

The Bahá'í teachings strongly condemn the holding of prejudices of any kind. Bahá'u'lláh has emphasized the equality of all human beings:

Know ye not why We created you all from the same dust? That no one should exalt himself over the other. Ponder at all times in your hearts how ye were created. Since We have created you all from one same substance it is incumbent on you to be even as one soul, to walk with the same feet, eat with the same mouth and dwell in the same land, that from your inmost being, by your deeds and actions, the signs of oneness and the essence of detachment may be made manifest.[1]

Specifically regarding prejudice and the disastrous effects of this upon human society, `Abdu'l-Bahá has said:

Prejudice — whether it be religious, racial, patriotic or political in its origin and aspect — is the destroyer of human foundations and opposed to the commands of God.[2]

This condemnation applies to prejudice of all forms: religious,[3] racial, ethnic, and national. All prejudices are false. They are the product of artificial distinctions which human beings have erected to separate themselves from one another. Enormous amounts of energy and resources are wasted in keeping up these artificial barriers. In the twentieth century, nationalist and racist ideologies have led to two World Wars, a host of minor conflicts, and devastation on the streets of our cities. The cost to humanity of these illusory ideas has been incalculable.

Racial and national prejudices which separate mankind into groups and branches, likewise, have a false and unjustifiable foundation . . . There should be no racial alienation or national division among humankind. Such distinctions as French, German, Persian, Anglo-Saxon are human and artificial; they have neither significance nor recognition in the estimation of God. In His estimate all are one, the children of one family; and God is equally kind to them. The earth has one surface. God has not divided this surface by boundaries and barriers to separate races and peoples. Man has set up and established these imaginary lines, giving to each restricted area a name and the limitation of a native land or nationhood. By this division and separation into groups and branches of mankind, prejudice is engendered which becomes a fruitful source of war and strife . . . Therefore, it has been decreed by God in this day that these prejudices and differences shall be laid aside. (`Abdu'l-Bahá)[4]

The Advancement of Women

In our societies, the largest group suffering from the effects of prejudice are usually women. For most of recorded history and in most of the world, human society has been a patriarchy — the rule of men. The very structures of these societies make it difficult for women to achieve their full potential or to have any effective say in the ordering of society. Even the various movements that have tried to rectify this, the suffragette movement at the beginning of this century and the women's movement more recently, have achieved only a limited success. In one sense then, the discussion of the position of women is

one aspect of the discussion in the previous section about the role of prejudice in society. Since women form such a large part of society, however, the case of women becomes one that is of a different order and requires special attention (although much of what is said about this could also be repeated about the other forms of prejudice).

Bahá'u'lláh has, in several places in his writings, asserted that men and women have an equal rank and station before God:

Exalted, immensely exalted is He Who hath removed differences and established harmony. Glorified, infinitely glorified is He Who hath caused discord to cease, and decreed solidarity and unity. Praised be God, the Pen of the Most High hath lifted distinctions from between His servants and handmaidens, and, through His consummate favours and all-encompassing mercy, hath conferred upon all a station and rank of the same plane. He hath broken the back of vain imaginings with the sword of utterance and hath obliterated the perils of idle fancies through the pervasive power of His might.[5]

The Equality of Women and Men

In past ages it was held that woman and man were not equal — that is to say, woman was considered inferior to man, even from the standpoint of her anatomy and creation. She was considered especially inferior in intelligence, and the idea prevailed universally that it was not allowable for her to step into the arena of important affairs. In some countries man went so far as to believe and teach that woman belonged to a sphere lower than human. But in this century, which is the century of light and the revelation of mysteries, God is proving to the satisfaction of humanity that all this is ignorance and error; nay, rather, it is well established that mankind and womankind as parts of composite humanity are coequal and that no difference in estimate is allowable, for all are human . . . In reality, God has created all mankind, and in the estimation of God there is no distinction as to male and female. The one whose heart is pure is acceptable in His sight, be that one man or woman. God does not inquire, "Art thou woman or art thou man?" He judges human actions. If these are acceptable in the threshold of the Glorious One, man and woman will be equally recognized and rewarded. (Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 133)

Nor are women inferior to men in their abilities. Any deficiency shown in the past was solely due to a lack of education and opportunities.

