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To cite this article: Boris Handal (2007) The Philosophy of Bahá'í Education, Religion and Education, 34:1, 48-62, DOI: [10.1080/15507394.2007.10012391](https://doi.org/10.1080/15507394.2007.10012391)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/15507394.2007.10012391>



Published online: 11 Nov 2010.



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The Philosophy of Bahá'í Education

Boris Handal

This paper discusses the main tenets underpinning a philosophy of Bahá'í education encompassing the individual and the society. It also examines the state of education and the child in the 19th century in the light of those principles. This is followed by a review of Bahá'í-inspired enterprises to implement those ideals around the world in the last century. Finally, the paper deals with the current state of education for children and women of the world as well as the erosive effects of secularism on religious values that have taken place in the past hundred and fifty years.

Brief Introduction to the Bahá'í Faith

Bahá'u'lláh, the Founder of the Bahá'í Faith, the newest of all world's religions, was born in Iran in 1817 into an aristocratic family whose lineage can be traced back to the early Persian kings.¹ His teachings centered on the principles of oneness of God, the unity of all religions and the unification of the human race.

Bahá'u'lláh's teachings also included the independent investigation of truth, the elimination of racial, religious or national prejudices, the equality of men and women, the harmony between science and religion, the abolition of extremes of poverty and wealth, the establishment of an international tribunal of justice to preserve universal peace, and the adoption of an international auxiliary language to facilitate communication and understanding among nations. He is recognized by the followers of the Bahá'í Faith as the messenger of God for this age. According to the Bahá'í teachings, messengers of God like Moses, Abraham, Christ, Muhammad, Krishna and Buddha, have appeared at intervals throughout history to establish the world's great religions.

The Muslim clergy and the Iranian government fiercely opposed Bahá'u'lláh's teachings right from the beginning and as a result many thousands of Bahá'ís were executed for their beliefs in the 19th century. Similarly, Baha'u'llah endured forty years of torture, imprisonment and exile in Iran, Iraq, Turkey and Palestine under the combined orders of the Shah of Iran and the Sultan of the Ottoman Empire.

Religion & Education, Vol. 34, No.1 (Winter 2007)

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During that period, over 100 volumes of writings flowed from Bahá'u'lláh's pen on a broad range of issues dealing with the progress of the individual and the society. These include mystical treatises, ethical and social teachings, laws and ordinances, in addition to fearless epistles to kings and rulers of the world such as Queen Victoria, Napoleon III, Pope Pius IX, the Emperor Franz Joseph of Austria, the Shah of Iran, the Sultan of the Ottoman Empire, the Czar Alexander II of Russia, Kaiser Wilhelm I of Germany, among others.

His passing as a prisoner in 'Akká (now in Israel) occurred in 1892. In an interview granted to Professor Edward Granville Browne of Cambridge University in 1890, Baha'u'llah summarized the main tenets of this new Faith:

We desire but the good of the world and the happiness of the nations; yet they deem us a stirrer up of strife and sedition worthy of bondage and banishment... That all nations should become one in faith and all men as brothers; that the bonds of affection and unity between the sons of men should be strengthened; that diversity of religion should cease, and differences of race be annulled — what harm is there in this?... Yet so it shall be; these fruitless strifes, these ruinous wars shall pass away, and the 'Most Great Peace' shall come... Do not you in Europe need this also? Is this not what Christ foretold?... Yet do we see your kings and rulers lavishing their treasures more freely on means for the destruction of the human race than on that which would conduce to the happiness of mankind... These strifes and this bloodshed and discord must cease, and all men be as one kindred and one family... Let not a man glory in this, that he loves his country; let him rather glory in this, that he loves his kind...³

Bahá'í Principles on Education

While a prisoner in a penal colony in Palestine, Bahá'u'lláh proclaimed the principle of universal education as well as a number of other pedagogical ideals that are only now being encouraged and appreciated by modern educationalists. There were the times when education all over the world was more a privilege than a right. The notion of mass education did not yet exist and the principles contained in the Declaration of the Rights of the Child as delineated by the General Assembly of the United Nations in 1959 were no more than a utopian dream.

