

What is Religious Humanism—A Baha’i Viewpoint

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“No serious attempt to set human affairs aright can ignore religion. Man’s perception and practice of it are largely the stuff of history”,¹ wrote the Universal House of Justice in its *The Promise of World Peace* to mark the United Nations International Year Peace in 1986. British historian Arnold Toynbee described religion as a “faculty of human nature”.² Surely, the world in its current condition has totally perverted its religious faculty resulting in much of the confusion and conflicts in and between individuals and as communities. At the same time, the indispensability of religion to social order has been repeatedly demonstrated by its direct effect on laws and morality. The chaos and derangement of present-day society can be directly attributed to the decline of religion as social force for the establishment of order and peace. How else can we explain the “perversion of human nature, the degradation of human conduct, the corruption and dissolution of human institutions”, that reveal themselves, “in their worst and most revolting aspects”.³ Religion stands for the uplift of human character, for the sense of decency and shame, for righteous conduct, for the conceptions of duty, for the promotion of unity among people, for the feelings of peacefulness, for hope and joy, and last but not the least it represents the voice of human conscience. It is, indeed, the most potent force for binding the human soul to its Almighty Creator.

Despite the vital role played by religion in the history of humankind and however dramatic the current resurgence of militant religious fanaticism, religion and religious institutions have, for many decades, been viewed by increasing numbers of people as irrelevant to the major concerns of the modern world. Given the fact that the source of every true religion is the same, the extant religions were never intended to become “barriers of iron which separate forever the members of the human family, but are barriers of ice which melt at the first glance of the sun of love”,⁴ says Prof. Minas Tcheraz Minas. To this I may add from Baha’u’llah, Founder of the Baha’i Faith, “the fundamental purpose animating the Faith of God and His Religion is to safe-guard the interests and promote the unity of the human race”.⁵

That differences exist between the religions is self-evident, but this does not constitute a compelling argument against the thesis of the unity of the religions. Differences can be discerned in the horizontal dimension; they belong, as Annemarie Schimmel formulates it, “to the outer sphere of the religion”,⁶ to the ‘husk’, in which forms, rites and above all the Law are set down, i.e., those aspects of a religion that are historically conditioned, whereas the differences in the metaphysical

concepts used are due to the varying cultural environment of the revelation to the diverse developments of human existence within the multifarious cultures of the world, as well as to the historical fragmentation of the religious traditions. The differences lie not in the light itself, but in the object on which it falls, similar to the way in which the sun appears in the mirror as a disc, but in the crystal as fire. In their essential teachings the religions constitute “the changeless Faith of God, eternal in the past, eternal in the future”.⁷ Thus, religion is for humanity and humanity is for religion, both interact upon each other to propel the society forward. The conflicts stemming from the plurality of religions is the stubborn clinging to ideas of exclusivism and superiority. Actually, plurality of the religions is in accordance with the divine plan of salvation (moksha). Baha’u’llah explains that religious truth is progressive, cyclically recurring event, open to future. He has declared invalid all claims to the finality, uniqueness and unsurpassability of any one religion. Baha’u’llah declares, “Consort with the followers of all religions in a spirit of friendliness and fellowship”,⁸ furthermore, “It is not his to boast who loveth his country, but is his who loveth the world”.⁹ His vision of humanity as one people and of the earth as our common homeland that was rejected by the rulers and leaders of the world in His time has today become the focus of human hope. Equally inescapable is the collapse of human morals and the socio-economic order that Baha’u’llah had prognosticated as inevitable.

Baha’u’llah says, “ye are the fruits of one tree and the leaves of one branch”.¹⁰ Humanity is like a tree. The people of various races, religions and cultural backgrounds are all leaves of the same tree. A world that spawns intolerance, ignorance, exploitation, fanaticism, terrorism, corruption, is world poised for self-destruction. The prevailing socio-religious order is lamentably defective and is incapable of exorcising the specters of war, hunger and disease.

Religious humanism demands that we place faith in the inherent goodness of the human being who has been created with a purpose. Today wide-spread resurgence of religious fundamentalism and conflicting creeds is pushing humanity to the brink of mutual destruction. How can we root out superstitions and blind worship of religious platitudes? It is true that each religion has its distinctive characteristic and its inalienable position. Through dialogue among members of different faiths, through the education of children by inculcating universal values, through visits to the places of worship and pilgrimage besides one’s own faith a humanistic ethos can emerge. For, the root cause of all wrong-doing is ignorance. Mutual tolerance, recognition and acceptance of other communities and respect for the human rights are the basic values implicit in a pluralistic society like India.

Humankind’s journey through the millennia has brought it to the stage of the long-awaited coming of age as a unified human race. The wars, exploitation, prejudice, and destruction of the environment that have marked the immature stages in the process should not be a cause of despair but a stimulus to assuming the responsibilities of collective maturity. To form some concept of what people and their daily life will be like in this millennia epoch, let us recall those moments, hours, days when our human association reached its apex of friendliness, harmony and delight; when we were part of a human group in which no friction existed, but which was dominated by love; in which we happily exchanged ideas and ideals with other humans in an atmosphere characterised both by sympathy and intelligence; a group from which we departed with signing hearts and vibrant memories. Despite the turmoil and upheavals that beset much of present-day society Baha’is believe

that such human life exists today, though rare. But with the dawning of the maturity of the human race this highest reach of human development, illumined and motivated by the spirit, will become the norm—self-seeking, with all the human friction it entails—will be a thing of the past, an abnormal expression of the human spirit. Instead of self-seeking with its corollary exploitation, service will be the daily rule of conduct. This service will be given with love and will win loving appreciation. The spiritual human being of the future will know the practice of that cosmic law which provides that the more one gives, the more one has. A mysterious law, difficult to comprehend. A law of humanism that transforms, life, once man himself has become transformed.

As the events of the 20th century have already demonstrated, patterns of habit and attitude which have taken root over thousands of years are not abandoned either spontaneously or in response simply to education or legislative action. Whether in the life of the individual or that of society, profound change occurs more often than not in response to intense suffering and to unendurable difficulties that can be overcome, in no other way. Just so great a testing experience, Baha'u'llah warned, is needed to weld the earth's diverse people into a single people. With every passing day, signs multiply that great numbers of people everywhere are awakening to this realisation.

REFERENCES

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8. Baha'u'llah, *Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah*, New Delhi, Baha'i Publishing Trust of India, 1973, section cxxxii, p. 289.
9. *Ibid.*, section cxvii, p. 250.
10. *Ibid.*, section cxii, p. 218.