

*** ELIMINATING RELIGIOUS INTOLERANCE

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Statement to the forty-third session of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights

Agenda item 23: Implementation of the Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief

Geneva, Switzerland

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"Religious fanaticism and hatred are a world-devouring fire, whose violence none can quench."

These words, written by the Founder of the Baha'i Faith over 100 years ago, are as true today as they were in the nineteenth century. Indeed, a resurgence of fanatical religious fervor, and its attendant violence, is one of the outstanding social phenomena distinguishing the closing years of the twentieth century.

The Special Rapporteur of the Commission, Dr. Ribeiro, in his excellent first report, has dealt with fanaticism. And Mrs. Odio Benito, the Special Rapporteur of the Sub-Commission, in the report which she will present this year to the Sub-Commission, has touched upon the same problem in her description of the contemporary manifestations of religious intolerance.

There has been a revival of religious fanaticism in all parts of the globe, and among people of varied faiths. It is a truly worldwide phenomenon and, in our view, a deeply disturbing one, for religious fanaticism breeds hatred and violence. We need not look far to find numerous examples in the world today of the civil strife, terror and human suffering that religious fanaticism has wreaked upon religious communities and entire nations. Its pernicious influence can be found at the root of all too many of the wars, conflicts and other ills undermining peace in the world, including the problem of terrorism.

Fanaticism represents a perversion of religion and is directly contrary to the humane teachings brought by the Founders of all the great religions of the world. We believe that the purpose of every religion has been to promote unity among all the peoples of the world, and to outlaw war and violence in human affairs. All the major religions have taught the "Golden Rule." The violence and disruption associated with religious fanaticism testifies to its spiritual emptiness. Fanaticism destroys the very foundations of human solidarity by dividing the world into contending factions, each believing itself to be superior to others and to have an exclusive claim on religious truth. These

actions and attitudes negate the very purpose of religion.

The current outbreak of religious fanaticism, while overturning the spiritual values conducive to the unity of mankind, also works to undermine the unique achievements of each of the religions it pretends to serve. The outstanding contributions made to the welfare of society by the teachings of the great religions are steadily being overshadowed by the atrocities committed in the name of those same religions.

Fortunately, the contemporary phenomenon of religious fanaticism does not, in our view, signal the dawn of a new era of religious strife. Instead, we believe that it represents the dying convulsions of doctrines and societies which have openly defied the altruistic teachings of their own faiths. Fanaticism may seem to prevail for a time on the international scene, but ultimately it will die an ignominious death as peoples around the world come to recognize and rediscover the unifying truths enunciated so clearly in all the great religions of the world.

Turning now to the role of the international community in combating religious intolerance in all its many guises, the Baha'i International Community believes that the attention accorded in the United Nations human rights programme to the implementation of the Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief is not only appropriate but must be increased.

This year sees two important landmarks in United Nations activities to combat religious intolerance -- namely, the presentation of the report of the Commission's Special Rapporteur, Dr. Ribeiro, and the presentation of the Odio-Benito Study to the Sub-Commission.

We assume that the Commission will have before it at next year's session the considered views of the Sub-Commission concerning the recommendations made by Mrs. Odio-Benito. Meanwhile, we trust that, this year, the Commission will take careful and measured steps to continue the implementation of the Declaration. We hope that the Commission will be able to reach consensus on the terms on which the Special Rapporteur's mandate will be renewed. We do not believe that public denunciations are necessarily the best method of resolving the issues involved. We therefore appeal to the Commission, and to the Special Rapporteur, to devise strategies which will enable the Rapporteur to discuss problems with Governments and to assist Governments in solving difficulties without politicization of the issues.

It is also, we believe, important that the Commission remind itself of the General Assembly's decision, in December 1962, to initiate the preparation of both a Declaration and a Convention to combat religious intolerance. Practical considerations called, eventually, for priority to be given to the elaboration of a Declaration, but we believe that the Commission should once again recognize that this issue has the same claim to being dealt with in a binding international instrument as does the issue of racial discrimination.

We do not advocate the hasty initiation of a drafting exercise by the Commission, and we believe that the suggestion contained in paragraph 216 of Mrs. Odio-Benito's report -- namely, that non-governmental organizations and independent experts should be entrusted with drafting the outline for a Convention -- is an interesting proposal.

We believe that all men and women of good will can contribute towards hastening the end of religious fanaticism. They can do this, first, by living up to the high ideals of love, unity and tolerance that lie at the center of their own religions or beliefs. In addition, and as Mrs. Odio Benito points out in her excellent report, everyone must be taught to respect the beliefs of others so that they will not merely tolerate, but positively respect, those who hold different beliefs. As we explained in our statement to the Commission last year, Baha'i communities around the world are already implementing educational programmes along these lines as their contribution to eliminating fanaticism under any guise and to implementing the principle of unity among peoples of every faith and belief. They will persevere in their efforts until the fire of religious fanaticism and hatred is finally extinguished.

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