Central to that philosophy was the value ascribed by Bahá'u'lláh to knowledge acquisition. Knowledge was not only seen as a tool for the development of a rational mind but also as a spiritual quality on its own that everyone should possess in order to become a nobler being. In Bahá'u'lláh's words,

Arts, crafts and sciences uplift the world of being, and are conducive to its exaltation. Knowledge is as wings to man's life, and a ladder for his ascent. The knowledge of such sciences, however, should be acquired as can profit the peoples of the earth... In truth, knowledge is a veritable treasure for man [mankind], and a source of glory, of bounty, of joy, of exaltation, of cheer and gladness unto him.⁴

Bahá'u'lláh commanded every father to take responsibility for instructing his children in the art of reading and writing. He also advised people to earmark part of their income for educational purposes. "Everyone, whether man or woman", Bahá'u'lláh wrote referring to this, "should hand over ... a portion of what he or she earneth through trade, agriculture or other occupation, for the training and education of children."⁵ He went further to say that in deciding on the education of one's children, in the case of insufficient financial means, preference should be given to the girl child because women are the first educators of the next generation. Moreover, Bahá'u'lláh stated that if a father deliberately fails to educate his children then he would lose his paternity rights or, as we call it today, loss of custodial rights. Bahá'u'lláh has also stated that, in cases of intestacy, teachers would inherit a small part of the state of a person thus giving them the status of spiritual members of a family.⁶

'Abdu'l-Bahá (1844-1921), Bahá'u'lláh's eldest son and successor, also wrote extensively on education.⁷ His progressive ideals dealt with a diversity of forward-looking educational issues such as instruction based on child's individual needs⁸, the standardization of training and teaching standards⁹, and formal education from infancy for both boys and girls¹⁰, arts, drama¹¹, music¹², and physical education¹³ in addition to inter-faith learning¹⁴, knowledge of modern languages¹⁵ and acquisition of skills beneficial to mankind.¹⁶

In addition, the Bahá'í teachings advocated innovative learning practices such as learning in groups through consultation¹⁷, interactive learning through play for nursery children¹⁸, the abandonment of physical chastisement practices¹⁹, character building as the most important objective of schooling²⁰, service to humanity²¹ and world-embracing instruction emphasizing education for peace.²² These educational provisions were all consid-

ered to be indispensable parts of the school curriculum as early as the turn of the 19th century. Bahá'u'lláh also indicated that the principles of religion should be taught in schools "... but this is such a measure that it may not injure the children by resulting in ignorant fanaticism and bigotry".²³

It is noteworthy that the Bahá'í teachings do not pretend presenting a detailed and definite system of education. Rather, they provide scholars and educational practitioners with a set of articulated ideas and ideals to guide them in designing educational models around such principles. Generating such a system is a process that will obviously require more planning, action, reflection and further refining over longer periods of practical experience and conceptualization.²⁴ However, this process has already started in many countries and it is evolving such as initiatives in the United States, Australia, India and Africa, as outlined further in this paper.

Education in the 19th Century

During the time Bahá'u'lláh's writings were expounded, Iran, the birthplace of the Bahá'í Faith, was sunk in a state of utmost intellectual and spiritual obscurity. Governed by the corrupt Qajar dynasty, there was no formal education system for children and the only establishment available was the *madreseh*. The *madresehs* were religious seminars to prepare young people for the clergy with emphasis on theology, history and Islamic law. In a *church-state* country where the intellectual life was controlled by an intolerant religious hierarchy, the only scholarly exercise was for the divines to indulge themselves on lengthy metaphysical arguments and profitless orthodox debates. Any attempt to modernization from overseas was averted in the name of religious uncleanness.²⁵ Only children from wealthy families, like Bahá'u'lláh, were fortunate enough to receive some basic literacy and numeracy instruction, and the rudiments of commerce from home tutors.²⁶

By the middle of the 19th century, the condition of education in the western world was also deficient, particularly in Europe which was held in a state of continuous warfare. Only Denmark, Switzerland, Prussia and Holland had accepted responsibility for providing compulsory and free education.²⁷ In many countries such as Victorian Britain and the United States, child labour was institutionalized with many children working in factories sometimes under inhuman conditions.²⁸ In industrialized cities, working class children attending fee paying schools still followed a differentiated curriculum, one which would reproduce their production role within a burgeoning industrial revolution driven society.²⁹ Child slavery continued to be institutionalized in several southern states of the Union until its total abrogation in

1865 with the enactment of the Thirteenth Amendment.³⁰ although the segregationist sequel in public schools remained in place under the “separate but equal” legal injunction till the early 1950s.

