

f-religion:

The Divine Educators and the Nature and Purpose of Religion

At the centre of every religion is the exalted and venerable Person of its Founder. These great beings who are the founders of the world's religions have been variously referred to as Manifestations of God, Avatars, Prophets or Messengers of God. It is through them that, over many millennia humanity has learned to recognize and revere the Creator. The guidance they have imparted has been the primary force impelling humanity's spiritual and moral development. The impact of their words, which are collected in the world's scriptures, have given rise to new systems of values which have transformed consciousness and behaviour, influenced arts and sciences and led to the emergence of legal codes and new forms of social administration. The story of their lives, as much as the impact of their words, has left an indelible impact on humanity's collective psyche. By exemplifying an all-embracing love for humanity, an unwavering adherence to justice and a sublimity of character far beyond anything visible on the ordinary human plane, these divine educators raised consciousness above the exigencies of animal existence and awakened hearts and minds to new frontiers of moral excellence. Not even the most hardened of sceptics can deny the monumental record of spiritual and moral accomplishment that humanity has achieved in the name of each one of them, whether it be Krishna, Rama, Buddha, Moses, Zoroaster, Jesus, Muhammad or Baha'u'llah.

The world of today stands in dire need of the moral inspiration and spiritual guidance of these divine teachers. Yet, humanity's ability to draw on their teachings to address its multiple challenges has been severely limited by the confusion that prevails around the concept and practice of religion. In so many cases, the teachings that these divine educators brought have been mixed with a body of man-made traditions, beliefs and practices that have, over the centuries, been added to them. The clear voice of God's messenger or avatar communicating with the human heart has often been lost in the din of competing voices presuming to speak with their authority or on their behalf. The most distressing outcome of this confusion can be seen in cases where the very purpose of religion is reversed – instead of freeing the soul from the shackles of ignorance, fanaticism and dogmatism are bred in its name and instead of instilling the consciousness of oneness, it is made a basis of prejudice and hatred.

The need of the hour then is for us to refocus on the life and mission of these divine educators in order to remind ourselves of the authentic purpose that religion is meant to serve, a purpose that was intended for it by its founders. Focusing on their lives also leads to the recognition that they are all one in their reality and in their mission. When we look beyond their specific cultural and historical contexts, all these teachers are united by a common purpose. Viewed together, they appear not as isolated founders of different religions but rather as agents of one common process unfolding across the ages throughout the planet – the progressive spiritualization of humankind. As the Bahá'í

writings attest in relation to the oneness of these divine teachers: “If thou wilt observe with discriminating eyes, thou wilt behold Them all abiding in the same tabernacle, soaring in the same heaven, seated upon the same throne, uttering the same speech, and proclaiming the same Faith.”

On the occasion of the birth anniversary of the Twin Prophet Founders of the Bahá'í Faith – the Bab and Baha'u'llah – the Bahá'í Office of Public Affairs of India is organizing a symposium on the theme ‘The Divine Educators and the Nature and Purpose of Religion’. The intention of this gathering is to achieve greater clarity on the oneness of religion and on the unifying and constructive purpose of religion by focusing on the life and mission of its founders. Some of the questions that this symposium will seek to explore are as follows:

1. The lives of the founders of the world's major religions reveal a common pattern. They were all possessed of innate knowledge and they revealed divine qualities to an extent far above what human beings can achieve. In their earthly lives, they remained entirely sanctified from attraction to worldly power or riches. Due to their love for humanity, they willingly endured immense suffering and sacrifice. Their message which called for social and spiritual transformation was vehemently opposed by those in power. Yet, despite immense odds, the light they brought to the world was not extinguished. Due to the divine source of their light, their message spread from heart to heart until it embraced a significant section of humanity. How can people of all religions grow in their consciousness of the underlying oneness of the purpose and mission of these divine educators? How can their work be seen as part of humanity's common religious heritage?
2. In order to arrive at a deeper understanding of the oneness that exists among these divine educators, it becomes necessary to learn to read their writings and appreciate their mission with a discernment that combines the use of reason with spiritual perception. Such an understanding would, for example, differentiate the contextual aspects of their message which were responding to the exigencies of their specific social and cultural settings from the core principles which they enunciated which are eternal and common to all. How can the capacity for such perceptive discernment be developed and fostered among the masses of humankind?
3. All of these divine educators spoke of a spiritual reality that transcends the material world. This spiritual reality includes the human soul which is the essential identity of the human being consisting of latent spiritual qualities such as love, generosity, justice and kindness which are to be developed in the course of one's life. In many ways, a better understanding of the station and purpose of these divine educators would depend on humanity achieving a more mature appreciation of the nature of spiritual reality and its connection with the material world. Going beyond crude explanations of the ‘spiritual’ in terms of the magical, the miraculous or the fantastic, such an understanding would have to open the way for humanity to engage in a rational and systematic process of drawing upon spiritual qualities and principles for constructive

social transformation. In other words, rather than seeking to locate the interaction of the spiritual and the material in the esoteric and the occult, it would seek to explore the spiritual in terms of the consciousness of one's interconnectedness with all beings and with the Creator and the expression of this consciousness in motivations and actions that seek to build a better world reflecting the principles of justice and unity. How can such an understanding be fostered and strengthened?

from

opa.bahai.in/advancement-of-women/building-a-more-caring-world-implications-for-the-family:

Building a More Caring World: Implications for the Family

In order to stimulate reflection and dialogue on the vital importance of building a more caring society and its implications for the relationships between the sexes especially in the context of the family, the Office of Public Affairs of the Bahá'ís of India in collaboration with the Bahá'í Chair for Studies in Development, Devi Ahilya University, Indore is organizing a series of events on the theme of 'Building a More Caring World: Implications for the Family'. This background note has been prepared by the Bahá'í Chair to help frame some of the fundamental concepts, issues and questions that such a discussion would have to explore.

Despite its crucial role in sustaining life and developing human capabilities, the true value of care often remains unrecognized. This systemic devaluation of care is closely related to the history of patriarchy. Care work has been devalued due to its association with the household which is considered part of the feminine private domain as opposed to the masculine public domain where work is recognized and valued. Due to care's association with women, even when care work is remunerated or carried out professionally, it is generally lower paid and less prestigious.

In most societies around the world, a woman's gender role has included the obligation to attend to the needs of the members of the family, especially children, the elderly, and the sick, and to manage and carry out various household chores. Women are expected to accept care responsibilities without compensation or acknowledgment since it is viewed as a God-given or nature-ordained duty. Failure to perform such services could invite the penalty of severe censure or even domestic violence.

While a patriarchal order values achievement, autonomy, and independence in men, self-abnegation, devotion to the family, and sacrifice are expected of women. Women are often expected to assume almost the entire responsibility for care labour at home which comes at the cost of limiting their freedom to choose their life path and missing opportunities to develop their capabilities. Further, the very nature of care work tends to make the caregiver emotionally attached to the person being cared for. This condition makes the caregiver (who is mostly a woman) into what Nancy Folbre calls a "prisoner of love" since she will not be willing to bargain for greater freedom for herself if such

freedom imperils the well-being of

the one being cared for (Folbre, 2002, p.38). The injustice of being made almost entirely responsible for caring labour inhibits millions of women from pursuing their higher education or participating fully in the work force as equals with men. This is often the case even in countries that have achieved high levels of economic development.

The revaluation of the conception of care thus cannot be achieved without decoupling it from patriarchal gender norms. Such efforts would naturally have to begin with the family, the primary space where both caring needs are addressed and conceptions of masculinity and femininity are formed, acted out and enforced.

Efforts aimed at correcting the discrimination against women in the family usually focus on removing barriers to their full participation in all arenas of life, sensitizing boys and men on the importance of care and equipping them with the skills needed to share equally in all its joys and burdens. The effectiveness of such efforts depends, in part, on a profound consciousness of the many implications of the principle of the equality of women and men. Appreciating this principle of equality becomes possible when a distinction is drawn between gender which is socially constructed and the inner nature of the human being which consists of those qualities and propensities that are common to all irrespective of sex. While the physical differences between men and women undeniably influences how they experience the world, the soul of the human being – that which is essential to our humanity – has no gender (Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity, 2009, p. 1). Given that the propensity to be caring and nurturing is common to all human beings as part of this shared nature, boys and men can, with the right orientation and guidance, develop and demonstrate the capacities for serving others in all settings.

Transforming gender norms would entail critically analyzing existing notions of masculinity and femininity and the assumptions underlying them against this non-fragmented conception of a fundamental human identity that transcends gender. For example, some prevalent conceptions of masculinity unduly glorify the values of autonomy, independence, self-reliance, toughness, and individual resilience. While these qualities have their value in particular contexts, their being feted in popular culture as uniquely masculine qualities leads to young boys learning from an early age to regard being vulnerable or dependent on others as signs of weakness that are to be rejected. Indeed, rather than helping young boys develop qualities in accordance with their natural state of interdependence by learning to collaborate and draw on each other's strengths, they are taught to compete and prove their worth on their own. Dependence on others is projected as a pathological sign of dysfunction. Similarly, rather than help men develop a healthy sense of their vulnerability, they are taught to be ashamed of their vulnerabilities or frailties and to portray an invulnerable persona as the mark of their manhood. The burden of living up to these unrealistic and ultimately inhumane standards undermines the emotional and psychological health of men. It impairs their capacities to

develop healthy social relationships based on trust, mutuality, and cooperation.

On the other hand, from a young age girls internalize the norms, values, standards of behaviour, ways of thinking and social expectations that are set for them by a patriarchal order. Often their subordination to the will and needs of others can go to such an extent that women are “denied a cultural conception of themselves as individuals” and they “may not even think of themselves as separate persons” (Folbre, 2002, p.6). Both the self-abnegation of the one and the self-aggrandizement of the other are two ends of the same spectrum. They are products of a social order shaped not by a conception of our common humanity but rather by the self-interested motives of patriarchy.

Given that these gender norms are embedded in the structures of society, transforming them is a complex process that takes time. To be sure, groups, organizations, and individuals working over many decades have already achieved significant progress in establishing the equality of women and men as an incontestable normative principle. Yet, much remains to be achieved in translating this principle into action. The surest foundation for replacing oppressive gender norms with egalitarian and just conceptions lies in the concepts and practices that young minds learn from their earliest years in the family. In this regard, by sharing equally in domestic care work, not only are boys learning to be fair and unselfish and girls learning that they are socially equal to boys, the practice of care by its very nature will call forth and develop the nurturing and caring capabilities within them.

Caring for another human being requires capability and discipline as much as the qualities of love and compassion. Rather than being temporarily moved by altruistic sentiments, it calls for consistency, commitment, and trustworthiness in the caregiver. The caregiver is often required to place the care-receivers' needs above their own. These capabilities are built through practice over a long period of time, and the intimate space of the family is the most natural setting where this learning process can begin for both boys and girls.

The challenge before the present and future generations is not just to create families where the equality of the sexes is a lived reality but also to build a society where care is highly valued for its seminal role in providing the conditions for the full development of human potential. While care is a means to progress, being caring in the sense of manifesting the qualities and abilities needed to actively support the progress of another person or be a responsible steward of the natural world, is in itself the mark of a morally and socially well-developed person. Thus, in the context of the family, the challenge is not only to ensure that all participate in carrying out domestic responsibilities, but also to raise young boys and girls who aspire to build their capabilities to serve and care for other human beings and the planet.

