

Baha'i Conceptual Framework for Interfaith Discourse and Action

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The overriding religious challenge in the world today is the failure to fully acknowledge the oneness of religion, giving rise to fanaticism and disenchantment. Current interfaith activities are a response to the Divine Will for a united humanity, but they would benefit from further intellectual coherence and spiritual commitment. To recognise that God is one and religion is, likewise, one, calls for a decisive break with the past, as great as was necessary to recognise the oneness of humanity in terms of gender, race and nationality.

Baha'i interfaith discourse and action, with humility as its watchword, avoids theological disputes, guards against triumphalism, partners with other religions is vigorously supporting existing interfaith activities, and is sincere in not aiming to bring about enrolments in the Baha'i community, but only to the realization of the oneness of humanity in the religious sphere.

Priority areas for Baha'i interfaith discourse and action

1. *Baha'is will work to generate intuitive awareness of the single truth underlying all religions, through*
 - a. *Enabling increasing numbers of people to have unifying, ever-widening experiences of others from different religious backgrounds*
 - b. *Nurturing an acceptance of the religious oneness of humanity by collaboratively identifying its fundamental principles, articulating them, according them broad publicity, and helping them become incarnated in public institutions.*
2. *Baha'is will continue to assist, in any way we can, existing interfaith activities and networks, vigorously promoting them, for we see in them "a response to the Divine Will for a human race that is approaching maturity"*
3. *Baha'is will support diverse institutions (e.g. national government, local authorities, schools, businesses, hospitals, community organizations, etc.) in their efforts to manage religious diversity in a way that promotes unity.*
4. *Baha'is will seek to identify and collaborate with those religious leaders who are ready to "wholeheartedly confirm" that "the truth underlying all religions ...is in essence one"*

While it is anticipated that the mission of interfaith activity, extending the consciousness of the oneness of humanity to the religious sphere, will be mutually reinforcing with the teaching work, it will be imperative to be clear that that Baha'i interfaith discourse and action is not a teaching activity, and should not be approached in that spirit, but is part of our more general contribution to the betterment of society, a collaborative endeavour with partners from other Faiths and with no ulterior motives. The task of sharing Baha'u'llah's message, in contrast, is "obviously not an interfaith project."

Baha'i Conceptual Framework for Interfaith Action¹

I. Key Challenge in Interfaith Work

- “organized religion... has long lent its credibility to fanaticism... We feel a responsibility, ...to urge earnest consideration of the challenge this poses for religious leadership.” (2)
- “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.” (2)
- “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.” (10)

Key Concepts

1. *The consequences of religious fanaticism poses a challenge that requires earnest consideration by all religions*
2. *Goodwill in the face of this challenge requires that Baha'is speak frankly, trusting that the spirit of common service to the Divine will ensure it is received with goodwill by our partners in other religions.*

II. Key Conceptual Need in Interfaith Work

- Consciousness of oneness of humanity in gender, racial, and national spheres put forward as model for what needs to happen in the religious sphere. In those three spheres “Fundamental principles have been identified, articulated, accorded broad publicity and are becoming progressively incarnated in institutions capable of imposing them on public behaviour.” This is the challenge of humanity in interfaith discourse. (6)
- “What the above words do unequivocally urge is renunciation of all those claims to exclusivity or finality that... have been the greatest single factor in suffocating impulses to unity and in promoting hatred and violence....” (16)

Key Concepts

3. *We engage in interfaith discourse to extend the consciousness of the oneness of humanity to the religious sphere*
4. *To achieve this we urge, contribute to and exemplify a renunciation of all religious claims to finality and exclusivity.*
5. *We do this by collaboratively identifying fundamental principles of the oneness of religion, articulating them, according them broad publicity, and helping them become incarnated in public institutions.*

¹ All references are to paragraph numbers of the House of Justice *Letter to the World's Religious Leaders*, except those to the paragraph numbers of *One Common Faith* (OCF), or to paragraph numbers in the House of Justice's message of Ridvan 2010.

III. A Baha'i Appraisal of Existing Interfaith Activity

- “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.” (24)
- 4 key areas of interfaith activity in the world have been identified by the Universal House of Justice: 1) the growing availability and dissemination of multi-faith literature; 2) the presence of multi-faith coverage in the media; 3) academic courses in comparative religion; and 4) interfaith worship services. “Alas, it is clear that these initiatives lack both intellectual coherence and spiritual commitment.. the suggestion that all of the world's great religions are equally valid in nature and origin is stubbornly resisted by entrenched patterns of sectarian thought.” (8,9)

Key Concepts

6. *Baha'is perceive existing interfaith activity as a response to the Divine Will*
7. *Baha'is will continue to support existing interfaith activity*
8. *Baha'is perceive a need for greater intellectual coherence and spiritual commitment to interfaith activity than current interfaith initiatives have so far achieved.*
9. *The goal of Baha'i interfaith discourse and action is the universal recognition of the equal validity of all religions in their nature and origin*
10. *Resistance to the equal validity of the origin and nature of all major religions is to be expected from “entrenched patterns of sectarian thought”.*

IV. Key Messages Underlying Baha'i interfaith discourse and action

- “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 over-arching truth that ...God is one and that, beyond all diversity of cultural expression and human interpretation, religion is likewise one.” (24)
- “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.” (25)
- “meeting the needs of the soul and those of society [are] reciprocal aspects of a mature spiritual life.” (20)
- “If religious leadership is to rise to the challenge [it] ...must begin by acknowledging that religion and science are the two indispensable knowledge systems through which the potentialities of consciousness develop.” (21)

Key concepts

11. *Baha'is see other religions as “partners” in “common service to the Divine”.*

