

The challenge of diversity in Singapore and a Bahá'í perspective

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What is Diversity?

Many definitions can be found on diversity. For the purpose of this paper, following will be used to explain the concept of diversity:

“The concept of diversity encompasses acceptance and respect. It means understanding that each individual is unique, and recognizing our individual differences. These can be along the dimensions of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, age, physical abilities, religious beliefs, political beliefs, or other ideologies.”¹

Diversity is "otherness," or those human qualities that are different from our own and outside the groups to which we belong, yet are present in other individuals and groups. “It is important to distinguish between the primary and secondary dimensions of diversity.”²

Examples of primary dimensions are: age, ethnicity, gender, physical abilities/qualities, race and sexual orientation. Examples of secondary dimensions are those that can be changed: educational background, geographic location, income, marital status, military experience, parental status, religious beliefs, and work experiences.

There is also a negative aspect called “Forced Diversity or Artificial Diversity” which is defined for instance in “the hiring or admission of the government-defined correct numbers of certain protected classes, i.e., supposedly "disadvantaged" persons of color.” There are some who feel that Forced Diversity is the antithesis of merit whereas “non-discrimination means treating everyone fairly without regard to race, gender or ethnicity.”³

While diversity can cover a spectrum of dimensions, for the purpose of this paper is an attempt to touch on some of the more visible and commonly known prejudices of culture, gender, race, religion, and even personality differences and where there may be references made in the Baha'í Teachings. This will help to provide some insights into what the Bahá'í Faith teaches in creating a world community that is now far flung and found in 191 countries and 46 territories with more than 2112 indigenous tribes, races and ethnic groups represented.⁴

Issues faced by Singapore

Diversity related issues are quite rife these days. Following the Sept 11 events, the problems of differences of races, creed and culture have become even more acute.

“Since Sept 11, a sickness of isolation, fear and suspicion has permeated not only Singapore, but the rest of the world. And it goes beyond differences in race.”⁵ In the same issue of Straits Times, same page, an IHT columnist wrote about France's rift “It's not about colour but culture” and alluded to cultural prejudice fuelled by different types of rear including “a fear of change”. And yet again, the same day's editorial highlighted “race troubles down under” and pointing to the racism that will threaten Australia's achievement in creating a plural society.

As recent as 1997, a survey was conducted in a University here. The conclusion is “Singapore as a country is first and foremost concerned about its image in the world market. In addition to positioning itself as one of the cleanest, safest places in Southeast Asia, it also prides itself on its dealings in business (e.g., McDermott et al., 1997) and in terms of racial harmony. Yet, beneath that claim, the cast study reported offers avenues for reconsideration and reconstruction.”⁶

The Government has been sensitive and alert to these potential problems. Among the actions taken are the creation of "Inter-Racial Confidence Circles" (IRCC) for the constituencies and "Harmony Circles" (HCs) for schools, work places and other local organizations in January 2002 with a National Steering Committee (NSC) on IRCCs provides broad guidance for IRCCs to deepen inter-racial and inter-religious rapport within the community.

A set of Guidelines on Family Friendly Workplace Practices was issued by the National Tripartite Advisory Panel (NTAP) to develop Family Friendly Workplaces in August 2004.

The objective is to facilitate the development and successful implementation of family friendly workplace practices by setting out the recommended employment code of conduct. This code promotes the responsible application and usage of such work practices by employers and employees

There is even a piece of legislation “Maintenance of Parents Act” which inter alia requires “one or more of his children pay him a monthly allowance or any other periodical payment or a lump sum for his maintenance”⁷

As to how effective these guidelines and grass root structures remain to be seen. The Singapore Constitution states that all persons are equal before the law and are entitled to equal protection under the law. In line with the principle of equality and good employment practices, employers should not select candidates on grounds of race, religion, descent or age, which are of no relevance to a job.”⁸

Despite various guidelines and acts, prejudices exist to some degree.

