

Tolerance as a Foundation for Unity and Justice: Perspectives from the Bahá'í International Community

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ABSTRACT

Strengthening societal norms of tolerance is a matter of high priority for many policy makers, as numerous areas are witnessing increasing signs of social cleavage, unrest, and turmoil. The importance of tolerance is well recognized in the United Nations Organization and the multilateral system more broadly. Yet experience shows that tolerant societies emerge only to the degree that conscious efforts to promote the values, qualities, and attitudes needed to sustain them. In this paper I examine the ethical and philosophical foundations of the notion of tolerance through analysis of the landmark Declaration of Principles on Tolerance, developed by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). I then explore the critical role to be played by education, particularly moral and values-based education, in building tolerant and inclusive societies. This exploration is grounded in analysis of grassroots efforts undertaken by the worldwide Bahá'í community, including the specific examples of the Sistema de Aprendizaje Tutorial (Tutorial Learning System) undertaken across Latin America, and a network of development organizations dedicated to the establishment of community schools across Africa, Asia, and the Pacific. These case studies suggest that, in addition to being a desired end in its own right, tolerance is a necessary prerequisite and instrumental means of bringing about a variety of other desired social conditions, particularly freely chosen unity and impartial justice.