

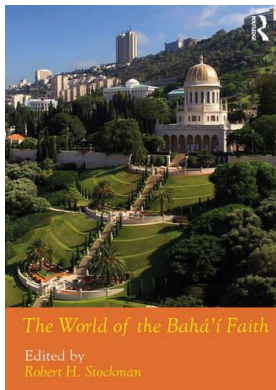
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The World of the Bahá'í Faith

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Interfaith Relations

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INTERFAITH RELATIONS

Anne M. Pearson and Robert H. Stockman

In the history of religions, Bahá'ís have an unusual place in the arena of interfaith relations insofar as their mandate to actively engage in cordial relations with those of any and all other religions and faith perspectives is found clearly articulated within the texts of the founder Himself. Bahá'u'lláh (*Tablets* 21) commanded His followers to 'Consort with the followers of all religions in a spirit of friendliness and fellowship'. His precepts require Bahá'ís to strive to free themselves from any prejudices and preconceptions they might hold and to enter into meaningful relationships with followers of other religions. Indeed, because Bahá'ís believe as a matter of theological principle that the religious heritage of humankind is the expression of the historical unfoldment of divine education from the one God through a series of Manifestations, it follows that becoming acquainted with the history, practices, and authoritative texts of other religions is strongly encouraged for Bahá'ís. Beyond the inherent positive value of striving for cordial relations, Bahá'í texts also warn that religious prejudice, claims to exclusivity, and the violent strife that may result from such attitudes are serious impediments to the advancement of civilization and to the unity and prosperity of humankind.

The Bahá'í Writings contain passages relevant to interfaith dialogue that can be interpreted as exclusivist and inclusivist (Martin 2007). The pluralist approach, however, is particularly prominent (Fazel 2003; May 1997), even innovative.

The emergence of interfaith dialogue in the modern world

The Bahá'í Faith and the interfaith movement were both born in the second half of the nineteenth century—a period during which the globalizing forces released by innovations in travel and communications caused ever-greater numbers of people and religions to interact in unprecedented ways.¹ Modern interfaith relations began as an almost accidental consequence of the efforts of Western European nations to pattern the world on their own imperialistic political, economic, and religious terms. As the world was being carved up in the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries, colonial officials and Christian missionaries encountered a bewildering variety of other worldviews and religious traditions. Eventually, a new consciousness of 'other' religions began to spread to the European and North American public with the dissemination of translations of the religious texts and the descriptions of the customs, beliefs, and practices of foreign peoples.

The prevailing attitude, however, of the majority of nineteenth-century European and American Christians towards other religions was that because Christianity was a ‘true’ universal religion, it would supersede them all. Unsurprisingly, then, when the important first World’s Parliament of Religions was convened over seventeen days in Chicago in 1893, it was dominated by Protestants, and each day’s sessions were opened with the Lord’s Prayer and Christian hymns. The approximately two hundred speakers included only one Muslim and small numbers of Buddhists, Hindus, Jews, Roman Catholics, and Eastern Orthodox Christians (Seager 1995: 50). The Parliament was the first time the Bahá’í Faith was mentioned in a large public gathering in North America. Even its inclusion underscores the approach of many Protestants to other religions current at that time. Bahá’u’lláh’s life and teachings are referred to at the close of a paper entitled ‘The Religious Mission of the English-Speaking Nations’ by the Reverend Henry Jessup, head of the Presbyterian missionary operations in Syria. Bahá’u’lláh is described as

a famous Persian sage, the Babi saint, named Behâ Allah—the ‘Glory of God’—the head of that vast reform party of Persian Moslems, who accept the New Testament as the Word of God and Christ as the deliverer of men, who regard all nations as one, and all men as brothers.

(*Jessup* in Barrows 1893 II: 1126)

Bahá’u’lláh and his teachings are mentioned, seemingly, as an example of the spirit of Christ working in the world. The assumption shared by many of the Christian delegates was that it was the destiny of other religions to be subsumed eventually into the Christian fold (Braybrooke 1980: 5). Of relevant note is that the Parliament occurred soon after the emergence in the 1870s of a new academic field called ‘comparative religions’, distinct from Christian or Jewish theological studies in its assumption that religion could be examined in a non-biased, ‘scientific’ manner through historical, critical, philological, and comparative methodologies. Among its pioneers was T. K. Cheyne, an Oxford professor of ancient Near Eastern religions, who, after becoming Bahá’í, published a book in 1914 titled ‘The Reconciliation of Races and Religions’, filled with extensive references to the Bahá’í Faith and other religions of the world. According to the chairman of the Parliament, Reverend John Barrows, the growing interest in the comparative study of religion was a vital factor in the almost universal endorsement of the idea of such a Parliament (Barrows 1893 I: 6).

