

# Crossing Religious Boundaries: Interfaith Challenges for the Future

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this paper is to summarize the growing world-wide interest in interfaith activities and how Bahá'ís can work together with it. It first describes a Bahá'í approach to inter-religious harmony, which includes: coming together with people of other faiths in the spirit of searching after truth; having the humility not to go beyond one's experience; understanding that there are elements to religious faith which are relative, subjective and progressive; testing theology by its moral effects, and propagating religious truths primarily by the force of example. The paper sets out to demonstrate how the modern interfaith movement is also advocating these same principles. More and more believers from the Abrahamic faiths are abandoning their traditional position of religious exclusivism, and identifying with a more globally pluralistic outlook, where all religions are understood to be equally true and complementary in nature. This process is bringing about a radical revision of traditional theology and missionary work. There is a preference to meet people of other faiths in a spirit of fellowship, rather than in competition. The theme of this paper is that Bahá'ís can learn much from this global trend towards inter-religious harmony. Bahá'ís must have the humility to acknowledge that although they have world religious unity as one of their core fundamental principles, they are as yet, only beginning to understand how it might be translated into practice. They too, like everyone else, are a natural part of the world-wide interfaith experience. Bahá'ís can learn lessons from the inter-religious harmony of India and the Far East, just as many Christians, Jews and Muslims have already done. The paper argues that this process of learning is essential to the specific mission of the Bahá'í Faith, which is to fulfil the aspirations of all previous religions. Bahá'í missionary work need not be in conflict with their interfaith activity, provided that

Bahá'ís understand their mission in the broader terms of creating unity and fellowship. Nor is the Bahá'í interfaith contribution independent of Bahá'í community life. The quality of the fellowship Bahá'ís can offer to people of other faiths is critically dependent on the degree to which they can achieve unity and harmony amongst themselves.

## 1. The Interfaith Challenge

As we move inexorably towards a multi-faith global village, more and more people today are crossing traditional religious boundaries. Whether they be religious fundamentalists, reformists, or liberals, whether they identify themselves with a religion or not, people from all backgrounds are joining in the multi-faith debate.

The modern interfaith movement has been developing alongside the Bahá'í Faith in the West, and there have been times when the two converged. The first Parliament of the World's Religions conference took place in 1893 in Chicago, and is widely regarded to be the start of the modern interfaith movement<sup>1</sup>. The conference also has a significant place in Bahá'í history, since it was one of the first times that the Bahá'í Faith was mentioned in a public forum in the West. Although the Bahá'í Faith was not represented at the conference, a paper by Reverend Henry H. Jessup, director of Presbyterian Missionary Operations in North Syria, referred to Bahá'u'lláh (the founder of the Bahá'í Faith) as a "Persian Sage", and closed with the well-known pen portrait of Bahá'u'lláh by the Cambridge University scholar E. G. Browne<sup>2</sup>. But there is considerable

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<sup>1</sup> Marcus Braybrooke, in his *Pilgrimage of Hope, One Hundred Years of Global Interfaith Dialogue*, "Although flawed in several ways as a model of interfaith cooperation, the Parliament of the World's Religions, held at Chicago in 1893, has come to mark the beginning of what is now known as 'the interfaith movement'", p. 8.

<sup>2</sup> Mentioned by Shoghi Effendi, the grandson of Bahá'u'lláh in his classic history of the Bahá'í Faith, *God Passes By*. He writes, on p. 256, "... a paper written by Rev. Henry H. Jessup, D.D., Director of Presbyterian Missionary Operations in North Syria, and read by Rev. George A. Ford of Syria... it was announced that, 'a famous Persian Sage... the Bábi Saint' had died recently in Akka, ... 'a Cambridge scholar' had visited Him, to whom he has expressed 'sentiments so noble, so Christ-like' that the author of the paper, in his 'closing words' wished to share them with his audience". Jessup quoted from E.G. Browne's interview with Bahá'u'lláh, "We desire but the good of the world and happiness of the nations; yet they deem us a stirrer up of strife and sedition worthy of bondage and

irony in how the Bahá'í Faith came to be mentioned at the conference. Jessup's paper set out to demonstrate the social, political, moral and religious superiority of the Anglo-Saxon race, and its duty to Christianize humanity<sup>3</sup>.

Apparently, quite independently, a Bahá'í Syrian doctor by the name of Ibrahim Khayrullah, who had learned of the Bahá'í Faith in Cairo, had settled in Chicago in February 1894, and was the first Bahá'í in the North American continent to actively promote Bahá'í teachings<sup>4</sup>. Over a space of only a few years, a Bahá'í community began to develop in Chicago, in the years following the first Parliament of the World's Religions conference. Among the first to join the Bahá'í Faith was the American, Thornton Chase, who in Bahá'í history, is referred to as the first Bahá'í in the West<sup>5</sup>. This occurred in 1894. Both the history of the Bahá'í Faith in the West and the modern interfaith movement had their beginnings with events that took place in Chicago around the years 1893-4.

In 1933, a World Fellowship of Faiths conference was held in Chicago, modeled after the 1893 Parliament of the World's Religions conference. Shoghi Effendi, then head of the Bahá'í Faith<sup>6</sup>, encouraged Bahá'ís to participate at the conference, stating that it was "in harmony with the spirit of the teachings"<sup>7</sup>. In 1936, the impetus towards interfaith activities gathered further momentum by the holding of the World Congress of Faiths conference in London. Shoghi Effendi was invited to give a paper. Shoghi Effendi delegated the task to an Irish Bahá'í scholar, George Townshend. Townshend was at that time still a clergyman (Archdeacon), and had just finished writing his first book on the relationship of the Bahá'í Faith to Christianity<sup>8</sup>. Townshend went on to publish many more

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banishment... That all nations should become one in faith and all men as brothers" (J. Esslemont, *Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era*, page 39).

<sup>3</sup> R. Stockman, *The Bahá'í Faith in America, Origins 1892-1900*, pp. 32-3.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid*, chapters 4-8.

<sup>5</sup> Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, p. 257.

<sup>6</sup> Shoghi Effendi was successor to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the eldest son of Bahá'u'lláh who died in 1921

<sup>7</sup> Shoghi Effendi, *Compilation on the Association with Religious Organizations*, no.7, pp. 2-3. Whether Bahá'ís actually took part in this conference is an interesting area for historical research.

<sup>8</sup> G. Townshend, *The Promise of All Ages*, first published by Christophil publisher in 1934, London.

such books, and was later recognised for his contributions to the growth of the Bahá'í Faith in the United Kingdom<sup>9</sup>. The 1936 Townshend interfaith paper was published in "Faiths and Fellowship", the World Congress of Faiths conference proceedings, along with the discussion it generated. It is reprinted here, in this Bahá'í Studies volume. From the various reports of the conference, it is clear that there was a considerable amount of Bahá'í involvement<sup>10</sup>.

George Townshend's paper has historical significance. It was checked by Shoghi Effendi himself, and is one of the first Bahá'í statements made in a modern interfaith setting. Moreover, it was written by one of the most distinguished Bahá'í scholars of the time. In a letter to George Townshend, Shoghi Effendi stated that his 1936 interfaith paper was "impressive, convincing, and its moderate tone will greatly appeal to the British mind"<sup>11</sup>. The paper, entitled, "Bahá'u'lláh's Ground Plan of World Fellowship", starts off by stating that the aim of the Bahá'í "ground plan of fellowship" is in "complete accord" with the purpose of the World Congress of Faiths conference, a purpose which Townshend described to be the promotion of the "spirit of fellowship through the inspiration of religion."<sup>12</sup>

Shoghi Effendi refers to the "World Fellowship of Faiths" conference in 1936 alongside other interfaith events. He specifically encourages members of the Bahá'í community to participate in such activities so that the "universality and comprehensiveness" of the Bahá'í Faith can be demonstrated and so that "vital and enduring links" between Bahá'í administrative agencies and interfaith organizations can develop<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> He later published *The Heart of the Gospel, The Glad Tidings of Bahá'u'lláh* and *Christ and Bahá'u'lláh*. In 1951, he was appointed to be among the first twelve 'Hands of the Cause', by Shoghi Effendi, in their own lifetimes. This was a position for those who had rendered outstanding services to the Bahá'í Faith

<sup>10</sup> Apart from the proceeding of the 1936 World Congress of Faiths conference, it appeared in the Bahá'í journal, *World Order Magazine*, November 1936, Vol. 2, No. 8. Also, an article by Helen Bishop on the Bahá'í participation in the Congress appeared in *The Bahá'í World*, Vol. VII, 1937, pp. 634-645.

<sup>11</sup> D. Hofman, *George Townshend*, p. 130.

<sup>12</sup> 'Bahá'u'lláh's Ground Plan of World Fellowship', George Townshend's paper (approved by Shoghi Effendi), published in *Faiths and Fellowship*, pp. 299-317.

<sup>13</sup> Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, pp. 324-5.



The World Congress of Faiths organization has played an influential role in helping to promote interfaith activities around the world. Interfaith activities were resumed after the Second World War, where conferences organized by various groups began to take place regularly. However, in the last few decades, interest in interfaith issues has become much more widespread. This year sees the convergence of two interfaith conferences, one local to Singapore and the other global. In their own ways, they constitute important landmarks in the development of inter-religious harmony. In June, the Inter-Religious Organisation of Singapore (IRO) celebrated its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, while in December, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Parliament of the World's Religions conference takes place in Cape Town, South Africa.

The visionary behind the Inter-Religious Organisation of Singapore, a Muslim missionary from India, Maulana Shah Muhammad 'Abdu'l Aleem Siddiqui Al Qadri, described its aim to be that of providing a forum whereby followers of each and every religion can "know the teachings of other religions, so that a spirit of fellowship might be created among them and so that they could all work together to spread the accepted moral principles and to fight the common evils"<sup>14</sup>. On the global level, the same sentiment is expressed in the mission statement of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Parliament of the World's Religions conference, which is to create, "harmony and cooperation between the world's religious and spiritual communities, giving rise to their commitment and contribution to a more just and peaceable world"<sup>15</sup>. These two mission statements obviously echo Townshend's description of the common ground between the Bahá'í Faith and interfaith movements, namely the "spirit of fellowship through the inspiration of religion".

In Singapore, the Bahá'í community organized a series of annual "World Religion Day" conferences from 1995 onwards, which were subsequently jointly held with the Inter-Religious Organisation (IRO) of Singapore. The First World Religion Day organized by Bahá'ís in Singapore took place in 1956. Bahá'ís formally became members of the IRO in 1997. This year, (1999), the name of the Bahá'í Faith appeared on

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<sup>14</sup> *Religions in Singapore, 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary 1949-1999*, Inter-Religious Organisation (IRO) of Singapore, p. 4.

<sup>15</sup> Mission statement on the Internet site, [www.cpwr.org](http://www.cpwr.org), on the eve of the Parliament of the World's Religions conference in Cape Town, South Africa, November, 1999.

a postage stamp along with the names of eight other religions, brought out to celebrate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the IRO. The rise of the Bahá'í Faith in South East Asia and the interfaith movement in Singapore have also, like elsewhere, been progressing side by side. One year after the formation of the IRO in Singapore in 1949, the first Bahá'í missionaries to Singapore arrived. Dr K. M. Fozdar and his wife, Mrs Shirin Fozdar, were not only the first teachers of the Bahá'í Faith to Singapore, but they inspired the growth of Bahá'í communities throughout the whole of South East Asia<sup>16</sup>.

The aim of this paper is to clarify the relationship between the Bahá'í Faith and the ideals of the modern interfaith movement, so that Bahá'ís and members of other faiths can be more effective in creating a "spirit of fellowship through the inspiration of religion". There are many ways in which Bahá'ís and their fellow interfaith co-workers can learn from each other. Bahá'ís can learn to appreciate the great principles of other religions and how they have transformed history. They can learn much from the vast experience already accumulated on inter-religious harmony and seek ways to correlate their own principles to it. On the other hand, Bahá'ís have a specific mission to carry out: they are charged with the mission of fulfilling the promise of all the world's major faiths. They have the duty, through the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh, to bring about the unity of mankind. In the Bahá'í writings, the unity of religions is described to be the "cornerstone" principle upon which the unity of mankind is to be founded<sup>17</sup>.

It should be emphasized from the outset that the views presented in this paper are the author's personal views, and should not be taken to be representative of a single Bahá'í approach to the subject of interfaith harmony. They are of course, many other possible approaches. For more articles by Bahá'ís on this subject, the reader may wish to refer to articles written by May and Fazel<sup>18</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> Phyllis Ghim-Lian Chew, 'The Emergence of the Bahá'í Faith in Singapore (1950-1972)', *The Singapore Bahá'í Studies Review*, Volume 1, 1996.

<sup>17</sup> "The fourth candle is unity in religion which is the cornerstone of the foundation itself" quoted in *The Seven Candles of Unity*, A. Khurshed, p. 165.

<sup>18</sup> See two articles in the book *Revisoning the Sacred*, edited by J. McLean. One is by D. J. May, "The Bahá'í Principle of Religious Unity: A Dynamic Perspectivism", pp. 1-36, the other is by S. Fazel, "Interreligious Dialogue and the Bahá'í Faith: Some Preliminary Observations", pp. 127-152. See also Fazel's article "Understanding

## 2. The relationship of the Bahá'í Faith to other religions

If the aim of the interfaith movement is to bring about more inter-religious harmony, it is in complete accord with Bahá'í principles. Bahá'ís are expressly enjoined by Bahá'u'lláh to associate with peoples of all religions in a spirit of friendship and fellowship. Bahá'u'lláh states, "Consort with all religions with amity and concord, that they may inhale from you the sweet fragrance of God"<sup>19</sup>. These kinds of statements, both by Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá<sup>20</sup>, make it clear that to participate in initiatives aimed at bringing about a greater degree of interfaith harmony is for Bahá'ís, a religious duty.

The insight that all religions are fundamentally one, described to be the "unalterable foundation and central tenet of Bahá'í belief" in the Bahá'í writings<sup>21</sup>, does not make the Bahá'í Faith syncretic nor does it mean that it believes that all religions are the same. The Bahá'í Faith is an independent world religion which has its own revealed scripture, laws and codes of ethics. It has its own doctrines and teachings that are based upon the writings of Bahá'u'lláh, its founder (1817-1892). The Bahá'í principle of "progressive revelation" teaches that there are two parts to every religion, an eternal part which is essentially common to all faiths, while the other part is transient, relative to the time and place and understanding of the people to whom it is revealed. The transient part typically pertains to the social laws and ordinances of a religion, while the eternal part consists of spiritual ideals and qualities. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, describes it in the following way,

"The Law of God is divided into two parts. One is the fundamental basis which comprises all spiritual things - ... it will never be abrogated, for it is spiritual and not material truth; it is faith, knowledge, certitude,

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Exclusivist Texts" which appears in *Scripture and Revelation*, Bahá'í Studies Vol. 3, edited by M. Momen, pp. 239-282.

<sup>19</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, para. 144.

<sup>20</sup> "Wherefore, O my loving friends! Consort with all the peoples, kindreds and religions of the world with the utmost truthfulness, uprightness, faithfulness, kindness, good-will and friendliness, that all the world of being may be filled with the holy ecstasy of the grace of Bahá, that ignorance, enmity, hate and rancour may vanish from the world and the darkness of estrangement amidst the peoples and kindreds of the world may give way to the Light of unity", *Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 14.

<sup>21</sup> Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 166.

justice, piety, righteousness, trustworthiness, love of God, benevolence, purity, detachment, humility, meekness, patience and constancy ... The second part of the Religion of God, which refers to the material world, and which comprises fasting, prayer, forms of worship, marriage and divorce, the abolition of slavery, legal processes, transactions, indemnities for murder, violence, theft and injuries - this part of the Law of God, which refers to material things, is modified and altered in each prophetic cycle in accordance with the necessities of the time."<sup>22</sup>

Elsewhere, 'Abdu'l-Bahá refers to the eternal spiritual part of religion as its "inner side", while calling the transient side its "external side"<sup>23</sup>. Bahá'u'lláh likens the difference between the founders of religion to be like wearing different clothing, that is, it is only in external appearance that they differ. The "Prophets", "have appeared clothed in divers attire", but they are really "soaring in the same heaven, seated upon the same throne, uttering the same speech"<sup>24</sup>. Their differences, are like "accents of God"<sup>25</sup>. From a spiritual inner perspective, they speak with one voice, utter the "the same speech", but outwardly, they sound different. Their difference is a superficial one, like different accents on the same word. Bahá'u'lláh equates the recognition of this unity with "the highest and innermost sanctuary of the inner meaning of the Word of God"<sup>26</sup>.

In his 1936 interfaith paper, Townshend emphasises the point that the unity of all religions is most effectively approached at the mystical level. He quotes the famous Christian mystic, Evelyn Underhill, noting the universality of the mystic experience. Referring to religious mystics, Underhill writes, "whatever the place or period in which they have arisen, their aims, doctrines and methods have been substantially the same"<sup>27</sup>. Townshend gives a poetic analogy to illustrate the Bahá'í

<sup>22</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, pp. 47-8.

<sup>23</sup> see for instance, "If we abandon hearsay and investigate the reality and inner significance of the heavenly teachings, we will find the same divine foundation of love for humanity", *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 232, also in *Paris Talks* p. 136, in the context of finding religious harmony, 'Abdu'l-Bahá states, "we should therefore, detach ourselves from the external forms and practices of religion".

<sup>24</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, p. 51.

<sup>25</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, p. 53.

<sup>26</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Íqán*, p. 160.

<sup>27</sup> G. Townshend, 'Bahá'u'lláh's Ground Plan of World Fellowship', *Faiths and Fellowship*, p. 306.

approach. He likens each religion to be like a temple which blends in within its own environment, but which from afar, looks to be quite different to other temples. Only by going inside them, "within their sacred structures", do we discover a "kinship in beauty", an inner unity:

"This age of widening consciousness and deepening love of truth has begun to bring us, on a scale quite unprecedented, some accurate knowledge of the sacred treasures and the sacred history of the human race. Scholars, divines, men of letters, poets have all contributed to this enlightenment. They show us each of the great religions as being like a majestic temple reared in some chosen spot by the hand of a master architect, and surrounded now by a multitude of lesser buildings of various later dates. Each temple blends with its own environment but is in marked contrast with all the other temples. No two are alike, and the annexes connected with each are still more unlike. But if the enquiring traveller pursues his investigations and makes his way within the sacred scriptures, he discovers in their several interiors and even in the shrines themselves an unmistakable kinship in beauty"<sup>28</sup>.

Here Townshend touches upon another important Bahá'í principle. In addition to the Bahá'í two-fold distinction of a transient and eternal part to every religion, is the teaching that humanity is evolving spiritually, and that the teachings of each religion represent successive phases in the development of "one truth". The "widening consciousness and deepening love of truth" of this age is part of a greater process of spiritual evolution:

"The fundamental principle enunciated by Bahá'u'lláh ... is that religious truth is not absolute but relative, that Divine Revelation is a continuous and progressive process, that all the great religions of the world are divine in origin, that their basic principles are in complete harmony, that their aims and purposes are one and the same, that their teachings are but facets of one truth, that their functions are complementary, that they differ only in the nonessential aspects of their doctrines, and that their missions represent successive stages in the spiritual evolution of human society..."<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 304.

<sup>29</sup> Shoghi Effendi, *The Promised Day is Come*, page v.



