

Bahá'í Contributions to Interfaith Relations

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P R E C I S

The Bahá'í Faith “claims not to destroy or belittle previous Revelations, but to connect, unify, and fulfill them,” according to Shoghi Effendi (Bahá'í “Guardian,” 1921–57). Seena Fazel proposed “three bridges that can link the Bahá'í community to other religions in dialogue”: “ethical,” “intellectual,” and “mystical-spiritual.” The Universal House of Justice (elected international Bahá'í council) addressed its public “Letter to the World’s Religious Leaders” (April, 2002) to promote consensus “that God is one and that . . . religion is likewise one.” Shoghi Effendi’s declaration that the Bahá'í Faith “proclaims all established religions to be divine in origin, identical in their aims, complementary in their functions, continuous in their purpose, indispensable in their value to mankind” potentially can promote ideal interfaith relations through reciprocal recognition and respect.



The *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* (the “Journal”) is “the first peer-reviewed journal in the field of interreligious dialogue.”¹ The Journal is endowed with a vision, that is, “a vision of the dialogue of religious people around the world seeking to promote human flourishing.”² A search of the Journal’s database in Project Muse—from Volume 50 (2015) through the current issue—reveals only two occurrences of the formal name of a

¹ *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* website, <http://dialogueinstitute.org/jes/>, accessed January 19, 2019.

² *Ibid.*

relatively recent world religion, that is, the “Bahá’í Faith.”³ A further search discloses only a single mention of the Universal House of Justice, the international Bahá’í council that oversees the affairs of the global Bahá’í community. A deeper search in the “EBSCOhost” database of the Journal’s issues, published between 1995 and 2018, result in only a single article that mentions the “Bahá’í Faith.” These search results demonstrate the relative paucity of attention paid to the Bahá’í Faith, which is now among the world religions. As for “interreligious dialogue,” the Universal House of Justice (the “House”) has directly contributed to the issue in its “Letter to the World’s Religious Leaders” (the “Letter”), issued in April, 2002.⁴

The House is an institution envisioned and ordained by Bahá’u’lláh (1817–92), prophet-founder of the Bahá’í Faith.⁵ The House is elected once every five years by members of Bahá’í National Spiritual Assemblies (annually elected national Bahá’í councils) at the International Bahá’í Convention, held at the Bahá’í World Centre in Haifa, Israel. The purpose and mission of the House are described in this statement on an official Bahá’í website:

Bahá’u’lláh conferred authority upon the Universal House of Justice to exert a positive influence on the welfare of humankind, to promote education, peace and global prosperity, and to safeguard human honour and the position of religion. It is charged with applying the Bahá’í teachings to the requirements of an ever-evolving society and is thus empowered to legislate on matters not explicitly covered in the Faith’s Sacred Texts. The guidance provided by the Universal House of Justice ensures unity of thought and action in the Bahá’í community as it learns to translate into

³ See Gity Banan Etemad, Review of Mikhail Sergeev, *Theory of Religious Cycles: Tradition, Modernity, and the Bahá’í Faith*, *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 51 (Summer, 2016): 426–427; and Jeanine Diller, “Which Ultimate(s) Would Theology without Walls Be About?” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 51 (Fall, 2016): 499–505.

⁴ The Universal House of Justice, “Letter to the World’s Religious Leaders” (April, 2002); available at <https://www.bahai.org/documents/the-universal-house-of-justice/letter-worlds-religious-leaders>, accessed January 19, 2019. For the Letter with numbered paragraphs, see https://bahai-library.com/uhj_religious_leaders_2002, accessed March 26, 2019.

⁵ See Christopher Buck and Youli Ioannesyan, “Scholar Meets Prophet: Edward Granville Browne and Baha’u’llah (Acre, 1890),” *Baha’i Studies Review*, vol. 20 (2014; published 2018), pp. 21–38; available at https://www.academia.edu/36015012/_Scholar_Meets_Prophet_Edward_Granville_Browne_and_Baha_u_llah_Acre_1890_2018_, accessed January 19, 2019. For a scholarly, comprehensive overview of the Bahá’í Faith, see Peter Smith, *An Introduction to the Bahá’í Faith* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

reality Bahá'u'lláh's vision for a spiritually and materially prosperous global civilization.⁶

This essay will take a close look at the House's "Letter to the World's Religious Leaders" as a contribution to interfaith discourse. As an independent world religion, the Bahá'í Faith is relatively small in numbers (an estimated 7,000,000 adherents worldwide), but it has a significant global distribution. Bahá'í communities are established in every country in the world except for North Korea and the Vatican. As such, the Bahá'í Faith is said to be the second most widely diffused religion in the world today. The rapid spread (that is, "diffusion" in terms of world religious statistics) of the Bahá'í Faith is impressive by any measure, yet it is still emerging from its former obscurity.

