

IDENTITY RECONSIDERED

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Abstract

Identity-based differences related to race, ethnicity, or religion may not always be the sole reason for conflicts spiraling out of control. However, such divides should not be underestimated, because they may be at the root of violence and armed conflicts. This article looks at some of these contemporary trends and then explores how the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith on nested identities might inform this subject and provide a new framework of analysis. The article further examines some of the consequences arising from narrowly-construed identity formations and, in conclusion, offers some practical ideas for implementing effective peacebuilding programs.

Keywords: *Identity-based conflicts, Baha'i Faith, peacebuilding, global identity, spiritual identity*

Introduction: The Role of Identity in Conflict

Over the last couple of decades, the role that differing ethnic and religious identities have played in armed conflicts has received more academic attention and interest. The conflicts between Israelis and Palestinians in the Middle East, between the Karen and Chin people in Burma, between Indians and Pakistanis in Kashmir, between Hutus and Tutsis in Rwanda, and between Serbs and Albanians in Kosovo are just a few examples; but, in the context of history, the list of such divides is a very long one. In these and similar cases, opposing ethnic and/or religious communities typically have a very strong sense of a particular identity that is juxtaposed against "the other." The armed conflicts that these divides have engendered have led to not only considerable bloodshed, but also in many cases, to the social and economic destruction of entire communities.

Scholars in this field have different opinions regarding the main drivers of conflict and cite a range of

diverse causes, such as competition over land or capital, the holding of different values, unmet psychological needs, social and economic discrimination, or leadership that promotes polarized agendas. While armed conflicts can happen for these and many other reasons, this article takes a closer look at identity affiliations and the "us vs. them" narratives that can be at their core. As Jay Rothman (1997, p. 6) explains in his book *Resolving Identity-Based Conflict: In Nations, Organizations, and Communities*, what may appear to be conventional disputes over something like resources or socioeconomic disparities may actually have deeper roots related to identity. He adds that identity-based conflicts "are deeply rooted in the underlying individual human needs and values that together constitute people's social identities, particularly in the context of group affiliation, loyalties, and solidarity."

Identity formations are not inherently problematic, but can become so when they lead to violence. For example, having diverse identities is an important part of being human and is how individuals find their place in the world and fit into a wider social framework. Forming narratives of who we are in relationship to a collective whole is particularly critical to self development and is the basis for creating meaningful societal bonds.

This concept breaks down however, when the

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primary identity of an individual or group—such as an affiliation with a nation-state, ethnic group, or religion—becomes so all consuming that it leads to violence against those holding opposing views. As Dr. Louis Kriesberg (2003) from Syracuse University suggests, the enduring identities of ethnic groups, identities that are non-compromising, identities built on viewing an enemy as subhuman, or identities associated with nationalist sentiments are among identity formations that can keep conflicts going.

Bahá'í Perspectives on Identity

In light of above, are there approaches that might break these destructive cycles? The rest of this article examines what the Bahá'í writings have to say about identity that might inform this topic and provide new ways to think about how peoples may live together more peaceably.

The place of identity in the Bahá'í Faith is multidimensional. The Faith's writings simultaneously address the imperative of embracing a common human identity that we all share, as well as the value of diversity and individual capacity. Both of these identities (universal and particular) are set in the context of humankind's larger spiritual identity and reality. While Oneness and universality are themes that most religious scholars associate with the Bahá'í Faith's writings, but a closer examination shows that its perspective on identity is considerably more nuanced.

