

CHAPTER 8

A MORE CONSTRUCTIVE ENCOUNTER: A BAHÁ'Í VIEW OF RELIGION AND HUMAN RIGHTS

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THE RISE OF human rights as a system of values and ethics commanding respect and motivating action with quasi-religious force was a notable feature of the twentieth century, which was also a time of increasing secularisation and 'privatisation' of religion. The tension between human rights values and religious values has led some to wonder if religion and human rights are compatible. This tension has been reinforced by the emergence in the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century of an increasingly aggressive form of religious extremism which is clearly contemptuous of human rights.

This chapter will explore the relationship between religion and human rights from a Bahá'í perspective and will examine the work of the Bahá'í community in wholeheartedly supporting the theory and practice of universal human rights.

INTRODUCTION

Human rights discourse has a compelling quality at a time when religion no longer holds the centre of the public square. The value placed on human rights and human rights as values seem to have a transcendent quality that compels respect with, in some cases, a quasi-religious force.¹

In this paper I want to give an example of a religion that has emerged in modern times, which clearly and directly addresses modern concerns and which is wholeheartedly committed to universal human rights. The Bahá'í Faith, which has grown from its initial milieu in the Middle East of the mid and late nineteenth century into a religion with a following in all parts of the world, has very clear theological foundations for its commitment to universal human rights and has long worked to promote

¹ Cf. James V. Spickard, 'Human Rights, Religious Conflict and Globalisation: Ultimate Values in a New World Order', *IJMS*, 1/1 (1999), 3–20.

the values that underpin human rights. This paper will adduce evidence from the Bahá'í sacred writings and other sources to demonstrate this commitment and will examine work done by the Bahá'í International Community (BIC) in support of the human rights of the Bahá'ís in Iran and of human rights more generally.

THEOLOGICAL UNDERPINNINGS

Bahá'u'lláh (1817–1892), founder of the Bahá'í Faith, firmly places religion in the public sphere. In his extensive writings (which form a major part of the Bahá'í scriptures) he addresses questions of good governance, of judicial, social, and economic justice, of the environment, of the relationship between science and religion, of social and familial relations, and, importantly in the present context, of the relationship between the individual and society. He envisages a future global society based on a deeply rooted understanding of human oneness in which principles of justice and equity are central to the form of government. This vision is expressed epigrammatically in the emblematic quotation from Bahá'u'lláh's writings: 'The earth is but one country and mankind its citizens.'

There is a close relationship between Bahá'u'lláh's political vision and his teachings about the nature of the individual. Bahá'u'lláh holds that every individual has qualities and capacities that must be released and developed for the good of the individual and, indeed, for the good of society as a whole. The job of government is, amongst other things, to establish conditions under which these capacities can be developed and put to use. This is a key point in understanding the Bahá'í position on human rights.

Human beings are seen as being fundamentally spiritual in nature. Much is said in the Bahá'í scriptures of the importance of developing the intangible, but nonetheless effective, qualities and capacities that are deemed to be spiritual: the virtues, such as truthfulness, trustworthiness and generosity; rationality and the enquiring mind; the capacity to know and love God. Since these qualities and capacities are to be found in each and every individual, and since, according to Bahá'u'lláh, God intends these capacities to be developed, it follows that everyone has the right to a life that will allow this development to take place.

Regard man as a mine rich in gems of inestimable value. Education alone can cause it to reveal its treasures, and enable mankind to benefit therefrom.²

The principle of the oneness of humankind is the core of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings and is seen as foundational to everything else Bahá'u'lláh wanted his followers to accomplish in the public realm. As a result, the oneness of humankind features centrally in Bahá'í statements and actions on human rights.

The language of rights is to be found in the Bahá'í scriptures from a relatively early date. Writing in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, Bahá'u'lláh warned the rulers of the world: '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.'³ The following exhortation by Bahá'u'lláh to his followers does not use the word 'rights,' but clearly foreshadows an important part of what the framers of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights set out to achieve:

Thou must show forth that which will ensure the peace and the well-being of the miserable and the down-trodden. Gird up the loins of thine endeavour, that perchance thou mayest release the captive from his chains, and enable him to attain unto true liberty.⁴

In addressing the requirements of just governance, Bahá'u'lláh again uses language that human rights workers would recognise, although he goes beyond the normal range of human rights discourse by calling on the ruler (referring to all those with leading roles in government)

to weigh his own being every day in the balance of equity and justice and then to judge between men and counsel them to do that which would direct their steps unto the path of wisdom and understanding. This is the cornerstone of statesmanship . . . From these words every enlightened man of wisdom will readily per-

² Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh Revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1978), 162.

³ *Ibid.* 85.

⁴ Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1983), 92.

ceive that which will foster such aims as the welfare, security and protection of mankind and the safety of human lives.⁵

In addition to addressing human rights in general terms, Bahá'u'lláh forbids specific abuses such as slavery and clearly enjoins practices such as freedom of religion and the equality of women and men. He strongly censures two great European powers for persecuting their Jewish populations, and in so doing approves, by implication, the principle of external intervention into the affairs of a sovereign state.