One example of this is the frequent references in ecumenical circles to the three "Abrahamic religions" of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Since the Bahá'í Faith has its origins in Islam (in much the same way that Christianity emerged as an independent religion from its parent religion, Judaism), the Bahá'í Faith could rightly be described as the fourth of the so-called "Abrahamic religions." That said, there is no reason to stir up controversy over whether or not the Bahá'í Faith should be recognized as being among the "Abrahamic religions." Islam, generally speaking, simply does not recognize the Bahá'í Faith as a legitimate religion, primarily since Muslims universally believe that the Prophet Muhammad is the "Seal of the Prophets" (Qur'an 33:40) and, therefore, the last divinely sent Prophet. From both Sunni and Shia perspectives, a post-Islamic messenger of God is seen as an impossibility, although they both have prophetic expectations of a Promised One, which the Bahá'í Faith claims to fulfill. Notwithstanding such nonrecognition of the Bahá'í Faith from orthodox Islamic perspectives, the relationship of the Bahá'í Faith to Islam was articulated by Bahá'í Orientalist, Alessandro Bausani (1921–88),⁷ in an article recently translated from the original Italian into English, within the context of

⁶"The Universal House of Justice"; available at <http://universalhouseofjustice.bahai.org/>, accessed January 19, 2019.

⁷See Biancamaria Scarcia Amoretti, "Bausani, Alessandro," *Encyclopaedia Iranica* (2008); available at <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/bausani-alessandro-prolific-italian-orientalist-in-several-fields>, accessed January 19, 2019.

Bausani's proposed "typology of monotheisms."⁸ Bausani, who translated the Qur'ān into Italian (*Il Korano*, 1955), stated that "Bahá'í doctrines . . . present a clear though simple theology and a precise legislative organization that is totally different from that of Islam."⁹ As "an autonomous and specific religion, no longer bound to Islam," the Bahá'í Faith "is truly the fourth monotheistic religion (together with Judaism, Christianity and Islam)" and is "the first monotheistic religion to originate in Persia, if one excludes the partial Zoroastrian monotheism."¹⁰

The Bahá'í doctrine of "Progressive Revelation" views world religions (including, besides the Abrahamic religions, Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, and Hinduism, among others) as appearing successively in ever-advancing forms and formulations, as part of an overarching spiritual evolution that drives the social evolution of the world as a whole. "Progressive Revelation," moreover, culminates in recognition of the Bahá'í Faith as the latest in the series of world religions that have appeared throughout history, with the recognition that Bahá'u'lláh is the latest "Manifestation of God" whose teachings represent the will of God for this day and age. Bahá'u'lláh came to unify the world—not miraculously, but through the power, breadth, and depth of the cosmopolitan principles, universal ethics, high moral standards, and other sociomoral teachings that he revealed and promoted, along with the institutions and community framework that he conceived and for which he established the foundations of a divinely inspired administrative order, according to Bahá'í belief.

The seemingly intractable problem of fanaticism, religious extremism, and prejudice is addressed in a broad-based, general way. This problem calls for a solution, although not one that is simple. The House's "Letter to the World's Religious Leaders" approaches this thorny cluster of issues

⁸ Alessandro Bausani, "Notes for a Typology of Monotheism," tr. Julio Savi, *Baha'i Studies Review*, vol. 19 (2013), pp. 215–230. See also idem, "Can Monotheism Be Taught? (Further Considerations on the Typology of Monotheism)," *Numen* 10 (December, 1963): 167–201, especially p. 168, in which monotheisms are ordered along a triple scheme: (1) Monotheisms proper (Judaism and Islam [primary]); Christianity and the Bahá'í Faith [secondary]); (2) Failed monotheisms (Zoroastrianism [primary]; Manicheanism [secondary]; Akhenaton's reform [archaic]); and (3) Para-monotheisms (Sikhism and various mysticisms). Here, by "secondary," Bausani meant "derivative" or "subsequent" in nature, not "less important."

