

Unity in Diversity: Acceptance and Integration in an Era

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The political and social climate that prevails in the world today emphasizes difference, disunity, and destruction rather than the qualities of unity and productive and constructive energy that are required to sustain human societies. These negative processes and forces have perpetuated our alienation from the basic material roots of our existence, the natural world of which we are a part. This paper presents a way of looking at the world that enables us to foster the diversity inherent in the human species as it exists today without perpetuating our alienation from nature and from each other. By exploring the concept of unity in diversity as an expression of unity without uniformity and diversity without fragmentation, this paper offers a resolution to many of the concerns felt by those who are resistant to the spread of one particular cultural hegemony and those who fear that awareness of differences can lead to greater intolerance. It is one of the basic premises of this paper that fostering the ecological factors that are inherent in the human condition at the same time as we maintain a vision of humanity's unique place in creation will help to resolve not only our ongoing problems in living harmoniously with our natural environment but our ongoing difficulties with each other as well.

. . . the best hope of humankind is to maintain as rich a diversity of social types as possible, with the expectation that each of these experiments in the human future will cross-fertilise with others, and thus maintain the vital diversity essential for indefinite survival. . . . Competition for ascendancy in world trade, power, or military might are simply empty, meaningless concepts for the future. By encouraging diversity elsewhere, each society ensures a rich source of ideas and techniques for its own future. --Mary Clark

The remarkable compatibility between all fields of science, whether they deal with inanimate objects or with living things has implications that affect deeply the culture of our times. The validity of these implications is supported by the fact that the various scientific disciplines strengthen each other when, perchance, they can establish contact. Despite the immense diversity of creation, we all accept that there exists in nature a profound underlying unity. The search for this unity provides the motivation for the lives of many different men--some who, like Einstein, search for it in general natural laws and others who, like Teilhard de Chardin, would trace cosmic evolution to a divine origin. --René Dubos

The use of the phrase unity in diversity and similar concepts is not a new phenomenon. Its roots reach back hundreds of years in non-Western cultures such as indigenous peoples in North America and Taoist societies in 400-500 B.C. In premodern Western culture it has been implicit in the organic conceptions of the universe that have been manifest since the ancient Greek and Roman civilizations through medieval Europe and into the Romantic era. In contemporary times, the phrase has been used in a variety of areas including a bibliography of libertarian publications and an interdisciplinary academic symposium, in which the following articulations of the concept appeared:

Unity in diversity is the highest possible attainment of a civilization, a testimony to the most noble possibilities of the human race. This attainment is made possible through passionate concern for choice, in an atmosphere of social trust. (Michael Novak, epigraph opening *Unity in Diversity: An Index to the Publications of Conservative and Libertarian Institutions* [1983])

. . . the disparate experiences of practitioners of various disciplines studying man as a social being, even when they do not have a common measure or a commonly stated objective, nevertheless share a unity of intent in understanding man in his social context--a unity that over time will lead to greater integrative approaches. Indeed, the technological imperatives of the end of the twentieth century demand an integrative approach to man's myriad undertakings, demand a Renaissance approach, one whereby the human mind can transcend the fragmented understanding of the parts that the explosion of knowledge and its collection has fostered. Whether this will be a systems approach, such as General System Theory, or an integration of different modes of consciousness, or something else, or a convergence and integration of some or all of these, we do not know. What we do know is that the search must go on. (Introduction to *Unity in Diversity: The Proceedings of the Interdisciplinary Research Seminar at Wilfrid Laurier University* [1980])

The most profound use of the concept has developed over the last 150 years as an integral aspect of an ecological understanding of the world and, to that end, it appears most frequently now in literature promoting that vision. Outside the natural and social sciences and humanities literature that draws from ecology, the concept appears in a well-articulated form in only one other place that I was able to discover in the research for this thesis, the Bahá'í writings. It is interesting to note that the origins of the Bahá'í Faith coincide almost to the year with the roots of ecology although none of the original members of either "movement" had any earthly connection with each other.* The parallels in the development of both movements are also interesting to note in that they both continue to emerge from obscurity in their respective domains, gaining recognition and respect as they effectively and constructively respond to

the challenges that face them.

The ecological context of the concept is based on the scientifically derived knowledge that biological diversity is necessary to sustain the healthy existence of ecosystems and that the healthy progress of the planet is dependent on a diversity of such ecosystems. Natural scientists and environmentalists lament the loss of species that will never be discovered because the environments in which they live are being destroyed by massive transformations such as deliberate burning of rainforests to release more arable land. In other cases, the environments are so sensitive that even minor changes result in unforeseen consequences such as the extinction of some species. The long-term consequences of the escalating loss of species diversity is unknown at this time. Efforts are underway at all scales of human endeavour to deal with the problem, the most recent global event being the drafting of the Biodiversity Convention at the Earth Summit.