Similar rights and rights-related language is also to be found in the writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, eldest son and successor of Bahá'u'lláh as head of the Bahá'í community. For example, in 1912, while on a prolonged visit to North America, 'Abdu'l-Bahá spoke of a day when 'there shall be an equality of rights and prerogatives for all mankind'.⁶ In other talks and writings he refers to the rights of labour, equal rights for women, and indeed equal rights for all.

The concept of human rights is, therefore, not at all problematic for the Bahá'í Faith. The values that underpin our modern understanding of human rights are strongly advocated, and Bahá'u'lláh constantly exhorts his readers to practise these values in their daily lives. He even goes so far as to prescribe to those in government that they should daily examine their consciences before presuming to advise or make judgements about or between others.

As stated above, the core spiritual principle in the writings of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá is summed up in the phrase 'the oneness of humankind'. The Bahá'í account of human rights starts from and expresses this principle. However, the focus on this principle would seem to require some examination.

We may be inclined, in the early twenty-first century, to regard the notion that all human beings are part of one human race as too obvious to be worthy of attention. That Bahá'ís and their institutions take this as the foundation of their work may not be seen as particularly significant or radical. And yet throughout the years when Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi, 'Abdu'l-Bahá's successor as head of the Bahá'í

⁵ Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets*, 166–7.

⁶ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace: Talks Delivered by 'Abdu'l-Bahá during His Visit to the United States and Canada in 1912* (rev. ed., Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982), 318.

community, were working and writing, theories of racial superiority and extreme forms of nationalism were rampant. Bahá'u'lláh's commitment to human oneness is without qualification. He explicitly removes notions of the 'saved' and the 'unsaved' from his frame of discourse and directs his (and our) attention to the needs of the whole of humankind of whatever ethnic, religious or national background, male and female alike, whether young or old, saint or sinner.

The implications are wide-ranging. Realisation of this principle as the foundation for the Bahá'í conception of a future global order based on justice requires that we abandon all our prejudices and that we fully embrace diversity as the essential complement to oneness – the other side, so to speak, of the oneness 'coin'. This 'unity paradigm' stops diversity being threatening and renders it something to be welcomed as enriching human life. Bahá'ís are particularly fond of a metaphor to be found in the Bahá'í scriptures that compares humankind to the flowers in a garden. The flowers are diverse in kind and character, but the garden is one single place. Diversity is actually essential to unity. Without diversity, unity descends into uniformity – and uniformity, whether in the biosphere or the sociosphere, is a kind of death. But diversity outside the framework of unity leads to division. Unity and diversity are, in the Bahá'í understanding, inextricably linked.

The source of human unity, in Bahá'í theological terms, is the one creator God, whose divine qualities are reflected in the inner reality; it is the capacity of all humans, of whatever race, religion or national origin, to reflect these divine qualities that renders them deserving of moral protection. As Matthew Weinberg writes:

A Loving Creator exists Who is the Source of all that is. It is not simply because human beings have the capacity for rational choice that they deserve moral protection, as modern philosophic liberalism would claim, but that they are spiritual beings who have the capacity to reflect Divine attributes such as love, creativity, and charity.⁷

The statement presented by the National Spiritual Assembly of the

⁷ Matthew Weinberg, 'The Human Rights Discourse: A Bahá'í Perspective', in *The Bahá'í World 1996–97* (Bahá'í World Centre), 247–63.

Bahá'ís of the United States to the first session of the UN Commission on Human Rights in February 1947 also makes this point:

The source of human rights is the endowment of qualities, virtues and powers which God has bestowed upon mankind without discrimination of sex, race, creed or nation. To fulfil the possibilities of this divine endowment is the purpose of human existence.⁸

And here we come to the heart of the matter. The Bahá'í picture of human nature is founded on notions of the divine origin of what constitutes humanity at its very core – although it should be said that the Bahá'í teachings on the relationship of divinity and creation are not simple and are beyond the scope of this paper. Suffice it to say that the Bahá'í scriptures teach that each individual has ‘the image of God’ ‘engraved’ on them as the essence of their being:

O son of man! Veiled in My immemorial being and in the ancient eternity of My essence, I knew My love for thee; therefore I created thee, have engraved on thee Mine image and revealed to thee My beauty.⁹

It is this heritage that makes each human being worthy of moral protection and the subject of inalienable human rights. Furthermore, because humankind is one, each and every human being is a trust of the whole:

From this basic principle of the unity of the human family is derived virtually all other concepts concerning human rights and freedoms. If the human race is one, any notion that a particular racial or ethnic group is in some way superior to the rest of humanity must be dismissed; society must reorganize its life to give practical expression to the principle of equality between women and men; each and every person must be enabled to ‘look into all things with a searching eye’ so that truth can be independently ascertained; and all individuals must be given the opportu-

8 Bahá'í International Community, *A Bahá'í Declaration of Human Obligations and Rights*, presented to the first session of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, Lake Success, NY, USA, February 1947.