This means that for Bahá'ís, religious truth is partially relative in at least two senses. In one sense, there is a portion of religious truth that is adapted to the needs and requirements of the people to whom it is revealed, and secondly, all religions are a natural part of the progressive spiritual evolution of humanity. Bahá'u'lláh claims to have brought the latest revelation in this evolutionary process, one which is directed to the whole world. He claims to be the "Promised One of all ages", declaring that all past religious prophecies and ideals will find their fulfilment in His revelation<sup>30</sup>. This is of course, a momentous claim. Each individual is invited to investigate it for his or her own self. The specific mission of the Bahá'í Faith is to usher in the prophesised age of universal unity and peace. This, according to Bahá'u'lláh, is the requirement of this age, the "unity of the human race"<sup>31</sup>. Religions can no longer advance separately and spiritual progress must be global in nature. Religious unity is thus an inseparable part of the future of mankind. 'Abdu'l-Bahá states, "The gift of God to this enlightened age is the knowledge of the oneness of mankind and of the fundamental oneness of religion. War shall cease between nations, and by the will of God the Most Great Peace shall come; the world will be seen as a new world, and all men will live as brothers"<sup>32</sup>. Bahá'u'lláh's words, quoted at the first Parliament of the World's Religions in 1893 express the same sentiment, "We desire but the good of the world and happiness of the nations; yet they deem us a stirrer up of strife and sedition worthy of bondage and banishment... That all nations should become one in faith and all men as brothers."<sup>33</sup>

In the interfaith context, this naturally raises the question of whether the claim of Bahá'u'lláh to be the "Promised One" implies that the Bahá'í Faith is in any way superior to other faiths, or whether it somehow supersedes them. Are there not in the Bahá'í writings, passages which emphasise its distinctive "preeminent" character, stating that it "stands unparalleled in the annals of the past, nor will future ages witness its like"<sup>34</sup>? Is the Bahá'í Faith not a strongly missionary religion which calls

<sup>30</sup> "O people! The Day, promised unto you in all Scriptures is now come", *Gleanings*, p. 314. See also, "The Promised One hath appeared in this glorified station whereat all beings, both seen and unseen have rejoiced. Take ye advantage of this Day", *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, p. 52.

<sup>31</sup> Shoghi Effendi, quoting Bahá'u'lláh in, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp. 202-3.

<sup>32</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *'Abdu'l-Bahá in London*, p. 20.

<sup>33</sup> J. Esslemont, *Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era*, p. 39.

<sup>34</sup> Shoghi Effendi, quoting Bahá'u'lláh, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 103.



upon its members to bring about the "eventual recognition by all mankind of the indispensability, the uniqueness and the supreme station of the Bahá'í Revelation"<sup>35</sup>.

The answer to this question is clearly given in the Bahá'í writings. Although the Bahá'í Faith claims to be the fulfilment of previous religions, Bahá'u'lláh never regarded Himself to be superior to the founders of other religions, nor must Bahá'ís ever consider their faith to be intrinsically superior to other faiths. The differences between religions are to be entirely accounted for by the differing requirements and needs of the people to whom they were revealed. The greatness of the Bahá'í Faith does not lie in the superiority of its founder over the founders of previous faiths, rather, it comes from the greatness of this age<sup>36</sup>.

Throughout the Bahá'í writings, whenever the uniqueness and sublime character of Bahá'u'lláh's revelation is emphasised, it is followed by an equally forceful statement on the intrinsic unity and equality of all religions. Bahá'u'lláh declares that, "Take heed that ye do not vacillate in your determination to embrace the truth of this Cause - a Cause through which the potentialities of the might of God have been revealed, and His sovereignty established. With faces beaming with joy, hasten ye unto Him. This is the changeless Faith of God, eternal in the past, eternal in the future"<sup>37</sup>. In fact, Bahá'u'lláh emphatically warns his followers that they must never yield to the temptation of making any distinction between the founders of religions, or in any way imply that one is superior to another:

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<sup>35</sup> In the context of describing the aims of members that serve on Bahá'í administrative institutions, Shoghi Effendi states, "Whether it be by an open and bold assertion of the fundamental verities of the Cause, or the adoption of a less direct and more cautious method of teaching; whether by the dissemination of our literature or the example of our conduct, our one aim and sole object should be to help in the eventual recognition by all mankind of the indispensability, the uniqueness and the supreme station of the Bahá'í Revelation. Whatever method he adopts, and however indirect the course he chooses to pursue, every true believer should regard such a recognition as the supreme goal of his endeavor. Bahá'í world." (Letter addressed to the members of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States and Canada, 11<sup>th</sup> May 1926, quoted in *Bahá'í Administration*, p. 109)

<sup>36</sup> Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 166.

<sup>37</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, p. 136.

“Beware, O believers in the Unity of God, lest ye be tempted to make any distinction between any of the Manifestations of His Cause, or to discriminate against the signs that have accompanied and proclaimed their Revelation. This indeed is the true meaning of Divine Unity, if ye be of them that apprehend and believe this truth. Be ye assured, moreover, that the works and acts of each and every one of these Manifestations of God, nay whatever pertaineth unto them, and whatsoever they may manifest in the future, are all ordained by God, and are a reflection of His Will and Purpose. Whoso maketh the slightest possible difference between their persons, their words, their messages, their acts and manners, hath indeed disbelieved in God, hath repudiated His signs, and betrayed the Cause of His Messengers”<sup>38</sup>.

This is one of the most explicit declarations of religious equality that appears in all sacred scripture. Full equality between the founders of all the world's major religions is an inherent requirement of being a Bahá'í. A Christian cannot become a Bahá'í unless he or she accept that the revelation of Islam stands on an equal footing to Christianity and that the Quran is the “Word of God”. Nor can a Jew become a Bahá'í unless he or she accept that Christianity and Islam are, like Judaism, covenants from God. Likewise, all members of the Abrahamic Faiths who embrace the Bahá'í Faith must accept that Hinduism and Buddhism are divine revelations which are equal in importance to their former faith. Each religion, from the Bahá'í perspective, has been indispensable to the spiritual welfare of mankind.

After describing the uniqueness of the Bahá'í Faith, and referring to the founders of other faiths as “preliminary Manifestations”, Shoghi Effendi reiterates the “oneness” of religions:

“The successive Founders of all past Religions Who, from time immemorial, have shed, with ever-increasing intensity, the splendor of one common Revelation at the various stages which have marked the advance of mankind towards maturity may thus, in a sense, be regarded as preliminary Manifestations, anticipating and paving the way for the advent of that Day of Days when the whole earth will have fructified and the tree of humanity will have yielded its destined fruit. Incontrovertible

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<sup>38</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, pp. 59-60.

as is this truth, its challenging character should never be allowed to obscure the purpose, or distort the principle, underlying the utterances of Bahá'u'llah - utterances that have established for all time the absolute oneness of all the Prophets, Himself included, whether belonging to the past or to the future. Though the mission of the Prophets preceding Bahá'u'llah may be viewed in that light, though the measure of Divine Revelation with which each has been entrusted must, as a result of this process of evolution, necessarily differ, their common origin, their essential unity, their identity of purpose, should at no time and under no circumstances be misapprehended or denied. That all the Messengers of God should be regarded as "abiding in the same Tabernacle, soaring in the same Heaven, seated upon the same Throne, uttering the same Speech, and proclaiming the same Faith"<sup>39</sup> must, however much we may extol the measure of Divine Revelation vouchsafed to mankind at this crowning stage of its evolution, remain the unalterable foundation and central tenet of Bahá'í belief. Any variations in the splendor which each of these Manifestations of the Light of God has shed upon the world should be ascribed not to any inherent superiority involved in the essential character of any one of them, but rather to the progressive capacity, the ever-increasing spiritual receptiveness, which mankind, in its progress towards maturity, has invariably manifested"<sup>40</sup>.

Elsewhere, Shoghi Effendi writes

"Nor does the Bahá'í Revelation, claiming as it does to be the culmination of a prophetic cycle and the fulfilment of the promise of all ages, attempt, under any circumstances, to invalidate those first and everlasting principles that animate and underlie the religions that have preceded it. The God-given authority, vested in each one of them, it admits and establishes as its firmest and ultimate basis. It regards them in no other light except as different stages in the eternal history and constant evolution of one religion, Divine and indivisible, of which it itself forms but an integral part. It neither seeks to obscure their Divine

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<sup>39</sup> Shoghi Effendi quotes Bahá'u'lláh, "It is clear and evident to thee that all the Prophets are the Temples of the Cause of God, Who have appeared clothed in divers attire. If thou wilt observe with discriminating eyes, thou wilt behold Them all abiding in the same tabernacle, soaring in the same heaven, seated upon the same throne, uttering the same speech, and proclaiming the same Faith", *Gleanings*, p. 52.

<sup>40</sup> Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 166.

origin, nor to dwarf the admitted magnitude of their colossal achievements. It can countenance no attempt that seeks to distort their features or to stultify the truths which they instill. Its teachings do not deviate a hairbreadth from the verities they enshrine, nor does the weight of its message detract one jot or one tittle from the influence they exert or the loyalty they inspire. Far from aiming at the overthrow of the spiritual foundation of the world's religious systems, its avowed, its unalterable purpose is to widen their basis, to restate their fundamentals, to reconcile their aims, to reinvigorate their life, to demonstrate their oneness, to restore the pristine purity of their teachings, to co-ordinate their functions and to assist in the realization of their highest aspirations. These divinely-revealed religions, as a close observer has graphically expressed it, "are doomed not to die, but to be reborn... 'Does not the child succumb in the youth and the youth in the man; yet neither child nor youth perishes?' ..."<sup>41</sup>

The call for Bahá'í missionary work must go hand in hand with the equally important principle of the oneness of religions. This means that Bahá'ís should never find themselves competing with members of other religions for converts. They should ultimately regard all religions as manifestations of "one religion", the "same Faith" and their purpose with respect to other religions should be to, "widen their basis, to restate their fundamentals, to reconcile their aims, to reinvigorate their life, to demonstrate their oneness, to restore the pristine purity of their teachings, to co-ordinate their functions and to assist in the realization of their highest aspirations". This most definitely requires inculcating a spirit of fellowship with members of other faiths.

In the Bahá'í writings, the spiritual development of mankind as a whole is likened to the growth of a human being, who grows through the various stages of childhood, youth and adulthood<sup>42</sup>. The last two lines in the citation already quoted from Shoghi also uses the same analogy for religions, "does not the child succumb in the youth and the youth in the man; yet neither child or youth perishes"<sup>43</sup>. Here Shoghi Effendi is

<sup>41</sup> Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 114.

<sup>42</sup> Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 114, pp. 164-165.

<sup>43</sup> Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 114.

drawing from an analogy given by the Báb<sup>44</sup> "True knowledge ... is the knowledge of God, and this is none other than the recognition of His Manifestation in each Dispensation ... This doth not mean, however, that one ought not to yield praise unto former Revelations. On no account is this acceptable, inasmuch as it behooveth man, upon reaching the age of nineteen, to render thanksgiving for the day of his conception as an embryo. For had the embryo not existed, how could he have reached his present state? Likewise had the religion taught by Adam not existed, this Faith would not have attained its present stage."<sup>45</sup>

The analogy of different religions being like different phases in human growth needs to be considered carefully. On a superficial level it might appear to support the belief that the later religions are in some way more advanced than the earlier ones. But, both the Báb and Shoghi Effendi present this analogy to state precisely the opposite, that is, they use it to describe the equality of all religions. This analogy has been previously explained in an earlier Singapore Bahá'í Studies Review article in the following way:

"During childhood, a human being learns fundamental principles which stay with him for the rest of his life, arguably, childhood is the most important period. Most of us in childhood and youth go through various experiences, learn different principles, which are not related together. It is only usually during the adult phase of our lives that the different experiences of our past are pieced together, put into a wider perspective. It is only usually as an adult that the different lessons of the past acquire a greater meaning. Of course, each phase of our life is equally important, and at any one stage, we are still the same person. Along with each phase of our growth, we are discovering more about ourselves. But the consciousness of our self-identity does not fully mature until we are adults. Adulthood is the time that we are best able to integrate our different experiences together. The Bahá'í claim is that mankind as a whole is approaching the phase of maturity or adulthood, and is at present caught in the tumultuous phase of the rebellious youth<sup>46</sup>. All religions have taught us fundamental lessons which will always remain,

<sup>44</sup> The forerunner of Bahá'u'lláh, who together with Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá is taken to be one of the three principal figures of the Bahá'í Faith.

<sup>45</sup> Báb, *Selections from the Writings of the Báb*, p. 89.

<sup>46</sup> Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp. 164-165.



but this is the time in our collective history when all these different past experiences will be brought together"<sup>47</sup>. Bahá'u'lláh claimed to have brought the revelation which will achieve this unity. This is, in a nutshell, the unique claim of the Bahá'í Faith. Bahá'ís are not in any way superior to members of other faiths, or to people of no faith. They are to be distinguished by the nature of their task. They are specifically called upon to unite all religions.

In the context of arriving at religious harmony, the Bahá'í writings frequently stress the need to "search after truth". When asked for the best way to unite people of different faiths together, 'Abdu'l-Bahá replied, "Search after truth. Seek the realities in all religions. Put aside superstitions. Many of us do not realize the Reality of all Religions"<sup>48</sup>. The Bahá'í writings stress the need to investigate things for oneself, first-hand, and minimise the passive absorption of second-hand information. We are encouraged, wherever possible, to go to the source, to investigate for ourselves. In matters of religion, this means that we must read and understand the scriptures of different faiths for ourselves, and not be content to rely on other people's description of them. In the Bahá'í Faith, not investigating matters for ourselves is stated to be the chief source of propagating religious prejudices. If however, our motivation is to search for truth, then, according to the Bahá'í writings, we will naturally be led to discover that all religions are one:

"In order to find truth we must give up our prejudices, our own small trivial notions; an open mind is essential. If our chalice is full of self, there is no room in it for the water of life. The fact that we imagine ourselves to be right and everybody is wrong is the greatest of all obstacles in the path towards unity, and unity is necessary if we would reach truth, for truth is *one*... when we are earnest in our search for anything, we look for it everywhere. This principle we must carry out in our search for truth. Science must be accepted. No one truth can contradict another truth. Light is good in whatsoever lamp it is burning! A rose is beautiful in whatsoever garden it may bloom! A star has the same radiance if it shines from the East or from the West. Be free from prejudice, so you will love the Sun of Truth from whatsoever point in the

<sup>47</sup> A. Khursheed, 'The Hindu Concept of God: Unity in Diversity', *The Singapore Bahá'í Studies Review*, Volume 2, 1997, pp. 3-49.

<sup>48</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *'Abdu'l-Bahá in London*, p. 62.



horizon it may arise! You will realize that if the Divine light of truth shone in Jesus Christ it also shone in Moses and in Buddha. The earnest seeker will arrive at this truth. This is what is meant by the 'Search after Truth'. It means, also, that we must be willing to clear away all that we have previously learned, all that would clog our steps on the way to truth; we must not shrink if necessary from beginning our education all over again. We must not allow our love for any religion or any one personality to so blind our eyes that we become fettered by superstition! When we are freed from all these bonds, seeking with liberated minds, then shall we be able to arrive at our goal. 'Seek the truth, the truth shall make you free.' So shall we see the truth in all religions, for truth is in all and truth is one!"<sup>49</sup>

Townshend in his 1936 interfaith talk describes "truth" to be the "living rock" upon which the "Bahá'í programme of fellowship" is based, and goes on to describe it as the "sole real corrective of all forms of error":

"Man's advancing power is due to his increasing knowledge of truth; and the magnificence of this present age bears witness in the last resort not to the personal greatness of this generation, but rather to the greatness of a continuously unfolding Truth. If this Age is to become the Age of Universal Brotherhood, it must be the Age of Knowledge, knowledge of Truth. The Truth will set us free. The Truth will make us one. As the first item of his programme, therefore, Bahá'u'lláh claimed that every individual should have the right of seeking for himself the truth. Love of truth, which at the present time is growing apace among mankind, is the sole real corrective of all forms of error and illusion. The great enmities which in the past have divided mankind, and which were due to misunderstanding and ignorance, have, in recent times, lost their vitality, and our estrangements are now due chiefly to the instinct of imitation and to prejudice. These prejudices have come down to us from the past, racial, religious, national. For them all, Bahá'u'lláh offers one radical cure, the search after truth"<sup>50</sup>.

The "search after truth" principle is sometimes referred to as "unfettered search after truth", to emphasise that it involves us making every effort

<sup>49</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, pp. 136-7.

<sup>50</sup> George Townshend, 'Bahá'u'lláh's Ground Plan of World Fellowship', *Faiths and Fellowship*, p303

to rise above our prejudices. It is important to note that the "search after truth principle also applies to Bahá'ís, that is, it is an attitude of mind. We should not be content with another person's description of religion, even where we share the same beliefs. We should investigate for ourselves. Bahá'ís should read and reflect on the Bahá'í writings for themselves. If Bahá'u'lláh makes a claim, it needs to be tested by one's own experience. Religious truth cannot be propagated by tradition, from generation to generation, it must be rediscovered by each new generation.

Another corollary of the search after truth principle is that Bahá'ís should not attempt to convince others about the truth of Bahá'u'lláh's claim, but rather, they should let other people investigate it for themselves. The requirement of making one's own investigation, as opposed to relying on tradition or respected authorities is of course, the essence of a scientific approach. Science advances when people think for themselves and do not blindly follow others. The Bahá'í Faith has been referred to as "scientific in its method" by Shoghi Effendi<sup>51</sup>. The old approach of "preaching" the message must be replaced by a spirit of investigating truth, because that is what the "unfolding Truth" for this age requires:

"In accordance with the divine teachings in this glorious dispensation we should not belittle anyone and call him ignorant, saying: 'You know not, but I know'. Rather, we should look upon others with respect, and when attempting to explain and demonstrate, we should speak as if we are investigating the truth, saying: 'Here these things are before us. Let us investigate to determine where and in what form the truth can be found.' The teacher should not consider himself as learned and others ignorant. Such a thought breedeth pride, and pride is not conducive to influence. The teacher should not see in himself any superiority; he should speak with the utmost kindness, lowliness and humility, for such speech exerteth influence and educateth the souls."<sup>52</sup>

Humility, as the precondition for investigating the truth together with people of different religions is, from the Bahá'í perspective, indispensable. It also means that we should refrain from making judgements about the spiritual merit of another person. 'Abdu'l-Bahá

<sup>51</sup> Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, 1955 edition, p. 7.

<sup>52</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, pp. 29-30.

stated, "Let us therefore be humble, without prejudices, preferring others' good to our own! Let us never say, 'I am a believer but he is an infidel', 'I am near to God', whilst 'he is an outcast'. We can never know what will be the final judgement! Therefore let us help all who are in need of any kind of assistance"<sup>53</sup>

In terms of how we are to treat people, it matters not if someone is a "believer" or a "non-believer". All must be treated with equal compassion, friendliness, and respect because this is what the unity of mankind principle implies. 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains that

"A fundamental teaching of Bahá'u'lláh is the oneness of the world of humanity. Addressing mankind, He says, "Ye are all leaves of one tree and the fruits of one branch." By this it is meant that the world of humanity is like a tree, the nations or peoples are the different limbs or branches of that tree, and the individual human creatures are as the fruits and blossoms thereof. In this way Bahá'u'lláh expressed the oneness of humankind, whereas in all religious teachings of the past the human world has been represented as divided into two parts: one known as the people of the Book of God, or the pure tree, and the other the people of infidelity and error, or the evil tree. The former were considered as belonging to the faithful, and the others to the hosts of the irreligious and infidel - one part of humanity the recipients of divine mercy, and the other the object of the wrath of their Creator. Bahá'u'lláh removed this by proclaiming the oneness of the world of humanity, and this principle is specialized in His teachings, for He has submerged all mankind in the sea of divine generosity."<sup>54</sup>

How does the above injunction, of making no distinction between the "believer" and the "non-believer" relate to the opening verse of Bahá'u'lláh's "Most Holy Book"? Bahá'u'lláh states here that, "The first duty prescribed by God for His servants is the recognition of Him Who is the Dayspring of His Revelation and the Fountain of His laws, Who representeth the Godhead in both the Kingdom of His Cause and the world of creation. Who achieveth this duty hath attained unto all good; and whoso is deprived thereof hath gone astray, though he be the author

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<sup>53</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, pp. 147-8.