There have been instances of employment discrimination for example in Singapore, and as a result of which the MOM had to convene the tripartite group of representatives from the Employers, Union and Government to issue employment guidelines stating inter alia: “Candidates for jobs should be selected based on merit, experience, capability and other relevant job requirements. ... in line with the principle of Meritocracy in Singapore.”

Another example of employment discrimination was as recent as May last year (2005) when a condominium refused to employ Indian guards.⁹ Members of the public and the Ministry of manpower reacted. Some were even wondering if the Government might legislate so as to reduce discrimination.

Diversity related legislations in Singapore are not new as the Singapore’s Penal Code already contains a number of laws relating to religious harmony and protection of women. For example “Uttering words, etc., with deliberate intent to wound the religious feelings of any person.” Another one that is quite well known is “Assault or use of criminal force to a person with intent to outrage modesty.”¹⁰

Other legislations include the Retirement Age Act and the inter-religious harmony act.

There is also a Presidential Council for Minority Rights which “has the potential to be transformed into a major institution where minority representation and interests may be

safeguarded.”¹¹

It is worth noting that one of the recommendations is that “The state should consider the philosophical tensions between ethnicity that is mutually exclusive and national identity that is mutually inclusive.” Another recommendation is that “Ethnic categories should not be utilized to characterize communities for negative indicators like drug addiction, divorce rates and juvenile delinquency. Such utilization can create stereotypical images.”¹²

Diversity can be a competitive advantage and there is need to leverage unique talents, ideas, experiences to be successful in a competitive market. Singapore encourages foreign talents and this too is an additional challenge to multiculturalism. Findings so far is that “there are more sojourners than settlers and a local-foreign divide is perceptible”¹³

Diversity cannot be legislated. While it is important and crucial to protect the minorities in the community, meeting the diversity challenge has to go deeper to effect a transformation and to eventuate a truly national and international community. A lot of times, people are encouraged to have the right attitude of tolerance.

In his article on 21st century diversity myths and facts, David P. Tulin, cited one of the myths that “the best way to change individuals and organizations is by changing attitudes.” The fact is: It's not what one thinks of others, but what one does to others that count. Often, we judge ourselves by our intentions; and others judge us by our behaviors. Attitude alone is insufficient to change individuals and organizations.

Bahá'u'lláh Himself and His followers suffered tremendously from the various prejudices due to the ignorance shrouding the ecclesiastics and the authorities of those days. One of the earliest adherents of the Faith among the more than 30,000 that were killed included a famous Persian lady poetess by the name of Tahirih. She died for her belief and practice and was accused of having removed her veil, a requirement of women in the Middle East in those days; as Bahá'i beliefs included equality between man and woman. Having to live with different cultures and communities in the course of His exile in Iraq, Turkey and eventually to the Holy Land (modern Israel), Bahá'u'llah and His band of faithful believers Even till these days, the Baha'i Faith despite its 160 yrs old history is still being discriminated against including in its country of origin.

A Bahá'i perspective

The Bahá'i Writings denounces prejudices of all kinds and that these “are destructive of divine foundations in man. All the warfare and bloodshed in human history have been the outcome of prejudice. This earth is one home and native land. God has created mankind with equal endowment and right to live upon the earth. As a city is the home of all its inhabitants although each may have his individual place of residence therein, so the earth's surface is one wide native land or home for all races of humankind. All are the children and servants of God.”¹⁴

No where in the history of religions are there more revealed Writings and guidance given on such issues than that found in the Bahá'i Faith. However, as diversity issues can cover a whole wide range of variation in the qualities or attributes in human beings, from age to personality and politics, we will have to limit ourselves to just a few for the purpose of this paper.

The five common diversity related issues that arise in Singapore are: culture, race, religion, gender, and age. What follows will be some relevant quotes from the Bahá'i Holy Writings. In

fact, there are so many allusions to these topics that this paper will not do justice to such important topics.

