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Religion and Development at the Crossroads: Convergence or Divergence?

A statement to the World Summit on Sustainable Development by the Baháýí International Community

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Over the course of the 20th century, ethnic, racial and national prejudices have increasingly given way to the recognition that humankind is a single family and the earth its common homeland.[1] The United Nations (UN), which was created in response to this dawning recognition, has worked tirelessly to bring about a world where all peoples and nations can live together in peace and harmony. To help bring about this world, the UN has crafted a remarkable framework of international institutions, processes, conventions and global action plans that have helped to prevent conflict and warfare, to protect human rights, to nurture equality between women and men, and to uplift the material conditions of countless individuals and communities.

Despite these significant achievements, 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,[2] UN development policies and programs[3] have hardly begun to address religious bigotry as a major obstacle to peace and well-being.[4]

Religion as the Basis of Civilization and Progress

It is becoming increasingly clear that passage to the culminating stage in the millennia long process of the organization of the planet as one home for the entire human family cannot be accomplished in a spiritual vacuum. Religion, the Bahá'í Scriptures aver, *"is the source of illumination, the cause of development and the animating impulse of all human advancement"*[5] and *"has been the basis of all civilization and progress in the history of mankind."*[6] It is the source of meaning and hope for the vast majority of the planet's inhabitants, and it has a limitless power to inspire sacrifice, change and long-term commitment in its followers.[7] It is, therefore, inconceivable that a peaceful and prosperous global society - a society which nourishes a spectacular diversity of cultures and nations - can be established and sustained without directly and substantively involving the world's great religions in its design and support.[8]

At the same time, it cannot be denied that the power of religion has also been perverted to turn neighbor against neighbor. The Bahá'í Scriptures state that *"religion must be the source of fellowship, the cause of unity and the nearness of God to man. If it rouses hatred and strife, it is evident that absence of religion is preferable and an irreligious man is better than one who professes it."*[9] So long as religious animosities are allowed to destabilize the world, it will be impossible to foster a global pattern of sustainable development: the central goal of this Summit.

Religion and the United Nations: Working Together for Peace and Justice

Given the record of religious fanaticism, it is understandable that the United Nations has been hesitant to invite religion into its negotiations. However, the UN can no longer afford to ignore the immeasurable good that religions have done and continue to do in the world, or the salubrious, far-reaching contributions that they can make to the establishment of a peaceful, prosperous and sustainable global order. Indeed, the United Nations will only succeed in establishing such a global order to the extent that it taps into the power and vision of religion. To do so will require accepting religion not merely as a vehicle for the delivery and execution of development initiatives, but as an active partner in the conceptualization, design, implementation and evaluation of global policies and programs.[10] The historically justified wall separating the United Nations and religions[11] must fall to the imperatives of a world struggling toward unity and justice.[12]

The real onus, however, is on the religions themselves. Religious followers and, more important, religious leaders must show that they are worthy partners in the great mission of building a sustainable world civilization. To do so will require that religious leaders work conscientiously and untiringly to exorcise religious bigotry and superstition[13] from within their faith traditions. It will necessitate that they embrace freedom of conscience for all people, including their own followers,[14] and renounce claims to religious exclusivity and finality.[15]

It should not be imagined that the acceptance of religion as a partner within the United Nations will be anything but gradual or that religious hostilities will be eliminated any time soon. But the desperate needs of the human family make further delay in addressing the role of religion unacceptable.

Religion and the United Nations: Possible Next Steps

For its part, the United Nations might begin the process of substantively involving religion in deliberations on humankind's future by hosting an initial gathering of religious leaders convoked, perhaps, by the Secretary-General. As a first priority, the leaders might call for a convention on freedom of religion and belief to be drafted and ratified, as expeditiously as possible, by the governments of the world, with the assistance of religious communities.[16] Such an action by the world's religious leaders, which would signal their willingness to accept freedom of conscience for all peoples, would significantly reduce tensions in the world.

