

A BAHÁ'Í PERSPECTIVE ON SACRED SCRIPTURE IN TODAY'S WORLD.

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ABSTRACT:

Examination of the value of using Sacred Scripture to address the issues in today's world is an imperative religious leaders of today ignore at their peril. As custodians of Divinely revealed guidance for humanity there is an obligation to apply the teachings of the world's religions to the dire needs of society. Translating that "value" to "adoption by the world at large" requires a new paradigm within which all revealed scripture is considered of equal value by its peer religions and claims of exclusive access to the Truth are totally renounced. In comparing Faiths it is useful to consider the nature of the Sacred Scripture as having a double helix of, on the one hand, spiritual and moral teachings, while on the other, social instructions suitable to the age and place in which they were revealed. Understanding this dichotomy allows for the appreciation of religion as a singularity with evolutionary tendencies. Science and religion have to revisit their relationship and understand their complementary and unique roles in assisting humanity pursue its innate drive to discover the nature of existence and their position within creation. Fundamentalist literalism, although prevalent in today's world, usually arises in times of stress and change and should not be considered a healthy response to meeting the needs of humanity especially given the propensity for this behaviour to develop into war.

INTRODUCTION:

The following presentation addresses the series of questions set by the Centre for Theology, Science and Culture, Flinders University, and is largely a compilation of various publications available on the international Baha'i website www.bahai.org.

WHY SHOULD THE WORLD PAY ATTENTION TO THE SCRIPTURE OF THE WORLD'S RELIGIONS?

(what our Holy Books teach?)

Religion as we are all aware reaches to the roots of motivation. When it has been faithful to the spirit and example of the transcendent Figures who gave the world its great belief systems, it has 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 animal instinct. Unquestionably, the seminal force in the civilizing of human nature has been the influence of these Manifestations of the Divine that extends back to the dawn of recorded history.

This same force, which operated with such effect in ages past, remains an inextinguishable feature of human consciousness. 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. As the course of civilization demonstrates, religion is also capable of profoundly influencing the structure of social relationships. Indeed, it would be difficult to think of any fundamental advance in civilization that did not derive its moral thrust from this perennial source.

Many of the social structures of today find their origins and inspiration in the Sacred Texts of the past 6000 years. This very University is the product of Islamic culture that arose from the Koran. Algebra, numeracy, astronomy, literature all owe a great debt to Islam and the teachings of Mohammed. The sense of justice and legal system we enjoy can be traced back to Judaic culture and the Torah while the sense of mercy, love and forgiveness enshrined in our social services, hospitals and welfare organisations can be seen to come directly from Christian values enshrined in the New Testament.

Is it conceivable, then, that passage to the culminating stage in the millennia-long process of the organization of the planet can be accomplished in a spiritual vacuum? If the perverse ideologies let loose on our world during the century just past contributed nothing else, they demonstrated conclusively that the need cannot be met by alternatives that lie within the power of human invention.

Bahá'u'lláh's teachings on individual morality start with the notion that there is only one God. Although various religious teachings in relation to society at large must change to fit the needs of the times, there are certain fundamental moral and ethical teachings that are common to all faiths. Bahá'ís understand that these teachings are fundamental to the happiness and well-being of the human species and they do not change.

The moral code of the Ten Commandments, with its condemnation of murder, adultery, theft, lies, covetousness and disrespect of parents, can be found in all religions. Likewise, those commandments that define the individual's relationship with God have steadily emerged in the succession of Divine revelations.

Bahá'u'lláh reaffirmed these laws and elaborated them. He not only condemned murder and lying but particularly censured backbiting. Gambling, assault, and trespassing are interdicted. So are alcoholic drinks and narcotic drugs – unless prescribed by a physician.

Honesty and trustworthiness are extolled in Bahá'u'lláh's writings. "Trustworthiness is the greatest portal leading unto the tranquillity and security of the people," Bahá'u'lláh wrote. "In truth the stability of every affair hath depended and doth depend on it."

