

## Religious Challenges in the 21st Century and the Baha'i Faith

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Our planet in its present form is several million years old. To put it in perspective, visualise the human species a million years ago as composed of something like 100,000 inquisitive furry creatures living in the most fertile parts of Africa, Asia and perhaps Europe. There was land enough for the average family to occupy an expanse three times the size of Delhi city all by itself. But naturally most of them gravitated into the valleys favoured with the best water and game, leaving other regions almost empty. They did not live in villages though (for villages had not been invented) but rather roamed about in small groups hunting meat and gathering vegetables to feed themselves. If there was any religion at this point of time it was largely to do with the understanding of the mighty forces of Nature.

After some 990,000 years, which would bring us to 8000 B.C., this species, with its newly evolving brain and growing awareness that it was basically different from other creatures, had multiplied to an estimated three million people and was steadily, if slowly, increasing in numbers, stimulated by such developments as cattle, horses and buffalo could be persuaded to plow, the wind to said a ship, or a river to grind grain-miracles never before seen on planet Earth. The human reality of ancient times was broken into a patternless maze. Peoples then began to live in boxes of isolated civilisations. From the study of the ruins of these civilisations and what is left of their arts, culture and writings one learns of many interesting things about the kind of society that existed. A common denominator of their geography is their association with rivers and shores of the seas. Whilst there were nomadic groups of the bedrocks of these civilisations were pastoral. The people followed a clear code of behaviour, religious rituals, social taboos, obeyed a hierarchy of administration.

The Earth was treated as sacred, as the seed-ground for new life of the spirit. There was also the general conviction that earth and heaven are intermingled. This harmony with Nature was a preponderating factor in preservation of global ecology and its sustainability. As to religious ethos there was a pantheon of deities, associated with Nature and Life that formed an integral part of the peoples' daily life. Some of the practices were conducive to their well being others proved detrimental to their future survival. For instance, the ritual of human and animal sacrifice that formed the basis of ancient peoples' religious beliefs led to large-scale massacres, orgies and futile blood baths. This

is actually blind faith. Such blind faith in certain elements of religion are even prevalent today going by the masses who are gullible enough to believe in toto the preaching and doings of cult figures who hold sway.

In China, Shamanism, an ancient religion, was practiced for many thousands of years. Shamanism surrounded their existence. Through charms, trances, sacrificial offerings, magic and prayers the spirits were contacted for favours and for protection from disasters. Likewise, in India a host of rituals exist even to this day to propitiate the gods and goddesses.

Religion or *dharma* according to the Baha'i is understood to be the package of divine guidance brought to humanity from time to time by spiritual luminaries described variously as the avatara, the messenger, and the messiah. It is a process whereby the Cosmic Reality, the Supreme Unknowable Creator of the whole universe discloses His will for the advancement of civilisation, as we know it. In the several thousand years of man's recorded history, a number of spiritual luminaries have appeared. They are the founders of world faiths. Like the chapters of a weighty book, each Faith unfolds the spiritual genius of humankind and paves the way for its continuing advancement. The Baha'i Faith, Baha'i believe, is the latest chapter to this process of divine unfoldment. Baha'u'llah (1817–1892) is its Founder-Avatara.

For most people in today's world religion or *dharma* is not understood in such a straightforward manner. Religion for them is an ancient legacy that has come down as a tradition mixed with spirituality that has now become mixed up with dogma and superstition that is hard to believe and therefore, best left to elders and the womenfolk in the household. So much so that the positive qualities of this powerful civilising agent has been reduced to belief in cultic practices and blind faith in charismatic god-men and god-women who have come to hold sway on the belief systems of countless millions—from the illiterate masses to the sophisticated and famous-men and women in every country of the world.

What are the reasons for religion to become a suspect in present-day society? Do religious traditions promote or hinder community? Do they act as forces that unite or as barriers that separate peoples? In fact, some would claim that it is futile to look to religions to provide the resources for addressing the challenges of the 21st century. To begin with, in a world where many barriers are broken down or are being lowered to facilitate greater communication and interaction between peoples and nations, religious groups continue to remain communities of mutual isolation. Religions seem to provide exclusivist identities and do not always emphasise the mutual interdependence of the social milieu. Again, precisely at a time when the world needs the forces of reconciliation, healing and community, we see within some of the religious traditions an increase of fundamentalism, extremism and religious intolerance. This situation is aggravated by the increased role of religion that has begun to play in public life. The so-called "politicisation of religions, and the religionalisation of politics" have raised many fears about the role of religion in public life. It is, therefore, very appropriate that the International Centre for Religious Studies, Delhi, has decided to focus attention on the challenges before religions in the 21st century. The biggest religious challenge is to question the very status quo of religion in the light of the teachings given by its Founder(s). For after all is

not religion the “faculty of human nature.” And it is the perversion of this faculty that has contributed to much of the confusion in society and the conflicts in and between individuals. But neither can any fair-minded observer discount the preponderating influence exerted by religion on the vital expressions of civilisation. Furthermore, its indispensability to social order has repeatedly been demonstrated by its direct effect on laws and morality.

