

Exploring the Connections Between Youth, Religion and Social Change

**Thought piece prepared for the Baha'i Community of Canada
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This thought piece shares insights from a series of conversations with youth across the country, which explored the connections between youth, religion and social change. The Baha'i Community of Canada supported the conversation series, titled "The Spirit of Social Change," which engaged hundreds of youth in almost a dozen conversations in cities throughout Canada.¹ Below, we will explore four broad, yet related questions: Why is it important that youth participate in social change? Why do youth choose to participate (or not) in processes of social change? What are the consequences for youth participation when religion is relegated to the private areas of life? What insights does religion offer to youth participating in social change?

For the purposes of this brief paper, "youth" refers to young people between the ages of 15 to 30. We see religion as a system of knowledge and practice concerned with translating moral and spiritual teachings into social reality. Religion of course is not limited to this definition, but here provides a framework for exploring the relationship between religion and social change. We see processes of social transformation to be animated by a vision of society characterized by unity, justice, love, cooperation, mutual support, the eradication of prejudice, and the removal of social barriers.

The importance of youth participation in social change

Experience shows that the period of youth is distinguished by enthusiasm, a willingness to learn, idealism, a thirst for knowledge, and a desire for justice that can encourage the participation of people of all ages in community building. It is perhaps for these reasons that young people have been and remain today at the

¹ For more information, see: <https://www.couchichinginstitute.ca/conversations/spirit-of-social-change>



forefront of movements that seek to create social change. However, it is also clear that there are also many youth who do not feel connected to their families, schools and communities, nor empowered to participate in the life of society.

There are many reasons to encourage young people to participate in processes of social change. As citizens of this planet and members of humanity, all people have the right and the responsibility to contribute to making the world a better place. Young people are society's future leaders and decision-makers; therefore, the active participation of its younger members is essential for the achievements of one generation not to be lost in the next. Young people, who also often experience the consequences of social problems such as violence, unemployment, and an aggressive consumer culture most directly, have unique perspectives to offer on the state of our society as active protagonists of change rather than mere recipients of benefits. Finally, youth are in the prime of their life, and have a special charge and opportunity to contribute to the wellbeing of their communities that can shape the direction for their future adulthood.

Some sources of youth disengagement

Why do many youth choose not to participate in processes of social transformation? Some young people say they do not have a voice in society, that they are not listened to, and that they do not have the language to express their thoughts. Others comment that the popular notion that youth is a time to pursue pleasure, and that the taking on of responsibility should be delayed affects the way youth see themselves and the way adults perceive youth. More fundamentally, many youth, who are not generally satisfied by superficial explanations for complex problems, say they do not feel inspired by current prevalent discourses about social change and the limited range of opportunities presented to them.

Many of those committed to social change – regardless of their religious affiliation or system of belief – are animated by a vision of society characterized by spiritual values such as unity, justice, love, cooperation, mutual support, the eradication of prejudice, and the removal of social barriers. However, these vital aspects of community building are rarely captured by discourses on social progress that focus on economic growth or political power. When spiritual



dimensions of social change are not taken into account, conversations about change have the risk of becoming superficial, technical, and accessible to only a few “experts”. The importance of personal conduct and cooperative relationships often falls into the background. Too often conversations about social change become abstract, and the larger question of why it is important to take action is lost. This can lead to apathy and disengagement.

A question considered during the conversation series was: Why are spiritual and ethical issues not discussed in prevalent public discourse on social change? One reason proposed is that there is a lack of consensus on what terms such as “unity” and “justice” mean, and difficulty in measuring them. It is often easier to talk about the more visible aspects of reality and measurable indicators of social change. Another reason that spiritual ideas are not part of the dominant conversation on social change is that religion is the main source of spiritual insight, and that it has – with some justification – widely viewed as a source of conflict. Furthermore, spiritual values are not even always present in prevalent social discourses or perspectives about religion itself, where customs and traditions may take greater attention than the moral principles at their core. Still another reason is the widespread belief that issues of religion and spirituality are personal matters that are best discussed in the privacy of one’s home or place of worship, if at all.

