

# Rights and Responsibilities in the Bahá'í World Order: From “Me” to “Us”—Confronting the Fear

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The international field of human rights is fraught with conflicting assumptions and worldviews, accusations of cultural hegemony or alternatively of self-serving cultural relativity, and arguments about whether universality is desirable, necessary, or possible. These disputes reach an impasse most readily when they concern the priority of the individual versus the community, often expressed in terms of choosing to confer priority either on individual human rights or on individuals' responsibilities to society. This essay proposes that this presumed conflict—between the need to fully protect human dignity and equality and the need to foster the well being of society as a whole—is false. It is submitted that the essential goals of the liberal human rights regime can be achieved while also creating communities that are more unified and conducive to the common good than is generally believed possible in modern Western societies. Bahá'í principles offer a way to do both, and Bahá'í communities in every culture around the world offer emerging models, still in infancy, of how to put these principles into practice.

To Western human rights advocates, any attempt to legally link human rights with human responsibilities is suspect. Such linkage is a hallmark of socialist legal traditions, under which the exercise of individual rights is dependent upon the performance of duties to society. In such legal systems, rights are a contingent grant of the state, rather than an entitlement belonging to every human being.<sup>1</sup> The socialist position is anathema to the essential liberal concept of human rights, defeating the very purposes for which that concept was historically created: to protect individuals from tyranny, and from oppressive and abusive claims of social duty or the collective good as determined by unaccountable authorities. Nevertheless, as U.S. society is reportedly beginning to rediscover the value of community, and to entertain the thought that an individual rights approach alone may not be sufficient to achieve social justice and human fulfillment, the question is before us again: where is the ideal balance

between individual freedom and the good of society as a whole? Is this image of a “balance”—implying that for one side to go up the other must go down—the right image?

All people are conditioned in our thinking, our concept of self, our relationships and worldviews by what we have experienced and learned growing up in our native cultures. As incontrovertible as this fact may be, and as frequently acknowledged as it is in human rights debates, its full implications are still usually ignored in the first person. The Western human rights tradition is not only a legal heritage but a set of cultural and social assumptions that permeate individuals' views of themselves and of their relationships to others, to society, and to governmental institutions. People in Western societies do not disavow social responsibilities. Most would acknowledge that they have countless responsibilities, either voluntarily assumed or flowing from citizenship, to a range of people and institutions, including family, friends, neighbors, employer, civic or private organizations, government, and perhaps even to society at large. The question is whether these responsibilities have any direct connection to rights, and how the exercise of rights affects all of these human relationships.

It is not within the very limited scope of this essay to explain systematically the Bahá'í teachings on human rights, the Bahá'í view of service to humanity as an essential purpose of life, the new institutional order ordained in the Bahá'í writings, or even the Bahá'í principles on community building, as essential as these are to the points being made. Much of this is set out elsewhere in the present work.<sup>2</sup> The purpose is rather to suggest some perspectives—cultural, legal, and psychological—to help explain why those of us with a generally Western upbringing have such difficulty imagining how a unified society could be created without unacceptably compromising individual rights. Unless we understand why we believe what we believe, we cannot loosen the hold that culture and upbringing have on our minds. Recasting the boundaries between individual and society requires probing the assumptions and wholly legitimate fears underlying Western individualism. These are evaluated here in light of Bahá'í principles. It also requires a mind open to the possibilities of social evolution, based on changed assumptions and a new institutional order. To be independent in our investigation of truth, a core Bahá'í principle, demands no less.

There are passages in the Bahá'í writings that, taken alone, could support the liberal Western view of human rights; others could support the socialist approach (which also resembles the approach of many traditional “non-modern” societies). There are countless references in the Bahá'í writings to individual rights, to abolishing prejudice and all forms of discrimination, to the duty to

speak one's views frankly, and to the central spiritual duty to investigate truth without bias. The individual is "the focus of primary development" in society, and the Universal House of Justice has the constitutional duty to "safeguard the personal rights, freedom and initiative of individuals."<sup>3</sup> Shoghi Effendi wrote:

The unity of the human race, as envisaged by Bahá'u'lláh, implies the establishment of a world commonwealth in which all nations, races, creeds and classes are closely and permanently united, and in which the autonomy of its state members and the personal freedom and initiative of the individuals that compose them are definitely and completely safeguarded.<sup>4</sup>

Such passages confirm the Western view of the necessity and even centrality of individual rights in creating a just society in which all can flourish. Other passages in the Bahá'í writings suggest a different view:

The Bahá'í conception of social life is essentially based on the principle of the subordination of the individual will to that of society. It neither suppresses the individual nor does it exalt him to the point of making him an antisocial creature, a menace to society. As in everything, it follows the 'golden mean.'<sup>5</sup>

To some readers, the foregoing statement comes as welcome assurance of restoring balance to an unbalanced world, of promoting the good of both individuals and society as a whole, without sacrificing the well being of either. For others, reference to "the principle of the subordination of the individual will to that of society" is a red flag. Governments, armies, and others (certainly not limited to those of socialist heritage) have waged atrocities against human beings the world over in the name of perverse claims of the "good of society" or the "good of the state." But what are we to make of "the principle of the subordination of the individual will to that of society" when it is joined in the Bahá'í writings with powerful defenses of human rights? This is new. This combination raises questions that communities and governance systems have not yet addressed, much less resolved. This is the basis for the claim that, in the Bahá'í system, human dignity and equality can be fully protected while also fostering the well being of society as a whole and building unified communities.

