

The Singapore Bahá'í Studies Review

1999 - Volume 4, Number 1

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Challenges for the New Millennium

Papers

The Bahá'í Faith and the Singapore Women's Movement:
Challenges for the next Millennium

Phyllis Ghim-Lian Chew

The Missing Moral Dimension

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The Human Spirit in Moral Education

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The Language of the Heart:

Parallels between Chinese and Bahá'í Approaches to the Spiritual Self

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Crossing Religious Boundaries:
Interfaith Challenges for the Future

Anjam Khursheed

Special Supplement

Selected Talks and Statements on Interfaith Issues
by Religious Leaders and Scholars

Compiled by Anjam Khursheed

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**Journal of the Association for Bahá'í Studies
Singapore**

The views expressed in this journal do not necessarily reflect those of the Association, nor are they authoritative renderings of Bahá'í belief.

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Note from Editor

The annual Association for Bahá'í Studies conference this year focused on the theme of "Challenges for the New Millennium". Some of the talks presented at the conference inspired the papers that appear in this volume. Also published in this issue, is a special Interfaith Supplement, which includes talks and addresses given by various religious leaders and scholars from around the world. The supplement is our dedication to the 50th Anniversary of the Inter-Religious Organisation of Singapore (IRO).

I would like to thank the Reverend Marcus Braybrooke for his help in providing various talks given under the auspices of the World Congress of Faiths organization, and his permission for me to reproduce them here. I would also like to thank Rabbi Mordechai Abergel for providing me with the Jewish talk in the Interfaith Supplement. I am in debt to Antonella Khursheed for type setting the journal, and to Lynette Thomas for the copy editing,

Anjam Khursheed
December, 1999

The initial objectives for Bahá'í studies classes in the early 1970s were to provide a foundation for the study of Bahá'í teachings and to introduce students to the Bahá'í Faith. The classes were held in the evenings and were open to all students. The curriculum was designed to cover the basic principles of the Bahá'í Faith, including the unity of God, the unity of religion, and the unity of humanity. The classes were highly successful and led to the formation of a Bahá'í community in Singapore.

I would like to thank the Bahá'í community in Singapore for their support and for providing a warm and friendly atmosphere for the study of the Bahá'í Faith. I would also like to thank the Bahá'í community in other parts of the world for their support and for providing a warm and friendly atmosphere for the study of the Bahá'í Faith. I am sure that the Bahá'í community in Singapore will continue to grow and prosper in the years to come.

Author's address:
 December 1999

The Bahá'í Faith and the Singapore Women's Movement: Challenges for the Next Millennium

Phyllis Ghim Lian Chew

Abstract

This article is a preliminary attempt to examine the relationship of religion and the fight for women's rights in Singapore, which began with the founding of the Singapore Council of Women. It sets out to chart and analyse the reasons behind the Bahá'í Faith's extraordinary engagement in the women's movement in Singapore and to reflect on the broader relationship between gender, religion and the women's movement. The article concludes by examining some challenges for the next millennium with regards to the relationship between gender and religion.

Introduction

Of the nine religions of Singapore listed in the book "Religions in Singapore" published by the Inter-Religious Organisation of Singapore (IRO),¹ an organisation which attempts to inculcate the spirit of friendship and co-operation among the leaders and followers of different religions in the island republic, the Bahá'í Faith can be said to be the religion with the most direct and consistent involvement in the women's movement, either in Singapore or in other parts of the world. This is a unique and unusual phenomenon because religion's record in promoting the advancement of women has not been exactly exemplary. While typically in the early years of their existence, religions have tended to

¹ Inter-Religious Organisation of Singapore. *Religions in Singapore*, Revised edition, 1999. The book lists nine religions of Singapore: Hindu, Jewish, Zoroastrian, Buddhist, Taoist, Christian, Muslim, Sikh, and Bahá'í.

encourage the participation of women, historical evidence suggests a gradual tendency among religious institutions over time to establish practices and support attitudes that impede the development of women's potential. Over time, religions have adopted a patriarchal framework of interpretation and this has played a role in enforcing the subordinate status of women.

The great religions of the world have been the most important source for shaping and enforcing the image and role of women in culture and society. It is the source for both vision and values as well as a source of division and social fragmentation. This article is a preliminary attempt to examine the relationship of religion and the fight for women's rights in Singapore which began with the founding of the Singapore Council of Women. I will attempt to chart and analyse the reason behind the Bahá'í Faith's extraordinary engagement in the women's movement in Singapore and through such an attempt, reflect on the broader relationship between gender, religion and the women's movement as a whole. I will then conclude by examining some challenges for the next millennium with regards to the relationship between gender and religion.

Such an examination is timely because such an inter-relationship has rarely been commented on, much less published. Nevertheless, where religion is concerned, there have been studies on religious trends in Singapore and their implications through an analysis of the 1980 and 1990 census (Kuo 1989 and 1995). University academics such as Ling (1987) and Clammer (1991), Tamney and Hassan (1987) and Quah (1989) have also written sociological accounts on religions in Singapore. The IRO has published about fifteen published works, mainly speeches of past conferences and the history of the various faiths. Correspondingly, there have also been several published works on gender. Books published by the *Association of Women for Research and Action* (AWARE), a leading woman's group in Singapore, focuses only on the history, social conditions, economic conditions, legal status, laws, etc. concerning women (1998, 1996, 1999). So too do publications on women's status by Wong and Leong (1993) and Lam-Lin and Chew (1993). However, all these give inadequate attention to gender differentiation in religion and do not uncover the patriarchal framework of all-religious beliefs and practices. Their accounts have been mainly descriptive, historical and statistical, and they do not focus on the gender

element in religion. In so doing, they also contribute to the "invisibility" or marginality of women where Singapore religious life is concerned.

The Bahá'í Faith in Singapore

Founded in Persia in 1844, the Bahá'í Faith is the youngest independent world religion. Bahá'u'lláh, its founder, is regarded by Bahá'ís as the latest in a line of messengers of God that include Krishna, Abraham, Moses, Zoroaster, Buddha, Christ, Muhammad and the Báb. The central message of Bahá'u'lláh is the oneness or the unity of humankind.

To foster its basic principle of unity, the Faith teaches that one should treat others as one would oneself wish to be treated, a not too unusual tenet, which is also found in the other great religions. What is unique however, is that the Bahá'í Faith extends this basic principle unequivocally to that of the relationship between men and women. In other words, it believes that in order to establish justice, peace and order in an interdependent world, this principle must guide all interactions, including those between men and women. Men must use their influence in the political, religious and social institutions which they control to promote the systematic inclusion of women not out of condescension but through the belief that the contribution of women is valuable to the progress of society. Women on their part must be educated and come forward and contribute their skills to every aspect of social, economic and political development.

There are Bahá'í administrative bodies in almost all countries of the world. In Singapore, the first Bahá'í administrative body, known as a Local Spiritual Assembly, was incorporated in July 1952. Since then the community has been active but relatively low-key. In 1956, it organised the first World Religion Day, an occasion whereby members of different Faiths come together to talk and discuss important issues in the spirit of inter-faith harmony. The occasion was graced by the attendance of the Chief Minister of Singapore, Mr Lim Yew Hock. He was so impressed with the Faith that in the following year, when the Bahá'í community applied for a cemetery, it was awarded one, an act symbolic of the recognition by the Singapore Government of the Bahá'í Faith's

independent status. In 1972, the Bahá'í Faith was awarded a license to solemnise marriages in the Republic. In 1995, the practice of organising a World Religion Day was reactivated and such an occasion once again served to publicise the Bahá'í Faith's commitment to inter-religious harmony. Yet another milestone was achieved in 1997 when the Bahá'í Faith was admitted to the IRO as a full member. It was also highlighted in 1999 as one of the nine religious faiths in Singapore in a postage stamp issued by the Postal Authorities of Singapore.

Presently, the Singapore Bahá'í community has a membership of 2000 and today there are five Local Spiritual Assemblies in Singapore. These five assemblies are under the jurisdiction of the Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Singapore, a national body incorporated in Singapore in 1972.² Together, they oversee a wide variety of activities including the education of children, devotional services, study classes, discussion groups, social events, the observance of holy days, marriages and funeral ceremonies.

The Singapore Women's Movement: the First Wave

The Bahá'í Faith was instrumental in initiating the first women's movement in Singapore. The names of two Bahá'í women in particular come to mind here. One was Mrs Shirin Fozdar (1905-1992), the Honorary Secretary of the Singapore Council of Women (SCW) from 1952-1961 and the other was Mrs George Lee (Mdm Tan Cheng Hsiang) (1904-1999), the President of the SCW from 1952- 1971. The activities of the SCW signalled the first real attempt of women to form a broad-based umbrella body to fight for social reforms and increase their status with respect to men in society.³

Both Mrs Fozdar and Mrs Lee were chiefly responsible for formulating the advocacy work of the SCW and keeping its agenda in the public eye. While Mrs Lee, as President, held the helm and met with government agencies and foreign visitors on behalf of the SCW, it was her fiery and eloquent secretary who was the better known, and who created most of

² Membership records. The Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Singapore.

³ See Chew, P.G.L. *The Singapore Council of Women and the Women's Movement*.

the publicity for the SCW. Mrs Fozdar's public speaking abilities made her the natural spokesperson for the SCW and the darling of the media during the term of her tenure. Mrs Lee, on the other hand was reticent, soft-spoken and more comfortable in playing a background role. Nevertheless, she provided a good balance to her dynamic secretary: being Mandarin and Hokkien-speaking she was the natural magnet for the Chinese-speaking membership of the SCW.

Mrs Shirin Fozdar was born in Bombay, India, of Persian-Bahá'í parents in 1905. She had begun the fight for the emancipation of women in India when she was a teenager. Her involvement in the women's movement in India culminated in her nomination in 1934 as the representative of the All Asian Women's conference executive committee on women's rights at the League of Nations in Geneva. Mrs George Lee, on the other hand, was born in Singapore, was educated in English and Chinese, and did what most women of her generation did, managed the home and children. She was a member of the Methodist Girls' School Alumni Association and the first wife of newspaper owner and industrialist, Mr George Lee. Influenced by the Bahá'í views on the rights of women and the relationship of that principle to world peace, her life took on an extra dimension – changing from that of contented homemaker to that of women' advocate. She became convinced that women's rights were essentially human rights. As she was herself a victim of the then pervasive Chinese customary practice of polygamy, she persuaded Mrs Fozdar that the abolition of such a practice should be the main focus of the SCW and that it should be used as a symbol of the injustices faced by women in Singapore.

There were also other women from other religious denominations who were involved in this first awakening. The first executive committee of the Singapore Council of Women comprised, in fact, more Christian than Bahá'í women. Christian women, however, were more comfortable occupying the middle and lower executive positions. A good example was Mrs E. V. Davies (also known as Mrs Checha Davies) who, as membership chair of the SCW, recruited new members for the Council, helping its membership to grow, within a few years, to 2000 in 1955. She was a staunch Christian who believed that the essence of a religious life was in the doing rather than the talking. She was the daughter of a lay preacher in Kerala, India and an active member of the Tamil

Methodist Church in Singapore. While committing much of her time to the overseeing of SCW social projects for needy women, she deliberately kept out of the limelight where controversial issues on equality were voiced.⁴

Mrs Constance Goh Kok Kee (nee Wee Sai Poh), another member of the SCW during its inception, was an active member of Wesley Methodist Church and the General Conference of Women's Society for Christian Service. She was chiefly responsible for the moderate aspect of the SCW's agenda such as family-planning, the education of women and the formation of a girl's club, rather than its better known public stand on anti-polygamy and one-man-one-wife campaign. Another founder member and *protem* President of the SCW, Mrs Elizabeth Choy, was also a committed Christian and keen to play her part in the upliftment of women. Through her contacts with members of the Legislative Council, of which she was member from 1951-1956, the SCW was able to network with the political elite. Another *protem* committee member was Mrs Robert Eu, a City Councillor from 1949-1957 and founder-principal of the Paya Lebar Methodist Girls' School who gave much moral support to the SCW. Other Christian members were Mrs Seow Peck Leng, Mrs Shufen Khoo and Mrs H. B. Amstutz, wife of the Methodist bishop in Singapore. The expatriate women members such as Mrs R. A. Pohan, Mrs Winifred Holmes and Mrs V. W. West were also Christians. The Christian element was strong because they made up the better-educated and more socially conscious segment of the population. They were by and large against the practice of polygamy, which was then practised largely by the Buddhist-Taoist-Confucianist and Muslim segment of the population.

While the SCW contained mainly Bahá'í and Christian English-speaking women, it was the Bahá'í component which was chiefly responsible for the advocacy work. Generally, while accepting that the abolition of polygamy would be good for all, Christian women did not feel comfortable with the clear and unequivocal stand of Mrs Fozdar and Mrs Lee with regards to the principle of the equality of the sexes. Thus while Mrs Elizabeth Choy used her influence as Legislative Council member to get the SCW off to a good start, her role as member was

⁴ Interview with Mrs Shanta Sundram, daughter of Mrs E. V. Davis, 2.2.1992.

largely symbolic after the first year. Mrs Seow Peck Leng found Mrs Fozdar's ideas "too radical" but admitted that "without her the women's rights movement wouldn't have begun."⁵ In the same way, while Mrs Constance Goh was generous in her financial support to the SCW, she was comfortable only with its educational and social aspects. The following statement in a letter by Mrs Goh to Mrs Fozdar in 1952 epitomised the ideological difference between the Bahá'í and Christian coalition: "I do feel that we shall achieve most of our aims if we show that we are out to assess the needs of the women of Singapore and the potential contribution they would make to the community given the opportunity and facilities, rather than to stress fighting for one's rights."⁶

Muslim Ordinance of 1957

A distinguishing aspect of the SCW fight for the institution of anti-polygamous laws was that it was not just aimed at Chinese marriages but also at Muslim marriages. This was because more than half of the Malay marriages ended in divorce. The laws governing divorce then were lax, the husband having only to pronounce a ritual formula stating to his wife "I divorce you". If the husband pronounced a triple "talak", stating "I divorce you" three times in succession, the divorce became irrevocable.

Bahá'í women were therefore in the forefront of consciousness raising for Muslim women in Singapore. Indeed, there were Muslim members in the SCW. Two Muslim women, Cik Zahara bte. Noor Mohammed and Mrs Azizah Izmail, sat on its executive committee. However, Muslim women generally kept a low profile for fear of reprimand from their husbands.⁷ Being familiar with Muslim laws, Mrs Fozdar became their spokeswoman in the 1950's. Indeed, her attempts to uplift the status of Muslim women brought her headlong into conflict with the conservative members of the Muslim Advisory Board (MAB), the body responsible for advising the government on social, cultural, economic and religious

⁵ Interview with Mrs Seow Peck Leng, 29. 11.1992.

⁶ Singapore Council of Women's Organisation (SCWO), Mrs Constance Goh. First Family Planner. *One Voice*, 1993.

⁷ Singapore Council of Women Organisation (SCWO), The Quiet Crusader. *One Voice*, 1993.

matters pertaining to Muslims. In an interview, Mrs Fozdar recalled threats made on her life from irate husbands keen to hold on to such privileges.⁸

It was Mrs Fozdar's idea to highlight the plight of Muslim women by the distribution of handbills in the kampongs. These handbills quoted the Koran: "And if you fear that you cannot act equitably towards orphans, then marry such women as seem good to you, two and three and four; but if you fear that you will not do justice (between them) then (marry) only one or what your right hand possess (i.e. females taken as prisoners of war); this is more proper that you may not deviate from the course."⁹ This activity was stopped in mid-course by the police who feared a breach of peace, reminiscent of the Maria Hertogh riots in 1950¹⁰.

In 1954, as a means of putting pressure on the MAB, Mrs Fozdar sent a petition to a member of the House of Commons in England, Stanley Awbery, decrying the terrible insecurity of married life in Singapore and the opposition the SCW was encountering in its attempts to initiate reforms. Mrs Fozdar argued that while the SCW had a sizeable number of Malay supporters, a few leaders of the Malays "who are mostly themselves either Arabs, Persians or Indians and who are rich and can indulge in polygamy are opposed to any change." Moreover, these men were "backed by the Kathis (priests) who had made a business out of frequent marriages and divorces."¹¹ The petition prompted Awbery to ask the Secretary of State for the colonies in the House of Commons (in London) to report on the divorce rate in Singapore as well as what steps were being taken to tighten the marriage and divorce laws.¹²

⁸ Interview with Mrs Shirin Fozdar, 19.3.1990.

⁹ See *The Quran*, Sura 4, verse 3.

¹⁰ These riots occurred in 1950 in Singapore and centred around a little girl, Maria, born of Dutch parents given to a Malay family for adoption during the Japanese occupation in Singapore. The battle for her custody began as a dispute between two families but soon developed social implications. Racial sensitivity, religious fanaticism and radical nationalist politics were involved. The issue became a battle between two cultures and religion.

¹¹ Singapore Council of Women to Stanley Awbery, 9 Sep 1954. Available from Microfilm NA2044. Singapore National Archives.

¹² See Chew, P.G.L. *The Singapore Council of Women*, p. 13.

The activities of the SCW extended across the Causeway. Aware that the marriage laws in the Federation of Malaysia were more flexible and that many Malay men wishing to avoid the stricter laws in Singapore could go across to nearby Johore to be married, the SCW viewed changes in the Federation of Malaya as a necessary adjunct to their activities. In 1955, a petition was sent to all the Sultans in the States of Malaya asking them to use their influence to raise the marriage age of girls to 16, to encourage monogamy and to make the education of girls compulsory. In addition, Mrs Fozdar wrote to President Gemal Abdul Nassar of Egypt, then the dominant force in Arab politics, asking him to come to the rescue of Muslim women all over the world and to legislate for monogamous marriage, so that other Muslim countries could follow the progressive trend in Egypt.

Such actions played their part in pressurising the MAB for reforms and the Board eventually agreed to a provision of the Muslim Ordinance, which became law in 1957. The ordinance basically provided for the establishment of a Muslim law court (Syariah Court) in 1958 so as to make the process of divorce more difficult. Its enactment resulted in a marked decline in the divorce rate among Muslims.¹³

The Women's Charter of 1961

While the Muslim Ordinance of 1957 was a sterling victory for Muslim women, the Women's Charter of 1961 was a landmark victory for non-Muslim women. Once again, the roots of this Charter can be traced to 1954 when Mrs Fozdar initiated a bill ("Singapore Prevention of bigamous Marriages Ordinance"), calling for the minimum marriage age to be raised to sixteen and for bigamous marriages to be made void, for the attention of the Legislative Council.¹⁴ This was uneventful due to strong opposition from the Chinese, Tamil and Muslim Advisory Boards. Not one to be impeded by initial setbacks, both Mrs Fozdar and Mrs Lee lobbied for women's rights with politicians from newly

¹³ While the divorce rate was 51.7% in 1957 (the year of the passing of the Ordinance), it fell to 49.2% in 1958, to 36.8 % in 1959, to 26.9% in 1960 and to 21.8% in 1961. By 1962, the Singapore divorce rate was 26.8%.

¹⁴ The bill is reproduced in Chew. P.G.L., *The Singapore Council of Women*, p. 28.

established political parties such as the Labour Front and the People's Action Party (PAP), formed to contest for seats in the Singapore Legislative Council of 1955. In addition, Mrs Fozdar accepted numerous engagements to speak on radio and public lectures, most of which were highlighted in the press. One notable public engagement was at the International Women's Day Conference organised by the Women's League of the PAP on 8th March 1956 where Mrs Fozdar urged the crowd to support their stand on the abolition of polygamy. It was on this occasion that a resolution was passed for the first time by the League in support of the principle of monogamy, and which was subsequently moved during the Party's annual general meeting in 1957.¹⁵

When the PAP won the election of 1959, they kept their promises to women made in their election manifesto. Thus, the Women's Charter was enacted in 1961, which protected the status and welfare of women in Singapore with regards to marriage and divorce. It also abolished polygamy among non-Muslims and changed the whole framework of Chinese marriages. All marriages had to be legally registered from 1961 and those done solely through customary Chinese rites were not recognised as legal.

The successful passing of the Charter also saw the departure of Mrs Fozdar to Yasothorn, an impoverished Northeastern region of Thailand, to start a school for girls, as a means of rescuing them from prostitution and a life of drudgery. Without the driving force of Mrs Fozdar, and with most of the SCW's agenda already enacted in the Charter, Mrs Lee, as a President, found it difficult to hold the committee together, being more interested by then in the more prayerful and meditative aspects of the Bahá'í Faith rather than in its social-reform agenda. In the sixties, much of her time was taken up with volunteer duties in the local spiritual assemblies of the Bahá'ís of Singapore. She was also elected as a member of the National Spiritual Assembly of Malaysia (1965-1966), a position that required much travelling time between Singapore and various parts of Malaysia. In addition, Bahá'í or Christian women were not forthcoming in the reorganisation of the SCW or in taking over its leadership. Mrs EV Davis became more involved in social work with the YWCA. The building of the first women's hostel in Fort Canning Road

¹⁵ See Chew P.G.L. *Ibid.*, footnote 140.

in 1969 is chiefly attributed to her efforts. Mrs Constance Goh focussed on family planning and Christian mission work. Due to her work in this area, she was made a patron of the International Planned Parenthood Federation in 1977, an honour accorded to only a few. Mrs Elizabeth Choy concentrated her energies on managing the School for the Visually Impaired. Mrs Robert Eu left Singapore to begin a new life in Malaysia. Membership declined and the Council was eventually de-registered in 1971 due to disinterest.

The leadership of the women's movement passed from non-political women to political women with the departure of the colonial power and the election of the first nationalist government in 1959. Bahá'ís gave up the initiative to be in the forefront of political change during the early years of Singapore's independence because of the Bahá'í principle of non-involvement in party politics. Media attention was now on the new political women -- eight of whom contested in the 1959 elections and another ten in the 1963 elections.¹⁶ The 1959 election saw five women voted into the Singapore Legislative Assembly. Of these new women, the most outstanding was Chan Choy Siong, a member of the PAP who would remain as a Member of Parliament until 1970 and who had mooted the notion of anti-polygamy in 1956 immediately after the rally at which Mrs Fozdar spoke. Another early SCW member, Mrs Seow Peck Leng, who learnt much about advocacy work from Mrs Fozdar in the early fifties, became the first woman opposition member from 1959 to 1961 in Singapore's first Legislative Assembly.

Since most of the demands advocated by the SCW were met in the Charter of 1961, women associations reverted to their focus on social, charitable and community activities. This was a surprising phenomenon in view of the fact that this period saw the rise of many consciousness-raising groups in the West. The publication of Betty Friedan's book, *The Feminine Mystique* in the early sixties, for example, became a catalyst for many women by naming the sources of frustration they had experienced, and served as a focal point around which they could gather.

¹⁶ Most of the active women however were in the opposition parties which boycotted both the 1965 and 1968 elections leaving only Madam Chan Choy Siong of the PAP to be the spokeswomen for Singapore women. When Madam Chan resigned from politics in 1970, there were no women in politics until the 1984 elections.

In contrast, the sixties and seventies were relatively quiet years for women advocacy groups in Singapore. Attention seemed to have shifted to the pressing need for economic survival for the new nation state rather than women rights.

Groups such as the Chinese Women's Association, the YWCA, the Kamala Club, the Asian Women's Welfare Association and the Inner Wheel were occasionally highlighted by the media for their social, charitable and educational activities. It was also a time for the inception of local chapters of international organisations such as Soroptimist International, Quota Club and the Zonta Club. Professional networking groups slowly formed during this period e.g. the Singapore Association of Women's Lawyers and the Singapore Business and Professional Women's Association. There were also religiously-inspired women groups such as the Young Muslim Women's Association, the General Conference Women's Society of Christian Service and the Bahá'í Women's Committee but these organisations did not seek the public stage on women's rights.¹⁷ On the contrary, it was the national grassroots organisation under the Ministry of Community Development which made the greatest impact. In 1960, the People's Association (PA) was formed as a major community development agency. Its women's committees in each of the electoral constituencies were active in organising a wide range of cultural, educational, sports and recreational activities. Control at the grassroots level passed from the hands of independent civil groups to that of the government.

The Singapore Women's Movement: the Second Wave

Lam and Chew (1993) recount a second awakening in the eighties. By then, a younger group of Bahá'í women were ready to be involved in the second awakening. When a National Council of Women (NCW) was inaugurated in 1975 as a broad-based umbrella body, Bahá'í women were a part of the executive committee. However, the NCW functioned for only two years – until 1977 when the Social Affairs Ministry informed them that it was not a national organisation but a private one –

¹⁷ Bahá'í women rented a place at the YWCA in the 70's and focussed on projects to help the needy.

since it had only 7 affiliates, which did not include the PA and the National Trades Union Congress (NTUC), two groups with the largest number of female members in Singapore.

In 1980 when yet another attempt was made to form a broad-based Council, this time the Singapore Council of Women's Organisations (SCWO), Bahá'í women e.g. Mrs Anula Samuel and Mrs Shirin Fozdar (having returned from Thailand after 18 years) rallied once again to its inaugural meeting.¹⁸ The Bahá'í Women's Committee (BWC), a committee formed in 1972 under the auspices of the Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Singapore, became one of the first fifteen women's associations to seek affiliation to the SCWO.¹⁹ Its members took an active part in the SCWO's many sub-committees. In 1986, Lena Tan, a Bahá'í, became a member of the executive board of the SCWO (1986-1990).²⁰ Other Bahá'í women who succeeded her on the board included Christine Lee, Lalitha Nambiar and Anula Samuel. In their respective stints on the SCWO executive board, Bahá'í women served mostly as Treasurer and/or secretary and were also active in committees such as publication and research.²¹ Perhaps the most notable achievements of Bahá'í women where the SCWO was concerned was their involvement in the fundraising for the SCWO building during the tenure of Christine Lee, (Treasurer of the SCWO from 1992-1994), a period in which a Finance committee was first instituted to raise funds for a "Women's Centre".²² When the new building was opened in 1998, the Bahá'í Office for the Advancement of Women (BOAW) (earlier known as the Bahá'í Women's Committee) was among the first to establish its office there. It is now the focal congregational point for Bahá'í women in their attempts to organise service projects for the public.

¹⁸ Minutes of the first meeting of representatives of various women's organisations called by the Singapore Council of Social Service, 18th April 1979.

¹⁹ In 1980, the SCWO had only 15 affiliates. This grew to over 40 affiliates in 1999.

²⁰ See *SCWO Salutes Singapore women, 1980-1990*. 10th Anniversary commemorative publication by the Singapore Council of Women's Organisation.

²¹ Lynette Thomas and Phyllis Chew were involved in the editorial board of *One Voice*, the organ of the SCWO from 1993 - 1996.

²² The Treasurer and the Finance Committee under the leadership of Liew Geok Heok raised half a million dollars during its two-year tenure, establishing a solid start for the inception of the building.

Although Bahá'í women are no longer in the frontline of leadership, their participation in the women's movement has remained strong. They were actively involved in the Fourth UN World Conference for Women in Beijing in 1995. Eleven Bahá'ís went as part of the forty-eight strong SCWO contingent and the two workshops contributed by the SCWO during this conference were organised by the BWC.²³ In 1993, the BWC teamed up with the SCWO to publish the book *Voices and Choices – the Women's Movement in Singapore*, a landmark book which traced the history of the women's movement in Singapore and which was launched by the then President of Singapore, Mr Wee Kim Wee.

It was during this period that the BWC/BOAW began to focus not so much on advocacy work but also on activities such as family life relationships, education of girls, peace education, environmental protection and the promotion of women's health. In 1990, Bahá'í women organised a week-long exhibition *The Arts for Nature* which was one of the first attempts to raise public awareness on the need to conserve our environment in Singapore. The works of more than 60 local artists were selected and their paintings, sculptures and installation pieces were displayed at the Empress Place Museum and the proceeds from the sale of the paintings donated to the *Save the Turtles Campaign* of the Malayan Nature Society. In 1992, a Bahá'í, Mrs Tia Traazil became the first woman to win the Ministry of Environment's Green Leaf Award in the individual category for outstanding contributions to environmental protection and preservation.

The BOAW has also worked closely with government ministries. In 1995-6, Dr H. B. Danesh, an internationally renowned psychiatrist was invited by the BOAW to conduct a series of public workshops on marriage, family life and personal development. During his visits, he met with several governmental and non-governmental organisations, medical and educational institutions working in the areas of family violence and juvenile delinquency as well as with Mr Abdullah Tarmugi, the Minister for Community Development. Another health project and one which was endorsed by the Ministry of Health was the one that took place in 1997-8 when the BOAW and SCWO jointly

²³ These two workshops were on "Women, Work and Family" and "Young Women and a Violence-free Society".

organised a series of talks by medical doctors on various aspects of women's health.

Keen to cooperate with other civic groups, the BOAW has co-organised activities with the University Women's Association of Singapore, Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE), the Malayan Nature Society, the Society Against Family Violence and the National University of Singapore Society in its efforts to promote consciousness on women rights and the environment.

The second wave of women in the Singapore women's movement were quite different to those of the first wave. By comparison with its predecessor, the SCW, the SCWO has had a moderate agenda. The colonial authorities had left the scene and women's advocacy groups no longer spoke at street rallies or played to an eager media. Instead, groups such as SCWO (and subsequently, AWARE and SAWL) preferred the medium of letter-writing e.g. to the Forum page of the local press and the writing of reports to government and national bodies as a means of getting heard. There was not so much of the rousing passionate speeches and the extensive media coverage which occurred in the fifties. The socio-political scene was much more subdued than it had been in the years before independence. For example, a major event in 1984 organised by the SCWO and the Singapore Women's Association (SWA)²⁴ to commemorate the United Nations 1975-1985 "the women's decade" was basically an educational rather than an advocacy event. It was a presentation of the facts, problems, and statistics on women's jobs, home and families, children education and health rather than an explicit clarion call for popular support on women's rights.

Dissatisfied with what was perceived as the moderate agenda of the SCWO, and concerned with the discrimination of women in the home and workplace, another women's organisation, the Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE), was formed in 1985. Its immediate aim was to lobby and draw public attention to problems such as violence against women and children. This group also received support from Bahá'í women who worked mainly in its sub-committees.

²⁴ Mrs Seow Peck Leng, an early member of the SCW, was the founder-president of the Singapore Women's Association.

Since then, AWARE has highlighted controversial issues such as the phenomenon of unequal pay for equal work in many jobs, the unequal burden of childcare (with many women having to resort to staying at home to care for children in their infancy), inequalities in employment (unequal medical benefits), the prevalence of sexual harassment and abuse, and last but not least, negative media portrayal which imposes on women disadvantages and handicaps not faced by men. Not surprisingly, AWARE has been the women's organisation that has received the most press coverage in recent years.²⁵

It should also be noted that the second wave of women in the SCWO and AWARE were eager to promote themselves as secular organisations, careful not to focus on the powerful influence of religious ideology on gender issues. This is not surprising since the PAP government, from its inception in 1959, has handled matters of a religious nature with extreme care and has made it clear that any hint of religious prejudice that may lead to feelings of ill will and hostility between different religions would not be tolerated. To highlight this point, a Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act was passed in 1990 to provide for the maintenance of religious harmony in Singapore and to ensure that religion was not exploited for political or subversive purposes. Since then, civic groups have been extremely careful in keeping clear of religious issues.

Indeed, of the 41 affiliates of the Singapore Council of Women, religiously-inspired ones like the BOAW, Young Women's Christian Association, Young Women's Muslim Association, and the General Conference Women's Society have not succeeded in assuming leadership. While individual leaders of the SCWO and AWARE may have their particular religious affiliations, they are always careful to keep them in the private domain. This is a noticeable departure from SCW leaders such as Mrs Shirin Fozdar, Mrs George Lee, Mrs EV Davis and Mrs Constance Goh who were often keen to connect their civic commitments to their strong religious convictions. In media interviews, Mrs Fozdar, in particular, often referred to the Bahá'í teachings as the source of her inspiration.

²⁵ Two past AWARE presidents, Ms Claire Chiang and Dr Kanwaljit Soin have been elected Nominated Members of Parliament and two past presidents, Ms Claire Chiang and Ms Hedwig Anuar have also been nominated "Woman of the Year" in Singapore.

I found, however, three occasions where issues of religion continued to play a part in the women's movement, all three of them related to AWARE. One was in 1996, when as immediate past President of AWARE, Constance Singam, a Catholic, in a speech on the occasion of the official launching of *Veritas*, the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Singapore's Home page on the internet in 1996, called for the church to admit women to leadership positions in institutions of the church. She argued for the socialisation of men and women as equals in Catholic educational institutions. She urged the Church to introduce gender studies in Catechism classes, in Catholic schools and in the Seminary. Finally, she urged the Church to appoint girls for service during Mass, women as Communion ministers or have women as chairpersons of Parish Councils.

The other two occasions occurred during the AWARE presidency of Dr Phyllis Chew, a Bahá'í. As AWARE President, Dr Chew highlighted to the Singapore public the mass rape of Chinese women by the Indonesian military during the May riots of 1998. AWARE launched a public exhibition on mass rape and collected 45,000 signatures for a petition to the Indonesian President and the UN Commissioner of Human Rights, an event which was given extensive media coverage both in Singapore and Indonesia.²⁶ It carefully downplayed the religious and racial character of the rape by highlighting it from the women's angle. The other occasion took place in December 1998 when AWARE became the sponsoring body for the play "Talaq" which focussed on oppressed women divorcees in the Tamil Muslim community. The play explored the true-life experiences of such women in Singapore and highlighted social issues such as oppression, marital rape and the culture of silence forced upon these women. This play raised opposition from the conservative Tamil Indian Jamath group who filed their complaint to the Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura (MUIS) and the Ministry of Community Development on the grounds that it brought disgrace to Islamic principles and values.²⁷

²⁶ See the local media in Singapore e.g. *The Straits Times*, *The New Paper*, *Lianhe Zaobao* from 15. 8. 98 to 10. 9. 98. See also *Asiaweek* 7. 8. 98, p. 17.

²⁷ See *The New Paper* 8.3. 1999, 12.3.1999.

It can be concluded that while the Bahá'í contribution remained strong in the "second awakening", they had by and large, lost the leadership of the movement. Nevertheless, they remain highly visible in many women's groups in Singapore and enjoy a good reputation as co-operators and workers.

Reasons for Bahá'í involvement

Many reasons can be found to explain involvement of Bahá'í women in the women's movement in Singapore and other parts of the world. Firstly, there is the Bahá'í principle that women's education is of greater importance than men's education and there is the Bahá'í view that not until the equality of opportunity in education for the two sexes is achieved, will the foundations of war be removed. Indeed, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the interpreter of the Bahá'í writings, was even Aware of linguistic biases and style. In the promotion of a Universal Language for world-wide communication, he said "... no one person can construct a Universal Language. It must be made by a Council representing all countries, and must contain words from different languages. It will be governed by the simplest rules, and there will be no exceptions; *neither will there be gender, nor extra and silent letters. Everything indicated will have but one name*"²⁸(my italics).

Second, the Singapore BOAW is also advantaged in the periodic guidance it receives from the world Bahá'í Office for the Advancement of Women, a committee of the Bahá'í International Community in New York which enjoys consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). It is a world body that has worked directly with the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women and its Secretariat, the UN Division for the Advancement of Women. It has also established a close and co-operative relationship with other international non-governmental organisations, which are seeking, through their activities, to promote the advancement of women.²⁹

²⁸ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, 'Abdu'l-Bahá' in London, *Addresses and Notes of Conversations*. Bahá'í Publishing Trust, London, 1987, p. 95.

²⁹ See <http://www.bic-un.Bahá'í.org> The Bahá'í Office for the Advancement of Women

Thirdly, Bahá'í women are also encouraged to assume leadership positions in the Bahá'í administrative system. A survey of the participation of women in Bahá'í community life found that the percentage of women in leadership positions in the Bahá'í Faith compared favourably with the percentage of women in positions of political leadership world-wide.³⁰ Women compose an average of 30% of the elected membership of national-level Bahá'í governing councils and some 47% of the membership in special Bahá'í appointment positions for the sub-national and regional level. According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union, the average percentage of women members in the world parliaments is about 10%.³¹

This is an interesting contrast to religious leadership in other religions. While mainstream churches e.g. Anglican, Methodist, Lutheran and Presbyterian do allow the ordination of female pastors, they are by tradition male-oriented in terms of leadership, ritual and preaching role.³² In a book published on the occasion of the 40 years anniversary of the IRO, (1949-1989), Rev Anne Johnson, a Presbyterian minister, was listed as the only woman in the Council of the IRO. She is of the opinion that the lack of women leaders in religion is not because of a dearth of capable women but that the men have kept them out.³³ Similarly, while there are many nuns in Mahayana Buddhism, they are still not equal to monks. For example, Mahayana nuns do not teach in temples or take disciples here as the monks do. While monks officiate at funerals, to transfer merit to the deceased, nuns chant to lessen the bad karma and pollution of the deceased. In the Hindu tradition, the Dharmasutras defines a woman as one who is dependent on her father during her childhood, on her husband during her youth and on her son during her old age (Manu IX.3). Similarly, in Islam, men's work is usually regarded as more valuable than women's work, no matter how arbitrary the division of labour. As a consequence of this standard of determination, a

³⁰ Bahá'í World Centre, *The Bahá'í World 1995-1996*. Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, p. 135.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² In Singapore, women in religion are few and far between. The first Asian to be elected Head of the 200 year old world-wide Congregation of the Church of the Holy Infant Jesus is Singapore born, Mother superior general Daniel Ee. CHIJ nuns are exclusively teaching in convents and working with the poor (*Straits Times* 26.7. 1984).

³³ Telephone interview with Rev Dr Anne Johnson, 14.3.99.

hierarchy evolved in which women have been considered less significant than men in many social-religious systems (Wadud-Muhsin 1995).

Last but not least, Bahá'ís have an unusual role model in the figure of Tahirih, the most well known woman in Babi-Bahá'í history. Tahirih presents a startling contrast to the former religious female models. This gifted poet of the 19th century, far from being a dutiful daughter, continually opposed the theological views of her father, a prominent Muslim cleric. She is not admired for her success as daughter or wife, since her estrangement from her husband (also a cleric) also resulted in forced separation from her children. It is not surprising that to the more conservative religious clergy, she is a paradigm of the dangers of allowing woman too much freedom. Tahirih can be contrasted to the role model of Sita, Mary and Fatimah. In Hinduism, Sita is a wife who remains faithful to her husband at all costs. In Christianity, the Virgin Mary is a symbol of motherhood who, through devotion to her son, remained discreetly aloof from his ministry. Then there is Fatimah, daughter of Muhammad, who figures as role model of mother, wife and daughter.

To be objective, it must be noted that the Bahá'í Faith has the advantage of being a relatively young religion. It has been observed that if it is religion that downgrades women it is usually not the early version. Women were active in early religious movements, as can be seen in early Christian and Buddhist histories. However, the loss of momentum in women's religious activities after their initial success and their painful absence from epoch-making events attest to arbitrary restrictions introduced to curtail their work when past religions emerged from obscurity. What could be the reasons? Jealousy, insecurity, complacency by men? Disinterest and apathy on the part of women? There is evidence to support all these speculations. Abraham (1995) recounts that male theologians and religious leaders, whether they be Muslims, Hindus and Christians, have taken religious texts taken out of context to relegate women to subordinate roles in home, church and society.

Sharma (1987) also notes that the less differentiated religion and society are the greater is the participation of women. The more institutionalised a religion becomes, the more it excludes women from positions of authority and power. One observes that women hold higher positions in

archaic, ancient, tribal, and relatively non-institutionalised forms of religions e.g. shamanism, possession, rites, spiritualism or non-hierarchical groups like the Quakers, than in highly differentiated religious traditions with their complex structures. In both primitive and ancient religions, we find the widespread presence of women magicians, shamans, healers, visionaries and seers, prophetesses and priestesses. Women oracles of ancient Greece are well known. Female temple priestesses exist in Egypt, Sumeria, Babylon, Greece and Japan. As the Bahá'í Faith is a less differentiated religion viz. the other world religions, (e.g. there is an absence of clergy in the Bahá'í Faith), it is not surprising that women are able to play a more prominent role.

