

Towards the Elimination of Religious Prejudice

potential Christian contributions from a Baha'i perspective

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INTRODUCTION

This paper is offered as a contribution to the Christian community from an individual Baha'i perspective. Its focus is on the positive and negative possibilities facing Christianity in response to contexts such as September 11th, and is also informed by my reading of a recent letter from the world governing body of the Baha'i Faith, The Universal House of Justice, entitled "To the World's Religious Leaders". This letter was written in April 2002 and invites religious leaders of all faiths to engage in eliminating religious prejudice. It cautions that religious leaders have the powerful potential either to incite or to mitigate a global conflagration to which religious prejudice might easily contribute. Discussions of the catalytic role that religious leaders play in the realm of interreligious dialogue have not often been the subject of examination in this field and therefore it is hoped that this paper offers a useful focus on a subject infrequently discussed within Christian studies.



Window; photo, Cetta Kenney

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It is written by one who holds a genuine filial love for the Christian community, a sense of gratitude and indebtedness for have been given the gifts associated with a theological education of a differing faith.¹ The thoughts contained within are therefore anchored in the personal experience of spending nearly every day for five years immersed in a Christian community, developing friendships, and having to wrestle with translating unfamiliar theological contexts in order to succeed.

ROOTS OF PREJUDICE

At the Australian Association for Religious Studies Conference in 1998, Emeritus Professor Max Charlesworth gave the opening address. In it he indicated that he felt that the greatest challenge facing Christianity in two thousand years was the exercise of believing that all the world's religions contained semi-independent yet truthful revelations of Absolute Reality.² Whether one believes this or not, it is a topic that is imperative to engage in, considering the powerful role of religion as potential social catalyst, whether negative or positive. Acts of terrorism and war only become possible when entire diverse groups of human communities are objectified as homogenous singularities whose spiritual value has been denied. The role that religious leaders play in creating such objectification processes is unfortunately one of the most significant sources of this dehumanising process. To cater to simplistic ontological judgements of the other is to open a door to evil.

Humanity can simply not afford another Crusades or a Thirty Year War. Our destructive capacity is so much more effective now, that the very survival of humanity

is threatened by the large-scale maintenance of religious prejudice.

This wisdom is not merely the result of an exercise in philosophical or ethical discourse, but is rather the hard practical lesson of experienced horrors that find their cause in other prejudices, such as racism, sexism and nationalism. Ethnic cleansing, racial enslavement, absolute national sovereignty leading to world wars, systemic female infanticide: credible theoretical justification of these prejudices are no longer possible in the majority of the thinking world.

How is it possible that we can still contemplate the legitimacy of religious prejudice? Have not the lessons of history in this regard been equally horrific, so as to bring us out of the prison walls of this prejudice as well? To quote from the letter of the Universal House of Justice:

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... 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.³

The great disparities of wealth and poverty, education and health, that currently exist, helps foment a culture of terrorism and war that is made possible by objectifying entire masses of people of differing faiths and cultures as having no intrinsic spiritual

value. If from a young age, we believed that we were truly one family, we would not feel comfortable living in relative luxury while our sisters and brothers starved or died of preventable diseases, or couldn't pursue the basic pre-requisites for happiness that most of us in the West currently take for granted.

The history of wars shows us that their causes are often complex, yet the contribution of religious prejudice cannot be overlooked, e.g.

