

Religion in an Ever-Advancing Civilization

FROM *THE BAHÁ'Í'S PUBLICATION*

The world's great faiths have animated civilizations throughout history. Each affirms the existence of an all-loving God and opens the doors of understanding to the spiritual dimension of life. Each cultivates the love of God and of humanity in the human heart and seeks to bring out the noblest qualities and aspirations of the human being. Each has beckoned humankind to higher forms of civilization.

Over the thousands of years of humanity's collective infancy and adolescence, the systems of shared belief brought by the world's great religions have enabled people to unite and create bonds of trust and cooperation at ever-higher levels of social organization—from the family, to the tribe, to the city-state and nation. As the human race moves toward a global civilization, this power of religion to promote cooperation and propel cultural evolution can perhaps be better understood today than ever before. It is an insight that is increasingly being recognized and is affirmed in the work of evolutionary psychologists and cultural anthropologists.

The teachings of the Founders of the world's religions have inspired breathtaking achievements in literature, architecture, art, and music. They have fostered the promotion of reason, science, and education. Their moral principles have been translated into universal codes of law, regulating and elevating human relationships. These uniquely endowed individuals are referred to as "Manifestations of God" in the Bahá'í writings, and include (among others) Krishna, Moses, Zoroaster, Buddha, Jesus Christ, Muhammad, the Báb, and Bahá'u'lláh. History provides countless examples of how these Figures have awakened 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 humanity's baser instincts. These achievements can be recognized as the common spiritual heritage of the human race.

Today, humanity faces the limits of a social order inadequate to meet the compelling challenges of a world that has virtually shrunk to the level of a neighborhood. On this small planet, sovereign nations find themselves caught between cooperation and competition. The well-being of humanity and of the environment are too often compromised for national self-interest. Propelled by competing ideologies, divided by various constructs of "us" versus "them," the people of the world are plunged into one crisis after another—brought on by war, terrorism, prejudice, oppression, economic disparity, and environmental upheaval, among other causes.

Bahá'u'lláh—as the latest in the series of divinely inspired moral educators Who have guided humanity from age to age—has proclaimed that humanity is now approaching its long-awaited stage of maturity: unity at the global level of social organization. He provides a vision of the oneness of humanity, a moral framework,

and teachings that, founded on the harmony of science and religion, directly address today's problems. He points the way to the next stage of human social evolution. He offers to the peoples of the world a unifying story consistent with our scientific understanding of reality. He calls on us to recognize our common humanity, to see ourselves as members of one family, to end estrangement and prejudice, and to come together. By doing so, all peoples and every social group can be protagonists in shaping their own future and, ultimately, a just and peaceful global civilization.

One humanity, one unfolding faith

We live in a time of rapid, often unsettling change. People today survey the transformations underway in the world with mixed feelings of anticipation and dread, of hope and anxiety. In the societal, economic, and political realms, essential questions about our identity and the nature of the relationships that bind us together are being raised to a degree not seen in decades.

Progress in science and technology represents hope for addressing many of the challenges that are emerging, but such progress is itself a powerful force of disruption, changing the ways we make choices, learn, organize, work, and play, and raising moral questions that have not been encountered before. Some of the most formidable problems facing humanity—those dealing with the human condition and requiring moral and ethical decisions—cannot be solved through science and technology alone, however critical their contributions.

The teachings of Bahá'u'lláh help us understand the transformations underway. At the heart of His message are two core ideas. First is the incontrovertible truth that humanity is one, a truth that embodies the very spirit of the age, for without it, it is impossible to build a truly just and peaceful world. Second is the understanding that humanity's great faiths have come from one common Source and are expressions of one unfolding religion.

