



**REPUBLIC OF KENYA
THE COURT OF APPEAL**

SPEECH DELIVERED BY:

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**AT THE CELEBRATION OF THE 200TH ANNIVERSARY
OF THE BIRTH OF BAHĀ'U'LLĀH, FOUNDER OF THE BAHĀ'I FAITH
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A Time to find Clarity, A time to Find Ourselves

In my work as a judge - a very privileged position in which I have had opportunities to interact with judges from other jurisdictions around the world - I have learnt that regardless of where they are born and where they live, human beings struggle with the same temptations; the same weaknesses; the same earthly failings.

There is, therefore, global and timeless application in the message contained in the first principle of the teaching of

Bahá'u'lláh: *search after truth*. In every corner of the globe today, we are living in an age where every person with an Internet-enabled, in-built camera cellphone has his or her own set of facts and he or she also has rapid access to a gullible audience. They call it the age of *fake news* and *alternative facts*. But while, indeed, perspectives of an event, of an experience or of an idea can differ, there is, no doubt, a core truth - an essential indisputable reality about that event, that experience or that idea. How well can we safeguard that core truth? How many laws must we write in every country in the world, so that human beings can respect that core truth? Can laws really help us to sift through the large architecture of convenient readings and dubious intentions so that we all recognize the veracity – nay, the sanctity – of that truth?

Bahá'u'lláh cautions against the race between religions; the superiority that each world religion claims against others – each claiming to be “*the only guardian of truth*”. We would do well to remember this teaching in this age when competition has taken the place of compassion; where “*I*” and “*Me-first*” have taken the place of “*we*” in our everyday thoughts, in our daily actions. Life need not be a competition, it can be complimentary, filled with companionship, filled with an

awareness and a responsiveness to other people's needs. Indeed, we must appreciate that our search for truth will never bear fruit until we form the self-reflexive habit of empathy – truly seeing and valuing the situation of the person we are so busy running past. I am reminded of that captivating moment in *To Kill A Mockingbird* when Atticus Finch, the even-keeled lawyer working in America's racist south, explains to his nine year-old daughter, Scout, why he is representing Tom Robinson, a black man who is facing a false rape charge. In Atticus's words, "*You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view... Until you climb into his skin and walk around in it*". In a world that is increasingly divided by dogma; torn between competing ideologies and burdened by histories of racism and ethnic discrimination, we must strive to learn how to do what Atticus Finch recommended. We all need to learn how to see things from the confines of someone else's skin, someone else's experiences and histories, someone else's view.

Increasingly, our world today suffers from what I like to call "*the pull of the herd*". By this I mean, the emerging practice of fundamentalist religion worldwide. The inescapable fact is that whether one is speaking of Islam or of Christianity across its various denominations, today, our world is being overrun by

rigid fundamentalists; by people who have *“gradually become bound by tradition and dogma”*.¹ The real tragedy is that we are not talking about this invasion; about this soulless entry of religious discourse into all spaces, all thought, all idiom without the accompanying positive shift in moral values; in basic goodness. If we are a world truly guided by religious values, why do we have refugees in our midst? Doesn't every religion teach the basic lesson of *“love thy neighbour”*? How can we really transform humanity's inner life so that the outer conditions are just and equitable for all? Bahá'u'lláh stresses *“The oneness of the human family He places at the core of collective life; the equality of women and men He unequivocally asserts”*. Let us muster the spirit of empathy that enables us to treat others justly, respectfully.

Equally important, our practice of whichever religion we belong to must not invade other people's spaces or denigrate their beliefs. Bahá'i writings redefine religion and teach us that *“no one truth can contradict another truth”*. Let us learn to co-exist. The world over, nothing has been more difficult for many to marshal than the fundamentals of human good and multiculturalism that Bahá'i writings teach. *“Ye are the fruits*

¹ Abdu'I-Bahà, *Paris Talks*

*of one tree, and the leaves of one branch. Deal ye one with another with the utmost love and harmony, with friendliness and fellowship... So powerful is the light of unity that it can illuminate the whole earth.”*² Living in a country where for too long, people were divided between the heathens on the one side and the people of the light on the other; a country where we are still tempted to condemn those who do not worship as we do; those who do not speak as we do, nothing can be more urgent than the healing that is provided by Bahá'u'lláh's teaching on *“the oneness of the world of humanity”*.³

Recently, I can across a sobering thought from Arundhati Roy, a celebrated, multi-talented Indian writer and activist whose novels I must now read. The thought that I stumbled upon is taken from her latest novel, *“The Ministry of Utmost Happiness”*. Until I read it, I can't be certain that it holds the geographical coordinates for the fountain of eternal happiness, but the title of that book and the following words from it, inspire me to act on making the world a better place: *“Sometimes a single person's clarity can unnerve a muddled crowd”*.

² Bahá'u'lláh, *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*, p. 14

³ Abdu'I-Bahà, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*

Humanity has never needed clarity more than we do now, in this age of information over-load, fake news, alternative facts and convenient interpretations. It is an age characterised by destructive social norms and detrimental values that are primed on self-centred materialism. As our world continues to plunge deeper into what feels like a “*season of anomy*”, (to borrow a phrase from the great Wole Soyinka), we need to hear words like those of Arundhati Roy and remind ourselves that we must never stop seeking clarity and we must never stop affirming those who provide it, those who take on the role of enlightening others and triggering hope and regeneration. Therefore, let us affirm and amplify the teachings of the Bahá’u’lláh.

If we embrace the Bahà’i teaching that “*the world of humanity is like a tree, the nations or peoples are the different limbs or branches of that tree, and the individual human creatures are as the fruits and blossoms thereof*”⁴, we can further our understanding of the complexity of the individual human being, the multiplicity of identities that fall under the label “*human*” and at the same time, that teaching allows us to focus on the fundamental traits – strengths and failings – that bind us, that command us to be each other’s keeper. How can we best create

⁴ Ibid. *Promulgation*

spaces where this fundamental truth and this calling to care are shared? Can we design new spaces of sharing with a focus on our young people in particular, because it seems to me that they are the ones who are most vulnerable in this age where inaccuracies thrive and truth is obscured? How best can we amplify for these young people what the Universal House of Justice describes as *“universal values through which diverse peoples have found common cause and which have moulded humanity's moral consciousness”*?

Perhaps it is on account of my upbringing in English repertory theatre, but very often, when I am at a loss in unravelling a situation, I turn to William Shakespeare. I truly believe that Shakespeare had an uncanny understanding of human character. It is in the play, *Hamlet*, that Ophelia, completely dazed by Hamlet's ambiguous words and actions, exclaims, *“Lord, we know what we are, but not what we may be”*. I, too, fairly dazed, often look at our world today, at this age of fake news and alternative facts and think: *“is this all that we are: self-absorbed, tech-driven, solitary seekers”*? It seems clear to me that that is the sum-total of many in our world but, surely, that need not be our nature tomorrow. We can mend our self-centered tendencies and we can consciously re-engineer our character virtues. If we agree to commit ourselves to this urgent

task, then the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh, are a very ideal place to start. We must affirm them. Let empathy be our daily staff; let the search for truth and the light of unity be the moral pillars by which we will stand, henceforth. This is no time for despair, it is a time for revelations.

I pray, that these bicentenary celebrations will be the moment when adherents of Bahá'u'lláh will rise to their full stature, make known what He knew, and take their rightful place in the moral reformation of our world.

**P. Kihara Kariuki
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