The ultimate aim in life of every human soul, the Bahá'í writings state, should be to attain moral and spiritual excellence--to align one's inner being and outward behavior with the will of an all-loving Creator. That each individual has been bestowed with a unique

destiny by God--a destiny which unfolds in accordance with the free exercise of the choices and opportunities presented in life--lies at the center of Bahá'í belief. In particular, it is through the moral exercise of our divinely conferred free will that opportunities are provided for spiritual advancement. *"All that which ye potentially possess,"* Bahá'u'lláh confirms, *"can...be manifested only as a result of your own volition."*

In a poetic passage, Bahá'u'lláh described the actions of the moral individual and urged His followers to live accordingly:

Be generous in prosperity, and thankful in adversity. Be worthy of the trust of thy neighbor, and look upon him with a bright and friendly face. Be a treasure to the poor, an admonisher to the rich, an answerer of the cry of the needy, a preserver of the sanctity of thy pledge. Be fair in thy judgment, and guarded in thy speech. Be unjust to no man, and show all meekness to all men. Be as a lamp unto them that walk in darkness, a joy to the sorrowful, a sea for the thirsty, a haven for the distressed, an upholder and defender of the victim of oppression. Let integrity and uprightness distinguish all thine acts. Be a home for the stranger, a balm to the suffering, a tower of strength for the fugitive. Be eyes to the blind, and a guiding light unto the feet of the erring. Be an ornament to the countenance of truth, a crown to the brow of fidelity, a pillar of the temple of righteousness, a breath of life to the body of mankind, an ensign of the hosts of justice, a luminary above the horizon of virtue, a dew to the soil of the human heart, an ark on the ocean of knowledge, a sun in the heaven of bounty, a gem on the diadem of wisdom, a shining light in the firmament of thy generation, a fruit upon the tree of humility.

Bahá'u'lláh, like Abraham, Buddha, Christ, Muhammad and the other Divine Messengers who preceded Him, sought to awaken the moral and creative capacities latent in human nature. *"Noble have I created thee,"* is the Divine assurance, *"Rise then unto that for which thou wast created."* He states that *"the purpose for which mortal men have...stepped into the realm of being, is that they may work for the betterment of the world and live together in concord and harmony."* *"Let each morn,"* He urges, *"be better than its eve and each morrow richer than its yesterday. Man's merit lieth in service and virtue and not in the pageantry of wealth and riches. Take heed that your words be purged from idle fancies and worldly desires and your deeds be cleansed from craftiness and suspicion. Dissipate not the wealth of your precious lives in the pursuit of evil and corrupt affection, nor let your endeavors be spent in promoting your personal interest... Guard against idleness and sloth, and cling unto that which profiteth mankind, whether young or old, whether high or low."*

From the Bahá'í perspective, religion has been the chief civilizing force in human history. Moral maturity thus comes from spiritual awareness. As stressed throughout the Bahá'í writings, the primary purpose of God in revealing His will through His Messengers is to effect a transformation in the moral and material conditions of human existence. The transformation called for by Bahá'u'lláh is directed to the inner character of every human being and to the organization of society--a transformation that engenders cooperation, compassion, rectitude of conduct, and justice.

In linking spiritual development to personal behavior, Bahá'u'lláh wrote *"that the citadels of men's hearts should be subdued through the hosts of a noble character and praiseworthy deeds."* He exhorts the world's peoples to *"illumine their beings with the light of trustworthiness , " "the ornament of honesty,"* and the *"emblems" of "generosity."* Service to humankind is the purpose of both individual life and all social arrangements: *"Do not busy yourselves in your own concerns; let your thoughts be fixed upon that which will rehabilitate the fortunes of mankind and sanctify the hearts and souls of men."*

Bahá'u'lláh sets before us the highest standard of morality and urges us to strive to attain it. To do so is the only path to true happiness and fulfillment. Our moral and spiritual advancement is therefore crucial to our well-being in both this life and the next . As Bahá'u'lláh counsels: *"Possess a pure, kindly and radiant heart, that thine may be a sovereignty ancient, imperishable and everlasting."*

Because it is concerned with the ennobling of character and the harmonizing of relationships, religion has served throughout history as the ultimate authority in giving meaning to life. In every age, it has cultivated the good, reprobated the wrong and held up, to the gaze of all those willing to see, a vision of potentialities as yet unrealized. From its counsels the rational soul has derived encouragement in overcoming limits imposed by the world and in fulfilling itself. As the name implies, religion has simultaneously been the chief force binding diverse peoples together in ever larger and more complex societies through which the individual capacities thus released can find expression. The great advantage of the present age is the perspective that makes it possible for the entire human race to see this civilizing process as a single phenomenon, the ever-recurring encounters of our world with the world of God.

Although the world's ever-shifting moral climate has led some modernists to reject or modify elements of God's historic moral code, Bahá'ís believe that an unbiased survey of contemporary conditions leads inescapably to the conclusion that society will only suffer if human morality is not revitalised. Worldwide corruption in business and government, the epidemic of sexually transmitted diseases, and the dissolution of family life provide concrete examples of the need to return to a high standard of individual conduct.