It has been objected by some that woman is not equally capable with man and that she is deficient by creation. This is pure imagination. The difference in capability between man and woman is due entirely to opportunity and education. Heretofore woman has been denied the right and privilege of equal development. If equal opportunity be granted her, there is no doubt she would be the peer of man . . .

The purpose, in brief, is this: that if woman be fully educated and granted her rights, she will attain the capacity for wonderful accomplishments and prove

herself the equal of man. She is the coadjutor of man, his complement and helpmeet. Both are human; both are endowed with potentialities of intelligence and embody the virtues of humanity. In all human powers and functions they are partners and coequals. At present in spheres of human activity woman does not manifest her natal prerogatives, owing to lack of education and opportunity. Without doubt education will establish her equality with men.

(`Abdu'l-Bahá)[6]

In some respects, `Abdu'l-Bahá asserts, the woman is "of the greater importance to the race. She has the greater burden and the greater work . . . The woman has greater moral courage than the man; she has also special gifts which enable her to govern in moments of danger and crisis." [7] She is also "more tender-hearted, more receptive, her intuition is more intense." [8]

`Abdu'l-Bahá says that this teaching of the equality of women and men is an important one for the progress of humanity:

And among the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh is the equality of women and men. The world of humanity has two wings - one is women and the other men. Not until both wings are equally developed can the bird fly. Should one wing remain weak, flight is impossible. Not until the world of women becomes equal to the world of men in the acquisition of virtues and perfections, can success and prosperity be attained as they ought to be. [9]

And so therefore: "As long as women are prevented from attaining their highest possibilities, so long will men be unable to achieve the greatness which might be theirs." [10] In particular, `Abdu'l-Bahá asserts that an increased role for women in society is necessary for the achievement of world peace.

As well as affirming the equality of men and women, the Bahá'í teachings recognize the necessity of dismantling some of the social structures that maintain patriarchal society. These features of the Bahá'í social order, such as the removal of authority from individuals and the decentralization of power, will be discussed in another chapter. In all, the aim is to achieve a better balance in society between its male and female elements:

The world in the past has been ruled by force, and man has dominated over woman by reason of his more forceful and aggressive qualities both of body and mind. But the balance is already shifting; force is losing its dominance, and mental alertness, intuition, and the spiritual qualities of love and service, in which woman is strong, are gaining ascendancy. Hence the new age will be an age less masculine and more permeated with the feminine ideals, or, to speak more exactly, will be an age in which the masculine and feminine elements of civilization will be more evenly balanced. (`Abdu'l-Bahá)[11]

Although women are guaranteed full equality with men, there is some inevitable complementarity in their social roles. Women are free to follow any occupation that they wish, but it is envisaged that they will be the first educators of any children that are born to them. As stated in the previous chapter, because of the importance of their role as the first educators of children, the

Bahá'í Faith teaches that, if there is any difficulty in the full provision of education, preference should be given to girls over boys. Women are, however, precluded from membership on the Universal House of Justice. `Abdu'l-Bahá says that this is "for a wisdom of the Lord God's, which will ere long be made manifest as clearly as the sun at high noon." [12] Bahá'ís must take this apparent anomaly as a matter of faith for the present.

Science, Technology and the Environment

The Bahá'í world-view accords the sciences and technology a high place. The human mind and its reasoning ability are one of the distinguishing marks of humanity, and science, which is the fruit of this, is regarded as a divine gift. In particular, the conflict that has occurred between science and religion over such concepts as evolution is considered to have been wrong. Science and religion should instead be seen as complementary aspects of human progress and development. `Abdu'l-Bahá says:

Religion and science are the two wings upon which man's intelligence can soar into the heights, with which the human soul can progress. It is not possible to fly with one wing alone! Should a man try to fly with the wing of religion alone he would quickly fall into the quagmire of superstition, whilst on the other hand, with the wing of science alone he would also make no progress, but fall into the despairing slough of materialism. [13]

Human beings, through the instrument of science and technology, have achieved a mastery over nature. Without religion, however, that mastery can become disastrous; science and technology can become the instruments of warfare or lead to environmental pollution. Bahá'u'lláh warned of the dangers of the excesses of our civilization:

