

"infinitely more advanced, more receptive, and more insistent to receive an ampler measure of Divine Guidance than has hitherto been vouchsafed to mankind" (ibid). It is the present age, not the religion of the age, that is superior.

Explicit pluralism accepts the more radical position implied by inclusivism: the view that the great world faiths embody different perceptions and conceptions of, and correspondingly different responses to, the Real of the Ultimate, and that within each salvation is occurring. Thus Bahá'u'lláh writes:

"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." (Gleanings, p. 217)

Nevertheless there are Bahá'í writings which seemingly do not support pluralist

thinking, by implying that the different religions will cease to exist in the future as all believers become Bahá'ís. In the tablet to Queen Victoria, Bahá'u'lláh declares: "That which the Lord has ordained as the sovereign remedy

and mightiest instrument for the healing of all the world is the union of all its peoples in one universal Cause, one common Faith". (WOB, p. 163)

Bahá'u'lláh is reported to have said to Edward Granville Browne that there would come a time when "all nations should become one in faith" and when "diversity of religion should cease" (qtd in Esslemont, p. 117-8). A tablet of TAbdu'l-Bahá written in 1906 contains the following passage: "The fourth candle

[of unity] is unity in religions (vahdat-i-din) which is the corner-stone of the foundation itself, and which, by the power of God, will be revealed in all its splendour." (qtd. in WOB, p. 39.) Another passage from TAbdu'l-Bahá's writings, explaining the nature of the events to come in this Dispensation forecasts the moment that "All men will adhere to one religion, will have one common faith" (qtd. in WOB, p. 205).

Taken at face value, these statements must be tempered with the condition that any predictions of the future religious development of the world will be largely inaccurate. The expected World Order of Bahá'u'lláh will not reflect any of our present-day conceptions: "All we can reasonably venture to attempt is to strive to obtain a glimpse of the first streaks of the promised Dawn that must, in the fullness of time, chase away the gloom that has encircled humanity" (WOB, p. 35).

Most Bahá'í writers, however, have understood this "one religion" as the religion of God. Shoghi Effendi explains that the different religions are like "stages in the eternal history and constant evolution of one religion, Divine and indivisible, of which it itself forms but an integral part." (WOB, p. 114)

The founders of the past religions have shed, according to Bahá'í belief, "with

ever-increasing intensity, the splendor of one common Revelation" (WOB, p. 166) and "allegiance to one common Revelation . . . is the goal towards which

humanity, impelled by the unifying forces of life, is moving." (WOB, p. 204). It is as humanity awakens to the realization that there is only one religion, "the changeless Faith of God, eternal in the past, eternal in the future", that the future will see no more diversity of religion. This is analogous to Bahá'í explanations of the Qur'anic verses 3:16 and 79, which state, "The true religion with God is Islam" and "Whoso desires another religion then Islam shall not be accepted of him" (Arberry's translation), which refer to "Islam" as faith in God and submission to His Will, rather than the Islamic faith as practised historically by Muslims.

The Bahá'í principle of freedom of religion supports the concept that the Bahá'í Faith will not become an imperialist religion. Consequently, to Bahá'ís, non-Bahá'ís are not impure, need not pay a poll-tax, and there are no rules limiting their freedom of work, education, habitation, or marriage with Bahá'ís. Freedom of religion renders the concept of apostasy meaningless to Bahá'ís. Therefore children born into Bahá'í families are free to remain Bahá'í or to leave the religion of their parents when these children reach the age of fifteen. In conjunction with this freedom, they have the obligation to investigate the truth independently, and discouraged to imitate others in matters of religion.

How is religious pluralism articulated philosophically? This has yet to be widely discussed in Bahá'í scholarship. What is needed is a theory that fully acknowledges the vast range and complexity of the differences apparent in the phenomenology of religion while at the same time enabling us to understand the major streams of religious experience and thought as embodying different awarenesses of one ultimate reality. Such a theory will be based on the fundamental principle of the Bahá'í Faith that religious truth is relative.

The principle of the relativity of religious truth leads to a belief that any absolute knowledge of ultimate reality is impossible, so that man has no access to absolute truth. Bahá'u'lláh states of God: "Exalted, immeasurably exalted, art thou above the strivings of mortal man to unravel Thy mystery, to describe Thy glory, or even hint at the nature of Thine Essence" (Gleanings, p. 4). Consequently all descriptions, all schemata, all attempts to define the nature of God, are limited by the viewpoint of the particular person making them. All such attempts "are but a reflection of that which hath been created within themselves" (Gleanings, p. 204). This has led to the theory of "metaphysical relativism" or "cognitive relativism" as an approach to deal with conflicting truth claims between the religions.

