

The Oneness of Religion

INTRODUCTION: *Approaching the sacred valley...*

Facilitator

The following is an introduction. Please read it out loud without comment, and then proceed with the study of the quotations.

This study experience is on the oneness of the world's religions. The Bahá'í perspective is that the world's great religions are all part of one continuous, progressive and relative communication of God to mankind. Now that's a lot to say, but what does it mean? It means that all the major religions of the world are like different but necessary chapters of one ongoing Book of God's Guidance. It means that each one of them has contributed to the ongoing spiritual evolution and development of the human beings. It means that each one had a purpose and each one spoke to a population of people and addressed the spiritual needs necessary for them to advance and progress. It means that over time, each new religion, each new Revelation from God, brought us forward, advancing, cooperating and unifying.



Symbols of Nine Religions

Continuity of religion suggests there has been *continuous* guidance from the Creator in the form of spiritual Revelation through chosen messengers or prophets. For example: the Hindu Religion teaches that whenever there is a decline in spirituality or morality, a new Teacher appears and renews what was taught before, and yet, explains things relative to the needs of modern society. They believe this has happened many, many times, making for continuous guidance within their religion. The Buddhist's Religion is similar. The Jewish Religion has more than twenty recognized prophets who they believe contributed to continuous guidance. The Christians also believe in the same Prophets as the Jewish Faith, but included Christ. The Moslems believe in the prophets of the Jewish Faith, the words of Jesus Christ, and also the teachings of Mohammad. It is clear that the idea of continuous guidance from God is not a new concept. What *is* a new understanding for our time is that in addition to there been continuous guidance *within* each religion, each perceived *separate* religion forms part of the one continuous religion of God. Speaking of His own Faith, Bahá'u'lláh states: "*This is the changeless Faith of God, eternal in the past, eternal in the future.*"

Relativity of religion suggests that God has communicated, through His chosen Prophets or Messengers, those things that He determined were needed for our spiritual growth and development at given times. That is, the teachings are relative to the needs and capacities of the people it addresses. Through the ages the needs change somewhat. Not unlike the educational needs of a child that change as they progress through the different grades of school. Thus, each religion had a different spiritual theme and emphasis relative to the time and needs of the population it addressed.

In addition to the religions being continuous and relative, they are also considered to be progressive. This means that each Revelation of God to man is more advanced, more complete, more encompassing and more inclusive than those prior. It means that each of the revealed religions has contributed to the progression of spiritual guidance from the one true God.

It is because of the continuity, relativity and progression of religion that we can say religions are one. This is one of the new progressive concepts revealed by Bahá'u'lláh for our time in history. Let us explore together, verses from the Bahá'í Writings that pertain to this subject.

OBJECTIVE: *A look to the horizon...*

Facilitator

Review the following objective with the participants:

The purpose of this group experience is to *explore* the concept of “The Oneness of Religion”, through a study of selected Bahá'í Writings.

THE STUDY PROCESS: *Attaining the pure water...*

Facilitator

Review the following study process with the participants. Then study the numbered quotations on the following pages, one at a time as described below.

1. **READING:** *A drink from the sacred stream...*

Have two participants take turns reading the quotation out loud so that it is read twice.

2. **CONFIRMING MEANING:** *A spray from the fountain of light...*

A. If anyone would like to have better understanding of a word used in the quotation, now is the time to refer to its substitute phrase, definition or synonym, which can be found in the boxes below each quotation. Read the substitute phrase, definition or synonym out loud so everyone can hear.

B. Read the sentence again that contains the word you selected, while **substituting for that word**, its given phrase, definition or synonym from the box below the quotation.

C. If anyone would like a better understanding of another word, repeat the process above until everyone is satisfied with their understanding of the words in the quotation.

D. Have the quotation read one more time by one of the participants.

3. **FINDING VALUE:** *Gem-like discoveries...*

In the tradition of the “talking circle” ask the participants to take turns sharing, one at a time, in a round, **WHAT WAS PERSONALLY MOST MEANINGFUL FROM THE QUOTATION AND WHY.** (Remember show and tell?) Remind the participants that *whatever* is shared should be considered as a valid perspective, and that in this *exploratory study* there are no right or wrong perceptions and no lesser or greater understandings. All are therefore asked to avoid comments, corrections, or judgments on the perceived insights of others. This is not a time for questions and answers, it is an exercise for the purpose of bonding hearts by sharing and receiving personal heartfelt perspectives without discussion.

1. “It is clear and evident to thee that all the Prophets are the Temples of the Cause of God, Who have appeared clothed in divers attire. 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.”

(Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Íqán*, pp. 153-54)

abiding: firmly residing
attire: *symbolic for* - spiritual adornments i.e. righteousness, justice, knowledge etc.
behold: with attention, look upon and observe
Cause: eternal religious Faith
clothed: *symbolic for* - invested or endowed
discriminating eyes: a careful perception for accuracy
divers: [old English for *diverse*] distinctly different
evident: easy to understand; obvious
Faith: true spiritual beliefs

heaven: sublime or exalted condition
proclaiming: formally and publicly declaring
Prophets: Ones who reveal divinely inspired revelations of God
seated: of an official position of status
soaring: raised to a higher majestic existence
tabernacle: holy dwelling place
Temples: *symbolic for* - that which reflects God or the Divine Presence
throne: supreme position of heavenly power and dignity
uttering: expressing orally or in writing

2. “...these firmly-established and mighty systems, have proceeded from one Source, and are rays of one Light. That they differ one from another is to be attributed to the varying requirements of the ages in which they were promulgated.”

(Bahá'u'lláh, *The Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*, p. 13)

ages: periods of time in history identified by distinct features
attributed to: explained to be caused by
firmly-established: well-founded and permanently secured
Light: emanation of spiritual knowledge and goodness [*symbolically means* - God]
proceeded: come forth

promulgated: made known and put into effect
rays: those things which are representative
requirements: necessary and appropriate conditions
Source: origin or cause [*symbolically means* - God]
systems: organizations of religious belief
varying: partially changing

3. “All these holy, divine Manifestations are one. They have served one God, promulgated the same truth, founded the same institutions and reflected the same light. Their appearances have been successive and correlated; each One has announced and extolled the One Who was to follow, and all laid the foundation of reality. They summoned and invited the people to love and made the human world a mirror of the Word of God. Therefore, the divine religions They established have one foundation; Their teachings, proofs and evidences are one; in name and form They differ, but in reality They agree and are the same.”

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 151)

appearances: coming into existence
correlated: closely, systematically, and mutually related
divine: God inspired
extolled: highly praised
form: manner of expression or behavior
foundation: underlying base for establishment and support
institutions: practices and administrative organizations
light: emanating spiritual knowledge and goodness

Manifestations: great Prophets; chosen Messengers
mirror: true representation or reflection
one: of a single and indivisible kind
promulgated: openly declared
reality: the true existence
reflected: mirrored forth
served: given the service and respect due to
successive: an orderly following of one after the other
summoned: called upon for specific action
Word: revelation or teachings

4. “The fundamental principle enunciated by Bahá’u’lláh ... is that religious truth is not absolute but relative, that Divine Revelation is a continuous and progressive process, that all the great religions of the world are divine in origin, that their basic principles are in complete harmony, that their aims and purposes are one and the same, that their teachings are but facets of one truth, that their functions are complementary, that they differ only in the nonessential aspects of their doctrines, and that their missions represent successive stages in the spiritual evolution of human society....”

(Shoghi Effendi, *The Promised Day is Come*, preface, p. 5)

absolute: considered as the final and total fact
aspects: characteristics or appearances
complementary: serving to mutually complete each other
continuous: united, uninterrupted succession
Divine: God inspired
doctrines: taught truths and principles
enunciated: definitely stated and announced
evolution: process of progressive development
facets: sharply defined views or aspects
functions: intended purposes and activities
fundamental: centrally important
harmony: agreement in fact and interests
missions: specific tasks with which they are charged

nonessential: not so important or necessary
origin: the source of their beginning
principle: governing truth or standard
process: series of events leading to a particular result
progressive: advancing, improving, and expanding
relative: related to, and dependent upon, the connected varying conditions
represent: serve as evidence and an example of
Revelation: communication of God to man
stages: periods of growth and development
successive: an orderly following of one after the other

5. “...in accordance with the principle of progressive revelation every Manifestation of God must needs vouchsafe to the peoples of His day a measure of divine guidance ampler than any which a preceding and less receptive age could have received or appreciated.”

(Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá’u’lláh*, p. 102)

accordance: agreement; conformity
age: periods of time in history identified by distinct features
ampler: more generous in size, scope, and capacity
divine: God inspired
guidance: instruction and direction
Manifestation: great Prophet; chosen Messenger

must needs: of necessity or requirement
preceding: earlier
principle: fundamental truth or standard
progressive: advancing, improving, and expanding
receptive: open and responsive to ideas, impressions, and suggestions
revelation: of God’s communication to man
vouchsafe: give or bestow out of graciousness

6. “Bahá’u’lláh promulgated the fundamental oneness of religion. He taught that reality is one and not multiple, that it underlies all divine precepts and that the foundations of the religions are, therefore, the same. Certain forms and imitations have gradually arisen. As these vary, they cause differences among religionists. If we set aside these imitations and seek the fundamental reality underlying our beliefs, we reach a basis of agreement because it is one and not multiple.”