⁹ Alessandro Bausani, *Religion in Iran: From Zoroaster to Baha'u'llah*, tr. J. Marchesi (New York: Bibliotheca Persica, 2000), p. 396.

¹⁰ Ibid.

from the standpoint of religious leadership itself. That said, the problem of religious prejudice is pretextual, that is, a point of departure, as the House, more importantly, addresses the question of interfaith dialogue itself and the direction that it can and should be taking, from a Bahá'í perspective. This perspective is offered as a Bahá'í contribution to interfaith dialogue, by way of an open message to the world's religious leaders. The document itself consists of twenty-five paragraphs, which are numbered here for the purpose of this analysis. The opening paragraph is simply a preamble, drawing attention to the twentieth century as a period of awakening of the peoples of the world to a common and collective realization of humanity's inherent biological and social unity, where common origin and common cause implicate a common destiny that can best be shaped by shared purpose and commitment to certain fundamental principles by a foreseeably emerging *de facto* consensus. This public letter opens as follows:

To the World's Religious Leaders

The enduring legacy of the twentieth century is that it compelled the peoples of the world to begin seeing themselves as the members of a single human race, and the earth as that race's common homeland. Despite the continuing conflict and violence that darken the horizon, prejudices that once seemed inherent in the nature of the human species are everywhere giving way. Down with them come barriers that long divided the family of man into a Babel of incoherent identities of cultural, ethnic or national origin. That so fundamental a change could occur in so brief a period—virtually overnight in the perspective of historical time—suggests the magnitude of the possibilities for the future.

Tragically, organized religion, whose very reason for being entails service to the cause of brotherhood and peace, behaves all too frequently as one of the most formidable obstacles in the path; to cite a particular painful fact, it has long lent its credibility to fanaticism. We feel a responsibility, as the governing council of one of the world religions, to urge earnest consideration of the challenge this poses for religious leadership. Both the issue and the circumstances to which it gives rise require that we speak frankly. We trust that common service to the Divine will ensure that what we say will be received in the same spirit of goodwill as it is put forward.¹¹

¹¹ "Letter to the World's Religious Leaders," paras. 1 and 2.

Here, the Letter frames the problem as one in which present-day religions all too often pose “formidable obstacles” to “brotherhood and peace” (para. 2)—with the greatest impediment being “fanaticism.” Elaborating further, the Letter calls attention to “claims to exclusivity or finality that, in winding their roots around the life of the spirit, have been the greatest single factor in suffocating impulses to unity and in promoting hatred and violence.”¹² Of course, “fanaticism” of all ilks arises from “claims to exclusivity or finality” taken to the extreme. So, if the “World’s Religious Leaders” to whom this letter is addressed agree with this presenting problem, what then is the proposed solution? Here is what the House proposed:

It is to this historic challenge that we believe leaders of religion must respond if religious leadership is to have meaning in the global society emerging from the transformative experiences of the twentieth century. It is evident that growing numbers of people are coming to realize that the truth underlying all religions is in its essence one. This recognition arises not through a resolution of theological disputes, but as an intuitive awareness born from the ever widening experience of others and from a dawning acceptance of the oneness of the human family itself.¹³

The House linked its proposition that “the truth underlying all religions is in its essence one” to a burgeoning awareness of “the oneness of the human family itself.” How does this principled solution—with its aim to reduce religious bigotry universally—relate to interfaith dialogue? The Letter states:

Inspired by this perspective, the Bahá'í community has been a vigorous promoter of interfaith activities from the time of their inception. Apart from cherished associations that these activities create, Bahá'ís see in the struggle of diverse religions to draw closer together a response to the Divine Will for a human race that is entering on its collective maturity. The members of our community will continue to assist in every way we can. We owe it to our partners in this common effort, however, to state clearly our conviction that interfaith discourse, if it is to contribute meaningfully to healing the ills that afflict a desperate humanity, must now address honestly and without further evasion the implications of the

¹² *Ibid.*, para. 16.

¹³ *Ibid.*, para. 17.

over-arching truth that called the movement into being: that God is one and that, beyond all diversity of cultural expression and human interpretation, religion is likewise one.¹⁴

This statement reaffirms the Bahá'í commitment to interfaith dialogue, seen as an intrinsically worthwhile endeavor. That said, this public statement is one of religious diplomacy, and it is thus of a general nature and intentionally open-ended. Religious leaders may take heart that the Bahá'í community worldwide will continue to be “a vigorous promoter of interfaith activities,” as stated above. This assurance operates as an ongoing mandate for Bahá'ís to redouble their efforts to contribute to interfaith dialogue and cooperation. The Letter explicitly values the “cherished associations that these activities create” and sees great benefit in the efforts of “diverse religions to draw closer together.”