The above considerations raise several questions. How can a family identify and change pre-existing norms and habits that, in one way or another, devalue care

or assign it as solely a women's concern? How can generations of young people be raised with the yearning to serve others, to be champions of justice and builders of unity and not just achievers of professional attainment or economic success? Parents clearly play a signal role in this process. Yet, for their efforts to bear enduring results, they will need the support of the extended family, the State and various institutions of society such as the education system and the media. What is called for is a society-wide reorientation and realignment of values from those based on materialism towards commitment to principles that express the higher potential in human beings. How is such a transformation to take place? How can faith in the possibility of such a transformation be kindled and sustained? Faith in the possibility of change depends in part on how compellingly that change can be imagined or conceived. Imagining an alternative world where the values of care are preeminent will call for new metaphors, vocabularies and new uses of language that can allow us to go beyond the limiting premises of our prevalent culture and open a space for looking at familiar concepts in new ways. The very concept of care and the associated notions of love, collaboration, reciprocity and service, will need to be reconceived to discard the negative or limited connotations attached to them by a patriarchal and individualistic culture and to envision the vast potentialities for individual and social progress inherent to new and more broadened ways of understanding and applying these concepts. How is such an imaginative intervention in the life of society to be initiated?

For a vast number of economically underprivileged families where both parents often have to work to make ends meet, the needs for external assistance with care are immediate and constant. How can these needs be better recognized and prioritized by the State and CSOs? Where the support from the State is inadequate, how can capacity be built at the level of a group of neighboring families or a community to support each other with their caring needs? In all such efforts, the challenge will be to ensure that the conception of care is not reduced merely to its material dimensions as the delivery of a set of services, essential as they are. If the values of care are to be the guiding vision for society, they will have to address all dimensions of human well-being, including the spiritual, the emotional, the social, and the material. Caring for the non-material dimensions of life includes creating structures and environments conducive to social and spiritual development and synergizing such development with material progress in a mutually reinforcing way. How is the learning associated with these dimensions of caring to be generated, and in what ways can it begin from the family?

from

opa.bahai.in/role-of-religion/drawing-on-the-power-of-faith-in-building-a-united-india:

Drawing on the Power of Faith in Building a United India

The unity and integrity of a nation as diverse and vast as India over the past seven and half decades has been an astonishing achievement of which all of humanity can be proud. While there could be many factors contributing to

keeping India together as a nation, few can deny that a vital cohesive force that binds the nation together is the spirituality of its people. This spirituality finds expression in a culture that values human beings as the creation of the Divine, is open and accepting of people of all backgrounds, that views in all living beings the reflections of the sacred and therefore enjoins respect, gentleness and non-violence in all relationships as the ideal way of life.

This spirituality of the Indian people is not a free-floating, amorphous, or superficial condition, but rather a state of being that is rooted in the religious beliefs of the people. India remains a deeply religious nation where its peoples' spiritual convictions have a strong bearing on the way they understand and carry out their civic duties. Thus, living together in peace and unity is viewed not just as an outcome of citizens fulfilling their formal obligations to each other in a social contract but rather as the expression of the profound spiritual principles that govern interpersonal relationships where the individual finds joy and fulfillment in the well-being of the other.

While religion plays a powerful role in India in strengthening the social fabric through its altruistic injunctions, it is also a historical fact that from the time of India's independence, religion has also been made into the primary cause of conflict and social tension in the country. Over the past few decades there has been a worldwide resurgence of religious fundamentalism. Voices that represent religious extremism and intolerance have increasingly entered the political and social mainstream and, in many countries, they now dominate public discourse. This has created an atmosphere of confusion around the concept of religion where its unifying and constructive role has been steadily obscured by the tendency to view it solely through an identitarian lens. India too, has not been immune to it and these challenges come at a time of great uncertainty in world history when the need for internal unity is vital to successfully navigate the waves of present and impending crises that can gravely undermine the nation's progress including increasing geopolitical instability and war, economic recession, climate change, terrorism and a global food and energy crisis.

The need of the hour then is for a constructive discourse involving individuals, communities, the State, institutions of society such as the media, the judiciary, the private sector and the education system and religious leaders on the role of religion in contributing to social harmony. The ground for such a discourse must be laid by clarifying the fundamental nature and purpose of religion as a system of knowledge and practice, and the common foundations of all religions. Such a discourse must show a practical path forward for interreligious collaboration in contributing to the progress of the nation.

To contribute towards such a process, the Office of Public Affairs of the Bahá'ís of India is organizing a symposium titled 'Drawing on the Power of Faith in Building a United India'. The deliberations during this symposium will seek to explore and gain deeper understanding on questions such

as these that will need to be addressed in bringing the power of Faith to bear on the building of a united and prosperous India:

If religion is to become a force for promoting unity in diversity, a new level of interreligious harmony and unity must be realized in both understanding and practice. The surest foundation for interreligious unity must be sought in their common nature and purpose that all religions share. Despite differences in their outward form which can be attributed to the particular historical and social contexts in which they appeared, at their core all religions share a common set of moral and spiritual teachings. All religions expound upon spiritual realities. They call upon people to develop qualities such as honesty, justice, truthfulness, uprightness, kindness, love and trustworthiness. The Founders and saints of all the major religions exemplified to a superhuman degree perfection in these qualities and set for humanity peerless examples of moral excellence. Although the social teachings, laws and rituals of different religions have differed based on changing historical needs and circumstances, they ultimately can be seen to serve the same purpose of advancing humanity's collective maturity. How can this sense of unity between peoples of various religions be continually reinforced to override theological, sectarian and doctrinal divides?

A discussion on religion's nature and purpose must also address the many harmful attitudes, beliefs and practices that are perpetuated in the name of religion and that have their basis in superstition, blind imitation and prejudice. Such beliefs and practices are not only inherently harmful because they stunt individual and collective progress, they can also gradually grow into a dense thicket of dogma and rituals that chokes the vivifying spirit of each religion. When religion gets reduced to such beliefs and practices that are neither morally edifying nor amenable to reason, it is a short step away from turning into a source of prejudice, hatred and contention. Addressing these complex challenges will require a vibrant normative discourse on religion that continually refocuses on its social and moral purpose in light of contemporary realities. It will also call for religious beliefs and practices being vigorously exposed to the light of reason with the intention of cutting through layers of blind belief or superstition to reach to the heart of religious meaning and intention that is in harmony with science and reason. How can such a discourse be advanced?

Addressing the complex and unprecedented challenges of the twenty first century will require the masses of humanity to make deep changes in their patterns of thought and behavior and a willingness to make profound sacrifices for the common good. The kind of structural and systemic changes that are needed to become more just, united and to restore our balance with nature will require selfless efforts from the masses of humanity on a scale and for a duration never before witnessed. History bears witness that other than religion no other power or man-made ideology has been capable of stirring the depths of human motivation and calling forth the spirit of nobility, sacrifice and initiative needed to achieve such an objective. The world today is in dire need of the

power of religion to once again course through the veins of a beleaguered humanity and to stir a common and collective response to humanity's challenges. How can this unifying and constructive power of religion be stimulated and channeled by one and all and not just religious leaders?

from

opa.bahai.in/advancement-of-women/digital-inclusion-and-the-advancement-of-women-wielding-a-double-edged-sword:

Digital Inclusion and the Advancement of Women: Wielding a Double-Edged Sword

Among the range of structural and systemic factors that inhibits the full participation of women in India in economic and social processes is their relative lack of access to digital technology in a world that is being rapidly digitized. According to a recent statistic, in India only 14.9 % of women are reported to be using the internet.

This lack of access has adverse implications for a woman's prospects in life. Digital technologies today provide access to critical health services, government welfare schemes, opportunities for education, civic participation, employment, and financing. For women, the access to the internet has the potential to strengthen their sense of agency by allowing them to access and verify information, to connect with markets for their services or goods and to receive payment securely without having to go through an intermediary.

During times of crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic access to smartphones, a computer and an internet connection became a critical necessity for survival with crucial services related to health, vaccinations, livelihoods, education and security being offered mainly through digital means. This transitioning of many social and economic services to online platforms suggests that the future is going to be much more reliant on digital technology making it all the more crucial to reduce the gender digital gap.

There are various structural factors that prevent women in India from accessing digital technologies. Owning smartphones and accessing the internet are relatively expensive. The majority of women in the country lack the means or the financial independence to buy a smartphone or pay for internet access. Levels of literacy continue to be lower for women than men. It has often been found in families that priority is given to male members when it comes to using smartphones or accessing the internet. Studies have found that families fear giving women access to the internet assuming that it may lead them to challenge patriarchal norms, expose them to unknown dangers or distract them from domestic work and care-giving which is still widely viewed as their primary duty. As a consequence of this deprivation, millions of women across urban and rural India remain deprived of the opportunities that the internet offers for bettering their lives.

While there is undoubtedly a need to greatly increase access to the internet among women in India, this process needs to be approached with thoughtful care to avoid reductionistic or naïve ways of thinking about technology in the

context of development policy. The importance of access to the internet must be neither underestimated nor exaggerated. Providing digital connectivity to women is a small part of a much larger transformation that will need to happen in the social, economic, cultural and spiritual life of society to advance the equality of women and men. It is not a quick-fix to the complex and multifaceted challenge of ensuring gender equality as some technocratic prescriptions tend to view it. To bear their intended fruits, technological interventions must be accompanied by a range of capacity building measures among girls and women and also among institutions and communities at the grassroots to be able to draw on technology intelligently and with sensitivity to the social, economic and cultural context.

A related challenge is the tendency of being naïve about the role and impact of technology in the betterment of society and on the condition of women in particular. Digital technology, like technology in general, is a double-edged sword. While the benefits of digital access are readily apparent, it is also a fact that the internet as a social space has turned into an increasingly hostile and dangerous space for women with misogynistic attitudes and opinions being brazenly shared with little or no regulation. According to a survey conducted by the World Wide Web Foundation, more than half of the young women interviewed spoke of experiencing violence online, including sexual harassment.

Further, there is a self-reinforcing feedback loop at play between the patriarchal values in a society and the kind of technologies that the society develops. Technologies are developed by men, for men and they largely represent male perspectives, needs, tastes and sensibilities. Owing to the complex factors behind gender-based occupational segregation, too few women the world over enrol for educational programs related to engineering and technology and this results in the limited influence of women on the design of technology. This is one of the reasons why the technology that is developed usually does not reflect the needs and life experiences of women. In addition to this, artificial intelligence systems that undergird many popular websites and applications strengthen and amplify existing gender stereotypes. The algorithms that run these AI systems learn and draw patterns from data of users online. Considering that a majority of users online are men, male biases enter into what these systems learn thus reinforcing existing gender norms rather than serving as a force for change.

Thus, regardless of how enticing the prospects of rapid internet-driven change may seem, the fact remains that there are no shortcuts on the path of development. While increasing digital access for India's women is vital, to make good on the promise of technology calls for capacity building in girls and women, for greater participation of women in the fields of science and technology, for the conscious and deliberate inclusion of women's perspectives in the design of technologies and for greater efforts from the State, civil society and technology companies to make the internet a safe and

wholesome space.

