

liberation from oppression. the world, and that through the
 Sav-
 ior, the world will be filled with jus-
 Résumé
 tice and enlightenment.¹ Bahá'u'lláh
 Le présent article porte sur la
 compréhension, d'un point de vue bahá'í,
 asserted that His Faith was the fulfill-
 de la nature de l'oppression. Dans la ment of those promises. The
 question
 première partie, l'auteur relève quatre of oppression and
 empowerment is
 grands types d'oppression dans le monde 1 The Arabic word zulm,
 meaning
 d'aujourd'hui, qui mettent en cause l'ordre "oppression" and
 "injustice," comes from
 politique internationale, les types d'État, the same root as the word
 zulma, meaning
 les structures économiques et les formes "darkness."
 Bahá'u'lláh frequently uses the
 d'identité culturelle. Dans la deuxième ambiguity of these terms to
 characterize
 partie, il explore la réponse personnelle
 true knowledge and enlightenment as the
 de Bahá'u'lláh à l'oppression, à la lumière
 polar opposite of oppression. The themes
 de ses trois déclarations historiques.
 of darkness and light are also central to
 Enfin, l'auteur tire des implications
 des discussions abordées dans les deux Zoroastrianism, in which the
 world is
 premières parties dans le but de définir viewed as a battleground
 between good
 les caractéristiques d'une approche bahá'íe and evil, light and
 darkness, God and
 de l'autonomisation et de la libération à Ahriman, and it is with the
 coming of the
 l'égard de l'oppression. Promised One that
 oppression is to be de-
 feated and enlightenment rule the world.

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in fact central to the identity of the yet paradoxically condemns
 practices
 Bahá'í Faith and a frequent theme in like racism, colonialism,
 patriarchy,
 the Writings of its Central Figures, and cultural intolerance as univer-

which analyze the root causes of oppression and provide a comprehensive approach to its elimination. During the nineteenth century, humanity became intensely conscious of the issue of oppression. In the past, and most people considered their own fate to be a consequence of the natural or review divinely ordained order of things, but oppression-nineteenth-century social and political philosophers began to view the existing order of things as arbitrary, unjustly unjust, and morally indefensible. A search for the causes of oppression ensued and has continued into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. But Although none of those efforts actually identified the root cause of oppression. The dominant discourse on oppression and injustice, while offering great insights, others—accepts—and thus at times reproduces—some of the tacit premises of the very culture of oppression that it Historically, criticizes.

sally immoral. The end of the Cold War brought a temporary optimism, which was subsequently shattered by the events of the last twenty years, and we are now witnessing a growing attitude of pessimism, cynicism, hopelessness. It is useful at the outset to the meaning of the concept of sion. Oppression refers to the of power to keep others in a state subjection and to treat them by denying what is due them as right by virtue of their humanity. Oppression therefore, by is the essence of injustice. it encompasses material of every kind, it also includes of psychological and spiritual sion. The act of oppressing denying them their rights as beings—presupposes the dehumanization of the oppressed.

attempts to justify oppression as morally acceptable have relied on the oppressed group as outside the boundaries of the moral community and therefore as subject to exploitation, degradation, abuse,

and
perity would reign. In the twentieth
those
century, oppression, rather than re-
ceding, reached unprecedented levels
of intensity, culminating in the geno-
cide of millions. As a result, the con-
fident rationalism of modernity was
replaced by an inconsistent postmod-
ernism that simultaneously rejects
injus-
the possibility of universal values and
theory
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rejects the causal primacy of both in-
dividuals and human consciousness
atti-
in favor of social structures. In this
workers.
view, the only thing that truly exists
cause
is material reality, defined as the eco-
entire
nomic structure of society; oppression
that
is manifested in inequalities of class.
transla-
Thus, according to Marxist theory, the
does
root cause of all varieties of oppres-
sion in the present world is capitalism.
translation,
According to this logic, the solution to
mean-
the problem is communism.
cause
Despite the good intentions of
of
Marxist theory, its analysis of oppres-
civi-
sion is incomplete and inadequate and,
handful of
as a result, its implementation only
that
created new forms of oppression. This

deprivation of the rights due to
to whom we owe moral duties.

THE LAW OF NATURE AS ROOT CAUSE

In recent times, the most prominent
and influential theoretical
the problem of oppression and
tice has been Marxism. Marxian

the short-term and immediate causes
of strikes—namely, the greedy
tude of both capitalists and

But then He identifies the real

of the problem and devotes His

discussion to an elaboration of

structural analysis. The 1908

tion of Some Answered Questions

not capture the main point made by

‘Abdu’l-Bahá. The new

however, accurately conveys the

ing of His words: “Now, the root

of these difficulties lies in the law

nature that governs present-day

lization, for it results in a

people accumulating vast fortunes

far exceed their needs, while the

great-
fact is exemplified in the language of Karl Marx himself, who in his own writings degrades, dehumanizes, and humiliates anyone who dares to disagree with him. Furthermore, his theory creates and justifies extreme forms of hatred and violence against the “enemies of the people.” Individual autonomy and human rights are rejected, and despite Marxism’s claim to offer emancipation, it instead would institutionalize what is in effect a collective slavery.

In an Marxist theory could not offer a complete theory of emancipation because it did not address the root causes of oppression. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s words concerning the issue of economic injustice, in one of His table talks recorded in *Some Answered Questions*, go directly to the heart of the matter. Chapter 78 of that book is devoted to the question of industrial strikes. Bahá’u’lláh and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá deals very briefly with

er number remain naked, destitute, and helpless” (78.2).
While ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is ing the underlying social structure that leads to extremes of He criticizes both the inequality capitalist society and the forced artificial equality imposed munism because He finds both to be merely different expressions of same root cause of injustice. That cause is “the law of nature that erns present-day civilization.”

article entitled “On the Importance of Divine Civilization,” published in *The Asiatic Quarterly*,² explains further what is meant by this “law of nature”: “In the struggle the dominant note is the for existence—the result of which

2 A revised version of this article is quoted in J.E. Esslemont’s *The New Era*.
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30 the survival of the fittest. The law of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá frequently discusses

the survival of the fittest is the origin of all difficulties. It is the cause of war and strife, hatred and animosity, between human beings” (174). In His letter to the Executive Committee of the Central Organization for Talks, He a Durable Peace, known as the Tablet “to- to The Hague, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá further towards the states that “as long as man is captive to nature,” they nature he is a ferocious animal, as the inhabitants of struggle for existence is one of the exigencies of the world of nature. This matter of the struggle for existence more is the fountain-head of all calamities than and is the supreme affliction” (Selections 227). The “law of nature” thus is the Darwinian struggle for existence. In this model, progress is the result of constant struggle and predatory competition between, but also within, species. When the model is applied to human beings, society is viewed essentially as a jungle in which the regulating principle is the pursuit, by any means necessary, of particularistic

what happens when human beings according to the law of natural instincts—without the strait provided by education, ically moral education grounded in a spiritual worldview. In Paris says that when human beings turn towards the material side, bodily part of [their] become “inferior to the the lower animal kingdom.” They come worse than animals because are “more savage, more unjust, vile, more cruel, more malevolent the lower animals themselves. [their] aspirations and strengthened by the lower side of soul’s nature,” and they brutal. . . . Men such as this work evil, to hurt and to are entirely without the spirit vine compassion, for the ity of the soul has been that of the material” (31.6).³

3 Ironically, when humans

forget their self- or group interests against those themselves to of other individuals and groups. According to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, when human beings reduce themselves to the realm both their de- of beasts and apply the law of animal transcend nature to the realm of human social relations, the result is not progress but in the con- oppression. From this perspective, it is selfishness, consumerism, and struggle for existence, not capitalism itself that is the prob- human beings shatter the balance of na- lem; the issue is not whether individ- uals or the collectivity own the means discussion, of production, because both types of about the re- structures lead to oppression when assist all they operate according to the law of “paradise”; see nature, which is itself the root cause. 315–17.

