

Purposeful Spiritual Endeavour: A Fundamental Connection between Bahá'ís and Christians

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Abstract

The need for a clearer, warmer, more purposeful connection between individuals of different religious Faiths is self-evident. For Christians and Bahá'ís there is a commonality in spiritual orientation, religious impulses and encounters, as well as personal commitment, that needs to be recognised. There is a comparable unfolding process at work in our individuality, inspiration, growth and service that needs to be acknowledged. We each have a similar concern with our own inescapable human needs, aspirations, religious devotion and expressiveness that needs to be respected.

We are challenged to a deeper understanding of the ideas we value as well as a deeper appreciation of each other. Fortunately there exist productive factors within spiritual inspired understanding that can facilitate, deepen, refine and regulate this worthwhile enterprise. The qualities of affinity, objectivity, fulfilment and empathy can operate in more developmental, resilient, reciprocal and genuine ways within us and between us. At the root source of understanding these dynamic virtues are its germinal inspiration. In the development of understanding they are its purpose and measure. In the outcome of understanding they are its fruit and presage of further progress.

Since the emphasis in this paper is on spiritual goodness and religious wisdom it is more of a contemplation than an exposition. It is an affirmation based upon the belief that, "*we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord*" (2 Corinthians 3.18). It is based on the conviction that this cannot occur through arrogance, intolerance, exclusiveness or

pretentiousness, but through grace, faith, conscientious endeavour, and fruitful mutuality. It holds that, despite the waves and billows of human frustration, limitation, ambition, struggle, and interaction, "Deep calleth unto deep" (Psalm 42.7).

Dedication

"O God, My God!

Aid Thou Thy trusted servants to have loving and tender hearts.

**Help them to spread abroad amongst all the nations of the earth,
the light of guidance that cometh from the company on high.**

Verily, Thou art the Strong, the Mighty, the All-Subduing, the Ever-Giving. Verily, Thou art the Generous, the Gentle, the Tender, the Most Bountiful."

*'Abdú'l-Bahá*¹

"Most High, Glorious God!

Enlighten the darkness of my heart and give me, Lord,

**a correct faith, a certain hope, a perfect charity, sense and knowledge,
so that I may carry out Your holy and true command."**

*St. Francis*²

¹ *Bahá'í Prayers and Holy Writings, A Selection*, p 69

² St Francis, quoted in, *The MacMillan Dictionary of Religious Quotations*, 316.9

Introduction

Our brief is to discover the link between the Bahá'í Faith and the Christian Faith. We are both connected in the sense that we are both religions, concerned with spirituality, and we are both made up of individual human beings with similar concerns, problems, disappointments and aspirations. Of course, there are differences in doctrinal interpretation, ordinances and organisation. But are they all that insurmountable? How can we both as groups and in individual encounters initiate a fruitful, peaceful, productive relationship and mutual understanding? How can we avoid argumentativeness, annoyance, impatience, misunderstanding, and conceit? Obviously the answer is not magical or instantaneous: it can be better than that, it can be spiritual, gradual and developmental, pragmatic, beneficial and useful, authentic and actual.

These ideas are presented for your consideration based on the following conditions that we must ever hold primal. "Knowing this first, that no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation. For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man; but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost" (2 Peter 1.20-21). Thus, not only must we be cautious of exclusivity in others, with regard to spiritual insight and religious outlook, we must be cautious of it within ourselves. It is only through a consultative approach that this can be overcome, and we need to keep faith with our own religious covenant and not follow after "feigned words (that) make merchandise of you" (II Peter 2:3). So it is incumbent on us to maintain a realistic, co-operative modesty with regard to any ideas expressed in religious dialogue.

Similarly, it should be borne in mind that: "A Bahá'í scholar...will not make the mistake of regarding the sayings and beliefs of certain Bahá'ís at any one time as being the Bahá'í Faith. The Bahá'í Faith is the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh: His Own Words as interpreted by 'Abdu'l-Bahá and the Guardian. It is a Revelation of such staggering magnitude that no Bahá'í at this early stage in Bahá'í history can rightly claim to have more than a partial and imperfect understanding of it"³. Yet also, "The House of Justice advises

³ The Universal House of Justice: *The Challenge and Promise of Bahá'í Scholarship*, Bahá'í World, XVII, pp 195-6

you not attempt to define too narrowly the form that Bahá'í scholarship should take, or the approach that scholars should adopt. Rather you should strive to develop within your Association respect for a wide range of endeavours and approaches"⁴.

As a result, a challenge is laid upon us both. We need to be clear about, and yet resilient in, our reasons for and methods of associating with one another. What can we offer each other and the world? It is likely to be frustrating or counter-productive if one side or individual assumes he has the advantage and uses it as a platform for ego-centricity or an inconsiderate patronising implementation of his own slanted agenda. We need a lot of patience and perseverance. Our inspiration needs to be sure and adaptable. Our courage needs to be directed by stability within ourselves, and a sense of nurturing each other. It needs to have a cleansing refining effect on our characters, expectations and modes of communication in a reciprocal way. We need a sense of social affinity, resilient objectivity, reciprocal fulfilment and genuine empathy to release and develop the refining nature of religious spirituality in its endeavour for a more actualised purpose. We need to discover how it is that "We do the work, but God works in us the doing of the works"⁵.

1. Development Affinity

1.1 Through our common spiritual orientation

Both Christians and Bahá'ís have a common impulse to arrive at something higher than what material forms can offer.

"Know, O thou possessors of insight that true spirituality is like unto a lake of clear water which reflects the divine. Of such was the spirituality of Jesus Christ. There is another kind which is like a mirage, seeming to be spiritual when it is not. That which is truly spiritual must light the path to God, and must result in deeds. We cannot believe the call to be spiritual when there is no

⁴ *Scholarship, A Compilation*: Research Department of the Universal House of Justice, note 14

⁵ St Augustine, quoted in, *The MacMillan Dictionary of Religious Quotations*, p 452:12

result. Spirit is reality, and when the spirit in each of us seeks to join with the Great Reality, it must in turn give life⁶.

What qualities does a fresh, healthy lake have? It is contained, yet adaptable. It is cohesive, yet fresh and clear. It is cleansing and yet also refreshing. It is very useful, beneficial and practical, through both its individual characteristics and its integration into the world around it. From its face is reflected the sun, the moon, and the clouds, and the vast expanse of the sky, as well as the mountains and forest rising around it. On its surface is the play and sparkle of light and colour. Inner currents and outer winds, even storms, can move and shake its waters, yet it still rests easily on the earth's surface. Its fluid nature flows into lowly places, yet its depths are calm and peaceful. It is the home for a variety of life within it and around it. It is a source of nourishment, even for many things beyond its borders. Many creatures come regularly from long distances to partake of its bounty. A healthy lake has streams flowing into it from innocent springs, and a river, on its way to the sea, flowing out so men can irrigate their dry fields. It is interactive with the environment in which it exists. It is interactive with the sky and the earth through which it fulfils itself and gains meaning.

If religious spirituality cultivated and maintained these symbolic qualities in a purposeful, holistic and renewing way, all our endeavours would become more refined in their nature. The original, authentic inspiration and benign nature of Revealed Faith would, as a result, be much more available, accessible, actualised, and much more fulfilling to us all in a steady, ongoing, progressive way. This implies that our efforts be interactive and moderated by a consultative process and diversified dynamic contained within a covenantal ethic. Our faith needs to be more than a faith against certain things; it needs to be a faith in, and for, the inevitable fairness of spiritual reality. It needs to allow the full potential of our spiritual principle to operate more easily, more joyously, more co-operatively.

We share a common purpose, in that we are instinctively seeking fulfilment through becoming more refined in our characters, attitudes, values, and relationships. We have turned this urge into a co-operative endeavour by aligning ourselves with religion. This connection between us is more

⁶ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *'Abdu'l-Bahá in London*, p 107

fundamental than any differences of explanation or expression. It reveals the benign nature and inspiration of our own motivations. It reveals our hopes for mutual encouragement and enrichment, maturing goodness and a continuous reliable quickening. It reveals our desire for a profound and subtle yet substantial and unfolding regeneration. We have obviously realised that physical things depend ultimately on spiritual things, and not the opposite. This shared awareness is very hopeful, since it means that our outer efforts can become more adaptable and our motivations more agreeable with each other.

Most religions have a common theme. It is the desire and need to make contact with God, as defined by our status as creatures, and to be shown by Him through creation and revelation the path on earth that can lead to greater freedom, health, prosperity, and wisdom. This must primarily occur on spiritual levels to be of lasting value. Thus, at its core, religion can be seen to be profoundly practical in its purpose to lead mankind to greater efficiency, happiness, achievement, fulfilment, inner and outer peace, and sublime affinity and benefit. These are the things that every individual wants and searches for. We have made these aspirations our goals in life. We need to help each other in achieving these ambitions. They show the essential oneness of our humanity. The reward of living in society is that each person can derive benefits from every other person's efforts. Each person contributes a little, and then receives the vast benefits of society's accomplishments. Not only in material terms, but also in terms of collective wisdom and spiritual truth it can be experienced in many ways. The saints and sages of all religions have declared that they have drawn their wisdom from a sublime universal source, and that this source is full of unbounded justice, mercy, love, wisdom and joy.

Even though individual religions, like different nations and cultures, have unique characteristics, these are only the surface aspects. The fundamental principles at their heart are universal and everlasting. For this reason, the letter of the law or surface meanings, are not as integral as the spirit of the law which is far more invigorating. All religious teachings have their bases in the belief that there is an Unfathomable Spirit which sustains us even when we are not aware of it. We live by a deeper power than any set of propositions can provide. This power creates and supports all the functions of life. Every act of good, no matter how small is a radiation of that divinity. The blessings of life that this Singular Creative Being provides are deeper than what can be

appreciated by the senses or understood by the mind. Thus, it is only in our souls that our lives can be susceptible to the Eternal Spirit. It is from here that we derive our true strength. In the innermost sanctuary of our being we can discover our steadfastness and accord beyond all the displays of pleasure and pain, gain and loss, praise and humiliation, confidence and confusion that we experience in life. Religions have ever sought to answer this universal human need in the context of the time and cultures in which they have appeared.

Thus, Bahá'ís believe that all the benign and spiritually inspiring Faiths of the world occurred, not only as man's intrinsic religious response to his existence but also as God's reciprocal response to the perennial nature and needs of humanity, and that "Every Divine Revelation hath been sent down in a manner that befitted the circumstances of the age in which it appeared"⁷. Hence, for example, the greater restriction on divorce implemented by Christ at a time when Jewish family life and national stability were being undermined by Róman influences. Hence also, the later lifting by the early apostles of the necessity for circumcision as the gospel spread to the gentile world. Since that time Christianity has shown a remarkable ability to adapt to the norms and needs of varying minorities, cultures and historical events. However, this has not been without conflict, division, misunderstandings and denominational variety, albeit there has been a continuous repetition of revivalistic influences within all its organisational expressions, and this has contributed to its worldwide spread. The Bahá'í Faith, also, faces similar challenges to adapt to different cultures, races, classes of society, backgrounds, needs and problems, without compromising its essential covenant of unity. This creates many paradoxes, which Bahá'ís must work through with sensitivity, common sense, spiritual commitment, profound guidance, and inspired perseverance.

No great undertaking is possible without a willing, co-operative, persistent, creative, nurturing, steady, stable, consistent, and co-ordinated enterprise. We will have to uncover renewing and invigorating patterns of order and growth within our religious impulses to grow in our usefulness to mankind. Inner regeneration is the prerequisite to translating religious ideals into social benefit. All success in life is the result of putting our attention, energies and virtues into the appropriate channels and allowing a timely growth to occur. Working with a divided mind or purpose almost always gives results that are

⁷ Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p 81

less than hoped for. One of the fullest, most insightful, most federating expressions of religious motivation is seen in loving relationships between people. The world is nourished by kindly wisdom, loving concern, forgiveness, sharing, and by great sacrifice. Christians and Bahá'ís cannot escape this great truth. A universal human spiritual transformation needs to be individually experienced first. Then an overflow of loving concern needs to occur in our undertakings. Divisiveness within and between individuals is almost always a cause of unnecessary friction, that is, unless it provides space for a common unifying factor to emerge.

