

Panel Discussion on the book of Prof. Ameen A. Rihani
Multiculturalism & Arab-American Literature

March 7, 2008

Distinguished Guests,
Dear Friends.

With great pleasure I welcome you at NDU, and at this Panel Discussion on the book of Prof. Ameen A. Rihani, "Multiculturalism & Arab-American Literature". This event which is organized by the Faculty of Humanities at NDU is an opportunity for all of us to refresh our minds and hearts about the important constituents of multiculturalism.

In its convention on the protection and promotion of the diversity of cultural expressions, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) affirmed that "cultural diversity is a defining characteristic of humanity" and it took into account that "culture takes diverse forms across time and space and that this diversity is embodied in the uniqueness and plurality of the identities and cultural expressions of the peoples and societies making up humanity".

In the era where globalization has become a part of the human life, where the world is reduced to a global village, and where multiculturalism is imposing itself as a fact, the preservation and promotion of the cultural diversity of expressions has become an ethical imperative. Therefore, an open dialogue that takes into consideration the risks of identity-based isolationism and standardization associated with globalization has more than ever become a challenge. Such a dialogue will guarantee respect for cultural identities, allowing participation of all in a democratic framework; and it will also provide a favorable atmosphere for the creative capacities of all, making then culture a factor of development.

Thus, multiculturalism becomes an enriching fact in a diverse vulnerable reality. For instance, at a macro level, nowadays mobility is contributing at large to the coexistence of a variety of cultures. Moreover, at a micro level, in today's society we notice a multiplicity of cultures even within the one family. Every person is "the other", every person is the different. That reminds me of a Cuban proverb stating: "Every head is a world". However, though we live in a multicultural world, yet the challenging question remains that of how to render this multiculturalism fruitful and beneficial to all? To this question I would like to answer with the words of Jimmy Carter, Former President of the United States of America, who, speaking about the American diverse reality, said that: "We become not a melting pot but a beautiful mosaic. We are different peoples; we have different beliefs, different yearnings, different hopes, and different dreams".

The book we are exploring today holds with its black and white two valuable revelations among many others. First, it reveals an enriching multicultural experience of the Arab-American philosophers of the early twentieth century when multiculturalism was not yet a trend; and second, it exhibits the multiculturally-enriched experience of the twenty-first-century Lebanese Author of this book, at a time cultural diversity is a defeating challenge. Not being an expert in this field, I

leave with total confidence to you, Distinguished Speakers, the task of assessing this work of Professor Ameen Albert Rihani.

We, at NDU, understand that Multiculturalism is now more important in higher education than ever, and particularly in Lebanon. Democratic values affirming cultural pluralism within our Lebanese society form the basis of the teaching and learning multicultural educational approach that we are striving to adopt. Along these lines, Professor Gloria M. Ameny-Dixon of McNeese State University in California maintained in one of her researches that “the global perspective of multicultural education recognizes cultural pluralism as an ideal and healthy state in any productive society and promotes equity and respect among the existing cultural groups”. Indeed, we believe that the global perspective of multicultural education will keep NDU as a model of academic excellence in our pluralistic and democratic society.

Once again, I would like to welcome you all at NDU and extend my deepest gratitude to our distinguished guests from other sister institutions. I would like as well to thank the Faculty of Humanities under the leadership of Dr. Carol Kfoury for organizing this cultural gathering. Moreover, I sincerely congratulate Professor Ameen Rihani, Vice-President for Academic Affairs at NDU, for this distinctive work.

Allow me at last to leave you with a statement from Albert Einstein that said: “A human being is a part of the whole that we call the universe, a part limited in time and space”.

Dear Friends, we, in Lebanon, need to understand that the whole is greater than all its parts.

Fr. Walid Moussa, S.T.D.
President