Ireland – Catholic vs. Protestant

Israel – Jew vs. Muslim,

Sri Lanka – Hindu (Tamils) vs. Buddhist (Sinahlese)

Kosovo – Christian (Serbian) vs. Muslim (Albanian)

Iraq and current “war against terrorism” – Muslim vs. Christian

Strangely, there is a clear gap in the international community in acknowledging the importance that religion possesses in its capacity to facilitate both war and peace. As the following Baha'i statement makes clear:

...the United Nations has yet to grasp fully both the constructive role that religion can play in creating a peaceful and prosperous global order, and the destructive impact that religious fanaticism can have on the stability and progress of the world. This lack of attention to religion can be clearly seen in the development realm, where the United Nations has, for the most part, viewed religious communities merely as channels for the delivery

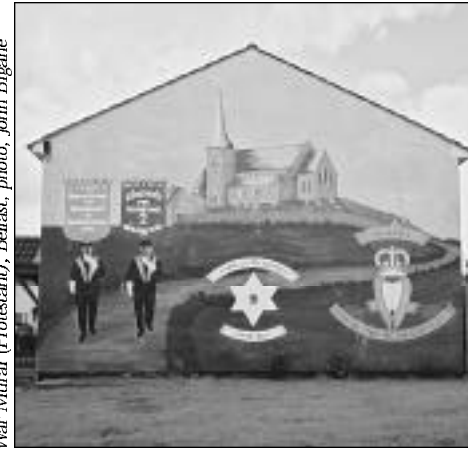
of goods and services, and as mechanisms to carry out development policies and programs. Moreover, while the United Nations' human rights machinery has been used to condemn religious intolerance and persecution, UN development policies and programs have hardly begun to address religious bigotry as a major obstacle to peace and well-being.⁴

This is not an “indictment of organized religion itself” but rather is representative of the uniquely motivating power of religion itself and the choices available to religious leaders in how they use it.

TRANSFORMATIVE POWER OF LOVE

Engaging this consideration, this paper offers that the greatest opportunity facing future Christianity in its role of witnessing Christ to the world is to provide an example of loving relationships that transcend religious and cultural prejudice. Many Christians already consider this a central feature of their faith. Yet the spirit of ecumenism embraced by many within the Christian tradition needs to be expanded from encompassing the churches to encompassing other faith communities who also attempt to witness a loving God. Such filial affection must be genuine and naturally spring from the heart. A practised, public display of tolerance in multifaith contexts has no transformative capacity of spirit. Nor do theological conferences which attempt to sort out the theological differences between traditions offer much in the way of transformative capacity of spirit either. It is not to be found in high level meetings between reli-

War Mural (Protestant), Belfast; photo, John Bigane



UN development policies and programs have hardly begun to address religious bigotry as a major obstacle to peace and well-being.

War Mural (Catholic), Belfast; photo, John Bigane



gious leaders, infrequent shared worship services, or interreligious committee meetings.

The Christian faith makes it clear that only love possesses such a force necessary to dispel religious prejudice. The fostering of an authentic love for members of other faiths on a personal level will only occur when religious leaders provide a loving vision to their communities that other religious communities have an intrinsic spiritual value, and furthermore encourage their communities to form authentic personal relationships with members of those other faith traditions. They are not “others” who live far away in a foreign land. One does not have to fly to another country for these relationships to grow; rather, they are often our neighbours or the school friends of our own children. To invite them into our own homes, allow ourselves to be transparent instead of wearing a mask of pretend perfection, help them with their own problems and allow them to see our own, encourages humility in our own faith to grow as we respond to theirs. It is only when a vision of other faith traditions as part of our own family takes hold that true principles of interdependence necessary for world peace will occur. The Christian tradition has all the resources necessary for their community members to draw on for this to become a common feature of Christian life.

One may anticipate objections to the plausibility that entire religious communities can make such a dramatic shift from religious intolerance to genuine filial affection for members of all faiths as one family, in one loving household of one God. How could such a transformation possibly occur? It is helpful to realise that the same necessary dramatic shifts have made other equally difficult enterprises in recent human history seem implausible if not impossible, yet they

have occurred. The existence of slavery in the United States seemed permanently entrenched upon economic dependency and motivated by the deep racial vilification held in the hearts of all but a few members of southern white society. Today the leader of the United Nations is an African. People alive today can remember when women were not allowed to vote and had little in the way of rights or education. Today, from Iran to New Zealand, most law schools have

