

*PROGRESSIVE
REVELATION*

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BAHÁ'Í PUBLISHING TRUST
27 RUTLAND GATE
LONDON, S.W.7

“Religion should unite all hearts and cause wars and disputes to vanish from the face of the earth, give birth to spirituality, and bring life and light to each heart. If religion becomes a cause of dislike, hatred, division, it were better to be without it.”—‘ABDU’L-BAHÁ.

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FIRST EDITION 1954
REPRINTED 1961
REVISED EDITION 1966
REPRINTED 1970

THE ONENESS OF RELIGION

Often in the past religion has caused strife. Sometimes co-religionists have fought about religious disagreement; sometimes men have attacked those of a different faith to force acceptance of their own belief. Still more often, differences of religion or sect have caused hatred, division and dislike, without physical violence. Even to-day there are millions of people who try to make others unhappy because they do not approve of their religious beliefs. Many more contribute to discord by narrow insistence on their religious view and refusal to investigate the views of others.

A casual glance at the great religions of the world is enough, if unprejudiced, to reveal that they have much in common. All teach that we should love one another, do good, be sincere, truthful and law-abiding; that we should seek out our own shortcomings before we presume to condemn the faults of others, and that we should not consider ourselves superior to our neighbours. Each has a Central Figure, who is revered above all men and a scripture based on His teaching. With so much in common, it is strange that the followers of different religions should be so antagonistic to each other's beliefs.

The point has been well made by George Townshend in his book *The Promise of All Ages*:

“All the world over, mankind has honoured the spokesmen of God and has adopted their teachings. It reveres Christ, Buddha, Zoroaster, Krishna, and other High-Prophets as its greatest leaders. But it has not looked on them as related to one another. It has thought of them as rivals, competing for the homage of the world. It has imagined that to accept the revelation of one is to deny the revelation of every other, and that the votaries of any one High-Prophet are not loyal to their Lord unless they esteem him the sole authentic revealer come from God. It has balanced the High-Prophets against one another as it were in scales, so that when one goes up, the others must go down. . . . Thus the influence of religion, which ought to have tended to unify the peoples of the world, has through a misunderstanding, engendered hostility and strife. The High-Prophets never spoke ill of one another; the antagonism originated with their followers. None affirmed that his revelation was final or exhaustive.”

The followers of the Great Leaders have caused differences between religions to appear

which had no part in the Message of their Founders. The Founders preached unity and concord because, although each revealed His Message in a form suited to the particular needs of a particular age, their Revelation was in essence one. Bahá'u'lláh, the Central Figure of the Bahá'í Faith, explains this in a beautiful passage:

“Their revelation may be likened unto the light of the moon that sheddeth its radiance upon the earth. Though every time it appeareth it revealeth a fresh measure of its brightness, yet its inherent splendour can never diminish, nor can its light suffer extinction. It is clear and evident, therefore, that any apparent variation in the intensity of their light is not inherent in the light itself, but should rather be attributed to the varying receptivity of an ever-changing world. Every Prophet Whom the Almighty and Peerless Creator hath purposed to send to the peoples of the earth hath been entrusted with a Message, and charged to act in a manner that would best meet the requirements of the age in which He appeared.”

Needs change, and the needs of yesterday are not the needs of today; laws that were fitting when mankind was young would not be fitting now. Progress decrees that the form

of religion revealed for an earlier stage of man's development cannot suit the later stages too. Under the tuition of each of the Great Educators humanity advances, so that the next Manifestation of God comes to men prepared to hear what before was hidden.

It is as though man ascended through the classes of a school; each successive teacher imparts more truths to the child and when he has digested these he is ready to move to the next class. The lesson is suited to the child's stage of progress; there would be no advantage in giving a sixth-form lesson to a first-form pupil, rather the too great demand on the undeveloped soul would cause it to wither and die. So also the teaching of the Great Educators is mercifully adapted to the stage of development reached by mankind.

The Messenger of God reveals both spiritual truths, which are eternal, and laws belonging to a particular age. The spiritual truths are revealed according to the spiritual development of the men of that time. Thus Moses said: "*Love thy neighbour as thyself,*" but only the rarer spirits in His dispensation realised that Gentiles also were their neighbours. Jesus stressed that love should extend beyond the Jewish race, but still His followers were unable

to grasp fully the oneness of mankind. Only recently have men progressed enough to regard the whole human race as one family, without division of colour, class or creed. Bahá'u'lláh, coming to a world prepared by the long line of earlier Messengers of God, could make this a central feature of His Teaching. All three Messengers were aware of the truth taught by Bahá'u'lláh, but until now man has not been ready to receive its full force. Knowing the limitations of the men of His age, Jesus said:

“I have yet many things to say unto you but ye cannot bear them now. Howbeit when He, the Spirit of Truth, is come, He will guide you unto all truth.” (John xvi. 12, 13).