This ecological foundation for the concept of unity in diversity has given rise to its use by movements such as social ecology, ecofeminism, and organizations based on Native principles. It has also been used as a moral foundation for harmony between some of these movements. In summing up the historical conflict between social and deep ecologists, Steve Chase writes, "Unity-in-diversity is a basic attribute of healthy eco-communities. Why shouldn't it be a healthy characteristic for the radical ecology movement?" (in Bookchin and Foreman, 1991, p. 10). As will become more evident shortly, the concept finds its most profound application in human relationships. For feminism in general and ecofeminism in particular, the concept represents a means to unite the diversity of women's voices around the world, drawing on their cultural and geographical distinctions, and finding common ground in their experience as women. The concept could also find expression in current attempts by Natives in North America to acquire self-governance, drawing on their common experience since European settlement and the diverse expressions of their cultural traditions to provide richness in a new social environment. Murray Bookchin has articulated one of the central aims of radical ecology as a social force in contemporary society:

. . . one of the tasks of the radical ecology movement is to articulate a general human interest that transcends the real but particularistic interests of class, nationality, ethnicity, and gender in order to build alliances to reconstruct our communities along more humane and ecological lines. Yet we need to be wary of talking too glibly about the general human interest. Multiculturalism must mean more than mistaking the currently dominant culture as the universal and expecting other people to adopt the perspective of this dominant culture. (Bookchin and Foreman, 1991, pp. 102-3)

Bookchin makes a crucial point here, that is, the fear that many "minority" groups have of becoming subsumed within a dominant culture characterized by white, male values. It is this fear also within

contemporary Western society that has given rise to the notion of "political correctness," a phenomenon that threatens to increase the fragmentation in society despite its attempts to foster awareness of and sensitivity to difference. A healthy and constructive articulation of the concept of unity is needed to erase those fears and mend the rifts that have developed. The concept must incorporate a set of principles that is universally applicable to all human beings simply because they are human at the same time that it provides protection for the diversity of characteristics that maintains the vibrancy of the human species.

Unity without Uniformity

To establish a universally recognized concept of unity, there is need for an acceptance that universal principles exist. These principles are reflected in values that apply to each and every human being. These principles

lie at the core of all the major religions and our most noble cultural traditions. The values of universal brotherhood, love for one's neighbour, and the golden rule of treating others as we ourselves would wish to be treated are just some of the ideals that are common to all cultures. They have fostered social union and amity between people for countless generations, inspired great works of art, and continue to underscore our highest aspirations. Today's world would indeed benefit from a profound affirmation of these essential spiritual truths. (Laszlo, 1989, pp. 104-5)

To Laszlo, the application of these values requires rising above the religious dogmas, political ideologies and national allegiances which bitterly divide the world. It entails restating the fundamental truths that lie behind all religions, philosophies and traditions. Consideration of these values . . . leads us to recognize the oneness of the entire human species, an ideal that extends former loyalties and does not abrogate them. (p. 105)

If we accept this philosophical foundation for the application of unity, traditional rivalries and vendettas must be forgotten, divisive theories and ideologies submerged, and national borders transcended. The interdependence implied by the notion of the oneness of humanity requires a relinquishing of any idea or activity that allows for the suffering of even one person. If we are interdependent, then the suffering of one affects us all. When a person receives an injury to one part of the body, the entire system of that person is affected as the body attempts to heal itself. If the injury is severe, the whole body, not just the affected part, becomes debilitated. The treatment in that situation is multifaceted. Not only is the injured area treated with specific remedies but the whole body also receives the benefit of nutrients that are provided to assist in the healing. Human beings have not yet learned how to apply this concept of healing to the planet or to the human species itself.

To carry the organic analogy one step further, each component of the body performs an essential and specific function, without which the entire

body is handicapped. Each human being possesses talents and the capacity, when given the opportunity, to acquire skills that contribute to the ongoing progress and development of the species. Those talents and capacities ideally contribute to the richness of the human community as each individual expresses herself or himself freely and harmoniously with others. However, humanity has developed institutions and systems that inhibit the optimal function of each individual in the collectivity. Because we possess ingenuity and creativity, humans have developed coping mechanisms that have obscured not only the hidden damage caused by ignoring certain fundamental characteristics of the human species but also the direct causal connections between our efforts to "improve" human existence and the devastation wreaked by such "improvements."

As long as human beings in any part of the planet are inhibited from developing their individual potential the entire species will remain handicapped. True unity will be achieved when each individual becomes an active and functioning participant in the whole, performing the skills they possess as constructive and productive contributors to their local, regional, and global community. This goal can be accomplished if a balance between the physical and spiritual dimensions of human existence is achieved, enabling productive contributions to human society to be offered as service to the ongoing progress and development of the world without fear of exploitation and oppression.

The Bahá'í writings include many evocative analogies to express a vision of unity that is characterized by diversity rather than uniformity.

