

Submission by the Bahá'í International Community
to the
seminar on the encouragement of understanding,
tolerance and respect in matters relating to
freedom of religion or belief

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INTRODUCTION

The achievement of religious tolerance and understanding is, in the Bahá'í view, a prerequisite for the establishment of universal peace and the elimination of all forms of discrimination - whether this discrimination be based on race, ethnic origin, religion, sex, nationality, language or any other characteristic.

Countless wars have been waged throughout human history in the name of religion, and innumerable conflicts have been spurred by religious differences. Religion has become yet another basis and pretext for discrimination and for the violation of human rights. Certainly the development of religious tolerance would eliminate one of the most potent sources of conflict in the world today.

At the same time, the attainment of religious tolerance would produce benefits that would extend into every sphere of global life. The development of religious tolerance and understanding would allow man to recommit his spiritual energies to the central purpose of all the world's revealed religions - the unification of the whole of humanity. For it is religion itself that - if not abused by man for human, selfish ends - provides an awareness of man's spiritual purpose and of his fundamental unity with other men. Such an awareness is essential for the eradication of all the prejudices that currently divide mankind, and is the only sure basis for establishing world peace.

Because the development of religious tolerance is such an important goal and imperative for our time, the Bahá'í International Community wholeheartedly welcomes the holding of this seminar on the encouragement of understanding, tolerance and respect in matters relating to freedom of religion or belief. We are pleased to submit the following comments of relevance to the topics to be discussed by the seminar, as an elaboration of the Bahá'í perspective described above. In particular, we would like to offer the Bahá'í view on the root causes of manifestations of religious intolerance; the various manifestations of religious intolerance in the contemporary world; the necessary means for eradicating religious intolerance, including action in the fields of legislation and education; and models for local action based on the experience of Bahá'í communities around the world.

1. THE ROOT CAUSES OF MANIFESTATIONS OF RELIGIOUS INTOLERANCE

Manifestations of religious intolerance can be viewed as the product of the interaction of two main factors. The first is simple religious prejudice. Every violation of religious rights, no matter what its outward manifestations, can be traced ultimately to the existence of attitudes of religious prejudice. As Arcot Krishnaswami has pointed out in his seminal Study of Discrimination in the Matter of Religious Rights and Practices, "Underlying most discriminatory practices are prejudices which have crystallized into mores of a society. In the particular case of attitudes towards religions or

beliefs, perhaps more than in any other field, mores are slow to change since they stem from deeply held convictions." In this sense, religious prejudice is the primary root cause of religious intolerance.

Prejudice alone, however, may remain obscured or latent; it need not manifest itself directly in outward actions. Yet when religious prejudice combines with any number of selfish, lower human motives it can lead to the violation of the right to freedom of religion or belief. These lower motives - whether the quest for power, the desire to feel morally superior to others or the need to find a scapegoat for social or economic ills - represent the immediate causes of manifestations of religious intolerance. Both prejudice and these other lower human motives are discussed in more detail below.

1.1 Religious prejudice

Religious prejudice may itself be the product of a number of factors. Certainly one of the most important is simple ignorance of other beliefs. There exists a natural human tendency to regard any person who is different - for whatever reason - with suspicion and initial mistrust. In the Bahá'í view, this tendency must be countered by fostering in every individual an awareness of the fundamental, organic unity of all members of the human race and an appreciation for diversity and variety in beliefs and cultural and social backgrounds as a source of enrichment to the whole of human society.

Another cause of religious prejudice, however, and one which operates to make prejudice based on religion one of the most pernicious and potent forms of prejudice, is the tendency of human beings to proclaim the inherent superiority of their own belief and to refuse accordingly to accept the equal dignity and worth of people of other faiths. These attitudes may take the form of a claim to have an exclusive hold on truth. Such a conviction has served historically as the basis for countless "holy wars" waged against so-called "heretics" or "infidels".