In the absence of strong public education systems parochial schools became common. While retaining the power to accommodate their curriculum to their peculiar religious beliefs such as the teaching of their own catechism, these denominational schools were under varying degrees of government support, regulation and funding according to each country. For example, by the middle of the century, German schools were totally in hands of the government, the French had abolished the teaching of religion in schools after the establishment of the Third Republic while England having a state-supported church avoided government intervention on educational issues.³¹ In other countries, both Reformation Protestants and Roman Catholics were competing in creating they own parochial schools for having a share in the spiritual and intellectual lives of their societies. In the United States, the massive Irish Catholic immigration in the 19th century, reluctant to be assimilated into the traditionally oriented Protestant school system, opted for creating their own schools within an atmosphere of continuous and very often violent religious conflict. The issue was finally was put to an end when free public education, non-denominational by nature, became fully institutionalized in all states by the turn of the century.³²

Education was also introduced to impoverished indigenous populations by European missionaries in the form of religious instruction and cultural dominance, thus becoming an instrument of colonization that very often accompanied various forms of oppression³³, such as the case of the *stolen generation* of Aboriginal children in Australia³⁴ or in several African, Latin American and Asian dependencies.

Philosophies on schooling revolved on themes like patriotism, militarism, the industry or the church.³⁵ Generally speaking, girls had limited access to education, and what little instruction they had access to was based on house chore duties and perpetuating other traditional roles. The institution of the kindergarten was virtually unknown while schools still prescribed corporal punishment.³⁶ Teaching and learning methods were embedded within a mechanicist view of instruction. Rote learning was the norm, the child being considered as a vessel to be passively filled in with information³⁷, and teacher training was scarce and rudimentary.³⁸ Cooperative learning was an embryonic concept while the only didactical tool used in the classroom was the chalkboard. The child was taught to blindly accept the tenants espoused by the textbook.³⁹ School curricula was encyclopedically oriented, lacked diversity and study of ancient languages such as Greek and Latin were lauded following the Renaissance educational tradition.⁴⁰

Pedagogy and psychology were still unborn sciences as such. Philosophers and well-wishers such as Pestalozzi, Rousseau, Herbart, and Froeber had formulated or were developing their own views on education. As research methods were unknown, some of these views were more subjective appreciations rather than the product of experimentation or systematic observation. This led to a variety of ideas such as those expressed by Jean Jacques Rousseau, the father of the French Revolution and author of the famous *Émile*, who asserted that women should be educated to please the men.⁴¹ In all of these, the 19th century was a century moving towards secularization and rejection of the divine. Darwin had totally denied the Bible as divine revelation and himself gave up Christianity at the age of forty⁴², Freud called religion a “universal obsession neurosis of humanity”⁴³, Marx regarded it as the “opium of the people”⁴⁴ while Nietzsche declared that “God is dead”.⁴⁵

The trend towards secularized education became more prominent in the last century. “The vitality of men’s belief in God is dying out in every land; nothing short of His wholesome medicine can ever restore it.” observed Bahá’u’lláh in 1873, “The corrosion of ungodliness is eating into the vitals of human society; what else but the Elixir of His potent Revelation can cleanse and revive it?”⁴⁶ Educational programs were also caught in this secularizing tendency and consequently the design and delivery of schools and teacher training programs were influenced. For example, most of these 20th century educational theories were based on materialistic assumptions of the human being. Pavlov compared children’s learning to animal behaviour through his theory of classical conditioning, Skinner in his behaviorism associated cognitive processes with black boxes, while Piaget related these processes to vegetal functioning, probably due to his training as a biologist.⁴⁷ Other 20th century learning models such as the information-processing approach equated thought processes to computers components or like cognitive psychologists that explained these thought processes in terms of the interaction of chemical and physical neural reactions. Constructivism, considered by many as a more thorough approach to understanding how people comprehend the world, still partook of the idea of human beings as *social animals*, contrasting with the Bahá’í belief that humankind is not only a distinctive realm of creation but the supreme one.⁴⁸

A New Conception of the Child

It is in this disoriented spiritual and intellectual landscape of the 19th century that Bahá’u’lláh proclaimed that a human being is a *Supreme Talisman* and stated that “Lack of proper education hath, however, deprived

him of that which he doth inherently possess.”⁴⁹ He emphasized that it is mainly through both the development of spiritual capabilities and formal instruction that men and women will develop and accomplish their highest destiny. The *talisman* metaphor inspires us to believe in the fathomless spiritual powers of each individual to solve problems, a capacity that goes beyond his or her material nature. In the same paragraph, Bahá’u’lláh also compared human beings to mines “rich in gems of inestimable value”⁵⁰ whose treasures can be revealed only through education for the benefit of all mankind.

