



# ONE COUNTRY

"The earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens" — Bahá'u'lláh

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## RELIGION

### Unprecedented act of senior cleric for religious coexistence resonates across religions

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NEW YORK ? In a symbolic and unprecedented act, Ayatollah Abdol-Hamid Masoumi-Tehrani, a prominent Muslim cleric in



Iran, announced

on 7 April 2014 that he has gifted to the Bahá'ís of the world an illuminated work of calligraphy of a paragraph from the writings of Bahá'u'lláh, the Prophet-founder of the Bahá'í Faith.

The gift comes in the wake of several recent statements by religious scholars in the Muslim world who have set out alternative interpretations of the teachings of Islam in which tolerance of every religion is, in fact, upheld by the holy Quran.

The action has generated a hopeful response from many quarters, including extensive comments from Arab and Muslim thinkers worldwide.

‘This is a most welcome and hopeful development with possible implications for the coexistence of the peoples of the world,’ said Ms. Bani Dugal, the principal representative of the Bahá’í International Community to the United Nations.

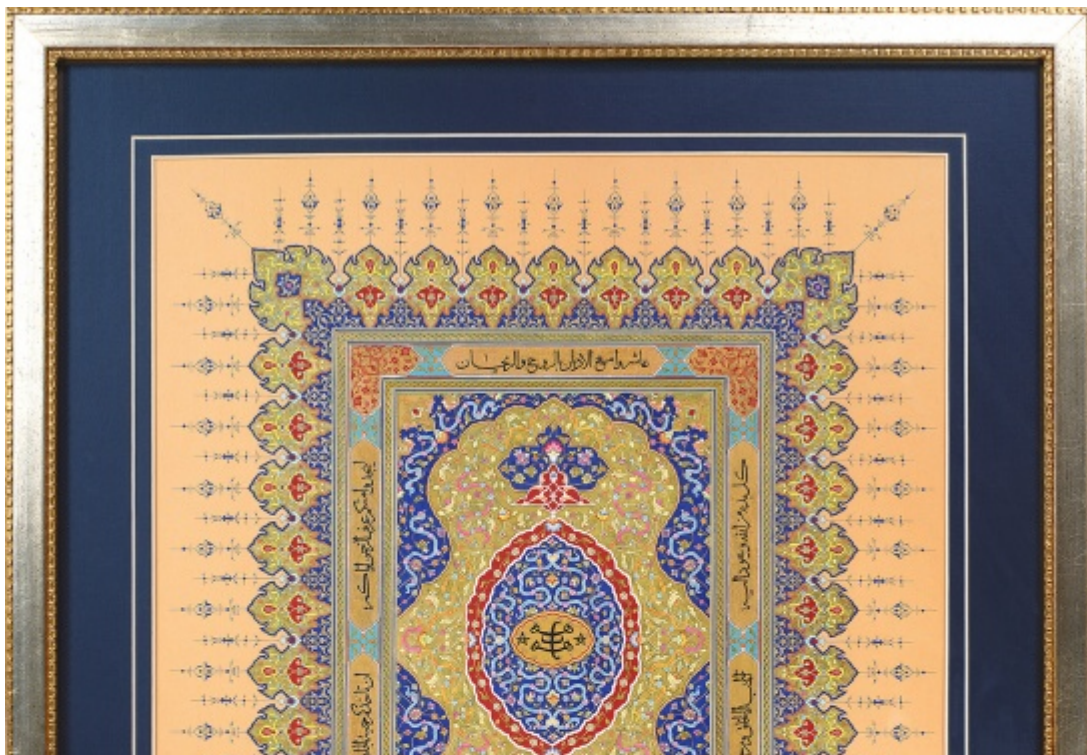
Ayatollah Tehrani stated on his website that he prepared the calligraphy of the verse as a ‘symbolic action to serve as a reminder of the importance of valuing human beings, of peaceful coexistence, of cooperation and mutual support, and avoidance of hatred, enmity and blind religious prejudice.’

Ayatollah Tehrani presented this exquisite gift to the Bahá’ís of the world, particularly to the Bahá’ís of Iran, who he said ‘have suffered in manifold ways as a result of blind religious prejudice.’ He further said that his act is ‘an expression of sympathy and care from me and on behalf of all my open-minded fellow citizens.’

In response, Ms. Dugal said: ‘The Bahá’í International Community is deeply touched by this act of high-mindedness and the sentiments of religious tolerance and respect for human dignity that prompted it.

‘This bold action by a senior Muslim cleric in contemporary Iran is unprecedented,’ said Ms. Dugal. ‘It is also remarkable in light of the ongoing and systematic persecution of the Bahá’í community in that country by the Islamic government.’