In His writings, Bahá'u'lláh raised a call to the leaders of nations, to religious figures, and to the generality of humankind to give due importance to the place of religion in human advancement. All of the Founders of the world's great religions, He explained, proclaim the same faith. He described religion as "the chief instrument for the establishment of order in the world and of tranquility amongst its peoples" and referred to it as a "radiant light and an impregnable stronghold for the protection and welfare of the peoples of the world." In another of His Tablets, He states that "the purpose of religion is to safeguard the interests and promote the unity of the human race, and to foster the spirit of love and fellowship amongst men." "The religion of God and His divine law," He further explains, "are the most potent instruments and the surest of all means for the dawning of the light of unity amongst men. The progress of the world, the development of nations, the tranquility of peoples, and the peace of all who dwell on earth are among the principles and ordinances of God. Religion bestoweth upon man the most precious of all gifts, offereth the cup of prosperity, imparteth eternal life, and showereth imperishable benefits upon mankind."

The decline of religion

Bahá'u'lláh was also deeply concerned about the corruption and abuse of religion that had come to characterize human societies around the planet. He warned

of the inevitable decline of religion's influence in the spheres of decision making and on the human heart. This decline, He explained, sets in when the noble and pure teachings of the moral luminaries who founded the world's great religions are corrupted by selfish human ideas, superstition, and the worldly quest for power. "Should the lamp of religion be obscured," explained Bahá'u'lláh, "chaos and confusion will ensue, and the lights of fairness and justice, of tranquility and peace cease to shine."

From the perspective of the Bahá'í teachings, the abuses carried out in the name of religion and the various forms of prejudice, superstition, dogma, exclusivity, and irrationality that have become entrenched in religious thought and practice prevent religion from bringing to bear the healing influence and society-building power it possesses.

Beyond these manifestations of the corruption of religion are the acts of terror and violence heinously carried out in, of all things, the name of God. Such acts have left a grotesque scar on the consciousness of humanity and distorted the concept of religion in the minds of countless people, turning many away from it altogether.

The spiritual and moral void resulting from the decline of religion has not only given rise to virulent forms of religious fanaticism, but has also allowed for a materialistic conception of life to become the world's dominant paradigm.

Religion's place as an authority and a guiding light both in the public sphere and in the private lives of individuals has undergone a profound decline in the last century. A compelling assumption has become consolidated: as societies become more civilized, religion's role in humanity's collective affairs diminishes and is relegated to the private life of the individual. Ultimately, some have speculated that religion will disappear altogether.

Yet this assumption is not holding up in the light of recent developments. In these first decades of the 21st century, religion has experienced a resurgence as a social force of global importance. In a rapidly changing world, a reawakening of humanity's longing for meaning and for spiritual connection is finding expression in various forms: in the efforts of established faiths to meet the needs of rising generations by reshaping doctrines and practices to adapt to contemporary life; in interfaith activities that seek to foster dialogue between religious groups; in a myriad of spiritual movements, often focused on individual fulfillment and personal development; but also in the rise of fundamentalism and radical expressions of religious practice, which have tragically exploited the growing discontent among segments of humanity, especially youth.

Concurrently, national and international governing institutions are not only recognizing religion's enduring presence in society but are increasingly seeing the value of its participation in efforts to address humanity's most vexing problems. This realization has led to increased efforts to engage religious leaders and communities in decision making and in the carrying out of various plans and programs for social betterment.

Each of these expressions, however, falls far short of acknowledging the importance of a social force that has time and again demonstrated its power to inspire the building of vibrant civilizations. If religion is to exert its vital influence in this period of profound, often tumultuous change, it will need to be understood anew. Humanity will have to shed harmful conceptions and practices that masquerade as religion. The question is how to understand religion in the modern world and allow for its constructive powers to be released for the betterment of all.

Religion renewed

The great religious systems that have guided humanity over thousands of years can be regarded in essence as one unfolding religion that has been renewed from age to age, evolving as humanity has moved from one stage of collective development to another. Religion can thus be seen as a system of knowledge and practice that has, together with science, propelled the advancement of civilization throughout history.

Religion today cannot be exactly what it was in a previous era. Much of what is regarded as religion in the contemporary world must, Bahá'ís believe, be re-examined in light of the fundamental truths Bahá'u'lláh has posited: the oneness of God, the oneness of religion, and the oneness of the human family.

