

From Tolerance to Unity: The Baha'i Faith and Conviviality

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Abstract

According to Whitehead, “religion is world-loyalty” and in the 21st Century one of the most pressing issues in regards to “world-loyalty” is mitigating and ending the fractious divisions among the world’s religions. To achieve conviviality in its fullest sense, we must, as the Baha’i Writings say, let “our vision be world-embracing” not only in spiritual questions but in all human affairs. We must move from tolerance, a necessary but not sufficient stage, to unity. Taking this step requires us to re-contextualize our understanding of religion, i.e. we must see that despite the apparent diversity of religions, there is, ultimately only one religion on earth and all particular faiths are aspects or manifestations of this one religion revealed over time and under different circumstances. This will help to achieve Whitehead’s “mutual immanence” needed for in-depth dialogue and conviviality. On the practical level, it leads to the “coordination of values” (Whitehead) or “unity of conscience” (Baha’i) which is needed for effective action for peace among religions and nations.

“Let your vision be world-embracing”[1] - with these words, Baha’u’llah, the Founder of the Baha’i Faith, points to the essential challenge facing all religions in a rapidly contracting world: the unavoidable encounter of different religions which often seem to contradict one another on a wide variety of issues. Because religious isolationism is virtually impossible, how can each of these religious traditions include other faiths in its understanding of the world? More to the point, how are apparently competing traditions to achieve conviviality – living and growing together – for the benefit of humankind? As the phrase “world-embracing” vision suggests, conviviality requires more than just acknowledging the existence of other faiths; we must also “embrace” them as ‘kindred’ who are working together and growing together in mutual respect, understanding and appreciation. Only in this way can we actualize Whitehead’s statement that “religion is world-loyalty.”[2]

From a Baha’i perspective, conviviality and “world-loyalty” are the central goals of religion

itself: “it is evident that the fundamentals of religion are intended to unify and bind together; their purpose is universal, everlasting peace.”[3] Furthermore, they require that we “[c]onsort with the followers of all religions in a spirit of friendliness and fellowship.”[4] To emphasize this viewpoint more strongly, the Baha’i Writings assert that “If religion becomes the source of antagonism and strife, the absence of religion is to be preferred.”[5] In short, without conviviality, religion loses its purpose and value and therefore its reason for being.

The issue of conviviality among religions inevitably raises the question of how this can be attained and practiced on a global scale. From a Baha’i perspective, the foundational principle of conviviality is that “reality is one and not multiple, that it underlies all divine precepts and that the foundations of the religions are, therefore, the same.”[6] Whitehead alludes to a similar underlying principle when he describes peace, or the “Harmony of Harmonies”[7] as “a broadening of feeling due to the emergence of some deep metaphysical insight, un verbalized and yet momentous in its coordination of values.”[8] This is precisely the Baha’i position: the values espoused by the various world religions will be based on the “deep metaphysical insight” that, since reality is one, the values emerging from this unity must, ultimately, be in harmony. Once this is recognized, there will be peace or conviviality among religions.

One of the corollaries of the foundational principle of metaphysical unity is that “[t]here can be no doubt whatever that the peoples of the world, of whatever race or religion, derive their inspiration from one heavenly Source.”[9] In other words, all religions share a common origin – although, given the Baha’i principle of the essential unknowability of God, this Source need not necessarily be interpreted as a personal God. It can refer to an entity or a process or, according to apophatic theology, to a *je ne sais quoi* but whichever understanding is chosen, all things depend on this Source for their existence. Their common origin in something that transcends all human limitations invests the world’s religions with an objective innate value, purpose and dignity that do not depend on subjective human evaluations either personal or collective. This suggests that particular religions do not lose their purpose, value and dignity by paying more attention to their commonalities and, less attention to their differences for the sake of “peace among religions”[10] which is required for “peace among the nations.”[11]

Given their common origin, the differences among religions require explanation. From a Baha’i – and Whiteheadian – perspective, the underlying principles of religion remain stable while other differences are only variant expressions of the enduring “golden core.”[12] Abdu’l-Baha writes,

Religion is reality and reality is one. The fundamentals of the religion of God are therefore one in reality. There is neither difference nor change in the fundamentals.[13]

He adds:

