

DIFFERENCE, BEAUTY AND THE DIVINE:  
HARMONY IN RELIGIOUS PLURALITY

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*<sup>12</sup> Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, <sup>13</sup> bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. <sup>14</sup> And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.*

—Colossians 3: 12-14

THERE IS UNDOUBTEDLY SOMETHING DEEPLY ENCHANTING about the notion of harmony. It has an alluring and attractive sense of possibility that evokes both desire from within us and a reflective sense of our inner harmony. Yet this sense of possibility is one that always seems to lie just beyond our full comprehension, and sadly, just beyond our capability to produce and sustain. In some sense, our appreciation for harmony exposes a desire within us to believe in the perfection, beauty and purpose of things. This lies beyond their immediate appearance or circumstances and beyond our immediate understanding of their relation. Of course, this presupposes that there is indeed a deeper relation of things which we fleetingly perceive in our glimpses of harmony but that remains largely hidden from our everyday perception. This notion is a kind of utopian sense – expressing the feeling that things should fit together well, that the whole is both more beautiful and more fitful as a sum than as its parts and in which things although currently disconnected, distraught or destroyed could be made, with only a little finesse, to be better. Harmony, however received or experienced, offers us a passing induction into this sense, a fleeting glimpse of the potential of our world and, perhaps, a starting point for the imagination required for its renewal.

This feeling evoked by the experience of harmony is apparent across the different circumstances in which we remain surprised by the perception of harmony, whether found in our enjoyment of musically, naturally or physically harmonious experiences. This concerns the aesthetic quality of harmony – the way in which harmony is perceived, felt or experienced.<sup>1</sup> Harmony, in this context, contains within it innumerable connections to the other qualities that form and structure our experience of reality. Whether in the form of experiencing beauty, truth, or

goodness, the process and unfolding of the aesthetic reception remains the same. The rapture of Beauty, that experience of perfection aside from our desire to possess or own, an appreciation of the thing as is without the need to tinker, correct or add. As Eco notes, ‘we talk of beauty when we enjoy something for what it is, immaterial of whether we possess it or not’<sup>2</sup>. The piercing revelation of Truth, that sudden epiphany of relation and not just correctness, but fittingness, a solidity of knowledge that expresses itself not only finitely, within a particular context, but expresses within its infinite relation to the universal.<sup>3</sup> The deep realisation of Good, either in an action or within some physical thing, that restores not only the balance and harmony of the context but also, in some sense, our hope for the wider goodness of things. As the medieval scholar Boethius notes in the context of divine human relations, goodness flows one from thing to another, stating:

For the first good, because it is, is good in virtue of the fact that it is. But a second good, because it flowed from that whose being itself is good, is itself also good.<sup>4</sup>

Goodness connects goodness and in doing so, illuminates the connections between us all. Harmony is the hidden glimpse behind each of these that is unveiled through and with each of them but remains floating, somewhat elusive, between them.

There is a sense that Harmony is the connecting aspect of the Good, the True, the Beautiful - that each of these other principles exists in relation with the others through their innate harmony, that each principle extends and opens beyond itself to the others, reflecting within the disclosure of one a relation beyond that context and into a wider harmonious whole whereby the Good, True, and Beautiful are to be found through one another. This describes, perhaps, where our experiences of harmony can come to be found, between and amongst our experiences of other pinnacles of human emotion and experience. Think of those places in which we revel in the experience of harmony:

The slow, delicate, haunting build-up of voices in the choral work of Thomas Tallis.<sup>5</sup> An aching longing silence, pregnant with possibility and enticement, that flowers, ever so slowly, into a glorious expression of purity, clarity and perfection. A swelling coherence of purpose begins, building within and through the difference found between voices, expressing not only the clarity of vision but also the myriad themes to be found within it. A resounding returning of those differences to the central theme, a love-struck longing for

belonging, an expression of wholeness and relation, a revelation of the truly good through harmonious song.

The quiet, purposeful, busyness of a flourishing wood in spring, the tiny and the gigantic all striving for their place. A sense of shared purpose that extends beyond the confines of a single organism, bridging the divide between species, between the natural and created orders, between the human and the world in which we live.<sup>6</sup> Harmony here is the feeling of correctness and connectedness, correct in burgeoning form and freedom of action, connected in producing together the crescendo of spring.

