

CHAPTER 13

Bahá'í Faith

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The Bahá'í religion had established ethical and social principles for the ennobling of individuals and the ordering of societies well before “social justice” emerged as a dominant value in modern democracies. Indeed, the Bahá'í Faith claims to be a religion “endowed with a system of law, precept, and institutions capable of bringing into existence a global commonwealth ordered by principles of social justice” (Bahá'í World Centre, 1993: 107). In the Bahá'í hierarchy of moral values, social justice ranks as a central and guiding principle. The distinctively pragmatic Bahá'í approach is to promote social justice through coordinated initiatives of “social action.”

Bahá'ís generally prefer to speak of “social action” rather than “social justice” because they view the former as proactive and the latter as reactive. Social action, as they speak of it, anticipates social issues and addresses them prospectively; social justice aims at remediating injustices that have already occurred. Seen in this light, engaging in social action could be expected to reduce the need to redress social injustices. If “social justice” is conceived broadly (i.e., not simply as remedial or corrective), then “social action” is the name that Bahá'ís use to articulate a proactive model for achieving social justice. This proactive orientation to social justice involves acting on the basis of a vision and core values to reorder society by means of a multifaceted, systematic, and progressive plan of social engagement: multifaceted in that it involves undertaking different kinds of initiatives and projects simultaneously around the world; systematic in that it involves coordinating complementary initiatives and programs; and progressive in that it extends successful local and regional initiatives to communities around the globe.

The centrality of justice in Bahá'í thought is evident in the declarations of the religion's early leaders. Its founder, Bahá'u'lláh (1817–1892), elevated justice by linking it in several ways to God and by citing its practical utility: “The best beloved of all things in My sight is Justice . . . turn not away therefrom if thou desirest Me, and neglect it

not that I may confide in thee." "By its aid thou shalt see with thine own eyes and not through the eyes of others, and shalt know of thine own knowledge and not through the knowledge of thy neighbor." "Ponder this in thy heart; how it behooveth thee to be. Verily justice is My gift to thee and the sign of My loving-kindness. Set it then before thine eyes" (Bahá'u'lláh, 1978: 37). 'Abdu'l-Bahá (1844–1921), Bahá'u'lláh's son and appointed successor, who led the religion from 1892–1921, also accorded justice a special status: "Justice . . . is a universal quality"; and "justice must be sacred, and the rights of all the people must be considered" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, 1969: 159).

But social justice is not an end in itself. In the Bahá'í hierarchy of values, social justice directs thought and action to a higher principle and to a grand vision of a future world commonwealth. "The purpose of justice," Bahá'u'lláh declared, "is the appearance of unity among men" (Bahá'u'lláh, 1978: 67). In other words, social justice is a means to a higher end, unity, which Bahá'ís view as an organizing principle for their entire system of community norms and practices, which will, in turn, transform society on a global scale. They describe this unity not as rigid uniformity or slavish conformity but as "unity in diversity" – a social culture in which diversity can flourish.

Historical Setting and Formative Experiences

Bahá'í concern for social justice appears repeatedly in the religion's sacred writings as well as in many of its institutional documents and policy statements, including those of the Bahá'í International Community, a religious nongovernmental organization (NGO) with consultative status at the United Nations. But the impetus for the religion's concern for social justice lies in the experiences of its founding leaders and the more recent experiences of its adherents in countries whose regimes are hostile to the religion.

Officially designated today as the "Bahá'í Faith," the Bahá'í religion was founded in 1844 CE by the Báb ("the Gate," a spiritual title taken by Sayyid 'Alí-Muḥammad Shírází, 1819–1850) and further elaborated by Bahá'u'lláh ("Glory of God," a spiritual title adopted by Mírzá Ḥusayn-'Alí Núrí, 1817–1892), a Persian nobleman born to a high-ranking vizier and grandee. The Báb, by advancing independent prophetic claims and by revealing a code of laws, the Persian *Bayán* (thereby asserting the independence of his own religion and undermining an obsolete Shí'í orthodoxy and corrupt clerical order), paved the way for, and openly foretold, the advent of an even greater religious figure, whom most Bábís accepted as Bahá'u'lláh. The Bábí religion thus evolved into the Bahá'í religion, which is why both the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh are considered to be the co-founders of the Bahá'í Faith.¹ A number of the laws revealed by the Báb were, in fact, modified by Bahá'u'lláh and incorporated into the *Most Holy Book* (*Kitáb-i-Aqdas*).