The 1893 World’s Parliament of Religions is often taken as the starting point of the modern interfaith movement. In 1891, the General Committee of the proposed Parliament sent out a ‘Preliminary Address’ to eminent religious leaders and scholars to explain the purpose of the congress, expressing its belief that the ‘time was ripe for a new manifestation of human fraternity’ (Braybrooke 1980: 1). While the question of the nature of the relation of religions to each other and especially to Christianity was of particular concern, the organizers did agree upon ten proposed ‘objects’, most of which are surprisingly hopeful and open minded and continue to be reflected in contemporary interfaith organizations. These objects included: to show ‘what and how many important truths the various religions hold and teach in common’; ‘To promote and deepen the spirit of human brotherhood among religious men of diverse faiths, through friendly conference and mutual good understanding, while . . . not striving to achieve any formal and outward unity’; ‘To indicate the impregnable foundations of Theism, and the reasons for man’s faith in Immortality, and thus to unite and strengthen the forces which are adverse to a materialistic philosophy of the universe’; ‘To inquire what light each Religion has afforded, or may

afford, to the other religions of the world'; 'To discover . . . what light Religion has to throw on the great problems of the present age, especially the important questions connected with Temperance, Labor, Education, Wealth and Poverty'; and 'To bring the nations of the earth into a more friendly fellowship, in the hope of securing permanent international peace' (Barrows 1893 I: 18). These proposals are, by and large, well in accord with Bahá'u'lláh's teachings concerning interfaith relations and the purpose of religion, which is described in one place as 'to safeguard the interests and promote the unity of the human race, and to foster the spirit of love and fellowship amongst men' (Bahá'u'lláh *Tablets* 168). Further, rejecting materialist philosophies as well as counteracting the pernicious effects of materialism and applying spiritual principles to address 'the great problems of the age' are significant themes in Bahá'í literature.

Then, as now, most participants in interfaith fora would affirm the uniqueness of each religion, acknowledge the differences, witness commonalities, and resist attempts to unify them in some kind of universal faith, seen as a form of unwelcome synthesis. This concern about the folding of the unique religious traditions into one continued to be expressed in the current Parliament of the World's Religions' stated approach to its work, which is that it 'seeks to promote interreligious harmony, rather than unity' (<https://parliamentofreligions.org/2020-annual-report>). Clearly, the concept of unity of religion referred to here is not precisely the Bahá'í notion. Rather, for Bahá'ís, unity of religion means, as 'Abdu'l-Bahá (*Foundations of World Unity* 91) explains, that 'the foundations of the divine religions are one and the same', and thus the Bahá'í Faith rather profoundly recognizes the 'many important truths the various religions hold and teach in common'.

As North America experienced new waves of immigrants from all over the world due to the relaxation of immigration laws in the mid-twentieth century, a dramatic change in North America's religious complexion occurred along with a steadily broadening notion of what constitutes the 'mainstream' in American religion. The reality of this enhanced ethnic and religious diversity was vividly on display at the second Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago in 1993, an event planned by a multi-faith committee. Greater Chicago in 1993 was a city with not only dozens of Hindu, Buddhist, Sikh, Jewish, and Muslim sites; it was also the location of the first continental Bahá'í House of Worship. This time Bahá'ís were involved in the Parliament as both organizers and presenters.

The Bahá'í Faith's expansion beyond the scope of nineteenth-century Iranian Shi'ism was facilitated by the same developments in travel and communication mentioned earlier, though also carefully coordinated for several decades by Shoghi Effendi, the Head of the Bahá'í Faith from 1921 to 1957. The planned travelling by Bahá'ís to countries around the world and the establishment of Bahá'í communities in diverse locations mirrored the less planned and certainly unprecedented movement of the world's peoples from South to North, East to West, that began in the twentieth century and whose pace has only intensified. The adherents of the world's religions are thus encountering one another as never before.