1.2 Through our unfolding social function

What is obvious, is that the age in which we live has influences at work on a more global, interactive, confrontational level than was experienced even 200 years ago. The Industrial Revolution, political revolutions, technological, scientific, and social revolutions are, in fact, still rapidly changing the way we live. The world seems smaller. Cultures, religions, economies, nations influence each other whether they want to or not. And never before in history have religions been so socially close to each other. Both Christianity and the Bahá'í Faith rank amongst the most widespread of all religions in the world⁸. There are Christians and Bahá'ís in almost every nation on earth. Although the Bahá'í Faith only numbers about 5 million, its appearance in diverse places and situations such as the island of Samoa, a village in New Guinea, a city like Tokyo or New York, the wastes of Arctic Iceland point to its universal appeal and adaptability. It is clear then, that the arena of expression in which Christians and Bahá'ís find themselves, to which all those who call themselves children of God belong, and at this time in history, owe their loving contribution to, is this planet, this earth, this one world with all its inhabitants.

That Bahá'ís and Christians will have to learn to understand, respect and appreciate each other is essential for social harmony and peace, ever more so now as we snowball into the future towards the inevitable experience of the globalisation of mankind. This concerns both Christians and Bahá'ís since "Christ was a divine Centre of unity and love. Whenever discord prevails

⁸ see David R. Barret, 'Religion: World Religious Statistics', 1988 Britannica Book of the year, p 303

instead of unity, wherever hatred and antagonism take the place of love and spiritual fellowship, Antichrist reigns instead of Christ"⁹. This century has shown that the possibility of oppressive forces using prejudice and hostility as instruments of control has not diminished. Concern for love, and the healing of antagonism is, consequentially, enjoined on Bahá'ís and Christians as inescapable duty, and intrinsic need.

These statements appear in the Bahá'í Writings: "The Cause of Bahá'u'lláh is the same as the Cause of Christ. It is the same temple and the same foundation. Both of these are spiritual spring times and seasons of the soul-refreshing awakening and the cause of the renovation of the life of mankind"¹⁰; "Gird up the loins of your endeavour, O people of Bahá that haply the tumult of religious dissension and strife that agitateth the peoples of the earth may be stilled, that every trace of it may be obliterated... Religious fanaticism and hatred are a world-devouring fire, whose violence none can quench. The Hand of Divine power can, alone, deliver mankind from this desolating affliction"¹¹; "Consort with the followers of all religions in a spirit of friendliness and fellowship. Whatsoever hath led the children of men to shun one another, and hath caused dissensions and divisions amongst them, hath, through the revelation of these words, been nullified and abolished"¹²; "He hath lent a fresh impulse, and set a new direction, to the birds of men's hearts, and hath obliterated every trace of restriction and limitation from God's holy book"¹³. As the Bible says: "How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him that bringeth good tidings, that publisheth peace; that bringeth good tidings of good, that publisheth salvation; that saith unto Zion, Thy God reigneth!" (Isaiah 52.7)

Peace can come about only as a result of concern and understanding for others. Negotiations and agreements are simply the superficial manifestation of this deep concern and active understanding. We must look toward deeper, more lasting feelings of friendliness, courtesy, warmth, compassion,

⁹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p 7

¹⁰ *Bahá'í References to Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, p 36

¹¹ *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p 288

¹² *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p 95

¹³ *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p 96

sympathy, empathy, fairness, tolerance between people - and in this case, between individual Bahá'ís and individual Christians. To both Christians and Bahá'ís Christ speaks: "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God." (Matthew 5.9) This is the spiritual, moral and ethical basis for our relationship. We can be loyal to our religious convictions and commitments without being smug or bigoted. Fanaticism, superstition, dogmatism, pettiness and prudery are, after all, simply artificial attempts to manufacture a religious experience and spiritual purpose. Similarly, apathy, obtuseness, vacillation, naive gullibility, and grandiose claims are plainly superficial responses to religious endeavour and spiritual whole-heartedness. In religious dialogue, for instance, we cannot effectively claim to have access to wisdom and at the same time, display intolerance and insincerity.

Every human has some degree of affiliation and affinity with others. As a person goes through life, this connectedness is put to many tests. Yet by understanding the more sublime teachings of religion, a person can find the faith he needs for this inter-personal link to endure beyond, and rise above, hardships, grievances or misunderstandings. More than a passing glance at scriptures or people's foibles is necessary to achieve this level of understanding. Acts of prayer, meditation, faith, forgiveness, and often, sacrifice, are needed to provide us with the stamina that allow sympathy for our fellow man to become an abiding part of our lives, of our being. When many more of us attain to this type of faith and deeper affinity, the expression of relatedness will be more spontaneous, more widespread as are the ties that link family members together, despite the disagreements, negotiations, and consultation that members of a family sometimes need to go through.

The Golden Rule is the cornerstone of religious understanding as applied to human relationships. The majority of the scriptural teachings on human interaction are simply variations or reflections of, or subsidiary derivations from the Golden Rule. Trying to live by it in attitude and action automatically evokes the expression of all these other principles. It is the most concise and all-embracing expression of all the other principles. It has been taught by all the founders of every major religion as the surest way for human beings to arrive at a more workable relationship with others. Jesus said, "...all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets." (Matthew 7.12) He calls this the straight and narrow gate in the following verse and suggests that most people ignore even

this simple instruction on how to live. He further implies that it is one of the tests to determine whether men are false prophets since such are more preoccupied with greed and aggression than with equity. In the Bahá'í Writings it is expressed so: "Tell the loved ones of God that equity is the most fundamental among human virtues. The evaluation of all things must needs depend on it"¹⁴; observe equity in your judgement, ye men of understanding heart. He that is unjust in his judgements is destitute of the characteristics that distinguish man's station"¹⁵; "be fair to yourselves and to others, that the evidences of justice may be revealed through your deeds"¹⁶; lay not on any soul a load which ye would not to be laid on you, and desire not for anyone the things you would not desire for yourselves. This is my best counsel unto you, did ye but observe it"¹⁷.

We are in such a hurry to change the world, that instead of working progressively on ourselves with each others' help, we sometimes become nuisances, hassling others and accosting them with our enthusiasm. We forget however "That the heart is the throne in which the Revelation of God the All-Merciful is centred"¹⁸. Hearts are not won or nurtured by imposition, strident posturing, vehement agitations, or meddling interference. Any new life, in this age, must needs stir first within people, and this is accomplished by our first paying attention with great humility to the destiny and virtues with which we ourselves have been endowed. Example has ever been a more direct form of persuasion than words, which are only signposts. We need to be careful that we do not create a situation again where people cry for the world to be saved from all the people who think that they can save it.

1.3 Through our inescapable human need

Nevertheless we have our limitations. We are not all, at any one time, highly cultured or clever. Sometimes we are clumsy and ignorant, but surely we all have the capacity to bear with each other in gentleness. We can be moderate,

¹⁴ *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p 203

¹⁵ *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p 204

¹⁶ *ibid.*, p 278

¹⁷ *ibid.*, p 128

¹⁸ *ibid.*, p 186

yet far-sighted. We can be appreciative, yet balanced and resolute. Relationships, possibly even more so those based on idealistic, religious or spiritual considerations, have their highs and lows, ups and downs, forward and backward moments. We can work at remaining consistent and persistent with each other. We can encourage each other to maintain faith and joy. We can help each other mature, develop and grow. We can leave dubious impulses and ulterior motives behind without fear - they don't work in the long term anyway. We can give up being pompous or artificial, and learn that nobility is discovered in service to mankind and God. We can learn to relax into the spiritual abundance within both the Christian tradition and Bahá'í Faith, without losing sight of the patience, determination and steadfastness that an ongoing process of developmental understanding requires. We can be high minded, yet realistic. "For the fruit of the Spirit is in all goodness, and righteousness and truth." (Ephesians 5.9) "Where people are praying for peace the cause of peace is being strengthened by their very act of prayer, for they are themselves becoming immersed in the spirit of peace"¹⁹.

Most surely we all have inadequacies, but this duty to understand one other should not be dismissed, neglected, or abandoned, "No one should abandon duties because he sees defects in them. Every action, every activity is surrounded by defects as a fire is surrounded by smoke"²⁰. Our faith can give us the assurance that God wants us to move into a greater goodness, and supports us and sustains us in this endeavour, despite our limitations and failures. Surely it is more righteous to dissolve theological bickerings, religious squabbings, and personal prickliness, than to maintain them. We are capable of accepting a greater goodness without fear or guilt, laxity or shabbiness.

Any kind of worthwhile association, begins with a positive attitude, a friendly mood, an affinity, a rapport and an uplifting-ambiance. It is this cultivation of mood that is fundamental and foundational, basic and necessary, before questions of doctrine or opinion can ever be approached; otherwise we do not end up teaching our respective Faiths, we end up proselytising with many negative side-effects. We must acknowledge and respect the spiritual potential of ourselves and spiritual identity of the other person. We must be convinced, even just a little, that we are somehow sincerely and genuinely one in our

¹⁹ John Macquarrie, quoted in, *The MacMillan Dictionary of Religious Quotations*, 313.5

²⁰ Bhagavad Gita, quoted in, *The MacMillan Dictionary of Religious Quotations*, 253.9

desire to understand God's purposes. Nobody looks through the same eyes or thinks with the same brain. We all have unique and different perspectives. We need each other. Without that other person's perspective one piece of the divine puzzle, one star in the universe of understanding is missing. If we are not willing to listen to others why should they listen to us? If we dismiss their concerns and doubts, why should they take us seriously? As the Buddha is reputed to have said: "Hatred does not cease by hatred, but only by love; this is the eternal rule"²¹. We have the ability to arouse various emotions in each other so we must select carefully.

Whenever there is tension or squabbling between individuals, groups, or nations, it means that a time of mutual understanding has been neglected or lost. It means that the channels of communication have not been used or are broken. Affinity is a unifying, federating force. It radiates inwardly and outwardly in a determined, persevering yet flexible manner to deliberately and adaptably resolve disruptions and contentions, and differences between people and nations. In some circles, compromise is such a dirty word that the tendency is to be stiff-necked rather than conciliatory. Compromise is sometimes viewed as a sign of weakness, cowardice, and treachery instead of the unavoidable necessity, that it is. It takes more sacrifice and courage to modify one's position and moderate one's actions to considerably incorporate others than to stamp our feet and defend our corner at any cost to ourselves and others. Civilisation is based on the notion that some conformity, within fair and reasonable bounds, is inescapable and beneficial. For example, economics is established on the reality of bargaining towards an agreeable benefit and cost. Yet in our personal affairs we often don't seem very willing to be beneficial or productive, economical or civilised. We imagine that we are being used. What is wrong with being useful? Our unique qualities and contributions need not be dissolved or lost by being integrated into a greater whole which allows them to be made even more useful and beneficial.

A sense of affinity can conquer before there is fighting. Even if yelling and accusations break out, they can be contained before they lead to attack and betrayal. Even if the channels of communication break down, one should still aim for a reestablishment of accord. It is obvious that peace between people cannot solely be brought about by signatures on a piece of paper. Since the

²¹ quoted in *The MacMillan Dictionary of Religious Quotations*, 225.2

beginning of recorded history, tens of thousands of peace treaties have been signed between people. Clearly, treaties alone cannot sustain the peace between people, any more than a marriage certificate can sustain love in a marriage. It begins in the heart, flows out from there, and returns there. This is a lesson that we have to be convinced of and to learn finally and absolutely, albeit developmentally and through trial. It is time to look forward to more central, more grounded, deeper, more lasting feelings of peace and affinity in ourselves and between people. This peace and affinity must be raised in the home of our hearts. This is where a religious experience, such as Bahá'ís and Christians claim to have, comes in. It is nourished by a personal relationship with God, even if it is a limited acquaintance due to our createdness and human limitations. We must begin with what we have and where we are. A sense of harmony with the Source of life, and life's meaning, purpose, and function can help enormously in our efforts to attain a workable harmony with every other aspect of reality, especially other people.

