

# Identity

An Essay in Three Parts

By Norman “Nourollah” Gabay

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## Part I

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“**In this world**, you could succeed in either of two ways: through your own intelligence, or through the ignorance of the others.” — *Jean de La Bruyère*

**Time’s our best advisor.**

**For the best guidance,**

**Don’t look any further.**

**Until the rise** of Reza Shah the Great and his flourishing reign, the Iranian society had fallen so behind that as late as 1925 C.E., the people had neither identity cards, nor birth certificates, and why, not even last names! And they dressed and thought very much like today’s masses of Afghanistan. It was Reza Shah, the Pahlavi King, who moved the Iranian youth from the traditional schools known as *maktab-khaneh* to modern schools and universities. He saved the country from the seize of a feudal system and the advocates of various identities. He endowed the Iranian person a unique nationality, and within merely 16 years, he had managed to advance the country by centuries. Alas, no other public servant was subjected to the ingratitude of their own people like he and his son were. As *Nahjol-Balaghat* says, “**Be afraid of the unkindness of whom you were kind to!**” How could we reward love and kindness by unkindness and ingratitude?

Had there been no Reza Shah, there would have been no civilized class of the Iranian people today. Thanks to him, our grandmothers and grandfathers finally left behind the Safavid era cruelties and the Qajar era ignorance, which they had suffered for centuries. They received birth certificates and passports, got themselves a proper education, dressed themselves in the latest fashion, and gradually entered the global society.

When choosing themselves a last name, most people depending on their level of knowledge and interests, chose a religious, professional or job-related name; one based on the name of their city or village; a royal title endowed by the kings; or the name of a great person or institution, such as Pasteur, Rothschild, or Alliance. Some others, akin to the proverbial bald man who answered to “Hairy Ali!”, chose for themselves last names that contradicted their most evident characteristics. Surprising choices were not rare. In our city of Kashan, we had a carpet-weaver whose name was Ali Joon-Kan, that is, “Ali the Dying Man!” There were also six brothers, who thanks to their ignorant father, were known unofficially (*sic!*), and in translation, as Pigeon, Tigery, Dove, Wolfy, Little Goat, and Ducky! It’s always interesting when you run into people with religious names who’ve since converted to another religion, such as a Pastor Mohammad-Ali or a Pastor Kazem, Christian clerics with distinctly Islamic names. I take the opportunity and ask whether their identities changed at all together with their religion or citizenship? Can a person’s identity change at all, or is it just an excuse to divide people — yet another tool to spread the seeds of discrimination and oppression?

The Iranian Ministry of Justice used to have an Office of Identification, whose clerks were responsible to examine the backgrounds of the visitors and report their findings to the pertinent court, so that the judge could take into consideration the parties’ past and present lives when deciding their cases. (Imagine the poor investigating agent of the Office of Identification, who had to study the features of tigers in order to identify a Mr. Tigery!)

**Looking closely**, we can see that the human mind, too, has an “office of identification”, which often within the first few seconds of meeting another person, learns about their nationality, color, race, language, overall appearance, and worse of all, their religion. Then, based on our own mental background and right or wrong convictions, and more or less without any further examination or deep reflection, it “decides the identity” of the other person and judges them

accordingly — and when a position of power is involved, it may even subject them immediately to discrimination and punishment.

**As I read in a magazine**, studies have shown that people run judgment on another person within the first 11 seconds of meeting them, and that the other person's tidiness and outfit largely influences our decision about them.

Crying out aloud when a visitor with a one-sided worldview arrives as if they had volunteered to invite discrimination to themselves! He or she may show up wearing a certain color, carrying a scrap of cloth on the head, bearing a special name, or otherwise, having some apparent characteristic which speaks of their specific religion, homeland, or nationality — **in short, they are branded!** Then, the office clerk, even though aware of the daily news, may as well treat this innocent unwitting fellow poorly and unfairly, or even violate their rights.

So far, we offered some general remarks about the evident outcome of humankind's shameful discriminations against one another, and specially in relation to assigning a variety of arbitrary identities. For a particular example, let us now turn to a tragic and regretful incident and examine the cause behind it.

**On Thursday, December the 27<sup>th</sup>, 2012**, Sunando Sen, a 46-year old man of the Asian Indian ethnicity, was waiting on a New York subway platform, when Erika Menendez, a woman filled with religious hatred, pushed him from behind under the wheels of a train — and the poor man was torn into pieces. The next day, the NYPD officers arrested the murderer and asked her why she had committed such a heinous bestial crime. Her answer? "I thought he was a Muslim!"

