

The Role of Religions and Faith-Based Actors

*in Advancing Spiritual and Material Prosperity
on the Continent of Africa*



A Statement of the Bahá'í International Community
Addis Ababa Office

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Distinguished Religious Leaders and Faith-Based Actors,

Amidst the turbulence of a world undergoing significant change, the pace of which appears to be increasing with each passing day, the role of religion and faith-based actors in addressing these challenges is indispensable. On the African continent in particular, religion often takes on elevated importance. Religions are uniquely positioned not only in the effort to build unity between diverse peoples but also to make meaningful and lasting contributions in the pursuit of goals shared by many across governments, international organisations, and various spheres in society. Speaking of the power of religion, the Bahá'í Writings state,

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In truth, religion is a radiant light and an impregnable stronghold for the protection and welfare of the peoples of the world, for the fear of God impelleth man to hold fast that which is good, and shun all evil. Should the lamp of religion be obscured, chaos and confusion will ensue, and the lights of fairness and justice, of tranquility and peace cease to shine.



True to this view, when seen through the lens of history, religion has lent critical moral authority to and been an organising force in addressing the pressing needs of peace and justice, health, education, environment, and gender issues. While interfaith groups have similarly addressed these and other critical issues elsewhere around the world, the experience of religious dialogue and directing the efforts of religion towards the betterment of society in Africa is worthy of specific mention and focus.

From the perspective of the Bahá'í Faith, the journey—and indeed more often the struggle—of diverse religions to come together in dialogue and collaboration is a response to the Divine Will for humanity. It underscores what Bahá'ís consider to be a central tenet of their Faith: that God's purpose in revealing spiritual truth through successive religions has been to guide and train humanity in its different stages of material and spiritual development. Bahá'ís participate in interfaith dialogue not merely to represent their beliefs, but because it is an expression of a core belief.

Bahá'ís believe that the common aim of all religions is to unite humanity and to advance civilisation both spiritually and materially. Therefore, all our efforts should be directed at advancing the cause of oneness among humanity, creating the means of unity and love, promulgating universal peace, freeing people from every prejudice, and doing away with every difference and distinction.

In this light, while religious dialogue can help to dispel misconceptions, build trust, and foster a climate of respect, interfaith efforts can become much more than an occasion for information exchange and relationship building. At a higher level, and there are abundant examples in Africa,

these efforts can draw on faith in God's constant assistance and in the Holy Texts as a source of inspiration and guidance in devising solutions to the issues of paramount importance in the world. Far from being relegated to the periphery of society, as is sometimes the case in other regions, those involved in interfaith efforts in Africa have the opportunity and the obligation to demonstrate the power of unified action to promote peace, uphold justice, and guide behavioural change in a manner that improves the environment, addresses health and educational needs, fosters peace and reconciliation, and uplifts the lives of women and girls.

Interfaith leaders and representatives bring institutional depth and structure, an ability to collectively organise, and a wealth of experience that can make them valuable partners for government agencies, multilateral bodies, and non-governmental organisations. When these strengths are utilised to achieve specific goals and when interfaith actors speak in a single voice and with focus, the possibilities are vast and, perhaps, transformative. As such, interfaith efforts have the potential to heal divisions, build trust among diverse communities, and spur collective action, particularly on issues of peace, justice, and reconciliation.

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Where the efforts of interfaith groups are scattered and partisan, they can stumble or lose their influence. When religious leaders do not take a proactive role in guiding and sustaining interfaith initiatives and, instead, allow them to be directed by the well-meaning but disjointed efforts of donors and other funding agencies, trust can be eroded and authority cannot be exercised. Inter-religious councils, particularly those at national levels, must also guard against becoming politically charged venues to wage proxy battles or pursue partisan interests. This can have the effect of undermining their moral legitimacy and confirming the cynical view, which is predominant in many corners, that organised religion should no longer have a place in the life of a community.

As such, intellectual coherence and spiritual commitment are essential ingredients to interfaith groups becoming effective champions in healing divisions and spurring collective action. Effective interfaith groups do not always need to operate in the limelight; their ability to work quietly and steadfastly can build trust among diverse communities, particularly on issues of peace, justice, and reconciliation.

Moreover, the dialogue and the cordial interactions that occur at international and continental levels among various religious leaders need to happen at the grassroots level. The same spirit of interfaith solidarity needs to be encouraged within and between local churches, mosques, temples, and synagogues. Any form of violence among followers of religions, or misunderstandings that may arise between religious groups, can be directed by enlightened leadership towards peaceful cooperation and building a better future for all.

Bahá'ís believe that religion has community-building power which can find expression in spaces for conversation. Environments are created where ideas are exchanged in an atmosphere of humility and respect, where both the convener and the group take ownership. The environment thus created wakens and brings to the surface a unity of thought and purpose that also advances the individual's spiritual development.

For those whose task is to carry forward the critical work of interfaith groups, and for others who strive for close association with their fellow brothers and sisters, regardless of race, religion, and status, let us renew our commitment to collective action, work together to eradicate prejudices, and endeavour to build a future where mutual respect and love transcend all barriers.

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