



Teachings on Spiritual Reality, pp 166).

If

God has always provided guidance through His Messengers, and if human beings have always existed on the planet, then countless Manifestations have come and gone, carrying civilization forward during prehistory as well, from the discovery of fire, to that of agriculture, to the establishment of the family unit, and every other human achievement.

“Civilization

and cultures arise, built upon religious teachings of a new Manifestation coming into contact with people who are transformed by the Word of God, as the teachings affect their lives and they obtain a new measure of truth. When that unifying force, the penetrating influence of the word of God, taketh effect, the difference of customs, manners, habits, ideas, opinions and dispositions embellish the world of humanity. This diversity, this difference, is like the naturally created dissimilarity and variety of the limbs and organs of the human body, for each one contributeth to the beauty, efficiency and perfection of the whole” (Abdu’l-Bahá SAB 290-291).

Causes

of Division

What

we know and understand may all be traced back to divine teachings. In revealing religion, the Manifestations of God have stressed spiritual teachings, agreeing with each other (Selections from the Writings of Abdu’l-Bahá, p. 52-53). “Each of the divine religions embodies two kinds of ordinances. The first is those which concern spiritual susceptibilities...the second... is those which relate to the material affairs of humankind.” (Teachings of spiritual reality, pp 161-2).

Inasmuch

as the teachings of the Manifestations have the power to transform human nature, cannot one assume that new cultures are born out of these transformations? “The birth of family life, development into the achievement of tribal solidarity...constitution of the city states...sovereign nations” (Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Baha [SWAB], p. 43). As society organized itself into families, tribes, and nations, it has made distinctions as to ethnicity, race, culture, nationality and religion. Thus one type of difference is material and the other is spiritual.

“Differences

are of two kinds. One is the cause of annihilation and is like the

antipathy existing among warring nations and conflicting tribes who seek each other's destruction, uprooting one another's families, depriving one another of rest and comfort and unleashing carnage" (SWAB 290).

#### Children

learn to categorize by grouping together things that are alike and sorting out things that are not alike. Bahá'u'lláh says that humankind is reaching the stage of maturity. People used to be incapable of grasping certain truths. Jesus said "I have yet many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now. Howbeit, when he, the Spirit of Truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth" (John 16:12-13). Thus humankind may have made distinctions among the in-group and the outgroups, because humans may have been incapable of understanding the concept of human oneness just as The notion that "I and my traditional enemy are the same" may have been beyond human understanding.

#### The

Manifestations in every age have been rejected: The motives for past rejections are our heritage. "Whatever in days gone by hath been the cause of the denial and opposition of those people hath now led to the perversity of the people of this age" (Bahá'u'lláh, Kitáb-i-Iqán) Opposition to God's Messengers chronicled in the Iqán was not perpetrated merely by individuals, but by entire groups who denied, repudiated, vehemently opposed, contended, envied, and ignored the truth out of waywardness, idle fancy, pride, arrogance, petty mindedness and tyranny.

#### The

only distinction that Manifestations seem to make among people is that of the believers and the heedless. Mohammad in the Koran tells the believers to eschew polytheists who are unclean. History shows that much effort has been exerted to maintain the hegemonic power of clergy, gathering force from tribes and nations to participate in the name of the religions of their fathers, though Bahá'u'lláh laments in the Iqán how people consistently reject Manifestations whose sole purpose was to exhort them to believe in God. "The essential reality of the religions is one and their seeming variance and plurality is adherence to forms and imitations which have arisen" (PUP, p. 99). History viewed thus provides one explanation for the origins of some of the prejudices that the House of Justice says "once seemed inherent in the nature of the human species, barriers that long divided the family of man into a Babel of incoherent identities of cultural, ethnic or national origin" (Letter April 2002).

#### Cultural Identity

Seen

through the lens of Bahá'í teachings, one God made us all, and we all share a spiritual nature. This is where we begin to connect with each other. Yet we've each grown up in language and cultural systems among others who seem to share assumptions and expectations. Manifestations have revealed spiritual and material laws. Their interplay has blended in peoples' minds and developed similar assumptions as children learn their parents' assumptions. "If you're like us, you'll behave this way." We've internalized these assumptions so that they seem "natural" to us. We never discuss them, they just are. And usually they lie dormant unless countered or challenged by someone else

[Examples?]

[pioneer stories]

The

Italian language distinguishes between knowledge (*sapienza* – facts, unchanging from day to day) and knowing (*conoscenza* – changes in different contexts). Similarly, cognitive psychologists say that the brain processes explicit knowledge (information acquired during skill learning) and implicit, non-declarative knowledge, such as habits to which we have no conscious access; evolutionarily older, and more resistant to disruptions by diseases and disorder (e.g., amnesia). There's less individual variation in implicit behaviors. "People share certain understanding because they've learned to interact successfully" (Borofsky, 345).