The civilization, so often vaunted by the learned exponents of arts and sciences, will, if allowed to overleap the bounds of moderation, bring great evil upon men. Thus warneth you He Who is the All-Knowing. If carried to excess, civilization will prove as prolific a source of evil as it had been of goodness when kept within the restraints of moderation. Meditate on this, O people, and be not of them that wander distraught in the wilderness of error. The day is approaching when its flame will devour the cities . . . [14]

Humanity's arrogant misuse of nature has led to a situation where environmental calamities threaten in many different ways. Humanity must learn to overcome this arrogance and adopt a more humble approach towards the earth and what it contains.

Every man of discernment, while walking upon the earth, feeleth indeed abashed, inasmuch as he is fully aware that the thing which is the source of his prosperity, his wealth, his might, his exaltation, his advancement and power is, as ordained by God, the very earth which is trodden beneath the feet of all men. There can be no doubt that whoever is cognizant of this truth, is cleansed and sanctified from all pride, arrogance, and vainglory. (Bahá'u'lláh) [15]

Indeed contemplating nature can be a way of contemplating the Divine. [16] And

from this contemplation of nature, we come to recognize the interconnectedness of all things and the necessity of taking care of our environment:

We cannot segregate the human heart from the environment outside us and say that once one of these is reformed everything will be improved. Man is organic with the world. His inner life moulds the environment and is itself also deeply affected by it. The one acts upon the other and every abiding change in the life of man is the result of these mutual reactions.[17]

Liberty and Human Rights

All around us there are many individuals and groups claiming rights and freedoms. The desire and drive for freedom have been one of the main themes of the twentieth century. Religious freedom, political freedom, the right to free speech, the right to work freely, the right to spend your money freely, the freedom to travel; all of these are freedoms that have gradually been won, in the West at least, during this century. The question must however be raised as to where this quest for freedom stops.

Individualism, the cult of the individual, has reached a point where society is suffering from its adverse effects. Is the individual to be given the freedom to do whatever he or she likes? Is the freedom to carry any type of weapon, the license to undertake all types of sexual activities, or the liberty to publish or broadcast any type of attack on a minority group also going to be allowed? Another question that arises is whether these freedoms that have been gained have really led to a greater degree of human happiness. No-one can deny or fail to be grateful for the fact that there has been great progress in freeing millions of human beings from tyrannical oppression by governments, religious authorities and other powerful institutions. But there has simultaneously been an increasing sense of isolation and dislocation for individuals in society.

As the century has progressed, the cult of individualism has gain in strength and become a central feature of society. We have reached the point where the central preoccupation of most politicians and social commentators appears to be the devising of strategies to give individuals more and more rights and freedoms. The libertarian doctrines of the political Left insist on the right of the individual to pursue self-fulfilment. The free-market capitalism of the political Right insists on the freedom to maximize profit and the rights of the individual as consumer. Both sides of the political spectrum have thus fuelled the trend of the past few decades leading to the growth of individualism.

The effect of all of this on the community has only recently been recognised. To give people greater and greater freedom without balancing this with a greater sense of responsibility in their use of that freedom leads to a society in which people are pursuing their own desires and indulging themselves whatever the effect this might have on others. This freedom and self-indulgence finds expression in drug abuse, alcoholism, vandalism, violence, sexual promiscuity, and a general lack of respect for the rights and dignity of others. It leads in turn to crime on the part of those who cannot legitimately earn the money to be a part of the consumer society; to depression, suicide and

drug dependence in those who are the victims of the culture of greed and the social isolation that is created; and to corruption among the rich and powerful.

The group that has perhaps been affected by this the most has been children. The educational practices of the past, which included trying to instill a sense of self-discipline and social responsibility into children, have been discarded. They have been replaced by practices based on the theory that children should be given the greatest amount of freedom possible to develop themselves. The extent to which this has been carried leaves children without a structure or framework to their lives. When confronted with a society that itself has lost its standards and its sense of moderation, these children have neither the maturity to deal with the freedom that is thrust upon them by society nor now the social support of a caring adult society upon which to fall back.