Challenges for the next Millennium

The Bahá'í Faith is linked intimately with the inception of the women's movement in Singapore; just as it is linked with the emergence of a wider woman's consciousness in the world. Tahirih, for instance, is one of the firsts, if not the first, woman in the Muslim world to remove her veil in public, her intention being to signal the dawning of a new religious dispensation. In Singapore, the public became familiar with the word "Bahá'í" through media coverage on Mrs Fozdar and the anti-polygamy issue. For many people in Singapore in the 1950's, "Fozdar" was a household word due to the extensive media coverage, which she was able to generate with regards to women rights. Mrs Fozdar's contribution to the social history of Singapore cannot be doubted. She was the first woman singled out for a tribute by the SCWO in 1988. AWARE has also initiated a trust fund to honour her memory – the Shirin Fozdar Trust Fund – in 1992. Due to the work of the SCW, the first umbrella body of women's associations to fight for equal status, Singapore was ahead of UN organisations and similar organisations in neighbouring countries such as Indonesia and Malaysia.³⁴ Of course, it

³⁴ The United Nations passed a convention concerning consent to marriage, minimum age for marriage and registration of marriage only in 1962, one year after the Singapore Women's Charter. Non-Muslims in Malaysia acquired rights similar to the Women's Charter of Singapore only after the Marriage and Divorce Act of 1976 was finally implemented in March 1982. In Indonesia, it was only in 1974 that the status of women in marriage was safeguarded by a Marriage Act, which recognised the principle of

must not be forgotten that there were other women who rallied around her -- most of whom were reform-minded and socially motivated Christians. Christian women, however, were uncomfortable with the forthright stand which Bahá'ís took on the issue of the equality of status between men and women and preferred a lower profile.

With the first flush of independence in 1959 and the enactment of the Women's Charter in 1961, the women's movement in Singapore began to lose its momentum. In the place of the civic groups of the 1950's was the emergence of women in politics and they began to spearhead policies pertaining to women. Gradually, more women groups were formed -- professional, international, and charitable -- but the issues of interest were now not so much on women's rights but on adapting to a newly independent republic keen to get ahead with economic progress. Meanwhile, the social, recreational and educational needs of the masses were gradually taken over by the vast network of Peoples' Associations (PA) all over the island. While Bahá'í women remained active throughout the first and second wave of the women's movement, they had, by and large, lost the leadership of the women's movement with the departure of Shirin Fozdar. Due to the changed socio-political climate, the younger group of Bahá'í women in the second wave were not so focussed on the promotion of human rights per se as their health, environmental and educational activities.

As the chief influence on culture, social norms and values, religion must always feature either directly or indirectly in the women's movement. In the first wave, women leaders in civic groups had the courage to face the wrath of the conservative religious leaders of the community, as can be seen in the resistance between the SCW and the Tamil, Muslim, and Chinese Advisory Boards. In the second wave, women were careful to detach themselves from matters relating to religion owing to the changed socio-political climate in Singapore. While Bahá'í women attempted to influence Muslim reforms in the past, it would be inappropriate to do so today due to the rise of Muslim fundamentalism and also due to the existence of Muslim women's groups who could themselves take the lead in their own affairs. Neither is it appropriate for Singaporean

monogamy in marriage and allowed polygamy only with prior approval from the first wife and a court of law.

groups to extend their work across the Causeway, since Malaysia is now an independent country.³⁵

What then for the next millennium? For the Singapore Bahá'ís, they will have the task of keeping pace with a movement which they have been associated with from its inception. They will have to train more leaders among themselves to play key roles in the movement and they will have to continue to educate the masses on the importance of human rights and women's rights in their attempts to create a united world.

There is also an urgency to link the women's movement more closely with the peace movement. The goals of peace have been a central theme in all religions, although traditionally, religion has focussed more on inner than outer social and political peace. Peace is an urgent survival issue for the contemporary world, an issue of extraordinary magnitude ever since Hiroshima. It is time for religious leaders to argue persuasively against the justification of violence and war. For the Bahá'ís, the achievement of full equality between the sexes is one of the most important though least acknowledged prerequisite of peace. If conflict among nations is closely related to conflict in the country and the family, it is the special responsibility of non-governmental organisations such as the BOAW to eradicate the underlying sources of conflict – be it poverty, human rights violations or misunderstandings. Such sources are often the real causes leading to human unhappiness and dissatisfaction with one another, eventually contributing to violence as a means of remedying the source of the perceived injustice. The challenge then for the Bahá'í community both in Singapore and the world is to educate the public on the inter-relationship between equality of the sexes and world peace. They have to convince the public that only when women enter into all fields of human endeavour, then and only then can the moral and psychological climate be created for international peace to emerge.

³⁵ In Malaysia, there is the presence of AWAM (All Women Action Society), a member of the Muslim Women's Action Group (better known from Sept 1990 as "Sisters in Islam", the name under which the group entered public debate, especially through letters to the editors of the Malay and English language press). Whether this movement will eventually influence their Muslim sisters in Singapore remains to be seen.

It should also be noted that although the Bahá'í Faith has been in Singapore for half a century, its membership size has remained relatively small. The Bahá'í register records a total of about 2,000 believers. It is an irony that while it is the religion which appears to be the most conducive where women's rights are concerned, it has not succeeded in attracting the majority of the more progressive or feminist-inclined sector of the population. This is striking when one realises that in Singapore and Southeast Asia, religion is not only holding its own but also gaining in strength. The Dakwan movement in Malaysian Islam, the Christian charismatic movement of Southeast Asia, the emergence of neo-Hindu groups like Sai Baba, the proliferation of Chinese mediums, the Japanese Nichiren Shoshu School of Buddhism are conspicuous examples. It will be interesting to see how the Bahá'í Faith will meet the challenge from such groups in the coming years.

Looking at religion in general today, it is obvious that religions are at a turning point where gender issues are concerned. The feminine critique of specific religious ideas and practices is becoming sharper, more articulate and detailed day by day. Today, institutional religion is facing a crisis due to a worn-out paradigm between the sexes. A new perspective is needed to help women develop their full potential, which has laid dormant for most of recorded history. In order to establish this reality, there is a need to eliminate worn out doctrines and shibboleths that have emerged from earlier socio-religious conditions and which have denied women's full equality by claiming she was created unequal by God.

The challenge of traditional theological thinking has already begun. In the West, the Movement for the Ordination of Women has gained considerable support especially in larger Christian churches such as the Anglican, Roman Catholic and Orthodox. In the last 20 years, the number of women theology students have risen exponentially. In many theology courses in the West, more than half are women.³⁶ (King 1993). In Singapore, in the early 1990's there was a conference on feminist mariology whereby a statement was issued by the attendees "to liberate ourselves from the destructive effects of 2000 years of male interpretation of Mary" and "to return to the Scriptures as women within

³⁶ King, Ursula. *Feminist Theology from the Third World*, p. 2-20

our own cultural contexts, to rediscover the Mary who is liberated and the liberator."³⁷

While most of the challenges so far have been addressed to the patriarchal heritage of the Judeo-Christian tradition, increasing evidence exists that critical feminist consciousness is growing everywhere among the religions of the world, not just Jewish and Christian, but also within Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam. Buddhist nuns in the Theravada tradition strongly request the right to full ordination in Sri Lanka and Thailand. In the Mahayana tradition, women have asked for full recognition as Zen masters. Hindu women have established the right to recite the Vedas and follow the path of renunciation (*sannyasa*) traditionally closed to them. Some also campaign to be gurus in their own right.³⁸

There is a growing awareness that religion is indispensable to social order and has a direct effect on laws and morality. The challenges of the next millennium must include the challenge to explore in greater depth the achievements of women and the potential transformative power of their contributions in religion. More important is the issue of educating the next and future generations on inequality. How are we to ensure that succeeding generations will not perpetuate the stereotypical ways of thinking and being that they have been used to? Society today needs a global ethic, a universal standard of values, ideals and goals - a need reflected in the "declaration toward a global ethic" of the recent World parliament of religions in Chicago (1993) which outlined a "minimal ethic" based on common values of the great world religions. One ethical point common to all religions is to treat each other as one would oneself like to be treated. Certainly, if the treatment of women were scrutinised in the light of this universal ethical standard, the world would progress beyond traditional, cultural and religious practices. In Singapore, perhaps the IRO as the officially recognised body representing the multi-faiths of the republic, can lead the way where this principle is concerned.

³⁷ *Ibid.* p. 271

³⁸ *Ibid.* pp 20-20.

In the light of fast-changing social-political circumstances, the enduring values of religion also need, from time to time, to be re-examined. Questions and problems never encountered before need to be posed. The challenge of the equality of the sexes confronts most of the world's religions in an unsettling and perturbing way. The Bahá'í Faith can only be commended for pointing and leading the way for its resolution, a process truly unique in religious history, both in Singapore and elsewhere.

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Mr David Marshall, Chief Minister of Singapore, 1955-1956, on 18.1.1993

Mr Ong Pang Boon, Organising Secretary of PAP Tanjong Pagar Branch, 1955-1956, on 23.2.1993.

Members of executive committee of SCW:

Mrs Elizabeth Choy, 9.9. 1992; Mrs Shirin Fozdar, 19.3. 1992; Mrs Constance Goh Kok Kee, 3.2. 1993; Mrs George Lee 9. 3. 92; Mrs Shanta Sundram (daughter of Mrs E. V. Davis), 2.2. 1992; Mrs Seow Peck Leng, 8. 9. 1992; Cik Azizah Osman, 10.12.1992, Mrs Seow Peck Leng, 29.11.1992.

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The Missing Moral Dimension

Suresh Sahadevan

Introduction

Many areas of our social fabric today are fashioned by policies which are largely materially efficient and technically sound. These sectors can be as diverse as economic growth and technopreneurship as well as health and education. Despite the characteristic progress that we see or are expected to see with such policies, there is however, for me, an uneasy feeling that something is missing, something fairly vital: a dimension that also pays heed to graciousness within and between individuals, a dimension that, though it may not immediately and directly result in revenue, efficiency or productivity, is crucial, in the longer run and indirectly, for these same objectives. I believe that our government is also aware of this missing dimension in our society - as exemplified by our Prime Minister's recent analysis regarding the need to develop graciousness in our society:

"Singaporeans cannot just be materialistic, self-centered and impatient to get rich quick. My vision is a Singapore where every citizen strives to make Singapore a better home, where people are considerate and well-behaved towards one another, where everyone is well-educated, trained and employed, gracious, happy and enjoying a high quality of life. Graciousness, honesty and care for one another are important features of a civilized society."¹

Technically sound and materially efficient policies, while good for promoting economic welfare and external comfort, are still inadequate to address certain inner, value-centered or moral needs. Moreover, awareness of this moral dimension increases and the actualization of the

¹ Goh C.T., *A Better Home for All*, in: *Speeches - Bimonthly Selection of Ministerial Speeches*, Singapore: Ministry of Information and the Arts, 1996, 20 (4), pp. 4-8.

highest human potentials becomes more possible as society achieves a basic level of stability and prosperity.² With a little reflection, one realizes that this dilemma is not peculiar to Singapore alone and no developed society has truly solved it. In this brief presentation, I would like to attempt an analysis of what I regard to be a withered and withering moral dimension in our manifold endeavours. This paper argues that the saga goes beyond any specific society or individual; it is our collective and historical narrative of a continually evolving humanity and the main objective of this analysis is to suggest a possible approach to moral recovery.

I think it is also important at the outset to state what will not be covered in today's talk. I am extremely aware how a topic such as this closely interfaces with moral philosophy, but the latter will be largely avoided. One reason is in the interests of time, but more importantly, from what I have come to know about contemporary moral philosophy, it has actually failed to provide us with clear answers to the central questions of moral enquiry. I can only adumbrate upon this failure in this presentation but the interested reader can refer to some excellent books describing in-depth the historical reasons leading to the philosophical difficulties as well as the pervasive and paralyzing moral relativity of our age.^{3,4}

To transcend the failure of moral philosophy requires, I believe, a return to the theological foundations of the moral dimension. Historically, these foundations occupied a dominant position in the governance of society and it will be instructive to briefly review the reasons why spiritual perspectives have become marginalized in many developed nations. A return to the metaphysical origins of ethics requires a new spiritual paradigm that will not result in the same prejudices and errors which were enacted in the name of religion in the past. Once moral clarity and justification can be restored through a spiritual basis, then moral responsibility can be re-exercised in all our manifold endeavours, improving the ethos of our social life.

² Maslow AH. *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature*, p. 7.

³ MacIntyre A., *After Virtue*.

⁴ MacIntyre A., *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*.

With regards to the new spiritual paradigm, as well as how it can bring about moral recovery, I shall quote several times from the Bahá'í writings. Those who know the Bahá'í Faith reasonably well will immediately realize that the quotations refer to spirituality or religion in general and not just specifically to the Bahá'í Faith. For those unfamiliar with the Bahá'í Faith, a few introductory words are necessary. The Bahá'í Faith, with its birth in 1844, is the youngest of the world's religions and its central message is that divine revelation is periodic, continual and progressive with each revelation reaffirming the eternal changeless spiritual laws already enunciated by earlier religions. At the same time it has brought new social laws that may differ from its predecessors, since social laws have to be relevant for the changing needs of an ever-advancing human civilization. It is with this central tenet of progressive religion that it espouses its three cardinal principles of Oneness of God, Oneness of Religions and Oneness of Mankind. Thus the Bahá'í Faith makes no distinctions between religions in terms of any being better or superior. All religions and all prophets are equal in status and their purpose, when understood and practised properly, is to morally support an ever-evolving civilization. These perspectives will have to be kept in mind in the discussion.

Moral Atrophy

The first part of today's talk focuses on some of the important reasons that have led to the atrophy of the moral dimension in our lives and our interactions with one another. I believe there are three main reasons: firstly, the regarding of "facts" as being superior to "values" (which, ironically, is in itself a value judgement); secondly, the problem of moral subjectivism or relativism, and lastly, psychological factors pertaining to moral commitment and freedom.

Facts vs Values

From the period of Enlightenment onwards, a progressive belief has occurred in all urbanizing parts of the world that the route to success for humanity in all its endeavours is through the scientific method, which is

founded upon empiricism and rationality. Science has repeatedly demonstrated its ability to both predict as well as control various natural events, resulting in material comfort for all of humanity. This spectacular success of science has produced a rather unique mode of thinking that now influences all of us: the way to solve all problems is by employing the scientific method to first define problems in objective terms, then solve them objectively through empirical and rational methods and thus arrive at objective solutions. Objectivity - meaning observability, measurability and hence testability - is so fundamental to the scientific attitude that there is now a pervasive inclination in many developed and developing societies that whatever is non-observable and non-measurable is less important or, worse still, not important. Facts are thus prized over values since the former are characteristically objectifiable and quantifiable and hence amenable to further analysis and application, but the latter are typically not so.

Philosophers and scientists have pointed out, however, that the foundations of scientific objectivity are themselves theory-laden and resting upon certain very non-objective and non-testable assumptions such as the principles of lawfulness of nature and finite causation.^{5,6} But these expositions have by and large gone unheeded and instead, there exists a widespread, but unjustified certitude in the abilities of a theory- and value-neutral science to solve all the problems of humanity. That such capabilities, even if true, are restricted to the measurable domain of our existence and therefore have only a limited and finite role (since the totality of our life experiences includes also the important, but non-quantifiable, inner world of emotions and meanings) is seldom, if ever, reflected upon.

With the attitude that the study of human values rank second to the study of scientific facts, compounded further by not having objective, testable approaches to solving moral disagreements, ethics have become relegated to a secondary role in our society. Thus the moral dimension comes into our lives nowadays in a less immediate, less direct and more watered-down mode, typically associated with the sanctions imposed by society's legal institutions. They define for us our minimal codes of

⁵ Khursheed A., *The Universe Within*, pp. 84-93.

⁶ Maxwell SE, Delaney HD. *Designing Experiments and Analyzing Data*, pp. 6-11.

conduct and relationships and are largely characterized in contractual terms. Moral inspiration and excellence of character are not within the courts' purview and thus not the social focus of our lives. In fact, such notions appear archaic and anachronistic, and their direct relevance have become questionable in the face of the overwhelming need to strive for technical excellence and wealth acquisition.

Subjectivism and Relativism

The lack of objective standards in morality leads to moral subjectivism. The truth of an ethical stand is to be perceived subjectively by each one of us. Such moral convictions that originate from within can be powerful enough to guide our actions, but the justifications for these convictions cannot be measured nor tested. In sum, moral subjectivism implies that when an individual thinks something is ethically justified, he cannot - as long as he is not breaking any legal statutes - be proven wrong, scientifically. Even when a law is violated, the wrongness of that action can only be classified as such by predefined legal statutes and not be established by an empirical or rational analysis of the underlying ethical stand that prompted the wrong action.

It is in this way that moral truth also becomes relativistic - relative to the individual or culture concerned. Embedded in this concept is that each individual is entitled to his own notions of what right and wrong is, and that he does not have to be accountable for his ethical stands. It is hardly surprising then that such relativism in moral standards has rapidly led to a state of having no standards whatsoever, with each individual only promoting his self-interests, especially in a social environment that gives the message that everyone is only worth his marketable talents and that nobody else is going to be responsible for him or to care for him. Another consequence stemming from moral plurality is that since nothing conclusive can be proven scientifically within the ethical realm, there is no need to waste so much time, and care so much about, moral issues. Thus, what moral relativism almost always leads to is moral indifference and if the contemporary media is anything to go by, moral indifference is pervasive.

If we accept the simple definition that what we mean when we use the word "moral" involves the caring or concern for others, then both the fuzziness of ethical standards through moral relativism and the consequent moral indifference lead relentlessly to our present situation - a situation where progressively (or more accurately, regressively) we care less and less for others. In summary, ethical relativism marks the failure of modern moral philosophy's self-set tasks from the beginning of the Enlightenment to use empirical reasoning alone (and avoid teleological, non-scientific reasoning as exemplified by the religious approach to ethics) to derive for humanity its required set of moral standards.

Psychological Matters

Over and beyond the philosophical history of ethical plurality, a related characteristic of many urbanized societies is the psychological weakening of the individual's will to be committed to, and struggle towards, a moral lifestyle. As Fromm has pointed out, many people today shun away from effort, commitment and discipline (and all of these traits are crucial for the leading of an ethical life); the causes of this "no effort - no pain" doctrine⁷ are several, including the culture emanating from technical progress that has cumulatively been liberating the human race from hard work. Fukuyama, in articulating the perspectives of Nietzsche, has observed how as humanity moved historically from authoritarian, aristocratic regimes towards more tolerant, democratic cultures, the climate of discipline in society correspondingly withered, resulting in an ascent of mediocrity.⁸ Facilitating this trend further are the elaborate developments within the media industry that have often emphasized superficial personality over depth of character, creating in the process an impression that a happy life generally is an easy life, both physically and psychologically.

For a significant segment of our society, the contemporary fuzziness of ethical standards conveniently provides an excuse for moral laxity. One can now argue that moral standards themselves are contentious and

⁷ Fromm E., *The Art of Being*, pp. 24-26.

⁸ Fukuyama F., *The End of History and the Last Man*, pp. 300-312.

unclear and that there is therefore no logical justification for expending effort or discipline to maintaining any high moral standards. One can also state that the very concept of obeying a set of eternal moral laws runs counter to the fundamental precept of man's inner freedom, an ideal that all liberal societies cherish and uphold. Again, as Fromm has pointed out, the underlying spirit of anti-authoritarianism that characterizes such clamours for freedom, while they may have had certain valid historical origins, is largely these days a rationalization for unrestrained fulfillment of all forms of passive whims, rather than valuing opportunities to creatively develop an active will.⁹ Needless to say, such insights are not part of mainstream social awareness.

All the above factors have resulted in a moral vacuum and what has stepped in to fill this void, so as to still give life purpose, meaning and direction, is promotion of self-interests. In fact, nurturing, advancing and fulfilling self-interests are now considered to be valid, rational and legitimate activities at all levels of society, and they have been predominantly responsible for the contemporary "culture of Narcissism".¹⁰

Moral Recovery

Reconceptualizing Religion

The above analysis focussed on how philosophy and science have failed to give the moral dimension of our lives a good objective grounding as well as how, in conjunction with some of the peculiarities of a modern lifestyle, they have been unable to provide the necessary impetus for moral commitment. This state of affairs has arisen because Science and Philosophy were thought to be more than capable substitutes for Religion which traditionally had always been the acknowledged fountainhead of morality. The consequent narcissistic and self-centred culture is unsurprisingly producing a calculative, manipulative and uncaring atmosphere. In the interests of reversing this trend, it is

⁹ Fromm E. *The Art of Being*, pp. 26-29.

¹⁰ Lasch C., *The Culture of Narcissism*.

necessary at this stage to ask whether one can still turn back to Religion to redeem that moral dimension for all of us, as individuals and as society. To properly answer this question we need to be aware of the important reasons that caused the dethronement of Religion in the first place.

The main problems were related to the according of initiative and power to the leaders of religious institutions and their subsequent corruption. The misuse of power by ecclesiastical leaders resulted in hypocrisy and injustice and with the constricting atmosphere of religious intolerance, the individual believer was powerless to protest against any corruption or unfairness. Also agonizing was religious prejudice that was largely fomented by the same leaders and the cruelties and mayhem inflicted against members of another religion. Thus what transpired as power in Religion, which was originally meant to be the experience of the love of God, was the subjugation to, and injustice from, religious institutions. Hence, when the advent of the scientific revolution displaced Religion from its central role in society, many resolved never to allow such patterns of religious power and prejudice to dominate society again.

This background awareness and understanding is crucial as we are now poised to reexamine the usefulness of Religion in restoring the moral dimension of our lives. Is it possible to reaccept Religion while simultaneously avoiding the horrors and ills of the past that Religion has itself perpetrated? If the answer to this is "no", meaning that the horrors and harms of Religion have been, are, and will always be inevitable, then we might as well stop the enquiry here. A remedy, by definition, must not be as bad or worse than the problem it is trying to rectify. It will then also be pointless to examine more closely the relevant conceptual links between morality and religion. Thus our first step is to wonder whether it is possible for Religion to reoccupy a central role in our society - can it do this sensibly, moderately and usefully? To address this matter, imagination is the needed faculty.

Imagine a conceptualization of Religion that accepts all human beings and religions to be equal, coming from the one and same Source. This oneness of religion is to be understood through a principle called progressive revelation - that Divine revelation periodically comes to mankind from God, with each religion arriving at a time when the

preceding one is waning in its influence. Revelation comes through a Prophet-Founder, and all Prophet-Founders are deemed equal, with none being superior over others. Each Revelation has at least two aspects: (a) the eternal - which comprise the core spiritual principles that are essentially timeless and universal in their application and (b) the social - which comprises the specific laws governing social conduct and matters relevant to the era that the Revelation occurs in. The latter, unlike the former, varies from religion to religion, since the social laws have to meet the changing needs of an ever-advancing human civilization. Such differences between religions, however, are secondary and should never be the grounds for dissension or division. In fact, imagine a Religion where one is encouraged "to look into all things with a searching eye", and discern the underlying oneness behind the varied forms of reality.¹¹

Over and beyond this vital oneness of God, religion and man, imagine a conceptualization of Religion that exhorts independent investigation of truth by all individuals without bias or fear and encourages individual initiative and enterprise. The role and function of religious institutions are clearly defined and the relationship between the individual and institution specified, each recognizing and respecting the responsibilities of the other. No individual is given power over other people. The authority of the institutions is that of the institutions' and not of the individuals' who comprise the institutions and these individuals themselves are prayerfully elected regularly with no campaigning or partisan politics. Above all, imagine a Religion which encourages excellence in moral, scientific and artistic endeavours and sees scientific enterprise as not being in opposition with spiritual strivings; a Religion which does not negate the world, requiring from its adherents service towards humanity, and yet at the same time reminding everyone that the realities of this life do not constitute the Ultimate Reality, that worldly participation therefore must always be coupled with an attitude of spiritual detachment.

If such a Religion or understanding of Religion were possible would we allow ourselves the possibility of its re-acceptance to our society and to ourselves? I venture that to the many who are reflective and fair-minded, the answer to this question will be "yes" and this is exactly the

¹¹ Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 157.

understanding of Religion that the Bahá'í Faith provides¹² - not just of itself but about Religion in general, embracing in the process, the truth of all Religions before and after.

It needs to be emphasized that even when Religion is reinstated to a central position in our society, its ability to improve the moral dimension of our lives is tied up then with how we truly practice its core principles. In other words, even when we can call ours to be a religious society, the mere presence of that word "religious" will not result in any transformations till we ourselves are willing to be transformed spiritually, in accordance with the central teachings of Religion. This means, amongst other matters, our readiness to voluntarily impose limits to the promotion of self-interests and for us to be genuinely concerned with, and help improve the welfare of others. However, the willingness to incorporate a spiritually-based code of ethics into our lives requires that we are also clear about Religion's perspectives on moral justification and moral commitment and it is to this that we now turn.

Moral Justification

If we can sufficiently re-conceptualize Religion as above, to the point that we are not intrinsically prejudiced against its possible return to our lives, then what is necessary at this stage is to examine underlying concepts in Religion's basis for moral justification and its enjoiners to moral commitment. Firstly, the issue of justifying the truth of moral actions. If we accept the framework that there are 4 approaches to truth in general¹³. (1) Truth that you feel, (2) Truth that you are told, (3) Truth that the senses reveal and (4) Truth revealed through reason, then the moral truth of Religion is given its grounding primarily by (2) - the Truth that you are told. Both (1) and (4) are also involved - eventually the truth that has been told to us requires further verification from our capacities to reason and feel; but essentially they only serve to corroborate, and by themselves, are unable to derive the truth of morality.

¹² Hatcher W.S., Martin J.D., *The Bahá'í Faith*.

¹³ Fernandez-Armesto F., *Truth*.

What does it mean, "Truth that you are told" in the context of Religion? It is the acknowledgement of the truth of Religion as given by the revelation of its Prophet-Founder. In other words, the truth of Religion is predicated upon, first and foremost, the truth of its Prophet-Founder and not, as many may have believed, the truth of God, who, by definition, is inaccessible and incomprehensible to all of us. A fundamental concept elucidated in the Bahá'í Writings is how the knowledge of the Divine Messengers is tantamount to the knowledge of God, and is in fact, the only mode made available for humanity to know God:

"... The door of the knowledge of the Ancient Being hath ever been, and will continue forever to be, closed in the face of men. No man's understanding shall ever gain access unto His holy court. As a token of His Mercy, however, and as a proof of His loving kindness, He hath manifested unto men the Day-Stars of His divine guidance, the Symbols of His divine unity, and hath ordained the knowledge of these sanctified Beings to be identical with the knowledge of His own Self. Whoso recognizeth Them hath recognized God. Whoso hearkeneth to their call, hath hearkened to the Voice of God, and whoso testifieth to the truth of their Revelation, hath testified to the truth of God Himself..."¹⁴

To establish the veracity of the Divine Messengers is a more accessible first step than to grasp the elusive, non-objectifiable and indefinable concept of God and once this crucial step of recognizing the truth of Religion's Prophet-Founders is taken (and its details are further discussed below), then moral truth, as enunciated by the Prophet, becomes grounded, attains "objective" standards and very importantly, allows for the evaluation of which actions are to be regarded as moral and which are not.

The use of the word "objective" in this context, however, requires careful consideration. There is objectivity insofar as the source of truth is still outside of ourselves, not rendering morality therefore to be a totally arbitrary subject matter, but the objectivity of this realm is still not the same as scientific objectivity. For one, it is non-measurable and thus beyond any scientific analysis, and secondly, as one of its corroborating steps, it requires from us also a feeling for the truth of its

¹⁴ Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp. 49-50.

contents which, from an empirical scientific perspective, is neither necessary nor sufficient for truth verification. Lastly, the objectivity of moral truth, even when understood as springing from the truth of Religion's Prophet-Founders, still allows for a subjective latitude in the interpretation of moral principles and their specific application in our daily lives. These interpretations and applications can still differ from individual to individual in accord with their varying inclinations and capacities to understand and practise moral truth. Diversity is thus allowed for in the spiritual context but what needs to be observed is that the variations of moral expression are not totally random. Figuratively, there is a well-defined centre, and the types of action classified as moral oscillate within a fixed band around this centre. This model of truth, as fluctuations within a band from the centre is again at variance with the classical notions of scientific truth where fluctuations of understanding or practice about core principles are not typically accommodated. However, the variations of moral expression as allowed for by Religion are such that limits are still imposed upon moral subjectivity and thus, unlike the consequences of post-modern moral philosophy, the world of moral behaviour in the Religious paradigm never becomes total anarchy. This, in essence, becomes Religion's greatest contribution to moral clarity.

Once the truth of the Prophet-Founder is acknowledged, the question of which moral standards do I follow and why becomes non-existent. The believer strives to follow faithfully the revealed standards of God as pronounced by the Prophet. The crucial question then is how do we recognize the truth of the Prophet-Founder? The capacity to recognize this truth is deemed by Religion to be potentially residing in all of us.¹⁵ This capacity however, remains a potentiality until we choose to investigate this truth and undertake its necessary search for ourselves. The choice to seek out the truth is given to us and that choice has to be exercised by ourselves - nobody else can do it for us. For those who decide to undertake that investigation or search, ardour is a needed quality¹⁶ - a lackadaisical, semi-hearted attempt will be foredoomed to failure. Another extremely important prerequisite is that our hearts and minds must be open, unprejudiced and freed from all forms of

¹⁵ Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 143.

¹⁶ Bahá'u'lláh, *Seven Valleys and the Four Valleys*, p. 7.

attachments,¹⁷ and continual exercises of honest and even courageous self-reflection are needed for the seeker to be in this state.

In such a spirit of search, the truth of the Divine Messengers is established by exploring the life history of the Prophet Founders and by studying Their revealed words.

“Say: The first and foremost testimony establishing His truth is His own Self. Next to this testimony is His Revelation. For whoso faileth to recognize either the one or the other, He hath established the words He hath revealed as proof of His reality and truth.”¹⁸

Thus for us who are not in a position to witness the Prophets directly in Their process of Revelation, the only recourse available to us to determine Their truth are the historical accounts of Their lives and, where available, Their revealed Words of God. What always features prominently in a fair-minded reading of the life history of the Prophets is the degree of personal sacrifice (in some instances, to the point of death) They endured for the sake of upholding the truth of God’s Revelation for humanity and it is precisely this sacrifice and the reasons for the sacrifice that the seeker has to contemplate upon. With reference to the Word of God, it is Religion’s singular claim that the Word of God has special powers capable of inspiring and transforming the inner spirit of the true seeker. Thus the interaction of the seeker with the Prophet-Founder’s revealed words coupled with a knowledge of His life and sufferings, all in the spirit of the seeker’s humility, openness and detachment, would be sufficient for the seeker to make a decision about the truth or falsehood of the Central Figure. The fact that many, for all sorts of reasons, still will not or choose not to recognize this truth of the Prophets is itself recognized by Religion. The onset of the spiritual journey (which begins with the belief in the Prophet - at least in this earthly life) is deemed by Religion to come to different people at different points in time (and it need not be during this existence either). The nonbelievers are left to their own devices, and discord or disagreement with them is forbidden to those who would claim themselves to be believers of Religion. In fact, for the believers, many

¹⁷ Bahá’u’lláh, *Kitáb-I-Íqán*, p. 192.

¹⁸ Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh*, p. 105.

tasks await them, all centering around the realities of moral commitment.

Moral Commitment

I have tried to explain how the recognition of the truth of the Prophet-Founder is the religious justification for morality. The recommended approach for determining this truth (reading and reflecting on the Prophet's life history as well as His revealed Word of God) has also been touched upon and it will be realized that this judgement of truth requires from the seeker both his reasoning faculty as well as what can crudely be termed as his feeling for truth. As the final part of today's talk, we will look at moral commitment and Religion's influence on it. Earlier, the progressive weakening of the "moral will" in many of today's societies was depicted and linked to moral relativism as well as an individual's psychological preference for freedom and inclination towards self-centredness. Let us see now what Religion's solutions to these challenges are.

The clearest reason for moral commitment is again linked to the truth of the Prophet. As the Bahá'í Writings make clear, recognition of that truth enjoins upon the seeker a two-fold obligation: steadfastness in his belief and obedience to the laws as revealed in Religion.

"In this Day whosoever is guided...to...the station of recognizing the Source of divine commandments and the Dayspring of His Revelation, hath everlastingly attained unto all good. Having reached this lofty station a twofold obligation rested upon every soul. One is to be steadfast in the Cause... The other is observance of the divine ordinances which have streamed forth from the wellspring of His heavenly-propelled Pen. For man's knowledge of God cannot develop fully and adequately save by observing whatsoever hath been ordained by Him and is set forth in His heavenly Book."¹⁹

¹⁹ Bahá'u'lláh. *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 268.

In other words, recognition of the Prophet-Founder's status, in addition to justifying and making clear the moral standards, also means commitment to a moral lifestyle. But Religion also offers other perspectives that are linked to moral commitment.

The central challenge of a moral lifestyle is that it demands that we go beyond the pursuit of self-interests, that we actively work towards the fulfillment of others' needs. While this may certainly have the potential to effect excellence in one's character, that excellence may not necessarily (especially, in the short-run) result in any tangible benefits. However, it is such material success that most of us are caught up with, that gives our life direction and meaning, and its overwhelming importance is the fundamental message that secular societies passes onto all their citizens.

How Religion transcends this challenge is in educating its adherents that what they deem to be this life is not the only reality, that over and beyond this life, there is another, Ultimate Reality; and in relation to this Ultimate Reality, moral excellence, and not earthly success, constitutes the true (albeit long-term) victory. There is nothing wrong with earthly success or its related striving as long as it is accomplished through moral excellence, as a result of which the believer is inwardly detached from such attainments. As MacIntyre has pointed out, from early historical times there has been an awareness that both virtue and victory are facets of excellence that human beings are inclined to strive towards, and the pursuit of one can certainly collide with the demands of the other.²⁰ Religion's answer to this dilemma is clear: the acquisition of virtues must always be given priority over the pursuit of worldly achievements.

However, detachment is one topic that is extremely easy to talk about, compared to its actual practice. As stated above, the Religious perspective is that this earthly life is not truly the ultimate reality since everything around us is impermanent, transient and fleeting - be they relationships, possessions or responsibilities: the "changes and chances of life".²¹ It would thus be foolish to set our hearts on, and overwhelm our minds with what is intrinsically a transitory life. However, such an

²⁰ MacIntyre A., *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, pp. 30-46.

²¹ Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 258.

inner reorientation is radically at odds with conventional social perspectives. All around, people hunger for riches, fame and power but without reflecting on the impermanence and instability of these goals: I may finally be able to attain my dream-level of wealth, fame and power, but can I be sure that tomorrow these will still remain with me? In a nutshell, practising spiritual detachment will certainly bring the individual beyond the established pursuits and beliefs of modern society.

Yet neither should detachment be understood to mean negation of life and withdrawal from the manifold duties or responsibilities that it throws in our direction. As contemporary Religion would have it, no longer can the believer practise detachment by leading an ascetic life. Thus detachment is not to be understood as an external deprivation of sorts - it is, in essence, an inner re-orientation and there is therefore nothing wrong about experiencing happiness or being wealthy while adopting a moral lifestyle, so long as the individual does not become attached to that happiness or wealth. Participation in life is extremely important to be able to attain one of the central goals of Religion: to be of service to mankind. In fact, if the purpose of life as defined by Religion is the acquisition of virtues, then the reason for that acquisition is for us to be better able to serve mankind and any such service demands an immersion into, and involvement with, one's society.

What is interesting then in the practice of an ethical lifestyle is the juxtapositioning of love (or service) and detachment. There appears to be an apparent tension or paradox in these two concepts. Conventionally, one associates love with attachment and detachment with the contrary. But I believe the love that Religion envisages is something quite different from what we ordinarily understand the word to mean. This love or compassion is the natural expression of our inner love of God and it is non-possessive. The way in which concomitant detachment makes this love-state different from the conventional love-state is that truly nothing is expected in return. There are no calculations. The question "What's in it for me?" becomes meaningless and non-existent. These are some of the features of the moral standards that Religion enjoins its adherents to have, and be committed to.

The above explications about detachment only make clearer the significant difficulties of its practice. Thus the spiritual individual

cannot escape the experience of a profound aloneness when striving to practise a detached ethical lifestyle which runs counter to current social norms. The only way of preventing that aloneness from becoming a negative loneliness is again in the sincere practice of detachment in the first place. But this still does not remove the difficulty of becoming spiritually detached. However, Religion has an answer to this difficulty and it resides in the experience of the love of God.²² It is this love that will inspire and empower an individual to undertake ethical detachment and still remain psychologically integrated and healthy. At the practical level, this love of God translates into love or compassion for our fellow beings for the sake of God, the Creator of all. And it is this experience of love or compassion that generates a feeling of lightness or gentleness to what could otherwise be a severely austere lifestyle of obedience to ethical rules and detachment from secular demands.

So far under the topic of moral commitment we have discussed how it naturally follows from the initial step of recognizing the truth of the Prophet-Founder. Moreover, the difficulties of leading a moral lifestyle in the midst of secular societies were touched upon, emphasizing in the process, the importance of detachment and compassion and their apparent conceptual tensions. Throughout the discussion we have briefly mentioned how for moral commitment to be realistic and fruitful, and how for detachment and compassion to be practised healthily and meaningfully, the underlying inspiration of the love of God is crucial. What remains now, as the last part of today's talk, is to address the issue of how this love of God can come about in all of us.

In answering this question, we should also reflect upon how unique Religion is, compared to all other branches of human knowledge in effecting changes in moral behaviour. All other relevant disciplines can only, at best, describe ethical behaviour, they cannot motivate, inspire or transform. Even psychology, which comes closest to this task, is essentially descriptive of the humanistic importance of leading an other-oriented as compared to a self-oriented lifestyle; its prescriptive scope, on the other hand, is very limited and where it exists, is primarily cognitive in nature, lacking inspiration. Religion, however, clearly and boldly states that spiritual transformation is a potential reality in all of us

²² 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 301.

and that the starting point of this transformation is the knowledge of God which, as described earlier, is tantamount to the knowledge of the Prophet-Founder, and in particular, the revealed Word of God. It is Religion's singular claim and promise that as long as an individual, with openness, sincerity and courage, interacts with the Word of God, the Writings will inspire and transform the seeker and create within him the mysterious love of God.

"Every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God is endowed with such potency as can instill new life into every human frame, if ye be of them that comprehend this truth..."²³

"Is it within human power... to effect in the constituent elements of any of the minute and indivisible particles of matter so complete a transformation as to transmute it into purest gold? Perplexing and difficult as this may appear, the still greater task of converting satanic strength into heavenly power is one that We have been empowered to accomplish... the Word of God, alone, can claim the distinction of being endowed with the capacity required for so great and far-reaching a change"²⁴

"The words of Bahá'u'lláh... have a creative power and are sure to awaken in the reader the undying fire of the love of God."²⁵

The individual thus becomes inspired and motivated to turn away from his self and to turn towards God because of the Beauty of God. The extent to which this love can be attained in our lives varies from one to another, dependent on the earnestness of our endeavours as well as His Grace. To then maintain this transformed state or even grow further, we are required to daily interact with the Word of God through prayers and meditations and put into sincere practice divine ordinances. In this way, by inspiration, faith and deeds, the individual's moral commitment becomes strengthened.

²³ Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 141.

²⁴ Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 200.

²⁵ On behalf of Shoghi Effendi, *The Importance of Deepening Our Knowledge and Understanding of the Faith*, pp. 34-35.

Conclusion

This presentation has described the missing moral dimension in many of our individual and social endeavors and has ascribed the phenomenon to the downfall of the true practice of spirituality, a downfall precipitated by the corrupt past practices of Religion as well as an unwarranted conviction about man's intellectual capabilities. Also central to this paper is the belief that for moral recovery to be effected realistically and lastingly, Religion has to be reinstated to a central position in the lives of both individuals and society. Admittedly, this can only be if both the structure and functioning of religious institutions are different from the past (without altering the spiritual content of love) so as to ensure that its historical errors will never be repeated.

However, even the above-described repositioning of Religion cannot, by itself, reinvigorate our current moral climate. Such re-energizing can only occur if we ourselves are prepared to practise the true precepts of Religion. Thus we ourselves must want and be ready to be transformed, become progressively less self-centered and more compassionate towards others, in thoughts as well as deeds. Only then can the empowering influence of Religion be realized. Of course, the need for Religion has been approached in this paper from the standpoint of today's withering moral dimension, but ultimately, the truth of Religion can never be determined this way. That ascertainment, by necessity, will have to come at a more personal level and it requires from the seeker a willingness to undertake an independent and unbiased search for truth. Aspects of such a search and its end points (knowledge and love of God) have also been briefly addressed in this presentation.

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inadequacies are the author's responsibility; all I can say is that this work could have been far worse.

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The Human Spirit in Moral Education

Kuek Yi Hsing

Abstract

As belief in traditional authorities in Europe has declined, morality and ethics have been constantly undermined. With the rise of modern science, there has been a progressive fragmentation in spiritual values. Moral education has been caught in between. In schools run by religious institutions, it is still a part of religious education, whereas in secular schools, it has become a distinct subject on character and behaviour, duty and obligation, devoid of any religious affinity. In search of what to teach in moral education, a mixture of ethics, religious festivities and cultural traditions, nation-building concepts, and other trivialities such as social etiquette, personal grooming and self-esteem have been included in the curriculum.

