

Bahá'í Teachings
on
ECONOMICS

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That the world is sick no one in these troubled times would deny. Upon the diagnosis of its sickness, however, there is no such agreement. Some would say it was caused by bad organisation; human nature is neither better nor worse than it always has been; change the organisation, they say, and everything will be all right. Others regard organisation as unimportant; only let men lead better lives, say these, and organisation will look after itself. Between the two extremes is the attitude of the Bahá'í teachings.

These recognise that man's nature has progressed through a series of ups and downs; sometimes mankind is at a spiritual peak, sometimes in a spiritual trough, but in the long run development is always upwards. Were this not so, mankind would still be in the primitive state of his forefathers. Increasingly efficient organisation of material resources is not the cause of this spiritual progress; progress in both spheres has been a

consequence of another cause, the education of mankind by God. Just as man's body developed from a simple organism, so the spirit of man is also developing; and its development is guided by the Divine Will. Whenever the spirit of man spurts forward, his organisation of material things spurts forward too.

Without progress of the spirit, organisation is worthless. No organisation can carry men higher than the level their souls have reached. Organisation canalises the energies of men, prevents waste, breeds co-operative action, but it cannot make bricks without straw; if men are not potentially capable of great things, organisation cannot change their inner natures.

But even the best of material needs moulding into shape. Law is needed to keep the imperfections of man within bounds; economic organisation is needed to ensure that the material gifts of God are properly used. Without organisation there would be chaos.

The Bahá'í teachings present a picture of mankind, revived and reborn, achieving progress through an organised unity. That this is no empty hope is demonstrated

by the Bahá'í communities all over the world. In almost every country there will be found a group of people doing their best to practise the spiritual teachings of Bahá'u'lláh, free from prejudice of race or class or creed, anxious to recognise truth from whatever quarter it comes, working for the peace and well-being of the whole of mankind and *organised* so that a single spirit works through them all. The action of the Bahá'í world is a unified action which allows scope for local differences and individual initiative. It is a model on a small scale of what an organised world should be like.

A keynote of both the Bahá'í administration and the Bahá'í economic teachings is adaptability. They contain no rigid economic plan, for different places and different periods of history require different forms of economic organisation. Instead there are certain broad principles laid down to act as a framework within which the local government and the world government of the future can from time to time make their own plans to meet their own particular problems.

A WORLD ECONOMY

The first of these principles is that there must be a world economy. "The earth is but one country and mankind its citizens," wrote Bahá'u'lláh. This implies a wider loyalty than the loyalty to national governments which leads people to regard the sufferings of human beings in other countries as no concern of theirs. "Let not a man glory in that he loves his country; let him rather glory in this, that he loves his kind." Not only must individuals look upon all men as their brothers, whether or not they are of the same race, colour, class or creed; governments also must have at heart the well-being of the whole human race. Of the elected representatives of the people of a state Bahá'u'lláh said: "It behoveth them . . . to be trustworthy among His servants, and to regard themselves as the representatives of all that dwell on earth." The present Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith, explaining the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh, said in 1936: "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 successively attempted and fully established. World unity is the goal towards which a harrassed 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, recognise the oneness and wholeness of human relationships, and establish once for all the machinery that can best incarnate this fundamental principle of its life."

In such a world, economic organisation would have as its sole aim the good of humanity and not merely the interests of some limited group of people such as a class or a nation. There would be a world currency because it is needed (all objections to it are based on a limited nationalist outlook); a universal system of weights and measures, because there would be no reason to forego the convenience of a standardised system. Raw materials will be organised for the good of the world as a whole and markets co-ordinated in the most effective way. All the bars to world trade which now exist will vanish along with the greatest of all economic handicaps, war; for the chief

cause of war is placing sectional interests before the interests of mankind. Along with the war of armaments the economic war of tariffs and quotas will vanish too. The whole world will become a single state, economically as well as politically.

This is the goal. Until it is achieved, whatever promotes the unification of mankind is good. The governments of the world must agree as the occasion demands how best to apply the principle of a world economy, until such time as a central body is established to direct development. The Economic and Social Council of the United Nations Organisation is an important step on the road indicated by Bahá'u'lláh eighty years ago.