Bahá'í authoritative teachings encouraging and guiding dialogue

As the Bahá'í Faith spread, its ethnically diverse community members embraced and reflected its core belief in the oneness of humanity and the unity in diversity it implies. In both its internal interactions and interactions with people of diverse faiths and practices, the Bahá'ís have been guided by specific exhortations and spiritual principles found within the Bahá'í sacred writings. 'They that are endued with sincerity and faithfulness', Bahá'u'lláh (*Tablets* 36) wrote,

should associate with all the peoples and kindreds of the earth with joy and radiance, inasmuch as consorting with people hath promoted and will continue to promote unity and concord, which in turn are conducive to the maintenance of order in the world and to the regeneration of nations. Blessed are such as hold fast to the cord of kindness and tender mercy and are free from animosity and hatred.

In this passage, the exhortation to associate with *all* peoples is reiterated, as is the appropriate attitude in which to do so—'with joy and radiance', 'free from animosity and hatred'—and the effects of such engagement: the promotion of unity and concord, which is essential for humanity's prosperity and security. In this and other passages, then, as Bahá'ís dialogue with peoples of other faiths, they are adjured to guard against fanaticism, pride, disputation, and contention and are called upon to acquire such qualities as friendliness, loving fellowship, active listening, trustworthiness, kindly assistance, and service to others.

The Bahá'í scriptures also provide the parameters within which diversity and dialogue can flourish, together with the principles and mechanisms—notably consultation—by which differences of views can be aired and addressed before they lead to conflict. Bahá'ís are encouraged to share the teachings of their Faith with others, but such efforts are described as manifesting virtues in one's conduct using wisdom, moderation, courtesy, and detachment. Coercion, deceit, and exploitation of fears and prejudices are explicitly rejected. Further, Bahá'ís are reminded by the words of Shoghi Effendi (*Promised Day Is Come* 107) that the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh

disclaims any intention to belittle any of the Prophets gone before Him, to whittle down any of their teachings, to obscure, however slightly, the radiance of their Revelations, to oust them from the hearts of their followers, to abrogate the fundamentals of their doctrines, to discard any of their revealed Books, or to suppress the legitimate aspirations of their adherents.

The purpose animating the teaching of the Faith is not the same as the purpose animating interfaith dialogue. The goal of teaching is to inspire others to investigate the claims of the Bahá'í Faith for themselves, leading, possibly, to conversion, whereas the goal of dialogue is to advance mutual understanding. The means for either 'teaching' or 'dialogue' are similar, however; both require respectful listening as well as speaking.

Early years of interfaith relations and the example of 'Abdu'l-Bahá

The earliest Bahá'í interfaith relations were largely with Shi'í Muslims. Through individual teaching efforts, tens of thousands of Persians had become Bábís, and later Bahá'ís. Yet because the Bahá'í Faith claims to fulfil Islam, asserting that Bahá'u'lláh's dispensation has superseded that of Muhammad's and because Muslims usually regard such claims as heretical, dialogue between Bahá'ís and Muslims, in the current sense of the term, did not often take place. Indeed, the claims of the Bahá'í Faith often elicited antipathy from Muslim clerics. There were some theological debates between Iranian Muslim clerics and Bahá'í teachers, both in person and through correspondence,² but such debates were either hidden from the public or fraught with tension. Overall, the outright hostility against the Bahá'í community has meant that friendly and open interfaith dialogue with such Muslims was limited. Early interactions with adherents of other faiths (Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians, Hindus) tended, in general, to be less fraught, even while distinctions between 'teaching' and what we currently understand by 'dialogue' were at that time not always clear or perhaps meaningful among Bahá'ís or peoples of other faiths.

As He was the authorized interpreter of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings and the perfect exemplar of the Bahá'í Faith, it is essential to consider the actions and words of 'Abdu'l-Bahá as they pertain to interfaith relations and dialogue. He went to a mosque every Friday when He was living in 'Akká, in part to strengthen relations with the community in which He was living. Likewise, He urged visiting pilgrims to put aside prejudices and 'even go to the other churches and mosques, for, in all of these worshiping places, the name of God is mentioned' (Star of the West 1918: 37). While travelling in Europe and North America in 1911–13, He met with religious leaders and thinkers such as Pasteur Henri Monnier in Paris, Reverend Russell Conwell in Philadelphia, Rabbi Martin Meyer in San Francisco, the biblical scholar Thomas Kelly Cheyne in Oxford, and the renowned French philosopher Henri Bergson. A Unitarian minister, Howard Colby Ives, met with Him frequently and eventually became a Bahá'í. In North America, 'Abdu'l-Bahá spoke in thirty-one white Protestant churches, fifteen Theosophical and other metaphysical gatherings, three synagogues, and one African American church. In these and other venues, He expounded the main themes of the Bahá'í revelation, related them to current thought and critical issues of the day, listened to what was on the minds and in the hearts of those with whom he engaged, and demonstrated the virtues mentioned earlier.