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FOUR FORMS OF OPPRESSION
 human beings sufficient if the interna-
 Oppression takes four main forms, all of which are ultimately rooted in a no-
 materialist worldview that sees human beings in terms of the law of nature and the logic of the jungle. They pertain to the international political structure, the economic structure of various societies, forms of the state, demolition and forms of cultural identity. Most

spiritual reality and reduce the level of animals, they also realm of nature. Since strained by instinctual limits, sires and their destructive power all bounds. When intelligence blind tool of material desires, text of a worldview glorifying species. For a summary of the in the Writings of the Báb, sponsibility of human beings to creatures to attain their Saiedi, *Gate of the Heart*,

slogans about the equality of all hu-
 tional order does not embody those ideas (World Order 42–43). It is
 table that Marxist theory has never proposed a global approach to social problems. While Marxism advocates the international solidarity of the workers of the world, its actual ap-
 proach to globalism is the
 of all the states in the world—in

other

discussions of oppression focus on the forms related to the economy and the state, while neglecting the other two soci-

types.

ety were prevalent in the nineteenth century, but Bahá'u'lláh found them

INTERNATIONAL ANARCHY

the nation, and it was not merely the

The first form of oppression is related to the current political structure of the world. Although it is increasingly wrote

recognized that humanity has arrived at the global stage of its development, contemporary globalization has been characterized by anarchy and the

law of the jungle at the level of international relations. It is ironic that although both Marxist theory and political science realism emphasize the causal primacy of structures over individual units, both theories ignore the fact that the existence of anarchy in international relations constitutes treat-

one of the most important reasons for inequality, tyranny, and oppression in the world. Because of the oneness and interconnectedness of the world today, most of humanity's problems mem-

cannot be solved through a nationalistic political approach. Nor, as noted by Shoghi Effendi, are merely pious

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The key implication of this metaphor is that the component parts of an organic entity are not alien others such

to be repulsed, exploited, suppressed, global

or annihilated. Just as all parts of the body operate to their mutual benefit and for the good of the whole, so too

words, the extension of anarchy to

global level of social reality.

Organic theories of state and

ety were prevalent in the nineteenth

inadequate because they centered on

nation but all of humanity which had

now assumed an objective organic and

interconnected character. As He

in His Tablet to Queen Victoria, addressing the elected representatives of governments,

Regard the world as the human body which, though at its creation whole and perfect, hath been afflicted, through various causes, with grave disorders and maladies. Not for one day did it gain ease, nay its sickness waxed more severe, as it fell under the

ment of ignorant physicians, who gave full rein to their personal desires and have erred grievously. And if, at one time, through the care of an able physician, a

ber of that body was healed, the rest remained afflicted as before.

(Súriy-i-Haykal, ¶174)

territory, was not the main determinant of human destiny, in comparison to other accidents of birth,

as class. But we now live in a

world, yet one without recognized global rights and one whose peoples suffer from extremes of inequality.

must all the different parts of humanity recognize their essential connection and dependence on one another, as well as the responsibility inherent in partaking of that reciprocal relationship and the shared identity it confers. However, such recognition is impossible if human beings regard themselves as merely creatures of nature—that is, as solely material beings without obligation to those outside their own narrowly defined group. One of the ironic features of modernity is that it proclaims the inalienable rights of all and yet accepts as natural and moral the injustice and inequality associated with the status of citizenship. For today the most important determinant of the destiny of individuals—that is, of the rights, opportunities, and life chances they will enjoy—is national citizenship. By virtue of being born in a particular country, multitudes of children are condemned to an uncertain future of poverty and lack of access to resources. The same

Although ‘Abdu’l-Bahá wrote *Treatise of Divine Civilization* to address the issue of the development and modernization of nineteenth-century Iran, He includes in that treatise a call for universal peace through security; indeed, His discourse on liberation and development of the nation of Iran is itself His critique of international anarchy. Paradoxically, there is one kind of international oppression that is now universally condemned: colonialism and imperialism. Yet colonialism is condemned without questioning the structural reality behind it, international anarchy. Some scholars try to evade this theoretical contradiction by defining colonialism, or imperialism, as a mere effect of capitalism. However, colonialism and imperialism have always existed. Under capitalism they took a capitalistic form, but they did not come into existence as a consequence of that system. In the writings of Marx himself, the slave

accident of birth, in a different nation, of production was the essence of the provides other children with opportu- colonial economic logic of the Roman nities that are guaranteed by the right Empire. Colonialism is the product of citizenship. applying the law of the jungle in the

In the past, various parts of the realm of human relations. In modern capitalism, the world were relatively similar in terms structure of their level of development, so citi- of economic relations within the col- onizing country (capitalist zenship, or membership in a political relations)

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is entirely different from the economic can be traced to the dominance of the structure that was allowed in colo- law of nature in international rela- tions. International anarchy nized territories (slavery and feudal- therefore provides the clearest example of ism) because not only the principles application of the logic of the the of capitalism but also those of nation- jungle applied to the world of humanity. alism contribute to defining the way the colonized alien people are treated.

Furthermore, as realists have correct- ECONOMIC STRUCTURES

ly pointed out, the relation of states to one another is partly autonomous from The second form of oppression is related to economic structures. In the internal economic structures of those units. International relations are the past, both feudal serfdom and not mere expressions of an economic slavery played a fundamental role in economic structures. Both those in- system; rather, they are significantly stitutions were based on an affected by the anarchic structure of explicit and literal dehumanization of the international system. people.

In His Writings, Bahá'u'lláh fre- Modern societies are faced with the quently and explicitly condemned two polar opposites of capitalism and colonialism, linking colonial wars communism. However, both these and with the anarchic logic of nature. Fol- systems in their pure forms are

also

lowing the British invasion of Egypt in 1882, which began the formal col-
jungle

onization of the Middle East by the
is

British, Bahá'u'lláh denounced British
individu-

colonial aggression. Referring to wars,
profit-seeking,

including the British colonial invasion,
a

He noted: "The vast majority of wars
as

in the world are waged out of mere
whom

corrupt desires, yet they are falsely at-
for

tributed to religion, honor, and coun-
Extremes

try. Religion and country bear witness
opportunities,

to the falsehood of these people. Say:
The world is but one country, and all

are created by the same Word. Where-
fore wage ye wars, and whom do ye

regard as your enemy?"⁴
sensitivity to

All the various forms of oppression
associated with international anarchy

an-
archy of international relations, pure

⁴ From a previously untranslated Tab-
let; provisional translation.

