



## Religion and Peace: Making Transformation Possible

### *Background Note*

On the occasion of the bicentenary celebrations of the birth anniversary of the two Prophet Founders of the Bahá'í Faith, the Bab and Baha'u'llah, and the 74<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the formation of the United Nations Organization, the Office of Public Affairs of the Bahá'ís of India is organizing a symposium on the role of religion in fostering the enabling conditions of peace.

There is growing recognition that a conception of peace that equates it with the mere cessation of violence and conflict has yielded limited results. Those in the field of peace and conflict resolution acknowledge that efforts to address intergroup conflict and violence are most enduring when carried out in the context of a long-term commitment to social and economic justice and to strengthening the bonds that hold diverse peoples in society together. Peace, in this broader sense, is a condition of collective thriving, a state of communal health and well-being. In this sense, the challenge of peace is one that faces all human societies and not just those currently enduring war or coping with its aftermath. In an interconnected world where diverse peoples are living in growing proximity to each other and where systems of inclusion and exclusion are taking shape, learning to live peacefully together will increasingly move from being a moral choice to an imperative for collective survival.

To be prepared for the challenges of the twenty-first century, our conception of peace will need to focus on our vast and yet largely untapped potential to collaborate and to draw strength from diversity. The seeds of peace lie within human nature just as do those of war. Each civilization chooses which seeds to water. For too long the aspects of human nature that tend towards conflict and violence have been nurtured, consolidated and reinforced through culture, the media, our systems of knowledge and our social structures and institutions. A worldview that considers human beings to be inherently warlike, selfish and aggressive, anticipates and normalizes conflict, competition, war and violence as the natural state of affairs in human interaction. Peace becomes a palliative, a brief interlude before individuals and groups get back to fight each other for power, glory, wealth, status, prestige or perhaps just survival. What is required is a movement towards a culture of peace where those aspects of human nature that lead to cooperation, mutual trust, altruism, generosity and justice are allowed to grow and flourish.

Some might consider a civilizational advancement of this magnitude to be impractical and unrealistic. However, it is vital to remember that at certain moments of great crisis in history, when solutions can no longer be found through pragmatism, humanity has found it necessary to turn towards its ideals to take a creative leap forward. Around a century ago many would have called the idea of an organization such as the United Nations hopelessly idealistic. It took two world wars and the loss of nearly 100 million lives to make humanity realize that an international organization of this kind is an ideal that must be acted on to allow us to continue to survive as a species. A central question before the present generation is this – are we willing to take another step forward through an act of consultative will and consciously create the culture, institutions and structures of peace, or will we again wait until perhaps a greater devastation forces our hand and compels us to outgrow the habits of war?

It is in this context that the role of religion in fostering the potential for peace becomes highly relevant. Notwithstanding the predictions that it would fade away with the processes of modernization, religion continues to remain a profound force in the lives of the vast majority of the world's people who see themselves as moral beings concerned with spiritual awareness and purpose. A dispassionate view of history will reveal the vital role that religion has played in training human nature to overcome animal tendencies and to develop those moral and spiritual qualities that conduce to social order such as compassion, generosity, trustworthiness, forbearance, humility, courage and the willingness to sacrifice for the well-being of others. Its influence extends to the whole of society as a source of law and morality and as a means of order and stability. It is this positive function that defines the true nature and purpose of religion and differentiates it from the many forms of prejudice, hatred, ignorance and superstition that are propagated in its name. It is also in this sense that religion can develop those conditions and qualities both within the human being and society that are essential for peace. As the Bahá'í writings puts it, true religion must be "the cause of oneness among men, and the means of unity and love; they must promulgate universal peace, free man from every prejudice, bestow joy and gladness, exercise kindness to all men and do away with every difference and distinction."

Religion not only articulates a vision for individual and society to move towards, it also cultivates the will needed to put that aspiration into action by tapping into the roots of human motivation.

The symposium titled 'Religion and Peace: Making Transformation Possible' is being organized by the Office of Public Affairs of the Bahá'ís of India to open up a space for exploring the implications of drawing upon religion in building a culture of peace. Given below are some of the thematic areas that will be explored during this symposium along with questions to stimulate discussion around each.