It is more accurate to say that the Bahá'í writings blend seemingly diverse ideals, rather than balancing them or compromising between them. A 1988 letter of the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís in the United States, published under the title, *Individual Rights and Freedoms in the World Order of*

Bahá'u'lláh (hereinafter Rights Statement), is a preeminent example of such blending with respect to free speech rights and the responsibility to build unity in one's community and society. This letter was motivated by noticing Bahá'ís in the United States "invoke Western liberal democratic practices when actions of Bahá'í institutions or some of their fellow Bahá'ís do not accord with their expectations."<sup>6</sup> The Rights Statement emphasizes the nature of the Bahá'í administrative order and its distinction from previous governance structures, the requirements of freedom, the appropriate avenues and methods for criticism within the Bahá'í community, the role and right of freedom of expression, and the love that is necessary to build peace and unity on the foundation of justice. The Rights Statement is a model of how to approach the blending of ideals, based on an analysis of ultimate purpose. It also goes a long way towards bringing to light the assumptions of Western tradition, both those that are worthy of the future of humanity and those that need to evolve. This essay attempts no such comprehensive analysis, but does in its conclusion return to the question of ultimate purpose: development of the individual not only as a political or economic actor but as a spiritual being, who requires relationships and community to achieve full human potential.

So, how does one begin to achieve independence in the investigation of truth? What is at issue here is not the possibility of attaining truly objective knowledge, which has preoccupied philosophers for centuries and is now, in the age of quantum physics, considered virtually impossible, but rather increasing degrees of detachment from the views of others. Bahá'u'lláh, the Founder of the Bahá'í Faith, wrote that through justice, "thou shalt see with thine own eyes and not through the eyes of others, and shalt know of thine own knowledge and not through the knowledge of thy neighbor."<sup>7</sup> The more highly educated we are, the more we like to believe that we are the masters of our own thoughts, free of external control, but the persistence of cultural differences belies this notion. Education is one way to escape cultural conditioning, but it must be an education that challenges one's assumptions rather than consistently and implicitly reinforcing them.

Another path to increased detachment from one's upbringing is to live in a foreign culture long enough for it to cease being foreign, long enough to discover that your view of your home culture has changed and that your thought patterns are shifting. The following sketch comparing life in Japanese society to life in the United States demonstrates, lest there be any doubt, that there is more than one way to live. Generalizations are offered not as accurate descriptions of every member of a given society, but as reflecting ideas that Japanese and Americans in fact hold about themselves and about each other. This observer has lived in each country long enough to become thoroughly unsure as to

which extreme—U.S. individualism or Japanese communitarianism—is more threatening to human well being or holds more promise of evolving towards the “golden mean.”

### The United States and Japan—One Planet?

A Western foreigner newly settling in Japan will at first be surprised by stories of junior high school students who are ostracized or worse for wearing the wrong socks with their school uniform, or who are expelled from school for coloring their hair. Surprise will give way to deep concern when this Western foreigner realizes that most of her Japanese university students are incapable of formulating an interesting question for class discussion, in either Japanese or English, and that even those who could do so will never voluntarily speak in class unless coerced. Concern yields to distress when this foreigner learns that her own outspoken seven-year-old daughter, after only one year in Japanese school, now refuses to answer a teacher's question until she is sure what answer the teacher is looking for, in fear of making a m-i-s-t-a-k-e. The teenage suicide rate in Japan is off the charts. Widespread domestic violence is only now beginning to emerge from being shrouded as a private family matter. The Japanese saying, “the nail that sticks up gets hit down,” takes on ever deeper and more pernicious meaning the longer one remains in Japan and understands the implications of Japanese-style communitarianism.<sup>8</sup>

A Japanese foreigner newly settling in the United States will at first be surprised by the sloppy appearance of students on their way to high school and by how much free time students enjoy, with few evening or weekend classes. Surprise will give way to concern when this Japanese foreigner realizes that most of her American university students not only eat their lunches during lectures, but expect their teachers to be available at their beck and call to discuss at length any idle question that occurs to them or to challenge their grade on a quiz. Concern yields to horror when this foreigner learns that anyone in the United States, not only police officers, may own a gun, most of them legally. In the United States, the likelihood that one will be a victim of violent crime (other than domestic violence) is heavily dependent on the neighborhood in which one lives and works, which in turn depends primarily on one's economic advantages, which correlate strongly with one's race or ethnicity. The American advertising slogan, “have it your way,” takes on ever deeper and more pernicious meaning the longer one remains in the United States and understands the implications of American-style individualism.

Americans are shocked at the lack of individuation in Japan, at the lack of what is viewed in the United States as personal moral maturity and autonomy

typical for an adult, and the low level of apparent public debate and concern over profound issues of social justice, such as the status of permanent residents of Korean ancestry. But Japan is a country where every child receives a decent public education, where the differences between the best and the worst public schools are tiny by U.S. standards, where virtually every (legal) resident is covered by affordable national health insurance, and where the levels of poverty and violent crime are a small fraction of those in the United States. Granted, all of these systems are coming under increasing stress in Japan with the current economic recession, but the differences in how these human needs are handled in the two countries remain astounding.