The idea that “God is one” is a way of saying that “reality is universal.” Similarly, the concept that “religion is one” is shorthand for acknowledging that the fundamental purpose of religion is to make this world a better place by promoting spiritual awareness, cultivating empathy, fostering moral rectitude, and encouraging service to humanity—and that the religions of the world, through effective and enlightened religious leadership, can collectively and cooperatively promote transconfessional affinity and common cause through shared human and spiritual values. Although they may not attract universal assent, these fundamental religious commitments go far in promoting common ground and common cause for the commonweal of humanity at large. Just about anyone who has known Bahá'ís is aware of what Bahá'ís often refer to as the “three onenesses,” that is, the “oneness of God,” the “oneness of religion,” and the “oneness of humankind.” Moreover, the idea that “God is one” and that “religion is likewise one” ties into the “oneness of the human family”—all of which derive from a “truth is one” view of reality. The concluding paragraph of the Letter ends with a warning of the imminent danger of unbridled religious fanaticism to wreak further havoc, unless and until religious leaders—within their respective faith communities, as well as through interfaith channels—take decisive action to counter the perils of religious extremism:

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, para. 24.

With every day that passes, danger grows that the rising fires of religious prejudice will ignite a worldwide conflagration the consequences of which are unthinkable. Such a danger civil government, unaided, cannot overcome. Nor should we delude ourselves that appeals for mutual tolerance can alone hope to extinguish animosities that claim to possess Divine sanction. The crisis calls on religious leadership for a break with the past as decisive as those that opened the way for society to address equally corrosive prejudices of race, gender and nation. Whatever justification exists for exercising influence in matters of conscience lies in serving the well-being of humankind. At this greatest turning point in the history of civilization, the demands of such service could not be more clear. “The well-being of mankind, its peace and security, are unattainable”, Bahá'u'lláh urges, “unless and until its unity is firmly established.”¹⁵

Note that “the rising fires of religious prejudice” are dynamically linked with “equally corrosive prejudices of race, gender and nation.” The Letter calls on religious leaders to be mindful of the challenges posed by religious, racial, gender-based, and national prejudices and to resolve to dedicate their individual and collective efforts to administer the cure for these diseases afflicting the body politic—that is, by promoting interreligious, interracial, gender-based, and international unity.

The Letter makes a number of other important points as well. The power of religion to eradicate prejudice in all its pernicious forms is emphasized and given new, influential life in the following passage by Bahá'u'lláh, as quoted in the Letter:

There can be no doubt whatever that the peoples of the world, of whatever race or religion, derive their inspiration from one heavenly Source, and are the subjects of one God. The difference between the ordinances under which they abide should be attributed to the varying requirements and exigencies of the age in which they were revealed. All of them, except a few which are the outcome of human perversity, were ordained of God, and are a reflection of His Will and Purpose. Arise and, armed with the power of faith, shatter to pieces the gods of your vain imaginings, the sowers of dissension amongst you. Cleave unto that which draweth you together and uniteth you.¹⁶

¹⁵ Ibid., para. 25.

¹⁶ Ibid., para. 15.

In Bahá'í belief, Bahá'u'lláh's statements, including the passage above, are inspired. They constitute Bahá'í Sacred Scripture. Bahá'u'lláh's writings are divinely revealed and, therefore, represent the Word of God for this day and age. The Letter, commenting on the passage above, makes clear that Bahá'u'lláh "does not call for abandonment of faith in the fundamental verities of any of the world's great belief systems."¹⁷ "Far otherwise," it adds, affirming this fundamental fact, "Faith has its own imperative and is its own justification."¹⁸ "What the above words do unequivocally urge," the Letter further explains, as seen above (note 14), "is renunciation of all those claims to exclusivity or finality that, in winding their roots around the life of the spirit, have been the greatest single factor in suffocating impulses to unity and in promoting hatred and violence."¹⁹ If they are to succeed in exerting a positive influence, the world's religious leaders now face a "historic challenge."²⁰

Without directly identifying any radical religious organizations, the presumption appears to be that extremist religious groups are so well known as to be perfectly obvious. Therefore, this document does not single out any specific exponents of radical Islamism or any similar movements across the religious spectrum. Such fanaticism may be seen as the extreme and, in a sense, unmitigated trajectory of popular and widely held religious attitudes that have gained traction at the grassroots level within various faith communities. To address the root causes is subtly to advocate attitudinal, if not doctrinal, religious reform. What the House offers may be regarded as a Bahá'í -inspired "theology of religions," although this is not explicitly represented as such.

