



Treasuring Diversity: The Role of Religion in Building an Inclusive Society

Background Note

Through the rapidly-advancing processes of globalization and urbanization, societies across the world are becoming increasingly diverse in their demographic composition while at the same time ever more interconnected within themselves and with the wider world. This presents our generation with a unique opportunity. For a society, its demographic diversity is a priceless resource to be exploited for the social, cultural, economic and intellectual enrichment of the whole. Just as the genetic diversity that characterizes our biological heritage is a source of beauty, strength and intelligence in the human family, cultural and demographic diversity in a society can multiply the capacities of the body politic manifold.

However, diversity is enriching only in the context of a society where the bonds between groups are characterized by trust, respect and empathy. In our highly interconnected world, the opportunities to build such bonds of unity are many more than what previous generations had. The internet, mass media and social media have greatly expanded the means available for groups to share, collaborate, communicate and develop mutual understanding. But equally, these same developments have also increased the possibilities of conflict. They have become potent instruments for propaganda campaigns seeking to incite hatred and suspicion between groups through misinformation and the cultivation of prejudice.

Thus in seeking to build an inclusive and harmonious society, the shaping of perceptions and attitudes of groups towards each other becomes a most pressing concern. A harmonious society requires that its members have a profound conviction in their oneness and equality as members of one society, and indeed as human beings. It is only when this oneness is embraced as a fundamental truth and not merely as a rhetorical statement that it becomes possible for qualities vital for harmonious collective existence such as empathy, compassion, forgiveness, love and respect to flourish. It is only when this conviction becomes deeply embedded in society's collective consciousness that the tendency to view other groups as less important than one's own, to create stereotypes and to magnify differences can be resolutely resisted.

Any effort to address the consciousness of people in society cannot ignore the question of religion. For the vast majority of the world's people, religion is the source of their identity and their values. It is the system of knowledge that has, throughout history, civilized human nature. It explores the deepest motivations of human behaviour and provides spiritual principles to guide actions.

No doubt religion has been misused both in the past and in the present and has been made the basis of prejudice. But these are distortions and perversions of the true spirit of religion which

aims to create unity. In this regard, it is important to focus on the core of religion which consists of spiritual teachings and moral principles that are common to all religions.

Fundamentalism, dogmatism and superstition are alien to the spirit found in scriptures of the great religions and in the lives of their Founders.

When it comes to building an inclusive society, religion can help instill a profound spiritual conviction in the oneness of humankind and can nurture social virtues such as universal brotherhood, equality, justice, forgiveness, humility, love and compassion. That human beings are one in essence, regardless of their apparent differences, is a spiritual truth expressed in all religions. “*Know ye not why We created you all from the same dust? That no one should exalt himself over the other;*” writes Bahá’u’lláh, the founder of the Bahá’í Faith. “*He who experiences the unity of life sees his own Self in all beings, and all beings in his own Self, and looks on everything with an impartial eye*”, are the words of Lord Buddha. “*He alone sees truly who sees the Lord the same in every creature...seeing the same Lord everywhere, he does not harm himself or others;*” says Lord Krishna. “*No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us*”, are the words of Jesus Christ. Similarly, one reads in the Quran, “*show kindness to parents, and to kindred, and orphans, and the needy, and to the neighbour that is a kinsman and the neighbour that is a stranger, and the companion by your side, and the wayfarer...*”

What distinguishes religion from a philosophy is that it not only creates intellectual acceptance of the need for high moral principles, but also instills the will needed to put these principles into action by tapping into the roots of human motivation.

This symposium is being organized by the Office of Public Affairs, of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha’is of India as an attempt to invite dialogue among thinkers willing to explore the positive role that religion can and must play in India in building an inclusive society.

Given below are a few of the many questions that such a dialogue would need to explore:

- How can religious communities develop a united vision of the kind of inclusive society they want to create, a vision that is grounded in each of their religious texts and yet not exclusive to any one of them?
- How can the spiritual and moral teachings which are common to all Faiths be drawn upon to counter divisive agendas that seek to make religion a source of hatred? Similarly, how can true religion which is based on reason be differentiated from superstition, empty rituals and blind imitation? What role can the State, the civil society and religious leadership play in promoting this process? What role do education systems and the media have in this?
- How can populations be empowered to take charge of their own religious heritage such that they become active protagonists in applying spiritual principles for the betterment of the world rather than being objects of manipulation by the clergy or various political organizations? How can religious communities become communities that systematically and thoughtfully learn to apply these spiritual teachings to the needs of the modern age

in a way that is inclusive and not rigid? What kind of concrete actions can religious communities engage in to give expression to, and to strengthen a sense of commitment to the common good?

- How can the universal love and brotherhood fostered by religion be channelized to create the willingness in oppressed populations or groups to forgive past wrongs, to give up the lust for revenge, to abandon bitterness and resentment or a sense of victimhood and to be willing to make a fresh start in building a peaceful and harmonious society?

Office of Public Affairs

National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of India

Baha'i House, 6, Shrimant Madhavrao Seindia Marg, New Delhi -110 001

Ph: 91-11-23386458, 23389326,9873642273, 9953825600 Fax: 91-11-23389333 Email: dea@ibnc.in