Christians and Bahá'ís have so much to share that it seems ridiculous that we try to avoid it. High-minded religious people have a common aim of pragmatic concern. As Jesus said, "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me." (Matthew 25.40) We stand accountable before Christ and God in this regard. Many issues await our consultation and cooperation. Problems of racism, crime, human rights, poverty, illiteracy, prejudice, disease, neglect of children and the elderly, community care and interaction, injustice to women, the environment, war, to mention just a few, await our humane endeavours. If this is a social gospel, so be it. It is hypocritical to talk to a hungry man about the love of God, if it is in our means to give him bread. It would make our religious claims fraudulent. We need to effect a revolutionary change in our hearts and attitudes. As Jesus said, "...where your treasure is, there will your heart be also..." (Matthew 6.21)

2. Resilient Objectivity

2.1 Towards our common religious impulses

Our purpose is to know and love God, develop our characters and relationships to our full capacity. We participate in Grace through faith, and

share it with the world in the spirit of graciousness. When we meet those whose opinions differ from our own, we need not turn our face from them, or allow difference of opinion or diversity of thought to separate us from our fellow-men, or to be the cause of dispute and strife in our hearts. To understand is to approach, appreciate, accommodate, and apply the insights and illuminations absorbed into our consciousness, and awakened within our being. Thus, are we transformed and developed to higher levels of intelligence, a deeper sense of existence, more profound sensitivity, and subtle effectiveness. And all this according to our capacity and the degree of accord experienced. Any religious understanding or connection cannot solely begin and end with words. It must be more realistic, more substantial, more dynamic than that to claim authenticity, validity or actuality. As Albert Einstein said: "Of course understanding of our fellow beings is important. But this understanding becomes fruitful only when it is sustained by sympathetic feeling in joy and sorrow"²².

There are obvious facets of understanding, whether it be understanding ourselves and others, or understanding concepts of reality, or notions of spirituality and religion, that are needed to act as centering and grounding agents. Intelligence has an inductive component as well as a deductive one. It needs to be sensible and sensitive, as well as reasonable and intuitive. It needs to be motivational and ethical, as well as devotional and mystical. It needs to address both social and psychological wellbeing, as it is related to spirituality. It needs to meet individual and collective spiritual needs and aspirations. It needs to be useful in regulating, furthering, integrating and refining our attitudes and endeavours. It is a means more than an end; a direction more than a destination. Understanding, as such, participates in the greater notion of 'conscious being'. Our task is to participate efficiently, effectively and holistically in this process as stewards. Religious understanding is, therefore, that face of human awareness that turns towards the concept of the All-Embracing, All-Pervasive Impelling Motive Force of reality, of which consciousness and being are emanations. In a spiritual sense, it is the need for some glimpse of God's Active Providence and a taste of the enduring substantially of the Ground of Being, and so a perspective of our part in, and contribution to, the overall scheme of things. We can then live our human lives, with all the accompanying tasks, in the liberating and restful certainty

²² quoted in, *The MacMillan Dictionary of Religious Quotations*, 431.3

than nothing in the world can separate God's love from us unless we alone grant the permission.

If all phenomena are viewed as constituting a divine creation, then human understanding generally can be viewed as a religious endeavour and spiritual effort. It is also a very humane enterprise, if we use it to examine the holiness and healthiness of our own respective religious commitments, in relation to ourselves as individuals, and each other as community. For Bahá'ís and Christians, this is especially interesting and crucial in view of the revolutionary social and psychological factors that are seeking expression and resolution in this historical age. That we, as Bahá'ís or Christians, repudiate each other, or ignore each other, is becoming more and more morally unacceptable. There is also the required service to mankind that our respective Writings demand of us both. This is because religious understanding needs to be an intelligent and sensitive, intuitive and sensible connection with people, ideas, feelings, situations and events, with human personality and character and outlook, with the world and its history; with time and space, as well as the Measureless and Enduring. It springs from, is based on and nourished by, developed and impelled by, a belief, faith and trust in the Ineffable Essence and God's Radiant Providence. It is a surrender and commitment to the intrinsic, inescapable, holistic, educational, and ultimately gracious and ennobling attributes of God's Infinite Dignity and Eternal Generosity, and that must ultimately occur beyond definitions or argumentativeness since "God is not what you imagine or what you think you understand. If you understand you have failed"²³.

'Abdu'l-Bahá explains: "...the Reality of Divinity is holy above all understanding. The pictures of Divinity that come to our mind are the product of our fancy; they exist in the realm of our imagination. They are not adequate to the Truth; Faith in its essence cannot be put into words... the Divinity which man can understand is partial; it is not complete. Divinity is Actual Truth and Real Existence, and not any representation of it. Divinity Itself contains all, and is not contained"²⁴. Yet a trust in the Ineffability of God and His Providence is not a heaven-sent excuse for indolence or despair, nor a way of by-passing responsibility with regard to social, material or physical needs and

²³ St Augustine, quoted in, *The MacMillan Dictionary of Religious Quotations*, 431

²⁴ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *'Abdu'l-Bahá in London*, p 22

concerns. As a consequence of this belief in God's unsearchable wisdom, we have to take up the challenge of laying bare any gems that lie hidden in the mine of our true and inmost selves, of carrying forward the civilising process in the world. We have to take on the situations and affairs God sends us, or places in our way, knowing that they come from Him and must be steered back to Him.

Understanding, therefore, as a growing process must in some ways be ennobling, satisfying and fulfilling, resourcefully enriching, unifying and integrating, integral and sensitising, balancing and moderating, developmentally purposeful, and decisively inspirational - in its means and ends, at its root and in its fruit, in its process and outcomes. With these fundamental qualities, our insights and outlook can become more essentially religious and necessarily spiritual, being more mature and humane in their manner, measure and message. Religious teachings are then able to be living waters for thirsty souls. The heaven of understanding with its luminaries of consultation, compassion, tolerance, and righteousness can be reflected from the mirror-like surface of our receptive hearts. Religious teachings need to be alive and refreshing, regenerating and enlivening, fluidly adaptable and relevant and applicable to life. As Jesus said; "If any man thirst, let him come to me and drink. He that believeth on Me, as the scripture hath said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water" (John 7.38). His metaphor of water contains allusions to all the necessary qualities of religious heartiness and interaction.

Surely, we can agree that purpose of religion is to establish unity and concord amongst the peoples of the world, and it should not be made the cause of dissension and strife. It should safeguard the interests, and promote the unity of the human race, and foster the spirit of love and fellowship amongst men as direct result of an individual spiritual regeneration and shared religious transformation. It must put an end to religious strife and establish a bond of connection between the hearts of men. People who are willing to come together in attitudes of intelligence, illumination, spirituality, sincerity, truthfulness contribute to the welfare of mankind, and are instrumental in establishing happiness and righteousness. Tolerance and compassion heal the sorrow and grief in human hearts. It cleanses prejudice and fanaticism. We are missing the mark if we denounce the idea of fellowship. Our shame and guilt is only healed by the God of kindness, justice and mercy, by way of our

authentic and actual response. Our waywardness and folly can only be healed by the breaths of the Holy Spirit; the Spirit of wholeness. God does not exist for our ambitions, or for our imposition on, or interference with others. We can open our hearts to believe that His Will is the freely chosen, organic unity of the individual and collective soul. To be sure our approach and appeal can become extremely idealistic and at times sentimental - but understandably so. We need to appeal to more than the head. We need to soften our cynicism.

On the other hand, we need a personal and instinctive wariness of rigid, static, categorical, dogmatic modes of thinking, especially as religion cannot help but use language. Language is more connotative, situational, psychological, and functional than traditional theologies sometimes seem to consider. Hence, the need for, and use of, parables, symbols, metaphors, and ordinances by God's Messengers that contain and convey grounding significances and centering principles, multilayered allusions, unlocking the potential of receptive hearts through their grace. "Divine things are too deep to be expressed by common words. The heavenly teachings are expressed in parable in order to be understood and preserved for ages to come. When the spiritually minded dive deep into the ocean of their meaning they bring to the surface the pearls of their inner significance. There is no greater pleasure than to study God's word with a spiritual mind"²⁵, "The Spirit breathing through the Holy Scriptures is food for all who hunger"²⁶. As the Bible says: "... they are spiritually discerned..." (1 Corinthians 2.14) As Jesus explains: "Unto what is the kingdom of God like? and whereunto shall I resemble it? It is like a grain of mustard seed, which a man took and cast into his garden, and it grew and waxed a great tree, and the fowls of the air lodged in the branches of it... It is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal, till the whole was leavened." (Luke 13.18-21) All of these inspired words teach us that religious teachings are subtle, profound, organic and developmental. They must work themselves from the inside out; from the simple towards the vast, from the easy towards the great. We can allow the formless, intangible influence of the Holy Writings to inspire us all and flow easily through us like breath; surprising, sublime and supernal in their effects.

²⁵ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *'Abdu'l-Bahá in London*, p 78

²⁶ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p 57

2.2 Towards our unfolding individuality

Religious teachings must have a pragmatic consequence upon our attitudes. We often have so much concern about what might happen, that what is actually happening passes almost unnoticed. Religion asserts that God is Ever-Present. "Whither shall I go from Thy spirit? or whither shall I flee from Thy presence? ... Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts: and see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting." (Psalm 139.7, 23-24), "for the Spirit searcheth all things, yea, the deep things of God." (1 Corinthians 2.10) Our lives are often trying to tell us something, but often we don't have time to listen. We are more afraid of voicing our complaints to God, not out of fear of disrespect, but out of fear for the remedies that might be suggested to our conscience. Nevertheless, in this place of open-heartedness to the Spirit of God at work in us individually, several things become clear. One is that God's Spirit is at work in all spiritually-minded, spiritually-discerning people; that while we have been living our lives others have been living theirs. Also, that it is patently absurd to expect that we'll always stay on good terms so long as they are simply one's own. Moreover, in order to get from what was to what will be, we must go through what is, that the only difference between yesterday and tomorrow is today, that unless we move, the place where we are is the place where we will always be. Are we still waiting for the world to atone for all our real or imagined grievances and unfulfilled expectations? Are we still disgruntled over the fact that nobody has ever loved us, the way we think everybody should love us? This is the malaise that haunts us all, and its healing is not always obtained in one day. We must make an effort to connect with others despite our shared inadequacies.

Individually, we are free to take charge of our lives. We can be more decisive. We are free to make choices, modifications, adaptations, connections, based on our own personal standpoints and experiences, but our having to explain or justify every conceptual reference or empirical link in our thinking or motivations is quite disheartening. We need time and space to heal and grow. There are strong affective and intuitive motivations in our thoughts which would be disturbing, disruptive and counter-productive to remove. However, they are still only our thoughts and feelings. We can do with them as we think best suits our growth-situation and benign creative insights. After all is said and done, religious understanding's aim is not to have us primarily remember a

whole lot of information. It is to nurture attitudes and values, and stimulate a sense of alertness, awareness and spiritual devotion and motivation in ourselves, and if it proves useful to others as well, so be it. It needs to cultivate habits and skills, and produce practical benefit, and blessings. We do not need to propose a new dogma - we can add, subtract, rephrase, and, most of all, extract and refashion what suits the spiritual purposes of our lives. This is as long as we do not impose our perspectives and predilections on others as the core representation of our Covenantal Religion. They are simply our developing responses to It. Nevertheless, it is towards a sense of community that we are aiming, so it is helpful if our thoughts are lofty, far-reaching, and non-aggressive, so that there can be an overflow of blessings to others and the world around us. One of the most satisfactory things in life is to have been able to give a large amount of ourselves to others whether it be by sharing or adapting. We can welcome other viewpoints without being upset, tossed about, or destabilised.

“Religion... is not a series of beliefs, a set of customs; religion is the teachings of the Lord God, teachings which constitute the very life of humankind, which urge high thoughts upon the mind, refine the character, and lay the groundwork for man's everlasting honour... And this is clear: a power above and beyond the powers of nature must needs be brought to bear, to change this black darkness into light, and these hatreds and resentments, grudges and spites, these endless wrangles and wars, into fellowship and love amongst all the peoples of the earth. This power is none other than the breathings of the Holy Spirit and mighty inflow of the Word of God”²⁷.

As the Bible explains: “Now the end of the commandment is charity out of a pure heart, and of a good conscience, and of faith unfeigned: From which some having swerved have turned aside unto vain jangling; desiring to be teachers of the law; understanding neither what they say, nor whereof they affirm” (1 Timothy 1.5-7); “... receive with meekness the engrafted word, which is able to save your souls. But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves. For if any be a hearer of the word, and not a doer, he is like unto a man beholding his natural face in a glass: For he beholdeth himself, goeth his way, and straightway forgetteth what manner of man he was. But whoso looketh into the perfect law of liberty, and continueth

²⁷ *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, p 52-3

there in, he being not a forgetful hearer, but a doer of the work, this man shall be blessed in his deed. If any man among you seem to be religious, and bridleth not his tongue, but deceiveth his own heart, this man's religion is vain. Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world." (James 1.21-27). Real religion is often just ordinary, uneventful goodness, received by God's grace and returned to Him through kindness and humility. Thus it is not necessary for it to be flashy. It already glows in our hearts.