9 Bahá'u'lláh, *The Hidden Words* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1985), Arabic No. 3, p. 4.

nity to realize their inherent potential and thereby contribute to 'an ever-advancing civilization.'¹⁰

Inextricably linked to these conceptions – of the divine origin of what is fundamentally human, of the necessity that divinely conferred talents and capacities must be discovered, trained and brought to bear in meeting human needs, and of human oneness – is the principle that everyone has the capacity, the right and the obligation to investigate reality for themselves. Human beings must be free to discover and know God. In so doing, they discover their own reality. This process of spiritual discovery – of God and of oneself – is of the essence of life:

For Bahá'ís, the most fundamental of human rights is the right of each individual to investigate reality for himself or herself, and to benefit from the results of this exploration.¹¹

The primary task of the soul will always be to investigate reality, to live in accordance with the truths of which it becomes persuaded and to accord full respect to the efforts of others to do the same.¹²

Clearly the right to follow one's conscience in matters of religion and belief and the right to education are closely connected, and other rights are necessary to make the fulfilment of this right in everyone's lives possible.¹³

However, it may not be at all obvious in a secular frame of reference why the right to investigate reality for oneself assumes such central importance in the Bahá'í universe of discourse. One might well ask, 'Isn't the right to life prior to the right to investigate reality for oneself (and all that follows from that right)?' Clearly Bahá'ís would never deny the importance of the right to life, physical safety, wellbeing and so on. But the Bahá'í frame of reference includes what is considered in Bahá'í theology to be transcendent and intangible; in a word, eternity. At stake is

¹⁰ Weinberg, xx.

¹¹ Bahá'í International Community, 'Development, Democracy and Human Rights', statement to the United Nations World Conference on Human Rights, Vienna, June 1993.

¹² The Universal House of Justice, *To the World's Religious Leaders*, April 2002.

¹³ Clearly the right to live, the right to development and the right to adequate housing would be among those required to make it possible for individuals to investigate reality for themselves.

not just what happens to humans in life ante-mortem but what happens, according to Bahá'í beliefs, post mortem. The relationship of the soul to its God can, under certain circumstances, assume greater importance for an individual than physical life itself – and the readiness of Bahá'ís at different times in the history of the community to lose their lives rather than deny their faith bears witness to the importance of the eternal in Bahá'í life and thought. This strong belief has had particular force for the Bahá'ís in Iran and has helped shape the response of the Iranian Bahá'ís to sustained persecution.

A written comment submitted by the Bahá'í International Community to the fiftieth session of the Commission on Human Rights highlights the importance of dignity and the fulfilment of individual potential:

Recognition of the oneness of humanity gives rise to an elevated concept of human rights, one that includes the assurance of dignity for each person and the realization of each individual's innate potential. This view differs markedly from an approach to human rights that is limited to preventing interference with the individual's freedom of action.¹⁴

To live a life that is fully human, that allows the individual, regardless of gender, ethnic origin, religion or belief and so on, to develop their capacities and to put them to use for their own benefit and in service of society requires that the individual be free to investigate reality themselves, to follow their conscience, to be educated, to have the necessary physical and psychological well-being, to experiment with their aesthetic and intellectual capacities, and to struggle to cultivate moral and spiritual insights. All of these are inextricably linked. We have God-given capacities, the argument goes; God requires us to develop those capacities, and governments and individuals alike have the duty of ensuring that it is possible to do this.

14 Bahá'í International Community, 'Responsibility to Promote Human Rights', written comment on the Draft Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Freedoms, submitted to the 50th session of the Commission on Human Rights in response to an invitation from Ibrahima Fall, assistant secretary-general for human rights, issued in accordance with resolution 1993/92 of the Commission on Human Rights, Geneva, December 1993.

In undertaking this search, a search that is for all practical purposes synonymous with the living of a life that can be said to be truly human, every individual needs the assurance that the exercise of the faculties referred to will enjoy access to whatever benefits, protections, and opportunities can reasonably be provided by the society in which he or she lives. These benefits include . . . not only civil and political rights, but also rights in the area of economic, social, and cultural life.¹⁵

Human dignity is also a key concept in human rights discourse and, indeed, in the Bahá'í approach to human rights. It is another of those intangible but effective qualities of human life. Societies give a high value to the preservation of dignity, particularly for high status individuals. Loss of dignity can have serious negative psychological and social repercussions for individuals, and deliberate deprivation of dignity is one of the more powerful sanctions that can be applied to persons who are deemed to have transgressed. Preservation of the dignity of the vulnerable, notably of the elderly, is a matter of great concern in many societies.

In the Bahá'í view, dignity stems from what Quakers refer to as 'that of God in everyone'. It is the divine in the human that deserves respect, regardless of the person's outer appearance and circumstances. Protection and promotion of human dignity is the responsibility not just of governments but also of individuals and of society *in toto*:

If, as in the Bahá'í perspective, the realization of human rights involves promoting human dignity, then it becomes apparent that governments alone cannot implement human rights. Legal protections for human rights and freedom from government oppression are unquestionably essential to human dignity. But dignity is fostered fundamentally by the way one is treated by others.¹⁶

A useful summary of the principles underpinning and governing the Bahá'í approach to human rights is provided by an article on the 'Bahá'í World' website:

15 Bahá'í International Community, 'Development, Democracy and Human Rights.'

16 Bahá'í International Community, 'Responsibility to Promote Human Rights.'

As recognised in 1993 at the World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna, human rights are universal, indivisible and interdependent. Upon reflection, it can be seen that these concepts stem from our underlying sense of oneness and the subconscious recognition that we are all parts of an interrelated whole.