### **Economic Justice**

At the root of conflict and violence is injustice. Overcoming injustice requires a transformation both in collective consciousness and in the structures of society that normalize and perpetuate oppression. Enduring change towards more just conditions cannot come about through mere pragmatic thinking. Transforming the structures of society would threaten the individual and collective self-interests of large numbers who either openly or in a hidden way benefit from maintaining the status quo. It is only a deeply embedded consciousness of the oneness of humankind that would enable groups to see their own interest in the interest of the whole of humankind and create structures where the wellbeing of humankind would be accorded primacy over all other interests. The will that is required for the sacrifice and long term commitment that such a change would entail can only come about through a spiritualized consciousness that finds within the resources of the spirit the wisdom and universal love needed to overcome prejudice, heal wounds, disencumber the self from memories and narratives of the Other, and to transcend the accumulated baggage of immaturities in a step towards a new, more mature state of individual and collective existence.

Among the most glaring injustices that perpetuate conflict are economic inequalities. The inordinate disparity between rich and poor, a source of acute suffering, keeps the world in a state of instability, virtually on the brink of war. Many of those who have analyzed this problem have found one of the main causes of growing disparity to be inherent to the present pattern of globalization that destroys local economies, disrupts traditional livelihoods and destroys local economic structures in the name of integration into the global economy. How can local economies

be strengthened? How can they interact with the global economy in a way that is mutually enriching and just, where interaction with the global enriches the local, strengthens local agency and where the diversities of culture, ecology and traditions are preserved and nurtured? What spiritual qualities and principles would need to come into play in building of just economic structures?

### **The Equality of Women and Men**

The emancipation of women, the achievement of full equality between the sexes, is another challenging, though less acknowledged prerequisite of peace. The denial of such equality perpetrates an injustice against one half of the world's population and promotes in men harmful attitudes and habits that are carried from the family to the workplace, to political life, and ultimately to international relations.

Discrimination against women is among the oldest forms of oppression and no society can claim to have overcome it. Values of male privilege has been kneaded into the very clay out of which institutions and structures of society are formed. Unfortunately in many cases religious texts have also been interpreted in a way that makes them seem to be condoning male superiority. When the texts of all religions are viewed not as isolated artefacts but as part of one divine process of civilizing humankind, it becomes possible to see the principle of equality of the sexes being elaborated gradually over time in successive scriptures in tune with growing human capacity to accept its challenging implications. What might seem to be discrimination against women in a religious text by today's standards, when viewed in its historical context would be seen to be a tremendous advancement over the prevailing standards at the time. In this process, it is also important to distinguish numerous man-made additions to religion from its authentic form reflected in the scriptures.

The transition towards a peaceful society will require that the equality of the sexes be fully realized in all its implications. It is easy to see discrimination against women in traditional societies. Yet even modern societies with claims to be progressive pose great barriers to the full participation of women as equals in all walks of life. What are some of the most formidable of these barriers? How can religion assist with overcoming them at the level of both thought and practice?

Building peaceful societies require, among other things, qualities and capacities of the human soul such as cooperation, love, generosity, nurturance, patience, justice, determination, courage and sacrifice for the common good. However, humanity's understanding of many of these qualities and capacities and its ability to draw upon them have been distorted by gender stereotypes which reduce many of these spiritual qualities to gender traits. How can the full resources of the human spirit be developed in the mammoth exercise of building a new civilization that is just and united?

### **Aesthetics and Peace**

Art, music, and literature are among the main means by which values are created, recreated, transmitted and questioned in a culture. They are also tools for the imagination by which alternative future and realities become conceivable. They communicate subtle, ineffable insights about the human condition. In words, images, movements and sounds, they capture beauty and profound meaning which otherwise would remain beyond the horizon of mundane existence. By their very nature, the arts thus tend towards the spiritual dimension of human life.

Art, music and literature have a profound role in making a culture of peace imaginable, in creating the appetite and aspirations for the conditions of peace and in awakening hearts and minds to spiritual potentialities for harmonious collective existence. How can art serve as a medium to awaken consciousness of these potentialities – the potential to create relationships and structures that replace competition with collaboration, suspicion with trust, struggle for power and selfish gain with a selfless commitment to the common good? Through these means how can art become a means for building a culture of peace?

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