There is no lack of criticism in the US and Europe on the weakness of the secular models of moral education and there have been calls for "going back to basics" by the fundamentalists. From the Bahá'í point of view morality has assumed a new meaning and a new direction. It is no longer sufficient to be virtuous; one has to be conscious of the fact that the world has become one single state. To be moral implies going beyond being patriotic to one's country, race, culture and religion. One's allegiance must be to the whole of humankind.

The article examines briefly the historical perspective that has led to the immanence of secular models of moral education in Europe and the US, how moral education has been taught in Singapore, some secular models from the US and their inadequacies, and what the Bahá'í Writings have to offer.

The Division: Religious and Secular Moral Education

The great progress of science and technology over the past few hundred years seems to have brought with it an equally momentous crisis of values. Ever since the 18th century European Enlightenment, the great rise of faith in science and reason has been shadowed by an equally sharp decline in the respect for moral authority. This process of secularization has been gathering pace in recent years. The Catholic theologian, Hans Kung, notes that:

"Ever since the youth and student revolts of the late 1960s, there are no longer any institutions or guardians of values which are not in crisis or have not been radically challenged. Where today is there any undisputed authority? We used to be told: the pope, the bishop, the church says; or the prime minister, the government, the party says; or the teacher, the professor, 'your father' says. Where nowadays could we even settle a discussion – let alone pacify a demonstration – with an appeal to such authorities? No; the state, church, courts, army, school, family – all seem to be insecure. They are no longer accepted without question – least of all by young people – as guardians of values."¹

The crisis of values seems to be inseparable from the crisis of traditional religion. With the rise of Reason as an alternative to Faith, clearly articulated during the European Enlightenment period, many sought to found moral values on rational or empirical principles. This trend is clearly evident in the philosophy of Hobbes, Hume and the Utilitarians. The writer Udo Shaefer, summarizes the impact of these philosophies on European moral values over the last two hundred years in the following way:

"The crisis of Christianity and, in its wake, the crisis of morals has been on the way for a long time, at least since the European Enlightenment, the Copernican revolution of thought, which began in the 17th century and molded the West. This new attitude was based on a belief in the power of reason, on the conviction of the absolute certainty of rational knowledge. Faith in the old presuppositions and authorities, for so long considered valid beyond question, gave way to a spirit of criticism.

¹ Hans Kung. *Why I am still a Christian*. T and T Clark Ltd., Edinburgh, 1987, p3.

Reason claimed to be autonomous and set itself up as the unique court of appeal. The spirit of modernism, which made a method of doubt, has profoundly changed the world. It was the ideal for man in his newly attained independence and maturity to be liberated from prejudice and preconceived ideas and at the same time to hold a commitment to methodological discipline and absolute objectivity. This new way of thought has laid the foundation of our scientific-technical civilization... However, the spirit of modernism is also responsible for the deep crisis of faith and, in its wake, the crisis of morals."²

Moral Philosophy in the 1900's

The moral confusion of our times, the undermining of spiritual values, and particularly the decline in respect for moral authorities, has had a profound effect on the moral training of children. The distinct development of moral education in America since the 1960's has been towards a more open process of reasoning and reflecting, away from the authoritative "bag-of-virtues" approach. One of the models that was in use in the 60's in America is called "values clarification" developed by Carl Rogers(1965), Simon, Howe and Kirschenbaum (1972). Rogers had, in the 50's, developed techniques in counseling that were non-directive, non-judgmental, and client-centered and which became known as humanistic psychology. These techniques were then introduced to schools where students were treated as clients. Students were allowed to discover their own values as long as they were comfortable with what they chose. The emphasis is on skills and opportunities for the students to reflect on inputs and come up with their own thought-out answers. The aim was to help students identify their own values and those of others using both rational thinking and emotional awareness.

Another model was developed by Lawrence Kohlberg (1984). In this abstract-reflective approach, development of moral life results from making the right choice after considering the consequences. The students were urged to discuss the reasons for their value choices and to foster change in the stages of reasoning. A hypothetical or factual value

² Udo Shaefer. *Ethic for a Global Society*. The Bahá'í Studies Review 1994 London, pp. 50-51.

dilemma would be presented to the class and would be discussed in small groups.

Some have claimed that the main reason for the failure of these models in moral education is the lack of adult guidance. William Kilpatrick wrote: "decision-making curriculums pose thorny and ethical dilemmas to students, leaving them with the impression that all morality is problematic and all questions of right and wrong are in dispute. Youngsters are forced to question values and virtues they've never acquired in the first place or upon which they have only a tenuous hold."³ He claimed that the actual result of these methods is moral confusion.

Why had so much freedom been given to the students in moral education? Kirschenbaum explained in his article in which he tried to analyze the reasons for the failure of values clarification model:

"This immoderation was understandable. Louis Raths, the founder of values clarification, went through his professional formative years in the aftermath of World War II. He saw the excesses of fascism. He witnessed the newsreel of entire cultures that so relinquished their ability to choose freely and to defend their convictions publicly that they blindly followed their leaders into a moral abyss that surpassed the imagination. Then Raths and his students Harmin and Simon watched the United States go through the dark days of McCarthyism, when thinking for oneself and publicly expressing even the slightest dissent were considered by many to be un-American. To these three educators, values clarification- which emphasizes critical thinking, rational individual choice, and public affirmation- seemed a sensible and essential remedy against authoritarian leadership wherever it might appear. Suffice to say for now that we were so passionate about the importance of giving young people the skills necessary to make their own responsible decisions that we overstated our case."⁴

³ Kilpatrick, William. Experiments in Moral Education. Talk given at the Seventh International Congress of Professors World Peace Academy Washington, 1997.

⁴ Kirschenbaum, Howard. *A Comprehensive Model for Values Education and Moral Education*, Journal: Phi Delta Kappan, v.73 n.10 June 1992, pp. 77-176.

So after 30 years of experimenting with different models in moral education in schools, there are still disagreements on the most fundamental issues. Now in the 90's there is a revival of character education by which "good character" is placed as the central desirable outcome of the school's moral enterprise. There are core values which can withstand the test of reversibility (Would you want to be treated this way?) and universalizability (Would you want all persons to act this way in a similar situation?). Lickona writes about these values:

"They define our responsibilities in a democracy, and they are recognized by all civilized people and taught by all enlightened creeds. Not to teach children these core values is a grave moral failure."⁵

The new character education in the US calls upon an individual teacher to act as caregiver, model, and mentor. It asks of the school to create a moral community, to enforce rules and to involve students in decision-making thereby creating a democratic classroom environment. It suggests teaching of values through curriculum and through moral reflection.

In this respect, Kilpatrick talks about the power of aesthetics and believes that good books should be included in the moral education curriculum. He believes that people are convinced not by arguments, but by the force of beauty. The right and rich source of beauty comes from stories, images and memories that inspire the students to do the right things.

Moral Education in Singapore

Moral Education has been a compulsory subject in schools since Singapore attained self-government in 1959 and independence in 1965. Not unlike many newly independent countries, Singapore too was looking into the issues of curriculum content and the nature of moral education.⁶

⁵ Lickona, Thomas, *The Return of Character Education*, Journal, Educational Leadership, Vol.51 no.3 Nov. 1993, pp. 6-11.

⁶ J Chew Oon Ai, *Civic and Moral Education in Singapore: Lessons for Citizenship Education?* Journal of Moral Education, 1998, Vol. 27 no. 4, pp. 504-524.

Starting with the late 1950's, a programme of "Ethics" was introduced in all primary and secondary schools with the objectives of inculcating values and laying the foundation for character development. The aim was to nurture the pupil into self-respecting and good citizens. Stories were used in primary schools and proverbs and aphorisms were taught in the secondary schools.

In the 60's, a programme of "Civics" replaced Ethics in upper primary school and the content was geared towards nation building. It was subsequently revised to introduce Asian values and culture in 1974, and was re-named Education for Living (EFL). The new subject was an integration of Civics, History and Geography and was taught in the mother tongue (Mandarin, Malay or Tamil).

In 1979, the Ong Teng Cheong Report on Moral Education found that Civics syllabus in secondary school as well as the EFL programme had little content on moral values. Those that were dealt with were too abstract and there were insufficient explanations on the moral and ethical principles behind them. The Report recommended Civics and EFL be replaced by Moral Education (ME) under three broad areas:

- 1) Personal Behaviour - habit formation and development of character
- 2) Social Responsibility - sense of belonging to the community and respect
for cultural heritage
- 3) Loyalty to the Country - love of country and spirit of nation building.

Based on the Report, a common Moral Education syllabus for primary one to secondary two was issued to schools in 1983 with "Being and Becoming" Package for secondary and "Good Citizens" Package for primary schools.

At upper secondary level, Religious Knowledge (RK) and Confucian Ethics (CE) was introduced as a compulsory subject in 1984. The object of teaching RK and CE was to anchor the values acquired from primary one to secondary two through the teaching of one of the established religions/ethical systems. However the introduction of RK and CE proved to be controversial and was phased out in 1992.

Throughout the forty-odd years of implementing moral education in schools, the main thrust has been citizenship training, incorporating some moral development techniques such as values clarification into the lessons, and lessons on social living such as social etiquette and boy-girl relationships. With the introduction of the concept of National Education in 1995 by the Prime Minister, Mr Goh Chok Tong, this trend seems set to continue for many years to come.

Contributing Factors towards Limited Success of Moral Education

Among contemporary works analyzing the shortcomings of various moral education models in the US, the findings can be grouped under three categories:

1. The Basic Flaws within the Models

The moral education of the 60's was concerned with ideas, with intellectual skills, and with structures of thinking. There was little attention to doing - to moral action or how one ought to behave.

Winston Langley wrote:

"The approach (abstract reflective) tends to see moral education and development as somewhat specialized rather than something that is all-pervading, spreading and assimilated into all areas of one's life. Second by virtue of its specialized and abstract nature, the approach rarely induces one to see the relationship between moral values and human condition. Indeed one can know very well the formal ideals and rules and yet never understand their application to ambient life."⁷

2. Whose Values Should We Teach?

⁷ Langley, Winston, *Children, Moral Development, and Global Transformation*, World Order Magazine, Spring 1997, pp. 18-19.

In scientific and philosophical fields, values are not given the same recognition as facts. Values are regarded as mere feelings and not objective truths. Only facts, which can be scientifically proven, are objective truths. As a result, moral values are therefore relative truths, a matter of private and personal value judgement. As a subject, moral education becomes more of personal preference, as long as the reasoning power is cultivated in the minds of the students.

The increasing secularization of the public arena is another barrier to achieving the moral consensus indispensable for character education in schools. Government schools retreated from their once central role as moral and character educators.

3. The Constraint of Teachers

James Leming⁸ observed that teachers do not think of themselves as moral educators. The education system requires that teachers see themselves first as classroom managers. The demands on teachers' time and energy are a very real problem resulting in "burn-out" or cumulative fatigue. There is very little passion left to teach moral values, which are considered secondary in importance to academic subjects.

While these are very real problems and limitations, there are bigger issues that contribute to the limited successful implementation of moral education programmes.

The decline in moral discipline has to be looked upon as but one of the many complex problems facing humanity, all of which are interdependent. One of the main problems is the pattern of modern life that is based on accumulation of material wealth. Schumacher commented on the highest goals of the present generation :

"The development of production and acquisition of wealth have thus become the highest goals of the modern world in relation to which all

⁸ Leming, James S., "Kholbergian Programmes in Moral Education: A Practical Review & Assessment" in *Lawrence Kholberg, Consensus and Controversy*, Edited by Sohan Modgil and Celia Modgil, Falmer Press, Philadelphia, 1986.

other goals, no matter how much lip service may still be paid to them, have come to take second place. The highest goal require no justification; all secondary goals have finally to justify themselves in terms of the service their attainment renders to the attainment of the highest. This is the philosophy of materialism, and it is this philosophy -- or metaphysics -- which is now being challenged by events."⁹

Another worldwide trend that needs urgent address is the declining influence of parents over their children. The present set-up of schools is simply not equipped to take full responsibility in educating children, and will not succeed until parents exercise their inescapable duty to educate their children.

Human Spirit in Moral Education

Morality in the Bahá'í Faith is not merely following a set of do's and don'ts. Neither is it solely about the learning of virtues and values, both of which are insufficient. It is based upon relationships between people that necessitate moral behaviour and two powerful forces that can instill these moral virtues and values, religion and world citizenship, are presented here for discussion. They function in the domain of the human spirit and are the foundation for a new morality in a broadened, universal arena.

Religion as A Motivation Force

Teaching our children to differentiate right from wrong is not difficult. The problem is the cultivation of the will to do the right thing. Even as Confucius said of himself:

"Morality cannot be properly cultivated, learning cannot be deeply pursued, words of wisdom cannot be put into practice, bad habits cannot be changed – these are my greatest worries."¹⁰

⁹ E.F. Schumacher, *Small is Beautiful*, Sphere Books, 1974, p. 246.

¹⁰ Confucius. *Analects Chap 9 Verse 23*. (Direct translation from Chinese text).

The current focus on moral education has been far removed from religion. Yet again and again when the issue of universal values is discussed, the recognised values such as justice, kindness, honesty and integrity are found in the teachings of all religions. There is little doubt that religion has the power to inspire scholars and the illiterate to a higher level of sacrifice and altruistic love, a feat no secular learning can match.

The Bahá'í Faith regards religion as a means for man to establish an authentic relationship with his Creator. In the process of knowing his Creator and thereby learning to love Him, he is able to establish the right relationship with his fellow men. Morality can then be firmly established upon greater and greater understanding of God: sacrifices are evoked for the love of God.

Fasting is a good example of sacrifice and self-discipline. Very few people would go on a period of fasting even when it has been proven medically to be beneficial to the body. Yet millions of religious followers abide by this law every year without the need of any physical justification. Many virtues are learnt in fasting: patience, moderation, mindfulness of the less fortunate, self-discipline, a prayerful attitude and humility. What lesson is more powerful than this?

On the enlightening and spiritualizing power of divine religions, 'Abdu'l-Bahá quoted the comment of Galen, a Greek philosopher, on the early Christians:

"The generality of mankind are unable to grasp a sequence of logical arguments. For this reason they stand in need of symbols and parables telling of rewards and punishments in the next worlds. A confirmatory evidence of this is that today we observe a people called Christians, who believe devoutly in rewards and punishments in a future state. This group shows forth excellent actions, similar to the actions of an individual who is a true philosopher. For example, we all see with our own eyes that they have no fear of death, and their passion for justice and fair-dealing is so great that they should be considered true philosophers."¹¹

¹¹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá. *The Secret of Divine Civilization*, Bahá'í Publishing Trust, Wilmette, 1970, p. 84.

However, many religious teachings are now obscured by prejudices and dogmas. One of the most dangerous of present day religious dogmas is the prejudice that only one religion contains all truth, and the other religions are false. The degeneration of true religion into a set of dogmas has been the chief source of suffering. Religious followers were persecuted and at times put to death for subscribing to differing views. This frame of superiority and the desire to convert everyone else to the sole truth was the beginning of cultural disharmony when the Western powers expanded their influence and colonised the rest of the world.

While my proposition is to reintroduce religious teachings into the school curriculum on moral education, we have to be selective by excluding religious prejudices and concentrate on values that will promote understanding and love between people of all races and creeds. Religion has the force to empower man to rise above material pursuits. It induces in the human spirit a higher aspiration, a motivation and will to act beyond what he is normally asked for. To deprive our children of this immense source of knowledge and inspiration is both a disservice to them and to future generations.

World Citizenship

The idea that the next stage of man's social evolution is global unity is not new. World consciousness has been expressed by poets, gurus, saints, and many thoughtful men throughout history. It is not difficult to see that the world has to function as one country as we witness economic problems and environmental disasters that are global in scale and that are becoming more acute with each passing day. World summits and conferences have been called by world leaders from all nations to find ways to combat these issues on a united front, and yet we are still clinging to the age-old nationalistic, patriotic and racial loyalties that divide the world.

On the subject of world education, Harold Taylor writes:

"In the most optimistic reading of contemporary history, we could now say that we have reached a stage at which it has become necessary for the educated man to extend the dimension of his loyalty to the entire

human race. The conception of education itself must now be one which locates man intellectually in a universe described by scientists, artists, and writers, and in a cultural setting as big as the globe. To enjoy any longer the luxury of defining one's nation, one's society, or oneself in terms of pride of ancestry, social superiority, or power of destruction is not only supremely dangerous to the survival of the race, but intellectually and socially obsolete."¹²

World education is not just about geography, different cultures and lifestyles. It is about creating feelings of affection towards people of different beliefs, cultures and races in a globalised world. Where love and respect are shown only within limited sections of the community, hostility and prejudice will breed and no amount of moral education can transform prejudiced hearts.

Based on the Bahá'í principle of the oneness of the human race, teaching of world citizenship should cover those ethics that contribute to world civilization. It should teach the principle of "unity in diversity" with a common vision of world unity. Its promotion of the principle of oneness of mankind will be a potent force against the tide of racism, prejudice and violence to minorities. With this principle as the foundation, other virtues such as co-operation, kindness, integrity and the rest will become more meaningful in this period of the global maturity of man.

A new spirit has been infused by the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh, as 'Abdu'l-Bahá elaborated:

"In this age his holiness Baha'u'llah has breathed the holy spirit into the dead body of the world; consequently every weak soul is strengthened by these fresh divine out-breathings – every poor man will become rich, every darkened soul will become illumined, every ignorant one will become wise, because the confirmations of the holy spirit are descending like torrents. A new era of divine consciousness is upon us. The world of humanity is going through a process of transformation. A new race is being developed. The thoughts of human brotherhood are permeating all

¹² Taylor, Harold. *The World as Teacher*, Doubleday, New York, 1969, p. 3 quoted in Gayle Morrison's *Education for Worldmindedness*, World Order Magazine, Summer 1972.

regions. New ideals are stirring the depths of hearts and a new spirit of universal consciousness is profoundly felt by all men."¹³

Conclusion

At this juncture of human history, morality loses its meaning when it is confined to a single race, group or nation. It actually becomes dangerous and harmful to humanity as a whole. For moral education to succeed and serve mankind, sweeping changes to the structure of society also has to take place, for the school cannot effectively teach world citizenship while the world is still in disarray and divided along racial and ideological lines.

Throughout the history of man, the majority of immoral acts are committed not by the ordinary folk, but by the people in authority. They exploit, manipulate, persecute, and even put to death people who are weaker and people who profess different beliefs to theirs, all in the name of racial superiority, economic development and religion. It is no wonder why many have looked away from religion as a legitimate source of knowledge and inspiration. This is indeed the tragedy of mankind: skepticism on one side and blind belief on the other. To construct a new world civilization, moral education can play a part in offering the middle path and promote the principle of the oneness of man and his share and responsibility in a borderless world.

¹³ 'Abdu'l-Bahá. *Star of the West*, Vol. VIII no. 1 (March 21, 1917) p. 16.

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The Language of the Heart: Parallels between Chinese and Bahá'í Approaches to the Spiritual Self

Sim Tze Hong

INTRODUCTION

The Chinese use the language of the heart to describe things relating to human nature. For example, "open heart" means happy, "close heart" means concern, and "use heart" means to concentrate. The Chinese use the heart to "think" and to express feelings.

Both Chinese and Bahá'í teachings recognise the nobility of a human spirit that is created to reflect divine attributes. The "heart" is the part of human nature bestowed by the creator to be pure, kind and radiant. Man needs to go through the process of transformation and development. The teachings of the Manifestations of God¹ and saints raise human consciousness about the spiritual self. When a man follows the teachings of the Manifestation of God, he is enlightened and gains true knowledge about the spiritual self. An enlightened man has unity within him, is motivated to serve, and brings unity among people. When a man lives his life with pure and goodly deeds, he contributes to the advancement of civilization.

The Chinese recognise the true self as a man having a divine mandate rather than a man having a covenant with God as in other religions. As cultures interact, it becomes more important to find the common ground between them. This paper focuses on the parallels between the Chinese, especially Confucian teachings, and the Bahá'í teachings about the

¹ "Manifestation of God" is terminology used in the Bahá'í Faith for a Divine Teacher or Prophet. The concept is like God being the Sun and the Manifestations of God being the mirrors, who perfectly reflect the attributes of God.

spiritual self. The discussion of this paper talks about the nature of the heart, the pathway to perfection, and the knowledge of oneself.

THE NATURE OF THE HEART

Chinese traditions and Bahá'í teachings have profound and similar concepts about the nature of the heart. The Chinese concept of the heart refers to human nature that is created *Cheng*, *Ren* and *Ming*. The Bahá'í concept of the heart refers to human nature that is created "pure, kindly and radiant." *Cheng* is similar to "pure," *Ren* is similar to "kindly" and *Ming* is similar to "radiant."

The Chinese Concept of the Heart

A Heart that is *Cheng*

Cheng can mean a heart that is pure, sincere and truthful. In the Confucian classic, *The Doctrine of the Mean*, it says: "What *Tian* (Heaven) has conferred is called the Nature"² and "*Cheng* is the Way of *Tian*, to be *Cheng* is the way of men."³ *Tian* is the Creator.⁴ The Chinese knowledge of *Tian* includes the fear of *Gui Sheng* (ghost and God). Confucius says that *Gui Sheng* cannot be seen or heard, yet they manifest in all things and "all things cannot exist without them." They cause the people of the world to worship them. Confucius says: "The arrival of *Sheng* is unpredictable, how can one's heart be unpure? Its essence is mysterious, but it manifests everywhere. So manifest, so *Cheng* (truthful) that it cannot be veiled."⁵

Human beings understand *Tian* by being *Cheng*. *Cheng* is the foundation for all relationships. In *The Doctrine of the Mean*, it mentions that the pre-requisite for a man to be trusted by the ruler is to be trusted by his friends. The pre-requisite to be trusted by a friend is to be trusted by parents. The pre-requisite to be trusted by parents is to be *Cheng*, to be

² *The Four Books, The Doctrine of the Mean*. p. 24.

³ *Ibid*, p. 46.

⁴ The Chinese concept of *Tian* is the Creator of all things. *Tian* is lower than *Dao*. *Dao* is the essence and the power of existence and is unknowable. *Dao* is similar to the Bahá'í concept of God and *Tian* is similar to one of the Names of God-- Creator.

⁵ *The Four Books, The Doctrine of the Mean*, p. 36.

sincere in one's act. In order to be *Cheng*, one needs to know what is *Shang* (the Supreme Good). Without knowing *Shang*, it is impossible to be *Cheng*.⁶ Since "*Cheng* is the Way of *Tian*," to know *Shang* is to know *Tian*. Since "to be *Cheng* is the way of man" and "what *Tian* has conferred is called the Nature," to know *Tian* is human nature and to follow the way of *Tian* becomes the first duty of man.

The Doctrine of the Mean describes the process to be *Cheng* and to know. Firstly, through human nature, it says: "to be *Ming* (to know) by being *Cheng* is called nature (human)." Secondly, through education, it says: "to be *Cheng* through knowing is called *Jiao* (education)."⁷ The concept of *Jiao* or education is defined as follows:

"What *Tian* has conferred is called Nature, to follow Nature is called *Dao*⁸ (the Way), *Siu Dao* is called *Jiao* (to learn and to live by *Dao* is called education)."⁹

The Chinese word *Jiao* means both religion and education. From the above definition, religion and education are not separated from each other. To live by *Dao* needs *Cheng* or truthfulness. Confucius says, "*Dao* cannot be left for an instant. If it could be left, it would not be *Dao*. Therefore a *Jun Zi* (superior man) is cautious when he is not watched, fearful (fear *Dao*) when he is not heard (in privacy). There is nothing that is most hidden and most minute that does not manifest."¹⁰ The relationship between a man and *Dao* is like a fish and the ocean. The fish may not be aware of the sea and may not see the sea. Nevertheless, the fish is dependent on the sea and cannot leave it. Confucius points out the need to apply truthfulness in society. He says if he were to rule, he would ensure that abuses of the legal system do not arise. People would fear the righteousness of the rulers. If people do not have sufficient grounds for their case, they would feel shameful and not take their disputes to court. This is called "knowing the root," and "knowing the

⁶ Ibid, p. 46.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ *Dao* in this context refers to the heavenly way instead of the essence of God as explained in a previous footnote.

⁹ *The Four Books, The Doctrine of the Mean*. p. 24.

¹⁰ Ibid.

root is called the perfection of knowledge."¹¹ This is the concept of *Cheng* and its application.

Referring to *Cheng*, Mengcius says: "A great man is he who does not lose his childhood heart" (maintaining a pure heart).¹² The level of purity or *Cheng* that man can achieve varies. Only a saint can achieve the level of perfect *Cheng*. In *The Doctrine of the Mean*, it says:

"Only the perfect *Cheng* of the world can adjust the great invariable relations of mankind, establish the great fundamental virtues of humanity, and know the transforming and nurturing operation of Heaven and Earth. What enables him to do so? It is because his *Cheng* has reached the stage of *Ren*, his knowledge is perfect and profound, just as the sky that is vast and has no limit."¹³

In another passage from the same book, it reads:

"Only the perfect *Cheng* of the world can perfectly develop his nature. Able to perfectly develop his own nature he can develop others' nature. Able to develop others' nature he can develop the nature of all things. Able to develop the nature of all things he can assist the transforming and nurturing power of Heaven and Earth. Able to assist the transforming and nurturing power of Heaven and Earth he can stand parallel to Heaven and Earth"¹⁴

An ordinary man cannot be compared to a saint who is able to "perfectly develop his nature." Nevertheless, Confucius says that a man can strive to be *Cheng* by "choosing *Shang* (Supreme Good) and firmly holding to it," "studying it extensively," "inquiring into it thoroughly," "differentiating it clearly," and "practicing it earnestly."¹⁵ Confucius continues that an ordinary man is "second" to the saint (and cannot know everything), so he should focus on investigating the reality of certain fields of study.¹⁶ In another passage, Confucius says:

¹¹ *The Four Books, The Great Learning*, pp. 6-8.

¹² *The Four Books, The Works of Mengcius*, p. 414.

¹³ *The Four Books, The Doctrine of the Mean*. p. 58.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 48.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 46.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 48.

"*Cheng*, is the act to perfect one's own nature. *Dao* (the Divine Way), is the way to perfect one's own way. *Cheng* is the beginning and the end of all things...*Cheng* perfects not only oneself, but it also perfects all things. Perfecting oneself is being *Ren* (benevolence); perfecting all things is knowledge. All these are the virtues of (human) nature, the unity of the inward and outward *Dao*."¹⁷

In sum, *Cheng* perfects a man inwardly, and perfects all things outwardly. Since *Ren* is the outcome of being *Cheng*, it is necessary to elaborate the Confucian concept of *Ren*.

A Heart that is *Ren*

Ren can mean a heart that is benevolent and kind, or a heart that fully expresses human nature. It is the perfection of *Cheng*. Mengcius says: "*Ren* is the human heart; *Yi* (justice) is the human path."¹⁸ In another passage, he says, "*Ren* is the distinguishing characteristic of man. As embodied in man's conduct, it is called *Dao* (the Way)."¹⁹ That means a man having the quality of *Ren* is in harmony with the heavenly way. Mengcius says that *Ren* is the "little difference" that distinguishes a human being from an animal."²⁰ Confucius elaborates *Ren* in many ways. Kong Jiang (the 72th descendent of Confucius) says that *Ren* is the way men "know each other, love each other and associate with each other."²¹ From this perspective, it is easier to understand *Ren* in the ways a man exercises his powers to know, to love, and to will.

Ren and Knowing

At the level of knowing, to be *Ren* is to recognise the nobility of oneself. Mengcius says the business of a *Jun Zi* (superior man) is to have "noble aims." To have "noble aims" is to "practice *Ren* and *Yi*." To kill an innocent man is "not *Ren*," to take things not belonging to oneself is "not *Yi*." The intention and action of a man should be guided by these principles. Mengcius says: "intention is based on *Ren* and action is based on *Yi*. Then the business of a great man is completed."²² Zhengcius says

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 50.

¹⁸ *The Four Books, The Works of Mengcius*. p. 484.

¹⁹ Ibid. p. 542.

²⁰ Ibid, p. 416.

²¹ Kong Jien, *Kong Zi De Ren Sheng Ze Dao*. (Confucius Way of Life) p. 5.

²² *The Four Books, The Works of Mengcius*. p. 526.

that a *Si* (scholar) has a "heavy responsibility" and a "long way." To set *Ren* as a personal responsibility is "heavy" and to stop only at death is "long." Thus a *Si* has to persevere and be steadfast.²³

Regarding the ways to be *Ren*, Zi Xia says if one "learns intensively, fixes his aim, inquires earnestly, and reflects over current matters, then he encompasses *Ren*."²⁴ Learning needs discipline and requires one to make the right choice. Confucius says "to discipline oneself and to observe *Li* (propriety) is *Ren*," to do so, one "sees not contrary to *Li*, listens not contrary to *Li*, speaks not contrary to *Li*, acts not contrary to *Li*."²⁵ *Ren* begins with oneself. Confucius says "if the aim is fixed upon *Ren*, there will be no practice of wickedness." He says that a man with *Ren* is "able to like men (the righteous) and to hate men (the wicked)."²⁶

Ren and Loving

At the level of loving, to practice *Ren* is to avoid conflict, to create harmony and unity. Confucius suggests the golden rule can avoid conflict, he says: "not to do to others as you would not wish done to yourself. To have no murmuring against you in your country, and none in the family."²⁷ Mengcius suggests an active way to create harmony and unity, he says: "All men have some things that they cannot bear, extend that feeling to what they can bear, then it is *Ren*. All men have some things that they will not do, extend that feeling to what they will do, then it is *Yi* (justice)."²⁸ What a man can rightfully bear and will rightfully do should be in line with *Ren* and *Yi*. Mengcius explains with the following example:

"All men have a heart that cannot bear the suffering of others... If a man suddenly sees a child who is about to fall into a well, he will be alarmed and have sympathy. Such a feeling does not come from the intention to befriend the child's parents, nor from the intention to be praised by

²³ *The Four Books, The Confucian Analects*, p. 128.

²⁴ *Ibid.* p. 246.

²⁵ *Ibid.* p. 166.

²⁶ *Ibid.* p. 88.

²⁷ *Ibid.* p.166.

²⁸ *The Four Book, The Works of Mengcius*. p.548

neighbours, nor from trying to avoid the irritating noise of the crying child."²⁹

Mengcius says a man should possess a few kinds of heart, he states:

"A man without a sympathetic heart is not a man; without a heart of shame he is not a man; without a heart of modesty and complaisance (gentleness, willingness to please others) he is not a man; without a heart to differentiate between good and evil he is not a man. A sympathetic heart is the beginning of *Ren* (benevolence); a heart of shame is the beginning of *Yi* (justice), a heart of modesty and complaisance is the beginning of *Li* (propriety), and a heart to differentiate good and evil is the beginning of *Zi* (wisdom). All men have these four beginnings (inherited qualities), just as they have four limbs."³⁰

A man needs to develop his four limbs so that he can grow and remain active physically. Similarly, a man needs to develop his "four beginnings" of *Ren*, *Yi*, *Li*, *Zi* so that he can grow and remain active morally and spiritually. *Ren* creates a society that is caring and forgiving. *Yi* creates a society that is truthful and righteous. *Li* creates an orderly and courteous society. *Zi* creates a society free from unseemly influences. The result is harmony and unity in society, which leads to a morally and spiritually advanced civilization. .

Ren and Willing

At the level of willing, a man begins the practice of *Ren* with his family. Mengcius says: "The essence of *Ren* (benevolence) is service to one's parents. The essence of *Yi* (justice) is obedience to one's elder brother. The essence of knowledge is to understand both (*Ren* and *Yi*) and persevere in them. The essence of *Li* (propriety) is to regulate and to refine both. The essence of *Yue* (music; happiness) is to rejoice from having both."³¹ At the social level, a man reflects his quality of *Ren* through associating with others. Confucius says:

²⁹ Ibid, p. 320.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid, p. 406.

"Establish for others as you wish to be established yourself, achieve for others as you wish to be achieved yourself. To take a matter around you as an example and extend it to others is the method of practicing *Ren*."³²

Therefore, action is most important because it is the tangible product of one's nature and the result of one's will. In human relationships and actions, Mengcius points out that a great difference exists between "not being able" and "not being willing." "Not being able" refers to things beyond a man's capacity. "Not being willing" refers to things within a man's capacity but things a man refuses to do. However, men always use the reason of "not being able" as an excuse to refuse things that they should do but are not willing to do. Mengcius explains with the following example. If a man was asked to carry a mountain or jump across the ocean, he can refuse, and say that he is not able to do so because it is beyond his capacity. However, if a strong man is asked to make a walking stick out of a branch for an elderly man, he should not refuse by giving the excuse that he is not able to do so, because in this case, the request lies within his capacity to accomplish the task.³³ Besides, to be kind and helpful to the elderly is a social responsibility. Man needs goodwill in all human relationships and to have an attitude of service to others. A human heart with *Ren* will naturally associate with others in a spirit of good will. A heart that is *Cheng* and *Ren* will be *Ming*.

A Heart that is *Ming*

Ming means radiant. A person with truthful words and deeds is like the sun that is radiant and cannot be veiled. In *The Doctrine of the Mean*, it mentions the process and outcomes of being *Cheng*. It says: "Being *Cheng* becomes apparent. Being apparent becomes manifest. Being manifest becomes *Ming* (radiant). Being *Ming* moves (others' hearts). Being moved, things (old habits and bad customs) are changed. Being changed, things (society) are transformed."³⁴ In other words, if a heart is truthful, a man's words and deeds will be truthful and manifest. His words and deeds exert influence on others and can transform society. He will be like a lamp that provides guidance to others. The degree that a

³² *The Four Books, The Confucian Analects*, p. 114.

³³ *The Four Books, The Works of Mengcius*, p. 272.

³⁴ *The Four Books, The Doctrine of the Mean*, p. 48.

heart is *Ming* is in proportion to his degree of *Cheng* and the services a man is willing to perform.

In sum, the Chinese concept of human nature is based on *Cheng*, *Ren* and *Ming*. Human nature is bestowed by Heaven, created to be pure, sincere and truthful. A pure heart knows Heaven; it perfects oneself inwardly, and perfects others outwardly. Man is also created to be kind, truth-seeking and noble. Man has the duty to create unity and harmony in society. A man who has these qualities will be spiritually radiant and contributes to the advancement of society.

The Bahá'í Concept of the Heart

The Bahá'í concept of the heart is similar to the Chinese one. In *The Hidden Words*, Bahá'u'lláh, the prophet founder of the Bahá'í Faith mentions that man is "created" by God to be "rich" and "noble" and should not seek "enlightenment" from anyone besides God.³⁵ He says that all things "in heaven and earth" have been "ordained" for men "except the human heart," which God has "made the habitation" of His "beauty and glory."³⁶ Man has no ownership of the heart. Man is the trustee of the heart and has the obligation to care for the heart. By doing so, a man can fulfil in his life, God's trust. Referring to the heart, Bahá'u'lláh says:

"My first counsel is this: Possess a pure, kindly and radiant heart, that thine may be a sovereignty ancient, imperishable and everlasting."³⁷

A "pure, kindly and radiant heart" is the spiritual basis of human nature and is the pre-requisite for all human development.

A Pure Heart

A pure heart is similar to the Confucian concept of *Cheng* - pure, truthful and able to recognise *Shang* (the Supreme Good). Mengcius says that a great man has a "childhood heart." Similarly 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the son of Bahá'u'lláh once held a child close to him and said that "the true Bahá'í

³⁵ Bahá'u'lláh, *The Hidden Words*, 1:13, p. 8.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 2:27, p. 32.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 1:1, p. 5.

loves children, because Jesus says they are of the Kingdom of heaven. A simple pure heart is near to God; a child has no worldly ambitions."³⁸ In another passage, 'Abdu'l-Bahá says: "Whosoever has a pure heart and renders good deeds is nearer to God and the object of His favor."³⁹ Purity and truthfulness are inseparable. Just as the Chinese say that to be *Cheng* is to recognise *Shang*, to have a pure heart is to recognise God and to be "near to God." To have a truthful heart is to obey God and to "render good deeds."

When one observes the sun, he will notice that to give light is the characteristic and the necessity of the sun. Similarly, the nature of a mirror has the characteristic and the necessity to reflect light. 'Abdu'l-Bahá says that a "pure heart" becomes the "mirror of the beauty of truth" to "manifest" (divine) "Light." 'Abdu'l-Bahá exalts "purity from every defeat" as "the first perfection" for a man. He adds: "In all ...actions and conduct there must first be purity."⁴⁰ A man with a pure heart manifests his perfect nature, like a spotless mirror, he reflects perfectly the light of God. This is similar to the Chinese saying that to know by being *Cheng* is called "nature" (human).

A man gains true knowledge by reflecting the knowledge of God. The Chinese say that "to be *Cheng* through knowing is called education" and education is to live by the way of *Dao*. Similarly, Bahá'ís recognise that following the teachings of the Manifestation of God is the beginning of all learning. Bahá'u'lláh says: "The source of all learning is the knowledge of God, ... and this cannot be attained save through the knowledge of His divine Manifestation."⁴¹ The "perfect *Cheng* of the world" who knows the "operation of Heaven and Earth" mentioned by the Chinese can be compared to the Manifestation of God. The Chinese recognise the supreme "Good" through their Saints and Bahá'ís recognise God through the Manifestation of God. Throughout the history of China, there has not been a figure commonly known as a "prophet" who establishes a religion as in other major world religions. The Chinese recognition of the "Good" is a profound act of self knowledge and an awareness of a divine mandate. The Bahá'í recognition of God is a

³⁸ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Abdu'l-Bahá in London*, p. 59.

³⁹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 300.

⁴⁰ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Bahá'í World Faith*, Compilation, p. 333.

⁴¹ Esslemont, J.E. *Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era*. Quoted from *Words of Wisdom*, p. 74.

covenant and an act of obedience to the Teachings of their prophet founders.

In the *Kitab-i-Aqdas*--the Most Holy Book Bahá'u'lláh says the recognition of the Manifestation of God is "the first duty prescribed by God for His servants." He adds: "Whoso achieveth this duty hath attained unto all good; and whoso is deprived thereof hath gone astray, though he be the author of every righteous deed."⁴² 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains that "actions alone are not sufficient; they are a body of the greatest loveliness, but without spirit." He adds: "that which is the cause of everlasting life, eternal honor, universal enlightenment, real salvation and prosperity is, first of all, the knowledge of God."⁴³ This is similar to the Confucian concept of *Cheng* being the foundation of all relationships. Without knowing the "Supreme Good," it is impossible to be *Cheng*; without *Cheng*, it is impossible to be trusted by others.

The recognition of God is coupled with the love of God. When man loves God and lives in God, man can receive love from God. This is a reciprocal process. Referring to this relationship, Bahá'u'lláh says: "Love Me that I may love thee. If thou loveth Me not, My love can in no wise reach thee."⁴⁴ A fish leaving the ocean cannot enjoy the bounty of the ocean. 'Abdu'l-Bahá further explains: "the love of God enables man to purify his innermost heart."⁴⁵ Love has to be coupled with obedience. Bahá'u'lláh says that whoso recognises God has reached a "most sublime station" and has to observe "every ordinance" of God. These are "twin duties" which are "inseparable" and "neither is acceptable without the other."⁴⁶ Observing the ordinances of God needs truthfulness. Truthfulness, as 'Abdu'l-Bahá says, is "the foundation of all human virtues." He added: "Without truthfulness progress and success, in all the worlds of God, are impossible for any soul. When this holy attribute is established in man, all the divine qualities will also be acquired."⁴⁷ This is similar to the Confucius saying that to be truthful is "knowing the root."

⁴² Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitab-i-Aqdas*, p. 19.

⁴³ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 300.

⁴⁴ Bahá'u'lláh, *The Hidden Words*, 1:5, p. 6.

⁴⁵ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Tablets of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 60.

⁴⁶ Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitab-i-Aqdas*, p. 19.

⁴⁷ Shoghi Effendi, *The Advent of Divine Justice*, p. 26.

The knowledge of God motivates man to focus his attention on noble spiritual goals in life, and not to be attached to material goals. Spiritual goals are eternal, and material goals are transient. The spirit of man is everlasting, and the body of man is mortal. Purification of the heart develops the spirit of man. For this Bahá'u'lláh says: "Abandon not for that which perisheth an everlasting dominion, and cast not away celestial sovereignty for a worldly desire."⁴⁸ To have a pure heart, a man needs to detach himself from all things except God. Bahá'u'lláh says:

"Blind thine eyes, that is, to all save My beauty; stop thine ears to all save My word; empty thyself of all learning save the knowledge of Me; that with a clear vision, a pure heart and an attentive ear thou mayest enter the court of My holiness."⁴⁹

To be detached from all things except God is similar to the condition described in the Chinese saying of "firmly holding" to "Good," to study it extensively and to practise it earnestly.