The basic human rights which flow from this principle, as noted, are now widely recognised. They include, of course, the understanding that human rights must be applied irrespective of differences of racial background, ethnic origin, religious belief or national identity. They encompass the equality of women and men. And they comprehend that all individuals worldwide possess the same rights to freedom of investigation, information and religious practice. They also include an understanding that basic social, economic and cultural rights, such as the right to basic necessities such as food, shelter, and health care, also stem from the understanding that the benefits of medicine, science and technology, the products of agriculture, and the knowledge that is imparted by education come from a collective process of evolution that has led to the creation of our present day civilization. The fruits of civilization are the birthright of all, and steps to promote and protect human rights should keep this understanding clearly in the foreground.¹⁷

The Bahá'í view, then, is that 'human rights are not arbitrary in nature because they are grounded in the universal realities of human experience and embody values presupposed by a wide range of cultures.' The humanness that underlies local cultures is a universal and 'includes a set of potentialities, not wholly determinable, that are actualized differently by every human being.'¹⁸

The logical extension of this point is that all human beings are entitled to flourish, if not as a claim on God or nature, then as a claim on each other. This implies a universal obligation to promote collective well-being and suggests that human morality itself must be universal. Human rights can then be regarded as a vehicle

17 'Human Rights' <<http://www.bahai.org/article-1-8-0-3.html>>.

18 Both quotes from Weinberg, xx.

for shaping social conditions 'so as to realize the possibilities of human nature.'¹⁹

As Spickard says:

the triumph of human rights ideals is not just an intellectual, but a social-structural matter. It involves the creative shaping of a social order that encourages people to value their stake in each other's lives.²⁰

This link between human rights and the creation of a social order that allows individuals to fulfil the potentials that the Bahá'í teachings say they have is crucial and motivates what the Bahá'í community does to promote human rights.

BAHÁ'Í HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVITIES

Having set out the theological underpinnings of the Bahá'í approach to human rights, I now propose to examine some of the activities undertaken by the Bahá'í community in relation to human rights. These activities fall into two broad areas: promotion of universal human rights in general, and work to protect the human rights of Bahá'í communities that suffer human rights abuses or are deprived of their human rights.

The latter area has focussed largely on the situation of the Bahá'ís in Iran and it is this that I shall consider first. I shall do this from the perspective of one who is part of an international team of Bahá'ís involved in defending the human rights of Bahá'ís in Iran and who takes the lead in work with the British government and parliament. I shall briefly outline the history and present situation of the persecution of the Bahá'ís there and then look at how the Bahá'í International Community and leading national Bahá'í communities work to defend the Bahá'ís in Iran.

¹⁹ Ibid; Weinberg is quoting Jack Donnelly, *Universal Human Rights: In Theory and Practice* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989).

²⁰ Spickard, 18.

DEFENCE OF THE HUMAN RIGHTS OF THE BAHÁ'ÍS IN IRAN

Spickard considers that 'the call for human rights has achieved what amounts to near universal veneration. It has become a cultural icon . . .' But, he says, 'There is, of course, a counter-trend':

The growth of rights-discourse has occurred despite the opposition of some non-Western regimes, who argue that rights language stems from Western philosophic principles and is thus not applicable to other civilisations. For example, Iran has announced that Islamic law requires an interconnection between religion and the state; so Iran represses Bahá'ís, whom it accuses of heresy.²¹

The Bahá'í community in Iran, founded in 1844, has suffered persecution at the hands of both the religious and the civil authorities of that country from very early in its history.²² Around twenty thousand Bahá'ís are estimated to have died as a result of pogroms in the nineteenth century. The community has continued to be persecuted periodically throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. From time to time oppression of the Bahá'í community has been part of official policy under both the Pahlavi and the Khomeinist regimes.

Under the Islamic government of Ayatollah Khomeini it quickly became clear that the intention of the new Islamic regime was to extirpate the Bahá'í community from its country of origin. Even before Khomeini returned to Tehran he had condemned the Bahá'ís as a political faction:

In an interview given by the Ayatollah Khomeini to Professor James Cockcroft of Rutgers University in December 1978, the Ayatollah was asked: 'Will there be either religious or political freedom for the Bahá'ís under an Islamic government?' His answer: 'They are a political faction; they are harmful. They will not be accepted.' Professor Cockcroft then asked: 'How about their freedom of religion – religious practice?' The Ayatollah answered: 'No.'²³

²¹ Ibid. 6.

²² A useful summary of the persecution of the Bahá'ís is to be found in *The Bahá'í Question: Iran's Secret Blueprint for the Destruction of a Religious Community. An Examination of the Persecution of the Bahá'ís of Iran* (New York: Bahá'í International Community, 1999).

²³ Ibid. 20.