Born in 1817 to a high-ranking minister of the Shah in Tehran, Bahá'u'lláh was incarcerated in a subterranean dungeon in 1852 because he was a leader of the proscribed Bábí religion, where he experienced his first visionary/revelatory moments of prophetic inspiration. He was exiled to Baghdad in 1853, to Istanbul (Constantinople) and Edirne (Adrianople) in 1863, and finally to 'Akká (Palestine, now Israel) in 1868.

These successive experiences of exile, infused with a clear sense of destiny and messianic purpose, seem to have galvanized his vision of international order and world peace that would later prove to be distinguishing features of his ministry and lifework. For example, one of the signal events of Bahá'u'lláh's ministry was the public proclamation, directed to the world's political and religious leaders, of his mission to unify the world, a proclamation that stands as one of the first international peace missions of modern times.

Bahá'u'lláh's experiences lent further impetus to his international call for nonviolent ways of resolving conflicts among peoples, nations, and religions. Beginning in September, 1867, he addressed individual and collective letters ("epistles") to world leaders, including Queen Victoria of England, Kaiser Wilhelm I of Prussia (now Germany), Czar Alexander Nicholas II of Russia, Emperor Napoleon III of France, Emperor Franz Joseph of Austria, Sulṭán 'Abdu'l-'Azíz of the Ottoman Empire, Náṣiri'd-Dín Sháh of Persia (now Iran), and the Presidents of the Americas collectively. In these letters, Bahá'u'lláh summoned leaders and their nations to disarmament, reconciliation, justice, and the "Most Great Peace." To the leaders of the Zoroastrian, Jewish, Christian, and Muslim faiths, he revealed epistolary "Tablets," calling these leaders to religious reconciliation and inviting their recognition of Bahá'u'lláh as the promised messiah of all religions.

On his death in 1892, Bahá'u'lláh was succeeded by his eldest son, 'Abdu'l-Bahá (1844–1921). Like Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá's approach to social justice was informed by his father's prophetic vision, reinforced by his experience as a prisoner and exile for most of his life as he accompanied his father throughout his successive exiles, and enlightened by an innate wisdom that Bahá'u'lláh accentuated in appointing 'Abdu'l-Bahá as his successor, interpreter, and exemplar. 'Abdu'l-Bahá was liberated by the Young Turks Revolution in 1908. From 1911 to 1913 he traveled to Europe, North Africa, and North America, promulgating his father's principles of social justice and world unity.

If imprisonment, exile, and revelatory experiences intensified the consciousness of early Bahá'í leaders, persecution has kept social justice at the forefront of thinking among contemporary adherents to the religion. This is true nowhere more vividly than in Iran, where some 300,000 Bahá'ís constitute the country's largest non-Muslim minority religion. Persecution of Bahá'ís in Iran has taken place ever since the religion's inception there in the mid-nineteenth century. Repression of the Bahá'í community continues to be official government policy. As a result, Bahá'ís have been targets of discrimination and violence. Since Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution, more than 10,000 Bahá'ís have been dismissed from government and university posts. Bahá'ís in Iran are systematically denied jobs, pensions, and the right to inherit property, and the government of Iran has prosecuted a systematic campaign to deny Bahá'ís rights in what one independent scholar has described as "suspended genocide" (Momen, 2005).

Following the 1979 Islamic revolution, the Iranian regime tried to eradicate the Bahá'í Faith as a viable religious organization by executing its leaders. In 1981, the state, dominated by the clergy, executed all nine members of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Iran. In 1984, and again in 1986, Iranian authorities executed the majority of the members of the new National Spiritual Assembly of the

Bahá'ís of Iran, which had been elected to replace the martyred members of that same council.

In 1983, Iran declared the Bahá'í religion to be an unlawful, criminal organization and banned it. In strict conformity with the Bahá'í religious commitment to obey civil authorities, the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Iran complied with the Iranian ban on organized Bahá'í activity by suspending its administrative network. Following suspension of its formal system of democratically elected local and national councils, the Bahá'í community in Iran managed its affairs by an informal seven-member national committee, known as the “Yaran” (“Friends”). In February 2009, Iran announced the trial of the seven Yaran, charged with “espionage on behalf of Israel,” “insult to the sacredness of Islam,” and “propaganda against the regime”; they were sentenced in 2010 to 20-year prison terms.