'Abdu'l-Bahá pressed His European and North American listeners to use their God-given powers of reason to independently investigate reality. To the audience of St. James Methodist Church in Montreal on September 5, 1912, for example, He said: 'God has created man and endowed him with the power of reason whereby he may arrive at valid conclusions. Therefore, man must endeavor in all things to investigate the fundamental reality', and, after affirming the unity of the 'divine Prophets', He then asserted that the 'reality proclaimed in the heavenly Books and divine teachings is ever conducive to love, unity and fellowship' (*Promulgation* 444, 447). In similar talks to Christian and Jewish audiences, 'Abdu'l-Bahá helped clarify basic Bahá'í principles that offer a common foundation to interfaith dialogue: the independent investigation of reality, the oneness of religion, the role of revelation in all religions, and the purpose of religion to strengthen harmony among people and to advance civilization. 'Abdu'l-Bahá was also forthright, however, about some contentious matters in interfaith relations. For example, He challenged the audience in one of San Francisco's Jewish congregations to consider whether the acceptance of Moses by Christians and Muslims has been detrimental to them and then inquiring 'What harm could result to the Jewish people, then, if they in return should accept Christ and acknowledge the validity of the Prophethood of Muhammad?' (520). He asked his audience, in effect, to make truth a higher value than religious identity. Further, in the investigation of truth, he counselled setting aside presumptions based on inherited traditions, for such presumptions and imitations of ancestral beliefs and practices have contributed to the 'disagreements and dissensions which afflict and affect humanity'. These imitations, 'Abdu'l-Bahá (447) argued, 'are accidental and without sanction in the Holy Books'. Certainly, there was a range of responses, not always favourable, among audiences to such statements. Yet such talks remind Bahá'ís that interfaith exchange can, and should be, frank, without being deliberately offensive. 'Abdu'l-Bahá's talks to religious groups tended to focus on the major spiritual and social teachings of the Bahá'í Faith rather than its administration or laws. This may be due not only to the fact that very few Bahá'í texts had been translated into European languages but also to the attention He paid to the particular contexts in which the public exposition of Bahá'í teachings was being made.

Few interfaith associations existed for Bahá'ís to join, so following 'Abdu'l-Bahá's return to Palestine, informed by the content of His talks and inspired by the examples that He had provided them, Bahá'ís turned their efforts at dialogue in other directions, notably organizations promoting peace, the advancement of women, and inter-racial harmony.

Interfaith relations between 1921 and 2000

As the Bahá'í Faith continued to spread slowly across the globe, thanks in large part to Bahá'í travelling teachers, opportunities for interfaith dialogue also grew. One such teacher was the American Martha Root (1872–1939) who took the Faith to dozens of countries on five continents, speaking about its teachings to myriad audiences, including Theosophical societies, and participating in interfaith gatherings, such as the international conference on 'Peace by Religion' held in The Hague in 1928 (Stockman 2002: 27). Other Bahá'ís occasionally received invitations to present their ideas at interreligious conferences, such as in 1924 when the American Bahá'í Mountfort Mills spoke about the Bahá'í Faith at the Conference on Some Living Religions within the British Empire.³ Some years later, in 1936, when Shoghi Effendi was invited to speak at the World Congress of Faiths in Canterbury, England, he chose to send the prominent British Bahá'í George Townshend, formerly Archdeacon of Clonfert and Canon of St. Patrick's Cathedral, Dublin. Townshend's paper was called 'Bahá'u'lláh's Ground Plan of World Fellowship'.⁴ Shoghi Effendi (*God Passes By* 342–343) specifically encouraged Bahá'ís to participate in such interfaith conferences intended for the promotion of religious unity, international cooperation, and the like so that the 'universality and comprehensiveness' of the Bahá'í Faith could be demonstrated and 'vital and enduring links' between Bahá'í administrative agencies and such organizations could be forged. Not surprisingly, then, Bahá'ís were active in the interfaith gatherings associated with the formation of the United Nations in San Francisco in 1945.