A commitment to the unity of the human race is, indeed, central to the Bahá'í teachings and positioned as the next necessary stage in humanity's evolution. Throughout the Bahá'í writings, its adherents are called to be "world citizens." While this principle may have seemed unrealistic when the Faith was founded in the mid-19th Century, it is less far-fetched today as our interactions with others increasingly transcend traditional boundaries defined by geography, race, culture, or other divides. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the son of the Faith's prophet-founder Bahá'u'lláh and the interpreter of His teachings, spoke widely of these themes in his travels to both Europe and America in the early 20th Century. He spoke of the need for an "unlimited unity" over the more limited unities of lineage, tongue, nation, and politics ('Abdu'l-Bahá 1982, p. 190-194):

The unity which is productive of unlimited results is first a unity of mankind which recognizes that all are sheltered beneath the overshadowing glory of the

All-Glorious; that all are servants of one God; for all breathe the same atmosphere, live upon the same earth, move beneath the same heavens, receive effulgence from the same sun and are under the protection of one God. This is the most great unity, and its results are lasting if humanity adheres to it; but humankind has hitherto violated it, adhering to sectarian or other limited unities such as racial, patriotic or unity of self-interests; therefore no great results have been forthcoming.

Despite the emphasis in the Bahá'í writings on the essential oneness of the human family, its teachings do not disregard other loyalties. Love of one's country, a "sane patriotism," and an individual's pride in their own cultural heritage are all encouraged. The diversities of the human race are likened to a garden that is all the more appealing because of its diversity of shape, fragrance, and color. Shoghi Effendi (2006, p.77), the appointed head of the Bahá'í community until his passing in the mid 1950s, clarified that although recognition of one's place in the larger human family is central to the Bahá'í teachings, this principle

... can conflict with no legitimate allegiances, nor can it undermine essential loyalties. Its purpose is neither to stifle the flame of a sane and intelligent patriotism in men's hearts, nor to abolish the system of national autonomy so essential if the evils of excessive centralization are to be avoided. 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. It calls for a wider loyalty, for a larger aspiration than any that has animated the human race.

The Bahá'í Faith, then, values diversity, but calls its adherents to a wider loyalty to humankind. Yet, identity in the Bahá'í Faith goes beyond understanding one's position in the larger society. It takes on a much more personal and individual character with the emphasis that its teachings place on spiritual identity. In many ways, this is the foundation of all other identity formations. Namely, the Bahá'í writings emphasize that individuals have a physical, intellectual, and spiritual reality. The material world, according to the Bahá'í teachings, largely serves as the means or conduit through which one's spiritual qualities are refined and developed for continued progress in "all the worlds of God."

Bahá'í teachings imply that understanding this

spiritual reality is also central to achieving universal peace. "Until national and international prejudices are effaced in the reality of this spiritual brotherhood," notes 'Abdu'l-Bahá (1982, p. 143), "true progress, prosperity and lasting happiness will not be attained by man." In a similar vein, he refers to the different "collective centers" that characterize the life of humanity. These include patriotism, nationalism, identity of interests, and political alliances. While these affiliations are important to organizing society, he notes, they are "the matter and not the substance, accidental and not eternal, temporary and not everlasting" and will not survive great revolutions and upheavals. Rather, he adds, the eternal collective center is the body of divine teachings that is influenced by the Holy Spirit and that "destroys the foundation of differences" ('Abdu'l-Bahá 1993, p.101-107).

A Closer Look at Divisive Paradigms

The Bahá'í scriptures center around a theme of unity and, as such, there are many passages relating to the attributes, qualities, and even institutional structures needed to attain this goal in a world of great divides. The founders of the Bahá'í Faith, however, were certainly not naïve about the great destruction and upheaval that often occurs in the name of narrowly-construed identities.

Take religion. The Bahá'í writings address both its contributions to society and the way it has been misused. In the first instance, they laud the role of religious leaders who have practiced justice and fairness. Religion in its true form is seen as "conducive to the progress and uplift of the world," as "the cause of human betterment," the "source of human enlightenment," and involving the "acquisition of praiseworthy attributes" ('Abdu'l-Bahá 1982, p. 179)." In a pointed statement to the world's religious leaders in 2002, the international governing body of the Bahá'í Faith—the Universal House of Justice—noted the power of religion to awaken "in whole populations capacities to love, to forgive, to create, to dare greatly, to overcome prejudice, to sacrifice for the common good and to discipline the impulses of an animal instinct" (Universal House of Justice 2002, p. 3).