Addressing the individual, Bahá’u’lláh declared: “Thou art even as a finely tempered sword concealed in the darkness of its sheath and its value hidden from the artificer’s knowledge.”⁵¹ “Man is even as steel,” Bahá’u’lláh stated, “the essence of which is hidden: through admonition and explanation, good counsel and education, that essence will be brought to light.”⁵² Thus Bahá’u’lláh, as far back as the 1850s, was proposing a developmental view of education, one that must also come from within the individual.⁵³ This innate nobility of human beings proclaimed by Bahá’u’lláh was distinctive at that time and presented a clear contrast with prevalent theological conceptions of children as being born sinful.⁵⁴

‘Abdu’l-Bahá defined education as a holistic activity encompassing material, human and spiritual aspects of the individual and the society. In explaining these three broad facets for educating the body, the mind and the spirit, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá stated:

Material education is concerned with the progress and development of the body, through gaining its sustenance, its material comfort and ease. This education is common to animals and man. Human education signifies civilization and progress—that is to say, government, administration, charitable works, trades, arts and handicrafts, sciences, great inventions and discoveries and elaborate institutions, which are the activities essential to man as distinguished from the animal. Divine education is that of the Kingdom of God: It consists in acquiring divine perfections, and this is true education; for in this state man becomes the focus of divine blessings, the manifestation of the words, “Let Us make man in Our image, and after Our likeness.” This is the goal of the world of humanity.⁵⁵

Great emphasis was placed on the role of schools in developing character and ethical values to the extent that it was considered the ultimate goal

of education. “A child that is cleanly, agreeable, of good character, well-behaved—even though he be ignorant—,” in ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s advice, “is preferable to a child that is rude, unwashed, ill-natured, and yet becoming deeply versed in all the sciences and arts. . . . If, however, the child be trained to be both learned and good, the result is light upon light.”⁵⁶ The approach taken to moral development sought to empower children to develop their own moral conscience even at the sacrifice of their own immediate interests. Rather than bearing towards current behaviour modification theories which differentiate *being* than *doing* by inducing rational but moral-free responses to life choices, the Bahá’í approach focuses on living the virtues and adopted them permanently as part of people’s spiritual nature regarding of the circumstantial outcomes of their decisions.⁵⁷ Personal transformation was also seen as a powerful factor in achieving social transformation. For example, raising awareness on world citizenship was considered a preparation for achieving unity in diversity in a world free from religious, racial or national prejudices.⁵⁸ These all-embracing ideals coupled with the acquisition of virtues and spiritual qualities were seen as indispensable as the academic component of the school curriculum.⁵⁹

Bahá’i-inspired Education in the 20th Century

Empowered by the copious literature of Bahá’u’lláh and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá on education, the oppressed Iranian Bahá’í community in the 20th century positioned itself at the vanguard of educational reform in their own country. Bahá’u’lláh had exhorted: “Bend your minds and wills to the education of the peoples and kindreds of the earth”⁶⁰ while ‘Abdu’l-Bahá had written: “The primary, the most urgent requirement is the promotion of education. It is inconceivable that any nation should achieve prosperity and success unless this paramount, this fundamental concern is carried forward.”⁶¹ The Iranian Bahá’í community itself managed in an atmosphere of fanaticism and bigotry to establish a network of fifty progressive schools for boys and girls, the first one founded in 1898 and the rest in the early part of the 20th century (see Fig. 1). These schools were open to children of all backgrounds; for example, half of the students in one of the schools in the capital Tehran came from the broader community. Regrettably, in an act of religious intolerance, all Bahá’í schools were banned in the mid-1930s by the government of Reza Shah. It was also due to this emphasis on education that by 1973 illiteracy among Bahá’í women under forty was almost totally eradicated as compared to the 15% national literacy rate.⁶² Likewise, many Bahá’ís went to higher education and pursued successful professional careers thus obtaining positions of prominence in the Iranian society before the 1979 revolution.



Fig. 1: A Bahá'í School for Girls in Iran in 1933

Unfortunately, for the past 26 years, the Iranian Bahá'í youth have been deprived access to tertiary education and Bahá'í teachers have been banned from teaching in public schools and universities as part of the cultural cleansing campaign pursued by the Iranian government. In addition, over 200 Bahá'ís have been executed because of their beliefs, a number of them after explicitly being charged for teaching Bahá'í children's classes, the equivalent of Sunday schools in the West, including the hanging of a seventeen year old girl.⁶³ The regime has also managed to close down an institution of higher learning established by the Iranian Bahá'í Community with an enrollment of over 900 students and a staff of 150 academics. Initially established through Indiana University as a distance education program, the *Open University* later on developed its own courses in the form of ten undergraduate degrees. Disciplines taught included computer science, accounting, psychology, law, literature, applied chemistry, biology, civil engineering, pharmacology and dental science. Classes were run in private homes and in rented premises where laboratories, photocopying facilities and specialized libraries were held. This endeavor came to an end in 1998 when over 500 homes were raided, 36 academics were arrested and all their equipment was confiscated.⁶⁴