Over a century ago, Bahá'u'lláh gave much the same analysis of the social situation and the direction in which it was heading. He rejected the idea that unlimited freedom is beneficial to human beings. Liberty, he asserted, if carried to excess takes human beings to level of animals and below. It is then as great a source of evil as a moderate degree of it is a source of good:

We approve of liberty in certain circumstances, and refuse to sanction it in others.[18]

Bahá'u'lláh expounds a principle in relationship to liberty that has a much wider application — the principle of moderation. He says that however much something may appear to be good, if it is carried to excess it becomes a source of evil:

It is incumbent upon them who are in authority to exercise moderation in all things. Whatsoever passeth beyond the limits of moderation will cease to exert a beneficial influence. Consider for instance such things as liberty, civilization and the like. However much men of understanding may favourably regard them, they will, if carried to excess, exercise a pernicious influence upon men.[19]

Human rights must stem from a knowledge of the dignity and worth of every individual human being — a knowledge which is enshrined in the scriptures of most religions. `Abdu'l-Bahá says that all human beings should have the opportunity to grow and develop their potential:

There are souls in the human world who are ignorant; we must make them knowing. Some growing upon the tree are weak and ailing; we must assist them toward health and recovery. If they are as infants in development, we must minister to them until they attain maturity. We should never detest and shun them as objectionable and unworthy. We must treat them with honour, respect and kindness. . . In brief, all humanity must be looked upon with love, kindness and respect.[20]

`Abdu'l-Bahá has stated that society must adopt equal and guaranteed human

rights for all:

Bahá'u'lláh taught that an equal standard of human rights must be recognized and adopted. In the estimation of God all men are equal; there is no distinction or preferment for any soul in the dominion of His justice and equity.[21]

The above should not be read as implying that the Bahá'í teachings condemn freedom and liberty. On the contrary, they advocate that increased liberty and human rights based on justice are important advances which allow individuals the opportunity to develop their full human potential. Bahá'u'lláh warns, however, that this trend should not be allowed to proceed to the extreme point where it threatens the order and stability of society.

Agriculture

In most countries that have become industrialized and have advanced materially, agriculture has become of marginal importance. `Abdu'l-Bahá says, however, that it is "the fundamental basis of the community"[22] and that "the peasant class and the agricultural class exceed other classes in the importance of their service." [23] Bahá'u'lláh asserts that "special regard must be paid to agriculture" as it is an activity which is "conducive to the advancement of mankind and to the reconstruction of the world." [24]

'Abdu'l-Bahá has outlined a scheme that would make rural communities more self-sufficient and less vulnerable to natural disasters. He outlines a scheme for the accumulation of a public treasury in each rural community, which would relieve suffering in the case of the poor, the incapacitated, and those suffering as a result of misfortunes or natural disasters, and thus make these communities more independent.[25]

Teachings on Government and Social Policy

Bahá'u'lláh addressed the kings and rulers of his time on a number of issues, many of which continue to have relevance today. Surveying the world of his time, he noted that there were two main models of government, the authoritarian, absolutist model represented by the Tsar of Russia, the Sultan of Ottoman Turkey or the Shah of Iran, and the democratic model, which was especially associated with the new republic formed in the United States of America and with Britain. He strongly advocated the democratic model. He recommended, however, that a monarch be kept as head of state since "the majesty of kingship is one of the signs of God. We do not wish that the countries of the world should remain deprived thereof." [26] He therefore advised a combination of democracy and kingship (i.e. a constitutional monarchy).

Bahá'u'lláh particularly admonished the rulers and governments of the world to establish peace and to reduce unnecessary expenditure on armaments.

Compose your differences, and reduce your armaments, that the burden of your expenditures may be lightened, and that your minds and hearts may be

tranquillized. Heal the dissensions that divide you, and ye will no longer be in need of any armaments except what the protection of your cities and territories demandeth. Fear ye God, and take heed not to outstrip the bounds of moderation, and be numbered among the extravagant.

