

Advancing the Conversation on Reconciliation in Canada

**Thought piece prepared for the Baha'i Community of Canada
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Reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in Canada involves the whole of society. According to the final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), reconciliation “is about establishing and maintaining a mutually respectful relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples in this country.” To build this relationship calls for the participation of every individual, family, group, business, cultural body and level of government. It includes fostering greater awareness of our history, acknowledging harms that have been done, and taking practical steps to redress injustice and harms visited on Indigenous peoples over several generations. From land and resource ownership, decision-making and management to what is taught in our schools and universities, there are a wide range of matters to address and a long path to walk for all of us.

Rising to the challenge of reconciliation must include a change in our public discourse about relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in Canada. As the TRC noted in its report, “Expanding public dialogue and action on reconciliation beyond residential schools will be critical in the coming years.” While the way forward is being led by Indigenous peoples and Indigenous organizations, many of the changes in language and mindset need to be made by non-Indigenous people. The purpose of this thought piece is to present some modest reflections on expanding this public dialogue, to support the actions outlined by the TRC. It draws on insights from the Baha'i teachings, and from our community's efforts to apply the principle of the oneness of humanity, a core concept of these teachings. We reflect on the role of talking and listening, learning and building cross-cultural understanding, the importance of education, the teaching of history, and the process of working for long-term social change.



Our brief comments here capture a few, though not all, of our thoughts on the challenge of reconciliation. Other aspects are reflected in the Baha'i Community of Canada's 1994 submission to the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, its 2013 submission to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and a short film called *The Path Home*, produced in 2015 to commemorate the formal conclusion of the work of the TRC.¹ These contributions have been complemented by innumerable local community actions over many decades that have fostered friendship, partnership, dialogue, and new ways of working together between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples.

It is necessary at the outset to appreciate the challenge of genuine reconciliation. Neither the complexity of the issues, nor the time required to see measurable success, can be underestimated. Real and enduring reconciliation confounds any one-dimensional approach, or reliance solely on government-led initiatives. We are collectively walking a path of social and personal learning about reconciliation.

The role of education

Educational institutions must play their part in this process by properly teaching about history, cultures and ways of life that furnish fundamental background understanding to conversations that can go beyond the sharing of mere opinions. We must acknowledge the deep scars of our history, and develop a consciousness and language that examines critically both past injustice and contemporary oppression, yet holds to a view of the inherent nobility of every person. Better education is necessary if we are to do justice to the experiences, the actions and the work required for the generation of new patterns of reciprocity and cooperation that reconciliation requires. Here governments can help, especially at provincial and local levels where legislation and policy is generated, to give impetus to new patterns of education and exchange, most especially among young people. However, citizens also have to encourage and respond to such policy and its implementation.

¹ See: ca.bahai.org/public-discourse



From our Baha'i experience with youth across Canada, we feel strongly that it is among the youth, from childhood up through the early years of identity formation when values are acquired and character is formed, where much of our social investment in reconciliation can be placed. It is during the crucial time of early adolescence (around eleven to fourteen), we believe, when young people can be brought together in service and friendship to learn the rich rewards that a process of reconciliation that transcends cultural and identity boundaries can foster. To provide the conditions of such engagement among youth is a task that government, educational institutions, religious communities, indigenous organizations and other groups of civil society are well equipped to manage.

Educational reform should also give due attention to the way in which history is taught to young people. On one hand, this involves learning about those times in our history where there were cooperative relations and treaties between Indigenous peoples, settlers and newcomers. We can also take lessons from genuine achievements in more recent times that have been able to overcome conventional and harmful social patterns. Such examples help to build our understanding as individuals, families and communities strive to participate in constructive social change.

However, education must also include what the TRC referred to as “policies of cultural genocide and assimilation.” Young people need to be taught about the most negative forces of history, still present in different forms – having to do with oppression, destruction of cultures, and atrocities – while also being provided with a hopeful kind of learning. Such education should foster the development of capacity to discern patterns and processes of history that represent successful achievements of reconciliation, which helps people learn to perceive advances in justice where they occur, learn to cherish collective actions that jump across previous divides and enhance or kick-start new patterns of cooperation and collaboration among peoples. In history, we see intensely negative and destructive forces, but we also see the movement of positive and constructive forces. While understanding the dark side of human history may be necessary, understanding and learning from the positive side is also required if we are to move forward with the work of reconciliation.

This kind of understanding is not aided by simple slogans or clichés, or the kind of either-or thinking that expresses itself in rigid dichotomies that divide and



fragment our thinking. It requires attending to the conditions necessary for patient and deep appreciation of the multiple principles and practical measures that we need to stitch together if we are to have sustained healing, cumulative and collective learning, and an unbiased recognition of the truths about our history.

Advancing a conversation

The idea of learning is fundamental to the way action is pursued as we encounter others, speak together, and develop partnerships and friendships across barriers that injustice, prejudice and pain have erected. Learning will come as much from mistakes that courageous action generates, as it will from learning based on successes. We have to nurture and build new capacities of joint resolve and determined action. Such capacities are not to be taken for granted, nor expected to mature without attention. Misunderstanding and discomfort are bound to characterize early efforts, but a commitment to learning and understanding helps those involved to overlook the shortcomings of others, become attentive to unconscious prejudices, and continue to work for unity despite the difficulty it often entails. Over time, it allows us to more fully recognize one another for who we are, and to build greater mutual respect and understanding on that basis.