COURAGEOUS LEADERSHIP NEEDED

Those who were courageous enough to begin the transformations often felt uncomfortable in standing for justice in their own communities, as they were seen as unorthodox and unfaithful to beliefs believed to be central to the order of existence. Additionally, such discomfort was often an internal experience of wrestling



The Interreligious Peace Council, Belfast; photo, John Bigane

more than 50% female students. While one must acknowledge that these transformations of human equality are organic processes that are still unfolding and that still are far from complete, these dramatic transformations seem to have only taken a day in the perspective of overall human history. To forget the apparently insurmountable barriers between then and now that have eventually fallen in one day would be to lose a valuable source of inspiration and confidence in the capacity for this current apparently intractable situation likewise to become transformed.

with their upbringing and the conceptual tools they had available to work with. Each one was a prophet who was courageous not because they were certain of success, but because they overcame their own fears and prejudices. These first courageous individuals often had limited experience that did not allow them a comprehensive vision, expansive knowledge, or the necessary eloquence to communicate the requirements and needs of how such justice can be established. Equally, they may not get to see the fruits of their labour, which makes their determination all the more precious. They may say,

“This is important, even if I don’t know how it can be achieved.” However, it is often the children who are the ones who find the way, develop new frameworks of meaning and bring down the walls their parents banged their bruised fists against. One generation recognises its importance, includes such an ethos in their children’s education and the next begins the more substantial transformation of social relationships to realise it.

We need today’s religious leaders to engage in equally courageous acts of justice and empower their communities with a vision that the only option before us is a vision of each other as one loving family of diverse backgrounds with a common Mother/Father, a common home and a common destiny. It is anticipated that such leaders will/do experience the same discomfort and will need the courage of earlier prophets. Yet they must provide the vision to their children, even if the barriers of religious intolerance appear as unbreakable as the chains of the slaves, the walls of Auschwitz and Berlin, or the blockades placed in front of the suffragettes.

for my own “proof texts” to demonstrate conclusively the informed nature of my faith. If I had maintained my initial apologetic stance at Knox College, envisioning myself an armoured warrior in preparation for possible future battles between our faiths, it would have betrayed the true spirit of my own faith and indeed all religions whose ultimate purpose is to facilitate loving relationships.

Through the gentle advice of a wise friend in my own faith, I was persuaded patiently that a better goal is to become a bridge builder – one who encourages those from either side freely to traverse and visit the other. Such a goal is as challenging as it is rewarding. I often felt the keen loneliness of standing in the middle of the bridge, committed to being authentically anchored on both sides, yet often experiencing the misunderstanding, distrust and ambiguous confusion shown towards me from both sides. Equally so, some of the happiest moments of my life arrived through many fine friendships and unique discoveries that formed out of that process.

If I had not chosen the more awkward, vulnerable path of the bridge-builder, and authentically cherished the theological gifts of the Christian community, I would not have been able to then apply those same gifts to my own religious context and discover a rich theology of environmental ethics that eventually formed my Masters thesis. Nor would I have contemplated doing my PhD in Law as a practical application of the spiritual principles of relationality I acquired in order to assist in the development of Indigenous Human Rights. My engagement with other faith communities, rather than diluting and weakening my own personal faith as a Baha’i, focused and strengthened it and gave me the capacity

SPEAKING PERSONALLY

Some personal experience is relevant here. When I began my theological studies at Knox Theological College in 1990, I was a young Baha’i filled with the desire to arm myself with the necessary resources to defend my faith, should that time ever arise. For me, the words etched across the doorway into Knox Theological College – “Dedicated to the Glory of God” – meant “Dedicated to Baha’u’llah”, the founder of the Baha’i faith whose name translates directly as “Glory of God”. Such evangelical emotions arose as I immersed myself in historical books and the Bible itself, searching

and confidence so that I could pursue translating the wisdom of my own texts into real life solutions.

A greater joy is witnessing brave Christians equally willing to engage my Baha'i community and other religious communities in like manner and watch them walk away with an armful of friendships and unique spiritual gifts.