On the occasion of the international women's day, the Baha'i Office of Public Affairs is organizing a symposium on the theme Digital Inclusion and the Advancement of Women: *Wielding a Double-Edged Sword*. This symposium seeks to bring together leaders in the field of technologies, feminist scholars, development practitioners and social scientists to explore the conditions under which the growing digitization of India can contribute to the greater empowerment of women.

from opa.bahai.in/role-of-religion/religion-peace-and-the-end-of-otherness:

Religion, Peace, and the End of Otherness

Never before in human history have the conditions for achieving peace seemed as promising and yet the prospects for realizing it seemed so remote. The outward preconditions for achieving the coming together of the world's peoples seem to be all in place. Rapid technological development and accelerating processes of globalization have broken down barriers between peoples and shrunk the world into a veritable global neighborhood. Yet, tightening global interconnectedness has also aggravated forces that have multiplied the propensity for conflict.

Those who have analyzed this phenomenon have traced a link between globalization and the politics of identity. Studies have shown how the radical reordering of social, economic and cultural life triggered by globalization has disrupted the value systems and the cultural milieus that gave people a sense of their place in the world and endowed their lives with meaning. This sense of dislocation along with a growing sense of powerlessness in the masses in the face of widening economic disparities and systemic injustices has fueled the rise of movements of identity politics that have spread the world over in the past three decades. Such movements, it has been observed, draw their appeal from promising a return to traditional forms of collective identities based on religion, race, nationality or caste. In a world in flux buffeted by bewildering changes, they provide an illusory, but highly cherished, sense of stability and certainty. They evoke a sense of power through identification with a larger collective and a triumphalist narrative of the group's glorious past. They also instill a sense of the group's moral superiority by casting its identity in opposition to an imagined 'Other' which is usually a rival social group portrayed as being unclean, morally inferior and repulsive. Feelings of collective self-righteousness are often heightened by exaggerated or false narratives of a history of past atrocities committed by the Other that fuel a sense of victimhood and project the Other as an existential threat to the group. Through relentless propaganda campaigns such movements ensure that prejudice remains finely-sharpened.

The overcoming of prejudice against an 'Other', thus, has increasingly become the defining challenge of our times. The resolution of our other collective challenges— be they related to the environment, the economy or collective security – will depend on our ability to work together in collaboration for common ends setting aside prejudicial mindsets. However,

eliminating prejudice from minds and hearts and from the structures of society has proven to be notoriously difficult. Great strides have been made in achieving this goal over the past century with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the adoption of egalitarian principles in national constitutions and through legislation of the State. Yet, while these have undoubtedly been landmarks in the journey towards greater oneness, experience has shown that prejudice has a tendency to linger on, often under a veneer of political correctness, only to reassert itself on the social fabric over time.

One of the reasons overcoming prejudice has been such a stubborn challenge is that it often remains hidden in cultural codes and embedded within laws and policies. It also tends to appeal to powerful instincts and impulses that can remain impervious to reason and logic. This explains in part why despite modern scientific and philosophical discourses establishing the baselessness of stereotypes about peoples and groups, such conceptions and the negative emotions associated with them persist even in the most enlightened circles.

History has shown that the one force capable of transforming human consciousness and instilling a profound conviction in the oneness of humankind is religion. Through the wealth of statements enjoining love and unity contained in scriptures, through the exalted and peerless example of all-embracing fellowship and universal love shown by its prophets and saints and through its enunciation of the concept of a soul as a spiritual identity common to all human beings, religion establishes an unassailable foundation for belief in the oneness of humankind. It not only propounds the concept of equality but also instills those virtues that make unity possible such as unconditional love, compassion, kindness, empathy, mercy and a willingness to sacrifice for the common good.

Any claim that religion can contribute to the abolition of prejudice is bound to be countered with the objection that religion itself has been turned into a potent source of prejudice. It is here that distinction will need to be made between true religion and the divisive interpretations and practices that are propagated in its name. All religions have a common set of spiritual teachings that enjoin humankind to develop spiritual qualities, to discipline their selfish and aggressive tendencies and to contribute to the betterment of society. All religions derive their inspiration from the same spiritual source and they all aim to achieve the same purpose, which is to unite humanity and ensure the advancement of civilization. Religious prejudice then is the antithesis of the true religious spirit. It arises from interpretations and impositions that fail to see the divine truth at the heart of every religion.

The need to draw upon the unifying and constructive spirit of religion to transcend binaries of 'us' and 'them' and to work together to abolish all forms of prejudice was one of the central themes in the talks and writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, one of the Central Figures of the Bahá'í Faith.

Whether in His writings or in His life of selfless and sacrificial service to humankind, He remained a tireless advocate and a peerless example of the spiritual qualities and attributes that would extinguish prejudice and

establish a firm basis for universal peace. It is on the occasion of the centenary of his passing in November 1921 that the Office of Public Affairs of the Bahá'ís of India is organizing a symposium on the vital issue of the role of religion in establishing peace through the overcoming of prejudice.

Some of the questions that the symposium hopes to address are as follows:

How can religious leaders, civil society actors, and policy-makers work together to abolish stereotypes about various religious, racial, national, and caste groups? In what ways can the spiritual power of religion be drawn upon to eliminate deeply embedded prejudicial feelings? How can prejudicial conceptions seeded in the institutions and structures of society be identified and weeded out?

Efforts to eliminate prejudice will fail unless they take into account the instruments that are proliferating and reinforcing prejudices about various groups in society. These include various forms of propaganda disseminated through the mainstream media and social media platforms. How can these forces that seek to spread hate be countered by stronger countervailing forces of love and unity?

How can institutions that educate and socialize young minds raise new generations that are not only able to resist propaganda but also act as champions of unity who will, in the words of Abdu'l-Baha, "strive for universal peace, seek the means of love, and destroy the basis of disagreement"?

from

opa.bahai.in/role-of-religion/treasuring-diversity-the-role-of-religion-in-building-an-inclusive-society:

Treasuring Diversity: The Role of Religion in Building an Inclusive Society

Through the rapidly-advancing processes of globalization and urbanization, societies across the world are becoming increasingly diverse in their demographic composition while at the same time ever more interconnected within themselves and with the wider world. This presents our generation with a unique opportunity. For a society, its demographic diversity is a priceless resource to be exploited for the social, cultural, economic and intellectual enrichment of the whole. Just as the genetic diversity that characterizes our biological heritage is a source of beauty, strength and intelligence in the human family, cultural and demographic diversity in a society can multiply the capacities of the body politic manifold.

However, diversity is enriching only in the context of a society where the bonds between groups are characterized by trust, respect and empathy. In our highly interconnected world, the opportunities to build such bonds of unity are many more than what previous generations had. The internet, mass media and social media have greatly expanded the means available for groups to share, collaborate, communicate and develop mutual understanding. But equally, these same developments have also increased the possibilities of conflict. They have

become potent instruments for propaganda campaigns seeking to incite hatred and suspicion between groups through misinformation and the cultivation of prejudice.

Thus in seeking to build an inclusive and harmonious society, the shaping of perceptions and attitudes of groups towards each other becomes a most pressing concern. A harmonious society requires that its members have a profound conviction in their oneness and equality as members of one society, and indeed as human beings. It is only when this oneness is embraced as a fundamental truth and not merely as a rhetorical statement that it becomes possible for qualities vital for harmonious collective existence such as empathy, compassion, forgiveness, love and respect to flourish. It is only when this conviction becomes deeply embedded in society's collective consciousness that the tendency to view other groups as less important than one's own, to create stereotypes and to magnify differences can be resolutely resisted.

Any effort to address the consciousness of people in society cannot ignore the question of religion. For the vast majority of the world's people, religion is the source of their identity and their values. It is the system of knowledge that has, throughout history, civilized human nature. It explores the deepest motivations of human behaviour and provides spiritual principles to guide actions.

No doubt religion has been misused both in the past and in the present and has been made the basis of prejudice. But these are distortions and perversions of the true spirit of religion which aims to create unity. In this regard, it is important to focus on the core of religion which consists of spiritual teachings and moral principles that are common to all religions.

Fundamentalism, dogmatism and superstition are alien to the spirit found in scriptures of the great religions and in the lives of their Founders.

When it comes to building an inclusive society, religion can help instill a profound spiritual conviction in the oneness of humankind and can nurture social virtues such as universal brotherhood, equality, justice, forgiveness, humility, love and compassion. That human beings are one in essence, regardless of their apparent differences, is a spiritual truth expressed in all religions.

“Know ye not why We created you all from the same dust? That no one should exalt himself over the other,” writes Bahá'u'lláh, the founder of the Bahá'í Faith. “He who experiences the unity of life sees his own Self in all beings, and all beings in his own Self, and looks on everything with an impartial eye”, are the words of Lord Buddha. “He alone sees truly who sees the Lord the same in every creature...seeing the same Lord everywhere, he does not harm himself or others,” says Lord Krishna. “No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us”, are the words of Jesus Christ. Similarly, one reads in the Quran, “show kindness to parents, and to kindred, and orphans, and the needy, and to the neighbour that is a kinsman and the neighbour that is a stranger, and the companion by your side, and the wayfarer...”

What distinguishes religion from a philosophy is that it not only creates intellectual acceptance of the need for high moral principles, but also instills the will needed to put these principles into action by tapping into the roots of human motivation.

This symposium is being organized by the Office of Public Affairs, of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of India as an attempt to invite dialogue among thinkers willing to explore the positive role that religion can and must play in India in building an inclusive society.

Given below are a few of the many questions that such a dialogue would need to explore:

How can religious communities develop a united vision of the kind of inclusive society they want to create, a vision that is grounded in each of their religious texts and yet not exclusive to any one of them?

How can the spiritual and moral teachings which are common to all Faiths be drawn upon to counter divisive agendas that seek to make religion a source of hatred? Similarly, how can true religion which is based on reason be differentiated from superstition, empty rituals and blind imitation? What role can the State, the civil society and religious leadership play in promoting this process? What role do education systems and the media have in this?

How can populations be empowered to take charge of their own religious heritage such that they become active protagonists in applying spiritual principles for the betterment of the world rather than being objects of manipulation by the clergy or various political organizations? How can religious communities become communities that systematically and thoughtfully learn to apply these spiritual teachings to the needs of the modern age in a way that is inclusive and not rigid? What kind of concrete actions can religious communities engage in to give expression to, and to strengthen a sense of commitment to the common good?

How can the universal love and brotherhood fostered by religion be channelized to create the willingness in oppressed populations or groups to forgive past wrongs, to give up the lust for revenge, to abandon bitterness and resentment or a sense of victimhood and to be willing to make a fresh start in building a peaceful and harmonious society?

from

opa.bahai.in/role-of-religion/religion-and-peace-making-transformation-possible
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Religion and Peace: Making Transformation Possible

On the occasion of the bicentenary celebrations of the birth anniversary of the two Prophet Founders of the Bahá'í Faith, the Bab and Baha'u'llah, and the 74th anniversary of the formation of the United Nations Organization, the Office of Public Affairs of the Bahá'ís of India is organizing a symposium on the role of religion in fostering the enabling conditions of peace.

There is growing recognition that a conception of peace that equates it with

the mere cessation of violence and conflict has yielded limited results. Those in the field of peace and conflict resolution acknowledge that efforts to address intergroup conflict and violence are most enduring when carried out in the context of a long-term commitment to social and economic justice and to strengthening the bonds that hold diverse peoples in society together. Peace, in this broader sense, is a condition of collective thriving, a state of communal health and well-being. In this sense, the challenge of peace is one that faces all human societies and not just those currently enduring war or coping with its aftermath. In an interconnected world where diverse peoples are living in growing proximity to each other and where systems of inclusion and exclusion are taking shape, learning to live peacefully together will increasingly move from being a moral choice to an imperative for collective survival.