Japanese are shocked by the lack of personal security in the United States, physical and otherwise, by public incivility and rudeness, and by the extreme segregation by economic level of housing, from mansions and sprawling suburbs to inner cities and dangerous subways. But the United States is a country where almost anyone (relative to Japanese practice) has a chance to train for a new job at any stage of life, where women are (almost) the peers of men in many public and private institutions, where university education is among the best in the world, where public interest groups have some effective voice in politics, where it is no longer publicly acceptable to be overtly bigoted or extremely sexist, and which is struggling severely but making some progress in figuring out how to create a harmonious and just society out of the hugely diverse population that is the United States.

Are all of these differences between Japan and the U.S. (and these are only some of the most obvious) due to the two societies' respective views of the individual and society, of human rights and human responsibilities? Probably not. Japan and the United States are radically different cultures, each with long histories of social and political evolution and revolution that barely intersected with one another. But their respective communitarian and individualistic roots clearly have something fundamental to do with all of the social, political, and cultural differences between them.

### **The Spectrum**

Japan and the United States do not represent opposites but rather points on a line. Societies or governments that place primary value on the individual, and those that place primary value on the collective or community, can be located along a spectrum of possibilities. The United States may be considered a state of strong individualism, and Japan a state of strong communitarianism.

In the individualistic state, even young children are imbued with an individual rights orientation, prone to argue loudly about whether a game is fair, about what they have a right to do (such as take their ball and go home), and how no one (often including their parents) has the right to tell them differently. Such a society tends to perpetual disruption and conflict, as competing rights claims clash. Given ordered systems for public and private dispute resolution, however, members of such a society generally accept this persistent contention as a fact of life, as a necessary part of the process for resolving rights claims and thereby achieving some level of social justice, since it appears that no better way has been found.

In the communitarian state, young children are imbued with a sense of their responsibilities to the group, with the need to belong and to find their identity in belonging, and they are punished by exclusion, be it to the hallway of a school or to the outdoor back steps of their home.<sup>9</sup> In Japan, children and adults alike are largely defined by relationships to their “sempai” (seniors) or “kohai” (juniors), and by the respective duties or privileges that flow from these relationships of status. Such a society has rigid structures of authority, in both public and private life and institutions, and obedience to rules and to those in power is generally considered a virtue.

In the individualistic society, the overall aim of social organization may be described as “social justice,” whatever that may mean to various segments of the population. Unfortunately, justice is often reduced to meaning getting one’s way, taking revenge, or proving someone else wrong. In the communitarian society, the overall aim is “social harmony.” While harmony obviously has much to commend it, it can also be reduced to meaning only a superficial quiet, a lack of overt conflict or a condition of prevailing homogeneity and passivity, born of tight social controls and the need or desire to please certain others.

As far apart as the United States and Japan are on the spectrum of individualism and communitarianism, this spectrum continues further in both directions. Beyond the individualistic state to the “left” is libertarianism and anarchy. To the “right,” beyond the communitarian (but politically democratic) state is totalitarianism and autocracy. It would seem that human civilization, on the global scale and through the long ages of history, has in the main managed to advance from both primitive extremes. Compared to these poles, Japan and the United States represent considerably more moderate forms of governance and social structure, in terms of the balance between wholly unfettered individual will and absolute unfettered and unaccountable authority. The challenge and opportunity offered to humanity by Bahá'u'lláh is to take the remaining steps toward the golden mean, to the ideal blending of individual autonomy and community cohesion, called in the Bahá'í writings, “unity in diversity.”

Shoghi Effendi describes the future “world federal system” not as a compromise or trade-off among various prevailing systems, but as “blending and embodying the ideals of both the East and the West.”<sup>10</sup> It is generally perceived that one ideal of Eastern cultures is their emphasis on community and relationships; one ideal of Western societies is their emphasis on individual autonomy and moral choice. The mandate of the nascent global Bahá'í community and institutions is to blend these ideals. In a blending, as distinct from a compromise, the essence and virtue of both individualism and communitarianism are preserved. What is jettisoned are the unfortunate extremes to which East and West have both succumbed. An individualistic society does not necessarily have to be self-centered, fractured, morally adrift, and greedy. A communitarian society does not necessarily have to be conformist, exclusionary, authoritarian, and ethnocentric. A characteristic of the maturity of civilization should be the capacity to blend ideals, and to distinguish between the core of an ideal value and its mutation into a harmful or even pathological extreme.

### Assumptions Underlying the Liberal Concept of Human Rights

Western attachment to the moral and social primacy of the individual is intimately linked with the traditional Western concept of human rights. That concept, which has been both defended and critiqued eloquently and repeatedly, need not be addressed at length here. But it is useful to identify certain assumptions underlying the Western human rights concept, and to pay particular attention to free speech rights in the United States in comparison with international treaty standards. This example shows that even free speech is not an absolute right under U.S. law (as is sometimes supposed by non-lawyers), and that the judicial interpretation of what is and is not protected speech reflects value choices that may not serve the present needs of the highly pluralistic U.S. society, let alone the world.