Conversely, in the second instance the Faith's texts include numerous passages about the damage that religious prejudice has done to society. Harsh words are reserved for those religious leaders who have led people astray to pursue their own selfish agendas.

Bahá'u'lláh himself was subjected to over 40 years of imprisonment, torture, and a series of banishments at the hands of both secular and religious authorities in the Ottoman Empire and Persia in the mid- 19th century when He revealed His cause.

On nationalism and racism, Shoghi Effendi (1980, p. 113) also referenced the "false gods" of "Nationalism, Racialism and Communism" that humanity has blindly worshiped and to which "the flesh and blood of the slaughtered multitudes" have been sacrificed. He went on to state:

The theories and policies, so unsound, so pernicious, which deify the state and exalt the nation above mankind, which seek to subordinate the sister races of the world to one single race, which discriminate between the black and the white, and which tolerate the dominance of one privileged class over all others – these are the dark, the false, and crooked doctrines for which any man or people who believes in them, or acts upon them, must, sooner or later, incur the wrath and chastisement of God.

Numerous references can be found in the Bahá'í writings to those in positions of power during various historical periods who have brought ruin to countless societies and spilled the blood of innocents. In more contemporary documents, the Faith's Universal House of Justice (2002, p. 2) comments on the "horrors being visited upon hapless populations today by outbursts of fanaticism that shame the name of religion" and calls upon both religious leaders and the "battalions of nationalism" to put away the "inflammatory rhetoric designed to provoke hatred and fear of others" and accept the "processes of unification that are transforming the rest of humanity's social relationships."

A recent paper from a Bahá'í-inspired agency called the Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity (2009, p. 2) speaks more broadly to the detrimental effects that divisive ideologies as a whole have had, and are having, on contemporary society:

... those who have sought advantage at the expense of others have often invoked real or imagined differences as a means of dividing people—in order to advance their own interests and ambitions. Over time, these distinctions born of self-interest have solidified into stereotyped constructs related to race, gender, nationality, and ethnicity. These stereotyped constructs have often been used to define human

beings and to divide them into groups. Narrowly identifying with particular physical or social characteristics and placing them at the center of our understanding of self and other has had ruinous consequences, whether that identity has been used as a basis for seeking preference over others or has congealed in response to the experience of prejudice and oppression. The deeply fragmented social reality that we find around us today is, in part, a consequence of these narrow identity constructs and attachments.

This statement, and others like it, invites thoughtful citizens to reflect on whether or not the divisions that have become a “modus operandi” in our contemporary society are sustainable.

Considering Consequences

At worst, strongly-held identity affiliations that position people along “us vs. them” dividing lines result in harm or violence to others. At best, they create an inability to work together for the common good. This latter point is all the more urgent given that the range of global problems that require humanity’s attention, i.e. challenges of environmental destruction, economic collapse, social disorder, etc., are unlikely to be solved if divisive identity constructs, increasingly angry and polarized discourses, and a failure to recognize our common human needs, are making collaboration impossible.

The Bahá’í sacred writings emphasize that the most urgent issues facing humanity can only be addressed collectively, and that norms and institutions need to be updated urgently to reflect a new era in human history. Many contemporary thinkers would similarly acknowledge that the world is at a critical turning point and requires institutions to adapt to a more interdependent reality.

Philosopher Kwame A. Appiah notes, for example, that the challenge before us “is to take minds and hearts formed over the long millennia of living in local troops and equip them with ideas and institutions that will allow us to live together as the global tribe that we have become (2006, p. xiii).” But, an awareness of why it is important to foster a global or common human identity is a necessary precondition. As repeated several times in this paper, that awareness does not preclude a pride in other loyalties, but it does call humanity to a rethinking of those attachments that are causing harmful, destructive divisions in society and to abandon practices that are no longer meeting the requirements of an evolving society.

