

Religion & World Order 1994 Symposium

A Baha'i Response

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I propose to address my comments primarily to the first question -- global ethics -- and talk quite specifically about the Baha'i position on the associated issues (peace, social and economic justice, human rights, cultural identity, and ecological balance). After that I should like to add a few random comments on some of the other questions: working towards a just world system, collaboration with the UN, and development of a multi-religious movement. Most of what I am going to talk about is drawn directly from the sayings of Baha'u'llah, the founder of our religion, and are not ideas that some ordinary Baha'i, such as myself, has dreamed up. They are the original teachings of the faith and therefore have the power to affect people the way that the words of Jesus or Mohammed do, rather than, say, the words of a bishop or a mullah, or a committee.

1. Global Ethics

Peace & Security

What should be said about the issue of peace and security? First, it is the Baha'i position that peace has to be regarded as the very highest priority. "The principle of the oneness of mankind [is] the pivot round which the teachings of Bahau'llah revolve." Secondly, the Baha'i position is that we are all world citizens. "Let not a man glory in this, that he loves his country. Let him rather glory in this, that he loves his kind." Thirdly, the Baha'i position is one of presenting a vision of what might be: a vision of a future world society based on the spiritual principles of justice and peace, which would include such features as a democratic federal world government supported by a world police force.

Obviously, this vision is not going to happen tomorrow. It is recognized that there has to be a step by step approach to its achievement. The Baha'i community sees the first stage in this process as the ending of war, disarmament of the nations, and the establishment of collective security. These developments, in essence, could be achieved by the end of this century.

It is interesting to note in this context that the Baha'i teachings give a very important role to the United States in the process. America has a special spiritual destiny. That is something that may not be obvious when we read the newspapers every day. My view, in meditating upon this teaching, is that there is indeed much in America's cultural inheritance that makes it uniquely qualified for taking a lead in creating a global society. For instance, it's the first and most mature federal democracy, and this is clearly a model

for future world government. Second, it is the melting pot of the world's cultures. There is no other country like it in this respect. Perhaps, most important of all, is its religious idealism, which has, for example, made enormous contributions to development of universal human rights, to the Hague Conventions, to the United Nations and so on.

Finally, there is a confidence in the future amongst Baha'is that I think is a very important factor in promoting action. It comes first from a clear sense of the purpose of life, which is to acquire the qualities of nobility. Second, it comes from a sense of history: that we are moving, metaphorically, from adolescence (when we have great physical power associated with scientific advance, but limited wisdom), toward adulthood (when we, at last, acquire wisdom and moral strength). Third, it comes from a balanced view of human nature: "In man there are two natures: his spiritual or higher nature and his material or lower nature. In one he approaches God. In the other he lives for the world alone."

Economic and Social Justice

Priority for peace implies priority for justice. There is a need to explicitly identify the two spiritual guiding principles which apply to economics: reward for service for the common good and avoidance of extremes of wealth and poverty. The following is a very brief list of some of the important Baha'i teachings on this subject:

1. A global economy to ensure efficiency in production of wealth for the benefit of all.
2. Encouragement of voluntary giving and service.
3. Profit sharing.
4. Universal compulsory education.
5. Equality of the sexes, with special emphasis on women's education.

Human Rights, Cultural Identity, and Integrity

There are two powerful teachings in the Baha'i faith elaborating on the universal religious principal of love for our fellow human beings that address the issues of human rights, and cultural identity and integrity. First, Baha'i teachings call for consciously abolishing prejudice. It is particularly important to abolish religious prejudice. This requires more than simply being tolerant; it requires total respect and reverence for each and every founder of the great religions. "Beware...lest ye be tempted to make any distinction between any of the Manifestations of God." Second, we should positively appreciate the diversity of cultures as an enrichment of world civilization, which benefits us all equally. Baha'i teachings make specific reference to the beauty of cultures that have suffered oppression, and to the special contribution they will make to the spiritualization of humanity.

Ecological Wellbeing

There is in the Baha'i teachings a positive view of God's material Creation. "Nature in its essence is the embodiment of My Name, the Maker, the Creator...it is a dispensation of Providence ordained by the Ordainer, the All-Wise." Also, there is a holistic view of humankind and its relationship with the natural environment. Baha'i teachings give self respect and knowledge of our potential to be noble beings, and they simultaneously emphasize humility in the face of God and Creation. The Baha'i view of the purpose of life is to grow towards God and not to acquire material things beyond what is necessary to achieve that end.

2. Working Toward Just World Systems

Let me now say a few words about our second question: working towards just world systems. We were asked, "From the perspective of your religious values and principles, what should be the criteria for a true global civilization?" My answer, based on my understanding of the Baha'i perspective is, "A true global civilization would be dedicated totally to support and encouragement of every man, woman, and child on the face of the planet, in striving to achieve their full potential: physical, intellectual, and, above all, spiritual.

A second aspect of the question is what local initiatives can be undertaken to achieve world order? There are some 20,000 local Baha'i communities in just about every country of the world which are totally dedicated to the achievement of the unity of mankind and the establishment of world peace.

The third aspect is about insights concerning solution of existing tensions. One valuable concept that the Baha'i community can offer is the system of public discussion called "consultation." Unlike democratic debate which encourages division and conflict, Baha'i consultation focuses on achieving the right answers through unity. Modern conflict-resolution techniques are a step in the direction of Baha'i consultation, which also includes personal detachment, adherence to spiritual principle, conscious concern to have universal contribution to the discussion, and clear identification of the facts of the case.

3. Collaborating With the UN and Its Specialized Agencies

Now for our third question: What are the strengths and weaknesses of the UN, and what reforms are suggested? This is too vast a subject to be answered here, but some fundamental and immediate points from a Baha'i perspective are:

1. Holding a world convocation to discuss needs of the world now that the Cold War is over, as happened at the end of World Wars I and II.
2. Making arbitration of disputes between nations by the World Court compulsory.
3. Creating a standing world police force which is directly recruited and independently financed.

4. Developing a Multi-Religious Movement

Finally, there is the question, "How can we develop a multi-religious movement? An area where the religious communities of the world could most effectively work together for world peace, with a minimum of friction, would be in persuading the UN and all national governments to introduce compulsory studies in world citizenship in all schools. Universal religious teachings on human unities could be one basis for such studies. Perhaps such studies could be linked to a pass certificate which, in effect, could be a world citizenship passport.