



Religion, Peace, and the End of Otherness

Background Note

Never before in human history have the conditions for achieving peace seemed as promising and yet the prospects for realizing it seemed so remote. The outward preconditions for achieving the coming together of the world's peoples seem to be all in place. Rapid technological development and accelerating processes of globalization have broken down barriers between peoples and shrunk the world into a veritable global neighborhood. Yet, tightening global interconnectedness has also aggravated forces that have multiplied the propensity for conflict.

Those who have analyzed this phenomenon have traced a link between globalization and the politics of identity. Studies have shown how the radical reordering of social, economic and cultural life triggered by globalization has disrupted the value systems and the cultural milieus that gave people a sense of their place in the world and endowed their lives with meaning. This sense of dislocation along with a growing sense of powerlessness in the masses in the face of widening economic disparities and systemic injustices has fueled the rise of movements of identity politics that have spread the world over in the past three decades. Such movements, it has been observed, draw their appeal from promising a return to traditional forms of collective identities based on religion, race, nationality or caste. In a world in flux buffeted by bewildering changes, they provide an illusory, but highly cherished, sense of stability and certainty. They evoke a sense of power through identification with a larger collective and a triumphalist narrative of the group's glorious past. They also instill a sense of the group's moral superiority by casting its identity in opposition to an imagined 'Other' which is usually a rival social group portrayed as being unclean, morally inferior and repulsive. Feelings of collective self-righteousness are often heightened by exaggerated or false narratives of a history of past atrocities committed by the Other that fuel a sense of victimhood and project the Other as an existential threat to the group. Through relentless propaganda campaigns such movements ensure that prejudice remains finely-sharpened.

The overcoming of prejudice against an 'Other', thus, has increasingly become the defining challenge of our times. The resolution of our other collective challenges— be they related to the environment, the economy or collective security - will depend on our ability to work together in collaboration for common ends setting aside prejudicial mindsets. However, eliminating prejudice from minds and hearts and from the structures of society has proven to be notoriously difficult. Great strides have been made in achieving this goal over the past century with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the adoption of egalitarian principles in national constitutions and through legislation of the State. Yet, while these have undoubtedly been landmarks in the journey towards greater oneness, experience has shown that prejudice has a

tendency to linger on, often under a veneer of political correctness, only to reassert itself on the social fabric over time.

One of the reasons overcoming prejudice has been such a stubborn challenge is that it often remains hidden in cultural codes and embedded within laws and policies. It also tends to appeal to powerful instincts and impulses that can remain impervious to reason and logic. This explains in part why despite modern scientific and philosophical discourses establishing the baselessness of stereotypes about peoples and groups, such conceptions and the negative emotions associated with them persist even in the most enlightened circles.

History has shown that the one force capable of transforming human consciousness and instilling a profound conviction in the oneness of humankind is religion. Through the wealth of statements enjoining love and unity contained in scriptures, through the exalted and peerless example of all-embracing fellowship and universal love shown by its prophets and saints and through its enunciation of the concept of a soul as a spiritual identity common to all human beings, religion establishes an unassailable foundation for belief in the oneness of humankind. It not only propounds the concept of equality but also instills those virtues that make unity possible such as unconditional love, compassion, kindness, empathy, mercy and a willingness to sacrifice for the common good.

Any claim that religion can contribute to the abolition of prejudice is bound to be countered with the objection that religion itself has been turned into a potent source of prejudice. It is here that distinction will need to be made between true religion and the divisive interpretations and practices that are propagated in its name. All religions have a common set of spiritual teachings that enjoin humankind to develop spiritual qualities, to discipline their selfish and aggressive tendencies and to contribute to the betterment of society. All religions derive their inspiration from the same spiritual source and they all aim to achieve the same purpose, which is to unite humanity and ensure the advancement of civilization. Religious prejudice then is the antithesis of the true religious spirit. It arises from interpretations and impositions that fail to see the divine truth at the heart of every religion.

The need to draw upon the unifying and constructive spirit of religion to transcend binaries of 'us' and 'them' and to work together to abolish all forms of prejudice was one of the central themes in the talks and writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, one of the Central Figures of the Bahá'í Faith. Whether in His writings or in His life of selfless and sacrificial service to humankind, He remained a tireless advocate and a peerless example of the spiritual qualities and attributes that would extinguish prejudice and establish a firm basis for universal peace. It is on the occasion of the centenary of his passing in November 1921 that the Office of Public Affairs of the Bahá'ís of India is organizing a symposium on the vital issue of the role of religion in establishing peace through the overcoming of prejudice.

Some of the questions that the symposium hopes to address are as follows:

1. How can religious leaders, civil society actors, and policy-makers work together to abolish stereotypes about various religious, racial, national, and caste groups? In what ways can the spiritual power of religion be drawn upon to eliminate deeply embedded

prejudicial feelings? How can prejudicial conceptions seeded in the institutions and structures of society be identified and weeded out?

2. Efforts to eliminate prejudice will fail unless they take into account the instruments that are proliferating and reinforcing prejudices about various groups in society. These include various forms of propaganda disseminated through the mainstream media and social media platforms. How can these forces that seek to spread hate be countered by stronger countervailing forces of love and unity?
3. How can institutions that educate and socialize young minds raise new generations that are not only able to resist propaganda but also act as champions of unity who will, in the words of Abdu'l-Baha, “strive for universal peace, seek the means of love, and destroy the basis of disagreement”?

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