

Précis Commentary on 'One Common Faith'

William S. Hatcher

The statement 'One Common Faith', prepared under the supervision of the Universal House of Justice, addresses the following fundamental question of the modern world: On one hand the facts of history show clearly that revealed (prophetic) religion has been the primary driving force of the rise of human civilization. On the other hand, the current forms of the respective communities derived from these same religions have now become one of the most divisive and destructive forces of the twenty-first century. How could such a thing have occurred?

In 1900, religion was still the dominant force in human society. The century that followed became an historical interlude in which a dogmatic and hedonistic materialism displaced and disestablished religion. However, neither materialism nor multifaith liberalism were able to elicit the discipline and unselfish devotion necessary to establish a firm basis for social progress. Following the obvious failure of areligious materialism to satisfy the needs of humanity, there is a recent resurgence of interest in religion. But the traditional faiths now also fail to satisfy the needs of humanity. Indeed religious conflict has become almost worse than materialism in unleashing uncontrollable and destructive impulses upon the world.

The failure of 20th century materialism is largely due to its failure to recognize that the moral values which all agree are necessary to the viability of any society were taken for granted as an ineradicable part of human nature rather than seen in their true light as the legacy bequeathed by the great religious Founders of history. By neglecting or opposing religion, materialism thus alienated itself fatally from this precious legacy.

As the weaknesses of materialism became apparent, spiritually hungry individuals turned towards a number of substitutes for religion in the form of various cults encouraging self-indulgence in the name of self-discovery and spirituality. At the same time, society as a whole put its collective faith in divers programmes of social and economic development, which were supposed to bring a material 'heaven on earth'. The material suffering of the dispossessed masses of humanity and the ever-widening gap between the haves and have-nots are witnesses to the failure of this faith.

There are several reasons for the inadequacy of the traditional faiths to meet the current needs of humanity. Their pre-modern origins have not equipped them to deal with new and subtle moral question arising from globalization and from various scientific advances. In particular, globalization, with its mass movement of people and its instantaneous communication, has forced a confrontation between the culture-bound elements of traditional religious communities, challenging their respective self-perceptions of superiority over other religions and blinding them to the fundamental universal values they all share. At the same time, scientific progress has raised novel moral issues related to such things as the proper use of environmental resources, or the ethics of, say, stem cell research or various forms of nuclear technology.

Attempts by traditional faiths to fashion responses to modern questions cannot be genuinely rooted in the teachings of their respective Founders, since such questions were never raised and thus never addressed by their Founders.

The refusal of traditional faith communities to recognize the relativity and progressive nature of religion seems to have led to a defensive attitude in which each responds to this challenge by pressing even harder its exclusivist claim that its creeds, formulas, and practices represent the only final and absolute truth of religion. Such claims are often spearheaded by a

clergy that has arrogated to itself a spiritual and moral authority not based in the Founder's teachings. This tableau has been darkened further by attachment to various teachings and concepts that are the result either of human imagination or of misinterpretation of passages of scripture.

The oneness of God, the capacity of each human soul to commune with its Creator (and the centrality of the Manifestation in facilitating such communion), and the promise of the return (repetition) of the revelation-event are common to all of the holy scriptures of the great religions. Unity on such fundamental questions indicates strongly that all revelations are part of single, unified process – that indeed there is only one Religion rather than a disparate series of unrelated religions. The more clearly culture-related elements of each religious dispensation can be seen to derive from the necessity that the Founder deal effectively with the dominant evils in His society (e.g., idolatry in the case of Muhammed). In so doing, other issues (such as the equality of women and men) had to be deferred to a later revelation (that of Bahá'u'lláh), where they have now been elevated to the status of fundamental moral principles, coeval with such perennial principles as the proscriptions against theft, murder, or adultery.

Although many of the principles enunciated by Bahá'u'lláh in the 19th century have now been accepted by humanity generally, it is only Religion renewed that can generate the motivation necessary to the successful implementation of these principles. At the same time, Bahá'u'lláh prescribes the erection of a world federal system together with certain collective mechanisms for the permanent containment of violent conflicts between nations.

Of all the evils now facing humanity, the most fundamental is that of disunity, a disunity that can only be overcome by a religiously motivated and supremely powerful unifying force. The Bahá'í Faith, with its Covenant-based world wide community, is that force. Indeed, there is no other visible or imaginable alternative but to implement the prescriptions of Bahá'u'lláh in their totality. This solution is not manufactured or ad hoc, but is the culmination of the whole of humanity's history and the fruit of the entire series of progressive revelations. In our ongoing dialogue with the modern world, we Bahá'ís must learn how to open the eyes of humanity to the reality of this solution.