

*** CREATING A CLIMATE OF RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE

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Statement submitted to the 48th session of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights

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In the view of the Baha'i International Community, Mr. Angelo Vidal d'Almeida Ribeiro, the Special Rapporteur, has prepared an excellent report. His work in bringing to light situations of religious intolerance and in recommending appropriate social responses and initiatives has been extremely valuable. We wish to take this opportunity to express our sincere hope that the Commission will renew his mandate, scheduled to expire this year.

Mr Ribeiro emphasizes not only the manifestations of religious intolerance, but their underlying causes. Baha'is have long shared the belief expressed in his last year's report to the commission that "more determined effort should be made at all levels to combat attitudes of discrimination or intolerance, especially when they have deep historic and cultural roots." The creation of a climate of religious tolerance is a challenge that faces religious leaders, educators, the media, and government officials especially.

Many believers find it difficult to reconcile deep religious conviction with tolerance of other beliefs. It is tempting to insist that one has discovered the one and only truth and to relegate the remaining masses of humanity, adhering to other beliefs, to the status of apostates or unbelievers, spiritually doomed, deserving pity at best, or outright ridicule and persecution at worst. Throughout history too many sincere people in every part of the world have fallen victim to this thinking.

In the Baha'i view, such attitudes are, in part, the product of ignorance. If other religions are shrouded in mystery, then they become an empty vessel into which the individual is attempted to pour fears and fantasies. Experience shows that ignorance breeds superstition and perpetuates religious prejudice and animosity.

The effectiveness of any individual grows as he is taught to appreciate through the exercise of his own faculties, the way in which diversity of faith enriches social life. Baha'u'llah urges the right of the individual to freely investigate truth for himself as a principle essential to the advancement of civilization. In order to exercise this capacity fully, however, one must be able to read. One great value of literacy, therefore, is the access it gives ordinary people to the scriptures of their own faith as well as to the sacred

texts of other faiths.

The most powerful remedy for religious superstition and contention is an examination of the original teachings of the founders of the world's great faiths. No student of comparative religion can fail to be struck by the extraordinary degree of harmony to be found in these original scriptures. Certainly, a fair-minded examination of these principal sources for the civilizing of human nature will reveal nothing to support the animosities that pit one religious community against another.

Lamentably, some sectarian leaders discourage investigation of other beliefs and even dissuade their followers from fully investigating the truth of their own religious teachings. Such attitudes foster prejudice, and lead, all too often, to violent attacks on believers of other faiths. Indeed, one of the strangest and saddest features of the current outbreak of religious fanaticism is the extent to which, in each case, it is undermining not only the spiritual values which are conducive to the unity of mankind but also those unique moral victories won by the particular religion it purports to serve.

Baha'u'llah taught that the primary purpose of religion is to "establish unity and concord amongst the people of the world." Governments, NGOs, and citizens' groups who are struggling to mobilize a common response to the various crises afflicting our world have the right to expect from religious leadership a similar willingness to sacrifice dogmas and sectarian interests that inhibit the mobilization of humanity's spiritual resources.

In conclusion, Mr. Chairman, the Baha'i International Community wishes to thank Mr. Ribeiro for continuing to urge governments to protect, through constitutional and legal means, the rights of their citizens to freedom of religion and belief. At the same time, we warmly endorse his call for efforts to promote greater understanding of this right among the general populace, particularly through inter-faith dialogues and through systematic efforts by the Centre for Human Rights to get accurate information to the media and into the curriculum of schools and universities.

The Baha'i International Community is confident -- because of its experience in bringing together in harmony members of nearly every religion and culture on earth -- that even deeply rooted religious prejudices melt away in an environment of humility, compassion, and an earnest search for truth.

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