

Human rights: reflections from a Bahá'í viewpoint¹

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Introduction

From its inception in Iran in 1844, the Bahá'í Faith has developed into a global religion in both its geographical spread and in the diversity of the composition of its community. As of May 1995 the Bahá'í community worldwide numbered over five million. A total of 174 National Spiritual Assemblies had been established in separate countries and territories, each representing a well established Bahá'í community.² Today just under 90% of local Bahá'í communities are found in the developing world, approximately 10% in western countries, and less than 2% in the original Islamic heartlands where the Bahá'í Faith emerged³ (although Bahá'ís in Iran constitute 6% of Bahá'ís worldwide]

Born in modern times, the Bahá'í Faith addresses human rights in the language of modernity. As well, however, we find traditional religious terminology employed through themes such as justice and care of the dispossessed with which religions have characteristically dealt with issues now falling within the human rights framework. In the earliest writings of Bahá'u'lláh, the prophet-founder of the Bahá'í Faith, we find rights themes addressed in terms of the spiritual journey of the soul. From this seed, references to rights evolve into a well-defined set of principles which form the foundation of the Bahá'í teachings, many of which have subsequently been championed by the modern human rights movement, and some of which suggest future human rights agendas.

The Bahá'í community has long undertaken activities which promote

1 This paper was first presented at a the conference "Human Rights, Faith and Culture", held by ABS Australia to Commemorate the 50th Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Canberra, 7-8 November 1998.

2 Statistics from *The Bahá'í World 1995-1996*, Haifa: World Centre Publications, 1996. Local communities sufficiently developed to possess Local Spiritual Assemblies numbered 17,148 with the following geographical spread: Africa: 4,828, Americas 4,515, Asia 5,954, Australasia 901, Europe 950.

3 Peter Smith, *The Bábí and Bahá'í Religions: From Messianic Shi'ism to a World Religion*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.

human rights, particularly in the fields such as the abolition of racial and other prejudices and the advocacy of the equality of men and women. Since the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights the community has also advocated human rights through its contribution as a non-government organisation represented at the United Nations, and in the work of national communities around the world.

A significantly increased focus on human rights issues since 1994 has resulted in the community developing a better understanding of the scriptural basis of the Bahá'í commitment to human rights, and to begin to develop methodologies for the effective advocacy of rights which are consistent with the community's non-political character and its emphasis on building unity between people. The focus on rights also raises the question of how to deal maturely with areas where the standards of the Bahá'í Faith and particular aspects of human rights may seem to be in tension.

Bahá'í Scripture and Human Rights Principles

Bahá'u'lláh's Teachings

In a 40 year period from 1852-1892 Bahá'u'lláh delivered a complex body of religious teachings directed to his followers, to enquirers, to leaders of society and to humanity in general. Although the following involves some generalisation, there are definite phases in those teachings which provide useful markers for highlighting the evolutionary way in which human rights are given expression in those teachings.

During the first phase, his Baghdád teachings from 1852 to 1863, Bahá'u'lláh's writings were largely mystical and theological in character, focusing on the relationship between man and God and on the nature of religion. Observance of human rights is regarded as an element of the soul's search for God. The second phase, from 1863 to 1872, during which Bahá'u'lláh was successively exiled to Constantinople, Adrianople and finally the prison city of 'Akká in Palestine, featured a key series of letters to various kings and rulers. Here observance of human rights is a divine obligation imposed on the rulers of society. The third phase is represented by the writing in 1873 of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, the Bahá'í book of sacred law, in which human rights are foundational elements of the ordering of the 'divine' society. The fourth and final stage is expressed in a series of letters written to various followers in which Bahá'u'lláh provides his vision of an enlightened society, outlining a series of teachings designed to addressing the healing of social ills. As aspirations for the future, human rights are at the core of the healing of society's ills and the redemption of humanity

‘Abdu’l-Bahá and the Bahá’í Principles

The second major element of the Bahá’í sacred corpus are the teachings of Bahá’u’lláh’s son, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, who was appointed by Bahá’u’lláh, in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, as the interpreter of his teachings and as his successor as leader of the nascent Bahá’í community after his own death. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, from nine years of age, shared his father’s life of exile and imprisonment and indeed was not finally released from more or less vigorous forms of state control and detention until the Young Turk revolution in 1908. Again, although an over generalisation, it may be said of him that he played a role similar to that of St Paul in Christianity: in conveying the teachings he had received from its cultural homeland to a broader cultural setting. As Paul expressed Christianity to the gentiles, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá expressed the Bahá’í Faith to the west, and through the west, to modernity. In 1911-1913 ‘Abdu’l-Bahá undertook extensive travels and public engagements in North America and Europe conveying the teachings of his father. His talks are collected in a number of works which have become core elements of Bahá’í scripture.⁴

