

Reflections on the Role of Religion in Society

**Thought piece prepared for the Baha'i Community of Canada
November 2014**

The Baha'i community of Canada is a religious community dedicated to promoting the betterment of society. Working in collaboration with people of all religions and those of none to explore the role of religion in Canadian society is a central feature of our efforts to further this aim. Our experience is yielding insights into the role of religion in society, and this paper represents an initial effort to discuss some of these insights as a contribution to the broader discourse on religion in Canada's public life.

In recent years, religion has received greater attention in Canadian public life, no longer being dismissed as a matter merely of private family or community worship. What, then, is to be the public role of religion? As significant as religion may be, it remains highly contested, with little consensus about its role in society and whether that role is positive or negative.

Opinions vary between non-believers and believers, and among non-believers between those who dismiss religion but feel it relatively harmless and those who see it as a barrier to progress or, worse, a source of prejudice, ignorance and even violence and conflict.

Many believers embrace the benefits of religion in their own lives, and some are confident that those benefits extend to the life of society generally. Other believers prefer religion to remain a private matter between them and their exclusive group of fellow believers, separate from engagement with the life of a society that they feel is irredeemably secular. Still other believers favour something called spirituality but could do without the institution of religion. Yet another segment of believers are resolutely sectarian and insist on defending



their exclusive religious views, doing all they can to advance even extremist views among the public.

Religion and the public sphere

That religion itself has enormous potential for good is certainly not a universal conviction, and the popular media shows considerable ignorance on the positive impact of religion. As well, a strong social tendency is to denounce religion for a range of sins, some illusory, while magnifying other genuine harms for which religion is only one factor among many.

If the benefits of religion to society are to be more widely appreciated, then there seems to be a clear need to better report and publicize the contributions that religion makes around the world to education, health care and other social structures, just as there is a need for better analysis of how religion has so often been exploited for political or selfish gain, taking the blame for the arrogance and misdirected ambition of a relative few. Religion is easy to blame when the errors and evils of human beings are carried out under the guise of religion and religious motivation.

Thus, if religion is to enter more actively into public discourse and participate in the development of a robust and healthy public sphere, then work needs to be done both broadly across society and by believers themselves. Exclusive private or sectarian claims that place religion beyond reasonable discussion need to be challenged by fair and reasonable questioning. Furthermore, the easy and superficial dismissal of the need for religion as an institution in society also needs to be questioned. There are costs to society and a decline in the well being of people that can legitimately be traced to the decline of religion as a source of social good.

To be sure, religion has allowed itself to be used by all manner of self-interested and malignant causes, used and abused by those who seek power for power's sake alone. It has often refused to come to terms with the effectiveness of the scientific method. Those who would rid society of religious institutions don't have far to go to find reasons. Yet this modern understanding of religion has also been partial and one-sided, blind to the contributions that religion has made to



human life through the centuries, contributions still very much in evidence today around the world if one cares to look with a fair and reasonable eye. The well-being, security and happiness of communities, as well as of millions upon millions of individual lives, owes much to religion if a just and balanced assessment is made.

Religion in general, never minding its many forms, communities, confessions and practices, surely invites a more reasonable and effective defence and a more vigorous effort to define and uphold its many virtues than popular opinion and the average media reference to it acknowledge. If religion is to be fairly assessed as a social good, then it must be understood for what it is, in all its diversity, and that requires a certain level of freedom of belief, and non-belief, in an environment of toleration, mutual respect and pluralism. That is the only practical conception of global and national societies that seems possible as a *modus vivendi* in the ever more diverse communities around the world.

Religion as a source of social good

In defining religion and its several contributions to human life and community, several factors seem crucial. First, religion can enrich our understanding of human nature in a way that goes well beyond the narrow conception of human beings as mere consumers, economic units, individuals bereft of community, or as entitled citizens. These powerful conceptions of human nature fail utterly to account for the full nobility of human beings. Furthermore, the claims to cultural identities that try to recover some sense of human dignity remain too thin and too specific for a universal understanding of who we are. There is a need for a broader vision of the human being, one that overcomes the problems of alienation, anomie and apathy that undermine human potential and leave it bereft of that meaning, beauty and love that seem essential to any authentic and fulfilling human life.

Secondly, human solidarity, unity and the oneness of the human family—which face so much fragmentation in the modern world—are surely among the most central values of religion. The world religions were, after all, global before modern globalization was made possible by the communication and transportation advances of science and technology. The broad solidarity of early



cosmopolitan Christian, Jewish and Muslim communities, stretching often across continental divides, is a consideration that cannot be divorced from any fair evaluation of religion.

Thirdly, justice—in both idea and practice—has always been integral to religion and human civilization. Progress and a spread of human felicity can be observed with the rise and efflorescence of several of the world’s great religions, moving human life beyond earlier, narrower confines. Beyond even the advances of recent constitutional arrangements and the modern embrace of the rule of law (which we should all celebrate), religion can be a source of new understandings and new ways of upholding justice in personal, family and community life, beyond the merely legal. This vision of justice is at the heart of all major religions in which various formulations of the golden rule are to be found.

Knowledge, not just of natural forces and of how best to cope with our physical existence but of human relationships, of social organization, of art and music and of the human spirit have always been associated with religion. Yet a strange amnesia has taken hold of the modern mind, separating religion from science. We forget that religion and science were previously in close interaction. Religion provided the matrix of motivations, values and epistemic virtues, generating science. Those who have spoken in the name of religion as science has emerged have too often, however, defended superstition and blind faith, to the detriment of the reasoning, convictions and practices that can surely endure in complementarity with science, all elements that serve as a solid foundation of true belief for those who know that one cannot separate reason from a conviction in a transcendent and ever-abiding God. Religion must come to terms with what it understands of the generation of knowledge, the engine of human civilization, and learn to work hand in hand with the other main pillar of an enlightened civilization, science, to the benefit of all.

Finally, in defending and defining religion’s place in the public sphere, a broader understanding of power is necessary. Our understanding of power has narrowed to thinking of it as the use of coercion and force for the purpose of dominating others. While acknowledging the dominating exercise of power, we also need to appreciate a more positive and productive role of power. We must appreciate the necessity and place of authority in human social organization, and also



recognize the generative powers released from developing human capacity, from drawing on the motivating potential of spirituality and from harnessing collective aspirations.

These past several decades, thoughtful people the world over have cast aside ideas, if not completely the habits, that have propped up prejudices of all kinds—against women, against different races, against certain classes and social positions, against the handicapped, against the different and the diverse—while a general prejudice against religion, and particular prejudices against particular religions, have remained in both idea and practice. Why? Society must cast aside this last prejudice. Religion is here to stay, and it is time to engage in a fair and thoughtful discussion of its public role.

The Bahá'í community of Canada collaborates with a number of people to help develop contributions to thought on issues of social concern.

This paper represents thinking that is helping to inform the work of our community to participate in Canadian public discourses. This is not a position paper or official statement from the Bahá'í community, but rather a set of reflections that draws insight from the Bahá'í teachings and the experience of the community as we seek to apply them to the betterment of society.

Further thoughts or comments on this paper can be addressed to: externalaffairs@cdnbnc.org

