for religious tolerance to address ethical, religious, and political concerns. Like Thoreau, he united spirituality with political activism which was his way of ensuring that the Christians in Lebanon and the Arab world would earn their rights and safeguard their land through secular Pan Arabism, for Arabs existed before Christianity and Islam:

In the Arab peninsula, there are kings and princes who call for Arab unity based on religion and we [Rihani] call for Arab unity based nationalism and propagate it among people with all the force/power and faith that we hold [...] This national spirit which springs from the greatest historical truth is the first cornerstone of Arab renaissance. Indeed, the Arabs existed before Islam and before Christianity, and they will prevail after Islam and Christianity (Rihani 1956, pp. 159-160).

To conclude, Rihani proposed religious tolerance based on a new spiritual understanding of religion in order to bring harmony to warring religious factions in Lebanon and the Arab world. He preached that ‘good deeds are the real religion rather than the religious rituals’ (Rihani 2010, , p. 289), and this spiritual framework according to Abdul Aziz Said ‘allows us

to relocate our most basic, inherited assumptions in ways which can free us to untangle ourselves from our present circumstances and move toward our shared collective destiny' (2004, p. 114). Rihani's philosophy chimes in with the needs of a better interconnected world, and delineates a course which humanity today needs to follow if it hopes to prevail and prosper.

Unfortunately, Rihani's attempt to unify his people through pointing out their shared beliefs, their interconnectedness in this world, and their limited mental powers was not appreciated and his advocacy for respect and tolerance was unheeded. Nussbaum argues that if public language does not foster respect, 'human equality will remain vulnerable' (Nussbaum, 2004, p. 45). A quick look at our world today proves her right. A hundred and score years after Rihani's call for adopting religious tolerance, religious fanaticism is as rife as it were during his times. The players in some cases have changed, but the game is the same. People are 'extremely slow learners' to borrow Wilkins' (2003, p. 240) words, for they have not learnt from their mistakes in history despite the centuries of religious conflicts they have lived through. Religious intolerance among Christians and Moslems and even atheists abounds in the world and sectarianism is also alive and well. What is ironic is that violent fanatic acts are almost daily being committed in the name of religion! If Rihani were to return to Earth today and witness all these atrocities, he would reiterate what he had said more than a century ago but this time with reference to the twenty-first century: 'Do we really belong to the ... [this century], the century of civilization, enlightenment, democratic principles, socialism and Christian charity? [...] In vain did Jesus Christ come to Earth' (Rihani, 2010, pp. 30-31).

Notes

¹ The term 'Syrian' at that time referred to Syrians, Lebanese, and Palestinians. Rihani used the term 'nation' when addressing the Syrians in his speech titled 'Religious Tolerance,' *The Rihani Essays*: 'Fellow Syrians! We are a nation that consists of three million people [...]' p.32. It is also used in *Al-Qawmiyyat* (1956), 1, in an article titled 'As-suriyyoun wal harb' (Syrians and War), p.89 in addition to other articles. The term was widely adopted in the American émigré community, e.g. *The Syrian World* was an Arab American periodical to which Rihani and Jibran contributed in the 1920s. See also Scott (2006).

² See also Jamil Jabre (1964), p.31, p.36, p.120.

³ See Hisham Sharabi (1970) on reasons for Christians' insecurity during the Ottoman rule. The Ottomans ruled Lebanon from 1516 till the end of World War I. Rihani referred to Ottoman rule as repressive repeatedly in his *Al-Qawmiyyat*, 1-2. See also Wail Hassan (2008) pp. 246-47.

⁴ On Emerson, and Thoreau, see Walter Edward Dunnavent III (2004).

⁵ On Whitman's influence on Rihani, see Terri De Young (2004).

⁶ On Carlyle's influence on Rihani see Nash (1994) and Wolfgang Iser (1996).

⁷ The poem was first published as 'An-Najwa' in Ameen Rihani, *Ar-Rihaniyat*, 4 (Beirut: The Scientific Press, 1923).

⁸ My translation.

⁹ Lebanon has eighteen officially recognized religious groups including four Muslim sects; twelve Christian sects, the Druze sect, and Judaism.

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