In these travels, and in his written works, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá focused on conveying a crystallisation of the teachings of his father which he would variously describe as “the teachings of Bahá’u’lláh” or the “principles of the Bahá’í Faith”.⁵ Later Shoghi Effendi described these principles as (together with the Kitáb-i-Aqdas) “the bedrock” of the Bahá’í teachings and “the essential elements of that Divine polity which [‘Abdu’l-Bahá] proclaimed to the leaders of public thought as well as to the masses at large”.⁶

The following is a typical listing of the principles which ‘Abdu’l-Bahá would describe:

- Independent investigation of truth
- The oneness of humanity
- The basic unity of religion
- The abolition of all prejudice, whether of race, sex, nationality, class or creed
- The equality of men and women
- Universal compulsory education
- The abolition of extremes of wealth and poverty
- The importance of justice as a ruling principle of society
- The establishment of international peace and world unity
- The adoption of a universal language
- The harmony of science and religion⁷

4 *Promulgation of Universal Peace* (talks delivered in Canada and the United States), *Paris Talks*, and *‘Abdu’l-Bahá in London*.

5 e.g. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 63 “The third teaching or principle of Bahá’u’lláh is ...” 107, 127, 169 - in answer to a questions about tenets of faith.

6 Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, Wilmette: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1944, p. 281-282.

7 This particular listing is derived from Shoghi Effendi’s presentation of these principles in *God Passes By*, pp. 281-282.

A number of these are directly concerned with human rights or carry rights implications which were expressed by Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and subsequently in the practice of the Bahá'í community. Their expression in the Universal Declaration and subsequent human rights declarations and treaties is striking.

For instance the abolition of racial prejudice is reflected in article 2 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and its realisation pursued through instruments such as the Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination. Similarly the equality of men and women is a principle championed by the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women. The right to education is given expression in article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and half at least of the concept of the 'abolition of extremes of wealth and poverty' is found in article 25 of the Declaration. The 'independent investigation of the truth' is expressed as a 'duty' of every individual - to know and believe of their own knowledge and not through that of others. It implies with it a duty on others not to interfere with this independent investigation - the sacred task of each soul. The promotion of peace is of course intimately connected with the realisation of human rights and the Bahá'í insistence on the fundamental importance of the achievement of peace has been characteristic of its many decades of advocacy.⁸

Replete with human rights resonance is however the concept of the oneness of humanity, which in its expression by 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Bahá'u'lláh himself, symbolises complex ideas concerning the nature of the human person and society. This principle is central to the character of the Bahá'í teachings being regarded as the "pivot" around which the Bahá'í teachings are built.⁹

The oneness of humanity expresses the common spiritual origin - and thus 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"*¹⁰

It symbolises the "value" of the human person, in language which parallels the concept of human dignity in article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

*"Noble have I created Thee, yet thou hast abased thyself. Rise then to that for which thou wast created."*¹¹

8 An instance is found in *The Promise of World Peace*, a document released by the Universal House of Justice for the International Year of Peace.

9 Shoghi Effendi *God Passes By*, p. 217.

10 Bahá'u'lláh, *Hidden Words* (Arabic), number 68.

11 Bahá'u'lláh, *Hidden Words* (Arabic), number 22.

It expresses the basic moral paradigm of Bahá'u'lláh's teaching, emphasising a vision of service to humanity as the highest moral order.

*Do not busy yourselves in your own concerns; let your thoughts be fixed upon that which will rehabilitate the fortunes of mankind and sanctify the hearts and souls of men.*¹²

It expresses the close bonds uniting all human beings together:

*"Ye are the fruits of one tree and the leaves of one branch. Deal ye one with another with the utmost love and harmony, with friendliness and fellowship ... So powerful is the light of unity that it can illuminate the whole earth ... Exert yourselves that ye may attain this transcendent and most sublime station, the station that can ensure the protection and security of all mankind. This goal excelleth every other goal, and this aspiration is the monarch of all aspirations. So long, however, as the thick clouds of oppression, which obscure the day star of justice, remain undispelled, it would be difficult for the glory of this station to be unveiled to men's eyes ..."*¹³

Bahá'u'lláh's teaching that *"The earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens"* expresses yet another aspect. It concisely conveys not only the idea of oneness but also the idea of equality of all humans before one global law.

'Abdu'l-Bahá links the principle of oneness of humanity to the obligation to observe justice to towards our fellow human beings and to respect rather than denigrate any individual. Accordingly a division of humanity into 'believers' and 'unbelievers', with the social implications that division has carries, is profoundly rejected. The believers are called on to associate with all humanity and to treat all with equality.¹⁴

The foundational philosophies of the Universal Declaration - of dignity, equality, fraternity and non-discrimination, find expression in the idea of the oneness of humanity and the other core Bahá'í principles outlined above.

The strength of the resonance of the Bahá'í principles with human rights is striking. It is not surprising then to find that 'Abdu'l-Bahá sometimes explicitly included human rights among the basic principles of Bahá'u'lláh. Thus in a talk delivered in Philadelphia on 9 June 1912 'Abdu'l-Bahá stated:

"Bahá'u'lláh taught that an equal standard of human rights must be recognised and adopted. In the estimation of God all men are equal;

12 "Lawh-i-Dunyá", *Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp. 212-213.