To be prepared for the challenges of the twenty-first century, our conception of peace will need to focus on our vast and yet largely untapped potential to collaborate and to draw strength from diversity. The seeds of peace lie within human nature just as do those of war. Each civilization chooses which seeds to water. For too long the aspects of human nature that tend towards conflict and violence have been nurtured, consolidated and reinforced through culture, the media, our systems of knowledge and our social structures and institutions. A worldview that considers human beings to be inherently warlike, selfish and aggressive, anticipates and normalizes conflict, competition, war and violence as the natural state of affairs in human interaction. Peace becomes a palliative, a brief interlude before individuals and groups get back to fight each other for power, glory, wealth, status, prestige or perhaps just survival. What is required is a movement towards a culture of peace where those aspects of human nature that lead to cooperation, mutual trust, altruism, generosity and justice are allowed to grow and flourish.

Some might consider a civilizational advancement of this magnitude to be impractical and unrealistic. However, it is vital to remember that at certain moments of great crisis in history, when solutions can no longer be found through pragmatism, humanity has found it necessary to turn towards its ideals to take a creative leap forward. Around a century ago many would have called the idea of an organization such as the United Nations hopelessly idealistic. It took two world wars and the loss of nearly 100 million lives to make humanity realize that an international organization of this kind is an ideal that must be acted on to allow us to continue to survive as a species. A central question before the present generation is this – are we willing to take another step forward through an act of consultative will and consciously create the culture, institutions and structures of peace, or will we again wait until perhaps a greater devastation forces our hand and compels us to outgrow the habits of war?

It is in this context that the role of religion in fostering the potential for peace becomes highly relevant. Notwithstanding the predictions that it would fade away with the processes of modernization, religion continues to remain a

profound force in the lives of the vast majority of the world's people who see themselves as moral beings concerned with spiritual awareness and purpose. A dispassionate view of history will reveal the vital role that religion has played in training human nature to overcome animal tendencies and to develop those moral and spiritual qualities that conduce to social order such as compassion, generosity, trustworthiness, forbearance, humility, courage and the willingness to sacrifice for the well-being of others. Its influence extends to the whole of society as a source of law and morality and as a means of order and stability. It is this positive function that defines the true nature and purpose of religion and differentiates it from the many forms of prejudice, hatred, ignorance and superstition that are propagated in its name. It is also in this sense that religion can develop those conditions and qualities both within the human being and society that are essential for peace. As the Bahá'í writings puts it, true religion must be "the cause of oneness among men, and the means of unity and love; they must promulgate universal peace, free man from every prejudice, bestow joy and gladness, exercise kindness to all men and do away with every difference and distinction."

Religion not only articulates a vision for individual and society to move towards, it also cultivates the will needed to put that aspiration into action by tapping into the roots of human motivation.

The symposium titled 'Religion and Peace: Making Transformation Possible' is being organized by the Office of Public Affairs of the Bahá'ís of India to open up a space for exploring the implications of drawing upon religion in building a culture of peace. Given below are some of the thematic areas that will be explored during this symposium along with questions to stimulate discussion around each.

Economic Justice

At the root of conflict and violence is injustice. Overcoming injustice requires a transformation both in collective consciousness and in the structures of society that normalize and perpetuate oppression. Enduring change towards more just conditions cannot come about through mere pragmatic thinking. Transforming the structures of society would threaten the individual and collective self-interests of large numbers who either openly or in a hidden way benefit from maintaining the status quo. It is only a deeply embedded consciousness of the oneness of humankind that would enable groups to see their own interest in the interest of the whole of humankind and create structures where the wellbeing of humankind would be accorded primacy over all other interests. The will that is required for the sacrifice and long term commitment that such a change would entail can only come about through a spiritualized consciousness that finds within the resources of the spirit the wisdom and universal love needed to overcome prejudice, heal wounds, disencumber the self from memories and narratives of the Other, and to transcend the accumulated baggage of immaturities in a step towards a new, more mature state of individual and collective existence.

Among the most glaring injustices that perpetuate conflict are economic inequalities. The inordinate disparity between rich and poor, a source of acute suffering, keeps the world in a state of instability, virtually on the brink of war. Many of those who have analyzed this problem have found one of the main causes of growing disparity to be inherent to the present pattern of globalization that destroys local economies, disrupts traditional livelihoods and destroys local economic structures in the name of integration into the global economy. How can local economies be strengthened? How can they interact with the global economy in a way that is mutually enriching and just, where interaction with the global enriches the local, strengthens local agency and where the diversities of culture, ecology and traditions are preserved and nurtured? What spiritual qualities and principles would need to come into play in building of just economic structures?

The Equality of Women and Men

The emancipation of women, the achievement of full equality between the sexes, is another challenging, though less acknowledged prerequisite of peace. The denial of such equality perpetrates an injustice against one half of the world's population and promotes in men harmful attitudes and habits that are carried from the family to the workplace, to political life, and ultimately to international relations.

Discrimination against women is among the oldest forms of oppression and no society can claim to have overcome it. Values of male privilege has been kneaded into the very clay out of which institutions and structures of society are formed. Unfortunately in many cases religious texts have also been interpreted in a way that makes them seem to be condoning male superiority. When the texts of all religions are viewed not as isolated artefacts but as part of one divine process of civilizing humankind, it becomes possible to see the principle of equality of the sexes being elaborated gradually over time in successive scriptures in tune with growing human capacity to accept its challenging implications. What might seem to be discrimination against women in a religious text by today's standards, when viewed in its historical context would be seen to be a tremendous advancement over the prevailing standards at the time. In this process, it is also important to distinguish numerous man-made additions to religion from its authentic form reflected in the scriptures.

The transition towards a peaceful society will require that the equality of the sexes be fully realized in all its implications. It is easy to see discrimination against women in traditional societies. Yet even modern societies with claims to be progressive pose great barriers to the full participation of women as equals in all walks of life. What are some of the most formidable of these barriers? How can religion assist with overcoming them at the level of both thought and practice?

Building peaceful societies require, among other things, qualities and capacities of the human soul such as cooperation, love, generosity, nurturance, patience, justice, determination, courage and sacrifice for the common good.

However, humanity's understanding of many of these qualities and capacities and its ability to draw upon them have been distorted by gender stereotypes which reduce many of these spiritual qualities to gender traits. How can the full resources of the human spirit be developed in the mammoth exercise of building a new civilization that is just and united?

Aesthetics and Peace

Art, music, and literature are among the main means by which values are created, recreated, transmitted and questioned in a culture. They are also tools for the imagination by which alternative future and realities become conceivable. They communicate subtle, ineffable insights about the human condition. In words, images, movements and sounds, they capture beauty and profound meaning which otherwise would remain beyond the horizon of mundane existence. By their very nature, the arts thus tend towards the spiritual dimension of human life.

Art, music and literature have a profound role in making a culture of peace imaginable, in creating the appetite and aspirations for the conditions of peace and in awakening hearts and minds to spiritual potentialities for harmonious collective existence. How can art serve as a medium to awaken consciousness of these potentialities – the potential to create relationships and structures that replace competition with collaboration, suspicion with trust, struggle for power and selfish gain with a selfless commitment to the common good? Through these means how can art become a means for building a culture of peace?

from

opa.bahai.in/role-of-religion/places-of-worship-their-evolving-nature-and-purpose:

Places of Worship – Their Evolving Nature and Purpose

Over the past couple of years the Office of Public Affairs of the Bahá'ís of India has in collaboration with academicians, development organizations, media persons, interfaith associations and policy makers, engaged in a discourse exploring the role of religion in building a better society. As part of discussions with various individuals and groups on this theme, the Office has become increasingly conscious of the role of religious institutions in promoting social transformation. Among these institutions are places of worship. Mandirs, mosques, churches, gurudwaras, houses of worship and synagogues are institutions in every locality and neighborhood that provide a powerful stimulus for unifying people through communal worship and in inspiring them to carry out acts of service for the betterment of society. In the Office's conversations with its collaborators a sense of concern had become apparent with regard to these places of worship – contemporary events have shown that they could serve a unifying and constructive purpose or become platforms for propagating hatred and fanaticism. It seemed like a new conversation was needed on the role of places of worship in the evolving realities of twenty first century world. This discourse would have particular

relevance for India where religious co-existence has become a pressing social need. This document has been prepared by the Office to provide a few initial thoughts and questions to stimulate discussions around this theme.

Throughout the ages, human beings have pondered and marveled with awe at the majesty, grandeur and beauty of Creation– from the exquisite perfection evident in the arrangement of the petals of a flower to the mysterious order that pervades the behavior of galaxies in the Universe, from the realm of thoughts and feelings to the subtle and ineffable realities of the spirit. The only befitting response the human heart and mind has found to the overwhelming perfection and beauty of the world of existence has been to worship and adore the Intelligence that lay behind its creation. The relationship between this Being who has been called God, Ishwar or Allah and the individual soul has been the fundamental theme of all the religions of the world. It is in the context of this loving relationship that the Founders of the great religions have been able to inspire their followers to discipline animal tendencies and to cultivate divine attributes and virtues such as love, generosity, compassion and justice that are needed for harmonious social existence. Not only has this connection with the divine provided a sense of meaning, security and moral orientation to the individual, it has also served as the basis for the consciousness of the oneness of humankind as people see each other as children of one God who embody in their essential nature the same set of divine attributes and qualities.

At the centre of humanity's relationship with the Divine has been the place of worship. In communities wherever they live, human beings have always consecrated an area of space and reared a structure especially meant for worship. It could be as small as a street-side shrine or a towering architectural marvel – for the worshipper the space is rendered sacred by its association with the remembrance of God. The place of worship has been a site of communal worship uniting its worshippers in a pure bond of love. It has been a mainstay in the spiritual life of the individual as well as the community.

In the rapidly changing world of the twenty-first century, as human beings strive to anchor their lives in spiritual awareness and to orient themselves to God, there is the question of what role places of worship will play in the life of the individual and the community. There is no doubt that as every other institution in society evolves in sync with changing realities, places of worship will also have to evolve in terms of addressing the complex needs of an increasingly interconnected and complex world. The challenge is to ensure that in this process, it evolves in a way that channelizes the powers of the spirit to unify people across ethnic, religious, racial and national lines and to instill the desire to build a society based on justice and not to reinforce religious fundamentalism and fanaticism or to encourage divisive, sectarian and narrow forms of identity.

Below a few questions to stimulate discussion on the direction this evolutionary process could take:

If places of worship are to be true to the spirit of love and oneness that underlies all religions, they must serve as agents for unifying people of all religious, national, ethnic, and social backgrounds in society. What role can religious leaders and religious communities play in ensuring that the spiritual energies generated by places of worship provide a powerful stimulus for overcoming prejudices against peoples of other backgrounds, for healing past conflicts, countering hatred with love and establishing the spiritual basis for unity in diversity?

What are some of the barriers that prevent places of worship from fulfilling their true purpose of establishing unity among all peoples? How can these obstacles be overcome?