The persecution of Bahá'ís in Iran has served to reinforce, for the members of the worldwide Bahá'í community, the need for precisely the kinds of principles of social justice and unity that have been central tenets of their religion since its inception. It has also bolstered their commitment to live by the principles they espouse. Thus, for example, when the members of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Iran were executed in 1981, 1984, and 1986, the Bahá'í community responded not with violence but with elections: they elected members to replace their martyred colleagues.

Bahá'ís at the Grassroots Level

The Bahá'í Faith enjoins followers of the religion to observe a number of social norms (laws) drawn from the *Most Holy Book*. For instance, Bahá'í social norms require commitment to family and fidelity in marriage, and place a high value on productive work, which, when performed in the spirit of service, is regarded as worship of God. Bahá'ís are also expected to abstain from alcohol and narcotics and, in general, to lead healthy lives. The primary purpose of a Bahá'í's life is threefold: to love and worship God, to acquire virtues, and to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization.

While many of the norms or laws seem directed at shaping personal piety and refining character, their larger purpose is often to prepare followers of the religion to serve humanity more effectively. Thus, for example, “backbiting” (speaking maliciously of another person who is not present) is forbidden, not simply as a matter of personal integrity, but because it is socially corrosive and undermines the larger goal of social unity.

The proscription of negative personal behaviors such as backbiting illustrates a simple but important point in Bahá'í social and moral thought: Bahá'ís aspire to provide an integrated system of values and socio-moral principles aimed at achieving unity among all people. Most behaviors that are specifically forbidden, allowed, or required by religious law fall under some larger principles (often related to social justice), and these overarching principles aim at achieving the ultimate principle, which is “unity in diversity” within the framework of a world commonwealth, leading, in time, to a golden age of world civilization.

The gradual introduction of four “core activities” – devotional meetings, study circles, children’s classes, and junior youth groups – has had an important transformative influence on recent Bahá’í community life. Devotional meetings, regular gatherings of individuals for prayer and worship, are considered an essential practice for the spiritual health and well-being of a community. Study circles consist of small groups of people, who regularly meet to study the Bahá’í sacred writings in a sequence of courses developed by the Ruhi Institute, guided by a trained facilitator, and supplemented by artistic, service, and social activities aimed at developing skills and capacities to help build spiritually and morally grounded neighborhoods and communities. Neighborhood children’s classes provide a moral framework that assists children to achieve excellence in material, intellectual, and spiritual aspects of life. Junior youth groups, populated by young people between the ages of 12 and 14, are guided by an “animator” (an older youth who acts as a peer facilitator). The purpose of the group meetings is to develop young people’s powers of expression, sharpen their capacity to understand the moral implications of their thoughts and actions, and engage them in service to their communities. All of these activities inculcate Bahá’í principles of social justice and encourage their creative application at the grassroots level.

When the Bahá’í community was relatively small, its contribution to social well-being was naturally limited. In 1983, however, the Universal House of Justice announced that the growth of the Faith had given rise to the need and opportunity for a greater involvement in the life of society. Since that time, Bahá’ís began to engage more systematically in social and economic development projects of varying degrees of complexity. Now, Bahá’í efforts to contribute to social transformation have widened to include participation in the public discourse on issues of concern to humanity, such as advancing ideal international relations, instituting infrastructures needed to sustain world peace, systematically eliminating prejudices of all kinds, empowering youth spiritually and morally, and promoting social justice through social action. These Bahá’í endeavors have steadily increased over the past 25 years and will grow in scope and influence in the future.

While there is a mystical dimension in Bahá’í spiritual life, there are no esoteric teachings reserved for a spiritual elite. Each Bahá’í is expected to embark on a quest toward spiritual perfection in an effort to draw ever nearer to the “Great Being.” This is achieved, in part, by acquiring virtues, which in turn produce noble character leading to good deeds. Good deeds must be properly motivated, which is to say, they must spring from pure intentions. Proverbially, one’s heart must be “in the right place” while doing “the right thing.” The link between pure motives and noble deeds is the well-formed (virtuous) character. For Bahá’ís, the great example of virtuous character is ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, one of whose titles is “the perfect Exemplar.”

Institutions, Affiliations, and Initiatives

The themes of justice and unity are evident in many of the Bahá’í Faith’s institutions as well as in its national and international affiliations and initiatives.