13 Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 288.

14 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 63

there is no distinction or preferment of any soul in his justice and equity".¹⁵

The adoption of a document such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is thus at the level of central principle from a Bahá'í point of view, and its adoption represents a realisation of a basic aspiration of the Bahá'í Faith. The adoption of the Universal Declaration indeed in the light of this statement, can be seen from a Bahá'í viewpoint as carrying prophetic fulfilment.

As we explore the body of teachings on which the Bahá'í principles are based we see a deeper stream of reference to human rights expressed in traditional religious terminology - terminology drawn not from modern western political philosophy - rather from the traditions of the great prophetic traditions of the Middle East. The comprehensiveness of this reference to human rights underlines the centrality of rights in the Bahá'í Faith. The traditional language expressing rights concepts signals what can be deduced from a study of Judaism, Christianity, Islam and indeed the other great faiths: that these systems of thought have contributed directly to the assumptions and ways of thought from which human rights and instruments such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights have emerged.

The journey of the soul (1852-1863)

As noted above, the earliest references to rights concepts in Bahá'í scripture are found in Bahá'u'lláh's mystical and theological writings. From a Bahá'í point of view rights are a far richer concept than mere legal prohibitions limiting the power of those governing society. They are enjoined on the believer, not only because they represent justice, but because the believer must express them to be able themselves to attain to God. The following passage from the *Kitáb-i-Iqán*, in which Bahá'u'lláh discusses the religious path, is an example of this:

When a true seeker determines to take the step of search in the path leading to the knowledge of the Ancient of Days he must ... never exalt himself above anyone ... That seeker should regard backbiting as grievous error ... He should succour the dispossessed, and never withhold his favour from the destitute. He should show kindness to animals, how much more to his fellow man, to him who is endowed with the power of utterance ... He should not wish for others that which he doth not wish for himself ... These are among the attributes ... of the spiritually minded.¹⁶

In the previous section we have reviewed a number of quotations from the

¹⁵ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 182.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 264 (quoting from the *Kitáb-i-Iqán*).

Hidden Words which come from this period and which underline equality in spiritual terms. In the same works we find a range of other rights concepts such as adherence to justice, care for the poor and condemnation of injustice, in each case expressed in mystical language. These kind of references, as Bahá'u'lláh himself states, crystallise the teachings 'revealed unto the prophets of old'. To draw on one example the following passage from the prophet Isaiah talks of the kind of worship that is acceptable to God:

"The multitudes of your sacrifices - what are they to me?" says the Lord. "I have more than enough of burnt offerings, of rams and the fat of fattened animals ... Stop bringing meaningless offerings! Your incense is detestable to me ... I cannot bear your evil assemblies. Your New Moon festivals and your appointed feasts my soul hates. They have become a burden to me ... even if you offer many prayers I will not listen ... Your hands are full of blood; wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight! Stop doing wrong, learn to do right! Seek justice, rebuke the oppressor. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow".

Sources such as this, which could be multiplied from a variety of religions, underline the universality and antiquity of philosophies which underline the modern human rights movement.

The duties of the rulers of society (1863 - 1873)

The next phase of Bahá'u'lláh's writings is represented by letters to various kings and rulers of society in which he proclaims his divine mission. These letters include an active advocacy of rights expressed in terms of divinely imposed duties binding on the rulers of society. It is a theme that continues in subsequent periods of his teachings. Thus we find the core of civil and political rights: a condemnation of oppression and praise of just governance and the securing of rights.

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.¹⁷

We also find the basic outlines of the concepts of economic rights in repeated calls for economic justice. Thus Bahá'u'lláh calls on the Ottoman sultan to address the extremes of wealth and poverty under his rule:

Deal with ... undeviating justice so that none among [your subjects]

¹⁷ Bahá'u'lláh, *The Proclamation of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 11.

*may either suffer want or be pampered with luxuries. This is but manifest justice ... for this is what we observed when we entered the City [Constantinople]. We found among its inhabitants some who were possessed of an affluent fortune and lived in the midst of excess riches, while others were in dire want and abject poverty. This ill beseemeth thy sovereignty, and is unworthy of thy rank.*¹⁸

In addition to these two major themes we find a number of specific rights references addressed to rulers of society. Religious discrimination is condemned in a reference to the persecution of the Jewish community by two governments.¹⁹ In an allusion to the suffering of the Bahá'í community, Bahá'u'lláh outlines the kinds of abuses of governmental power that are impermissible and which should be addressed by the world's leaders, including violation of life, property, and reputation. He emphasises the duty of kings (in modern terminology, governments) to prevent oppression.²⁰ The role of the will of the people in the process of governance is alluded to in an early letter to Queen Victoria: "We have heard that thou has entrusted the reins of counsel into the hands of the representatives of the people. Thou, indeed, hast done well".²¹ To these representatives he emphasises that they should regard themselves as "the representatives of all that dwell on earth",²² a concept which emphatically suggests the duty to advance the rights of all people:

*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.*²³

A third major theme which dominates Bahá'u'lláh's message to the rulers is his encouragement for them to establish peace in the world. While examination of this theme is beyond the scope of this paper, it is important to note that a full appreciation the promotion of peace was central in his writings to kings and rulers.