The first major issue discussed in the Letter is the equality of men and women: "At the level of global discourse, however, the concept of the equality of the sexes has, for all practical purposes, now assumed the force of universally accepted principle."²¹ Although enjoying "similar authority in most of the academic community and information media,"²² the problem of denying women opportunities to enjoy equal social status and to

¹⁷ Ibid., para. 16.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid., para. 17.

²¹ Ibid., para. 3.

²² Ibid.

fulfill their inherent potential continues to be a widespread problem in many societies today.

Second on the agenda of social problems aggravated by religious fanaticism is the problem of “nationalism” that goes beyond a healthy “love of country that enriches one’s life” to “inflammatory rhetoric designed to provoke hatred and fear of others.”²³ Third on the agenda is racism and ethnic prejudice. Widening the scope, the Letter decries “such injustices” as the deeply “ingrained prejudices of ethnicity, gender, nation, caste and class”²⁴ that continue to plague the world today. “Fundamental principles” of human dignity and equality have gained wide assent. Their ideological and institutional influence may be brought to bear on “public behaviour” where the ultimate “outcome will be to revolutionize relationships among all peoples, at the grassroots level.”²⁵ Hence, along with the problem of religious fanaticism, “prejudices of ethnicity, gender, nation, caste and class”²⁶ constitute the House’s agenda of social problems that the world’s religious leaders are tasked with trying to solve.

Taking a retrospective, historical approach, the Letter looks back to the 1893 “Parliament of the World’s Religions” as part of the “World’s Columbian Exposition” in Chicago. The Parliament had “a vision of spiritual and moral consensus that captured the popular imagination on all continents and managed to eclipse even the scientific, technological and commercial wonders that the Exposition celebrated.”²⁷ Thereafter, “interfaith movements of every kind took root and flourished,” and universities “launched degree programmes in the study of comparative religion.” “[I]nterfaith worship services, unthinkable only a few decades earlier, were becoming commonplace.”²⁸ “Alas,” the Letter hastens to add, “it is clear that these initiatives lack both intellectual coherence and spiritual commitment.” As a result, little progress was made by organized religion in fostering “racial integration” or the “emancipation of women” to enjoy “full equality with men.”²⁹ The world’s religious leaders, by and large, have failed to do their

²³ Ibid., para. 4.

²⁴ Ibid., para. 6.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., para. 7.

²⁸ Ibid., para. 8.

²⁹ Ibid., para. 9.

part to foster such positive social transformation, as the Letter notes with frankness and candor:

So fundamental a reorientation religious leadership appears, for the most part, unable to undertake. Other segments of society embrace the implications of the oneness of humankind, not only as the inevitable next step in the advancement of civilization, but as the fulfilment of lesser identities of every kind that our race brings to this critical moment in our collective history. Yet, the greater part of organized religion stands paralyzed at the threshold of the future, gripped in those very dogmas and claims of privileged access to truth that have been responsible for creating some of the most bitter conflicts dividing the earth's inhabitants.³⁰

The Letter points out how “outbursts of fanaticism that shame the name of religion” today are by no means a recent phenomenon, considering that early modern European history was troubled by the “Age of Religious War.”³¹ The Letter calls upon religious leaders to do their part to eradicate “the blind forces of sectarian dogmatism that inspired such conflicts.”³² “To this accounting,” the Letter goes on to say, “must be added a betrayal of the life of the mind which, more than any other factor, has robbed religion of the capacity it inherently possesses to play a decisive role in the shaping of world affairs.”³³ This refers to “materialism or terrorism”—which, significantly, invokes thoughts of both Christian and Islamic fundamentalism in their relationship to science.

In a spirit of optimism, however, the Letter points to these problematics as creating a historic opportunity for the world's religious leaders to take positive steps in countering religious extremism, prejudice of all kinds, and uncontrolled impulses in human behavior generally: “Such reflections, however painful, are less an indictment of organized religion than a reminder of the unique power it represents. Religion, as we are all aware, reaches to the roots of motivation.”³⁴ Religion, given its recognized ability to shape religious consciousness for better or worse, is a sociomoral

³⁰ Ibid., para. 10.