Significantly, Bahá'ís also began to initiate interfaith events, notably 'World Religion Day', established by the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States in 1950, to be marked on the third Sunday of January. The day calls for peoples of faith around the world to recognize that all religions have common spiritual goals and mutual interests and that despite the divisions that have existed in the past, religion can be a positive, unifying force. Subsequently, Bahá'ís in many countries, from Estonia to Singapore and Gabon to Peru, have seized the opportunity to celebrate this day by organizing interfaith events such as conferences, panel discussions, and arts programs.⁵ Ties that formed through these interfaith gatherings have led to wider collaborations between religious groups, and other events have grown out of World Religion Day celebrations, such as the First Ukrainian Youth Festival of Religions in 2004, following its first World Religion Day celebration in 2003, hosted by the National Institute of Philosophy. Three countries have issued World Religion Day commemorative postage stamps: Sri Lanka in 1985, Singapore in 1999, and the Republic of Congo in 2007.

Through the 1970s, the Bahá'í Faith began to attract scholarly attention in some circles.⁶ Yet such attention remained scant, and likewise, the invitation extended to Bahá'ís to participate in interfaith gatherings at various levels remained low. This is likely due to several factors. First, outside Iran at least, the existence of the Bahá'í Faith was generally not well known. Second, there was a reticence among those engaged in organizing high-level or institutional dialogue to include new religions (perceived as either unimportant or suspicious). For example, Bahá'ís were not invited to join the Interfaith Conference of metropolitan Washington, DC, when it was established in 1978 because the conference's bylaws, designed to include more 'established' faiths, required religions to have outlived their founder by one hundred years. After the centenary of Bahá'u'lláh's passing in 1992, the Bahá'ís were eligible and were finally admitted in 1997. Third, there was a paucity of Bahá'ís who had academic training in religious studies, and fourth, Bahá'í national and local institutions were still developing capacity to contribute substantively to social discourse. All these factors began to change in the 1980s.

The significant numerical growth of the Bahá'í Faith in the 1970s and 1980s, the publicity—including UN Resolutions—that followed the severe rise in persecution of the Bahá'ís in

Iran after the revolution in 1979; the wide dissemination of the 1985 ‘Peace Statement’ written by the Universal House of Justice; the 1986 opening of the award-winning Bahá’í House of Worship in New Delhi, India; the surge in scholarly publications on aspects of the Bahá’í Faith; the creation of national Bahá’í offices of external affairs; and the institutional development of the Faith are among the factors that led to the emergence of the Bahá’í Faith from obscurity to a more robust participation in the life of society.

A striking example of this emergence from obscurity in the area of interfaith activities is the increasing role that Bahá’ís have played in the Parliament of the World’s Religions. The Parliament, reconvened after a century in Chicago in 1993, saw several Bahá’ís serving on the coordinating council and on supporting committees. In the same year, Bahá’ís were also actively involved in commemorations of the Parliament in London and Bangalore.⁷ Subsequent Parliaments (Cape Town 1999, Barcelona 2004, Melbourne 2009, Salt Lake City 2015, Toronto 2018) have seen Bahá’ís take on expanding responsibilities—serving on the convening boards of directors and steering committees as well as participating as plenary speakers, workshop leaders, and volunteers. The co-chair of the Cape Town Parliament was a female Bahá’í business professor. The Toronto Parliament in 2018, attended by 8,500 people, featured three Bahá’í plenary speakers, two Bahá’í film screenings, and over fifty presentations given by Bahá’ís on such topics as the empowerment of youth, the relationship between religion and citizenship, and the practice of interfaith dialogue.

The serious commitment by Bahá’ís institutions to contribute to the promotion of dialogue is demonstrated by the Bahá’í participation in other international interfaith forums as well. For example, in 1987, the Faith was invited to become the sixth religion in the World Wide Fund for Nature; in 1986 Bahá’ís were invited to participate in the Vatican-sponsored interfaith gathering—the First Day of Prayer for Peace; in 1989, the Bahá’ís helped form the Sacred Literature Trust, created to publish editions of scripture; and in the same year, they joined the New York-based ‘Temple of Understanding’. In 1993, the Faith began to take part in the North American Interfaith Network; in 1994, the Bahá’í International Community joined the large and influential interfaith body called the World Conference on Religions and Peace. Bahá’í representatives participated in the important year 2000 ‘Millennium World Peace Summit of Religious and Spiritual Leaders’ in New York City, where one thousand religious leaders from around the globe met in an effort to ‘forge a partnership for peace’, resulting in a declaration entitled ‘Commitment to World Peace’.⁸

