

9. Unity through Diversity

Locke considered the following a social dilemma: “we feel and hope in the direction of universality, but still think and act particularistically.” In his 1935 “Values and Imperatives” article and later works, this dilemma reappeared, if not as axiomatically given in the human situation, as a seemingly relentless problematic. Locke credits Royce with appreciating the problem of loyalty as group self-interestedness. The possibility of cross-cultural unity, mediated by the principle of reciprocity, is the basis of unity through diversity.

There is, for Locke, a “spiritual equivalence” between various religious faiths. He locates recognition of this within Bahá’í history, but considers its origin less important than its adoption. The acceptance of spiritual equivalence, Locke suggests, is a positive good that can be beneficial in limiting sectarian conflict.

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Unity Through Diversity: A Bahá'í Principle

There is one great spiritual advantage in the tidal series of negative upsets and breakdowns in the contemporary world and that is the ever-accumulative realization of the need for a complete reconstruction of life. Even among the unintellectual classes and in the most partisan circles the idea of reform and radical change meets no effective resistance, where but a short while ago, any suggestion of change would have met both emotional and doctrinal resistance to a serious degree. And although there is still a considerable amount of surviving partisanship in the notion of specific cures and panaceas, each based on some over-emphasis on some special view or theory or formula, in many cases,—perhaps the majority, there has come the recognition that superficial and local change are alike insufficient, and that to cure or affect modern ills, any remedy seriously proposed must be fundamental and not superficial, and wide-scale or universal rather than local or provincial. And so the most usual sanctions of contemporary thinking even for partisan and sectarian causes are the words “universal,” “international,” “human.” Ten years ago, national, racial, or some equivalent circumscribed loyalty and interest would have been unquestioningly assumed, and agitated almost without apology as axiomatic. I regard this change, although as yet a negative gain, as both one of the most significant and positive steps forward that humanity has taken,—or rather,—has been forced to take.

In this dilemma of doubt and frantic search, many are the gods and principles invoked, and doubtless a few of the many will turn out historically to have had saving grace. For certainly no pure principle can of itself do more than motivate or sanction; mankind is not saved by declarations and professions of faith, but by works and ideas. However, in the doing and the acting, there is always the important factor of the orientation and attitude which are so vital, and often the initial aspect of a new way of life. In this connection, I think, it is of the utmost importance to recognize as an influential factor in the contemporary situation a common trend toward universalism. Even though it is not yet accepted as a general principle, as a general desire and an ideal goal, the demand for universality is beyond doubt the most characteristic modern thing in the realm of spiritual values, and in the world of the mind that reflects this realm.

But when we come to the statement of this generally desired universality, we fall foul of countless nostrums, and welter again in the particularisms that we have inherited from tradition and our factional and denominationalized world. Here, then, is the present dilemma;—we feel and hope in the direction of universality, but still think and act particularistically. And in many ways and connections, it seems that we must. Is there no solution to this typical but tragic situation?

It is just at this juncture that the idea of unity in diversity seems to me to become relevant, and to offer a spiritual common denominator of both ideal and practical efficacy. What the contemporary mind stands greatly in need of is the divorce of the association of uniformity with the notion of the universal, and the substitution of the notion of equivalence. Sameness in difference may be a difficult concept for us,—it is. But the difficulty is historical and traditional, and is the specific blight and malady of the modern and Western mind. I take it for granted that the desire and effort to reach universality in the characteristic modern and Western way would be fatal if possible, and is fortunately impossible in practice. Only in the chastisement of defeat will it be recognized how unnecessary and hopeless the association of the two concepts really is. Spiritual unity is never achieved by an exacting demand for conformity or through any program of imposed agreement. In fact, the demands of such an attitude are self-defeating. What we need to learn most is how to discover unity and spiritual equivalence underneath the differences which at present so disunite and sunder us, and how to establish some basic spiritual reciprocity on the principle of unity in diversity.