Human rights are a very distinct category of rights claims, distinguished, for example, from contractual, legal, or moral rights. Contractual rights are acquired voluntarily by a party upon entering into a valid contract, and generally depend upon performing one's duties to the other party. For example, in a sales contract in which money is to be exchanged for a computer, the seller has no claim to the buyer's money apart from the contract, and only has a claim to the money under the contract if she delivers the computer. Legal rights are those that the relevant legal system recognizes, generally implying that there are legal means available to pursue a remedy if the right is violated. Such rights may flow from private agreements (contracts), from laws and governmental regulations, or from the national constitution directly. Moral rights is a term most often used to



assert a claim to a right that is not a legal right. While many legally enforceable rights are also considered moral entitlements, a right is sometimes said to be “only” a moral right when the legal system does not recognize it. Legal rights differ among countries, but moral rights claims may be even more diverse, reflecting the different values held by individuals and groups within a single society.

In contrast to contractual, legal, and moral rights, the traditional Western concept of human rights is that they are rights belonging to every human being, simply by virtue of being human.<sup>11</sup> They are not given by any government, and therefore cannot be taken away by any government. Thus, they need not be legal rights. The concept assumes the moral equality of every human being, positing that every person is equally entitled to respect and to protection of his or her dignity. One's human rights are expressly not contingent on fulfilling duties of any sort. To condition human rights on performance of responsibilities would be to assert that human rights derive from some social relationship rather than from one's simple humanity, and this would gut the concept.

The independence of human rights from responsibilities does not mean that an individual cannot be deprived of the enjoyment of a right, through legitimately constituted criminal justice procedures, as a consequence of criminal conduct. For example, a person may be imprisoned (restricting the right to freedom of movement) as punishment for theft, in some places sentenced to death (terminating one's right to life) upon conviction for murder, or have their children taken away (restricting parental rights) as a consequence of being convicted of child abuse. But in no case does proving the absence of criminal conduct or fulfillment of a duty come first. In other words, one does not need to show that one is a good parent in order to have parental rights, that one is a good citizen in order to have the right to vote, that one does not discriminate against others in order to be entitled to equal protection of the laws, or that one has something worthwhile or truthful to say in order to be entitled to freedom of speech.

The question of what particular rights are or are not human rights consistent with the traditional Western concept remains a subject of some debate, but at the core are the essential civil and political rights plus the right to own property. The overall purposes of these rights are generally to provide equal opportunity to all (as distinguished from equality of outcome or results), to allow everyone to participate on an equal basis in the democratic political process and the legal system, and to ensure that otherwise the government leaves people alone to speak, choose, and do as they please. Due to the nature of these rights, the party with primary responsibility for protecting them is the government and its agents. For example, the government has a legal duty not to discriminate

based on race, religion, national origin, sex, etc., but individuals have no such duty, provided that they are acting in their individual capacity in a “private” sphere of activity.

In the traditional Western concept of human rights, can rights ever be limited or restricted? The theory holds that the only justification for limiting a human right is to protect another person’s human right. There is only one right which may be said to be “absolute,” subject to no limitations whatsoever, and that is freedom of belief and conscience, because its exercise can never interfere with another’s right. All other rights may be limited, including how one practices one’s beliefs or expresses one’s conscience. For example, one may not handle snakes dangerous to the public in the name of religious practice, nor burn crosses in another’s front yard. There is also a doctrine that gives narrow play to protecting “public order,” that has been invoked, for example, to prohibit bigamy in the name of religious observance, but other examples of its use are rare. When courts must choose between two competing rights claims, they engage in a balancing process. It is instructive, for example, to examine the limitations in U.S. constitutional law on free speech, perhaps the most cherished U.S. rights tradition, to see in what circumstances other rights are given priority.

The principal exceptions to the free speech right guaranteed in the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution are obscenity, defamation, and creating an immediate physical danger. The reason for excluding obscenity from protection is not some competing right not to be exposed to it (although this concern does enter into zoning restrictions for pornographic but not obscene establishments), but is based on an analysis of the kind of “speech” Congress had in mind when it adopted the Amendment. For similar reasons, “commercial speech,” i.e., advertising, enjoys some but not full constitutional protection. Defamation laws prohibit speaking or publishing that harms another’s reputation in certain ways, but only if the statement is false. In other words, people have a right not to have their reputation smeared by false statements, but have no right to be protected from damaging but accurate statements. The other right that may supersede another person’s right to free speech is the right to physical security. According to the classic example, one has no right to scream “Fire!” in a crowded movie theatre when there is no fire.

The central principle in free speech doctrine is that, absent the foregoing exceptions, speech must not be restricted on the basis on its content. The First Amendment, as currently interpreted and applied by the U.S. Supreme Court, protects an individual who wishes to say or publish even the most hate-filled racist muck, provided that it will not be likely to create immediate physical danger. Thus, a racist speech given to a group of like-minded listeners is per-

mitted. The same speech given on a street corner where it is likely to provoke a riot is not. The danger of future riots, not to mention all other forms of human suffering and social conflict that will predictably flow from a proliferation of hate groups, is considered legally too remote or speculative to justify denying the right to free speech.