In the *Most Holy Book* (*Kitab-i-Aqdas*, which is the core Bahá'í code of laws), Bahá'u'lláh called for the establishment of a local House of Justice in every community. To distinguish these "Houses of Justice" from institutions with an agenda for political power, 'Abdu'l-Bahá gave them the temporary title of "Spiritual Assemblies." Each nine-member local and national Spiritual Assembly is charged with overseeing the growth and welfare of the Bahá'í community within its jurisdiction. Each national spiritual assembly, as mandated by its constitution and bylaws, is tasked with fostering unity among the various elements of society within its power to do so and to advance the work of social and economic development.

As declared in its Constitution, the mission of the Universal House of Justice, the supreme governing institution of the Bahá'í Faith, is "to do its utmost for the realization of greater cordiality and comity amongst the nations and for the attainment of universal peace"; "to safeguard the personal rights, freedom and initiative of individuals"; "to give attention to the preservation of human honour, to the development of countries and the stability of states"; "to provide for the arbitration and settlement of disputes arising between peoples"; and "to foster that which is conducive to the enlightenment and illumination of the souls of men and the advancement and betterment of the world" (Universal House of Justice, 1973: 5). These duties elaborate on and reinforce the more general themes of justice and unity to which the religion is committed.

The Bahá'í International Community, formed in 1948 as a nongovernmental organization (NGO) at the United Nations, represents an association of democratically elected national and regional spiritual assemblies. Serving as the voice of the worldwide Bahá'í community in international affairs, the Bahá'í International Community focuses on four core areas, each related to social justice:

- 1 Promotion of a universal standard for human rights.
- 2 Advancement of women.
- 3 Promotion of just and equitable global prosperity.
- 4 Development of moral capabilities.

It also defends the rights of Bahá'ís in countries where they are persecuted, such as in Iran and Egypt.

In 1970, the Bahá'í International Community was granted consultative status (now called "special" consultative status) with the United Nations Economic and Social Council. It was granted a similar status with the United Nations Children's Fund in 1976 and with the United Nations Development Fund for Women in 1989, the same year it established working relations with the World Health Organization. The Bahá'í International Community views its work with these and other organizations and offices (e.g., the United Nations Environment Program; the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights; the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization; and the United Nations Development Program) as primary channels for promoting Bahá'í social justice values at the international level.

On the 60th anniversary of the founding of the United Nations (October 2005), the Bahá'í International Community issued *The Search for Values in an Age of Transition*, a document that articulates its recommendations on democracy, human rights, collective

security, and development. In it, the Bahá'í International Community endorses democracy not simply as an expression of majority rule, but as a form of political governance in which the rights of the governed are respected, leaders function transparently, principles of fairness and equality of opportunity are observed, and decisions are predicated on assessment of community needs. In the view of the Bahá'í International Community, a democracy that satisfies these criteria qualifies as good governance and is essentially an expression of social justice. Moreover, these criteria are not limited by any legal or jurisdictional boundaries, but are universal in scope and applicability.

Engaging the Global Community

One way in which Bahá'ís engage in proactive social justice (social action) is by supporting, participating in, or partnering with United Nations initiatives. For instance, Bahá'í representatives provide leadership in a number of United Nations-related bodies, including the Values Caucus, the Commission on the Status of Women, the Commission on Sustainable Development, the Committee of Religious NGOs, the NGO/Department of Public Information Executive Committee, and the Millennium NGO Network for UN reform.

Bahá'ís also partner with regional or national organizations to effect change at the international level. Established in 2002 in The Hague, Netherlands, the International Criminal Court (ICC) is mandated to try individuals accused of war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide. In an effort to achieve the full support of the United States for the ICC, the world's first permanent court, the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States decided to become a founding member of the Washington Working Group for the International Criminal Court (WICC) and the American Coalition for the International Criminal Court (AMICC). The Faith and Ethics Network of the ICC was created to promote awareness of the Court and to support justice and reconciliation efforts in countries where the ICC conducts investigations and prosecutes cases. A Bahá'í representative currently serves as co-chair of this international inter-faith coalition.

Bahá'ís also initiate activities of their own in order to demonstrate how local and international social action projects complement each other. The following sections highlight several such social justice (or social action) projects.