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Equally dehumanizing is the sys-
tem of communism. Although com-

munist ideology uses lofty slogans to
criticize the cruelties of capitalism,

of
in practice communism itself is no

overall
less cruel or dehumanizing. All ex-

periments in implementing commu-
and

nism so far have only produced the

defined by dehumanization and the
application of the law of the

to human society. Pure capitalism

based on the reduction of

als to selfish, isolated,

and utilitarian entities. From such

perspective, humans are defined

bundles of infinite desires, for

reason is simply an efficient means

the pursuit of self-interest.

of inequality, unequal

the exploitation of the weak, the

destruction of the environment, the

commodification of values, consum-

erism, the cold logic of monetary

calculation, and lack of

the plight of others are prominent

features of this system. Like the

capitalism is impersonal anarchy at

the level of economic relations.

FORMS OF THE STATE

The third form of oppression deals
with the political characteristics

the individual units within the

anarchic structure of international

relations—the form of the state

authority within the society. The

form

crudest forms of totalitarianism and state tyranny. The positive aspects of a capitalist system—namely, the formal freedom of individuals, property

rights, political democracy, and the autonomy of civil society from the state—are all obliterated in this system. Although Marx conceived of the communist utopia as a society where the state would wither away, in reality all communist experiments have witnessed the predatory expansion of justice or the state as the sole regulator of all aspects of life.

Like religious fundamentalism, communist totalitarianism dictates the details of the individual's life and suppresses human freedom. Contrary to the prevalent views of Marxists, God

these features of communist societies are not a result of misapplying Marxist ideas. Rather, the very logic of forced equalization creates a situation in which the detailed aspects of life in society must be regulated and controlled by the state. In other words, both pure capitalism and communism exemplify the application of self-determination.

a naturalistic logic of materialism that imposes the law of the jungle at

taken by the state is determined in response to two main questions. The first concerns who should rule.

Two main answers to this question are polar opposites of democracy and despotism. The second question involves the limit of the legitimate of the state in the life of the people.

The polar answers to this question are anarchism and totalitarianism. Both questions have significant implications for whether the state fosters oppression.

For most of human history, various forms of despotism prevailed. The despotic state makes a distinction between the naturally superior rulers and the inferior masses. Rulers were defined as the representatives of God on earth, figures whose relation to masses replicated the relation of God to His creatures. Whether theocratic or secular, such despotism reduces masses of the people to the level of animals and natural objects, suppressing consciousness, participation in decision-making, individual freedom, human rights, and

However, even democracy—without a framework of spiritual values

the level of human society. and employed in the service of the
divisive struggle for dominance—can
become the vehicle of oppression
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and the “tyranny of the majority.” other words, must protect the
freedom
The divisiveness, electioneering, and of individuals to pursue their
private interests. One of the main
obsession with winning power at the contradictions of Marxist thought is that
contradict- theory actually maintains an
expense of other groups that char-
acterize the existing democracies re- extreme
flect a more civilly ritualized, but still negative conception of the state,
find- ing the state to be a product of
dysfunctional and ultimately destruc-
class inequality, as the state promotes
tive, expression of the struggle for the
existence. interests of the dominant economic

The second question also directly class; yet Marxists in all capitalist
so- cieties continually call for the
relates to issues of oppression and expansion of the state and higher
freedom. Regardless of the identity interference and regulation of
levels of society.

of the rulers, states can be defined in terms of the limits and extent of
their interference in society. In the CULTURAL IDENTITY

totalitarian state, whether secular or While the three types of
religious, the state determines all as- discussed thus far are related to
pects of the institutions of society social
and regulates the lives of individuals. structures, the next to be
considered

Obviously such a type of state also is related to moral orientation,
values, and the identity of individuals.
negates the freedom and autonomy of
Ma- terialistic philosophy is blind to
individual human beings and degrades this
form of oppression because it is a
them to the level of natural objects. nec-

It is partly in reaction to these forms of dehumanization that the anarchic theory of the state defines freedom as the elimination of all impediments to individual liberty, and thus perceives the state itself as a major obstacle to human rights. For this theory, the solution to the problem of oppression is the abolition of the state so that its interference eliminated altogether. But this theory also reduces society to a jungle—although a jungle that is imagined to be paradise. Liberal theory recognizes the necessity of the state yet perceives it as a necessary evil and attempts, therefore, to reduce its interference in the life of individuals to a minimum. The state, in

essary consequence of that same materialistic orientation; in ever, it is one of the most root causes of injustice. From a perspective, materialist assumptions about human nature are the source of prejudice: the presumption of a purely material identity for human beings leads to viewing them as members of groups defined by material and social characteristics, and all those who are different are thereby perceived the “other.” In the Bahá’í view, human essences must be understood in light of the following ontological framework, set out in the Writings of the Báb. All things consist of the two aspects

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divinity and servitude, or existence and essence. They are as mirrors which consist of two parts: a glass that has the property of reflection and an image that shows in the glass. Our particularistic essences are what become and needs of one set of people moral imperatives, whereas those of others are ignored or suppressed. determining logic of social becomes the struggle for existence, coercion, and the politics of deception

differentiate us from each other. But in those diverse mirrors, one and the same image of God is reflected.

connection

This second part is our aspect of “divinity.” The difference in our essences creates the illusion of separateness and ego identity. Our existence, or our divine aspect, however, affirms our unity in that we are all reflections of the attributes of God, Who is one. Although the Bible affirms this concept in the *imago dei*, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness” (Gen. 1:26), nevertheless throughout history, human cultures have defined identity by material characteristics that differentiate people from one another. The Báb reaffirms that our true reality as human beings is our common spiritual unity, as mirrors and signs of God. If we define ourselves in this way, we see the oneness of God reflected in the oneness of humanity—a unity that is diverse in its reflections of the divine attributes. But if we define identity in terms of difference—focusing on distinctions of race, gender, social class, nationality, language, religion, and other particularistic aspects—we can easily perceive others as strangers,

‘Abdu’l-Bahá, pre-enemies, or even as sub-humans. Violence, conflict, and oppression then become easy to justify. As Durkheim noted, the limits of morality are defined by group boundaries. The interests

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In one way or another, all forms of oppression relate to some kind of personal prejudice and thus to some form of those

and conquest.

In His Tablet to The Hague, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá draws a direct

connection between the natural law of struggle for existence and various forms

of prejudice:

In every period war has been waged in one country or another and that war was due to religious prejudice, racial prejudice, political prejudice or patriotic prejudice. It has therefore been ascertained and proved that all prejudices are destructive of the human edifice. As long as these prejudices persist, the struggle for existence must remain dominant, and bloodthirstiness and rapacity continue. Therefore, even as was the case in the past, the world of humanity cannot be saved from the darkness of nature and cannot attain illumination except through the abandonment of prejudices and the acquisition of the morals of the Kingdom. (Selections 313)

In other words, for

prejudice is the same as the dehumanization of the self and others—or

receiving and treating humans as if

were animals.

determined by economic status but also (at least partly) by their

characteristics as members of

denying the spiritual essence of human beings. However, the word “prejudice” is inadequate to fully describe the meaning of the original Persian term used by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. The original word is ta‘as. s.ub, which refers to an excessive particularistic identification with a group. Such a one-dimensional materialist social identity becomes the source of the fi-partiality, prejudicial judgment, and deals an attitude toward other groups that orients them as strangers, enemies, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and, consequently, as threats. Ta‘as. s.ub, knowledge of therefore, easily leads to “social death,” God nec-or avoidance of other groups and a creatures, readiness to act toward them in ways uni-that would be immoral if directed at Good those who are regarded as belonging In other to one’s own moral community—for culture those who are by definition outside the interconnectedness moral community can be treated like supreme law beasts. and it Ta‘as.s. ub, or particularistic identity, in reducing human identity and rationality to the narrow vision and uni-sentiments of a group, denies individual autonomy, independence of

specific categories.