Where such attitudes are manifested by followers of the world's major religions, they clearly represent a distortion of the Teachings of their Prophets and a misunderstanding of the reality that all the world's religions have proceeded from one God. It is the Bahá'í view that all religions emanate from the same source - the one and unchanging God - and that, throughout human history, God has revealed himself to man through various Divine Educators, or Messengers. All these Messengers of God - who include Krishna, Buddha, Zoroaster, Abraham, Moses, Christ, Muhammad and, in our day, Bahá'u'lláh - have taught the same eternal spiritual principles of love, unity and tolerance. In fact, the central purpose of every religion has been to promote unity among men. According to the Bahá'í Writings:

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1. Arcot Krishnaswami, Study of Discrimination in the Matter of Religious Rights and Practices (New York: United Nations, 1960), p. 63.

All the Divine Manifestations sent by God into the world would have gone through their terrible hardships and sufferings for the single hope of spreading Truth, unity and concord among men. Christ endured a life of sorrow, pain and grief, to bring a perfect example of love into the world - and in spite of this we continue to act in a contrary spirit one towards the other...

While the spiritual teachings of these great Educators are changeless and eternal, like their Divine Source, each Messenger of God has brought social laws and teachings particularly suited to the needs of the age in which He appeared. Only these social teachings have changed from one religion to another. Bahá'ís believe that Bahá'u'lláh, the Prophet-Founder of the Bahá'í Faith, is the most recent - but not the last - of these Messengers of God, and that He has brought social laws and ordinances for this age, while renewing the spiritual message taught by all the past Messengers.

Man has chosen to dwell on these outward differences of religion, rather than the unity of their spiritual message, and a distorted emphasis on these differences is the source of religious enmity and estrangement. The Bahá'í Writings underline that any doctrine of religious exclusivity is contrary to the very spirit of the teachings of all religions:

Most regrettable of all is the state of difference and divergence we have created between each other in the name of religion imagining that a paramount duty of our religious belief is that of alienation and estrangement, that we should shun each other and consider each other contaminated with error and infidelity. In reality the foundations of the divine religions are one and the same. The differences which have arisen between us are due to blind imitations of dogmatic beliefs and adherence to ancestral forms of worship.

This recognition of the fundamental unity of all religions is coupled, in Bahá'í belief, with a commitment to the principle of the independent investigation of truth. God has provided guidance to man through religion, but it is the responsibility and right of each individual to search and find religious truth for himself, and no man can judge the spiritual capacity of another or dictate to him the best path for his spiritual growth. In the Bahá'í view, every person must have the right to practise the religion of his choice - or not to believe at all.

The belief in the inherent superiority of one's own belief to the exclusion of others, and the prejudice that ensues, springs from a failure to recognize both the right of every individual to discover religious truth for himself and the essential unity and harmony of all religions. Arguably one can support the concept of freedom of belief

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2. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Paris Talks, pp. 121-122.
 3. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Foundations of World Unity, p. 92.

while believing that one's own belief is exclusively valid; yet human character is such that mere intellectual arguments in favour of toleration have made little dent on human prejudices. Only a positive appreciation for the unity of religions can overcome this prejudice.

1.2. The lower human motivations that activate religious prejudice

We have examined above the various factors leading to religious prejudice - the primary root cause of manifestations of religious intolerance. A number of self-centred motives - the immediate causes of manifestations of religious intolerance - can activate this prejudice and lead to concrete violations of religious freedom. These motives can involve struggles for power, for social position, for the maintenance of the existing social and political order or for the establishment of a new social and political structure; they can equally include the desire to seek scapegoats as a result of dissatisfaction with one's position in society or with the conditions existing in one's country.

Thus, for example, religions can be perceived to "threaten" the existing power structure within the dominant religion in a country; they can be perceived as threatening the overall moral, social and political order in a society, whatever its form; and they can be perceived as a threat to other groups if the religion's members are regarded as wealthy or privileged - or simply on the way to attaining a more equal socio-economic standing with the rest of the population. Likewise, members of certain religions may be used as scapegoats for a country's internal or external problems. They may be accused of fomenting internal conflict, causing troubles abroad or being the source of the nation's economic woes. In all these ways, religious prejudice can lead to religious differences being used as a basis and pretext for pursuing selfish ends - in turn resulting in manifestations of religious intolerance.