Besides such eternal teachings gradually unfolded to the advancing spirit of man, each Messenger of God also brings temporary laws and commands. These may be changed by the next of God's Messengers. To the Tribes of Israel wandering in the desert, Moses gave many laws which Jesus in a later age repealed. Yet even as He repealed them Jesus proclaimed: *“Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets; I am not come to destroy but to fulfil.”* (Matthew v. 17). The truth that shines through the Law of Moses is revealed also in the Law of Jesus; but circumstances in

the world had changed and a new law was needed to fulfil the old.

When the Israelites were in the desert, they had no prisons and no established home. Had Moses not ordained strict laws with fearful punishments, the innocent among Israel would have been at the mercy of the vicious. Love and Justice demanded that the law be strong. Therefore Moses decreed death as the penalty for ten separate offences. "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" was in those days a merciful command, prohibiting excessive punishment. Later, when Jesus came, altered circumstances permitted the law of love to be expressed in gentler form. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Son of Bahá'u'lláh, has explained this in the following words:

"The practical part of religion deals with exterior forms and ceremonies, and with modes of punishment for certain offences. This is the material side of the law and guides the customs and manners of the people. In the time of Moses, there were ten crimes punishable by death. When Christ came this was changed; the old axiom, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,' was converted into 'Love your enemies, do good to them that hate you,' the stern old law being changed into one of love, mercy and forbearance. In the former days

the punishment for theft was the cutting off of the right hand; in our time this law could not be so applied. In this age, a man who curses his father is allowed to live, when formerly he would have been put to death. It is therefore evident that whilst the spiritual law never alters, the practical rules must change their application with the necessities of time."

To change these rules, and to give man more advanced teaching, God sends His Messengers to walk upon the earth.

THE MESSENGERS OF GOD

From the beginning that has no beginning God has manifested Himself through His Messengers. Through them He causes man to know Him and to love Him; through them He breathes fresh life into creation. They are the Educators of humanity, the Source of progress, the Founders of religion. Alone and unaided, opposed by the powers of the world, each one has triumphed over adversity, unfurled the banner of His Faith and established His sovereignty over the hearts of men. Such achievements are not possible for created beings; only Manifestations of God can do these things.

In former ages the Manifestations did not explain clearly Their station. Sometimes they spoke as though They were God Himself; at others They would admit themselves human. Their immediate companions perhaps understood the hidden references to Their true station, but later followers were confused. These either worshipped them as God or regarded them only as inspired men. Doctrines such as the Trinity were evolved to try to explain the seeming contradiction of their station.

We, in this glorious age, are more fortunate. Bahá'u'lláh has revealed to us the true meaning of the paradox in words that are deep, yet crystal clear. God in His Essence, He explains, is beyond the understanding of man:

“The door of the knowledge of the Ancient Being hath ever been, and will continue for ever to be closed in the face of men. No man’s understanding shall ever gain access unto His holy court.”

Therefore He sends His Messengers to mediate between His Essence and mankind:

“As a token of His mercy, however, and as a proof of His loving-kindness, He hath manifested unto men the Day-Stars of His divine guidance, the Symbols of His divine unity, and

hath ordained the knowledge of these sanctified Beings to be identical with the knowledge of His own self."

These Day-Stars of divine guidance owe their great station to the Holy Spirit with which God has endowed Them. Because of it they have direct intercourse with God and act as channels for the outpouring of His grace. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, in explaining how They mediate between God and man, likens God to the sun and the Holy Spirit to the rays of the sun bringing light and life and heat to the earth:

"As the rays of the sun bring the light and warmth of the sun to the earth, giving life to all created beings, so do the Manifestations bring the power of the Holy Spirit from the Divine Sun of Reality to give light and life to the souls of men. Behold, there is an intermediary necessary between the sun and the earth; the sun does not descend to the earth, neither does the earth ascend to the sun. This contact is made by the rays of the sun which bring light and warmth and heat. The Holy Spirit is the light from the Sun of Truth bringing, by its infinite power, life and illumination to all mankind, flooding all souls with Divine radiance, conveying the blessings of God's mercy to the whole world. The earth,

without the medium of the warmth and light of the rays of the sun, could receive no benefits from the sun. Likewise the Holy Spirit is the very cause of the life of man."