<sup>54</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 454.

of every righteous deed.”<sup>55</sup> This text is sometimes used to justify the view that ‘Teaching’ the Bahá’í Faith is more important than being the “author of every righteous deed”. But the passage goes on to state, “It behoveth everyone who reacheth this most sublime station, this summit of transcendent glory, to observe every ordinance of Him Who is the Desire of the world. These twin duties are inseparable. Neither is acceptable without the other”<sup>56</sup>. This means that something which is equally important to the recognition of Bahá’u’lláh’s mission, in fact “inseparable” from it, is “observing every ordinance of Him”. Bahá’u’lláh’s counsels are first and foremost to do with spiritual transformation, “O Son of Spirit! My first counsel is this: Possess a pure, kindly and radiant heart, that thine may be a sovereignty ancient, imperishable and everlasting”<sup>57</sup>, and “The most vital duty, in this day, is to purify your characters, to correct your manners, and improve your conduct. The beloved of the Merciful must show forth such character and conduct among His creatures, that the fragrance of their holiness may be shed upon the whole world, and may quicken the dead, inasmuch as the purpose of the Manifestation of God and the dawning of the limitless lights of the Invisible is to educate the souls of men, and refine the character of every living man. Good character is, verily, the best mantle for men on the part of God; by this God adorns the temples of His friends. By My life, the light of good character surpasses the light of the sun and its effulgence. He who attains thereto is accounted as the essence of men. Upon this the honour and glory of the world are based and are dependent. Good character is the means of guiding men to the right path and the great message.”<sup>58</sup> Can any Bahá’í really claim to have observed “every ordinance” of Bahá’u’lláh. How can we really make any meaningful distinction between the person who has not recognised Bahá’u’lláh’s message and the Bahá’í who has not properly acted upon it? If we are to be true to Bahá’í ideals, we should not make judgements on the spiritual merit or demerit of someone on the basis of the recognition or non-recognition of Bahá’u’lláh. As Bahá’ís, our primary concern should be to focus on how well we ourselves are living up to Bahá’u’lláh’s message.

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<sup>55</sup> Bahá’u’lláh, *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, p. 19.

<sup>56</sup> *ibid*

<sup>57</sup> Bahá’u’lláh, *Hidden Words*, from the Arabic, no. 1.

<sup>58</sup> Bahá’u’lláh, *The Pattern of Bahá’í Life*, A Compilation, p. 31.

A similar passage to the opening verse of Bahá'u'lláh's *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* has already been quoted from the writings of the Báb in the context of understanding the Bahá'í unity of religions principle. The Báb appears to state, like Bahá'u'lláh, that the most important duty is for everyone to recognise the "Manifestation in each Dispensation" (founder of a religion): "True knowledge... is the knowledge of God, and this is none other than the recognition of His Manifestation in each Dispensation". But he then goes on to make it clear that this in no way means that those of other faiths, of previous "Dispensations", are inferior: "This doth not mean, however, that one ought not to yield praise unto former Revelations. On no account is this acceptable, inasmuch as it behooveth man, upon reaching the age of nineteen, to render thanksgiving for the day of his conception as an embryo. For had the embryo not existed, how could he have reached his present state? Likewise had the religion taught by Adam not existed, this Faith would not have attained its present stage."<sup>59</sup>

Underlying all claims to Bahá'í uniqueness, are the equally important principles of the unity of mankind, and the unity of religion. Taken together, they imply that Bahá'ís are never to consider themselves to be intrinsically superior to anyone, or in any way special. They are only special or unique in terms of their unique mission, which confers upon them a special responsibility. It is a duty clearly described in their sacred scriptures. They, through the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh, must endeavour to bring about the unity of mankind, which involves creating inter-religious harmony on a global scale. Bahá'ís are specially charged with the task of fulfilling the highest aspirations of all the world's spiritual traditions. The weight of this responsibility should provide an antidote to the all too human tendency to feel superior.

Being more humble, in the sense of not stepping beyond one's experience is an essential prerequisite to carrying out science and often, secular objections to religion are made with this important principle in mind. The famous philosopher Bertrand Russell objected to proofs of the existence of God on the grounds that they go beyond our experience<sup>60</sup>, while the famous physicist, Albert Einstein rejected the Christian/Judaic

<sup>59</sup> Báb, *Selections from the Writings of the Báb*, p. 89.

<sup>60</sup> B. Russell, 'The existence of God', chapter 13 in the book, *Why I am not a Christian*, pp. 133-153.



conception of God, because it was in his view, anthropomorphic, and the result of people going beyond their experience<sup>61</sup>. This makes the necessity for taking a more humble approach in investigating truth all the more urgent. The Bahá'í principle, that religious truth is in part relative, both in a subjective and progressive sense, provides the framework for a less dogmatic approach. The objective truths of religion, the absolute timeless ones, lie beyond reason, and can only be approached at the mystical level, in an inner spiritual way. On the other hand, the outward truths of religion are relative to our comprehension of the world and ourselves, and they, according to Bahá'í teachings, change from time to time and from place to place. The way we understand our "souls" or "God", or the act of "creation" is obviously dependent on our culture. It is also irreducibly personal and subjective. Even within the same faith, believers will differ about the way they understand them. This means that we should not be dogmatic about the *doctrines* of our faith, since we cannot avoid the imprint of cultural and individual subjective bias.

The Bahá'í Faith accounts for the relative nature of religious knowledge in its doctrines. Take for instance the Bahá'í concept of God. In the Bahá'í Faith, as in the Abrahamic religions, God is unknowable. So what is it that we imagine when we think of God? The Bahá'í writings give clear answers to this question. When we think of God, we are actually thinking of the spiritual qualities of the "Manifestations of God" and of "our true selves".

The "Manifestations of God" are in Bahá'í terminology, the founders of religions. Bahá'u'lláh writes that, "These Prophets and chosen Ones of God are the recipients and revealers of all the unchangeable attributes and names of God. They are the mirrors that truly and faithfully reflect the light of God. Whatsoever is applicable to them is in reality applicable to God, Himself, Who is both the Visible and the Invisible"<sup>62</sup>, and if "man attains to the knowledge of the Manifestations of God, he will attain to the knowledge of God"<sup>63</sup>. 'Abdu'l-Bahá gives the analogy of God being like the sun, and the Manifestations being like perfect pure mirrors. While it might be impossible for a terrestrial creature to reach

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<sup>61</sup> A. Einstein, *Ideas and Opinions*, pp. 36-8.

<sup>62</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, p. 142.

<sup>63</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 222.



the Sun (God), we can come into contact with it through the reflected light of a perfect and pure Mirror, the Manifestation of God.

On the other hand, anything we can conceive, must be understandable in human terms. So even with respect to the Manifestations, we cannot have *objective* knowledge of them. In the Bahá'í writings, the concept of God is linked to our spiritual potential, to the spiritual qualities latent within us. In the context of knowing God, Bahá'u'lláh states,

“Far, far from Thy glory be what mortal man can confirm of Thee, or attribute unto thee, or the praise with which he can glorify Thee! Whatever duty Thou has prescribed unto Thy servants of extolling to the utmost Thy majesty and glory is but a token of Thy grace unto them, that they may be enabled to ascend unto the station conferred upon their own inmost being, the station of the knowledge of their own selves.”<sup>64</sup>

Our praise has in fact very little to do with God and more to do with our own spiritual progress. The Manifestation helps us unlock our true potential, of reaching the “knowledge” of our “true selves”. This is stated in many different ways in the Bahá'í writings. Sometimes the soul of man is likened to a mirror which reflects the light of the Manifestation, “A pure heart is as a mirror; cleanse it with the burnish of love and severance from all save God, that the true sun may shine within it and the eternal morning dawn... Whenever the light of Manifestation of the King of Oneness settleth upon the throne of the heart and soul, His shining becometh visible in every limb and member”<sup>65</sup>. In the another instance, the human heart is likened to the soil of a garden which yields spiritual fruits when nurtured by the “divine Gardeners” (the founders of religions), “man is in need of divine education and inspiration, that the spirit and bounties of God are essential to his development. That is to say, the teachings of Christ and the Prophets are necessary for his education and guidance. They are the divine Gardeners Who till the earth of human hearts and minds. They educate man, uproot the weeds, burn the thorns and remodel the waste places into gardens and orchards where fruitful trees grow.”<sup>66</sup> To know God, is, according to the Bahá'í writings,

<sup>64</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, pp. 4-5.

<sup>65</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *Seven Valleys and Four Valleys*, pp. 21-22.

<sup>66</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 295.

the reason why we exist<sup>67</sup>. The meaning of life is therefore a paradox: we are called upon to know God but can never do so. But we can develop spiritually, through the help and influence of the Manifestations of God, and in doing so, we fulfil our life's purpose.

In sum, human knowledge of God, according to the Bahá'í writings, is irreducibly relative and personal. It is relative to the knowledge of our true selves, which is deepened through our knowledge of the founders of religion. There is no objective way to understand God. To speak of God in an objective way would be to step beyond our experience. A strong sense of humility is needed to prevent us from thinking we could ever know God in objective terms.

What of the descriptions of God as Creator, is that an objective attribute? According to the Bahá'í Faith, all attributes of God are subject to our limited human comprehension. It is clear that creation myths differ from culture to culture, but what about the act of creation itself? In the Abrahamic religions, God is always related to the act of creation, but in Buddhism, associating God with an act of creation is apparently a mistaken doctrine. Does this not indicate that even God as Creator is a relative notion, which changes with time and is different from place to place? In fact, in the Bahá'í writings, the act of creation is a continual process where the universe is being "renewed and regenerated" by the "Word of God", "Every thing must needs have an origin and every building a builder. Verily, the Word of God is the cause which hath preceded the contingent world - a world which is adorned with the splendours of the Ancient of Days, yet is being renewed and regenerated at all times"<sup>68</sup>. The act of creation is inseparable from the Word of God, but are we capable of knowing the difference between God and the Word of God? The Word of God, according to the Bahá'í writings, is on another realm of existence, a higher plane which exists outside space and time, but nevertheless, it is not God. According to the Bahá'í writings, it is the Word of God which is periodically incarnate in human form, and not God. It appears to us in the form of the Manifestations of God<sup>69</sup>. The important point here is that there is an intermediary world between us

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<sup>67</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, p. 65.

<sup>68</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 241.

<sup>69</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, p. 47.

and God, and it represents the source of all attributes of God for us, including that of Creator.

We are not capable of knowing whether the universe was created by God, or the Word of God, or of understanding the difference between the two. For an ant, an artificially created plastic drinking cup and the natural soil of a garden are indistinguishable. The ant is simply not capable of making any meaningful distinction between the two. Likewise, we can speak of a Creator, but we must not be dogmatic about it since at the end of the day, it is a relative human concept, and the world of God lies far beyond what we can conceive. A more modest goal, is to translate some of the teachings of our faith into deeds, and then, in our own personal way, we can begin to know our true selves and develop spiritually. This, according to Bahá'í teachings, *as I understand them*, is knowledge of God.

Because there can never be any objective knowledge of God, a strong sense of humility in our interaction with people of different religions is needed, and for that matter, with people of the same faith. For Bahá'ís, doctrinal issues must never become a source of dispute. Our understanding of religious doctrines will always be inherently subjective, and tolerance of this diversity is essential for religion in the modern world. Adherence to objective religious truths, to formal doctrines, whether they appear in a common declaration of principles or creed, is no longer adequate. Religious beliefs today must necessarily be more personal, more diverse, and more humble. The touchstone to assess the validity of various religious doctrines is to examine their moral outcome. Have they helped us to be of better service to others? Have they helped us unlock our true potential? What in other words, are their moral fruits? A religious outlook of this kind, more modest, more personal, is also compatible with modern science.

Another area where our spiritual diversity needs to be recognised, is with respect to how we proclaim and teach our faith. Because our faith is inherently personal, we all contribute to it in our different ways. There should never be any pressure on any individual believer to take part in organised campaigns. Organised campaigns, while inspiring for some, will inevitably not appeal to others. More and more people, in the spirit of thinking for themselves, prefer to take their own initiatives.

If one surveys the Bahá'í writings, noting all places where Bahá'ís are exhorted to teach the Bahá'í Faith, it becomes apparent that its success is conditional upon living the Bahá'í life. Living the Bahá'í life, is the highest and most effective means of spreading the Bahá'í message. It is best spread through deeds, and only secondly by words. A sample of the Bahá'í writings on this subject is given below:

"God hath prescribed unto every one the duty of teaching His Cause. Whoever ariseth to discharge this duty, must needs, ere he proclaimeth His Message, adorn himself with the ornament of an upright and praiseworthy character, so that his words may attract the hearts of such as are receptive to his call. Without it, he can never hope to influence his hearers."<sup>70</sup>

"Whoso ariseth among you to teach the Cause of his Lord, let him, before all else, teach his own self, that his speech may attract the hearts of them that hear him. Unless he teacheth his own self, the words of his mouth will not influence the heart of the seeker. Take heed, O people, lest ye be of them that give good counsel to others but forget to follow it themselves."<sup>71</sup>

"Love ye all religions and all races with a love that is true and sincere and show that love through deeds and not through the tongue; for the latter hath no importance, as the majority of men are, in speech, well-wishers, while action is the best."<sup>72</sup>

"As to the fundamentals of teaching the Faith: know thou that delivering the Message can be accomplished only through goodly deeds and spiritual attributes, an utterance that is crystal clear and the happiness reflected from the face of that one who is expounding the Teachings. It is essential that the deeds of the teacher should attest the truth of his words. Such is the state of whoso doth spread abroad the sweet savours of God and the quality of him who is sincere in his faith."<sup>73</sup>

<sup>70</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, CLVIII, pp. 334-335.

<sup>71</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, pp. 277-279.

<sup>72</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 69.

<sup>73</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 175.

“Not by the force of numbers, not by the mere exposition of a set of new and noble principles, not by an organized campaign of teaching - no matter how worldwide and elaborate in its character - not even by the staunchness of our faith or the exaltation of our enthusiasm, can we ultimately hope to vindicate in the eyes of a critical and sceptical age the supreme claim of the Abhá Revelation. One thing and only one thing will unfailingly and alone secure the undoubted triumph of this sacred Cause, namely, the extent to which our own inner life and private character mirror forth in their manifold aspects the splendor of those eternal principles proclaimed by Bahá'u'lláh.”<sup>74</sup>

This last passage suggests that there can be no substitute for living the Bahá'í life. In the “eyes of a critical and sceptical age”, the degree to which Bahá'ís live up to their ideals will determine their success in the missionary field. At present, in the author's experience, there is a tendency to give priority to gaining new converts (declarations in Bahá'í terminology), to organise teaching campaigns, and to engage in all manner of publicity orientated activities. These kinds of activities typically promote the principles of the Bahá'í Faith, concentrating on its external aspects. As we look toward the future, more will be required of an inner spiritual kind. Are Bahá'ís themselves shining examples of their own principles? Are they known to be independent investigators of truth? Do they rely upon second-hand accounts of the Bahá'í writings, or do they make their own independent investigations of them? Are they known for their humility? Are they known for their service to mankind? Are they known for bringing religious harmony? When they announce the uniqueness of Bahá'u'lláh's claim, do Bahá'ís in the same breath declare the unity of mankind and unity of religious principles? Is the Bahá'í community a living example of the fellowship and unity it advocates for the world? These are the kinds of questions Bahá'ís should be continually asking themselves, and in the author's experience, they have only just begun to realise it.

Consider the following analogy, given in the context of describing the interfaith challenge to Christians:

“We have been like a company of people marching down a long valley, singing our own songs, developing over the centuries our own stories

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<sup>74</sup> Shoghi Effendi, *Guidance for Today and Tomorrow*, p. 194.



and slogans, unaware that over the hill there is another valley, with another great company of people marching in the same direction, but with their own language and songs and stories and ideas; and over another hill yet another marching group – each ignorant of the existence of the others. But then one day they all come out onto the same plain, the plain created by modern global communications, and see each other and wonder what to make of each other...<sup>75</sup>

Where would we locate the Bahá'í Faith and its followers in this analogy? Since Bahá'ís are for the most part, mainly converts, they are like everybody else, arriving on the modern interfaith “plain” and like everybody else, they are in the process of discovering the world’s rich variety of spiritual traditions. They do not have however, as yet, a religious tradition in the same sense as the other groups. They do not have an established “singing tradition”. In *my* opinion, Bahá'ís are like people who have found the sheet music of a new song on the plain which is promised to be the “universal song”. The problem is that although they have found the music, they, like everyone else, are not very good singers, and are gradually realizing that it is not good enough to have the written music, they also need to train at singing. Not only this, they are beginning to realize the need to learn the existing songs, so that they are better prepared to sing the “universal song”. Just like everyone else, they are becoming aware of more songs. Their special task is to help each group remember its own song. They must do this largely by example, that is, they must themselves concentrate on becoming good musicians who can sing the original version of all the old songs. The new “universal song” will require the harmonies and rhythms of all the old songs, and the music of all songs will never be lost. The “universal song” is not a syncretic mix of all previous songs, it contains elements from them, it harmonizes with them, and yet at the same time, it is something completely distinct, it has its own melody and character, and is something that all the people on the modern “plain” can participate in. This analogy is honest to the great truth claim of Bahá'u'lláh, and yet at the same time, stresses the need for individual Bahá'ís to be humble, to become living examples of their own principles. It highlights the need for Bahá'ís to work in fellowship with people of other religions, learning from them, and eventually assisting them in realizing their highest aspirations.

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<sup>75</sup> J. Hick, *God Has Many Names*, p. 41.



It is interesting to note that, in the context of spreading the Bahá'í teachings, 'Abdu'l-Bahá also uses the "song" metaphor:

"... the call to the world of unity... may be raised; the flag of the oneness of the world of humanity be unfurled, the melody of universal peace may reach the ears of the East and West... the song of the love of God may exhilarate and rejoice all the nations and peoples... exert ye with heart and soul, so that association, love, unity and agreement be obtained between the hearts, all the aims may be merged into one aim, all songs become one song and, the power of the Holy Spirit may become so overwhelmingly victorious as to overcome all the forces of the world of nature."<sup>76</sup>

### 3. The Living Example of 'Abdu'l-Bahá

Although the Bahá'í Faith is relatively young in comparison to other world faiths, it has already established an interfaith history. At the centre of this contribution is the living example of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, who, particularly through his Western tours between the years 1911 to 1913, demonstrated how the Bahá'í principles on inter-religious harmony can be translated into action. Over a period of several years, throughout numerous centres in both Europe and America, 'Abdu'l-Bahá spoke of religious unity from Church pulpits, Synagogues, and Mosques. His public and private addresses attracted the interest of many leading clergymen. His two visits to Britain for instance, received a day by day account in the London based Christian Commonwealth journal. The spirit of fellowship and the deep accord that 'Abdu'l-Bahá struck with leading Western clergymen is evident in the following two extracts from the Christian Commonwealth journal while he was in London:

This newspaper article records a dialogue between the Reverend R. J. Campbell, Minister of the City Temple Church in London. The editor of the Christian Commonwealth journal, Albert Dawson, recorded the dialogue and published it along with other articles which featured 'Abdu'l-Bahá and the Bahá'í Faith in the 13<sup>th</sup> September edition 1911.

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<sup>76</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Tablets of the Divine Plan*, pp. 78-9.

Three days before this, 'Abdu'l-Bahá gave his first Western public address in the City Temple Church.

