

# The Diversity of The Unique

## *Thoughts gleaned from Sheikh Khaled Ben Tounes, A Sufi leader*

© 2006 United Methodist Church – Central Conference of Central and Southern Europe

"One can never bathe twice in the same river." This ancient saying should inspire us to rediscover the meaning of time and of universality. In dialogue with the leader of the Sufi brotherhood Alawiya, we begin to perceive the dimension of time which is also called eternity. This is a welcome and refreshing vision. This Sufi teacher reminds us of the unbelievable and prodigious truth. There are no two flowers, no two snowflakes, no two human beings which are naturally identical. Each one of us is unique, created in the image of the unique God. Why then should there be only one expression of faith exactly the same for all people? The multiplicity of expressions of faith, says Sheikh Khaled Ben Tounes, is a reality growing out of the will of God.

God's prophets are like the different beads on a rosary, and spirituality is the string on which all the beads are threaded. All the prophets are thus bound together, each one to all the others, beyond the bounds of their individuality and differences of expression. This image does not imprison us in the dogmatism of a unique message in the same tones for all people and all times. It opens us up, heart and mind, to the primordial message, the unity which has no name, the unity beyond all names that we can name, that of the transcendency of God. Thus the message given by Adam becomes also the living message of Noah, of Abraham, of Moses, of Jesus and of Muhammad. It is a continuous word pronounced in discontinuous sequence, but always the same, because it comes from the same source: God. There is no break in the eternal truth. In reality, each prophet has come to contribute to the revelation so that humankind can recover the universal in itself. There is thus no opposition, but harmony in different voices which proclaim the same word of a relationship between God and his creation, between man and all the expressions of God's word that men have perceived in the unique source. We need no longer live in the antinomy that "I have the truth and all others are in error, my religion is the only true faith."

It is easy enough to say that in theory, as an expression of the absolute. Unfortunately, in the reality of daily living, it seems to be denied, since particularities and sectarianism appear to be on the rise, in all societies.

However, our reality is relative. Like the river, we are only a brief instant of eternity. We do not and cannot see and consider reality in the context of eternity, the flowing river of time. Muhammad said, "Don't speak ill of time, because time is God." Time gives birth and life, with time life is not, we come out of it and we return to it. It is true for all the component parts of our reality. Today's reality, obvious to each one of us, is in constant evolution.

Man of tomorrow will be universal or will be transformed into a sort of machine that thinks. If we seek to preserve humanity in ourselves, it is in universalism that the future resides. All fundamentalism, all conservatism reminds us of that. They spring from the conservatism which abhors any attempt to restructure their comfortable order, whether that order be philosophical, moral or religious, order created and controlled by that fundamentalism, that reactionary conservatism. The sad truth is that such points of view are set in the concrete of an immovable point in time. All exoteric schools of thought give us prefabricated truths whereas true spirituality pushes us to build, beginning from a quest. The interior seeking drives the searcher for truth to the limits of his own possibilities, and, beyond to that, to what he does not yet know. The real search for the real truth gives no prepackaged answers. Besides, reducing all truth to a single path is to diminish the grandeur of the absolute, to narrow divine possibility, to scale all the world according to the limits of human dimension. Each human being, each flower, each drop of water, each snowflake, each leaf of a tree has its own design and specificity. Each seed, each grain of sand is different from all others and has its own identity. There are no two fingerprints in the universe exactly alike. That is the mystery, the staggering immensity of divine power. Each time, God has given a new unity, a new unit, in his own image, therefore unique. This divine power gives birth to a new and renewed creation which resembles nothing else and no one else in every detail. In that, everything grows out of the unique, who does not make a cookie-cutter universe, but makes each creature, each object in creation unique and different, in order to mark each with a unique imprint. The future will be made clearer when men understand that this difference, these differences, among all the creatures and their vision of the unique source, is the expression of God's infinite compassion and love for all of us. The fact that there are several different ways to perceive things, to see reality, several messages addressed to creation, several philosophies which approach reality from a new and different perspective is an integral part of divine will. This multiplicity in its diversity is not of human origin, but of divine origin, in order to point us continually to unity. Those who grasp that will live in an environment at once universal and fecund for them, because they will draw upon the total heritage of humankind.