The foregoing example illustrates how out of step the U.S. system is now with international standards. States parties to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, that entered into force in 1969, agree to “condemn all propaganda and all organizations which are based on ideas or theories of superiority of one race or group of persons of one colour or ethnic origin, or which attempt to justify or promote racial hatred and discrimination in any form, and ... shall declare an offence punishable by law all dissemination of ideas based on racial superiority or hatred ...”<sup>12</sup> In comparing this standard to U.S. law, it is apparent that the U.S. system (that is, the Constitution as currently interpreted by the Supreme Court) places a higher value on individual free speech rights than it does on creating a racism-free society, or at best feels that it is too hard to define hate speech without endangering constitutionally protected speech. One wonders whether the U.S. public generally would agree.

The supreme value placed on free speech under U.S. law is based on the notion of the “free marketplace of ideas.” The remedy for “bad” speech (that which arguably has no value or is destructive of social values) is not to censor it but to allow more speech, on the assumption that flooding the system with information is how the public shapes its opinions and learns to distinguish, according to each individual’s own value system, what is good and what is bad.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, to allow racial hate speech seems prehistoric, as if the government is trying to maintain a stance of moral neutrality toward the issue, a neutrality that is belied by our nation’s more recent legal and social history. The human right of an individual to be a racist cannot be disputed, as there can be no justification for a government to dictate permissible beliefs to individuals. But that does not imply the right to act on those beliefs nor to disseminate such ideas, when they are socially divisive in the most profound way: by explicitly denying the principle of human equality on which the concept of human rights is supposedly based.

The U.S. Constitution has been referred to by one writer as embodying a “morality of noninterference,” viewing individuals as “atoms of self-interest” and the struggle for power as a zero-sum game. Safety from man’s “insatiable appetite for power” was presumed to flow from rules reinforcing separation: separating legislative from executive from judicial, federal from state, government from commerce, government from the people, and people from people.

This mindset is identified by that (male) writer with a prototypical male view, that equates adulthood with autonomy and individual achievement. He contrasts this with the prototypical female view, which equates maturity with responsibility and the capacity to care for and empower others. The female approach seeks security in relationships and in connections, and is suspicious of the male view as justification for indifference and unconcern.<sup>14</sup> The argument is not that the female view should replace the male, but that both need to be reflected in our laws and institutions to create a balance which is more fully human.

This gender analysis is one approach to understanding the need for further evolution in Western constitutional rights structures. Another is to see the shift from a highly individualistic approach to an approach that gives wider scope to an individual's sense of concern and responsibility as the move from an adolescent stage of newly discovered individuation to a more mature concern with one's place in the larger world. Another may be to see this stage of radical individualism, along with the strong Western human rights tradition that accompanies it, as a historically necessary stage in order to obliterate, permanently, any claim of legitimacy for tyranny and oppression. The argument can be made that in order to overcome these evils it has been necessary to place the individual squarely above society, to ensure that human rights trump any collective-good policy justification. But evolution of civilization need not stop there.

The conclusion suggested by this look at the assumptions underlying the traditional Western concept of human rights is not that they have all been superseded or become unnecessary. On the contrary, by giving rise to national governments based on a central purpose of protecting individual rights, humanity has gradually discovered and developed over the course of recent centuries the concept of limited government or constitutional government. This is a profound step forwards in political organization, particularly considering that it followed on the era of the divine right of kings. In a constitutional system, by definition, there are limits placed on the powers of government, the structure of government is set out along with provisions about how the system can accommodate change over time, basic rights are guaranteed, and a system is established to ensure authoritative interpretation of the constitution itself. Constitutional government is an advance in civilization that is to be treasured and guarded. The question is, what kind of constitution is necessary for the next stage in the evolution of human society? Bahá'ís believe that the writings of the Faith contain, as Shoghi Effendi terms it, the "charter" of future world civilization.<sup>15</sup>

The Bahá'í writings that compose this "charter" set out laws and principles, ordain an institutional system from the local through international levels, allocate the powers of interpretation and elucidation of the charter itself, and form

the basis upon which a full legal system may be developed in the future. By addressing issues from obligatory prayer to the prohibition of slavery, from the requirements for marriage to condemning tyranny and violence, from exhortations to truthfulness to punishments for certain crimes, it is unlike any constitution known.<sup>16</sup> Its universal, comprehensive, and irrevocable principles, all of which may be said to derive from and promote the central value of the oneness of humanity, constitute the framework within which all Bahá'í institutions must operate. The overarching social purpose of these principles is to create unity in diversity, and to create it through justice. "The light of men is justice. Quench it not with the contrary winds of oppression and tyranny. The purpose of justice is the appearance of unity among men."<sup>17</sup> "Justice and equity are two guardians for the protection of man."<sup>18</sup>

Preserving and defending the body of rights that today are considered internationally to be fundamental civil and political rights (although not necessarily entirely as now interpreted in U.S. law) would seem to be an essential element in achieving this justice and in accomplishing the aims both explicit and inherent in the concept of the oneness of humanity. But in the Bahá'í system justice alone is not the final goal. The purpose of justice is unity, and unity requires that rights be joined by responsibilities. Unity does not require that a new raft of responsibilities become legally enforceable, and, in this writer's view, fundamental rights should remain wholly legally independent of responsibilities.<sup>19</sup> But in tandem with legal development, achieving unity requires a profound psychological shift in how we understand both our rights and our selves in relation to our community and society.

