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Bahá'í International Community's Contribution regarding initiatives on global dialogue for promotion of a culture of tolerance and peace based on respect for human rights and religious diversity

Submitted to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Anti-Discrimination Unit

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1. The Bahá'í International Community welcomes the invitation of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights to put forward its contributions with regards to initiatives that promote a culture of peace based on respect for human rights and religious diversity. Indeed, the work of the Bahá'í International Community is rooted in the understanding that a peaceful society is strengthened by the cultural diversity of its members, that it progresses through individuals' independent search for truth, and that it is ordered by an adherence to the rule of law which protects the rights of all girls and women, boys and men.
2. Given the persistent intolerance and discrimination based on religion or belief, the Bahá'í International Community recognizes the need for coherent action by the international community to create a climate in which individuals of differing beliefs can, alongside one another, lead dignified and meaningful lives free from violence and discrimination. The General Assembly resolution of 19 December 2006, entitled, "Combating Defamation of Religions," however, is inadequate for the achievement of these ends. If its co-sponsors are true to the intent of the resolution, they will recognize the self-evident need to extend its provisions to include all religions. Today, violence and discrimination are directed towards many religious communities, big or small, new and old; numerous attacks on smaller religions go largely unnoticed. There can be no hierarchization of religion in this regard.
3. The Bahá'í International Community, representing over 180 national affiliates, has led a worldwide campaign to educate its national affiliates about the full panoply and interconnectedness of human rights by systematically promoting human rights education and, as regards the resolution in question, has consistently promoted an awareness of the individual's right to freedom of religion or belief. Throughout the last decade, over 100 national affiliates received the tools to promote human rights education in their national and local communities, often learning about human rights for the very first time.
4. Against a backdrop of pernicious violence and discrimination on the basis of religion, which has not spared members of the Bahá'í Faith, the Bahá'í International Community has given particular emphasis to the matter of freedom of religion or belief – an integral principle of the Bahá'í Faith. The Community has helped its national affiliates to become aware of this right, its status worldwide, and the responsibilities it entails. In an effort to mobilize members of the worldwide Bahá'í community to become active proponents of a culture that recognizes the sacred nature of the human conscience, that upholds the right of every individual to search for truth, and that fosters peaceful dialogue and knowledge generation, the Bahá'í International Community has encouraged its affiliates to be guided by the following principles.
5. First, the freedom to hold beliefs of one's choosing and to change them is a distinguishing attribute of the human conscience and makes possible the individual's search for meaning. The immutability of this right under international law validates its place in safeguarding the dignity of human beings. In flagrant violation of this right, governments of some Muslim countries have designated "approved" or "heavenly" religions, in which people are permitted to believe. Targeting converts to "unapproved" religions, these States have illegitimately leveled charges of "apostasy" – punishable by imprisonment and sometimes death – effectively depriving individuals of the right to exercise their conscience. Given the interdependence of human rights, such violations of the right to freedom of religion or belief, have compromised, among others, the right to education, employment, peaceful assembly, citizenship, health, and at time, life itself.
6. Second, the right to freedom of religion and belief is necessarily contingent on the exposure to new ideas and the ability to share and receive information. While this right cannot legitimately be extended to embrace acts that incite hatred, the State cannot prevent criticism and honest debate concerning matters of religious belief.
7. Against the backdrop of increasing pluralism, States face the challenge of maintaining social cohesion and national unity. Cultural homogeneity and ideological uniformity are no guarantors of peace and security. It is the setting up of just laws, which uphold the dignity and equal rights of all believers and non-believers alike, male and female that provides the surest foundation for a peaceful and prosperous society. An independent judiciary is a vital component in the process of effectively adjudicating cases concerning incitement of religious hatred.
8. Where contentious opinions about religions are expressed, it is the responsibility of the State to provide for right of reply. As a minimum standard, both sides must be afforded the right to respond, in a peaceful and legal manner, so as to allow the public to arrive at their own conclusion. A long-term preventative strategy to combat the defamation of religions and beliefs involves the education of children, first and foremost. Specifically, it involves providing them with the tool to peacefully question, coherently discuss and freely participate in the generation of knowledge. In this way, a whole generation can be prepared to counter the forces of ignorance and fanaticism eating away at the social and intellectual fabric of society.
9. Alongside states, religious leaders bear a great responsibility for the prevention of defamatory practices, so that they themselves do not become obstacles in the path of peace and mutual understanding. Rather, by word and example, they must guide their followers to a peaceful coexistence with those who think and behave differently. In a religiously plural society, it must be acknowledged that obligations inherent to a particular religious community are not binding on persons who are not part of that group unless the content of such obligations corresponds to internationally agreed-upon human rights.<sup>[1]</sup>
10. Finally, legal measures alone will not eradicate the destructive tendencies towards violence and discrimination, particularly when such measures favor the protection of one group of believers over another which is similarly persecuted. The Bahá'í International Community has endeavored to contribute to the creation of a culture of respect and knowledge-sharing through guiding the efforts of its national affiliates to promote the principles of the independent search for truth, adherence to a universal code of human rights and to the creation of an environment - both culturally and legally - in which the human mind is free to know and to believe. We thank the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights for the opportunity to make this submission.