There is a feeling of experiencing a great work of art, that dwells in relation to both the viewer, and to the truth that the art seeks to express. Whether the art aims to be representational, expressing the truth of the thing directly, or aims to express the ineffable quality of relation between the thing and its potential.<sup>7</sup> Think of the tortured visions of saints, showing both the connection between the divine and the human, mirrored in ourselves, and highlighting the utopian possibility of our bodies.

These experiences, far removed from each other in time, place, or context but sharing that inescapable aesthetic quality, enchant our imaginations with the promise of purpose and meaning behind their apparent differences. Much as our lives are quests for meaning, so too our experiences of meaning elucidate a hidden harmonious whole. As David Cadman in attempting to define 'harmony' has noted the experience of harmony is independent of context being rather 'an expression of wholeness', a 'way of looking at ourselves and the world of which we are part' and fundamentally about 'connections and relationships'.<sup>8</sup> This notion of harmony draws out a number of characteristics of the circumstances in which harmony is to be found, including, but not limited to, aspects of purpose, relation, vulnerability and desire. Each of these aspects is to found in our appreciation of harmony with these characteristics themselves being integral to our aesthetic sense of harmony beyond the immediate context.

This can be seen most clearly by examining the relationship between these particular characteristics and the experience of harmony within specific contexts. The aspect of relation is perhaps the clearest. We experience harmony when we feel the logic of the ongoing difference within the context we experience when we are assured that the difference experienced within the harmonious circumstance is

itself manifested through the relation of the specific to a broader universal. If we return to the notion of musical harmony, perhaps the easiest experience of harmony to grasp, we are aware that the different sounds produced within a harmonious piece of music rely, for their harmony, on their relationship to the other sounds produced within the same moment. Without this relation, either simultaneous relation in the context of technical musical harmony, for example, between different notes played at the same time, or relation between a particular note played at a particular time and the other notes that surround it within a piece of music, perhaps best thought of as holistic harmony, the existence of harmony collapses into the unrelated existence of the note in isolation. Without the relation of the specific (the note, the insect, the depiction held in art) to the general (the theme of the piece of music, the balanced ecology of the forest, or the glimpse of truth offered by the artistic representation) the notion of harmony being present in that particular context collapses. In this, relationality, the ongoing connection of one thing to another, is a requisite and necessary aspect of the experience of harmony. Without relationality, anything in particular fails to express its harmonious connection to things beyond itself, remaining locked within the prison of its own isolated, and therefore meaningless, existence.

This aspect, of relation between the specific and the general, highlights the necessity of purpose for the presentation of harmony within our experience of reality. A random confluence of things does not represent a harmonious whole, unless within the supposed random order some greater arrangement or purpose can be received by the self which is experiencing. This is not to say that the experience of harmony requires arrangement – only the perception of it by the self. While experiences of harmony may appear random at first, the bewildering busyness of a forest, for example, harmony emerges as an aesthetic experience in our uncovering of the pattern and purpose within that immediately confusing multiplicity. The relationship between the things perceived to be in harmony must be purposeful, whether deliberate in the case of created art or music or naturally occurring in the case of mutually interacting forms of ecology. In each case, it is the appreciation of purpose behind the relationship that reveals the experience of harmony to the viewer.

The notion of purpose, however, is distinct from the notion of arrangement, although obviously related. While a natural and unmeaning confluence of factors can evoke harmony through their relation to and revelation of a universal truth, this is not necessarily formed from the deliberate arrangement of things to suggest or incur that revelation. After all, the viewer of the instance of harmony

carries with them the heavy hermeneutic weight of their lives, their other experiences, their expectations and their beliefs, the *wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewußtsein* (historically-effected consciousness) espoused by the German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer.<sup>9</sup> This hermeneutic filter often serves not to uncover harmony, but rather to obscure its presence, hiding the potential revelation of purpose and relation beyond ourselves within the constructed confines of our own selves.<sup>10</sup> By shaping our experience of the world not as it is, but rather through our expectations and personal beliefs, we shape our ability to perceive beyond the limits of our comprehension.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, so often it is the appreciation of purpose beyond ourselves that reveals the harmonious connection of the self to the other, the sacred to the profane and the world to worlds beyond.