12. *Baha'is owe it to their religious partners to state clearly their conviction that "God is one and that, beyond all diversity of cultural expression and human interpretation, religion is likewise one"*
13. *Baha'is are aware that recognising the oneness of religion represents a decisive but necessary break with the past for many believers in the world's religions.*
14. *To achieve recognition of the oneness of religion, we must begin by acknowledging that religion and science are two indispensable knowledge systems.*
15. *Baha'is propose that the needs of the individual soul and of society are reciprocal, so that religions cannot address one without addressing the other.*

V. Interfaith and the "culture of systematic growth"

- We achieve the oneness of religions through two "parallel efforts": "promoting the betterment of society" and "teaching the Baha'i Faith". These are not "competing activities", but "reciprocal features of one common programme"
- "The culture of systematic growth taking root in the Bahá'í community would seem... by far the most effective response the friends can make to the challenge discussed in these pages.. The nature of the core activities of the current Plan-children's classes, devotional meetings and study circles-permits growing numbers of persons who do not yet regard themselves as Bahá'ís to feel free to participate in the process. The result has been to bring into existence what has been aptly termed a "community of interest". As others benefit from participation and come to identify with the goals the Cause is pursuing, experience shows that they, too, are inclined to commit themselves fully to Bahá'u'lláh as active agents of His purpose. Apart from its associated objectives, therefore, wholehearted prosecution of the Plan has the potentiality of amplifying enormously the Bahá'í community's contribution to public discourse on what has become the most demanding issue facing humankind." (OCF 66)
- "However central the ideal of the oneness of religion unquestionably is, therefore, the task of sharing Bahá'u'lláh's message is obviously not an interfaith project." (OCF 67)

Key Concepts:

16. *We promote the oneness of religions directly through interfaith discourse aimed at "promoting the betterment of society" as outlined above*
17. *We achieve it indirectly through teaching the Baha'i Faith, as others embrace the vision of Baha'u'llah.*
18. *"The culture of systematic growth" brings us in contact with people from diverse religious backgrounds, some of whom enrol in the Baha'i community, and many others of whom maintain their distinct religious beliefs but collaborate with us as part of our community of interest.*
19. *"The culture of systematic growth" thus stimulates "intuitive awareness of the awareness of the single truth underlying all religions, through*

20. *Facilitating ever-widening experiences of others*
21. *Facilitating a dawning acceptance of the oneness of humanity more generally.*
22. *Teaching the Faith, however, is not an interfaith project, although, apart from its associated objectives, it can amplify our contribution to the consciousness of the oneness of religions.*
23. *The systematic culture of growth on the one hand, and promoting the betterment of society through interfaith discourse on the other, should, therefore, although potentially mutually reinforcing, should be regarded as separate endeavours*
24. *Teaching the Faith aims directly to help souls embrace Baha'u'llah (which in the process may awaken intuitive awareness of the oneness of religion in the community of interest, but this is not its focus). Sincerity in this respect is imperative: we should not say we are engaging in interfaith discourse when our aim is to teach the Faith.*
25. *Interfaith discourse is a process aiming to awaken intuitive awareness of the oneness of religion (although in the process sometimes it may result in connecting souls to Baha'u'llah, but this is not its focus). Sincerity in this respect is imperative: we should not say we are engaging in interfaith discourse when our aim is to teach the Faith.*

VI. Strategy For Baha'i Interfaith Discourse and Action

- “recognition [that]... the truth underlying all religions... is in its essence one 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.” (17)
- “In order for this diffuse and still tentative perception [of the oneness of religion] to consolidate itself and contribute effectively to the building of a peaceful world, it must have the wholehearted confirmation of those to whom, even at this late hour, masses of the earth's population look for guidance.” (17)
- “In an integrating world, it is natural that patterns of response and association will undergo a continuous process of shifting, and the role of institutions, of whatever kind, is surely to consider how these developments can be managed in a way that promotes unity.” (19)
- “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.” (24)
- “In this connection, we feel compelled to raise a warning: It will be important for all to recognise that the value of engaging in social action and public discourse is not to be judged by the ability to bring enrolments. Though endeavour in these two areas of activity may well effect an increase in the size of the Baha'i community, they are not

undertaken for this purpose. Sincerity in this respect is an imperative... The watchword in all cases is humility. While conveying enthusiasm about their beliefs, the friends should guard against projecting an air of triumphalism, hardly appropriate among themselves, much less in other circumstances.” (Ridvan 2010)

Key Concepts:

16. *Baha’i interfaith discourse and action will avoid theological disputes*
17. *Baha’is will work to generate intuitive awareness of the single truth underlying all religions, through*
 - a) *Enabling increasing numbers of people to have unifying, ever-widening experiences of others from different religious backgrounds*
 - b) *Nurturing an acceptance of the religious oneness of humanity by collaboratively identifying its fundamental principles, articulating them, according them broad publicity, and helping them become incarnated in public institutions.*
18. *Baha’is will seek to identify and collaborate with those religious leaders who are ready to “wholeheartedly confirm” that “the truth underlying all religions ...is in essence one”*
19. *Baha’is will seek to support institutions (eg. government (national and local), schools, businesses, hospitals, community organizations, etc.) who are trying to manage religious diversity in a way that promotes unity.*
20. *Baha’is will continue to assist, in any way we can, existing interfaith activities and networks, vigorously promoting them, for we see in them “a response to the Divine Will for a human race that is entering on its collective maturity.”*
21. *Baha’i interfaith will not aim to produce enrolments. Sincerity in this respect is an imperative.*

Baha’i interfaith discourse and action will turn to humility as its watchword and will guard against projecting an air of triumphalism, neither among themselves nor in other circumstances.