In sum, the first duty for man is to recognise God. Purity of heart enables a man to recognise God through the Manifestation of God. This recognition is coupled with love, which in turn purifies one's heart. This love is coupled to obedience. Recognizing God and observing God's ordinances are twin duties that cannot be separated. Observing God's ordinances needs truthfulness, and truthfulness is the foundation of all human virtues. A pure heart is the spiritual basis of human nature and the pre-requisite of all noble human conduct and action. In order to purify his heart, a man needs to detach himself from all things except God.

A Kindly Heart

A kindly heart is similar to *Ren*. To be kind implies the need to associate with others. It is also easier to understand a kindly heart from the way a man exercises his powers to know, to love and to will. 'Abdu'l-Bahá says that the difference between man and animal is their degrees of consciousness. Referring to an animal, he says: "It has no consideration or consciousness of good and evil. It simply follows its natural instinct and inclination."⁵⁰ While the Chinese practice *Ren* as an act of self-

⁴⁸ Bahá'u'lláh, *The Hidden Words*. 2:37, p.35.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 2:11, p. 26.

⁵⁰ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*. p. 40.

consciousness, Bahá'ís practice kindness as an act of following the teachings of the Prophets. 'Abdu'l-Bahá says:

“ The Prophets of God have come to show man the way of righteousness in order that he may not follow his own natural impulse but govern his action by the light of Their precept and example. According to Their teachings he should do that which is found to be praiseworthy by the standard of reason and judgment of intellect, even though it be opposed to his natural human inclination; and he should not do that which is found to be unworthy by that same standard, even though it be in the direction of his natural impulse and desire.⁵¹”

From this perspective, to have a kindly heart, a man may need to act in opposition to his “natural human inclination” and “natural impulse and desire.” A man is able to do so because he has “consciousness of good and evil” and is able to reason by his intellect. To have a kindly heart does not mean to do good action alone. 'Abdu'l-Bahá says that “good action” alone, though “praiseworthy,” is not enough. In order for a righteous action to be “perfect and complete,” three “virtues of humanity” are needed, namely: the “knowledge of God”, the “love of God” and “goodwill”.⁵² From this perspective, a kindly heart knows through the “knowledge of God,” loves through the “love of God,” and wills through “goodwill.”

Knowledge of God

The knowledge of God, according to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, is “the cause of spiritual progress and attraction, and through it the perception of truth, the exaltation of humanity, divine civilization, rightness of morals and illumination are obtained.”⁵³ The knowledge of God is the cause of nobility of a man and the exaltation of humanity. Bahá'u'lláh says man is created “noble.” He uses the example of a phoenix to describe the need of a man to transcend his body, to “burst” the bodily “cage asunder”⁵⁴ and “on the wings” of his soul, to soar “to the realm of the infinite.”⁵⁵ A phoenix soars high in the kingdom above and will not be content with

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Question*. pp. 300-301

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Bahá'u'lláh, *The Hidden Words*, 2:38, p. 36.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 2:1, p. 23.

the earth below. Similarly, a man with noble aims seeks the exalted knowledge of God, and will not be content with material knowledge of the world.

Similar to the Chinese way of a *Jun Zi* who has "noble aims" and observes *Ren* and *Yi* (justice), Bahá'u'lláh makes justice a requirement for a man who wishes to win His confidence. He says: "The best beloved of all things in My sight is Justice" and "justice is My gift to thee and the sign of My loving-kindness." He adds that by justice, "thou shalt see with thine own eyes and not through the eyes of others, and shalt know of thine own knowledge and not through the knowledge of thy neighbour."⁵⁶ To see and to know by oneself means to independently investigate truth. This echoes the saying of *Zi Xia* that if one "learns intensively, fixes his aim, inquires earnestly, and reflects over current matters, then he encompasses *Ren*."

Similar to the Confucian teaching on the way to observe *Li* (propriety), Bahá'u'lláh says:

"Hear no evil, and see no evil, abase not thyself, neither sigh and weep. Speak no evil, that thou mayest not hear it spoken unto thee." In addition, one should always have his "heart unsullied," his "thoughts pure," and his "nature sanctified."⁵⁷

Bahá'u'lláh says one should know how to differentiate between good and evil, to "treasure the companionship of the righteous and eschew all fellowship with the ungodly."⁵⁸

Knowledge of God is truth. Through the knowledge of God, a man can obtain "spiritual progress" and can contribute to the "exaltation of humanity" and the advancement of "divine civilization."

Love of God

There are different degrees of love: love of self, love of friends, love of God and love of human beings for one another. 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains the differences between these bonds of love. He says that self-love "is a

⁵⁶ Ibid, 1:2, pp. 5-6.

⁵⁷ Bahá'u'lláh, *The Hidden Words*, 2:44, p. 37.

⁵⁸ Ibid, 2:3, p. 24.

strange trait and the means of the destruction of many important souls in the world. If man be imbued with all good qualities but he be selfish, all the other virtues will fade or pass away and eventually he will grow worse."⁵⁹ Love between friends is not true love, because it is "originated by the accidental conditions of life," "subject to transmutation," "subject to change," and is merely "fascination" and "acquaintanceship." The love of God is the "real and great love," it purifies a man's heart and enlightens his soul. 'Abdu'l-Bahá says:

"The spiritual love of God maketh man pure and holy and clotheth him with the garment of virtue and purity... This love is not physical... it is absolutely spiritual... The souls whose consciences are enlightened through the light of the love of God, they are like unto shining lights and resemble stars of holiness in the heaven of purity... The real and great love is the love of God. That is holy above the imaginations and thoughts of men."⁶⁰

In addition, 'Abdu'l-Bahá says that the love of God, is "the fruit of human existence," "the spirit of life, and the eternal bounty" and the "greatest power in the human world." Without the love of God, "the contingent world would be in darkness... the hearts of men would be dead, and deprived of the sensations of existence; ... spiritual union would be lost... the light of unity would not illuminate humanity."⁶¹

The love of human beings for one another is similar to *Ren*. This is universal love. Mengcius says that to be *Ren* is to extend what one "can bear" and "will do" to others, according to *Ren* (benevolence) and *Yi* (justice). Similarly, Bahá'í teachings encourage people to have a kindly heart towards others. However, very few can achieve this, since profound self-knowledge is needed. From the Bahá'í point of view, the love of man for man has a spiritual foundation and is only possible through the love of God. 'Abdu'l-Bahá says the love of man for man is "prompted by the ideal of the unity of spirits." He says:

"This love (love of man for man) is attained through the knowledge of God, so that men see the Divine Love reflected in the heart. Each sees in the other the Beauty of God reflected in the soul, and finding this point

⁵⁹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Tablets of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 136.

⁶⁰ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Tablets of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 22.

⁶¹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 301.

of similarity, they are attracted to one another in love... This love will bring the realization of true accord, the foundation of real unity."⁶²

The love of God therefore is the foundation of all human love. The love of God motivates a man to transcend his self love and his love for his friends, and enables him to have true love for others, to have universal love.

The tangible action of loving God is to love man. Similar to the golden rule of Confucius not to do to others as you would not wish done to yourself, Bahá'u'lláh says: "Ascribe not to any soul that which thou wouldst not have ascribed to thee, and say not that which thou doest not."⁶³ In addition, He says: "Magnify not the faults of others that thine own faults may not appear great; and wish not the abasement of anyone, that thine own abasement be not exposed."⁶⁴ To avoid conflict and the abasement of man, Bahá'u'lláh prohibits backbiting and idle talk. He says:

"The tongue is for mentioning what is good, defile it not with unseemly talk... everyone should utter that which is meet and seemly, and should refrain from slander, abuse and whatever causeth sadness in men."⁶⁵

Avoiding conflict by disciplining the tongue is not enough. A man needs to actively carry forward deeds of kindness, to create unity and harmony. 'Abdu'l-Bahá says:

"Knowledge is not enough; we hope by the Love of God we shall put it into practice. We know that to help the poor and to be merciful is good and pleases God, but knowledge alone does not feed the starving man, nor can the poor be warmed by knowledge or words in the bitter winter; we must give the practical help of Loving-kindness."⁶⁶

Similar to the saying of Mengcius that a man has a "sympathetic heart" and should extend this feeling to "what a man can bear," Bahá'u'lláh

⁶² 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, pp. 180-181.

⁶³ Bahá'u'lláh, *The Hidden Words*, 1:29, p. 12.

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 2:44, p. 37.

⁶⁵ Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, p. 182.

⁶⁶ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *'Abdu'l-Bahá in London*, pp. 60-61.

says: "Bestow My wealth upon My poor, that in heaven thou mayest draw from stores of unfading splendor and treasures of imperishable glory."⁶⁷ While to care for the needy and to be generous is praiseworthy, to offer up one's soul is more pleasing to God. Bahá'u'lláh says: "To offer up thy soul is a more glorious thing couldst thou but see with Mine eye."⁶⁸

Goodwill

Goodwill is the third virtue of humanity. 'Abdu'l-Bahá defines goodwill as "absolute light" and the "basis of good actions." He says that goodwill is "purified and sanctified from the impurities of selfishness, of enmity, of deception." He explains goodwill with the following example:

"Now it may be that a man performs an action which in appearance is righteous, but which is dictated by covetousness. For example, a butcher rears a sheep and protects it; but this righteous action of the butcher is dictated by desire to derive profit, and the result of this care is the slaughter of the poor sheep. How many righteous actions are dictated by covetousness! But goodwill is sanctified from such impurities."⁶⁹

Mengcius says: "the essence of Ren is service to one's parents." Similarly, Bahá'ís regard services to one's parents as "sacred duties." 'Abdu'l-Bahá says: "The (children's) prosperity in this world and the Kingdom depends upon the good pleasure of parents, and without this they will be in manifest loss."⁷⁰ Goodwill begins from one's family. To extend it is to practice goodwill towards others. In this regard, Bahá'u'lláh says: "no man should enter the house of his friend save at his friend's pleasure, nor lay hands upon his treasures nor prefer his own will to his friend's, and in no wise seek an advantage over him."⁷¹ In another passage, He says that one should "show forbearance and benevolence and love to one another," converse with a person with "a spirit of extreme kindness and goodwill" to help him "see and recognize the truth," without esteeming oneself to be superior to others.⁷²

⁶⁷ Bahá'u'lláh, *The Hidden Words*, 1:57, p. 18.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 302.

⁷⁰ 'Abdu'l-Bahá'u'lláh, Bahá'í Education, Compilation, p. 39.

⁷¹ Bahá'u'lláh, *The Hidden Words*, 2:43

⁷² Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, V, p. 8.

Similar to the Confucian teaching of treating others as one would want to be treated, Bahá'u'lláh says: "He should not wish for others that which he does not wish for himself, nor promise that which he does not fulfil."⁷³

Goodwill prevents enmity and hatred. 'Abdu'l-Bahá says: "We should manifest the spirit of justness and goodwill toward each other." If we do otherwise, such as "censure and pronounce anathema, praising ourselves and condemning all others," then "nothing but enmity and hatred, injustice and inhumanity can possibly result."⁷⁴ The Bahá'í standard of exercising goodwill can be seen in the following passage of 'Abdu'l-Bahá:

"Should other peoples and nations be unfaithful to you show your fidelity unto them, should they be unjust toward you show justice towards them, should they keep aloof from you attract them to yourself, should they show their enmity be friendly towards them, should they poison your lives sweeten their souls, should they inflict a wound upon you be a salve to their sores. Such are the attributes of the sincere! Such are the attributes of the truthful."⁷⁵

Goodwill not only prevents "enmity and hatred," but it also brings unity. If we consider enmity and hatred, injustice and inhumanity to be like darkness in the world, justness and goodwill are like light in the world. To eliminate darkness, light is needed. A man needs to utilize his spiritual potential. Bahá'u'lláh says: "Were man to appreciate the greatness of his station and the loftiness of his destiny he would manifest naught save goodly character, pure deeds, and a seemly and praiseworthy conduct. If the learned and wise men of goodwill were to impart guidance unto the people, the whole earth would be regarded as one country."⁷⁶ In another passage, He says: "So powerful is the light of unity that it can illuminate the whole earth."⁷⁷ This metaphor of light can further be illustrated by having a radiant heart.

⁷³ Ibid. CXXV, p. 265.

⁷⁴ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Foundations of World Unity*, p. 99.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 172.

⁷⁷ Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 288.

A Radiant Heart

It is easier to understand a radiant heart with the metaphor of light in the context of a "light of unity." Man is like a lamp that potentially bears the light of God. Bahá'u'lláh says:

"Thou art My lamp and My light is in thee. Get thou from it thy radiance and seek none other than Me. For I have created thee rich and have bountifully shed My favor upon thee."⁷⁸

The lamp cannot be lit by itself and it needs the light of God. The teaching of the new Manifestation of God lights the lamp of the heart. Bahá'u'lláh says the coming of a new Manifestation of God represents the "Godhead" of the age.⁷⁹ Turning towards the Manifestation of God is equivalent to turning towards the light of God, which provides the guidance, vision and direction for man. When a man polishes the mirror of his heart, he can reflect the light of God. Bahá'u'lláh says:

"My claim on thee is great, it cannot be forgotten. My grace to thee is plenteous, it cannot be veiled. My love has made in thee its home, it cannot be concealed. My light is manifest to thee, it cannot be obscured."⁸⁰

A man enlightened by the teaching of God will "manifest" the light of his knowledge and wisdom. This light "cannot be obscured" and a man will be radiant. This is similar to the Confucian saying that a pure heart can understand all things, able to reflect outwardly and become radiant.

As already mentioned, the human heart belongs to God, it is the "home" for the love of God and God has a "great claim" on man. It is man's duty to lay his life in the path of God. Service to God is service to humanity. One way for a man to manifest God's command is to live his life according to divine teachings, to proclaim divine principles to the world. To walk the path of God, a man needs to willingly accept tests and trials. Bahá'u'lláh says: "My calamity is My providence, outwardly it is fire

⁷⁸ Bahá'u'lláh, *The Hidden Words*, 1:11, p. 8.

⁷⁹ Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitab-i-Aqdas*, p. 19.

⁸⁰ Bahá'u'lláh, *The Hidden Words*, 1:20, p. 10.

and vengeance, but inwardly it is light and mercy. Hasten thereunto that thou mayest become an eternal light and an immortal spirit."⁸¹

A man who lives as a shining lamp through his deeds can illuminate the path for others with his light. A man who proclaims the Word of God is as a brilliant star that provides guidance and direction to the people of the world. When the light of God enlightens the people of the world, unity is manifested, and the "light of unity" will "illuminate the whole earth." This idea echoes the saying of Mengcius that a heart being *Cheng* becomes manifest and it can move hearts and transform society. Parallel to the Chinese saying that a heart that "fully develops its nature" can "stand parallel to Heaven and Earth," Bahá'u'lláh says: "Make mention of Me on My earth, that in My heaven I may remember thee, thus shall Mine eyes and thine be solaced."⁸²

In sum, both the Confucian and the Bahá'í concepts of the heart talk about human nature being bestowed by the Creator and entrusted by the Creator. The Human heart has the potential to be pure, kind and radiant. It is man's duty to fulfil this divine trust and to optimize his potential through words and deeds. If a man fully develops the potential of his heart, a man will be worthy to return and to meet his Creator. A man who develops his heart is on the pathway to perfection. This pathway requires man to go through a process of transformation, to overcome obstacles, to find the lost heart and to cultivate it.

PATHWAY TO PERFECTION

Obstacles to Human Transformation

Perhaps the chief obstacle to human transformation is self-love or self-centeredness. Confucians consider a self-centered man as *Xiao Ren* and an other-centered man as *Jun Zi*. *Xiao Ren*, which literally means small man, is a man who loves the small self (to be self-centered) rather than the big self (to be other-centered). A *Jun Zi* is righteous and a *Xiao Ren* is just the opposite. These differences are described in the Confucian classic, *The Four Books*. A *Jun Zi* is "harmonious but not partisan with

⁸¹ Ibid, 1:50-51, p. 16.

⁸² Ibid, 1:43, p. 15.

people;" a *Xiao Ren* is "partisan but not harmonious with people."⁸³ A *Jun Zi* "thinks of virtue" and "the sanctions of law;" a *Xiao Ren* "thinks of comfort" and "favour."⁸⁴ A *Jun Zi* is "conversant with *Yi* (justice); a *Xiao Ren* is "conversant with gain."⁸⁵ A *Jun Zi* is "satisfied and composed;" a *Xiao Ren* is "always full of distress."⁸⁶ A *Jun Zi* "enables others to accomplish good things, but does not enable others to accomplish bad things;" a *Xiao Ren* "does the opposite."⁸⁷ A *Jun Zi* is "affable, but not adulatory;" a *Xiao Ren* is "adulatory, but not affable."⁸⁸ A *Jun Zi* "has a dignified ease without pride;" a *Xiao Ren* has pride without a dignified ease."⁸⁹ A *Jun Zi* "has (high) expectation in himself;" a *Xiao Ren* "has (high) expectation in others."⁹⁰ As a result of the different personalities of a *Jun Zi* and a *Xiao Ren*, a *Jun Zi* "progresses upwards" and a *Xiao Ren* "declines downwards."⁹¹

Xiao Ren therefore represents a man with low consciousness and who fails to develop his potential. *Jun Zi* represents a man with high consciousness and who is progressing towards perfection. A man can never be totally freed from self and ego and from imperfection. Confucian himself said that he was far from being a saint. Nevertheless, a man should constantly strive to be a *Jun Zi*.

Bahá'ís consider the heart as "a divine trust." 'Abdu'l-Bahá says the heart should be cleaned "from the stain of self-love" and should be adorned "with the coronal of pure intent."⁹² As mentioned before, self-love causes the destruction of a soul and selfishness causes all the virtues in man to fade. 'Abdu'l-Bahá says that self-love is a trait within man called the "natal self" or the "ego." It is the inner voice that tells oneself: "I am a little better than the others," and "I am more important."⁹³ Bahá'í teachings also recognise that a man can never be free from self and ego,

⁸³ *The Four Books, The Confucian Analects*. p. 73.

⁸⁴ *Ibid*, p. 91.

⁸⁵ *Ibid*, p. 93.

⁸⁶ *Ibid*, p. 125.

⁸⁷ *Ibid*, p. 172.

⁸⁸ *Ibid*, p. 184.

⁸⁹ *Ibid*, p. 187.

⁹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 208.

⁹¹ *Ibid*, p. 196.

⁹² 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Secret of Divine Civilisation*, p. 116.

⁹³ Savi J., *The Eternal Quest for God*, pp. 126-128.

but he should strive to master the ego. Shoghi Effendi, the successor of 'Abdu'l-Bahá says:

"The only people who are truly free of the "dross of self" are the Prophets, for to be free of one's ego is a hall-mark of perfection. We humans are never going to become perfect, for perfection belongs to a realm we are not destined to enter. However, we must constantly mount higher, seek to be more perfect. The ego is the animal in us, the heritage of the flesh which is full of selfish desires. By obeying the laws of God, seeking to live the life laid down in our teachings, and prayer and struggle, we can subdue our egos. We call people "saints" who have achieved the highest degree of mastery over their egos."⁹⁴

Therefore, human transformation is a process of overcoming and mastering the ego. This can be achieved through striving to obey the laws of God in one's life. The pathway towards perfection is endless. In the pathway, a man needs to search for the lost heart and to cultivate it.

Searching for the Lost Heart

According to Mengcius, it is important to learn extensively. He says: "Learn extensively and discuss minutely what is learned; the object is to go back and set forth in brief what is essential."⁹⁵ He adds: "The way of learning is none other than seeking the lost heart."

The lost heart refers to a man who is not conscious about *Ren* (benevolence) and *Yi* (justice). Mengcius says:

"*Ren* is the heart of man; *Yi* is the path of man. Alas indeed, to abandon the path (*Yi*) and not pursue it, to lose the heart and not know to seek for it. When men's fowls and dogs are lost, they know to seek for them again, but when they lose their hearts, they do not know to seek for them."⁹⁶

⁹⁴ Shoghi Effendi, *Unfolding Destiny*, p. 453.

⁹⁵ *The Four Books, The Works of Mengcius*, p. 414.

⁹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 484.

To avoid losing the heart, a man needs to nourish his heart. The way to nourish the heart, according to Mengcius, is to make "the desires few." He says:

"As a man who makes the desires few, though the heart may be lost, but rarely. As a man with many desires, though the heart may be kept, but rarely."⁹⁷

Men should be conscious about the divine mandate bestowed by Heaven. Mengcius says:

"Heaven's plan to create mankind is this: that those who first apprehend should instruct those who are slower to apprehend; those who are first to be conscious should instruct those who are later to be conscious."⁹⁸

Mengcius regards himself as one who is "first to be conscious" and has the duty to instruct others. Mengcius is conscious about the ways of the two Moral Kings, Yao and Shun. Yao and Shun practiced *Dao* (Divine principles) and *Yi* (justice) during their ministries.

Confucius says that men are created with different degrees of consciousness. He says:

"Those who are born with apprehension are the highest class of men. Those who learn and apprehend are second; those who have difficulties but they learn are the next class. As to those who have difficulties and yet do not learn, they are the lowest of men."⁹⁹

Confucius regards the recognition of *Dao* (the Divine Way) as the ultimate goal of learning. He says: "Hearing (recognising) *Dao* in the morning, one can die in the evening (without regrets)."¹⁰⁰ Similarly, Bahá'ís regard the knowledge of God as "the source of all knowledge." Referring to the ignorance of man, 'Abdu'l-Bahá says:

"Is it not astonishing that although man has been created for the knowledge and love of God, for the virtues of the human world, for

⁹⁷ Ibid, p. 550.

⁹⁸ Ibid, p. 444.

⁹⁹ *The Confucian Analects*, p. 220.

¹⁰⁰ *The Four Books, The Confucian Analects*. p. 90.

spirituality; heavenly illumination and life eternal, nevertheless he continues ignorant and negligent of all this? Consider how he seeks knowledge of everything except knowledge of God."¹⁰¹

'Abdu'l-Bahá continues with an example of God being the father and man being the son and says:

"It is as if a kind and loving father had provided a library of wonderful books for his son in order that he might be informed of the mysteries of creation; at the same time surrounding him with every means of comfort and enjoyment; but the son amuses himself with pebbles and playthings, neglectful of all his father's gifts and provision."¹⁰²

The knowledge of God encompasses *Ren* (benevolence) and *Yi* (justice) mentioned by Mengcius. Mengcius says that making "the desires few" is the way to prevent losing the heart. Similarly, the Bahá'í Faith recognizes material attachment as the chief factor that leads man to be ignorant of the knowledge of God. Shoghi Effendi says:

"Indeed the chief reason for the evils now rampant in society is the lack of spirituality. The materialistic civilization of our age has so much absorbed the energy and interest of mankind that people in general do no longer feel the necessity of raising themselves above the forces and conditions of their daily material existence."¹⁰³

A man needs to transcend his material life. This does not mean to abandon all material possessions. The Bahá'í Faith recognizes wealth as a means and not as an end in life. Bahá'u'lláh says:

"Well is it then with him, who, being rich, is not hindered by his riches from the eternal kingdom, nor deprived by them of imperishable dominion... The splendor of such a wealthy man shall illuminate the dwellers of heaven even as the sun enlightens the people of the earth!"¹⁰⁴

¹⁰¹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Foundation of World Unity*, p. 64.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ Shoghi Effendi, *Directives from the Guardian*, p. 86.

¹⁰⁴ Bahá'u'lláh, *The Hidden Words*, 2:53, p. 41.

Instead of being attached to material life, a man should strive to excel in all fields of learning. 'Abdu'l-Bahá says: "carry forward the various branches of knowledge, be active and progressive in the field of inventions and the arts. Endeavour to rectify the conduct of men, and seek to excel the whole world in moral character."¹⁰⁵ In this way, a man not only preserves his heart, but he also develops his heart.

Cultivating the Heart

A man having found his heart can cultivate the growth of his heart. To cultivate the heart, it is necessary to clear the blockage of the heart and not violate the law of growth. In addition, a man needs to plant the seeds of divine knowledge and wisdom.

Clearing the Blockage of the Heart

Mengcius encourages men to cultivate the heart constantly. He criticizes the ignorance of men and says that men who plant trees "know to nourish them." In the case of their own persons, men "do not know to nourish them." The reason is not that people love their trees more than their hearts, but it is because people fail to reflect about themselves.¹⁰⁶ A tree that has an outer form and shape is easy to perceive. The heart, an inner faculty, can only be realized through reflection. In order to nourish the heart, it is necessary to clear the path of the heart. Mengcius cites the example of a path in the hill. He says: "A path in a hill, if constantly being used, will become a road. If it is not being used, it will be blocked by wild grass."¹⁰⁷ As mentioned before, "heart" refers to human nature being *Ren* (benevolent) and the "path" refers to *Yi* (justice). The "wild grass" refers to desires that have to be kept "few."

Similarly, Bahá'ís use the metaphor of clearing the soil of the heart. 'Abdu'l-Bahá says that if seeds are sown in soil "full of useless plants, weeds and rubbish," the seeds are "wasted." If seeds are sown in "pure, sweet and fertile soil," they may "vegetate," become "fresh and verdant and form into heaps of harvest." In the same passage, 'Abdu'l-Bahá says:

¹⁰⁵ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Bahá'í Education*, Compilation, p. 21.

¹⁰⁶ *The Four Books, The Works of Mengcius*, p. 484.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid*, p. 544.

"If the health and well-being of the body be expended in the path of the Kingdom, this is very acceptable and praiseworthy; and if it is expended to the benefit of the human world in general -- even though it be to their material (or bodily) benefit and be a means of doing good -- that is also acceptable. But if the health and welfare of man be spent in sensual desires, in a life on the animal plane, and in devilish pursuits -- then disease is better than such health; nay, death itself is preferable to such a life."¹⁰⁸

A soil full of "useless plants, weeds and rubbish" refers to "sensual desires," living a life "on the animal plane," and "in devilish pursuits." These attachments do not befit a man's true station and should be cleared from the heart. In addition, Bahá'u'lláh warns men not to be beguiled by the world but that they walk the way of righteousness and truth. He says:

"Take heed lest the world beguile you as it beguiled the people who went before you! Observe ye the statutes and precepts of your Lord, and walk ye in this Way which hath been laid out before you in righteousness and truth. They who eschew iniquity and error, who adhere to virtue, are, in the sight of the one true God, among the choicest of His creatures."¹⁰⁹

Not Violating the Law of Growth

The process of cultivating the heart is similar to cultivating crops. Each crop has its own pace of growth and men cannot violate this law of nature. Men have to labour with patience during the process of growth. Referring to this principle, Mengcius tells a story of a farmer who was impatient to wait for the growth of his crops. Feeling frustrated with the slow progress in his field, the farmer decided to labour in the field one day and he pulled each stalk higher from the ground. He then returned home to share the news that the stalks had grown double in height. His son was curious about the news and went to the field to investigate the next day. Not surprisingly, all the stalks died. Mengcius adds: "There are few in the world, who do not 'help' their crops to grow... what they do is not only of no benefit, but harmful."¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁸ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Tablets of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 207.

¹⁰⁹ Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitab-i-Aqdas*, p. 45.

¹¹⁰ *The Four Books, The Works of Mengcius*, p. 312.

Nurturing a man's spiritual welfare is similar to nurturing the crops. The difference between men is that each man is at a different stage of development. In guiding a heedless soul to the knowledge of truth, 'Abdu'l-Bahá says one should be patient and do it "little by little." One should conduct himself with "absolute rectitude," treat the soul "with the utmost kindness," and to exemplify with "divine instructions...good qualities and behaviour patterns." By doing so, one will succeed in awakening a "previously heedless individual," and will change his "ignorance to knowledge of the truth."¹¹¹

Planting the Seeds of Divine Knowledge and Wisdom

The metaphor of the heart being a "garden"¹¹² with "pure soil" and the "sacred city" is used by Bahá'u'lláh. In this "garden," a man should "sow the seeds of divine wisdom and knowledge" in its "pure soil." It is astonishing that Bahá'u'lláh repeats three times¹¹³ the above phrase with almost identical words in *The Hidden Words*, a book that contains the essence of His teachings. One of these phrases is:

"Sow the seeds of My divine wisdom in the pure soil of thy heart, and water them with the water of certitude, that the hyacinths of My knowledge and wisdom may spring up fresh and green in the sacred city of thy heart."¹¹⁴

By repeating these phrases three times in *The Hidden Words*, it would seem to indicate that the cultivation of the heart is the primary duty for men. It is so fundamental, so difficult to sustain, so easy to forget that Bahá'u'lláh has to remind us again and again. Cultivating the heart is a slow process that needs patience. Before the "hyacinths" spring up, their beauty and their potential are hidden within seeds. Referring back to *The Hidden Words*, the seeds to be sown in the heart refers to the "delightful words," the "mystic holiness,"¹¹⁵ the "divine mystery" and "divine utterance"¹¹⁶ revealed by Bahá'u'lláh in His station as a Manifestation of God for mankind today. 'Abdu'l-Bahá says that God

¹¹¹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 265

¹¹² Bahá'u'lláh, *The Hidden Words*, 2:3., p. 24.

¹¹³ Ibid, 2:33, 2:36, 2:78, pp. 34, 35, 49.

¹¹⁴ Ibid, 2:23, p. 30.

¹¹⁵ Ibid, 2:33, p. 34.

¹¹⁶ Ibid, 2:78, p. 49.

has sown seeds in the "soil of existence" and has irrigated it through "His spiritual bounties." This soil will surely bring forward "good plants of divine gifts," leaves of "love and union," stems of the "teachings of the True One and His supreme laws," and the "grain" of "heavenly blessings which giveth life to the souls."¹¹⁷ In another passage, He says: "Unless the seed is sown, the bounty and blessing will not be attained; until the tree be planted, the fresh fruit will not be produced."¹¹⁸

It is not enough to sow divine seeds only in one's heart. A man has to avoid sowing the seeds of doubt, suspicion and dissension in the minds of other people and not lead them away from truth. Bahá'u'lláh warns people not to become the cause of disunity. He says: "Fear ye God and sow not the seeds of dissension amongst men."¹¹⁹ On the other hand, a man should actively nourish the hearts of other people. 'Abdu'l-Bahá says:

"Use thy utmost power to sow and cast those pure seeds, the divine teachings, in the hearts which move and cheer by the fragrance of God."¹²⁰

The revealed teachings of the Manifestation of God contain divine knowledge and wisdom. By turning towards such teachings, the heart can reflect divine knowledge and wisdom. The outcome of cultivating the heart is spiritual growth and development. Spiritual growth enables a man to gain a true knowledge of himself.

KNOWLEDGE OF ONESELF

Knowledge of oneself is the precondition for all spiritual progress. This comes from the knowledge of the Manifestation of God. A man needs to know that the purpose of his creation is to bear spiritual fruits for humanity. A man's true nature is his spirit, which is immortal.

¹¹⁷ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Tablets of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 612.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 632.

¹¹⁹ Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 196.

¹²⁰ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Tablets of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 171.

Knowledge of the Manifestation of God

Throughout history, it is the Manifestations of God, saints and philosophers who awaken human consciousness, and refresh hearts and souls. Referring to the purpose of the Manifestations of God, 'Abdu'l-Bahá says:

"The divine prophets have revealed and founded religion. They have laid down certain laws and heavenly principles for the guidance of mankind. They have taught and promulgated the knowledge of God, established praiseworthy ethical ideals and inculcated the highest standards of virtues in the human world."¹²¹

In another passage, 'Abdu'l-Bahá says that the fundamental principles of the Religion of God are "morals and conduct, with the knowledge of divine mysteries" and the "light of the virtues of the world of humanity" is the result of "the love and knowledge of God."¹²²

The Manifestation of God is the bridge that connects this world to the world of God. The coming of a new Manifestation of God inspires the people of the world, purifies old traditions and offers new lights of guidance to the people of His time. Man needs to renew consciousness individually and to renew civilization collectively. Bahá'u'lláh is the latest Manifestation of God. Referring to the social principles of Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá says: "Without these teachings progress and advancement for mankind are in no wise possible. Every community in the world findeth in these Divine Teachings the realization of its highest aspirations."¹²³ Bahá'u'lláh states:

"Consider, how can he that faileth in the day of God's Revelation to attain unto the grace of the "Divine Presence" and to recognize His Manifestation, be justly called learned, though he may have spent aeons in the pursuit of knowledge, and acquired all the limited and material learning of men? It is surely evident that he can in no wise be regarded as possessed of true knowledge. Whereas, the most unlettered of all men, if he be honoured with this supreme distinction, he verily is accounted as

¹²¹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Bahá'í World Faith, Compilation*, p. 226.

¹²² 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 53.

¹²³ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Bahá'í World Faith, Compilation*, p. 347.

one of those divinely-learned men whose knowledge is of God; for such a man hath attained the acme of knowledge, and hath reached the furthestmost summit of learning."¹²⁴

In a statement of the Bahá'í International Community, it says:

"The Bahá'í teachings espouse the fundamental unity of mankind and the need for this reality to be manifested through the actions and attitudes of all peoples, based on a common spiritual commitment. On this basis, Bahá'ís see it as a basic objective both individually and collectively to carry forward an ever advancing civilization."¹²⁵

As mentioned, the "basic objective" for a man is to "carry forward an ever advancing civilization," and without the social principles of Bahá'u'lláh, "progress and advancement for mankind are in no wise possible." A man cannot perfect the knowledge of his true self if he does not know his "basic objective." In addition, a man cannot achieve his "basic objective" if he does not know the social principles of the latest Manifestation of God--Bahá'u'lláh. Bahá'u'lláh says that the recognition of Manifestations of God and obedience to their teachings are "twin duties" that cannot be separated.¹²⁶ To obey God is to serve God; to serve God is to serve mankind. Man must perform services and to bear spiritual fruits for humanity.

Man Must Bear Spiritual Fruits

Mengcius says: "He who has optimized his heart knows his nature. Knowing his nature, he knows *Tian* (Heaven). Preserving one's heart, nourishing one's nature, is the way to serve *Tian*. Short life or long life should not cause a man any double mindedness. Cultivate character and wait (for Heaven's command). This is the way to establish *Ming* (destiny)."¹²⁷ All men are born with a destiny. A man must fulfil his destiny by optimizing his heart's capacity to serve *Tian*. To serve *Tian* is

¹²⁴ Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitab-I-Iqan*, p. 145-146.

¹²⁵ Bahá'í International Community, *Social Welfare and Social Development* (Oct 1985). BIC Doc. #85-1009.

¹²⁶ Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitab-i-Aqdas*, p. 19.

¹²⁷ *The Four Books, The Works of Mengcius*. p. 512.

to serve humanity with a heart that practices *Ren* (benevolence) and *Yi* (justice).

A man is like a fruit tree in the garden of mankind. A man who occupies himself fully with material pursuits and does not distinguish himself with goodly deeds is like a tree that yields no fruit. A fruit tree that yields no fruit is useless. The Chinese describe a useless man as a "moving-corpse and walking-flesh." This is the most despised of all men. A man's value in life is to bear fruits that benefit both himself and others. Using the metaphor of a tree, Bahá'u'lláh says:

"The Prophets and Chosen Ones have all been commissioned by the One True God... to nurture the trees of human existence with the living waters of uprightness and understanding, that there may appear from them that which God hath deposited within their inmost selves. As may be readily observed, each tree yieldeth a certain fruit, and a barren tree is but fit for fire. The purpose of these Educators, in all they said and taught, was to preserve man's exalted station... The fruits that best befit the tree of human life are trustworthiness and godliness, truthfulness and sincerity; but greater than all, after recognition of the unity of God... is regard for the rights that are due to one's parents."¹²⁸

The fruits of "trustworthiness and godliness, truthfulness and sincerity" are meant for service to humanity. Service to humanity begins from serving one's parents, because the family is the foundation of society. This echoes the Chinese saying already mentioned that "the pre-requisite to be trusted by friends is to be trusted by parents" and "the essence of *Ren* (benevolence) is service to one's parents."

A man who serves humanity optimizes his heart's capacity. Referring back to the first counsel of Bahá'u'lláh, such a man will possess "a pure, kindly and radiant heart" and his heart will be "a sovereignty ancient, imperishable and everlasting." He will come to recognise the immortality of his heart and will be characterized by spiritual attributes.

¹²⁸ Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitab-i-Aqdas*, p. 139.

Immortality of the Heart

The reality of a man is his heart. The heart can also be called the soul, and the soul is immortal. One way to understand the immortality of the soul is through the attainment of spiritual attributes or virtues. Loacius says that long life is not measured by how long a man lives. Long life is measured by how long people remember a man's virtues and deeds. He says: "Those who die but not perish (forgotten) have long life."¹²⁹ The immortality of the soul can be observed through its good effects.

Confucius says that man can observe the sign of the existence of God through acts of worship offered by people of the world.¹³⁰ Similarly, man can observe the sign of the immortality of the soul through burial ceremonies and ancestor worship. The recognition of the immortality of the soul motivates a man to focus his attention beyond this transient world of existence. Just as a baby in the womb needs to prepare for his physical development for the world after birth, a man needs to prepare for his spiritual development for the world after this life.

'Abdu'l-Bahá says: "Spiritual attributes are needed in the next world but must be attained in this world." Spiritual attributes are the outcome of a man who maximizes his heart's capacity. A spiritually enlightened man gains his "virtues or perfection" through seven ways. According to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, these are: "knowledge of God," "love of God," "faith," "philanthropic deeds," "self sacrifice," "severance from this world," "sanctity and holiness." 'Abdu'l-Bahá added, "Unless he acquires these forces and attains to these requirements he will surely be deprived of the life that is eternal." On the other hand, if a man possesses "the knowledge of God" and "the love of God," lives in "utmost state of sanctity and holiness," and "becomes the cause of love among mankind," he shall surely attain to a "second birth" and enjoy "everlasting existence."¹³¹

In another passage, 'Abdu'l-Bahá says: "The purpose of man's creation is...unity and harmony."¹³² The knowledge of God enables a man to

¹²⁹ Lao Zi, *Lao Zi*, p. 74.

¹³⁰ *The Four Books, The Doctrine of the Mean*, p. 34.

¹³¹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Foundation of World Unity*, pp. 63- 64

¹³² 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 4.

know the source of his creation. The love of God motivates a man to obey the teachings of God and to love mankind. When a man becomes the cause of unity among men, he truly fulfils his heart's capacity and the purpose of his creation.

CONCLUSION

Chinese culture and Bahá'í teachings use the language of the heart to describe human nature and spiritual reality. They both consider the heart to be a divine trust and stress the need to optimize the potential of the heart. The Chinese concept of the heart is human nature that is created to be *Cheng*, *Ren* and *Ming*. The Bahá'í concept of the heart is human nature that is created to be "pure, kindly and radiant." They both say that purity of heart is required to recognize God and that being pure is the pre-requisite of all spiritual actions. They both say that the difference between man and animal lies in a different degree of consciousness, and that man has the capacity to know, to love, and to will. Man has the capacity to know his nobility, to love others, to extend goodwill to others and to create unity. The Chinese consider the way a man knows, loves and wills to be founded on self knowledge. Bahá'ís consider the way a man knows, loves and wills as the result of the knowledge of God, the love of God and goodwill.

Both Chinese culture and Bahá'í teachings talk about the golden rule of treating others as one would wanted to be treated. They both talk about an active way of extending help and being of service to others. In addition, Bahá'í teachings exalt the offering of one's soul in the path of service, and describe it to be a "more glorious thing".

A man who optimizes the potential of his heart is radiant and he becomes the light of guidance to others. He is on the pathway to perfection. Both Chinese culture and Bahá'í teachings talk about the need to overcome the obstacles of self-centredness, to be detached from desires and material possessions. They both emphasize the need to cultivate human hearts with patience, and to nurture hearts with divine principles, divine knowledge and wisdom.

The Chinese regard saints as those who have perfect *Cheng* and are able to establish a code of morals and conduct. Bahá'ís regard the

Manifestations of God as perfect souls who reveal divine laws and principles for the guidance of man. They see the Manifestation of God as the source of all knowledge, the source of human progress and the advancement of civilization.

A man who recognizes the Manifestation of God gains true knowledge of himself. Both Chinese culture and Bahá'í teachings recognise that the objective of man is to provide service to humanity. They both say that service to humanity begins with one's family. Through good words and good deeds, a man obtains spiritual attributes. Both teachings recognise the immortality of spiritual attributes and consider that the purpose of man's creation is unity and harmony.

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Crossing Religious Boundaries: Interfaith Challenges for the Future

Anjam Khursheed

Abstract

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

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

1. The Interfaith Challenge

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

The modern interfaith movement has been developing alongside the Bahá'í Faith in the West, and there have been times when the two converged. The first Parliament of the World's Religions conference took place in 1893 in Chicago, and is widely regarded to be the start of the modern interfaith movement¹. The conference also has a significant place in Bahá'í history, since it was one of the first times that the Bahá'í Faith was mentioned in a public forum in the West. Although the Bahá'í Faith was not represented at the conference, a paper by Reverend Henry H. Jessup, director of Presbyterian Missionary Operations in North Syria, referred to Bahá'u'lláh (the founder of the Bahá'í Faith) as a "Persian Sage", and closed with the well-known pen portrait of Bahá'u'lláh by the Cambridge University scholar E. G. Browne². But there is considerable

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

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

irony in how the Bahá'í Faith came to be mentioned at the conference. Jessup's paper set out to demonstrate the social, political, moral and religious superiority of the Anglo-Saxon race, and its duty to Christianize humanity³.

