

Diversity and the Development of Humanity

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Diversity has been the defining characteristic of our planet. Whether it is the whisking sands of the Gobi Desert to the lush herbaceous life of the Amazon rainforest, the diverse and complex systems that make up Earth have changed, adapted and survived the chaos of the natural world only to expose how interdependent they truly are with each other. And just the same, humankind has shown itself to change and adapt to the constant struggles of nature-and itself. The development of humanity is an amazing process of survival where progress, achievement, and superiority have prevailed due to the development of the mind. The network in our brain not only includes information necessary for survival but it also contains the desire to learn, create, and even inspire. It is from this that ideas, beliefs, religion, and philosophy are born. How could we ever imagine that such a diverse population would believe in anything totally uniform? Yet even in chaos, patterns exist and prove that similar thoughts can converge into something homogeneous. Amazingly, this one thought can turn into something practiced, revered, and even fought over. So when looking at religion, specifically the major monotheistic religions of our time, I try to remember that people

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are diverse, so why shouldn't their beliefs and traditions be as well? One can not expect a single religion to appeal to everyone, but perhaps simply look for some sort of connection between them all.

This was my attitude as I traveled to Morocco in December 2009 to study and interact with its culture and people. The travel team embarked on a week-long trip exploring the sights and sounds of bustling Casablanca, the political capital of Rabat, and the red desert sands of Marrakesh. Morocco's long history can be considered a model for the diversity that I discussed above. It, too, has been molded and shaped from the merger and separation of peoples and tribes, oppressors and liberators, intellectuals and travelers. It has been considered the epicenter for three distinct cultures: Sub-Saharan, European, and, Middle Eastern. Each of these is as unique as the stars in the sky yet have found a way to co-exist in the Islamic country of Morocco. To say this developing relationship has been a quick or an easy process is untrue, instead struggle over resources, governmental rule, and social structures has been an ongoing reality. But as the future approaches and our world continues to change, so does, for the most part, people. Morocco, as an independent nation, has realized its importance in the world and has adapted to the turbulent waves of civilization. It has the face of Western society with its feet squarely planted on the continent of Africa and its heart tied to the faith of Islam.

The religion of Islam came to Morocco in the late 600's and the conversion process took strong root. Today, around 97 percent of Moroccans are Muslim. The spread of Islam from Arabia is a prime example of how a simple belief can grow and flourish in the minds of people and eventually in the cultures of others. Though sometimes the reasonings for conversion are convoluted, the process takes place never the less. The devotion to their faith is powerfully evident in the people of Morocco. The streets of each city and individual neighborhood are scattered with mosques and the Muslim people are supported and encouraged by the daily call to prayer. Time did not exactly stop during the prayer, traffic still scurried and the market still buzzed, but the spiritual presence was apparent. I do not adhere to a specific religion nor do I pray, yet I often found myself stopping to ponder over the conflict, struggle, and beauty in life. For that week in Morocco, the call to prayer became a unique reminder for me to pause in this hectic race we call life and simply reflect.

I realized that one does not have to entirely agree with something to appreciate its meaning and purpose for someone else. For example, I asked one

of the female students in our group if she truly wanted to wear the hijab. This was a very personal question but I was convinced she answered me in honesty. She whole-heartedly believed that in God's eyes it is the right thing to do for a woman to dress accordingly, not only to bring honor to her family and protect her sexuality for her husband. It was an outward representation of her commitment to God. Truthfully, I was taken back by her response. I assumed that the majority of Muslim women, especially my generation would feel oppressed by the strict conservatism in dress. Instead the hijab appeared in this sense an attribute of character, morality, and even empowerment. Though I now better understand the hijab's relationship to the Muslim woman, I still struggle with its place in Muslim social structure. I could imagine that many women are forced to wear the hijab or burka out of necessity. If these woman did not they would be looked down upon in many Muslim societies and even bring shame to their family. I can imagine that this social pressure prevents many women from seeking out independence and developing their own individuality. From my experience and interpretation, Islam is so densely intertwined in personal identity. But I have learned that my perspective is only one interpretation; that others are equally valid.

Though I try very hard to experience life with a curious spirit and open mind, it becomes very challenging to disconnect from past experiences, bias, and perspectives when being introduced to a new environment. No two people will ever experience an event in the exact same way because of their past understandings. So when writing about these experiences encountered in Morocco, I decided to somewhat explain why I felt moved, or embarrassed, curious, offended, or taken back. I would never say something that occurred or was said was wrong or right. Everything overheard and witnessed on this trip should be evaluated in context; we were in a Muslim nation as American students apart of a research team learning about the history, people and culture of Morocco. I somewhat felt pressured to look at this trip solely as a scholarly experience, as a piece to a project for a greater understanding but this trip was also a part of my personal journey in life. My experiences in Morocco stretched my way of thinking and curbed my appetite for the unknown.

The most moving experience for me personally was also one of the first sites we as a group visited, Hassan II, the eloquently build mosque in Casablanca. I am thankful that we came to the mosque first because it somewhat set the stage for my interactions and interpretations for the remainder of the trip. We

arrived at the mosque about an hour or so before sunset. Situated on the coast, the mist of the waves crashing along the rocks tickled my cheeks and the salty air filled my lungs. The lighting was serene and the atmosphere peaceful. I was immediately attracted to this sight because of my sincere respect and reverence for the sea. Adhering to very few boundaries along with its vast and unpredictable nature, the ocean and its brotherly winds prove to be the most powerful and tangible entity my mind has ever understood.