### The Psychological Factors—What Are We Afraid Of?

Those of us who have been raised with American-style individualism face a number of real barriers if we venture to consider recasting the relationships between ourselves and our families on the one hand, and our society and social institutions on the other. At both the personal level and the level of social policy, we seem to be held back by certain fears, all of which are entirely rational, given our circumstances. Nevertheless, these fears may be examined and questioned. As has been emphasized earlier, it is a great challenge to separate what is meritorious in individualism from the cultural habits of self-centeredness, supposed moral neutrality, and greed that it has engendered, while at the same time recognizing that the alternative is not to bounce to an opposite extreme of stifling conformity. The principles of community building in the Bahá'í teachings express an unusual blend.

At the most basic personal level, the primacy of individual autonomy appears to be so extreme that we are afraid we will lose our selves if we become part of anything at all (the image of imprinting at birth on John Wayne, archetypal cowboy of American movies, comes to mind.) We seem to fear, consciously or otherwise, that if we join a group or commit to being part of a community, without keeping a substantial psychological distance:

1. I will have to be like everyone else and act like them;
2. I will have to agree with what others say or at least pretend to agree;
3. I will have to like everyone else or at least be nice to them all;
4. I will have to take on responsibilities to others that I may not always feel like fulfilling;
5. my independent initiative will be limited; and/or,
6. I might have to admit dependence on others or that I am not fully self-sufficient.

What are the assumptions about the characteristics of community implied in these fears? How do these assumptions compare to principles of Bahá'í community building? If this list is even partially accurate, it is apparent that fear of having to conform (#1 and 2 above) is a basic problem in community building in our society. Of course, many groups (social, religious, political) do demand from their members a high degree of conformity, and to this extent the notion of belonging has been given a bad name. According to Bahá'í principles, a community must thrive on diversity of all kinds: race, gender, ethnic background, social class, language, culture, educational experience, religious temperament, family styles, personality types, even diverse styles of learning and expression. As Shoghi Effendi stressed, uniformity in matters of principle is essential, diversity in everything else is encouraged.

Conformity in thought or behavior should not be confused with the consequences of the exercise of choice. A fundamental purpose of our Western freedoms is to enable individuals to make their own life choices. Every significant choice one makes necessarily forecloses other options. For example, when one becomes a Bahá'í, one is choosing to give up the prerogative to join the KKK, to run for partisan political office, to drink alcohol, and to engage in other behaviors that are contrary to Bahá'í laws and principles. The fact that all members of the community make these same choices is not evidence of conformity, but of acting on shared principles and values, freely chosen as a result of one's faith in Bahá'u'lláh. Every choice exercised is a choice to forsake the freedom to choose that which is incompatible with the first. That is the meaning

of the verb, "to choose." A perpetual state of total freedom, meaning a continuing state of available but unexercised choice, would not seem to have much value in adult life.

As for other elements in the list above, independent initiative (#5) is preserved in a Bahá'í community; in fact individual initiative is referred to in the Bahá'í writings as the source of power of a community. It is also raised to an additional community level, as individuals should discover in a Bahá'í community that their own initiative can often contribute to progress in collective action, as well as be improved itself through consultation with others. Acknowledging one's dependence on human relationships (#6), as well as one's capacity to learn to care for and be responsible for others (#4), are essential to community life, and reflect spiritual reality described in the Bahá'í writings. These are necessary aspects of personal spiritual growth.

As for the remaining element above, Bahá'í community life does require being nice to others (#3). More specifically, "love, respect and courtesy" are among the "spiritual requisites for all successful Bahá'í relationships."<sup>20</sup> Why do we have such trouble with this, to the point of sometimes even claiming that such "manners" (itself a mischaracterization) are a limitation on freedom of expression? In American society, does one have a "right" to be rude, insulting, or thoughtless? This is not an entitlement included in the U.S. Bill of Rights or in any human rights treaty, and would seem somewhat contradictory to protecting human dignity, but it is not uncommon for Americans to claim that they are entitled to speak to anyone in any manner they please at any time. Perhaps this claim is based on the assumption that anything not prohibited by the government is acceptable. If so, this assumption reflects an extremely limited view of human society. Laws have never been intended to be the sole guides of human behavior, but simply the last resort and safety net to prevent behavior most destructive to society or harmful to others. To imagine that the safety net is the standard itself, that law has replaced morality (regardless of the extent to which moral standards are agreed in a given society), seems to be a characteristic of our individualistic rights-oriented society. On some level, we seem to think that we should "feel free" to do anything at all that a law does not proscribe, even though very few people actually live their lives that way. People generally do impose upon themselves all kinds of extra-legal limitations and requirements, and may or may not be aware of where those values have come from in their lives.