We have learned that you are increasing your outlay every year, and are laying the burden thereof on your subjects. This, verily, is more than they can bear, and is a grievous injustice.[27]

One quality which Bahá'u'lláh particularly commends to those in authority is justice:

Be vigilant, that ye may not do injustice to anyone, be it to the extent of a grain of mustard seed. Tread ye the path of justice, for this, verily, is the straight path . . . Decide justly between men, and be ye the emblems of justice amongst them . . . Beware not to deal unjustly with any one that appealeth to you, and entereth beneath your shadow . . .

God hath committed into your hands the reins of the government of the people, that ye may rule with justice over them, safeguard the rights of the down-trodden, and punish the wrong-doers. If ye neglect the duty prescribed unto you by God in His Book, your names shall be numbered with those of the unjust in His sight.[28]

Bahá'u'lláh also addressed the elected representatives of the people urging them to maintain the highest moral standards.

O ye the elected representatives of the people in every land! Take ye counsel together, and let your concern be only for that which profiteth mankind, and bettereth the condition thereof.[29]

Among those matters in which the utmost probity should be exercised is the appointment and promotion of officials. These appointments must be made according to fitness and merit and not because of family or personal connections.[30]

`Abdu'l-Bahá wrote a book, *The Secret of Divine Civilization*, much of which deals with the qualities necessary for government leaders and officials.

The question of how decisions are made in society is an important one. At present, decision-making tends to be the prerogative of an individual leader or a small group in power. In the Bahá'í teachings, great importance is attached to group decision-making by a consultative process. Bahá'ís consider the development of the skill of effective consultation to be an important part of social and community development. The process of consultation, however, is one which, in the Bahá'í view, is very underdeveloped at present. (On the underlying principles of Bahá'í consultation, [click here](#)).

Crime and its punishment is a social issue which concerns many people. On the subject of the treatment of criminals, `Abdu'l-Bahá says that the individual does not have the right to exact vengeance. The community as a whole, however, needs to protect its members from harm.

If someone oppresses, injures and wrongs another, and the wronged man retaliates, this is vengeance and is censurable . . . But the community has the right of defense and of self-protection; moreover, the community has no hatred nor animosity for the murderer: it imprisons or punishes him merely for the protection and security of others. It is not for the purpose of taking vengeance upon the murderer, but for the purpose of inflicting a punishment by which the community will be protected. If the community and the inheritors of the murdered one were to forgive and return good for evil, the cruel would be continually ill-treating others, and assassinations would continually occur . . . The tent of existence is upheld upon the pillar of justice and not upon forgiveness. The continuance of mankind depends upon justice and not upon forgiveness.[31]

Alongside this administration of justice, however, `Abdu'l-Bahá also advocates that our eventual aim must be to educate children so as to make the committing of a crime itself a rare thing in society.

But the most essential thing is that the people must be educated in such a way that no crimes will be committed; for it is possible to educate the masses so effectively that they will avoid and shrink from perpetrating crimes, so that the crime itself will appear to them as the greatest chastisement, the utmost condemnation and torment. Therefore, no crimes which require punishment will be committed.

. . . communities are day and night occupied in making penal laws, and in preparing and organizing instruments and means of punishment. They build prisons, make chains and fetters, arrange places of exile and banishment, and different kinds of hardships and tortures, and think by these means to discipline criminals, whereas, in reality, they are causing destruction of morals and perversion of characters. The community, on the contrary, ought day and night to strive and endeavour with the utmost zeal and effort to accomplish the education of men, to cause them day by day to progress and to increase in science and knowledge, to acquire virtues, to gain good morals and to avoid vices, so that crimes may not occur . . .[32]

Teachings on Economics

The Bahá'í texts also contain passages dealing with economic matters. One of the main ways in which people, especially politicians, think that they will be able to solve the problems that our societies face is through economic manipulation. Various economic theories are propounded, but the inevitable experience is that when those who advocate these theories come to power, the measures that they enact do not bring about the anticipated benefits. According to the Bahá'í teachings, much of the economic activity in the world today is wrongly conceived because it is built upon incorrect assumptions.