2. THE VARIOUS MANIFESTATIONS OF INTOLERANCE OF RELIGION OR BELIEF IN THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD

Religious intolerance - caused by prejudice and other lower human motives - may manifest itself in a variety of ways, and the rights enshrined in the Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief may likewise be violated in many different ways. Violations of the right to religious liberty may, however, for the purpose of better understanding, be divided into three major categories. The first category comprises violations of the basic right to have a religion or belief of one's choice and to change this belief. The second category includes violations of the right to practise and to manifest one's religion or belief, while the third category encompasses violations of civil, political, economic, social or cultural rights on the basis of religion or belief.

Naturally, these categories may overlap and do not necessarily exclude one another. For example, a religious community may suffer curtailment of some purely religious rights while at the same time suffering discrimination in areas not directly connected with religion - in the area of employment, for instance. Likewise, certain acts of discrimination may have as their purpose to compel an individual to recant his own belief.

2.1 Violations of the basic right to maintain or to change the religion or belief of one's choice

The Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief is most flagrantly violated if individuals and religious communities are denied the basic right to which they are entitled under Article 1 - that is, the right to have a religion or belief of their choice. The right to hold or to change a particular belief - whether or not it is outwardly manifested - may be denied outright through various acts of oppression and coercion. Mere adherence to a particular religion may, for example, be designated a criminal offence, with correspondingly severe penalties in the form of imprisonment, or even execution. The followers of a religion that has been proscribed by law may become the victims of physical assault, torture, assassination and murder - or may simply "disappear." Individuals may be deprived of their homes, personal possessions or means of livelihood. All or any of these acts of intimidation may be directed towards the goal of coercing an individual to renounce his or her religious beliefs, or of preventing him from leaving a religion in which he does not believe.

Violations of the right to have or to change the religion or belief of one's choice are perhaps the most pernicious of religious rights violations, for they take aim at what Arcot Krishnaswami describes as the "inner faith and conscience of an individual."⁴ Krishnaswami indicates that world opinion considers that violations under this first category may not be justified under any circumstances.⁵ His observation that "there are even today cases of interference with this freedom - or at least with its outward aspects"⁶ is certainly as true today as it was in 1959.

2.2 Violations of the right to practise and to manifest one's religion or belief

Whether or not the basic right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion is directly violated in the manner just described, the right of individuals and religious communities freely to practise their religion and outwardly to manifest their beliefs may be denied or curtailed. Violations in this second category may assume a number of forms. Individuals may, through legislation, judicial decrees, or acts of intimidation perpetrated by officials, groups or individuals, be

4. Krishnaswami, p. 16.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.

denied the right to observe the social laws of their religion, including those relating to marriage and divorce; to teach their faith to others; to make voluntary contributions to the funds of their religious organization; to make pilgrimages to the holy places of their religion; or (as provided in Article 5 of the Declaration) to educate their children in accordance with their own beliefs.

Similarly, the right of an individual to manifest his or her belief in community with others (as provided in Article 1 of the Declaration) may be severely curtailed. Religious gatherings may be forbidden; religious communities may be prohibited from choosing their religious leaders and organizing their religious affairs; and all contact with their co-religionists in other parts of their own country or in other countries may be proscribed. Voluntary contributions from members of religions to national or international religious funds may be proscribed and monies so directed may be confiscated by the government; assets owned by religious communities - such as holy places, burial sites, and financial assets - may likewise be seized and confiscated or destroyed. Religious communities may be forbidden from maintaining charitable or humanitarian institutions, and religious classes conducted for the purpose of educating members in the principles of their own faith may be prohibited. The observance of holy days, fasts and other religious practices as a community may be proscribed. Finally, religious communities may be forbidden to publish and disseminate religious publications and literature. Almost all of these restrictions constitute violations of the rights enumerated in Article 6 of the Declaration.