The *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* and human rights

The *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, Bahá'u'lláh's book of sacred law, is the fundamental

18 Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 235.

19 Bahá'u'lláh, *Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 255.

20 "Twenty years have passed, O Kings, during which We have, each day, tasted the agony of a fresh tribulation ... They that rose up against Us, have put Us to death, have shed Our blood, have plundered Our property, and violated Our honour. Though aware of most of Our afflictions, ye, nevertheless, have failed to stay the hand of the aggressor. For is it not your clear duty to restrain the tyranny of the oppressor, and to deal equitably with your subjects, that your high sense of justice may be fully demonstrated to all mankind." Bahá'u'lláh, *The Proclamation of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 11.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 34.

22 *Ibid.*

23 *Ibid.*, p. 67.

source for the way of life practised by Bahá'ís. The *Aqdas* provides for prayer, fasting, religious institutions, places of worship and religious festivals. It deals with traditional religious subjects - morality, man's relationship with God and individual spiritual growth. It is concerned with basic social laws such as the prohibition of theft and murder. It deals with basic matters of personal status such as marriage, divorce and inheritance. Within this overall context we find in the *Aqdas* basic human rights principles - dignity, equality, fraternity, non-discrimination - and the outlines of the concepts of civil and political rights and economic, social and cultural rights. In addition there are a range of provisions bearing directly on human rights principles found in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The idea of human unity is expressed in the *Aqdas* in a call to Bahá'ís to "consort with all religions in the spirit of amity and concord", with the added emphasis that "all things proceed from God and unto Him they return". Here we find both the idea of the human fraternity and the idea of the equality of human beings found in article 1 of the Declaration.²⁴ Its basic intent is reinforced in provisions such as the abolition of ritual impurity, a concept whose discriminatory impact and destructiveness to equality and dignity (particularly for women) requires no elaboration. In the context of this abolition Bahá'u'lláh again calls on his followers to "consort with the followers of all religions".²⁵

Human dignity is expressed in passages which emphasise the sacredness of the human person - "the human temple", "temple of man" - and which encourage behaviour worthy of that dignity.²⁶ The way in which the prohibition of murder is expressed emphasises the sacredness of human life:

*let no soul slay another ... What! Would ye kill him whom God hath quickened, whom He hath endowed with a breath of spirit through a breath from Him? Grievous then would your trespass be before His throne! Fear God, and lift not the hand of injustice and oppression to destroy what He hath Himself raised up.*²⁷

From a religious viewpoint the "right to life" set out in article 3 of the Declaration could not be more strongly stated. The applicability of this prohibition to the agents of government is implicit in the condemnation of the abuse of power to take life expressed in this passage. The abolition of the slave trade and the practice of slavery set out in article 4 of the Universal Declaration is advocated in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*:

24 "God hath, likewise, as a bounty from His presence, abolished the concept of 'uncleanness', whereby divers things and people have been held to be impure." Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, para 144.

25 *Ibid.*, para 75.

26 *Ibid.*, para 120 and 154 dealing with intoxicants and mind altering substances.

27 *Ibid.*, para 73.

*It is forbidden to you to trade in slaves, be they men or women. It is not for him who is a servant to buy another of God's servants ... Let no man exalt himself over another: all are but bondslaves before the Lord.*²⁸

As well as forbidding both the slave trade and slavery the language emphasises the concept of human equality - including by implication the equality of men and women, an equality explicit in other of Bahá'u'lláh's writings. The right to social security found in articles 22 and 25 of the Declaration is expressed in a variety of provisions of the *Aqdas*:

*All have been enjoined to earn a living, and as for those who are incapable of doing so, it is incumbent on the Deputies of God and on the wealthy to make adequate provision for them.*²⁹

Other passages confirm the system of charitable contributions for relief of the poor known as *Zakát*, which was taught by the Muhammad.³⁰ The estate of a deceased who leaves no children and no will is to be expended "on the orphaned and widowed, and on whatsoever will bring benefit to the generality of the people".³¹ These passages envision a society providing systems of social security.

The right to education found in article 26 of the Declaration is expressed in the *Aqdas*:

*Unto every father hath been enjoined the instruction of his son and daughter in the art of reading and writing ... He that putteth away that which is commanded unto him, the Trustees are then to take from him that which is required for their instruction if he be wealthy and, if not, the matter devolveth upon the House of Justice. Verily have We made it a shelter for the poor and needy.*³²

This passage provides successive mechanisms to ensure that all children receive an education. Like the passage dealing with slavery, where equality of men and women is implied, this provision promotes equal gender access to education.