This principle is basic in the Bahá'í teaching. It may lead us to another dangerous partisanship to assert it as exclusively. Bahá'í; but there is no escaping the historical evidences of its early advocacy and its uncompromising adoption by the Bahá'í prophets and teachers. But it is not the time for insisting on this side of the claim; the intelligent, loyal Bahá'í should stress not the source, but the importance of the idea, and rejoice not in the originality and uniqueness of the principle but rather in its prevalence and practicality. The idea has to be translated into every important province of modern life and thought, and in many of these must seem to be independently derived and justified. Suffice it, if the trend and net result are in the same general and progressive direction and serve to bring some values and

behaviour nearer to the main ideal. Through the realization of this, and the welcome acceptance of all possible collaboration, a spiritual leadership and influence can be exerted that is otherwise impossible. And no narrow cultism, however pious and loyal, can accomplish this. The purity of Bahá'í principles must be gauged by their universality on this practical plane. Do they fraternize and fuse with all their kindred expressions? Are they happy in the collaborations that advocate other sanctions but advance toward the same spiritual goal? Can they reduce themselves to the vital common denominators necessary to mediate between other partisan loyalties?

We should not be over-optimistic. The classical statements of this and other basic Bahá'í teachings like the oneness of humanity are on the lips and tongues of many, but almost every specific program enlisting the practical activities of men today still has in it dangerous elements of sectarianism. And to the old sectarianisms that we could possibly regard as having had their day, there is constantly being added new ones that are very righteous in the view of their adherents. Oppressed classes and races cannot be told that their counter-claims forced from them by the natural reactions and resistance to suppression and restriction should yield in the early hours of their infancy to broader and less specific loyalties. These new nationalisms and other causes will not listen immediately to such caution or impose upon themselves voluntarily such unprecedented sacrifices. Let us take specific instances. Can anyone with a fair-minded sense of things, give wholesale condemnation to the partisanship of Indian Nationalism, or Chinese integrity and independence, or Negro and proletarian self-assertion after generations of persecution and restriction? Scarcely,—and certainly not at all unless the older partisanship that have aroused them repent, relax, and finally abdicate their claims and presumptions.

On questions like these we reach the crux of the problem, and seem to face a renewal and intensification of national, class and racial strife. Is there no remedy?

In my view, there is but one practical way to the ideal plane on which a cessation or abatement of the age-old struggle can be anticipated with any degree of warrant. And that is in the line of not asking a direct espousal of universalism at the expense of the natural ambitions and group interests concerned; but rather to ask on the

basis of reciprocity a restriction of these movements to their own natural boundaries, areas and interests. Josiah Royce, one of the greatest of the American philosophers saw this problem more clearly than any other Western thinker, and worked out his admirable principle of loyalty, which is nothing more or less than a vindication of the principle of unity in diversity carried out to a practical degree of spiritual reciprocity.

Of course, it will be a long time yet before the mind of the average man can see and be willing to recognize the equivalence of value between his own loyalties and those of all other groups, and when he will be able to assert them without infringement of similar causes and loyalties. But when the realization comes from hard necessity that the only alternative policy is suicidal, perhaps we can count on a radical reversal of what still seems to be the dominant and ineradicable human failing and propensity to continue the tragic narrow self-assertiveness of the human past.

In starting with the unequivocal assertion of equivalence and reciprocity between religions, the Bahá'í teaching has touched one of the trunk-nerves of the whole situation. But it seems that this principle needs to be carried into the social and cultural fields, because there the support and adherence of the most vigorous and intellectual elements in most societies can be enlisted. Translated into more secular terms, a greater practical range will be opened up for the application and final vindication of the Bahá'í principles. Only the narrowly orthodox will feel any loss of spirituality in this, and the truly religious-minded person will see in it a positive multiplication of spiritual power, directly proportional to the breadth and variety of the interests touched and motivated. The Bahá'í teaching proposed a religion social and modern in its objectives; and so the challenge comes directly home to every Bahá'í believer to carry the universal dimension of tolerance and spiritual reciprocity into every particular cause and sectarianism that he can reach. His function there is to share the loyalties of the group, but upon a different plane and with a higher perspective. He must partake of partisanship in order to work toward its transformation, and help keep it within the bounds of constructive and controlled self-assertion.

Each period of a faith imposes a special new problem. Is it too much to assume that for us the problem of this particular critical de-

cade is just this task of transposing the traditional Bahá'í reciprocity between religions into the social and cultural denominationalisms of nation, race and class, and vindicating anew upon this plane the precious legacy of the inspired teachings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Bahá'u'lláh? Certainly that is my reverent conviction and my humble suggestion.