It is the heart of man that grows in its capacity to know God and which God seeks to possess not by authoritarian force but by embracing and unfolding love, and awakening, pervasive light. It is from this central point that our latent potential bursts into life. As the Bible explains: "For the kingdom of God is not in word but in power. What will ye? Shall I come unto you with a rod, or in love, and in the spirit of meekness? (1 Corinthians 4.20-21); "Forasmuch as ye are manifestly declared to be the epistle of Christ... written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God; not in tables of stone, but in fleshy tables of the heart. And such trust have we through Christ to Godward. Not that we are sufficient unto ourselves to think anything as of ourselves, but our sufficiency is of God. Who also hath made us able ministers of the new testament, not of the letter but of the spirit; for the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life" (2 Corinthians 3.3-6).

Doctrines and rules are tools, aids and signposts. Like the sabbath, they were made for man, not man for them. They are not whips, chains or prisons. "For the Kingdom of God is not meat and drink, but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost. For he that in these things serveth Christ is acceptable to God, and approved of men. Let us therefore follow after the things which make for peace, and things wherewith one may edify another. For meat destroy not the work of God." (Romans 14.17-20). For Christ "having made peace through the blood of His Cross by Him to reconcile all things unto Himself, by Him, I say, whether they be things in earth or things in heaven." (Colossians 1.20) This peace with God and from God, on earthly and heavenly levels is what we nurture and hold in trust. The Bahá'í writings explain: "Know thou that when the Son of Man yielded up His breath to God, the whole creation wept with a great weeping. By sacrificing Himself,

however, a fresh capacity was infused into all created things"²⁸; "Jesus Christ gave His life upon the cross for the unity of mankind"²⁹; "Jesus Christ sought to create this love in the hearts. He suffered all difficulties and ordeals that perchance the human heart might become a fountain source of love"³⁰; "Christ endured a life of sorrow, pain and grief, to bring a perfect example of love into the world -and in spite of this we continue to act in a contrary spirit one towards another"³¹. In the bible are we instructed: "Only let your conversation be as it becometh the gospel of Christ...that ye stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel, and in nothing terrified by your adversaries" (Phillipians 1.27-28)

2.3 Towards our inescapable aspirations

This unified steadfastness, enterprise, and courage begins in the heart. As Jesus said: "The Kingdom of God cometh not with observation: neither shall they say, Lo here! or Lo there! for behold the kingdom of God is within you" (Luke 17.20-21). Bahá'u'lláh elaborates: "The one true God, exalted be His glory, hath ever regarded, and will continue to regard the hearts of men as His own, His exclusive possession. All else, whether pertaining to land or sea, whether riches or glory, He hath bequeathed unto the kings and rulers of the earth"³². This is why He declares "Who can ever believe that this servant of God hath at any time cherished in His heart a desire for earthly honour or benefit? The cause associated with His Name is far above the transitory things of this world"³³; "By the righteousness of God! It is not our wish to lay hands on your kingdoms. Our mission is to seize and possess the hearts of men. Upon them are the eyes of Bahá fastened. To this testifieth the kingdom of Names, could ye but comprehend it"³⁴. As Jesus also declared: "My Kingdom is not of this world." (John 18.36)

²⁸ *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p 85

²⁹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p 5

³⁰ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p 15

³¹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p 121-2

³² *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p 202

³³ *ibid.*, p 85

³⁴ *ibid.*, p 212

Any theocratic hopes or millennial faith we have must arise not from tradition, subversion, imitation, oppression, or the arbitrariness and legislations of oligarchies or vested interests who assume power without diplomatic and humane responsibility. A divine civilization can only come from the collective willingness and collaborative liberty of humane souls. It must begin with, and in, and be sustained by and through, the Spirit at work within us individually, freely and fairly. The heart needs to be ready to receive the vibrating influence of a renewing, inner spiritual order and vitality before it can blossom outwardly. The soul of man needs first to be revolutionised through the agency of the Holy Spirit in all Its wonder, uniqueness and systematic transformative power. We need to allow our own equilibrium to be upset first by the demands of inner accord before ever any outer concord can said to be authentic, actual, or durable.

The Messiah rules the mundane affairs of men through the iron rod of a tempered character; and measures the city, gates, and towers of hearts with the golden rod of the Spirit. Any peace within us, between us, and around us, needs to be the ever-widening ripples of "the peace of God, which passeth all understanding (which) shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus." (Phillipians 4.7). We are enjoined to "let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to the which also ye are called in one body; and be ye thankful." (Colossians 3.15). To this did Jesus refer when He said: "Peace, I leave with you, my peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you.." (John 14.27). However this holds a promise and responsibility, "Nevertheless we, according to his promise look for new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness. Wherefore, beloved, seeing that ye look for such things, be diligent that ye may be found of Him in peace, without spot, and blameless." (2 Peter 13-14) Any peace among the people of the world, between us now; any progress or outer renewal begins inside us, "...peace must first be established among individuals, until in the end it leadeth to peace among nations... strive ye with all your might to create through the power of the word of God, genuine love, spiritual communion and durable bonds among individuals"³⁵.

For Bahá'ís or Christians to call themselves Bahá'ís or Christians is not enough. Their inmost being must become ennobled and enlightened, as well as

³⁵ *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, p 246

humbled and warmly softened through living a Bahá'í or Christian life. The Bible tells us to beware of, "having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof: from such turn away" (2 Timothy 3.5); "But thou, O man of God, flee these things, and follow after righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, meekness" (1 Timothy 6.11); "Except the Lord build the house, they labour in vain that build it" (Psalm 127.1). Inner truth is the basis for outer reality. Our inner life is the basis for outer activity and our reaction to circumstances, and response to external events. No one thinks in our minds but us. No one feels in your heart but you. No one chooses God but ourselves individually. As John Donne said: "Christ beats His drum, but He does not press men, Christ is served with volunteers"³⁶. Sadly, man's inhumanity to man; witch-hunts, persecutions, concentration camps, inquisitions, martyrdoms, book burnings, slander and defamation, make us all mourn, and disillusion many. It is liberty of conscience, sanctuary and privacy, that are the necessary concomitants of cooperation and unity. An unfettered, free, fair, individual search for truth, and investigation of reality, is the first step towards having a decent, realistic, healthy, holy religion. Integrity and sincerity, fairness and justice, tolerance and accountability, can never be eliminated from sanctity. Thus, of patience, faith, and practicality do we require a lot. For "Faith is a living and unshakeable confidence, a belief in the grace of God, so assured that a man would die a thousand deaths for its sake"³⁷.

We are stuck with the influences and tensions of our respective histories and distinctive individual outlook, the needs of the present world situation, and our concerns for, and beliefs about, the future. We can be proud of the nobler aspects of our respective heritages, and can be committed to keeping that legacy alive for the benefit of future generations. We can gain a greater objectivity of the initiating impulses that dynamised our religions, and have a greater vision of the road ahead.

Thus any ideas or teachings, whether humanly or divinely inspired, are more like springboards than toll-gates. Religious ordinances are not to be equated with civil laws even if they are similar, for the former is the prerogative of a maturing spiritual conscience, and the latter serves basic social necessity and

³⁶ quoted in, *The MacMillan Dictionary of Religious Quotations*, 166.8

³⁷ Martin Luther, quoted in, *The MacMillan Dictionary of Religious Quotations*, 177.6

mundane secular considerations. Religious ideas are brought to the measure and test by being spiritual guidelines for a more spiritual, voluntary religious life. "No one doth well what he doth against his will"³⁸. It is, thus, not complete agreement from others that we must individually desire, rather more sympathy with our motives and a mutual ethical impulse. That others will discover some naive presumptions, untested assumptions, or even inadequacy in us is highly likely. We can let them take what they can and leave the rest, while mutually remaining committed to God, and our fundamental responsibility to humanity and history. We can be wise enough to stay committed to our humanity and existence. We can be gracious and still be committed to a valid, viable, genuinely spiritual future and authentically realised unfolding destiny.

Christians and Bahá'ís need to have enough faith in God to give Him, themselves, each other, and other human beings, some leeway; some room to manoeuvre. We all need time and space to grow as individuals, albeit in a considerate and co-operative mode. We all need to find some way to begin to initiate and establish a covenant of equitable concord with each other in regard to religion. This concord needs to be one that has space for diversified expression and mutual understanding. It needs time for consultation and reciprocal appreciation. It needs to be based on a rational and ethical commitment to each other, as well as humane, sensitive and reasonable considerations. It needs to be one that eschews egocentric self-promotion and domineering, or a dictatorial manner. It needs to be one that avoids insensitivity and unreasonableness. It can work at overcoming both coldness and naivety. This is an idealistic yet arduous goal. It is a difficult undertaking which needs, not stubbornness, but great resilience, patience, tolerance, objectivity, fairness, honesty, sincerity, truthfulness, and trustworthiness. "The whole point of this life is the healing of the heart's eye through which God is seen"³⁹. It begins with us making a commitment to the religious claim that the Eternal God is the Supreme Source of justice, peace, joy, and love; that He supports and sustains the universe, and as a consequence, us in it. This is understood to happen on wiser, deeper, more imponderable levels than we can imagine, express or fathom. Religion, as we know it, is the claim that we trust God to do the right thing beyond our limited hopes and fears, and in more

³⁸ St Augustine, quoted in, *The MacMillan Dictionary of Religious Quotations*, 15.4

³⁹ St Augustine, quoted in, *The MacMillan Dictionary of Religious Quotations*, 226.5

essential and quintessential ways than we can grasp. Thus, together, we can look ahead freely, clearly, intelligently, benevolently, and decisively, knowing that in the final analysis: "The eternal God is thy refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms" (Deuteronomy 33.27).

Trusting in God, Bahá'ís and Christians have the capacity to take small, gradual steps in the direction of unity. This is not necessarily an organisational unity, but rather an organic federation of concerns based on mutual friendship, understanding and appreciation. To do this, we both need a revival in our hearts of the things that are more fundamental than intellectual propositions, more evangelical than proselytising for larger numbers of enrolments, or more charismatic than noisy enthusiastic assertions. We need to touch the heart of the human condition. A life of goodness, wisdom and righteousness considers the spiritual potential and sublime worth of each and every human being. We need to be more convincing than what contrariness or variance provides,

"He (God) has endowed man with ears that he may hear the message of reality, and conferred upon him the gift of reason by which he may discover things for himself. This is his endowment and equipment for the investigation of reality. Man is not intended to see through the eyes of another, hear through another's ears, nor comprehend with another's brain. Each human creature has individual endowment, power and responsibility in the creative plan of God"⁴⁰. It is through this method that we find fulfilment, in ourselves, each other, reality and religion. Whatever our differences, "all men are the leaves and fruits of one same tree, they are all branches of the tree of Adam, they all have the same origin...the only differences that exist and that keep them apart are these: there are the children who need guidance, the ignorant to be instructed, the sick to be tended and healed; thus I say that the whole of humanity is enveloped by the mercy and grace of God. As the holy writings tell us: all men are equal before God. He is no respecter of persons"⁴¹. The creator does not subvert the human need to discover and know truth and reality through human effort. God does not subvert the free will placed in man. However, neither is the human need to be educated and loved, and the ability to sacrifice and share dismissed or degraded as a consequence of our individual autonomy. These enrich and extend our capacity when freely done. Self-centredness is only

⁴⁰ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p 293

⁴¹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p 129-130

overcome willingly. Love is only nurtured willingly. Any religion worthy of the title is a candlestick on which burns the light of guidance, education, comfort, healing, encouragement, progress and redemption – necessarily spiritual, inescapably honest, expressively realistic and freely chosen.

3. Reciprocal Fulfilment

3.1 Through our common encounters

Understanding something or someone is satisfying when it meets human needs for succour and illumination. Often it takes time to become sensitive to what these are, especially in others. If we imagine that we have no more need of nourishment or insight ourselves, such conceit is unworthy of us. Or confidence is misplaced and unfounded if we believe that we have arrived at perfection. There is a certain timeliness in breakthroughs of insight and appreciation. When people of two different Faiths meet, it is all too easy to lose sight of the “forest because of the trees”. Our own enthusiastic conviction tempts us to “push our luck” with each other - but hearts are not always won in this way. We are capable, when necessary, of being more contained, more content with steady, modest gains, of focusing on small cumulative accomplishments. A required amount of turn-taking needs to occur. It needs patient faith to go one step at a time in order to allow a Christian or Ba.ġá'í the space needed to examine and demonstrate the validity and relevance of his/her Faith. We can nurture our ability to flow in an exchange, not like a torrent or a flood, but as an interdependent, co-operative fluid participant. We can pass the cup of fellowship, containing the outlooks, perceptions, insights, and feelings which each individual treasures, to and fro with graciousness and ease. We need to have our hearts sprinkled with a sense of the conditions and needs of each other. Contentiousness is exhausting. It exhausts any sense of relatedness that we may have.