Writing of religion as a social force, Baha’u’llah said: “Religion is the greatest of all means for the establishment of order in the world and for the peaceful contentment of all that dwell therein.” Referring to the eclipse or corruption of religion, He wrote: “Should the lamp of religion be obscured, chaos and confusion will ensue, and the lights of fairness, of justice, of tranquility and peace cease to shine.” In an enumeration of such consequences the Baha’i writings point out that the “perversion of human nature, the degradation of human conduct, the corruption and dissolution of human institutions, reveal themselves, under such circumstances, in their worst and most revolting aspects. Human character is debased, confidence is shaken, the nerves of discipline are relaxed, the voice of human conscience is stilled, the sense of decency and shame is obscured, conceptions of duty, of solidarity, of reciprocity and loyalty are distorted, and the very feeling of peacefulness, of joy and of hope is gradually extinguished.”

Baha’u’llah further explained that like the seasons in a year, religion is renewed from age to age. Thus his object was to renew religion to its pristine glory and thereby enable humankind to establish world unity and world peace. “The earth is one but country and mankind its citizens”, wrote Baha’u’llah. Elsewhere he stated: “The well-being of mankind, its peace and security are unattainable unless and until its unity is firmly established”. Through an irresistible process, the traditional barriers of race, class, creed and nation are breaking down, which will, in time, give birth to a universal civilisation.

Baha’u’llah’s writings seize upon a host of metaphors in their attempt to express the paradox that lies at the heart of the phenomenon of the cosmic purpose for humanity at this point of time in world history. And they were addressed to all strata of the society including the kings, rulers and religious leaders of his time addressing them both as individuals and collectively. Among those he addressed individually were Napoleon III, Queen Victoria, Kaiser Wilhelm I and Czar Alexander II, Emperor Franz Josef, Pope Pius IX, Sultan Abdul Aziz and Nasiri’d-Din Shah. In these letters, Baha’u’llah expounded his mission and the process he had set in motion for the fulfilment of the divine promises. He warned the kings and leaders of the turmoil and changes in the world’s political and social order if the teachings he had brought were not accepted and called for general efforts at disarmament. He warned them also of the injustices against the poor and urged them to work unitedly for creating a Commonwealth of Nations stating that only by acting collectively to ban war could lasting peace be established. God has “the desire of beholding the entire human race as one soul and one body,” wrote Baha’u’llah. “All men have been created to carry forward an ever-advancing civilisation.”

The foremost challenge faced by followers of every religion in the this new century is the claim to be the sole possessors of truth, clinging rigidly to their own narrow interpretation of the teachings

of their religion. This stubborn refusal to appreciate and accept other faiths can lead only to bitter antagonism and futile division, as it has in the past. The interfaith declaration entitled "Towards a Global Ethic," which was produced by an assembly of religious and spiritual leaders from virtually every major world religion and spiritual movement at the 1993 Centenary of the Parliament of World Religions in Chicago, suggests that it is indeed possible for the world's religions to find much common ground in this regard. The declaration states: "We affirm that a common set of core values is found in the teachings of the religions, and that these form the basis of a global ethic... There already exist ancient guidelines for human behaviour which are found in the teachings of religions of the world and which are the conditions for a sustainable world order."

This universal ethic known as the "golden rule" is part of the spiritual heritage of humankind. It is taught in one form or another in all the world religions and systems of belief and can be found among the traditions of the world's most ancient societies:

**HINDUISM:** "This is the sum of all true righteousness: deal with others as thou wouldst thyself be dealt by. Do nothing to thy neighbour which thou wouldst not have him do to thee after." *The Mahabharata*.

**JAINISM:** "In happiness and suffering, in joy and grief, we should regard all creatures as we regard our own self..." *Yoga-Sastra*.

**BUDDHISM:** "Hurt not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful." *Udana-Varqa, 5:18*.

**SIKHISM:** "Be thou not estranged from another. For, in every heart pervades the Lord." *Guru-Granth Sahib, Vol. 1, p. 250*.

**JUDAISM:** "What is hateful to you, do not to your fellow men. That is the entire Law, all the rest is the commentary." *The Talmud, Shabbat, 31a*.

**CHRISTIANITY:** "As ye would that men should do to you, do ye also to them likewise." *The Gospel of St. Luke 6:61*.

**ISLAM:** "No one of you is a believer until he desires for his brother that which he desires for himself." *Sunnah*.

**BAHA'I FAITH:** "He should not wish for others that which he doth not wish for himself, nor promise that which he doth not fulfil." *Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah*.