The gathering might also discuss the foundation within the United Nations System of a permanent religious forum, patterned initially perhaps on the UN's recently founded Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues. The creation of this body would be an important initial step toward fully integrating religion into the UN's work of establishing a peaceful world order.[17]

For their part, religious leaders will need to show that they are worthy of participation in such a forum. Only those religious leaders who make it clear to their followers that prejudice, bigotry and violence have no place in the life of a religious person should be invited to participate in the work of this body.

The Promised Reign of Peace and Justice

It is evident that the longer the United Nations delays the meaningful involvement of religion in its work, the longer humanity will suffer the ravages of injustice and disunity.[18] It is equally clear that until the religions of the world renounce fanaticism and work whole-heartedly to eliminate it from within their own ranks, peace and prosperity will prove chimerical. Indeed, the responsibility for the plight of humanity rests, in large part, with the world's religious leaders. It is they who must raise their voices to end the hatred, exclusivity, oppression of conscience, violations of human rights, denial of equality, opposition to science, and glorification of materialism, violence and terrorism, which are perpetrated in the name of religious truth. Moreover, it is the followers of all religions who must transform their own lives and take up the mantle of sacrifice for and service to the well-being of others, and thus contribute to the realization of the long-promised reign of peace and justice on earth.

Notes

1. Along with this recognition has come the awareness that world-wide peace and prosperity will be impossible so long as human rights are routinely violated, women are denied equality, ethnic and racial minorities are discriminated against, the ravages of poverty are ignored, and unfettered national sovereignty is exercised.

2. Unfortunately, the UN has been unable to move beyond its *Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief*, to create a convention on freedom of religion and belief. The ability of the United Nations to transform General Assembly declarations on race and on women into conventions only highlights its lack of success in the area of religion and belief - i.e., after producing the *Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination*, and the *Declaration on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women*, the UN created the *International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women*.

3. Although some of the global action plans from recent United Nations conferences suggest that misuse of religion poses an obstacle to development, the few references that they do contain neither explore the effects of religious bigotry and violence on development and security, nor offer any notable solutions. (See, e.g., *The Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action*, II-22, 38; *The Copenhagen Declaration and Programme of Action*, 69; *The Platform for Action of the Fourth World Conference on Women*, 24, 80 (f), 131, 224; *The Habitat Agenda*, 25; *We the Peoples: the Role of the United Nations in the Twenty-First Century*, 200; and *The Declaration of the World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance*, 59-60.)

Agenda 21 mentions religion, but with no reference to the impact that its misuse has on development (see, Agenda 21, 5.53, 6.1, 6.3, 6.4, 6.12, 6.32, 6.34 (a)(i), 36.13 (a)). Moreover, the *Programme for the Further Implementation of Agenda 21*, which was produced at the Earth Summit +5, contains no mention at all of religion, and the *Draft Plan of Implementation for the World Summit on Sustainable Development* that was negotiated at the Fourth Preparatory Committee session (27 May - 7 June 2002), mentions religion but once, and then only in the context of ensuring that the delivery of basic health care services is "consistent with ý. cultural and religious values" (A/CONF199/PC/L.5, #45). This omission of the destructive effects of religious fanaticism on sustainable development from the global action plans emanating from the Earth Summit, the Earth Summit +5, and the World Summit on Sustainable Development, is all the more striking, given that some of the conferences of the 1990's did, at least, express concern about religious intolerance.

