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McDaniel: Chandler's bio of Gibran is a powerful tool for unification

rmcdaniel Jan 27, 2024 Comments

I wish I had still been preaching when I came upon Paul-Gordon Chandler’s biography of Kahlil Gibran. Oh, the sermons I could have written. It admits to a degree of shallowness on my part that I previously knew so little about Gibran. Chandler’s “In Search of a Prophet: A Spiritual Journey with Kahlil Gibran” was an awakening.

Whether you knew anything of this profound man’s works before or not, Chandler’s book affords all an opportunity to enjoy a deep appreciation of the man.

Gibran died at age 48 in 1931, a generation before Chandler was born in 1964. Having learned something about both men, it seems quite probable that had their time on this Earth been reversed, it might well have been Gibran who would have undertaken Chandler’s biography. Such is the depth of life experience, intellectual capacity, spiritual acumen and artistic curiosity the two share.

The Rt. Rev. Paul-Gordon Chandler is the Bishop of the Episcopal Church in Wyoming. He moved to Wyoming from Doha, Qatar, where he was Rector of the Anglican Church. Chandler grew up in Senegal, West Africa, and has traveled much of the world, intimately familiarizing himself with a vast array of religions and cultures.

The Archbishop of Canterbury awarded Chandler the Hubert Walter Award for Reconciliation and Interfaith Cooperation, the highest international award for service to reconciliation and interfaith dialogue among Anglicans.

I first encountered Chandler during CARAVAN. Its art exhibit, titled “Abraham: Out of Many, One,” visited Laramie in 2021. With his unique sense of the role of art in bridging gaps, Chandler founded CARAVAN as a means of “using the arts to further a global quest for a more harmonious future with each other and with the earth.” (oncaravan.org/abraham)

It would take someone of that intellectual background, global experience and artistic sagacity to undertake an enlightening dissertation of the life and accomplishments of Kahlil Gibran. Only a few, Chandler among them, have the capacity to guide readers adequately through such a meaningful life.

The Rev. James Winkler, former general secretary of the National Council of Churches, notes, “Chandler’s biography rings with the same grandeur and deep insight present in Gibran’s poetry.”

Few writers integrate the intellect, experience and spirituality of people like Gibran and Chandler. As a result, it may be long after he leaves this world behind that another will write an equally important biography of Chandler.

Chandler’s biography teaches of Gibran’s innate capacity to see the beauty of a relationship with the divine, regardless of whether it comes through Judaism, Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism or elsewhere.

“Yet,” Chandler writes, “(Gibran) found the supreme sage in Jesus, whom he saw as ‘the Supreme Light.’” Chandler was struck by Gibran’s “ever-increasing fascination with Jesus” as “a thread woven throughout his entire life” and “whose path he sought to walk.”

Kahlil believed Jesus is “the supreme figure of all ages, and in him we shall always find mystery, love, imagination, tragedy, beauty, romance, and truth.”

Chandler observed Gibran’s “preoccupation with Jesus ... unique among the world’s non-Christian religions.” Chandler’s biography demonstrates that Jesus led Gibran beyond the Jesus of Christian dogma to feel the love all around him without delivering him to divisive forms of Christian exclusivity we too often see.

During my years in the pulpit, I reminded people that everything Jesus taught came from the Hebrew Bible, that Jesus was an esteemed prophet in Islam, and his words echo throughout Eastern religions. Still, the words necessary to unite people across dogmatic lines evaded me. However, Chandler’s exhilarating portrait of Gibran includes the very words and ideas I searched for in vain. This book is a powerful tool for unification.

Chandler’s ability to use words to paint such a vivid picture of Gibran’s life offers a glimpse of hope for bringing Christians, Muslims, Jews and others together around the Communion Table for the purpose of (as Chandler writes in the book’s preface) inviting all on “Gibran’s fascinating journey toward an all-encompassing spirituality ... that is more than ever needed in our world today.”

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