[i]t is the outward practices of religion that are so different, and it is they that cause disputes and enmity – while the reality is always the same, and one. The Reality is the Truth, and truth has no division. Truth is God's guidance, it is the light of the world, it is love, it is mercy.[14]

The external differences are rooted in varying historical, cultural, geographical and economic conditions which influence the way the principles of a religion are taught and applied. This implies not only that we must learn to 'look through' the culture bound expressions to the underlying similarities but also that some teachings are strictly related to a particular culture and, therefore, lack universality. In seeking conviviality among religions, the latter must be set aside or recognized as applying only in particular cultural contexts. Speaking of religion, Whitehead makes a similar point:

Religion will not regain its old power until it can face change in the same spirit as does science. Its principles may be eternal, but the expression of those principles requires continual development. This evolution of religion is in the main a disengagement of its own proper ideas from the adventitious notions which have crept into it . . .[15]

In other words, Whitehead, like Abdu'l-Baha, notes that religions have been unduly burdened by "adventitious" concepts and practices collected over time. These "notions" hinder the evolution of religions just as, Whitehead notes, they hinder the development of science. Whitehead, of course, is referring specifically to the time-bound scientific ideas that religions may have absorbed, but his point applies just as well to the necessity of religions to free themselves from culturally and historically limited expressions of "eternal verities" Otherwise, their usefulness and relevance will be diminished and fade over time.

While the foundations of religion are identical, the subsequent expositions, adaptations and specific applications differ since they are shaped by culture, language, geography, climate, economics and historical circumstances. Whitehead also identifies teachings "which are expressed in terms either suited to the emotional reactions of bygone times or directed to excite modern emotional interest of nonreligious character." [16] In other words, the forms in which these ideas are expressed are no longer relevant to the time and no longer even religious. The distinction between the foundations and the form of expression suggests that the differences are the superstructural, "exoteric" [17] aspects of religion built on the foundational commonality of "love and unity." [18] Because such superstructural developments are bound by time, place and

other temporary conditions they cannot help but emphasize differences, and, at the same time obscure similarities. This is precisely what creates the challenge of conviviality in the first place.

However, it would be erroneous to think that differences are irrelevant or dispensable. Rather, they should not be the first priority in dialogue with other religions. It is possible to value and maintain the historical forms in which a particular religion expresses itself, and, at the same time, to accept that the same principle may be expressed in other ways. Indeed, it is possible to gain a new appreciation of the differences once we understand their relationship to the stable foundational principles of religion. The differences may reveal aspects of the foundational principles that are not as readily discernable in other traditions. Moreover, some individuals may find that the expression of these principles found in a particular tradition ‘speak’ to them more effectively than others. However, this should cause them to overlook that the specific expressions they appreciate gain their validity and power from the foundational principles from which they are derived. If these are neglected, slipping into a narrow focus on specific historical expressions will be difficult to avoid. The key to achieving conviviality is for each faith to keep its focus on the stable “golden core”

At this point, it is clear that the Baha’i Faith – and Whitehead – distinguish form and content as well as essential and accidental aspects of religion. As noted before, speaking of religion (and science) Whitehead states:

Its principles may be eternal, but the expression of those principles requires continual development. This evolution of religion is in the main a disengagement of its own proper ideas from the adventitious notions which have crept into it[19]

In other words, religion has stable, “eternal” principles which are expressed in various forms – which undergo “continual development. The content remains but the form changes. The same is true of religion. Without this distinction, it would be impossible for religions to focus attention on the substantial agreements underlying the differing expressions or forms of a teaching in order to find a basis for dialogue. Insistence on the particular form of a teaching can only lead to irresolvable clashes. The same may be said of the distinction between essential and accidental aspects of religion. It is necessary to differentiate the historically molded features that affect the expressions of a principle from the principle itself. To do otherwise is, in effect, to trap a religion

(and science) permanently within its historical and cultural circumstances and consequently, to limit its ability to adapt to an evolving world. Progress would cease.