We are so afraid of missing out, that we can become careless in our remarks and heedless in our concerns. We are swept along by the enthusiasm of an opportunity to proclaim the good news, as we see it, to share our beliefs, that we dampen other people's interest. We earn the attention, respect and co-operation of each other by speaking appropriately to the immediate situation and not spinning off into some abstract world. Modesty and relevance,

uninhibited and unforced, have their long-term rewards and subtle impact. Petty ideas or contentious notions tend to cloud immediate issues. For Bahá'ís and Christians to plunge into controversial theologies, without first establishing trust and friendship is unproductive. Religious exchange takes place within the social dynamics of a relationship and real-life situation. It needs to be functional and situational to be fulfilling to both parties. People need to be convinced and comfortable that there are spiritual and circumstantial qualifications, pure motives and clear purposes in a religious exchange. This is in order to prevent the dangers that have historically shamed religion and brought many people to their present state of mistrust and cynicism. Each layer and dimension of belief, faith and trust, needs to be certain of its support experientially, intuitively, intellectually and emotionally. Trust is ever evolving. Truth as man experiences it is ever emerging. Understanding is ever expanding. Honesty is ever challenging.

We each see only gleams of light; some may be seen more clearly or fully than others. Which are brighter is for God to see. As it is, none of us could cope with the full glare. Yet, we are each right and wise to follow what light we ourselves are capable of experiencing. We cannot safely assume to be certain of who is wise among us, and who is not, lest the splinter we see in another's eye turn out to be the shadow of the plank in our own. We can handle all ideas with greater love, greater care, greater ease, greater discernment. "Who is a wise man and endowed with knowledge among you? let him show out of a good conversation his works with meekness of wisdom. But if ye have bitter envying and strife in your hearts, glory not, and lie not against the truth. This wisdom descendeth not from above, but is earthly, sensual, devilish. For where envying and strife is, there is confusion and every evil work. But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle and easy to be entreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy. And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace of them that make peace." (James 3.13-18)

Our attitudes and actions do not need rash demands or reckless, impatient ideals. Our faith in the potential in each other has effects beyond our expectations and produces a greater sense of wholeness. Outer conditions and inner drives must be balanced with insight. Competing emotions need to be brought into harmony. This state of mind must underlie every discourse. One cannot assume dominance without there being an overt or covert backlash on

the part of the other participants. In terms of priority, spirituality supports, pervades, and sustains intellect, emotions and physical sensibility, yet without tyranny. Modesty, diplomacy, discretion, and concern for others have primacy over conceit, tactlessness, and self-centredness. They are virtues because they are more efficient, effective and durable. Godliness is the image of God at work within us. As the Sikh Writings indicate: "God is in thy heart, yet thou searchest for Him in the wilderness"⁴².

We must be careful that we do not willingly or heedlessly sow thorns of doubt, thistles of malice, and seeds of dissension in the fertile soil of each other's hearts. We can through our insight, outlook, genuineness, compassion, and faith-filled radiance, awaken in each other the kernel of reciprocity and mutuality on subtle, profound, central, spiritual, godly, and authentic levels. We must allow patience, good-will, and insight to shower their refreshment and resilience on our ideals and ambitions. We can surrender to the conviction that God's love is never lost even though the forms and channels it uses may vary or change. If this is so, then we can readily afford to release all contrariness, volatility, and capriciousness. We can easily afford to see with more loving eyes. What is the point of assisting others out of their difficulties into our own? It is ridiculous to expect others to use their own judgement and then do as we say. Self-enlightened people are sometimes quite ponderous, artless, inelegant, and boring in their efforts to prove how enlightened they are, boring to others who are not so informed and to others who are. Sometimes the best way to be useful is to stop blocking other people's way. The only thing worse than the difficulties of having to grow up spiritually are the difficulties of being grown up. We have no need to become "holy terrors". Authoritarianism has plagued the growth of religion and consolidation of its institutions. We have no need to usurp authority from secular concerns which have been won by mankind at great cost. The cause of Christ and Bahá'ullah has never been served, nor can ever be served, by the betrayal of our humanity. The non-religious populace has judged, and will continue to judge us this regard. Ethical people courageously champion justice, fairness and reasonableness. They value equity for every human being, even if it brings discomfort or personal sacrifice.

We need to avoid evasiveness or dishonesty, in favour of a prudent considerate

⁴² quoted in, *The MacMillan Dictionary of Religious Quotations*, 202.1

sounding out of each other's assumptions, concerns and motives. We need to state frankly what we believe without the irritation or restlessness that fuels arguments or suspicion. Sometimes long-winded elaborations are untimely or unrequested. When relationships hang in the balance, we can be courageous enough to take the risk of openness. When doubt is present it is treated to our detriment by subterfuge, cleverness, evasiveness or dismissiveness. We need to be prepared to take a simple, easy non-defensive stand when required, but this depends on the occasion. The fact is that some of us will test everyone and everything new, and we do it in overt and covert ways depending on our personalities. What we are really doing is looking for and sounding out the trustworthiness in the ideals, moods and purposes that are being conveyed and embodied by the conveyor. In such situations quality is more to be desired, of more benefit and value, than quantity. Words and actions given and received with good-will, empathy, sincerity, sensitivity, common-sense and reasonableness are ultimately more productive, more inspiring than those done for show. Nothing enduring and genuine can ever be attributed to force or intrigue. Words need to come, not from outward display, but from within, from the heart, which needs to be kept in a tender state lest it lose the fragrance of God's Breath. Our words have the power to elevate or crush the well-being of others. Our words may teach others to love or loath themselves and those around them. They have the power to affirm or shatter. They encourage trust or doubt.

3.2 Through our unfolding inspiration

Frankness offered in sympathy and consideration gives even our smallest comments and gestures a more genuine weight in the long-term scheme of things. Our concern with persuasiveness need not rely on past successes or present enthusiasms. To glory in the past, rest on our laurels, be somersaulted by our one-eyed view or fantastic expectations of things can interfere with the flow of interactive communication. It is the present that counts as we move out of the past into the future, although it gains its momentum from both. Immediacy and impact gain their value from a more generous, nobler, less egocentric perspective. Thus, in this way, we keep moving ahead to higher vantage points. An adaptable clarity answers the need for both dignity, relevance and growth in religious exchange. That we can give ourselves and each other room to fulfil ourselves is suggested in I Timothy 6:4-7 where the

writer exhorts us to a "doctrine which is according to godliness" and warns us against snobbery or begrudging attitudes, against being "proud, knowing nothing but doting about questions and strifes of words whereof cometh envy, strife, railings, evil surmisings, perverse disputings of men of corrupt minds, and destitute of the truth, supposing that gain is godliness". He asserts that "godliness with contentment is great gain". He goes on to say that fulfilment is when we do good, "rich in good works, ready to distribute, willing to communicate." and this, we discover, requires the space others need to express themselves.

These qualities are indicative of the "good foundation against the time to come." (v.19) Our mutual fulfilment, through understanding reality and ourselves, and each other as participants in its passing parade and spectacle, is ongoing, cumulative and measured in an increase in faith and virtue - individually and mutually. In terms of our spiritual orientation, we can soon discover that 'saint' and 'prophet' are terms used to describe those who most fully respond to God through love and insight. The false prophet (is easily recognised for he) speaks out of the self-centred conditioning of the world in which he lives"⁴³. Our purpose is not to delude ourselves or others, but to embody and exemplify deep, realistic, subtle, advantageous significances. We need to allow the heaven of our theologies to be cleft asunder, as it were, in order to let the Sun of Truth, the radiance of authenticity and honesty, shine through. We need to find a way whereby we can inhale the subtle fragrances of the Grace of God that underlie our nominal distinctions and abstract generalisations. We cannot do this without a lot of soul-searching, emotional discomfort, intellectual effort, prayer, contemplation, and readings from holy writings. We cannot, as spiritually impelled beings, wriggle out of our responsibility to the Creator and Source of Revelation, and the inescapable essence of our faith. Faith is the channel of grace, and it must be regularly cleansed and refined. It is only in this way that we are justified in our approach to God. All our attitudes and efforts are based on this. We can make a commitment to decency by not displaying prejudice or bigotry.

The curse of religious competitiveness and authoritarianism defames God's Name and enfeebles our testimony to His graciousness and justice. The curse of religious totalitarianism slanders and makes suspect our claims to divine

⁴³ Gilbert Shaw, quoted in, *The MacMillan Dictionary of Religious Quotations*, 835.8

inspiration. Antagonistic divisiveness and snobbish dissension are immoral. The sinful attitudes and mentalities that arise as duplicity towards ourselves, and our fellow men, lead to and perpetuate bitter splits. We need to listen to the deep cry in our own hearts beyond all our stubbornness and indifference, beyond any self-righteousness and spiritual numbness. We need to listen to the collective cry of history and mankind beyond our personal obsessions or dictatorial ideologies. We need to turn away from contrived, limited and superficial remedies. We need something that begins in, flows from, and returns to the heart. Any cogency, coherence and cohesiveness within and between people is supported by communication. Discourse and dialogue, no matter how small and troublesome are worth the effort. We are capable of taking pains to obtain a more fruitful, objective perspective on the issues that confront us as spiritual beings and religious people. We also need to remember that we are creatures, derived, vulnerable, limited, and interdependent. We have the developmental capacity of steadily gaining the advantage of a more existential, personal, and interactive involvement in faith, as it is revealed through and beyond our own personal beliefs. Whenever resentful misunderstanding occurs the mark has been missed somewhere, and we must uncover it without excessive self-blame and criticism of others. It is part of an evolving process, where ultimately, our bonds, as prophesied in all our scriptures, are to become like family ties.

Any reconciliation on spiritual levels whether acknowledged or not, springs from one's own connection and relationship with Divinity. This connection is one that has thrown us back upon the ineffability, providence, fairness, and mercy of God, as it is operating in our lives. We need to trust that God is the All-sufficing above all things. In doing so, we align ourselves with the spiritually developmental processes at work in us, and around us. Nevertheless, we had better be prepared, as a result, to undergo the disruptive dramatic changes that usually accompany growth. We had better be prepared for changes to our conditioned, imitative ways of perceiving reality. What Providence sends our way is often educational. It challenges us to deeper resourcefulness, autonomy, and interactive understanding. It will claim precedence over any warm feelings of cosiness, or ruts we are stuck in. If we are not willing to make such a conditional commitment in advance, to allow our preferences and priorities to be rearranged, to have the basics of our stewardship put to the test and refined, to undergo a regular spiritual revolution and renewal, recentering, regrounding, re-evaluation, and revival,

so as to be lifted to the next stage of our spiritual perfecting and maturation, then we had better give up the notion of growing up religiously at all.

We can always remember that, in terms of feeling fulfilled in our understanding of our human responses to reality, and our being affected by it, and in our relationships, each ending is a new beginning. The journey ever continues, and at every stage we are confronted by a new paradox and new challenge. This helps us avoid self-satisfied complacency or dogmatism in our understanding of existence as a spiritual vehicle, ourselves as unfolding spiritual beings, of religion as a diversified spiritual expression, or holy scriptures as oceans with allusions and depths yet unplumbed. What a high objective and measure is enjoined on all Christians and Bahá'ís. "Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ!" (Ephesians 4.13) And as is expressed in the Bahá'í Writings, "is not the object of every Revelation to effect a transformation in the whole character of mankind, a transformation that shall manifest itself both outwardly and inwardly, that shall affect both its inner life and external conditions? For if the character of mankind be not changed, the futility of God's universal Manifestations would be apparent"⁴⁴. Spirituality is not a static, stagnant state. It is the devotional, mystical, motivation, rational, and moral procedure leading towards a greater uncovering of one's capacity to reflect divinity. It is the unfolding of one's ability to become more godly, more Christ-like.