The principles of protection of privacy and reputation found in article 12 of the Declaration are expressed in the *Aqdas*: "take heed that ye enter no house in the absence of its owner, except with permission." Believers are forbidden to commit "backbiting or calumny", a prohibition strongly emphasised in Bahá'u'lláh's teachings.

28 Ibid., para 72.

29 Ibid., para 147.

30 Ibid., para 146.

31 Ibid., para 21.

32 Ibid., para 49.

References in the *Aqdas* to the kings and rulers of society continue elaboration of the basic elements of civil and political rights, reinforcing statements addressing such rights in greater detail elsewhere. Bahá'u'lláh reminds the Kings that their power is not arbitrary: they are subject to a higher law and to divine sovereignty.³³ This concept reminds us of the non-secular sources of the concept of the “rule of law”. He is contemptuous of the “throne of tyranny” in Constantinople, the capital of the Ottoman Empire.³⁴ In a paragraph specifically addressed to the rulers of America he calls on them to “Adorn the temple of dominion with the ornament of justice and fear of God”. He calls on them to “Bind ye the broken with the hands of justice, and crush the oppressor who flourisheth with the rod of the commandments of your Lord, the Ordainer, the All-wise.”³⁵ In a reference to his native city of Tíhrán he predicts that eventually God will bless its throne “with one who will rule with justice” and that “erelong, the reins of power” would fall into the hands of the people.³⁶ In a later work he clarifies the intent of this reference:

*Referring to the land of Tá [Tíhrán] We have revealed in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas that which will admonish mankind. They that perpetrate tyranny in the world have usurped the rights of the peoples and kindreds of the earth and are sedulously pursuing their selfish inclinations.*³⁷

Bahá'u'lláh later expresses support for constitutional monarchy, as it is “adorned with the light of both kingship and of the consultation of the people”³⁸

These provisions of the *Aqdas* establish a broad foundation for human rights. The significance of this scriptural foundation cannot be overemphasised. Bahá'í support of human rights is not a question of response to current social trends; it falls rather into the category of fundamental norm of Bahá'í community life. Advocacy of human rights is one aspect of aspiring and doing justice to the way of life inculcated in the Bahá'í teachings.

An enlightened world society

The final phase of Bahá'u'lláh's writings was embodied in a series of major letters to the faithful and others which set out his vision of an enlightened world society. Here again we find the stream of human rights thought expressed. In the *Tablet of the World*, for instance, he defines societal evil in terms which only too well capture the depths of violations of human dignity in the twentieth century:

³³ Ibid., para 81 and 82.

³⁴ Ibid., para 89.

³⁵ Ibid., para 88.

³⁶ Ibid., para 91 and 93.

³⁷ Bahá'u'lláh, *Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 212.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 216.

*The unbelievers and the faithless have set their minds on four things: first, the shedding of blood; second, the burning of books; third, the shunning of the followers of other religions; fourth, the extermination of other communities and groups.*³⁹

A flavour of the writings of this period can be gleaned by an examination of the letter known as *Glad-Tidings* which, among others, abolishes the law of holy war, encourages association with the followers of all religions, promotes the adoption of a universal language so that “the whole earth will come to be regarded as one country”, encourages loyalty to government, calls for the establishment of global peace, promotes freedom in dress, encourages service to the community, prohibits the destruction of books, promotes the sciences and the arts, regards work as worship, and promotes constitutional monarchy. Similar passages are found in other writings of the period.

It is also in this period that Bahá'u'lláh defines the distinguishing character of his teachings:

*We have on one hand, blotted from the pages of God's Holy Book whatsoever hath been the cause of strife, of malice and mischief amongst the children of men, and have, on the other, laid down the essential prerequisites of concord, of understanding, of complete and enduring unity.*⁴⁰

It is from passages such as this that the core principle of the oneness of humanity is drawn.

Again we find additional human rights elements represented in this period. For instance, the idea of fair reward for work: “The people of Bahá should not deny any soul the reward due to him, should treat craftsmen with deference”.⁴¹ The proper administration of justice is referred to: “Shed not the blood of anyone, O people, neither judge ye anyone unjustly.”⁴² Respect for the property of others is embodied in such passages as: “Deal not treacherously with the substance of your neighbour. Be ye trustworthy on earth”.⁴³ The *Aqdas* instruction to ensure the education of children is reiterated as a central principle. The obligation to work is identified as a form of worship, which later we see elaborated as a right to work and as a duty on those who organise society to ensure work is provided for all.

³⁹ Ibid., pp. 215-216.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 217.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 189.

⁴² Ibid., p. 328.

⁴³ Ibid.

Seen from the Bahá'í paradigm

Religions provide meaning to life, and in doing so they provide a conceptual world or paradigm within which the religion's principles and teachings are elaborated. Accordingly, though we have seen a powerful affirmation of rights themes in the Bahá'í teachings, those teachings cannot be seen as merely an expression of human rights philosophy or any other system of thought. The Bahá'í approach to human rights needs to be understood in its own context, if it is to be fully appreciated.