Culture

The Bahá'í viewpoint of diversity says in reality, beyond the external differences, human beings really share an essential spiritual relativity. Notwithstanding the diverse cultures, classes, lifestyles and persuasions “people are all involved in the human struggle for spiritual development and evolution.”¹⁵

Despite 160 years of history, Baha'is themselves sometimes grapple with the challenge of cultural diversity. For instance, in a letter addressed to Canada, the issue of cultural diversity was answered by the Universal House of Justice:

“Your letter raises the issue of cultural diversity within the Baha'i community. The Faith seeks to maintain cultural diversity while promoting the unity of all peoples. Indeed, such diversity will enrich the tapestry of human life in a peaceful world society. The House of Justice supports the view that in every country the cultural traditions of the people should be observed within the Baha'i community as long as they are not contrary to the Teachings. The general attitude of the Faith towards the traditional practices of various peoples is expressed in the following statement of Shoghi Effendi's, published in "The World Order of Baha'u'llah US 1982 edition, pages 41-42.

“Let there be no misgivings as to the animating purpose of the world-wide Law of Baha'u'llah It does not ignore, nor does it attempt to suppress, the diversity of ethnical origins, of climate, of history, of language and tradition, of thought and habit, that differentiate the peoples and nations of the world.... Its watchword is unity in diversity such as 'Abdu'l-Baha Himself has explained:

"Consider the flowers of a garden Diversity of hues, form and shape enricheth and adorneth the garden, and heighteneth the effect thereof..."

The House of Justice also spoke about the long process before the diversity of a world unity and as envisaged in a world commonwealth of nations, which Bahá'is believe will be the promised Golden Age. “Much wisdom and tolerance will be required, and much time must elapse until the advent of that great day.”¹⁶

Race

“Racism is a pernicious and persistent evil. It represents a major blight on human progress.”¹⁷

“Racism retards the unfoldment of the boundless potentialities of its victims, corrupts its perpetrators, and blights human progress. Recognition of the oneness of mankind, implemented by appropriate legal measures, must be universally upheld if this problem is to be overcome.”¹⁸

From its early beginning since its inception in 1844 the principle of the oneness of mankind has been a basic tenet and teaching in the Bahá'í Faith.

It was only in 1966 that the United Nations adopted the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination and used a definition of racist discrimination:

...any distinction, exclusion, restriction or preference based on race, colour, descent, or national or ethnic origin which has the purpose or effect of nullifying or impairing the recognition, enjoyment or exercise, on an equal footing, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural or any other field of public life. ¹⁹

“Bahá'u'lláh taught the Oneness of humanity; that is to say, all the children of men are under the mercy of the Great God. They are the sons of one God; they are trained by God. He has placed the crown of humanity on the head of every one of the servants of God. Therefore all nations and peoples must consider themselves brethren. They are all descendants from Adam. They are the branches, leaves, flowers and fruits of One Tree. They are pearls from one shell. But the children of men are in need of education and civilization, and they require to be polished, till they become bright and shining. It is racial, patriotic, and religious and class prejudice that has been the cause of the destruction of Humanity.²⁰

There is one God; mankind is one; the foundations of religion are one. Let us worship Him, and give praise for all His great Prophets and Messengers who have manifested His brightness and glory.²¹

Bahá'is are convinced that the failure to recognize the principle of the oneness of humanity, has undermined the moral foundation of human society and racism is the symptom. To eliminate racism entirely, we must have the “unshakable conviction of the oneness of the human race.”

Suppressing the symptom of racism does not cure the disease, but curing the disease of not accepting the oneness of the human race will eliminate the symptom.

Religion

“Religious fanaticism and hatred”, Bahá'u'lláh warns, “are a world devouring fire, whose violence none can quench. The Hand of Divine power can, alone, deliver mankind from this desolating affliction....”

While subscribing to the essential message of religion is immutable and in Bahá'u'lláh's words, “the changeless Faith of God, eternal in the past, eternal in the future,” problems arise when followers the various faiths “prove unable to distinguish between its eternal and transitory features” The transitory features are those for instance which revolve around the understanding of religion's social role which naturally changes from time to time. “The remedy the world needeth in its present-day afflictions can never be the same as that which a subsequent age may require” This is the pivotal principle for progressive revelation of the Divine.