Once Khomeini had returned to Iran, the Bahá'í community was rapidly engulfed in a flood of attacks by government agencies and the increasingly powerful Shi'ite clergy.

The holiest Bahá'í shrine in Iran was destroyed in 1979. In 1980 the increasingly powerful Shi'ite clergy began to destroy the leadership of the community, presuming that the ordinary Bahá'ís would quickly give way to social pressure to recant their faith.

The Bahá'í International Community and Bahá'í communities across the world moved to protest to the UN and to their national governments about the treatment of the Bahá'ís in Iran.²⁴ But despite the growing international outcry, ever larger numbers of Bahá'ís were executed.

Bahá'ís arrested in the 1980s, particularly those who had been members of the elected Bahá'í councils, were systematically tortured, and some were subjected to mock executions or made to witness the torture of friends or family members. The purpose of the torture was almost always to try to force Bahá'ís to recant their faith or to confess to supposed crimes or action against state security.

Perhaps the most notorious of the Bahá'í executions was the hanging of ten Bahá'í women in Shiraz on 18 June 1983. The youngest of the ten was only 17; her 'crime' had been teaching Bahá'í children's classes.

In addition to the more florid examples of human rights abuses, the authorities in Iran have consistently attempted to undermine the survival of the entire Bahá'í community. In the wake of the 1979 revolution, Bahá'ís were refused access to primary, secondary and tertiary education; Bahá'ís were dismissed from their jobs, and the pensions of retired Bahá'í civil servants were terminated. The government expropriated as many of the assets of individual Bahá'ís as it could: homes and personal possessions were confiscated, life-savings swept away, community properties transferred to the state, the assets of Bahá'í welfare agencies confiscated. Bahá'í holy places were desecrated and destroyed, and Bahá'í cemeteries razed. Bahá'ís were forced to bury their dead in barren pieces of land without any of the necessary funerary facilities.

In 2004, two significant pieces of Bahá'í heritage were destroyed,

²⁴ The most complete examination of the interaction between the United Nations human rights system and the case of the Bahá'ís in Iran is to be found in Nazila Ghanea, *Human Rights, the UN and the Bahá'ís in Iran*, (Oxford: George Ronald Publisher, and The Hague: Kluwer Law International, 2002).

either with the connivance or at the instigation of the religious authorities;²⁵ and properties belonging to Bahá'ís continue to be confiscated.²⁶ Most seriously, Iranian Bahá'í youth are still deprived of access to higher education, unless they deny their faith.

Given the importance placed upon education by the Bahá'í Faith, this deprivation of access to higher education for its most able young people is extremely serious. It is demoralising for the young people concerned and leads to the increasing impoverishment of the Iranian Bahá'í community. The authorities in Iran have also made a number of attempts to close down the Bahá'í Institute for Higher Education, established by the Bahá'ís in Iran in 1987 as a way of harnessing their own resources to educate Bahá'í youth at university level.²⁷

The efforts made by the Iranian authorities to prevent young Bahá'ís from receiving education are instances of a long-standing policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran to suppress the development of the Bahá'í community. In his 1993 report to the UN Commission on Human Rights, Reynaldo Galindo Pohl, special representative on Iran, revealed the existence of a secret memorandum drawn up by the Supreme Revolutionary Council in 1991 on 'the Bahá'í question'.²⁸ The memorandum makes it clear that the Supreme Revolutionary Council considered the Bahá'í question at the express instructions of the supreme leader, Ali Khamenei, and it recommends steps to stifle the development of the Bahá'í community in Iran.

The memorandum was approved by Khamenei's own signature. It has never been disavowed, and the policy it sets out remains in force.

To understand why the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran would wish to suppress the Bahá'í community, which made important

25 The grave of a significant early Bahá'í, Mulla Muhammad-'Ali Barfurushi (known as Quddus), and a house in Tehran that had belonged to Mirza Buzurg-e-Nuri, the father of Bahá'u'lláh. It was noted in an article in an Iranian newspaper, *Etemaad*, 1 July 2004, that the latter was an important piece of Islamic architectural heritage.

26 In 2003, for example, several Bahá'í families in the village of Katá in the Buyír-Ahmad region of Iran were dispossessed of properties that provided them with income. Information provided by the Bahá'í International Community.

27 Information provided by the Bahá'í International Community in their periodic 'Update: Situation of the Bahá'ís in Iran', February 2005.