The difference in paradigm between secular modernism and a religious system such as the Bahá'í Faith inevitably gives rise to a number of areas of conceptual tension. These tensions need to be acknowledged and explored. In some cases the tension can be resolved by a better understanding of the nature of human rights, or of the Bahá'í teachings, and by better understanding what is essential to each.

Fundamentally the Bahá'í approach to human rights is one that balances communitarian approaches with individual interest. Unsurprisingly given its religious character, responsibilities are as important as rights from a Bahá'í point of view. This issue, of course, only becomes problematic if one views human rights as in any sense anti-communitarian or anti-responsibility. Such an interpretation must be regarded as highly questionable, certainly in respect of the principles of the human rights movement grounded in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. If one looks to the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, one finds that its very first phrase is a reference to a duty, not a right: the duty of the individual to know God and his prophets and to obey their teachings. Curiously, however, we can observe that the Universal Declaration itself begins with a duty rather than a right:

every individual and every organ of society, keeping this Declaration constantly in mind, shall strive by teaching and education to promote respect for these rights and freedoms and by progressive measures, national and international, to secure their universal and effective recognition and observance".⁴⁴

In addition, every right implies duties. The "right to life", for instance, in an active sense is addressed to all mankind and only has meaning if we understand by it "thou shalt not abuse power to take human life". Article 29 of the Universal Declaration includes the idea of community responsibility, stating "everyone has duties to the community in which alone the free and full development of his personality is possible". The emphasis on rights as opposed to duties in the Declaration itself also needs to be understood in its historical context. The language, for very good reasons, is concerned to

44 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, preamble.

emphasise the limits of governmental power, because governments have so prominently been the principal violators of rights. The introduction of extensive reference to duties would potentially undermine this purpose. The same is true of the international human rights treaties, which are concerned to bind governments with legal obligations not qualified by ambiguities arising from duties which might be read by those minded to avoid human rights obligations as making rights conditional.

A second area of difficulty is presented by the revolutionary origin of human rights philosophy. To the extent that human rights can be interpreted as continuing to endorse the violent overthrow of government, they would not accord with Bahá'í principle. Violence is a methodology antithetical to the character of the Bahá'í Faith and is profoundly rejected. Bahá'ís are counselled to be obedient and loyal to government:

*None must contend with those who wield authority over the people; leave unto them that which is theirs, and direct your attention to men's hearts.*⁴⁵

In the last clause of this passage we see encapsulated the Bahá'í view that the true transformation of society depends ultimately on the transformation of the individual. The pacific character of the Bahá'í Faith is emphasised by other provisions such as the prohibition on carrying arms unless essential, and on engaging in conflict, striking another, or committing similar acts "whereby hearts and souls may be saddened".⁴⁶ These statements do not imply an acceptance of unjust rule, but they define a methodology based the peaceful and progressive transformation of such injustice.

Fundamental to an appreciation of the Bahá'í approach is its emphasis on unity as the prerequisite to social well-being and the Bahá'í Faith's own unifying mission which mandates that all its activities be directed to the achievement of unity in the human family. The foregoing is not necessarily outside the bounds of modern human rights thinking. The preambular paragraphs to the Declaration in fact note that one of the purposes of human rights is to obviate the necessity for individuals to resort to "rebellion against tyranny and oppression".

Further, the modernity of the Bahá'í Faith in its social principles does not equate to an acceptance of moral indifference or moral relativism in matters of personal conduct, which is a prominent characteristic of modern cosmopolitan society. Indeed the Bahá'í Faith expects high standards of morality from its followers including in areas such as personal ethics, chastity, and abstinence from alcohol, drugs and gambling.

⁴⁵ Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, para 95.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, para 159 and 148.

The Faith's emphasis both on peace and on high standards of conduct is reflected in Bahá'u'lláh's critical reference to liberty in the *Aqdas*. It is a reference which can be easily misunderstood if taken out of context. In the *Aqdas*, Bahá'u'lláh refers to excesses of liberty as contrary to human well-being. As indicated by the Universal House of Justice such references cannot be construed as approval of oppressive governance:

A true reading of the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh leaves no doubt as to the high importance of [freedom of thought, expression and action] to constructive social processes. Consider, for instance, Bahá'u'lláh's proclamation to the kings and rulers. Can it not be deduced from this alone that attainment of freedom is a significant purpose of his Revelation? His denunciations of tyranny and His urgent appeals on behalf of the oppressed provide unmistakable proof. But does not the freedom foreshadowed by His Revelation imply nobler, ampler manifestations of human achievement? Does it not indicate an organic relationship between the internal and external realities of man such as has not yet been attained?⁴⁷

An analysis of the relationship between the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith and human rights is found in a major essay in the 1996-1997 volume of *The Bahá'í World*.⁴⁸ The inclusion of this essay in an official publication of the international Bahá'í community reflects the significance of human rights in the current work of the community. Titled "The Human Rights Discourse: A Bahá'í Perspective", the article addresses the philosophy of rights and makes a number of observations. First and foremost, it discusses the basic congruence between human rights values and the Bahá'í teachings. Secondly, it is concerned to critique moral relativism and thus to support the universality of human rights, commenting that relativistic statements about rights (such as in the Bangkok Declaration) "are often intended to insulate governments from international criticism regarding treatment of their citizens". Thirdly, the article discusses the various sources posited for human rights (nature, reason etc.) supporting the validity of arguments for a divine origin for those rights. Fourthly the article emphasises the communitarian character of the Bahá'í teachings which call for a balance between individual freedom and the promotion of the collective good.

