

The Bahá'í Faith and Peace Psychology:  
The Potential for Science and Religion to Collaborate

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Abstract

Relationships between the Bahá'í Faith and the discipline of Peace Psychology are charted in this paper. It is noted that Bahá'í scripture urges the collaboration of Science and Religion.

The potential for Bahá'í peace initiatives, coupled with empirical peace psychology approaches, are examined across the topics of three Division 48 Task Forces: Ethnicity and Peace, Feminism and Peace, and Peace and Education.

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President Kimmel used the analogy of bringing "Mohammad to the mountain" (1994, p. 1) in reference to the division Task Forces and the general membership of Division 48 of the APA, Peace Psychology; he also pointed out that "we cooperate with other organizations" involved in peace efforts (p.12). This article aims to chart the path of bringing Bahá'u'lláh (founder of the Bahá'í Faith) and various Task Forces (and the Division of Peace Psychology in general) together to the mountain. The mountain I refer to in this context is the mountain of collaboration in "psychological research, education, and training on issues concerning peace..." (Division 48 Goals). This, in itself, would exemplify progress toward peaceful coexistence, and unity in diversity, of two frequently warring entities: Science and Religion.

The program for this paper is to establish linkages of potential collaborative action between Peace Psychology and the Bahá'í Faith by (a) framing mutual interests around the topics of the Task Forces, such as "Ethnicity and Peace Psychology", "Feminism and Peace Psychology", and "Peace and Education", and (b) submitting a paper analogous to this one to The Journal of Bahá'í Studies, a journal read by Bahá'í scientists and activists. This would set the conditions for peace psychologists to bring their empirical research skills to Bahá'í initiated

"peace projects", and for Bahá'í scientists and activists to become involved in Division 48 initiatives.

### The Bahá'í view of the unity of Science and Religion

The Bahá'í Faith is the world's newest "independent" religion (Hatcher and Martin, 1984). As noted in the 1988 Britannica yearbook, the Bahá'ís have organized communities in 205 countries, making it the second most widely "dispersed" religion on earth (Barrett, 1988). Bahá'u'lláh forbid clergy in the Bahá'í Faith and provided for local Bahá'í communities to be ruled by democratically elected bodies of nine adults. As of 1989 there were over 20,000 of these institutions spread fairly evenly around the planet.

All these Bahá'í institutions encourage the scientific method because Bahá'u'lláh has explicitly recommended the study of science, and stated that the acquisition of knowledge "is incumbent upon everyone. The knowledge of such sciences, however, should be acquired as can profit the peoples of the earth, and not those which begin with words and end with words" (Bahá'u'lláh, 1978 [ca 1885], pp. 51-52). The activists and empiricists among us must take some comfort in this attitude!

A Bahá'í prophecy states that "when religion, shorn of its superstitions, traditions and unintelligent dogmas, shows its conformity with science, then there will be a great unifying, cleansing force in the world, which will sweep before it all wars, disagreements, discords, and struggles..." ('Abdu'l-Bahá,

cited in Esslemont 1950/1928, p. 256). On the other hand, Bahá'ís also believe that science, unbridled from religion, leads to ugly forms of materialism and the creation of destructive and violent forces. Bahá'í philosophers and scientists have written many books and articles on the unity and need for science and religion to inform and support each other (cf. Aull, 1988) and, in particular, have encouraged Bahá'ís, in their ardent quest for international and intrapersonal peace, to make use of psychology, as a science, in this effort (Roesch, 1988).

A note of reassurance to peace psychologists: the Bahá'í writings forbid Bahá'ís from being fanatical and also forbid them from any form of prejudice. Thus, Bahá'ís can easily collaborate with psychologists who respect them and will hold no prejudice towards psychologists who are either atheists or followers of other religions, whether those religions be Hindu, Christian, Jewish, Moslem, Buddhist, etc. A note of reassurance to Bahá'ís: peace psychologists, by definition, tend to be mature in issues of "conflict resolution, reconciliation, and prevention of...destructive conflict" (Division 48 Goals). Therefore, it is more likely they will be able to collaborate and "consult" with Bahá'ís with less prejudice than most social scientists hold toward the religiously devout. "Consultation" is a key ingredient to a Bahá'í lifestyle as well as Bahá'í government: it is a method of collaborative discussion that aims at consensus building in which all contributors are frank and open, yet

detached and non-contentious with their personal views.

In summary, Bahá'ís encourage the use of science, both for systematically improving the human condition and for rooting out superstitions in religion. On the other hand, Bahá'ís believe in God as supernatural and that the spiritual nature of reality is not reducible to the physical. To what degree "spiritual things" may be investigated by science is an open question for Bahá'ís and one worthy of study, rather than simply dismissed as meaningless by positivist approaches to science.

#### Ethnicity and Peace Psychology

Wagner (1994) makes a case on how, since the collapse of the focus on Communism vs. Capitalism, peace psychologists must pay attention to ethnic conflict as a major impediment to peace. He goes on to note that opportunities to focus on positive peace have increased "as have the importance of building peace rather than designing stopgap agreements that quell conflict temporarily" (p. 18). Similarly, Smith (1992) has charted the difficulties that nationalism presents, as well as ethnic strife, for creating a world at peace.

Both of these conclusions, that racism and nationalism are major obstacles to peace, were strongly proclaimed by Bahá'u'lláh in his series of epistles to prominent kings and rulers of the 19th century. Likewise, the Universal House of Justice (1985), a democratically elected institution that currently rules the Bahá'í world, has re-emphasized the need to proactively eradicate

racism and nationalism as pre-requisites to world peace.