3.3 Through our inescapable devotion

We may have small confidence of reaching the reflected likeness of either Christ or Bahá'u'lláh in this lifetime but such an ideal is our pole star, as it were. Is it not a glimpse of the Blessed Beauty that inspires us to become more beautiful? We follow in Their footsteps, follow Their example and Their purposes in this lifetime. The "Word was made flesh and dwelt among us... full of grace and truth." (John 1:14); that is, the Universal, Creative Declaration of God took on a concrete reality, a concrete personal life, and revealed the divine ground of being in the noble form of the human temple. The fundamental, essentially universal truth for humanity appeared as a

⁴⁴ Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitab-i-Iqan*. The Book of Certitude, p 124

realistic phenomenon for us to reflect in our lives where possible, according to our capacity as enhanced by the grace of God. The Life and Light, exuded as a beam proceeds from the sun, as a result of the Divine Activity, has a transforming, educational effect on man, especially those who are open to Its warmth. The Radiance of God took on human form and exemplified and revealed for us the power of being and knowledge. While it is true that Bahá'ís and Christians have different perspectives on this, the underlying initiative is the same. With respect to the authority of Christ to awaken us and regenerate us wholeheartedly, it can be discovered that this is not subverted in the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh, but is crystalized and reanimated, albeit in a renewed and refreshing manner. Example and Inspiration move the soul, and the world, much more potently than philosophy, theology, or legality. "The glory of God is man fully alive"⁴⁵.

In religion, the emphasis on personality and history derive from a specific Revelation. This leads to prescriptive approach where laws, ordinances, institutions, and formulae, are given explicitly. Semantic distinctions are maintained through legalistic or literal interpretations. The nominalised, quantitative features of the Revelation are often emphasised. Whereas the emphasis on essence and development gives rise to focus on the qualitative, processive nature of Revelation which leads to a descriptive approach. Principles, significances, metaphors, dynamics, and similarities gain an energetic impulse through a versatile or symbolic application. Both exist side by side in all religious Faiths. They are complementary, and both are necessary at any given time. Yet there is varying emphasis from period to period, culture to culture, and group to group. Different traditions and movements have arisen from their concerns. So, if we, individually or collectively, in explanation or commitment, seem different to each other in our religious understanding and application, it could be due to aforementioned duality at work in religion. What is more important, though, is that we consult and co-ordinate our spiritual urges and religious initiatives in complementary, high-minded, practical, fruitful and relevant ways. The book of Hebrews addresses this issue for the Christian Dispensation. It can show us that the grace of God, and our response to it, is not necessarily a way out so much as a way through, and into deeper significances, more sublime inclusion, and a more transcendent perspective. It teaches us to release that which we no longer

⁴⁵ St Irenaeus, quoted in, *The MacMillan Dictionary of Religious Quotations*, 206.2

need and allow our concepts to be fresh, new, vital and relevant. We can look beyond ourselves to acknowledge the Spirit greater than ourselves.

We need to be wary of the extremes of being either too literal or too metaphorical. Excessive emphasis on rules, regulations, doctrines, and procedures lead to prudish attitudes, over-specification and authoritarianism. This was the problem Jesus had with the Pharisees. Excessive esoteric abstractions can result in over-generalisation, grandiose claims, undirected or unfocused hopes, which often leads to complacency. In the former, divine teachings are often added to or made a burden. In the latter, they are explained away or made impotent. Both extremes of focus are forms of stagnation. Fanaticism, superstition, anarchy or materialism are inevitable consequences. They seek to compensate hungrily and hopefully, yet ineffectually, for the neglected dynamic of a unifying covenantal ethic containing diversified expression and a consultative mode. Without this dynamic, diversity may be persecuted, freedom and privacy devalued, or co-operation eschewed and responsibility degraded. An understanding sympathy for the limitations of the human condition and an appreciative accord with ennobling human potential is needed. We need these to operate and unfold in a balanced way within religion. We can stand in truthfulness, and move forward with joy as we all have our aspects of spiritual understanding, whether latent or active. We can move into greater goodness with faith, confidence, and mutual respect. We are promised that, "an humble man without learning, but filled with the Holy Spirit, is more powerful than the most nobly-born profound scholar without that inspiration"⁴⁶.

In any religious expression, smug hypocrisy, pedantic self-righteousness, naive gullibility, dogmatic superficiality, and retrograde domineering, can bespeak an imbalance, a certain degree of spiritual immaturity or numbness. To be unreasonable, insensitive, hard-hearted, "a know-it-all", condescending, patronising, even obsequious, conniving, under-handed, pretentious, and "nit-picking", suggests, from a realistically spiritual, and truly religious perspective, a level of inappropriateness. It suggests thoughtlessness and ineptness. All these negative factors simply point to our need to rebalance and mature. They simply reveal to us the limitations, contingency, vulnerability, and imperfection of every human being. They open up for us our need to be

⁴⁶ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p 165

more heedful, realistic, patient and grateful to God for our growth and development, our ability to mature in balanced ways, and our progressive impulses. This can be awakened through the refining nature of spiritual endeavour. This can be stimulated by a purposeful fulfilling quest for an even greater religious understanding. Life is about living and learning, and steadily coming to terms with situations and people. It is about coming to terms with reality on all its apparent and subtle levels. Negative responses come up to let us know that we are still holding on to and relying on faulty assumptions. They let us know that it is time to work on our attitudes and reactions in a more sublime, refined spiritually-sophisticated manner, even if just a little at a time. "The path of the just is as the shining light, that shineth more and more unto the perfect day." (Proverbs 4.18). We still have much to learn so we need to remain always open to growth and educational surprises. The paradox is that all our efforts at progress need to bring forth a profound ease emerging from a deep faith. "You have made us for Yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in You"⁴⁷.

It is only through a restful trust in God, and a confidence in His benign justice that we can gently move forward and softly accomplish things worthwhile.

4. Genuine Empathy

4.1 In our common spiritual commitment

What is to be encountered in this quest for a greater, yet easier harmony with our common humanity and innate ideals is not really that new or original, but it needs to ever be genuine and heartfelt. These qualities are for us, in some respect, the primary measures of any idea's worth. It is to ourselves that our thoughts are firstly addressed, as a way of clarifying our intuitions and motivations, and providing a fertile ground and productive atmosphere within which we can view the relationship that exists in us between a Christian experience and Bahá'í experience. There is basically no essential contradiction or break, but this may not be accepted or appreciated by everyone. It involves the modest realistic stance that there are honest, idealistic impulses that both

⁴⁷ St Augustine, quoted in, *The MacMillan Dictionary of Religious Quotations*, 227-7

Bahá'ís and Christians share at very deep, profound and subtle religious levels, as is expressed in Phillipians 3:8-16: "I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord... that I may know Him, and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being made conformable unto His death... Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect: but I follow after, if that I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus. Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended: but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus...". For "Religion in its humility restores man to his only dignity, the courage to live by grace"⁴⁸. Further, "He that loves God seeks neither gain nor reward but only to lose all, even himself"⁴⁹ (St John of the Cross: MD.396.7). We can have faith that the supernatural awaits and sustains the growth and progress of our spiritual nature, but it must not be forgotten that it purifies. We become poor in our own conceits and rich in the things of God's glory. We become nothing compared to His designs yet ennobled by the invisible presence and sparkling beauty of the Loved One, whereby we live for God, with God, from God, and in God.

Bahá'u'lláh states: "O Son of Justice! whither can a lover go but to the land of his beloved? And what seeker findeth rest away from his heart's desire? To the true lover reunion is life, and separation is death. His breast is void of patience and his heart hath no peace. A myriad lives he would forsake to hasten to the abode of his beloved"⁵⁰, or in other words "Only love enables humanity to grow, because love engenders life and it is the only form of energy that lasts forever"⁵¹.

Motivated by our love for God, and from God, we must make sure that the quest for refinement, maturity, sincere intent and pure motive is not confused at this stage with sterility, blandness or pretentiousness. This barrenness

⁴⁸ George Santayana, quoted in, *The MacMillan Dictionary of Religious Quotations*, 244.5

⁴⁹ St John of the Cross, quoted in, *The MacMillan Dictionary of Religious Quotations*, 396.7

⁵⁰ Bahá'u'lláh, *The Hidden Words in Persian*, no. 4

⁵¹ Michael Quoist, quoted, *The MacMillan Dictionary of Religious Quotations*, 278.4

comes from a denial of, or indifference to, our common humanity. To be sure, we are often overcome by a sense of failure, immaturity and inadequacy, and we sometimes feel discouraged, disheartened and disappointed. Even if there is a discord between our hopes and our circumstances, it is not an excuse for us to wallow in self-pity, blame or be constantly judgmental of ourselves, or each other. Such arrogance and lack of objectivity is not fruitful. Having a teachable spirit is an impetus to move forward, onward, and upward. It is an impetus to take the next step no matter how small. We can always remember that the opportunity for great deeds may never come, but the opportunity for good deeds is renewed day by day. The thing to long for is the goodness, not the worldly glory. We seem to be often trying to accomplish something big, not realising that life is made up of little things. One of those little things is to seek contact with God's activity in the simple goodness and splendour of every trial and circumstance. The ordinary ways, customs, and habits, which we all engage in are not a matter of conflict with Providence but rather necessary bulwarks of reality and spirituality. We can see the goodness of God reflected in the simple goodness within others.

How can we see God's countenance reflected and mirrored in ordinary, everyday people and situations? Obviously "No man hath seen God at any time...(but)... if we love one another, God dwelleth in us, and His love is perfected in us." (1 John 4.12). Jesus declared God (John 1.18) by living in a simple way and mixing with all sorts of people, even outcasts. He experienced the most common of emotions and events with sincerity and insight. He appreciated the simple and plain things, people and situations because He knew that His Father was always at work, and therefore, so was He (John 5.17). All of His life was change, but His response was ever refreshing and renewing. He was courageous and independent in His forgiveness, sacrifice, fairness, peace, love, and unshakeable trust in God. We too can listen to God by hearing the joys and potential of life, of people. Nevertheless, we are directed to: "Love the creatures for the sake of God... You will never become angry or impatient if you love them for the sake of God. Humanity is not perfect. There are imperfections in every human being, and you will always become unhappy if you look toward the people themselves. But if you look toward God you will love them and be kind to them, for the world of God is the world of perfection and complete mercy. Therefore do not look at the

shortcomings of anybody, see with the eye of forgiveness"⁵².

We need to see beyond dogmas, structures and organisation to people themselves, although the former have a necessary and inescapable function; and then beyond people to God's mercy and grace. We can look into each other's hearts with their hopes and dreams, disappointments and sacrifices, -at times in conflict, at times in harmony. Regardless of the sublimity of the ordained and organisational potential of a religion, it is still upheld and nourished by the spirit of God working freely through people - finite people clinging to infinite values. It is our duty to co-ordinate our tensions and values within our own Faiths, and then between our Faiths, through our faith. Peace comes when we can accept the shortcomings of ourselves and others. It comes when we let go of hurts and affronts and move on. It comes from within each and every human being, spreads outwards to others, and so ripples to every corner of the earth, one heart and deed at a time.

Both Bahá'ís and Christians have hopes for a better world touched by the creative, available power of God's Spirit, as found in the nobler aspects of creation, and built on and developed by the enduring principles available to us through our respective Revelations. The way ahead is, in its means and outcomes, none other than genuine respect, voluntary co-operation, uplifting appreciation, and tactful fellowship without demanded reorganisation, disadvantageous fear, reprobate antagonism, or a perverse betrayal of our respective commitments to the teachings of our Founders. History pictures the tragic alternative to these factors. To separate ourselves from unbelief and mistrust begins within. It does not necessarily imply rejecting others because their interpretation and understanding of scripture are different, unless they are being used for self-centred, divisive aims. To separate ourselves from other Faiths suggests that unbelief has not been righteously dealt with in one's own soul. It infers a belief that reasonableness is not wise, that sincerity is not virtuous, that love is not love wherever it occurs. It infers a lack of belief that "God is no respecter of persons: but in every nation he that feareth Him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with Him." (Acts 10.34-35). It implies a subtle duplicity, in that we expect others to delve beneath the surface references to unearth durable principles and significances, while we remain unwilling to do the same. It suggests that our obsession with "One Way" has

⁵² 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p 93

forgotten that its narrowness is a reference to its focus, that its straightness is its direction. Its oneness is sharp enough to release us from the traps of superficial labels and expectations and open a way through and past personal inclinations, and liberate us into sharper, clearer, more focused character of the all-embracing, pervasive, more profound and demanding nature of God's Active Providence through His Spirit. Christ embodied and sacrificed His life for this kind of spiritual cohesion.