Yet, the appreciation of true purpose, the ability to be surprised by its revelation, requires a sense of epistemological vulnerability within our hermeneutical framing.<sup>12</sup> Without a vulnerability to error within our matrix of expectations, everything is expected, pedestrian and already illuminated. There is no space for surprise within a system that perfectly matches our predictions, each occurrence following predictably from the last or within a system which constantly reframes the ideological filter of our reality.<sup>13</sup> The danger of our contemporary world undoubtedly lies within this aspect of its epistemology, a desire for a resolute certainty that isolates us from the sense of wonder, surprise, and illumination that is critical to developing our awareness of the power and value of things outside ourselves.<sup>14</sup> Within contemporary mechanistic, modernist and materialistic constructions of our reality, there is a lack of the vulnerability and humility, so necessary for the revelation of a deeper harmony beyond our immediate apprehension.

Without this sense of vulnerability in our assumptions and expectations, we become epistemological didacts, whereby our epistemological assumptions override our experience of reality – never surprised, never enchanted, never to be shaken from our preconceived notions and valuations. We become sad and detached, trapped within a cage of certainty which eternally disappoints our very human desire for wonder. Yet, our experiences of harmony in all sorts of contexts provide a glimpse between the bars of the iron rationality of our contemporary world, a sudden revelation of both purpose and relation that exceeds the confines of our expectations. Harmony when experienced is a surprise, a movement of ourselves outside of the commonplace or ordinary and the dislocation of our ordinary world by the glimpse of our dependence on something outside ourselves.<sup>15</sup> It is an allowance and welcoming of change in our life, a change that, through illuminating our unthinking expectations, temporarily disrupts our ordinary course in life.

This vulnerability to change on the part of our epistemological foundations, the ability to be surprised by something unexpected, the openness to the correction of our suppositions, connects to the appreciation for relation and purpose evident within our experience of harmony. Indeed, these three form necessary characteristics of the aesthetic quality of harmony, shaping our experiences of moments of transcendence. However, these three together, while sufficient for an experience of harmony, are not the only way in which our experience of harmony is in relation with our selves. Here, we move beyond the experience of harmony, to the experience of the experience of harmony. It is not enough merely to grasp that a piece of art gestures towards the relation of the particular to the universal, expresses that that relation has some form of purpose or connection behind it, and to be open to the possibility that this experience could in some sense illuminate one's own considerations of the nature of reality. There is also the critical matter of desire within our experiences of harmony, a desire not only to seek out those fleeting instances of connection but also a desire towards the continual uncovering of the meaning and importance of those moments.<sup>16</sup> Our experiences of harmony are not, therefore, discrete illuminations without intrinsic meanings that float free and loose, impinging on our selves only during the time of our immediate experience. Our feeling of harmony is rather a quest of desire, a continuous attempt not only to experience moments of harmony through particular experiences but also to expand this feeling both chronologically and kairologically within our lives.<sup>17</sup> We desire, on experiencing moments of harmony, to understand not only how this moment of revelation relates to other moments we experience, how our illumination of harmony within the forest relates to the seeming disharmony of our built environments but also how the revelation to us of harmony within a moment of experience relates to those beliefs we hold about the ultimate meaning of reality, how the specific awareness of relationality and purpose contained within our experience connects to the relationality and purpose of the whole of reality. This exposes two forms of desire, the first towards the other, and the second to a continuation of the flourishing of the first. Both forms of desire expressed here are forms of the central desire to know more about the reality in which we live, the purpose that seems to animate our own existences. Our desire is a continual uncovering of more, a greater understanding of things and a revelling in the difference that things outside ourselves make to our lives.

We therefore require in our aesthetic appreciation of harmony a combination of both relation and purpose. It is the unveiling of both of these features that elicits the grasping of harmony within us, the awareness that things are connected

and in motion with each other, and that this relation is structured in such a way that a broader relation is connected to the specific relation apparent. The notion of harmony in song is exposed both technically, within the relation of purposefully struck notes to create a particular vibration, cohesively, between the location of that vibration, whether musical or vocal, and those around it, composing a discrete emotional reaction to their positions, and on a somewhat grander scale, as the meaning and tone of the harmonious music reveals within itself and to ourselves the connection between our personal experiences and the broader truths of the world. Harmony surprises us, uncovering and illuminating itself in an attempt to seduce our interest and our self.<sup>18</sup> The seduction of potential meaning is critical to the entrancing quality of our experiences of harmony, gesturing towards a correction of our current position by the potentiality of the other, and the grasping of true purpose through the revelation of a continual falling short in our current understanding.