2.3 Violations of civil, political, economic, social or cultural rights on the basis of religion or belief

The third category described above involves violations of non-religious rights on the basis of religion or belief. Whether or not they are denied the basic right to freedom of belief, and whether or not restrictions are imposed upon their religious activities, individuals and communities may be subjected to discrimination in the enjoyment of their civil, political, economic, social or cultural rights solely on the basis of their religion. This discrimination may involve, for example, the denial of grounds for the enjoyment of various rights through non-recognition of certain religions in national constitutions which are based on religious law and which make enjoyment of certain rights conditional upon membership in one or more officially recognized religions. It may involve, as already described, denial of the right to life, to freedom of person and to personal property on the basis of religion. Similarly, personal status may be impaired under the law. For example, marital status, citizenship or the right to obtain identity cards or passports may be denied on the basis of religion. Discrimination may also take the form of denial or infringement of the right to education through harassment, dismissal from or refusal of admission to public schools, or - in the field of employment - may be manifested in such practices as denial of employment, withholding of promotion or arbitrary dismissal. Such acts constitute violations of the non-discrimination rights set out in Articles 2 and 3 of the Declaration.

3. THE NECESSARY MEANS FOR ERADICATING RELIGIOUS INTOLERANCE

In the previous two sections we have outlined both the root causes of manifestations of intolerance based on religion or belief and the various specific forms that these manifestations may assume in the contemporary world. It is evident from the types of violations of the right to freedom of religion or belief described above, on the one hand, that appropriate and effective legal, judicial and administrative measures must be taken in order to protect persons from violations of the right to religious freedom. At the same time, the fact that outward manifestations of intolerance are but the product of inner prejudices and the action of lower human impulses implies that religious tolerance will only be fully realized when a change of attitudes has been brought about through appropriate education. In this respect, education must be viewed as the primary remedy for the problem of intolerance based on religion or belief.

3.1 Action in the field of legislation

3.1.1 Action at the national level

The violations of the right to freedom of religion or belief outlined in Section 2 are very real and pervasive. To combat these direct, outward, violations of religious freedom it is essential that appropriate constitutional, legislative, judicial and administrative measures be adopted at all governmental levels to ensure that all the rights set forth in the Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief are adequately and fully protected by law. Laws should be adopted which explicitly protect the fundamental right to have a belief or to change one's belief; which, on the basis of the Declaration, clearly define and protect the specific rights associated with the right to practise and to manifest one's belief; and which ensure the full enjoyment of all civil, political, social, economic and cultural rights without discrimination on the basis of religion or belief. In particular, measures should be taken to ensure the implementation of such laws. States should ensure that the rights set forth in the Declaration are realized in practice and are guaranteed through the existence and application of effective grievance and recourse measures.

The importance of effective legislation is emphasized by Krishnaswami, who underlines that the duties of public officials to refrain from making any adverse distinction on the basis of religion "must be discharged through the adoption of appropriate legal provisions of a preventive or remedial character, including penal sanctions when necessary, as well as by administrative action." In addition to the legal protection which laws may provide, the very adoption of laws may contribute to an evolutionary change of attitudes. Krishnaswami affirms that: "The very process of adoption of laws may

in itself constitute an educational measure. Individuals are inclined to consider wrong what the law prohibits, and right what it enjoins them to do.⁹

3.1.2 Action at the international level

At the international level, the United Nations might consider the following means of promoting the effective protection of religious rights in both national and international law:

a) the United Nations might offer assistance to states in the drafting of appropriate legislation.

b) the United Nations might investigate ways of disseminating information on the standards set forth in the Declaration to judges, legislators, magistrates, lawyers, public officials, civil servants and other officials whose duties involve the protection of the right to freedom of religion or belief.

c) the appropriate United Nations human rights bodies might consider the possibility of elaborating additional standards as a means of implementing the Declaration. In particular, they might investigate the possibility of beginning discussions on the elaboration of a draft convention on the elimination of all forms of intolerance and of discrimination based on religion or belief.

d) the appropriate United Nations human rights bodies might consider further measures to study the current dimensions of the problem of religious intolerance and discrimination and to monitor the situation in the world relating to religious intolerance. They might consider establishing a formal or informal body which could study the state of religious tolerance in various parts of the world and could report to one of the United Nations human rights organs.