'Abdu'l-Bahá offers this description of a flower garden to illustrate the concept:

As difference in degree of capacity exists among human souls, as difference in capability is found, therefore, individualities will differ one from another. But in reality this is a reason for unity and not for discord and enmity. If the flowers of a garden were all of one color, the effect would be monotonous to the eye; but if the colors are variegated, it is most pleasing and wonderful. The difference in adornment of color and capacity of reflection among the flowers gives the garden its beauty and charm. Therefore, although we are of different individualities, . . . let us strive like flowers of the same divine garden to live together in harmony. Even though each soul has its own individual perfume and color, all are reflecting the same light, all contributing fragrance to the same breeze which blows through the garden, all continuing to grow in complete harmony and accord. (1982, p. 24)

The light that we all reflect is the spiritual foundation for the concept of unity that is expressed in this paper. It manifests the source of all creation, the qualities latent within each creature, including humans, that reflect those of the Creator. This aspect of creation is beginning to be perceived and expressed by participants in the deep ecology, ecofeminist, and bioregional movements. This passage from the Bahá'í writings also alludes to the differences within the human community,

a certain cultural practice will reveal the reason it was developed in the first place many decades if not centuries ago and offer a resolution to contemporary conflicts. Such an analysis will reveal why cultural traits are so important to the members of that group and what makes culture such a powerful aspect of human existence:

Each person, in order to retain those attributes we recognise as human, must live in relation to others, within a social context, a culture which gives meaning to individual existence. This need for cultural meaning is at once the sine qua non of human existence and the source of our greatest danger. . . .

It is apparent that people everywhere, as they struggle to adjust their traditional worldviews to meet changing circumstances, must take care that they do not throw out the "baby" of cultural meaning and bondedness with the "bath water" of maladaptive institutions, lest they end up with new institutions that are destructive of the human psyche itself. (Clark, 1989, pp. 474-75)

Religion, as the most powerful of cultural expressions, is also the greatest source of conflict. If it continues to be a source of disharmony among human beings, the planet would certainly be better off without it. However, religion continues to be a powerful force in human existence; it is destined to endure in one form or another. Therefore, an even more intensive examination of religion might be necessary to reveal the sources of the tensions between different religious groups. It is just possible that the evidence will offer not only a resolution to the problems that continue to perpetuate the fragmentation within and between national communities but also a source of inspiration to unite the global family through guidance for each individual at the interpersonal and community levels. This release of guidance and inspiration has the potential to have a massive impact on every aspect of human activity, a possibility that brings the discussion back to the basic focus of this thesis, the environmental crisis.

Unity in Diversity: Environmental and Human Applications

The message is clear when we examine the geographic scale of human awareness of and action to deal with the environmental crisis. Not only must we learn how to think globally and act locally (the ubiquitous slogan coined by René Dubos) but we must also learn how to think globally and locally and act globally and locally.

This ethic of thinking and acting has profound geographical, ecological, social, philosophical, and spiritual implications. During most of recent human history, the primary way in which regions have been perceived has been derived from the political boundaries that have been established. However, as ecological awareness has developed, there is an increasing perception of the difficulties posed by such often arbitrary determinations of territory. Research in both the action-oriented and philosophical streams of environmental studies is resulting in increased knowledge relating to the physical foundations of human existence and the impacts of

human attitudes and activities on the planet. The heightened awareness of and sensitivity to the ecological factors of the human-environment relationship reveal the need to broaden our concept of territory beyond the politically created boundaries that currently denote the international social and economic climate. By adopting scales of attention that reflect the bio- and geophysical factors that shape the earth, human beings will recapture their connection with their natural roots. By learning more about their local environment and how it connects with the biosphere, human beings will not only increase their sensitivity to and understanding of the immediate factors that influence their lives but also heighten their sense of interdependence with the global community of which we are all an integral part. The diversity of ecosystems across the planet is the physical foundation for the diversity of cultural groups that have evolved in those regions throughout human history. Increased knowledge of those groups will also heighten our awareness of the interconnections between human and nonhuman nature.

However, focussing on the natural environment as the source of unity for the human family is not sufficient. There are many other factors that need to be considered. Human beings are complex creatures whose psyche is profoundly affected by more than just our connections with nature.

Attention must be paid to how the knowledge gained from studying human interactions with nature affects human interactions with each other. If humanity is ever to find peace with itself, it will come from a massive transformation in the way humans relate to one another both individually at the family and local community level and in terms of the national and international institutions that are developed to organize broader scales of human interaction. The moral foundations for such relations are deeply rooted in human history in the inspirations for the religious and cultural traditions that provide meaning for the billions of people who share the planet. Unity will be found in the development of broader understanding and acceptance of the diversity in the human family and in the fostering of the basic principles that sustain healthy interpersonal relations.

*The term "ecology" was coined in 1858 as *Okologie* by German biologist Ernst Heinrich Haeckel. Thoreau used the term in English in his later writings. The Bahá'í Faith was officially established in 1863 when, in a garden outside Baghdad, confirmed to his followers that he was "the Promised One" foretold in the previous religious dispensations.

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