Murderer: Christian. Victim: Hindu. Provocative factor: Religious hatred, and that toward another religion. Culprit: The many so-called religious books, and the news which result from the daily dose of recurrent inciting writings.

**It's not about one religion or another. Rather, the issue is the folly of "deciding the identity of people", on the one hand, and the savage behavior of those contaminated with religious hatred, on the other.** Today, it could be one group with a certain religious identity, while tomorrow it'll be another. Every day, some new identity and yet another sect are introduced. Study history and read the news. Could we imagine an end to this chronic ill? Yes,

we may: This situation will end when the generations contaminated with religious and sectarian hatred are past behind, and when we'll have stopped teaching inciting books.

**I believe that humanity will someday come to realize that an individual has only one true identity, which is his human identity, one which he shares in with all other human beings.** Then he will understand that all other identities are vacuous, man-made and arbitrary, some mere means to power in the hands of the seditious elements of the world. As we can see, the best color is “colorless”, the best of people are “the free-spirited”, and the best religion, family and nation are those who go on bringing up human beings who are devoid of any religious, racial and patriotic hatred.

A Filipino clerk who had worked and lived for years in the Saudi Arabia and had been even whipped (*sic!*) in that country, had many stories to tell. He said that over there, they rather “sold” the daughter away to a husband — any husband; and that any household with a daughter to “sell” would hang a white flag atop their door-frame to invite in the husband slash customer. According to him, if a driver was stopped over a violation, the police would first notice the religion of the driver; if he was “one of us”, he would receive a warning or a citation; but if he “belonged to the others”, then he would be whipped right there — because the criteria for the punishment was “the religion” and not the legal violation and the nature of it! Clearly, not only religion hasn't been a solution to our many problems, but also it has constantly generated its own share of troubles. As such, it's best if we moderate it by combining it with modern sciences and by adjusting it to our modern civilization. Otherwise, the cycle of fear will continue to incite chaos in new places and with ever new names and colors; because we can rein in religious bigotry only by the guidance of the intellect and by teaching what it means to be human. In that case, the **ominous heritage of hatred**, dressed as it may in of a variety of arbitrary identities, may finally be eliminated.

## **Part II**

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Let's see how such young and prosperous immigrant countries as the United States, Australia and Canada, have dealt with the issue of “identity”, this global chronic ill, and with positive

results; whereas those countries poisoned by discrimination, although they all believe in one book, continue to roll in their own blood. The answer is that the latter have kept fighting one another as an effort to maintain their “superior identity” — one day, in the heart of Europe under the banner of “the Inquisition”, and another day in the heart of the Middle East under the flag of ISIS!

In comparison, the aforementioned countries, namely America, Australia and Canada, they don't have one specific official religion (!) or the kind of religious, national, racial or sectarian identities which have been around in the millennia-old religious countries. They realize that everyone living in their land, as with their ancestors, have been immigrants, like the rest of the inhabitants of our planet; and equipped with this knowledge, they march on toward the “world civilization”. By mixing together a variety of cultures, devoid of one religion or a single way of life, these old and new immigrants, have been able to create a healthier and more comfortable environment for all who live in their land. They have learned from their ancestors' bitter experiences, and those of the others, that religion is not the only issue; rather, humanity and humane goals and intents have the priority. And that to a ship without a destination, every wind comes as an unkind storm.

But what about the other countries? Should we sit around idly, keep watching a daily dose of catastrophic news, and do nothing against the efforts of the seditious elements who try to penetrate families and seep into the other countries? Should we let human lives continue to be sacrificed, generation after generation, to maintain a bunch of arbitrary and inciting identities in the name of religion or in the guise of homeland, tribe, color, race, etc.? Could we allow the coming generation to regress back to the ancient times to protect some “identity”, to re-live the age when their ancestors made the obsolete laws that surrounded the matter of identity? The answers are clearly negative. We need to keep adjusting the laws and regulations to modern times, and we ought to evolve and continue to make progress. **Immanuel Kant** said, and I paraphrase, “We can't prevent the force of evolution and the advancement of the civilization. Rather, we'd fare better to go along with them and maintain moderation and unity, so that we'll survive.”

The bigot man better heed the words of the Sage, who said,

**I asked, “Why the fight between country and religion?”**

**He said, “A hubbub at the table over a bite.”**

We can learn about a religion from what its followers have done throughout history — and history is available to everyone. Indeed, it’s the people who earn glory for themselves and the others. It’s unreasonable to die and to let people die every day, deluded by the idea of preserving some arbitrary identity or defending a small patch of the earth, this shared home of our species. This very day, we can erect a new building anywhere in the world and consider it holy, one to belong to all humankind. We’ve had more than enough of jealous greed. As the poet said,

**O Saadi! As true is the tale of our love for the homeland,  
One shouldn’t die there in disgrace just because he was born there!**

One can’t forget the evacuation of the Gaza Strip. On that day, as we saw, beautiful buildings which thereto had belonged to Israel, and which would go to the Arabs within an hour, were set on fire and ruined by a bunch of blind-minded people. They wished to destroy the “Jewish identity” of some brick and mud, even if it drove their country to ruins. It was an evident example of the outcome of human bigotry and artificial identities.