God has not called people to a ministry of bigotry and condemnation, but of transformative spirituality, discernment, infectious compassion, and developing skilfulness. Yet, we need to establish ourselves, to put down roots into God's eternal covenant with man. Divine Truth seeks to express itself in time and space. Our culture, the needs of the time, our own conscience, and our idiosyncracies are all factors in a personal relationship between man and God. They are acceptable to the Creator and are useful instruments in His Hands. We all have specific temperaments and gifts, and it behoves us to find a religious arena for their development, refinement, and increasing usefulness. We have no need at all to consider ourselves superior to those believers in God's grace who do not find their immediate fulfilment in the group that we find satisfaction. What is placed on us, regardless of what identity we assume, is a responsibility to carry out our spiritual responsibilities, and uncover spiritual bounty, as to provide the blessings we ought to provide. Our religion, whatever its name, needs to be beneficial and productive, not a mere code of beliefs or laws, but the "unsealed choice wine" of spiritual power, genuineness, fairness, and love. If what is said here is obvious, - then we can be content that it strikes a chord in our awareness.

4.2 In our unfolding spiritual growth

The claims that there is a fundamental obligation that links Bahá'ís and Christians alike, must not appear too grandiose. We need to be simple and straightforward. If, we are mentally stimulated into further self-satisfaction and self-congratulation, we have failed. Somehow, someway, the influence of religious revelation, on which we ponder and comment, must leave us more creative, more durable, more nurturing and nourishing. It must leave us more tender and steady, clearer, warmer, more courageous and adaptable, more sharing and happier, more stable and down-to-earth. It is steadily possible to

become more sensitive and sensible towards each other. We are able to progressively detach ourselves from the extremes of grandiose claims and petty fixations. We have the ability to gradually learn to detach ourselves from indifference, cynicism, conceit and supercilious attitudes. We can learn from each other. We actually need each other. We each have an insight that the other does not have. Let no one imagine that he has no influence. God brings us together for mutually educational purposes. As Confucius said: "Without feelings of respect, what is there to distinguish men from beasts?"⁵³. If we offer a place in our lives to others, we must also make the space and time for them to find it. If we are so understanding about ourselves when we do something wrong, then we can readily grant that same forgiveness and tolerance to others.

Who among us has no defects? "The world of existence is progressive (and) is dependent for its progress on reformation, a reformation that is an educational process: the world of nature is incomplete and imperfect until awakened and illumined by the light and stimulus of education"⁵⁴. The spiritual education of oneself is a prime responsibility. In the Bible we are warned against the folly of intellectual pride. "If any man think that he knoweth anything, he knoweth nothing yet as he ought to know. But if any man love God, the same is known of Him" (Corinthians 8.2-3) and "By love alone is God enjoyed, by love alone delighted in, by love alone approached and admired. His nature requires love. The law of nature commands thee to love Him: the law of His nature and the law of thine"⁵⁵. Spirituality, of which love is the core, is like a mountain, the further you climb, the higher it is. It is like the earth, the further you go the further it extends. Shallow people use up their strength and give up. Only those who have a real, true, realistic and truthful trust in God can explore its height, depth and breadth. We can be like explorers opening the way for others to follow. This is the concern of deep spiritual love and wisdom. This is the living meaning of religious understanding.

Who among us knows everything? Fulfillment is found through knowledge, understanding and insight when our hearts are "comforted, being knit together

⁵³ quoted in, *The MacMillan Dictionary of Religious Quotations*, 355.10

⁵⁴ 'Abdu'l-Bahá quoted by Julio Savi, *The Eternal Quest for God*, p 50

⁵⁵ Thomas Traherne, quoted in, *The MacMillan Dictionary of Religious Quotations*, 279.5

in love, and unto all riches of the full assurance of understanding, to the acknowledgement of the mystery of God, and of the Father, and of Christ; in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. And this I say, lest any man should beguile you with enticing words." (Colossians 2 : 2-4) It is not clever words that fulfil our need to understand God or each other. It is fellowship, and learning to be Christ-like. A simple saint has more practical wisdom than the greatest academic if that academic uses his knowledge as a springboard for the ego. Fulfilment is not found in how much we know as much as how that realisation links us to God through faith-filled love and to each other through faithful appreciation and empathy. All our understanding is aimed at these principles. It grows through them and is matured by them. The thing to always remember, when we as individuals or groups encounter each other, is that we are all seeking fulfilment. It is the field in which we seek fulfilment that may vary.

We can avoid turning truths into dogmas through bickering, one-upmanship, or dispute. War begins as contentiousness in the heart, and must be dealt with there first. When it erupts between us in seed form as antagonism, it must be dealt with immediately. As the Zoroastrian Writings say: "War is the greatest crime man perpetrates against man"⁵⁶. The Tao Te Ching admonishes us: "Weapons of war are tools of evil; those who truly admire them are murderers at heart"⁵⁷. Arrogance, resentment, fear, deceit, envy, and greed are all the seeds and tools of war within us and between us. They are ugly, divisive, debilitating, inappropriate, dishonourable and ignoble. Why are we so addicted to them? It is time for Bahá'ís and Christians to go 'cold-turkey', as it were, despite the discomfort and withdrawal symptoms. It is the faith, peace and empathy that we find and nurture within the deepest, richest, noblest places of our beings that brings harmony to our attitudes, relationships and the world. When we activate, practice, and nourish these energies through responsive and responsible deeds we are serving the God of Righteousness and giving form to redemptive grace. We need a spiritual inspiration in order to generate the patience, adaptability, and will-power essential for putting arduous new ideals into practice, without destroying the integrity of ourselves and others. We are reminded: "What doth it profit, my brethren, though a man say he hath faith, and have not works, can faith save him?... if it hath not

⁵⁶ Quoted in, *The MacMillan Dictionary of Religious Quotations*, 445.1

⁵⁷ Quoted in, *The MacMillan Dictionary of Religious Quotations*, 444.8

works (it) is dead, being alone... for as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also" (James 2: 14,17,26).

When a person achieves an understanding of the spiritual aspects of human life, he begins to act more and more in a manner that encourages and supports a similar development in others. It is necessary to have the goal to depart from this life having removed from one's heart and the world, some of the need for weapons, strife and provocation. We should have done something, in some small way, to alleviate unhappiness and misery in human hearts. We should have done something, in some small way to strengthen the bonds of human fellowship, and help cure man's inhumanity to man. We should have made an attempt to reconcile the difference between responsible freedom and freely-chosen responsibility. It begins in our own lives first. This may sound very idealistic, yet if we do not nurture such a goal, a state of peace and harmony will never reign in human hearts, or on earth, in any form. We must first take the log out of our own eye before criticising another for the speck in his.

Since the length of an individual lifetime in this world is brief, it is wise to dedicate ourselves to the most sublime of goals. "These days are swiftly passing and this mortal life will remain fruitless and without result. Therefore, while there is yet time and the arrow is in the bow, enter ye the chase and strike ye the game. This game is the good-pleasure of God, and this chase is the merciful Providence, that is, living in accord with the divine instructions"⁵⁸. As we need to try to nourish and strengthen ourselves, so we should do the same for others. If someone disparages another, it means that he perceives that person as something separate from and foreign to himself. We must ever remember that the feelings and hopes of others are, in many ways, the same as ours. Any religion, worth its salt, conveys high thoughts and aspirations, and views all the people in the world as members of one great family. As the Bible says: "God that made the world and all things therein... hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth... that they should seek the Lord, if haply they might feel after Him, and find Him, though He be not far from everyone of us: for in Him we live, and more, and have our being... for we are also His offspring..." (Acts 17.24, 26-29).

⁵⁸ *Nearness to God; Readings for Morn and Eve*, reading for May 14th

We will undoubtedly err at some point as we work through the lessons we must learn. Forgiveness is as necessary to life as the air we breathe. We become frustrated when obstacles arise, but anger shows that a person feels he or she alone, or some other person - not God - is responsible for our tests and the strength we need. Only by admitting our own faults and human limitations can we learn to depend on God more, and become more tolerant and loving towards our fellowman and to his shortcomings. Religion is that which allows our finite, individual consciousness to relate to the Universal Spirit of God. It allows this connection to be brought into our immediate awareness, and to be used practically in our day to day lives.

4.3 In our inescapable religious expressiveness

What gives religious teachings their attractiveness, cohesiveness, power, relevance, and honour? What rains sanctity on the dry and commonplace from the clouds of spiritual bounty? What dissolves our disappointments and causes our disillusionments to evaporate? "He that loveth another has fulfilled the law... (for)... love is the fulfilling of the law" (Romans 13.8, 10); or as 'Abdu'l-Bahá states, "By the absence of love, enmity increases. By the exercise of love, love strengthens and enmities dwindle away"⁵⁹; "Jesus Christ sought to create this love in the hearts. He suffered all difficulties and ordeals that perchance the human heart might become the fountain source of love. Therefore, we must strive with all our heart and soul that this love may take possession of us so that all humanity... may be connected through the bond of this divine affection: for we are all the waves of one sea; we have come into being through the same bestowal and are recipients from the same centre... the centre of effulgence is the sun, and we must direct our gaze to the sun. God is the Supreme Centre. The more we turn toward this Centre of Light, the greater will be our capacity"⁶⁰. Hence "There is a net of love by which you can catch souls"⁶¹.

Love releases and relaxes. It is free, therefore it is attractive. If we see an opportunity for some practice of warm consideration in every encounter, we

⁵⁹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p 9

⁶⁰ *ibid.*, p 15

⁶¹ Mother Teresa, quoted in, *The MacMillan Dictionary of Religious Quotations*, 279.4

are opening our inner eye to the omnipresent goodness of God, "Love is the cause of the existence of all phenomena and the absence of love is the cause of disintegration... Love is the conscious bestowal of God, the bond of affiliation in all phenomena"⁶²; "If Jesus Christ had not possessed love for the world of humanity, surely He would not have welcomed the cross. He was crucified for the love of mankind. Consider the infinite degree of that love. It has been likewise with all the Prophets and Holy souls. If the Bab had not manifested love for mankind, surely He would not have offered His breast for a thousand bullets. If Bahá'u'lláh had not been aflame with love for humanity, He would not have willingly accepted forty years' imprisonment"⁶³.

To love as Holy Souls do is not only a precept, it is our vocation, our destiny and our fulfilment. It is our only central resource, our only axis, our only enduring meaning, "Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God; and everyone that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God. He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love..." (1 John 4.7-8). More binding than all our labels is the directive to love, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." (Matthew 22.37-40).

Consequently, it must be remembered that for empathy with others to be genuine, it must spring from our love for God, for "resuscitation is impossible except through a heavenly potency, a supernatural power, the divine power of the Holy Spirit"⁶⁴. We must become attracted to God. The breaths of the Holy Spirit must take effect. Unless this is so, it is impossible for the teachings of God to accomplish in us"⁶⁵. As Jesus said, "Except a man be born again he cannot see the kingdom of God... that which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit." (John 3.3, 6) "The divine aspect, or spiritual nature consists of the breaths of the Holy Spirit. The second birth of which Jesus has spoken refers to the appearance of this heavenly nature in

⁶² 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p 255

⁶³ *ibid.*, p257

⁶⁴ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p 277

⁶⁵ *ibid.*, p 250

man. It is expressed in the baptism of the Holy Spirit, and he who is baptized by the Holy Spirit is a veritable manifestation of divine mercy to mankind. Then he becomes just and kind to all humanity; he entertains no prejudice and ill-will toward none; he shuns no nation or people"⁶⁶; "Illumine and hallow your hearts; let them not be profaned by the thorns of hate or the thistles of malice. Ye dwell in one world, and have been created through the operation of One Will. Blessed is he who mingleth with all men in a spirit of utmost kindness and love"⁶⁷. We need to be interested in each other and be tolerant of each other's idiosyncracies and imperfections for the sake of God. We must do it for goodness' sake.