These characteristics of our experiences of harmony connect through one particular, but often overlooked, necessity for harmony – the essential presence of difference. As Diogenes identified, this difference is not only a feature of our reality, but its maintenance and negotiation are critical aspects of our underlying reality. He noted:

All things come into being by a conflict of opposites, and the sum of things flows like a stream.<sup>19</sup>

Yet, it is Heraclitus that shows us that this conflict results not in the desolation of one aspect of difference, its destruction or erasure, but rather a harmonious attitude of mediation without reduction.<sup>20</sup> It is only through the relation between the difference that purpose emerges:

There is harmony in the bending back as in the case of the bow and the lyre.<sup>21</sup>

Without difference, however conceived, harmony does not and cannot exist. Without difference, between notes, between creatures, between the sacred and the profane, harmony is a notion that fails to function at all. Our recognition of difference is an intrinsic feature of our ability to partake in the harmonious; indeed, it is through our recognition of difference that harmony emerges. The characteristics of relation, purpose, vulnerability, and desire, each has within it the expression and awareness of difference.

This examination of the characteristics of our experience of harmony is not without a purpose of its own. If our experiences of harmony are structured according to a certain pattern (a recognition of difference, its exposing of relation between that difference, its revelation of purpose within that relation, and our continual desire to uncover more of that illumination of meaning) then so too, should we wish for the exploration of harmony on the level of society; our social and communal desire for harmony must come to be structured accordingly. In attempting to engage with this movement, we must take stock of the current situation before attempting to determine fruitful courses of action for our performance of social harmony. This practice is itself an individual, and social, modelling of the eternal quest for personal and public meaning that is central to our human experience. In attempting to discover the nature of the meaning of our existences, we commit also to the discovery of our shared social meanings, the way we, as individuals, fit within the relational whole of society. Our meanings and their production, the meanings of others and their production, and the differences expressed between them are critical factors in our social living; indeed, they form our very notion of what society is.<sup>22</sup>

Yet, within our contemporary societies, social atomisation and rampant individualism have long encouraged the denial of the role that we each play in the lives of others.<sup>23</sup> The denial of the way that our actions, whether directly or indirectly, have an impact beyond our immediate surroundings opens up a dangerous path. Think of our callous exportation of environmental disasters to poorer societies across the globe through our cultural fixation on accumulative materialism or the casual disregard for yawning chasms of inequality, of both outcome and opportunity, that infest our developed societies, or the ever declining sense of an ethical 'common good' on which our communities can rely for mutual comprehension. It is within this context that our notions of meaning and the negotiation of difference between them becomes a central task.

I wish to address this question – *How does the experience of harmony inform our performance of social harmony?* – within the context of religious difference for three reasons.

The first that religions are meaning producing systems par excellence in that they attempt to articulate the meaning behind the totality of our existence to provide a narrative that not only explains our individual place within society but also articulates the meta-level purpose of our existence.<sup>24</sup> Religions attempt to tell stories to explain not only how things are but also how things have been and how things will be. Beyond this, they also provide meaning to this description by



offering up a vision of how things should be, how things could be changed and how the way things were, are, and will be are connected to one another within a broader explanatory framework. In this sense, religions, like our currently dominant form of secular liberalism, attempt to articulate the totality of our existence, giving meaning to every aspect of our lives, our understanding, and our societies. Religions form the meta-narrative structure which binds together the various stories within which we live.<sup>25</sup> Harmony, as a fleeting glimpse of relation and purpose, uncovers this meta-narrative reality, exposing the nature of the inter-relation of things posited by religious traditions to our gaze.

The second reason is that plurality, particularly religious plurality, is an ever-increasing feature of our societies. Our societies within the contemporary West are kaleidoscopic in their internal variety, with cultural, social and religious differences being prominent features of the way we experience our communities and of the way we conceive of our place within society. This plurality of culture, social understanding, self-identification and religious faith has become an inescapable feature of our worlds, impinging on our daily life in a way that represents a significant, and often under-considered, break with our imagined pasts. This process of pluralisation experienced by our communities is not a static event, but rather an ever-increasing trend towards greater and greater plurality.<sup>26</sup> This is the fractalisation of shared values and meanings, under the influence of post-modern hyper-individualisation producing within itself deeper and deeper accounts of internal variation. Plurality, the expression of difference, is the pre-eminent feature of our contemporary societies, an inescapable ordering of our world around the distinction between the self and the other, the one and the many, the we and the them.