³¹ Ibid., para. 11. See Mark Konnert, *Early Modern Europe: The Age of Religious War, 1559–1715* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006).

³² “Letter to the World's Religious Leaders,” para. 11.

³³ Ibid., para. 12.

³⁴ Ibid., para. 13.

force not only to be reckoned with but also as a resource to mobilize: “This same force, that operated with such effect in ages past, remains an inextinguishable feature of human consciousness.” Moreover, “religion is also capable of profoundly influencing the structure of social relationships.”³⁵

Social transformations in the twentieth century have given rise to an emerging “global society.”³⁶ The Letter calls upon the world’s religious leaders to affirm publicly “that spiritual life . . . constitutes one unbounded reality equally accessible to everyone.”³⁷ After acknowledging “wide differences among the world’s major religious traditions with respect to social ordinances and forms of worship,” the Letter puts this into historical perspective by speaking of “religion’s evolutionary nature. What cannot be morally justified” is to take unfair advantage of these differences and to use them “as a means to arouse prejudice and alienation.”³⁸ A positive historical legacy can serve as a resource for doing collectively what individuals have achieved “in nurturing moral character.”³⁹ “The scriptures of all religions,” the Letter points out, “have always taught the believer to see in service to others not only a moral duty, but an avenue for the soul’s own approach to God.” The social transformation that the world is witnessing today “gives this familiar teaching new dimensions of meaning.”⁴⁰ Religious leaders must also acknowledge that “religion and science are the two indispensable knowledge systems through which the potentialities of consciousness develop.”⁴¹ The Letter reminds religious leaders, who enjoy prestige and great sway of influence, of “the potentiality of power to corrupt” and that they not “surrender to the lure of worldly power and advantage.”⁴²

Ideally, religion “is concerned with the ennobling of character and the harmonizing of relationships” and has “served throughout history as the ultimate authority in giving meaning to life.” As the very term implies, “religion has simultaneously been the chief force binding diverse peoples together in ever larger and more complex societies.” From a historical

³⁵ *Ibid.*, para. 14.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, para. 17.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*, para. 18.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, para. 19.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, para. 20.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, para. 21.

⁴² *Ibid.*, para. 22.

perspective, “this civilizing process” may be seen “as a single phenomenon, the ever-recurring encounters of our world with the world of God.”⁴³

How was the Letter received? Bahá’ís around the world presented copies of the House’s Letter to religious leaders in their respective national and local communities. “By the end of June [2002],” reports *One Country*, “the six-page letter had been delivered to at least 1,600 leaders in more than 40 countries.”⁴⁴ “And the response has, so far, been overwhelmingly appreciative,” *One Country* goes on to say, “with religious leaders, academics who study religion, and specialists in related fields saying that the letter is a much needed and timely intervention on an issue of global concern.”⁴⁵ Anecdotal evidence indicates that reception to this open letter was generally positive. For instance, Professor Jonathan Sacks, Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of Great Britain and the Commonwealth, stated, “This is the message. This is the moment. We are facing the greatest challenge that God has ever given us and this is the message we need.”⁴⁶ Dr. Ulrich Dehn of the Protestant Center for Religious and Ideological Issues in Germany expressed the “hope that this letter will have consequences, that there will be people reacting to it.”⁴⁷ The *Times of India*, *The Hindu*, and several other newspapers featured articles on the message, and a New Delhi newspaper, *The Pioneer*, published excerpts of the Letter in two installments.⁴⁸

A collective realization that “religion is likewise one,” however, may be easier said than done, to the extent that such recognition may be limited by various claims of religious exclusivism. This is exactly the point of the House’s open letter—that religious leaders are being asked to confront the dire implications for humanity of their claims of exclusivism: “What the above words do unequivocally urge is renunciation of all those claims to exclusivity or finality that, in winding their roots around the life of the spirit, have been the greatest single factor in suffocating impulses to unity

⁴³ *Ibid.*, para. 23.

⁴⁴ “Worldwide, the Baha’i community issues an appeal for religious tolerance,” *One Country* 14 (April–June, 2002); available at <https://www.onecountry.org/story/worldwide-bahai-community-issues-appeal-religious-tolerance>, accessed January 19, 2019.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

and in promoting hatred and violence.”⁴⁹ In 2005, three years later, the Universal House introduced a statement that it commissioned, “One Common Faith.” In its “Foreword,” the House reflected on its open letter of 2002:

At Riḍván 2002, we addressed an open letter to the world’s religious leaders. . . . The letter acknowledged with appreciation the achievements of the interfaith movement, to which Bahá’ís have sought to contribute since an early point in the movement’s emergence. . . .