The Bahá'í writings discuss two important concepts based on relativism that provide some explanation of religious diversity. The perspective of one is from the social evolution of mankind, and the historical development of society. This is that some of the differences between the religions can be ascribed to the varying requirements of the ages into which these religions were born. This

social part of religion which administers to the material needs of society "is modified and altered in each prophetic cycle in accordance with the necessities of time" (SAQ, p. 48). TAbdu'l-Bahá uses this explanation to account for the differences in the laws of capital punishment and divorce between Judaism and Christianity (see Esslemont, p. 123). Shoghi Effendi explains that the central themes of Christianity, Islam and the Bahá'í Faith have differed because of the conditions of society: "[T]he fundamental distinction between the Mission of Jesus Christ, concerning primarily the individual" and the Message of Bahá'u'lláh is that the latter is "directed more particularly to mankind as a whole" (PDIC, p. 119). The conception of the nation as a unit is the central theme of the Faith of Islam "inasmuch as the evolution of human society required it at that time" (ibid, p. 120).

Other differences between the religions can be explained by the increasing spiritual maturity and receptivity of mankind. Bahá'u'lláh declares the religions differ "only in the intensity of their revelation and the comparative potency of their light" (Bahá'u'lláh qtd. in WOB, p. 58). Bahá'u'lláh uses the analogy of feeding children to explain this principle: "Words are revealed according to the capacity so that the beginners may make progress. The milk must be given according to measure so that the babe of the world may enter into the Realm of Grandeur and be established in the Court of Unity" (qtd. in Esslemont, p. 122). Therefore Bahá'u'lláh states that "The Revelation of which I am the bearer is adapted to humanity's spiritual receptiveness and capacity" (qtd. in WOB, p. 60).

Another consequence of metaphysical relativism is the resolution of the seemingly contradictory ontological statements of monism and dualism in the different world religions. TAbdu'l-Bahá states in his commentary of the Islamic tradition "I was a Hidden Treasure . . ." that no matter how hard an individual strives in his efforts to gain knowledge of the Absolute, the only success is to achieve a better knowledge of his own self. TAbdu'l-Bahá likens this state of affairs to a compass: no matter how far the compass travels, it is only going around the point at its centre and, similarly, however much men may strive and achieve within the realms of spiritual knowledge, ultimately they are only attaining a better and greater knowledge of themselves, not of any exterior Absolute.

In His Kitab-i-Aqdas, Bahá'u'lláh provides the normative standard for Bahá'ís in their relation to other religionists: "Consort (casharua) with all religions with amity and concord . . ." (Synopsis, p. 25). "The second Taraz [ornament] is to consort (mu'casharat) with the followers of all religions in a spirit of friendliness and fellowship . . ." (TB, 34-5, see also p. 87). "[T]he shunning of the followers of other religions" (TB, p. 94) is therefore

forbidden. TAbdu'l-Bahá says that "Conflict and contention are categorically forbidden in His Book" (Will and Testament). He also recommends in one of his talks that all believers must visit their houses of worship: "All must abandon prejudices and must even go to each other's churches and mosques, for, in all of these worshipping places, the Name of God is mentioned. . . All of the leaders must, likewise, go to each other's Churches and speak of the foundation and of the fundamental principles of the divine religions. In the utmost unity and harmony they must worship God, in the worshipping places of one another, and must abandon fanaticism" (qtd. in Esslemont, p. 120-1).

Integral to the Bahá'í peace programme is the vision of a future where "The causes of religious strife will be permanently removed" (WOB, p. 204), and of the creation of a universal peace in which "universal peace amongst religions" (SOW 4, p. 254) will be established. Consequently the Bahá'í Peace Statement urges religious leaders to discuss the possible resolution of conflicts between the religions, and the means to cooperate to improve the lot of humanity: "How are the differences between them to be resolved both in theory and in practice? The challenge facing the religious leaders of mankind is to contemplate, with hearts filled with compassion and a desire for truth, the plight of humanity, and to ask themselves whether they cannot, in humility before their Almighty Creator, submerge their theological differences in a great spirit of mutual forbearance that will enable them to work together for the advancement of human understanding and peace" (Promise of World Peace, p. 14). Bahá'ís have suggested that this indicates that they act as a "propelling power" (PUP, p. 12) toward the process of peace between the religions. The Bahá'í International

Community's support of the World Wildlife Fund's Network of Religion, thousands of local communities endeavours to supporting World Religion Day activities, and individual Bahá'ís attempts to consort with other religionists are all practical examples of grassroots efforts towards this goal.

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