Bahá'u'lláh set an uncompromising standard: if religion becomes a source of separation, estrangement, or disagreement—much less violence and terror—it is best to do without it. The test of true religion is its fruits. Religion should demonstrably uplift humanity, create unity, forge good character, promote the search for truth, liberate human conscience, advance social justice, and promote the betterment of the world. True religion provides the moral foundations to harmonize relationships among individuals, communities, and institutions across diverse and complex social settings. It fosters an upright character and instills forbearance, compassion, forgiveness, magnanimity, and high-mindedness. It prohibits harm to others and invites souls to the plane of sacrifice, that they may give of themselves for the good of others. It imparts a world-embracing vision and cleanses the heart from self-centeredness and prejudice. It inspires souls to endeavor for material and spiritual betterment for all, to see their own happiness in that of others, to advance learning and science, to be an instrument of true joy, and to revive the body of humankind.

True religion is in harmony with science. When understood as complementary, science and religion provide people with powerful means to gain new and wondrous insights into reality and to shape the world around them, and each system benefits from an appropriate degree of influence from the other. Science, when devoid of the perspective of religion, can become vulnerable to dogmatic materialism. Religion, when devoid of science, falls prey to superstition and blind imitation of the past. The Bahá'í teachings state:

Put all your beliefs into harmony with science; there can be no opposition, for truth is one. When religion, shorn of its superstitions, traditions, and unintelligent dogmas, shows its conformity with science, then will there be a great unifying, cleansing force in the world which will sweep before it all wars, disagreements, discords and struggles—and then will mankind be united in the power of the Love of God.

True religion transforms the human heart and contributes to the transformation of society. It provides insights about humanity's true nature and the principles upon which civilization can advance. At this critical juncture in human history, the foundational spiritual principle of our time is the oneness of humankind. This simple statement represents a profound truth that, once accepted, invalidates all past notions of the superiority of any race, sex, or nationality. It is more than a mere call to mutual respect and feelings of goodwill between the diverse peoples of the world, important as these are. Carried to its logical conclusion, it implies an organic change in the very structure of society and in the relationships that sustain it.

The experience of the Bahá'í community

Inspired by the principle of the oneness of humankind, Bahá'ís believe that the advancement of a materially and spiritually coherent world civilization will require the contributions of countless high-minded individuals, groups, and organizations, for generations to come. The efforts of the Bahá'í community to contribute to this movement are finding expression today in localities all around the world and are open to all.

At the heart of Bahá'í endeavors is a long-term process of community building that seeks to develop patterns of life and social structures founded on the oneness of humanity. One component of these efforts is an educational process that has developed organically in rural and urban settings around the world. Spaces are created for children, youth, and adults to explore spiritual concepts and gain capacity to apply them to their own social environments. Every soul is invited to contribute regardless of race, gender, or creed. As thousands upon thousands participate, they draw insights from both science and the world's spiritual heritage and contribute to the development of new knowledge. Over time, capacities for service are being cultivated in diverse settings around the world and are giving rise to individual initiatives and increasingly complex collective action for the betterment of society. Transformation of the individual and transformation of the community unfold simultaneously.

Beyond efforts to learn about community building at the grass roots, Bahá'ís engage in various forms of social action, through which they strive to apply spiritual principles in efforts to further material progress in diverse settings. Bahá'í institutions and agencies, as well as individuals and organizations, also participate in the prevalent discourses of their societies in diverse spaces, from academic and professional settings, to national and international forums, all with the aim of contributing to the advancement of society.

As they carry out this work, Bahá'ís are conscious that to uphold high ideals is not the same as to embody them. The Bahá'í community recognizes that many challenges lie ahead as it works shoulder to shoulder with others for unity and justice. It is committed to the long-term process of learning through action that this task entails, with the conviction that religion has a vital role to play in society and a unique power to release the potential of individuals, communities, and institutions.