*"Towards Spiritual Unity, An interview with 'Abdu'l-Bahá.  
Dialogue between Abbas Effendi and Rev. R. J. Campbell"  
Christian Commonwealth, Wednesday, Sept. 13<sup>th</sup>, 1911,  
London,  
Albert Dawson.*

- R. J. C.: I have long looked forward to this opportunity  
 A. B.: That is proof that both our hearts are one  
 R. J. C.: I think that is true  
 A. B.: There is a Persian saying that hearts that are at one find their way to one another  
 R. J. C.: I do not think that saying is peculiar to Persia  
 A. B.: Often two people live in the same house in constant intimacy, but their hearts are not united. Here are two men, one living in the East and one in London, whose hearts are coming to meet one another long ago. Although in the material world we were far apart, we have always been near in the spiritual world. The real nearness is the nearness of the heart, not of the body  
 R. J. C.: The spirit knows no nationality  
 A. B.: Praise be to God that now there is between us a material as well as a spiritual tie, the union is perfect!  
 R. J. C.: I am so glad you took the resolution to come to England, even though you can remain only a short time.  
 A. B.: From the time I left Egypt my purpose was to come here, but I remained a few days on the lake of Geneva for change of air.  
 R. J. C.: I know many of your friends who are also mine  
 A. B.: I have read your sermons and speeches  
 R. J. C.: And I have read yours  
 A. B.: That is a proof of unity. As I have read your sermons (with a humorous smile), you have to read mine.  
 R. J. C.: I see on my left one who has spoken from my pulpit (Tamaddon-ul-Molk)  
 A. B.: We are all friends of one another (hands raised in benediction). We have spread the proclamation of universal peace, therefore we are friends of people all over the world. We have no enemies; there are no outsiders; we are all servants of one God.  
 R. J. C.: That is good  
 A. B.: Worshippers of one God, we are the recipients of the graces of one God. Men have made differences and divisions; God did not establish them. God has created everyone, and treats everyone equally. He is merciful to all and gives food (lit.

"livings") to all. God knows everyone. To him none is a foreigner. We must follow his example.

R. J. C.: What is distinctive of the Bahá'í movement as compared with the faith out of which it came?

A. B.: The Báb foretold the coming of One after him who would address the whole world. We are followers of that One - Bahá'u'lláh. When he manifested himself, some of the followers of the Báb did not receive him. Those are called Babis; the disciples of Bahá'u'lláh are Bahá'ís. The Báb came as a reformer of Islam, and foretold the coming of a greater one in his footsteps. Instead of confining his revelation to the Moslem world, Bahá'u'lláh gave it forth to all mankind. The narrow-minded ones, even those who meant well, could not understand so broad a movement, they were not strong enough to follow Bahá'u'lláh; they said, "He is speaking a language we cannot understand". Therefore they are called Babis.

R. J. C.: What a close parallel to primitive Christianity! The Judaising portion did not wish the Gospel to go any further.

A. B.: It has come about, by their narrow-mindedness, and exclusiveness, that the Babis are now opposed to all the other religions; they want to keep rigidly to the teaching of the Báb, and convert everybody to it. The Bahá'ís recognise the truth in all religions. They come from the same root, but there is now that difference.

R. J. C.: A difference of attitude

A. B.: Their conduct is absolutely different.

R. J. C.: How many Babis are there?

A. B.: Very few

Interpreter: Perhaps 200 or 300 in Persia.

R. J. C.: It is suggested that there are three million Bahá'ís.

Interpreter: There are no statistics....

R. J. C. (to 'Abdu'l-Bahá): I should like you to visit the City Temple

A. B.: I should like to come. I know that the City Temple is a centre of progress in the religious world, and seeks to promote a universal understanding. As you have been a promoter of unity in the Christian world I hope you will strive to bring about unity in the whole world. A man first wants unity in his own family, and then as his intelligence expands he wants unity in his village, then in his town, then in his country, then in the world. I hope you will strive to unify the whole world.

R. J. C.: We are doing what we can. We believe that religions are many, but Religion is one.

A. B.: The principle of religion is one, as God is one.

A Lady: Mr Campbell's reform movement in Christianity is helping the world of Islam. The attitude of the New Theology is one Moslems can understand; they cannot understand the divisions of Christianity.

R. J.C.: I have some evidence of that.

When Mr Campbell left it was with the understanding that there would be a further meeting.

Another Christian Commonwealth newspaper article appeared a week later, describing the meeting of 'Abdu'l-Bahá with another London Church Minister. This time, 'Abdu'l-Bahá was invited by Archdeacon Wilberforce to address his congregation at St John's Church.

*"The Vanishing of the Veil,  
'Abdu'l-Bahá at St. John's Westminster,  
Archdeacon Wilberforce's Welcome"  
The Christian Commonwealth, Wednesday Sept. 20<sup>th</sup>, 1911  
Peggy Scott*

Eighteen months ago Archdeacon Wilberforce, who had been watching the Bahá'í movement for some time with interest, sent a message to 'Abdu'l-Bahá. "We are all one," he said, "there behind the veil." And 'Abdu'l-Bahá replied from his home in Akka, "Tell him the veil is very thin, and it will vanish quite."

All who were present in St. John's Westminster, last Sunday evening, could not fail to realise that the veil was vanishing. Archdeacon Wilberforce's beautiful intercessory service was a means to that end. He asked that each one in the vast congregation should at that time put away all selfish thought and use all energy in prayer for those in trouble. "'ill you bear upon your heart," he said, "' mother ill in India." This followed a graphic description of the circumstances, until each felt the loneliness of the sick woman and the keen anxiety of the daughter hastening to her side. So the spirit of unity was spread abroad.

Then Dr Wilberforce told of the teacher - "Master" he called him - who had come to London to emphasise unity, and who was present that evening at St. John's to proclaim the meaning of it. "Whatever our views," The Archdeacon said, "we shall, I am sure, unite in welcoming a man who has been for forty years a prisoner for the cause of brotherhood and love."

'Abdu'l-Bahá is not an orator or even a preacher, but, in view of all he stands for, we are keenly interested in everything he has to say.

Full of expectation, the congregation waited when the Archdeacon for a brief moment left the church. Divested of his white surplice, he returned with 'Abdu'l-Bahá. All eyes were fixed on the leader of the Bahá'í movement. In his customary Eastern robe and head-dress, walking hand in hand with a leader of the West, it did indeed seem that the veil was vanishing.

Down the aisle they passed to the bishop's chair, which had been placed in front of the altar for 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Standing at the lectern, Archdeacon Wilberforce, introduced the "wonderful" visitor. He told of his life in prison, of his sufferings and bravery, of his self-sacrifice, of his clear and shining faith. He voiced his own belief that religion is one, as God is love.

Then 'Abdu'l-Bahá rose. Speaking very clearly, with wonderful intonations in his voice and using his hand freely, it seemed to those who listened almost as if they grasped his meaning, though he spoke in Persian. When he had finished, Archdeacon Wilberforce read the translation of his address. His theme was the Character of the Manifestations of God. He said God the Infinite could not be comprehended of man; that whatever man understands of God is born of his imagination. For illustration he pointed to the mineral, which does not comprehend the vegetable, as the vegetable cannot understand the animal. So the animal cannot reach the intelligence of humanity. Neither, said he, is it possible for man, a created being, to understand the Almighty Creator. Nevertheless, the perfections and qualifications of God are seen in every created being and in the most perfect beings in the most perfect manner. In the manifestations of God, 'Abdu'l-Bahá likened these qualities to the rays of the sun focussed in a mirror. If we claim that the sun is seen in the mirror, we do not mean that the whole sun has descended from the holy heights of heaven and entered into the mirror, that is impossible. The Eternal Nature is seen in the manifestations, and its light and splendour are visible in extreme glory. Therefore men have always been taught and led by the prophets of God. The prophets of God are the mediators of God. All the prophets and messengers have come from one Holy Spirit and bear the message of God, suited to the age in which they appear.

It is the *One* Light in them, and they are one with each other. But the eternal does not become the phenomenal, neither can the phenomenal become eternal. St. Paul, the great apostle said, "We all, with open face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of God, are changed into the same image, from glory to glory."



Then, raising his hands, 'Abdu'l-Bahá prayed: "O God, the Forgiver! O Heavenly Educator! This assembly is adorned with the mention of thy holy name. Thy children turn their face towards thy kingdom. Hearts are made happy and souls are comforted. Merciful God! Cause us to repent of our shortcomings! Accept us in thy heavenly kingdom and give unto us an abode where there shall be no error. Give us peace. Give us knowledge, and open unto us the gates of thy heaven. "Thou art the Giver of all! Thou art the Forgiver! Thou art the Merciful!"

The final note of a real chord of harmony was struck when Archdeacon Wilberforce asked that 'Abdu'l-Bahá would pronounce the Benediction. "I think we should take it kneeling," he said.

Who shall say that that the veil is not vanishing?

'Abdu'l-Bahá's interfaith contribution, has as yet, not been fully documented. A considerable amount of literature was generated through 'Abdu'l-Bahá's direct and indirect contacts with theologians, Church Ministers, and Christians from a variety of different backgrounds. Apart from articles in newspapers and journals, some Christian scholars were inspired to write books that were based upon their meetings with 'Abdu'l-Bahá. A book entitled, "The Reconciliation of Races and Religions" by the Oxford Bible scholar, Thomas Kelly Cheyne was such a book. Cheyne entitled his chapter on 'Abdu'l-Bahá as "The Ambassador of Peace". The Christian Commonwealth journal was considered to be a reform movement within Christianity, calling for a greater degree of openness and recognition for the truth in other religions. The subtitle of the journal which appeared on the front page of every issue read, "The organ of the Progressive Movement in Religion and Social Ethics". Clearly from the above citations, Rev. R. J. Campbell and Archbishop Wilberforce were making contacts with religious figures in the East. Just how movements like these might have influenced the modern interfaith movement is a fascinating question, and one for future research. The Englishman, Sir Francis Younghusband, founder of the World Congress of Faiths organisation, certainly knew of the Bahá'í Faith. He had great admiration for the Báb and frequently attended Bahá'í meetings<sup>77</sup>. At the time of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's visit to London,

<sup>77</sup> D. Hofman, *George Townshend*, p. 123.

Younghusband, living in England, was around 50 years old, and was beginning to write several books that described his religious views<sup>78</sup>.

#### 4. Modern Religious Pluralism

Modern interfaith dialogue has its critics as well as its supporters. Harvey Cox, a Christian speaker at the 2<sup>nd</sup> Parliament of the World's Religions held in Chicago 1993, spoke of the presence of an "antidialogical wing" in Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam. Harvey Cox acknowledged his having "sharp-edged and sometimes unpleasant conversations" with his fellow Christians, who were opposed to interfaith dialogue<sup>79</sup>. At the first Parliament of the World's Religions, John Henry Barrows, one of Chicago's most liberal clergymen who promoted the event, claimed later that he had hoped leaders of world religions would be convinced of the superiority of Christianity. Most Protestant evangelicals agreed with the response of the Archbishop of Canterbury, that to participate was to presuppose the equality of religions, but Salvation is in Christ alone, they protested. The Christians who gave their support to the conference lay outside mainstream American Protestant Churches.

Seyyed Hossein Nasr, the Muslim speaker at the 2<sup>nd</sup> Parliament of the World's Religion conference cited several difficulties for modern interfaith dialogue. The first is that it is dominated by the West, and so in many ways reflects the religious concerns of western educated people, rather than being representative of the world's religions<sup>80</sup>. The agenda of interfaith dialogue, according to Nasr, is thus dominated by modernity and reactions to it, "the presence of the modern world is twofold: One is through the destruction of religion and the other through the foreshortening of its vision"<sup>81</sup>. Nasr claims that modernity "denies the significance of religious categories" and that this limits the effectiveness of inter-religious dialogue, since it is primarily, a modern western debate about religion. Under the pressure of a secular threat, religious communities, according to Nasr are becoming more intolerant. This is

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<sup>78</sup> Marcus Braybrooke, *A Wider Vision*, pp. 28-9.

<sup>79</sup> A. Sharma, K.M. Dugan, *A Dome of Many Colors*, pp. 50-1.

<sup>80</sup> *ibid.*, p. 60.

<sup>81</sup> *ibid.*, p. 162.

clearly discernible in some forms of fundamentalism. Nasr gives the example of the present young generation of students at Muslim universities, "when you look at those young students at an Islamic university who do all the shouting and who think they are the most pious and devout of all Muslims, many of them are the ones who, in contrast to their grandfathers, have much less interest and much less affinity for friendship with people of other religions"<sup>82</sup>

Another difficulty raised by Nasr is the element of Christian mission: "so many Western scholars have tried to present Christianity, let us say, to the Islamic world or the Hindu world, in their capacity as missionaries. In the majority of cases (there are always exceptions) their goal has been to bring about an understanding of Christianity to Islam or to Hinduism or to Buddhism not so much with the purpose of *explaining* but of seeking to *convert* them to their own point of view"<sup>83</sup>. Other Muslims have leveled the same objections at Christian interfaith dialogue. Mahmoud Ayoub commenting on the Pope's recent interfaith dialogue initiatives, questioned whether this was dialogue or mission. He cites statements of the Pope to conclude that the dialogue recently advocated by the Catholic Church is "simply an instrument of mission"<sup>84</sup>. The Pope himself declared, "Inter-religious dialogue, is a part of the Church's evangelizing mission"<sup>85,86</sup>. But this kind of intention is precisely what is unacceptable to many non-Christians partners in the interfaith debate. In

<sup>82</sup> *ibid.*, p. 163.

<sup>83</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 61-62.

<sup>84</sup> Mahmoud Ayoub, 'Pope John Paul II on Islam', *John Paul II, and Interreligious Dialogue*, edited by B.L. Sherwin and H. Kasimow, pp. 181.

<sup>85</sup> A. Sharma, K.M. Dugan, *A Dome of Many Colors*, p. 181.

<sup>86</sup> A recent statement delivered by the Pope during the Wednesday's General Audience: "Dear Brothers and Sisters, We are reflecting today on how to witness to God the Father in our relations with the followers of other religions. Sacred Scripture teaches us that there is one God who desires the salvation of all. This truth is the foundation for inter-religious dialogue. Dialogue does not lead to the abandonment of proclamation but is a part of the Church's evangelizing mission. Discussion and exchange should lead to deeper knowledge of one another's convictions, and to eventual agreement on fundamental values. While recognizing that the world's religions "often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men", the Church is also aware of her duty to proclaim Christ, "the way, and the truth, and the life" (John 14:6), in whom men find the fullness of religious life and in whom God has reconciled all things to himself" (Nostra Aetate, 2). May the Great Jubilee be an opportunity for the followers of all religions to grow in esteem and love for one another, through a dialogue which will truly be a saving encounter." Wednesday, 21<sup>st</sup> April, 1999.

the 1986 Assisi conference, where by special invitation of Pope John Paul II, religious leaders from different faiths came together to pray for world peace, the Pope in his closing address expressed his feelings of being a "brother and friend" to all those present but in the same breath stated, "I profess here anew my conviction shared by all Christians, that in Jesus Christ, as Saviour of all, true peace is to be found"<sup>87</sup>.

From the very beginning of the modern interfaith movement, missionary work was thought to be incompatible with it, and this has been the basis of much opposition ever since. Christian opposition has often called for more missionary involvement, while Muslim and other non-Christian groups have sought to reduce it.

The secular threat which some believe to be inherent in the modern interfaith movement has several aspects to it. The word "secular" has primarily been defined in a Western context and it is generally associated with the rejection of something religious. It would be misleading to suggest Western secular societies have rejected religion. The Western crisis of religion is more accurately a crisis of organized religion, and not about whether people have become irreligious. Hans Kung, the famous Catholic theologian argues that religion today has successfully resisted the opposition of various secular movements that were popular at the beginning of this century: "If we look at East Germany, at Poland, at Czechoslovakia or the Soviet Union, at South Africa, Iran, the Philippines or Korea, and finally also at North and South America, today the cultural historical thesis of the end or the dying out of religion seems clearly to have been falsified. Neither atheistic humanism (a la Feuerbach) nor atheistic Socialism (a la Marx) nor atheistic science (a la Freud or Russell) has succeeded in replacing religion. On the contrary, the more the ideologies, these modern secular convictions of faith, lost credibility, the more the religions, old and new convictions of faith, gained impetus. Nowadays people talk of a post-ideological era but hardly still of a post-religious era."<sup>88</sup> He cites the 1987 Gallup Poll in the USA, where 94% believed in God, the 1989 Allenbach Poll in West Germany where 70% believed in God and the 1990 Sunday Times and Sunday Telegraph in the UK in which 75% believed in a "supernatural

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<sup>87</sup> *John Paul II, and Interreligious Dialogue*, edited by B. L. Sherwin and H. Kasimow, pp. 42-3.

<sup>88</sup> H. Kung, *Global Responsibility, In Search of a New World Ethic*, p. 45.

being". Hans Kung goes on to conclude that the crisis of religion in the West is one relating to organized religion, "It is Institutionalized religion, the Christian churches, which at least in Europe are in crisis because of fossilization and isolation (in the case of the Catholic Church) or exhaustion and lack of profile (in the case of the Protestant Church), which they have brought down on themselves. But given the present diffusion of religion and the zeal for conversion among fundamentalists or alternative communities there can be no question of a dying out of religion generally"<sup>89</sup>.

While the majority of people in the "secular West" continue to believe in God, very few still regularly go to Church. Some estimate that less than ten percent in Europe regularly attend church, and the reasons given for this is that religious thought is out of date, and not relevant to today's needs<sup>90</sup>.

Western scholars of religion have identified three broad categories of how people of different faiths see one another: the exclusivists, inclusivists, and pluralists. Although these categories were first made in the context of Christianity's relationship to the other world's religions, they were later generalised to apply to all inter-faith relationships.

The first category of people, the exclusivists, are most popularly associated with traditional religion. Their attitude of mind is exemplified for instance, in the late medieval Catholic dogma, extra *ecclesiam nulla salus*, 'outside the church, no salvation'. It is also epitomised in the pronouncement of Pope Boniface VIII in 1302:

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<sup>89</sup> *ibid*

<sup>90</sup> J.M. Templeton states: "Religious thought should progress along with the social, political, economic, and scientific environment, or people will grow dissatisfied and abandon belief systems that appear to have little basis in reality. A *New York Times* study covering 1957 to 1970 chronicled Americans' replies to the question, 'At the present time do you think religion as a whole is increasing its influence in American life or losing its influence?' The percentage who thought religion was indeed losing influence increased from fourteen percent in 1957 to seventy-five percent in 1970. Reasons given for this decline in religious influence included statements that religion was 'outdated' or 'not relevant in today's world'. The report stated that these results revealed one of the most dramatic reversals in opinion in the history of polling. The Gallup organization has found even greater religious decline in Europe. Every nation in Europe has lower church attendance percentage-wise than in America. In some nations still considered heavily Christian, church attendance by adults now averages below ten percent." (*The Humble Approach*, p. 66)



"We are required by faith to believe and hold that there is one holy, catholic and apostolic church; we firmly believe it and unreservedly profess it; outside it there is neither salvation nor remission of sins...Further, we declare, say, define and proclaim that to submit to the Roman Pontiff is, for every human creature, an utter necessity of salvation"<sup>91</sup>.

There has been some discussion as to whether this statement was really directed at other religions, or whether it was essentially a Christian inter-denominational one<sup>92</sup>. But the inter-religious intolerance of the period in which it was written is unmistakable. The medieval period was a time of Holy Wars between Christianity and Islam. Religious polemics were inseparable from the clash cultures. Religious exclusivism was an essential ingredient to cultural exclusivism. For Christian Europe, religious superiority remained an underlying ethic for cultural exclusivism right up to the end of the Western Colonial period earlier this century. Even now, there are vestiges of it that still linger on.

