

Religious Intolerance

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RELIGIOUS INTOLERANCE

Baha'i International Community

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Intolerance of one kind or another is a common human problem, but religious intolerance is perhaps the most damaging of any because its practice characteristically assumes the authority of God and thus gives particular impetus to the violation of many fundamental human rights. Diversity of religions and beliefs is often cited as the cause of such intolerance, but this is not necessarily so. Prejudice is more certainly the reason, as in the case of racism. For considerable historical evidence indicates that diverse religious communities, even some of those which today perpetrate violent acts of intolerance, can get along in a spirit of cordiality and have done so in many instances. This they can do because there is to be found in the scriptures of each of the revealed religions a basis for toleration towards others of dissimilar beliefs.

In the past, when there was an absence of global perspective and human beings did not yet see themselves as one people, the regional containment of different religious communities could continue with relatively limited universal impact. Today with the superabundant increase in knowledge and the instant linking of all parts of the planet through the burgeoning advances in communications technology, the world has contracted into a neighbourhood in which whatever affects one part is immediately felt by all other parts. Discordant elements are no longer isolated by distance and cannot therefore be ignored. This new condition has awakened an acute consciousness of the need for new rules for conducting the relationships of a global community. The traditions which for centuries have so confidently been maintained are seriously challenged and often are threatened by the situation. People everywhere look for answers to the inevitable questions that arise.

The Baha'i International Community holds to the understanding that the purpose of religion is the manifestation of love, justice and unity--love of God, the Unknowable Essence and force behind all creation, for humanity; love of humanity for God; love of humanity for its kind; justice which is basically expressed in the doctrines of all divine religions; unity which, as the outcome of the combined expression of love and justice, fosters social order and the progress of civilization. Baha'u'llah proclaimed more than a century ago that the time for the unity of the entire human race has come, emphasizing the oneness of religion; and He foresaw a period of social disequilibrium during which the peoples of the earth would become so interconnected and find this disequilibrium so burdensome as to have no choice but to resolve issues of disunity and establish world peace.

Religious intolerance is a large aspect of the disunity at the crux of the problems afflicting the planet. Regrettably, disunity is common in the

relations between religions and within religions, vitiating the spiritual and moral influence which religion is meant to exercise. "Should the lamp of religion be obscured," Baha'u'llah declared, "chaos and confusion will ensue, and the lights of fairness and justice, of tranquillity and peace cease to shine." +F1 The consequences of such obscurity are dreadful because, as He said, "Religion is the greatest of all means for the establishment of order in the world and for the peaceful contentment of all that dwell therein." +F2 The Baha'i community finds guidance in Baha'u'llah's teaching that all religions come from the same divine Source and are essentially one. But for those not subscribing to this belief, there is the golden rule, a common theme variously expressed in the scriptures of all revealed religions, which indicates a standard of justice to which all can adhere, a basis for human rights, a premise for tolerance.

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By ignoring the golden rule, religious communities have, alas, let go of a vital connecting link by which they can maintain good relations with all people regardless of their beliefs. The conflict and contention resulting from this unfortunate lapse have undermined the integrity of religion as a unifying force and given justification to the rise of secularism. Sustained by the liberating philosophies of the Enlightenment, secularism has promoted tolerance, and this has benefited humanity; but through the extreme liberalism it has espoused, secularism has also condoned the profane to a degree that severely loosens the cohesion of society, and it has promoted materialism to an extent that threatens the very basis of civilization. Moreover, secularism has adopted a dogmatic character which aligns it with the very practice of intolerance it was intended to correct. The emergence of secularism as a reaction to religious intolerance, and the behaviour of religious communities in reaction to secularism, as reflected both in their accommodation in some instances and rejection in others of its materialistic philosophy, are a terrible paradox which accounts for much of the confusion deranging modern life. Baha'u'llah exhorted the people of the world to observe "tolerance and righteousness", clearly suggesting that it is possible to believe and to be tolerant. +F3

A renowned historian described religion as a faculty of human nature. And it is profoundly to be regretted that this faculty has been so perverted by the acts of men as to produce much of the dysfunctionality in society. Yet it must, in all fairness, be acknowledged that religion has exerted a prevalent influence on the vital expressions of civilization and has been essential to social order, as demonstrated by its direct effect on laws and morality.

Where the innate human tendency toward transcendence is not satisfied because the light of religion has been obscured, people sometimes develop the urge to create gods of their own fancies. Cults emerge from such situations and in extreme cases pose a real danger to society, a danger which must be curbed by the imposition of appropriate civil laws.

While it is necessary and wise in the current state of the world that religious matters not be confused with politics, the indispensability of the virtues of religion to the tranquillity of society must be recognized by governments and

political leaders. Religion is concerned with morals and spiritual education of the people, and it inculcates the concept of reward and punishment which is embodied in the teaching of the fear of God. People are motivated and disciplined by the hope for reward and the fear of punishment. 'Abdu'l-Baha has said: "There is no greater prevention of oppression than these two sentiments, hope and fear. They have both political and spiritual consequences."+F4 Governments would do well, then, to uphold the importance of religion while at the same time promulgating civil laws which overrule those practices of religious communities which interfere with the basic human rights of all people.

Adopting declarations and other measures to influence the actions of governments is, of course, entirely necessary, but it is not sufficient to cope with the issues of religious intolerance. Attendant to these considerations is the obvious obligation resting on religious leaders across all traditions to lower the barriers which intolerance erects against people. Persistent, serious thought must be given to creating a climate of opinion which will urge these leaders to work individually and collaboratively in finding ways, on the basis of their respective sacred scriptures, to alleviate the immense, world-destabilizing problems of intolerance.

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"They that are endued with sincerity and faithfulness," Baha'u'llah wrote, "should associate with all the peoples and kindreds of the earth with joy and radiance, inasmuch as consorting with people has promoted and will continue to promote unity and concord, which in turn are conducive to the maintenance of order in the world and to the regeneration of nations."+F5

Convinced of the necessity for a standard of universal human rights, the Baha'i International Community appreciates and applauds the ongoing efforts of the United Nations and governments to enforce measures which will lift the burden of oppression from the innumerable victims of all forms of discrimination, including that inflicted by religious intolerance.

F1. "Tablets of Baha'u'llah Revealed after the Kitab-i-Aqdas" (Wilmette: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1988), p. 125.

F2. "The World Order of Baha'u'llah: Selected Letters" (Wilmette: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1982), p. 186.

F3. "Tablets of Baha'u'llah Revealed after the Kitab-i-Aqdas" (Wilmette: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1988), p. 36.

F4. "Paris Talks: Addresses given by 'Abdu'l-Baha in Paris in 1911-1912" (London: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1979), p. 157.

F5. "Tablets of Baha'u'llah Revealed after the Kitab-i-Aqdas" (Wilmette: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1988), p. 36.