

Rethinking the role of Religion

in the midst of our changing aspirations and increasing diversity

A document of The Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Singapore

1. Introduction

The Bahá'í Community of Singapore submits this paper as our humble initial contribution to the ongoing national conversation initiated by the Honourable the Prime Minister Mr. Lee Hsien Loong during his National Day Rally speech on 26th August 2012. We hope to join our fellow Singaporeans in having a meaningful conversation about where we want to go as a country and as a people.

Much of the discussions in the Our SG Conversation dialogue sessions and in the related virtual platforms have revolved around issues such as the increasing cost of living, the widening income gap, immigration policies, the need for shared values, the nurturing of healthy families and our education system.

Underlying many of the issues raised appears to be the changing aspirations of our people and the ever-increasing diversity in our society. These underlying developments are fast becoming the main challenges in our endeavour to build a harmonious and united society. How we, as individuals and as a society, respond to these developments will, to a large degree, determine whether our society becomes nurturing, cohesive and progressive, or inhospitable, divided and unsustainable.

This paper hopes to initiate an exploration into the role of Religion to foster capacity to define, analyse and meet human aspirations based on the fundamental principles of the nobility and oneness of humanity.

The term “Religion” in this paper is not a reference to any specific religion or sect. “Religion” here is used in broad terms, much in the same way one can use the word “Science” to describe a broad system of knowledge and practice.

2. Our interconnectedness with an evolving global civilization

The increasing diversity and profound changes in culture we see in our society today is a direct result of the forces of globalization and advancing technology. These forces have swept away barriers that have kept peoples apart. More significantly, our increasing diversity and its attendant challenges is a phenomenon that is linked to a rapidly evolving global civilization. Singapore, like the rest of humanity, appears to be undergoing the turbulence akin to an adolescent entering into adulthood.

Thus, the answers to questions about advancing our own society are closely linked with answers to questions about advancing human civilization as a whole. It is only with this perspective that we can advance our own society. Serving the interests of humanity as a whole will serve the interests of our own society.

3. Science, Religion and Capacity Building

Advancing society is a collective endeavour. It requires the active participation of individuals, institutions and communities. For individuals, institutions and communities to be active contributors, their capacities to define, analyse and meet their aspirations must be significantly developed.

The generation, application and diffusion of knowledge are crucial to capacity building.

Progress in human understanding and civilization has always relied upon two principal systems of knowledge; namely Science and Religion.

The methods of Science have allowed humanity to construct a coherent understanding of the laws and processes governing physical reality and, to a certain degree, the workings of society itself. The insights of Religion have provided understanding relating to the deepest questions of human purpose and motivation. When these two knowledge systems have operated in concert, peoples and cultures have freed themselves from destructive habits and practices and attained to new levels of technical, artistic and ethical achievement.

Religion in its truest form has imparted spiritual and moral verities that in no way contradict the discovered truths of science. Science and Religion are complementary faculties of human nature that engage in the process of discovering and understanding reality; they are both tools that enable society to investigate truth. Any false dichotomy between faith and reason results in extremes. A careful historical analysis reveals that the periods of greatest advancement in human civilization have been those where both faith and reason were permitted to work together, drawing on the resources of the totality of human insight and experience.

4. A vision of united and sustainable communities of the future

The Bahá'í sacred scriptures testify, "*The well-being of mankind, its peace and security are unattainable unless and until its unity is firmly established*". Science and Religion must contribute to the promotion of unity and social cohesion.

We envisage the sustainable communities of the future will draw from the reservoirs of both Science and Religion to unite, flourish and perpetuate themselves; their true prosperity will flow from the light of spiritual awareness and virtue as well as from material discovery and progress; they will link material progress to fundamental human aspirations; they will be distinguished for their abiding sense of security and faith and for the closely knit fabric of their social life; they will be noted for their high standard of rectitude and complete freedom from all forms of prejudice; there will be trust and confidence between their members and their institutions; and there will be full recognition of the interdependence of the peoples and nations of the planet.