For the rest of the world, religious exclusivism is an integral part of traditional culture. It is apparent in the widespread tendency to equate religious beliefs with cultural identity. For example, until recently, the faith of most Muslims was derived from their country of origin. There seems to be little choice in the matter. Even if say a Pakistani child is brought up in Britain, he or she is often deemed to be a Muslim irrespective of what his or her religious views are. This fact was poignantly illustrated in the Salam Rushdie affair. Religion by culture, as opposed to religion by choice is the traditional religious approach, not all modern Muslims agree with it today. Religion by choice, and not by place of birth, is a relatively recent modern practice.

Religious exclusivism is also popularly associated with religious fundamentalism. The term "fundamentalism" originally arose out of Christian reform movements in America around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but is now inseparable from a religious response to secularism. It would be incorrect to reduce fundamentalism to religious exclusivism or to describe it as anti-scientific. Fundamentalists see themselves as holding beliefs that are more truthful to their religious tradition than

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<sup>91</sup> J. Hick, *A Christian Theology of Religions*, p. 83.

<sup>92</sup> J. Hick, *A Christian Theology of Religions*, pp. 83-4.

other denominations. This often involves a more literal interpretation of their scripture than other members of their faith, which leads on some occasions to a conflict with modern science, as in the Creationists vs Evolutionists controversy. In other instances, a more literal approach to interpreting scripture encourages religious exclusivism. For instance, some Christian fundamentalists justify their religious exclusivism by quoting Biblical texts such as, "I am the way, the truth and the life; no man cometh unto the Father, but by me" (John 14:6). But it is important to remember that fundamentalism is first and foremost an intra-religious phenomenon, rather than an inter-religious one. Fundamentalists, particularly Christian ones, have historically defined their beliefs primarily in relation to how they differ from members of their own faith. Of course, as people of different faiths come into greater contact with each other, fundamentalists are beginning to reformulate their doctrines taking people of other religions into account. It cannot however, be assumed in advance that their outlook will be exclusivist.

The inclusivists give more respect to other faiths than the exclusivists. They acknowledge that there are valuable aspects to other religions, but recognise them ultimately to be indirect manifestations of the revelation of *their* own faith. The Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner (1904-84), considered non-Christians to be "anonymous Christians"<sup>93</sup>. A similar position is articulated by the present Catholic Church. In a statement prepared in 1965 called *Nostra Aetate*, the Catholic Church set out its relationship to the world's major religions in the following way:

"The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions. She regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men. Indeed, she proclaims, and ever must proclaim Christ "the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14: 6), in whom men may find the fullness of religious life, in whom God has reconciled all things to Himself. The Church, therefore, exhorts her sons, that through dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions, carried out with prudence and love and in witness to the Christian faith and life, they recognize, preserve and promote the good

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<sup>93</sup> Karl Rahner, 'Christianity and the Non-Christian Religions', in *Christianity and Other Religions* selected readings, edited by J. Hick and Brian Hebblethwaite, pp. 56, 61.

things, spiritual and moral, as well as the socio-cultural values found among these men”<sup>94</sup>

Here the Catholic church only recognizes the validity of other religions in terms of them containing a “ray of truth” which is much more fully present in Christ. In 1998, the present Pope cites the first Encyclical Letter of his pontificate which mentions the “seeds of the Word” being “present and active in various religions”<sup>95</sup>. In the same letter he states, “It must first be kept in mind that every quest of the human spirit for truth and goodness, and in the last analysis for God, is inspired by the Holy Spirit”. So either by being “seeds of the Word”, or as a ray of the Holy Spirit, some degree of good is allowed for in other religions. However, they cannot be compared to the “fullness of religious life” in Christ. This approach exemplifies religious inclusivism. Not wanting to reject other religions outright, inclusivists allow other religions to contain a small measure of *their* own truth.

The third category of responses to the modern multi-religious challenge, pluralism, puts all religions on an equal footing. Each is described to be different, but complimentary in character. Each contains valid lessons for the others, and there is none that is intrinsically superior to the rest. Brian Hebblethwaite, a Christian pluralist, describes pluralism in the following way:

“Christians must cease to think of their faith as bearing witness to God’s final and absolute self-revelation to man. Rather, they must learn to recognize their experiences of God in Christ to be but one of many different saving encounters with the divine which have been given to different historical and cultural segments of mankind”<sup>96</sup>.

The pluralist believes his or her religious tradition is one amongst many. Each religious tradition is considered to be equally valuable to mankind as a whole.

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<sup>94</sup> Published in the interfaith supplement of this volume.

<sup>95</sup> Pope John Paul II, Wednesday General Audience, 9<sup>th</sup> September, 1998.

<sup>96</sup> quoted by H. Kasimow in *John Paul II and Interreligious Dialogue*, edited by B. L. Sherwin and H. Kasimow, pp. 3-4.

Another spokesman for religious pluralism, perhaps the most famous, is the Protestant theologian/philosopher, John Hick. He presented the challenge of pluralism in terms of a metaphor borrowed from the history of modern science. Just as the earth was believed to lie at the centre of the universe, with all the planets and the sun revolving around it, so traditional religion sees itself at the centre of a "universe of faiths". But just as Copernicus realized that it was the sun which lay at the centre, not the earth, so too must all religions make a Copernican like revolution in their spiritual universe. The religious Copernican challenge is to place God at the centre of the universe of Faiths. John Hick puts it in the following way

"Copernicus realized that it is the sun, and not the earth, that is at the center, and that all the heavenly bodies, including our own earth, revolve around it. And we have to realize that the universe of faiths centers upon God, and not upon Christianity or upon any other religion. He is the sun, the originiative source of light and life, whom all the religions reflect in their different ways"<sup>97</sup>.

The religious Copernican metaphor has a democratic appeal about it. It has obvious attractions to a multi-faith society and so seems better adapted to the future of mankind than exclusivism or inclusivism. It has however, aroused considerable opposition. The Christian theologian, Martin Forward, states, "the alluring call by pluralists for a theocentric rather than christocentric theology of religions could turn out to be a siren call to destruction. It espouses a simplistic, partial and reductionistic view of Jesus"<sup>98</sup>. Elsewhere, he states, "If Hick's and other pluralist's interpretation of Jesus' importance to the world of the third millenium were to triumph in Christianity, Jesus would in practice become a rather marginal figure"<sup>99</sup>. The fear here, is that a theocentric centre will displace the position of Christ, who according to Martin Forward, must always lie at the centre of a Christian's faith.

Opposition to religious pluralism may in some instances, be linked to its similarity to postmodernist pluralism. The postmodernist thesis in relation to different cultures, not only respects their differences but also

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<sup>97</sup> J. Hick, *God Has Many Names*, pp. 70-1.

<sup>98</sup> Martin Forward, *Jesus, A Short Biography*, p. 158.

<sup>99</sup> *ibid*, p. 164.

states them to be incompatible, that is, it rejects any common ground between them. The positive aspect of this is that there is no basis for superiority or inferiority. As a social philosophy, cultural pluralism has obvious merits, and engenders an ethic of equal respect for all races. But it has limitations. By making all values relative, there is the danger of arriving at no values at all. If all values are equally valid, there is nothing to recommend any of them. Likewise, the postmodernist insistence that all truths' claims are relative, means by the same token, that the postmodernist thesis itself is one amongst many equally valid ones, there being no objective basis to choose between them. These types of limitations to pluralism as a philosophy are well known, and it might appear that the same kind of limitations exist for religious pluralism. If all religions are ultimately relative, in the subjective and cultural sense, there is no objective basis to recommend any one of them. They are equally invalid as they are valid. If all religious people become pluralists, they will, by definition, no longer be committed to any one faith. Pluralism taken a little further, undermines belief in religion as a whole.

But religious pluralism is different from postmodern pluralism. In Hick's Copernican analogy, each religion is not left without a centre, God is placed at the centre. Religious pluralism entails a unity in diversity of truths, where the common centre to each religion, according to Hick, is God. Now just what we mean by God is of course debatable. Buddhism does not seem to attach the same importance to it as say the Abrahamic religions. Hick suggests that all religions in one way or another entail belief in what he refers to as "the Real" or "the Eternal One"<sup>100</sup>. But the main point here is that religious pluralism is different to postmodern pluralism in that it recommends something. Just because all religions are equally valid does not make them all *completely* relative. There are of course many subjective elements to them, but religious pluralism also acknowledges common elements to all religions, that is, objective ones. Articulating their objective side is not a straightforward task, but nevertheless, it is important to recognise that this side to religious pluralism exists.

Hick's proposal of putting the Real at the centre of all religious experience is a separate proposition from the principle of pluralism. It is not clear if "The Real" provides the common ground on which people of

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<sup>100</sup> J. Hick, *A Christian Theology of Religions*, pp. 57-81.



different faiths can unite. But the spirit of Hick's proposition calls for a reorientation of egocentric values, and that is the part with which most people would agree. Seyyed Nasr, in the same spirit, prefers to put the "perennial religion" at the centre of all religions. He defines it as the "inner reality" of each faith:

"One can speak of *religio perennis*, the perennial religion, lying at the heart of all authentic religions... this philosophy, or rather metaphysics, is based on the fundamental principle that the only point of accord between various sacred forms is precisely the inward esoteric dimension; that is, the forms of a religion are not exhausted by their outward limitations, and there is always an inner reality of which the outward is the external form. The outward exists by virtue of the fact that it has issued from the inward...if we limit religions and their truth claims simply to their externality, we will never be able to reach the inner dimension where alone unity is to be found"<sup>101</sup>.

Nasr's "perennial religion" has a close relationship to the mystical side of all religions. Whether it is Hick's Real or Nasr's perennial religion, the important point here is that they both believe in an eternal and universal part to religion. They both describe the differences between religions to have come about from the finite nature of human knowledge, which changes from time to time and from place to place. Nasr refers to "crystallizations in the world of time and space", on the "human plane"<sup>102</sup>. Hick speaks of the "diversity of forms" in religions coming from the principle (articulated by the theologian St Thomas Aquinas) that "Things known are in the knower according to the mode of the knower"<sup>103</sup>. He also cites the philosopher Kant's well-known distinction between the "noumenal world" or "Real in-itself", as opposed to the finite human conception of it<sup>104</sup>.

The inner mystical side to religions being at the common centre of the world's spiritual traditions is also very close to the Bahá'í approach. But how would Bahá'ís respond to Hick's proposal of putting the Real at the

<sup>101</sup> A.Sharma and K.K. Dugan, *A Dome of Many Colors*, p. 161.

<sup>102</sup> A.Sharma and K.K. Dugan, *A Dome of Many Colors*, p. 161.

<sup>103</sup> J. Hick, *God Has Many Names*, p49

<sup>104</sup> J. Hick, *God Has Many Names*, p106

centre of their faith instead of Bahá'u'lláh? Would their response not be similar to Christians like Martin Forward who reject it?

A Bahá'í response to Hick may be made along the following lines. Even though the idea of an unknowable being, the Real, is present in most religious traditions of the world, the Real's *spiritual attributes* are known to us through the founders of religions. The Christian God for instance, is known through the person of Christ. So to displace Christ from the Christian centre would also be tantamount to displacing God from the centre. We can displace the human, historical transient Christ from the centre, but not the eternal spiritual Christ. In fact, the common centre has all the founders of religions in it. The transient parts to all religions, although still important, will take a secondary role and revolve around the inner timeless centre. Christians should keep Christ at their centre, but if it is to be shared by people of other faiths, it must be an inner Christ, the Logos, the eternal Word of God. Bahá'ís should put Bahá'u'lláh at the centre of their faith, and if it is Bahá'u'lláh as the eternal Word of God, faith in Bahá'u'lláh will lead to faith in the other founders of religions, and vice-versa. They will all be connected. In this way can the many names of God, along with the names of various prophets and sages, find unity in an unnameable centre.

It is important to recognise that interfaith dialogue is not limited to religious pluralism. Martin Forward, although opposed to religious pluralism, is committed to interfaith dialogue. Dialogue may involve clearing up misunderstandings and be a way of making oneself heard. Certainly, all participants in the dialogue do not have to agree with one another. Even if all participants were to agree on the fundamental unity of religions, they may differ about the way they describe it. They can all still learn from one another. Keith Ward, an influential Christian philosopher and theologian thinks that the kind of pluralism advocated by Hick cannot overcome religious differences, and that we have to learn to live with religious theological and doctrinal differences. He emphasizes the importance of finding common ground on pluralist ethics, rather than finding unity in theology or doctrine. He states that "It is a mark of maturity to be able to disagree in friendship, and that is what religious believers in the pluralist context of the modern world are going to have to do"<sup>105</sup>. Ward lists "seven principles of global pluralism" which

<sup>105</sup> Keith Ward, *God, Faith and the New Millennium*, p. 168.

include having an attitude of respect, humility, concern for other people's welfare, search for truth, cooperation, peace etc.

Pluralism, primarily in terms of an ethical attitude of mind, was articulated in the "Dialogue Decalogue, ground rules for Interreligious, Inter-ideological dialogue" by Leonard Swidler, editor of the *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*. He presents "ten commandments" which are based upon having respect, humility, honesty, sincerity etc<sup>106</sup>. Other notable efforts to found pluralism on adopting the right ethics have been made by the Catholic theologians, Hans Kung and Paul Knitter. Kung in the concluding pages of his book "Global responsibility, in search of a new world ethic" states:

"In this book it has become clear from beginning to end that a new post-colonial, post-imperialistic, postmodern world constellation is in the making, and thus a polycentric world which is being bound ever closer together by new communication technologies. But at the same time this polycentric world must be a transcultural and multi-religious world. In this polycentric, transcultural and multi-religious world ecumenical dialogue between the world religions takes on quite new importance; for the sake of its peace this postmodern world needs more than ever the global religious understanding without which a political understanding will in the last resort no longer be possible. The slogan of the hour is therefore, 'We must begin on global religious understanding here and now!' We must advance inter-religious understanding energetically in the local, regional, national and international spheres. We must seek ecumenical understanding with all religious groups and at all levels... we need a more intensive philosophical and theological dialogue of theologians and specialists in religion which takes religious plurality seriously in theological terms, accepts the challenge of the other religions, and investigates their significance for each person's own religion...at the same time we need the spiritual dialogue of religious communities, of monks, nuns and laity, who are silent, meditate and reflect together and are concerned with a deepening of the spiritual life, and the questions of a spirituality for our time...Therefore the programme which guides us and which comes together as one may be summed up once again in three basic statements: no human life together

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<sup>106</sup> Leonard Swidler, 'The Dialogue Decalogue' in *A Source Book for the Earth's Community of Religions*, project editor, J. Beversluis, pp. 158-160.

without a world ethic for the nations; no peace among the nations without peace among the religions; no peace among the religions without dialogue among the religions"<sup>107</sup>.

Now Kung's call for pluralism is clearly much more practical than theological. It is a call to recognise "religious plurality" in the context of finding ethics for the future peace and security of the world. Kung was invited by the Council for a Parliament of the World's Religions (CPWR) to help draft the "Global Ethic" declaration statement. This statement was signed by many people attending the 2<sup>nd</sup> Parliament of the World's Religions conference in 1993<sup>108</sup>.

The call for "global responsibility" is also the major theme explored by Paul Knitter. An important contribution made by Knitter is to suggest how Christian mission should be reevaluated in terms of Christians serving humanity. The force of his argument lies in the suggestion that the paramount duty of Christians is first and foremost to bring about the "Kingdom of God", and not necessarily to win more converts for Christianity. He suggests that it is "conversion to the Kingdom" which has priority, and this involves bringing about a more united, just and peaceful world. He states that, "Such an understanding of mission can be not only sobering but consoling. A missionary who has no baptisms to report, but who has helped Hindus, Buddhists, and Christians to live together lovingly and justly is a successful disciple of Christ; a missionary who has filled the church with converts without seeking to change a society that condones dowry deaths or bonded labor is a failure"<sup>109</sup>.

Knitter's arguments are directed primarily at Christians, but they also obviously apply to members of other faiths. He also writes against Christian exclusiveness. Being faithful to Christ's message does not necessarily mean that a Christian has to be exclusive. Christians can be "true" to their spiritual experience by affirming the transforming of Christ in their own lives, but they step beyond their experience when they try to make it exclusive. They can only properly affirm the truth of

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<sup>107</sup> H. Kung, *Global Responsibility, in Search of a New World Ethic*, pp. 135-8.

<sup>108</sup> "A Global Ethic", Chapter 23, *A Source Book for the Earth's Community of Religions*, project editor, J. Beversluis

<sup>109</sup> Paul Knitter, *Jesus and the Other Names*, p. 121.

their own experience, and this does not automatically mean that they can judge the truth of other people's experience. Knitter sums this up by stating, "Truly" doesn't require "Only"<sup>110</sup>.

Another Christian who has written in favour of religious diversity and pluralism is J. M. Templeton. Templeton, advocates a Christian "humble approach", which makes it possible for Christianity to be open to learn from the insights of other religions as well as learning from the discoveries of modern science. Templeton states,

"Differing concepts of God have developed in different cultures. No one should say that God can be reached by only one path. Such exclusiveness lacks humility because it presumes that we can and do comprehend God. The humble person is ready to admit and welcome the various manifestations of God. Jesus quoted Isaiah thus: "But in vain they do worship me; teaching for doctrine the commandments of men." (Matthew 15: 9). Schism in religions is caused by intolerance; and intolerance is a form of egotism. However, tolerance is not the same as the humble approach. We should seek to benefit from the inspiring highlights of other denominations and religions, not just to tolerate them. We should try our very best to give the beauties of our religion to others, because sharing our most prized possessions is the highest form of "Love thy neighbor". Let us not water down the diverse religions into a know-nothing soup; but rather let us study enthusiastically the glorious highlights of each. An old Chinese precept is, "the good man does not grieve that other people do not recognize his merits. His only anxiety is lest he should fail to recognize theirs." It is a mistake for people of different religions to try to agree with each other. The result is not the best of each but rather the watered-down, least-common denominator. What is more fruitful is a spirit of humility in which we recognize that no one will ever comprehend all that God is. Therefore, let us permit and encourage each prophet to proclaim the best as it is revealed to him. There is no conflict unless the restrictive idea of exclusiveness enters in. We can hold our ideas of the Gospel with utmost enthusiasm, while humbly admitting that we know ever so little of the whole and that there is plenty of room for those who think they have seen God in a different way."<sup>111</sup>

<sup>110</sup> *ibid*, p. 72.

<sup>111</sup> J.M. Templeton, *The Humble Approach*, p. 46.



Apart from humility, Templeton advocates a theology based upon the principle of spiritual evolution, which has obvious parallels with the Bahá'í approach. He describes it in terms of an evolution of "consciousness":

"The nature of the Universe is to evolve. This is true of every part including rocks, minerals, plants, animals and man. This is also true of the very essence of the Universe, which is consciousness. Consciousness has been present in every stage. It is God-Mind seeking to express Itself as perfection. Consciousness evolves along with every other element. A rock is more limited in consciousness than the mineral it contains. A vegetable with its ability to grow is a still more highly evolved expression of consciousness. As the Persian poet wrote: "God sleeps in the mineral, dreams in the vegetable, stirs in the animal, and awakens in man"<sup>112</sup>. He then goes on to quote Teilhard de Chardin, the famous French Catholic theologian who lived in the early part of this century. He cites Chardin for evolution being the "law of the universe", where "each one of us is evolving towards the God-head"<sup>113</sup>. Chardin believed that evolution was directed, both on the physical and spiritual level by the "Universal Christ". He called the future point of human evolution, the "Omega Point". Chardin writes of a "Super-Christ", responsible for developing a "Super-Mankind" or "Super-Humanity". But Templeton's multi-faith approach is a great advance on Chardin's theology. Chardin asks whether Christianity is the only "possible religion?", and argues that it is, believing that only Christianity is truly universal. Of Islam, he states, "the Allah of the Koran will remain a God for the Bedouin. He could never attract the effort of any truly civilised man"<sup>114</sup>. Of Hinduism, he states that it is based upon "negation" and that we must "never allow ourselves to be run away with by the sophism of the East"<sup>115</sup>. He concluded that "if Christianity is now the only factually possible religion, it is because it is the only one logically possible. The divine, with which mankind cannot do without if it is not to fall back into dust, will be found for us only if we adhere closely to the movement from

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<sup>112</sup> J.M. Templeton, *The Humble Approach*, p. 92.