4. In its efforts to combat terrorism, the United Nations has been hesitant to address religious fanaticism. Through a series of resolutions, treaties and actions, the United Nations has sought concerted international cooperation to combat terrorism, branding it "one of the most serious threats to international peace and security in the twenty-first century" and inimical to "global stability and prosperity." (S/RES1377 (2001)). Yet, at the same time, the UN has been reticent to identify religious fanaticism as a source of terrorism, referring to it, if at all, mostly indirectly - e.g., "terrorism motivated by intolerance or extremism" (S/RES/1373 (2001)). In those few instances when it is mentioned directly, it is included in a list of various justifications - e.g., "criminal acts intended to provoke a state of terrorýare...unjustifiable, whatever the considerations of a political, philosophical, ideological, racial, ethnic, religious or other nature that may be invoked to justify them." (A/RES/55/158, para 2; see also A/57/37, Annex III, Article 5, *Report of the Ad Hoc Committee* [charged with drafting a *Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism*] *Established by General Assembly Resolution 51/210 of 17 December 1996*; and the *International Convention for the Suppression of the Financing of Terrorism*, Article 6). Interestingly, even the various resolutions that were issued by the Security Council, the General Assembly and the Commission on Human Rights in response to the terrorist acts of 11 September 2001, failed to identify religious fanaticism as the force animating those acts (to find allusion to this fanatical motivation, one has to look to speeches by the UN Secretary-General: "We are in a moral struggle to fight an evil that is anathema to all faiths." SG/SM8013, *Message of the Secretary-General Kofi Annan to the Warsaw Conference on Combating Terrorism*, 6 November 2001.) This hesitancy to acknowledge and forcefully condemn the religious bigotry motivating terrorist acts weakens the effectiveness of the UN's efforts to bring an end to international terrorism. For, it is only by identifying and understanding the peculiar motivation behind such acts that they can be effectively combated.

5. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, Bahá'í Publishing Trust, Wilmette, IL, 1982, p.361.

6. Ibid.

7. Religion has inspired in whole populations capacities to love, to forgive, to create, to dare greatly, to overcome prejudice, to sacrifice for the common good and to discipline the impulses of animal instincts. Against all odds and with little in the way of meaningful encouragement, it continues to sustain the struggle for survival of uncounted millions, and to raise up in all lands heroes and saints whose lives are the most persuasive vindication of the principles contained in the scriptures of their

respective faiths. Indeed, its fundamental laws and cardinal principles have, throughout the ages, constituted the warp and woof of the social fabric, uniting peoples into communities and serving as the ultimate authority in giving meaning and direction to individual and collective life.

8. It is untenable to maintain that a regime of international human rights can replace religious purpose as the force capable of inspiring the profound sacrifices and driving the extensive changes necessary for the unification and pacification of humankind. While it is true that international human rights norms and standards are based largely on principles that have their foundation in the world's great religions, such a regime, standing on its own - unmoored from religious purpose - cannot elicit the moral vision and commitment required to establish and sustain universal peace and justice. In fact, severed from the virtues taught by all religions - such as kindness, forgiveness, compassion, generosity, love, sacrifice, responsibility, and service to others - human rights and fundamental freedoms are often used to justify selfish individualism, anti-social lifestyles, over-consumption, ethical relativism, cultural aggrandizement and national chauvinism.

9. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, Bahá'í Publishing Trust, Wilmette, IL, 1982, p. 181. This principle is repeatedly stressed in the Bahá'í Scriptures - e.g., *"If religion proves to be the source of hatred, enmity and contention, if it becomes the cause of warfare and strife and influences men to kill each other, its absence is preferable"* (Ibid. p. 298); *"If a religion become the cause of hatred and disharmony, it would be better that it should not exist. To be without such a religion is better than to be with it"* ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *'Abdu'l-Bahá in London*, Bahá'í Publishing Trust, Oakham, England, 1982, p. 28); *"If religion becomes a cause of dislike, hatred and division, it were better to be without it, and to withdraw from such a religion would be a truly religious act"* ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, eleventh edition, Bahá'í Publishing Trust, London, 1969, p. 130).

10. While religious principles have had a palpable influence on the UN, most notably in the human rights realm, the UN has yet to accept the world's religions as genuine partners in its work. The involvement of religious non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in certain activities at the United Nations; the religious sentiments that UN and governmental officials occasionally express during negotiations; the Permanent Observer status held by the Holy See (representing the State of Vatican City); and other such means through which voices of religion are sometimes raised in the UN; can hardly be said to constitute substantive religious involvement in the deliberations and conceptual work of the UN. This lack of involvement is perplexing, given that the world's religious scriptures promise an age of universal peace and world-wide harmony - an age whose establishment is the central purpose of the United Nations.