This revitalisation can only be sourced from the Sacred Scriptures of the world's religions

IS FUNDAMENTAL LITERALISM THE ONLY WAY TO PRESERVE THE AUTHORITY OF SACRED TEXTS?

Fundamental literalism and claims of a privileged access to truth represents a betrayal of the life of the mind which, more than any other factor, has robbed religion of the capacity it inherently possesses to play a decisive role in shaping world affairs. Fundamental literalism will lead to marginalisation and alienation of both the religion and the individual.

Fundamental literalism will never preserve the authority of sacred texts in the eyes of the world at large. The authority of the texts is really only preserved by demonstrating the ability of those writings to change the hearts and souls of humankind to be more peaceful, loving and tolerant of one another. In order to affect the generality of the population they have to be accessible so that people can independently investigate the truth and choose for themselves. The primary task of the soul will always be to investigate reality, to live in accordance with the truths of which it becomes persuaded and to accord full respect to the efforts of others to do the same

The freedom to hold beliefs of one's choosing and to change them is central to human development as it makes possible the individual's search for meaning – a distinguishing impulse of the human conscience. The responsibility to uphold universal principles of freedom of religion or belief rests not only with States but with religious leaders as well. In a world harassed by violence and conflict in the name of religion, leaders of religion bear tremendous responsibility for guiding their followers towards a peaceful coexistence and mutual understanding with those who think and believe differently. Too often, those acting in the name of religion have fanned the flames of hatred and fanaticism, themselves serving as the greatest obstacles in the path of peace.

We are all equally vulnerable to fundamentalism. It is a human weakness, shared by everyone alike, and is not specific to any race or culture, any creed or nation. It is certainly not particular to any one religion, nor to religion alone, for it afflicts all ideologies, whether political, economical or cultural. It is allied to our propensity, as a species, to believe - that impulse to trust in abstractions, in each other, and even in mere words, which is one of the hallmarks of our humanity - and it only becomes dangerous when conditions allow its corollary, the impulse to persuade, to run rampant in the form of fanaticism. Fundamental literalism too often leads to fanaticism. The two are not identical. One can be a fanatic without being a fundamental literalist although it is less likely that a fundamental literalist will be open to non-fanatical discussion of their particular viewpoint. In times of stress or change, there is a hardening of the arteries in our belief systems, which inclines us towards fundamentalism and fanaticism.

Fundamentalism could be defined as an instinctual reaction to social and psychological insecurity, economic and political instability, racial and cultural vulnerability.

- It defines life in literal-minded and absolute terms, interprets reality according to physical and materialistic criteria, and censors and undermines intellectual inquiry.
- It promises security and salvation on the basis of a strict code of behaviour, controlled and monitored by a self-serving elite, who apply sanctions to ensure their own power.
- It justifies itself by an internal and circular logic unchecked by objective reason; it shrinks the range of language, and transforms media into propaganda.
- It exacerbates notions of exclusivity, re-writes history / science, restructures education and feeds / incites a sense of racial, cultural, religious superiority.

- It gives rise to a siege mentality, a culture of victimisation and of blame; it lends itself to confrontational relationships and the language of “us” and “them”.

Fear is common to all forms of fundamentalism. It is the cause as well as the consequence, the underlying factor as well as the concrete expression of fear. Fundamentalism feeds on fears specific to the human soul: the dread of annihilation, the terror of meaninglessness, and the uncertainty about ourselves. “I will show you fear,” says T.S.Eliot, “in a handful of dust.”

Religion has a specific role to play in relation to these fears because it defines how we should behave in relation to who we are and why we exist. It is unique among belief systems in combining a code of conduct with a sense of destiny.

However religion is particularly prone to fundamentalism. This is because it confronts us with the paradox of ourselves: it has a human face but claims a divine source. All religions, the world over, contain a double helix of two languages - the literal and the symbolic - which reflect this paradox. The first language can be found in the social laws and ordinances of religion which are historically, culturally and (until recently) geographically specific and would appear like all other human institutions to be subject to change. The second language, which is symbolic and figurative, provides us with spiritual and moral teachings that appear to have eternal value and universal relevance. Whenever the distinction between these twin aspects of religion is lost, whenever the two languages are confounded or misappropriated, fundamentalism invariably ensues.

It is a sign that religion is undergoing a crisis of identity when radical elements among its professional clergy begin to incite people to subversion, violence and self-immolation, on the grounds that the material aspects of their beliefs are immortal and therefore immutable. It is a sign that its cohesive influence is waning and its leadership feels threatened when those people incited prove to be individuals who are themselves undergoing crises of identity and feel marginalized and alienated by society.