Bahá’í institutional statements related to interfaith relations

In addition to scriptural and authoritative sources of guidance concerning interfaith relations, Bahá’ís have benefitted from relevant statements prepared by the Universal House of Justice since 1963 and, under its jurisdiction, the Bahá’í International Community (BIC). Examples of BIC-issued statements are the 1993 statement ‘Promoting Religious Tolerance’ presented at the world Conference on Human Rights in Vienna and the 2001 statement ‘Belief and Tolerance: ‘Light Amidst Darkness’, presented at the International Consultative Conference on School Education in Relation with Freedom of Religion and Belief, in Madrid.

Two statements from the Universal House of Justice are particularly germane to interfaith relations. The first is the aforementioned 1985 publication ‘To the Peoples of the World—A Bahá’í Statement on Peace’, which emphasized the vital role of religion in achieving world peace. Among the salient barriers to peace it identifies are religious prejudice and strife. This document, personally distributed to tens of thousands of people around the world, elicited numerous commentaries and conversations. Among the recipients of the Peace Message was the

Tibetan Buddhist Dalai Lama who, in March of 1994, became the first senior head of a religion to make an official visit to the Shrine of the Báb in Haifa.

The second statement is the 2002 letter ‘To the World’s Religious Leaders’, again, personally presented to thousands of religious leaders in more than forty countries. This unsparingly direct letter identifies key challenges for advancing not only interfaith relations but also social cohesion and the prosperity of humanity. It warns against the ‘rising fires of religious prejudice’ and urges the leaders of all religions to condemn fanaticism, to renounce claims of exclusivity or finality, and to undertake wider interfaith dialogue. It notes that while other forms of prejudice such as racism and sexism have been giving way to new public norms and principles affirming equality, religious prejudice has been allowed to fester. On the one hand, religion is a ‘unique power’ in humanity’s collective life that has been the ‘chief force binding diverse peoples together’, awakening capacities to love, to forgive, to overcome prejudice, and to sacrifice for the common good and providing a perennial source for moral guidance. Yet, on the other hand, religion can be corrupted and its purposes perverted. The letter cites a number of examples of the form and effects of the corruption of religion, including ‘blind forces of sectarian dogmatism’ that lead to ‘outbursts of fanaticism that shame the name of religion’. Claims to exclusivity or finality defended by religious leaders have ‘been the greatest single factor promoting hatred and violence’, the effects of which have been ‘ruinous’ on countless lives. Further, religious institutions have often been the ‘chief agents’ in ‘discouraging’ the use of intellectual faculties that allow individuals to investigate truth for themselves.

The invitation and challenge to the leaders of the world’s religions from the Universal House of Justice is to consider what today will best serve the well-being of humankind as a whole. Is it in ‘suffocating impulses to unity’, impulses which are now evident in growing numbers of people, or in ‘arousing prejudice and alienation’ and promoting hatred and violence in the name of religion? If religious leadership is to have meaning in the emerging global society, the letter states, appeals for mutual tolerance are not enough. Leaders of religion must allow in the sphere of religion the same kind of ‘fundamental reorientation’ that other segments of society are embracing—the oneness of humankind and also of religion.

Appreciative responses to this letter, and in particular to the urgency of the problem of religious fanaticism and the need for more interfaith cooperation, were offered by numerous religious leaders, among them Karan Singh, the then New Delhi-based chairman of the Temple of Understanding, and Jonathan Sacks, the Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregation of Great Britain and the Commonwealth. In addition, various formats of discussions were organized by Bahá’ís at local levels to offer opportunities to discuss the points raised by the letter.

Bahá’ís and interfaith relations 2003–present

Since the release of the letter to religious leaders with its explicit encouragement for Bahá’ís to continue to be ‘vigorous’ promoters of interfaith activities, the scope of Bahá’í interfaith engagement, including collaborations with multi-faith partners on a variety of activities and projects, has increased exponentially, again, parallel to significant increases in the formation of multi-faith associations and initiatives in a context where, post 9/11, interreligious tensions, sectarian violence, and radicalization have flared. Bahá’í involvement in interfaith activities in the last two decades can be categorized into five discrete areas.

One area is the effort to inform and engage religious leaders about the persecution of the Bahá’ís of Iran, an effort that has often resulted in official statements condemning the violation of the right to freedom of religion. For example, in 2010, a statement was issued by prominent religious leaders in the UK calling on the Iranian government to fulfil its obligations under

Article 18 of the UN Declaration of Human Rights and to ‘correct this flagrant injustice’ (BWNS 2010).