In response to this, Nat Rutstein (1993), a Bahá'í who is a Professor of Communication, developed "Institutes for the Healing of Racism" based on Bahá'í principles of consultation. In over 200 locations in the U.S. and abroad, these institutes have brought people of color together with whites to openly discuss feelings of suspicion and superiority with the goal of healing the wounds of racism as a positive peace intervention. My personal observational experience is that the institutes are particularly effective in helping whites, who either don't want to be racists or who don't think they are racists, overcome their prejudicial cultural programming. Although tales of great success of these institutes are told, and of city governments and police departments adopting the methodology, I know of no systematic research being conducted on the efficacy of the Institutes. This is an area of potentially fruitful collaboration between Bahá'ís and peace psychologists.

Besides the individual initiative involved in the Institutes for the Healing of Racism, the national governing body of the Bahá'ís of the United States has sponsored, encouraged, or collaborated with city governments and other community organizations to establish Models of Unity projects. These have taken place in cities as diverse as Chicago, Atlanta, and Portland, Oregon. The central premise is that history is full of examples of diverse peoples working together to establish peace

and respect for unity in diversity. By studying these examples and holding them up as illustrations of hope, we can create a realistic vision of positive peace in communities that are experiencing ethnic strife. Although some of these projects have had a data collection and analysis component (Stockman, 1994), they certainly could benefit from the consultation and collaboration of peace psychologists.

### Feminism and Peace Psychology

There is a Bahá'í prophecy that "until woman and man recognize and realize equality, social and political progress here or anywhere will not be possible ('Abdu'l-Bahá, 1982/1922, p. 77). "War and its ravages have blighted the world; the education of woman will be a mighty step toward its abolition and ending, for she will use her whole influence against war....She will refuse to give her sons for sacrifice upon the field of battle. In truth, she will be the greatest factor in establishing universal peace and international arbitration. Assuredly, woman will abolish warfare..." ('Abdu'l-Bahá, 1982/1922, p. 108). These bold claims, put forth early this century, are echoed in papers by feminist peace psychologists McKay (1994) and Winter (1994). In summarizing a variety of researchers' work, McKay commented, "Women...may more inherently be peacemakers because they are 'nicer, kinder, and gentler'" (1994, p. 18). Likewise, Winter noted that "Empirical evidence supports the gender gap in support of U.S. military



action, as in the recent case of the Persian Gulf War" (1994, p. 19), that is, women were much less in favor of military intervention than men.

The Universal House of Justice, in their 1985 statement on the promise of world peace addressed "To the Peoples of the World", make this important declaration: "The emancipation of women, the achievement of full equality between the sexes, is one of the most important, though less acknowledged prerequisites of peace....Only as women are welcomed into full partnership in all fields of human endeavor will the moral and psychological climate be created in which international peace can emerge." To develop this critical aspect of the planetary infrastructure for peace, Bahá'ís are engaged in hundreds, and perhaps thousands, of women's development projects on every continent, and most major islands, of the globe (cf. Perkins, 1989). To empirically study to what degree ensuring the equality of men and women will assist in creating a world at peace is a fine project of potential collaboration among Bahá'ís and peace psychologists.

### Peace and Education

Education about peace issues is a central goal of Division 48 as well as that of the Peace and Education Task Force. It is certainly one that is near and dear to the hearts of all Bahá'ís.

Johnson (1992) points out that research supports five steps in teaching students to be peacemakers: (a) create a cooperative context (he cites Deutsch, 1973, in support), (b) structure

academic controversies (he cites Johnson & Johnson, 1992, in support), (c) teach students how to negotiate (he cites Johnson & Johnson, 1991, in support), (d) teach students how to mediate conflicts, and the fifth step is (e) to arbitrate student conflicts.

As cooperative learning is so conducive to the Bahá'í ideal of "consultation in all matters", many Bahá'í public and private school teachers have eagerly made use of Johnson and Johnson's (1989, 1991) and Slavin's (1990) research to validate their dedication to teaching conflict resolution and cooperation in the classroom (cf. Pihlainen, 1991).

Besides the Bahá'í ideal that all must be taught consultative and conflict resolution skills, Bahá'ís also believe that taking "world citizen" as one's primary political identity, is a crucial aspect of preventing war. "[C]onsideration must also be given to teaching the concept of world citizenship as part of the standard education of every child" (Universal House of Justice, 1985). Curriculum materials that are used in Bahá'í schools (religious, academic, or both) around the world, explicitly teach for peace, conflict resolution (Bahá'í "consultation"), and a world citizen perspective. One such typical text, developed for use at the international residential New Era High School, in Panchgani, India, is Thoughts: Education for peace and one world (Taafaki, 1986). It is always important to examine the effect of curriculum. To systematically study the

connection between "world citizen" identity, as taught in schools (Bahá'í or secular), and the development of world peace is a project worthy of consideration.

### In Closing

This paper aimed to chart important connections between the interests of Peace Psychologists and Bahá'ís. As this was a brief paper, it did not describe the many peace-related human rights activities that Bahá'ís have been involved in with the United Nations (De Araujo, 1978), or the activities of the "Bahá'í Chair for World Peace" (Bushrui, 1993), endowed at the Center for International Development and Conflict Management, the University of Maryland. The paper did address three fields in which I hope Bahá'ís and Peace Psychologists will join together to design and methodically measure outcomes: creating racial unity, assisting women to become leaders for peace, and educating all children in the methods of peacemaking consultation and world citizenship. In the big picture this collaboration itself may be representative and symbolic of reconciliation and peaceful coexistence of two frequently antagonistic communities: those of Science and Religion.

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