Of course, as economic and other crises intensify, it may well be that people will form more rigid and exclusive identity groups in the short-term. “While the complexity and extent of the problems of the world require a perspective that sees the interconnected and often global nature of causes to problems, the crises of our times are narrowing the perspectives of vast numbers of people,” suggests Dr. John Woodall, a Bahá’í and formerly a psychiatrist at the faculty of Harvard Medical School (2005, p. 47). He goes on to note that finding the collective will to address global problems will require a broadening of identity that, in part, needs to be taught in a systematic way.

Practical Implementation

The topics presented in this paper may seem abstract at one level, but they also lend themselves to some potential ways to work with different conceptions of identity as tools for peacebuilding and conflict management. The analysis below takes a closer look at working with spiritual and global identities, which, overall, get short shrift compared to a focus on more traditional identity formulations such as nationality.

There are certainly many religious traditions, including the Bahá’í Faith, that emphasize the importance of a spiritual identity and the human soul’s relationship to a divine spirit. But, the question remains how to draw on this untapped energy, depth of knowing, and moral imagination to advance peace. As a contemporary paper from the Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity (2009, p. 2) notes:

Men and women of insight, often inspired by the sacred scriptures of the world, have throughout history sought to broaden human consciousness by drawing attention to that which is most essential about human nature: the inner reality with which every human being is born, the reflection of the Divine in each of us, that which we all share in common, that which is whole within us, as opposed to the fragmented labels with which society tags us in the course of our life.

Great religious leaders, such as Martin Luther King in the United States, Desmond Tutu in South Africa, Mother Theresa in India, and the Dalai Lama in Tibet have been vital voices for peace and justice. And, there are many more “unsung heroes” doing this important work. Most attention in the conflict resolution field or subfield of peace and justice however, particularly in media reporting, is on religion as a

source of division and a cause of conflict rather than a vehicle through which people can experience a shared commitment to a spiritual reality. Of course, interfaith movements have flourished over the last century and there are also many religious actors and peacebuilders who are encouraging interfaith dialogue and supporting reconciliation. Even in interfaith forums though, the focus is often on appreciating the differences, theological and otherwise, between participants rather than on examining the spiritual identities and common values that unite them.

When so many people around the world seek what is spiritual and gives their lives meaning, even when it is not in the sense of following a traditional religious path or structure, such an identity would seem to have an important part to play in renewal. As politicians and intellectuals, especially in the West, often rush to disassociate themselves from anything with a religious or faith-inspired link, it may be that one of the greatest means for transforming societies is being overlooked. "To draw upon the spiritual roots of motivation that lie at the heart of human identity and purpose is to tap the one impulse that can ensure genuine social transformation," suggests the Bahá'í International Community (2001). There are some initiatives that are focusing on learning about the spiritual lives of the "other" and the religious values, for instance compassion and trustworthiness, that are critical to peacebuilding; but, how the spiritual impulse can be supported at the programming level remains a rich avenue to explore. In other words, what are the practical ways that this impulse can be used to foster more collaboration in a given community? There are many initiatives, for example, in the United States that bring people together across faith lines to advance one or more social causes. (A website that this author developed at www.modelsofunity.net also highlights a few of these case studies globally.)

In addition to examining the role of spiritual identities in conflict transformation, there may be nothing that is more urgent than educational initiatives that can move society out of divisive paradigms. There are numerous ways, for example, that young people can learn to appreciate their own ethnic, religious, and cultural heritage without resorting to harmful and hateful messages about the "other." Understanding that diverse identities are nested under the umbrella of a common human identity can help to develop the qualities of compassion and empathy that sit at the core of many traditions—religious and otherwise. And, a deeper understanding of the inter-

dependence of the peoples and nations of the world is not only becoming a moral imperative, but an increasingly needed skill in many professions.

