

**V Congress of the Leaders of World and Traditional Religions  
Astana, 10 June 2015**

**Panel Session 2  
The Influence of Religion on Youth:  
Education, Science, Culture, and Mass Media**

**REMARKS  
Joshua Lincoln  
Secretary-General of the Bahá'í International Community**

Bahá'ís believe that humanity is approaching the crowning stage in a centuries long process which has brought it from its collective infancy to the threshold of maturity—a stage that will witness the unity of the human race in a global civilization. Humankind is in the midst of an unprecedented transition. Behind so much of the turbulence and commotion of contemporary life are the fits and starts of a humanity struggling to come of age. Widely accepted practices and conventions, cherished attitudes and habits, must all be re-examined, as the imperatives of maturity begin to assert themselves. In all of this, Bahá'ís see the hand of a loving and all-powerful Providence at work.

In thousands upon thousands of settings across the planet, Bahá'ís are working shoulder to shoulder with their fellow human beings to learn about new patterns of human relationships and corresponding social structures that embody the principle of the oneness of humankind. Central to this endeavour is a conviction that the will to bring about constructive social change and the capacity to forge new patterns of human life—based on principles of justice and unity—rests in the young populations of the world. In them, we see not only the seeds of the future but the hope of the present.

Roughly one quarter of our world's population can be said to comprise youth, and almost all of us have passed or are destined to pass through this most promising stage of human life. Youth are found everywhere—in every family, village, city and country. Nevertheless, despite their growing numbers and the hope that they represent for humanity's future, they are often seen as a group in crisis.

While in some settings, youth are portrayed as apathetic and disinterested in the affairs of the world, more often than not, we are seeing an emerging picture—particularly in the media—of

a young generation deeply discontented with the state of the world and responding in ways that are at once generating awe and fear.

The seeds of this discontent can be found in the paradoxical landscape before them. On the one hand, advancements in scientific knowledge and rapid technological progress have brought to light the capacity of the human race to scale heights undreamt of only a few short decades ago. On the other hand, the much-vaunted civilization has failed to deliver on its promise to usher in an age of peace and prosperity for all.

With the changing social structures of community and family across the planet and the loss of the support and buffer they provided individuals, youth are particularly affected. They are of course among those most impacted by the powerful social forces and interests so rapidly shaping the world today. An aggressive materialistic culture promotes excessive consumption, selfishness and passivity. These influences can result in apathy and indifference.

The emptiness of an excessively materialistic culture also produces a profound sense of emptiness and breeds conditions of discontent without providing adequate channels for the expression of young people's innate desire to contribute to social betterment.

The denial of education and the lack of employment also contribute significantly to what appears to be a marginalization of young people. These powerful forces together with widespread poverty, conflict, war and abuse represent a betrayal of the generations to come.

All of this makes the young vulnerable to the influence of those who would prey on them for their own profit. Youth become susceptible to destructive ideologies and behaviours. To give but one example, stories on the radicalization of youth fill news media almost on hourly basis these days. Victimization of youth and simultaneous fear of them has come to shape popular conceptions of an age group that in reality holds the promise of the future.

For Bahá'ís, the period of youth is a most precious time in life. Therefore, the emerging discourse on the role of youth in society is one that the Bahá'í community welcomes with great expectation.

Yet, for Bahá'ís, it is apparent that the potential of the youth cannot find its highest expression without the influence of religion in the world. Indeed, in order for the relationship between youth and society to be recast in a positive, mutually reinforcing manner, we must look at the role of religion in a new light.

Religion has a unique power. As we are all aware, it reaches to the roots of motivation. When it has been faithful to the spirit and example of the transcendent Figures who gave the world its great belief systems, it has awakened in whole populations capacities to love, to forgive, to create, to dare greatly, to overcome prejudice, to sacrifice for the common good and to discipline the impulses of animal instinct. It is perhaps the one power that can ultimately enable humankind to transcend its differences and unite.

