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*Blokes and the Bahá'ís*

## Blokes and the Bahá'ís

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ONE OF MY favourite scenes, which I never tire of seeing on video, is the parade of nationalities and ethnic groups at the Bahá'í World Congress. It was such a moving scene and I have watched it so many times I know the commentary off by heart, "We are the Ndangwe. We are the Trobriand Islanders." I can recite the names of places I still have not got round to looking up on a map. However, one group was not represented. I refer to "blokes". "We are blokes" the commentator would proudly announce and there he would be, resplendent in belt and braces, with a copy of Exchange and Mart in his back pocket and a pencil stub behind his ear.

Being part "bloke" myself I have often mused on why so few of my full-blooded brethren have found their way into the Bahá'í community in this country. Is it a chicken and egg situation? Are blokes not looking for religion or are religious communities not able to accommodate them comfortably in their midst? It's probably true that they are thin on the ground in any religious group.

Blokes often come into contact with the Bahá'í Faith when their partner comes across the Bahá'í Faith and takes an interest. Sometimes a lady enquiring about the Faith will bring her reluctant and embarrassed bloke along with her. He is probably there for two reasons. One, to support his wife, to whom he is very loyal and protective, and two, to make sure she's not getting into anything strange. It is not impossible, in such a situation, to attract the husband to the healing message of Bahá'u'lláh but the hosts need to be sensitive to certain, basic lore.

Unfortunately Bahá'ís often make certain assumptions that make meetings uncomfortable for blokes. For example, blokes do not hug, believe me, they do not hug. Blokes do not read prayers out loud in public so do not ask them to. Blokes like to merge in the background and observe, to watch and listen carefully and gauge the sincerity of what is happening. What they don't want is to be suddenly, without warning, the focus of attention. Some of the other groups missing from our communities have very different needs. Some cultural groups like very much to be the centre of attention, enjoy being asked about their work, their families, and their ambitions. It is our job to develop the knowledge and sensitivity to know which group is which.

Maybe the points are over generalised but the truth is that we have not achieved a mix in our communities that reflects the social and ethnic mix in the towns in which we live. There is no particular reason why we should have in such a short period of time and what we have achieved may be perceived by posterity as remarkable. However, if we are to be serious about advancing the process of entry by troops then we will have to develop the skills to

know what makes diverse people comfortable.

A comfortable guest will want to call again. Most people have two parts to them – the part that reflects the culture in which they were reared and the part that is shared by all human beings because it is part of the human condition. The sensitive host will be able to touch both parts. To touch the first part it is necessary to look, listen, reflect and consider how you can show that you accept the person even if they are quite different from yourself and that you are quite comfortable in their company. It is also necessary to be sincerely interested in the person and not to push them into uncomfortable and unfamiliar situations – would you like to read a prayer? – What do you do for a living? – You mend things – Oh that’s nice. I’m a brain surgeon, my wife is a nuclear physicist, and I think everyone else here has an “ology” of some description.

Bahá’u’lláh has said,

“Every person who in some degree turneth towards the truth can himself later comprehend most of what he seeketh. However, if at the outset a word is uttered beyond his capacity, he will refuse to hear it and will arise in opposition.”<sup>[1]</sup>

If a bloke is scared away on his first encounter with the Faith a most valuable asset has been lost – someone who does things. The brilliant thing about blokes is that they are never happier than when they are doing something. There is no shortage of talkers and thinkers in our midst but people who actually do something are an invaluable treasure. In the *Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy* there is a wonderful episode where a planet announces that it is about to cease to exist and therefore needs to be evacuated. Three enormous spaceships will be built to go in search of a new planet. People whose jobs do not actually produce anything or create wealth man the first spaceship. It is not until they are in deep space that they realize that the other two spaceships full of artisans, inventors and entrepreneurs do not appear to be following them. The joke is that the planet elders have invented a scheme whereby every few generations they can off-load the people who do not actually do very much. There is no possibility that they would jettison a spaceship full of blokes. The truth is that many of the environments we create are very cerebral and very comfortable for thinkers and talkers. If we did more, if we made our own pamphlet stands, if we cut the grass for elderly people then doers would be more comfortable in our midst and would feel appreciated and valued.

To touch the part of a person that is shared by all human beings it is necessary to create an atmosphere of unconditional love. Everyone wants to love and be loved, to have a place and be appreciated, even, or maybe especially, blokes. But love is not everyone hugging on arrival. It goes much deeper than that. It is everybody accepting everybody else for what they are, it is not pushing anyone beyond their boundaries.

However, that environment cannot be artificially created. That love can grow from saying lots of prayers together, from sharing a goal and a vision, from serving each other, from being united and from a deep yearning for the Faith to grow and flourish and influence the world. Shoghi Effendi has said of firesides,

“..where new people are invited, and where some phase of the Faith is mentioned and discussed. If this is done with the intent of showing Bahá’í hospitality and love, then there will be results.”<sup>[2]</sup>

Kevin Beint

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1 The Gift of Teaching: Compilation issued by the Universal House of Justice. p7

2 From a letter written on behalf of the Guardian to an individual believer, March 6, 1957:Lights of Guidance, p. 248