If we taught our children, in families and in schools that the message of Adam, of Noah, of Moses, of Jesus, of Muhammad, of Buddha, of Lao-Dze were not contradictory messages, but rather complementary visions of a unique reality, what would happen? If they came to draw upon these traditions in order to live them out, to feel and sense them, to contemplate them without enclosing themselves in a corral, and also without castrating the traditions by binding their spirits and creating intercultural and intercultural catastrophes, would not the human spirit be forced to broaden its horizons and understand spirituality in a larger and more authentic sense?

One is tempted to think that desperation calls the tune. Material misery and poverty of affections appear to engender fanaticism and fundamentalism in both spiritual and political realms. Injustice certainly plays an important role. When a youth has received no training, or when training leads to futility or to nothing at all, when there is no work, when all doors are locked and bolted, he loses sight of the mileposts along the road. He has not been nourished, he is no longer strengthened, and rebels against what appears to be a blocked future. Some express their revolt in music or in rap poetry, others lose themselves in the stupor of drug addiction, still others take up arms and let themselves be manipulated by people who seek power and offer them the glories of "martyrdom" for a fanatical cause.

Sufis resume that in three formulas. They say that the exoteric means you and me, thus duality and confrontation. There is you or there is I. The esoteric changes the dimension in saying that you are I and I am you. What concerns you concerns me. What makes you sad saddens me, and what gives you joy makes me rejoice. There is a permanent exchange, a perpetual interface. Sufis go a step farther in saying that knowledge is neither you nor I, but Him, in the absolute. There, all levels out. The "me," the ego, melts away in the divine, before the ultimate truth. We are all ephemeral, circumscribed by time and our humanity, while God is eternal; He is in time and is time. These formulas describe the three stages of our pilgrimage. In the first, it is always the "me" which detains the truth; I want to dominate. I want to have power over the other. The world today has become so exoteric that we inculcate only that; in mosques, in churches, in chapels and in philosophy courses, that is our theme. We lift up the "me" and in doing so also the "you," and, finally the spirit of confrontation. Thus it is that mankind loses the notion of transcendental unity, no matter what their origin or standpoint. What stands out in mankind is the image of mankind, its own image, or perceived image. Entire civilizations have been wiped out in the name of so-called noble principles, conceived to save men, and which in reality only enslave men and women and children, because they seek to make others think like ourselves. True, one cannot deny oneself. I cannot make an abstraction of myself. I exist. I am a reality. I have an objective reality. But this self which I have made the center of the universe of my existence is not fed by a universal (divine) spirit. This "me" does not integrate itself into the relationship with my brothers and sisters around me and even less with the more distant cousins and neighbors of my existence. Its very egotistical nature is destructive. One can thus see what human nature is doing. Humanity has already destroyed species of living creatures, both in the vegetal world and in the animal realm. Men pollute. Humans pillage nature and their fellow creatures, their fellow humans.

One is tempted to believe that this is an irreversible process, a one-way street. Some fear that the machine has gotten out of control and that only a cosmic catastrophe can halt the wreckage. It works that way at least on the individual level. A person takes stock only when he has received a shock, a dramatic event which makes him open his eyes. On the universal human level, it is the same. Humanity needs violent reminders that he needs to get back on track, in order to make one evaluate one's way of life. Is there anyone alive who does not realize that the emphasis on the "me" leads to a dead-end street? Is there any political figure worthy of the name who does not recognize that fact? Is there any philosopher, any real religious leader? All of the managers of human society need to learn another language. Who is doing it? Who is telling the truth? Do we not continue to live the same falsehoods, to hide our eyes to reality as much as we can? We have tried for too long to control ourselves by principles which lead nowhere. We are on the threshold of a new perception of reality; we are at crossroads.