Beyond these thematic issues are specific provisions of Bahá'í law that need to be considered in the overall context of the relationship between the Bahá'í teachings and human rights. The following examples illustrate some of the issues that arise.

47 Universal House of Justice, *Individual Rights and Freedoms in the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh: To the Followers of Bahá'u'lláh in the United States of America*, 29 December 1988.

48 Matthew Weinberg, "The Human Rights Discourse: A Bahá'í Perspective", *The Bahá'í World 1996-1997*, Haifa: World Centre Publications, pp.247-274.

1. A social law introduced by Bahá'u'lláh requires that once intending spouses have decided they wish to marry each other, they should seek and obtain the consent of their parents to the marriage. This might be seen as impeding free consent of the spouses as referred to in article 16.2 of the Universal Declaration. Yet Bahá'u'lláh's intent in introducing this provision furthers an aim of this article, which is the well-being of the family:

Desiring to establish love, unity and harmony amidst Our servants, We have conditioned [marriage], once the couple's wish is known, upon the permission of their parents, lest enmity and rancour should arise amongst them.⁴⁹

2. The intestacy laws provided by Bahá'u'lláh provide for a complex series of inheritors who receive different portions of the inheritance. The first male child receives significant preference over other potential beneficiaries, and in other instances a greater proportion of inheritance is provided for male as opposed to female beneficiaries. Here again difficult issues arise, a full appreciation requiring consideration of the context of these inheritance laws.
3. The death penalty is allowed for in the case of murder and arson, as is its commutation to life imprisonment.⁵⁰ A significant body of work in the human rights movement is undertaken to bring about the full abolition of the death penalty, although there is an equally significant resistance to this aim.

Rather than creating a fundamental divergence, such issues need to be seen in the context of an evolutionary and diverse human rights system, whose basic provisions vary over both time and place, although its fundamental principles and intent remain in essence unchanging. Since 1948 new "generations" of rights have been created and different regions have emphasised different aspects of human rights. Work within the international system to elaborate rights continues largely unabated. Furthermore, rights are themselves not absolute and are balanced against each other. For instance, the "Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination" limits the right to freedom of expression in order to promote racial equality. Universality thus cannot be taken to mean uniformity: within limits there is scope for a diversity of approaches to achieving the minimum aspirations set out in the Universal Declaration.

⁴⁹ Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, para 65.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, para 62.

Bahá'í aspirations for human rights

A review of the Bahá'í approach to human rights would be incomplete without reference to those areas where the Bahá'í teachings suggest the need for further development of human rights principles. Of central importance to unfulfilled human rights aspirations from a Bahá'í point of view is the concept of the oneness of humanity - a concept at the core of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings and which he emphasises repeatedly. It is expressed in various ways including the idea of global citizenship. "The Earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens." This idea of universal human citizenship implies, in stronger terms than expressed in the Declaration, the equality of rights of all members of the human family. Citizenship is the organising principle that replaced hierarchical medieval society with egalitarian concepts of modernity. Yet, in today's world we still do not practice full equality of human rights. One's country of birth still determines whether one will live in abject poverty or in material affluence unimaginable to previous generations, whether one will experience peace or warfare, whether one lives in a democratic society or whether one is subject to tyranny. It is a reality implicitly endorsed by the Declaration, which in this respect gives priority to the rights of states as opposed to the rights of the individual. For instance articles 13 (freedom of movement, and the right to leave a country), 14 (the right to asylum) and 15 (the right to nationality) can be seen from a Bahá'í point of view as steps along the way to adopting the principle that all humanity are the citizens of a common homeland.

In this context article 28, which states that "everyone is entitled to a social and international order in which the rights and freedoms set forth in the Declaration can be fully realised", would be seen as an area of neglected human rights advocacy. From the point of view of the Bahá'í teachings, human rights will not be achieved until the unity of the human race is established.

The Bahá'í principle that extremes of wealth as well as the extreme of poverty need to be addressed suggest another area of human rights advocacy. In broader terms the attention given to economic rights in the Bahá'í writings contrasts with western approaches which in the past were primarily focused on civil and political rights. Thus far efforts towards the achievement of basic economic standards for all human beings, as called for in the Universal Declaration, have been notably unsuccessful; and extremes of poverty and wealth are increasing, both globally and within national borders.

