

The Baha'i Faith; a Non-ideological Approach to Religion.

The fundamental premise of the Baha'i Faith is that religious truth, like scientific proof, is objective, relative and progressive. Religion is therefore viewed as a knowledge-generating enterprise rather than a belief-affirming or rule-making enterprise. Just as the natural world is ordered by objective relations of cause and effect which can be progressively and rationally understood, so the spiritual and moral world is subject to similar laws and relationships. The very purpose of religion is to generate an ever more adequate understanding of the laws and principles of spiritual reality.

The usefulness of scientific knowledge is that it increases our autonomy with respect to the natural world. In the measure that we understand the relationships of causality which drive physical systems, we can implement this understanding to our increasing benefit. We can act in the present in such a way as to bring about a future configuration beneficial to our happiness and well-being. Similarly, the Baha'i Faith affirms, when we truly understand the laws governing spiritual reality, we can act in the short term so as to optimize our spiritual well-being and happiness in the medium and long terms.

However, just as history is replete with examples of the misuse of science, so it is replete with misuses of religion. Indeed, we all know that science and scientific knowledge have been applied to create weapons of destruction, as well as to cure diseases and increase the efficiency of economic production. Similarly, the spirit of devotion and self-sacrifice created by sincere religious conviction has often been transformed into a destructive and life-negating fanaticism, ascetism and superstition.

Baha'is believe that the source of such distortions of religion is primarily to be found in the pervasive view that the human being is fundamentally sinful and evil. Beginning with the myth of Adam and Eve, and of the fall from an initial state of perfection, religious teaching has frequently tended to confirm mankind in an extremely negative view of human nature and human potential. But science has now established that the human race evolved from lower and less complex forms of life, not from a state of initial perfection. The social history of mankind has witnessed a similar evolution towards increasing complexity, in which society has been progressively organized in more sophisticated units: the family, the tribe, the city-state and the nation.

Moreover, we now observe a general tendency and world-wide impulse towards the organization of our collective life on a planetary level. This impulse is accompanied by an increasing realization of the immense human potential for love, mutuality, reciprocity, cooperation and unity. Those religious voices which continue to proclaim dogmatically a childish, superstitious and outmoded view of human nature -- one clearly deriving from a pre-scientific conception of the world --- those voices risk a total loss of their credibility.

Let us put the question squarely and simply. The very social purpose of religion is to create and promote harmony and unity among all peoples. In this modern era of increasing unity and cooperation, how can religion be effective if it is divided into a myriad dogmatic, competing sects, denominations, ideologies and movements, each claiming to be the only true path to God? How long will religion survive if it generates conflicts rather than helping to resolve them. Is not that which unites religions -- belief in one God and that all humanity are His children --more important than whatever separates or divides them?

Baha'is believe that these are vital and real questions, not subjects for sterile academic debates. Should not all those who recognize the vital importance of spirituality cooperate in mobilizing our collective spiritual resources for the task of implementing those spiritual processes in the present that will lead to a more productive future for us all?