

THE PROMISE OF WORLD PEACE

Universal House of Justice

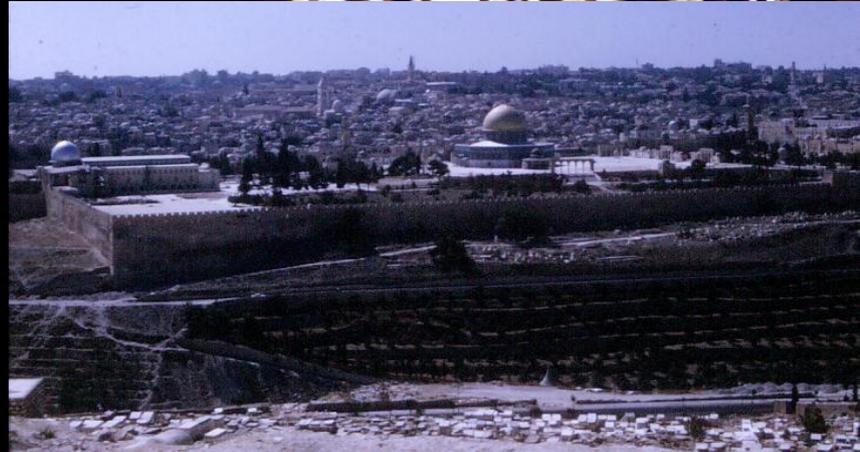
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Section I – Religion and Materialism

in simplified language
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All religions
empower
social
progress



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What distinguishes the human race from all other forms of life is the human spirit, and the mind is its essential quality. This has enabled humanity to build civilizations and to prosper materially. But this alone has never satisfied the human spirit, whose mysterious nature leads it towards transcendence, a reaching towards an invisible realm, towards the ultimate reality, that unknowable essence called God. The religions brought to mankind by a succession of manifestations have been the primary link between humanity and that ultimate reality, and have empowered mankind's capacity to achieve spiritual success together with social progress.

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No serious attempt to arrange human affairs and achieve world peace can ignore religion. History is largely about religion, a faculty of human nature. We cannot deny that religion has been perverted, contributing to confusion in society and the conflicts in and between individuals. But neither can any fair-minded observer ignore the influence exerted by religion on civilization. Furthermore, it is essential to social order through its direct effect on laws and morality.

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Writing of religion as a social force, Baha'u'llah said: "Religion is the greatest of all means for the establishment of order in the world and for the peaceful contentment of all that dwell therein." Referring to the corruption of religion, he wrote: "Should the lamp of religion be obscured, chaos and confusion will ensue, and the lights of fairness, of justice, of tranquillity and peace cease to shine."

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The Baha'i writings point out that the "perversion of human nature, the degradation of human conduct, the corruption and dissolution of human institutions, reveal themselves, under such circumstances, in their worst and most revolting aspects. Human character is debased, confidence is shaken, the nerves of discipline are relaxed, the voice of human conscience is stilled, the sense of decency and shame is obscured, conceptions of duty, of solidarity, of reciprocity and loyalty are distorted, and the very feeling of peacefulness, of joy and of hope is gradually extinguished."

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The paralyzing conflict of humanity today is due to its own misunderstandings and confusion perpetrated in the name of religion. Those who have held blindly and selfishly to their fixed views, who have imposed on their followers erroneous and conflicting interpretations of the teachings of the Prophets of God, are responsible for this confusion, compounded by the artificial barriers between faith and reason, science and religion.

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For from a fair-minded examination of the actual words of the Founders of the great religions, and of the social environments at the time of their missions, there is nothing to support the contentions and prejudices disturbing the religious communities of mankind and therefore all human affairs.

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The teaching that we should treat others as we ourselves would wish to be treated, an ethic repeated in all the great religions, proves this in two ways: it sums up the moral teachings and desire for peace in all these religions regardless of their place or time of origin; it also shows how unity is their essential virtue. Had humanity seen the Educators of its collective childhood as agents of one civilizing process, it would no doubt have benefited much more from the cumulative effects of their successive missions.

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The return of fanatical religious movements in many lands is only a dying convulsion, with their violence and disruption demonstrating their spiritual bankruptcy, undermining not only the spiritual values for the unity of mankind but also those unique moral victories of their own religion.

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However vital a force religion has been in the history of mankind, and however dramatic the return of religious fanaticism, religion and religious institutions have been viewed by increasing numbers of people as irrelevant to the major concerns of the modern world. In its place they have either pursued self-centred material satisfactions or followed man-made ideologies designed to rescue society from its evident evils.

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All too many of these ideologies, instead of accepting the oneness of mankind and promoting harmony among different peoples, have tended to worship the state, to subordinate the rest of mankind to one nation, race or class, to prevent all discussion and interchange of ideas, or to abandon starving millions to the operations of a market system that worsens the situation of the majority of mankind, while enabling a few to live with great wealth.

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How tragic is the record of the substitute faiths that the worldly-wise of our age have created. Entire populations who have been taught to worship at their altars are now disillusioned. The fruits these doctrines have produced, after decades of their leaders' limitless exercise of power, are the social and economic ills in every region of our world. Beyond this is the spiritual damage reflected in the apathy of the peoples of all nations and the extinction of all hope in their hearts.

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The time has come when those who preach materialism, whether of the east or the west, whether of capitalism or socialism, must account for their moral leadership. Where is the "new world" promised by these ideologies? Where is the international peace they proclaim? Where are the cultural achievements produced by favouring one race, nation or class? Why is the great majority of the world's peoples sinking into hunger and poverty when today's leaders control such great wealth?

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It is the materialistic ideals of all such ideologies that maintain the falsehood that human beings are selfish and aggressive. They have failed to satisfy the needs of mankind, but this increases the resistance to change. We need a fresh effort to find solutions to the problems of the planet. It is primarily a question of attitude. Will humanity continue to be lost in old concepts and unworkable assumptions? Or will its leaders, regardless of ideology, courageously consult together in a united search for appropriate solutions?

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Those who care for the future of the human race may well consider this advice. "If long-cherished ideals and time-honoured institutions, if certain social assumptions and religious formulae have ceased to promote the welfare of the generality of mankind, if they no longer minister to the needs of a continually evolving humanity, let them be swept away and relegated to the limbo of obsolescent and forgotten doctrines."

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“Why should these, in a world subject to the immutable law of change and decay, be exempt from the deterioration that must needs overtake every human institution? For legal standards, political and economic theories are solely designed to safeguard the interests of humanity as a whole, and not humanity to be crucified for the preservation of the integrity of any particular law or doctrine.”