Advancement of women

For Bahá'ís, establishing the equality of men and women is one of the most basic ways to reorder societies. Bahá'í writings draw an analogy between the ideal working relationship between men and women and the way the wings of a bird function together. The bird's flight is possible only if it can effectively coordinate its wings, and that can happen only if both wings are equally strong and fit. Similarly, Bahá'ís believe, human relationships will be maximally effective only if men and women, as the respective

“wings of a bird,” are equally empowered to perform their roles. Consistent with the “wings” imagery and the supporting ideology found in Bahá'í sacred writings, the Bahá'í International Community has identified the advancement of women toward equality with men as one of its four core values. Thus, in *The Search for Values in an Age of Transition*, the Bahá'í International Community asserts that a healthy democracy must be founded on the principle of the equality of men and women (and, by extension, the equality of all peoples). Commending the international community's commitment to democracy, the Bahá'í International Community stresses that ideal democracy is good governance – an essentially moral exercise – which can only come about with the full participation of women and minorities.

The Bahá'í effort to realize its vision for gender equality illustrates the way in which the religion pursues complementary local, national, and international plans of action. At the local level, the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States developed a manual, *Guidelines for Spiritual Assemblies on Domestic Violence*, to provide informed, consistent, and explicit guidance on domestic violence to local Bahá'í councils (known as Local Spiritual Assemblies). The same National Spiritual Assembly also encouraged Bahá'ís to urge their American congressional representatives to support ratification of the United Nations' Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.

Wealth equity

“Tell the rich of the midnight sighing of the poor, lest heedlessness lead them into the path of destruction, and deprive them of the Tree of Wealth,” Bahá'u'lláh counseled (Bahá'u'lláh, 1985: 39). The words of the founder vividly convey the historical Bahá'í concern for the poor and the needy. In Bahá'í thought, economic values must be measured by human values, which is to say, justice requires that economic policies and practices must serve society's most disadvantaged citizens. Thus, Bahá'ís are committed to the elimination of extremes of wealth and poverty by such practices as profit sharing among workers, redistribution of wealth through system of graduated income taxation, voluntary sharing of one's wealth for the betterment of society, and equitable distribution of the world's resources.

As with the strategy they have adopted toward gender equality, Bahá'ís approach issues of poverty on multiple fronts. For instance, at the local level, Bahá'í communities have launched more than 1700 development projects worldwide, including more than 600 schools (with over 400 village tutorial schools) and seven radio stations broadcasting educational, health, and agricultural programs, all aimed at mitigating the effects of poverty. Internationally, the Bahá'í Office of Social and Economic Development, an agency of the Bahá'í World Centre in Haifa, Israel, monitors the progress of Bahá'í-inspired development programs worldwide. The Office provides advice and support for these projects, and facilitates collaborative undertakings with like-minded organizations as well. Bahá'ís also actively cooperate with several international relief organizations, economic development organizations, and the World Health Organization.

Environmental issues

In “Seizing the Opportunity: Redefining the Challenge of Climate Change” (2008), the Bahá’í International Community states that “a need for new approaches centered on the principles of justice and equity is apparent.” Bahá’ís regard environmental concerns as social justice issues to the extent that they influence one’s capacity to promote healthy physical conditions for human beings while developing sustainable economies.

As with other social issues, the Bahá’í International Community has addressed environmental issues in several ways. For instance, as one response to global warming, which is seen as having a cumulative impact through industrial and other carbon-based emissions and thus threatens the planet’s future as a whole, Bahá’ís established the International Environment Forum in 1997. The Forum, a nongovernmental, professional organization with more than 200 members in 56 countries on five continents, promotes the application of spiritual and ethical principles to the global challenges of the environment and sustainable development. Accredited by the United Nations as a scientific and technological organization to the World Summit on Sustainable Development (Johannesburg, 2002), the Forum networks with a wide array of organizations with similar missions and sponsors annual conferences. Also, in 2009, the Bahá’í International Community endorsed the “Interfaith Declaration on Climate Change.”

Interfaith relations

The Bahá’í concern to nurture interfaith relations flows directly from its commitment to the overarching principle of unity. Bahá’ís place a high premium on interfaith relations that conduce to widening the circles of unity in human society. One of their most prominent initiatives was launched by the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá’ís of the United States, which in 1949 instituted an annual “World Religion Day.” Then, as now, the third Sunday of January each year was designated for this celebration. The first World Religion Day was held on January 15, 1950, and was observed by Bahá’í communities across the United States. For Bahá’ís, World Religion Day serves as an occasion to highlight what they regard as the essential harmony of the world’s religions, and to raise awareness of the contributions of Bahá’í principles in promoting religious reconciliation and confraternity. Celebrated with interfaith dialogue, conferences, and other events that advance mutual understanding (or what scholars call “spiritual literacy”), Bahá’ís see World Religion Day as an occasion to foster transconfessional affinity among religions and, most importantly, to promote the idea and ideal of world unity. World Religion Day, which Bahá’ís consider a natural expression and extension of their emphasis on the unity of religions, races, and nations, is now observed internationally.

