

Citizenship and Inclusion

**Thought piece prepared for the Baha'i Community of Canada
March 2017**

As the movement of populations accelerates around the world, every society is challenged to adapt to new pressures and disruptions. Canada has become increasingly diverse in race and culture since changes to immigration policy in the 1960s opened up the country to people from around the world. It has also posed perennial questions about who we are as a country, what it means to be Canadian, and how to foster harmony among the various cultures that constitute our society – including Indigenous cultures, French, English, and those of more recently arrived groups. Many are now asking how we can become a more inclusive society. This in turn invites the question of what it means to be inclusive, and how to foster inclusion.

This paper intends to make a modest contribution to this evolving conversation, drawing upon the Bahá'í teachings and the Bahá'í community of Canada's efforts to apply the principle of the oneness of humanity – a core concept of these teachings – in its community life. The interdependence and complexity of a world that is increasingly global is the future of our collective life on this planet. This is an historical trend that few can deny. Rather than reacting against it, we can embrace the diversity of people – in all their varied identities – that helps to enrich our society. A more inclusive Canada represents a pioneering effort to learn how cooperation, reciprocity and mutual aid across an ever more diverse human community can benefit all.

Therefore, the process of fostering inclusion, as we see it, is related to broadening the basis of society in response to an ever-changing world. In a world that is increasingly interdependent, there is an urgent need to listen to one another, participate in dialogue across social barriers, and strengthen the bonds of solidarity among diverse groups and people. This is a process that cannot be accomplished by law and policy alone. The challenge will have to be taken up



The Bahá'í Community of Canada
La communauté bahá'íe du Canada

voluntarily by individuals, communities, and institutions that learn to harness diversity to build a more unified and prosperous society.

In this paper, we explore aspects of a vision of inclusion that embraces these different actors in society, underscoring questions that invite further exploration. We have published other reflections on a number of related themes on the subject of reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, and on the role of religion in civic engagement.¹ These contributions have been informed by the experience of Bahá'í communities across the country, which seek to be welcoming to all people and to represent this diversity on elected bodies.

Individuals

We must acknowledge at the outset how difficult it can be to define inclusion. Indeed, it is often easier to identify how individuals and groups are excluded from participation in the life of society. Therefore, one way to examine inclusion is to consider how to remove the social barriers that prevent people from contributing to society. One of these barriers is prejudice. Prejudice needs to be addressed through the media and government policy, as well as by helping individuals reflect on their beliefs and attitudes. For some, prejudice is expressed outwardly through discriminatory actions, hate speech, and online harassment. However, prejudice can also be subtler, in the form of assumptions or stereotypes about groups of people that are expressed through unconscious biases. How do we help individuals to reflect more deeply on their beliefs and attitudes about other groups, so that both conscious and unconscious bias can be corrected? What kinds of conversations help this process?

One of our observations from participating in conversations that intend to challenge underlying prejudices is that the experiences of those who have felt their effects are given priority. Such an approach is perfectly valid. Indeed, how else would people learn the truth about prejudice if not informed by the standpoints of those who have experienced it first-hand? Furthermore, it takes courage to speak about the experience of oppression, and special efforts are

¹ See: Statements and Thought Pieces published by the Bahá'í Community of Canada at: <http://ca.bahai.org/public-discourse>



often warranted to create space for such voices to be heard. However, this approach can sometimes be extended so far that others are discouraged or disallowed from speaking at all. In such cases, the power of consultation and dialogue to foster mutual understanding is not fully realized. How should this kind of dialogue be arranged, so that all can be heard, listened to, and understood? What kind of tone and language would help participants in these conversations to challenge pre-conceived notions and accept new insights?

How, indeed, can we learn to navigate our complex array of identities and those held by people we live and work with in our daily lives? There are many identities we carry with us every day, including our race, gender, culture, class, nationality, religion, and profession. These identities are valued parts of our lives, and they contribute to our sense of belonging in the world. Throughout history, however, many thinkers have urged people to subordinate our varied social ties to our shared human identity. One contemporary author has called us to resist “the miniaturization of human beings” that results from limiting our bonds of solidarity to those within a narrow group. For many people, our shared human identity is connected to the recognition that humans have a spiritual reality – a soul – that is intrinsically noble, and deserving of respect and dignity.

Even as we recognize our common humanity with others, and attempt to use our “inner eye” – as one philosopher has put it – to imagine the world from the perspective of other people, we will still find issues on which we fundamentally disagree. Indeed, one might find the cultural practices of another group of people distasteful or objectionable. What should individuals do with these thoughts and attitudes? There are those who advocate toleration as a solution, suggesting that – within the bounds of the law – we ought to accept a great deal of difference in society and aim to live in peaceful coexistence. The virtue of toleration can help individuals to become more open-minded, to reserve judgment when encountering difference, and to be patient and forbearing with that which we do not understand or necessarily value. Learning to tolerate ideas and practices we do not value is essential to preserving freedom of thought and expression in society. However, can we aspire to something more than toleration in our relationships with one another? What attitudes and practices would help to foster greater understanding and respect for those who are most different from us?