The first of these incorrect assumptions is the idea that human happiness and contentment can be achieved merely by increasing the wealth of the individual members of the society. Economists assume that all human beings are motivated by selfishness and greed and that therefore the more any particular economic

policy caters for these base motivations, the more successful it will be. And so most economic theories are put forward on the basis that they will give increased wealth to the members of the society. According to the Bahá'í teachings that is not the right way to achieve human happiness and contentment — human beings will only be satisfied if the spiritual aspect of their nature is fulfilled and developed alongside the physical.

The second incorrect assumption is that it is possible to achieve lasting benefits for one section of society or one part of the world at the expense of other sections or parts of the world. This again is a false concept according to the Bahá'í teachings. It may be that a particular policy will bring temporary benefits to one social class or one country at the expense of other classes or other countries, but that is only a temporary gain and the policy is a short-sighted policy. Because of the inter-connectedness of all humanity, if any part of humanity is adversely affected by the policy, then in the long run all of humanity will be adversely affected. We must cease to regard ourselves as belonging to particular factions or races or nations of humankind and we must start to regard humanity as one people and the whole world as one country. Only an economic policy that benefits all, will in the long run benefit anyone.

The third incorrect assumption made by economists when formulating their theories, and this one is perhaps the most important of all, is the idea that materialistic economic theories can actually solve economic problems. `Abdu'l-Bahá says that economic problems are at their deepest level spiritual in nature and so they can only be solved by correcting the underlying spiritual problems — problems such as injustice, corruption, and selfishness. The solution to the economic ills of the world, therefore, according to the Bahá'í teachings, lies not in applying elaborate and sophisticated economic theories or even in legislation or political manipulations. The underlying cause of these economic problems is a spiritual malaise that affects the whole world and so only a spiritual solution will cure these economic problems.

The fundamentals of the whole economic condition are divine in nature and are associated with the world of the heart and spirit . . . Strive, therefore, to create love in the hearts in order that they may become glowing and radiant. When that love is shining, it will permeate other hearts even as this electric light illumines its surroundings. When the love of God is established, everything else will be realized. This is the true foundation of all economics . . . Economic questions are most interesting; but the power which moves, controls and attracts the hearts of men is the love of God. (`Abdu'l-Bahá)[33]

It is, therefore, not surprising to find that the Bahá'í Faith does not advocate any particular economic theory, nor does it add yet another economic theory to the large number of existing ones. One of the principle concepts in the Bahá'í Faith is the idea that the social structure of humanity is constantly changing and so no economic theory is always going to be right for the whole world. Instead, in the Bahá'í scriptures, a number of principles are put forward which must be the basis on which any specific economic plans

are based. These economic principles include:

The need for world peace. As mentioned above, at present the economies of so many countries are crippled by the expenditure necessary to purchase large quantities of arms. Even very poor nations that barely have enough to feed themselves are spending a large proportion of their national income on armaments. A necessary precursor for the solution of the world's economic problems then is the establishment of world peace and a collective security arrangement that will enable all countries to reduce their expenditure on arms (for more information on this, [click here](#)).

The need for a world economy. As has already been pointed out, we must take the benefit of the whole of humanity into consideration when planning economic measures and so all economic planning must be done inside a global perspective. When each measure is planned, the question must be asked: "is this measure going to be of overall benefit to the whole of humanity?" The resources of the planet would then be developed for the benefit of all and not for the profit of a few. Part of the development of a global economy will be the need to move towards a world currency, a world system of weights and measures, and international regulation of the terms of trade.

The need for justice in the economic system. One of the key spiritual qualities that should govern all public affairs is justice. In economic terms this means that one section of society should not be able to maintain control over all the means of production and distribution in a society and thus maintain an economic stranglehold on that society so that they become very rich while everyone else is condemned to poverty. Such imbalances and injustice exists both within countries and between countries. Some countries have great wealth and waste enormous resources of energy and materials; and these countries have policies which are instrumental in keeping other countries very poor, to the extent that some do not have enough even to feed their populations. Part of the problem is the unfair terms of trade between the rich countries and the poor countries and this must be addressed at the global level. Another part of the problem is the consumerism and excessive competition in the richer countries which leads to enormous waste and excessive consumption. At the level of the individual, the Bahá'í teachings suggest that such measures as a progressive income tax will eliminate the extremes of wealth and poverty in a society. It is important to note that the Bahá'í Faith does not think that we either can or should try to achieve a complete equality of wealth among all people or the forced redistribution of wealth, as is advocated by some versions of communist doctrine. It is an illusion to believe that it is ever possible to reach such a state. Human beings are varied in their intelligence and abilities and one can never achieve a complete equalization of wealth. In addition, under Bahá'í law, everyone is entitled to their property and to pass on that property to whomever they wish. What Bahá'ís are advocating is that it is the extremes of poverty and wealth that should be eliminated.