These two considerations point towards the third way in which the understanding of the experience of harmony gestures towards the consideration of specifically religious harmony. Religions, in attempting to produce definitive meaning, often struggle to effectively consider the essentiality of difference. While cultural and social differences (increasingly tolerated within the framework of secular liberalism as expressions of individuality and preference) are relatively unchallenging to accounts of social similarity, or able to be bracketed within particular communities, religious difference poses a distinctly different issue. Religions, in their meta-narrative function, attempt the explanation of the entirety of our reality, not only describing reality but by attempting to explain the ultimate meaning of it. In doing so, their ability to articulate meaning depends on the ability of that articulation to encompass the totality of our reality.<sup>27</sup> The persuasive power of the meta-narrative comes from its claim to total meaning and its ex-

pression of logical coherence in doing so and, given this, the ability to hold within itself space for difference, particularly different accounts of the meta-narrative nature of reality, declines.<sup>28</sup> In attempting to explain everything, meta-narrative structures must give meaning to the differences experienced by individuals. In doing so, meta-narrative structures construct and position the other, providing their meaning to us, sadly so often in ways that fail to reflect their true nature.

Religious difference therefore represents a significant challenge to our notions of harmony, never mind the aspiration for a sense of religious harmony within our societies.<sup>29</sup> Religions are noted for their disagreement, their difficulty conceiving of the place of the other, and their claims to matters of truth and correctness.

I wish to turn to exploring some of the ways in which our aesthetic experience of harmony offers guiding points for our practice of relation in the service of social and religious harmony. How might our experience of harmony, that revealing glimpse of something beyond, change the way in which we attempt to build harmony between and amongst ourselves in the here and now? If our experience of moments of harmony are formed from the illumination of relation between difference, purpose within that relation, an expression of vulnerability regarding our certainty of knowledge, and our desiring to know more about the connections between instances of harmony, then so too must these characteristics form part of our experience of harmony within society, and our commitment to the ongoing expression of that harmony in our individual and social actions. Ultimately, our experience of harmony must come to inform our performance of harmony.

So, how exactly might we mirror aspects of relation, purpose, vulnerability, and desire within our social interactions with those of other faiths? How might we act, and think, in such a way that these characteristics form significant parts of our attitude towards the presence of the other? These questions are complicated and context-specific, being related to the specific ways in which the difference being addressed manifests itself within our plural societies. However, we are able to consider at least the ways in which our own actions and ways of thinking may be broadened by a consideration of these characteristics of harmony.

The notion of relation is, I believe, a useful place to begin our consideration. As outlined before, it is tempting in our current social climate to declaim the idea that we live our lives in relation with others. We exist often in an isolated fashion both physically, socially, and mentally. Our physical isolation, even within bustling and ever more crowded global cities, exists in our solitary living, working, and playing – partitioned in small single occupancy accommodation, working within confining cubicles which deliberately stifle communal inefficiency, and of-

ten connecting socially only with those available online.<sup>30</sup> This physical solitude mirrors the increasing examples of social isolation, the breakdown of community feeling, the decline in civic and democratic participation and the prevailing sense of anomie that exists within much of the sub-cultural milieu.<sup>31</sup> Beyond this, and as a consequence of both of these factors, we come to exist psychologically as increasingly individual, whereby our lack of connection to the other becomes a normal facet of our existence, rather than an aberration of capitalist materialist control. Yet, this perception of isolation, of a lack of relation to the other, is illusory. While our current forms of engagement with anything or anyone outside of ourselves are often fleeting, pursued selfishly, or undertaken subconsciously, this is not to say that the fact of interaction is not meaningful. Our contemporary realities are distinctly formed through plurality and multiplicity, containing within them an often bewildering range of possibility and difference. Think of any town or city these days, and then seek to imagine that location without any of the religious, cultural, or social difference present in our shops, restaurants, places of worship, public spaces or even our own families. While our lives often seem to be devoid of interaction or relation, in actuality we live our lives surrounded by difference, constantly engaged in the negotiation of differences, from the minor aspects of learning to live within a community formed of racially, culturally and religiously different people, to more major social questions of how to construct shared social values.

