

Belief and Tolerance

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BELIEF AND TOLERANCE: LIGHTS AMIDST THE DARKNESS

The human spirit must be free to know. Apprehending who we are, for what purpose we exist, and how we should live our lives, is a basic impulse of human consciousness. This quest for self-understanding and meaning is the essence of life itself. The innate and fundamental aspiration to investigate reality is thus a right and an obligation of every human being. It is for this reason that the Baha'i teachings affirm that the "conscience of man is sacred and to be respected."^{+F1}

To search for truth-to see with one's "own eyes and not through the eyes of others"-is to undertake a process of spiritual discovery with a keen sense of justice and openness.^{+F2} It is by its very nature a process that is creative and transformative; if pursued with sincerity and fairness, it can bestow upon the seeker of knowledge "a new eye, a new ear, a new heart, and a new mind."^{+F3} The rational soul is thereby awakened to the capacities of kindness, forbearance, and compassion that lie within it. Clearly, the human yearning for truth is a power that cannot be shackled, for without the freedom to know, human nature remains the prisoner of instinct, ignorance and desire.

In the midst of an age convulsed by moral crisis and social disintegration, the need for understanding about who we are as human beings is vital to the achievement of lasting peace and well-being. Historically, such insight about human existence and behavior has been provided by religion. Its indispensable function in addressing the universal inclination towards transcendence, and its essential role in civilizing human character throughout the ages, have been central to defining human identity as well as promoting social order. Through its cultivation of humanity's spiritual nature, religion has ennobled the lives of peoples everywhere and has engendered cohesion and unity of purpose within and across societies. Religion, in a very real sense, provides the warp and woof of the social fabric-the shared beliefs and moral vision that unite people into communities and that give tangible direction and meaning to individual and collective life. The right to exercise freedom of conscience in the matters of religion and belief is therefore not only crucial to satisfying the spiritual promptings of the aspiring soul, but to the enterprise of building harmonious and equitable patterns of living. Coercion in matters of faith vitiates the very principles of religion. For commitment can only be born of belief that is freely chosen. The right to freedom of thought, conscience and belief now codified in international human rights instruments directly finds its roots in the scriptures of the world's religions. This fact should assure each of us that truth need not be feared, as it has many facets and shelters all of our diverse expressions of faith. If, after all, people of religious faith believe that the Creator is eternal and the center of all existence, then they must also believe that the unfettered and genuine search for truth will lead to

truth.

The elimination of all barriers to the free exploration, acceptance, and expression of religious belief is critical to the objective of a creating a universal culture of human rights. However, to clear the way for a constructive dialogue about the role of religion in establishing social justice, an historical accounting must be taken. That religion has been responsible for immense suffering cannot be denied. Much darkness and confusion can be attributed to those who have appropriated the symbols and instruments of religion for their own selfish purposes. Fanaticism and conflict poison the wells of tolerance and represent corrupt expressions of true religious values. Consequently, vigilance is necessary in safeguarding the transformative power of religion from the forces of extreme orthodoxy on one hand, and irresponsible freedom on the other.

"The purpose of religion," Baha'u'llah states "...is to establish unity and concord amongst the peoples of the world; make it not the cause of dissension and strife."⁴ In unity—a unity that embraces and honors the full diversity of humankind—all problems can be solved. When applied on a universal basis, the teaching that we should treat others as we ourselves wish to be treated, an ethic variously repeated in all the great religions, will undoubtedly reveal the salutary power of unity. The building of a global society based on cooperation, reciprocity, and genuine concern for others is the ultimate expression of unified action. In short, the core spiritual values held in common by the world's religions contain within them the principal means for the reconciliation and advancement of the earth's peoples. Through these values and the commitment they inspire, "Minds, hearts and all human forces are reformed, perfections are quickened, sciences, discoveries and investigations are stimulated afresh, and everything appertaining to the virtues of the human world is revitalized."⁵

In order to play its part in overcoming the prejudices and suspicions now afflicting the world's faith communities, religious leadership must devote attention to these commonly shared spiritual precepts rather than doctrinal differences or claims of exclusivity. Let each religion demonstrate its capacity to guide the world's inhabitants to peaceful coexistence, moral rectitude and mutual understanding, rather than spreading enmity, fear and intolerance. The recent trend toward interfaith dialogue around the globe offers a positive example of how disparate communities can work together to broaden vision and shape public discourse in a unifying way. Religious leaders are uniquely placed to draw attention to the potentialities and promise of the present moment in human affairs, and challenge all key societal players to action. Increasing interchange among spiritual leaders and their followers, especially children, will no doubt lead to new understandings of what is possible for human beings and how peaceful patterns of collective life can be nurtured. "Shut your eyes to estrangement, then fix your gaze upon unity," is Baha'u'llah's counsel. "Cleave tenaciously unto that which will lead to the well-being and tranquillity of all mankind. This span of earth is but one homeland and one habitation."⁶

For the global Baha'i community, the protection of human freedoms is part of a

larger spiritual undertaking of fostering a set of attitudes and practices that truly release human potential. Genuine social progress, it believes, can only flow from spiritual awareness and the inculcation of virtue. From this perspective, the task of creating a universal ethos of tolerance is intimately bound up with a process of moral and spiritual development.

