

# Bahá'í Faith and Social Action

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## BAHÁ'Í FAITH AND SOCIAL ACTION

The Bahá'í is an independent world religion that promotes social justice through social action by advancing processes leading to world peace. In the Bahá'í value-hierarchy, social justice is the cardinal principle of human society. On the theory that all human actions flow from consciousness, Bahá'ís believe that world peace can only be established on a foundation of human solidarity—the harmony of races, religions, and nations. The purpose of justice, according to Bahá'u'lláh (1817–1892), prophet-founder of the Bahá'í Faith, is the achievement of unity in human society. International peace and security are unattainable, Bahá'u'lláh counsels, unless and until world unity is firmly established. Acting globally through interfaith alliances and national and international agencies, including the United Nations, Bahá'ís actively promote race unity, human rights, social and economic development, moral development, and the advancement of women. They draw international attention, in particular, to human rights violations against the Bahá'ís in Iran while advocating universal human rights for all. Bahá'ís aim to achieve these humanitarian goals through practical applications of Bahá'í principles of unity. Bahá'í philosopher Alain Locke (1885–1954), whose work is cited here to depends on discovering necessary common values scale. World democracy thus entails building infrastructures that can best canalize efforts to achieve

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social justice, to which Bahá'í institutions and programs of social action contribute. Bahá'ís distance themselves from the political theater Bahá'ís at the United Nations Embracing democracy, they shun campaigning. Instead, Bahá'ís work with the body Ethics-based and religious non-governmental organizations (RNGOs) are playing increasingly significant

partisan politics  
exercising their  
of party politics.

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include the following:

roles in their consultative collaborations with the United Nations. As a RNGO, the Bahá'í International Community (BIC) represents a network of 182 demo-

2. Social justice

cratically elected National Spiritual Assemblies that act on behalf of over 5.5 million Bahá'ís worldwide.

harmony

Accordingly, the BIC is the voice of the worldwide cooperation

Bahá'í community in international affairs. On the 60th equality

anniversary of the United Nations in October 2005,

6. Wealth equity (economic justice)

the Bahá'í International Community issued a statement, "The Search for Values in an Age of Transition," economic development

presenting its recommendations for human rights, law

development, democracy, and collective security.

9. Human rights

Commending the international community's commitment to democracy, the BIC stressed that democracy conscience

is good governance—an essentially moral exercise responsibility

(what Alain Locke calls a "moral democracy").

science and religion

Democracy will succeed only if it is coefficient with

13. International scientific cooperation

personal integrity (gaining respect of the governed), moral principles, transparency, objective need assess-standards/world intercommunication

ments, and ethical applications of scientific resources. language

Democracy, according to the BIC, must be rooted in

16. Universal education

moral values that promote social welfare both within and beyond the nation-state. Without this principled Environmentalism

anchor, democracy falls prey to the excesses of indi-commonwealth

vidualism and nationalism, which tear at the fabric of the community, both nationally and globally. As

20. World peace

sociomoral forces, Bahá'í principles of unity serve as a moral bedrock for building a world democracy.

1. Human unity

3. Racial

4. Interfaith

5. Gender

7. Social and

8. International

10. Freedom of

11. Individual

12. Harmony of

14. International

15. International

17.

18. World

19. World tribunal

21. Search after

truth

22. Freedom of conscience

Principles of Unity

23. Love of God

24. Nobility of character (acquiring virtues)

In his epistle to Queen Victoria (c. 1869), Bahá'u'lláh endorsed parliamentary democracy as an ideal form of civilization (individual purpose)

25. Advancing

governance. Referring to his own mission as that of a worship

26. Work as

"World Reformer," Bahá'u'lláh promulgated social

27. Ideal marriage

principles that are wider in scope than the process of electing governments. The Bahá'í community, in a values

28. Family

measured participation in political democracy, eschews communities

29. Model

30. Religious teleology (Progressive Revelation) identify themselves as Bahá'ís, to

employment if they

31. Bahá'í doctrinal integrity

bar their promotion

to any position of influence, and to

deny to all Bahá'ís the right to a higher education. No

32. Bahá'í institutional support (the "Covenant")

Bahá'í can, in practice, attend university in Iran. Iranian

33. Promoting Bahá'í values

columnist Iqbal

Latif calls Iran's denial of Bahá'ís'

access to a university education "intellectual cleansing"

In 1925, Alain Locke stated that Bahá'í principles— brothers by the clergy-dominated

of their ethnic

and the leavening of America's national life with its of the anti-Bahá'í campaign has

regime. This phase

power—are to be regarded as the salvation of democracy. Only in this way can the fine professions of

aptly been

collectively affects a community estimated to

tion that

American ideals best be realized.

include more than

300,000 Iranians.