While it is true to speak of the unity of all religions, understanding of the context is vital. At the deepest level, as Bahá'u'lláh emphasizes, there is but one religion.

The growing dangers of religious prejudices arising from not truly appreciating the diversity of the Faiths can be catastrophic. While upholding the principle of the oneness of religion as one of the central Teachings of the Bahá'i Faith, the Bahá'is are not ambiguous about who they believe is their Avatar or spiritual Educator for this age. With the succession of past Divine revelations including the major Faiths of the world, Bahá'is believe Bahá'u'lláh is the latest Redeemer and Founder of a world civilization. His Teachings “Think not that We have revealed unto you a mere code of laws. Nay, rather, We have unsealed the choice Wine with the fingers of might and power.”

Only an adequate study and understanding of the Bahá'i scriptures can one eradicate one's prejudices of religion. Despite the diversity of backgrounds, members of the Bahá'i community

everywhere has experienced the love, unity, tolerance and upheld the principle of “the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion and belief “ as a practical possibility.

Another aspect of diversity is the issue of gender.

Singapore passed the Women's Charter in 1961 to protect the rights of women and girls in Singapore, due much to the pioneering work in the field of women's rights largely influenced by a Bahá'í, Mrs. Shirin Fozdar, who was also an outspoken champion of women. The Women's Charter is also an Act which provides the legal basis for equality between husband and wife.²²

In the realm of gender, “Until womankind reaches the same degree as man, until she enjoys the same arena of activity, extraordinary attainment for humanity will not be realized; humanity cannot wing its way to heights of real attainment.”²³

To the Bahá'ís, the equality of man and woman is both a moral and spiritual standard And as long as “women are prevented from attaining their highest possibilities, so long will men be unable to achieve the greatness which might be theirs.”

In fact Bahá'ís believe that "when women participate fully and equally in the affairs of the world, when they enter confidently and capably the great arena of laws and politics war will cease."²⁴

The role of education for women is a very urgent and important one. It starts with the children classes and women Bahá'ís play very active and significant roles in the Bahá'í administration and Community development. “Man and woman both should be educated equally and equally regarded.”²⁵

In fact, such is the great station of women that in a tablet Bahá'u'lláh said “By My Life! The names of handmaidens who are devoted to God are written and set down by the Pen of the Most High in the Crimson Book. They excel over men in the sight of God. How numerous are the heroes and knights in the field who are bereft of the True One and have no share in His recognition,”

(From a Tablet - translated from the Persian)

Age issue

The challenge of global aging is a real one and not only for Singapore. This demographic crisis will impact on the future growth in living standards, and various social political stability of the each country. One keeps hearing about attempts made to harness an elderly workforce through retraining, financial incentives for employers and reduced wages and CPF contributions and even mandated delayed retirement age. Such attempts cannot be successful without the aged and those who are not aged in the workforce to have a unified moral and spiritual perspective of aging as a whole.

The Bahá'í perspective has always been that one should serve at whatever age. For instance to a 79 year old, the Guardian of the Faith said "Even though you are 79 years old, that does not seem in your case to be any handicap; and in this Cause, as the Guardian has told us there is work for everyone of some sort, of whatever age he or she may be."²⁶

The polarization of age or what is sometimes labeled as the generation gap is not inevitable. Bahá'is too just like any community face this challenge sometimes. “The solution, as in all such cases, is to be found through intelligent and mutual compromise. The old believers have to give

up something of their old conceptions and ways of working in order to better adapt themselves to the changing social conditions and circumstances. The young too must learn to act with wisdom, tact and moderation, and to take advantage and benefit from the age-long experience of their older fellow-believers.”²⁷

Both old and young have something to contribute to the progress and welfare of the community. Baháullah Himself stated in the Book of Laws, “loving-kindness to one's parents hath been linked to recognition of the one true God! Happy they who are endued with true wisdom and understanding, who see and perceive, who read and understand, and who observe that which God hath revealed in the Holy Books of old, and in this incomparable and wondrous Tablet.”²⁸