A second area is participation in international meetings of religious leaders, such as the three-day Interfaith Forums that have been taking place immediately prior to the annual summits of the G8 (from 2006–13) and G20 (since 2014), where religious leaders from diverse faith traditions deliberate on the major themes of the summit, articulate shared moral concerns, and deliver collaborative statements about the mutual responsibility that faith groups and political leaders share for improving the lives of the most vulnerable people and species in the world.

A third area is Bahá’í-led or co-sponsored multi-faith initiatives organized either through regional offices of the BIC or through national Bahá’í offices of public affairs. For example, in May of 2019, the BIC Brussels office hosted a forum exploring changing religious landscapes in Europe, co-organized with the European Parliament and the University of Groningen. A fourth area is participation in national multi-faith conferences, exhibitions, and events organized by other groups. For example, Bahá’ís were invited by the Christian Study Centre in Pakistan to participate in a seminar in Rawalpindi in 1996 on religious minorities (*The Bahá’í World* 1998: 81), and Bahá’ís have had a leadership role in the Canadian Interfaith Conversation, begun as a follow-up to the G20 in Canada in 2010. In its annual conferences, this initiative brings together leading thinkers and national interfaith networks to explore the place of religion in public life, creating a space where a variety of insights can shed light on a topic, and collective understanding can advance.

A fifth area is participation in regional or local interfaith groups and associations and interfaith prayer services and events in a variety of contexts and formats. It is at this local level that Bahá’í involvement in interfaith activity is likely most evident. Finally, it is notable that across the globe, hundreds of thousands of individual Bahá’ís, their families, and their friends have been initiating neighbourhood ‘devotional’ gatherings where prayers and readings from the Faith and other religions may be shared. These gatherings, welcoming to those of any or no faith, are intended to strengthen the spiritual character of the community.

Since the early twentieth century, Bahá’ís, committed to enhancing interreligious harmony, have sought to participate in interfaith activities, whether with groups primarily seeking fellowship and mutual learning or groups oriented toward service or social change. As the Bahá’í Faith emerged from obscurity—its independent status as a world religion widely recognized and its track record of friendly, respectful, and serious engagement with other peoples of faith publicly evident—Bahá’ís have been able to confidently take a seat at the ‘interfaith table’. Further, Bahá’ís have increasingly focused their attention on creating spaces to enable a discourse that draws on the universal spiritual and moral principles of religion to address a world facing multiple, intersecting problems of a global nature, from how to foster social cohesion in an age of fragmentation to gender equality and human rights to wealth disparity and the critical issue of climate change.

Notes

- 1 Portions of this article are a revised condensation of R. H. Stockman (2002), used with permission of the Bahá’í Publishing Trust.
- 2 For an example, see Iraj Ayman, ‘Háj Mihdí Arjmand’, in *Scripture and Revelation: Papers Presented at the First Ifan Colloquium, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, England, December 1993*, ed. M. Momen (Oxford: George Ronald, 1997), 18–19.
- 3 This paper is found in *The Bahá’í World, Vol. II, 1926–1928*, 225–242 (1928), New York: Bahá’í Publishing Committee.
- 4 The text of this paper may be found in *The Bahá’í World, vol. VI, 1934–36*, 614–619 (1937), New York: Bahá’í Publishing Committee, <http://dl.bahai.org/bahai-world/the-bahai-world-vol06-1934-1936.pdf>.

- 5 Dozens of such World Religion Day events are described in the annual yearbook, *The Bahá'í World*, under the heading 'Interfaith' in the section called 'Year in Review'.
- 6 For instance, philosopher of religion Jacques Chouleur published an article in *Annales Universitaire d'Avignon* titled 'La Foi Mondiale Bahá'íe: Religion Planétaire de l'avenir?' 1.2 (1975), later translated into English as 'The Bahá'í Faith: World Religion of the Future?' in *World Order* 12:1 (Fall 1977) 9–18.
- 7 'Chicago Meeting not the only event commemorating the 1893 Parliament,' in *One Country* 5.2 (July–Sept. 1993) 6.
- 8 A summary of the address given by the secretary-general of the Bahá'í International Community, Albert Lincoln, during the third plenary session is in *The Bahá'í World 2000–2001* (2002), Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 89–90.

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