If we are Bahá'ís or Christians, just to avoid being wrong, or just to be more right at the expense of others being more wrong, our spirituality is suspect. Our own candle does not shine brighter because we blow someone else's out. The light only increases when all the candles shine. We need righteousness more than rightness. We need truthfulness before we can understand any truth. We need a corrective faith before we can be concerned with what is correct. Such virtues as righteousness, truthfulness and faith are not ours to claim as self-originated or self-sustained. They are created potential in all people awaiting the stimulation of Divine Grace. When released through participatory faith rather than nominal belief they acquire both a natural and heavenly dimension. Their inherent vitality is unlocked. That is why God is the Primal Creative and Redemptive Force - not us. Our duty and bounty is to care for, and cultivate these virtues interactively, mutually, and reciprocally. This is a duty and a bounty. It is a trusteeship, and a stewardship. It is not a grasping, stingy, self-opinionated, self-congratulatory ownership. All things come from God, and unto Him do they return. Empathy for others springs from an empathy with God's Providence. The universal panorama includes other people. Faithfulness arises from a more benign, genuine and substantial base than the ego. Faithfulness matures our self-consciousness beyond its mean-spirited inefficient boundaries.

"Peace on earth and goodwill towards men" was the angelic promise at Christ's birth. Christ's ministry may begin with the redemption of the individual soul but it does not end there. We are warned in the Bible not to be

⁶⁶ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p 41

⁶⁷ *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p 334

“removed from Him that called you into the grace of Christ unto another gospel, which is not another, but there be some that trouble you, and would pervert the gospel of Christ... do I seek to please men? for if I yet pleased men, I should not be the servant of Christ... for I received it not of man... but by the revelation of Jesus Christ” (Galatians 1.6-7, 10, 12). We are instructed to have our, “feet shod with the gospel of peace” (Ephesians 6.15). Christ’s gospel was not a gospel of legalistic, credal extremes or obsessions. It was the good news of spiritual reconciliation as manifested in His Purity and Essence, and exhibited and fulfilled through all He was, did, and still is. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá asserts that, “the Spirit of Christ is always pouring upon the contingent world, and is manifest before the insight of the people of assurance”⁶⁸. Spiritual reconciliation must occur not only within us but also between us. It needs to quicken us into a cooperative service to God and mankind.

Will this task of mutual respect and service to mankind be challenging? Yes, it will, but, “To the loyal soul, a test is but God’s grace and favour; for the valiant doth joyously press forward to furious battle on the field of anguish, when the coward, whimpering with fright; will tremble and shake. So too, the proficient student, who with great competence mastered his subjects and committed them to memory, will happily exhibit his skills before his examiners on the day of his tests. So too will solid gold wondrously gleam and shine out in the assayer’s fire. It is clear then, then tests and trials are, for sanctified souls, but God’s bounty and grace, while to the weak, they are calamity, unexpected and sudden”⁶⁹.

Part of the deal of loving God wholeheartedly is to remain inwardly positive, firm and cheerful in our faith, as well as outwardly supple in our faithfulness to the nobility, beauty, and justice of religious co-operation and spiritual connectedness. One of the measures of maturity is having the capacity to continually grow. However, this needs a dynamic foundation, “For every one of you his paramount duty is to choose for himself that on which no other thing may infringe or usurp from him. Such a thing - and to this the Almighty is My witness is the love of God, could ye but perceive it. Build ye for yourselves such houses as the rains and floods can never destroy, which shall protect you from the changes and chances of this life. This is the instruction of

⁶⁸ Bahá’í *References to Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, p 113

⁶⁹ *Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, p 181-2

Him Whom the world hath wronged and forsaken"⁷⁰; "O My Servants! Deprive not yourselves of the unfading and resplendent Light that shineth within the Lamp of Divine Glory. Let the flame of the love of God burn brightly within your radiant hearts. Feed it with the oil of Divine guidance. Guard it within the globe of trust and detachment from all else but God"⁷¹. As the Bible says "... put on the new man, which is renewed in knowledge, after the image of Him that created him... Put on therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, bowels of mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, longsuffering; forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any; even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye. And above all things put on charity, which is the bond of perfectness" (Colossians 3.10, 12-14). "And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity" (1 Corinthians 13.13).

What this implies for Bahá'ís and Christians is that before we can even begin sharing our faiths with each other and working together in the service of mankind, we must be sure of our own spiritual life, its growth and vitality. Moreover the possibility of expanding our vision and enlarging our capacity is always ours to strive for, "Virtue is nothing but well-directed love"⁷².

Referring to the other founders of religions, Bahá'ís are warned that the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh "does not seek to undermine the basis of any man's allegiance to their Cause"⁷³. Similarly, "In this Day, we can neither approve the conduct of the fearful that seeketh to dissemble his faith, nor sanction the behaviour of the believer that clamorously asserteth his allegiance to this cause. Both should observe the dictates of wisdom, and strive diligently to serve the best interests of the faith"⁷⁴; "The tabernacle of unity hath been raised; regard ye not one another as strangers. Ye are the fruits of one tree, and the leaves of one branch. We cherish the hope that the light of justice may shine upon the world and sanctify it from tyranny."⁷⁵

⁷⁰ *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p 261

⁷¹ *ibid.*, p325

⁷² St Augustine, quoted in, *The MacMillan Dictionary of Religious Quotations*, 439.3

⁷³ Shoghi Effendi, *World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p 57-8

⁷⁴ *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p 343

⁷⁵ *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p 218

Conclusion

As a consequence of having considered the refining purpose of our spiritual quest, the need for a genuine spiritual and the mutual fulfilment and universal benefit we can uncover in our religious endeavour, what are the prime considerations? They are that "The reason for God's having made Himself manifest, and for this shining forth of infinite lights from the realm of the invisible, is none other than the training of all men's souls and the refining of the characters of all on earth - so that blessed individuals who have freed themselves from the murk of the animal world, shall rise up with those qualities which are the adornings of the reality of man"⁷⁶; "He is a true Bahá'í who strives by day and by night to progress and advance along the path of human endeavour, whose most cherished desire is so to live and act as to enrich and illuminate the world, whose source of inspiration is the essence of Divine virtue, whose aim in life is to conduct himself as to be the cause of infinite progress. Only when he attains unto such perfect gifts can it be said of him that he is a true Bahá'í"⁷⁷; "To be a real Christian is to be a servant in His Cause and Kingdom, to go forth under His banner of peace and love toward all mankind, to be self-sacrificing and obedient, to become quickened by the breaths of the Holy Spirit, to be mirrors reflecting the radiance of the divinity of Christ, to be fruitful trees in the garden of His planting, to refresh the world by the water of life of His teachings - in all things to be like Him and filled with the spirit of His love"⁷⁸. As Jesus said, "Wherefore by their fruits shall ye know them. Not everyone that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my father which is in heaven" (Matthew 7.20-21), which concurs with Proverbs 11:30, "The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life".

Could either a Bahá'í or Christian pray with the same depth as this Islamic prayer: "Whatever share of this world Thou doest bestow on me, bestow it on Thine enemies, and whatever share of the next world Thou dost give me, give it to Thy friends. Thou art enough for me"⁷⁹. For as the Bible says: "All things

⁷⁶ *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, p 10

⁷⁷ *ibid.*, p 18-9

⁷⁸ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p 6

⁷⁹ Rabi'ah of Basra, quoted in, *The MacMillan Dictionary of Religious Quotations*, 96.a

came from Thee, and of Thine own have we given Thee." (1 Chronicles: 29.14) Such sentiments posit a spiritual surrender to God, and a workable sense of loving oneness and friendliness with others. The acknowledgement of this commission, mandate, and delegation, enables us to stay balanced in all life's changes and cycles. It enables us to be appreciative, of life's creative flow and circulation through us, and between us, since its origin and culmination is in the Indescribable, Transcendent yet ever Personal and Immanent Life of life. We can accept life knowing that it exists for our inner perfecting and refinement. It exists for our advance on germinal and pivotal levels. Thus, are we inspired by ideals but not neglectful of reality. We are grounded by reality but not enslaved by it. We can celebrate what accord we already have with each other. We can be glad and grateful to be here and now. We can appreciate the present for the seminal opportunities it contains, and the moderating requirements it challenges us with. These are the gifts of God to us now. The present situation is none other than the receptacle for God's sublime good-pleasure and claim on us. It is the channel for His educational purposes and our cultivation. We can stand centred in regeneration, grounded in faith, established in His love, and balanced in service. We stand centered in all the important little, simple and easy truths. Such as, "Let all things be done decently and in order" (1 Corinthians 14.40), remembering that "the fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance: against such there is no law... If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the spirit" (Galatians 5.22, 23, 25).

We are thus impelled, and compelled, by the challenging, refining nature of our common religious spirituality, in its endeavour for a more authentic purpose, to patiently investigate our prejudices and presumptions. Bahá'ís and Christians need to uncover a deeper sense of developmental affinity, due to the realization that we are becoming even more inescapably interfaced through historical and global developments, as well as our spiritual impulses. It is incumbent upon us, as a consequence, to cultivate a more resilient objectivity in dealing with the uniqueness of each individual's response, religious needs and spiritual quest, regardless of their religious affiliation. Only through our being fulfilled in reciprocal ways can we nourish a more substantial understanding of ourselves and each other. It is a genuine appreciation and empathy between people that enriches and invigorates religion, and refines faith, in real people, and in more reliable ways than any semantic rigidity, abstract information or esoteric descriptions can ever do.

Religion is not merely something to be known and studied intellectually. It is to be experienced deeply and spiritually, and lived sensibly, reasonably, appropriately, wholeheartedly, clearly and generously. It requires a focus and direction based on faith towards, and springing from, the renewing and regenerating grace of God, and His Revelation and Manifestation to humankind. Wisdom and knowledge are not always the same thing. The intellect can never lead one to a complete religious outlook or spiritual insight. One has to use one's entire being and situation to come into contact with the truth, "The Kingdom of God cometh not with observation: neither shall they say, Lo here! or Lo there! for, behold the kingdom of God is within you" (Luke 17.20-21).

Our affirmation needs to be that we all grow in our faith regardless of whether we agree or disagree with each other individually. Faith is much better than belief. Belief is when someone else has done the necessary thinking. Faith is much more, for it dwells in the reasonable heart and not just the reasoning mind; it abides in the sensitive soul and not just the sensational emotions and promotes the growth of spirit. It is like the song of the bird at the dawning of a new day. Our anxieties may be overcome by remembering the following words, "Christ leads me through no darker rooms than He went through before; Those that unto God's kingdom come must enter by this door"⁸⁰. Faith does not necessarily reveal itself in a religious label, or through fixated jargon. It reveals itself in the conviction that the hidden God revealed Himself in His world and in history in a very particular way. This is not imprisoned in a set of propositions, but was incarnated for us. It is reflected by us, through the power of Grace manifested as Love, and all the signs that accompany That Ministry to our hearts and lives. Whatever separate explanations, specific attributes, particular characteristics, distinct individuality, definitely prescribed mission, we assign to our religion are bridges not barriers. Whatever unique names, we as Bahá'ís or Christians joyously and wholeheartedly respond to, are personally attracted and committed to, our motive is the same. We want to respond to the Voice of God as we hear it and drink from the Cup of the love of God that is in our hands. We all have a need to constantly realign ourselves with the inmost essence and supreme singleness of God's love. We all need to attune ourselves to the melody of the Eternal Voice that is available and accessible to our own individuality. We are all drops in that limitless Ocean of

⁸⁰ Richard Baxter, *Pocket Prayers*, p 77

mercy, therefore we must seek out harmony in our souls and relationships.

We may have different perceptions on how this can be fulfilled, yet we can be one with the divine process and one with each other in seeking to respond to its challenge. We can be one in our responsibility to do our part. Therefore, whatever our religious penchant, we are still left with the exhortation: "O ye beloved of the Lord! Strive to become the manifestations of the love of God, the lamps of divine guidance shining amongst the kindreds of the earth with the light of love and concord"⁸¹. This inescapable admonition can be our common purpose. Its realisation can unfold pragmatically through us. Its importance can be our common contemplation. Its significance can be our common prayer.

"Make my heart overflow with love for Thy creatures and grant that I may become the sign of Thy mercy, the token of Thy grace, the promoter of concord amongst Thy loved ones, devoted unto Thee, uttering Thy commemoration and forgetful of self but ever mindful of what is Thine."

*'Abdu'l-Bahá*⁸²

"Lord, make me an instrument of Thy peace.
Where there is hatred, let me sow love. Where there is injury, pardon.
Where there is discord, unity. Where there is doubt, faith.
Where there is error, truth. Where there is despair, hope.
Where there is darkness, light...
For it is in giving that we receive. It is in pardoning that we are pardoned.
It is in dying that we are born to eternal life."

*St. Francis*⁸³

⁸¹ *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, p 28

⁸² *Bahá'í Prayers and Holy Writings, A Selection*, p 74

⁸³ *Pocket Prayers*, pp 14-5

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