The concept of the "oneness of religion" takes article 18 of the declaration one step beyond recognising the freedom of others to practice their beliefs - it implies the idea that all religions are from God and therefore sacred and worthy of reverence. It is an idea that promotes reconciliation and mutual respect between the followers of all faiths. Religious tolerance remains

an unachieved aspiration, as sadly evident in conflict between followers of different faiths in a number of countries.

Bahá'í community advocacy of human rights

The Bahá'í teachings provide rich sources for action to promote human rights. Thus, as one would expect, the Bahá'í community has sought to translate these principles into practical action. In a general sense Bahá'í community life intrinsically involves the promotion of human rights. The practices of free and fair elections, the role of the community in the governance of its own affairs, the promotion of unity between people irrespective of race and background, the pursuit of gender equity are all inherent aspects of Bahá'í community life. In a Bahá'í International Community statement on human rights education the promotion of human rights principles in Bahá'í moral education classes is discussed: "Bahá'í communities in 173 countries are already both promoting and providing education, based on the principle of the oneness of humanity, which seeks to cultivate respect for the rights of others, a sense of responsibility for the well-being of the human family, and the moral attributes that contribute to a just, harmonious and peaceful world civilization. As a fundamental tenet of their religion, Bahá'ís are committed to the eradication of all forms of prejudice, including those based on race, ethnic origin, religion, sex or nationality — prejudices that fuel hatred and cause otherwise good people to deprive their fellow citizens of rights."⁵¹

As well as this general context there is an increasing body of specific human rights advocacy in which the Bahá'í community is engaged. Statements issued by the Bahá'í International Community, which represent some of its work at the United Nations, give an indication of the length of commitment to human rights at the international level. The Bahá'í community contributed to the drafting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights through its "Bahá'í Declaration of Human Obligations and Rights". From 1974 onwards there has been a steady stream of Bahá'í contributions to the human rights work of United Nations bodies, covering a broad range of topics including women's rights, racial prejudice, rights of minorities, religious tolerance, rights of indigenous people, economic social and cultural rights, human rights education, violence against women and combating racism.⁵²

A 1974 document on the elimination of discrimination against women illustrates how the Bahá'í community, as a global entity, has worked over many years to promote human rights:

51 Bahá'í International Community, "Statement on the UN Decade of Human Rights Education delivered to the UN Commission on Human Rights", March 1996.

52 Statements of the Bahá'í International Community can be accessed via the Bahá'í World web site at www.bahai.org.

Since this is the first occasion we have had to report on publicity given to the Declaration on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, we would like to mention that as far back as 1968 we were making available to our affiliates [national communities] information on the [Declaration on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women], as well as mailing supplies for United Nations Day or Human Rights Day meetings.

This description is representative of the kind of global and grass roots activity that Bahá'í communities have pursued for many years.

During the International Year of Peace in 1986, the Universal House of Justice issued *The Promise of World Peace*, a document which focused on the prerequisites for the achievement of peace. It was shared with community leaders from the Secretary General of the United Nations to the chiefs and mayors of local communities, as well as the public in general. It continues to be distributed by the Bahá'í community. Its themes include the abolition of racism, the equality of men and women, the abolition of extremes of wealth and poverty, and the need for universal education.

In 1994 Bahá'í advocacy of human rights was given a greater focus through the adoption of an international policy for a Bahá'í contribution to the fostering of peace that focused on four thematic issues: human rights, advancement of women, global prosperity and moral development. This policy has had the effect of significantly increasing national and local Bahá'í focus on these issues. In 1997 the Bahá'í community launched a program of action to support the implementation of national measures pursuant to the United Nations Decade for Human Rights Education. In this campaign Bahá'í communities have been encouraged to undertake promotion of commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and steps to implement the UN plan of action for the decade.

In Australia the Bahá'í community has participated in such activities over many years. The community's work for peace was recognised by an award from the United Nations Secretary General in the International Year of Peace. Since 1996 there has been an increased focus on commemoration of Human Rights day, adding to routine activities in support of other international and national commemorations such as United Nations Day, International Women's Day, Reconciliation Week and Refugee Week. In its national work the community has sought to increase its contribution to non-government work in the field of human rights. A wide range of activities were organised to promote the fiftieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1998, including local commemorations and the conference at which this paper was presented.

Conclusion

As we explore the body of Bahá'í teachings we see a deep stream of reference to human rights expressed in traditional religious terminology - terminology drawn not from modern western political philosophy, but rather from the traditions of the great prophetic traditions of the Middle East. The comprehensiveness of this reference to human rights underlines the centrality of rights in the Bahá'í Faith. The traditional language expressing rights concepts signals what can be deduced from a study of Judaism, Christianity, Islam and indeed the other great faiths: that these systems of thought have contributed directly to the assumptions and ways of thought from which human rights and instruments such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights have emerged.

The very act of humanity gathering in 1948 to declare its global values and its aspirations for all human beings was profoundly spiritual in character. It remains a beacon towards a future worthy of human dignity - for all members of the human family.