In another passage He likens the Holy Spirit to a mirror held to the Face of God, reflecting it for the eyes of man. To gaze directly on the Face of God is beyond man's power, but by turning towards the Holy Spirit he can see the light of the sun reflected as in a clear mirror. Therefore Bahá'u'lláh says:

"Whoso recogniseth them hath recognised God. Whoso hearkeneth to their call, hath hearkened to the voice of God, and whoso testifieth to the truth of their Revelation, hath testified to the truth of God Himself. Whoso turneth away from them, has turned away from God, and whoso disbelieveth in them, hath disbelieved in God. Every one of them is the Way of God that connecteth this world with the realms above, and the Standard of Truth unto everyone in the kingdoms of earth and heaven. They are the Manifestations of God amidst men, the evidences of His Truth, and the signs of His glory."

These Mirrors are perfect Beings, who live perfect lives and give perfect teaching. There have been many of Them; Muḥammad,

Buddha, Moses, Jesus, Krishna, Noah, Zoroaster, Abraham, are examples. Of most we have now no record, even Their names are lost to us; but the glory which surrounds the names of those we know is itself a proof of Their divine station.

Divine, but not to be identified with the Essence of God, for that is exalted above place and time; the sun does not come down into the mirror, nor is the light of the sun the same as the sun itself. The Manifestations are exalted above men, but they partake of humanity. Although possessed of the Holy Spirit, They have also a human body and a human soul. This is Their dual station, which mankind has in past ages found so confusing.

The human station of these Day-Stars of divine guidance has always been a severe test for mankind. It causes them to need food and sleep like other men, to be subject to the ills and chances of this world and to appear outwardly like ordinary human beings.

Bahá'u'lláh has written:

“As these holy Persons were subject to such needs and wants, the people were, consequently, lost in the wilds of misgivings and doubts, and were afflicted with bewilderment and perplexity.

How, they wondered, could such a person be send down from God, assert His ascendancy over all the peoples and kindreds of the earth, and claim Himself to be the goal of all creation . . . and yet be subject to such trivial things.”

Sometimes the Manifestations speak in Their divine station as through with the voice of God. At others Their words stem from Their human station. Jesus spoke thus when He said: *“Why callest thou me good? there is none good but One, that is, God.”* (Matthew xix. 17). The parable of Satan tempting Jesus has been explained by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá to refer to the tempting of the Holy Spirit in Jesus by His human impulses.

The distinctions and differences between the Messengers of God originate in Their human station. In Their divine station these Great Beings are one—one in Their perfection and one in Their Message. Bahá’u’lláh describes this unity in words of great beauty:

“If thou wilt observe with discriminating eyes, thou wilt behold Them all abiding in the same tabernacle, soaring in the same heaven, seated upon the same throne, uttering the same speech, and proclaiming the same Faith. Such

is the unity of those Essences of Being, those Luminaries of infinite and immeasurable splendour."

In another place He puts more strongly the need to recognise Their unity:

"Beware, O believers in the Unity of God, lest ye be tempted to make any distinction between the Manifestations of His Cause, or to discriminate against the signs that have accompanied and proclaimed Their Revelation. This, indeed, is the true meaning of Divine Unity."

The word of Jesus is one with the word of Moses and the word of Buddha with the word of Muḥammad. Eyes directed to the perfection They share can detect no difference between these Essences of Being. They may truly claim in this station to be but one Essence speaking with but one voice. In contrast, in Their human station They are subject to the limitations of the world of creation. All created things have their own individuality and are separated one from another. Therefore Bahá'u'lláh writes:

"In this respect, each Manifestation of God hath a distinct individuality, a definitely prescribed mission, a predestined revelation, and

especially designated limitations. Each one of them is known by a different name, is characterised by a special attribute, fulfils a definite mission, and is entrusted with a particular Revelation."

Eyes directed to differences and to the human personality of the Manifestations of God must inevitably fail to see Their inner oneness.

Failing in this, men scorn and persecute Them; so have they always treated God's Messengers.