In school settings, especially below the college level, educational initiatives and courses could well frame discussions about religious and nationalist identities in the context of what it means to have a broader human identity and a sense of responsibility to those beyond one's borders. With few exceptions, such as global citizenship-focused courses in select European countries, the curricula in most schools overwhelmingly emphasize national affiliation and identity. Little, if any, time remains for an exploration of global issues, worldviews, or the skills, attitudes, and values needed for becoming a "globally competent" individual and gaining the collaborative skills that this task will require. Teaching about conflict typically takes precedence over teaching the skills for peacebuilding. While understanding the history of conflict and the causes of conflict is a valuable exercise, little change for a better world seems possible if educators remain stuck in this conflict-focused paradigm.

The International Education for Peace Institute (EFP) offers one alternative model. Inspired by Bahá'í ideals, it largely rejects conflict-centered approaches and promotes a unity-based framework in its curricula. It has successfully worked with hundreds of schools in Bosnia and Herzegovina (representing the three main ethnic populations) to create "cultures of peace" in schools. Such educational models that are effectively working to bridge traditional divides in society need far more research and scaling up.

Conclusion

This paper has reviewed identity-based conflicts and some of the key principles of the Bahá'í Faith that might inform this subject. As a concluding observation, it is worth noting that prevailing theories related to identity, and related themes of multiculturalism, are overwhelmingly on 'otherness.' "The prevalent stance that identity is about difference is untenable," suggests Matt Weinberg (2005/6, p. 179), a Bahá'í scholar on this topic. "Perceiving identity through the relativistic lens of separation or cultural preservation ignores compelling evidence of our common humanity and can only aggravate the forces of discord and disagreement now so pervasive in the world," he adds.

The Bahá'í teachings focus less on this 'otherness' and more on unity. For those who see this latter focus

as overly idealistic, it is worth asking whether the culture of conflict and adversarial approaches that seemingly characterize the modern world—not only in the field of international relations, but also in business, advocacy, and the legal realm—is a sustainable model. Taking a glass half full vs. half empty perspective, how would our world look if what unites people is receiving just as much, if not more, attention than what divides them? What if the global community was investing more resources in empowering the connectors in society rather than appeasing its dividers? What if disunity was seen as a cause of conflict rather than just a symptom? What could change vis-à-vis identity-based conflicts if more people accepted the concept of our common human identity? And, how might these principles be reflected in policy? Achieving these goals is not likely in the short term, but the lens through which one sees the world is critical to shaping the attitudes and behaviors that unfold from that understanding.

While this paper has suggested that recognizing our fundamental spiritual reality and common human identity are important steps toward lessening identity-based conflicts, this path is hardly an easy one. Achieving any sense of peace in societies torn apart by ethnic conflict, for example, remains that much more difficult when there is no security, and/or when those who have suffered the most are seeing the perpetrators of violence rewarded for their crimes. As such, justice may be a first priority. And, even in stable societies, achieving unity of thought and action requires a common vision and purpose.

Learning to live together peaceably may happen by conscious choice, but may be more likely to happen by default after continuing world crises that force humanity to face its shared reality. Whatever hardships the immediate future may hold, the world's religions, and religious leaders, have an important part to play in this transformative period. And, ultimately, the Bahá'í teachings offer hope for a future that reflects humanity's growing maturity. As Shoghi Effendi reiterated (1980, p. 117):

The ages of its infancy and childhood are past, never again to return ...while the coming of age of the entire human race is yet to come. The convulsions of this transitional and most turbulent period in the annals of humanity are the essential prerequisites, and herald the inevitable approach, of that Age of Ages ... in which the folly and tumult of strife that has, since the dawn of history, blackened the annals of mankind, will have been finally transmuted into

the wisdom and the tranquility of an undisturbed, a universal, and lasting peace

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