



Office of Public Affairs of the Bahá'ís of India

The Divine Educators and the Nature and Purpose of Religion

Background Note

At the centre of every religion is the exalted and venerable Person of its Founder. These great beings who are the founders of the world's religions have been variously referred to as Manifestations of God, Avatars, Prophets or Messengers of God. It is through them that, over many millennia humanity has learned to recognize and revere the Creator. The guidance they have imparted has been the primary force impelling humanity's spiritual and moral development. The impact of their words, which are collected in the world's scriptures, have given rise to new systems of values which have transformed consciousness and behaviour, influenced arts and sciences and led to the emergence of legal codes and new forms of social administration. The story of their lives, as much as the impact of their words, has left an indelible impact on humanity's collective psyche. By exemplifying an all-embracing love for humanity, an unwavering adherence to justice and a sublimity of character far beyond anything visible on the ordinary human plane, these divine educators raised consciousness above the exigencies of animal existence and awakened hearts and minds to new frontiers of moral excellence. Not even the most hardened of sceptics can deny the monumental record of spiritual and moral accomplishment that humanity has achieved in the name of each one of them, whether it be Krishna, Rama, Buddha, Moses, Zoroaster, Jesus, Muhammad or Baha'u'llah.

The world of today stands in dire need of the moral inspiration and spiritual guidance of these divine teachers. Yet, humanity's ability to draw on their teachings to address its multiple challenges has been severely limited by the confusion that prevails around the concept and practice of religion. In so many cases, the teachings that these divine educators brought have been mixed with a body of man-made traditions, beliefs and practices that have, over the centuries, been added to them. The clear voice of God's messenger or avatar communicating with the human heart has often been lost in the din of competing voices presuming to speak with their authority or on their behalf. The most distressing outcome of this confusion can be seen in cases where the very purpose of religion is reversed – instead of freeing the soul from the shackles of ignorance, fanaticism and dogmatism are bred in its name and instead of instilling the consciousness of oneness, it is made a basis of prejudice and hatred.

The need of the hour then is for us to refocus on the life and mission of these divine educators in order to remind ourselves of the authentic purpose that religion is meant to serve, a purpose that was intended for it by its founders. Focusing on their lives also leads to the recognition that they are all one in their reality and in their mission. When we look beyond their specific cultural and historical contexts, all these teachers are united by a common purpose. Viewed together, they appear not as isolated founders of different religions but rather as agents of one common process unfolding across the ages throughout the planet – the progressive spiritualization of humankind. As the Bahá'í writings attest in relation to the oneness of these divine teachers: "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."

On the occasion of the birth anniversary of the Twin Prophet Founders of the Bahá'í Faith – the Bab and Baha'u'llah - the Bahá'í Office of Public Affairs of India is organizing a symposium on the theme 'The Divine Educators and the Nature and Purpose of Religion'. The intention of this gathering is to achieve greater clarity on the oneness of religion and on the unifying and constructive purpose of religion by focusing on the life and mission of its founders. Some of the questions that this symposium will seek to explore are as follows:

1. The lives of the founders of the world's major religions reveal a common pattern. They were all possessed of innate knowledge and they revealed divine qualities to an extent far above what human beings can achieve. In their earthly lives, they remained entirely sanctified from attraction to worldly power or riches. Due to their love for humanity, they willingly endured immense suffering and sacrifice. Their message which called for social and spiritual transformation was vehemently opposed by those in power. Yet, despite immense odds, the light they brought to the world was not extinguished. Due to the divine source of their light, their message spread from heart to heart until it embraced a significant section of humanity. How can people of all religions grow in their consciousness of the underlying oneness of the purpose and mission of these divine educators? How can their work be seen as part of humanity's common religious heritage?

2. In order to arrive at a deeper understanding of the oneness that exists among these divine educators, it becomes necessary to learn to read their writings and appreciate their mission with a discernment that combines the use of reason with spiritual perception. Such an understanding would, for example, differentiate the contextual aspects of their message which were responding to the exigencies of their specific social and cultural settings from the core principles which they enunciated which are eternal and common to all. How can the capacity for such perceptive discernment be developed and fostered among the masses of humankind?

3. All of these divine educators spoke of a spiritual reality that transcends the material world. This spiritual reality includes the human soul which is the essential identity of the human being consisting of latent spiritual qualities such as love, generosity, justice and kindness which are to be developed in the course of one's life. In many ways, a better understanding of the station and purpose of these divine educators would depend on humanity achieving a more mature appreciation of the nature of spiritual reality and its connection with the material world. Going beyond crude explanations of the 'spiritual' in terms of the magical, the miraculous or the fantastic, such an understanding would have to open the way for humanity to engage in a rational and systematic process of drawing upon spiritual qualities and principles for constructive social transformation. In other words, rather than seeking to locate the interaction of the spiritual and the material in the esoteric and the occult, it would seek to explore the spiritual in terms of the consciousness of one's interconnectedness with all beings and with the Creator and the expression of this consciousness in motivations and actions that seek to build a better world reflecting the principles of justice and unity. How can such an understanding be fostered and strengthened?

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