Interestingly, under the Miscellaneous Exhortations in the same Holy Book of Laws for Bahá'is, The first three are:

“a. To associate with the followers of all religions with fellowship

“b. To honour one's parents

“c. Not to wish for others what one does not wish for one's self”²⁹

Summary and conclusion

This paper is only a small attempt in providing the Bahá'í perspective from the many wonderful Teachings found in the vastness of Bahá'u'lláh's Revealed Scriptures. The diversity of culture, race, religion, gender, and age in Singapore is a major challenge, particularly post September 11. Despite the excellent efforts of the Government of Singapore to galvanize its people towards the vision of one country one people, the transformation of its people has to go beyond the visible areas of change such as through legislations and social reengineering. Only the spiritual dimensions of individual and community life can produce a fundamental reorientation of attitudes, beliefs and habits. Spiritual beliefs and convictions is the most powerful driver of human relations. Bahá'is believe that by drawing the attention of the people to Bahá'u'lláh's message of hope, of love, of practical reconstruction, only can the severity of racial, religious and cultural crisis be mitigated or averted.

¹ <http://gladstone.uoregon.edu/~asuomca/diversityinit.html>

² Source: Diversity At UMCP: Moving Toward Community Plan 1995

³ Ward Connerly, as published in The Egalitarian, August/ September 2005, Volume 8, Issue 3.

⁴ The Bahá'í World vol 2003 p.279

⁵ The Straits Times 17 Dec 2005 pS14 “Embracing Otherhood”

⁶ The Edge: The E-Journal of Intercultural Relations, Summer 1998, Vol. 1(3)

Posted: 6/30/98 Academic Research Report “The Role of Dominant Ethnicity in Racism: Reportage on Chinese Rule in Multi-Racial Singapore by Linda K. Fuller, Ph.D.

⁷ Maintenance of Parents Act. Section 3

⁸ Employment Guidelines <http://ele.ecitizen.gov.sg/Employment/EmploymentGuidelines/> Last updated on 07 December 2005

The Straits Times, 3 May 2005 “No Indian guards, insists condo's managing agent”

¹⁰ Penal code 298, 354, 509

¹¹ Report on IPS Research Forum on Ethnic Relations in Singapore, 24 Oct 2002

Report prepared by Lai Ah Eng (IPS Research Fellow and Coordinator of the IPS Ethnic Relations Project) November 2002 p. 12

¹² ibid

¹³ ibid

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- ¹⁴ Abdu'l-Baha, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 287
- ¹⁵ *Celebrating Diversity: A module for the Local Spiritual Assembly Development process*. P 14
- ¹⁶ 25 July 1988 Letter from the Universal House of Justice (Cultural Diversity) The National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'is of Canada
- ¹⁷ BIC Document #90-0126
UN Document #E/CN.4/1990/NGO/7
- ¹⁸ *The Promise of world Peace* p.8
- ¹⁹ Adopted and opened for signature and ratification by General Assembly resolution 2106 (XX) of 21 December 1965 entry into force 4 January 1969, in accordance with Article 19
- ²⁰ Ibid
- ²¹ Abdu'l-Baha, *Abdu'l-Baha in London*, p. 20
- ²² <http://www.scwo.org.sg/cms/content/view/28/62/>
- ²³ Bahá'í International Community, 1993 Apr 05, *Equality of Men & Women A New Reality*
- ²⁴ 'Abdu'l-Baha, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, pages 134-135.
- ²⁵ Abdu'l-Baha, *Abdu'l-Baha in London*, p. 27
- ²⁶ Written on behalf of the Guardian to an individual believer August 23, 1954: cited by the Universal House of Justice, December 14, 1970
- ²⁷ *Compilations, Lights of Guidance*, p. 638
- ²⁸ *The Kitab-i-Aqdas*, p. 138
- ²⁹ Ibid, p. 159