Community

The process of fostering inclusion in society must clearly extend beyond individual beliefs, attitudes, and practices. It also includes changes at a collective level, in the communities where we live. A community, after all, has its own qualities and attributes that are reflected at the level of shared culture. It serves as a reservoir of collective action and social movements that can make fundamental transformations in the life of society. Individuals help to shape their social and cultural environment, and society also has a reciprocal effect on individuals. Therefore, how can we describe the characteristics of a community that promotes the active participation of all of its members?

Since the 1970s, multiculturalism has become a hallmark of Canadian discourse in a way that has encouraged more inclusive communities. The similar idea of “interculturalism” has emerged out of Quebec’s experience of promoting social cohesion. These concepts came from the belief that recognizing the value of different cultures helps newcomers to become active participants in Canadian society. People are taught to be respectful of differences, and to celebrate them in our communities, workplaces, and politics. Multiculturalism and interculturalism have helped Canadian society to reconcile the pursuit of social harmony with the public recognition of a diverse citizenry.

The next frontier of multiculturalism, as one leading thinker has argued, is religious and secular diversity. Religious freedom is recognized as a fundamental right in Canada, as protecting both the rights of religious people to hold their views and express them in practice, as well as those of non-religious people who hold a variety of views about moral and ethical issues. These rights sometimes conflict with other individual rights. The primary model for resolving such conflicts is to simply balance competing individual rights and make reasonable accommodations in exceptional cases. This approach, while sometimes necessary, is not always the most constructive. We also need to create space for dialogue that allows people to explore common ground and points of unity that connect religious and secular traditions of thought and practice. It might not be possible to always find consensus, but the process of talking together itself creates mutual understanding and some areas of agreement.



One of the conditions that limits constructive dialogue is a culture of adversarial debate. If groups are always presumed to have conflicting interests, they become locked into an adversarial mode with each other. An adversarial mindset influences our politics and public discourse, as well as the process of seeking legal remedies for injustices. Indeed, the pain, delay, and expense of litigating cases related to land claims, recognition of the harms caused by the Indian Residential Schools, and a handful of recent religious freedom cases, can make the groups involved feel increasingly alienated from and at odds with mainstream society and its institutions. There is an urgent need to explore alternatives to protest, litigation, and partisan politics as methods of resolving conflicts between groups.

A final issue at the level of community is the challenge of improving the material conditions of all of its members. It is not enough to celebrate cultural and religious diversity, if minority groups live in poverty or face systemic discrimination. History has shown that resentment, fear, and suspicion grow alongside rising income inequality and social marginalization. This is a problem we must all work to address with many newcomers to Canada, Indigenous peoples, and people who have been displaced from their jobs by economic changes. It is important that the way we talk about diversity is matched with practical measures that promote economic equality and uphold human dignity for everyone who shares this land.

Inclusion and Oneness

In this paper, we have shared a few aspects of our vision of an inclusive society and what it might require of us, individually and collectively. At the centre of the Bahá'í teachings and the experience of our community is the concept of the oneness of humanity – that despite our infinite diversity, we are part of a single human family that must learn to live together in full recognition of our interdependence. This is an idea that has been in Canada for a long time. Various traditions of Indigenous constitutional thought refer to a social order designed around the well-being of all of our relations, constituting the members of our human family with whom we share the land. How, indeed, can we become more conscious of this conception of our society when interacting with newcomers and strangers?



Inclusion is more than just a decision to accommodate diversity; it means aligning ourselves with the forces of history that are drawing humanity closer together. The widespread tendency to justify inclusion by appealing to the enlightened self-interest of people may end up being short-sighted. We might instead appeal to other sources of motivation: the attraction people feel to a vision of social progress, a sense of common purpose, and the calling of principles of human solidarity. In this way, we can uncover reservoirs of goodwill, hope, and a common resolve to work to build a better world for future generations.

The Bahá'í community of Canada collaborates with a number of people to help develop contributions to thought on issues of social concern.

This paper represents thinking that is helping to inform the work of our community to participate in Canadian public discourses. This is not a position paper or official statement from the Bahá'í community, but rather a set of reflections that draws insight from the Bahá'í teachings and the experience of the community as we seek to apply them to the betterment of society.

Further thoughts or comments on this paper can be addressed to: externalaffairs@cdnbnc.org