These

dimensions of knowing coincide, perhaps, with the material and spiritual natures of humans and the material and spiritual teachings of the Manifestations. How does the knowing, the spiritual learning, become knowledge, (habitual, part of "human nature"?) "The fundamental principles of the Prophets are correct and true, the imitations and superstitions which have crept in are at wide variance with the original precepts and commands" (Teachings on Spiritual Reality, pp 161-2).

What

is Prejudice?

Abdu'l-Bahá

says, "all religious, racial, patriotic and political prejudice must be abandoned, for these are the destroyers of the real foundation of humanity." (Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 299) and "the prejudices and bigotries which exist today among the religions are not justifiable, inasmuch as they are opposed to

reality,” and “racial assumption and distinction are nothing but superstition. (p. 299) Further, “Consider the prejudice of patriotism. This is one globe, one land, one country. God did not divide it into national boundaries. He created all the continents without national divisions. Why should we make such division ourselves? These are but imaginary lines and boundaries” (PUP p. 299). “By this division and separation into groups and branches of mankind, prejudice is engendered which becomes a fruitful source of war and strife (PUP p. 316). “Each nation has clung to its own imitations, and because these are at variance, warfare, bloodshed and destruction of the foundation of humanity have resulted (PUP p. 232) “Man has laid the foundation of prejudice, hatred, and discord with his fellowman by considering nationalities separate in importance and races different in rights and privileges” (PUP p. 232).

In seeking the causes of intergroup prejudices, communication theory often focuses on identity formation and how cultural identities can obstruct understanding. Intergroup prejudices can be counted among the contemporary perversities that Bahá’u’lláh condemns. Culture and language are seen as central to identity formation, providing standpoints from which individuals perceive the world: Individuals are born into cultural worlds and form their sense of self and their worldviews from a particular perspective, filtered through a particular language. The divisions established among human beings, whether national, racial, religious or cultural, are man-made divisions, yet they are so fundamental that most individuals derive a sense of identity from one or several of these groups. It can be argued that what is perverse about people today derives from these divisions, for opposition to the past Manifestations was led by clergy who held the reigns of power, who relied on

continued support from families and tribes. The literature bulges with research about how, by establishing the we-they boundaries, groups reinforce themselves.

## Cultural Unity

“Gather ye together and for the sake of God resolve to root out whatever is the source of contention amongst you.” (World Order of Bahá’u’lláh, [WAB] p. 17) Seeing that these divisions are the root of a problem, though, is not powerful enough to wish them away. There are multiple languages, multiple cultures, multiple religions and perspectives on the planet. Children learn the teachings of their families’ religions, of their nation’s

schools. Traditions, manners, virtues come with cultural and religious undertones. In short, diversity exists and it does so within a social and political hierarchy and as such, makes membership in one or another group advantageous. Diversity in and of itself should provide no problem.

The statement can be heard among Bahá'ís, "There is only one Bahá'í Faith." While Bahá'ís believe this to be true, it is a mindset that overlooks the tenet of unity in diversity, that denies that individuals have different perspectives based on history and culture and sex. A recent example that I observed: We had a funeral of a longtime American Bahá'í whose Christian family opposed her participation in the Faith when she was a young woman. A family member asked the LSA to plan the memorial service and asked that Persian chanting not be included so as not to put off family members. The Persians in the community were offended and accused the LSA of being cowardly, as though they were denying their faith. They insisted that Bahá'u'lláh's prayers are in Farsí and should always be included.

#### Discussion

A.

Problem:

1. Power differences exist among groups. In most segments of society, whites dominate, but as Kweisi Mfume recently reminded the NAACP, blacks can be racist too, when they have power.

B.

Analysis:

1. Bahá'u'lláh says we've inherited bad traits of the past.

2. Humanity past started the laying down of boundaries, the making of distinctions whereas Manifestations have distinguished between the Godly and the ungodly

C.

Solution:

1.

Awareness – What are your underlying assumptions?

a.

how do you perceive time, space, smell, values?

b.

how do others perceive you?

c.

How do you know?

2. Gurevitch (1989) says to understand that you don't understand. But you can empathize

3.

'Abdu'l-Bahá says to travel.

a.

What is the wisdom of pioneering?

b. One is that you're forced to be in another culture and may learn to distinguish

II..

What do you expect?

A.

Contrast your expectations at Bahá'í events with those outside and you can see how expectations develop.

1. think about conferences, summer schools, world congress, convention, feast, firesides.

2. Meetings start with prayers and often end with "a closing prayer."

3. Prayers are never made up, but from Bahá'u'lláh and Abdu'l-Bahá

4.

Meetings aren't punctual[?]

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