If places of worship in the modern world are to contribute to building a better society, their social contribution should be more than just creating unity among diverse peoples, vital as this is. The spirit of compassion, dedication, altruism, and self-sacrifice that is awakened through worship yearns to find expression in concrete actions taken for the establishment of justice and for the overall betterment of society. How can programs of social action be connected to these places of worship that would offer channels for directing the desire for selfless and sacrificial service in areas of much needed social change in India such as the promotion of the education of children and youth, the abolition of various social ills, the promotion of the equality of women and men, the preservation of the environment, and the overcoming of poverty, among others?

from opa.bahai.in/role-of-religion/joint-statement:

The Role of Religion in the Fight Against the Coronavirus Pandemic

A Joint Statement by Representatives of Various Religions and Interfaith Organizations

During the past couple of months our planet has entered into a public health crisis of unprecedented magnitude and intensity. Well over two million have been infected with the coronavirus, more than a hundred thousand individuals have succumbed to the disease and the impact of this pandemic on the economy and society is as yet too great to be estimated. In all this disruption and despair, religion has often been referred to in both positive and negative contexts. On the one hand, at this time of uncertainty people have turned to religion for hope, strength and spiritual stamina. Faith has inspired in people a sense of solidarity and a desire to serve others, especially the most vulnerable. At the same time, the name of religion has also been used to emphasize a sense of separateness and exclusivity, to cultivate prejudice, and to reject science and espouse superstition.

At this time of unprecedented crisis, when the need of the hour is for united action to overcome this great peril, the statements and prescriptions made in the name of religion must be well-founded and consistent. They must not create confusion on how this pandemic must be addressed or contradict established

scientific advice. It is in response to this urgent imperative that we, the representatives of various faiths and interfaith groups are issuing this statement to reiterate those principles common to all religions that have the greatest bearing on our response to the present crisis. We appeal to those of all religions to unite in a common commitment to these principles and, in the larger national interest, to put aside their differences. After all, religion is probably the most powerful means for mobilizing human conscience to serve the common good. It would be an unpardonable loss if the resources of faith are left scattered and in disarray and not allowed to come together as a singular force to lend impetus to this collective endeavor.

At the outset we would like to affirm that if, at this time, religion is to speak with one voice we must agree on the common foundations of all religions. Although every religion bears the distinct stamp of its particular history and the geographical setting in which it appeared, the essential spiritual and moral teachings of all religions are one. All religions have come with the purpose of developing the moral and spiritual capacities latent in human nature and in building societies where these capacities can flourish and be channelized to advance society's wellbeing. Although the social teachings, laws and rituals of different religions have differed based on changing historical needs and circumstances, they ultimately can be seen to serve the same purpose of advancing humanity's collective maturity. This understanding of the essential oneness of religion provides the foundation on which people of all religions can learn to draw upon a common spiritual heritage to fight collective challenges. It also provides an unassailable basis for rejecting religious prejudices which, as recent events in the country have shown, can flare up during times of crisis and aggravate social tensions.

The most vital principle of religion that needs to be emphasized at this time is the oneness of all human beings. At the heart of all religions is a spiritual conception of the human being which transcends the material body. This spiritual reality, which is referred to as the soul, is the source of divine attributes and virtues which allow human beings to demonstrate altruistic, selfless and other-regarding behaviors. It is this spiritual nature that constitutes the essential identity of the individual and it is because of this fundamental identity common to all, that human beings are considered as one by the scriptures of the world's religions. Religion further teaches the ideal that all of humanity are interconnected and interdependent even as the members of one family and the cells of one body. "Know ye not why We created you all from the same dust? That no one should exalt himself over the other," states the Bahá'í writings. "He who experiences the unity of life sees his own Self in all beings, and all beings in his own Self, and looks on everything with an impartial eye", wrote Lord Buddha. "He alone sees truly who sees the Lord the same in every creature...seeing the same Lord everywhere, he does not harm himself or others," says Lord Krishna. "You shall love your neighbour as yourself," are the words of the Torah. "No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us", are the words of Jesus Christ. Similarly, one reads in the

Quran, “show kindness to parents, and to kindred, and orphans, and the needy, and to the neighbour that is a kinsman and the neighbour that is a stranger, and the companion by your side, and the wayfarer...”

Today, the spread of coronavirus provides a testament to the oneness and interconnectedness of the human family where the well-being of one is dependent on the well-being of all. As the past few weeks have shown, among the biggest obstacles that stand in our way as we strive to find a way out of this crisis is the tendency to be selfish or self-centered whether as an individual, a community or a nation. The age-old habit of dividing the world into an ‘us’ and a ‘them’ (many times evoked in the name of religion) and of restricting the sphere of concern to the particular ingroup to which we belong, has shown to be a dangerous and life-threatening delusion in the context of the present crisis.

Closely linked to the principle of the oneness of humankind is the injunction to give expression to one’s love for the Creator and for humanity in selfless and sacrificial service to the common weal. To be meaningful, service has to be in the context of addressing the needs and challenges of humanity in the present world. To be religious then is to be an active servant of humankind in the here and now, to use one’s talents and capacities to address contemporary challenges and to contribute to the well-being of all without distinction. No greater embodiments of this spirit of selfless and sacrificial service can be found than those doctors, health workers, policemen, media persons and government functionaries who, at great risk to their personal lives, are carrying out their duties. There is little doubt that when many of these valiant individuals contemplate in the privacy of their conscience the risk they court on a daily and hourly basis in the line of duty, it is from their spiritual convictions that they find the strength to sustain their efforts and firm their resolve. In the days, weeks and months ahead, many others will be called upon to make sacrifices and to render services, however small, for the well-being of the whole. Indeed, the very act of those law-abiding citizens to scrupulously adhere to the norms of social distancing and willingly accept the restrictions placed on their social and economic lives, can be considered a vital form of service to the whole.

Finally, a word of clarification is in order about the cases of religious fanaticism, superstition and contempt for science that are being expressed in the name of religion in the context of the pandemic. These have done incalculable harm not only by exposing thousands to the virus but also by vitiating public discourse with half-truths, falsehoods, conspiracy theories and doomsday narratives which hang as a thick cloud of gloom over the hearts and minds of people and obscure clarity of thought. What dispels this darkness is the principle that true religion must be in harmony with science and acceptable to reason. Religion enunciates the laws and principles of spiritual reality the same way that science has helped us discover the laws that govern the material world.

To advance in both the spiritual and material aspects of life, humanity needs

both science and religion. Religion, in its true form advocates the principle of the independent investigation of the truth. Every soul has the duty to independently know and understand spiritual reality guided by reason and not by relying on blind imitation. Similarly, there is the need to distinguish religion from superstition which is based on ignorance. Although this difference is not always easy to establish, it is vital that the distinction be recognized and upheld so that statements made in the name of religion are subject to critical analysis and to the test of reason. Failing this, there is the danger that religious discourse become a platform for all kinds of fantastical, magical or even harmful ideas to find acceptance and unthinking endorsement. Unless such a critical posture is fostered with regard to various claims made in the name of religion, people will be vulnerable to manipulation by those who out of a desire for leadership or power might seek to misdirect the religiosity of the people towards superstition and fanaticism.

By stating the above, we do not wish to suggest that the vastness and immensity of religion as a system of knowledge and practice can be reduced to a few principles. Rather, our intention in focusing on these principles is to draw out from the ocean of guidance in each religion those teachings that are most relevant to unifying us in our response to the crisis at hand. We also do not claim that these are the only teachings of religion that apply to the present crisis – there could be many others which scholars of religion can identify and discuss in what can hopefully become a vibrant discourse on the role of religion in promoting the common good. However, the urgency of this critical hour compels us to share these initial thoughts without further delay.

Our faith in an all-loving Creator and in the nobility of the human race convinces us that humanity will emerge from this ordeal stronger and more united, with a deeper appreciation of its inherent oneness and interconnectedness.

H.H. Pujya Swami Chidanand Saraswati, President and Spiritual Head, Parmarth Niketan Ashram, Rishikesh, Uttarakhand

Dr. Imam Umer Ahmed Ilyasi, Chief Imam, All India Imam Organization

H.G. Dr. Anil Joseph Thomas Couto, Archbishop of Delhi, New Delhi

H.G. Dr. Peter Machado, Archbishop of Bangalore, Karnataka

H.G. Dr. Youhanon Mar Demetrious, Metropolitan, Diocese of Delhi, Malankara Syrian Orthodox Church

H.G. Dr. Jonathan Ansar, Metropolitan Archbishop, National Church of India (Anglo Catholic Community)

Rabbi Ezekiel Malekar, Chief Priest, Judah Hayam, Synagogue, New Delhi

Swami Shantatmananda, Secretary, Ramakrishna Mission, New Delhi

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RT Dr. Pallav Kumar Lima, United Believers Council of Churches, Bhubaneswar,
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Dr. Jasbir Singh, Vice-President, Rajasthan Sikh Samaj, Former Chairman,
Rajasthan Commission for Minorities, Jaipur.

from

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Women's Empowerment and the Transformation of Economic Structures

Over the past decades, great progress has been achieved in advancing towards the equality of women and men. Yet, as those working for the empowerment of women have realized, profound and enduring transformation will require not just changes in perceptions and behavior of people but also systematic and sustained efforts to transform those structures of society that inhibit women's full and meaningful participation in public life. Patriarchal biases and assumptions built into these structures can place limits on the depth and the scope of the transformation that can be achieved.

Among the various social structures that impact the condition of women, those that relate to the economic arrangements of society merit particular attention. The relationship between economic structures and the empowerment of women has been under-explored relative to its importance. Further, given the tendency to view development purely in terms of economic growth and the willingness to sacrifice social, ecological and ethical interests at its altar, the gender dimension requires special attention lest its relevance be obscured or compromised.

The prevalent economic system rewards competitiveness, domination and aggression which are values that characterize patriarchal societies. The value of altruism, reciprocity, cooperation, and mutual aid, whose relevance to a world of economic interdependence is increasingly acknowledged in academic discourse, remains largely ignored in mainstream economic policies.

The existing economic order emphasizes the accumulation of material wealth which tends to benefit a privileged minority while undervaluing collective prosperity, community well-being and environmental sustainability. Within such an order, scant value is placed on the unremunerated and unacknowledged work of feeding, nurturing and caring for others. The challenge is not only to render such work visible and valuable, but also to ensure that women participate more fully in all fields of work, that men become more active in the work of caring and nurturing and that the values underpinning such work are carried to other arenas of society.

Further, numerous studies have established the adverse impact of policies promoting unregulated economic globalization on the social fabric of India and, by extension, on the condition of women. The weakening of the local economy and the neglect of small scale agriculture caused by these policies have been shown to contribute to the exploitation and marginalization of vulnerable populations (particularly women and girls), and the large-scale degradation of the environment.

In this regard, we need to ask ourselves how women and men can engage in economic activity in a way that conduces to justice. How can they contribute to the construction of new economic structures and processes that reflect values such as reciprocity, cooperation, and mutual aid rather than competition and exploitation? How can we expand the conception of human rationality so that it is not reduced to utility maximization on the part of self-interested individuals who are divorced from social and moral obligations? How do we render the unremunerated work of caring for others valuable and visible in society?

from

opa.bahai.in/advancement-of-women/raising-men-to-be-promoters-of-the-equality-of-the-sexes:

Raising Men to be Promoters of the Equality of the Sexes

The Bahá'í community of India, along with numerous individuals, communities

and groups around the country, has over the past many decades made great efforts in promoting the principle of the equality of women and men. While great progress has been made in advancing towards this goal, numerous incidents involving violence against women in society has only served to confirm the distance that yet remains to be covered. As part of its series of roundtable gatherings on advancing towards the equality of women and men titled 'Engendering Equality', the Office of Public Affairs of the Baha'is of India has been organizing gatherings on the theme 'Raising Men to be Promoters of the Equality of the Sexes'.