28 Summarised by the special representative in Doc.E/CN.4/1993/41, para. 310. A translation into English of the complete memorandum can be found in *The Bahá'í Question*. It can also be found at <<http://www.bahai.org/>>.

contributions to the social and economic development of the country in the first half of the twentieth century, one has to pay attention to the theological position of the Shi'ite clerical hierarchy. Friedrich Affolter explains that

In a country with already low religious diversity, a post-Islamic religion such as the Bahá'í Faith (while in itself a tool for making sense of a society in change) was perceived not only as a contradiction of Islamic logic; it also was perceived as a threat to the legitimacy of Khomeinism. It went counter to the interests and emotional needs of the Iranian mullas and their followers. Hence, Bahá'ís were declared heretics, deviants and destructive ideologists who ought to be exterminated. Doing so did not only help to get rid of a perceived threat; in addition, it also strengthened and consolidated 'ties of closeness' within the Shi'i faith community.²⁹

Affolter goes on to explain that the current Iranian regime, although 'seeking to create a system . . . capable of enhancing the spiritual and socio-economic liberation of the oppressed', is propagating an authoritarian political culture:

This time, however, it is based on an assertion of divine legitimacy for an Iranian Shi'i population socialized into subjugation to authority, communal identity, and acceptance of the clergy's claim of the divine right to lead. In this context, scapegoating anything that is perceived as a threat to the clergy's legitimacy becomes a political imperative.³⁰

If Affolter's analysis is correct, the persecution of the Bahá'ís is based partly in theology and partly in power politics.

Ghanea's analysis would seem to add weight to this perspective.³¹ She considers that her extensive study of the treatment of the Bahá'ís in Iran, which she sees as a test case for the UN's human rights system, has implications for the relationship between religion and the State and for the relationship between religion and human rights.

29 Friedrich W. Affolter, 'The Specter of Ideological Genocide: The Bahá'ís of Iran,' in *War Crimes, Genocide, and Crimes Against Humanity*, 1/1 (January 2005), 59–89.

30 Ibid. 74–5.

31 Ghanea, 215–16.

The main question that emerges is that of religious ‘oppositional’ communities – defined here *not* as those which are politically opposed to the government or those which demand territorial independence or resort to the use of force but those which are *construed* as ‘oppositional’ by the majority in historical or political mythology. In States where religion (or the absence of religion) is still seen as a factor in relation to national identity, and therefore of loyalty, there have been problematic human rights consequences owing to difference of belief being perceived as a threat. . . . the Bahá’í case in Iran clearly indicates a case where even individual human rights have been made conditional on coercing a particular religious affinity and where members were targeted for legally-sanctioned, systematic and intense persecution.³²

It would seem clear that the underlying motivation for the breach by the Iranian government of the human rights of the Bahá’ís in Iran over many years is (and has always been) the desire to eliminate a community that is, according to the interpretation of Islam by the Shi’ite clergy, religiously heterodox and ineluctably in conflict with the traditional understanding that there can be no prophet after Muhammad.³³ Religious and civil authorities, whose legitimacy is based on an Islamist ideology, cannot countenance the survival of a community which they see as challenging everything they stand for.

Article 13 of the Iranian Constitution makes it clear that Iranian Zoroastrians, Jews and Christians are the only recognised minority religious groups free to practise their religions within the limits of the law. It follows, therefore, that Bahá’ís are not free so to do, and long experience shows that the Iranian authorities hold the Bahá’ís to be ‘unprotected infidels’.

Representatives of the Iranian government have repeatedly and publicly denied that the Bahá’í community is a religious minority at all, let alone the largest religious minority in Iran, a claim made by the Bahá’í International Community and backed by references in a range of UN documents. They have also subjected the Bahá’ís to a range of wholly

³² Ibid. 216.

³³ For a discussion from a Bahá’í perspective of the meaning of the phrase ‘Seal of the Prophets’ see Moojan Momen, *Islam and the Bahá’í Faith* (Oxford: George Ronald Publisher, 2000), 34 ff.

unsustainable accusations: that they were supporters of the Pahlavi regime; that they are agents of Zionism; that they are involved with prostitution, adultery and immorality; and that they are heretics or enemies of Islam. All these accusations have been consistently and effectively refuted by those involved in the defence of the human rights of the Iranian Bahá'ís.

Defence of the rights of the Bahá'ís in Iran has been co-ordinated over many years by the United Nations Offices of the Bahá'í International Community (BIC) in New York and Geneva, with the aim of seeking the full emancipation of the Bahá'í community in Iran to practise their religion freely and publicly.³⁴

The whole strategy of the Bahá'í International Community and of Bahá'í National Spiritual Assemblies in support of the BIC is based on arguing from international human rights norms that the abusive treatment of the Bahá'ís in Iran is egregious and that the justifications put forward by the Iranian government for its treatment of the Bahá'í minority are wholly fallacious. Iran as a State Party to all the relevant UN Covenants must protect the human and civil rights of all its citizens. As Professor Abdelfattah Amor, Special Rapporteur on religious intolerance to the 1996 Commission on Human Rights, stated in his report to the Commission:

The Special Rapporteur deems it important that Iran . . . should reconsider its attitude to the Bahá'í Faith, in the interests of freedom of religion or belief, in compliance with its international commitments and teachings to the effect that religion admits of no constraint. Whatever perception certain Iranians may have of the Bahá'í question, it is for the State, which is responsible for all its citizens, to focus on constants rather than variables and consider each individual and each minority, as repositories of rights

³⁴ The affairs of the Bahá'í community throughout the world are governed by elected councils or assemblies at local and national levels. The world governing council of the Bahá'í community is also an elected body and is called the Universal House of Justice. The Bahá'í International Community is an international NGO with consultative rights at ECOSOC; every National Spiritual Assembly or national Bahá'í governing council is an affiliate of the Bahá'í International Community.

and obligations, to be worthy of respect and attention and to have the right to consideration and protection.³⁵

It should be noted that the second sentence of the paragraph cited above is wholly consistent with the principles underpinning the Bahá'í approach to human rights in general, as set out in the first section of this paper.