<sup>113</sup> *ibid*, p. 92.

<sup>114</sup> Teilhard de Chardin, *Science and Christ*, p. 105.

<sup>115</sup> *ibid*, p. 106.

which Christ is progressively emerging."<sup>116</sup> There are in Chardin, unmistakable sentiments of Western cultural and religious superiority.

There are obviously different levels at which religions can interact. Although many have reservations about Hick's theological pluralism, there are a growing number of people who support a movement for religious plurality in the service of mankind, in coming together to create a more united, just and humane world. Even, Hick's rational theology is part of a broader hope for brotherhood:

"The broad trend of the present century is ecumenical. Old divisions are being transcended. The deeper essentials in which people agree are tending to seem more important than the matters on which they differ. Projecting this trend into the future, we may suppose that the ecumenical spirit which has already so largely transformed Christianity will increasingly affect the relations between the world faiths. There may well be a growing world ecumenism, in which the common commitment of faith in a higher spiritual reality which demands brotherhood on earth will seem more and more significant, while the differences between the religious traditions will seem proportionately less significant. The relation between them may thus become somewhat like that between the Christian denominations in this country - that is to say, they are on increasingly friendly terms: they freely visit one another's worship and are beginning to be able to share places of worship; they cooperate in all sorts of service to the community; their clergy are accustomed to meet together for discussion; and there is even a degree of interchange of ministries; and so on."<sup>117</sup>

So far, examples of Christian pluralism have been described. There are however, like-minded movements in Judaism. Jonathan Sacks, Chief Rabbi in the United Kingdom, likens the plurality of faiths to the plurality of languages. Just as knowledge of many languages does not detract from one's own mother tongue, but in fact leads to a greater appreciation of language in general, so interfaith activity can enhance our appreciation of religion. Just as the existence of many languages can exist side by side, without feeling threatened by the others, so too, can religions coexist peacefully. Sacks describes it in the following way,

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<sup>116</sup> *ibid*, p. 111.

<sup>117</sup> J. Hick, *God Has Many Names*, p. 77.

"Babel is the essential preface to the history of Abraham. Without it, we might have thought that the covenant with Abraham was universal like the covenant with Noah, that it applied to all humanity and that it expressed a universal religious truth. It did not. Just as after Babel there is no single universal language, so there is no single universal culture and no single universal faith. The faith of Abraham left room for other ways of serving God, just as the English language leaves room for French and Spanish and Italian. Faiths are like languages. There are many of them, and they are not reducible to one another. In order to express myself at all, I must acquire a mastery of my own language. If I have no language, I will still have feelings but I will be utterly inarticulate in communicating them. The language into which I am born, which I learn from my parents and my immediate environment, is where I learn self-expression. It is a crucial, perhaps even an essential, part of who I am. But as I venture out into the world I discover that there are other people who have different languages which I must learn if we are to communicate across borders. A faith is like a language. I am at home in my own language as I am at home in my own faith. True conversions are rare. But I am not compromised by the existence of other languages. To the contrary, the more languages I can speak, the more I can communicate with others and the more I am enriched by their experience. To believe that our faith is the only religious reality there is, is rather like the old-fashioned British tourist who believed that you could communicate with the Spanish by speaking English very slowly and very loudly. After Babel, the religious reality, like the linguistic reality, is inescapably plural."<sup>118</sup>

The contemporary orthodox rabbi, David Hartman, finds in the Bible two covenants, that of "Creation", and the other "Sinai". The Creation covenant (as reflected in the story of Noah), is with all mankind, while the Sinai covenant is specifically with Israel. The two covenants run in parallel and do not preclude each other. This allows for the plurality of faiths, each God's way of speaking to different groups of people<sup>119</sup>. Rabbi Dr Norman Solomon, director-designate of the Centre for the Study of Judaism and Jewish-Christian Relations (at Birmingham in the

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<sup>118</sup> Jonathan Sacks, *Faith in the Future*, pp. 79-80.

<sup>119</sup> Cited by Norman Solomon, 'Judaism and World Religions, the 1985 Sir Francis Younghusband Memorial Lecture', *World Faiths*, No. 12, February 1986, p. 22.

England), uses the "covenant of Noah", the universal covenant in Judaism, as a basis for interfaith dialogue:

"The 'covenant of Noah' offers a pattern for us to seek from others not necessarily conversion to Judaism, but rather that faithfulness to the highest principles of justice and morality which we perceive as the essence of revealed religion. The dialogue of faiths is therefore for us a natural outgrowth of our mission. We are still bound to one another by our history and by common religious formats; this special bond is open for others to join, though they are under no obligation to do so. Yet we take joy in the bond that unites mankind, as descendants of the one 'first created pair', Adam and Eve, and look forward to the restoration of that universal bond in time to come, when 'the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the lord, as the waters cover the sea' (Isaiah 11 :9)."<sup>120</sup>

Jewish pluralists such as Jonathan Sacks and Norman Solomon accept that God has made multiple covenants in human history, each with different people. They emphasize that there is nothing in the covenant of Judaism that precludes or negates the validity of the others. The unity of mankind must ultimately be the principle upon which Jewish pluralism takes its inspiration, since ultimately, we are all made in God's image (Genesis 1:26).

## 5. Ancient Wisdom

The three key organisers of the first Parliament of the World's Religions conference were Christians: Charles Bonney, Rev. John Henry Barrows, a Presbyterian minister, and Rev. Jenkin Lloyd Jones, a Unitarian minister. Most the speakers and attendees at the conference came from a Christian background. In a study guide on "Interfaith Dialogue", the Rev. Marcus Braybrooke, a leading figure in the world interfaith movement over the last 25 years, lists four organizations which have been particularly active in promoting global interfaith exchange. They are: The International Association for Religious Freedom, started in 1900 by some of those who attended the Parliament of the World's Religions; The World Congress of Faiths, founded in 1936 by Sir Francis

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<sup>120</sup> *ibid.*, p. 25.

Younghusband: The Temple of Understanding, now based in New York, founded in 1960 by Judith Hollister: and The World Conference on Religion and Peace, whose first assembly did not meet until 1970<sup>121</sup>. The founders and main contributors to these organisations have been, for the most, Christians.

These organisations, largely Christian in inspiration, are reaching out into the non-Western world. It is interesting to note that there was a first Parliament of Religions conference in Singapore on the 22<sup>nd</sup> December, 1979, and the first Asian conference on Religion and Peace took place in Singapore in 1976.

Most the literature on modern religious pluralism originated from debates started from within Christianity, and the influential writers on the subject have been Christian. As the debate becomes more global in nature, this is slowly changing. But the main point here is that the modern interfaith movement has emerged from the Christian West. There is considerable irony in this fact, since compared to the other world religions, Christianity has relatively little experience in interfaith harmony.

The great Buddhist emperor Ashoka of the third century CE in Sri Lanka, after converting to Buddhism, transformed a reign of war into one of peace and inter-religious harmony. Instead of sending out troops to conquer neighbouring countries, he sent out Buddhist missionaries preaching a message of unity, compassion and non-violence. He explicitly set out to promote inter-religious harmony in the name of Buddhism. Buddhism spread throughout South East Asia without violence.

In the world of Islam, the most famous example of inter-religious harmony is in medieval Spain. Christians and Jews were allowed to live peacefully for long periods at a time under the protection of Islamic rulers. This kind of protection and harmony was linked with the ethics of Islam. There were of course other times where local Caliphs attempted forced conversions. In such cases, many Jews and Christians were pressured to renounce their faith, flee their homes, or suffer a martyr's

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<sup>121</sup> "A Study Guide for Interreligious Cooperation and Understanding", Chapter 26, *A Source Book for the Earth's Community of Religions*, project editor, J. Beversluis.



death. The family of Moses Maimonides, the most famous of all Jewish philosophers was compelled to leave their home for this reason<sup>122</sup>. However, this persecution was relatively mild in comparison to the persecution of Jews under Christian rule, or the suffering of Muslims under the Spanish Inquisition.

Another enlightened period for interfaith harmony took place in Northern India in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, where saints from both within Hinduism and Islam attempted to repair the damage of religious intolerance. The ten saints of the Sikh religion, starting with Guru Nanak, based their doctrine of religious harmony on the unity of God. In their sacred scripture, the *Adi-Granth*, there are quotations from both Hindu and Muslim sages. The great Muslim ruler Akbar in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, attempted to found a "Divine Faith", which incorporated elements from Islam, Hinduism, Christianity and Zoroastrianism, but his dream of religious unity did not continue on after his death.

The long period of Buddhists, Taoists and Confucianists living side by side in China is also an important interfaith achievement. Wing-Tsit Chan, a writer on Chinese history, describes it in the following way:

"It has often been said that in the last 1800 years the three religions of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism have been going on in parallel, harmonised, or synthesised... It is not uncommon to find in a Chinese family a Buddhist father, a Taoist mother, and a Confucian son... the great majority, however, cannot be described as exclusive followers of Confucianism, Buddhism, or Taoism either in the broad sense of systems of thought or in the narrow sense of an organised religion. In the realm of religion, many of them follow the three religions at the same time, visiting Buddhist or Taoist temples as the need arises and also perform Confucian rites before their ancestors. Temples dedicated to the Three Sages are found in all parts of China, and some of them even include representations of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism... It is often said that the average Chinese is one who wears a Confucian crown, so to speak, a Taoist robe, and Buddhist sandals."<sup>123</sup>

<sup>122</sup> Moses Maimonides, *Guide for the Perplexed*, p. xvii - p. xviii,

<sup>123</sup> Wing-Tsit Chang, 'The Historic Chinese contribution to Religious Pluralism and World Community', in *Religious Pluralism and World Community*, edited by E. J. Jurji, pp. 114-5.

There have been periods of religious conflict in China. The Buddhists were persecuted in the 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries, but these periods of intolerance were relatively brief, very seldom involved bloodshed, and were largely political and economic in nature. At the turn of this century, various interfaith organisations in China were formed, apparently quite independent of the modern Western interfaith movement. Around 1915 for example, The Society of World Religions and the International Society of Holy Religions were founded. In a decade or so, they were followed by The Universal Ethical Society, the Tao Yuan or Society of the Way and the Ikuan Tao or the Way of Pervading Unity<sup>124</sup>. Members of these societies recognised the validity of Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, Islam, Christianity and Judaism.

Religious pluralism, although very much in vogue at the moment in the West, has in fact ancient roots. Both in India and China, the unity in diversity principle of religions has evolved over millennia. The founder of Taoism, Lao Tzu, at the beginning of his most famous work, the *Tao-te Ching*, points to the unity of all things in the "Nameless Tao". There is "non-being", and the world of "being", these two worlds are the "same, but after they are produced, they have different names, they both may be called deep and profound, the door of all subtleties!"<sup>125</sup>.

In the *Analects* of Confucius, the brotherhood of man concept is clearly and unmistakably stated. A disciple of Confucius, Ssu-ma Niu expressed his anxiety over having no brother, but in response, the following Confucius saying is cited, "If a superior man is reverential (or serious) without fail, and is respectful in dealing with others and follows the rules of propriety, then all within the four seas (the world) are brother"<sup>126</sup>. In a footnote, the translator, Wing-Tsit Chan, adds that here, "the four seas" would ordinarily mean China, none doubts that here it means the entire world"<sup>127</sup>. Indeed, the context of the passage, implying that wherever someone treats another person with reverence and respect, that person is

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<sup>124</sup> Wing-Tsit Chan, 'The Historic Chinese Contribution to Religious Pluralism and World Community', in *Religious Pluralism and World Community*, edited by E. J. Jurji, pp. 118-9.

<sup>125</sup> Lao Tzu, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, Wing-Tsit Chan, verse 1, p. 139.

<sup>126</sup> *ibid*, p. 39.

<sup>127</sup> *ibid*.

one's brother. The passage proclaims the universal brotherhood of mankind, and points to a common ethical principle underlying all people.

Buddhism in China articulated the "One in Many" principle. The philosophy of Fa-Tsang (596-664) of the Hua-Yen school, is known as the "One-and-all" philosophy<sup>128</sup>. Summarizing the Buddhist unity in diversity principle, Fa-Tsang states, "the tendency of harmonious combination becomes unrestricted because it has no nature, and all phenomena which exist spontaneously can be combined because they rise through causation. As the one and the many totally involve each other, we look at one particle of dust and everything suddenly becomes manifest. As the "This" takes in the "other", we look at a tiny hair and all things appear together. The reason is that, when the mind understands, all dharmas can be free and at ease, and because the principle is clear, great wisdom can be achieved. Among seekers of wisdom, who will examine its source? People talking about it it seldom investigate its mystery to the limit."<sup>129</sup> The Buddhist "One in Many" principle influenced the Neo-Confucianists in the Sung period, and for the last millennium, it has become deeply rooted in Chinese culture. The Neo-Confucianist, Chang-Tsai (1020-77), linked it to Confucian brotherhood, "Heaven is my father and Earth is my mother, and even such a small creature as I finds an intimate place in their midst. Therefore that which fills the universe I regard as my body and that which directs the universe I consider as my nature. All people are my brothers and sisters, and all things are my companions"<sup>130</sup>. Moreover, specifically on the subject of religious plurality, To K'an Tse of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD stated, "All religions have their source in Heaven which they obey"<sup>131</sup>. The Emperor Wu (502-549), said of Confucius, Lao Tzu, and Buddha, "Traced to the source, the three sages are no different"<sup>132</sup>. These are but a few examples of the long history of religious pluralism in China, there is much more. In the I-Ching, "The Book of Changes", the classic pre-Confucian text, a religious unity in diversity principle is clearly articulated, "In the world,

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<sup>128</sup> *ibid.*, chap. 25

<sup>129</sup> *ibid.*, p. 424.

<sup>130</sup> *ibid.*, p. 497.

<sup>131</sup> Wing-Tsit Chan, 'The Historic Chinese Contribution to Religious Pluralism and World Community', in *Religious Pluralism and World Community*, edited by E. J. Jurji, p. 123.

<sup>132</sup> *ibid.*

there are many different roads but the destination is the same. There are a hundred deliberations but the result is one"<sup>133</sup>.

Religious pluralism in India has also a long tradition to it. In the Rig Veda, hymns that date before 1000 BC, the following unity of the gods principle is stated: "They call it Indra, Mitra, Vaurana, and Agni and also heavenly, beautiful Garutman: The real is one, though sages name it variously." (Rig. Veda 1: 169). In the famous Baghavat Gita, Lord Krishna declares that: "In any way that men love me in that same way they find my love: for many are the paths of men, but they all in the end come to me" (Gita 4: 11).

If Hinduism has a long history of searching for unity, of advocating religious pluralism, then Buddhism has a distinguished legacy in the "search after truth". Of all the world's religious traditions, it is Buddhism that gives the most simple, profound, and clearly stated lessons on detachment. More than any other religion, it warns against the perils of blind attachment to religion. There are many images that beautifully express this in Buddhist writings. One such story is the "parable of the Raft". The Buddha likens religious teachings to being a raft which can be used to cross the river of life. But once on the other side, the traveller is encouraged to leave it behind, and continue the journey unencumbered by it:

"Monks, as a man going along a highway might see a great stretch of water, on his side dangerous and frightening, the further bank secure, not frightening; but if there were no boat for crossing by or a bridge across for going from this side to the beyond, it might occur to him: 'Suppose that I, collecting grass, sticks, branches and leaves and tying them into a raft, depending on that raft and striving with hands and feet, should cross over safely to the beyond?' Then he does so. This might then occur to him. 'Depending on this raft and striving with hands and feet, I have crossed over safely to the beyond. Suppose now that putting this raft on my head or my shoulder I should proceed as I desire?' What do you think, monks, if he does this is he doing what should be done with that raft?" "No, Lord." "What, monks, should that man do with the raft? It might occur to him: 'Suppose now that I beach this raft on dry ground or

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<sup>133</sup> Book of Changes, quoted by Phyllis Chew, *The Chinese Religion and the Bahá'í Faith*, p. 68.

submerge it and proceed as I desire?' In doing this, monks, that man would be doing what should be done with the raft. Even so, monks, is this simile of the raft taught by me for crossing over, not for retaining. You, monks, by understanding this simile should get rid, even of right mental objects, all the more of wrong ones"<sup>134</sup>

There are of course, many ways in which this image of the Buddha can be understood. On the individual level, we all have our "rafts", our "attachments", which we must be ready to leave behind in the path of truth. Maybe, some doctrines or practices were useful to us at one stage of our development, but now, only hinder us from going forward. This does not necessarily mean we reject religious teachings, but it does mean that we do not blindly adhere to them, remaining static within them. Religion should always be carrying us forward: if we are to progress, some of our previous beliefs must in some way be superseded. If there are elements to our faith that are no longer useful, a hindrance to our progress, then we should have the courage to discard them. Moreover, our love for one religion must not blind us from recognizing the truth in another. In this context, the Bahá'í Faith is also very clear. 'Abdu'l-Bahá stated that "We should, therefore, detach ourselves from the external forms and practices of religion. We must realize that these forms and practices, however beautiful, are but garments clothing the warm heart and the living limbs of Divine truth. We must abandon the prejudices of tradition if we would succeed in finding the truth at the core of all religions"<sup>135</sup>. 'Abdu'l-Bahá goes on to say that, "We must not allow our love for any one religion or any one personality to so blind our eyes that we become fettered by superstition"<sup>136</sup>. Indeed, 'Abdu'l-Bahá encouraged us to discard the kind of religious beliefs that lead to discord and conflict, "Religion should unite all hearts and cause wars and disputes to vanish from the face of the earth, give birth to spirituality, and bring life and light to each heart. If religion becomes a cause of dislike, hatred and division, it will be better to be without it, and to withdraw from such a religion would be a truly religious act."<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> Buddha: Parable of the Raft, *The Raft, Twelve Discourses of the Buddha*, compiled by Mom Chao Upalisan Jumbala, p. xxii.

<sup>135</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 136.

<sup>136</sup> *ibid.*, p.137.

<sup>137</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 130.



Implied in the above passages, is the encouragement to judge religious doctrines by their moral effects and results. This approach is beautifully stated in the Buddhist writings. After hearing different Brahmins dispute about religion, each claiming that their way was the only correct one, the disciples of Buddha asked for advice. The Buddha replied:

“Don’t you accept anything merely because it is a revealed authoritative tradition. Don’t you accept anything merely because it is an unbroken succession of teaching (apostolic succession). Don’t you accept anything merely because it is report or hearsay. Don’t you accept anything merely because it is found in the scriptures (of various sects). Don’t you accept anything merely on the grounds of logic or from speculative metaphysical theories. Don’t you accept anything merely because of standpoint or point of view. Don’t you accept anything merely after reflecting on reasons. Don’t you accept a fact as true merely because it agrees with a theory you are already convinced of. Don’t you accept anything merely on the grounds of competence or reliability of a person. Don’t you accept anything merely out of respect for your teacher. Whenever you know for yourselves that these things are of merit, these things are harmless, these things are praised by the wise, these things, if performed in full, conduce to benefit, conduce to happiness, then do you keep on fulfilling them”<sup>138</sup>.