We need to recognize the value of conversation and the qualities that generate productive and advancing conversation. These qualities include: talking issues through, listening carefully, thinking before speaking, and speaking as long as is necessary to be understood if the aim is to generate common understanding. This is a conversational ethic upheld in many Indigenous cultures, and it deserves more attention within wider Canadian society. This attention to dialogue acknowledges that there are no short-cuts to healing and reconciliation, and there can be no healing, reconciliation or justice without taking the time to understand and be understood.

It is that sort of conversation that carries the potential to generate enduring social transformation. This mode of conversation prizes candour and courtesy, respect between all participants, and not merely respect towards those who are the most egregiously wronged victims but also those who may feel misunderstood, and are either correctly or wrongly accused of siding with forces of injustice. The purpose cannot be to assign guilt or shame, but to help all to



understand the role they can play in building mutually respectful relationships. This is part of a genuine process of seeking the truth, of seeking to give all involved the opportunity to participate, and learn and be influenced by the conversation. This has nothing to do with negotiation and compromise, or the play of force, domination and paternalism; neither is it protest and outrage, however understandable such expressions may be. Viewed this way, conversation that aims at generating both personal and collective transformation becomes an expression of justice. The point here is that organizations, institutions, communities – indeed all of us – must somehow expand both the quality and the quantity of those social spaces where such conversations about reconciliation can take place.

A vision of social change

In the long-term, humankind is having to learn to live as one human family in our shared planetary home. This is inescapable if we simply survey history to this point, understanding the imperatives of our single planet and its integrated environment. In that light, we can see positive evidence that the diversity of peoples on the planet is gradually coming together in spirit and good-will, if not yet in workable institutions and harmonious patterns of coordination and social unity. We see the dim outlines of that threshold of maturity for the human race that many peoples foresaw, and which is foretold in Indigenous prophecies. We are living through the turbulence of an adolescent age. At such a time, there are destructive forces that cause enormous suffering. Some live in the most appalling and inequitable circumstances. We do need to learn to overcome those forces. But we need to take account of the positive advances and, most importantly, the reservoir of hope and idealism that lies within the younger generations.

We also need to consider the question of power. Power is often described as a means of domination, or a way of seizing control from someone else. Politics itself is too frequently regarded as a contest, with the goal of seeking power. This model of politics is proving to be ever more divisive and destructive. Relationships of power that prize domination, coercion and control have disproportionately harmed efforts at reconciliation. We need to consider a broader view of power that considers other productive and generative capacities to which we have access. For instance, the power of unity, of love, of humble



service, of pure deeds – these are powers that are often neglected in the realm of social action. When properly and intentionally cultivated, they can generate social possibilities and alternatives that are impossible to produce through coercive power. These powers of the human spirit can be fostered in order to guide and build social relationships based on cooperation and reciprocity, rather than perpetuating an endless struggle between competing groups and interests. Noble goals cannot be achieved by unworthy means. If we seek to build a society based on truth, mutual respect, justice and unity – a society that is sincere about reconciliation- then the means by which social and political change is pursued should reflect these high ideals.

The Baha’i community has had, for a century and more, a long-standing commitment to embracing the role of Indigenous people in society. In 1916, before the Baha’i community in Canada included Indigenous members, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá called on the Baha’is to “attach great importance to the indigenous population of America” because of the unique potential of those peoples to “enlighten the whole world.” The Baha’i community has grown to include Indigenous people among its membership since the 1940s and in its national leadership since the 1970s. We will continue, Indigenous and non-Indigenous alike, to pursue those steps that lead to greater unity, noting the way in which Baha’i concepts overlap with the sacred values, teachings, and practices of Indigenous spiritualities. As varied as those Indigenous values and practices may be across the many Indigenous groups of our land, a number of common features appear to resonate with the Baha’i teachings regarding the nobility of the human being, the wisdom of divine providence and creation, and the immense importance of valuing human lives in a manner in which every individual is considered the trust of the whole, and the unity of the collective can only be insured by giving due attention to justice.

Reconciliation as a spiritual challenge

Fundamentally, reconciliation is a spiritual process. It is a process of realizing the fundamental oneness of humanity in all dimensions of life. Reconciliation requires engaging with one another in a spirit of selfless love, where misunderstandings are overcome through patient and respectful dialogue, and cultural differences provide an occasion to learn from one another. Indigenous cultures understand love as something that includes cooperation, reciprocity



and mutual aid, but they go beyond this in thinking of all people as relatives. This, too, is our conviction as Baha'is. Humanity itself is but one family. As our teachings put it: "shut your eyes to estrangement, then fix your gaze upon unity." We should "not be content with showing friendship in words alone," rather, our hearts should "burn with loving kindness for all who may cross [our] path." That is the spirit by which reconciliation can advance.

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.

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