Despite this bleak background, Bahá'í individuals and institutions have established a large number of schools, universities, radio stations, centers of

learning and other grassroots socio-economic projects around the world for people of all backgrounds. There are currently over 1700 projects operating mostly in developing countries and running programs on literacy, numeracy, environment, and agriculture, the advancement of women, health care, drug prevention and parenting.⁶⁵ Their endeavours are continually aiming at developing new curricula by exploring the processes and significance of applying spiritual values to educational concepts and practices, including a strong service component to the broader community. Successful examples of Bahá'í-inspired educational initiatives around the world include among others: Nur University in Bolivia⁶⁶, Maxwell International School in Canada⁶⁷, the School of the Nations in Macau⁶⁸, Yerrinbool College in Australia⁶⁹, the Banani School in Zambia⁷⁰, Towshend International School in the Czech Republic⁷¹, Santitham School in Thailand⁷², the Ocean of Light School in Tonga⁷³, the School of the Nations in Brazil⁷⁴, and the Barli Vocational Institute for Rural Women in India.⁷⁵ Some of these enterprises have had their work publicly acknowledged such as the City Montessori School in India⁷⁶ that won in 2002 the UNESCO award for Peace Education and FUNDAEC (The Foundation for the Application and Teaching of the Sciences) of Colombia which was qualified by the Bucharest Club as "the best educatory project of the time."⁷⁷

Their activities are guided by the Universal House of Justice, the international governing body of the Bahá'í Faith located in Israel, through its Office of Social and Economic Development. In addition, a group-based and self-directed tutorial system called the "Ruhi Institute" has been implemented at the Bahá'í local level in the past five years. Their aim is to develop human resources within the Bahá'í community. There are currently over 11000 study circles established around the world. Some of the modules of this training institute are aimed at the moral education and training of children and youth while other community-oriented courses such as teacher training and primary health are being developed at the local level.⁷⁸ On a major scale, the Bahá'í International Community has been advocating in international forums in favour of universal and moral education since 1948 from its position as an international non-governmental organization at the United Nations, and through its consultative status within the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC).

Conclusions

The Bahá'í Faith brought a new light to the languishing education of the 19th century. It proclaimed that children are born noble, not sinful, with

plenty of latent attributes that need to be patiently developed and nurtured. Pedagogically, the Baha'i writings advocated for more child-centered approaches that included many of the innovative practices that are in use nowadays as outlined earlier in this paper. Curriculum wise, moral education and world citizenship were made central to the child's upbringing. These ideals also advocated for more diversity in the school curriculum, one that necessarily should reflect the changing needs of society and prepare the individual as a world citizen. According to the Bahá'í writings, education had to be compulsory for both boys and girls, rather than voluntary, and social mechanisms were put in place to this effect to minimize disadvantage such as girls education and funding the education of the less privileged in society.

Last century witnessed the emergence of a number of successful Bahá'í-inspired educational establishments striving to apply the principles enunciated by Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdul-Bahá. Although restricted by material resources, these institutions have achieved remarkable results, as seen above. Such a doctrinarian and historical commitment at the local, national and international level, within a single century, by a world religious community that is still banned and persecuted in its birthplace is indeed extraordinary.

It is certainly encouraging to witness that many of these ideals are now being unanimously accepted and implemented. However, it should be asserted that not enough effort has been rendered in the fields of universal and spiritual education in response to Bahá'u'lláh's counsel. On the one hand, a constant trend towards secularization and value-neutral education has continued to drive religious values away at least from most public education systems. Using the lens of history, it can be said that the three generations of the 20th century, both in the East and the West, has grown up in a world reverencing nationalism, racialism and communism as virtual deities.⁷⁹

On the other hand, this year UNICEF has alerted that 121 million children of primary-school age do not attend school while two-thirds of the illiterate adult population are women, mostly from developing countries.⁸⁰ Such disturbing reality certainly conflicts with our 21st century claims to modernity and globalization. This lack of progress in the fields of universal and moral education not only summons all the nations for the worldwide implementation of these principles but also reminds us of Bahá'u'lláh's admonitions more than a century-and-a-half ago:

Strain every nerve to acquire both inner and outer perfections, for the fruit of the human tree hath ever been and will ever be perfections both within and without. It is not

desirable that a man be left without knowledge or skills, for he is then but a barren tree. Then, so much as capacity and capability allow, ye needs must deck the tree of being with fruits such as knowledge, wisdom, spiritual perception and eloquent speech.⁸¹

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