**TAOISM:** "The good man 'ought to pity the malignant tendencies of others; to regard their gains as if they were his own, and their losses in the same way." *The Thai-Shang*.

**CONFUCIANISM:** "Surely it is the maxim of loving-kindness: Do not unto others that you would not have them do unto you." *Analects, XV, 23*.

**ZOROASTRIANISM:** "That nature only is good when it shall not do unto another whatever is not good for its own self." *Dadistan-i-Dinik, 94:5*.

Baha'is view the current phase of rapidly changing world conditions in a hopeful way, aware of the anguish created by current chaotic social dislocations but seeing them as part of a long-term

process of adjustment, the pain of which can best be alleviated if we become conscious of its nature and direction. The current period of human history is one of those axial periods understood best perhaps in the phrase “the coming of age of humanity.” The period of relative isolation of various peoples of the world has ended. We have now collectively entered a new world where boundaries, if they exist at all anymore, are no longer impenetrable. The interdependence of humanity with all its diversity of cultures, nations, and peoples will continue to increase. Exclusive sovereignties are no longer possible.

The culmination of this process will be some form of an integrated world economy and political structure in which all of us will feel as much a part of world society as we feel a part of our own community. This is not a hope or a wish. It is a reality apparent in current trends.

The first principle of a new world civilisation has been described as the recognition of the spiritual nature of the human being. The second is to become aware that a human society capable of solving its problems is no mere causal or artificial grouping of a large number of human beings, but a reflection and outworking a creative spirit. The Baha’i teachings tell us that such a spirit is moving the minds and hearts today throughout the world. Its necessary creation is a world society, and the path leading to that world society is a living belief in the oneness of humankind.

We of today are passing through the final stage of a transitional age, the “forty years of wilderness” that lie between the old world and the new are over. The part that each person plays is determined by whether he or she looks backward or forward, whether he responds to materialism or to the higher law, whether he is a slave to the darkness or the servant of light. In the words of Shoghi Effendi, Guardian of the Baha’i Faith: “Unification of the whole of mankind is the hallmark of the stage which human society is now approaching. Unity of family, of tribe, of city-state, and nation have been successively attempted and fully established. World unity is the goal towards which a harassed humanity is striving. Nation building has come to an end. The anarchy inherent in state sovereignty is moving towards a climax. A world growing to maturity, must abandon this fetish, recognise the oneness and wholeness of human relationships, and establish once for all the machinery that can best incarnate this fundamental principle of its life.”

Progress toward world unity will not be easy; the struggle challenges us to understand the triple mindset. First, when the need of the larger unity is denied and resisted; second, when the need of unity is admitted, but substitutes for the true unity are attempted; and third, the hour when all resistance and subterfuge are abandoned, and the spirit of real oneness is accepted by the generality of humankind. We have already passed through the first stage of the three stages. We are currently experimenting with the second through incomplete measures and half-hearted efforts. But the Cosmic Law is at work. Everywhere the signs are evident that the world has at last begun to respond to a new spirit, and there are many now ready to serve its universal aim then a century ago when Baha’u’llah enunciated the principle of the Oneness of Humankind.

Towards the end of His life, even though still under the sentence of exile and imprisonment, Baha’u’llah was allowed to move outside the city walls to an abandoned estate known as Bahji. There he was visited by disciples, scholars and government officials who thronged the modest

mansion for enlightenment and to pay homage. One such visitor was a Cambridge orientalist, Prof. Edward Granville Browne who later wrote the following words: “Though I dimly suspected whether I was going and whom I was to behold (for no distinct intimation had been given to me), a second or two elapsed ere, with a throb of wonder and awe, I became definitely conscious that the room was not untenanted. In the corner where the divan met the wall sat a wondrous and venerable figure.... The face of him on whom I gazed I can never forget, though I cannot describe it. Those piercing eyes seemed to read one’s very soul; power and authority sat on that ample brow... No need to ask in whose presence I stood, as I bowed myself before one who is the object of a devotion and love which kings might envy and emperors sigh for in vain! A mild dignified voice bade me be seated, and then continued: *‘Praise be to God that thou has attained!... Thou hast come to see a prisoner and an exile... We desire but the good of the world and the happiness of the nations; yet they deem us a stirrer up of strife and sedition worthy of bondage and banishment... That all nations should become one in faith and all men as brothers; that the bonds of affection and unity between the sons of men should be strengthened; that diversity of religion should cease, and differences of race be annulled - what harm is there in this?... Yet so it shall be; these fruitless strifes, these ruinous wars shall pass away, and the ‘Most great Peace’ shall come.’*”

Our plea is let the religions of the world take the initiative to achieve this promised vision foretold and sung throughout the ages by prophets, seers and poets and now actually dawning upon the harassed and desperate children of men.