Some other prominent Bahá’í interfaith initiatives have been launched by the Universal House of Justice, an institution that directs the spiritual and administrative affairs of the global Bahá’í community, and by the Bahá’í International Community as

a nongovernmental organization. In 2000, in a session of the Millennium World Peace Summit of Religious and Spiritual Leaders at the United Nations (the first assembly of prominent religious leaders ever held in the United Nations), Albert Lincoln, Secretary-General of the Bahá'í International Community, called on the world's religious leaders to identify those "core values that are common to all religious and spiritual traditions" (Bahá'í International Community, 2000). Two years later, the Universal House of Justice issued a public letter, "To the World's Religious Leaders" (2002), in which it charged that the interfaith movement has lacked "both intellectual coherence and spiritual commitment," to the extent that the "greater part of organized religion stands paralyzed at the threshold of the future, gripped in those very dogmas and claims of privileged access to truth that have been responsible for creating some of the most bitter conflicts dividing the earth's inhabitants." Describing the Bahá'í community as "a vigorous promoter of interfaith activities from the time of their inception," the letter claims that interfaith activities in general will be of limited value, unless and until "interfaith discourse" honestly addresses, without further evasion, "that God is one and that, beyond all diversity of cultural expression and human interpretation, religion is likewise one." The letter also calls on religious leaders to acknowledge that "religion and science are the two indispensable knowledge systems through which the potentialities of consciousness develop."

The Bahá'í International Community has also participated in a number of interfaith organizations, including the North American Interfaith Network, the Council for a Parliament of the World's Religions, the Tripartite Forum on Interfaith Cooperation for Peace, and the Committee of Religious Non-Governmental Organizations at the United Nations.

Human rights

International law is informed by a set of universal moral norms, which include certain entitlements (rights) that individuals are believed to possess and that are commonly regarded as transnational; that is, beyond the legal jurisdiction of any single state. In 1948 the United Nations adopted a Universal Declaration of Human Rights and thus became the first international body in history to issue a collective proclamation expressing a consensus on core values as they relate to the rights of all people. While the Declaration is not a legally binding treaty, some of its provisions have come to be embodied in international law in such instruments as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), adopted by the General Assembly in December 1966. Together with the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Covenants are referred to as the "International Bill of Human Rights."

Informed by their own experiences (Bahá'ís have historically been the victims of abuse and persecution, primarily in the Middle East) and by their sacred writings (Bahá'ís believe that human rights are ultimately God-given), Bahá'ís sought to influence the crafting of the United Nations' Declaration of Human Rights. To this end, the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States and Canada presented

A Bahá'í Declaration of Human Rights and Obligations to the first session of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights in February, 1947 at Lake Success, New York. This statement broadly addressed human rights in seven categories: the individual; the family; race; work and wealth; education; worship; and social order. In 1995, the Bahá'í International Community presented another statement on human rights and social justice, *The Realization of Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights*, for the 47th session of the Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities Geneva. While the influence of these documents is unclear, there is no doubt that they express a longstanding and fervently held conviction among Bahá'ís that the protection of human rights remains a moral priority of the highest order.

Since 1985, American Bahá'ís have taken prominent leadership roles in pressing the United States to ratify international human rights treaties, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the United Nations Convention to Eliminate Racial Discrimination, the United Nations Convention against Torture, and the United Nations Convention against Genocide. Current ratification efforts focus on the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women as well as the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Bahá'ís currently serve on the steering committees of the Campaign for US Ratification of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Working Group on the Ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.

Race unity

Bahá'í efforts to eliminate racial prejudice stand at the center of their efforts to eradicate prejudice of all types. In 1921, the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States and Canada inaugurated a series of “race amity” conferences throughout the United States. Alain Locke (1885–1954) – the first African American Rhodes Scholar (1907), leader of the Harlem Renaissance (1919–1934), and prominent American Bahá'í (1918–1954) – helped organize the first such conference in the nation’s capital.