It is useful to compare the foregoing list of fears and apprehensions with those that underlie the stereotypical fear of commitment upon entering into marriage. Marriage is sometimes portrayed in our society as the most severe encroachment on personal freedom, e.g., "ball and chain." Yet anyone fortunate

enough to have experienced a good marriage, or who is closely acquainted with someone who has, knows that nothing could be further from the truth—in a good marriage. The freedoms, prerogatives, and greater level of autonomy that one “sacrifices” to be part of a good marriage are not considered a loss by the partners. A partner in a good marriage has learned by experience that the value of the relationship far exceeds what was given up, and may even deny that anything of value had been sacrificed. The same is true for those who have successfully entered into community with others in forms less intimate than a marriage.

When considering political questions of human rights and governmental authority rather than personal issues of autonomy, why are we afraid to let go of the supremacy of the individual? Subordinating the individual will to the good of society means, to our knowledge, that the state can dictate where you live, where you work, how many hours you must work, what you will earn, who will take care of your children while you work, how many children you may have, who you may marry, with whom you may associate, what you must profess to believe, and what you can read. This is expressly not what “subordination of the individual will” means in the Bahá'í system. Bahá'í law and principles directly contradict such repressive governmental restrictions. It may tax our imagination to discover other meanings of “subordination of the individual will” that are compatible with basic human rights, but it can be done.

Beyond the specific practices of oppressive governments, past and present, we are afraid of what we cannot foresee. We are afraid of what we do not know and have not experienced. Even if we are inspired to try to blend the ideals of East and West, we do not know exactly where we are going. It is hard enough to handle a change process when one knows with some confidence what the outcome will look like. But to work for change based on principles—on applying both the transcendent and more specific principles of the Bahá'í writings to whatever may be the current conditions at a given time and place—is a severe psychological challenge. This process is bound to produce anxiety and discomfort, along with excitement, inspiration, and enticing glimpses of the possibilities. For example, to approach gender equality, we need to give up many of our gender-stereotyped identities, but in the Bahá'í writings there are no clearly defined definitions of masculinity and femininity with which to replace them. This is what principle-based learning is about, as distinguished from rule-based learning or following a developed model, and it is what Bahá'ís are called to do. As the popular book title (on time management) reads, “feel the fear and do it anyway.” Bahá'u'lláh has prepared us to expect radical change: “The world's equilibrium hath been upset through the vibrating influence of this most great, this new World Order. Mankind's ordered life hath been revolutionized through



the agency of this unique, this wondrous System—the like of which mortal eyes have never witnessed.”<sup>21</sup>

Along the path of this process of blending ideals, there seem to be two particularly deep pitfalls to avoid. The first is myopia. Because the Bahá'í writings embody a combination of ideals on a variety of subjects, it is extremely easy to read selectively and thereby justify or feel comfortable with one's own current assumptions, whatever they may be. One can emphasize honesty and the frank expression of one's views or the responsibility to be courteous and respectful; the sanctity of motherhood or the requirement that women become the peers of men in public life; the prohibition on backbiting or the desirability of consultation with one's Assembly to solve problems. In all of these cases, it is not a question of choosing one or the other. It is figuring out how to do both at the same time. The same is true with respect to blending the rights of individuals with the responsibilities necessary to create unified societies.

The other pitfall is the pendulum swing. When our values are questioned, a human tendency is to assume that the only alternative is an opposite extreme. Or, as we try to engage in a change process and to move away from our habits, we overshoot the golden mean and land on the other side. This is a consequence, again, of the principle-based learning process. We are not comfortable with this process, and habitually seek a model to follow. The only alternative models available are likely to be just as far from the mean in the other direction. This can happen, for example, when someone who has generally distrusted authority and institutions becomes a Bahá'í, thus finding good reasons as well as a spiritual basis to come to think that authority in certain forms is a good thing. But the result may be that he or she behaves for a time in a manner that is rigid or domineering, or otherwise displays negative expressions of authority. Principle-based learning, intertwined as it must be in the Bahá'í system with personal spiritual growth, is a perpetual challenge.

The greatest fear likely to be aroused by the Bahá'í teachings on social evolution is that it is advocating not only values but a system of governance derived from revealed religion. It is beyond the scope of this essay to explain how the Bahá'í administrative order differs from other systems, to further describe the protections inherent in its constitution, or to explain why the principle of obedience to decisions of elected Bahá'í institutions instills confidence in the Bahá'í community rather than fear. The Bahá'í governance system needs to be examined on its merits, as well as in light of its claim to divine origins. It would be a great loss if our devotion to our Western traditions, that have given rise to such progress in governance, would render us incapable of considering that they too must evolve and develop in response to change and in order to release still-untapped human potential. The advances and lessons of the past

few hundred years are a vital foundation for the future, but they are not the end of the story.

### **An Emerging Sense of Responsibilities—A Proposed Universal Declaration**

As high as the psychological barriers to community building may be, and as strict as the Western tradition has been about separating rights from responsibilities, few have ever supposed that a good society could be created on the basis of rights alone. The difficulty has been to reach agreement on what responsibilities members of society share, and on whether they should be legally codified.