The full emancipation of the Bahá'í community will be considered by the BIC as achieved once the Iranian government has fully implemented a series of recommendations concerning the situation of the Bahá'ís in Iran made by the Special Rapporteur, who calls on the government of Iran to allow Bahá'ís access to education and employment, the right to citizenship, freedom to bury and honour their dead, freedom of movement, security of the person, re-establishment of the Bahá'í institutions, non-discrimination on grounds of religion and belief, return of community properties, and legal and human-rights training for the judiciary.

It should also be noted that the Bahá'ís do not seek to become a 'recognised' religion under the Iranian Constitution, but seek, rather, 'the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion' and the 'freedom, either individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest [their] religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching', as set out in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (Article 18), an instrument to which Iran is a State Party.

In other words, the Bahá'í community does not in any way seek exceptional treatment, but works, as a matter of principle fully within the international human rights framework, to win for the Bahá'ís in Iran what should be theirs by right.

PROMOTION OF UNIVERSAL HUMAN RIGHTS

In addition to defending the human rights of the Bahá'ís in Iran (and in other countries when necessary), the Bahá'í community nationally and internationally does a lot of work to promote universal human rights. As

³⁵ Doc.E/CN.4/1996/95/Add.2. BIC has set these recommendations out as a series of benchmarks which can be used to measure progress in the phased implementation of the Special Rapporteur's recommendations. The Special Rapporteur on Religious Intolerance is now known as the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion and

explained towards the beginning of this paper, Bahá'í religious principles are such that the community is bound to make its views known in relevant forums and do what work it can in promoting the principles and practices of human rights.

However, to grasp the nature of the work that the Bahá'í community does in this field it is essential also to understand that any aspect of the Bahá'í teachings must be seen in the context of the whole corpus of Bahá'í scripture. Certain themes appear again and again in Bahá'u'lláh's writings. As already mentioned, unity is an overarching theme in the Bahá'í universe of discourse – everything else is seen in the light of unity. Justice is another, related, central theme – and for Bahá'u'lláh, justice is something that starts with the individual's own investigation of reality and goes on to embrace not only judicial applications of justice, but social and economic justice as well.

The implication for Bahá'í practice is that every element of life is interconnected with every other element. In a particularly powerful passage in his writings, 'Abdu'l-Bahá reminds the Bahá'ís of a saying of Bahá'u'lláh, 'Ye are all the fruits of one tree, the leaves of one branch.' 'Abdu'l-Bahá continues:

Thus hath He likened this world of being to a single tree, and all its peoples to the leaves thereof, and the blossoms and fruits. It is needful for the bough to blossom, and leaf and fruit to flourish, and upon the interconnection of all parts of the world-tree, dependeth the flourishing of leaf and blossom, and the sweetness of the fruit.

For this reason must all human beings powerfully sustain one another . . . Let them at all times concern themselves with doing a kindly thing for one of their fellows, offering to someone love, consideration, thoughtful help. Let them see no one as their enemy, or as wishing them ill, but think of all humankind as their friends; regarding the alien as an intimate, the stranger as a companion, staying free of prejudice, drawing no lines.

The moral imperative in these lines is one that 'Abdu'l-Bahá lived by;

it connects very strongly with how Bahá'ís strive to live and how Bahá'í individuals and institutions work to make human rights a reality.

These themes of human oneness, of equality of treatment for all, of justice in all its forms, are ones that run through the many statements made by the Bahá'í International Community to the UN since 1947. A quick survey of issues addressed by these statements indicates both the range of concerns that the Bahá'í community believes require attention and the way in which the above-mentioned central Bahá'í principles are applied to finding solutions to the world's problems. Issues include human rights, the advancement of women, global prosperity (including care for the environment) and moral development. Much is being done by the Bahá'í community on international, national and local levels, through public statements and practical projects, to develop and promote good practice in all of these areas. The Bahá'í International Community has addressed statements to all the major UN conferences, to the General Assembly and to a wide range of UN commissions and agencies. A small and fairly random sample of statements (in no particular order) includes:

- A Bahá'í Declaration of Human Obligations and Rights – statement by the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States to the first session of the UN Commission on Human Rights, February 1947.
- Human Rights and Extreme Poverty – statement to the UN Sub-Commission on the Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities, August 1994.
- Responsibility to Promote Human Rights – written comment on the Draft Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognised Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, December 1993.
- Development, Democracy and Human Rights – statement to the UN World Conference on Human Rights, June 1993.
- Protection of Minorities – written statement presented to the 55th session of the UN Commission on Human Rights.
- Promoting Religious Tolerance – statement to the UN Commission on Human Rights, January 1995.

- The Role of Religion in Promoting the Advancement of Women – written statement to the UN Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing, September 1995.
- The Right to Education – written statement to the 56th session of the UN Commission on Human Rights, March 2000.
- United Nations Decade on Human Rights Education – written statement to the 53rd session of the UN Commission on Human Rights, March 1997.