...

Response has been encouraging. Bahá’í institutions throughout the world ensured that thousands of copies of the document were delivered to influential figures in the major faith communities. . . . Bahá’ís report that, in general, they were warmly welcomed. . . . We feel hopeful that our initiative may serve as a catalyst opening the way to new understanding of religion’s purpose.⁵⁰

Today, societies the world over are increasingly multicultural and multifaith in their demographic makeup. Disavowing any inherent sense of superiority or triumphalism, a Bahá’í perspective on religious pluralism is readily seen in this call by Bahá’u’lláh:

The second Taráz is to consort with the followers of all religions in a spirit of friendliness and fellowship, to proclaim that which the Speaker on Sinai hath set forth and to observe fairness in all matters.

They that are endued with sincerity and faithfulness should associate with all the peoples and kindreds of the earth with joy and radiance, inasmuch as consorting with people hath promoted and will continue to promote unity and concord, which in turn are conducive to the maintenance of order in the world and to the regeneration of nations. Blessed are such as hold fast to the cord of kindness and tender mercy and are free from animosity and hatred.⁵¹

⁴⁹ “Letter to the World’s Religious Leaders,” para. 16.

⁵⁰ The Universal House of Justice, “Foreword” to Bahá’í International Community, *One Common Faith* (2005); available at <https://www.bahai.org/library/other-literature/official-statements-commentaries/one-common-faith/one-common-faith.pdf>, accessed March 26, 2019.

⁵¹ Bahá’u’lláh, *Ṭarāzāt* (“Ornaments”), in *Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh Revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1988), pp. 35–36; available at <https://www>

This moral imperative can be further developed doctrinally in terms of interfaith relations, for my Bahá'í perspective. Shoghi Effendi (1897–1957)—who led the Bahá'í world as “Guardian” of the Bahá'í Faith from 1921 to 1957—wrote the following statement regarding the Bahá'í perspective on purpose with regard to the other religions of the world:

Fundamental Principle of Religious Truth

Let no one, however, mistake my purpose. The Revelation, of which Bahá'u'lláh is the source and center, abrogates none of the religions that have preceded it, nor does it attempt, in the slightest degree, to distort their features or to belittle their value. It disclaims any intention of dwarfing any of the Prophets of the past, or of whittling down the eternal verity of their teachings. It can, in no wise, conflict with the spirit that animates their claims, nor does it seek to undermine the basis of any man's allegiance to their cause. Its declared, its primary purpose is to enable every adherent of these Faiths to obtain a fuller understanding of the religion with which he stands identified, and to acquire a clearer apprehension of its purpose. It is neither eclectic in the presentation of its truths, nor arrogant in the affirmation of its claims. Its teachings revolve around the fundamental principle that religious truth is not absolute but relative, that Divine Revelation is progressive, not final. Unequivocally and without the least reservation it proclaims all established religions to be divine in origin, identical in their aims, complementary in their functions, continuous in their purpose, indispensable in their value to mankind.⁵²

Taking each of the “established religions,” one by one, a Bahá'í “theology of pluralism” or “theology of religions” is capable of further specificity and application, on a religion-by-religion basis. One way to accomplish this is to substitute a particular religion as one of the “established religions” and to see how Shoghi Effendi's significant statement may be applied practically to bilateral interfaith relations. Taking Christianity as an example, the following Bahá'í perspective on Christianity follows, by means of the following paraphrase of Shoghi Effendi's pronouncement: Unequivocally and without the least reservation, it [the Bahá'í Faith]

.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/bahauallah/tablets-bahauallah/2#772470557, accessed March 28, 2019.

⁵² Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1991), pp. 57–58; available at www.bahai.org/r/609410782, accessed March 28, 2019.

proclaims [Christianity] to be divine in origin, identical in [its] aims, complementary in [its] functions, continuous in [its] purpose, indispensable in [its] value to humankind.