Or do you remember the bitter incident at the Babri Mosque, in the city of Ahmad-Abad, India? In that painful affair, about 3,000 people died over preserving the identity of a piece of land where a mosque had once stood. One party insisted on the “Islamic identity” of the land, while the other wouldn’t let go of its “Hindu identity”! Still more tragically, the Gaza and the Babri Mosque incidents won’t likely be the last of this problem.

As **Václav Havel**, the Czech philosopher and President said, and I paraphrase, “Where bigotry forbids to think, evil shall emerge, and it’ll take intellect as its maiden slave.”

My dear reader; the aim of religion is to teach people about humanity — and there’s no end to learning. Teaching science has no conflict with religion and identity. We can learn something from anybody’s good words and the better pages of any book. **The world did not stop once the scriptures arrived!** No book has been, nor shall it be, the last book. As **Hillel** put it in *Pirkey Avot* or the “The Advice of the Sages”, “*od-la mossif, yassif*”, that is, “Who does not add [to his knowledge], he will end what he knows.” Should the followers combine their religious commands with teaching modern sciences, it will provide for the survival of their religion;

otherwise, there won't be any noteworthy religion or religious adherents in our time. To promote and maintain some baseless nonsense attributed to the religion, and to defend the material that disagrees with our contemporary understanding, these rather make the religion vanish than survive. I emphasize that our identity has nothing to do with the religion, that the followers of all religions are equal as human beings, and that our true identity is our very human identity which is common between us and all other people.

### **Part III**

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Indeed, what is the philosophy of identity?

A most fundamental problem is to tell the road from the hole, the good from the bad, the human from the animal, and to do so correctly and in time; because the number of possible roads together with human resilience complicate the matter far worse than we can imagine.

The world is full of both people and animals. When a person is faced with an animal, he knows it's an animal; but when he faces a human-looking animal, he can't tell if it's an animal or a human; and as such, he sets out to find out about its origin, nature, identity, personality and authenticity, so that perhaps — perhaps! — he could understand to which social group he or she belongs. Thence, to some extent, the value of belonging to a group helps us to identify the others. That's also why I believe that people should have rather deemed religions as a number of social clubs meant for social interaction, mingling and bonding, where we can choose better known people to join in our close circle, and even to marry our children. It invites reflection that in the Jewish tradition, the word *beith-keneset*, translated to English as “synagogue”, doesn't mean “a place of worship”, “temple”, or “mosque”; rather, it signifies “a gathering place,” a place meant for social contact, worship, up-to-date reports, and if necessary, helping the others.

It's said of one recent American President who asked his C.I.A. chief, “Why is it that despite the Agency's vaster resources, I still receive the Mossad intelligence reports before those of the C.I.A.?”

The head of C.I.A. answered, “They have certain centers named Synagogues, where all kinds of information, from this aunt’s gossip to that mother-in-law’s chatter or the big brother’s rumors travel.” The President said, “Then let’s attend this Saturday’s ceremony in disguise. I’ll go to the main synagogue in Washington. You pick one in New York. Let’s find out up-close their secret to success. And make sure nobody finds out about our plans!”

That Saturday, the President entered the synagogue in disguise, took a seat next to an old man, and asked him, “What’s up, buddy?” The old man said, “I’m baffled as to why the President is supposed to come here incognito, and the chief of C.I.A. should walk with a cane into a synagogue in New York! Why won’t they show up without the make up?!” The President realized that the proverbial wall housed the mice, and the mice had ears — and those who had escaped the claws of the dog-looking cat, they knew several languages! And it was of no fault of theirs. As they say, once a mouse was about to leave its nest, when he heard a cat’s meow! Startled, he rushed back in and waited there for awhile. Minutes later, he heard a dog barking, thought that the cat was gone, and left the nest, only to be grabbed by the cat’s vicious claws. The little mouse moaned and said, “But I heard a dog barking?!” The cat laughed and said, “You can’t make a living these days without a few languages!”

## **Conclusion**

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**Gabriel García Márquez**, Nobel Laureate in Literature, was asked, “What would you write if you were given a hundred pages to write about hope?” He said, “I’d leave ninety-nine pages blank, and on the last line of the last page, I’d write, “Remember that the world is round. You may feel that you’ve reached the end, but you could’ve just arrived at its beginning.”