On March 20, 2006, the U.N. Special Reporter on Freedom of Religion or Belief, Asma Jahangir, issued Bahá'ís in Iran

a press release regarding a confidential letter sent

The Bahá'í Faith originated in Persia, now Iran, by the Chairman of the Command

October 29, 2005,

where the Bahá'í community has experienced a century and a half of persecution. In the years immedi-

Headquarters of

government officials that the

release informed

ately following the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran, Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, had instructed Command Headquarters clerics, with state sanction, ordered the arbitrary closely monitor to identify all Bahá'ís and ing media attacks on arrest of Bahá'ís, the use of torture, and the execution of more than 200 members (particularly elected ing media attacks on their activities. In the wake of mount- ing media attacks on of more than 200 members (particularly elected ing media attacks on the Bahá'ís, such surveillance aggravates an members of Bahá'í administrative councils)— aggravates an already dangerous situation. Anti- Bahá'í propaganda sometimes demanding that families pay for the bul- Bahá'í propaganda campaigns have typically pre- ceded government-led lets used to kill their loved ones. Other actions taken ceded government-led assaults on the Bahá'ís in Iran. In 2006, another against Bahá'ís include confiscation of property; the regime is now U.N. special reporter reported that the regime is now seizure of bank assets; expulsion from schools and worsening the confiscating family homes, thereby worsening the universities; denial of employment; cancellation of pensions and demands that the government be reim- A New Model of Local Democracy bursed for past pension payments; desecration and destruction of Bahá'í cemeteries and holy places; In marked contrast criminalization of Bahá'í activities, thereby forcing Bahá'í to Iran's efforts to extirpate the Bahá'í community, the Bahá'í Faith, as a global, supranational the dissolution of Bahá'í institutions; and pronounce- supranational ment that Bahá'í marriages were illegal acts of pros- experiment. In its titution. State-instigated incitements to violence took the form of relentless propaganda campaigns aimed Social Development" (1994), the BIC stresses that the values of at inflaming anti-Bahá'í passions to instigate mob values of democracy and social justice must first be taught at home. violence and crimes against Bahá'ís. The family, says the BIC, is the first environment to teach A new and insidious anti-Bahá'í strategy was human rights, social formalized in a secret 1991 memorandum from the human rights, social responsibility, tolerance, and peace, thus enabling Iranian Supreme Revolutionary Cultural Council on "the peace, thus enabling individual members to become Bahá'í question." Personally endorsed by Ayatollah Ali advocates for social justice. These values, seen as the spirit of democracy, Khamenei on February 25, 1991, this document advises spirit of democracy,

extend to each local Bahá'í

government officials to expel Bahá'ís from universities community. The Universal House of Justice (the once Bahá'í identity becomes known. The directive— world Bahá'í governing body) speaks of the Nineteen-still in force—instructs officials to refuse Bahá'ís Day Feast (a Bahá'í worship service and consultative

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meeting held roughly every 3 weeks throughout the the first nation to proclaim the unity of mankind. May it be the first to year) as an arena of democracy at the very root of unfurl the standard of the Most Great society. This is where the Local Spiritual Assembly envisions America's role in build- Peace." This prayer (the Bahá'í council annually elected by plurality vote ing a world democracy—not by force, but by exam- with no campaigning allowed) and the members of the ple, in accordance with universal, moral principles.

community meet on common ground, where individ- Strengthening Human Rights uals are free to offer their gifts of thought, whether new ideas or constructive criticism, to the building processes of an advancing civilization. Based on these The BIC notes that the rise of democracy worldwide is a positive trend and similar practices, the Universal House of Justice speaks of Bahá'u'lláh having prescribed a system that elections, combines democratic practices with the application of human rights standards. In promoting social democracy, knowledge through consultative processes. American Bahá'ís

have taken leadership roles in advo- Interfaith Cooperation cating U.S. ratification of U.N. human rights treaties, including the U.N. Convention to Eliminate Racial Discrimination; the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights; In accordance with Bahá'u'lláh's call to peace and the International Convention on the Prevention and fellowship among religions, Bahá'ís have taken part and the Punishment of the Crime of Genocide; in the Parliament of the World's Religions, the World International Convention against Torture and Bank's World Faiths Development Dialogue, and the Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment. Current Committee of RNGOs at the United Nations. In 1950, ratification efforts center on the

the annually elected governing body of the American Bahá'í community, the National Spiritual Assembly Against Women and the Convention of the Bahá'ís of the United States (NSA) inaugurated Child.