Fundamental literalism should not be accepted as a legitimate response to the current needs of humanity. Protection of the purity of one’s faith should never be confused with the high jacking of religion by criminals intent on destroying a society in which they feel marginalised and alienated.

HOW DO WE MAKE A FAITHFUL RESPONSE TO THE CLAIMS OF SCIENCE?

Together with the crumbling of barriers separating peoples, our age is witnessing the dissolution of the once insuperable wall that the past assumed would forever separate the life of Heaven from the life of Earth. The scriptures of all religions have always taught the believer to see in service to others not only a moral duty, but an avenue for the soul’s own approach to God. Today, the progressive restructuring of society gives this familiar teaching new dimensions of meaning. As the age-old promise of a world animated by principles of justice slowly takes on the character of a realistic goal, meeting the needs of

the soul and those of society will increasingly be seen as reciprocal aspects of a mature spiritual life.

If religious leadership is to rise to the challenge that this latter perception represents, such response must begin by acknowledging that religion and science are the two indispensable knowledge systems through which the potentialities of consciousness develop. Far from being in conflict with one another, these fundamental modes of the mind's exploration of reality are mutually dependent and have been most productive in those rare but happy periods of history when their complementary nature has been recognized and they have been able to work together. The insights and skills generated by scientific advance will have always to look to the guidance of spiritual and moral commitment to ensure their appropriate application; religious convictions, no matter how cherished they may be, must submit, willingly and gratefully, to impartial testing by scientific methods.

Science that attacks religion is failing in the same way as the religion that attacks science. Science has no means for measuring values, morals or spirituality. By the same token religion is ill equipped to provide the blue print for the space shuttle. Historically religion has provided the inspiration behind some great discoveries. For example the first mention of the earth revolving round the sun rather than the sun around the earth is to be found in the Koran – a divinely inspired treatise rather than a scientific journal. It was many years before it was proved scientifically.

Science provides a tool. It can be used for either the progress of the world or its destruction. Religion provides the value base on which to judge the proper use of the tool. "Religion and science are the two wings upon which man's intelligence can soar into the heights, with which the human soul can progress. It is not possible to fly with one wing alone! Should a man try to fly with the wing of religion alone he would quickly fall into the quagmire of superstition, whilst on the other hand, with the wing of science alone he would also make no progress, but fall into the despairing slough of materialism."

"God made religion and science to be the measure, as it were, of our understanding. Weigh all things in this balance. To him who has the power of comprehension religion is like an open book, but how can it be possible for a man devoid of reason and intellectuality to understand the Divine Realities of God?"

"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."

CAN WE BALANCE OUR OWN FAITH TRADITION'S EXCLUSIVE READINGS OF SCRIPTURES WITH THE CHALLENGE OF OTHER WORLD FAITHS?

As the twentieth century opened, the prejudice that seemed more likely than any other to succumb to the forces of change was that of religion. In the West, scientific advances had already dealt rudely with some of the central pillars of sectarian exclusivity. In the context of the transformation taking place in the human race's conception of itself, the most promising new religious development seemed to be the interfaith movement. In 1893, the World's Columbian Exposition surprised even its ambitious organizers by giving birth to the famed "Parliament of Religions", a vision of spiritual and moral consensus that captured the popular imagination on all continents and managed to eclipse even the scientific, technological and commercial wonders that the Exposition celebrated.

Briefly, it appeared that ancient walls had fallen. For influential thinkers in the field of religion, the gathering stood unique, unprecedented in the history of the world. The Parliament had, its distinguished principal organizer said, emancipated the world from bigotry. An imaginative leadership, it was confidently predicted, would seize the opportunity and awaken in the earth's long-divided religious communities a spirit of brotherhood that could provide the needed moral underpinnings for the new world of prosperity and progress. Thus encouraged, interfaith movements of every kind took root and flourished. A vast literature, available in many languages, introduced an ever wider public, believers and non-believers alike, to the teachings of all the major faiths, an interest picked up in due course by radio, television, film and eventually the Internet. Institutions of higher learning launched degree programmes in the study of comparative religion. By the time the century ended, interfaith worship services, unthinkable only a few decades earlier, were becoming commonplace.