A PARADOXICAL UNDERSTANDING OF HUMAN NATURE

To some extent, Some Answered Questions is the elaboration of a logic as the alternative to a and naturalistic orientation. In nal chapter of the book, which with the relevance of spiritual tion to ethical behavior, proposes a general rule: God is love of God. Love of essarily leads to love of all including all human beings. This versal love leads to good will. will leads to ethical behavior. words, spiritual culture is a of the unity and of all things. Love is the of this spiritual consciousness, leads to a free, united, and just We can immediately distinguish two alternative responses to this versal love. The first is the doctrine that rejects God and

degrades mind, objectivity, and independent in- humans to the level of beasts. The sec- on is religious fanaticism, vestigation of truth. In other words, which also rejects universal love for all human oneself to the level of a natural ob- beings and, instead, fosters extremes of hatred, prejudice, and violence against other religions and cultures and against women. For frequently these forms of prejudice interact with each other. For example, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the persistence of discrimination on universal love of God must lead to the basis of religion, ethnicity, or gen- love; when it does not, as in the case of religious fanaticism, it is der in a society implies that the class really just another form of that position of individuals is not only naturalistic

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logic that degrades human society to the structure of society and in social institutions. True liberation, the level of the jungle. In both cases, therefore, is dependent on the realization of lack of spiritual orientation leads to a so- cial order that affirms both oppression. individual autonomy and the oneness of humani- In this context, a spiritual defini- ty. The first teaching of tion of the human being requires a Bahá'u'lláh is the affirmation of individual paradoxical understanding of human freedom and independence from all others, nature. On the one hand, the human in the principle of the independent soul is a mirror of divine attributes in- vestigation of truth, which including divine oneness: thus human requires seeing with one's own eyes and beings are defined by individuality, not through the eyes of others.⁵ Yet uniqueness, autonomy, freedom, and

His

personal responsibility. On the other hand, the human being is one with all other humans and is expressive of the unity, interconnectedness, and solidar-

ity of all beings. To ignore either of institutional-

these features of spiritual conscious- individuals

ness would reduce the human being to the level of an object. When the

in di-

individual is reduced to the collectiv- regu-

ity, humans are deprived of their hu-

In this

manity, namely their uniqueness, free- dom, self-determination, and personal autonomy, as well as their capacity for feder-

independent thinking. Conversely, decen-

when individuals are reduced to atom- both

istic selves who are isolated, self-seek- citizens

ing, narcissist, and violent beings who the

perceive life as a competitive arena for in

maximizing egotistic pleasures and individual

manufactured commercial needs, soci- ety becomes a jungle inhabited by wild for

beasts.

all human beings.

Although oppression is rooted in

humanity's forgetfulness of its spir- presenting the

itual truth, this does not mean that frequently

abstract ideas determine social reality. investigation of

In fact, a distinguishing feature of the Bahá'u'lláh."

Bahá'í worldview is that ideas are in-

ultimate teaching is the oneness of humanity. These two aspects of hu- man reality are interdependent: one cannot be realized without the

A just society is one that

izes both the autonomy of

and the unity of humanity.

Thus it is logical that unity

versity is the principle that must

late a just global order as well.

model, nations are both autonomous and united. The anarchy of interna- tional relations is replaced by a

ated structure characterized by

tralization; people see themselves

as citizens of the world and as

of their own country. Similarly,

economic order is defined by unity

diversity, safeguarding both

autonomy and freedom while main- taining opportunity and prosperity

5 'Abdu'l-Bahá, when

Bahá'í principles in His talks,

began with independent

truth as the "first teaching of

See, for example, Promulgation

of Univer-
separable from their crystallization in
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sal Peace, 180.
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OPPRESSION OF THE HEART
oppressing our own hearts. Hence,
So far we have discussed external
im-
forms of oppression, but the worst
well.
is oppression of the heart and soul.
Here, the oppressor is truly success-
de-
ful in tyranny if the victim becomes
For
a participant. As various sociologists
manner
and philosophers have noted, the
that
highest form of domination takes
place when the victim internalizes the
oth-
viewpoint of the oppressor and thus
even
willingly contributes to the victim's
must
own degradation and corruption. In
such situations, we are accomplices to
tyranny against our own selves.
of
The internalization of the culture
li-nafsih),
of the oppressor manifests itself in
different ways. In its most elementary
oppres-
expression, the victim comes to believe
that he or she is indeed inferior to the
phrase,⁶
oppressor and accepts the legitimacy
Bahá'í Faith
of an unjust system of inequality and
oppression. In a more subtle form of
mod-
internal oppression, the oppressed in-
ternalizes the fabricated ideology of
defines
the oppressor that defines the victim

law of nature and instinct, we are
in reality, all acts of oppression
ply an act of self-oppression as
If we oppress others because we see
the world as a jungle, we are also
fining ourselves merely as beasts.
example, by acting in a racist
against others, we are indicating
we define our own reality, worth, or
identity in terms of skin color or
er material characteristics. Thus,
before dehumanizing others, we
first dehumanize ourselves.
It is in this connection that the
Bahá'í Writings frequently talk
of
the "self-oppressor" (z. álim
or one who commits tyranny against
oneself. In self-oppression, the
sor and the oppressed become one and
the same. Based on a Qur'anic
the central figures of the
have distinguished between three
types of people: self-oppressors,
erates, and those who precede others
in doing good deeds.⁷ The Báb
the self-oppressor as one who re-

as immoral, irrational, violent, or pre- forgets
 occupied with immediate gratification. his true reality, namely his aspect
 of
 Hopelessness, another form of dehu- divinity. The moderate is a
 practical
 manization, is a frequent outcome of person who balances the two. Those
 such internalization. who precede others in good deeds
 There is yet another way in which
 the culture of the oppressor is inter- 6 See Qur'án 35:32.
 nalized. Here, the victim comes to 7 The Báb discusses this in
 several of
 share the philosophical worldview of His works, including *Risálah*
fi'l-Ghiná
 the oppressor, including the oppres- (Iran National Bahá'í Archives
 [henceforth,
 sor's own self-definition. In this way, INBA] 14:444). 'Abdu'l-Bahá
 mentions it,
 both parties are engaged in self-op- in a number of places, in regard to
 His
 pression, for if we forget our spiritual brother's self-oppression. For
 example, see
 reality and act only according to the Ishráq Khávarí, *Rahíq-i-Makhtúm*
 . 1:295.
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revolve around their true spiritual re- not pose a major threat to the
 survival
 ality, which is their aspect of divinity. of the human race or the planet. At
 Overcoming oppression is not possible the present stage of human history,
 without addressing both external and however, we have become capable of
 internal forms of oppression. instantly exterminating millions of
 We have seen that oppression, people, destroying the natural envi-
 whatever its form, is ultimately rooted ronment, and in the process
 eliminat-
 in the materialist denial of the spiri- ing ourselves as well. Yet,
 materialist
 tual reality of human beings, who are philosophies have only extended the
 defined instead as creatures of nature. implications of their main premise,
 de-
 This principle reflects itself in the fining human beings as nothing more
 most important structural contradic- than sophisticated animals and thus
 tion of our contemporary civilization. maintaining various forms of
 particu-
 In nature itself, the struggle for exis- laristic identities that breed
 prejudice,
 tence is not a destructive or harmful ignorance, and conflict.