World Religion Day to promote interfaith ecumenism. In April 2002, the Universal House of Justice issued Promoting Race Unity a public letter addressed "To the World's Religious Leaders." This letter called on religious leaders world-wide to achieve common cause through a greater series of race amity conferences in appreciation of their common ground and to unequivocally renounce all claims to exclusivity or finality, as contribution to what Alain Locke (who such claims have precluded religious unity and have Faith in 1918) called a "racial hatred and violence. The spirit of efforts (which Locke personally helped organize) to promote interracial harmony lives on today. In 1957, the NSA inaugurated Race Unity America's World Role Day (second Sunday in June)—an event now recognized by the United Nations—to promote interracial harmony. In 1991, 9/11 terrorist attacks, the NSA of the Bahá'ís of the United States published a statement, "The Destiny of Race Unity," a statement addressed to all Americans. Since racism is really a global issue, the NSA had urged the United States to become a party to the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, which was finally ratified in 1948. In 1997, sponsored by the National Spiritual Assembly, a video, called "The governance as a practical necessity. in all facets of

Convention on the Discrimination the Rights of the

In 1921, the NSA of inaugurated a Washington, D.C., in a historic joined the Bahá'í democracy" or, more

nized by the United

International

All Forms of Racial

finally ratified in

in all facets of

Power of Race Unity," was broadcast on the Black Bahá'í-sponsored initiatives represent, but do Entertainment Network and on other networks by the worldwide Bahá'í community across America. The video characterizes the Bahá'í democratically elected institutions to promote social justice through social action.

—Christopher G. Buck

Social and Economic Development

See also Democracy; Human Rights Watch; Religious Economic solutions to global poverty require that economic values be predicated on spiritual values. In promoting economic justice and prosperity (what Alain Locke calls "economic democracy"), Bahá'í communities have launched more than 1,500 development projects worldwide, including more than 600 schools and seven radio stations broadcasting educational, health, and agricultural programs. Projects are tracked Security and Human Rights for All." <http://www.bahai.ch/pdf/LargerFreedom.pdf> by the Bahá'í Office of Social and Economic Development, an agency of the Bahá'í World Center in Haifa, Israel. Published in December 2004, In Community on the occasion of the 60th Service to the Common Good: The American Bahá'í the United Nations (BIC Document No. 05-1002). <http://www.bic-un.bahai.org/pdf/05-1002.pdf> from among more than 400 Bahá'í-sponsored initiatives, a handful of projects in the fields of education, Community's submission to the 2006 Commission on health care, race unity, community development, and Development on the review of the First United women's rights. These projects include, among others: Health for Humanity, Tahirih Justice Center, Women for International Peace and Arbitration, <http://www.bic-un.bahai.org/pdf/06-0101.pdf>

These not exhaust, efforts nity and its mote social justice

Activism

Further Readings Bahá'í

International

General's Report, Development,

for values in International anniversary of 05-1002). Bahá'í

Social Nations Decade Document No.

Bahá'í Institute for Race Unity, Native American March). Religious nongovernmental organizations: An exploratory analysis. *Voluntas: Bahá'í Institute, Children's Theater Company, and International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Parent University*. In what Locke calls "cultural democracy," one must not forget the various Bahá'í Islam and minorities: The case of the artists, American Indian dancers, Bahá'í-sponsored [Special issue]. *Studies in Contemporary Islam*, musical groups, ballets, and youth dance workshops English: [http://www.iranian.com/Opinion/2005/June/Bahai/Images/BuckBahais2005.pdf](http://www.iranian.com/Opinion/2005/June/Bahai/Images/BuckBahais2005Eng.pdf); Farsi: <http://www.iranian.com/Opinion/2005/June/Bahai/Images/BuckBahais2005.pdf>

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