This approach has yet to be widely experimented with, much less adopted, yet it is worthy of testing in the social laboratory of interfaith relations in which a Bahá'í presence is included. Whether or not interfaith representatives of Christianity would be prepared to offer reciprocal recognition along these lines remains to be seen. This short declaration of interfaith recognition has tremendous potential as a foundation for more extensive interfaith encounter, engagement, and ecumenism. This formula conceivably could take on a life of its own and represent recognition and reciprocity between any two faith communities in an interfaith context in which a Bahá'í representative is at one end of the dialogue. If so, this would represent a distinctively Bahá'í contribution to interfaith dialogue and accord at the level of reciprocal recognition and declarations of common cause and shared values at the level of principle.⁵³

The Letter remains relevant today. Now, some seventeen years later, revisiting this official statement can serve to define better a Bahá'í perspective on interfaith dialogue. This public Bahá'í statement on interfaith relations may be regarded as a contribution to ecumenical literature in general and to better understanding of what the Bahá'í Faith brings to the table in interfaith dialogues. It serves as a resource for reminding and reorienting religious leaders of the pressing need to reduce religious prejudice—not only by pointing out the evil inherent in prejudice itself but also by discrediting and counteracting the intellectual and doctrinal basis for such prejudice by refocusing religious belief on the overarching conviction that “the truth underlying all religions is in its essence one.”⁵⁴ The House's recommendations are mandates for progress in interfaith dialogue in particular and for interfaith relations generally.

⁵³ See Christopher Buck, “Fifty Baha'i Principles of Unity: A Paradigm of Social Salvation,” *Baha'i Studies Review*, vol. 18 (2012), pp. 3–44 (published June 23, 2015); available at https://www.academia.edu/35016378/_Fifty_Baha_i_Principles_of_Unity_A_Paradigm_of_Social_Salvation_2017_update_, accessed January 19, 2019. Also presented at Princeton (NJ) University, February 21, 2014; available at https://www.academia.edu/29512160/_50_Baha_i_Principles_of_Unity_Invited_Public_Lecture_Princeton_University_Feb._21_2014_, accessed January 19, 2019.

⁵⁴ “Letter to the World's Religious Leaders,” para. 17.

Seena Fazel has proposed “three bridges that can link the Bahá’í community to other religions in dialogue”: (1) an “ethical bridge” that “should focus on tackling obstacles to world peace in cooperative projects with other religious communities”; (2) an “intellectual bridge” that “needs to confront religious differences and attempt to resolve them”; and (3) a “mystical-spiritual bridge” that “can significantly enrich the nature of Bahá’í community and devotional life and contribute to a Bahá’í theology of religions.”⁵⁵ These “three bridges” may be read and appreciated as constructive ideas for increasing the scope and substance of interfaith encounters. In other words, thanks to the April, 2002, Letter from the House, Bahá’í engagement is expected to increase in scale and substance. In any case, Bahá’í contributions to interfaith dialogue can be expected to draw on the Letter. Such noble efforts are in keeping with one of the purposes of the Bahá’í Faith: “Therein lies the strength of the unity of the [Bahá’í] Faith, of the validity of a Revelation that claims not to destroy or belittle previous Revelations, but to connect, unify, and fulfill them.”⁵⁶

A review of the literature shows that precious little has been written beyond passing references to this document. As such, the *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* may be the very first venue in which the Universal House of Justice’s “Letter to the World’s Religious Leaders” has been described and analyzed in some depth.

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⁵⁵ Seena Fazel, “Interreligious Dialogue and the Bahá’í Faith: Some Preliminary Observations,” in Jack McLean, ed., *Revisioning the Sacred: New Perspectives on a Bahá’í Theology*, Studies in the Babi and Baha’i Religions 8 (Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 1997), pp. 137–152; available at https://bahai-library.com/fazel_interreligious_dialogue, accessed January 19, 2019.

⁵⁶ Shoghi Effendi, *World Order of Baha’u’llah*, p. 22; available at <http://reference.bahai.org/en/t/se/WOB/wob-11.html>, accessed January 19, 2019.

has written prolifically in both academic, online, and legal publications, with dozens of journal and encyclopedia articles, reviews, book chapters, and legal briefs to his credit. His books include *God & Apple Pie: Religious Myths and Visions of America* (Educator's International Press, 2015); *Religious Myths and Visions of America: How Minority Faiths Redefined America's World Role* (ABC-CLIO/Prager, 2009); and *Symbol & Secret: Qur'an Commentary in Baha'u'llah's Kitab-i Iqan* (Kalimat Press, 1995, 2004). He has done presentations throughout the U.S. and in Canada and Israel. In addition to his bar association memberships, he is on the Council of Religious Advisors at Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh, PA.