3.2 Educational programmes to foster tolerance of religion or belief

In Section I above, prejudice and other lower human motivations were identified as the root causes of manifestations of religious intolerance. These prejudices and lower human behaviours can only be changed through proper education - education which seeks to change values and attitudes, and which is based on the spiritual, moral and ethical teachings brought by all the Prophets of God. The Bahá'í Writings state:

There are some who imagine that an innate sense of human dignity will prevent man from committing evil actions and ensure his spiritual and material perfection...And yet, if we ponder the lessons of history it will become evident that this very sense of honour and dignity is itself one of the bounties deriving from the instructions of the Prophets of God. We also observe in infants the signs of aggression and

9. Ibid., p. 63.

lawlessness, and that if a child is deprived of a teacher's instructions his undesirable qualities increase from one moment to the next. It is therefore clear that the emergence of this natural sense of human dignity and honour is the result of education...¹⁰

3.2.1 The type of education required to eliminate religious intolerance

3.2.1.1 A spirit of free inquiry

The education required to eliminate prejudice must, first of all, promote that spirit of free inquiry which alone can break through traditional religious divisions, traditions and dogmas and allow each individual to discover truth for himself:

Another new principle revealed by His Holiness Bahá'u'lláh is the injunction to investigate truth; that is to say, no man should blindly follow his ancestors and forefathers. Nay, each must see with his own eyes, hear with his own ears and investigate the truth himself in order that he may follow the truth instead of blind acquiescence and imitation of ancestral beliefs.¹¹

In particular, as part of this investigation, individuals must be given the opportunity to investigate beliefs other than their own with a view towards gaining a greater understanding of these beliefs and how they relate to one's own.

3.2.1.2 A recognition of the essential unity of religions

While knowledge of other beliefs is a first step towards eliminating prejudices, it is not sufficient in itself to eradicate prejudice. For prejudice has been caused not only by general ignorance of other beliefs, but in particular by a failure to recognize the oneness of religion and an accompanying tendency to dwell on outward religious differences instead. Individuals will only truly become tolerant of other beliefs when they are able to see that the fundamental tenets of all the world's revealed religions are one and the same.

Thus, the investigation described above must have as its second goal the development of an appreciation for the fundamental unity of all religions and for the spiritual teachings of love, unity, and tolerance that are common to all religions - teachings that include such spiritual principles as "faith, knowledge, certitude, justice, piety, righteousness, trustworthiness, love of God, inward peace,¹² purity, detachment, humility, meekness, patience, and constancy." The Bahá'í Writings state in this connection:

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10. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, The Secret of Divine Civilization, p. 97.
 11. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Bahá'í World Faith, p. 246.
 12. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Some Answered Questions, pp. 55-56

Therefore it is our duty in this radiant century to investigate the essentials of divine religion, seek the realities underlying the oneness of the world of humanity and discover the source of fellowship and agreement which will unite mankind in the heavenly bond of love...For if we remain fettered and restricted by human inventions and dogmas, day by day the world of mankind will be degraded, day by day warfare and strife will increase and satanic forces converge toward the destruction of the human race.

As part of his investigation of religious truth, each individual must also be given the opportunity to understand how the social teachings of various religions - those teachings relating to material matters such as fasting, prayer, forms of worship, marriage and divorce, legal processes and penalties for murder, violence, theft and injuries - are "modified and altered in each prophetic cycle in accordance with the necessities of the times."⁴ Such an understanding of why religious teachings on material matters differ from religion to religion can help dispel prejudices based on an exclusive focus on these outward differences. "It is the outward practices of religion⁵ that are so different, and it is they that cause disputes and enmity."