The basis of equality between women and men is the fact that although physically men and women are different and they experience the world differently, the soul, which is the core of human identity, has no sex. In that which is most essential to human identity, in those noble qualities and capacities that distinguish humans from animals, men and women are alike. Thus, moving towards equality for both men and women implies raising new generations who have developed a whole range of human qualities and capacities freed from limiting conceptions of femininity and masculinity. The distorted conceptions of femininity – which are based on some form of female objectification and on qualities that make women seem suited only for the domestic sphere – have been extensively critiqued. However, more attention needs to be given to the limiting conceptions of masculinity that boys are socialized into through institutions such as the family, the education system and the media. Immature conceptions of masculinity that equate being manly with being unemotional, inexpressive, aggressive, competitive and authoritative and that relate male sexuality with dominance, conquest and violence towards women – still enjoy wide appeal. Such conceptions distort the natural expression of the personalities of boys by making them suppress their feelings and tender emotions, by not allowing them to admit vulnerability in the presence of others and by placing unreasonable pressure on them to project a false image of themselves. By adopting these conceptions, men deny themselves the experience of being truly human, particularly with regard to their relationship with women. They miss the important lessons of life learned from participating in challenging relationships in which women play an equal role.

To play their part alongside women in building a just society, men would have to overcome these limiting conceptions without succumbing to pressure from a patriarchal society or the fear of ridicule. Through courage and perseverance, new patterns of thought and behavior related to masculinity will have to be ingrained into the culture in which new generations are raised where the conception of manliness includes being nurturing, caring and emotionally expressive and where relationships with women are governed by a spirit of mutual respect, collaboration and equality.

The transformation that is envisioned here requires not only fundamental change in perceptions and consciousness but also in the institutions and structures of society which have certain prejudices embedded in them. Given below are a few questions to help us reflect on some of the implications of these changes:

The family is one of the first and most powerful spaces where gender roles are learned and perpetuated in both overt and subtle ways. How can boys and girls be brought up from an early age with qualities and capacities that will help them, as they grow up, to become proactive promoters of equality between the sexes? How can men be assisted to take on an equal share of responsibilities in parenting of children and care-giving for the old? How can they share equally the responsibilities of managing the household? How can decision making in the family be organized on a consultative and collective basis rather than being dictated by the head of the family? How can men in the family ensure that their daughters, sisters and wives have opportunities to pursue meaningful and fulfilling work and contribute fully to the life of society rather than being saddled with domestic responsibilities?

Another space where there have been both advancements and setbacks in implementing the principle of equality has been the workplace. Although women have entered every field of work in large numbers, the continuing influence of patriarchy still ensures that a woman's contributions can be easily undermined or ignored simply by virtue of her being woman. In many fields, women still receive less pay than their colleagues and men are preferred over them when it comes to promotions or challenging assignments. How can men be sensitized to the many obstacles that women face in the workplace and how can they collaborate together in seeking to remove these barriers to the progress of women?

Some of the other institutions which have a profound influence on the perpetuation of gender roles are the educational system, religious institutions, cultural institutions related to the media, cinema and literature and the economic system? In what ways can educational systems create critical consciousness in new generations to recognize the prevalence of patriarchal prejudices in open and subtle ways? How can spiritual and moral education programs instill a deep commitment to equality of the sexes and foster the will to become champions of justice by pushing against the status quo even when it demands sacrifice? The media, advertising, film and literature are perhaps the most powerful means for socializing young people in conceptions of masculinity and femininity. How can the considerable influence of these institutions on public perceptions be leveraged to model and propagate positive and mature conceptions of femininity and masculinity? How can civil society ensure that young boys and girls are protected from content that provides degrading representations for women and men such as pornography?

from opa.bahai.in/advancement-of-women/seedbeds-for-change-reconceptualizing-the-family-as-a-space-for-fostering-the-equality-of-the-sexes
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Seedbeds for Change: Reconceptualizing the Family as a Space for Fostering the Equality of the Sexes

Over the past couple of decades, the Office of Public Affairs of the Bahá'ís of India has, in collaboration with a large number of individuals

and organizations, sought to advance a discourse on the principle of the equality of women and men. In the past couple of years, a distinct thread of this discourse has emerged focusing on the role of men as promoters of the equality of the sexes. Naturally, these conversations have frequently revolved around the family as a fundamental social institution where conceptions related to the role of women and men are learned and practiced. Not only is the family the first space where human beings learn those patterns of thought and behavior that are associated with being a man or a woman, it also provides the structure where these conceptions are given concrete shape in the form of well-defined gender roles. Thus, a society's advancement towards the goal of the equality of the sexes will remain superficial unless a simultaneous effort is made to refashion the family as an institution that embodies this principle to ever higher degrees. It is for this reason that the Office has decided to initiate a conversation on the kind of changes that the family as an institution would need to undergo to serve as a seedbed for the concepts, attitudes and values that promote the equality of the sexes and to model the kind of transformation that society as a whole would need to achieve.

Like many institutions in our world today, the family is in a state of flux. Inherited conceptions of what a family must be like are being increasingly buffeted and rendered obsolete by the forces of social, cultural and economic change. The conception of the family as a dictatorial space where one or more members (usually serving male privilege) dominate others is being vigorously questioned. Yet, no wholesome alternative to it is visible. It seems clear that not all the individualistic and materialistic forces assailing the traditional conceptions of the family are necessarily positive or desirable in their outcomes. There is the danger that in seeking to dismantle some of the undesirable features of inherited conceptions of the family, the very essence of the family—as a space where children imbibe essential moral values and where bonds of love, trust and mutual support flourish—gets diluted. What is clear is that the model of a family that manifests the principle of the equality of women and men will not come from borrowing templates from the past or from passive and uncritical submission to the forces of modernity. It requires a conscious and conscientious process of learning on the part of society as a whole. It is to contribute to such a process of learning that the Office has initiated these discussions.

Given below are a few themes and questions to stimulate discussion on this subject:

Sharing the functions of nurturance and care-giving: One of the fundamental functions that a family performs is to educate and nurture children and to take care of the sick and the old. Failure to provide these vital services can have devastating and long-lasting impact on those who are vulnerable. Traditionally, women have played a major role in providing these services of care giving, nurturing, the supervision of the educational needs of children and of the maintenance of an orderly, clean, safe and healthy home. These forms of service are often not valued and are taken for granted. How can the value of such

essential work in the home be better recognized? How can boys and men be groomed to take on an equal share in providing these valuable services in the home?

Consultation as the basis for decision-making: If decision making in a family is not to be an outcome of arbitrary and dictatorial authority, members of the family will need to learn to communicate with each other with respect and openness drawing on a whole range of qualities such as love, humility, tact, empathy, courtesy and moderation. The capacity to consult in a loving, considerate and yet frank manner in arriving at collective decisions is an art whose value humanity is only beginning to appreciate. However, mastery of this art will be crucial for mature and responsible decision making. The family will naturally be one of the primary spaces where members will have the opportunity to learn this art. In the context of the family where each member has their particular rights and responsibilities, what would the process of consultative decision-making look like? How would diverse viewpoints, temperaments, outlooks and life experiences be harmonized in commitment to the common good?

Developing an outward-looking orientation: While the family strives to achieve the well-being of each of its members, its integrity as an institution serving the social good demands that the ultimate purpose of the family must always be towards serving the well-being of the larger society. Commitment and loyalty to the family cannot be allowed to turn into a form of family or clan worship where the glorification and prosperity of the family takes precedence over the obligation to serve the common good. A family that is conscious of its moral responsibility as a building block of society will always be outward oriented – alive to the needs of the society it lives in and striving to serve these needs with all its capacities. How can this posture of selfless service to the common good be inculcated as a preeminent moral principle guiding family life?

Overcoming domestic violence: While the family is the space where children receive love, encouragement and positive values, it is also often the setting of their first encounter with grave injustices. One of the worst forms of injustices perpetrated in the family, especially against girls and women, is violence. While physical and sexual abuse are the most egregious manifestations of violence, this pathology of the soul also finds expression in a whole range of other abusive behaviors such as verbal abuse, ridicule and mockery, neglect, emotional and psychological manipulation, intimidation and bullying. In this regard, what can society do to develop zero tolerance for violence in the family whether it be physical, emotional or verbal – and reject all pretexts on which such violence is condoned whether it be on the grounds of ‘familism’ where the sanctity and honour of the family takes precedence over the safety of its members or on religious or cultural grounds? How can the spiral of intergenerational violence be broken such that those who are abused do not become the abusers of the next generation? Although legal provisions against violence and enforcement of human rights frameworks can provide strong grounds for creating an atmosphere of deterrence, eventually a culture of freedom from violence can only flourish on the foundation of the inviolable

dignity and honour that is the birth right of every individual. What are some of the spiritual conceptions of the nature of the human being that provide the basis for such conceptions of human dignity and honour? How can they be drawn upon to create a culture of mutual respect and peace?

from

opa.bahai.in/media-and-society/covering-religion-with-sensitivity-and-understanding-in-an-interdependent-world:

Covering Religion with Sensitivity and Understanding in an Interdependent World

With the tremendous rise in the power of the media in the past couple of decades, it has become vital for journalists to introspect on the influence their coverage has on the minds and lives of people. One area where such introspection is urgently needed is in the coverage of religion.

In the contemporary world, the phenomena of religion manifests itself in paradoxical ways – as a means for inculcating goodness and virtue and at the same time as a tool for spreading hatred and dissension. On the one hand religion has and continues to play a crucial role in people's lives as a source of meaning, purpose and values. Religion's contributions to culture, law and morality have helped strengthen the social fabric. Historically, religion has had a profound role to play in civilizing human nature and contributing to the advancement of civilizations. On the other hand, religion has also been made the basis of fierce prejudices. Fundamentalism, sectarianism and superstition have all been spread in its name by vested interests with disastrous consequences.

The positive influence of religion as a source of meaning and ethics can be seen in the lives of the majority of the world's people. This influence, although life sustaining and vital, is often inconspicuous and unarticulated. It can be discerned in the countless hopes, aspirations and acts of goodness, of charity, and kindness that sustains civilized life. The negative ways in which religion have been used, on the other hand, tends to attract a lot of attention, especially from the media. The media's coverage of religion or religion-related issues is often framed by its proclivity for conflict and controversy. In the process, religion's meaning-bestowing and civilizing function in the lives of people tends to get obscured. Numerous instances of cooperation and loving co-existence between people of different religions are overlooked while cases of conflict due to religion receives much attention. The role of religious convictions in people's commitment to virtues such as decency, kindness, forgiveness and mercy are ignored while instances of violence caused by a misguided interpretation of religion gets highlighted by the media.

Such negative images of religion in the media are a cause for deep concern due to the effect they have on our social reality. They tend to perpetuate a profound confusion in society about the true nature of religion by identifying religion with the divisive and superstitious beliefs and practices that are propagated in its name. In other words, by routinely focusing attention on the

malignant expressions of the religious impulse, the media can normalize these malignancies and gradually deprive society of the conception of what healthy expressions of religious conviction and belief should be like. In the process, a sense of cynicism is bred towards religion which weakens humanity's link with the positive and vitalizing influence that true religion can have for the moral and spiritual development of individuals and societies.

No doubt religion has been and is being misused by various vested interests. But so have other major institutions and system of knowledge such as politics, business or science. The answer to this misuse has not been to abandon these institutions or systems of knowledge; it has rather been to emphasize their true nature and purpose. The test of true religion is the wholesomeness of the fruit it bears. As the Bahá'í writings put it, religions must be "the cause of oneness among men, and the means of unity and love; they must promulgate universal peace, free man from every prejudice, bestow joy and gladness, exercise kindness to all men and do away with every difference and distinction." If religion "becomes the cause of estrangement then it is not needed, for religion is like a remedy; if it aggravates the disease then it becomes unnecessary."