The debate about the relationship between rights and responsibilities goes back, in the Western tradition, at least as far as the French Revolutionary Parliament of 1789. Nearly half of the members of that Parliament who voted for the Declaration of Human Rights voted also for a proclamation of human responsibilities. More recently, the drafters of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted as a United Nations General Assembly resolution in 1948, included one article on responsibilities. Article 29 states, "Everyone has duties to the community in which alone the free and full development of his personality is possible." The Declaration also acknowledges the needs of the general welfare, stating that the only limitations on rights are those necessary to protect the rights of others or to meet "the just requirements of morality, public order and the general welfare in a democratic society." A few years ago, in honor of the 50th anniversary of that Declaration, a significant initiative was launched to increase individuals' sense of responsibility to each other without compromising human rights. The InterAction Council proposed a Universal Declaration of Human Responsibilities.<sup>22</sup> Its primary drafter was Dr. Hans Küng, President of the Global Ethic Foundation, who also drafted the Declaration Toward a Global Ethic, adopted by the Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago in 1993.

The Universal Declaration of Human Responsibilities was intended as an ethical appeal, put forward for international debate, in an attempt to establish a standard that can be adopted by all people. It was intended as a complement to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, to reinforce and strengthen it. Whereas the latter eventually led to the adoption of many human rights treaties, the initiative of the InterAction Council is specifically not aimed at legal codification. "Precisely because community and morality cannot be prescribed [as legal obligations], the personal responsibility of citizens is indispensable."<sup>23</sup> In nineteen very brief articles, the Universal Declaration of Human Responsibilities sets forth duties concerning non-violence and respect for life, justice and solidarity, truthfulness and tolerance, and mutual respect and partnership. It

begins with the general principles that every person has a “responsibility to treat all people in a humane way” and to “strive for the dignity and self-esteem of all others.” All persons, groups and organizations, including states, armies and police, are “subject to ethical standards.” It also includes the negative converse of the Golden Rule: “What you do not wish to be done to yourself, do not do to others.” The provisions of the Declaration may represent emerging global consensus on the core responsibilities necessary to create more humane societies.

With respect to non-violence, the Declaration includes the responsibilities to respect life and to resolve disputes without violence, denies the right to injure, torture, or kill (except in self-defense), and prohibits genocide, terrorism and the abuse of civilians as instruments of war. “The animals and the natural environment also demand protection. All people have a responsibility to protect the air, water and soil of the earth...” As the dominant rights-oriented approach in the U.S. legal system has forced even environmental issues into the rights mold, leading to arguments about whether or not plants or animals or natural resources have legal “standing” in order to claim a right to protection, this alternative approach based on responsibilities might be considerably more sensible and productive (if, in this case, tied to enforcement measures).

With respect to justice and solidarity, the Declaration states that, “Every person has the responsibility to behave with integrity, honesty and fairness.” In contrast to the rights approach of the United Nations Declaration on the Right to Development, the InterAction document asserts that, “All people, given the necessary tools, have a responsibility to make serious efforts to overcome poverty, malnutrition, ignorance and inequality [and to] promote sustainable development...” “All people have a responsibility to develop their talents through diligent endeavor;... Everyone should lend support to the needy, the disadvantaged, the disabled and to the victims of discrimination.”

Other articles in the Declaration include the responsibility of all men and women “to show respect to one another and understanding in their partnership. No one should subject another person to sexual exploitation or dependence.” Representatives of religions “should not incite or legitimize hatred, fanaticism and religious wars, but should foster tolerance and mutual respect between all people.” Every person, “however high or mighty,” has a “responsibility to speak and act truthfully.” “General ethical standards,” such as truthfulness and fairness, apply to politicians, public servants, business leaders, scientists, writers, artists, and others. This extends to the media as well. “Freedom of the media carries a special responsibility for accurate and truthful reporting.”

One additional provision deserves comment, as it seems particularly forward-looking. Article 11 states:

All property and wealth must be used responsibly in accordance with justice and for the advancement of the human race. Economic and political power must not be handled as an instrument of domination, but in the service of economic justice and of the social order.

To even begin to put this provision into practice would require a profound shift in perspective on the social function of wealth and on the rights and duties associated with property ownership. Presently, the control of property is used as a means of acquiring power over others and of gaining independence from those who could do one harm. It is widely believed that wealth confers privileges that the owner is free to use in an entirely self-serving manner. According to the Bahá'í principles on economics, possession of property or resources carries responsibilities and imposes on the owner duties to others. This is central to the Bahá'í vision of economic justice and is fundamental to the process through which the extremes of wealth and poverty are to be eliminated. In addition to governmental measures, voluntary action on the part of individuals and enterprises is essential to the Bahá'í economic model.<sup>24</sup>

Similarly, Article 11 states that political power must not be used to dominate but to serve justice and the social order. This also comports with Bahá'í teachings. The Bahá'í administrative order is based on the attitude of service. The possibility of individual political power has been structurally eliminated, replaced with corporate decision-making by elected bodies. The concept of leadership itself is changed, from control to empowerment. “[L]eadership is that expression of service by which the Spiritual Assembly invites and encourages the use of the manifold talents and abilities with which the community is endowed, and stimulates and guides the diverse elements of the community towards goals and strategies by which the effects of a coherent force for progress can be realized.”<sup>25</sup>

This proposed Universal Declaration of Human Responsibilities is a worthy attempt to promote thought and dialogue. