

Bahá'í perspective of social evolution, humanity has emerged from its collective childhood:

The long ages of infancy and childhood, through which the human race had to pass, have receded into the background. Humanity is now experiencing the commotions invariably associated with the most turbulent stage of its evolution, the stage of adolescence, when the impetuosity of youth and its vehemence reach their climax . . .

Accordingly, humanity is now in its adolescence, on the threshold of maturity:

What we witness at the present time, during "this gravest crisis in the history of civilization," recalling such times in which "religions have perished and are born," is the adolescent stage in the slow and painful evolution of humanity, preparatory to the attainment of the stage of manhood, the stage of maturity, the promise of which is embedded in the teachings, and enshrined in the prophecies, of Bahá'u'lláh. The tumult of this age of transition is characteristic of the impetuosity and irrational instincts of youth, its follies, its prodigality, its pride, its self-assurance, its rebelliousness, and contempt of discipline. (Promised Day is Come)

Psychologists characterize adolescence as a time of identity crises, rebellion, erratic behavior and confusion over beliefs and values. The dilemma of adolescents is their immaturity; often they do not realize that they are enduring a difficult but necessary period of change. From a totally dependent period of childhood, they are struggling to become independent adults. But in the eyes of adolescents, now is forever; the painful, confusing, inexorable process of growth seems permanently beyond their control. They may want to return to the security of total dependency, but they are compelled to advance toward autonomy. Faced with such conflicts, adolescents experiment; they begin to explore the boundaries of their new, emerging sense of freedom. Parents of teenagers are familiar with two behavioral extremes characteristic of the movement toward autonomy. One is scepticism toward authority, expressed most commonly as cynicism and rebellion. The other is self-assertion to establish one's individuality, often characterized by selfish, self-centered behavior.

Conversely, parents of adolescents may also exhibit extreme behavior. Some become authoritarian, imposing rigid demands enforced by the threat of swift punishment. Others become indulgent, permitting the youth to follow whatever impulses and inclinations they may have. The extremes of adolescence are evident in society, as well. In the human family scepticism regarding authority may be at an all time high. Regrettably, it is well earned; all over the world, authoritarian social systems are denying people fundamental rights necessary to their self-sufficiency and self-reliance. Consequently, oppositional movements dominate the political landscape. Conflict and contention have become institutionalized. Adversarial behavior is accepted and expected in virtually all social relationships: in government, in business, in marriages, in families. Opportunism and aggressive competition mark the spirit of the council chamber, the marketplace, the school, and the playing field.

In many societies individualism has been indulged to the point of self-worship. Self-interest is an accepted norm. For example, the indulgence in corruption is a global epidemic, affecting both institutions and individuals. The public trust, so vaunted in the world's dominant ideologies, is being betrayed at every level in every society on the planet. Governments, public agencies, educational and religious institutions, and corporations are being rocked or toppled daily due to scandals of every conceivable nature, involving everyone from ministers (both secular and religious) to their constituents.

All manner of addictive behavior, of crime, sexual exploitation, substance abuse, verbal and physical violence are openly acknowledged risks in people's daily lives, regardless of ethnicity, age, sex, race, class, or religion.

During the tumultuous time of transition, humankind, like an adolescent, has been exploring the limits of its own freedom. The mature parent understands that adolescents need a combination of consistent standards and unconditional love to guide their development and to assist them to assume the rights and responsibilities of adulthood. However, humanity currently is devoid of any consistent internal or external controls. It also lacks any clear sense of its fundamental unity and its inherent dignity and nobility. As a consequence, it suffers the frequently fatal excesses of rigid authoritarianism and wanton self-indulgence. Confused by a medley of contradictory and seemingly irreconcilable beliefs and practices, the whole world watches its political and social institutions, its time-honored religious systems and moral standards disintegrate.

Bahá'u'lláh, the Prophet-Founder of the Bahá'í Faith, anticipated these events more than a century ago:

The winds of despair . . . are, alas, blowing from every direction, and the strife that divides and afflicts the human race is daily increasing. The signs of impending convulsions and chaos can now be discerned, inasmuch as the prevailing order appears to be lamentably defective.

According to Bahá'u'lláh, humanity experiences turmoil because it desperately needs both a universal moral standard and the mechanism, or system, through which such a standard can be realized. He asserted that the present-day order would be "rolled up, and a new one spread out in its stead." He prophesied that all the world's governments would change, that oppression would encompass the earth and that, following a "universal convulsion," "the sun of justice will rise from the horizon of the unseen realm." This is an allusion to the ascendancy of the divine plan which He revealed:

The world's equilibrium hath been upset through the vibrating influence of this Most Great, this new World Order. Mankind's ordered life hath been revolutionized through the agency of this unique, this wondrous System, the like of which mortal eyes have never witnessed.

Adolescents learn that they must abandon the rules and behaviors appropriate to childhood; they learn to adopt new standards and develop new behaviors

commensurate with their new self-awareness, capacities, opportunities and responsibilities. Humankind is now faced with the same imperative:

That which was applicable to human needs during the early history of the race can neither meet nor satisfy the demands of this day, this period of newness and consummation. Humanity has emerged from its former state of limitation and preliminary training. Man must now become imbued with new virtues and powers, new moral standards, new capacities. New bounties, perfect bestowals, are awaiting and already descending upon him. The gifts and blessings of the period of youth, although timely and sufficient during the adolescence of mankind, are now incapable of meeting the requirements of its maturity.

Attaining the age of maturity means that one's potential can begin to be realized:

the stage of adolescence . . . must gradually be superseded by the calmness, the wisdom, and the maturity that characterize the stage of manhood. Then will the human race reach that stature of ripeness which will enable it to acquire all the powers and capacities upon which its ultimate development must depend.

According to Bahá'u'lláh, the process of human social evolution follows a divine plan. In every age God sends a Prophet or Messenger, a Manifestation of God, to provide people with the spiritual principles, the moral laws, and the framework of social institutions necessary to human unity and development. Historically, these revealed religions have formed the bases of society, the cornerstones for human civilization. Religion, too, is evolutionary, for each religion in this progressive series of divine revelations is linked to an ultimate purpose: the establishment of universal peace and the ultimate unification of the diverse elements that constitute human society.

Unification of the whole of mankind is the hall-mark of the stage which human society is now approaching. Unity of family, of tribe, of city-state, and nation have been successfully attempted and fully established. World unity is the goal towards which a harassed humanity is striving. Nation-building has come to an end. The anarchy inherent in state sovereignty is moving towards a climax. A world, growing to maturity, must abandon this fetish, recognize the oneness and wholeness of human relationships, and establish once and for all the machinery that can best incarnate this fundamental principle of its life. Humankind's coming of age is consummated by the establishment of a global civilization, the pivotal principle of which is the oneness of humanity. It is in this context and for this purpose that Bahá'u'lláh provides new understandings of the fundamental principles of freedom. The Bahá'í teachings confirm that freedom is a fundamental principle of human life, "essential" to all its expressions. Freedom is essential because it is necessary to the fulfilment of human potential. The more freedoms individuals enjoy, the more opportunities they have to determine their own destiny.

The future world commonwealth must guarantee that the "personal freedom and initiative of the individuals . . . are definitely and completely safeguarded." This fundamental principle is explicitly upheld in the constitution of the

Universal House of Justice, the supreme governing and legislative body of the worldwide Bahá'í community: Among the powers and duties with which the Universal House of Justice has been invested are:

. . . to safeguard the personal rights, freedom and initiative of individuals; and to give attention to the preservation of human honour. . .

There is a wide diversity of freedoms: Freedom from fear, oppression, want, hunger, disease, exploitation. Freedom to live, believe, think, learn, grow, progress, express, disagree. Freedom of association, worship, participation. Freedom in happiness, joy, peace, and security. One popular ideal of freedom is complete autonomy, absence of constraint. In North America, many sustain romantic images of rugged individualism, of the bravery and heroism of the European explorers, pioneers and early settlers; and of the courage of the Loyalists and the Revolutionaries. But such images are unsuited as symbols of humanity's highest ideals; at best, they are idealized snapshots from a culture's childhood. At their worst, they fail to honestly portray the human suffering which attends such exploits (most notably in this instance, the systematic genocide and enslavement of formerly free Indian and African peoples). From the Bahá'í point of view, the context of freedom is the dynamic relationship between individuality and interdependence. Freedom is fundamentally a social principle, enacted in a social matrix; it describes social relationships. Each individual and every society is like the cells and parts of one body:

In the human body, every cell, every organ, every nerve has its part to play. When all do so the body is healthy, vigorous, radiant, ready for every call made upon it. No cell, however humble, lives apart from the body, whether in serving it or receiving from it. Abdu'l-Bahá, Bahá'u'lláh's son and His appointed interpreter of His writings and leader of the Bahá'í community, explains that the most elementary social application of this principle is found in the family, from which it is extended through all levels of society. The integrity of the family bond must be constantly considered, and the rights of the individual members must not be transgressed. . . . All these rights and prerogatives must be conserved, yet the unity of the family must be sustained. The injury of one shall be considered the injury of all; the comfort of each, the comfort of all; the honor of one, the honor of all.

He states further that these rights that must be harmonized with the demands of an increasingly interdependent world:

In like manner all the members of the human family, whether peoples or governments, cities or villages, have become increasingly interdependent. For none is self-sufficiency any longer possible, inasmuch as political ties unite all peoples and nations, and the bonds of trade and industry, of agriculture and education, are being strengthened every day. Hence the unity of all mankind can in this day be achieved. Verily this is none other but one of the wonders of this wondrous age, this glorious century.

The idealized notion of freedom unconstrained is a chimera, an adolescent

fantasy. Absolute autonomy is impossible. Bahá'u'lláh makes it clear that such an ideal is most nearly fulfilled at the level of an animal:

Know ye that the embodiment of liberty and its symbol is the animal." In its natural state, an animal is virtually without care: all its material needs are provided; it enjoys freedom of movement; it exerts no great labor to partake of food and shelter; it has no commitments; it makes no plans; it faces no moral dilemmas. It is free of guilt and responsibility! But it is a complete and total prisoner of nature. Bahá'ís believe that the most fundamental of all freedoms is one that is bestowed by God to human beings alone: free will. It is in the exercise of a free will that the a human being realizes its greatest power and autonomy. Paradoxically, Bahá'u'lláh says that the highest expression of free will is the individual's submission to the Will of God: True liberty consisteth in man's submission unto My commandments, little as ye know it. . . . Were men to observe that which We have sent down unto them from the Heaven of Revelation, they would, of a certainty, attain unto perfect liberty. . . . The liberty that profiteth you is to be found nowhere except in complete servitude unto God, the Eternal Truth.

It is with the understanding and the faith that God's laws are humankind's greatest guide and protection that the individual submits to God's Will. But it is not a blind submission to an authoritarian rule that is required. Rather, Bahá'u'lláh enjoins all to use their reason, to question, to study, and to determine for themselves the validity of His claim. A sign of maturity in individuals is their understanding, acceptance, and practice of social responsibility. It implies their recognition of the dignity and capacities of all people, including themselves. Maturity also is reflected when individuals understand peoples' organic interdependence and contribute freely to the well-being of all, "inasmuch as in a world of interdependent nations and peoples the advantage of the part is best to be reached by the advantage of the whole."

The Manifestation of God awakens in human beings the awareness of their latent power and inspires them to realise their inherent nobility and their fullest potential. In this way, according to Abdu'l-Bahá, God frees the spirit "so that blessed individuals, who have freed themselves from the murk of the animal world, shall rise up with those qualities which are adornings of the reality of man." Having acquired these uniquely human qualities the individual is set free, "emancipated from the captivity of the world of nature."

Unlike an animal, human beings have the unique capacity to transcend the limitations of material existence. This is the basis for their artistic and scientific achievements. In their social affairs, it encourages them to subordinate their self-interest to a higher, collective good. Self-sacrifice, freely chosen, is the noblest of human virtues. It is also the foundation of true heroism, exemplified by people such as Gandhi, Mother Theresa, Tahirih, Chief Joseph, Harriet Tubman, and Raoul Wallenberg. By sacrificing themselves for the well-being of others, they transcend worldly limitations and attain a timeless distinction:

And the honor and distinction of the individual consist in this, that he among all the world's multitudes should become a source of social good. Is any larger bounty conceivable than this, that an individual, looking within himself, should find that by the confirming grace of God he has become the cause of peace and well-being, of happiness and advantage to his fellow men? No, by the one true God, there is no greater bliss, no more complete delight.

True liberty is attained through an awareness of the godliness of each individual, recognition of the universal authority of the Manifestation of God for this Day and freely choosing to obey His will, both individually and collectively.

Thereby are people awakened to their inherent nobility, dignity and honor and provided the mechanisms for attaining their fundamental interdependence and unity. Thereby is humanity liberated from the oppression of ignorance and error, released from the twin tyrannies of authoritarianism and anarchy, freed from the fetters of gross materialism and self-indulgence. Thereby does the human family at long last achieve the coming of age of the entire human race.

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