Apparently, quite independently, a Bahá'í Syrian doctor by the name of Ibrahim Khayrullah, who had learned of the Bahá'í Faith in Cairo, had settled in Chicago in February 1894, and was the first Bahá'í in the North American continent to actively promote Bahá'í teachings⁴. Over a space of only a few years, a Bahá'í community began to develop in Chicago, in the years following the first Parliament of the World's Religions conference. Among the first to join the Bahá'í Faith was the American, Thornton Chase, who in Bahá'í history, is referred to as the first Bahá'í in the West⁵. This occurred in 1894. Both the history of the Bahá'í Faith in the West and the modern interfaith movement had their beginnings with events that took place in Chicago around the years 1893-4.

In 1933, a World Fellowship of Faiths conference was held in Chicago, modeled after the 1893 Parliament of the World's Religions conference. Shoghi Effendi, then head of the Bahá'í Faith⁶, encouraged Bahá'ís to participate at the conference, stating that it was "in harmony with the spirit of the teachings"⁷. In 1936, the impetus towards interfaith activities gathered further momentum by the holding of the World Congress of Faiths conference in London. Shoghi Effendi was invited to give a paper. Shoghi Effendi delegated the task to an Irish Bahá'í scholar, George Townshend. Townshend was at that time still a clergyman (Archdeacon), and had just finished writing his first book on the relationship of the Bahá'í Faith to Christianity⁸. Townshend went on to publish many more

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

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

⁴ *ibid*, chapters 4-8.

⁵ Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, p. 257.

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

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

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

such books, and was later recognised for his contributions to the growth of the Bahá'í Faith in the United Kingdom⁹. The 1936 Townshend interfaith paper was published in "Faiths and Fellowship", the World Congress of Faiths conference proceedings, along with the discussion it generated. It is reprinted here, in this Bahá'í Studies volume. From the various reports of the conference, it is clear that there was a considerable amount of Bahá'í involvement¹⁰.

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

Shoghi Effendi refers to the "World Fellowship of Faiths" conference in 1936 alongside other interfaith events. He specifically encourages members of the Bahá'í community to participate in such activities so that the "universality and comprehensiveness" of the Bahá'í Faith can be demonstrated and so that "vital and enduring links" between Bahá'í administrative agencies and interfaith organizations can develop¹³.

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

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

¹¹ D. Hofman, *George Townshend*, p. 130.

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

¹³ Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, pp. 324-5.

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

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

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

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

¹⁵ Mission statement on the Internet site, www.cpwr.org, on the eve of the Parliament of the World's Religions conference in Cape Town, South Africa, November, 1999.

a postage stamp along with the names of eight other religions, brought out to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the IRO. The rise of the Bahá'í Faith in South East Asia and the interfaith movement in Singapore have also, like elsewhere, been progressing side by side. One year after the formation of the IRO in Singapore in 1949, the first Bahá'í missionaries to Singapore arrived. Dr K. M. Fozdar and his wife, Mrs Shirin Fozdar, were not only the first teachers of the Bahá'í Faith to Singapore, but they inspired the growth of Bahá'í communities throughout the whole of South East Asia¹⁶.

The aim of this paper is to clarify the relationship between the Bahá'í Faith and the ideals of the modern interfaith movement, so that Bahá'ís and members of other faiths can be more effective in creating a "spirit of fellowship through the inspiration of religion". There are many ways in which Bahá'ís and their fellow interfaith co-workers can learn from each other. Bahá'ís can learn to appreciate the great principles of other religions and how they have transformed history. They can learn much from the vast experience already accumulated on inter-religious harmony and seek ways to correlate their own principles to it. On the other hand, Bahá'ís have a specific mission to carry out: they are charged with the mission of fulfilling the promise of all the world's major faiths. They have the duty, through the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh, to bring about the unity of mankind. In the Bahá'í writings, the unity of religions is described to be the "cornerstone" principle upon which the unity of mankind is to be founded¹⁷.

It should be emphasized from the outset that the views presented in this paper are the author's personal views, and should not be taken to be representative of a single Bahá'í approach to the subject of interfaith harmony. They are of course, many other possible approaches. For more articles by Bahá'ís on this subject, the reader may wish to refer to articles written by May and Fazel¹⁸.

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

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

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

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

If the aim of the interfaith movement is to bring about more inter-religious harmony, it is in complete accord with Bahá'í principles. Bahá'ís are expressly enjoined by Bahá'u'lláh to associate with peoples of all religions in a spirit of friendship and fellowship. Bahá'u'lláh states, "Consort with all religions with amity and concord, that they may inhale from you the sweet fragrance of God"¹⁹. These kinds of statements, both by Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá²⁰, make it clear that to participate in initiatives aimed at bringing about a greater degree of interfaith harmony is for Bahá'ís, a religious duty.

The insight that all religions are fundamentally one, described to be the "unalterable foundation and central tenet of Bahá'í belief" in the Bahá'í writings²¹, does not make the Bahá'í Faith syncretic nor does it mean that it believes that all religions are the same. The Bahá'í Faith is an independent world religion which has its own revealed scripture, laws and codes of ethics. It has its own doctrines and teachings that are based upon the writings of Bahá'u'lláh, its founder (1817-1892). The Bahá'í principle of "progressive revelation" teaches that there are two parts to every religion, an eternal part which is essentially common to all faiths, while the other part is transient, relative to the time and place and understanding of the people to whom it is revealed. The transient part typically pertains to the social laws and ordinances of a religion, while the eternal part consists of spiritual ideals and qualities. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, describes it in the following way,

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

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

¹⁹ Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, para. 144.

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

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

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

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

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

²² 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, pp. 47-8.

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

²⁴ Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, p. 51.

²⁵ Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, p. 53.

²⁶ Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Íqán*, p. 160.

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

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

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

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

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

²⁸ Ibid., p. 304.

²⁹ Shoghi Effendi, *The Promised Day is Come*, page v.

This means that for Bahá'ís, religious truth is partially relative in at least two senses. In one sense, there is a portion of religious truth that is adapted to the needs and requirements of the people to whom it is revealed, and secondly, all religions are a natural part of the progressive spiritual evolution of humanity. Bahá'u'lláh claims to have brought the latest revelation in this evolutionary process, one which is directed to the whole world. He claims to be the "Promised One of all ages", declaring that all past religious prophecies and ideals will find their fulfilment in His revelation³⁰. This is of course, a momentous claim. Each individual is invited to investigate it for his or her own self. The specific mission of the Bahá'í Faith is to usher in the prophesised age of universal unity and peace. This, according to Bahá'u'lláh, is the requirement of this age, the "unity of the human race"³¹. Religions can no longer advance separately and spiritual progress must be global in nature. Religious unity is thus an inseparable part of the future of mankind. 'Abdu'l-Bahá states, "The gift of God to this enlightened age is the knowledge of the oneness of mankind and of the fundamental oneness of religion. War shall cease between nations, and by the will of God the Most Great Peace shall come; the world will be seen as a new world, and all men will live as brothers"³². Bahá'u'lláh's words, quoted at the first Parliament of the World's Religions in 1893 express the same sentiment, "We desire but the good of the world and happiness of the nations; yet they deem us a stirrer up of strife and sedition worthy of bondage and banishment... That all nations should become one in faith and all men as brothers."³³

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

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

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

³² 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *'Abdu'l-Bahá in London*, p. 20.

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

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

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

The answer to this question is clearly given in the Bahá'í writings. Although the Bahá'í Faith claims to be the fulfilment of previous religions, Bahá'u'lláh never regarded Himself to be superior to the founders of other religions, nor must Bahá'ís ever consider their faith to be intrinsically superior to other faiths. The differences between religions are to be entirely accounted for by the differing requirements and needs of the people to whom they were revealed. The greatness of the Bahá'í Faith does not lie in the superiority of its founder over the founders of previous faiths, rather, it comes from the greatness of this age³⁶.

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

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

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

³⁷ Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, p. 136.

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

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

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

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

³⁸ Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, pp. 59-60.

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

Elsewhere, Shoghi Effendi writes

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

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

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

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

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

In the Bahá'í writings, the spiritual development of mankind as a whole is likened to the growth of a human being, who grows through the various stages of childhood, youth and adulthood⁴². The last two lines in the citation already quoted from Shoghi also uses the same analogy for religions, "does not the child succumb in the youth and the youth in the man; yet neither child or youth perishes"⁴³. Here Shoghi Effendi is

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

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

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

drawing from an analogy given by the Báb⁴⁴ "True knowledge ... is the knowledge of God, and this is none other than the recognition of His Manifestation in each Dispensation ... This doth not mean, however, that one ought not to yield praise unto former Revelations. On no account is this acceptable, inasmuch as it behooveth man, upon reaching the age of nineteen, to render thanksgiving for the day of his conception as an embryo. For had the embryo not existed, how could he have reached his present state? Likewise had the religion taught by Adam not existed, this Faith would not have attained its present stage."⁴⁵

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

"During childhood, a human being learns fundamental principles which stay with him for the rest of his life, arguably, childhood is the most important period. Most of us in childhood and youth go through various experiences, learn different principles, which are not related together. It is only usually during the adult phase of our lives that the different experiences of our past are pieced together, put into a wider perspective. It is only usually as an adult that the different lessons of the past acquire a greater meaning. Of course, each phase of our life is equally important, and at any one stage, we are still the same person. Along with each phase of our growth, we are discovering more about ourselves. But the consciousness of our self-identity does not fully mature until we are adults. Adulthood is the time that we are best able to integrate our different experiences together. The Bahá'í claim is that mankind as a whole is approaching the phase of maturity or adulthood, and is at present caught in the tumultuous phase of the rebellious youth⁴⁶. All religions have taught us fundamental lessons which will always remain,

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

⁴⁵ Báb, *Selections from the Writings of the Báb*, p. 89.

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

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

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

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

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

⁴⁸ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *'Abdu'l-Bahá in London*, p. 62.

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

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

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

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

⁴⁹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, pp. 136-7.

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

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

Another corollary of the search after truth principle is that Bahá'ís should not attempt to convince others about the truth of Bahá'u'lláh's claim, but rather, they should let other people investigate it for themselves. The requirement of making one's own investigation, as opposed to relying on tradition or respected authorities is of course, the essence of a scientific approach. Science advances when people think for themselves and do not blindly follow others. The Bahá'í Faith has been referred to as "scientific in its method" by Shoghi Effendi⁵¹. The old approach of "preaching" the message must be replaced by a spirit of investigating truth, because that is what the "unfolding Truth" for this age requires:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

⁵³ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, pp. 147-8.

⁵⁴ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 454.

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

⁵⁵ Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, p. 19.

⁵⁶ *ibid*

⁵⁷ Bahá'u'lláh, *Hidden Words*, from the Arabic, no. 1.

⁵⁸ Bahá'u'lláh, *The Pattern of Bahá'í Life*, A Compilation, p. 31.

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

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

Being more humble, in the sense of not stepping beyond one's experience is an essential prerequisite to carrying out science and often, secular objections to religion are made with this important principle in mind. The famous philosopher Bertrand Russell objected to proofs of the existence of God on the grounds that they go beyond our experience⁶⁰, while the famous physicist, Albert Einstein rejected the Christian/Judaic

⁵⁹ Báb, *Selections from the Writings of the Báb*, p. 89.

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

conception of God, because it was in his view, anthropomorphic, and the result of people going beyond their experience⁶¹. This makes the necessity for taking a more humble approach in investigating truth all the more urgent. The Bahá'í principle, that religious truth is in part relative, both in a subjective and progressive sense, provides the framework for a less dogmatic approach. The objective truths of religion, the absolute timeless ones, lie beyond reason, and can only be approached at the mystical level, in an inner spiritual way. On the other hand, the outward truths of religion are relative to our comprehension of the world and ourselves, and they, according to Bahá'í teachings, change from time to time and from place to place. The way we understand our "souls" or "God", or the act of "creation" is obviously dependent on our culture. It is also irreducibly personal and subjective. Even within the same faith, believers will differ about the way they understand them. This means that we should not be dogmatic about the *doctrines* of our faith, since we cannot avoid the imprint of cultural and individual subjective bias.

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

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

⁶¹ A. Einstein, *Ideas and Opinions*, pp. 36-8.

⁶² Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, p. 142.

⁶³ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 222.

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

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

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

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

⁶⁴ Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, pp. 4-5.

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

⁶⁶ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 295.

the reason why we exist⁶⁷. The meaning of life is therefore a paradox: we are called upon to know God but can never do so. But we can develop spiritually, through the help and influence of the Manifestations of God, and in doing so, we fulfil our life's purpose.

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

What of the descriptions of God as Creator, is that an objective attribute? According to the Bahá'í Faith, all attributes of God are subject to our limited human comprehension. It is clear that creation myths differ from culture to culture, but what about the act of creation itself? In the Abrahamic religions, God is always related to the act of creation, but in Buddhism, associating God with an act of creation is apparently a mistaken doctrine. Does this not indicate that even God as Creator is a relative notion, which changes with time and is different from place to place? In fact, in the Bahá'í writings, the act of creation is a continual process where the universe is being "renewed and regenerated" by the "Word of God", "Every thing must needs have an origin and every building a builder. Verily, the Word of God is the cause which hath preceded the contingent world - a world which is adorned with the splendours of the Ancient of Days, yet is being renewed and regenerated at all times"⁶⁸. The act of creation is inseparable from the Word of God, but are we capable of knowing the difference between God and the Word of God? The Word of God, according to the Bahá'í writings, is on another realm of existence, a higher plane which exists outside space and time, but nevertheless, it is not God. According to the Bahá'í writings, it is the Word of God which is periodically incarnate in human form, and not God. It appears to us in the form of the Manifestations of God⁶⁹. The important point here is that there is an intermediary world between us

⁶⁷ Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, p. 65.

⁶⁸ Bahá'u'lláh, *Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 241.

⁶⁹ Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, p. 47.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

⁷⁰ Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, CLVIII, pp. 334-335.

⁷¹ Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, pp. 277-279.

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

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

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

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

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

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

⁷⁴ Shoghi Effendi, *Guidance for Today and Tomorrow*, p. 194.

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

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

⁷⁵ J. Hick, *God Has Many Names*, p. 41.

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

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

3. The Living Example of 'Abdu'l-Bahá

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

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

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

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

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

R. J. C.: I have long looked forward to this opportunity

A. B.: That is proof that both our hearts are one

R. J. C.: I think that is true

A. B.: There is a Persian saying that hearts that are at one find their way to one another

R. J. C.: I do not think that saying is peculiar to Persia

A. B.: Often two people live in the same house in constant intimacy, but their hearts are not united. Here are two men, one living in the East and one in London, whose hearts are coming to meet one another long ago. Although in the material world we were far apart, we have always been near in the spiritual world. The real nearness is the nearness of the heart, not of the body

R. J. C.: The spirit knows no nationality

A. B.: Praise be to God that now there is between us a material as well as a spiritual tie, the union is perfect!

R. J. C.: I am so glad you took the resolution to come to England, even though you can remain only a short time.

A. B.: From the time I left Egypt my purpose was to come here, but I remained a few days on the lake of Geneva for change of air.

R. J. C.: I know many of your friends who are also mine

A. B.: I have read your sermons and speeches

R. J. C.: And I have read yours

A. B.: That is a proof of unity. As I have read your sermons (with a humorous smile), you have to read mine.

R. J. C.: I see on my left one who has spoken from my pulpit (Tamaddon-ul-Molk)

A. B.: We are all friends of one another (hands raised in benediction). We have spread the proclamation of universal peace, therefore we are friends of people all over the world. We have no enemies; there are no outsiders; we are all servants of one God.

R. J. C.: That is good

A. B.: Worshippers of one God, we are the recipients of the graces of one God. Men have made differences and divisions; God did not establish them. God has created everyone, and treats everyone equally. He is merciful to all and gives food (lit.

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

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

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

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

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

R. J. C.: A difference of attitude

A. B.: Their conduct is absolutely different.

R. J. C.: How many Babís are there?

A. B.: Very few

Interpreter: Perhaps 200 or 300 in Persia.

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

Interpreter: There are no statistics....

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Who shall say that that the veil is not vanishing?

'Abdu'l-Bahá's interfaith contribution, has as yet, not been fully documented. A considerable amount of literature was generated through 'Abdu'l-Bahá's direct and indirect contacts with theologians, Church Ministers, and Christians from a variety of different backgrounds. Apart from articles in newspapers and journals, some Christian scholars were inspired to write books that were based upon their meetings with 'Abdu'l-Bahá. A book entitled, "The Reconciliation of Races and Religions" by the Oxford Bible scholar, Thomas Kelly Cheyne was such a book. Cheyne entitled his chapter on 'Abdu'l-Bahá as "The Ambassador of Peace". The Christian Commonwealth journal was considered to be a reform movement within Christianity, calling for a greater degree of openness and recognition for the truth in other religions. The subtitle of the journal which appeared on the front page of every issue read, "The organ of the Progressive Movement in Religion and Social Ethics". Clearly from the above citations, Rev. R. J. Campbell and Archbishop Wilberforce were making contacts with religious figures in the East. Just how movements like these might have influenced the modern interfaith movement is a fascinating question, and one for future research. The Englishman, Sir Francis Younghusband, founder of the World Congress of Faiths organisation, certainly knew of the Bahá'í Faith. He had great admiration for the Báb and frequently attended Bahá'í meetings⁷⁷. At the time of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's visit to London,

⁷⁷ D. Hofman, *George Townshend*, p. 123.

Younghusband, living in England, was around 50 years old, and was beginning to write several books that described his religious views⁷⁸.

4. Modern Religious Pluralism

Modern interfaith dialogue has its critics as well as its supporters. Harvey Cox, a Christian speaker at the 2nd Parliament of the World's Religions held in Chicago 1993, spoke of the presence of an "antidialogical wing" in Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam. Harvey Cox acknowledged his having "sharp-edged and sometimes unpleasant conversations" with his fellow Christians, who were opposed to interfaith dialogue⁷⁹. At the first Parliament of the World's Religions, John Henry Barrows, one of Chicago's most liberal clergymen who promoted the event, claimed later that he had hoped leaders of world religions would be convinced of the superiority of Christianity. Most Protestant evangelicals agreed with the response of the Archbishop of Canterbury, that to participate was to presuppose the equality of religions, but Salvation is in Christ alone, they protested. The Christians who gave their support to the conference lay outside mainstream American Protestant Churches.

Seyyed Hossein Nasr, the Muslim speaker at the 2nd Parliament of the World's Religion conference cited several difficulties for modern interfaith dialogue. The first is that it is dominated by the West, and so in many ways reflects the religious concerns of western educated people, rather than being representative of the world's religions⁸⁰. The agenda of interfaith dialogue, according to Nasr, is thus dominated by modernity and reactions to it, "the presence of the modern world is twofold: One is through the destruction of religion and the other through the foreshortening of its vision"⁸¹. Nasr claims that modernity "denies the significance of religious categories" and that this limits the effectiveness of inter-religious dialogue, since it is primarily, a modern western debate about religion. Under the pressure of a secular threat, religious communities, according to Nasr are becoming more intolerant. This is

⁷⁸ Marcus Braybrooke, *A Wider Vision*, pp. 28-9.

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

⁸⁰ *ibid.*, p. 60.

⁸¹ *ibid.*, p. 162.

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

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

⁸² *ibid.*, p. 163.

⁸³ *ibid.*, pp. 61-62.

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

⁸⁵ A. Sharma, K.M. Dugan, *A Dome of Many Colors*, p. 181.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

While the majority of people in the "secular West" continue to believe in God, very few still regularly go to Church. Some estimate that less than ten percent in Europe regularly attend church, and the reasons given for this is that religious thought is out of date, and not relevant to today's needs⁹⁰.

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

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

⁸⁹ *ibid*

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

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

There has been some discussion as to whether this statement was really directed at other religions, or whether it was essentially a Christian inter-denominational one⁹². But the inter-religious intolerance of the period in which it was written is unmistakable. The medieval period was a time of Holy Wars between Christianity and Islam. Religious polemics were inseparable from the clash cultures. Religious exclusivism was an essential ingredient to cultural exclusivism. For Christian Europe, religious superiority remained an underlying ethic for cultural exclusivism right up to the end of the Western Colonial period earlier this century. Even now, there are vestiges of it that still linger on.

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

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

⁹¹ J. Hick, *A Christian Theology of Religions*, p. 83.

⁹² J. Hick, *A Christian Theology of Religions*, pp. 83-4.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

⁹⁴ Published in the interfaith supplement of this volume.

⁹⁵ Pope John Paul II, Wednesday General Audience, 9th September, 1998.

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

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

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

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

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

⁹⁷ J. Hick, *God Has Many Names*, pp. 70-1.

⁹⁸ Martin Forward, *Jesus, A Short Biography*, p. 158.

⁹⁹ *ibid*, p. 164.

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

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

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

¹⁰⁰ J. Hick, *A Christian Theology of Religions*, pp. 57-81.

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

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

Nasr's "perennial religion" has a close relationship to the mystical side of all religions. Whether it is Hick's Real or Nasr's perennial religion, the important point here is that they both believe in an eternal and universal part to religion. They both describe the differences between religions to have come about from the finite nature of human knowledge, which changes from time to time and from place to place. Nasr refers to "crystallizations in the world of time and space", on the "human plane"¹⁰². Hick speaks of the "diversity of forms" in religions coming from the principle (articulated by the theologian St Thomas Aquinas) that "Things known are in the knower according to the mode of the knower"¹⁰³. He also cites the philosopher Kant's well-known distinction between the "noumenal world" or "Real in-itself", as opposed to the finite human conception of it¹⁰⁴.

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

¹⁰¹ A.Sharma and K.K. Dugan, *A Dome of Many Colors*, p. 161.

¹⁰² A.Sharma and K.K. Dugan, *A Dome of Many Colors*, p. 161.

¹⁰³ J. Hick, *God Has Many Names*, p49

¹⁰⁴ J. Hick, *God Has Many Names*, p106

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

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

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

¹⁰⁵ Keith Ward, *God, Faith and the New Millennium*, p. 168.

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

Pluralism, primarily in terms of an ethical attitude of mind, was articulated in the "Dialogue Decalogue, ground rules for Interreligious, Inter-ideological dialogue" by Leonard Swidler, editor of the *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*. He presents "ten commandments" which are based upon having respect, humility, honesty, sincerity etc¹⁰⁶. Other notable efforts to found pluralism on adopting the right ethics have been made by the Catholic theologians, Hans Kung and Paul Knitter. Kung in the concluding pages of his book "Global responsibility, in search of a new world ethic" states:

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

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

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

Now Kung's call for pluralism is clearly much more practical than theological. It is a call to recognise "religious plurality" in the context of finding ethics for the future peace and security of the world. Kung was invited by the Council for a Parliament of the World's Religions (CPWR) to help draft the "Global Ethic" declaration statement. This statement was signed by many people attending the 2nd Parliament of the World's Religions conference in 1993¹⁰⁸.

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

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

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

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

¹⁰⁹ Paul Knitter, *Jesus and the Other Names*, p. 121.

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

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

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

¹¹⁰ *ibid*, p. 72.

¹¹¹ J.M. Templeton, *The Humble Approach*, p. 46.

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

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

¹¹² J.M. Templeton, *The Humble Approach*, p. 92.

¹¹³ *ibid*, p. 92.

¹¹⁴ Teilhard de Chardin, *Science and Christ*, p. 105.

¹¹⁵ *ibid*, p. 106.

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

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

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

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

¹¹⁶ *ibid*, p. 111.

¹¹⁷ J. Hick, *God Has Many Names*, p. 77.

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

The contemporary orthodox rabbi, David Hartman, finds in the Bible two covenants, that of "Creation", and the other "Sinai". The Creation covenant (as reflected in the story of Noah), is with all mankind, while the Sinai covenant is specifically with Israel. The two covenants run in parallel and do not preclude each other. This allows for the plurality of faiths, each God's way of speaking to different groups of people¹¹⁹. Rabbi Dr Norman Solomon, director-designate of the Centre for the Study of Judaism and Jewish-Christian Relations (at Birmingham in the

¹¹⁸ Jonathan Sacks, *Faith in the Future*, pp. 79-80.

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

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

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

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

5. Ancient Wisdom

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

¹²⁰ *ibid.*, p. 25.

Younghusband: The Temple of Understanding, now based in New York, founded in 1960 by Judith Hollister: and The World Conference on Religion and Peace, whose first assembly did not meet until 1970¹²¹. The founders and main contributors to these organisations have been, for the most, Christians.

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

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

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

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

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

death. The family of Moses Maimonides, the most famous of all Jewish philosophers was compelled to leave their home for this reason¹²². However, this persecution was relatively mild in comparison to the persecution of Jews under Christian rule, or the suffering of Muslims under the Spanish Inquisition.

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

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

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

¹²² Moses Maimonides, *Guide for the Perplexed*, p. xvii - p. xviii,

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

There have been periods of religious conflict in China. The Buddhists were persecuted in the 5th, 6th, 9th and 10th centuries, but these periods of intolerance were relatively brief, very seldom involved bloodshed, and were largely political and economic in nature. At the turn of this century, various interfaith organisations in China were formed, apparently quite independent of the modern Western interfaith movement. Around 1915 for example, The Society of World Religions and the International Society of Holy Religions were founded. In a decade or so, they were followed by The Universal Ethical Society, the Tao Yuan or Society of the Way and the Ikuan Tao or the Way of Pervading Unity¹²⁴. Members of these societies recognised the validity of Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, Islam, Christianity and Judaism.

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

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

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

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

¹²⁶ *ibid.*, p. 39.

¹²⁷ *ibid.*

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

Buddhism in China articulated the "One in Many" principle. The philosophy of Fa-Tsang (596-664) of the Hua-Yen school, is known as the "One-and-all" philosophy¹²⁸. Summarizing the Buddhist unity in diversity principle, Fa-Tsang states, "the tendency of harmonious combination becomes unrestricted because it has no nature, and all phenomena which exist spontaneously can be combined because they rise through causation. As the one and the many totally involve each other, we look at one particle of dust and everything suddenly becomes manifest. As the "This" takes in the "other", we look at a tiny hair and all things appear together. The reason is that, when the mind understands, all dharmas can be free and at ease, and because the principle is clear, great wisdom can be achieved. Among seekers of wisdom, who will examine its source? People talking about it seldom investigate its mystery to the limit."¹²⁹ The Buddhist "One in Many" principle influenced the Neo-Confucianists in the Sung period, and for the last millennium, it has become deeply rooted in Chinese culture. The Neo-Confucianist, Chang-Tsai (1020-77), linked it to Confucian brotherhood, "Heaven is my father and Earth is my mother, and even such a small creature as I finds an intimate place in their midst. Therefore that which fills the universe I regard as my body and that which directs the universe I consider as my nature. All people are my brothers and sisters, and all things are my companions"¹³⁰. Moreover, specifically on the subject of religious plurality, To K'an Tse of the 3rd century AD stated, "All religions have their source in Heaven which they obey"¹³¹. The Emperor Wu (502-549), said of Confucius, Lao Tzu, and Buddha, "Traced to the source, the three sages are no different"¹³². These are but a few examples of the long history of religious pluralism in China, there is much more. In the I-Ching, "The Book of Changes", the classic pre-Confucian text, a religious unity in diversity principle is clearly articulated, "In the world,

¹²⁸ *ibid.*, chap. 25

¹²⁹ *ibid.*, p. 424.

¹³⁰ *ibid.*, p. 497.

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

¹³² *ibid.*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

¹³⁵ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 136.

¹³⁶ *ibid.*, p. 137.

¹³⁷ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 130.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

¹⁴⁰ Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 60.

important and that he has the authority to speak about them. Take for instance, the concept of God¹⁴¹. A classic Buddhist text, invariably quoted to demonstrate Buddhist agnosticism is Chapter 1 of the *Tevigga-Sutta*¹⁴². This discourse starts off with an argument between two Brahmins, Vasetta and Bharadvaga. Each of them, has his own path which leads to a "state of union with Brahma", and they begin to dispute about which one is superior. Unable to come to an agreement, they seek the advice of Buddha. Buddha establishes the fact that neither they, nor the sages that they respect or invoke, have met "Brahma face to face", and shows that there is a contradiction in their belief: they are dogmatic in their own "straight path" that leads to Brahma, yet they do not know Brahma, nor have they seen him. The Buddha concludes, "Verily, Vesettha, that Brahmans versed in the Three Vedas should be able to show the way to a state of union with that which they do not know, neither have seen - such a condition of things has no existence!"¹⁴³

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

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

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

¹⁴³ *ibid*, p. 173.

¹⁴⁴ *ibid*, p. 176.

¹⁴⁵ *ibid*, p. 180.

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

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

The apparent Buddhist rejection of God as Creator is also made in the context of rejecting the doctrine of certain Brahmans¹⁴⁹. The Buddha describes a being who thinks of himself as Brahma, as the Creator, but in reality, he was born into the world like others. He gains a following of people who also believe him to be the "Creator", by virtue of the fact that he lived a long time before them, not by the fact that he created them. The Buddha describes a being, who thinks of himself as the Creator, and who in reality is not. His belief is a delusion of grandeur. At the end of his discourse, the Buddha states, "This, bretheren, is the first state of things on account of which, starting from which, some recluses

¹⁴⁶ *ibid.*, p. 185.

¹⁴⁷ *ibid.*, p. 186.

¹⁴⁸ *ibid.*, p. 178.

¹⁴⁹ Nyanaponika Thera, *Buddhism and the God-idea*, pp. 10-11.

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

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

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

Hinduism, not the Bahá'í Faith, is generally credited for having brought the principle of religious unity to the modern world¹⁵¹. Although Bahá'ís have this principle as a central tenet of their faith, they are only just starting to explore how it might be put into action. In contrast, the Hindu contribution to religious harmony has been a living tradition in India and

¹⁵⁰ *ibid*, p. 11.

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

the Far East for over several millennia. Nowhere is the spiritual unity in diversity principle more beautifully and poetically stated than in the Hindu scriptures¹⁵². Hinduism, along with Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism have an experience of inter-religious harmony far beyond anything in the history of the Abrahamic religions. Bahá'ís must have the humility not only to accept this, but willingly celebrate and appreciate it.

6. Modern Eastern Pluralism

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

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

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

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

¹⁵³ quoted by Prabhavananda, in *The Spiritual Heritage of India*, p. 341.

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

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

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

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

¹⁵⁴ Ramakrishna, *The Gospel of Ramakrishna*, pp. 60-1.

¹⁵⁵ Vivekananda, *The complete works of Swami Vivekananda*, volume I, p. 15.

¹⁵⁶ *ibid*, p. 16.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

It is also worth noting that the founder of the World Congress of Faiths organization, Sir Francis Younghusband, developed a deep interest in Eastern religious literature. He was able to study them through his numerous expeditions to India, China and Tibet¹⁶⁰. The Reverend Marcus Braybrooke, who has been a central figure of the interfaith movement for the last 30 years and longstanding president of the World Congress of Faiths, spent a year in India in 1962-3, and subsequently wrote several works on the relationship of Christianity to Hinduism¹⁶¹.

¹⁵⁸ Paul Knitter, *Jesus and the Other Names*, p. 28.

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

¹⁶⁰ M. Braybrooke, *The Wider Vision*, pp. 22-32.

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

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

Sri Aurobindo was an Indian sage who lived and wrote around the same time as the Catholic theologian Teilhard de Chardin, in the first half of this century. Aurobindo, like Chardin, wrote of spiritual evolution. Aurobindo states, "All evolution is in essence a heightening of the force of consciousness in the manifest being so that it may be raised into the greater intensity of what is still unmanifest, from matter into life, from life into mind, from mind into the spirit"¹⁶². This upward evolution through different grades of consciousness or spirit is also a natural part of Bahá'í teachings¹⁶³. For Aurobindo, the path towards higher consciousness is leading to the "supermind". The force behind this upward evolution, he termed the Spirit or Mind. Unlike Chardin, Aurobindo was a religious pluralist. Aurobindo, in the introduction to his commentary on the Baghavad Gita sets out his principle of religious harmony and his opposition to religious exclusivism as follows:

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

¹⁶² Aurobindo, *The Life Divine*, p. 726.

¹⁶³ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, chap. 36.

¹⁶⁴ Aurobindo, *Essays on the Gita*, p. 2.

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

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

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

¹⁶⁵ Aurobindo, *The Life Divine*, pp. 699-700.

itself to develop its own truth and reality"¹⁶⁶.

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

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

¹⁶⁶ *ibid*, pp. 863-4.

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

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

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

¹⁶⁷ M. Ghandi, *All men are Brothers*, no. 26.

¹⁶⁸ *ibid*, no. 24.

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

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

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

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

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

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

¹⁷⁰ Shoghi Effendi, *World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 114.

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

7. Doctrinal issues of Finality

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

There are many ways Bahá'ís can refute the charge of heresy, only one will be mentioned here¹⁷². The Bahá'í position with respect to Muhammad being the "Seal of the Prophets" is to agree with it. They do not dispute it. But what they do say is that the "Seal" here refers to the "prophetic tradition", which is limited to the Abrahamic religions. The term "prophet" is used only by Muslims and the "People of the Book" (Christians and Jews). In the tradition of the "prophet", Muhammad is the "Seal". But there are other religious traditions in the world which have developed in parallel to the Abrahamic tradition. The "Seal of the prophet" does not for instance mean that there will be no more Hindu or Buddhist sages. The "Seal of the Prophets" does not mean that there will not be future revelations from God, only that in the "prophetic tradition", or Abrahamic tradition, Islam is the final one.

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

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

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

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

¹⁷³ Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, p. 60.

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

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

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

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

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

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

8. Conclusion

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

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

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

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

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

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Special Supplement

Selected Talks and Statements on Interfaith Issues by Religious Leaders and Scholars

Compiled by Anjam Khursheed

The following talks and addresses have been compiled to commemorate the 50th Anniversary of the Inter-Religious Organisation of Singapore. The selection is only meant to provide a small sample of the rapidly growing body of interfaith literature now available. Each talk or statement has been chosen primarily for its historical importance.

George Townshend, an Irish Archdeacon, wrote numerous books on the relationship between Christianity and the Bahá'í Faith and was one of the leading Western Bahá'í scholars in the first half of this century. His talk, delivered at the first World Congress of Faiths conference in 1936, is one of the earliest Bahá'í papers to appear in a modern interfaith setting. The Hindu contribution comes from some of Vivekananda's talks delivered at the first Parliament of the World's Religions conference held in Chicago in 1893. These talks, as well as his subsequent tours of the West, did much to disseminate information about Hinduism in the West. Vivekananda was the foremost disciple of the 19th century Indian sage, Ramakrishna, whose teachings revolved around the unity of religions and the non-dualist approach to God. The Buddhist talk comes from the fourteenth Dalai Lama, who is at present an influential spokesman for ecumenism between Eastern and Western religious traditions. The Jewish contribution comes from Jonathan Sacks, who was Chief Rabbi Elect of the United Hebrew Congregations of the British Commonwealth. Sacks was one of the first Chief Rabbis to clearly state his support for interfaith dialogue and religious pluralism. Robert Runcie, the present Archbishop of Canterbury, is also unequivocal in his support for interfaith dialogue. In his 1986 Sir Francis Younghusband memorial lecture, given here, Runcie displays an openness to other religions that is remarkably different to the exclusivist approaches taken

by his predecessors. Within Catholicism, the historic *Nostra Aetate* statement made by the II Vatican Council in 1965 is given. The statement began a new era of interfaith dialogue for the Catholic Church. Also included is an address given by Pope John Paul II in his recent visit to India. This message is concerned with interfaith relations in Asia. The Islamic contribution is problematic, since there are no religious leaders who represent the Islamic world, nor even a large section of it. Instead, the talk by Yusuf Ali delivered at the first World Congress of Faiths conference in London 1936 is given. Yusuf Ali was the translator of the most widely disseminated version of the Quran in English.

BAHÁ'U'LLÁH'S GROUND PLAN OF WORLD FELLOWSHIP*

George Townshend

**World Congress of Faith, 1936, London
Thursday, July 16th Morning Session**

The Ground Plan of World Fellowship which is now submitted to your consideration was composed out of the writings of Bahá'u'lláh and presented by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in London, and later in Paris, about a quarter of a century ago. It proposes in the simplest possible form a practical scheme for mastering the urgent problem of world-fellowship; and its originating idea, though of outstanding magnitude, is such as to place the whole plan throughout, from its beginning, in complete accord with the purpose we have before us today - that of promoting the spirit of fellowship through the inspiration of religion.

This Plan, in every feature, plainly implies that nothing less than a concerted effort on a world scale, with the spiritual energies of mankind informing its practical energies, will now suffice to awaken the spirit of fellowship and secure deliverance from danger. No local or regional effort; no partial effort of either religion alone or statecraft alone, will completely solve our problems. The sense of fellowship, to be adequate to this unique emergency, must, on the one hand, be broad-based on the whole of our human nature, spiritual, moral and intellectual, and on the other hand must not be limited by any terrestrial boundaries whatever.

* Taken from *Faiths and Fellowship, Proceedings of the World Congress of Faiths Conference*, published by J. M. Watkins, 21 Cecil Court, London, W. C. 2, 1936, pp. 299-317. Reprinted with permission from the World Congress of Faiths.

Such a thesis may still be ahead of the public opinion of mankind. But it is not so far ahead of that opinion as it was when it was first proposed in this city in 1911. Today our emergency is rather more serious than then; but it is of the same general character. What, then, and up to the present, has been lacking in men's experiments is clearness of spiritual vision, the guidance of intuition. Only Faith can point or see the way in such an hour as this. Men question the love of a God who could let loose on them so dire a cataclysm and could choose out this generation for suffering wholly unprecedented. Their doubt cuts them off from the source of light and help. There is no vision; and the people perish. Only Faith sees clearly, in open view, that this darkness is cast by a great light, that this passing defeat of the spirit of Fellowship is the prelude of its final victory. A loving God would not have set this generation problems without bestowing the ability to solve them, would not inflict dire penalties on those whom he regarded as guiltless.

We are daunted by the strange new troubles that close us in on every side; we do not look within and observe that a new power of mastering these is being developed in conscience and in spirit. Intellectual vision never was so keen as in this generation; but spiritual vision, was it ever more weak? We talk, we boast, of the New Age, but we miss its greatest gift. We say the human race is at last reaching maturity, but we do not realise the fullness, the completeness, of this growth. We perceive it is intellectual; we do not perceive that it is, in like measure, moral and spiritual. Man's conscience has become more sensitive, his spirit more responsive to heavenly promptings. As he is today endowed with a new degree of intellectual power, so also is he endowed today with a new degree of religious power. The evolutionary process, with even hand, bears onward the whole being and nature of man; his heart as well as his brain. New ideals, new hopes, new dreams of further progress, a more general, more insistent desire to build a better world than the one which we inherit, these bear witness to man's consciousness of growth. In all its faculties the human race is passing from childhood and ignorance towards maturity; towards the tasks that befit full manhood. Today mankind is like a youth leaving school for the sterner world of business and affairs. It is called on to put into practice the lessons of moral principle and human fellowship in which it has been instructed for so long. For how many centuries have we, all of us, been under tutelage to those whom we revere as the Founders of our Faiths? Is it strange that a time should come when we should be required to put into concrete deeds

the precepts of brotherhood we all acknowledge, and should at last be threatened with condign punishment if we disobey?

Much, indeed, has been done of late to remedy old wrongs, to suppress tyranny, to uplift the oppressed, to relieve the poor, to teach the ignorant. But how much remains undone! We have accomplished enough to convict ourselves of being fitted for a better social order, of being ready to inaugurate a system of widespread justice and fraternity, and of lacking the resolution to put our ideals into effect. There is enough of good in our recent record to incriminate us, but not enough to deliver us. We stand now before the judgment seat of heaven condemned by the evidence of our own acts.

We had no vision. Men turned from the saints, mystics and seers, and listened to secular philosophers. Blind leaders of the blind, into what perdition have they led us! Our intellectual eminence by some fatality heightened our troubles. Divorced from faith, it aggravated human pride, taught men to forget their moral responsibility and to deny their servitude before the moral law. The inevitable hour of retribution draws near.

Surely this is a love-tragedy vaster in its scale, more terrible in its poignancy than any in the history of our race!

The urge of evolution pressed us forward; we would not go. The spirit of fellowship grew warm in our hearts; we would not feed its flame. The gates of world-brotherhood opened wide; we turned away. God poured His spiritual bounties on spirit and conscience in greater abundance than ever; we in our blindness rejected His gifts and Him.

But this failure is not final nor for long. It is not the failure of Faith, nor yet of Love. It is the open, the confessed failure of human wisdom. Through its purgation men who have doubted will learn to turn for fellowship and peace to the way they have not trodden; the way of religion. But all must tread this way together. Since the whole world as a unit is involved, the ideals which are to guide this movement must be given a definite shape. If there is to be concerted action towards a single goal, some map of the common journey must be made. Vague sentiments of goodwill, however genuine, will not suffice. Some explicit agreement on principles will be required for any co-ordinated progress.