Perhaps is it that we have become too used to having to undergo this process of negotiation, and so it has become an invisible and unthinking practice of ours. With religious difference, we need to pay further attention if we are to understand the nature of our relation with the other. While within previously more homogenous societies religious communities could deny the extent of relation with the other, whether Protestant to our Catholic, or Methodist to our Anglican, or Muslim to our Christian, this denial of experience rings increasingly false in an ever more global, more varied and more connected world. It is impossible to deny the existence of the other within our societies, to deny their continued importance within our societies or to deny the way in which their presence inter-connects with our own.

These denials, while undoubtedly tempting on the part of the religious community, form a false consciousness that promotes a disconnect between the nature of reality as actually experienced on the one hand, and the meta-narrative offered within the religious group on the other.<sup>32</sup> It is this disconnect which, without strong shared values and mutual recognition, provides space for promotion

of divisive, polarising, and ultimately dangerous narratives about the other.<sup>33</sup> Our experience of harmony, our grasping that the relation expressed within the instance of harmony mirrors in some way the relation between ourselves and that beyond us, is a critical feature in our grasping that our individual existence is related to the existence of others, and that those others, by virtue of their humanity, share in the broader relation of existence to the beyond.

The experience of harmony therefore demands a recognition of relation between ourselves and the other, an understanding that we are connected, whether consciously or unconsciously, whether wanted or unwanted, whether deeply or shallowly, with the continuing existence of the other in our lives. This cannot be elided and attempts to do so, either philosophically or socially, must be resisted from within our own religious traditions. However, it is not enough to merely accept this existence of relation between ourselves and the other. In connection with the facets of purpose, vulnerability, and desire, this relation must be correctly understood as offering up the possibility of change, the possibility of learning more about the other, and through that, learning more about ourselves. This is an attitude toward the other, which undergirds our recognition of their existence with a recognition of the purpose within their existence. As the Quran 49:13 notes: ‘O mankind, We have created you male and female, and appointed you races and tribes, that you may know one another. Surely the noblest among you in the sight of God is the most godfearing of you. God is All-knowing, All-aware’ and so our meeting of the other in plural societies requires from us an attitude within that meeting which mirrors the actions of vulnerability, desire, and a recognition of inner purpose.<sup>34</sup> While, as we have seen, the recognition of relation is a critical first step to developing a common ground between communities of difference, this second step, one of recognising the purpose in that expression of difference, is a somewhat greater ask. While religious traditions generally promote universal views of reality, seeking to explain not only the totality of reality but also to be relevant and explanatory for the totality of humanity, their conceptualisation of the existence of difference is often lacking.

This is made even more apparent when the question of continued difference is considered. Although much current soteriological and theological speculation considers the place of the Christian tradition relative to people of other faiths, this is rarely extended to considerations of what the lack of gradual conversion to Christian truth by others means for Christian beliefs.<sup>35</sup> These related questions, the existence of the other and the others continued existence, demand a response from within our religious traditions beyond a retreat from the recognition of

relation. If we accept that our lives are fundamentally informed by our relation with those that are different from us, then this difference must be recognised as holding meaning, both for the other, and, crucially, for ourselves. While withdrawal from difference is perhaps comforting, it not only retreats from the nature of our reality, our everyday lived experiences but also excuses us from the ethical consideration of the meaning of the other.<sup>36</sup>

This is perhaps the most dangerous and demeaning step that we could undertake and fails to recognise the implicit push to universality within our religious traditions. By refusing to take the moral and ethical value of the other's presence in our lives seriously, we diminish the moral value of the other, degrading their presence either through their instrumentalisation or their marginalisation. We either deny the role that the other plays in our lives – insulating ourselves from difference, denying the possibility of change or growth, denying the other any voice with which to question our systems or beliefs – or we deny the moral weight of the other as a shared part of our universal reality; we instrumentalise them as tools of our politics, we misrepresent them for our own ends and we use the other in order to assuage our own moral failings.<sup>37</sup> While devastatingly prevalent in our contemporary political systems, this treatment of the other is a failure on the part of differing religious traditions and of secular modernity not only to take the other seriously but also to take their own traditions seriously as well.

As the Bible notes:

Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth'. So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. —Genesis 1:26-27.

As the Quran states:

He created the heavens and the earth in truth, wrapping night about the day, and wrapping the day about the night; and He has subjected the sun and the moon, each of them running to a stated term. Is not He the All-mighty, the All-forgiving? —Qur'an 39:5.