Alas, it is clear that these initiatives lack both intellectual coherence and spiritual commitment. In contrast to the processes of unification that are transforming the rest of humanity's social relationships, 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. The progress of racial integration is a development that is not merely an expression of sentimentality or strategy but arises from the recognition that the earth's peoples constitute a single species whose many variations do not themselves confer any advantage or impose any handicap on individual members of the race. The emancipation of women, likewise, has entailed the willingness of both society's institutions and popular opinion to acknowledge that there are no acceptable grounds "biological, social or moral" to justify denying women full equality with men, and girls equal educational opportunities with boys. Nor does appreciation of the contributions that some nations are making to the shaping of an evolving global civilization support the inherited illusion that other nations have little or nothing to bring to the effort.

So fundamental a reorientation religious leadership appears, for the most part, unable to undertake. Other segments of society embrace the implications of the oneness of humankind, not only as the inevitable next step in the advancement of civilization, but as the fulfilment of lesser identities of every kind that our race brings to this critical moment in our collective history. Yet, 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.

The consequences, in terms of human well-being, have been ruinous. It is surely unnecessary to cite in detail the horrors being visited upon hapless populations today by outbursts of fanaticism that shame the name of religion. Nor is the phenomenon a recent one. To take only one of many examples, Europe's sixteenth century wars of religion cost that continent the lives of some thirty percent of its entire population. One must wonder what has been the longer term harvest of the seeds planted in popular consciousness by the blind forces of sectarian dogmatism that inspired such conflicts.

The implications for today are summed up by Bahá'u'lláh in words written over a century ago and widely disseminated in the intervening decades:

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. The difference between the ordinances under which they abide should be attributed to the varying requirements and exigencies of the age in which they were revealed. All of them, except a few which are the outcome of human perversity, were ordained of God, and are a reflection of His Will and Purpose. Arise and, armed with the power of faith, shatter to pieces the gods of your vain imaginings, the sowers of dissension amongst you. Cleave unto that which draweth you together and uniteth you.

Such an appeal does not call for abandonment of faith in the fundamental verities of any of the world's great belief systems. Far otherwise. Faith has its own imperative and is its own justification. What others believe or do not believe cannot be the authority in any individual conscience worthy of the name. What the above words do unequivocally urge is renunciation of all those claims to exclusivity or finality that, in winding their roots around the life of the spirit, have been the greatest single factor in suffocating impulses to unity and in promoting hatred and violence.

It is to this historic challenge that we believe leaders of religion must respond if religious leadership is to have meaning in the global society emerging from the transformative experiences of the twentieth century. It is evident that growing numbers of people are coming to realize that the truth underlying all religions is in its essence one. This recognition 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. Out of the welter of religious doctrines, rituals and legal codes inherited from vanished worlds, there is emerging a sense that spiritual life, like the oneness manifest in diverse nationalities, races and cultures, constitutes one unbounded reality equally accessible to everyone. In order for this diffuse and still tentative perception 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.

With every day that passes, danger grows that the rising fires of religious prejudice will ignite a worldwide conflagration the consequences of which are unthinkable. Such a danger civil government, unaided, cannot overcome. Nor should we delude ourselves that appeals for mutual tolerance can alone hope to extinguish animosities that claim to possess Divine sanction. 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. 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 more clear. “*The well-being of mankind, its peace and security, are unattainable*”, Bahá’u’lláh urges, “*unless and until its unity is firmly established*”.

IS AUSTRALIAN SOCIETY SECULAR, SUPERSTITIOUS, SPIRITUALITY-SEEKING – OR ALL THREE?

Generalisations lead to pre-judging which is not helpful. A cross section of Australian society would find all elements of secular, superstitious and spirituality-seeking. The sublimation of religion will often find an outlet in sport. Sports fans exhibit all the outward similarities to a faithful congregation with regular weekly attendance, rituals, chants, blind faith, exuberance, enthusiasm and loyalty. High priests in the form of umpires and commentators abound and there are many different sects.

Australians exhibit some characteristic spiritual values. One is the acceptance of diversity. The country has been built on the back of outcasts and refugees. As long as you are prepared to put your past grievances behind you and accept your neighbours in your new home as friends you will be accepted in Australian society. If that is unfortunately not your personal experience then you are able to speak out against the injustice and people will listen and support you because it is not the accepted norm in Australian society. Another characteristic is community response to adversity. Bushfires, floods and droughts – Australians always set aside their differences and pull together. Fire fighters from Adelaide went to the aid of their Sydney colleagues recently because fires were out of control in NSW and extra manpower was urgently required.

Every human being has a drive towards spirituality, some are aware of this, others are not. Secular, superstition, spirituality seeking – these are just matters of degree in the personal journey of the soul. Overall Australian society has high moral values aligned with the values of the new age.

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