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THE BAHAI STATEMENT ON NATURE

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INTRODUCTION

In September of 1986 the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) launched their Network on Conservation and Religion, bringing religious leaders representing Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, Jews and Muslims together with environmental leaders in Assisi, Italy.

Each of the five religions represented there issued a declaration on nature. As of October 1987, the Baha'is are the sixth major religion to join this new alliance, and put forward this statement in support of the Network's objectives.

"Nature in its essence is the embodiment of My Name, the Maker, the Creator. Its manifestations are diversified by varying causes, and in this diversity there are signs for men of discernment. Nature is God's Will and is its expression in and through the contingent world. It is a dispensation of Providence ordained by the Ordainer, the All-Wise." Baha'i Writings

With those words, Baha'u'llah, Prophet-Founder of the Baha'i Faith, outlines the essential relationship between man and the environment: that the grandeur and diversity of the natural world are purposeful reflections of the majesty and bounty of God. For Baha'is, there follows an implicit understanding that nature is to be respected and protected, as a divine trust for which we are answerable.

Such a theme, of course, is not unique to the Baha'i Faith. All the world's major religions make this fundamental connection between the Creator and His creation. How could it be otherwise? All the major independent religions are based on revelations from one God,,a God who has successively sent His Messengers to earth so that humankind might become educated about His ways and will. Such is the essence of Baha'i belief.

As the most recent of God's revelations, however, the Baha'i teachings have a special relevance to present-day circumstances when the whole of nature is threatened by man-made perils ranging from the wholesale destruction of the world's rain forests to the final nightmare of nuclear annihilation.

A century ago, Baha'u'llah proclaimed that humanity has entered a new age. Promised by all the religious messengers of the past, this new epoch will ultimately bring peace and enlightenment to humanity. To reach that point,

however, humankind must first recognize its fundamental unity,,as well as the unity of God and of religion. Until there is a general recognition of this wholeness and interdependence, humanity's problems will only worsen.

"The well-being of mankind, its peace and security, are unattainable unless and until its unity is firmly established," Baha'u'llah wrote. "The earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens."

The major issues facing the environmental movement today hinge on this point. The problems of ocean pollution, the extinction of species, acid rain and deforestation,,not to mention the ultimate scourge of nuclear war,,respect no boundaries. All require a transnational approach.

While all religious traditions point to the kind of cooperation and harmony that will indeed be necessary to curb these threats, the religious writings of the Baha'i Faith also contain an explicit prescription for the kind of new world political order that offers the only long-term solution to such problems.

"That which the Lord hath ordained as the sovereign remedy and mightiest instrument for the healing of the world is the union of all its people into one universal cause...." Baha'u'llah wrote.

Built around the idea of a world commonwealth of nations, with an international parliament and executive to carry out its will, such a new political order must also, according to the Baha'i teachings, be based on principles of economic justice, equality between the races, equal rights for women and men and universal education.

All these points bear squarely on any attempt to protect the world's environment. The issue of economic justice is an example. In many regions of the world, the assault on rain forests and endangered species comes as the poor, legitimately seeking a fair share of the world's wealth, fell trees to create fields. They are unaware that, over the long term and as members of a world community which they know little about, they may be irretrievably damaging rather than improving their children's chances for a better life. Any attempt to protect nature, must, therefore, also address the fundamental inequities between the world's rich and poor.

Likewise, the uplifting of women to full equality with men can help the environmental cause by bringing a new spirit of feminine values into decision-making about natural resources. The scriptures of the Baha'i Faith note that: "...man has dominated over woman by reason of his more forceful and aggressive qualities both body and mind. But the balance is already shifting; force is losing its dominance, and mental alertness, intuition and the spiritual qualities of love and service, in which woman is strong, are gaining ascendancy. Hence the new age will be an age less masculine and more permeated with feminine ideals...."

Education, especially an education that emphasizes Baha'i principles of human interdependence, is another prerequisite to the building of a global conservation consciousness. The Faith's theology of unity and interdependence

relates specifically to environmental issues. Again, to quote the Baha'i sacred writings:

"By nature is meant those inherent properties and necessary relations derived from the realities of things. And these realities of things, though in the utmost diversity, are yet intimately connected one with the other.... Liken the world of existence to the temple of man. All the organs of the human body assist one another, therefore life continues... Likewise among the parts of existence there is a wonderful connection and interchange of forces which is the cause of life of the world and the continuation of these countless phenomena."

The very fact that such principles should come with the authority of religion and not merely from human sources, is yet another piece of the overall solution to our environmental troubles. The impulse behind the Assisi declarations on nature is testimony to this idea.

There is perhaps no more powerful impetus for social change than religion. Baha'u'llah said: "Religion is the greatest of all means for the establishment of order in the world and for the peaceful contentment of all that dwell therein." In attempting to build a new ecological ethic, the teachings of all religious traditions can play a role in helping to inspire their followers.

Baha'u'llah, for example, clearly addresses the need to protect animals. "Look not upon the creatures of God except with the eye of kindness and of mercy, for Our loving providence hath pervaded all created things, and Our grace encompassed the earth and the heavens."

He Himself expressed a keen love and appreciation for nature, furthering the connection between the environment and the spiritual world in Baha'i theology. "The country is the world of the soul, the city is the world of bodies," Baha'u'llah said.

This dichotomy between spirituality and materialism is a key to understanding the plight of humankind today. In the Baha'i view, the major threats to our world environment, such as the threat of nuclear annihilation, are manifestations of a world-encompassing sickness of the human spirit, a sickness that is marked by an overemphasis on material things and a self-centeredness that inhibits our ability to work together as a global community. The Baha'i Faith seeks above all else to revitalize the human spirit and break down the barriers that limit fruitful and harmonious cooperation among men and women, whatever their national, racial or religious background.

For Baha'is the goal of existence is to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization. Such a civilization can only be built on an earth that can sustain itself. The Baha'i commitment to the environment is fundamental to our Faith.