POVERTY AND WEALTH

Within each group of mankind, at present organised in national units, the most important cause of economic difficulties is the extremes of poverty and wealth which are so prevalent. Bahá'u'lláh taught that everyone has a right to the necessities of life and a certain amount of well-being; on the other hand no one has

the right to more wealth than he can use. Laws should therefore be passed guaranteeing to the poor a minimum standard of life and placing a limit on the wealth of any one individual.

Since these teachings were given the more advanced nations have progressed a considerable way along this path by means of unemployment insurance, minimum wages, graded income tax and similar devices; but in the less advanced countries there are still millions who lack the bare means of existence; and even where there has been progress, present laws are still far from ideal. In some countries the vast majority of the inhabitants are ill-fed and ill-clothed, while a few families control the greater part of the wealth of the whole country. Such an arrangement destroys the advantages of collective living; even the wealthy are bowed down by the tremendous task of administering a colossal fortune; the poor live in an unjust misery. To equalise the wealth of the poor and the rich would not be desirable, for this would end in discouragement and disorganisation; the moderate course is to place limits on wealth and to allow free variation between

these limits, so that all have something for which to strive but none are in want.

To establish such a system in the world will take some time, and great importance is placed on voluntary giving. "O ye rich ones on earth," writes Bahá'u'lláh, "The poor in your midst are My trust; guard ye My trust, and be not intent only on your own ease"; and again, "O ye rich ones of the earth! Flee not from the face of the poor that lieth in the dust, nay rather befriend him and suffer him to recount the tale of the woes with which God's inscrutable Decree hath caused him to be afflicted."

INDUSTRIAL ORGANISATION

In spite of industry's immense development in the last hundred years, the Bahá'í teaching points out the obvious but often forgotten truth that agriculture is the most important industry. By far the greater part of the inhabitants of the world earn their livelihood through agriculture and all depend upon it to keep alive. Many of the Bahá'í teachings concerning economic organisation are therefore given in accord-

ance with the needs of an agricultural community; it will be for the governments of the future to apply the principles embodied in these teachings to the varying needs of different types of industrial town.

Each village should have a storehouse or "House of Finance," to be controlled by wise men appointed by the democratically elected local governing body. Contributions to this central store will depend on wealth and on fortune in the year's work. From it, help will be given to those in need and to those who have suffered misfortune during the year. For example, orphans, cripples and the aged will be kept in comfort and if a farmer with heavy commitments has a bad year for some reason, he would also be helped. 'Abdu'l-Bahá says "the result of this system will be that each individual member of the body politic will live most comfortably and happily under obligation to no one. Nevertheless, there will be preservation of degrees because in the world of humanity there must needs be degrees."

In larger cities there should be a system on a larger scale, but the principles, such as graduated taxation and the taking into

account of commitments, as well as income, would also apply. Certain additional principles are needed for industry, since the majority of people are employed by others. On the question of nationalisation of industry no definite rule is given, for the same considerations do not apply at all times and places. The chief principle which Bahá'u'lláh lays down is that employees should be given as well as their wages, a share in the profits of their employers. In this way they are given an interest in their work, besides a share in the proceeds of their labours. Even the most advanced countries are still far from the ideal given by Bahá'u'lláh for industrial organisation.

CAPITAL AND LABOUR

The biggest of all the problems of industry is the relation between capital and labour. Each is liable to feel that the other is getting too big a share of the income arising from the sale of goods whose production requires both labour and capital. The workmen demand a bigger share, the employers say higher wages will leave them no profit at all, and a state is reached in

which the whole industry is paralysed by a strike or lock-out to the detriment of both capital and labour. Since there is no rule by which to determine what share each should have, the tendency has been for both to try to get as much as they could, and for the division to reflect the relative strength of employers and employed rather than any just solution of the problem.

Bahá'u'lláh knew this situation would arise. Explaining His teachings, 'Abdu'l-Bahá said: "The solution of the economic questions will not be brought about by array of capital against labour and labour against capital in strife and conflict, but by the voluntary attitude of goodwill on both sides." Without goodwill, strike must follow strike until the whole economic system is dislocated.