There is in this passage, a strikingly modern approach to finding truth, which has close parallels to a modern scientific outlook. Blind acceptance of doctrines in religion can no more be accepted than untested theories in science. Each must in some way be tested by individual experience. The touchstone for testing religious doctrines is their moral effect: do they “conduce to benefit, conduce to happiness”? We must be continually asking, what are the fruits of a religious doctrine or belief, in order to assess its truth content. The relativity of religious truth is implicit in this approach. There is no attempt to arrive at absolute or objective theology. The touchstone of judging a religious doctrine by its moral effects plays a similar role to that of experiments in science. Both types of tests cannot of course be applied too literally. A religious doctrine may be true, even though religious people do not translate it into good actions. A religion cannot be judged solely on the actions of its

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<sup>138</sup> Kalama Sutta, *The Raft, Twelve Discourses of the Buddha*, compiled by Mom Chao Upalisan Jumbala, p. 4.

followers. But it does provide a useful guide when attempting to make judgements between conflicting religious beliefs. Likewise in science, experiments by themselves seldom establish the truth of a theory, but they do help in choosing between rival theories.

The "fruit test" does not of course, only exist in Buddhism. All religions have a version of it. Christ gave it to his followers as a means of distinguishing between "false prophets": "Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. By their fruit you will recognise them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise every good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit" (Matthew 7:15-18). This "fruit test" is, very close in spirit to the Buddhist criteria of judging a doctrine by its moral effects. The difference is one of emphasis. Buddhism throughout its history has made the individual investigation of truth the touchstone for all religious beliefs. Even with respect to the Buddha's own teachings, a critical attitude is encouraged, "Just as experts test gold by burning it, cutting it, and applying it on a touchstone, my statements should be accepted only after critical examination and not out of respect for me"<sup>139</sup>. Bahá'u'lláh cites the words of Christ in the context of pointing to moral fruits being the way to settle religious disputes: "... dissensions among various sects have opened the way to weakness. Each sect hath picked out a way for itself and is clinging to a certain cord. Despite manifest blindness and ignorance they pride themselves on their insight and knowledge. ... It lowereth man's station and maketh him swell with pride. Man must bring forth fruit. One who yieldeth no fruit is, in the words of the Spirit,(Christ) like unto a fruitless tree, and a fruitless tree is fit but for the fire (Matthew 7:19)"<sup>140</sup>.

Now all references to theological subjects like "God" and "soul" in Buddhist scripture should be understood with the "fruit test" in mind. It is precisely in the background context of doctrinal disputes that the Buddha appears to be agnostic. But when examined more closely, the Buddha is rejecting the authority of certain Brahmins to talk about God or the soul, and not rejecting the concepts of God or the soul in themselves. In fact the opposite is true, he affirms that they are very

<sup>139</sup> Kalatissa Nanda Jayatilleke, 'Buddhism relativity and the one-world concept', in the book *Religious Pluralism and World Community*, edited E. J. Jurji, p. 67.

<sup>140</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 60.

important and that he has the authority to speak about them. Take for instance, the concept of God<sup>141</sup>. A classic Buddhist text, invariably quoted to demonstrate Buddhist agnosticism is Chapter 1 of the *Tevigga-Sutta*<sup>142</sup>. This discourse starts off with an argument between two Brahmins, Vasetta and Bharadvaga. Each of them, has his own path which leads to a “state of union with Brahma”, and they begin to dispute about which one is superior. Unable to come to an agreement, they seek the advice of Buddha. Buddha establishes the fact that neither they, nor the sages that they respect or invoke, have met “Brahma face to face”, and shows that there is a contradiction in their belief: they are dogmatic in their own “straight path” that leads to Brahma, yet they do not know Brahma, nor have they seen him. The Buddha concludes, “Verily, Vasettha, that Brahmans versed in the Three Vedas should be able to show the way to a state of union with that which they do not know, neither have seen - such a condition of things has no existence!”<sup>143</sup>

The Buddha likens the belief of Vasetta and Bharadvaga to be like the love that a man has for the “most beautiful woman in this land”, but when asked to describe her, they are unable to do so. The Buddha concludes that, “Yet these Brahmans versed in the Three Vedas say, forsooth, that they can point out the way to union with that which they know not, neither have seen! ... Does it not follow that, this being so, the talk of the Brahmans, versed though they be in the Three Vedas, is foolish talk?”<sup>144</sup> The Buddha continues with this line of enquiry, likening their theological position to be people who build a staircase to mount into a mansion, but in practice, they mount into thin air. He then goes on to observe that the behaviour of the Brahmins in question is quite different from the Brahma they worship, observing that the “Brahmans versed in the Three Vedas - omitting the practice of those qualities which really make a man a Brahman, and adopting the practice of those qualities which really make men not Brahmans”, and that “such a condition of things has no existence”<sup>145</sup>. The Buddha observes that

<sup>141</sup> For a discussion on this point with respect to the soul, see, A. Khursheed, ‘Body, Mind, Soul and Spirit’, *The Singapore Bahá’í Studies Review*, Volume 3, 1998, pp. 160-8.

<sup>142</sup> Chapter 1, *Tevigga-Sutta*, *Sacred Books of the East* edited by F. Max Muller, Vol. XI, pp. 167-188.

<sup>143</sup> *ibid*, p. 173.

<sup>144</sup> *ibid*, p. 176.

<sup>145</sup> *ibid*, p. 180.

Brahma is not “full of anger”, or “is pure”, or has “self-mastery”, but that “the Brahmans of the Three Vedas” have the opposite qualities. He concludes that in this way, “the Brahmans versed though they be in the Three Vedas, while they sit down (in confidence), are sinking down (in the mire); and so sinking they are arriving only at despair, thinking the while that they are crossing over into some happier land”<sup>146</sup>. But when asked whether he knew the path to Brahma, the Buddha responded, “For Brahma, I know, Vasettha, and the world of Brahma, and the path which leadeth unto it. Yea, I know it even as one who has entered the Brahma world, and has been born within it!”<sup>147</sup>.

The moral of the Buddha’s discourse is that the two Brahmans who were disputing about which was the way to “union with Brahma”, did not in fact know Brahma - they had not taken that path for themselves. Moreover, they did not in any way reflect the spiritual qualities of Brahma. They did not have the authority to talk about Brahma because Brahma was not part of their experience, and their talk was, according to the Buddha, “foolish talk”<sup>148</sup>. The Buddha was not rejecting the world of Brahma, or the spiritual attributes of Brahma. He was merely rejecting the authority of certain Brahmans to talk about Brahma. The Brahmans, in terms of what they could describe, and in terms of how they acted, proved that they did not know the way to “union with Brahma”, whereas the Buddha, made it unmistakably clear that he not only knew the path to the Brahma world, but had been “born within it”.

The apparent Buddhist rejection of God as Creator is also made in the context of rejecting the doctrine of certain Brahmans<sup>149</sup>. The Buddha describes a being who thinks of himself as Brahma, as the Creator, but in reality, he was born into the world like others. He gains a following of people who also believe him to be the “Creator”, by virtue of the fact that he lived a long time before them, not by the fact that he created them. The Buddha describes a being, who thinks of himself as the Creator, and who in reality is not. His belief is a delusion of grandeur. At the end of his discourse, the Buddha states, “This, bretheren, is the first state of things on account of which, starting from which, some recluses

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<sup>146</sup> *ibid*, p. 185.

<sup>147</sup> *ibid*, p. 186.

<sup>148</sup> *ibid*, p. 178.

<sup>149</sup> Nyanaponika Thera, *Buddhism and the God-idea*, pp. 10-11.

and Brahmans, being eternalists as to some things, and non-eternalists as to others, maintain that the soul and the world are partly eternal and partly not"<sup>150</sup>. The Buddha only implies that the creation doctrine of some Brahmans is faulty. He does not comment on whether there really is a Creator or not. His words cannot be generalised to apply outside the non-Brahman context, to say the Creator God of Abraham.

The general point is that Buddhism discourages speculation about all metaphysical doctrines, and makes judgements only with respect to their moral effects. Historically, this approach has protected it from entering into divisive doctrinal disputes. Instead of attempting to define a "common creed", or "declaration of faith", as with the Abrahamic religions, Buddhism has left doctrinal issues to individual judgement. In helping the individual decide, it has recommended the use of the "fruit test". There is a lesson here for anyone wishing to contribute to interfaith harmony.

For Bahá'ís, although they have the principles of religious unity, the search after truth and the harmony of science and religion in their scriptures, they have as yet to translate them into living principles which contribute to the unity of mankind. In this respect, they can learn much from Eastern wisdom. In Buddhism, the principles of the independent investigation after truth and the harmony of science and religion are beautifully embodied, both in word and deed. One can capture a glimpse of the power of these principles by appreciating the great contribution Buddhism has already made to the spiritual welfare of mankind. In modern times, these principles have captured the imagination of the Western world, and contributed towards a movement of inter-religious harmony, away from the traditional dogmatic religious exclusivism of the Abrahamic religions.

Hinduism, not the Bahá'í Faith, is generally credited for having brought the principle of religious unity to the modern world<sup>151</sup>. Although Bahá'ís have this principle as a central tenet of their faith, they are only just starting to explore how it might be put into action. In contrast, the Hindu contribution to religious harmony has been a living tradition in India and

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<sup>150</sup> *ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>151</sup> Robert Runcie, "It is not an accident that some of the most significant strides towards Unity have been Indian", *Christianity and World Religions*, p. 13.



the Far East for over several millennia. Nowhere is the spiritual unity in diversity principle more beautifully and poetically stated than in the Hindu scriptures<sup>152</sup>. Hinduism, along with Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism have an experience of inter-religious harmony far beyond anything in the history of the Abrahamic religions. Bahá'ís must have the humility not only to accept this, but willingly celebrate and appreciate it.

## 6. Modern Eastern Pluralism

In recent times, before the rise of the modern Western interfaith movement, China and India had been reformulating and restating their interfaith principles. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, while the Sikh religion arose to create unity between Islam and Hinduism, and started a remarkable period of inter-religious harmony in Northern India, in China, Lin Chao-en (1517-98), became the founder of the "Three-in-One" religion. This sect formulated a synthesis involving Taoism, Buddhist and Confucian doctrines. It attracted a considerable following, but was later outlawed by the late Ming government which burnt its books and temples. Nevertheless, despite this persecution it still survives today, particularly in Taiwan.

More recently, in the last half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, inter-religious movements in China and India predate the first Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago in 1893. The "Gospel" of Sri Ramakrishna (1836-1886) is now well known amongst the world's religious community, and in fact, Vivekananda, its foremost disciple, attended the first Parliament of the World's Religions conference in Chicago. The core teaching of the Ramakrishna movement is that all religions are one. In the words of Ramakrishna,

"So many religions, so many paths to reach the same goal... I have found that it is the same God towards whom all are directing their steps, though along different paths"<sup>153</sup>. On another occasion Ramakrishna likens the different religions in the world to the different names that each culture gives to water, although the names sound different, they refer to

<sup>152</sup> A. Khursheed, "The Hindu Concept of God: Unity in Diversity", *The Singapore Bahá'í Studies Review*, Vol. 2, 1997, p3-49

<sup>153</sup> quoted by Prabhavananda, in *The Spiritual Heritage of India*, p. 341.

the same liquid, "The tank has several *ghats*. At one Hindus draw water and call it *jal*, at another Mohammedans draw water and call it *pani*; at a third Christians draw the same liquid and call it *water*. The substance is one though the name differs, and everyone is seeking the same thing. Every religion of the world is one such *ghat*. Go with a sincere and earnest heart by any of these *ghats* and you will reach the water of eternal bliss. But do not say that your religion is better than that of another"<sup>154</sup>.

In his address at the Parliament of the World's Religions congress, in Chicago on 11<sup>th</sup> September 1893, Vivekananda stated that, "Unity in variety is the plan of nature, and the Hindu has recognised it"<sup>155</sup>. He went on to describe religious unity by paraphrasing the words of Krishna, "It is the same light coming through different colours. And these little variations are necessary for the purposes of adaptation. But in the heart of everything the same truth reigns. The Lord has declared to the Hindu in His incarnation as Krishna, "I am in every religion as the thread through a string of pearls. Wherever thou seest extraordinary holiness and extraordinary power raising and purifying humanity, know that I am there"..."<sup>156</sup>. Krishna in the Bhagavad Gita states, "In the whole vast universe there is nothing higher than I. All the worlds have their rest in me, as many pearls upon a string" (Gita 7:7). Clearly Vivekananda draws the natural conclusion implied in Krishna's words that the thread which unites together all things in the universe, must also bind together different religious revelations.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century the Chinese Confucianist, K'ang Yu Wei (1858-1927), formulated his vision for a Great Age of Unity. His vision was of the whole world as one family, where all live equally and justly:

"In the world of Great Unity, the whole world becomes a great unity. There is no division into national states and no difference between races. There will be no war... In the Age of Great Unity, the world government is daily engaged in mining, road building, reclamation of deserts, and navigation as the primary task... In the Age of Great Peace, there are no emperors, kings, rulers, elders, official titles, or ranks. All people are

<sup>154</sup> Ramakrishna, *The Gospel of Ramakrishna*, pp. 60-1.

<sup>155</sup> Vivekananda, *The complete works of Swami Vivekananda*, volume I, p. 15.

<sup>156</sup> *ibid*, p. 16.

equal, and do not consider position or rank as an honour either. Only wisdom and humanity are promoted and encouraged... In the Age of Great Peace, since man's nature is already good and his ability and intelligence is superior, they only rejoice in matters of wisdom and humanity. New institutions appear every day. Public benefits increase every day. The humane mind gets stronger every day. And knowledge becomes clearer every day. People in the whole world together reach the realm of humanity, longevity, perfect happiness, and infinite goodness and wisdom... In the Age of Great Peace, all people are equal. There are no servants or slaves, rulers or commanders, heads of religions or popes... In the Age of Rising Peace, humanity is extended to one's kind and therefore people are humane to all people. In the Age of Great Peace, all creatures form a unity and therefore people feel love for all creatures as well... History goes through an evolution, and humanity has its path of development."<sup>157</sup>

K'ang Yu Wei reformist attempts were largely unsuccessful and his book on the Great Unity (*Ta-t'ung shu*), remained unpublished until 1935, eight years after his death. Shortly afterwards, the communist movement in China grew to power, and religious matters were discouraged. However, from ancient times, religious plurality is deeply rooted in the Chinese tradition. When China comes out of its seclusion, and begins to play a more important role in world affairs, it will surely voice its support for inter-religious harmony.

Religious pluralism as a movement in Christian circles only began to develop after the Second World War. This means that religious pluralism in Christianity has a very short history. The Western modern interfaith movement is somewhat older than this, but in practice, it did not really attract much attention until relatively recently. Nor has Christianity any premodern examples of taking initiatives to promote inter-religious harmony. So all in all, there is much the Christian West can learn from the East.

There are many signs to suggest that the modern Western interfaith movement arose from its interaction with the East. Paul Knitter, describes how the West has been challenged to catch up with the

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<sup>157</sup> K'ang Yu Wei, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, edited by Wing-Tsit Chan, pp. 732-734.

religious pluralism of the East: "As I was told again and again by Indian Christians, in India - especially before power lust politicians began exploiting religion to promote communalism or factionalism - Hinduism, Muslims, and Christians have had to live together, to form and grasp their religious consciousness in relation to each other. That "my truth" cannot be the "only truth" has long been part of the Indian religious subconscious. Here the West is catching up as the plurality of religious truth invades and reshapes its consciousness"<sup>158</sup>. The Archbishop of Canterbury, Robert Runcie, cites his visit to India to be a decisive turning point in helping him make a commitment to interfaith dialogue,

"If we trust the life-giving power of the spirit within and amongst us, we can meet each other in openness and trust; we can learn to explore together the moments of revelation and the spiritual treasures which our respective faiths have handed down to us - a spark of divine life and a vision of holiness whereby the lives of countless people in past and present are nourished, sustained, transformed and sanctified. Again, the Indian religious heritage contains a great variety of spiritual disciplines and knows many saints and sages who have lived and taught the path of meditation and inwardness. Indian spirituality invites Christians perhaps above all to the practice of contemplation, to a life of inner and outer simplicity. Many western Christians have gone to India to learn precisely this, to be schooled in the inner life. It is remarkable how many Christian ashrams have been founded all over India in recent years."<sup>159</sup>

It is also worth noting that the founder of the World Congress of Faiths organization, Sir Francis Younghusband, developed a deep interest in Eastern religious literature. He was able to study them through his numerous expeditions to India, China and Tibet<sup>160</sup>. The Reverend Marcus Braybrooke, who has been a central figure of the interfaith movement for the last 30 years and longstanding president of the World Congress of Faiths, spent a year in India in 1962-3, and subsequently wrote several works on the relationship of Christianity to Hinduism<sup>161</sup>.

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<sup>158</sup> Paul Knitter, *Jesus and the Other Names*, p. 28.

<sup>159</sup> R. Runcie, *Christianity and World Religions*, p. 5, pp. 9-10.

<sup>160</sup> M. Braybrooke, *The Wider Vision*, pp. 22-32.

<sup>161</sup> M. Braybrooke, *Faith and Interfaith in a Global Age*, pp. 10-11.

Two Indians who have been influential in the shaping of Western interfaith consciousness this century have been Sri Aurobindo (1892-1950), and Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948). Their religious outlook, encapsulates many aspects of the long spiritual tradition of India, and also has many points in common with Bahá'í teachings.

Sri Aurobindo was an Indian sage who lived and wrote around the same time as the Catholic theologian Teilhard de Chardin, in the first half of this century. Aurobindo, like Chardin, wrote of spiritual evolution. Aurobindo states, "'All evolution is in essence a heightening of the force of consciousness in the manifest being so that it may be raised into the greater intensity of what is still unmanifest, from matter into life, from life into mind, from mind into the spirit"<sup>162</sup>. This upward evolution through different grades of consciousness or spirit is also a natural part of Bahá'í teachings<sup>163</sup>. For Aurobindo, the path towards higher consciousness is leading to the "supermind". The force behind this upward evolution, he termed the Spirit or Mind. Unlike Chardin, Aurobindo was a religious pluralist. Aurobindo, in the introduction to his commentary on the Baghavad Gita sets out his principle of religious harmony and his opposition to religious exclusivism as follows:

"First of all, there is undoubtedly a Truth one and eternal which we are seeking, from which all other truth derives, by the light of which all other truth finds its right place, explanation and relation to the scheme of knowledge. But precisely for that reason it cannot be shut up in a single trenchant formula, it is not likely to be found in its entirety or in all its bearings in any single philosophy or Scripture or uttered altogether and forever by any one teacher, thinker, prophet or Avatar. Nor has it been wholly found by us if our view of it necessitates the intolerant exclusion of the truth underlying other systems; for when we reject passionately, we mean simply that we cannot appreciate and explain. Secondly, this Truth, though it is one and eternal, expresses itself in Time and through the mind of man; therefore every Scripture must necessarily contain two elements, one temporary, perishable, belonging to the ideas of the period and the country which it was produced, the other eternal and imperishable and applicable in all ages and countries"<sup>164</sup>

<sup>162</sup> Aurobindo, *The Life Divine*, p. 726.

<sup>163</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, chap. 36.

<sup>164</sup> Aurobindo, *Essays on the Gita*, p. 2.