Education, then, emerges as an indispensable tool--a tool of active moral learning. To accomplish the broad objectives of ensuring the "full development of the human personality and the sense of its dignity" and promoting "understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial, ethnic or religious groups," education must strive to develop an integrated set of human capabilities--intellectual, artistic, social, moral and spiritual.^{+F7} There is no other way to raise up positive social actors who are builders of amity and agents of service and probity. "Regard man as a mine rich in gems of inestimable value," Baha'u'llah urges, "Education can, alone, cause it to reveal its treasures, and enable mankind to benefit therefrom."^{+F8} These "treasures" must be consciously developed because even though nobility, goodness and beauty are innate aspects of our nature, human beings can fall prey to inclinations that corrupt the inner self and quench the light of love. Educational curricula cannot therefore be solely concerned with the knowledge of physical and social phenomena, but must also be directed toward the goal of moral and spiritual empowerment. As a consequence of the deep connection between individual and social well-being, programs of education need to instill in every child a two- fold moral purpose. The first relates to the process of personal transformation--of intellectual, material and spiritual growth. The second concerns the complex challenge of transforming the structures and processes of society itself. To pursue this dual purpose of individual and collective transformation, specific moral capabilities must be developed. The capabilities of a moral person encompass the concepts, values, attitudes, and skills that enable the person to make appropriate moral choices and to promote creative and cooperative patterns of human interaction.^{+F9} Underpinning all such capabilities is a commitment to discover and apply truth in every domain of human endeavor. Since moral behavior is a concrete expression of humanity's spiritual nature, moral education efforts should draw in a systematic way on both the methods of science and the insights of religion.

An integral feature of any educational initiative having a moral and spiritual focus must be the notion of the oneness and interdependence of the human race. Oneness and diversity are complementary and inseparable. That human consciousness necessarily operates through an infinite diversity of individual minds and motivations detracts in no way from its essential unity. Indeed, it is precisely an inhering diversity that distinguishes unity from homogeneity or uniformity. Hence, acceptance of the concept of unity in diversity implies the development of a global consciousness, a sense of world citizenship, and a love for all of humanity. It induces every individual to realize that, since the body of humankind is one and indivisible, each member of the human race is born into the world as a trust of the whole and has a responsibility to the whole. It further suggests that if a peaceful international community is to emerge, then the complex and varied cultural expressions of humanity must be allowed to

develop and flourish, as well as to interact with one another in ever-changing patterns of civilization. "The diversity in the human family," the Baha'i writings emphasize, "should be the cause of love and harmony, as it is in music where many different notes blend together in the making of a perfect chord."^{+F10}

The rich religious heritage of humankind can also be viewed through the lens of unity. Baha'u'llah states: "There can be no doubt whatever that the peoples of the world, of whatever race or religion, derive their inspiration from one heavenly Source, and are the subjects of one God."^{+F11} The world's religions can thus be seen to be one in their nature and purpose with each being a wellspring of knowledge, energy and inspiration. They each have served to unlock a wider range of capacities within human consciousness and society—a process that has impelled the human race toward moral and spiritual maturity. Accordingly, curricula exploring the history and teachings of religion may wish to highlight the complementary aims and functions of the world's faith systems as well as the theological and moral threads that link them. In this regard, the right to investigate religion and the spiritual roots of human motivation can be understood to be a vital element of an integrating framework of collaboration and conciliation.

The promotion of tolerance and mutual understanding among the diverse segments of the human family cannot be a passive or rhetorical exercise. All forms of provincialism, all insularities and prejudices must be directly confronted. It is unfortunately the case that religious prejudice is a particularly virulent influence that continues to block human progress. Overcoming its corrosive effects will require deliberate and sustained effort. Toward this end, innovative and substantive programs of education are essential. But so too is an attitude of true humility among all those who believe in a loving and almighty Creator.

Let us be assured, and let it be communicated to the world's children, that it is possible to both tread the path of religious faith and to be tolerant. Civilization's future course depends on it. In the words of Baha'u'llah, "observe tolerance and righteousness, which are two lights amidst the darkness of the world and two educators for the edification of mankind."^{+F12}

F1. 'Abdu'l-Baha, *A Traveller's Narrative* (Wilmette: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1980), p. 91.

F2. Baha'u'llah, *The Hidden Words* (Wilmette: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1985), p. 4.

F3. Baha'u'llah, *The Kitab-i-Iqan* (Wilmette: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1983), p. 196.

F4. *Tablets of Baha'u'llah revealed after the Kitab-i-Aqdas* (Wilmette: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1988), p. 129.

F5. 'Abdu'l-Baha, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* (Wilmette: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1995), p. 278.

F6. *Tablets of Baha'u'llah*, p. 67.

F7. Article 13 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights; article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

F8. Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah (Wilmette: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1983), p. 260.

F9. The educational philosophy of N'r University, the second largest private institution of higher learning in Bolivia and Baha'i-inspired, is largely based on this idea of moral capabilities.

F10. 'Abdu'l-Baha, Paris Talks, (London: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1972), p. 53.

F11. Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah, p 217.

F12. Tablets of Baha'u'llah, p. 36.