Materialist

principle. Animals are ruled by instinct, but their instincts have limits: of

they kill for food but they do not set out to exterminate other species. They live in patterns of interdependence OPPRESSION:

with other creatures, and nature operates as an interconnected and integrated whole. Therefore, when animals act words were

according to the law of the jungle, the of

result is overall ecological balance and Ridván.

flourishing of life on the planet. The by

principle of struggle for existence becomes a problem only when it is applied to the realm of human society, for humans are not merely natural entities. Because they are spiritual beings who possess reason and free will, they are not constrained by instinctive limitations but are able to discover the laws of nature and, through science and technology, overcome them.

of prejudice, fanaticism, and violence. However, until the nineteenth century, scientific and technological advancement was relatively modest. Even when humans acted on the basis of the law of the jungle, they could

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His repeated exhortations to spiritualize every aspect of life are essentially advancement was relatively modest.

Even when humans acted on the basis of

of the law of the jungle, they could

In order to understand more fully the Bahá'í attitude toward oppression, it is instructive to examine how

victorious over

doctrines, however well intentioned they may be, are an intrinsic part

this destructive contradiction.

BAHÁ'U'LLÁH'S RESPONSE TO

THE THREE DECLARATIONS

Bahá'u'lláh's own life and

centered on rejecting various forms

of oppression. Years before His

declaration, He condemned slavery

by affirming that all people are

of God and therefore no human being can own another. He denounced

both the spiritual despotism of the clerics and the political despotism

of monarchs. He condemned British

a call to extirpate the root cause

of oppression.

spiritual culture of hope in order to render justice and love

tyranny and hatred. In other words,

Bahá'u'lláh Himself responded when the declarations of
 Bahá'u'lláh repre- sent a dialectic of crisis and
 He personally faced injustice and sent a dialectic of crisis and
 victory: they are all systematic responses to
 tyranny. To examine this question they are all systematic responses to
 op- pression and victimization through
 we shall concentrate on the most im- pression and victimization through
 the affirmation of the power of the
 the spirit. affirmation of the power of the
 Revelation, namely His declarations. In Hindu and Buddhist
 scriptures, the lotus is the symbol of the
 The Bahá'í Faith was born through the lotus is the symbol of the
 heart, spirit, and enlightenment.
 Bahá'u'lláh's concealed revelation in Among its
 late 1852 in the Síyáh-Chál dungeon various meanings, the lotus
 represents the dialectic of light and darkness:
 of Tehran. This event was followed out of the impure mud of ignorance,
 eleven years later by His manifest tyranny, and darkness, the pure and
 declaration in the Garden of Rid. ván, exquisite flower of knowledge,
 near Baghdad, on the eve of His exile and enlightenment emerges. It rep-
 justice, represents the triumph of love over
 to Constantinople (Istanbul). His uni- and enlightenment emerges. It rep-
 versal declaration took place in 1868 presents the triumph of love over
 preju- dice and hatred, the
 when He was banished to 'Akká. These transformation of
 three declarations are characterized captivity to nature into
 emancipation through the spirit. In circumstances
 by progressive levels of disclosure of through the spirit. In circumstances
 of oppression and tyranny, chained in
 His mission and station. But why did the darkness of the subterranean
 the Bahá'u'lláh choose these occasions to Bahá'u'lláh refuses to accept
 prison, the role of victim, to remain silent and
 unveil His mission, and why did He of victim, to remain silent and
 the role of victim, to remain silent and
 choose the particular themes? These surren-
 der to tyranny. Instead, He
 two questions are in fact integrally re- der to tyranny. Instead, He
 transforms the darkness of ignorance and
 related to each other. the darkness of ignorance and
 oppres- sion into the light of wisdom and love.
 A consistent logic underlies the sion into the light of wisdom and love.
 three declarations and their timing. This fact is central in
 Bahá'u'lláh's

Bahá'u'lláh Himself has frequently that reason and clearly explained His main reason for choosing these specific times as the occasion for His proclamations. In general, when oppression reaches its maximum point, and it appears that the tyrants have succeeded in defeating the Cause of God, Bahá'u'lláh turns this apparent defeat into victory by infusing a new spiritual energy into the world, enkindling the divine light of justice and proclaiming a new

8 INBA 26:278, provisional translation.
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Say! Verily this Bird hath winged His flight from the branches of Iraq and hath sought other branches. This departure is for the sake of the exaltation of the Cause, and is by reason of a hidden wisdom. . . . By God! Verily those who rejoice in the departure of this Bird are in manifest error.⁹

Know that verily We did not wish to reveal Our face to anyone. . . . However, inasmuch as those Bahá'u'lláh's Revelations who associate partners with God in imprisoned Us in this Remote Prison, We have lifted the veils of concealment, and revealed Our face like unto a shining and exalted sun.¹⁰ Bahá'u'lláh was imprisoned in the vile subterra-

life and Revelation, and for in at least twenty tablets He it explicitly. The following are a few examples:
Prison is the revealer of the Cause of God. By reason of that which the hands of the mischief have wrought, We have, through Our word, sounded the trumpet.⁸

message of those three revelations. Obviously, Bahá'u'lláh's unveil His fundamental teachings and worldview. But if these declarations are also a response to oppression, they should also explain the cause of oppression, the nature of liberation, and the method of resisting tyranny. That is precisely what we find.

THE CONCEALED DECLARATION

The inception of tion took place at the lowest point the fortunes of the Bábí community, it was facing the threat of tion after the attempt, by a few on the life of the shah in revenge the martyrdom of the Báb.

Verily tribulations have not prevented Bahá from extolling the recounted, Source of all things. . . . Upon Our exalted arrival in this prison we trans- “Ver- mitted to the kings the messages of the Lord, the Sovereign, the Mighty and the Beauteous, that the ex- they might be made aware that He doeth whatsoever He willeth, and that the inhabitants of the sword, heavens and the earth cannot prevail against Him. (Áthár-i-Qalam- vi- i-A‘lá 1:125)11 olence but through the power of love, as well as through the transforming The reason for the timing of Bahá’u’lláh’s declarations can help Coercion is there- us understand the content and the consistently distinguishes between the kingdom of 9 INBA 71:17; provisional translation. the heart and the kingdom of earth. 10 INBA 36:72; provisional translation. In the kingdom of the heart coercive 11 Provisional translation. methods are impermissible. Religion From Oppression to Empowerment 43

belongs to the realm of the heart. It is truth of the prophets of God.12 In this not a question of biology, tribal iden- age, it is no longer supernatural events tity, or race. Freedom of conscience that are the proof of divine revela- is the essential attribute of a free and tion—not because the Manifestation spiritual dominion. of God cannot do miracles, but rather, because now it is the liberating Word A further implication of this mes- itself that is the sign of the sage is expressed in His description of presence the truth of His Revelation as a female of the Holy Spirit. By emphasizing the entity: Word as the proof, we enter the realm

nean dungeon in Tehran known as the Síyáh-Chál. As He later

“One night, in a dream, these words were heard on every side:

ily, We shall render Thee victorious by Thyself and by Thy Pen” (Epistle 21). Bahá’u’lláh’s account of

perience implies several fundamental features of His message. The first is the abolition of the law of the

namely, jihad. The Cause of God is to be rendered victorious not through

olence but through the power of

and enlightening power of speech and discourse (the pen).

fore rejected. Bahá’u’lláh

the heart and the kingdom of earth.

