

“Religion And Development At The Crossroads: Convergence Or Divergence?”

*A Study Guide on the
Baha'i International Community's statement
to the World Summit on Sustainable Development*

Background Notes

The below questions and main points were developed by some 50 participants in a workshop in December, 2002, at the Baha'i Conference on Social and Economic Development for the Americas, in Orlando, FL, USA. Though they do not address the document comprehensively, perhaps they can serve as an introduction to study of the BIC statement to the WSSD.

Each of five breakout groups were asked to study a specific section of the statement (including related footnotes), to devise some questions answered by that section of the text, and to list the main points of that section. The groups then reported their findings which were recorded by Gail Lash and have been edited by Peter Adriance (padriance@usbnc.org), workshop facilitator, with assistance from Jorge Sanchez. Thanks to Gordon Naylor for help in developing the workshop.

Section I – Opening Paragraphs:

Questions:

- 1. Over the course of the 20th century, what has been the trend with ethnic, racial, and national prejudices?**
 - a. Over the course of the 20th century, ethnic, racial and national prejudices have increasingly given way to the recognition that humankind is a single family and the earth its common homeland.
- 2. Despite its significant achievements, what has the UN yet to grasp fully?**
 - a. Despite [its] significant achievements, the United Nations has yet to grasp fully both the constructive role that religion can play in creating a peaceful and prosperous global order, and the destructive impact that religious fanaticism can have on the stability and progress of the world.
- 3. In the development realm, how has the UN, for the most part, viewed religious communities?**
 - a. In the development realm...the United Nations has, for the most part, viewed religious communities merely as channels for the delivery of goods and services, and as mechanisms to carry out development policies and programs.

Main Points:

- In response to the growing recognition of the oneness of humanity, the UN has worked tirelessly to bring about a world where all peoples and nations can live together in peace and harmony.
- Despite many achievements, the UN has not yet fully grasped the positive role that religion can play, nor the destructive role of religious fanaticism, in bringing about a peaceful and prosperous global society.

Section II -- Religion as the Basis of Civilization and Progress:

Questions:

- 1. What cannot be accomplished in a spiritual vacuum?**
 - a. It is becoming increasingly clear that passage to the culminating stage in the millennia long process of the organization of the planet as one home for the entire human family cannot be accomplished in a spiritual vacuum.
- 2. How do the Bahá'í writings describe religion?**
 - a. Religion, the Bahá'í Scriptures aver, "is the source of illumination, the cause of development and the animating impulse of all human advancement" and "has been the basis of all civilization and progress in the history of mankind."
- 3. What does religion represent for the majority of the world's people; and what kind of power does it have?**
 - a. It is the source of meaning and hope for the vast majority of the planet's inhabitants, and it has a limitless power to inspire sacrifice, change and long-term commitment in its followers.
- 4. What will be impossible so long as religious animosities are allowed to destabilize the world?**
 - a. So long as religious animosities are allowed to destabilize the world, it will be impossible to foster a global pattern of sustainable development.

Main Points:

- The organization of the planet as "one home for the entire human family" cannot be accomplished in a spiritual vacuum.
- A peaceful and prosperous global society cannot be established and sustained without directly and substantively involving the world's religions in its design and support.
- The effects of religious strife hinder the advancement of a global pattern of sustainable development.

Section III -- Religion and the United Nations: Working Together for Peace and Justice

Questions:

- 1. Why has the UN been hesitant to invite religion into its negotiations?**
 - a. Given the record of religious fanaticism, it is understandable that the UN has been hesitant to invite religion into its negotiations.
- 2. What will be required for the UN to tap into the power and vision of religion?**
 - a. To do so will require accepting religion not merely as a vehicle for the delivery and execution of development initiatives, but as an active partner in the conceptualization, design, implementation and evaluation of global policies and programs.
- 3. How swiftly can the acceptance of religion as a partner within the UN be expected?**
 - a. It should not be imagined that the acceptance of religion as a partner within the United Nations will be anything but gradual or that religious hostilities will be eliminated any time soon.
- 4. What makes further delay in addressing the role of religion unacceptable?**
 - a. ...the desperate needs of the human family make further delay in addressing the role of religion unacceptable.

Main Points:

- The historically justified wall separating the United Nations and religions must fall to the imperatives of a world struggling toward unity and justice.

- Religious followers and, more important, religious leaders must show that they are worthy partners in the great mission of building a sustainable world civilization.
- The acceptance of religion as a partner of the United Nations will be gradual.
- Nevertheless, the current dire situation faced by humanity no longer allows a delay in addressing the role of religion in sustainable development.

Section IV -- Religion and the United Nations: Possible Next Steps

Questions:

- 1. How might the UN begin to involve religious leaders in deliberations on humankind's future?**
 - a. For its part, the United Nations might begin the process of substantively involving religion in deliberations on humankind's future by hosting an initial gathering of religious leaders convoked, perhaps, by the Secretary-General.
- 2. What action might the religious leaders call for as a first priority?**
 - a. As a first priority, the leaders might call for a convention on freedom of religion and belief to be drafted and ratified, as expeditiously as possible, by the governments of the world, with the assistance of religious communities.
- 3. What would such an action signal, and what would be its affect?**
 - a. Such an action by the world's religious leaders...would signal their willingness to accept freedom of conscience for all peoples [and] would significantly reduce tensions in the world.
- 4. Which religious leaders should be invited to participate in a permanent religious forum at the UN?**
 - a. Only those religious leaders who make it clear to their followers that prejudice, bigotry and violence have no place in the life of a religious person should be invited to participate in the work of this body.

Main Points:

- The UN might begin the process of involving religion in its deliberations by hosting a gathering of the world's religious leaders convoked, perhaps, by the Secretary General.
- A first priority for such a gathering might be to call for a convention on freedom of religion and belief, to be drafted expeditiously, with the assistance of religious communities.
- Such a gathering might also discuss creation of a permanent religious forum at the UN patterned initially perhaps on the UN's recently founded Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues
- Participation in such a forum should be open only to religious leaders who show that they are worthy of participation by making it clear to their followers that prejudice, bigotry and violence have no place in the life of a religious person.

Section V -- The Promised Reign of Peace and Justice

Questions:

- 1. What will be the effect of further delay by the United Nations in meaningfully involving religion in its work?**
 - a. It is evident that the longer the United Nations delays the meaningful involvement of religion in its work, the longer humanity will suffer the ravages of injustice and disunity.
- 2. With whom, in large part, does the responsibility of the plight of humanity rest, and what must they do?**

- a. ...the responsibility for the plight of humanity rests, in large part, with the world's religious leaders. It is they who must raise their voices to end the hatred, exclusivity, oppression of conscience, violations of human rights, denial of equality, opposition to science, and glorification of materialism, violence and terrorism, which are perpetrated in the name of religious truth.

3. What must the followers of all religions do to contribute to the realization of the long promised reign of peace and justice on earth?

- a. ...the followers of all religions...must transform their own lives and take up the mantle of sacrifice for and service to the well-being of others, and thus contribute to the realization of the long-promised reign of peace and justice on earth.

Main Points:

- Any further delays by the United Nations in involving religion in its work, will only prolong humanity's suffering from the ravages of injustice and disunity.
- Ultimately, the responsibility for the plight of humanity rests with the world's religious leaders. Thus, they must take the initiative in ending the many wrongs perpetrated in the name of religion.
- The followers of all religions must bring about the necessary change within their own lives and be willing to sacrifice and serve for the well-being of humanity in order to bring about the long-promised reign of peace and justice.