This roundtable meeting on the theme 'Covering Religion with Sensitivity and Understanding in an Interdependent World' is aimed as an opportunity for media persons to come together and reflect on the way their profession views religion and on the need for a more mature, balanced and sensitive coverage of this phenomena that has such a profound influence on individual and collective life. Given below are a few questions to stimulate reflection:

How can journalists help their readers and audiences distinguish the true nature and spirit of religion from the various distortions that flourish in its name? Among the most common of these distortions is religious fanaticism and the spread of intolerance and communal hatred in the name of religion. What normative goals should media organizations adopt in their coverage of religion and religious communities so that they don't become unwitting tools for the spread of communal prejudices and stereotypes? How can they promote social cohesion by countering derogatory stereotypes of particular communities, intolerant attitudes and hate speech?

Religion is also widely misused by the numerous unscrupulous godmen who exploit the gullibility of the masses to turn religion into an instrument for enriching and empowering themselves. How can the media help its readers and audiences to distinguish the sayings and doings of these pretenders from true religion? How can they ensure that in reporting about them they do not indirectly serve their purpose by turning them into celebrities?

In reporting about religious practices and beliefs, journalists have often confused superstition with religion. How can journalists differentiate true religion which is amenable to reason, from superstition, empty rituals and blind imitation?

Reporters often have to do their job at a breakneck pace in an age of digital

news. This leaves them with little time to think and reflect about their coverage of complex issues such as religion. Coverage of such issues often requires a deep appreciation for the context in which actions take place and a sensitivity to ethical implications. How can journalists find or create spaces for reflection where they can introspect on the way they cover issues such as religion and the influence this coverage has on the world?

from

opa.bahai.in/media-and-society/fostering-a-constructive-dialogue-on-religion:

Fostering a Constructive Dialogue on Religion

Over the last couple of years, the Office of Public Affairs of the Bahá'ís of India has engaged in a discourse on the role of religion in building a better society with various actors in civil society. Of these discussions, a distinct, rich and fruitful conversation developed between the Office and a committed group of journalists and media educators over the past two years. These discussions highlighted the positive influence of religion as a source of meaning, purpose and ethics in the lives of the majority of the world's people and in providing the values that have shaped social institutions. Although religions have defined themselves in terms of this constructive purpose, this positive aspect of religion is ignored or obscured in public discourse. Religious conflicts, controversies arising in the name of religion, exotic and fantastic beliefs and practices attributed to religion or the misdeeds of godmen receive disproportionate attention. The media plays an important role in projecting and emphasizing this distorted image of religion. The need to bring these positive aspects of religion back into the focus of public attention, of policy makers and the leaders of thought and role that the media can play in this process were some of the questions that these gatherings explored.

This document seeks to bring together some of the insights that emerged from these discussions. While briefly articulating some of the thoughts shared, each section also articulates a few questions for further exploration of this theme.

Creating conditions for a constructive dialogue on religion

For the media, these are difficult times to report on religion. In the age of the internet, the journalistic profession has evolved in a way that leaves reporters and editors without enough time to report on complex issues of religion with balance, sensitivity and nuance. The independence and integrity of journalists is increasingly under pressure from ideological commitments of the owners of media outlets and the compulsion to function as a business. At the same time, the public discourse on various issues including religion has become increasingly polarized and divisive in no small measure due to the influence of the unregulated domain of social media where propaganda statements and falsehoods are widely propagated.

Yet, as the journalists who participated in this discourse mentioned, despite these challenges, media persons can play a significant role in shaping popular

perception of religion and in creating the conditions necessary for religion to fulfill its constructive role. It was widely agreed that media persons need to become much better informed about religion – about the history and teachings of specific religions and also the common nature and purpose of all religions. This would allow them to report on religion and developments related to it with accuracy and understanding. It would also give them the discernment to differentiate healthy expressions of religiosity from distorted and malignant expressions of it. Similarly, it would allow them to distinguish what is genuinely religious from superstition and the spurious claims of false godmen.

Some journalists discussed the possibilities for the media to promote understanding about religious communities by promoting dialogue around points of agreement between various religions. This would create the conditions of friendship and mutual understanding which would provide a conducive atmosphere to address and overcome differences. At the same time, many expressed the need for developing a vocabulary that is universal and accessible to all to communicate the spiritual and moral principles which are common to all religions. As one journalist put it, “we need a language that would talk about spiritual principles in a way that those of all faiths and even of no faith can relate to and apply in their lives.”

One of the themes discussed was that the media could play a significant role in dispelling religious prejudices by the kind of stories it carries about different communities, the way communities are portrayed, the refusal to carry hate speech or stereotypes. Sometimes journalists need the sensitivity to report on certain sensitive issues in a way that “allows wounds to heal”. As one journalist explained, “just because something has happened and it is newsworthy does not mean I need to report it. There are many facts which if reported in certain contexts or without sensitivity can worsen social conditions. A journalist who is committed merely to reporting facts but is blind to higher truths of the need for social harmony will do great damage.”

In discussing about the issues involved in covering religion, journalists often introspected on the need to rethink certain subtle aspects of the way the media positioned itself in relation to society. As one of the journalists mentioned, some media institutions in India have adopted an adversarial posture in relation to the other institutions of society assuming that this is the only way to maintain their independence. “The media should speak like it is part of society,” she mentioned. “While we must be sensitive to injustice and wrongdoing, this does not justify having a cynical posture. Reporting the truth is not only about uncovering the abuse of power or failings in individuals and systems. Noble intentions and good motives are also true but the media is wary of focusing on them for fear of seeming naïve. This is partly why negative aspects of religion receive so much media attention”. Other journalists reflected on the need to report in a way that would retain people’s faith in goodness and nobility. It is such faith that inspires the hope in people that their efforts can result positive social transformation.

In this regard, the following questions were raised for further dialogue: Among

the greatest challenges in the present society is the flood of fake news and of propaganda that seek to foster religious prejudice. How can journalists counter this onslaught of fake news? In what ways can they facilitate inter-religious understanding and dialogue? How can they foster balanced dialogue on issues that are sensitive to particular religious communities while fosters consensus and builds on points of agreement? How can the growing polarization in public discourse be replaced with a spirit of consultation and mutual dialogue?

Clarifying the Role of Religion in Modern Society

Over the past many decades, religion has become increasingly prominent in political and social life in many countries around the world. In India, the sense of dislocation and anxiety brought about by rapid social changes caused by globalization and technological change have fueled the search for a spiritual anchor to ground one's identity in an altered social reality and a quest for meaning in a world where a traditional worldview has lost its former relevance.

The journalists who participated in this discourse spoke of the need to channel this quest for spirituality for serving the common good. Religious life, they felt, needed to be interpreted in ways that related to the needs of the modern world. Speaking of the need for 'healthy interpretations of religion', one journalist spoke of the need to give greater importance to the spiritual and moral teachings of religion rather than emphasizing its rituals and practices. Without a strong grounding in spiritual teachings, these practices and rituals which served external markers of religious identity turned religion into an identity construct that could be manipulated by political interests or exploited by godmen. Media persons also discussed the need for religion to help people overcome self-centeredness, greed and the attachment to material things which were rampant in modern consumer society. For them, the answer lay not in propagating a form of otherworldliness, asceticism or renunciation of society. Rather, religiosity had to find expression in concrete actions carried out in service to society. As one journalist put it, "religion needs to raise people's consciousness about the condition of society and to develop in them the desire to work for its betterment. It should create empathy in my heart and a feeling of connectedness with my fellow human beings. Where there is injustice, it should rouse me to seek justice...If I am truly religious, I cannot sit by and watch while my fellow citizens suffer poverty, lack of health care and education."

For many journalists it was clear that such a reorientation in religious life required enlightened leadership. However, as one media person mentioned, unfortunately the most vocal spokespersons of religion in today's world were not the most 'spiritual' people but rather those who were driven by political ambitions. The leaders of religion need to guide their congregations towards "becoming agents of unity and champions of justice". However, some journalists also commented that the very concept of leadership within religious communities needed to change. As one journalist put it, "in today's world where everyone is educated, we need new models of leadership. The people of a

religious community can themselves find their own path. We need communities learning to apply spiritual teachings to the needs of society.” These reflections led to a host of questions that need to be further explored: The media sets the agenda for public dialogue on themes of national importance. How can the media facilitate a new dialogue on the role of religious communities and their leaders and of religious institutions such as places of worship in serving the pressing developmental needs of the country? How can the powers of religion to mobilize human conscience to establish social harmony and unity and to overcome injustice through non-violent and peaceful means be channelized for the greater common good?

from

opa.bahai.in/media-and-society/the-role-of-media-in-fostering-constructive-public-discourse:

The Role of Media in Fostering Constructive Public Discourse

The vibrancy and constructiveness of public discourse can be taken as a vital measure of the democratic health of a society. It provides the space for rich dialogue where through the exchange of different opinions citizens reach a consensus on their collective vision for a better society and they renew their commitment to the moral principles underlying this vision. It is through the vibrant interchange of ideas that innovation and creativity are nourished and the horizons of thought are constantly expanded. Within the spaces where such discourse happens, members of society and its institutions deliberate on and give direction to public policies on a range of issues. Not only does the healthy back and forth among citizens and between them and the institutions of society ensure that decisions and policies affecting the common weal benefit from the most thorough and thoughtful consideration, this process also builds bridges of mutual understanding between citizens, institutions and communities which is vital for strengthening the trust and good faith needed to collaborate on common goals.

The institutions of the mass media have a central role to play in the quality and richness of public discourse in a society. They provide citizens with reliable information on matters of concern to the public good, they help frame issues in ways that highlight their relevance for the citizen and the implications of normative frameworks to the issues at hand. They play a crucial role in placing before the public the issues that should be prioritized. Further, they provide a dialectical space where policy makers and experts can communicate and deliberate on crucial issues with citizens and where the voices of citizens, their concerns and priorities, especially those who are economically or socially marginalized can be heard and acknowledged in decision making processes. While the mass media is not the only public institution responsible for the quality and integrity of public discourse, it plays a consequential role in shaping discourse by the way it presents the facts, frames them in ways that are compelling and meaningful for the citizen, prioritizes what matters the most, and ensures the representation of diverse voices and perspectives in deliberations on a subject pertaining to the common

good.

The past decade has witnessed a grave deterioration of the quality of public discourse in India and across the world. The possibility of engaging with fellow citizens and other stakeholders in society in constructive discourse based on good faith and mutual respect has become increasingly difficult in an atmosphere of extreme polarization and partisanship. The rampant spread of disinformation and the emphasis on distracting agendas unrelated to the real issues that pertain to collective well-being have dissipated, divided and dispersed the collective focus needed to address and find meaningful solutions to the challenges facing society.

In the effort to revive, rehabilitate and restore trust, civility and constructiveness to public discourse in India, the mass media has a vital role to play. Now, more than ever, society needs the mainstream media to perform its functions as a just and unbiased reporter of the facts, as a trustworthy guide to public opinion towards the issues that pertain to the common good, and as an enabler of constructive and consultative dialogue between the various stakeholders in the well-being of society.