In the kingdom of the heart coercive

methods are impermissible. Religion

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truth of the prophets of God.12 In

age, it is no longer supernatural

that are the proof of divine revela-

tion—not because the Manifestation

of God cannot do miracles, but

because now it is the liberating Word

itself that is the sign of the

of the Holy Spirit. By emphasizing

Word as the proof, we enter the

of spirit, beyond the realm of physical

While engulfed in tribulations I heard a most wondrous, a most sweet voice, calling above My head. Turning My face, I beheld a recognize

Maiden—the embodiment of the remembrance of the name of My Lord—suspended in the air before Me. . . . Betwixt earth and heaven she was raising a call which captivated the hearts and minds of men. She was imparting to both My inward and outer being tidings which rejoiced My soul, and Bahá'u'lláh

the souls of God's honoured servants. (Súriy-i-Haykal ¶6) Sociologically, the culture of patriarchy is not only a culture of violence against half of the population of development

the world; it also perpetuates violent Bahá'u'lláh

forms of character and attitude that an-lead to other kinds of oppression. The oneness of the human race and uni-

versal peace are already inseparable from the equality and unity of men and women.

Yet another implication of the statement quoted above is the rejection of miracles as the proof of the 12 See also Saiedi, "Concealment and Revelation."

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Throne. Thereupon, the Tongue of Glory uttered three blessed in

verses. First, that in this Revelation the use of the sword is prohibited. Second, that whoso

nature. We can see that the very first declaration is a call to transcend the logic of violence and the struggle for existence as well as a call to

the power of the spirit in the Word itself rather than in phenomena pertaining to physical nature.

THE RID. VÁN DECLARATION

As a response to the action of the Iranian and Ottoman states in exiling Bahá'u'lláh from Baghdad,

decided to divulge His inner secret as He was about to depart from that

ent in the Garden of Rid. ván that through Him a new and qualitatively unique stage of spiritual

of humanity had begun.

Himself later recounted the three

nouncements He made on the first day of Ridván:

On the first day of His arrival in the garden designated the Ridván,

the Ancient Beauty established Himself upon the Most Great

of all people. Referring to these pronouncements, Bahá'u'lláh affirms

the Kitáb-i-Aqdas that "all created things were immersed in the sea of purification when, on that first day

of
layeth a claim ere the expiration
. We shed upon the whole of
of a thousand years is assuredly
in grievous error. . . . And third,
that the one true God, exalted be
this
His Glory, at that very moment
shed the splendours of all His
be-
Names upon the whole creation.¹³
except the attributes of God. Thus no
The message of the second dec-
laration is a more elaborate version
in
of the first. It begins by announcing
the abolition of the law of the sword,
which is a rejection of the culture of
violence and an affirmation of the
of
sanctity of conscience. The second
be
statement reflects the principle of
namely
historical consciousness. Not only are
endowed
the various aspects of human and so-
cial existence changing, dynamic, and
progressive, but so is divine revelation
itself. However, even more than mere-
ly establishing the minimum period of
time for the duration of Bahá'u'lláh's
banish
Dispensation, this statement safe-
remote lo-
guards the unity of the religion, en-
suring its freedom from the conflict
He
generated by divisive authority claims.
The third statement provides the phil-
Instead,
osophical foundation for a culture of
turned
unity. On this Day, Bahá'u'lláh says,
moment to
God has revealed Himself to all be-
uni-

Ridván,
creation the splendours of Our most
excellent Names and Our most exalt-
ed Attributes” (§75). Since from
moment all beings are sacred, when
one looks upon one's fellow human
ings, nothing should be seen in them
one is impure and untouchable; no one
can be denied the dignity inherent
their human nature; no one can any
longer be defined as less than human
and consequently treated as a beast.
This is the day of the realization
human potentialities, and all must
viewed in terms of their truth,
that each is a sacred reality
with spirit.

THE UNIVERSAL DECLARATION

In 1868 the Ottoman sultan and
the shah of Iran moved to
Bahá'u'lláh further to a
cation where, they hoped, He would
not survive the hardships of exile.
was ordered imprisoned in the mili-
tary fort in the city of 'Akká.
however, once again crisis was
into victory. He chose that
proclaim His cause explicitly and

ings, enshrining the signs of all His temporal names and attributes in the hearts of the Prisoner Who addresses the kings with authority and majesty and announces the advent of the Lord, the universal revelation of God, and the inception of the Day of God. The message of the universal declaration rejects the culture of tyranny and oppression and summons the world to embrace a new culture of justice and unity. As we saw earlier, all oppression stems from the application of the law of nature and the logic of the jungle to the realm of human relations. We also saw that such an objectification of humans takes four main forms, manifested in international anarchy, political tyranny, economic injustice, and a culture of prejudice. The message of the universal declaration rejects all these forms of oppression. The main vehicle of that declaration is the Súriy-i-Haykal, or Súrih of the Temple, which also includes Bahá'u'lláh's messages to the individual rulers. The word haykal means both "temple" and "human body." Bahá'u'lláh uses the semantic ambiguity to create both a new individual culture and a new international structure, while em-

versally to the religious and rulers of the world. It is the temple of God, a temple that announces the coming of the Day of God, the day of peace, and the universal attainment of the presence of God. The Súriy-i-Haykal begins with a discussion of "temple" as the body of the human being. This new body is a sacred body which is the throne of God, the realization of spiritual values. In other words, the true temple is the reality of the body of God—Bahá'u'lláh Himself. Bodies are a reflection of that Holy Spirit. Thus He speaks of the eyes, ears, mouth, hands, feet, breast, the heart of this human body. For example, addressing the eyes of this new spiritual race of humans, He says that they should "[l]ook not upon the heavens and that which they contain, nor upon the earth and them that dwell thereon, for We have created you to behold Our own Beauty" (§19). Likewise, addressing the inmost of the temple, He says, "We have made thee the dawning-place of Our

phasizing that both culture and social institutions need to be defined through the spiritualization of consciousness. of the

His message constitutes a divine temple, the temple of God. However, the spiritu-

seat of the new temple is the heart and way,

mind of human beings. He discusses will

His vision of a new type of human that

being and a new type of political, economic, and global institutions which

“tem-

are necessary to uproot violence and signifi-

oppression from the world. Referring humanity

to this new vision, He concludes the says that

Súriy-i-Haykal by affirming that He has thus constructed the true temple

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individual societies and nations but humanity as a whole has assumed an organic character, like a human body. More than once, the Súriy-i-Haykal invites the leaders of the world to change their policies and attitudes in tranquillized.

accordance with this new reality. The direct implication of this principle is a call to end international anarchy and to move toward collective security and universal peace. Bahá'u'lláh writes: “O

ye the elected representatives of the people in every land! Take ye counsel

oppression

together, and let your concern be only

mov-

for that which profiteth mankind and states:

bettereth the condition thereof, if ye

knowledge and the dayspring of Our wisdom unto all who are in heaven and on earth” (¶67). All aspects

body, therefore, are transformed in

cordance with the principle of

alization and detachment. In this

a spiritual universalistic identity

replace the materialistic identity

is based in prejudice.