THE RELIGIOUS CYCLE

Manifestations of God are always at first rejected by those They come to save. They are imprisoned, exiled, crucified, in a thousand ways persecuted, by men who profess to believe in God, but are far from the Court of His Holiness. In the Day of the Manifestation only a few pure souls recognise His glory; these also suffer at the hands of the proud and worldly. Gradually the power of the Holy Spirit asserts itself; other souls are attracted to the sweet melodies of the Divine Nightingale; the hard clay of men's hearts is softened and their blind eyes opened to His shining splendour. Through this channel of Divine grace,

the spiritually dead receive life and the leprosy of unbelief is healed. A miracle occurs which embraces the whole creation—a miracle far greater than vitalising a dead body or healing a physical ill. Spiritual life is given to erring humanity to raise it from the mud in which it is always sunk when a Messenger of God is due.

As time passes, more and more people recognise the Bearer of the Holy Spirit. The forces of denial wax fierce in their efforts to resist the Cause of God; but God cannot be resisted. Opposition crumbles until eventually the Manifestation of God emerges supreme, recognised and revered by all save those God chooses to except. For a time His Faith experiences a Golden Age during which its youthful vigour has not yet been irretrievably perverted by its own followers. Then degeneration sets in. Men still profess to honour the teaching of the Founder of their religion, but they cease to obey it. They invent creeds and rituals not sanctioned by their Leader, to which they pay more attention than to the revealed word itself. They quarrel over the meaning of their acknowledged scripture, form themselves into sects and parties, preach things in the name of religion from which religion recoils. Materialism and greed gain possession of the world; the

priesthood becomes a vested interest; selfishness and pride capture the hearts of men; despair sweeps the surface of the earth, wrapping men's souls in clouds of darkening gloom. Then, when men least expect a saviour, the clouds are parted by the rising Sun of Glory. The light of the Holy Spirit shines again upon the earth, bringing promise of new life.

In 'Abdu'l-Bahá's words:

"God leaves not his children comfortless, but when the darkness of winter overshadows them, then again He sends His Messengers, the Prophets, with a renewal of the blessed spring. The Sun of Truth appears again on the horizon of the world, shining into the eyes of those who sleep, awaking them to behold the glory of a new dawn."

Again the Messenger of God is persecuted and again He is recognised by a few. Again He triumphs over adversity and again His word is established in the hearts of men. The whole cycle is repeated again and again, causing mankind each time to advance another stage on its journey to God. Thus does God perform His work of creation and thus has it been since the beginning, and thus will it be for evermore.

Once in every age this miracle is performed. We are still close to the time when Bahá'u'lláh, God's Messenger for this age, shed His radiance on the earth. We are witnessing the birth of a new day; as 'Abdu'l-Bahá has said:

“Now is the dawn; ere long the effulgent Sun shall rise and station itself in the meridian of its majesty. Then you shall observe the effects of the Sun. Then you shall behold what heavenly illumination has become manifest. Then you shall comprehend that these are the infinite bestowals of God! Then you shall see that this world has become another world.”

Mankind has been called to recognise a new Mirror reflecting the same Eternal Countenance; but it has failed to respond. Men have rejected the Messenger of God and in doing so they have denied the Founder of every great religion. Therefore mankind is experiencing great turmoil, for the Will of God cannot be denied. If humanity will not turn to the Bahá'u'lláh without first suffering, then it must suffer greatly. He has warned:—

“Say, O concourse of the heedless! I swear by God! The promised day is come, the day

when tormenting trials will have surged above your heads and beneath your feet, saying: 'Taste ye what your hands have wrought!' ”

But 'Abdu'l-Bahá, echoing His Father's promise, has said:

“Rest ye assured that this darkness shall be dispelled and these impenetrable clouds which have darkened the horizon shall be scattered and the Sun of Reality shall appear in its full splendour. Its rays shall melt the icebergs of hatred and differences which have transformed the moving sea of humanity into hard frozen immensity. The vices of the world of nature shall be exchanged into praiseworthy attributes and the lights of the excellences of the Divine realm shall appear.”

A little while, and the trials will pass, leaving mankind chastened and turning towards the Source of its life. Then will the truth become apparent to which Bahá'u'lláh calls humanity:

“Verily I say, this is the Day in which mankind can behold the Face, and hear the Voice of the Promised One. The Call of God hath been raised, and the light of His Countenance hath been lifted up upon men. It behoveth every man to blot out the trace

of every idle word from the tablet of his heart, and to gaze, with an open and unbiassed mind, on the signs of His Revelation, the proofs of His Mission, and the tokens of His glory.

Then at last will men befittingly answer this invitation sent by God:

“The seal of the choice Wine of His Revelation hath, in this Day, and in his Name, the Self-Sufficing, been broken. Its grace is being poured out upon men. Fill thy cup, and drink it in His Name, the Most Holy, the All-Praised.”

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