Efforts to relegate religion to private life have had unintended negative consequences for young people. First, religious youth describe feeling marginalized from the dominant public conversation and feel as if they have to ascribe to a distinct set of beliefs in public and another one in private, which leads to emotional turmoil. Second, some young people grow up in inward-looking religious communities that primarily look after their own adherents with limited attention to social transformation. These communities can foster conditions in which prejudice and misunderstandings about outsiders are spread. Social division, fundamentalism, and suspicion can be a product of confining religious discourse to private life. A third consequence of relegating religion to the private sphere is that religion becomes divorced from a vision of collective transformation and becomes solely about individual fulfillment, in some cases becoming virtually indistinguishable from goods or services available in the marketplace.



Another consequence of limiting religious discussion to the home or places of worship is that many young people do not have access to religious knowledge and insight. When complemented by scientific thought, knowledge from religion has the potential to provide youth with a moral structure, a comprehensive narrative with which to make sense of their lives, and a framework that helps guide their decisions. A lack of tools to make sense of their lives leads to what some describe as a spiritual void, confusion, a lack of clarity, apathy, and despair, a condition that is widespread. A lack of a moral structure, profound spiritual convictions, and clearly articulated values also makes young people more susceptible to manipulation by powerful influences such as selfishness and materialism wielded by institutions and organizations with powerful agendas. These influences, not always easy to detect, can be passively received and erode moral structures.

Religion offers spiritual and intellectual resources for transformation

Religion provides spiritual and intellectual resources for young people trying to make sense of their lives, and to participate in the transformation of society. It provides tools to assist young people to choose hope over despair, love over hate, and participation over apathy and indifference. It also offers a vision of a society in which all participate rather than only a few. In the field of service to others, religious communities can foster a sense of friendship, solidarity, and unity that is essential to creating social change. Some questions that emerge in relation to this theme include: What is it about religion that provides hope and fosters participation? How does religion promote friendship and solidarity and foster a sense of community? What role does friendship, solidarity, and unity play in social change? How can more youth draw from of the spiritual resources and perspectives offered by religion, regardless of their own backgrounds or affiliations?

Several youth shared that they decide not to participate in social change because they do not see how the actions they take make a difference in the world. They wonder: How can I be sure that my actions actually make a difference? What is the point of taking action if I do not see change? Insights from religion, however, can help to endow the smallest actions with meaning.



Spiritual perception gives youth different criteria for evaluating the impact of their actions. It helps them look not only at the results of the action taken but the spirit with which it is undertaken, and the larger context of change of which they are a part. Youth say that seemingly small actions – such as preparing food, spending time with small children or listening to someone as they try to explain their point of view – when offered with love contribute to building a community that reaches across potential boundaries of race, religious difference and culture. Understanding the power of even small actions also allows more people of all walks of life to participate in whatever way they can.

Another question that many youth grapple with is: How do young people go from participating in sporadic action to committing themselves to long-term process of social change, which may not produce immediate results? Religion provides a vision of human existence that extends beyond the needs and requirements of day-to-day life. The goal of building a society characterized by justice, unity, and cooperation will likely take generations to achieve, requiring a long-term vision. When one has a long-term vision, it is easier for one to make the sacrifices needed to achieve difficult goals. No great movement for transformation, from the achievement of democratic government to the abolition of slavery or the establishment of women’s suffrage took place without sacrifice. The accomplishment of significant goals requires sacrificing one’s time, personal resources and inherited habits of thought for a higher aim. Meeting pressing contemporary challenges such as ecological sustainability or the alleviation of the extremes of wealth and poverty also require sacrifice on the part of individuals, communities and institutions. Thus, insights from religion offer a long-term vision of progress that assists youth to understand the importance of sacrifice to advance processes of social transformation.

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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