But then the word “body” or

ple” takes on an entirely new

cance as well. Addressing all

and its leaders, Bahá'u'lláh

the world has entered a new stage

in its development when not only

hast done well, for thereby the

foundations of the edifice of

thine affairs will be strength-

ened, and the hearts of all that

are beneath thy shadow, whether

high or low, will be

It behoveth them, however, to be

trustworthy among His servants,

and to regard themselves as the

representatives of all that dwell

on earth. (¶173)

Addressing the form of

related to economic justice, in a

ing passage, Bahá'u'lláh

be of them that scan heedfully. Regard the world as the human body which, though at its creation whole and perfect, hath been afflicted, through various causes, with grave disorders and grossly

maladies” (¶174); and “O rulers of the tears

earth! Be reconciled among yourselves, that ye may need no more armaments save in a measure to safeguard your territories and dominions. Beware lest ye disregard the counsel of the All-Knowing, the Faithful” (¶181). In addition to addressing the tyranny that is international anarchy, the perceive.

Súriy-i-Haykal calls for the democratization of state authority as well. Addressing Queen Victoria, after approvingly noting that she has “forbidden the trading of slaves,” Bahá’u’lláh rule,

tells her:

their aid ye conquer. Yet, how

We have also heard that thou hast entrusted the reins of counsel

into the hands of the representatives of the people. Thou, indeed,

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O kings of the earth! We see you increasing every year your expenditures, and laying the burden thereof on your subjects. This, verily, is wholly and

unjust. Fear the sighs and

of this Wronged One, and lay not excessive burdens on your peoples. Do not rob them to rear palaces for yourselves; nay rather choose for them that which ye choose for yourselves. Thus We unfold to your eyes that which profiteth you, if ye but

Your people are your treasures. Beware lest your rule violate the commandments of God, and ye deliver your wards to the hands of the robber. By them ye

by their means ye subsist, by

disdainfully ye look upon them!

How strange, how very strange!

(¶179)

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OVERCOMING OPPRESSION AND ACHIEVING EMPOWERMENT

divine attributes. From this spiritual

The foregoing discussions of the root cause of oppression and of Bahá’u’lláh’s own response to tyranny understand-

suggest some implications for defining moral

a Bahá’í approach to overcoming oppression-

pression. By now it should be evident that all of the teachings and principles of the Bahá’í Faith, including the no

equality of men and women, a spiri-

characteristics and group affiliations

but by possessing a soul that reflects

consciousness comes the recognition that all human beings share in that same nature, and thus an

ing of the real meaning and the

implications of the oneness of

kind—that no one can be excluded from the moral community, or defined and treated as less than human;

material characteristics can place

one

tual solution to economic problems, outside the sphere of those to whom
the abolition of a clerical class, con- we owe moral duties.

sultative and democratic principles of The most important implication
governance, and the like, are intrinsic of this principle, and the necessary
parts of such an approach. To fully de- outcome of such a transformation of
scribe the Bahá'í approach to overcom- consciousness, is a

universalistic ori-

ing oppression is to describe the Bahá'í entation. In the Bahá'í

Writings it is

Faith itself. Thus, just a few overarch- explained that whatever is universal
is

ing aspects of such an approach will divine, and whatever is

particularistic

be mentioned here in conclusion. is non-divine ('Abdu'l-Bahá,

Majmú'iy-

A Bahá'í response to oppression i-Khi t.ábat 2:7). For humans to

act in

would be determined by the under- accordance with their spiritual

truth,

standing that oppression is shaped they must feel, think, talk, and act

by both individual behavior and in- in ways that are mindful of this

fact

stitutional structures; therefore, an and reflect such an orientation. In

fact

adequate approach to overcoming op- this is Bahá'u'lláh's

definition of the

pression requires transforming both human being as one "who, today,

ded-

individuals and social structures. As icateth himself to the service of

the

the root cause of these individual and entire human race" (Gleanings

249).

structural forms of oppression is lo- The supreme form of Bahá'í

activism

cated in the materialist reduction of thus is a systematic endeavor to

bring

human beings to the level of nature spiritual consciousness to the

world.

and the conceptualization of human The practical manifestation of this

reality as a jungle, the solution is the approach can be seen in the communi-

spiritualization of human conscious- ty-building activities that

Bahá'ís are

ness. The first step in that process engaged in throughout the world, as

is recognition of the nature of the they work to create a "a new kind

of

human being as essentially spiritu- collective life . . . which gives

practi-

al—defined not by material and social cal expression to all that is heavenly

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in human beings,” one characterized reaction and,

position but an instinctive

by systematic, conscious reflection on the

as such, part of the same logic of

the nature and implications of such a spiritual consciousness, as well as “a to

jungle. True moral achievement belongs to those who are subjected

culture of mutual support, founded on fellowship and humble service.”¹⁴ animals. In

dehumanization yet refuse to accept that status or to act like

Obviously another feature of the Bahá'í response to injustice is nonviolence. The commitment of Bahá'ís to become

other words, the way to oppose oppression is not to become the

to justice is sometimes misunderstood ty-

image of the oppressor, and to

because they refuse to engage in movement culture of

as dehumanizing and cruel as the

culture of movements that employ violent tactics. But a

rant, but rather to efface the

the nonviolent character of the Bahá'í attitude of

dehumanization from the heart. Such

community's response to oppression is although suf-

response can be seen in the

the logical consequence of its under-oppression

the Bahá'ís of Iran, who,

standing of oppression. Since oppression in all its forms is ultimately the confiscation

fering unrelenting brutal

result of the degradation of humans murder-

including the denial of their human rights and their dignity,

to the level of animals, oppression eradicate

of their property, imprisonment,

can only be eradicated through a categorical rejection of the logic of the or

der, and continuing efforts to

jungle. When one engages in violence, one participates in that same logic and with

their Faith and culture, have

engages in that same dehumanization,

to adopt the culture of victimhood

to respond to their oppressors with hatred, but have met opposition with

to respond to their oppressors with hatred, but have met opposition

“constructive resilience.”¹⁵

which is itself the very cause of oppression. For the same reason, Bahá'ís do not participate in political or social movements that are particularistic or partisan, and therefore divisive, but they do support those that are compatible with the universalistic principle. In fact, the true test of commitment to overcoming oppression is one's behavior when subjected to cruelty, violence, and injustice oneself. Although Bahá'u'lláh not responding with hatred and violence when one is oppressed may be partly understandable, it is not a moral

Bahá'u'lláh often is satisfied when the Bahá'í response to persecution was to refuse to act like human beings in the face of oppression. In contrast to the distorted definition of honor in tribal forms of consciousness where "evil" is the murder of a member of one's own group by an outsider, "virtue" is the murder of the members of the other group, only eliminated the difference between

15 Universal House of Justice, 9 September 2007, to the Bahá'í students deprived of access to higher education in the Bahá'ís of the World, Ridván . . . 2016. Iran.

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insider and outsider, but He also affirmed that it is better for a Bahá'í to be killed than to kill. For example, He writes: leave the character and manners of the beasts and brutes to their This is the exalted station of those who were killed and refused to kill. They are accounted in the sight of God as the loftiest of all creatures. . . . O My friends! Were your blood to be shed on the face of the earth, it would be far more beloved in My sight than were ye you never to forfeit this most exalted station, never to the bounds of humaneness, and to like. Hear and say not, give and wish not to usurp. . . . Through your pure deeds and saintly character the lights of justice, which are veiled and hidden by the oppression of the tyrants, will most assuredly shine resplendent in the name of God.¹⁷

to shed the blood of anyone. . . .

We have removed the law to wage Bahá'u'lláh,

holy war in Our Tablets on the day in which the Ancient Beauty was established upon the Throne of glory and majesty. . . . Quicken ye the souls through the reviving breath of your Merciful Lord.

