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CIVIL AND POLITICAL RIGHTS, INCLUDING THE QUESTIONS OF:
RELIGIOUS INTOLERANCE

Written statement* submitted by Baha`i International Community, a non-governmental
organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in
accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[3 February 2003]

*This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting
non-governmental organization(s).

From the reports of the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion and Belief, it is clear that serious violations of freedom of religion or belief are continuing the world-over. Extremism and fundamentalism are growing day by day, fueling intolerance and hatred on the basis of religion or belief. It is, therefore, gratifying to note the special emphasis that the Special Rapporteur has placed on the need to prevent religious intolerance and discrimination. We also appreciate his calling for an International Consultative Conference to engage the international community in discussions about the role of schools in that preventive process.

The International Consultative Conference on School Education in Relation to Freedom of Religion or Belief, Tolerance and Non-discrimination, held in Madrid in November 2001 produced a strong statement affirming the right of children to “be brought up in a spirit of peace, tolerance, mutual understanding and respect for human rights.” The final statement from that conference upheld the urgent need to “promote, through education, the protection and the respect for freedom of religion or belief in order to strengthen peace, understanding and tolerance among individuals, groups and nations, and with a view to developing a respect for pluralism”.¹ Widespread respect for freedom of religion or belief is an incredibly important goal in a world torn apart by religious extremism. For this goal to be achieved, however, the children of the world must learn that firmly held religious convictions are compatible with respect for the rights of those whose beliefs differ from their own.

The Madrid Final Document emphasizes the years of primary and secondary school² as being the critical time for instilling attitudes of tolerance and non-discrimination. Indeed the Bahá'í Writings confirm that “It is extremely difficult to teach the individual and refine his character once puberty is passed.... Therefore it is in early childhood that a firm foundation must be laid. While the branch is green and tender it can easily be made straight.” (Tablets of `Abdu'l-Bahá, p. 578)

An integral feature of any educational initiative that would foster respect for the rights of others must be the notion of the oneness and interdependence of the human race. Oneness and diversity are complementary and inseparable. That human consciousness necessarily operates through an infinite diversity of individual minds and motivations detracts in no way from its essential unity. Indeed, it is precisely the respect for diversity that distinguishes unity from uniformity. Hence, acceptance of the concept of unity in diversity implies the development of a global consciousness, a sense of world citizenship, and a love for all of humanity. It fosters in every individual the realization that, since the body of humankind is one and indivisible, each member of the human race is born into the world as a trust of the whole and has a responsibility to the whole. It further suggests that if a peaceful international community is to emerge, then the complex and varied cultural expressions of humanity must be allowed to develop and flourish and to interact with one another in ever-changing patterns of civilization.

We would, therefore, strongly recommend that the curriculum of every school include the principle of the oneness and interdependence of the human family. The children should also be trained in such virtues as kindness, cooperation, peacefulness, respect and tolerance. Children who learn to treat others with respect also learn to respect themselves. Children who grow up caring about the welfare of others are unlikely to be the purveyors of hatred and intolerance as adults.

¹ Madrid Final Document, November 2001, operative para. 1

² Madrid Final Document, operative para. 8

We would also urge that children learn to view the riches of humanity's religious heritage through the lens of unity. As stated in the Bahá'í Writings, "There can be no doubt whatever that the peoples of the world, of whatever race or religion, derive their inspiration from one heavenly Source, and are the subjects of one God." (Gleanings, p. 217) The world's religions can thus be seen to be one in their nature and purpose with each being a wellspring of knowledge, energy and inspiration. They each have served to unlock a wider range of capacities within human consciousness and society, impelling the human race toward moral and spiritual maturity. Accordingly, curricula exploring the history and teachings of religion may wish to highlight the complementary aims and functions of the world's faith systems as well as the theological and moral threads that link them.

Clearly much soul searching and reflection will be necessary within *and* between various religious and belief communities before this principle of the unity of religion will be universally embraced. An important contribution can be made by inter-religious dialogue, in deeply pondering the reality of, and urgent need for, a penetrating understanding of the essential oneness of religion, despite the obvious diversity of expression and practice. In the Bahá'í perspective, this *is* the true purpose of religion: "to establish unity and concord amongst the peoples of the world."³

There is a unique power inherent in religion that, if channeled appropriately, can serve as the strongest contributor to unity and understanding amongst the peoples of the world. Religion has shaped human civilization profoundly and positively over many centuries, and the Bahá'í International Community has no doubt that it can and will contribute to establishing bonds of genuine respect among the peoples of the world.

³ Bahá'u'lláh, Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh, The ninth Ishráq, p. 129