3.2.1.3 The role of religious principles

Third and finally, the education required to eradicate religious intolerance must draw its primary inspiration from the spiritual principles of human oneness and unity that lie at the very heart of the teachings of all the divine religions. Only religion itself can in the end provide that awareness of human unity and of man's spiritual purpose necessary to overcome prejudices and lower human impulses. The Bahá'í Writings accordingly emphasize that moral education is necessary to eliminate the prejudices and lower human motivations that lie at the root of any outward manifestations of religious intolerance, and that it is a necessary complement to legal sanctions implemented to combat these outward manifestations:

And among the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh is that religion is a mighty bulwark. If the edifice of religion shakes and totters, commotion and chaos will ensue and the order of things will be utterly upset, for in the world of mankind there are two safeguards that protect man from wrongdoing. One is the law which punishes the criminal; but the law prevents only the manifest crime and not the concealed sin; whereas the ideal safeguard, namely, the religion of God, prevents both the manifest and the concealed crime, trains man, educates morals, compels the adoption of virtues and is the all-inclusive power which guarantees the felicity of the world of mankind. But by religion is meant that which is

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13. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Bahá'í World Faith, p. 229.
 14. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Some Answered Questions, pp. 55-56
 15. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Paris Talks, pp. 120-121.

ascertained by investigation and not that which is based on mere imitation; the foundations of Divine Religions and not human institutions.¹⁶

It is true religion itself which provides the teachings of tolerance, of humility, of never presuming to be superior to others, of respect for other human beings: "all religions teach that we should love one another; that we should seek out our own shortcomings before we presume to condemn the faults of others, that we must not consider ourselves superior to our neighbours! We must be careful not to exalt ourselves lest we be humiliated."¹⁷

3.2.2 Towards practical programmes of education to foster religious tolerance

Krishnaswami emphasizes the importance of adopting effective educational measures to eliminate the prejudices that lie at the root of religious intolerance: "the enactment of laws and the taking of positive administrative and educational measures are required to eradicate - even if only gradually - such stubborn prejudices."¹⁸ In accordance with the concepts outlined above, the Bahá'í International Community would like to offer the following suggestions relating, first, to the possible content of educational programmes designed to combat religious intolerance, and secondly, to the specific measures which might be taken to implement such programmes.

3.2.2.1 Topics that might be incorporated in programmes of education designed to foster religious tolerance

The Bahá'í International Community suggests that programmes of education designed to eliminate religious prejudice should:

a) seek to develop a fundamental knowledge of the world's various religions and belief systems. They should include study of the lives of their founders, of the scriptures associated with each religion or belief, of their fundamental teachings, of their history and of their present-day practice in the world today, including their traditions and customs. In this connection, a number of admirable efforts have been made to develop materials for the study of comparative religion in schools.

b) incorporate an examination of the commonality of spiritual concepts in all human societies, such as, for example, the concept of the existence of some Being superior to man; the twofold physical/spiritual nature of man; the development in man of such qualities as compassion, truth, love and tolerance. In studying these common spiritual teachings, students might refer to the scriptures of all of the world's religions.

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16. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, pp. 302-303.
 17. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Paris Talks, p. 147.
 18. Krishnaswami, p. 58.

c) include a study of the different social teachings of various religions, in order to develop an appreciation for the variety of forms of religious expression.

d) include examination of the history of religious prejudice and conflict, with a view to understanding the nature of religious prejudice and how it results from a tendency to dwell on religious differences.

e) include a study of the principles of religious liberty and tolerance contained in the Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief.

3.2.2.2 Specific actions that might be taken in the field of education

The topics described above might be incorporated in a variety of educational programmes, initiated by religious organizations, non-governmental organizations, local community councils, or local, regional or national governments. The Bahá'í International Community would like to suggest the following specific actions that might be taken:

a) Governments might encourage the incorporation of the above topics in school curricula at the primary, secondary and university levels; might provide for the development of appropriate educational materials for use in curricula on religious tolerance; might encourage the development of appropriate teacher-training programmes; and might share with other states their experience in the field of education aimed at promoting religious tolerance.

b) Non-governmental organizations - including community and religious organizations and a variety of educational institutions - might develop special classes or courses which would incorporate the topics mentioned above, or they might choose to include these subjects in existing programmes. Furthermore, these organizations, in cooperation with each other or with government agencies, might consider a number of cultural programmes which would encourage religious understanding. Some of these activities might be undertaken in cooperation with UNESCO. These might include the development of multi-religious cultural programmes, through the use of exhibitions, religious libraries and museums.