In making these and many other statements, the Bahá'í International Community believes that it can help shape the thinking of governments and influential groups and individuals about the principles and practices of human rights. The statements always address the headline issue from a foundation of the central Bahá'í principles outlined above and others that derive from them. They do not – and could not, given the Bahá'í stance on non-involvement in partisan politics – suggest political solutions to these issues, but rather show how the Bahá'í spiritual principles, thoughtfully applied, will create a foundation for a new social order in which the abuses under consideration would no longer happen. For example, the statement on Human Rights and Extreme Poverty shows how the application of spiritual principles will change the nature of society:

The Baha'i approach to the problem of extreme poverty is based on the application of spiritual principles. The economic relationships of a society reflect the values of its members. Therefore, to transform those relationships, man's character must be transformed. Until justice is valued over greed, the gap between the rich and the poor will continue to widen, and the dream of sustainable economic growth, peace and prosperity will elude our grasp. Sensitizing mankind to the vital role of spiritual values in solving economic problems will, we are convinced, create a new impetus for change.³⁶

The emphasis is always on the need for transformation of individuals and society, and the inextricable connection between the two is shown.

³⁶ Bahá'í International Community, *Human Rights and Extreme Poverty*, statement to the UN Sub-Commission on the Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities, Geneva, August 1994.

And, while legal protections for human rights are understood to be necessary, they are clearly not sufficient. We have a *collective* and pressing responsibility for ensuring that the human rights of every individual are protected and fostered:

it is impossible to implement human 'rights' without a sense of collective responsibility. Indeed, if the whole of humanity is one interconnected body, then an injury to any member is an injury to the body as a whole. Thus it behooves every individual member of the human family to take action whenever and wherever human rights violations occur.³⁷

An examination of the meaning of the concept of 'responsibility' takes us right back to our starting point:

Yet in the Bahá'í perspective, the concept of 'responsibility' in the context of human rights encompasses the responsibility devolving upon every person, as a divinely-created being, to recognize the essential oneness of the human race and to promote the human rights of others with this motivation.³⁸

Bahá'í communities around the world also undertake a wide range of projects to learn in practice how the Bahá'í principles can be applied to human rights (broadly understood) and other concerns. In some countries the Bahá'í community has encouraged governments to introduce human rights education as an essential part of the curriculum:

As we educate our children to accept diversity as part of the human condition and to extend respect and full human rights to the entire human family, civilization will benefit from an unimaginable wealth of contributions.

In that respect, human rights education could be considered basic education for life in the modern world.³⁹

Even the work done by Bahá'ís in many countries to educate and train

37 Bahá'í International Community, *Responsibility to Promote Human Rights*.

38 Ibid.

39 Bahá'í International Community, *United Nations Decade on Human Rights Education*, statement to the 53rd session of the UN Commission on Human Rights, Geneva, March 1997.

children, youth, women and men in a wide range of knowledge and skills, from basic literacy to agriculture and village banking, can be understood as a major contribution to human rights by empowering the individuals and communities concerned with a new sense of purpose and dignity to manage their own lives and to interact on a more equal footing with governments and large organisations and businesses. As ‘Abdu’l-Bahá commented in *Secret of Divine Civilization*, his seminal work on the creation of well-developed society:

And the honour and distinction of the individual consist in this, that he among all the world’s multitudes should become a source of social good. Is any larger bounty conceivable than this, that an individual, looking within himself, should find that by the confirming grace of God he has become the cause of peace and well-being, of happiness and advantage to his fellow men? No, by the one true God, there is no greater bliss, no more complete delight.⁴⁰

CONCLUSION

From the foregoing it becomes apparent that, far from being in conflict with modern human rights norms, the Bahá’í Faith’s foundational principles – to be found in the writings of its founder, Bahá’u’lláh, and of his eldest son and successor as head of the community, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá – are entirely congruent with the principles of human rights as found in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and successive UN human rights covenants. The Bahá’í International Community has consistently and openly supported, through statements and through involvement in the UN human rights system, the development and implementation of international human rights law. National Bahá’í communities and their governing councils have, within the limitations of their resources, reinforced the work of the BIC, working with their respective governments and with partner human rights NGOs to build a culture of human rights across the world.

Regrettably the Bahá’ís have also had to defend the human rights of their co-religionists in Iran (and in some other countries) over a number of years. Working with national governments and with the UN human

40 ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Secret of Divine Civilization*, 2–3.

rights system, the Bahá'í community has developed a considerable level of expertise as an international human rights NGO; its work is widely respected by diplomats and by other human rights NGOs. It has been effective, without resort to violence or to partisan political manoeuvring, in persuading governments to help stay the hand of the oppressor, but this aspect of its work is far from over. Much remains to be done before the Bahá'ís in Iran can be said to be fully emancipated, to be free to manifest their faith in accordance with international law.

The motivating vision of the Bahá'í community is the development of a peaceful and united global civilisation. Promotion of universal human rights is integral to the rest of the work the community does to help make this vision a reality.