The model of transparent bridge building can be argued to be authentically Christian for a number of reasons. First it acknowledges the sacred nature of freedom necessary for a truly loving relationship to exist. A relationship is truly loving only if it is freely chosen. Christ's entire life as seen in

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the New Testament was a testimony to this. Secondly, bridge building is conducive to training our mental and spiritual faculties to be open and humble to the endless potential disclosure of God's infinite love.

OPENNESS AND ENGAGEMENT

Throughout the New Testament it is suggested that God is all-loving and ultimately committed to personal relationships. Correspondingly, this indicates that we can potentially witness God's love as uniquely expressed in the personal lives of all God's children. God's love is more than a monolithic self-expression, timeless and changeless. God's love is ultimately personal which means it is relational and therefore takes the other's position into consideration and will therefore manifest love in infinitely different ways. In discovering such humility, one is freed to explore with greater passion the

truth of God's potential self-disclosure as reflected and known by people of other faiths.

Such a commitment to openness and engagement does not mean the corruption and distortion of one's faith. Rather, when a faithful adherent encounters the humility to be open to the context of other faiths, it leads them closer to the centre of what it means to be more authentically Christian.

The feeling of true fellowship, necessary for authentic relationships between faiths, will not be gained by asserting a need to 'sort out' difficult theological tensions between religious traditions first. If the absolute resolution of metaphysical tensions between two

people into a homogenous agreement were a pre-requisite for marriage, no one would ever get married. Marriages are based first on the love that arises from the appreciation of the unique gifts that each person brings to the partnership and then working together to use those gifts to achieve growth in the relationships of the family.

If one had stood 150 years ago and asked "What is the future of Christianity in the West?", it would be interesting to assess the responses. The future would be shown to be complex, manifesting both the saddest depths of human behaviour as well as their noblest expressions. One would hardly have anticipated the great strides of justice made forward, springing from the love in the hearts of simple Christians. Yet standing at our vantage point, we can look back and see that Christian communities in the West made choices that were responsible for great acts of love and justice that have become social norms in protecting the equality of minorities, women and all nations.

It is likely that as we turn to the future we will see an equally complex 'history' that also contains the extremes of human behaviour, but perhaps we will also see a Christian community that took the lead once again, broke down the barriers of religious prejudice and made diverse religious unity and affection an integral part of civilization. I am personally confident of such a future.

However, the pathway to that future is mediated by a tension between two routes:

Whether peace is to be reached only after unimaginable horrors precipitated by humanity's stubborn clinging to old patterns of behaviour, or is to be embraced now by an act of consultative will, is the choice before all who inhabit the earth.⁵

In the immediate historical context the closing paragraph of the letter "To the World's Religious Leaders" is timely:

With every day that passes, the 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 it 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 clearer. "The well-being of mankind, its peace and security, are unattainable", Baha'u'llah urges, "unless and until its unity is firmly established."⁶

NOTES

¹Between 1990-1995, I completed a BTheol (Hons) at Knox Theological College, Otago University.

²"One might say that this is a task even more radical and momentous than that which confronted the early Christian communities when they realised that the second coming of Jesus was not imminent." In "Religion and Religions" in *Managing Religious Diversity: From Threat to Promise*, p. 44, Ed. Gary D. Bouma, AASR, 1999.

³Universal House of Justice, "To the World's Religious Leaders", April, 2002, paragraph 10.

⁴"Religion and Development at the Crossroads: Convergence or Divergence?" A statement to the World Summit on Sustainable Development by the Bahá'í International Community Johannesburg, South Africa, August 26, 2002.

⁵Universal House of Justice, "The Promise of World Peace", October, 1985, Baha'i World Centre, Haifa, Israel.

⁶Universal House of Justice, "To the World's Religious Leaders", paragraph 25, April 2002, Baha'i World Centre, Haifa, Israel.