In a world organised according to the laws of Bahá'u'lláh there would be no strikes. Maximum and minimum incomes having been fixed and a profit-sharing system of payment established, the basis for justice will be present. Administrative channels will be provided through which all disagreements could be peacefully settled. Should goodwill be lacking on one

side or the other, force would be applied not through one-sided strike action, but by law. Strikes will become illegal, since there will be no need for them, and "strikes are conducive to destruction and laws are the cause of life." But this state of things still lies in the future. Speaking in America in 1912 'Abdu'l-Bahá said: "In reality, so far, great injustice has befallen the common people. Laws must be made because it is impossible for the labourers to be satisfied with the present system."

ADMINISTRATION

In a pamphlet on economics, little can be said about the administrative system of the Bahá'í Faith, which is unique in the history of the world. It combines the advantages of democracy, monarchy and oligarchy, without being subject to their disadvantages. Its effect is to place government in the hands of disinterested men and women whose sole object is to carry out the will of God in accordance with the guidance given by Bahá'u'lláh. Such persons will not be swayed by partisan interests, but will have at heart the good of all mankind.

It is they who will apply the laws of Bahá'u'lláh to the needs of different places and times and will be responsible for seeing that justice is obtained by all, rich and poor alike.

There will be some decentralisation, but final authority will be centralised. With regard to administrative matters, it will repose in an elected world parliament; with regard to interpretation of Bahá'í Scripture, in the hands of a Guardian, appointed in a manner laid down in the Bahá'í scriptural writings themselves. Local authorities will have more power than now, national authorities less as part of their present authority will be exercised by the world parliament. Every provision will be made for preserving local and national characteristics where these are desirable, but they will be co-ordinated into a unified whole, and provision made for treating world problems on a world scale. Nations have as yet made little progress towards such a form of administration.

THE INDIVIDUAL

It is upon the behaviour of individuals

that the success of any economic system depends. Consequently all religious teachings addressed to the individual are relevant to economics. Bahá'u'lláh, however, has given certain individual teachings which are specially relevant.

Many of these are concerned with the attitude to work. To Bahá'ís, work is obligatory both for the rich and for the poor; begging and living in idleness are both forbidden. "The basest of men," writes Bahá'u'lláh, "are they that yield no fruit on earth. Such men are verily counted as among the dead, nay better are the dead in the sight of God than those idle and worthless souls"; and again, "The most despised of men before God is he who sits and begs." This work should be treated as a service to humanity, as well as a means of livelihood; "Occupy yourselves with that which will profit yourselves and others besides yourselves." The spirit in which work is approached should be that of a craftsman producing the best work he can in order to serve God and his fellow men. Work done in this spirit is deemed in the Bahá'í Faith equivalent to worship. "The man who makes a piece of notepaper to the

best of his ability, conscientiously, concentrating all his forces on perfecting it, is giving praise to God.”

Another individual teaching which is specially relevant to economics concerns the making of wills. Everyone should make a will and is free to leave his property to whom he wishes. Bahá'u'lláh has indicated, however, the way in which it is best to divide property. Children, wife, parents, brothers and sisters, and also teachers get a share, the biggest shares going to the closest relatives. Should anyone die intestate, this method of division would be imposed. Such a method would help to achieve a more equitable distribution of wealth and to reduce inequalities.

The more general teachings of Bahá'u'lláh also have a profound economic influence, but these are common to all religions and can only be summarised here. Like the Founders of other great religions, Bahá'u'lláh taught that true wealth consists of spiritual, not material riches. Material riches are a severe test to the spirit of man; poverty may be a hidden blessing. Thus He says: “Be not troubled in poverty nor confident in riches, for

poverty is followed by riches, and riches are followed by poverty. Yet to be poor in all save God is a wondrous gift; belittle not the value thereof, for in the end it will make thee rich in God." Detachment from the things of the world is enjoined, but detachment does not mean renunciation. "Should a man wish to adorn himself with the ornaments of the earth, to wear its apparels, or partake of the benefits it can bestow, no harm can befall him, if he alloweth nothing whatever to intervene between him and God, for God hath ordained every good thing, whether created in the heavens or in the earth, for such of his servants as truly believe in Him." The important thing is not to become attached to possessions and worldly interests.

Moderation in all things is enjoined, both for individuals and for governments. Justice is particularly stressed, as well as love and service. Deeds rather than words are recognised as the hallmarks of faith. Trustworthiness is given great importance and, of course, honesty. These teachings, are set out in other books which are available to all.