5. Human nature and purpose

The human being is not only an economic and social being, but one with a spiritual dimension concerned with questions about the meaning and purpose of life. The uniqueness of the human experience is the transcendent component of life. This dimension of existence significantly impacts our aspirations and needs.

Prevailing views about human nature can be self-contradictory. On the one hand we desire collective harmony and prosperity and on the other hand theories abound that human beings are slaves to self-interest. If this is true, then we are working for a collective goal that must forever lie beyond our means. Such contradictions can lead to paralysis of will that pervades all strata of society.

Thus efforts to build capacity for active participation in the collective endeavour to build a harmonious and united society must incorporate explorations that go to the heart of human nature and identity.

Advancement of society requires both internal and external reordering. Our efforts to build a united and harmonious society must address the inner life and character of human beings as well as the organization of society. Its purpose must be to promote a process of social change that engenders cooperation, compassion, rectitude of conduct and justice. Any meaningful enhancement of material well-being only flows from the concrete application of spiritual principles such as equity, trustworthiness and altruism.

Therefore capacity building efforts must be also directed at imbuing individuals and communities with a twofold purpose of transforming themselves and contributing to the transformation of society.

6. Contribution by Religion

Religion must serve the cause of the betterment of society. The fact that Religion as practiced in human communities has been subject to distortions does not detract from the significance of its role historically in humanity's endeavour to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization.

Religion as a system of knowledge and practice can contribute to the advancement of society by helping society generate, apply and diffuse knowledge about conceptions of human nature, in particular the inherent nobility and oneness of humanity. Religion must do this in a way that is unifying rather than divisive.

Bahá'ís have a deep and abiding conviction, arising from the Bahá'í Faith's teachings, that human beings are created noble. The Bahá'í sacred scriptures exhort that we are to "*Regard man as a mine rich in gems of inestimable value. Education can, alone, cause it to reveal its treasures, and enable mankind to benefit there from*".

Our inherent nobility unlocks creative capacities within human consciousness and safeguards human dignity. The concept of the nobility of human beings does not mean that if left to

ourselves human beings will avoid destructive actions. Belief in the inherent nobility of human beings must be connected with an equally strong belief in the power of education – an education that sheds light on the path of true understanding.

The concept of the oneness of humanity calls for a profound change in human consciousness. It lies at the heart of the exhortation that we should treat others as we ourselves would wish to be treated. The Bahá'í sacred scriptures proclaim "*The Tabernacle of unity hath been raised; regard ye not one another as strangers. Ye are the fruits of one tree, and the leaves of one branch*".

An understanding of our common essential identity has a profound impact on our ability to build a harmonious and united society. However, it should not be construed as a call to uniformity or merely an idealistic notion of tolerance. It is also not a concept to be used to stifle diversity in the name of universality. Diversity and oneness are compatible. The diversity in the human family should be the cause of love and harmony, as it is in music; different notes blend together to make a perfect chord.

Religion can also contribute by generating, applying and diffusing knowledge regarding the interconnectedness between individual transformation and service to society. Religion can explore the organic links between man and the world. The one acts upon the other and every abiding change in the life of man is a result of these mutual reactions. One cannot develop one's capacities in isolation from service to others. The moral individual of this age must be an active contributor to societal well-being.

7. Conclusion

The economic progress we have made in Singapore and aspire to continue to make will no doubt be significantly enhanced by the clarity regarding human nature and purpose that the insights of Religion will enrich.

The Bahá'í community holds great optimism in our future and hopes to contribute to the building of a Singapore that is both materially and spiritually prosperous. The Bahá'í sacred scriptures state:

"The purpose of religion as revealed from the heaven of God's holy Will is to establish unity and concord amongst the peoples of the world; make it not the cause of dissension and strife. The religion of God and His divine law are the most potent instruments and the surest of all means for the dawning of the light of unity amongst men. The progress of the world, the development of nations, the tranquility of peoples, and the peace of all who dwell on earth are among the principles and ordinances of God."

The Bahá'í Community of Singapore hopes this paper serves to initiate a thoughtful and self-reflective exploration into the role of Religion and warmly invites our fellow Singaporeans to contribute to this exploration.