It was to this task that Bahá'u'lláh long ago addressed himself, and worked out a Ground Plan on which the temple of human fellowship might be reared. It consisted of a set of fundamental principles and represented the minimum of what the occasion required. No foundation less deeply dug than this will hold the structure that is to be built upon it.

The burden of the whole scheme was laid ultimately upon the shoulders of each individual man and woman. Everybody by virtue of his status as a human being had his share in the vast world enterprise. The principle of individual responsibility was thus to be the basis of all progress.

But underneath this basic fact of human duty lay something deeper yet. The living rock on which this foundation was to be laid was something the strength of which humanity hitherto has too little recognised. That rock is the Truth. This spirit of fellowship which we seek to encourage is not by Bahá'u'lláh conceived as some addition to being, which the genius of man should undertake to create. As a flower within the bud, it lies waiting the hour of its appearance. It is a reality which our fragmentariness denies. And what this Assembly desires to do is not to create something new, but to give expression to something which is already in existence though unused. Man's advancing power is due to his increasing knowledge of truth; and the magnificence of this present age bears witness in the last resort not to the personal greatness of this generation, but rather to the greatness of a continuously unfolding Truth. If this Age is to become the Age of Universal Brotherhood, it must be the Age of Knowledge, knowledge of Truth. The Truth will set us free. The Truth will make us one.

As the first item of his programme, therefore, Bahá'u'lláh claimed that every individual should have the right of seeking for himself the truth. Love of truth, which at the present time is growing apace among mankind, is the sole real corrective of all forms of error and illusion. The great enmities which in the past have divided mankind, and which were due to misunderstanding and ignorance, have, in recent times, lost their vitality, and our estrangements are now due chiefly to the instinct of imitation and to prejudice. These prejudices have come down to us from the past, racial, religious, national. For them all Bahá'u'lláh offers one radical cure, the search for truth. The battle which mankind yet has to fight between prejudice and truth he seems to regard as the Armageddon of the human soul.

Through this search for truth mankind at last would become really and clearly conscious of the essential unity of the human race. For this unity is, and has ever been, a fact. "Ye are the branches of one tree, and the leaves of one branch. Deal ye with one another with the utmost love and harmony, with friendliness and fellowship", wrote Bahá'u'lláh. From the full knowledge of this unity, and from nothing less, there would be born in this age a spirit of world fellowship adequate to the present emergency. On this consciousness of unity, therefore, 'Abdu'l-Bahá laid the greatest stress. He gave to it a central place in his programme, other features supporting or amplifying it or giving it application in the practical affairs of mankind.

One of the facts which has obscured from men's view their essential unity is the difference between the world religions, which has been made the cause of estrangement, or prejudice and even of ill-will and strife. But, insisted 'Abdu'l-Bahá, there is nothing in these differences which should produce so sad a result. Indeed, there is an important aspect in which all religions are at heart one, and he included the existence of this unity as a principle in his scheme. He meant, so it seems, that a religion does not consist solely of a doctrine, and an institution, but is also, in a real and vital sense a spiritual atmosphere. It is, as he once described it, "an attitude of soul towards God, reflected in life." This is the essence of true religion; and to this extent, the whole world over, members of all the religions have an outlook, an experience, an obligation which they share in common with one another in spite of their special and distinctive loyalties, and which group them all together apart from the sceptic.

The more intensely spiritual men are, the more vividly conscious are they of the reality and sweetness of this communion, and one of their privileges is the experience of a deep sympathy, a common lowliness, a common aspiration which they share with those of a different tradition from their own.

Not only in their atmosphere and their influence but even in their profounder teachings the world-religions may show forth this unity. Do not all our faiths affirm and magnify the love of God for His creatures? What truth could be more ancient, more precious than this? What would bind those who espouse it with a closer tie of fellowship?

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

Experts in comparative religion have spoken with emphasis of the points of agreement to be found between the world religions. Professor Cheyne quotes Max Muller as "advising the Brahmists to call themselves Christians," and himself argues that the reconciliation of religions must precede that of races "which at present is so lamentably incomplete." The evidence of men of learning is supported by that of another cloud of witnesses, whose testimony none can gainsay, and who speak with the voice not of intellectual criticism but of spiritual knowledge. The highest exponents of a religion, those who understand most thoroughly its meaning and interpret its spirit with the most compelling authority, are those men and women of mystical genius whose impassioned devotion and obedience to their divine Master is the outstanding feature of their lives. If each of these religions were strictly exclusive, the negation of all the others, bringing to men its own irreconcilable message, those who followed these religions to the extreme, the mystics and the saints, would assuredly move farther and farther apart, and would come to rest at the last point of divergence. The greater the saint the wider the gulf between him and the saints of alien allegiances. At the same time the less aspiring and spiritually gifted multitudes, immersed in the daily human concerns which all men share alike, would be found to be the least estranged from one another by their differing creeds.

But in fact this is not so. Strangely, very strangely, religious history shows us something quite different, exactly the opposite. The contrast between each world-religion and all its sister-religions is, as a rule, felt most acutely and insisted on most vigorously by the less mystically

minded of its votaries. While the mystics of all the religions, instead of moving farther and ever farther apart, seem rather to travel by converging paths and to draw nearer and nearer together.

If one is to accept the account of their experience given by contemporaries or by themselves, these mystics seem all the world over to have gone upon the same spiritual adventure, to be drawn onward by the same experience of an outpoured heavenly love; and they testify one and all that to reach this knowledge of the love of God is to understand at last the mystery and the hidden blessedness of life, and to possess an everlasting treasure for which the sacrifice of all earthly things is but a little price.

This fellowship among all mystics is common knowledge, of which evidence is within the reach of all. In a well-known English work, Miss Underhill writes of the mystics that, "We meet these persons in the east and the west, in the ancient, medieval, and modern worlds. Their one passion appears to be the prosecution of a certain spiritual and intangible quest... This, for them, has constituted the whole meaning of life... and it is an indirect testimony to its objective actuality that whatever the place or period in which they have arisen, their aims, doctrines and methods have been substantially the same. Their experience, therefore, forms a body of evidence, curiously self-consistent and often mutually explanatory..." (Introduction to *Mysticism*, Chapter I)

Every public library in this country will contain books supplying illustrations of this statement. The mystical outlook and perspective both on the things of heaven and the things of earth is in its essence eternally the same. But perhaps no instance of the fundamental unity that underlies all mystical experience is more striking than that parallelism between Plotinus and St. Augustine to which in his *Evolution of Theology* Professor Edward Caird draws attention. "Some of the finest expressions of this (the mystical) attitude of soul," he writes, "may be found in the Confessions of St. Augustine. But when St. Augustine expresses his deepest religious feelings we find that he repeats the thoughts and almost the very words of Plotinus." Professor Caird then shows how closely akin to the thought of Plotinus is "that great passage in which Augustine gives an account of his last conversation with his mother Monica about the life of the redeemed in heaven." And he concludes, "how deeply neo-Platonism must have sunk into the spirit of St. Augustine, when, in

describing the highest moment of his religious experience, he adopts almost verbally the language in which Plotinus tries to depict the mystic ecstasy of the individual soul as it enters into communion with the soul of the world."

By what diverse paths have mystics, who had nothing in common save wholehearted servitude before the one loving God, by what diverse paths have they all alike attained the blessed Presence? And what man in his pride of opinion will shut out from Paradise those whom God's own hand has admitted? Thus do scholars and saints join to testify that the great religions have their aspect of unity as well as their aspect of variety, and that without qualifying their special allegiance, worshippers in all religions may find something in the fundamental nature of religion itself which promotes a sweet, precious and abiding sense of true companionship.

The promotion of a boundless spirit of concord and goodwill, Bahá'u'lláh maintained to be agreeable to the genius of every world-religion. Whatever misunderstanding may have arisen in bygone centuries, no religion as originally taught was meant to encourage animosity. Quite the contrary. Religion is meant to heal discord. So important, in an age of disintegration, did this feature of religion seem that 'Abdu'l-Bahá proposed to include in his Plan the precept that, "the purpose of religion is to promote harmony and affection."

One will not doubt this loving purpose may be discovered, or rediscovered, in every one of our world-faiths, and assuredly in Christianity. If we look away from Christendom to Christ and to the pure teaching of Christ, we find it evident throughout the Gospels. Christ said that one's whole duty was to love God and one's neighbour, and He described neighbour as meaning anyone you could help regardless of creed or kin. He made fellowship in love the evidence of Christian membership, "By this shall all men know that ye are My disciples if ye have love one to another."

In this Age we congratulate ourselves that for centuries past religious enmity has been continually growing more weak. Yet our ideal remains negative. To manifest no illwill towards those who differ in opinion from us is not enough. Christ enjoined a more positive attitude of soul, one of active goodwill despite all differences. When God thus commands a

spirit of affection towards all, He gives the power to obey His command. Religion, in other words, is creative. Through its force the will of an earnest man is enabled to achieve an inward change that otherwise would be beyond his strength. If this were not so, what useful place would religion fill in this kosmos of ours?

If now the creative power of religion to effect this purpose were called upon and put to vigorous use, how many vital problems which have proved insoluble on the intellectual plane, such as the reunion of Christendom or the combating of secularism, might prove much more tractable when carried to the spiritual plane!

Another effort at harmonisation was called for when Bahá'u'lláh included in this scheme an active partnership between religion and science.

Tolerance between the two is too little. In their nature they are complementary, as two wings with which the soul soars towards knowledge of the truth. Science divorced from religion gives a wholly distorted view of reality. Religion divorced from science may become a mere superstition. Man is to use both as his servants and thus to bring the material aspect of life and the spiritual aspect at last into evident and complete accord.

To these principles Bahá'u'lláh added, as necessary for practical results, certain provisions of a more material nature. 'Abdu'l-Bahá mentioned laws to prevent extremes of indigence and opulence, universal education, a common language, a central World-Tribunal.

To the use by all nations of a secondary or world language in addition to their mother tongue, great importance was attached. Without this device fellowship would never be assured. The religious history of mankind from the days of Babel to the present bears out this emphasis. When we remember, for example, the influence of the general use of the Greek language throughout the Roman Empire at the beginning of our Era; when we consider how in Islam the adoption of Arabic as a common language united peoples hitherto estranged, facilitated the interchange of thought and aided the rapid extension of a single culture over vast regions; or when again we observe how the cause of ecclesiastic unity was promoted by the use, and weakened by the disuse, of the Latin

language as a medium among the peoples of western Europe centuries ago; we are driven to conclude that in this age of radio and aviation a world-language would unify the peoples of mankind to a degree unprecedented in the past and difficult for us to calculate in anticipation.

The federal tribunal or Board of Arbitration which in a few words 'Abdu'l-Bahá proposed, differed in three notable points from the League which afterwards was set up. The provision of an adequate police force was an essential prerequisite: the draft of any proposed constitution was to be referred not only to the governments but also to the peoples of the world; and, when finally ratified and adopted, it was to enjoy the full support of religion, of church as well as of state, and its strict maintenance against any violation by any nation was to be held by all mankind as a sacred obligation.

In these and all other reforms man's greatest stay would be the Holy Spirit, without whose aid no peace or fellowship or unification would ever be secured.

This scheme of world fellowship, first promulgated some forty years before, was presented twenty-five years ago in London by 'Abdu'l-Bahá. "This," he said, "is a short summary of the teachings of Baha'u'llah. To establish this, Bahá'u'lláh underwent great difficulties and hardships. He was in constant confinement and he suffered great persecution. But... from the darkness of his prison he sent out a great light into the world." ('Abdu'l-Bahá in London, p. 18)

'Abdu'l-Bahá claimed that these principles were consistent with the spirit of all the world-religions, and were measured with exact and unique fitness to mankind's heightened capacity and its tremendous responsibility at this time. He felt no doubt of this being at no very distant date adopted: fellowship along these lines was the birthright of our New Age. But though they have percolated far through the world and have cheered the hearts of many, yet the larger collaboration between races and religions here so definitely outlined has in fact been postponed in favour of narrower views and more materialistic reforms. Our civilisation is in desperate plight and has sunk into a moral and spiritual abyss.

Men realise the urgent need of a reformation greater in range and intensity than mankind has ever yet achieved; but know not how to meet that need.

In such an emergency does not this bold original scheme of fellowship merit serious consideration and even the test of experiment? Does it deserve to be merely ignored by the rulers and teachers of the world?

In advocating peace to a western audience 'Abdu'l-Bahá once said: "You have had war for thousands of years; why not try peace for a change? If you do not like it you can always go back to war." One might hazard a similar suggestion about this fellowship plan. We have tried every other device, why not now try this?

For all its brevity, this summary may suffice to suggest the character of the Ground Plan of World Fellowship constructed by Bahá'u'lláh and presented here in London by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and may indicate how close it is in spirit and in purpose to the ideal which is now before this Assembly.

If it be true that reforms as great and as numerous as these are demanded by the Genius of our Age, one will perceive why the alternatives tried by mundane wisdom during this generation have resulted in consistent disappointment. What has been lacking in all is religious insight, an appreciation of the fact that evolution has brought to men an advance in their moral and spiritual powers and a proportionate heightening of their opportunities and responsibilities.

"That one is a man indeed who to-day dedicateth himself to the service of the entire human race... It is not for him to pride himself who loveth his own country, but rather for him who loveth the whole world. The earth is but one country and mankind its citizens." (Gleanings from Bahá'u'lláh, p.250)

Bahá'u'lláh clearly affirms that without a keener spirituality, a loftier and firmer faith in the Universal Father mankind will not discover the way out of its troubles. Only through the initiative of religion will humanity be rescued from dissention and united in hearts' fellowship. And if religiously minded men and women are to leaven with the spirit of fellowship this love-lorn and lonely world until the whole be

leavened, that which they will need beyond all else is that they have in their hearts no place where doubt or fear may enter but be possessed with the invincible assurance that under God the whole movement of evolution is with us in this endeavour, that no difficulty, no delay, no defeat which may take shape as we advance can ever stem the onward march of Heaven's purpose, that within man's soul to-day are ample powers to win all that we desire, and that the banner under which mankind will stand at last united is that spiritual faith in the love of Almighty God, which is the universal heritage of us all.

Comments by the Chairman, Viscount Sir Herbert Samuel:

If one were compelled to choose which of the many religious communities of the world was closest to the aim and purpose of this Congress, I think one would be obliged to say that it was the comparatively little known Bahá'í community.

Other faiths and creeds have to consider at a Congress like this, in what way they can contribute to the idea of world fellowship. But the Bahá'í faith exists almost for the sole purpose of contributing to the fellowship and the unity of mankind.

Other communities may consider how far a particular element of their respective faith may be regarded as similar to those of other communities, but the Bahá'í faith exists for the purpose of combining in one synthesis all those elements in the various faiths which are held in common. And that is why I suggest that this Bahá'í community is really more fully in agreement with the main idea which has led to the summoning of the Congress than any particular one of the great religious communities of the world.

Its origin was in Persia where a mystic prophet, who took the name of the Bab, the "Gate," began a mission among the Persians in the earlier part of the nineteenth century. He collected a considerable number of adherents. His activities were regarded with apprehension by the Government of Persia of that day. Finally, he and his leading disciples were seized by the forces of the Persian Government and were shot in the year 1850. In spite of the persecution, the movement spread in Persia and in many of the countries of Islam. He was followed as the head of the community by the one who has been its principal prophet and exponent, Bahá'u'lláh. He was most active and despite persecution and imprisonment made it his life's mission to spread the creed which he claimed to have received by direct divine revelation. He died in 1892 and was succeeded as the head of the community by his son, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, who was born in 1844. He was living in Haifa, in a simple house, when I went there as High Commissioner in 1920, and I had the privilege of one or two most interesting conversations with him on the principles and methods of the Bahá'í faith. He died in 1921 and his obsequies were attended by a great concourse of people. I had the honour of representing His Majesty the King on that occasion.

Since that time, the Bahá'í faith has secured the support of a very large number of communities throughout the world. At the present time it is estimated that there are about eight hundred Bahá'í communities in various countries. In the United States near Chicago, a great temple, now approaching completion, has been erected by American adherents to the faith, with assistance from elsewhere. Shoghi Effendi, the grandson of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, is now the head of the community. He came to England and was educated at Balliol College, Oxford, but now lives at Haifa, and is the centre of a community which has spread throughout the world.

SOME OF THE VIVEKANANDA'S SPEECHES AT THE PARLIAMENT OF RELIGION*

- Sept 11: Introduction Paper at World Conference (Welcome Speech)
- Sept 15: Why We Disagree
- Sept 19: Paper on Hinduism
- Sept 27: Address at the Final Session

September 11: Introduction Paper at World Conference (Welcome Speech)

Sisters and Brothers of America,

It fills my heart with joy unspeakable to rise in response to the warm and cordial welcome which you have given us. I thank you in the name of the most ancient order of monks in the world; I thank you in the name of the mother of religions; and I thank you in the name of the millions and millions of Hindu people of all classes and sects.

My thanks, also, to some of the speakers on this platform who, referring to the delegates from the Orient, have told you that these men from far-off nations may well claim the honor of bearing to different lands the idea of toleration. I am proud to belong to a religion which has taught the world both tolerance and universal acceptance. We believe not only in universal toleration, but we accept all religions as true.

I am proud to belong to a nation which has sheltered the persecuted and the refugees of all religions and all nations of the earth. I am proud to tell

* Taken from *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Volume 1, Advaita Ashrama, Calcutta, India, 1997, pp.3-24

you that we have gathered in our bosom the purest remnant of the Israelites, who came to the southern India and took refuge with us in the very year in which their holy temple was shattered to pieces by Roman tyranny. I am proud to belong to the religion which has sheltered and is still fostering the remnant of the grand Zoroastrian nation. I will quote to you, brethren, a few lines from a hymn which I remember to have repeated from my earliest boyhood, which is every day repeated by millions of human beings:

“As the different streams having their sources in different places all mingle their water in the sea, so, O Lord, the different paths which men take through different tendencies, various though they appear, crooked or straight, all lead to Thee.”

The present convention, which is one of the most august assemblies ever held, is in itself a vindication, a declaration to the world, of the wonderful doctrine preached in the Gita:

“Whosoever comes to Me, through whatsoever form, I reach him; all men are struggling through paths which in the end lead to Me.”

Sectarianism, bigotry, and its horrible descendant, fanaticism, have long possessed this beautiful earth. They have filled the earth with violence, drenched it often and often with human blood, destroyed civilization, and sent whole nations to despair. Had it not been for these horrible demons, human society would be far more advanced than it is now. But their time is come; and I fervently hope that the bell that tolled this morning in honor of this convention may be the death-knell of all fanaticism, of all persecutions with the sword or with the pen, and of all uncharitable feelings between persons wending their way to the same goal.

September 15: Why We Disagree

I will tell you a little story. You have heard the eloquent speaker who has just finished say, "Let us cease from abusing each other," and he was very sorry that there should be always so much variance.

But I think I should tell you a story which would illustrate the cause of this variance. A frog lived in a well. It had lived there for a long time. It was born there and brought up there, and yet was a little, small frog. Of course, the evolutionists were not there then to tell us whether the frog lost its eyes or not, but, for our story's sake, we must take it for granted that it had its eyes, and that it every day cleansed the water of all the worms and bacilli that lived in it with an energy that would do credit to our modern bacteriologists. In this way it went on and became a little sleek and fat. Well, one day another frog that lived in the sea came and fell into the well.

"Where are you from?"

"I am from the sea."

"The sea! How big is that? Is it as big as my well?" and he took a leap from one side of the well to the other.

"My friend," said the frog of the sea, "how do you compare the sea with your little well?"

Then the frog took another leap and asked, "Is your sea so big?"

"What nonsense you speak, to compare the sea with your well!"

"Well, then," said the frog of the well, "nothing can be bigger than my well; there can be nothing bigger than this; this fellow is a liar, so turn him out."

That has been the difficulty all the while.

I am a Hindu. I am sitting in my own little well and thinking that the whole world is my little well. The Christian sits in his little well and thinks the whole world is his well. The Mohammedan sits in his little well and thinks that is the whole world. I have to thank you of America for the great attempt you are making to break down the barriers of this little world of ours, and hope that, in the future, the Lord will help you to accomplish your purpose.

Sept 19: Paper on Hinduism

Three religions now stand in the world which have come down to us from time prehistoric - Hinduism, Zoroastrianism, and Judaism. They have all received tremendous shocks, and all of them prove by their

survival their internal strength. But while Judaism failed to absorb Christianity and was driven out of its place of birth by its all-conquering daughter, and a handful of Parsees is all that remains to tell the tale of their grand religion, sect after sect arose in India and seemed to shake the religion of the Vedas to its very foundations, but like the waters of the sea-shore in a tremendous earthquake it receded only for a while, only to return in an all-absorbing Hood, a thousand times more vigorous, and when the tumult of the rush was over, these sects were all sucked in, absorbed and assimilated into the immense body of the mother faith.

From the high spiritual flights of the Vedanta philosophy, of which the latest discoveries of science seem like echoes, to the low ideas of idolatry with its multifarious mythology, the agnosticism of the Buddhists and the atheism of the Jains, each and all have a place in the Hindu's religion.

Where then, the question arises, where is the common center to which all these widely diverging radii converge? Where is the common basis upon which all these seemingly hopeless contradictions rest? And this is the question I shall attempt to answer.

The Hindus have received their religion through revelation, the Vedas. They hold that the Vedas are without beginning and without end. It may sound ludicrous to this audience, how a book can be without beginning or end. But by the Vedas no books are meant. They mean the accumulated treasury of spiritual laws discovered by different persons in different times. Just as the law of gravitation existed before its discovery, and would exist if all humanity forgot it, so is it with the laws that govern the spiritual relations between soul and soul and between individual spirits and the Father of all spirits were there before their discovery, and would remain even if we forgot them.

The discoverers of these laws are called Rishis, and we honor them as perfected beings. I am glad to tell this audience that some of the very greatest of them were women.

Here it may be said that these laws as laws may be without end, but they must have had a beginning. The Vedas teach us that creation is without beginning or end. Science is said to have proved that the sum total of cosmic energy is always the same. Then, if there was a time when

nothing existed, where was all this manifested energy? Some say it was in a potential form in God. In that case God is sometimes potential and sometimes kinetic, which would make Him mutable. Everything mutable is a compound and everything compound must undergo that change which is called destruction. So God would die, which is absurd. Therefore, there never was a time when there was no creation.

If I may be allowed to use a simile, creation and creator are two lines, without beginning and without end, zoning parallel to each other. God is the ever-active providence, by whose power systems after systems are being evolved out of chaos, made to run for a time, and again destroyed. This is what the Brahmin boy repeats every day:

"The sun and the moon, the Lord created like the suns and the moons of previous cycles."

And this agrees with modern science.

Here I stand and if I shut my eyes, and try to conceive my existence, "I," "I," "I," what is the idea before me? The idea of a body. Am I, then, nothing but a combination of material substances? The Vedas declare, "No" I am a spirit living in a body: I am not the body. The body will die, but I shall not die. Here I am in this body; it will fall, but I shall go on living. I had also a past. The soul was not created, for creation means a combination, which means a certain future dissolution. If then the soul was created, it must die. Some are born happy, enjoy perfect health with beautiful body, mental vigor, and all wants supplied. Others are born miserable; some are without hands or feet; others again are idiots, and only drag on a wretched existence. Why, if they are all created, why does a just and merciful God create one happy and another unhappy, why is He so partial? Nor would it mend matters in the least to hold that those who are miserable in this life will be happy in another one. Why should a man be miserable even here in the reign of a just and merciful God?

In the second place, the idea of a creator God does not explain the anomaly, but simply expresses the cruel Rat of an all-powerful being. There must have been causes, then, before his birth, to make a man miserable or happy and those were his past actions.

Are not all the tendencies of the mind and the body accounted for by inherited aptitude? Here are two parallel lines of existence - one of the mind, the other of matter. If matter and its transformations answer for all that we have, there is no necessity for supposing the existence of a soul. But it cannot be proved that thought has been evolved out of matter; and if a philosophical monism is inevitable, spiritual monism is certainly logical and no less desirable than a materialistic monism; but neither of these is necessary here.

We cannot deny that bodies acquire certain tendencies from heredity, but those tendencies only mean the physical configuration through which a peculiar mind alone can act in a peculiar way. There are other tendencies peculiar to a soul caused by his past actions. And a soul with a certain tendency would, by the laws of affinity, take birth in a body which is the fittest instrument for the display of that tendency. This is in accord with science, for science wants to explain everything by habit, and habit is got through repetitions. So repetitions are necessary to explain the natural habits of a new born soul. And since they were not obtained in this present life, they must have come down from past lives.

There is another suggestion. Taking all these for granted, how is it that I do not remember anything of my past life? This can be easily explained. I am now speaking English. It is not my mother tongue; in fact, no words of my mother tongue are now present in my consciousness; but let me try to bring them up, and they rush in. That shows that consciousness is only the surface of mental ocean, and within its depths are stored up all our experiences. Try and struggle, they would come up. and you would be conscious even of your past life.

This is direct and demonstrative evidence. Verification is the perfect proof of a theory, and here is the challenge thrown to the world by the Rishis. We have discovered the secret by which the very depths of the ocean of memory can be stirred up - try it and you would get a complete reminiscence of your past life.

So then the Hindu believes that he is a spirit. Him the sword cannot pierce - him the fire cannot burn - him the water cannot melt - him the air cannot dry. The Hindu believes that every soul is a circle whose circumference is nowhere but whose center is located in the body, and

that death means the change of the center from holy to body. Nor is the soul bound by the conditions of matter.

In its very essence, it is free, unbounded, holy, pure, and perfect. But somehow or other it finds itself tied down to matter and thinks of itself as matter.

Why should the free, perfect, and pure be thus under the thralldom of matter, is the next question. How can the perfect soul be deluded into the belief that it is imperfect? We have been told that the Hindus shirk the question and say that no such question can be there- Some thinkers want to answer it by positing one or more quasi-perfect beings, and use big scientific names to fill up the gap. But naming is not explaining. The question remains the same. How can the perfect become the quasi-perfect; how can the pure, the absolute change even a microscopic particle of its nature? But the Hindu is sincere. He does not want to take shelter under sophistry. He is brave enough to face the question in a manly fashion; and his answer is: "I do not know. I do not know how the perfect being, the soul, came to think of itself as imperfect, as joined to and conditioned by matter." But the fact is a fact for all that. It is a fact in everybody's consciousness that one thinks of oneself as the body. The Hindu does not attempt to explain why one thinks one is the body. The answer that it is the will of God is no explanation. This is nothing more than what the Hindu says, "I do not know."

Well, then, the human soul is eternal and immortal, perfect and infinite, and death means only a change of center from one body to another. The present is determined by our past actions, and the future by the present. The soul will go on evolving up or reverting back from birth to birth and death to death. But here is another question: Is man a tiny boat in a tempest, raised one moment on the foamy crest of a billow and dashed down into a yawning chasm the next, rolling to and from at the mercy of good and bad actions - a powerless, helpless wreck in an ever-raging, ever-rushing, uncompromising current of cause and effect - a little moth placed under the wheel of causation, which rolls on crushing everything in its way and waits not for the widow's tears or the orphan's cry? The heart sinks at the idea, yet this is the law of nature. Is there no hope? Is there no escape? - was the cry that went up from the bottom of the heart of despair.

It reached the throne of mercy, and words of hope and consolation came down and inspired a Vedic sage, and he stood up before the world and in trumpet voice proclaimed the glad tidings:

"Hear, ye children of immortal bliss! even ye that reside in higher spheres! I have found the Ancient One who is beyond all darkness, all delusion: knowing Him alone you shall be saved from death over again."

"Children of immortal bliss" - what a sweet, what a hopeful name! Allow me to call you, brethren, by that sweet name - heirs of immortal bliss - yea, the Hindu refuses to call you sinners. We are the Children of God, the sharers of immortal bliss, holy and perfect beings. The divinities on earth - sinners! It is a sin to call a man so; it is standing libel on human nature. Come up, O lions, and shake off the delusion that you are sheep; you are souls immortal, spirits free, blest and eternal; ye are not matter, ye are not bodies; matter is your servant, not you the servant of matter.

Thus it is that the Vedas proclaim not a dreadful combination of unforgiving laws, not an endless prison of cause and effect, but that at the head of all these laws, in and through every particle of matter and force, stands One, "by whose command the wind blows, the fire burns, the clouds rain and death stalks upon the earth."

And what is His nature?

He is everywhere, the pure and formless One, the Almighty and the All-merciful. "Thou art our father, Thou art our mother, Thou art our beloved friend, Thou art the source of all strength; give us strength. Thou art He that beareth the burdens of the universe; help me bear the little burden of this life." Thus sang the Rishis of the Veda. And how to worship Him? Through love. "He is to be worshiped as the one beloved, dearer than everything in this and the next life."

This is the doctrine of love declared in the Vedas, and let us see how it is fully developed and taught by Krishna whom the Hindus believe to have been God incarnate on earth.

He taught that a man ought to live in this world like a lotus leaf, which grows in water but is never moistened by water; so a man ought to live in the world - his heart to God and his hands to work.

It is good to love God for hope of reward in this or the next world, but it is better to love God for love's sake; and the prayer goes: "Lord, I do not want wealth nor children nor learning. If it be Thy will, I shall go from birth to birth; but grant me this, that I may love Thee without the hope of reward - love unselfishly for love's sake." One of the disciples of Krishna, the then Emperor of India, was driven from his kingdom by his enemies and had to take shelter with his queen, in a forest in the Himalayas and there one day the queen asked how it was that he, the most virtuous of men, should suffer so much misery. Yudhishtira answered, "Behold, my queen, the Himalayas, how grand and beautiful they are; I love them. They do not give me any- thing but my nature is to love the grand, the beautiful, therefore I love them. Similarly, I love the Lord. He is the source of all beauty, of all sublimity. He is the only object to be loved; my nature is to love Him, and therefore I love. I do not pray for any- thing; I do not ask for anything. Let Him place me wherever He likes. I must love Him for love's sake. I cannot trade in love."

The Vedas teach that the soul is divine, only held in the bondage of matter; perfection will be reached when this bond will burst, and the word they use for it is, therefore, Mukti - freedom, freedom from the bonds of imperfection, freedom from death and misery.

And this bondage can only fall off through the mercy of God, and this mercy comes on the pure. So purity is the condition of His mercy. How does that mercy act? He reveals Himself to the pure heart; the pure and the stainless see God, yea, even in this life; then and then only all the crookedness of the heart is made straight. Then all doubt ceases. He is no more the freak of a terrible law of causation. This is the very center, the very vital conception of Hinduism. The Hindu does not want to live upon words and theories, If there are existences beyond the ordinary sensuous existence, he wants to come face to face with them. If there is a soul in him which is not matter, if there is an all-merciful universal Soul, he will Rota Him direct. He must see Him, and that alone can destroy all doubts. So the best proof a Hindu sage gives about the soul, about God, is: "I have seen the soul; I have seen God." And that is the only condition of perfection. The Hindu religion does not consist in struggles and attempts to believe a certain doctrine or dogma, but in realizing - not in believing, but in being and becoming.

Thus the whole object of their system is by constant struggle to become perfect, to become divine, to reach God, and see God; and this reaching God, seeing God, becoming perfect even as the Father in Heaven is perfect, constitutes the religion of the Hindus.

And what becomes of a man when he attains perfection? He lives a life of bliss infinite. He enjoys infinite and perfect bliss, having obtained the only thing in which man ought to have pleasure, namely God, and enjoys the bliss with God.

So far all the Hindus are agreed. This is the common religion of all the sects of India; but then perfection is absolute, and the absolute cannot be two or three. It cannot have any qualities. It cannot be an individual. And so when a soul becomes perfect and absolute, it must become one with Brahma, and it would only realize the Lord as the perfection, the reality, of its own nature and existence, the existence absolute, knowledge absolute, and bliss absolute. We have often and often read this called the losing of individuality and becoming a stock or a stone.

"He jests at scars that never felt a wound."

I tell you it is nothing of the kind. If it is happiness to enjoy the consciousness of this small body, it must be greater happiness to enjoy the consciousness of two bodies, the measure of happiness increasing with the consciousness of an increasing number of bodies, the aim, the ultimate of happiness, being reached when it would become a universal consciousness.

Therefore, to gain this infinite universal individuality, this miserable little prison - individuality must go. Then alone can death cease when I am one with life, then alone can misery cease when I am one with happiness itself, then alone can all errors cease when I am one with knowledge itself; and this is the necessary scientific conclusion- Science has proved to me that physical individuality is a delusion, that really my body is one little continuously changing body in an unbroken ocean of matter, and Advaita (unity) is the necessary conclusion with my other counterpart, Soul.

Science is nothing but the finding of unity. As soon as science would reach perfect unity, it would stop from further progress, because it would

reach the goal. Thus chemistry could not progress farther when it would discover one element out of which all others could be made. Physics would stop when it would be able to fulfill its services in discovering one energy of which all the others are but manifestations, and the science of religion become perfect when it would discover Him who is the one life in a universe of death, Him who is the constant basis of an ever-changing world, One who is the only Soul of which all souls are but delusive manifestations. Thus is it, through multiplicity and duality, that the ultimate unity is reached. Religion can go no farther. This is the goal of all science.

All science is bound to come to this conclusion in the long run. Manifestation, and not creation, is the word of science today; and the Hindu is only glad that what he has been cherishing in his bosom for ages is going to be taught in more forcible language and with further light from the latest conclusions of science.

Descend we now from the aspirations of philosophy to the religion of the ignorant. At the very outset, I may tell you that there is no polytheism in India. In every temple, if one stands by and listens, one will find the worshipers applying all the attributes of God, including omnipresence to the images. It is not polytheism, nor would the name henotheism explain the situation.

"The rose, called by any other name, would smell as sweet." Names are not explanations.

I remember, as a boy, hearing a Christian missionary preach to a crowd in India. Among other sweet things he was telling them was, that if he gave a blow to their idol with his stick what could it do? One of his hearers sharply answered, "If I abuse your God, what can He do?" "You would be punished," said the preacher, "when you die." "So my idol will punish you when you die," retorted the Hindu.

The tree is known by its fruits. When I have seen amongst them that are called idolaters, men, the like of whom, in morality and spirituality and love, I have never seen anywhere, I stop and ask myself, "Can sin beget holiness?"

Superstition is a great enemy of man, but bigotry is worse. Why does a Christian go to church? Why is the cross holy? Why is the face turned toward the sky in prayer? Why are there so many images in the Catholic Church? Why are there so many images in the minds of Protestants when they pray? My brethren, we can no more think about anything without a mental image than we can live without breathing- By the law of association the material image calls up the mental idea and vice versa. This is why the Hindu uses an external symbol when he worships. He will tell you, it helps to keep his mind fixed on the Being to whom he prays. He knows as well as you do that the image is not God, is not omnipresent. After all, how much does omnipresence mean to almost the whole world? It stands merely as a word, a symbol. Has God superficial area? If not, when we repeat that word "omnipresent", we think of the extended sky or of space - that is all.

As we find that somehow or other, by the laws of our mental constitution, we have to associate our ideas of infinity with the image of the blue sky, or of the sea, so we naturally connect our idea of holiness with the image of a church, a mosque, or a cross. The Hindus have associated the ideas of holiness, purity, truth, omnipresence, and such other ideas with different images and forms. But with this difference that while some people devote their whole lives to their idol of a church and never rise higher, because with them religion means an intellectual assent to certain doctrines and doing good to their fellows, the whole religion of the Hindu is centered in realization. Man is to become divine by realizing the divine. Idols or temples or churches or books are only the supports, the helps, of his spiritual childhood; but on and on he must progress.

He must not stop anywhere. "External worship, material worship," say the scriptures, "is the lowest stage; struggling to rise high, mental prayer is the next stage, but the highest stage is when the Lord has been realised." Mark, the same earnest man who is kneeling before the idol tells you, "Him the sun cannot express, nor the moon, nor the stars, the lightning cannot express Him, nor what we speak of as fire; through Him they shine." But he does not abuse anyone's idol or call its worship sin. He recognizes in it a necessary stage of life. "The child is father of the man." Would it be right for an old man to say that childhood is a sin or youth a sin?

If a man can realize his divine nature with the help of an image, would it be right to call that a sin? Nor, even when he has passed that stage, should he call it an error. To the Hindu, man is not travelling from error to truth, but from truth to truth, from lower to higher truth. To him all the religions from the lowest fetishism to the highest absolutism, mean so many attempts of the human soul to grasp and realize the Infinite, each determined by the conditions of its birth and association, and each of these marks a stage of progress; and every soul is a young eagle soaring higher and higher, gathering more and more strength till it reaches the Glorious Sun.

Unity in variety is the plan of nature, and the Hindu has recognized it. Every other religion lays down certain fixed dogmas and tries to force society to adopt them. It places before society only one coat which must fit Jack and John and Henry, all alike. If it does not fit John or Henry he must go without a coat to cover his body. The Hindus have discovered that the absolute can only be realized, or thought of, or stated through the relative, and the images, crosses, and crescents are simply so many symbols - so many pegs to hang spiritual ideas on. It is not that this help is necessary for everyone, but those that do not need it have no right to say that it is wrong. Nor is it compulsory in Hinduism.

One thing I must tell you. Idolatry in India does not mean anything horrible. It is not the mother of harlots. On the other hand, it is the attempt of undeveloped minds to grasp high spiritual truths. The Hindus have their faults, they sometimes have their exceptions; but mark this, they are always for punishing their own bodies, and never for cutting the throats of their neighbors. If the Hindu fanatic burns himself on the pyre, he never lights the fire of Inquisition. And even this cannot be laid at the door of his religion any more than the burning of witches can be laid at the door of Christianity.

To the Hindu, then, the whole world of religions is only a travelling, a coming up, of different men and women, through various conditions and circumstances, to the same goal. Every religion is only evolving a God out of the material man, and the same God is the inspirer of all of them. Why, then, are there so many contradictions? They are only apparent, says the Hindu. The contradictions come from the same truth adapting itself to the varying circumstances of different natures.

It is the same light coming through glasses of different colors- And these little variations are necessary for purposes of adaptation. But in the heart of everything the same truth reigns. The Lord has declared to the Hindu in His incarnation as Krishna: "I am in every religion as the thread through a string of pearls. Wherever thou seest extraordinary holiness and extraordinary power raising and purifying humanity, know thou that I am there." And what has been the result? I challenge the world to find, throughout the whole system of Sanskrit philosophy, any such expression as that the Hindu alone will be saved and not others. Says Vyasa, "We find perfect men even beyond the pale of our caste and creed." One thing more. How, then, can the Hindu, whose whole fabric of thought centers in God, believe in Buddhism which is agnostic, or in Jainism which is atheistic?

The Buddhists or the Jains do not depend upon God; but the whole force of their religion is directed to the great central truth in every religion, to evolve a God out of man. They have not seen the Father, but they have seen the Son. And he that hath seen the Son hath seen the Father also.

This, brethren, is a short sketch of the religious ideas of the Hindus. The Hindu may have failed to carry out all his plans, but if there is ever to be a universal religion, it must be one which will have no location in place or time; which will be infinite like the God it will preach, and whose sun will shine upon the followers of Krishna and of Christ, on saints and sinners alike; which will not be Brahminic or Buddhistic, Christian or Mohammedan, but the sum total of all these and still have infinite space for development; which in its catholicity will embrace in infinite arms, and find a place for, every human being from the lowest grovelling savage, not far removed from the brute, to the highest man towering by the virtues of his head and heart almost above humanity, making society stand in awe of him and doubt his human nature. It will be a religion which will have no place for persecution or intolerance in its polity, which will recognize divinity in every man and woman, and whose whole scope, whose whole force, will be centered in aiding humanity to realize its own true, divine nature.

Offer such a religion and all the nations will follow you. Asoka's council was a council of the Buddhist faith. Akbar's, though more to the purpose, was only a parlor meeting. It was reserved for America to proclaim to all quarters of the globe that the Lord is in every religion.

May He who is the Brahma of the Hindus, the Ahura-Mazda of the Zoroastrians, the Buddha of the Buddhists, the Jehovah of the Jews, the Father in Heaven of the Christians, give strength to you to carry out your noble idea! The star arose in the East; it travelled steadily towards the West, sometimes dimmed and sometimes effulgent, till it made a circuit of the world, and now it is again rising on the very horizon of the East, the borders of the Sanpo, a thousand fold more effulgent than it ever was before.

Hail Columbia, motherland of liberty! It has been given to thee, who never dipped her hand in her neighbor's blood, who never found out that the shortest way of becoming rich was by robbing one's neighbors, it has been given to thee to march at the vanguard of civilization with the flag of harmony.