If religion is to be the vital force that only it can, it must be re-examined in the light of this current age of transition in humanity's social evolution. Religious leadership would do well to scrutinize the orientation that has become deeply consolidated in so many communities toward the illusory "other" and challenge the pervasive and harmful claims of privileged access to truth that have fueled some of the most bitter conflicts in the world.

Can we afford to raise the generations that are to come with these same ideas that have by their very nature divided and separated and accentuated "otherness"? In a world that is rapidly contracting into a single homeland and in which millions upon millions are being swept across its surface and forced to interact and coexist, can emphasis on our differences and those beliefs that divide us be justified?

Young people can see the contradictions in this world. Contrary to the caricatures of the youth of today as either apathetic and disengaged consumers of material culture or radicalized threats to the peace and security of our societies, we know that youth have an acute sense of justice, yearning for meaning and purpose, a desire to serve and contribute meaningfully, a thirst for knowledge and an innate attraction to what is good and beautiful. These characteristics are intrinsic to the period of youth, though they may remain latent and dormant in whole populations when the education and moral empowerment of youth is neglected or left to those whose interests are inimical to the wellbeing of the human race. Is it not the role of religion to awaken and cultivate the high-minded and noble attributes latent in every soul and therefore in our youth?

In this context, understanding the complementary relationship between science and religion is a challenge that humanity must now face, if religion is to be a relevant force in inspiring and cultivating the best and noblest of humanity's characteristics and channelling them for the betterment of society. We must embrace science and imbue it with moral purpose. And the youth must see that faith does not contradict reason.

Religious communities are communities of practice where spiritual teachings are translated into social reality. Within them, a process of capacity building that enables young people to

participate in the transformation of society, and protects and nurtures them, can be set in motion.

We can see today that two forces in society directly and indirectly fuel one another. The Bahá'í Writings warn that religious fanaticism and religious hatred are “a world-devouring fire, whose violence none can quench” yet, at the same time that “ungodliness is eating into the vitals of human society”. Together, these two forces erode the space for mutual understanding and moral conviction.

Religion must help strengthen the hearts and minds of the youth of the world against the destructive influence of these two forces. This is a responsibility that is as practical as it is spiritual. One way to do this is to positively support the involvement of youth in the life of society.

Religion can provide resources for young people trying to make sense of their lives and to contribute to social progress at every level. It must offer a vision of society in which all participate. Religious communities can foster friendship, solidarity, and unity, essential to both selfless service and social change. Spiritual insights derived from religious teaching can help to endow small actions with profound meaning. Spiritual perception gives youth different tools for evaluating the impact of the action taken, but also the spirit with which it is undertaken, and the larger context of change.

Many people feel that sporadic action cannot produce real change. Yet, religion offers an understanding of human existence and evolution that lifts the eye from the rocky path to the distant horizon. Building a just and unified society takes generations to achieve, and requires long-term vision. No great historical movement has succeeded without one. Meeting pressing challenges like the ecological crisis, the inequality crisis or the gender gap will require strenuous effort and real sacrifice, for which a long-term vision is key. This should inspire every young individual.

Above all, religious communities have a responsibility to put these positive values – their values – into practice. The great religious teachers each sought to promote human well-being and advance civilization. This dynamic system of knowledge and action fills an essential purpose: to expand the bonds of unity among the people of the world and to transform their inner character and outer life.

Bahá'ís across the globe, in the most unassuming settings, are striving to establish a pattern of activity and community life to do this. The Bahá'í community readily acknowledges that to

uphold high ideals and to become their embodiment are not the same thing. Many challenges lie ahead, and much remains to be learned.

It is fitting then to end with Bahá'u'lláh's admonition to His followers: "associate with all the peoples and kindred of the earth with joy and radiance, inasmuch as consorting with people hath promoted and will continue to promote unity and concord, which in turn are conducive to the maintenance of order in the world and to the regeneration of nations."