Bahá'í “race amity” initiatives were as radical as they were historic. These events took place during the period of legal segregation in the United States known as the Jim Crow era, described by some as America’s apartheid system. While many politically liberal Americans of the time advocated abolishing Jim Crow laws and endorsed racial tolerance, Bahá'ís went much further and urged interracial harmony, even intermarriage. Locke saw not only the need for authentic reconciliation between the races but also its promise: “If they will but see it, because of their complementary qualities, the two racial groups (Black & White) have great spiritual need, one of the other” (Locke, 1933: 50).

Bahá'í efforts to eradicate racial segregation and promote harmonious race relations continued throughout the second half of the twentieth century. In 1957, in order to foster ideal race relations, the National Spiritual Assembly inaugurated Race Unity Day on the second Sunday in June. (This event is now recognized by the United Nations.) In 1991, the United States National Spiritual Assembly issued *The Vision of Race Unity*, a statement addressed to all Americans. Since racism is a global issue, the National Spiritual Assembly also urged the United States to ratify the International Convention

on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD), which it finally did in 1994. In 1997, the National Spiritual Assembly broadcast a video, *The Power of Race Unity*, to audiences across America via several networks, including the Black Entertainment Network. Similar efforts, all animated by the impulse to eradicate racism and promote racial harmony, have been undertaken by Bahá'í communities in other countries around the globe. Specifics vary from place to place, but they share a common strategy: the way to eliminate racism is to foster a genuine appreciation of diversity by nurturing a new global consciousness, which the Bahá'í religion seeks to encourage individually, institutionally, and internationally. Appreciation of racial diversity promotes racial justice, which is a species of social justice.

Conclusion

On May 28, 1942, in NBC's nationally broadcast radio show "Town Meeting of the Air" on the question "Is there a spiritual basis for world unity?", Bahá'í philosopher Alain Locke observed that such venerable ideals as world unity, world order, and the brotherhood of man have long "wandered disembodied in the world – witness the dismembered League of Nations." Criticizing "superciliously self-appointed superior races" and "self-righteous creeds and religions expounding monopolies on ways of life and salvation," Locke stressed that social justice must be approached pragmatically if world peace, which is predicated on social justice, is ever to be realized:

The fact is, the idealistic exponents of world unity and human brotherhood have throughout the ages and even today expected their figs to grow from thistles. We cannot expect to get international bread from sociological stone, whether it be the granite of national self-sufficiency, the flint of racial antagonisms, or the adamant of religious partisanship. . . . The question pivots, therefore, not on the desirability of world unity, but upon the more realistic issue of its practicability. (quoted in Buck, 2005: 179)

Locke's statement, while not directly referencing the Bahá'í Faith, captures the essence of the distinctively pragmatic Bahá'í approach, which is to promote social justice through coordinated initiatives of "social action" at local, regional, and international levels, while reorienting human consciousness through a global outlook.

Bahá'í social justice practices and strategies are animated by religious conviction, global orientation, and moral fitness globally translated into local initiatives – orchestrated under the auspices of a democratically elected administration, and informed by social principles nuanced by moral and pragmatic considerations. Where possible, Bahá'ís prefer to engage in proactive "social action" rather than remedial forms of social justice. Either way, social justice is not an end in itself, but a means to achieve a grand vision: that peoples of diverse backgrounds, races, and religions can live in unity, even as they respect each other's differences. Questions of international peace, human security, and equitable access to goods, services, and knowledge are all interrelated. Social justice, therefore, is a means to an end. World unity, in the Bahá'í conception of it, is the appropriate and desirable end or goal of social justice.

Note

- 1 With an estimated 5.5 million adherents, the Bahá'í religion is relatively small in numbers, yet is the second most widely diffused religion in terms of the number of countries in which Bahá'í communities have been established. Significant Bahá'í communities exist in 235 countries and territories, of which 182 are organized as national (or regional) affiliates, with more than 12 500 organized local communities. The religion's global scope is mirrored in the diversity of its adherents, with above 2100 distinct ethnic and tribal groups represented. The Bahá'í World Centre is located on Mt. Carmel in Haifa, Israel. The Universal House of Justice, democratically elected every five years, oversees the global Bahá'í community from the Holy Land. The essence of the Bahá'í teachings may be summed up in these words of Bahá'u'lláh: "The well-being of mankind, its peace and security, are unattainable unless and until its unity is firmly established" (Bahá'u'lláh, 1978: 167).

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