

IS CAPITALISM THE ANSWER?

Some observers, seeing the needs of eastern Europe and its rejection of centralised planning and political slavery, have hailed the overthrow of communism as the triumph of capitalism. But is this true? Is capitalism a satisfactory answer? Following "market forces" does not bring happiness and prosperity to everybody, as the rapid emergence of a poor underclass in some former communist countries shows. On a wider scale, capitalism ensures that those who control the sale of tea or cocoa live in comfort, but does it do the same for those who harvest these crops?. The Universal House of Justice, which is the elected world body of the Bahá'í community, wrote in 1985:

"All too many callously abandon starving millions to the operations of a market system that all too clearly is aggravating the plight of the majority of mankind, while enabling small sections to live in a condition of affluence scarcely dreamed of by our forebears."

It seems extremely unlikely that the people in the former socialist countries who were shown daily in their news media the unemployment, homelessness and social inequalities of capitalist societies, will readily accept these as inevitable features of society. These will surely seem as unacceptable to people raised in socialist societies as the lack of free speech, lack of choice, and the pervasiveness of the secret police seemed to people raised in democratic countries.

WHAT ABOUT DEMOCRACY?

The word "democracy", like the word "socialism", means different things to different people and in different countries. In everyday usage, it is generally taken to mean that the people have a free choice of representatives or of rulers. In practice, this choice is narrowed down to a choice between parties or between a few individuals only. In its original sense of government by the people it has largely been relegated to an ideal, and now usually relates to questions of government of the people.

Yet it should be possible, given the advances in communication, to combine the two, and develop a system of government in which the representatives are of the people and from the people, rather than imposed on the people. We should even be able to progress past the stage of having parties in competition with one another, with the divisiveness which this can cause. It is precisely this kind of change in world administration which Bahá'ís anticipate.

IS SOCIALISM FINISHED?

Socialism, as an ideal society arranged for the support of all of its members, can still exist as a goal. However, it is clear that a form of socialism must evolve which takes account of the human spirit and its longing for spiritual fulfilment, and it is in this context that socialists will find their theories echoed in the Bahá'í revelation.

DOES THE BAHÁ'Í FAITH HAVE THE ANSWER?

So could the Bahá'í Faith be the answer for those people who have been spiritually starved, but who were raised in an atmosphere of expectation that brotherhood, justice and oneness are attainable ideals, the basis of future society? Bahá'ís believe that spiritual values transcend theological rivalries. In eastern Europe, following the weakening of communist power, violent conflicts between different religions and denominations have broken out in several countries. It seems that the Bahá'í emphasis on the oneness of religion will have a deep and lasting appeal there. Bahá'ís believe that all the major religions derive their original inspiration from God, although their teachings may have become changed over time. They accept Bahá'u'lláh as the Promised One of all the religions, and believe that His Teachings are designed for this age.

WORLD SOCIETY

Another present source of conflict is nationalism. Many of the peoples formerly under communist rule are still struggling to be recognised as nations. At the same time, national membership of economic and political federations, for practical reasons as well as for human solidarity, is increasing throughout the world. Rather than having certain powerful nations exerting pressure on others, true world order will come about only when there is a genuine world body, elected from among all the world's peoples, which will ensure the security and freedom of all nations. A universal Bill of Rights, to safeguard the freedom of individuals, will also be necessary. Within such a world society, all nations, races, tribes and peoples would become respected as part of one human family. Nationalism would then take second place to world citizenship. The division of people into different classes would become irrelevant.

BAHÁ'Í ECONOMIC PRINCIPLES

The elimination of extreme personal wealth and the elimination of poverty are major goals of Bahá'í society. Economic conditions obviously vary from place to place and from time to time, and therefore these goals dictate certain economic principles rather than a rigid system. For instance, workers are entitled to an annual share of the profits of any enterprise. Their share is a right, and not to be confused with the cosmetic arrangements found in both capitalist and communist countries. In addition, the abolition of industrial slavery is itself a stated Bahá'í principle. Consultation is regarded as the guiding light in human affairs, which also has great implications for the workplace. Agriculture is considered as the foremost industry, since food production is crucial to human happiness, but methods must now be developed which are beneficial to all life. A world currency also needs to be established. At present, currencies are assessed daily against each other, leading to great advantages for the richest handful of nations and to destabilisation of economies caused by currency speculation. A world currency would remove these problems.

A NEW FORM OF GOVERNMENT

Bahá'ís believe that a totally new form of government is necessary. The

Bahá'í pattern of administration is a simple but flexible system. In each town or village an election takes place for a Local Spiritual Assembly, which is a body of nine people chosen from the community. The election is by secret ballot, and is completely free, without any nomination or canvassing, and with no party or elite putting itself forward. Each individual simply chooses the nine people he or she feels inspired to vote for. The Local Spiritual Assembly has a wide range of duties to ensure general well-being, and its members should:

"...regard themselves as the guardians appointed of God for all that dwell on earth."

By a similar process, delegates are chosen who elect a Secondary (national) House of Justice. These national bodies elect the Universal House of Justice. Bahá'u'lláh said:

"This Earth is but one country and mankind its citizens."

Experience in a number of eastern European countries has shown how quickly these Local Spiritual Assemblies can form when the conditions are right, and how creative they can be in responding to economic and social needs. Having no clergy, and having an essentially "grass-roots" administration, the Bahá'í Faith is demonstrating that it has much to offer the peoples of eastern Europe.

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