These scriptural resources are important not just for their commandatory power. They also ascribe moral weight to the universality of humankind, a validation of

the existence of plurality within that universality and a requirement to take our shared humanity seriously. These statements teach us not only that all share in the relationship to the divine that characterises our humanity, but that this relation of the other to the divine matters, not just to them but also that it must come to matter seriously to us. How can we come to understand the divine, even fleetingly, without committing to understand the other, fully and without reservation, projection or instrumentalisation?

A commitment to our own faith therefore requires a commitment to a treatment of the other that expresses vulnerability in the certainty of our own conceptions and an awareness that the difference of the other contains within it purpose and meaning.<sup>38</sup> Our being in relation with the other therefore imputes unto us a series of duties; to desire to always understand the other and to express this desire in a way that is both non-appropriative of the other and non-final in our expression of understanding.<sup>39</sup> So how do our actions and attitudes towards the religious other open space for the social revelation of harmony, how does our aesthetic experience of harmony fold into our social practice of harmony, and how might we develop and promote the instantiation of harmony in our communities? Our experience of harmony, formed through a revelation of relation, purpose and desire, points the way toward a reassessment of the place of the other within our social circumstances, a movement from our glimpse of the divine other in the instance of harmony to the place of the social other in our communities. This place of the other is formed through a recognition of the relationality present between the other and ourselves within the kaleidoscopic plurality of contemporary societies, an inescapable *pas-de-deux* of social interaction and negotiation that, through its constant performance, inevitably shapes and constructs fundamental aspects of our reality. The recognition of this relation is recognition of the nature of difference, as present, meaningful and a continuous aspect of our own self-formation. The real question therefore becomes not just what difference is but how we choose to engage with that difference.

We have a choice to make. That choice is not about whether we wish to engage with the other, that option is far gone, unsustainable and ultimately damaging to others and to ourselves, but rather the choice of how we will engage with the other. How we make this choice has an impact not only on our relationship with others in our communities but also on the relationship between ourselves and that beyond us. Each level of relation is symbiotically and rhythmically related to the other, mirroring and reflecting our actions at one level in the other, expressing the relationship between our differing levels of relation.

This is therefore not a call toward homogeneity, the occlusion of difference through toleration, or the obliteration of difference through agreement. Rather, it is a call for the embrace of multiplicity, relationality, and plurality in our conception of our selves and our societies. A plurality that expresses an awareness and recognition of the internal relationality within it, that takes that relationality seriously, and that mirrors externally our internal notion of our relation with the divine. This is not a momentary instance, as in our appreciation of aesthetic forms of harmony, but rather an attitudinal commitment to the performance of the characteristics of harmony, the performance of deliberate relation, of an awareness of shared purpose, and of a deliberate vulnerability of our certainties. This is therefore also not a question of truth or belief, of rightness or certainty. Our experience of harmony shows us the necessary characteristics for a real motivated discussion of truth, belief and certainty. It illuminates the background on which this engagement with the other, if it is to be conducted in a way that embodies integrity and respect for difference, may be begun. It is a commitment to the exploration of the meaning of the plurality within which we live with others, an embrace of mutual vulnerability and uncertainty, and a recognition of the ethical importance of the other for these deliberations.

Our experiences of harmony, that magical slipping of the ordinary into the extraordinary through the uncovering of its purposeful relation with the rest of reality, gives a glimpse not only of the aesthetic, the beauty of our reality but also the ethical, the duties we have toward those others who live with us within and among difference. Without difference, between ourselves and the other, there can be no sense of relation. Relation, that bedrock of our lives, expressed individually, spiritually, or communally, depends on our recognition and relationship with things that are not us, a recognition that they differ and that this difference matters. Without difference, between what is and what could be, there is no purpose. We are animated by purpose, we recognise purpose in others, and in doing so we come into relation with a veritable cosmos of imagination. Without difference, an awareness of the ability of the difference to have purpose, we cannot be vulnerable to the correction of the other. We depend on difference for change, for correction, for growth. We cannot be vulnerable, let down our guard, without a valuation of the other as worth that vulnerability. Yet, without that vulnerability we deny ourselves any possibility of change or growth. Without difference we cannot learn to desire, to learn to be seduced by the difference of the other, to fall in love with the inescapable and ever-elusive mystery of that which we are not.

## NOTES

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