Sept 27: Address at the Final Session

The World's Parliament of Religions has become an accomplished fact, and the merciful Father has helped those who labored to bring it into existence, and crowned with success their most unselfish labour.

My thanks to those noble souls whose large hearts and love of truth first dreamed this wonderful dream and then realized it. My thanks to the shower of liberal sentiments that has overflowed this platform. My thanks to this enlightened audience for their uniform kindness to me and for their appreciation of every thought that tends to smooth the friction of religions. A few jarring notes were heard from time to time in this harmony. My special thanks to them, for they have, by their striking contrast, made the general harmony the sweeter.

Much has been said of the common ground of religious unity. I am not going just now to venture my own theory. But if anyone here hopes that this unity will come by the triumph of any one of the religions and the destruction of the others, to him I say, "Brother, yours is an impossible hope." Do I wish that the Christian would become Hindu? God forbid. Do I wish that the Hindu or Buddhist would become Christian? God forbid.

The seed is put in the ground, and earth and air and water are placed around it. Does the seed become the earth, or the air, or the water? No. It becomes a plant, it develops after the law of its own growth, assimilates the air, the earth, and the water, converts them into plant substance, and grows into a plant.

Similar is the case with religion. The Christian is not to become a Hindu or a Buddhist, nor a Hindu or a Buddhist to become a Christian. But each must assimilate the spirit of the others and yet preserve his individuality and grow according to his own law of growth.

If the Parliament of Religions has shown anything to the world it is this: It has proved to the world that holiness, purity, and charity are not the exclusive possessions of any church in the world, and that every system has produced men and women of the most extended character. In the face of this evidence, if anybody dreams of the exclusive survival of his own religion and the destruction of others, I pity him from the bottom of my heart, and point out to him that upon the banner of every religion will soon be written, in spite of resistance: "Help and not fight", "Assimilation and not Destruction", "Harmony and peace and not Dissension".

RELIGIOUS HARMONY*

The Fourteenth Dalai Lama
Tenzin Gyatso

Talks in North America 1979-1981

Ecumenical Gatherings throughout North America

That we have here a common gathering of various believers is a positive sign. Among spiritual faiths, there are many different philosophies, some just opposite to each other on certain points. Buddhists do not accept a creator; Christians base their philosophy on that theory. There are great differences, but I deeply respect your faith, not just for political reasons or to be polite, but sincerely. For many centuries your tradition has given great service to humankind.

We Tibetans have benefited greatly from the help offered by Christian relief organizations, such as the World Council of Churches, as well as the many others that have helped Tibetan refugees when we were passing through our most difficult period. Our Christian friends all over the world showed us great sympathy along with substantial material assistance, and I would like to express my deepest thanks to them all.

All of the different religious communities accept that there is another force beyond the reach of our ordinary senses. When we pray together, I feel something, I do not know what the exact word is - whether you would call it blessings, or grace - but in any case there is a certain feeling that we can experience. If we utilize it properly, that feeling is very helpful for inner strength. For a real sense of brotherhood and sisterhood that feeling - that atmosphere and experience - is very useful and helpful. Therefore I particularly appreciate these ecumenical gatherings.

* Taken from *Kindness, Clarity, and Insight*, Snow Lion Publications, N.Y., 1984, pp. 45-50. Reprinted with permission.

All of the different religious faiths, despite their philosophical differences, have a similar objective. Every religion emphasizes human improvement, love, respect for others, sharing other peoples' suffering. On these lines every religion has more or less the same viewpoint and the same goal.

Those faiths which emphasize Almighty God and faith in and love of God have as their purpose the fulfilment of God's intentions. Seeing us all as creations of and followers of one God, they teach that we should cherish and help each other. The very purpose of faithful belief in God is to accomplish His wishes, the essence of which is to cherish, respect, love, and give service to our fellow humans.

Since an essential purpose of other religions is similarly to promote such beneficial feelings and actions, I strongly feel that from this viewpoint a central purpose of all the different philosophical explanations is the same. Through the various religious systems, followers are assuming a salutary attitude toward their fellow humans - our brothers and sisters - and implementing this good motivation in the service of human society. This has been demonstrated by a great many believers in Christianity throughout history; many have sacrificed their lives for the benefit of humankind. This is true implementation of compassion.

When we Tibetans were passing through a difficult period, Christian communities from all over the world took it upon themselves to share our suffering and rushed to our help. Without regard for racial, cultural, religious, or philosophical differences, they regarded us as fellow humans and came to help. This gave us real inspiration and recognition of the value of love.

Love and kindness are the very basis of society. If we lose these feelings, society will face tremendous difficulties; the survival of humanity will be endangered. Together with material development, we need spiritual development so that inner peace and social harmony can be experienced. Without inner peace, without inner calm, it is difficult to have lasting peace. In this field of inner development religion can make important contributions.

Although in every religion there is an emphasis on compassion and love, from the viewpoint of philosophy, of course there are differences, and

that is all right. Philosophical teachings are not the end, not the aim, not what you serve. The aim is to help and benefit others, and philosophical teachings to support those ideas are valuable. If we go into the differences in philosophy and argue with and criticize each other, it is useless. There will be endless argument; the result will mainly be that we irritate each other - accomplishing nothing. Better to look at the purpose of the philosophies and to see what is shared - an emphasis on love, compassion, and respect for a higher force.

No religion basically believes that material progress alone is sufficient for humankind. All religions believe in forces beyond material progress. All agree that it is very important and worthwhile to make strong effort to serve human society.

To do this, it is important that we understand each other. In the past, due to narrow-mindedness and other factors, there has sometimes been discord between religious groups. This should not happen again. If we look deeply into the value of a religion in the context of the worldwide situation, we can easily transcend these unfortunate happenings. For, there are many areas of common ground on which we can have harmony. Let us just be side by side - helping, respecting, and understanding each other - in common effort to serve humankind. The aim of human society must be the compassionate betterment of human beings.

Politicians and world leaders are trying their best to achieve arms control and so forth, and this is very useful. At the same time, we who have certain beliefs have a duty and responsibility to control our own bad thoughts. This is the real disarmament, our own arms control. With inner peace and full control of bad thoughts, external control is not particularly significant. Without inner control, no matter what steps are taken, external efforts will not make much difference. Therefore, under the present circumstances, we in the religious community have a special responsibility to all humanity - a universal responsibility.

The world situation is such that continent to continent all are heavily dependent on each other, and under such circumstances genuine cooperation is essential. This depends on good motivation. That is our universal responsibility.

Question: As a religious leader, are you interested in actively encouraging others to join your faith? Or do you take the position of being available if someone should seek knowledge of your faith?

Answer: This is an important question. I am not interested in converting other people to Buddhism but in how we Buddhists can contribute to human society, according to our own ideas. I believe that other religious faiths also think in a similar way, seeking to contribute to the common aim.

Because the different religions have at times argued with each other rather than concentrating on how to contribute to a common aim, for the last twenty years in India I have taken every occasion to meet with Christian monks - Catholic and Protestant - as well as Muslims and Jews and, of course, in India, many Hindus. We meet, pray together, meditate together, and discuss their philosophical ideas, their way of approach, their techniques. I take great interest in Christian practices, what we can learn and copy from their system. Similarly, in Buddhist theory there may be points such as meditative techniques which can be practiced in the Christian church.

Just as Buddha showed an example of contentment, tolerance, and serving others without selfish motivation, so did Jesus Christ. Almost all of the great teachers lived a saintly life - not luxuriously like kings or emperors but as simple human beings. Their inner strength was tremendous, limitless, but the external appearance was of contentment with a simple way of life.

Question: Can there be a synthesis of Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, Hinduism, and all religions, gathering the best in all, and forming a world religion?

Answer: Forming a new world religion is difficult and not particularly desirable. However, in that love is essential to all religions, one could speak of the universal religion of love. As for the techniques and methods for developing love as well as for achieving salvation or permanent liberation, there are many differences between religions. Thus, I do not think we could make one philosophy or one religion.

Furthermore, I think that differences in faith are useful. There is a richness in the fact that there are so many different presentations of the way. Given that there are so many different types of people with various predispositions and inclinations, this is helpful.

At the same time, the motivation of all religious practice is similar - love, sincerity, honesty. The way of life of practically all religious persons is contentment. The teachings of tolerance, love, and compassion are the same. A basic goal is the benefit of humankind - each type of system seeking in its own unique ways to improve human beings. If we put too much emphasis on our own philosophy, religion, or theory, are too attached to it, and try to impose it on other people, it makes trouble. Basically all the great teachers, such as Gautama Buddha, Jesus Christ, or Mohammed, founded their new teachings with a motivation of helping their fellow humans. They did not mean to gain anything for themselves nor to create more trouble or unrest in the world.

Most important is that we respect each other and learn from each other those things that will enrich our own practice. Even if all the systems are separate, since they each have the same goal, the study of each other is helpful.

Question: Sometimes when we hear Eastern religions compared with Western culture, the West is made to seem materialistic and less enlightened than the East. Do you see such a difference?

Answer: There are two kinds of food - food for mental hunger and food for physical hunger. Thus a combination of these two - material progress and spiritual development is the most practical thing. I think that many Americans, particularly young Americans, realize that material progress alone is not the full answer for human life. Right now all of the Eastern nations are trying to copy Western technology. We Easterners such as Tibetans, like myself, look to Western technology, feeling that once we develop material progress, our people can reach some sort of permanent happiness. But when I come to Europe or North America, I see that underneath the beautiful surface there is still unhappiness, mental unrest, and restlessness. This shows that material progress alone is not the full answer for human beings.

THE INTERFAITH IMPERATIVE*

Jonathan Sacks

Lecture to the Annual General Meeting of the Council of Christians and Jews, 1989

Many years ago I had the privilege of meeting one of the great religious leaders of the Jewish world. He was a Hassidic Rebbe, head of a large group of Jewish mystics. I was inspired by his teachings and impressed by the spirituality of his followers. But I had a question about the way of life he advocated. It seemed exclusive. In its intense and segregated piety it shut out the rest of the world. Was there not - I asked him - beauty and value outside the narrow walls in which he lived? He answered me with a parable.

Imagine, he said, two people who spend their lives transporting stones. One carries bags of diamonds. The other hauls sacks of rocks. Each is now asked to take a consignment of rubies. Which of the two understands what he is now to carry? The man who is used to diamonds knows that stones can be precious, even those that are not diamonds. But the man who has carried only rocks thinks of stones as a mere burden. They have weight but not worth. Rubies are beyond his comprehension.

So it is, he said, with faith. If we cherish our own, then we know the value of others. We may regard ours as a diamond and another faith as a ruby, but we know that both are precious stones. But if faith is a mere burden, not only will we not value ours. Neither will we value the faith of someone else. We will see both as equally useless. True tolerance, he implied, comes not from the absence of faith but from its living presence. His words rang true. My own experience had taught me likewise.

* Taken from *Faith in the Future, the Ecology of Hope and the Restoration of Family, Community, and Faith*, Mercer University Press, Georgia, 1997, pp. 74-81.

I grew up in Finchley, and my parents sent their children to the schools closest to hand. Both were Christian establishments, and I have often reflected on how my brothers and I, members of an Orthodox Jewish family, reacted to a religious environment so different from what we knew from the synagogue and home. The answer is simple. We encountered teachers who valued their religion, and as a result we learned to value our own. We were conscious of our difference, but the difference was respected. Interacting with our teachers and friends we learned that those who are at home in their own faith, who are confident in their beliefs and assured of their own religious heritage, are not threatened by another faith. On the contrary, they are capable of valuing and being enlarged by it.

So, at an early age, I learned how the encounter between Christians and Jews can benefit both traditions by teaching us pride in our own heritage, and humility in the face of another. That is the great truth on which the Council of Christians and Jews is predicated. But - and this is the crucial question - how many people still share that vision?

Twenty or thirty years ago, the answer would have been: a great many.

There was a time - it reached its high point in the 1960s - when the word 'interfaith' was on many people's lips. It seemed then as if dialogue would bring about a momentous transformation in the relationship between the great world religions. It was as if we were about to enter a new era in inter-religious understanding. There was a widespread sense that we had been estranged for too long.

For centuries, even millennia, religions had seen themselves as possessors of exclusive truths and of unique paths to salvation. Each in affirming its own faith, denied the integrity of others. Above all, the relationship between Judaism and Christianity had been fraught with tragedy. As centuries of suspicion, even hostility, reached their shattering climax in the Holocaust, men and women of faith knew in their hearts that some other understanding had now to emerge. So, in a historic gesture of reconciliation, Christians and Jews alike began to reach out to one another, determined to turn a history of alienation into a legacy of love.

It was, and in retrospect will be seen to be, a heroic undertaking. But the world has moved on, and in some respects not for the better. Today we stand between the beginning of two new decades, the 5750s in the Jewish calendar, the 1990s in the Christian calendar. And from both perspectives, the future seems more sombre than it did twenty or thirty years ago. In Judaism, Christianity, Islam and other world faiths the voice of tolerance and moderation has become muted, even unsure of itself. Those who claim to represent religious authenticity have been those who, by and large, reject dialogue, accommodation and pluralism, and speak instead of authority, exclusivity and the uncompromising fundamentals of faith. As a result, religion in the contemporary world has become again a scene of conflict rather than reconciliation.

Specifically in terms of the Jewish-Christian encounter there have been tensions on both sides. For Jews there has been a sense of unease. They ask the following questions. Have the Churches fully come to terms with the centrality of the State of Israel in Jewish consciousness? Have they understood what its security means to a people who came face to face with the angel of death at Auschwitz, and had no inch of the planet Earth that was their refuge and their home? Have they reflected fully on the pain caused by the convent at Auschwitz, a pain whose dimensions are too deep for me to analyse here? Do the Churches understand the particular assault on Jewish sensibilities caused by missionary activities targeted on lonely or vulnerable Jews? More deeply: Has Christian theology yet fully come to terms with the contemporary vitality of Jewish existence, with the miracle of Jewish religious and national rebirth after the Holocaust, with the fact that *Am Yisrael Chai*, the people of the covenant lives?

I speak as a Jew. But a Christian would surely set forth another perspective and testify to pain on the other side of the relationship as well. In Christian eyes it must at times seem that the State of Israel is a dilemma, not just an achievement. How can Jewish and Palestinian claims co-exist and be resolved? How, in Israel, can military and religious values live alongside one another? Can there be a religious ethic, not of powerlessness, but of power? Must our hearts not go out to the Palestinians as they once went out to the Jews? And as for the Holocaust, have we not moved beyond the time of remembering to a time of forgiving? Is there not a certain unforgiving relentlessness about bringing aged war criminals to trial forty years after the event? As a Jew,

I must hear that voice and that pain and know that they express sincere Christian concerns.

These tensions do not exist in isolation. They are part of a much deeper shift in religious consciousness. One image brings this vividly to mind. Two years ago a great hurricane swept across southern England. As Jews, we remember the date because it took place on the night of one of the great festivals of the Jewish year, *Simhat Torah*, the day of 'Rejoicing in the Law'. Our family was in the West End of London at the time, because my synagogue is next to Hyde Park. Just before dawn broke I went out to see what had happened. I came upon a scene of devastation. There was silence. No one else was yet about, and the wind had died. But everywhere, great trees had been uprooted and branches hurled across roads. The order of the park had been reduced to chaos. As the sun rose over that ravaged landscape it seemed for a moment like the end of the world.

A fearful thought then occurred to me. It was in just such moments that our ancestors saw God. Didn't the Psalm - the very Psalm which rabbinic tradition associated with the giving of the Torah - declare: 'The voice of the Lord breaks the cedars, the Lord breaks in pieces the cedars of Lebanon... The voice of the Lord twists the oaks and strips the forests bare' (Psalm 29:5,9)? God was not only in the still small voice that spoke to Elijah. He was also in the mighty east wind that divided the Red Sea. He was in the earthquake that swallowed Korach. He was in the volcanic upheaval that swept away Sodom and the cities of the plain. He was in the tempest that threatened to sweep away Jonah's ship.

That moment came back to me when the Salman Rushdie affair first began. I spoke about it on the radio. I said that for the past two centuries in the West we had seen God in the order of the garden and not in the mighty wind that wrecks the garden. We had seen Him in quiet faith, not in the fire and the thunder and the hurricane. The Rushdie affair took us by surprise because we had edited out of our image of religion a whole range of passion that submits to neither moderation nor tolerance. We remembered that God spoke to Elijah in a still small voice. We forgot that He spoke to Job out of the heart of the whirlwind.

And there lies the problem. The great conversation between faiths, which reached its heights in the 1960s, was predicated on a series of

assumptions that had their roots in the Enlightenment. We were gradually moving from a world of tradition to a society built on rationality. We were passing, slowly but inexorably, from the particular identities of particular faiths to a more universal conception of humanity. Society was becoming, as the sociologists said, secularised. Religious belief was still strong, but it was becoming marginal to our public decisions. Passion and prejudice were gradually dying, and in their place reason and moderation would hold sway. On that scenario, the bitter religious conflicts of the past looked very much like things of the past. It was a time for reconciliation.

But it didn't happen that way. Almost immediately, a new kind of religiosity began to emerge, or re-emerge, in Christianity, Judaism, Islam and other world faiths. It transpired that secularisation had failed to provide us with our most basic human needs: the need for meaning and personal identity. And the way to meaning and identity lay in highly particular religious traditions. So we began to see, and have become increasingly aware of, religious revivals built on intense hostility to the assumptions of the modern world. Critics call it Fundamentalism, a word I do not like because it groups together many different phenomena under a single name. But several things followed, and have become more and more noticeable over the passing years.

Firstly, religion, far from being a force for reconciliation, has become the battleground of some of the fiercest and most intractable conflicts in the contemporary world, from Northern Ireland to Lebanon and beyond. Secondly, the kind of religion that has real power over the lives of its followers is increasingly exclusive and confrontational. Thirdly, the theology that speaks of tolerance and openness and dialogue with the modern world is seen, by many believers in search of the truth, as a compromise that lacks content and authenticity. The result is that the most passionate religious believers today, in many faiths, are more concerned with their own destiny than with our collective destiny in this tense and troubled world.

“Restating the Interfaith Imperative”

So, as we face a new decade, we must begin to restate the inter-religious imperative in more forceful terms. We must see it not simply as a gesture

of goodwill undertaken by men and women of exceptional liberalism and vision, but as a set of religious axioms that must be confronted by all believers, even those who do not as yet see the need for meeting and reconciliation. We must focus our search not on the modern world and its values, for these are precisely what many religious believers reject. Instead, we must take our stand on the classic texts and principles of our great religious traditions. What, as a Jew, impels me to enter into conversation with men and women of other faiths?

The Hebrew Bible contains the great command, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself' (Leviticus 19:18), and this has often been taken as the basis of biblical morality. But it is not: it is only part of it. The Jewish sages noted that on only one occasion does the Hebrew Bible command us to love our neighbour, but in thirty-seven places it commands us to love the stranger. Our neighbour is one we love because he is like ourselves. The stranger is one we are taught to love precisely because he is not like ourselves.

Time and again the Hebrew Bible emphasises that we are judged by how we act to those who are unlike us, and who may even call into question everything we stand for. Rabbinic tradition held that Abraham was a greater man than Noah. Why so? Noah, the Torah says, was 'a righteous man, blameless among the people of his time' (Genesis 6:9). Nonetheless, said the rabbis, when the world was drowning, Noah saved only his own family, whereas Abraham fought a war and later prayed for the inhabitants of Sodom and the cities of the plain. The Jewish mystics once asked: Why is the *hassidah*, the stork, an unclean animal? Its name means 'the compassionate one'. How can a bird called 'compassion' be unclean? They answered: the *hassidah* has compassion only for its own kind. Compassion only for your own is not compassion.

Just before the story of Abraham and the covenantal people begins, the Bible relates the episode of the tower of Babel. In broad outlines, the moral of the story is clear. People gathered together to build a tower that would reach to heaven, but the proper place of man is on earth. They were guilty of hubris and they were punished by nemesis. The story is a satire of the pretensions of Babylonian civilisation and of the thought that because man has technological mastery, he can become like God. But this does not explain the story's central message, that after Babel the

world is split into many languages, and that until the end of days there is no single universal language.

Babel is the essential preface to the history of Abraham. Without it, we might have thought that the covenant with Abraham was universal like the covenant with Noah, that it applied to all humanity and that it expressed a universal religious truth. It did not. Just as after Babel there is no single universal language, so there is no single universal culture and no single universal faith. The faith of Abraham left room for other ways of serving God, just as the English language leaves room for French and Spanish and Italian.

Faiths are like languages. There are many of them, and they are not reducible to one another. In order to express myself at all, I must acquire a mastery of my own language. If I have no language, I will still have feelings but I will be utterly inarticulate in communicating them. The language into which I am born, which I learn from my parents and my immediate environment, is where I learn self-expression. It is a crucial, perhaps even an essential, part of who I am. But as I venture out into the world I discover that there are other people who have different languages which I must learn if we are to communicate across borders.

A faith is like a language. I am at home in my own language as I am at home in my own faith. True conversions are rare. But I am not compromised by the existence of other languages. To the contrary, the more languages I can speak, the more I can communicate with others and the more I am enriched by their experience. To believe that our faith is the only religious reality there is, is rather like the old-fashioned British tourist who believed that you could communicate with the Spanish by speaking English very slowly and very loudly. After Babel, the religious reality, like the linguistic reality, is inescapably plural.

In recent years we have become conscious of global ecology. Environmental thinking has made us aware of the inter-connectedness of our actions. The destruction of a rain-forest in one part of the world can affect the climate in another. So it is with our social ecology. Once, religions and cultures could live for the most part at a safe remove from one another, as if each was an island entire of itself. Today there is no safe remove. Walk down a modern city street, and you will pass people of a dozen different cultures and languages. Our economy and politics

are affected by the actions of a hundred different countries. Our very survival depends on the decisions of several powers not to use nuclear or chemical weapons. International terrorism may suddenly involve us in someone else's argument thousands of miles away. Our interconnectedness has become tangible. Modernity has cast the wholly other directly into our lives.

Judaism long ago recognised the significance of social ecology. It formulated the idea of *darkhei shalom*, 'the ways of peace'. It took this not as a pious sentiment, but as a significant factor in Jewish law. *Darkhei shalom* asserts that the basic duties that I owe to the members of my faith community, I owe to those outside it as well - not because we share a faith but because we share an environment, a society, and we must be able to live together if we are to be able to live at all. Faith sometimes demands radical and uncompromising action. But *darkhei shalom* tells me that I must exercise restraint and moderation if I am not to destroy the social environment in which I live along with those who have a different faith. *Darkhei shalom* is an ecological principle that tells us that we live in a world of complex interdependencies, and we must exercise self-restraint in order to preserve that world.

These ideas are undergirded by the most fundamental proposition of all. Before there were religions, even before there were human beings, God pronounced the still awesome truth of the human situation: 'Let us make man in our own image, after our likeness' (Genesis 1:26). On this, the sages of the Mishnah delivered the following commentary: When human beings make things in a single image, they are all alike. God makes humanity in a single image, yet each of us is unique.

A faith built on the Hebrew Bible must come to terms with the stunning implications of that remark. We have great difficulty in recognising the integrity - indeed the sanctity - of those who are not in our image, whose faith and traditions and culture and language are not like ours. Nonetheless, we are told, and must struggle to see, that the wholly other, he or she who is not in our image, is yet in God's image.

I have tried to show in this chapter how a Jew, through his or her commitment to Judaism, is led outward to the realities of a multifaith world. My argument rests on no hidden liberal or modernist premises that could be rejected by a religious extremist. Christian theology will

find its own way at arriving at these conclusions. But arrive at them we must. For if we are to co-exist in a world of rising religious intolerance, we shall have to find an interfaith imperative that speaks not only with a small voice, but also out of the heart of the whirlwind.

THE ESSENTIAL BASIS OF RELIGION*

A. Yusof Ali

The whole air is ringing with cries of world unity and world brotherhood. Let us examine how near we are to achieving it, and what is the best method by which it can be made real and permanent?

If we consider the marvellous development of communications in our own day, it seems strange that human solidarity should not have kept pace with these mechanical developments. From the horse-drawn coaches of the nineteenth century we went on to motor-cars with a speed of twenty or thirty miles an hour. Now Sir Malcolm Campbell achieves a speed, on land, of 300 miles an hour and the internal combustion engine is giving us every day more and more command of the air. We have airlines and air-routes scattered all over the world. The aviation record is held by the Italian Agello at 440 miles per hour. The sea voyage from England to India round the Cape, which took five or six months in the sailing ships of Warren Hastings's day, was shortened to three weeks by the Suez Canal steamship route of the latter part of the nineteenth century. The steamship speed grew from ten knots to twenty and twenty-five knots per hour, and now fast cruisers do twenty-seven or thirty knots or even more. In the air, the post from England to India now takes barely ten days and in all probability will shortly take only a week or even less. A few aviators and aeroplane constructors are already talking of an hourly post service between the two sides of the Atlantic, separated by a distance of over 3,000 miles.

But it may legitimately be asked, "Have these mechanical facilities of communication brought men's minds and hearts nearer?" It may be that there are greater facilities of mental contact between different races and

* Taken from *Faiths and Fellowship, Proceedings of the World Congress of Faiths Conference*, published by J. M. Watkins, 21 Cecil Court, London, W. C. 2, 1936, pp. 13-25. Reprinted with permission from the World Congress of Faiths.

people, but even that is doubtful. After all, the ordinary business of everyday life looks solely to the simple material needs and no higher. The real contact of mind with mind comes only when there is behind it a real desire to know and understand human personality in diverse and even unfamiliar forms.

Economic considerations have always played a large part in the lives of individuals and in the policy of nations. But in our own day, with all the complexities of modern life, we are apt to think of many other interests in economic terms. Our politics are coming to be more and more dominated by economics. Family life is undergoing strange transformations. It is becoming more and more fashionable in our education to emphasise the economic factor in both college and school curricula.

The growth of tariffs has made economics the main pivot on which national policy turns. God's earth is spacious, but economic nationalism has made it very narrow, and broken it up into a number of units mutually jealous of each other. Racial antagonisms are also being coloured more and more by economic jealousies.

Many of us, who, after the Great War, hailed the foundation of the League of Nations as heralding a new era of peace and goodwill among men, have had shocks, disappointments, and disillusiones. The leaders of nations are genuinely anxious to remove causes of difference and to build up a system of mutual understanding and mutual co-operation, but it cannot be said that the path before them is smooth. All sorts of barriers lie in their way. When we hold a World Economic Conference, currency questions and tariffs are found to be intractable barriers. During the present Italo-Abyssinian dispute, the question of an even and just distribution of raw products among many competing nations has been raised and not solved. When we hold Disarmament Conferences, questions of Ratios, Parity, and Security are raised. Nations are not yet ready to trust each other. The formula of "collective security" which has figured so largely in recent discussions is itself evidence of the distrust which individual nations feel one against the others. While this distrust continues, we can make no real progress in either disarmament, or in the reduction of tariffs, or in free travel or in real inter-communication between one country and another.

The League of Nations itself, as now constituted, is not able to carry out the programme or the objects with which it started. In the League Assembly there are various currents and undercurrents which it is not good form to mention, and which are not usually reported, but which everyone who has any inside experience knows to be the most important factors in the present relations of nations with each other. The racial factor is not negligible. Eastern nations have frequently said that they are at a disadvantage when dealing with Western nations, and the small States say the same thing against the bigger States. The European nations have a majority in the League, which other nations not within that charmed circle of geography or race are unable to counteract. In the cases of Japan and Germany the League was unable to do anything to express its collective will as embodied in solemn treaties. In the case of Abyssinia I fear that all the League's best intentions have been defeated by the onward march of armed force and the obscure but intricate relationships arising out of many years of political rivalry among three big naval Powers.

Fear, distrust, selfishness, jealousy, arrogance, or a sense of superiority - such human weaknesses can never be eradicated by political institutions, however wise and efficient they may be. Ultimately the whole brunt of the fight against these moral evils must be borne by Religion.

I am not going to discuss the various features of agreement and difference between the different religions as now professed in the world. Nor am I going to preach the ideal form which in my opinion religion should take in order to save humanity. Even taking human beings as they are, with their different religions as we find them, it is I think possible to build up a sense of mutual understanding, which will go far towards eradicating the evils of the conflicts whose climax expresses itself in war, boycott, or economic struggles between nation and nation, class and class, interest and interest. In the modern world, armed conflicts are so costly and so enormously destructive even to the victors, that they are undertaken only after tremendous preparations. But once undertaken, the cost, in lives lost, lives ruined, passions let loose, poisons injected into the moral atmosphere, territories devastated, industries uprooted, and capital swallowed up, is so gigantic that, except where victory is within easy grasp owing to obviously unequal forces, ordinary human intelligence shudders at the very idea. But other forms of conflict - continuous and insidious - are waged daily, and even become the

ordinary stock-in-trade of journalism, platform oratory, and herd-instinct patriotism.

Can we not expel this kind of poison from our social and international system? Only religion can do it. I mean by "Religion" that mode of looking at things which postulates the oneness of humanity, the ideals of peace, justice, and righteousness under the divine government of the world, and the responsibility of man to the voice of a God-given conscience. That is worth appealing to. Such appeals are made from time to time, but we must organise our spiritual forces, and consciously co-operate with men who share this faith, however widely divergent their views may be on doctrinal matters. I think that this is possible. I know from my own experience that it is possible as between individuals. And, after all, what are nations but groups of individuals? If men of goodwill can band themselves together, they can act as a leaven and influence large masses of humanity.

Let me describe my own personal experiences as one who has lived and mixed with people of almost all the religions in the world. I think I am entitled to say that, however human nature may be overlaid with baser motives, there is always latent in the human heart a spirit of sympathy, love, and service, which I consider to be the essential basis of Religion.

There are in India, as you know, people of many races and religions living side by side. It is true that in recent times there has been a great deal of racial and religious antagonism, mainly due to political manoeuvring. But individuals find that where there is any mutual desire for peace and goodwill the human heart responds in spite of differences in race, religion or community.

Amongst the Muslims themselves there are many shades of theological opinion. There is the main division of Shias and Sunnis. But in each of these main divisions there are sub-divisions which it is unnecessary for my purpose to enumerate. Further, under the stress of modern life and modern culture, new schools of thought are arising, each with its own point of view, and there is often a wide divergence of opinion on many doctrinal points. It seems to me strange that a Religion (and perhaps this is true of every religion) which entirely condemns sectarianism and preaches Catholic unity, should have divisions which result in acrimonious disputes of this nature. In the Quran (xxx, 31 -32), we are

expressly warned to avoid being among those who give false worship to God. "Those who split up their religion become mere sects -each party rejoicing in that which is with itself." It is also the Quranic teaching that men were all framed according to one divine pattern by the handiwork of God; our nature as created by God conforms to one divine standard; and if, through error or ignorance, mankind wanders away from that unity, it must be restored through the true teaching, and we must set our faces steadily towards that ideal. I have personally found no difficulty in mixing freely and working with and for Muslims of all denominations and shades of thought. I have travelled through nearly all Muslim countries - Arabia, Egypt, Palestine, Syria, Turkey, Iraq, Persia, and a great many others. Beneath many differences in their points of view there runs a general desire to cement the Brotherhood of Islam and to find in it the solution of the many difficulties and evils from which the Islamic world is suffering. This is in itself a happy augury, but I wish to see this principle carried very much further.

By far the larger proportion (about three-fourths) of my fellow-citizens in India belong to the Hindu Religion. This in itself is a very comprehensive system, comprising many schools of thought and many ways of practical and social life. While adhering to my own ideas on the subject of worship and religion, I have found much in Hindu philosophy, Hindu poetry, and the best of Hindu thought, to appreciate and admire. And I consider the Bhagawad Gita and the Ramayana of Tulsi Das (to mention only two instances) to be among the world's great treasures of religious literature. I consider the Tamil Kurral and the Hymns of Maratha Saints, like Tuka Ram, to have a claim to the attention of all students of devotional poetry. I number among my personal friends many Hindus, both those whose names are household words in India and those in private spheres of life. It has been a pleasure and a privilege to work with them. As individuals we find no barrier to friendship and understanding. We trust each other and take a delight in each other's company. Why can we not bring our respective groups to the same frame of mind?

Then there are minor religions in India, such as those of the Parsis of Bombay and the Sikhs of the Punjab. I call them "minor," not in a sense derogatory to their intrinsic value, but merely with reference to the numerical strength of the people professing those religions. In common with all who have much to do with the Parsis, I have found them socially

delightful. Their ladies are advanced in modernity. Their whole community has in many ways adopted modern ways. In material civilisation they probably lead the van.

I can say the same about my Sikh brethren in the Punjab. For many years I have lived in the Punjab and have taken part in its educational and public activities. Unfortunately, there is a great deal of friction at present between the Sikhs and the Muslims in that Province. That friction is due more to historical and political causes than to differences in religion properly understood. I know many Sikhs intimately. I know something of their religious literature. I have participated in the celebration of their Guru Nanak's Birthday. They have been publishing recently some of their religious literature in English, which I have read both with pleasure and profit. On the other hand, I know at least one Sikh (a true and valued friend of mine) who takes an interest in my English translation of the Quran and reads it regularly as it comes out in parts. There are all villages in the Punjab where Sikhs and Muslims live side by side. The Sikh Religion itself stands midway between Hinduism and Islam. In their scriptures are included some hymns of Muslim Saints. I am quite sure that apart from political and other rivalries and jealousies which reflect no credit on either community, there is no reason whatever why they should not live side by side, each tolerating the point of view of the other and all working together for the common good of India.

I have also travelled widely through Buddhist countries. In this connection let me mention Burma, China, and Japan. The Burmese have such a gentle nature that, if I had not read in the papers of the anti-Indian riots in Burma, I should not have believed that such a thing was possible. Here again the root cause of the trouble is political or economic. Under the New Constitution Burma is to be separated from India.

Of China I carry away very friendly but somewhat melancholy memories. The religions of China are Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism. In such a classification it is difficult to say where philosophy begins and religion ends. The three systems live side by side, and are not at all mutually exclusive. I have mixed with the votaries of all these cults and assisted at their meetings and celebrations. If it is not true to say that their teachings are fused together, it is at least true to say that in China there is no sharp antagonism of one against another. There are many individuals whom it will be difficult to classify under any name. And

there is the ultra-modern Chinese man or woman, very self-confident with his American English, but somewhat materialist in his religious outlook. Strange to say, I had more sympathy with both the new and the old type than they had with each other. The sadness of Chinese life arises from the extreme poverty of their masses and the breakdown of their political organisation. The heart of the Chinese people is sound; their morals will stand comparison with those of any people in the world; their intellects are acute, and are now turned towards modernity as made in the United States. In Religion the work of the great Hsu-Shi is bringing Chinese thought to an international plane. If only the Chinese people get a fair chance, they have much to contribute to the world's work and the world's thought.

Japanese Buddhism has developed special phases of its own. During my visit to Japan I tried to study some of these phases, and I found the heartiest welcome and the most generous assistance in my enquiries. When I was in the city of Osaka and mentioned my intention to visit Nara, where Indian Buddhism first established itself, everybody said:

"Of course, you must see that place because it is a piece of your own country." I went and saw it. It is a delightful place with a beautiful undulating park, left almost untouched from the eighth century onwards. If it were not for the characteristic trees - cryptomerias and oaks - I could have let my imagination roam at large and pictured myself visiting the Benares Deer Park, in which the Buddha preached in the days of his earthly ministry. For there are deer in this park left free at large, and no one is allowed to hurt or capture them.

The Japanese have developed special sects of Buddhism characteristic of their own country, the most learned of these sects being the "Zen". They believe in a contemplative life, and their priests have made valuable contributions to religious thought in the learned books which they have written. In philosophy they seem to be very near Vedantism. They believe in the unreality of the phenomenal world. A marked contrast to the Zen sect is the Jodo sect which may be called the popular form of Japanese Buddhism. They do not rely upon philosophy or learning. They rely mainly on faith, or what we should call in India Bhakti. In this respect they approach very near to the medieval Panths of India. They are very friendly and sociable with anyone who takes an interest in their beliefs and practices. I met some of them preaching in parks and public

places like the missionaries of foreign religions. The Jodo sect takes a revivalist form. The third sect which I shall mention is known as the Nichiren. This sect was of particular interest to me for they have diverged a great deal from the Hinayana doctrines of the countless Avatars of the Buddha, and have reached the teaching of Divine Unity through belief in the one and only Buddha of whom all other Buddhas are merely reflections. By a roundabout way they have approached Monotheism.

Let me relate to you a little experience I had with the Japanese Christian whom I met in climbing up to a Buddhist monastery situated on a high hill. There were many paths going up to the temple at the top. I found different people taking different paths up. I was a little puzzled as to the best way to take for myself. This gentleman of his accord came up and talked to me in Japanese English, and we became great friends. When I met him he was descending the hill, but when I asked for his guidance he was not content with merely giving me directions, but actually changed his own course and went up again with me to the temple. We had an interesting talk. When I spoke to him about the multiplicity of paths going up, he said, quite simply: "Is not that the way of Divine things? The goal is one, but the paths to it are many." He asked me if I had come on a special pilgrimage to that temple in my visit to Japan. I told him that I was interested in all religions, but that I was not myself a Buddhist but a Muslim. "Nor am I a Buddhist," said he. "Do you then follow the Shinto Way?" I asked. He smiled and said: "I am a Christian, but like you I love to go to Buddhist temples. I should like to go to your Muslim temples if there were any in Japan." I told him something about the Muslim form of worship and Muslim ideas of religion. We remain together for about two hours, but never for one minute in the course of our conversation did either of us feel that the other was an alien.

That is the one great charm of Japan. Their religion like their art is expressed in forms of delicate grace, which it would be difficult to define precisely. The ethnic and national form of their religion is Shinto. But who can define the elusive spirit of Shintoism? The Shinto Scripture Kojiki is, I understand, concerned with rites and ceremonies and beautiful customs which mingle well with almost any religion. They say that Buddhism absorbed Shinto, but I think it is more correct to say that the coalescence of Buddhism and Shinto has produced a national religion which is simple and easy, but not exclusive, except in so far that the

Japanese race idea or national idea seems exclusive to foreigners. The complete absorption of a man like Lafcadio Hearn in the Japanese spirit is an experience which has fallen to the lot of very few foreigners.

I now come to Judaism and Christianity, which are sister religions to Islam. There is so much common ground between them that it seems a pity that there should not be more intimate contact between those who bear those labels. It is true that there are certain fundamental doctrines in Trinitarian Christianity which are rejected by Islam. It is also true that the Jews have in the past suffered much persecution in Christian countries and are still suffering persecution in some parts of the world. But I see no reason why, in the freer countries, and in an international atmosphere, these three should not come together in fellowship and establish an understanding without either side giving up the beliefs which they consider fundamental. The Jews have lived in Muslim countries from the earliest ages of Islam. They thrived and flourished there and have contributed a great deal to the economic and social life of Muslim countries. In countries like England both orthodox and reformed Jews mix freely in society, in business, and in politics. Since Jewish emancipation they have filled with credit some of the highest posts under the Crown. It is very much to be hoped that the spirit of persecution and misunderstanding which still lingers in some parts of the world will disappear, and in its place a true and sincere fellowship of faiths, such as we all desire, will be substituted. When I advocate contact and understanding between two or three faiths, I must be understood to imply that as a prelude to contact and understanding between all faiths.

I have left to the last the mention of my personal relations with the Christians. They have been very intimate all through my life. The fellowship of England and India in one United Empire, though it is sometimes overshadowed by racial considerations on both sides, has yet brought about a better understanding of the Christian religion amongst the Indian Muslims, and I also think a better understanding of the religion of Islam amongst the British people. Speaking for myself, I can say that I understand and respect the essential spirit of British Christianity. My guardian, when I came to England at an immature age for study, was a Christian Englishman in the highest sense of the term. I love and revere his memory. I have met other members of his family with whom I have also been on the most friendly terms. I have studied the Christian religion as few Muslims have studied it. Although I am

earnestly and sincerely devoted to my own religion and have striven both in writing and in speech to expound it, I have always advocated, and still advocate, the possibility and desirability of a better understanding between Muslims and Christians in all spheres of life. Such an understanding is likely to help us not only in our own Empire, and in international relations generally, but I think it can also become a great guarantee of world peace and international understanding. The Holy Quran (verse 85) expressly says that the Christians are nearest in faith and friendship to the Muslims. In spite of many wars and misunderstandings, the thirteen centuries and a half that have passed since the birth of Islam have seen a gradual growth of a better understanding between the two faiths.