The intricate artwork must have taken several months to painstakingly prepare by hand. It features at its center, a symbol known to Bahá’ís as ‘The Greatest Name’ – a calligraphic representation of the conceptual relationship between God, His prophets and the world of creation. The gift measures at approximately 60cm x 70cm and is illuminated in a classical style. Ayatollah Tehrani’s other artworks include the illumination of the Quran, the Torah, the Psalms, the New Testament, and the Book of Ezra. His illumination of the Psalms is currently being held in the United States Library of Congress.



Ayatollah Tehrani chose to cite in the gift is taken from Bahá'u'lláh's *Kitab-i-Aqdas* "Most Holy Book." It reads "Consort with all religions with amity and concord, that they may inhale from you the sweet fragrance of God. Beware lest amidst men the flame of foolish ignorance overpower you. All things proceed from God and unto Him they return. He is the source of all things and in Him all things are ended."

On previous occasions, Ayatollah Tehrani has with great courage publicly voiced concern about the ongoing and severe persecution of religious minorities, including the Bahá'ís in Iran. Since the Islamic Revolution in 1979, hundreds of Bahá'ís have been killed and thousands have been imprisoned. There are currently more than 100 Bahá'ís being held in prison solely on the basis of their religious beliefs. Bahá'ís in Iran are denied access to higher education, obstructed from earning a livelihood, prevented from burying their dead in accordance with their own burial rites, and subjected to the demolition, desecration and expropriation of their cemeteries, all because of their religion.

Ayatollah Tehrani's hope is that this gift "which will be kept by the Universal House of Justice [the international governing body of the Bahá'í Faith] will serve as a reminder of the rich and ancient Iranian tradition of friendship and of its culture of coexistence."

## Initial reaction

Religious leaders and prominent thinkers around the world offered praise for Ayatollah Tehrani's action almost immediately after it was announced.

In the United Kingdom, two senior leaders of the Church of England issued statements the following week.

Lord Rowan Williams of Oystermouth, the former archbishop of Canterbury, said the gift of Ayatollah Tehrani was of "immense significance."

"It represents not only a personally gracious gesture but also a strand within the Islamic world at its best and most creative which is deeply appreciative of all that helps human beings to respond to God's will for peace and understanding," said Dr. Williams.

"Along with many others of all faiths, I shall pray that this marks a turning point in Iran's attitudes to the Bahá'í community, and I give thanks for the courage and generosity which have motivated this gift."

Christopher Cocksworth, the bishop of Coventry, said he was "heartened to learn" of Ayatollah Tehrani's gift to Bahá'ís.

"Given the systemic and long standing suffering experienced by the Bahá'í community in Iran, this is an imaginatively courageous step by a senior Iranian Islamic scholar," said Dr. Cocksworth on 9 April 2014.



Ayatollah Tehrani's "action reminds us all that despite the

dehumanizing nature of many of today's conflicts, religious leaders have a shared responsibility to encourage freedom of religion and belief and to foster a deeper respect for human dignity," said Dr.

Cocksworth, who is the Church of England's lead bishop in the Lords on foreign policy.

In India, likewise, leaders of the Buddhist, Islamic, Jain, Sikh, and Zoroastrian communities responded almost immediately with statements of support and hope.

Maulana Khalid Rasheed Farangi Mahli, head of the Islamic Centre of India, commented: "This friendliness towards a beleaguered religious minority is an exemplary act. It underscores the principle of the equality of all people before God, irrespective of religious belief.

Bhikshu Pragyanand of the Indian Buddhist Society (Bhartiya Buddha Samiti), a regionally prominent leader who is based in Lucknow, said Ayatollah Tehrani has set "an example for religious leaders of the world."

"His exhortation for the avoidance of hatred, enmity, and blind religious prejudice is very needed in today's world where freedom of conscience and freedom of belief are under constant threat in many countries," said Bhikshu Pragyanand.

Representing the Sikh community, Rajendra Singh Bagga, president of the Lucknow Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee, said Ayatollah Tehrani's gift "once again proves that humanity, compassion and peaceful coexistence is a very base of every religion of the world."

H. S. Sepai, leader of the Lucknow Parsi Anjuman of the Zoroastrian community, said Ayatollah Tehrani has shown "the way towards realization of world unity and world peace."

Shailendra Jain, national vice president of Bhartiya Jain Milan, called Ayatollah Tehrani's statement "path-breaking." "His noble gesture for the Bahá'ís of the world is to be appreciated by one and all," he said.

Prominent individuals in the academic and development communities have also responded with praise, including the well-known social scientist Amitabh Kundu. Dr. Kundu, an internationally recognized author of more than 25 books on economics, development, and social science, said he felt "happiness and satisfaction" upon learning of Ayatollah Tehrani's action.

"Let us hope that this is a beginning of a new beginning," he said. "This would be the view and hope of all right thinking people in India desiring to live in an inclusive world."

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