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 175)

basis: condition that supports and is sustaining
divine: God given
forms: manner or expressions of behavior
foundations: underlying base for establishment and support
fundamental: central importance [of]
imitations: the copying of behaviors observed in others
multiple: having numerous aspects or functions
one: single, indivisible, and harmonious

oneness: unity, harmony, and agreement of mind, feeling, and purpose
precepts: instructions in moral conduct
promulgated: openly declared
reality: the true existence
religionist: people who believe in religion
underlies: is the foundation and basis of
underlying: at the foundation and basis of
vary: undergo changes

7. “Just as the organic evolution of mankind has been slow and gradual, and involved successively the unification of the family, the tribe, the city-state, and the nation, so has the light vouchsafed by the Revelation of God, at various stages in the evolution of religion, and reflected in the successive Dispensations of the past, been slow and progressive. Indeed the measure of Divine Revelation, in every age, has been adapted to, and commensurate with, the degree of social progress achieved in that age by a constantly evolving humanity.”

(Shoghi Effendi, *The Promised Day is Come*, p. 118)

adapted to: modified to suit changing circumstances
age: period of time in history identified by distinct features
commensurate: equal in measure or extent
Dispensations: religious Systems regulating human affairs under divine authority
Divine: God’s
evolution: process of progressive development
light: emanation of spiritual knowledge and goodness
measure: adequate or due portion
organic: developing in the manner of a living organism

progressive: advancing, improving, and expanding
reflected: mirrored forth
Revelation: communication to man
social: human society as an interrelated, interdependent whole
stages: periods of growth and development
successive: orderly following of one after the other
successively: an orderly following of one after the other
unification: making into one harmonious unit
vouchsafed: given or bestowed out of graciousness

APPLICATION: *Showing forth divine light...*

Facilitator

Read the first paragraph and ask the participants to state their ideas out loud. Then, read through the last paragraph and allow time for the participants to write out their plans for action. These plans are not shared.

IMAGINING POSSIBILITIES: *Visions of radiant lights...*

How **could** the concepts in this study on *The Oneness of Religion* be applied a person’s life in these modern times? Begin your answers with: “**One could...**” Suggest as many ideas as you want.

DECIDING ACTION: *Mirroring a beam of light...*

Bahá’u’lláh wrote: “*It is incumbent upon every man of insight and understanding to strive to translate that which hath been written into reality and action....*” From your experience in this study on *The Oneness of Religion*, describe what **you** are inspired to put into reality and action. **I will make conscious efforts to...**

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CLOSING MEDITATION: *A heart song...*

Facilitator

Read the following out loud. This is a response from Bahá'u'lláh to a question proposed to him in a letter.

“The songs which the bird of thine heart had uttered in its great love for its friends have reached their ears, and moved Me to answer thy questions, and reveal to thee such secrets as I am allowed to unfold. In thine esteemed letter thou hadst inquired which of the Prophets of God should be regarded as superior to others. Know thou assuredly that the essence of all the Prophets of God is one and the same. Their unity is absolute. God, the Creator, saith: There is no distinction whatsoever among the Bearers of My Message. They all have but one purpose; their secret is the same secret. To prefer one in honor to another, to exalt certain ones above the rest, is in no wise to be permitted. Every true Prophet hath regarded His Message as fundamentally the same as the Revelation of every other Prophet gone before Him. If any man, therefore, should fail to comprehend this truth, and should consequently indulge in vain and unseemly language, no one whose sight is keen and whose understanding is enlightened would ever allow such idle talk to cause him to waver in his belief.

“The measure of the revelation of the Prophets of God in this world, however, must differ. Each and every one of them hath been the Bearer of a distinct Message, and hath been commissioned to reveal Himself through specific acts. It is for this reason that they appear to vary in their greatness. 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 splendor 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. God’s purpose in sending His Prophets unto men is twofold. The first is to liberate the children of men from the darkness of ignorance, and guide them to the light of true understanding. The second is to ensure the peace and tranquillity of mankind, and provide all the means by which they can be established.

“The Prophets of God should be regarded as physicians whose task is to foster the well-being of the world and its peoples, that, through the spirit of oneness, they may heal the sickness of a divided humanity. To none is given the right to question their words or disparage their conduct, for they are the only ones who can claim to have understood the patient and to have correctly diagnosed its ailments. No man, however acute his perception, can ever hope to reach the heights which the wisdom and understanding of the Divine Physician have attained. Little wonder, then, if the treatment prescribed by the physician in this day should not be found to be identical with that which he prescribed before. How could it be otherwise when the ills affecting the sufferer necessitate at every stage of his sickness a special remedy? In like manner, every time the Prophets of God have illumined the world with the resplendent radiance of the Day Star of Divine knowledge, they have invariably summoned its peoples to embrace the light of God through such means as best befitted the exigencies of the age in which they appeared. They were thus able to scatter the darkness of ignorance, and to shed upon the world the glory of their own knowledge. It is towards the inmost essence of these Prophets, therefore, that the eye of every man of discernment must be directed, inasmuch as their one and only purpose hath always been to guide the erring, and give peace to the afflicted.... These are not days of prosperity and triumph. The whole of mankind is in the grip of manifold ills. Strive, therefore, to save its life through the wholesome medicine which the almighty hand of the unerring Physician hath prepared.”

(Gleanings From the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, pp. 78-81)