11. For an interesting view of the influence of religious NGOs at the UN, see *Religion and Public Policy at the UN*, Religion Counts, 2002.

12. Such initiatives as the World Faiths Development Dialogue (a collaborative initiative between the World Bank and several world religions), and the Millennium World Peace Summit of Religious and Spiritual Leaders (a global gathering of religious leaders that was held, in part, in the UN General Assembly Hall, and that involved UN officials, but which was not officially endorsed by the UN) might be seen as initial steps toward directly involving religion in the work of the United Nations. The UN should build on such rudimentary steps, to establish mechanisms and processes that will bring, in a meaningful manner, religious values, aspirations and vision into the heart of the world-embracing enterprise that is the UN.

13. Religious leaders will need to accept science and religion as the two indispensable knowledge systems that must work together if humankind is to progress. At the same time, those who deny the relevance of religion to the resolution of the seemingly intractable problems confronting humanity must look, with unbiased minds, toward the insights and guidance of religion in order to ensure the appropriate application of the knowledge and skills generated by scientific inquiry. A fundamental principle of the Bahá'í Faith is the harmony of science and religion: *"God has endowed man with intelligence and reason whereby he is required to determine the verity of questions and propositions. If religious beliefs and opinions are found contrary to the standards of science, they are mere superstitions and imaginations; for the antithesis of knowledge is ignorance, and the child of ignorance is superstition. Unquestionably, there must be agreement between true religion and science. If a question be found contrary to reason, faith and belief in it are impossible, and there is no outcome but wavering and vacillation."* ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, Bahá'í Publishing Trust, Wilmette, IL, 1982, p. 181)

14. Fostering freedom of conscience includes allowing all individuals to investigate reality, to study and to appreciate other religions, and to change their religion if they so choose. The Bahá'í Writings stress that force and coercion in matters of religion and belief are violations of the Divine command: *"the conscience of man is sacred and to be respected."* ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *A Traveler's Narrative*, Bahá'í Publishing Trust, Wilmette, IL, 1980, p. 91.) Surely, the hallmark of what it means to be human is for the individual to investigate reality for herself, to freely choose her religion, and to worship God in the manner she believes is right.

15. To move beyond such dogmas will require embracing the notion that all of the world's great religions are equally valid in nature and origin and are aspects of one divine, progressive, civilizing process, refining humanity's capacity to know, to love and to serve. Bahá'u'lláh states, *"There can be no doubt whatever that the peoples of the world, of whatever race or religion, derive their inspiration from one heavenly Source, and are the subjects of one God."* (*Gleanings From the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, second edition, Bahá'í Publishing Trust, Wilmette, IL, 1976, p. 217.) The future of civilization ultimately rests on acceptance or rejection of this understanding of the nature and source of the world's great religions.

16. Other initial efforts might include the creation and ratification of international conventions on education and on the media. Building on the *Convention Against Discrimination in Education*, these conventions should unreservedly condemn and forcefully sanction those who, in the name of religion, use education and the media to oppress freedom of conscience and to promote division, hatred, terrorism, violence and bloodshed. There should be no tolerance for educational institutions and initiatives, or media policies and programs - whether public or private - that promote such attitudes and behavior.

17. The notion that the diversity of religions precludes the possibility of effective religious involvement at the United Nations is questionable. The world's religions hold many spiritual truths in common and are increasingly coming together, at all levels, to explore shared values and aspirations, to work to effect governmental policies and programs, and to carry out an array of initiatives. In fact, the common vision of a peaceable future, held by all of the world's great religions, indicates the immense dedication, energy and resources that religious involvement in the United Nations could bring to the organization as it seeks to fulfill its global mandate.

18. The growing danger of a religiously provoked global conflagration only highlights the need to hasten religious involvement in the work of the UN. However, such a danger civil government, unaided, cannot overcome. Nor should it be imagined that appeals for mutual tolerance can alone extinguish animosities that claim to possess Divine sanction. The situation 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 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.

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