I was five years old when I nearly drowned. I had always been adventurous and like many young children I was willing and able to test boundaries and authority. It's funny the things you remember at such a young age. I was wearing a pink bathing suit with bright colored stars and my grandmother calling me Ms. Hollywood. I remember being not allowed to jump off the diving board and swim in the deep end of my grandparent's pool without wearing my floaties. And I remember trying to dodge this rule by slowly wading in deeper and deeper so they would not notice. The next memory I have is the struggle for air as water rushed in my mouth and extreme, jolting panic. Those first few moments are as vivid as a picture yet I have no memory of my grandfather pulling me out of the water and resuscitating me. Ironically, I was on swim team from six years old up until my senior year of high school. I never let that experience neither defeat me nor let fear control my experiences in life. I have only taken from this a healthy respect for water and an understanding of what little control I have over it. I rarely think about what happened that summer evening but that first day in Casablanca at Hassan II, I was consumed by the memory.

The element of Islam that I particularly find meaningful and somewhat parallel to my belief system is this value and reverence to nature. Perhaps it is why I found Hassan II Mosque so powerful. To me, its location on the towering rocks above on the sea did not represent man's pride or egotistical character; instead the mosque was positioned to surround itself in the beauty and permanence of nature. Rivaling the beauty of the mosque and its scenery were the many different faces surrounding the holy site. Some were worn from years of hardship, other caked on with makeup, and others covered by a veil. I was taken back to see that Hassan II almost doubles as a park or social gathering center. Small boys were kicking around a football while their mothers sat along the benches chitchatting about the day, the waves crashing behind them. A little girl eyed me and I snapped pictures of the sunset. I pointed my camera at her and she grinned, her curly black hair twirling in the wind. I quickly snapped the picture and she

bolted to join the other young girls chasing pigeons. No one seemed started that I was there or offended by me taking photos. An atmosphere of peacefulness coated the site and the cool wind seemed to dull any kind pain, animosity, or sadness that might lie hidden. My heart was content and my mind at peace, but only for the moment.

Unfortunately, that night at the hotel my mind wondered to darker, more haunting things. I wrestle with Islam and its proclaim to peace yet our society is consumed by the divide and struggle of this religion and its relationship to the surrounding world. I still think about 9-11 or how our American soldiers were taken captive and decapitated on video. These were the perspectives that inevitably stuck with me as I walked down the streets along the ancient wall of Rabat or when I was the only woman in line at the gas station late at night on our way to Marrakesh. Those attacks of hatred are a scar to me as an American but a festering wound to me as a human being. I have witnessed that cultures clash and as humans we desire power and will justify our superiority to others by claiming their culture of beliefs wrong, but what happens when a people subjugate and punish their own?

The cover of Time magazine this week pictures a beautiful young woman in actuality but her face has been mutilated by the removal of her nose and ears. This Afgani woman was abused and left for dead because she fled her parents-in-law who were beating her and treating her as a slave. The Taliban with the approval of her husband was able to do this on the basis of the religious councils' verdict, which stated that a woman must have male accompaniment outside of the home. The Taliban commander said he must make an example out of her. I can not help be feel anger and resentment for a religion that can be so manipulated and misinterpreted by man in order to oppress and subjugate its people out of fear. But this is not unique to Islam—fundamentalism permeates all religions.

Though Morocco is rapidly growing and increasing its commercial and social ties with Europe and the Western world might be appalled at the actions taking place in other Arab countries, still professes the same religious background. It concerns me that so much aid and resistance to these crimes against humanity come from the West. I asked a student how he felt about the terrors happening around the world in the name of Allah and under the religious umbrella of jihad. He answered that those Muslims are extremists and do not represent the majority of Muslims. It is true, perhaps the Muslim terrorists only represent ten percent

of the Muslim population but they have polluted, tainted, and contorted not only the religion of Islam but also how outsiders perceive it.

At the end of our trip, I came home not feeling like an outsider. I befriended and came to love all of the Muslim professors and students I received the privilege to meet. And just as I had countless questions to ask my Muslim friends, for each question I had, they had two. Maintaining an open dialogue with people and cultures different from our own is the only way to better understand each other. I did my best to answer questions asked of me, even those many of these conversations turned into an opportunity for conversion. I was not offended to be asked to convert. I was somewhat touched that these students cared enough about me as an individual to get over any embarrassment or pride and simply ask. They are committed to their faith which I greatly respect. Perhaps this commitment and the love and devotion for humanity should be the new face of Islam. Perhaps not trying to convert the mind but appeal to the heart is the only way to truly understand each other's beliefs, traditions, and religions. After all, as diverse and unique as each individual might be, we all share the common element of humanity. Everyone goes through the struggles, successes, failures, and triumphs of life no matter what their skin color, or nation of origin, or religion. Maybe if these differences were overcome and the similarities recognized and embraced, we as the human race could come together like never before and create something powerful and permanent.