In performing its responsibilities to the public, the media faces immense obstacles today including political and economic interests that curtail its freedom and compromise its integrity and the pressures of functioning within the force field of disinformation, polarization and trivialization created by social media. How are media organizations and professionals to resist these influences and forces in seeking to perform their vital responsibilities to society? How does the media not only truthfully reflect the conditions of society but also foster constructive and harmonious yet critical dialogue on these conditions that would provide a foundation for public policy while strengthening good faith and trust between citizens, institutions and communities? How would it foster an environment where in the process of consensus building around vital issues and principles, diversity of opinion is valued and fostered? How can it help strengthen the relationships between citizens, institutions and communities based on the values of commitment to the truth, rationality, justice, collaboration, mutual respect and trust that are the essential pillars of collective life?

These are some of the questions that will be explored in the symposium being organized by the Office of Public Affairs of the Bahá'ís of India in collaboration with Ramanujan College, University of Delhi titled 'The Role of the Media in Fostering a Constructive Public Discourse'.

from

opa.bahai.in/well-being-of-child/children-youth-and-climate-change-realities-and-lessons-learned:

Children, Youth and Climate Change: Realities and Lessons Learned

Perhaps the greatest crisis facing humankind in the contemporary world is the threat of climate change. Of the various segments of society that are adversely

impacted by this crisis, children and youth are the most vulnerable. They have little or no voice of their own in decision making processes that affect their well-being and often receive very little attention from those who draft policies related to climate change or even development itself. This despite the fact that they will be the ones to live most years of their lives in a world altered by the ominous consequences of this crisis.

This neglect of children is not new. Most policy and institutional frameworks fail to regard the impact of policies, programs and legislations on development for children as a separate and unique category among vulnerable populations. Where policies are made about the interests and well-being of children, they tend to be paternalistic and lack a perspective that takes into consideration the capacities and potential of children.

Children are the most precious treasure a community possesses and in them are the seeds of the future of society. They are a trust of society which no generation can afford to neglect. The interests and well-being of children must thus be made a fixed criteria that all development policies, plans and programs must be required to meet. Further, rather than treating children paternalistically by considering them lacking in maturity or understanding, a spirit of adult behaviour must be shown to them where their capacities to understand profound issues, contribute their perspective on serious issues and take responsibility for addressing issues as a member of society is recognized and fostered. Yet, the questions remain of how this profound change in thinking and behaviour will come about in relation to children? How can the plight and dangers facing children be not only made visible but also foregrounded in all analysis of impacts of crises such as climate change on vulnerable populations? How can their capacities to be proactive participants in addressing challenges be recognized and fostered without imperilling their particular developmental needs as children?

The effects of Climate Change directly impacts the lives and future of 1.8 billion young people around the world. Youth are amongst the major victims of the climate crisis which is leaving an uncertain future with high carbon emissions and less access to the resources young people are increasingly aware of the challenges and risks associated with it. In this current context young people are left behind and not given equal opportunities and spaces for participation at all levels to raise their concerns. However, young people have shown the power of action through mobilization around the world and are demanding for Climate Action as the need of the hour. Sustainable development seeks for innovative approaches and ideas and young people are the valuable contributors to Climate Action.

In order to open a space for a deeper exploration of these questions in the context of climate change, YWCA of India, India Alliance for Child Rights and Bahá'í Office of Public Affairs are organizing a symposium with development practitioners, policy makers, academics, educationists, children and parents.

The symposium intend to explore the issue of children, youth and climate change

through the following themes:

Children and Youth as Protagonists of Change

Towards Climate Justice and Hope for an Inclusive and Sustainable Future

Children, Youth, Community and Climate Change – Finding the Nexus in policy making

Climate Change and Migration – The Impact on Children and Youth

from

[opa.bahai.in/art/a-symposium-organized-by-the-bahai-office-of-public-affairs-in-dia-](http://opa.bahai.in/art/a-symposium-organized-by-the-bahai-office-of-public-affairs-in-dia-new-delhi-to-explore-the-role-of-art-in-building-a-more-united-and-just-india)

[new-delhi-to-explore-the-role-of-art-in-building-a-more-united-and-just-india:](http://opa.bahai.in/art/a-symposium-organized-by-the-bahai-office-of-public-affairs-in-dia-new-delhi-to-explore-the-role-of-art-in-building-a-more-united-and-just-india)

Art as a Unifying and Constructive Force

A symposium organized by the Bahá'í Office of Public Affairs, India, New Delhi to explore the role of art in building a more united and just India

Throughout history art has served as a vital force in the advancement of civilization. Through its various forms, art has enabled humanity to capture, create and give expression to beauty. Through its unique language of symbols, metaphors, rhythms, movements, allegories, images, colours and sounds, art can reach the depths of the human spirit and communicate profound meanings about the mysteries and subtleties of existence that the language of description cannot capture. Great art can thus at the same time move the soul, elevate the mind, strengthen the will and upraise an individual's moral sense. At the collective level, it enriches culture and serves a timeless embodiment of the high-mindedness, creativity, wisdom and aesthetic sensibilities of a people.

Given its immense influence on the individual and on society, art has throughout history served a profound moral purpose. Artists have used the tools of their crafts as levers with which to raise the consciousness of their societies whether it be in inspiring people to unite and love each other by rising above their differences or in strengthening the commitment to justice or by awakening the dormant aspirations of a population to achieve new heights of moral excellence. What unites a 15th century balladeer in Banaras who wandered its streets chanting couplets that taught people to overlook differences of caste and creed with a nameless graffiti artist in today's Manhattan who highlights the plight of migrants and the dispossessed is a commitment to moral principles and social purpose that finds expression in their art. Across time, peoples in all cultures and nations have found in art a means to rise out of the dispiriting conditions of injustice, disunity and spiritual degeneration and to move towards a new vision of moral excellence.

Today Indian society is going through rapid social, economic and cultural changes. The challenge facing the present generation is to ensure that the transformation of Indian society is guided by the highest moral and ethical principles. Along with other groups and institutions such as the media, the education system and the judiciary, artists have a vital contribution to make

to this process. To fulfil their high social role, artists must be guided by an exalted and lofty and exalted conception of the role of artistic activity in developing the aesthetic, intellectual and spiritual endowments of human nature. In many of the world's scriptures, the sincere and dedicated pursuit of art is equated with a form of worship. As the Bahá'í writings put it, "All art is a gift of the Holy Spirit. When this light shines through the mind of a musician, it manifests itself in beautiful harmonies. Again, shining through the mind of a poet, it is seen in fine poetry and poetic prose. When the Light of the Sun of Truth inspires the mind of a painter, he produces marvellous pictures." And again, elsewhere it is mentioned, "Art is worship. ...When thy fingers grasp the paintbrush it is as if thou wert at prayer in the Temple." This exalted conception of art redeems it from being reduced to a mere form of economic activity or to an instrument of self-indulgence. It also demands that even as the fruits of great art be made accessible to all, everyone should have an opportunity to partake of its creative and ennobling influence by developing their artistic faculties whether as writers, dancers, dramatists, poets, potters, painters or craftsmen.

The above considerations have motivated the Bahá'í Office of Public Affairs in India, New Delhi to organize a series of events on the overall theme of 'Art as a Unifying and Constructive Force' to bring together artists from various fields with other social actors to reflect on the concept of art as a unifier of peoples and the role of art as a vehicle of spiritual and social transformation for the individual and society.

from opa.bahai.in/youth/youth-as-constructive-agents-of-change:

Youth as Constructive Agents of Change

This concept note seeks to provide an analytical framework for examining the role of youth in processes of social change and to stimulate dialogue on how families, institutions, and social structures can be reoriented to enable youth to act as constructive protagonists in the life of society.

The period of youth can be best described as a springtime in the life of the individual. Leaving behind the immaturity and dependence of childhood, it is a time when the individual is at the peak of physical vitality and strength. Unwilling to blindly obey or imitate, the mind of a young person asks searching questions about the world and seeks to understand reality for itself. Morally, this is the time in life when the individual is most sensitive and receptive to moral causes and to high ideals. Look at any social movement or cause for justice anywhere in the world across time, and one is sure to find at its heart a host of young people who fuel its advancement with their energy, idealism, and sincerity. It is these characteristics that make youth the most promising source of hope that any society has for a better future.

This potential of youth, however, can only be realized if young people are given the space to think, consult, and contribute as respected and responsible actors in the life of society. Unfortunately, prevalent attitudes towards youth, and the institutional structures in which they are embedded, do not

create an atmosphere that fosters such mature participation. Young people are, on the one hand, patronized and treated paternalistically by authority figures in the family, in educational institutions, or in the workplace, where their views or initiatives are not taken seriously. On the other hand, in the name of empowering youth and freeing them from paternalism, political and economic structures seek either to manipulate them to serve political agendas or, in the name of freedom, to draw them into an endless cycle of consumerism in which fulfilment is equated with the pursuit of ever-multiplying desires.

Despite such constraining forces, the world is full of examples of young people, individually and in groups, taking initiative to transform their societies. The spontaneous and energetic arising of youth in response to the dire needs of humanity—whether in health, education, social justice, or the preservation of the environment—bears testimony to their as yet largely untapped potential to “move the world.” For the sake of humanity’s future, it is imperative that society set aside the narratives and institutional structures that infantilize young people and instead create the conditions in which their immense capacity for constructive social transformation can be realized.

Reflection on how such a vision can be realized raises a number of questions. One of the most obvious ways in which youth are undermined in today’s world is through a culture of paternalism. This finds expression both in overt forms of regulating and controlling the young, as well as in subtler cultural practices where love and concern are expressed in ways that undermine the agency and wishes of youth. In such an atmosphere, young people do not find the space to investigate the truth for themselves, to develop the confidence to make their own decisions, to learn from their own experiences, or to contribute as equals to social and public causes. In some cases, special regard for the elderly and for the wisdom that comes from life experience is mistakenly assumed to imply the undermining of youth. What such assumptions overlook is that respect is not meant to be a scarce privilege bestowed only on a select few as a mark of superiority. Rather, respect is an attitude of heart and mind that arises out of recognition of the nobility and oneness of all human beings, and of the unique contribution that each brings to the human family, regardless of age, sex, race, or ethnic background. The question that such considerations raise is how families, educational institutions, and workplaces would need to be transformed to remove the structural basis of such paternalism.

Equally challenging is the way economic and political structures seek to manipulate and control youth and shape their self-conception. Consider, for example, the way highly sophisticated marketing and advertising campaigns manipulate the feelings and insecurities of children and youth from their earliest years and seek to convince them that happiness lies in a life of constant consumption. Reflect also on how the images that saturate the media environment portray young people as pleasure seekers, as self-centred individualists, as agents of conflict and aggression, or as reckless and rebellious anarchists at war with society. Not only do these narratives shape

perception and behaviour through constant repetition, they also lead to cynicism about the potential of youth to be serious and mature protagonists in building a better society. What is obscured through such propaganda is the immense potential of youth for moral leadership—for being peacemakers and bridge-builders, seekers of knowledge and champions of justice, protectors of the environment, and guides to generations younger than themselves.

The question before all of us, then, is how the relentless tide of commercial and political propaganda that conveys distorted conceptions of youth can be countered. How can young people develop a healthy conception of self—one that awakens them to their vast moral, intellectual, and artistic potentialities and instils in them a commitment to use these capacities for the welfare of society? How can young people be helped to see the different aspects of their lives—their education, their commitment to serve society, and their family responsibilities—not as disconnected fragments, but rather as dimensions of a purposeful life, a life that is actuated by a profound sense of mission to uproot injustices, heal disunity, and protect the planet?

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