When we witnessed the assassination of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, we are reminded that Israelis and Palestinians have been at war for fifty years, that they have been killing each other. It matters little that Rabin was killed by a fellow Jew, a fellow Israeli. On the scale of humanity, the same fact holds true. It is a dead-end street. The first one who at last wanted peace, to live in peace, to dialogue with his neighbor, was killed by his own. What sense does that make? Why? He appeared to question vested interests. During the Gulf War, many spoke of a new World Order. What are the contours of that new World Order? It would appear that such an order represents the will of some to dominate others. World Order? We should begin by taking the poorest of the planet into consideration; they are the largest number on earth. What are the powerful afraid of? If the poorest receive an equitable share, the wealthy are even better off! But we seem to be obsessed by ephemeral wealth. We produce more vehicles, more gadgets, more machines for those who already have too much and too many to the saturation point. And we find ourselves in a deep crisis. The only way for humanity to enrich itself is to learn to share. It is the principle of communicating vessels. If there is too much here, some has to go there. That would reduce the levels of animosity, would create currents of

exchange and change of thoughts, goods, values. It amounts to the seeking of peace for today's world and for tomorrow's inhabitants of the world. He who has nothing and watches his children starve is pushed to revolt. He who has everything and watches his neighbor and the neighbor's children starve is pushing revolt and destruction. What's the point of it? The have-nots have to find a way out of humiliation, exploitation, hunger and misery.

In what way is our world modern? Modernity should express itself in terms of harmonious human relations and not in sophisticated or complicated gadgets. We are perfectly capable of launching interstellar rockets, but we fail to feed people. Is it because we are incapable of doing so, or because we manage resources egotistically, as if there were nothing and no one beyond ourselves? If we were really capable of simple good sense, many of the problems of the world would be well on their way to solution.

All this rethinking must begin around the youth of the World. Young Sufis used to write their lessons on wooden tablets covered with clay. When the lesson was well learned, the words and the clay were washed off the wooden surface, and they began afresh. How is it possible to learn without erasing? When one talks with people, with adults, one has the impression that they think they know everything about everything. A store of information makes them arrogant. Their tablet has been filled up, and needs to be washed off so that they can learn anew. Whoever wants to know the truth must empty his store of knowledge. It is only then that he can find the basic materials of learning.

It is the principle of all philosophy: *tabula rasa*. But then the question of instructors is raised. How can one change methods of education in order to get things off dead center? That is one of the basic problems of our time. Education in our times has become an industry of brain-cramming rather than of awakening the spirit and the process of thought and reason. The void is immense and serious, because there are few in number who knows both how to learn and how to teach.

It would appear that the same void is present among those who are spiritual thinkers. Not many are spiritual awakeners. There are dishonest people everywhere. There are also clear and honest thinkers who lack the gift of teaching. There are seekers who don't know what they are looking for, or who simply look for crutches. They cannot walk on their own, or don't want to. They want a father, a mother, a teacher or a friend who holds them by the hand and who thinks in their place. They do not want liberty, but ready-made answers. They do not seek an awakening educational process which can make them responsible citizens of today's world, universal humans, but someone behind whom to walk. It is easier, in a sense. And in doing so, they fall prey to exploiters, to gurus, to sectarian principles. To seek truth is unnerving. It awakens, it cuts deep, it prunes prejudices and dead wood and weaknesses. In order to be able to say that I am you and you are I, you have to know how to translate it into daily living with your family, your neighbors, with society, including with your enemies. To give, even if it's only a smile, is sometimes a difficult task.

What's the answer? There are no prefabricated answers. At least there are none outside of God. However, one can observe in history that there is a pendulum effect. The lower the pendulum swings, the higher it will climb. We will be called upon to live very difficult times. Humanity's foundations will be shaken as by an earthquake. Religion, philosophy, economy, politics will all be touched. Communism is, at least for the time being, dead. Socialism is not as solid as it was once thought. Capitalism is not much better off. Everything presages a major crisis. God is catching us in our own trap. But he is perhaps preparing the way for the return of the Messiah.