Life is all about making, but not staying. Make a commitment to build, but don’t build to stay. Also don’t expect the others to bring you flowers. Roll your sleeves up, grab the shovel, till the soil, **plant the seed** — and take care of it. It’ll bring you the flowers.

If I were given a hundred pages to write about “religion” and “identity”, I’d leave ninety-nine pages blank and write on the last page, “Each person has just one identity, and that’s their human



identity which they share in with all people. To share an understanding of this fact will introduce the person to what it means to be human, to security, and to our shared human happiness. Then that person will reject all other arbitrary human identities, so far as **Saadi** said, “**Humankind shall reach the point where he can see nothing but God,**” when he’ll dismantle the walls and understand that, “**The children of Adam belong to one body, / Created from one essence.**”

Let’s not wait for somebody to bring us flowers. Instead, let’s raise children who are informed and equipped with modern science, so that they’ll bring us the gift of everlasting flowers (the grandchildren). **Religion is solely based on teaching what it means to be human;** and the best religion is that which raises better people, so far as the walls of division and conflict will come down, and “he will love his fellow humans as he loves himself.” (*Leviticus*, 19:18). Such a person will not favor his own identity over another’s; nor will he humiliate them, because, and I repeat, there’s no identity but the one we all share as humans.

The late **Moti’oddoleh Hejazi** (1900-1973 C.E.) was my ideal writer. As he wrote, one day in his childhood, he and a few classmates went on an out-of-town picnic. They camped at a river bank, spread the table-sheet, lit the *samavar* to heat water for the tea, danced to the *tombak*<sup>1</sup> of one of the boys, and ate and drank, until an old country man arrived walking toward the village. The youngsters ridiculed the man and laughed at him. The old man, hungry and thirsty, chose to keep composure, walked toward them, and said, “You children have fun! I own the garden behind the hill. After the lunch, come over there and enjoy its sight and fruit!” Suddenly, the young boys behaved differently, welcomed him to their table, and served him generously with food and drink. An hour later, as they began to wrap up things to leave, the old man spoke up and said, “You children are like my own, so let me give you a gift. The truth is that I don’t own the garden. My advice is that through life, think of everyone as the owner of the garden and be kind to them. Don’t ridicule anybody. People’s appearance, their names, their religions, these are no reasons to think of them beneath you.”

Love your kind as you love yours. Otherwise, given that different identities will always be there, one way or another, humankind will be exploited by the inciters. The following fable aptly fits our story.

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<sup>1</sup> *Tombak*: A principle Persian percussive instrument.

Once upon a time, a man lived with his wife and two daughters. When the time came, he married off the eldest daughter to a farmer, and the younger one to a potter. **While afterwards, his wife said,** “Go and visit our daughters to see how they’ve been doing.” The father went first to the farmer’s house. His daughter said, “We’ve tilled the land and spread the seeds. If it rains, it would be fantastic. If not, we’ll be miserable.” Next, he went to the potter’s house. His daughter said, “We’ve made the clay vases and filed them under the sun. If it rains, we’ll sink in misery. If not, it would be wonderful.” Back at home, his wife asked for the news. The man said, “Rain or not, we’ll be in trouble!”

As long as some people accept the seditious writings, **whether in peace or in times of war, we’ll be miserable!** The tree that bears poisoned fruit must be uprooted before it stops bearing the fruit. As we have seen, whether in peace or at war, humankind’s hostility toward “the other” has continued in the name of religion. It’s a dormant fire waiting to wake aflame — one day in Germany against the Jews, but another day in Myanmar (Burma) against the Muslims; or in Egypt against the Christians; or in Iraq against the Izadis, or the Kurds, etc. Hostility toward “the other”, has always been there, whether on a regional level, such as the sectarian conflicts of the Middle East and Ireland, or on a larger and more general scale, between one person and another. Even in Europe, amid its claims to civilization, hostility toward “the other” has somehow persisted, so far as people poisoned by religious hatred continued to cooperate with their enemy’s anti-Semitism, despite that the enemy had destroyed their own homes and murdered their own children.

Indeed, we have a long road ahead to the exalted place of humanity.

**I told a clever man, “Take a look at the world!”**

**He laughed and said, “Tough times,**

**Weird works, and a world in chaos!”**

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To receive copies of this essay and other essays and writings of Norman Gabay in English and Persian, including his book *An Invitation to Reason*, his *Glossary of the Millennia-old Dialect of the Jews of Kashan*, and soon, a digital book that will contain his more recent essays, please visit our website at [BabaNouri.com](http://BabaNouri.com).