This is what is worthy of those by

who are favored by God.¹⁶ only through spiritual awakening and Praise be to God that ye did not commit oppression whilst ye were

oppressed, that ye wished not to injure anyone though ye were afflicted with grievous injury, that with the utmost compassion ye beseeched God's mercy for all people though ye witnessed the onslaught of cruelty, that ye yearned for freedom though ye were imprisoned. All the trees of Paradise exclaim: How great the blessedness that awaiteth you. . . . This Wronged One counselleth

¹⁶ From a previously untranslated translation.

Tablet; provisional translation.

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and shall never be, of estimation in the sight of God, to be realized utterly and completely, and patterns

a swordsman to stand before Us ready to take Our life, We assuredly would not interfere with him and would leave him free.¹⁹

requires both fighting against the Thus the Bahá'í approach to oppressors

coming oppression is not motivated spiritual

by anger or hatred against the op-

In the writings of

the word "empowerment" when opposed to "oppression" implies that empowerment is itself the method for eradicating oppression. This empowerment flows from the realization and actualization of the inner power of the spirit; it cannot be attained

the sword or any form of coercion but consciousness. Bahá'u'lláh says:

O thou servant! Be endowed with My attributes, for verily We have removed the law of bloodshed and discord, and revealed the Cause with power and might, through Our character, and without anyone turning to strife. For verily power lieth in My will, and not in war and discord.¹⁸

I swear by God, were outward power, which hath never been,

¹⁷ INBA 8:343; provisional

¹⁸ INBA 23:44; provisional

spiritual question, both the powerful and the powerless groups can contribute to oppression if their

of thought, sentiment, and action are based on the logic of dehumanization of the self and others. Therefore, an adequate battle against oppression

tyranny committed by the

and fostering a culture of

empowerment within the oppressed

pressors but by universal love for all people and belief in the dignity and sacredness of the entire human race. when, follow-

From this perspective, one opposes injustice not to degrade the oppressor but rather to help restore the human Bábí dignity and rights of the oppressed as front well as to help the oppressor overcome was self-alienation, self-dehumanization, state, and self-oppression. Such an approach vi- requires rejecting not only physical path violence but also violence of language and sentiments. Azal,

A further feature of this approach is to maintain vigilance against not passivity. only external but also internal op- systematical- pression. When oppression is defined cru- in purely materialist ways, it is usually state understood to be a one-dimension- the al and external phenomenon. In this view, the victim is by definition unable Bábí to engage in self-oppression, nor is discourse based on that premise con- oppression, sidered legitimate: frequently, talk of the need for internal reform of the op- first pressed group is denounced as blam- in ing the victim. In the Bahá'í approach, pondering however, as oppression is ultimately a tion of the Bábí community:

community. In fact, that was precisely Bahá'u'lláh's response ing the attempt on the life of the shah, the state mobilized to murder all the Bábís and eradicate the Faith. There were two paths in of the Bábí community: the first one of hatred against the Qajar calling for holy war and inciting olence against the tyrants. This was followed by the nominal leader of the Bábí community, Yahyá even though he personally followed a policy of concealment and In contrast, Bahá'u'lláh ly and forcefully denounced the elty and oppression of both the officials and the clergy, yet at same time He addressed the internal cultural and moral state of the community, who, because of their subjection to extremes of had allowed themselves to think and act like beasts. Discussing His declaration, He explains that while in prison He was constantly the causes of the internal degrada-

Day and night, while confined in that dungeon, We meditated upon the deeds, the condition, and the conduct of the Bábís, wondering what could have led a people so high-minded, so noble, and of such intelligence, to perpetrate such an audacious and oppres-

outrageous act against the person of His Majesty. This Wronged One, thereupon, decided to arise, after His release from prison, and undertake, with the utmost vigor, the task of regenerating this people. (Epistle 21)

oppressed forget their spiritual dignity, Bahá'u'lláh continued this same ap-logic of

proach in all His later Writings. His stand against external oppression was always accompanied by admonishing will

His own community not to overstep the bounds of human dignity, not to engage in hatred and violence, and to adhere instead to detachment, truthfulness, sincerity, kindness, and goodly deeds. In fact, for Bahá'u'lláh and

the worst oppression against Him Great Light, no inhabitant of came not from the tyrants but from earth can exercise power over the the immoral acts committed by those confident believers of God, ex-who claimed to be His followers. As He writes in the Epistle to the Son of the Wolf:

realms of spirit. Were those who My imprisonment doeth Me no harm, neither the tribulations I suffer, nor the things that have

heart and My pen to lament. They that spread disorder in the land, and lay hands on the property of others, and enter a house without leave of its owner, We, verily, are clear of them. (23)

Recall that for Bahá'u'lláh

sion of the heart and soul is worse than oppression of the body. Being deprived of material resources belongs to oppression of the body. What was crucial for Him was that His community should not be oppressed in heart and spirit as well. If the

internalize their persecutors'

dehumanization, and allow themselves to succumb to degrading hatred and particularistic consciousness, they

become oppressed in both body and heart. He writes:

Be not afraid of death in the path of God, nor affrighted by the manifestations of iniquity

rebellion. I swear by the Most

cept that it be over their outward bodies, while they are powerless to establish ascendancy over the

associate partners with God to reflect awhile, they would never assault the divine beings, for the

befallen Me at the hands of My oppressors. That which harmeth Me is the conduct of those who, though they bear My name, yet commit that which maketh My translation.

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True liberation and empowerment, therefore, is realized when the oppressed refuse to permit the oppressor to succeed in controlling their heart de-

and spirit.

As was seen in Bahá'u'lláh's re-

Therefore,

sponse to oppression in His three dec-

larations, being subjected to tyranny and injustice was not the occasion for despair and surrender to dehuman-

ization but rather for turning crisis into the crucible from which victory lumi-

emerges. Thus, the Bahá'í approach to tongues

oppression is characterized by hope. Such a view of the relationship of oppression and empowerment is only His

understandable within the context of a spiritual worldview because, in the end, that relationship is a mystical paradox. Even as the delicate and pure lotus rises out of the crude and impure mud, so too the human spirit, when it refuses to surrender to the instinctual forces of nature, rises out of its encounter with oppression liberated and transcendent. But the emergence of the lotus is impossible without the mud:

It is by reason of the cruelty of the enemies that the fire of divine love is enkindled within the hearts and souls, and it is the oppression

purpose, of those who oppose the Faith, of the deeds they commit is to humiliate those symbols of certitude.²⁰

20 INBA 57:65; provisional

lovers of the Most Holy Abhá Beauty of God. Blessed is the one who achieves it and attains unto that which has always been the

sire of the devoted ones throughout centuries and ages.

the oppression of the tyrants is

bounty from God to His favored servants. For it is by reason of such cruelty that their station

exalted, they are enabled to draw nigh unto His sanctified and

nous Threshold, and the

of the righteous greet those who have attained it, gained admittance, entered the paradise of

good pleasure, and been counted as among the sincere servants.²¹

of the adversaries that hastens
the souls unto the Faith of God.
It is by reason of the cruelty of
the enemies that the lofty station
of the friends is revealed amongst
the people, and it is the oppres- 21 From a previously untranslated
let-
sion of the adversaries that makes ter written on behalf of Shoghi
Effendi;
manifest the exalted rank of the provisional translation.
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