Yes, Muhammad announced the *parousia*, Jesus' return. He said that this would happen at the end of time. Several hadiths speak of the event, too. In Islam, there are in reality three worlds. The first is that of temporal reality, of cause and effect, of observable phenomena. The second is that of spiritual reality, subtle, conceptual (not imaginary!), an eternal present which makes of the instant of an encounter a powerful force already in the Big Bang fifteen thousand million years ago. Finally, there is the other world, superior to any other possible, unimaginable, unreasonable, impenetrable. Another, different world. In this perspective, Jesus was and is and will be. There are those who have lived this experience, who live it today, who will live it.

More and more people will become aware that all the old books of faith are carriers of a reality which has nothing to do with virtual reality. The past, far from dead, carries within itself the seeds of a knowledge which will germinate. The more the present is dark, the more luminous will be the burgeoning light. In the affirmation of faith, the first step is to deny the existence of God: There is no God ... and then comes the second phase: but God. We as human beings of the end of the twentieth century at the threshold of the third millennium are still in the phase of negation. The affirmation will inevitably follow.

The critic has been posited of educational methods which have still helped many people. In fact, Sufis make use of many and varied methods of teaching, adapted insofar as possible to the needs of each searcher after truth. Reducing spirituality to techniques of instruction is an enormous error. Techniques are tools and

not aims, not the finality of spirituality. If we become too much identified with practices, we fall victim to the trap of sclerosis. Means and aims should not be confused with one another. What would be the use of learning how to drink boiling water or to walk on hot embers if we are not attentive to truth? In modern times, people sell methods and techniques to help us speak more clearly or to sell more easily. Speak more clearly of what, to sell what? If you use techniques, you have to learn to remain humble. Humility is still the basic key. Life is Love, and the rest is vanity. Whoever does not love humanity does not love God. Whoever does not love God's creation does not love the Creator.

Is it possible for humility to answer desperation? What good can come for a desperate person to let go of the ego? We do not abandon the self to bow down before another or before any other power. We are not humble in exchange for something or someone. It is a state of being. I am not in submission to anyone, but rather in the absolute and without counter value. We meet youth in the suburbs, victims of drug addiction, desperate, in full-blown revolution. They need to be reminded that, in the Muslim tradition, poverty is a transitory state, but only if it is voluntary. We are called upon to transform our degradation into a voluntary state of poverty. Thus, we can rise above the state of marginality and the left-behinds of society. In any case, there is nothing to lose except loss. We have the possibility of going into another dimension.

The Abbe Pierre did that with many Emmaus Pilgrims. He helped them learn to redignify poverty. People laugh at the notion. They are astonished. But there is a turning point, a candle of hope lighted. Something happens in the heart which is reflected in the eyes. Especially with women. Afterwards, it is obvious, you have to lend a helping hand for people to stand up and become something other than assisted vagabonds. Society creates marginal people, and maintains them in their marginalization. The problem is not only there. The state of consciousness has to be changed to nourish mankind with the universal.

What about the spirit of evil? We are not entering upon the rich symbolism of Satan. With Sufis, evil and suffering serve to show us what not to do. Evil and suffering are the real educators. They show where not to go. They say, "This way is dangerous."

Very early, we have to educate our children, before they become youth, and our youth before they become adults. We have to inculcate universal values, which we have received from all traditions: love of God, love of neighbor and sharing. We have to know that if we have a piece of bread and the other has none, animosity will arise between us, sooner or later, and more often sooner. If you eat the whole piece of bread, you risk indigestion and the other will still have nothing, whereas if you share, you will have won a friend, who in his own turn will have learned to share. We have to learn to consider warfare and violence as a sickness, a social sickness, a blemish on practice, a plague among humans. To give people a sense of nobility, of worth, of good deeds is a step in the right direction. Respect the houses of God, all the houses of God, whatever and wherever they may be as places where people go to open their hearts to others, and not as places where hatred is cultivated and where fundamentalism is inculcated. Youth, all people must learn once and for all time brotherhood with all of creation. We are a family among families that dwell on this planet. We must respect the tree and the animal, our fellow human beings.

"We are all descendants of Adam" said Muhammad. We are all of the earth. Let us give life to Noah. By the ark he saved humanity. Mohammad also said, "If you have a tree in your hand and time is running out, take time to plant the tree."

*Hugh Johnson*