c) The media might be encouraged to disseminate materials conducive to fostering understanding, tolerance and respect in matters relating to religion or belief.

d) The appropriate intergovernmental agencies, for example, UNESCO might:

- 1) solicit information on existing educational programmes and methods aimed at promoting religious tolerance and make this information available to interested governments, institutions and organizations;
- 2) compile a bibliography of educational materials which might be incorporated in curricula on religious tolerance, and possibly establish a library of such materials available to institutions and governments; and
- 3) consider the possibility of developing appropriate curriculum guides for teaching about religious tolerance which might be used in school programmes.

e) The United Nations General Assembly might consider the possibility of proclaiming 25 November "Universal Religious Tolerance Day", in commemoration of the anniversary of the adoption of the Declaration.

4. MODELS FOR LOCAL ACTION BASED ON THE EXPERIENCE OF BAHÁ'Í COMMUNITIES AROUND THE WORLD IN PROMOTING RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE

Bahá'í communities around the world are working to promote religious tolerance and unity as one of the fundamental tenets of their religious belief. Their endeavours are reflected, on the one hand, in the Bahá'í emphasis on fellowship with members of all religions, and on the other, by the efforts of these communities to educate all people in the principle of religious unity. In both these areas, the activities of Bahá'í communities offer possible examples of actions that local communities around the world might also take.

4.1 Fellowship with members of all religions

The Bahá'í Writings counsel: "O people! Consort with the followers of all religions in a spirit of friendliness and fellowship." Individual Bahá'ís and Bahá'í communities have attempted to follow this counsel in their everyday lives and affairs, in recognition of the reality that all divine religions proceed from the one and same God, and that the very purpose of religion is to foster unity among peoples of all races, creeds, colours and faiths. Bahá'ís emphatically avoid any tendency towards isolation or separatism, and rather seek to intermingle and interact with peoples of all religions and beliefs.

As a manifestation of this emphasis on fellowship with members of all religions, Bahá'í communities have erected six houses of worship, one on each of five continents of the world - North America, Central America, Europe, Africa, and Australia - and one in the Pacific. These houses of worship are open for worship to members of all religions, faiths and beliefs. Each of these houses of worship has nine entrances, symbolizing the nine major world religions and the fact that

each of these religions provides a path to God. Bahá'í communities also maintain local or national Bahá'í centres which are open to members of diverse religions and faiths and may often be used by residents of the local village or community for various community purposes.

Members of other faiths are warmly welcomed at commemorations of Bahá'í holy days and at most other Bahá'í gatherings. One Bahá'í holy day, the Day of the Covenant, commemorates the eternal and continuing covenant God has made with man through his Messengers, and as part of this observance prayers and selections from the Holy Books of all religions may be read.

Bahá'í communities have participated in a number of inter-faith councils and organizations aimed at promoting greater understanding among religions. Furthermore, they have, either singly or in cooperation with other religious organizations in their localities, developed a variety of charitable and humanitarian services available to all members of the local population, whatever their faith or belief. For example, Bahá'í communities have assisted in the organization of a number of rural development projects in South America and in Africa. The Bahá'í community of India has established two high schools, officially accredited and recognized by the Government of India, which are open to members of all faiths. Such efforts have been undertaken in the spirit of humble service to all members of humanity described in the following passage from the Bahá'í Writings: "Let us therefore be humble, without prejudices, preferring others' good to our own! Let us never say, 'I am a believer but he is an infidel', 'I am near to God, whilst he is an outcast'. We can never know what will be the final judgement! Therefore let us help all who are in need of any kind of assistance."²⁰

4.2 Education in the principle of religious unity

In addition to promoting association and fellowship with members of all beliefs, Bahá'í communities are actively engaged in educating all people in the reality of religious unity, seeking to foster the development of attitudes of religious tolerance and understanding.