Here Aurobindo acknowledges the existence of a "Truth one" which exists beyond the expression of any one single faith, having an eternal aspect, but also having diverse expressions in history which are relative to the "mind of man". Aurobindo here comes close to the Bahá'í two-fold distinction of there being an eternal (spiritual) part to each religion, and there being a transient relative part (social laws, ordinances). In almost identical fashion to the Bahá'í unity of religions principle, Aurobindo writes, "A unity behind diversity and discord is the secret of the variety of human religions and philosophies; for they all get at some image or some side clue, touch some portion of the one Truth or envisage some one of its myriad aspects"<sup>165</sup>.

Aurobindo also describes a great challenge for organized religion in modern times. When organized religion ignores the spiritual diversity of its followers, tries to lay down explicit codes of belief and practice with infallible authority, it will, according to Aurobindo be "open to denial":

"Religion has opened itself to denial by its claim to determine the truth by divine authority, by inspiration, by a sacrosanct and infallible sovereignty given to it from on high; it has sought to impose itself on human thought, feeling, conduct without discussion or question... Faith is indispensable to man, for without it he could not proceed forward in his journey through the Unknown; but it ought not to be imposed, it should come as free perception or an imperative direction from the inner spirit... The wide and supple method of evolutionary Nature providing the amplest scope and preserving the true intention of the religious seeking of the human being can be recognised in the development of religion in India, where any number of religious formulations, cults and disciplines have been allowed, even encouraged to subsist side by side and each man was free to accept and follow that which was congenial to his thought, feeling, temperament, build of the nature. It is right and reasonable that there should be this plasticity, proper to experimental evolution: for religion's real business is to prepare man's mind, life and bodily existence for the spiritual consciousness to take it up; it has to lead him to that point where the inner spiritual light begins fully to emerge. It is at this point that religion must learn to subordinate itself, not to insist on its outer characters, but give full scope to the inner spirit

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<sup>165</sup> Aurobindo, *The Life Divine*, pp. 699-700.

itself to develop its own truth and reality"<sup>166</sup>.

Aurobindo's point, of not substituting inner spiritual fundamentals with collectively enforced external practices, is of course, in keeping with the Bahá'í teachings. It is the inner side to religion which is eternal. The external side, although important from a social point of view, should never be used to stifle the inherent diversity of religious expression. Aurobindo fully acknowledges the irreducibly subjective side to religious experience. He presents the Indian experience here as an example of religion evolving in a natural way, where people are not pressured into holding religious beliefs by external authorities. Historically in India, there were religious disputes, but they were not violent as they were between the Abrahamic faiths. For the most part, Indians have been free to choose their faith. India has had this element of choice and diversity in religion from ancient times. This type of religious pluralism is now, more and more, characterising religion in the modern world. In the West, many have rejected organised religion for its lack of flexibility. There is an important lesson here for the survival of organised religion as a whole. People in the modern day have demanded the right to have their own religious beliefs, to their own individual self-expression. Any organised religion, if it is to survive, must give full recognition to this personal side to religious belief. The Bahá'í Faith, although it acknowledges this diversity in principle, is in its early stages of development. Although it fully recognises that religious truth is relative, both in a progressive and subjective sense, it has as yet, no living tradition of it. The great experience of religious diversity on the Indian subcontinent, is not something to reject or compete with, it is rather, an experience from which all of us can learn.

Mahatma Ghandi, is perhaps the most well known example of a modern Indian sage. In characteristic Indian style, he was committed to the spiritual unity in diversity principle: "I believe in the fundamental truth of all great religions of the world. I believe that they are all God-given, and I believe that they were necessary for the people to whom these religions were revealed. And I believe that, if only we could all of us read the scriptures of the different faiths from the standpoint of the followers of those faiths, we should find that they were at the bottom all

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<sup>166</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 863-4.

one and were all helpful to one another.”<sup>167</sup> Here Ghandi emphasizes the need for us to read the source scriptures for ourselves. Throughout his life, it was the practice of religion that he was better known for: Ghandi was known for his deeds, not so much for his words. He exemplifies the Eastern preference to practise religion rather than talk about it. This, in the missionary context, means that words by themselves have little effect. Religion is something that must be first and foremost translated into action: “I do not believe in people telling others of their faith, especially with a view to conversion. Faith does not admit of telling. It has to be lived and then it becomes self-propagating”<sup>168</sup>.

The need to demonstrate the truth of religion primarily in terms of deeds, as opposed to words is something, which is of course, emphasised in all religions. But religion in the West has tended to theorise, and divorce the practice of religion from its theology. Religion at the level of words alone encourages multiplicity of ideas, and has historically, often led to a clash of doctrines. The history of religion in the West is dominated by such doctrinal disputes. But when religious principles are translated into action, it takes on a unifying character, where people of different faiths meet on the field of community service, where hearts mingle in prayer and meditation. The contemporary Indian voice, through sages like Mahatma Ghandi, reject people who tell “others of their faith, especially with a view to conversion”. At the beginning of this century when Ghandi wrote these words, Christian missionaries were still sent out to the world to spread the Gospel. In India, their message was for the most part, rejected. Recently, Christianity has had to seriously revise its missionary ambition. Religious people in the West have moved much closer to the Eastern view that religion is best spread through deeds rather than by words.

Modern Buddhism also emphasizes the fact that religious conflicts arise from the failure of religious people to translate their own principles into action, and that they often attempt to hide this failure by aggressively converting others to their faith. A Christian addressed the present Dalai Lama by stating, “Christ’s words “Love thy neighbour” embody for us the Christian religion”, and then asks him, “What is your message to

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<sup>167</sup> M. Ghandi, *All men are Brothers*, no. 26.

<sup>168</sup> *ibid*, no. 24.

humanity when you meet another human being?" The Dalai Lama responded in the following way:

"Love of one's neighbor, kindness, and compassion - these are, I believe, the essential and universal elements preached by all religions. In spite of divergent philosophical views, we can establish harmony among all spiritual traditions on the basis of these common traits of love, kindness, and forgiveness. I always insist on this point and devote a great deal of energy to it. Most difficulties between religions come about because of people who, having failed to transform and bring peace to their own minds, do not really apply their own beliefs yet try all the while to impose them on others. This unfortunate behavior can provoke serious conflicts... my personal experience leads me to say that we must concentrate on the essence of our tradition rather than become attached to ritual and ceremony. The ritual and ceremonial aspects are, of course, linked to the changing customs of a place and an era. However, the essence of religion, of which teachings on the fundamental suffering of humanity are a part, is very useful... All human beings have greatly varied dispositions and characteristics. It is therefore advantageous, even desirable, to have many spiritual paths to cater to the diverse needs of diverse people. I often try to understand how certain so-called fundamentalist or extremist movements have come about. Upon reflection, I think that instead of concerning themselves with their own spiritual evolution, these fundamentalist movements fall into extreme attitudes by imposing their religion on others. Having failed to achieve their own maturity - the basic purpose of every spiritual tradition is, after all, the transformation and mastery of the mind - they impose on others a transformation that they themselves have not yet achieved, a constraint which is at the root of hatred, attachment, and all sorts of negative passions. These are often the signs of fundamentalism. On the other hand I think we naturally feel great respect for all the other forms of spirituality if we practice our religion in a perfectly pure fashion, with the understanding that in an initial stage the purpose is our own transformation. I also think that dialogue, communication, and exchange with other traditions are essential factors for mutual understanding. If the representatives of the different religions remain isolated, insular, they can have only a very fragmented and partial vision of their spiritual

traditions, and misunderstandings will remain. Exchange, contact, and shared personal experience can only lead to greater mutual respect...<sup>169</sup>

There is a great deal here in this passage that summarizes the Eastern approach to religion, and it is in complete agreement with Bahá'í teachings. The Dalai Lama points to the inner and spiritual aspects of religion, its practice, rather than its "ritual and ceremonial aspects", which are "linked to the changing customs of a place and an era". These words parallel the Bahá'í two-fold distinction between the eternal spiritual part to each religion, and its transient social part. The inherent subjective nature of religious faith is fully acknowledged, and the need to "have many spiritual paths to cater to the diverse needs of diverse people" is openly welcomed. In principle, Bahá'ís have unity in diversity as a central tenet of their faith, and believe that all religions are "complimentary" and part of the "evolution of one religion"<sup>170</sup>. Yet in practice, in the author's experience, the Bahá'í community is only just beginning to explore how this principle may be realised in deed, rather than word.

At present, Buddhism is playing an important role of uniting Eastern and Western spiritual traditions. Eastern sages are reformulating their respective traditions to the modern era. Rather than being in competition, Bahá'ís can learn how to be in fellowship with them. Historically, the Bahá'í contribution to the modern interfaith movement was made alongside Buddhism and Hinduism. There is much common ground, even at the doctrinal level. But doctrinal issues, even where there is convergence, should be kept at the secondary level, while the practice of religion must always be the primary concern, "Consider a rose", writes Bahá'u'lláh in the context of explaining the unity of religions principle, "whether it blossometh in the East or in the West, it is nonetheless a rose. For what mattereth in this respect is rather the smell and fragrance which it doth impart"<sup>171</sup>.

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<sup>169</sup> Dalai Lama, *Beyond Dogma: The challenge of the modern world*, p. 156.

<sup>170</sup> Shoghi Effendi, *World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 114.

<sup>171</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Íqán*, pp. 158-9.



## 7. Doctrinal issues of Finality

The Bahá'í Faith has some specific teachings that relate to the doctrinal claims of finality and exclusivity in the Abrahamic religions. These issues go beyond theology: in Iran, the birth place of the Bahá'í Faith, Bahá'ís have suffered severe persecutions precisely on the basis of one such finality doctrine. Since, according to many Muslims, Muhammed is the last and final prophet, all religions after Islam are charged with heresy, which in many cases, is punishable by death. What is the scriptural authority for such an action? In the Quran, there is only one passage upon which this Islamic claim to finality hinges. In the Surah of the "Confederates", it is stated that, "Muhammed is not father of any of your men, but he is the Apostle of Allah, And the Seal of the Prophets: And Allah has full knowledge of things" (Sura 33: 40). There are sometimes other passages of the Quran which are quoted to also support an exclusive position, such as, "If anyone desires a religion other than Islam, never will it be accepted of him.." (Sura 3:85), but these passages clearly should not be invoked in this way. There was no religion of Islam at the time the Quran was being written down. Islam in these passages, should be taken to mean "submission to God", for that is what the term "Islam" means. It does not refer to the religion of Islam, which came later.

There are many ways Bahá'ís can refute the charge of heresy, only one will be mentioned here<sup>172</sup>. The Bahá'í position with respect to Muhammad being the "Seal of the Prophets" is to agree with it. They do not dispute it. But what they do say is that the "Seal" here refers to the "prophetic tradition", which is limited to the Abrahamic religions. The term "prophet" is used only by Muslims and the "People of the Book" (Christians and Jews). In the tradition of the "prophet", Muhammad is the "Seal". But there are other religious traditions in the world which have developed in parallel to the Abrahamic tradition. The "Seal of the prophet" does not for instance mean that there will be no more Hindu or Buddhist sages. The "Seal of the Prophets" does not mean that there will not be future revelations from God, only that in the "prophetic tradition", or Abrahamic tradition, Islam is the final one.

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<sup>172</sup> S. Fazel and K. Fananapazir, 'A Bahá'í Approach to the Claim of Finality in Islam', *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 3, pp. 17-40.

There are two terms for the word prophet that appear in the Quran: prophet *nabi*, and apostle/messenger *rasul*. The word *nabi* appears most often in the context of describing descendants of Abraham and it is precisely the prophet *nabi* which is used in the "Seal of the prophets" (*khatam al-nabiyyin*) passage in the Surah of Confederates. Throughout the Quran, the word *nabi* is used exclusively for the descendants of Abraham, while the word Apostle appears to be more general (it includes Apostles outside the Abrahamic tradition, Hud, Salih, and Jethro). Moreover, the term Apostle frequently appears in a more universal context, such as, "To every people was sent an Apostle" (Sura 10:47).

Bahá'u'lláh never claimed to be a prophet, nor did his son, 'Abdu'l-Bahá. From the Bahá'í perspective the "Prophetic Cycle" has come to an end. Bahá'u'lláh's message is not specifically addressed to the Abrahamic religions alone, but it is a call made to mankind as a whole. Bahá'u'lláh states: "It is evident that every age in which a Manifestation of God hath lived is divinely ordained, and may, in a sense, be characterised as God's appointed Day. This Day, however, is unique, and is to be distinguished from those that have preceded it. The designation "Seal of the Prophets" fully revealeth its high station. The Prophetic Cycle hath, verily, ended. The Eternal Truth is now come. He hath lifted up the Ensign of Power, and is now shedding upon the world the unclouded splendor of His Revelation"<sup>173</sup>. The "high station" of this age, according to Bahá'u'lláh, is that religious development in the world will no longer go on in parallel, that is, separately in different parts of the world. For the first time in our collective history, one revelation will inspire people from all parts of the world to move forward together. Bahá'u'lláh claims to be the bearer of that revelation.

Claims of finality were also made in Judaism and Christianity and it is instructive to examine how Muhammad responded to them: "And they say: "None shall enter Paradise unless he be a Jew or a Christian." Those are their (vain) desires. Say: "Produce your proof if ye are truthful. Nay,- whoever submits His whole self to Allah and is a doer of good,- He will get his reward with his Lord; on such shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve" S. 2:111-2. Clearly for Muhammad, whoever is a "doer of good" is acceptable to God. On another occasion, after citing the exclusivism of some "People of the Book", Muhammad stresses the fact that the

<sup>173</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, p. 60.

bounties of God lie above human comprehension, they are unbounded, and we should not place our human limits upon them: "A section of the People of the Book say: "Believe in the morning what is revealed to the believers, but reject it at the end of the day; perchance they may (themselves) Turn back; And believe no one unless he follows your religion." Say: "True guidance is the Guidance of Allah. (Fear ye) Lest a revelation be sent to someone (else) Like unto that which was sent unto you? or that those (Receiving such revelation) should engage you in argument before your Lord?" Say: "All bounties are in the hand of Allah. He granteth them to whom He pleaseth: And Allah careth for all, and He knoweth all things." For His Mercy He specially chooseth whom He pleaseth; for Allah is the Lord of bounties unbounded." (Sura 3:72-4)

The Bahá'í Faith fully acknowledges the divine revelation of the Quran, it does not in any way oppose it or abrogate it. It does not in any way claim to be superior to it, and emphasizes the fact that all religions come from the same source and come for the same purpose. This is completely in keeping with the expectations of the Quran itself: "It is never the wish of those without Faith among the People of the Book, nor of the Pagans, that anything good should come down to you from your Lord. But Allah will choose for His special Mercy whom He will - for Allah is Lord of grace abounding. None of Our revelations do We abrogate or cause to be forgotten, but We substitute something better or similar: Knowest thou not that Allah Hath power over all things?" (Sura 2:106-7) Moreover, the way Muslims are called upon to judge others is by applying the "fruit test", that is, they must examine claims of truth in terms of their moral effects. They must accept the "righteous" and those who do "good works": "Those who believe (in the Qur'an), those who follow the Jewish (scriptures), and the Sabians and the Christians,- any who believe in Allah and the Last Day, and work righteousness,- on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve. (Sura 5:69), or "Not all of them are alike: Of the People of the Book are a portion that stand (For the right): They rehearse the Signs of Allah all night long, and they prostrate themselves in adoration. They believe in Allah and the Last Day; they enjoin what is right, and forbid what is wrong; and they hasten (in emulation) in (all) good works: They are in the ranks of the righteous. Of the good that they do, nothing will be rejected of them; for Allah knoweth well those that do right. exceeding torment." (S 3:113-5)

It is also instructive to examine how Christ responded to the religious exclusivist claims of some Jews. In Deuteronomy, it is said that "but he has revealed his Law, and we and our descendents are to obey it for ever" (Deut. 29:29). Upon these kinds of statements, some Jews reject the proposition that there could ever be another covenant with God after Judaism. So when the Pharisees charged Christ with breaking the Law, Christ responded: "Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am come not to destroy, but to fulfil. For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled." (Matthew 5: 17-18).

What about the text, "I am the way, the truth and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me" (John 14: 6)? This passage is often quoted to justify Christian claims of exclusivity. But it must be read in context, and if this is done, it does not appear to suggest that Christ is making an exclusive claim that applies to all humanity for all time. The context of this passage is that Christ is speaking to his disciples, reassuring them of eventual triumph. Christ first starts off by stressing the universality of his revelation, "In my Father's house there are many mansions", but after his disciple Thomas did not understand it, Christ made it simple for him - "I am the way, the truth and the life". The entire passage reads: "In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also. And whither I go ye know, and the way ye know. Thomas saith unto him, Lord, we know not whither thou goest; and how can we know the way? Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, the truth and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me. If ye had known me, ye should have known my Father also: and from henceforth ye know him, and have seen him." (John 14:2-7). Read in context, Christ is speaking specifically to his disciple Thomas. It is not clear what the "many mansions" are in the "house" of the "Father", but one thing is clear, it is by no means an exclusive message. In fact, it suggests that there are many pathways to God (many "mansions"), it was exclusive for Christ's immediate disciples, but certainly should not be the basis by which Christians should reject the truth of other religions.

As with other problems of inter-religious intolerance, a greater degree of humility is required. Who are we to judge whether someone is acceptable before God or not? Has not the history of religion taught us that we are

very poor judges indeed? Were the Pharisees not completely wrong about Christ? Were the People of the Book not completely wrong about Muhammad? In the words of St Paul, "for the letter kills but the Spirit gives life" (2 Cor. 3:6). The truth of St Paul's words echo down centuries and centuries of religious violence.

## 8. Conclusion

This paper has described some trends in the modern interfaith movement and how Bahá'ís can both contribute and learn from them. The paper describes how the rise of the Bahá'í Faith in the West and the modern interfaith movement developed side by side and how they have the common aim of bringing about more inter-religious harmony. The trend of people of different faiths coming together in a spirit of service, in the search after truth, is something which Bahá'ís can fully participate in. Bahá'ís can learn from the rich heritage of the older religions, particularly from the inter-faith legacy of Hinduism, Buddhism and the Chinese spiritual traditions. The paper has argued that this learning process is essential to the specific Bahá'í mission of being the "promise" of all the world's spiritual traditions.

There are many people today, who distrust and even resent traditional missionary activity. In the Pope's recent tour of India, public demonstrations were made against the work of Christian missionaries there. Despite the fact that India has an admirable record of inter-religious harmony and that there have been recent Papal statements in encouraging interfaith dialogue, many modern Indians see interfaith and missionary work as fundamentally incompatible. A conflict between the two need not arise for Bahá'ís, provided they understand their mission in the broader terms of bringing about a greater degree of inter-religious unity and fellowship. The success of all Bahá'í interfaith activity is crucially dependent on the degree to which Bahá'ís are able to translate their principles into action, particularly the extent to which they are able to achieve unity and fellowship amongst themselves. In short, Bahá'ís must themselves become living examples of the unity and fellowship they advocate. Having achieved unity amongst themselves, they are then in a position to bring together people of different faiths. This point is



made again and again in the Bahá'í writings. 'Abdu'l-Bahá describes it in the following way:

"Today, the one overriding need is unity and harmony among the beloved of the Lord, for they should have among them but one heart... Until such time, however, as the friends establish perfect unity among themselves, how can they summon others to harmony and peace? ... Wherefore, o ye beloved of the Lord, bestir yourselves, do all in your power to be as one, to live in peace, each with the others; for ye are all the drops from but one ocean, the foliage of one tree, the pearls from a single shell, the flowers and sweet herbs from the same one garden. And achieving that, strive ye to unite the hearts of those who follow other faiths."<sup>174</sup>

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<sup>174</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, pp. 279-280.

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*Wednesday's General Audiences:*

- 9<sup>th</sup> September 1998
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