‘Abdu’l-Baha encapsulates these ideas in a beautiful and instructive image:

Although the reality of Divinity is sanctified and boundless, the aims and needs of the creatures are restricted. God's grace is like the rain that cometh down from heaven: the water is not bounded by the limitations of form, yet on whatever place it poureth down, it taketh on limitations -- dimensions, appearance, shape -- according to the characteristics of that place. In a square pool, the water, previously unconfined, becometh a square; in a six-sided pool it becometh a hexagon, in an eight-sided pool an octagon, and so forth. The rain itself hath no geometry, no limits, no form, but it taketh on one form or another, according to the restrictions of its vessel.[20]

The universally bestowed divine inspiration is limited and shaped by the historically and culturally circumscribed boundaries of the receiving vessels. In other words, each religion adapts the universal divine inspiration in ways commensurate with the nature of the audience and historical conditions. The ‘rain’ represents the principles or “eternal verities,” [21] i.e. the content of divine inspiration whereas the pools represent the form. However, this image also illustrates the ontological priority of the content over the form since the content is the *raison d'être* of the container. It has ontological priority in regards to dependence. The ontological priority of the universal content or inspiration suggests that this content also receive priority in the quest for conviviality among religions. Focusing primary attention on the essential content that all religions share will help establish a common basis for discussion without which no serious dialogue among religions can take place and without which conviviality cannot be achieved.

Achieving dialogue and conviviality among religions is crucial in our time because, as Hans Küng makes clear, “No peace among the nations without peace between the religions”[22] Disunity, that is to say, lack of conviviality, among religions inhibits “peace among the nations” since it fosters and inculcates habits of mind and feeling conducive to exclusionary thinking, i.e. to thinking in partialities, to ‘othering,’ to rivalry and self-centeredness. At the collective level, it fails to achieve what Whitehead calls “a surpassing of personality,”[23] which is to say, it fails to grow beyond an unbalanced fixation on differences at the expense of commonalities. Neither religions nor nations in this condition can attain peace among themselves.

Completing his comments, Küng asserts that there can be “[n]o peace among religions without dialogue among the religions.”[24] Dialogue is necessary for religions to become agents for world peace. Such dialogue, which must begin with acknowledgement of the existence and legitimacy of other religions as expressions of humanity’s spiritual impulses, will inevitably facilitate a new understanding of religion itself. In Whitehead’s terms, the world’s religions will discover their “mutual immanence,”[25] which is to say, each religion discovers itself in the others by acknowledging the similarities embedded in different historically conditioned expressions of the truth. Eventually, such discoveries clear the way for recognizing the ultimate oneness of all religions, one of the key principles of the Baha’i Faith:

All the teaching of the Prophets is one; one faith; one Divine light shining throughout the world. Now, under the banner of the oneness of humanity all people of all creeds should turn away from prejudice and become friends and believers in all the Prophets[26]

This statement establishes a theological principle for re-visioning the multiplicity of particular religions as aspects or variant forms of a single, universal faith that is revealed over the course of human evolutionary development. It challenges us to lay aside the “prejudices” i.e. undue focus and insistence on differences between religions and to concentrate attention and efforts on the commonalities that promote spiritual friendship and conviviality. Even more, this statement encourages belief in “all the Prophets” since genuine spiritual friendship and conviviality are not possible if the Prophets of all religions are not given equal legitimacy. If we do not equally accept “all the Prophets,” we cannot really say that we accept the prophet’s revelation since the prophet is an integral part of the religion. Baha’u’llah says of them:

Inasmuch as these Birds of the celestial Throne are all sent down from the heaven of the Will of God, and as they all arise to proclaim His irresistible Faith, they, therefore, are regarded as one soul and the same person.[27]

From a Baha’i perspective, the prophets are all different but equal historical appearances of God’s Will. Thus, while Moses, Mohammed, Buddha and Baha’u’llah are outwardly, i.e. historically different personages, they are the same, spiritually and in-themselves.

In the Word of God there is still another unity -- the oneness of the Manifestations of God, Abraham, Moses, Jesus Christ, Muhammad, the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh. This is a unity divine, heavenly, radiant, merciful -- the one reality appearing in its successive Manifestations.[28]

Abraham, Moses, Buddha and so forth are simply the “successive” historical appearances of “the one reality.” The differences are accidental, not essential; formal not substantial.

