

**Reclaiming Freedom of Conscience, Religion or Belief
to Promote Social Integration**

While much attention has been given to the socio-economic dimensions of social integration, attention must now be given to an often overlooked dimension, namely the protection every individual's freedom of conscience, religion or belief.

The human being is not only an economic and social creature, but also a noble one with a free will and a conscience that make possible the search for meaning and for truth. Without the freedom to pursue this fundamentally human quest, neither dignity nor justice is possible. Yet, approximately half of the world's population still lives under laws, which restrict the right to freely adopt and change one's religion or beliefs.

A number of developments on the world stage highlight the need for the Commission's attention to this issue: an increasing movement of people is straining efforts to create cohesive societies; religious oppression continues to undermine social and political stability; and the concept of the "defamation of religions" has restricted the space for public debate of belief-related issues. In virtually all parts of the world, religion has become a subject of major political and social importance.

The Bahá'í International Community would like to take this opportunity to highlight possible lines of action to assist with the protection of this essential freedom to promote social integration.

First is the promotion of literacy and education: women, men and children who can read their own scriptures and those of others, who are free to question and discuss, will be better prepared to counter ignorance and fanaticism. The Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools—an initiative of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe—provides a recent example of an effort to promote a better understanding of the role that religions play in today's pluralistic world.

Another example comes from the government of the United Kingdom, which, in response to a report from its Commission on Integration and Cohesion, has launched a plan to tackle community tensions. It includes a consultative process to develop a strategy for fostering meaningful interactions between people from different faith communities, and between faith communities and wider civil society. These are but two examples among many springing up around the world.

As possible next steps for advancing the freedom of conscience, religion or belief to promote social integration, we recommend:

- That governments request that the Commission acknowledge the role of this freedom in social development and in the establishment of cohesive and just societies;

- That the UN initiate research into the connection between freedom of conscience, religion or belief and various dimensions of social development;
- That governments call for a Secretary-General's report on the status of this freedom, examining also the limitations of this freedom on particularly vulnerable groups, to better understand how this hinders social integration.

We believe that the individual's freedom of conscience, religion and belief is at the core of social development and of efforts to create a just and harmonious society. The human mind must be free to think, to know, and to believe.