For example, in classes conducted by Bahá'í communities in over 100 countries, children are being instructed in the principle of the unity of religions and of the independent investigation of truth. In these classes, children from all religious backgrounds - not only Bahá'ís - study the history, scriptures and teachings of the world's various religions. The aim of these classes is to develop an appreciation for each of these religions and for the essential spiritual principles common to all of them. In these classes, students also seek to understand how the social teachings of various religions have varied in accordance with the needs of the particular age in which they were revealed. Students learn that religious division is caused because men cling to the outward observances of religion and forget the simple, underlying truth of human oneness and unity which is the most important teaching of all religions. Finally, these classes seek to

20. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Paris Talks, pp. 147-148.

instill in children and youth a respect for all people, of whatever religion or belief, and in particular, a respect for the right of each and every person to investigate and find religious truth for himself.

In addition to holding classes for children, youth and adults, Bahá'í communities around the world have sponsored, often in collaboration with other religious organizations, a number of public meetings, commemorations and exhibits (including observances of United Nations Human Rights Day) at which various forms of religious belief have been discussed and the essential unity underlying these various forms of belief illuminated and studied. Members of all religions have participated in these events.

4.3 Some suggestions for local community action

Based upon the experience of local Bahá'í communities described above, the Bahá'í International Community would like to suggest the following actions that religious organizations, non-governmental organizations and governments might wish to consider at the local and national levels as means of promoting religious tolerance and understanding:

- a) Non-governmental organizations and various religious organizations could help to establish inter-faith bodies or councils whose purpose would be to promote an understanding of various beliefs, as well as an appreciation for the essential principles which they all share.
- b) Such inter-faith bodies, as well as individual religious or non-governmental organizations, could organize social events and gatherings whose purpose would be to bring together informally members of a variety of religions - simply for the purpose of sharing and socializing. Such inter-faith gatherings would help to promote a sense of fellowship among different religions in the local community.
- c) Meetings or observances could be held at which scriptures from different religions could be read, and representatives of various faiths could share their beliefs and teachings.
- d) Religious organizations could be encouraged to cooperate with one another in developing and implementing community service or development projects of an economic, social or humanitarian nature. The experience of working side-by-side with members of other faiths in service to the community as a whole could greatly help to foster attitudes of respect and understanding.
- e) Similarly, local religious organizations might cooperate in organizing observances of such events as United Nations Day and United Nations Human Rights Day as well as multi-religious exhibits or presentations in museums or libraries.

f) As suggested in Section 3, non-governmental organizations and religious organizations might be encouraged to consider holding classes in which different religions are studied, with a view to understanding the fundamental similarities in their spiritual teachings, as well as the differences in their outward forms of practice. Local, regional and national governments might also be encouraged to consider developing educational programmes in public schools aimed at developing an understanding of various religions and an appreciation for these religions.

CONCLUSION

The above paper has sought to show that the primary root causes of religious intolerance are, on the one hand, prejudice, and, on the other hand, a variety of lower human impulses which activate this prejudice; that religious intolerance may assume a variety of manifestations, ranging from violations of the basic right to have a belief of one's choice, to restrictions on the right to practise one's religion or belief; that action in the fields of both legislation and education is necessary to combat religious intolerance and the prejudice that lies at its roots; and that a number of actions may be taken by local communities and local community organizations to promote religious tolerance and understanding. The global problem of religious intolerance demands for its solution, in the end, a recognition of the fundamental oneness of the human race - a recognition that religion itself must provide. Only the healing power of religion and its teachings of tolerance can dispel fanaticism, intolerance and prejudice:

...Shall we remain steeped in our fanaticisms and cling to our prejudices? Is it fitting that we should still be bound and restricted by ancient fables and superstitions of the past; be handicapped by superannuated beliefs and the ignorances of dark ages, waging religious wars, fighting and shedding blood, shunning and anathematizing each other? Is this becoming? Is it not better for us to be loving and considerate toward each other? Is it not preferable to enjoy fellowship and unity; join in anthems of praise to the most high God and extol all His prophets in the spirit of acceptance and true vision? Then indeed this world will become a paradise and the promised Day of God will dawn... fierce and contending religions, hostile creeds and divergent beliefs will reconcile and associate, notwithstanding their former hatred and antagonism. Through the liberalism of human attitude demanded in this radiant century they will blend together in perfect fellowship and love...²¹

21. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Bahá'í World Faith, p. 280.