Again appealing to my personal experience, I can say that many Christian audiences have listened with welcome to my exposition of Islam, and some churches have even invited me to occupy their pulpits. Apart from doctrinal matters, there is so much common ground. The late Archbishop Soderblom of Sweden was a personal friend of mine. He and I had more than one opportunity of discussing some scheme, by which not only the Christian Churches, but Islam and other Faiths, could be brought to mutual understanding and harmonious co-operation. In Canada one of the meetings, at which I was expounding Muslim ideas, was presided over by an Archbishop, and he spoke in the most friendly and cordial terms of my exposition. In the development of Christian thought, and especially in Protestantism, many of the points which were raised by Islam by way of protest have been accepted, and Unitarianism is practically Islam. The abolition of a hereditary or privileged priesthood, the right of private judgment, personal responsibility, equality in brotherhood, removal of racial or caste barriers, the selection of rulers by democratic choice, government and corporate action after free consultation—principles like these are the basis of the preaching of Islam, and are now accepted (at least in theory) in all parts of the world.

I had an extraordinary experience in my early student days when I visited the island of Malta. I visited the Catholic Cathedral there. I conducted myself with reverence and attracted the attention of some Italian priests who, afterwards, came up to me, and spoke to me in the most friendly terms. In those days I knew no Italian, but I had some knowledge of Latin. When I spoke to them in Latin they were surprised, and their friendliness to me was all the more increased. We could not carry on a

very long conversation, as our pronunciations of the classical language were quite different. But the friendly feeling that grew up after that chance meeting induced them to add to their kindness by inviting me afterwards and showing me things which I should never have seen unshepherded. I still carry fragrant memories of that meeting in my heart and remember the words with which we parted. I asked them if it would be possible for us to meet again. They pointed to the sky and said: "Let us hope, in Heaven." (In coelo, speremus.)

Thus you will see that, individually, many of us have actually felt and experienced the fellowship of faiths. Why can we not bring it about on a larger scale and in a more organised way? We have seen before our eyes the "Past's enormous disarray." (Rupert Brooke.) Such ills cannot be cured by ordinary means, and certainly not through the instrumentality of politics. We have to look to deep-seated causes within. These are bound up with whole bundles of prejudices, feelings of attraction or repulsion, inherited tendencies and environments, historical and cultural chains of association, varied intellectual responses to common human experiences, and even deliberate misrepresentations or misunderstandings created perhaps for purposes of war or selfish aggrandisement. In so far as history and human experience have cleared our vision, we can put away past conflicts in the limbo of forgotten things. In so far as our actual feelings and sincere beliefs prevent us from seeing things in the same light, we can tolerate and try to understand other points of view. But there is nothing to prevent us, with all our differences, from realising a sense of fellowship and co-operation. The office of Religion is to bind us together in the bonds of a common humanity. Let us go forward, with humble faith and a firm resolve, to the achievement of our collective Hope!

Will you allow me to close with a quotation from Dolben's "Shrine"? -

"Without, the world is tired and old,
But once within the enchanted door
The mist of time are backward rolled,
And creeds and ages are no more;
But all the human-hearted meet
In one communion vast and sweet."

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CHRISTIANITY AND WORLD RELIGIONS*

Robert Runcie

**The Sir Francis Younghusband Memorial Lecture delivered
by the Archbishop of Canterbury at Lambeth Palace on 28th
May 1986**

Let me say first what a pleasure and privilege it is for me to give the Sir Francis Younghusband Memorial Lecture during this 50th anniversary year of the World Congress of Faiths. I am grateful for the opportunity this gives me to share with you some of my own reflections on the encounter of Christianity with other religions and to raise a number of questions which spring from what is a relatively new dimension for Christian experience, thought and identity.

Our present age is characterized by the resurgence and renewal of religions in many parts of the globe, as well as by attempts to translate their original message into the terms of a world transformed by science and technology. Behind this lies a wide spread pessimism about the future of humankind, an unsatisfied longing for alternative paths to salvation, and a search for some 'golden core' of religion independent of any specific tradition.

Increased travel and improved communication have provided many more opportunities for meeting people of other faiths and cultures. In turn, interreligious encounter and dialogue have generated hope for greater global unity and for wider global ecumenism. Historically speaking, this is a very recent development. Religious diversity has often been disruptive of community, and it remains the root cause of tensions and

* Taken from a booklet published by the World Congress of Faiths, London, 1986. Reprinted with permission.

deep divisions between different human groups. It is premature to presume that the age of holy wars is long past. The twentieth century has seen much bloodshed where religious differences have been a fundamental factor. But today a number of interfaith movements exist with the explicit purpose of fostering a better understanding of religious differences and similarities. Through nurturing a spirit of friendship and reconciliation, true dialogue can help us to overcome religious divisiveness and create new conditions for greater fellowship and deeper communion. It can help us to recognize that other faiths than our own are genuine mansions of the Spirit with many rooms to be discovered, rather than solitary fortresses to be attacked.

All of us have a part to play in this development, but some individuals have been outstanding in carrying the torch. Such a personality was Sir Francis Younghusband (1863-1942). In his book *A Venture of Faith* (1937), he movingly describes how he first had the idea of holding a World Congress of Faiths. He came from a Christian background and, in his own words, inherited a religious disposition and was encouraged in religious practice in his youth. But his experience of scientific thought, of government service and politics, of wide travelling and reading, made him see religion in a new perspective. Through numerous expeditions in India, China and Tibet, he encountered many expressions of Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam and developed a deep interest in eastern religions and philosophies. Profound personal experiences and the inspiration of earlier examples made him perceive the need to replace the spirit of rivalry among members of different faiths with a spirit of fellowship and a search for greater unity. He also developed a global vision of the role of religions in the development of society, and saw the need for a shared spirituality to give direction to mankind. Sir Francis Younghusband has been described as a mystic who pondered the mysteries of life, and answered the call of the spirit whilst remaining a devout Christian throughout his life.

"World fellowship through religion" - that was the keynote of the first Congress held here in London in 1936. Younghusband expressed the hope that "efforts will be made to take a worldview, to develop a world-consciousness, and to create a sense of world-fellowship". He was not a dreamer but a practical man who knew well enough the obstacles which stand in the way of human harmony. The human spirit in each of us is as contentious as it is creative.

Yet despite opposition and criticism, the religious and cultural diversity represented at the Congress was considerable. It also included representatives of different philosophical, scientific and humanist world views. Out of the experience of so many different people meeting together, sharing their thoughts, insights and even worship, there came a sense of exaltation and vision of the enriching possibilities of closer contact between peoples of different faiths. There was a clear rejection of any idea that the Congress intended to evolve some overall synthesis or new kind of eclectic religion. Instead, there was the recognition that, in Sir Francis' words:

"Religion, taken as a whole, benefited much from the variety in its different forms. All the centuries that the spirit of God had been working in Christians, He must also have been working in Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims and others... And recognizing this all-important fact, members of the Congress showed no disposition to try to form any new religion: rather were they inclined to draw inspiration from others for the development of their own".

In his personal conclusions Younghusband affirmed that "we shall have to make our lives conform to the greater conception of the world which is now emerging". He also admitted that his continuing loyalty to Christianity was sometimes strained to breaking point by the air of superiority and indifference so often adopted by Christians to those of other faiths. But the main impression left by the Congress was "that it deepened each man in his own faith ... the Hindu was made all the better a Hindu, the Muslim all the better a Muslim, and the Christian all the better a Christian. Each was driven down to his foundations - down to where he had perhaps never reached before. Each sought the permanent and abiding amid the great diversity of gifts".

A visit to India

The experience of that first conference of the World Congress of Faiths shows what many more of us have experienced since; namely that interreligious encounter and dialogue do not occur at an abstract, but at a personal level. They are at their liveliest when people meet with each other to share the sustaining insights and transforming treasures of their faith and to recognize an affinity of the human heart in the fellowship of the spirit. Such encounter nourishes new life and vision, and from it

arises the need for fresh reflection on the unprecedented religious, cultural and ethnic pluralism which most human groups experience today.

Speaking personally, my recent visit to India proved just such an experience, and I returned to this country with a fresh awareness of the need for reflection on the deep questions which arise for any Christian who takes the religions of India seriously. I went with a genuine but somewhat notional commitment to the need for dialogue between the great faiths. I returned with a deep sense of the urgency of our need to listen, revere and reflect.

India can be a stunning experience - not in any Hollywood sense - but rather as an experience which leaves one dazed and uncertain of one's bearing. Before, there were the certainties of an encapsulated western Christianity. After, there are new ways of thinking about God, Christ and the world. A number of vivid and haunting images remain and continue to pose disturbing questions.

There was a conversation with a Parsee in Bombay. To meet a living Zoroastrian is to be reminded that even the most ancient faiths are still alive. Here was someone for whom the utter *holiness* of God was indeed as fire. God's holiness is such that only the faithful may worship in the Temple of Fire. And I wondered whether contemporary Christianity had not something to rediscover about the awesome 'otherness' of a God we have at times neutered and domesticated.

Then there were the marvellous early Hindu sculptures at Mahabalipuram, near Madras, where gods and goddesses take hundreds of different forms and images. The sheer diversity of the divine was disconcerting. God seemed somehow greater than western monism. In the same place there was a moving carving of Vishnu resting on the waters of creation. Serenity and creativity do not normally go together in western thought. Again we have lost something which other faiths may restore to us. Though I did not have the opportunity of seeing a Buddhist shrine, the serenity of that early Hindu carving gave some intimation of the Buddhist gift of tranquillity and recollection.

In the north were the great Islamic monuments of the Moghul Empire. They speak again of the transcendence of God which is so prominent a

feature of Islam. Symmetry and mathematical perfection in the architecture of a mosque or palace are a reminder to the Christian of the source and goal of the human search for the perfect beyond this mutable world, for the changeless behind the transitory state of human life.

But I not only saw great temples and mosques. There were also the little street corner shrines of the cities with their garish painted idols and loud canned music. There was the simple rural mosque with no walls and with two stumps for minarets. In the countryside I saw the painted rocks and hill shrines which told of the piety of the animist - India's earliest aboriginal faith, continuing still alongside both the great religions and godless secularism of modern India. All this suggests the intimacy and holiness of faiths incarnated in the everyday life and culture of ordinary people.

Encounter with other religions

Encounter is the proper word for such experience. And it calls for rigorous reflection on matters Christians often take for granted: the uniqueness of God's revelation in Christ, or the universal significance of His incarnation and redemption. I do not question these basic Christian affirmations, but an experience of other faiths insists that we reflect upon them more deeply.

Over the last few decades many have written of the encounter of Christianity with other religions. They have done so largely in a spirit of openness, of enquiry and search for greater truth and understanding. But they are not the first to adopt this more enlightened approach. That search is a longstanding one. In the fifteenth century, Nicolas of Cusa, a Roman cardinal, set out in his *De Pace Fidei* the formal proposition that behind all the differences of religious practice there is one universal religion on which Jews, Christians and Muslims can agree. It turned out, however, that this one true religion involves the doctrines of the Trinity, the Incarnation and the Mass. But the *idea* of the harmony of all religions beyond the diversity of practice is a prophetic vision which we find again and again in Christian thought.

An impressive example of an early Anglican involvement with these concerns is to be found in the writings of Frederick Denison Maurice (1805-1872), and particularly in his Boyle Lectures of 1845 on "The

Religions of the World and their Relations to Christianity". Maurice was a seminal 19th century theologian who is perhaps as difficult to read as he is to classify. He is, I suppose, best remembered for his central work "The Kingdom of Christ", and for his part in the foundation, with Ludlow and Kingsley, of the Christian Socialist Movement. By contrast, his lectures on "The Religions of the World" are much neglected and today overlooked, although they have been described as Maurice's "most popular work during his lifetime".

Whilst "The Kingdom of Christ" augured ideas which proved important for the ecumenical movement among Christians, Maurice's thoughts on world religions in relation to Christianity foreshadowed some current and prevalent ideas in global ecumenism and interreligious dialogue. He delivered his lectures in two series: the first described some major religions of the world, and the second dealt with the relation of Christianity to them. The examples used were drawn from Judaism, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism. Whilst Maurice may have ventured beyond his depth in dealing with such a wide range of subjects, and whilst he did not always make the best use of the historical information available to him, he nonetheless spoke and wrote with considerable sympathy, understanding and insight about people of other faiths. He produced a pioneer work which in its own way helped Christians to develop a new attitude to world religions.

Maurice considered faith an essential constituent of being human, and recognized that all religions bear witness to man as a spiritual being. He insisted that some truth, but not necessarily the same truth, exists in all religions, and whatever this may be, it must stem ultimately from the Source of all truth. Whilst he approached other religions from the perspective of Christianity, and interpreted them by taking his own religion as the norm in a way more characteristic of the 19th century than our own, Maurice was also prepared to admit that Christianity might need the corrective contained in the insights of other faiths.

Maurice's insights went further than most other Christian writers of his period. He not only affirmed the truth of his own religion, but insisted on the possibility of learning from the truths present in others. Maurice believed in a divinely implanted religious aspiration in all human beings, at all times and in all places, even though he had yet to develop a realistic appreciation of the sheer pluralism of world religions. However,

he readily recognized the pluralism to be found within Christianity itself, and perceived the need for a closer integration of all human kind through the forces of both religion and science. He saw the unity of all human beings grounded and crowned in the ultimate unity of God.

The religious meaning of pluralism

These thoughts can still be relevant and inspiring, in spite of the fact that our contemporary religious pluralism has become far more complex and implies many new challenges. Several 20th century thinkers with a sensitive ear for the needs of our times have indicated that we have reached a new historical moment when a global consciousness is emerging, with a new awareness of the religious diversity and spiritual heritage of mankind. Instead of simply acknowledging such diversity as mere plurality, we need today to reflect critically and theologically on the religious *meaning* of pluralism. Such reflection is an urgent task for all faith communities.

I cannot speak here about the impact of interreligious dialogue on other religions, but must restrict my remarks to reflections made from a Christian perspective. Certainly, given the experience and witness of Christian faith, encounter with other faiths can deepen and enrich us, and make us reflect anew on matters central to our own faith. It should not be forgotten that Christianity itself was formed in dialogue with Judaism. Jesus of Nazareth was himself a Jew, and always remained a Jew, regularly joining in the worship of the synagogue, regardless of how fiercely he may have criticized the establishment figures of the Judaism of his time. The Christian church too first gained self-consciousness through wrestling with the pressing issue of its relation to Judaism.

(a) Freeing ourselves from isolation

First, interfaith encounter and dialogue helps us to avoid making crude choices between what is 'true' and what is 'false' in different religions. For whatever we say about religious experience it is clear that it is no respecter of credal differences. We have already begun, painfully, to emancipate ourselves from the isolation which limits religion to the insights and errors of one stream of tradition. I am reminded of a story told by Ninian Smart of the lady missionary who was driving him to a hospital not far from Benares. They passed a shrine, and she remarked:

"I'm always very sad to see the piety with which those Hindus worship at that shrine". He asked why. "Well", she said with a sort of simple finality, "there's no one there to hear them". That "simple finality" has no place today. Was it Max Muller who urged that in respect of religion "He who knows one, knows none"?

(b) Deepening our spirituality

Secondly at a deeper level, interfaith dialogue has important implications for the experience and practice of *spirituality*: for the life of faith, both in the individual human heart and in our respective communities. We must learn to recognize the work of the spirit at the centre of each of our faiths. 'Live Aid' and 'Sports Aid' are powerful signs that we are learning that the life and destiny of all human beings are closely interdependent, at the material and economic level, but we must also learn that we are globally interdependent in spiritual matters too.

Such an encounter of people from different faiths is a global event of great historical importance. We, as people of faith, owe it to the world to respond to the challenge of contemporary religious pluralism, not by weakening the intensity of our religious commitment, but through entering into dialogue at the deepest level by strengthening the depth of our own faith, by renewing the sincerity of our own worship, and by increasing the fervour of our own spirituality.

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

But whilst Christians may strive for greater inwardness, contemporary Indians are actively engaged in moving outwards, into areas of social and political action, in the affirmation of their distinct cultural and national identity, the building of nationhood, and in working for greater social and economic justice. This, of course, is part of the great Jewish tradition. It requires a certain kind of dialogue, too, so that harmony and balance are maintained between the different ethnic and religious groups.

We need both courage and humility to recognize this work of the spirit among us in other faiths. It takes courage to acknowledge religious diversity as a rich spiritual resource, rather than a cause for competition and tension. And it takes humility and sincerity to concede that there is a certain incompleteness in each of our traditions. However diverse in their development and message, they always remain in a process of becoming, so that there is always room for growth towards a fuller, richer vision of the truth. We must also recognize that ultimately all religions possess a provisional, interim character as ways and signs to help us in our pilgrimage to Ultimate Truth and Perfection.

(c) Rethinking our theology

Thirdly, for the Christian the theological challenges of religious pluralism are compelling enough. In particular, they affect our understanding of God and his grace, of Christ and his mission, and also our perceptions of community and the nature of Christian love.

Theology is literally 'talk about God'. In a wider sense it represents the struggle of 'faith seeking understanding', and concerns every attempt to conceive of ultimate reality and divine transcendence as revealed to us. Any dialogue must wrestle with this task. But if we are honest, we must recognize that no words, no thoughts, no symbols can encompass the richness of this reality, nor the richness of its disclosure in different lives, communities and traditions. Signs of divine life and grace, of the outpouring of the spirit on earth can be seen in myriad forms in human history and consciousness. From the perspective of *faith*, different world religions can be seen as different gifts of the spirit to humanity. Without losing our respective identities and the precious heritage and roots of our own faith, we can learn to see in a new way the message and insights of our faith in the light of that of others. By relating our respective visions

of the Divine to each other, we can discover a still greater splendour of divine life and grace.

Different religions have found many names and symbols for transcendence, many faces and forms as partial expressions of the Ultimate Mystery. Alternatively, they have followed the *via negativa* of the apophatic method, and have denied and emptied all concepts and categories to point to the Cloud of Unknowing beyond which we encounter the One who encompasses all realities and existence. To find the invisible behind the visible, the everlasting behind the everchanging turmoils of existence is the great longing and hope of the human heart. We yearn for peace, salvation, freedom and fulfilment, for the plenitude of the spirit promised to us, summed up in India in the one word *Brahman* which stands for pure Being, Consciousness and Joy. Although we may come from different religious backgrounds, we can all recognize a prayer of profound longing and hope in the well-known invocation of the *Upanishads*:

“Lead me from the Unreal to the Real,
Darkness to Light,
From Death to Immortality”.

Indian religious life presents us with an amazing variety of perspectives on the Divine Spirit as source of all life, whether this spirit is celebrated as utterly impersonal transcendence, worshipped as Lord of all beings, meditated upon as innermost centre of human person, or praised as a loving God of grace. When Thomas Merton visited India, he reflected on the spiritual significance of his pilgrimage in his *Asian Journal*, where he describes his encounter with Hindus and Buddhists. Merton felt that Hinduism was vibrating with a God-consciousness as presence - God not primarily understood as concept or image, but encountered in the fullness of experience as ultimate ground of reality and meaning from which flow all life and love. Some years ago John Robinson wrote a book about the encounter of Hinduism and Christianity which he entitled “Truth is Two-Eyed”. Given the richness and diversity of Indian religious perspectives, it might be rather more appropriate to say, drawing on a well-known Indian image, that ‘Truth is thousand-eyed’. For Hindus, the fullness of truth is reflected in myriads of facets and faces, all of which the unfathomable mystery of the Divine must encompass in ways which surpass our understanding.

The Universalism of Christ

For Christians, the person of Jesus Christ, his life and suffering, his death and resurrection, will always remain the primary source of knowledge and truth about God. The central message of the Christian gospel is a message of love, love poured out in the complete self-giving of God in His Son for the sake of all life and creation. For the Christian, this is firm and fundamental - it is not negotiable. Nonetheless, Christians recognize that other faiths reveal other aspects of God which may enrich and enlarge our Christian understanding. I am reminded here of that eloquent passage in Ninian Smart's contribution to *Soundings*:

"Journeying into foreign lands and alien cultures can bring one to a better understanding of one's own faith. One can see certain general features of good religion which can be used as a yardstick for measuring the inessential accretions of one's own faith. And just as studying Tolstoy may throw indirect light upon Turgenev, Mozart upon Brahms, Goya upon Picasso, so the gentle wonders of Buddhism and the subtle theologies of Hinduism, the poetry of the Tao and the single-mindedness of Islam, will shed some illumination upon the heart of Christianity".

One of the greatest challenges of interfaith dialogue which Christian theology must face is the question of the universality of Christ and his mission: the question as to the meaning and significance of the incarnation within the context of religious pluralism. There exists no easy answer to these questions, and it would take time before Christians can accept that there may be a plurality of answers within Christian theology itself, even before one moves to the wider pluralism of interfaith experience.

What is at stake is our understanding of the finality and significance of Christ's life and work, of, to use F. D. Maurice's term, 'the universalism of the Kingdom of Christ' at the centre and heart of the Christian faith. For Christians the coming of Christ is the ultimate sign of the fullness of God's grace. But in an age of radical historical consciousness an understanding of the incarnation as the central Christian event must also be linked to an understanding of the historical circumstances in which this belief first took root and developed.

Theological reflection must take account also of contemporary circumstances to which this message must now relate. These are not only

questions of theological import but of pastoral concern. An honest attempt to seek for answers would require an attitude of love and respect towards neighbours of other faiths. It would also open up new possibilities for mutual witness. If we want to find viable and helpful answers in a situation of great need, we will have to abandon any narrowly conceived Christian apologetic, based on a sense of superiority and an exclusive claim to truth. Instead of triumphalism and rejection, Christians must practise reconciliation.

We need to hear afresh the call of our Lord to follow his example of generous self-giving and loving service, his example of compassion amidst suffering, of help and hope for the poor, of strength for the weak. There is a call to universalism here, to the universal power of love and forgiveness which can transform the world.

I glimpsed something of the universalism of Christ's love in Calcutta when I visited Mother Teresa's Home for the Dying. I had not realized before that her hospice is built on temple property - dedicated appropriately enough to the goddess Kali. But there was more to it than that. Here was the love of Christ given and received by men and women of all faiths and of none alongside the goddess who symbolizes a mixture of destruction and fertility. At work was a saintly woman dedicated to the ministry of the mystery of dying and rising. That juxtaposition speaks powerfully of the universal power and significance of the love of Christ.

But most current models of theology do not yet proceed from a situation of dialogue. They are still mostly monologues internal to each of our faith communities. Yet things are changing. Whilst in the past the goal of Christian mission has mainly been the awakening of faith, the founding of churches, the growth and maintenance of Christian life we now perceive more clearly - as I perceived in Calcutta - another goal as that of giving witness to the spirit of love and hope, of promoting justice and peace, of sharing responsibility with others for the development of a caring society, especially where people are in need. Interfaith dialogue can help to remove barriers between us by creating conditions for greater community and fellowship. This will mean that some claims about the exclusiveness of the Church have to be renounced, but also that past and present prejudices about other religions have to be overcome, and ignorance and contempt actively resisted.

The Cambridge Divine, Brooke Foss Westcott, used to prophesy that new life for the Christian Church would come out of India. Devoting his intellectual life to resisting the German thesis that primitive Christianity had been corrupted by the influence of Greek philosophy and culture, he believed on the contrary that Christianity reached out to other cultures and dominated them, but in dominating them received new life for itself. And so he saw the Church as reaching out to India, and appropriating all that was best in the indigenous Hindu tradition.

What would emerge was doubtful: he prophesied that we might receive a new insight into St John's Gospel, a new light upon Christian mysticism. That still remains to be seen. We thought there was peril in the Indian Church if they so undervalued the need for truth transmissible in proposition that they might fail to see the dangers of eclecticism. But there has been strength in the fact that they have found it impossible to think in old and rigid categories about schism, sects, bell, book and candle. It is not an accident that some of the most significant strides towards Unity have been Indian - and never at the cost of the vitality of Christian discipleship.

I am not advocating a single-minded, and synthetic model of world religion. Nor was Sir Francis Younghusband. What I want is for each tradition, and especially my own, "to break through its own particularity", as Paul Tillich put it. Indeed Tillich is worth listening to here. The way to achieve this, he says, "is not to relinquish one's religious tradition for the sake of a universal concept which would be nothing but a concept. The way is to penetrate into the depths of one's own religion, in devotion, thought and action. In the depth of every living religion there is a point at which religion itself loses its importance, and that to which it points breaks through its particularity, elevating it to spiritual freedom and to a vision of the spiritual presence in other expressions of the ultimate meaning of man's existence. That is what Christianity must grasp in its encounter with the world's religions".

Our world is in desperate need of a new and larger vision of unity which transcends our differences. All people of faith possess potential for seeking greater unity through dialogue, through bonds of fellowship, and through shared service of the wider community. Is not the communion experienced in interfaith dialogue ultimately about a new way of life, a new mode of being, where we no longer see each other as competitors

but as partners and fellow pilgrims called to bear witness to the same spirit among all people?

'Faiths and Fellowship' was the theme of the first World Congress of Faiths Conference in 1936. Later, Sir Francis Younghusband prefaced its published Proceedings with the words: "To promote the spirit of fellowship was the one aim of the Congress". And the final impression of the Congress was that:

"Members, through meeting and working together to achieve one high object, had experienced something of that deep soul-satisfying joy such as only spiritual communion can give. There was a great gladness that such a thing was possible - and, if possible once, then possible again".

This is a word of hope and encouragement which 50 years later should inspire and strengthen us to go forward in the same direction. Arnold Toynbee, in a remarkable prophecy, suggested that the present century would be chiefly celebrated by historians hundreds of years hence as the time when the first sign became visible of that great interpenetration of eastern religions and Christianity which gave rise to the great universal religion of the third millenium AD. That is further than we can see, and certainly further than many would like to see happening - now or at any time. A rich diversity of religious experiences and forms is one of God's greatest gifts to his world. But it requires from us the virtues of understanding and sympathy, humility and readiness to listen and to learn. Only then can we build a greater global unity in the spirit of faith, hope and love.

NOSTRA AETATE* (IN OUR TIME)

DECLARATION ON THE RELATION OF THE CHURCH TO NON-CHRISTIAN RELIGIONS

II Vatican Council
October 28, 1965

1. In our time, when day by day mankind is being drawn closer together, and the ties between different peoples are becoming stronger, the Church examines more closely the relationship to non-Christian religions. In her task of promoting unity and love among men, indeed among nations, she considers above all in this declaration what men have in common and what draws them to fellowship.

One is the community of all peoples, one their origin, for God made the whole human race to live over the face of the earth.(1) One also is their final goal, God. His providence, His manifestations of goodness, His saving design extend to all men,(2) until that time when the elect will be united in the Holy City, the city ablaze with the glory of God, where the nations will walk in His light.(3)

Men expect from the various religions answers to the unsolved riddles of the human condition, which today, even as in former times, deeply stir the hearts of men: What is man? What is the meaning, the aim of our life? What is moral good, what sin? Whence suffering and what purpose does it serve? Which is the road to true happiness? What are death, judgement and retribution after death? What, finally, is that ultimate inexpressible mystery which encompasses our existence: whence do we come, and where are we going?

2. From ancient times down to the present, there is found among various peoples a certain perception of that hidden power which hovers over the

* Taken from the Official Vatican website: www.vatican.va.

course of things and over the events of human history; at times some indeed have come to the recognition of a Supreme Being, or even of a Father. This perception and recognition penetrates their lives with a profound religious sense.

Religions, however, that are bound up with an advanced culture have struggled to answer the same questions by means of more refined concepts and a more developed language. Thus in Hinduism, men contemplate the divine mystery and express it through an inexhaustible abundance of myths and through searching philosophical inquiry. They seek freedom from the anguish of our human condition either through ascetical practices or profound meditation or a flight to God with love and trust. Again, Buddhism, in its various forms, realizes the radical insufficiency of this changeable world; it teaches a way by which men, in a devout and confident spirit, may be able either to acquire the state of perfect liberation, or attain, by their own efforts or through higher help, supreme illumination. Likewise, other religions found everywhere try to counter the restlessness of the human heart, each in its own manner, by proposing "ways," comprising teachings, rules of life, and sacred rites. The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions. She regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men. Indeed, she proclaims, and ever must proclaim Christ "the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6), in whom men may find the fullness of religious life, in whom God has reconciled all things to Himself.(4)

The Church, therefore, exhorts her sons, that through dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions, carried out with prudence and love and in witness to the Christian faith and life, they recognize, preserve and promote the good things, spiritual and moral, as well as the socio-cultural values found among these men.

3. The Church regards with esteem also the Moslems. They adore the one God, living and subsisting in Himself; merciful and all-powerful, the Creator of heaven and earth,(5) who has spoken to men; they take pains to submit wholeheartedly to even His inscrutable decrees, just as Abraham, with whom the faith of Islam takes pleasure in linking itself, submitted to God. Though they do not acknowledge Jesus as God, they

revere Him as a prophet. They also honor Mary, His virgin Mother; at times they even call on her with devotion. In addition, they await the day of judgement when God will render their deserts to all those who have been raised up from the dead. Finally, they value the moral life and worship God especially through prayer, almsgiving and fasting.

Since in the course of centuries not a few quarrels and hostilities have arisen between Christians and Moslems, this sacred synod urges all to forget the past and to work sincerely for mutual understanding and to preserve as well as to promote together for the benefit of all mankind social justice and moral welfare, as well as peace and freedom.

4. As the sacred synod searches into the mystery of the Church, it remembers the bond that spiritually ties the people of the New Covenant to Abraham's stock.

Thus the Church of Christ acknowledges that, according to God's saving design, the beginnings of her faith and her election are found already among the Patriarchs, Moses and the prophets. She professes that all who believe in Christ-Abraham's sons according to faith (6)-are included in the same Patriarch's call, and likewise that the salvation of the Church is mysteriously foreshadowed by the chosen people's exodus from the land of bondage. The Church, therefore, cannot forget that she received the revelation of the Old Testament through the people with whom God in His inexpressible mercy concluded the Ancient Covenant. Nor can she forget that she draws sustenance from the root of that well-cultivated olive tree onto which have been grafted the wild shoots, the Gentiles.(7) Indeed, the Church believes that by His cross Christ, Our Peace, reconciled Jews and Gentiles, making both one in Himself.(8)

The Church keeps ever in mind the words of the Apostle about his kinsmen: "theirs is the sonship and the glory and the covenants and the law and the worship and the promises; theirs are the fathers and from them is the Christ according to the flesh" (Rom. 9:4-5), the Son of the Virgin Mary. She also recalls that the Apostles, the Church's main-stay and pillars, as well as most of the early disciples who proclaimed Christ's Gospel to the world, sprang from the Jewish people.

As Holy Scripture testifies, Jerusalem did not recognize the time of her visitation,(9) nor did the Jews in large number, accept the Gospel; indeed

not a few opposed its spreading.(10) Nevertheless, God holds the Jews most dear for the sake of their Fathers; He does not repent of the gifts He makes or of the calls He issues-such is the witness of the Apostle.(11) In company with the Prophets and the same Apostle, the Church awaits that day, known to God alone, on which all peoples will address the Lord in a single voice and "serve him shoulder to shoulder" (Soph. 3:9).(12)

Since the spiritual patrimony common to Christians and Jews is thus so great, this sacred synod wants to foster and recommend that mutual understanding and respect which is the fruit, above all, of biblical and theological studies as well as of fraternal dialogues.

True, the Jewish authorities and those who followed their lead pressed for the death of Christ;(13) still, what happened in His passion cannot be charged against all the Jews, without distinction, then alive, nor against the Jews of today. Although the Church is the new people of God, the Jews should not be presented as rejected or accursed by God, as if this followed from the Holy Scriptures. All should see to it, then, that in catechetical work or in the preaching of the word of God they do not teach anything that does not conform to the truth of the Gospel and the spirit of Christ.

Furthermore, in her rejection of every persecution against any man, the Church, mindful of the patrimony she shares with the Jews and moved not by political reasons but by the Gospel's spiritual love, decries hatred, persecutions, displays of anti-Semitism, directed against Jews at any time and by anyone.

Besides, as the Church has always held and holds now, Christ underwent His passion and death freely, because of the sins of men and out of infinite love, in order that all may reach salvation. It is, therefore, the burden of the Church's preaching to proclaim the cross of Christ as the sign of God's all-embracing love and as the fountain from which every grace flows.

5. We cannot truly call on God, the Father of all, if we refuse to treat in a brotherly way any man, created as he is in the image of God. Man's relation to God the Father and his relation to men his brothers are so linked together that Scripture says: "He who does not love does not know God" (1 John 4:8).

No foundation therefore remains for any theory or practice that leads to discrimination between man and man or people and people, so far as their human dignity and the rights flowing from it are concerned.

The Church reproves, as foreign to the mind of Christ, any discrimination against men or harassment of them because of their race, color, condition of life, or religion. On the contrary, following in the footsteps of the holy Apostles Peter and Paul, this sacred synod ardently implores the Christian faithful to "maintain good fellowship among the nations" (1 Peter 2:12), and, if possible, to live for their part in peace with all men,(14) so that they may truly be sons of the Father who is in heaven.(15)

NOTES

1. Cf. Acts 17:26
2. Cf. Wis. 8:1; Acts 14:17; Rom. 2:6-7; 1 Tim. 2:4
3. Cf. Apoc. 21:23f.
4. Cf 2 Cor. 5:18-19
5. Cf St. Gregory VII, letter XXI to Anzir (Nacir), King of Mauritania (Pl. 148, col. 450f.)
6. Cf. Gal. 3:7
7. Cf. Rom. 11:17-24
8. Cf. Eph. 2:14-16
9. Cf. Lk. 19:44
10. Cf. Rom. 11:28
11. Cf. Rom. 11:28-29; cf. dogmatic Constitution, *Lumen Gentium* (Light of nations) AAS, 57 (1965) pag. 20
12. Cf. Is. 66:23; Ps. 65:4; Rom. 11:11-32
13. Cf. John. 19:6
14. Cf. Rom. 12:18
15. Cf. Matt. 5:45

THE POPE IN INDIA: Meeting with religious leaders*

On Sunday afternoon, 7 November 1999, the Holy Father (John Paul II) went to Vigyan Bhawan Conference Centre in New Delhi for a meeting with representatives of India's many religions. After an opening prayer and welcome, addresses were given by Hindu, Muslim, Jewish, Sikh, Jain, Baha'i, Protestant Christian and other religious leaders. The Pope then gave the following address in English. Here is the text.

Distinguished Religious Leaders,
Dear Friends,

1. It is a great joy for me to visit once again the beloved land of India and to have this opportunity in particular to greet you, the representatives of different religious traditions, which embody not only great achievements of the past but also the hope of a better future for the human family. I thank the Government and the people of India for the welcome I have received. I come among you as a pilgrim of peace and as a fellow-traveler on the road that leads to the complete fulfilment of the deepest human longings. On the occasion of Diwali, the festival of lights, which symbolizes the victory of life over death, good over evil, I express the hope that this meeting will speak to the world of the things which unite us all: our common human origin and destiny, our shared responsibility for people's well-being and progress, our need of the light and strength that we seek in our religious convictions. Down the ages and in so many ways, India has taught that truth which the great Christian teachers also propose, that men and women "by inward instinct" are deeply oriented towards God and seek him from the depths of their being (cf. St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, III, q. 60, a. 5, 3). On this basis, I am convinced that together we can successfully take the path of understanding and dialogue.

* A newspaper article which appeared in *L'Osservatore Romano*, 10th November 1999.

2. My presence here among you is meant as a further sign that the Catholic Church wants to enter ever more deeply into dialogue with the religions of the world. She sees this dialogue as an act of love which has its roots in God himself. "God is love", proclaims the New Testament, "and whoever remains in love remains in God and God in him.... Let us love, then, because he has loved us first ... no one who fails to love the brother whom he sees can love God whom he has not seen" (1 Jn 4: 16, 19-20).

It is a sign of hope that the religions of the world are becoming more aware of their shared responsibility for the well-being of the human family. This is a crucial part of the globalization of solidarity which must come if the future of the world is to be secure. This sense of shared responsibility increases as we discover more of what we have in common as religious men and women.

Which of us does not grapple with the mystery of suffering and death? Which of us does not hold life, truth, peace, freedom and justice to be supremely important values? Which of us is not convinced that moral goodness is soundly rooted in the individual's and society's openness to the transcendent world of the Divinity? Which of us does not believe that the way to God requires prayer, silence, asceticism, sacrifice and humility? Which of us is not concerned that scientific and technical progress should be accompanied by spiritual and moral awareness? And which of us does not believe that the challenges now facing society can only be met by building a civilization of love founded on the universal values of peace, solidarity, justice and liberty? And how can we do this, except through encounter, mutual understanding and cooperation?

3. The path before us is demanding, and there is always the temptation to choose instead the path of isolation and division, which leads to conflict. This in turn unleashes the forces which make religion an excuse for violence, as we see too often around the world. Recently I was happy to welcome to the Vatican representatives of the world religions who had gathered to build upon the achievements of the Assisi Meeting in 1986. I repeat here what I said to that distinguished Assembly: "Religion is not, and must not become a pretext for conflict, particularly when religious, cultural and ethnic identity coincide. Religion and peace go together: to wage war in the name of religion is a blatant contradiction".

Religious leaders in particular have the duty to do everything possible to ensure that religion is what God intends it to be - a source of goodness, respect, harmony and peace! This is the only way to honour God in truth and justice!

Our encounter requires that we strive to discern and welcome whatever is good and holy in one another, so that together we can acknowledge, preserve and promote the spiritual and moral truths which alone guarantee the world's future (cf. *Nostra aetate*, n. 2). In this sense dialogue is never an attempt to impose our own views upon others, since such dialogue would become a form of spiritual and cultural domination. This does not mean that we abandon our own convictions. What it means is that, holding firmly to what we believe, we listen respectfully to others, seeking to discern all that is good and holy, all that favours peace and cooperation.

4. It is vital to recognize that there is a close and unbreakable bond between peace and freedom. Freedom is the most noble prerogative of the human person, and one of the principal demands of freedom is the free exercise of religion in society (cf. *Dignitatis humanae*, n. 3). No State, no group has the right to control either directly or indirectly a person's religious convictions, nor can it justifiably claim the right to impose or impede the public profession and practice of religion, or the respectful appeal of a particular religion to people's free conscience. Recalling this year the 50th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, I wrote that "religious freedom constitutes the very heart of human rights. Its inviolability is such that individuals must be recognized as having the right even to change their religion, if their conscience so demands. People are obliged to follow their conscience in all circumstances and cannot be forced to act against it (cf. Article 18)" (Message for the 1999 World Day of Peace, n. 5).

5. In India the way of dialogue and tolerance was the path followed by the great Emperors Ashoka, Akbar and Chatrapati Shivaji; by wise men like Ramakrishna Paramahansa and Swami Vivekananda; and by luminous figures such as Mahatma Gandhi, Gurudeva Tagore and Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, who understood profoundly that to serve peace and harmony is a holy task. These are people who, in India and beyond, have made a significant contribution to the increased awareness of our universal brotherhood, and they point us to a future where our

deep longing to pass through the door of freedom will find its fulfilment because we will pass through that door together. To choose tolerance, dialogue and cooperation as the path into the future is to preserve what is most precious in the great religious heritage of mankind. It is also to ensure that in the centuries to come the world will not be without that hope which is the lifeblood of the human heart. May the Lord of heaven and earth grant this now and for ever.

Biographical Data

PHYLLIS GHIM LIAN CHEW is immediate past President of both the Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE) and the University Women's Association of Singapore (UWAS). She is co-researcher of the award winning book: "Voices and Choices: The Women's Movement in Singapore" and was the co-ordinating secretary for the Singapore NGO Committee for the Fourth World Conference of Women in Beijing in 1995. For many years, she was on the editorial committee of *One Voice*, the organ of the Singapore Council of Women's organisation. By profession, she is a socio-linguist at the National Institute of Education, which is part of Nanyang Technological University; and by religious affiliation, a Bahá'í.

ANJAM KHURSHEED was born in Pakistan and grew up in Scotland where he received all his schooling and university education. By training, he is an applied physicist, and is at present, an Associate Professor at the National University of Singapore. In 1976, he became a member of the Bahá'í Faith. Apart from his international publications and patent applications as a professional scientist, Professor Khursheed is the author of three books that reflect his interest in the philosophy of science, religion and mind.

SURESH SAHADEVAN is a physician in geriatric medicine and his interests include the application of spiritual insights to contemporary moral challenges.

KUEK YI HSING has taught in Singapore secondary schools since 1978, mainly mathematics. He has also been discipline master and HOD of Pupil Welfare for 8 years. Mr Kuek Yi Hsing graduated from the University of Canterbury (NZ) in 1975 majoring in mathematics and economics and will be pursuing an MA in Moral Education at Landegg Academy in Switzerland in May 1999. He is married and is father of four children.

SIM TZE HONG is a Singaporean who became a member of the Bahá'í Faith in 1989. Since then he has visited twenty-six countries and territories for Bahá'í studies, and to experience Bahá'í community life.

By profession, he is a trainer and educator in the hotel industry and has international working experience covering ten countries and territories in Asia. He is currently a student of the Landegg Academy, Switzerland, completing his Master's degree in conflict resolution and integrated religious study. His area of interest is in comparative studies between Taoist, Confucian, Buddhist and Bahá'í teachings.