Abdu'l-Baha's statement clarifies why religious dialogue needs to be focused on the essential and substantial unity and less on the accidental and formal differences in the appearance of the Manifestations who founded the various religions. Furthermore, this essential unity of the Manifestations explains why the essential teachings of the prophets or Manifestations are identical, and have the same goal, i.e. “to establish unity and concord amongst the peoples of the world.”[29] The similarity of teachings is additional reason to believe that conviviality among religions must primarily pay attention to the “eternal verities.” The Baha'i Faith re-vision the appearance of various prophets and religions in the teaching of “progressive revelation”[30] in which successive prophets re-state the “eternal verities”[31] of all religions in a new and more appropriate historical form as humankind evolves.

Progressive revelation harmonizes with process philosophy because it views religion as always evolving. Unavoidably, this means that particular religions come into and go out of existence. Abdu'l-Baha pictures this process as the life-cycle of a tree:

From the seed of reality religion has grown into a tree which has put forth leaves and branches, blossoms and fruit. After a time this tree has fallen into a condition of decay. The leaves and blossoms have withered and perished; the tree has become stricken and fruitless. It is not reasonable that man should hold to the old tree, claiming that its life forces are undiminished, its fruit unequalled, its existence eternal. The seed of reality must be sown again in human hearts in order that a new tree may grow therefrom and new divine fruits refresh the world. By this means the nations and peoples now divergent in religion will be brought into unity[32]

This evolutionary, process view of religious history makes unity and conviviality more attainable because it discourages any literal and unnuanced understanding of all claims regarding the finality of any particular religion. All religions are part of a process that is endless and includes future prophets. There is no absolutely final prophet. Instead, finality can be thought of as referring to historical epochs or phases of human development rather than to a literal end of revelation. Indeed, this is how the Baha'i Faith understands itself. The Baha'i texts make it clear that there is a one thousand year time limit for Baha'u'llah's revelation after which a new Manifestation or Prophet will come with new teachings to meet mankind's needs in a new phase of human development. The new teachings will re-iterate the “eternal verities”[33] in new forms.

Re-visioning the world's particular religions as successively appearing aspects of one single revelation contributes to the development of conviviality in a multireligious community insofar as it facilitates the necessary journey from tolerance to unity. This journey is perhaps the greatest challenge arising from the multiplicity of religions since it requires a radical change of emphasis from differences to agreements and convergences, less concern with particular identities and traditions and more concern with the commonalities underlying all of them. Without such a change in emphasis, conviviality will be difficult to put into practice.

Tolerance is the willingness to live with good will, sympathy, lenience and detachment in the face of differences; it requires constraint in making judgments, especially negative judgments, and mindfulness of our own fallibility. It also implies a commitment to the personal autonomy of all. Unfortunately, while tolerance is necessary for conviviality, it is not sufficient. One reason is its essential fragility insofar as tolerance does not necessarily require common interests, a deficiency which can easily lead to divisions and even antagonism when interests diverge or clash. For example, religions may feel existentially threatened by a de-emphasis on their particular historically conditioned expressions of certain ideas or teachings in favor of increased emphasis on commonalities. They may even feel threatened by the concept of divergent expressions of the same idea or doctrine. Another reason is that tolerance by itself easily slides into benevolent indifference, i.e. a failure of genuine engagement which undermines any attempts to build positive and substantial ties among various religions. In such circumstances, connections tend to remain as superficial as they do in any dialogue lacking a shared foundation. In Whitehead's terms, "each religion has unduly sheltered itself from the other"[34] and remains unengaged with the others. This is a serious problem because, as Whitehead says:

the togetherness of things involves some doctrine of mutual immanence. In some sense or other, this community of actualities of the world means that each happening is a factor in the nature of every other happening. [35]

If this "mutual immanence" or mutual engagement is not recognized as a fact of existence, it is difficult if not impossible to make use of it in working towards conviviality and the resulting "unity of conscience." [36] From the Baha'i perspective such unity aims at establishing "the entire human race as one soul and one body." [37] 'Abdu'l-Baha adds, that all souls must become "as one soul, and all hearts as one heart." [38]

