



## Fostering a Constructive Dialogue on Religion: Insights from Conversations with Journalists

### *Background Note*

Over the last couple of years, the Office of Public Affairs of the Bahá'ís of India has engaged in a discourse on the role of religion in building a better society with various actors in civil society. Of these discussions, a distinct, rich and fruitful conversation developed between the Office and a committed group of journalists and media educators over the past two years. These discussions highlighted the positive influence of religion as a source of meaning, purpose and ethics in the lives of the majority of the world's people and in providing the values that have shaped social institutions. Although religions have defined themselves in terms of this constructive purpose, this positive aspect of religion is ignored or obscured in public discourse. Religious conflicts, controversies arising in the name of religion, exotic and fantastic beliefs and practices attributed to religion or the misdeeds of godmen receive disproportionate attention. The media plays an important role in projecting and emphasizing this distorted image of religion. The need to bring these positive aspects of religion back into the focus of public attention, of policy makers and the leaders of thought and role that the media can play in this process were some of the questions that these gatherings explored.

This document seeks to bring together some of the insights that emerged from these discussions. While briefly articulating some of the thoughts shared, each section also articulates a few questions for further exploration of this theme.

### *Creating conditions for a constructive dialogue on religion*

For the media, these are difficult times to report on religion. In the age of the internet, the journalistic profession has evolved in a way that leaves reporters and editors without enough time to report on complex issues of religion with balance, sensitivity and nuance. The independence and integrity of journalists is increasingly under pressure from ideological commitments of the owners of media outlets and the compulsion to function as a business. At the same time, the public discourse on various issues including religion has become increasingly polarized and divisive in no small measure due to the

influence of the unregulated domain of social media where propaganda statements and falsehoods are widely propagated.

Yet, as the journalists who participated in this discourse mentioned, despite these challenges, media persons can play a significant role in shaping popular perception of religion and in creating the conditions necessary for religion to fulfill its constructive role. It was widely agreed that media persons need to become much better informed about religion – about the history and teachings of specific religions and also the common nature and purpose of all religions. This would allow them to report on religion and developments related to it with accuracy and understanding. It would also give them the discernment to differentiate healthy expressions of religiosity from distorted and malignant expressions of it. Similarly, it would allow them to distinguish what is genuinely religious from superstition and the spurious claims of false godmen.

Some journalists discussed the possibilities for the media to promote understanding about religious communities by promoting dialogue around points of agreement between various religions. This would create the conditions of friendship and mutual understanding which would provide a conducive atmosphere to address and overcome differences. At the same time, many expressed the need for developing a vocabulary that is universal and accessible to all to communicate the spiritual and moral principles which are common to all religions. As one journalist put it, “we need a language that would talk about spiritual principles in a way that those of all faiths and even of no faith can relate to and apply in their lives.”

One of the themes discussed was that the media could play a significant role in dispelling religious prejudices by the kind of stories it carries about different communities, the way communities are portrayed, the refusal to carry hate speech or stereotypes. Sometimes journalists need the sensitivity to report on certain sensitive issues in a way that “allows wounds to heal”. As one journalist explained, “just because something has happened and it is newsworthy does not mean I need to report it. There are many facts which if reported in certain contexts or without sensitivity can worsen social conditions. A journalist who is committed merely to reporting facts but is blind to higher truths of the need for social harmony will do great damage.”

In discussing about the issues involved in covering religion, journalists often introspected on the need to rethink certain subtle aspects of the way the media positioned itself in relation to society. As one of the journalists mentioned, some media institutions in India have adopted an adversarial posture in relation to the other

institutions of society assuming that this is the only way to maintain their independence. “The media should speak like it is part of society,” she mentioned. “While we must be sensitive to injustice and wrongdoing, this does not justify having a cynical posture. Reporting the truth is not only about uncovering the abuse of power or failings in individuals and systems. Noble intentions and good motives are also true but the media is wary of focusing on them for fear of seeming naïve. This is partly why negative aspects of religion receive so much media attention”. Other journalists reflected on the need to report in a way that would retain people’s faith in goodness and nobility. It is such faith that inspires the hope in people that their efforts can result positive social transformation.

In this regard, the following questions were raised for further dialogue: Among the greatest challenges in the present society is the flood of fake news and of propaganda that seek to foster religious prejudice. How can journalists counter this onslaught of fake news? In what ways can they facilitate inter-religious understanding and dialogue? How can they foster balanced dialogue on issues that are sensitive to particular religious communities while fosters consensus and builds on points of agreement? How can the growing polarization in public discourse be replaced with a spirit of consultation and mutual dialogue?

#### *Clarifying the Role of Religion in Modern Society*

Over the past many decades, religion has become increasingly prominent in political and social life in many countries around the world. In India, the sense of dislocation and anxiety brought about by rapid social changes caused by globalization and technological change have fueled the search for a spiritual anchor to ground one’s identity in an altered social reality and a quest for meaning in a world where a traditional worldview has lost its former relevance.

The journalists who participated in this discourse spoke of the need to channel this quest for spirituality for serving the common good. Religious life, they felt, needed to be interpreted in ways that related to the needs of the modern world. Speaking of the need for ‘healthy interpretations of religion’, one journalist spoke of the need to give greater importance to the spiritual and moral teachings of religion rather than emphasizing its rituals and practices. Without a strong grounding in spiritual teachings, these practices and rituals which served external markers of religious identity turned religion into an identity construct that could be manipulated by political interests or exploited by godmen. Media persons also discussed the need for religion to help people overcome self-centeredness, greed and the attachment to material things which were

rampant in modern consumer society. For them, the answer lay not in propagating a form of otherworldliness, asceticism or renunciation of society. Rather, religiosity had to find expression in concrete actions carried out in service to society. As one journalist put it, “religion needs to raise people’s consciousness about the condition of society and to develop in them the desire to work for its betterment. It should create empathy in my heart and a feeling of connectedness with my fellow human beings. Where there is injustice, it should rouse me to seek justice...If I am truly religious, I cannot sit by and watch while my fellow citizens suffer poverty, lack of health care and education.”

For many journalists it was clear that such a reorientation in religious life required enlightened leadership. However, as one media person mentioned, unfortunately the most vocal spokespersons of religion in today’s world were not the most ‘spiritual’ people but rather those who were driven by political ambitions. The leaders of religion need to guide their congregations towards “becoming agents of unity and champions of justice”. However, some journalists also commented that the very concept of leadership within religious communities needed to change. As one journalist put it, “in today’s world where everyone is educated, we need new models of leadership. The people of a religious community can themselves find their own path. We need communities learning to apply spiritual teachings to the needs of society.”

These reflections led to a host of questions that need to be further explored: The media sets the agenda for public dialogue on themes of national importance. How can the media facilitate a new dialogue on the role of religious communities and their leaders and of religious institutions such as places of worship in serving the pressing developmental needs of the country? How can the powers of religion to mobilize human conscience to establish social harmony and unity and to overcome injustice through non-violent and peaceful means be channelized for the greater common good?

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