A new work ethic. Bahá'u'lláh says that in this age it is possible and necessary for the world to arrange its affairs in such a way that all people

receive an education and also receive training so that they are able to work and earn their livelihood. And it is also an obligation placed on each individual that they perform some useful work in society. Bahá'u'lláh even introduces a new work ethic when he says that work performed conscientiously and in the spirit of service to humanity is equivalent to the worship of God.

The importance of cooperation. At present much of the economic scene is dominated by competition and conflict. Although a small degree of competition is useful, today in many parts of the world, it has reached a stage of being wasteful and destructive. There should be an increased emphasis on cooperation in society. This can only be achieved, however, if individuals stop being self-centred and look instead to what will benefit society as a whole. In particular `Abdu'l-Bahá states that in industry, we must move away from the present situation of conflict between the workers and the owners of an enterprise, resulting in strikes and wastefulness. He says that the owners of an enterprise should share some of the profits of the enterprise with the workers, so that the workers receive their wages and a share of the profits of the company. In this way, all conflict of interest between the workers and the owners is eliminated and both sides will work in cooperation.[34]

The importance of voluntary sharing. Bahá'u'lláh places great importance upon the virtues and benefits of voluntary sharing. It will be a sign of the spiritualization of society when the rich realise that their wealth is a spiritual hindrance to them and voluntarily share with the poor.

Voluntary Sharing

. . . the Teachings of Bahá'u'lláh advocate voluntary sharing, and this is a greater thing than the equalization of wealth. For equalization must be imposed from without, while sharing is a matter of free choice.

Man reacheth perfection through good deeds, voluntarily performed, not through good deeds the doing of which was forced upon him. And sharing is a personally chosen righteous act: that is, the rich should extend assistance to the poor, they should expend their substance for the poor, but of their own free will, and not because the poor have gained this end by force. For the harvest of force is turmoil and the ruin of the social order. On the other hand voluntary sharing, the freely-chosen expending of one's substance, leadeth to society's comfort and peace. It lighteth up the world; it bestoweth honour upon humankind. (`Abdu'l-Bahá, Selections, p. 115.)

It is important to note that these are just general guiding principles. The Bahá'í teachings assert, however, that the sickness of society cannot be cured by economic policies or by laws. The sickness is a spiritual sickness and as long as the individual members of society are greedy, selfish, materialistic, and prejudiced, there can be no long-term solution. These spiritual ills need a spiritual cure. Only religious faith has the power to transform people and thus cure this spiritual disease. Only when the individuals in a society are spiritually transformed is there any hope of a lasting cure to the social, political and economic problems.

General Principles and Other Teachings

It can be observed that rather than a specific programme of social laws that it aims to put into place, the Bahá'í Faith has general social principles that serve to guide social policy. In the Bahá'í view the advancement of human civilization must happen gradually and organically. It does not occur through political leadership or legislation. It can only occur through individuals who are motivated to transform their own lives and, in so doing, gradually transform society.

The Bahá'í social teachings are thus phrased in terms of the general spiritual principles, such as equality and justice, that must underlie any social change. Many other social teachings can be found in the Bahá'í writings. Most of these are based either on the underlying spiritual principle of justice or they promote a global vision and a truly integrated world order. Among these is the injunction for the governments of the world to adopt a universal language that will be taught in all schools besides the mother tongue of each nation; the adoption of a universal system of weights and measures; the adoption of a universal standard of human rights; and the universal compulsory education of children.

Endnotes

Hidden Words, Arabic no. 68.

Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 316.

Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 316.

Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 316.

Compilation of Compilations, vol. 2, p. 357.

Promulgation of Universal Peace, pp. 135-7.

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