Unity, based on the understanding that there is only one world religion and all particular religions are aspects of it, facilitates the practical achievement of conviviality. When all religions accept the concept of their common source, recognize the universal “golden core” of their teachings and acknowledge they are all part of a single unfolding historical process, it is easier to develop a common interest in establishing conviviality among religions and nations. Re-visioning all religions as historically manifested aspects of one religion, encourages attention to the universal and unchanging fundamentals of religion per se, love, compassion, peace, unity, material and spiritual well-being and knowledge of God or ultimate reality. Differences among the religions will no longer function as masks that disguise the underlying similarities and convergences. Such a re-visioning also encourages a quest for greater understanding; after all, the better we understand the other religions, the better we will understand our own. This is one of the consequences of “mutual immanence.” Encouraging the vision of all religions as varying forms of a single universal religion also supports practical action in terms of social action projects as well as speaking out on major social issues of our time. When the spirit of rivalry goes, the spirit of service has more room to grow. Moreover, when the world’s inhabitants see the spirit of co-operative service at work among the religions, they will be more inclined to adopt the same spirit vis-à-vis their fellow human and other nations because religion has a major influence on the Zeitgeist.

From a Baha’i perspective, “religion must be conducive to love and unity among mankind; for if it be the cause of enmity and strife, the absence of religion is preferable.” [39] This absence is the stark alternative facing all religions in a world that is increasingly suspicious of them in their present fragmented and often antagonistic forms.

The failure to achieve conviviality among religions leaves the future of religion in doubt.

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Footnotes

[1] Baha'u'llah, *Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah*, p. 94.

[2] Alfred North Whitehead, *Religion in the Making*, Lecture II , “The Description of Religious Experience.” <http://alfrednorthwhitehead.wwwhubs.com/ritm1.htm>

[3] Abdu'l-Baha, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 97.

[4] Baha'u'llah, *Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah*, XLIII, p. 94.

[5] Abdu'l-Baha, *Foundations of World Unity*, p. 22.

[6] Abdu'l-Baha, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 175.

- [7] Alfred North Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas*, p. 283.
- [8] Alfred North Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas*, p. 283; emphasis added.
- [9] Baha'u'llah, *Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah*, CXI, p. 217.
- [10] Hans Küng, 1993 Statement at the Parliament of the World's Religions. See also Global Ethic Foundation, <http://www.weltethos.org/data-en/c-10-stiftung/11a-die-stiftung.php>
- [11] Hans Küng, 1993 Statement at the Parliament of the World's Religions. See also Global Ethic Foundation, <http://www.weltethos.org/data-en/c-10-stiftung/11a-die-stiftung.php>
- [12] Alexander Skutch, *The Golden Core of Religion*.
- [13] 'Abdu'l-Baha, *Foundations of World Unity*, p. 23.
- [14] Abdu'l-Baha, *Paris Talks*, p. 120.
- [15] Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World*, p. 189; emphasis added.
- [16] Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World*, p. 191.
- [17] Abdu'l-Baha, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 75.
- [18] Abdu'l-Baha, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 117.
- [19] Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World*, p. 189; emphasis added.
- [20] Abdu'l-Baha, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Baha*, p. 161.
- [21] Shoghi Effendi, *The Promised Day is Come*, p. 108.
- [22] Hans Kung, 1993 Statement at the Parliament of the World's Religions. See also Global Ethic Foundation, <http://www.weltethos.org/data-en/c-10-stiftung/11a-die-stiftung.php>
- [23] Alfred North Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas*, p. 283.
- [24] Global Ethic Foundation, <http://www.weltethos.org/data-en/c-10-stiftung/11a-die-stiftung.php>
- [25] Alfred North Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas*, p. 199.
- [26] 'Abdu'l-Baha, *'Abdu'l-Baha in London*, p. 42
- [27] Baha'u'llah, *Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah*, p. 50.

- [28] Abdu'l-Baha, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 192.
- [29] Baha'u'llah, *Tablets of Baha'u'llah*, p. 129.
- [30] Baha'u'llah, *Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah*, XXXI, p. 74.
- [31] Shoghi Effendi, *The Promised Day is Come*, p. 108.
- [32] Abdu'l-Baha, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 141.
- [33] Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, p. 100.
- [34] Alfred North Whitehead, *Religion in the Making*, Lecture IV, "The Three Traditions."
- [35] Alfred North Whitehead, *Modes of Thought*, p. 164.
- [36] 'Abdu'l-Baha, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Baha*, p. 297.
- [37] Baha'u'llah, *Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah*, CVII, p. 213; emphasis added.
- [38] 'Abdu'l-Baha, *Selections from the Writings of Abdu'l-Baha*, p. 76.
- [39] 'Abdu'l-Baha, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 128.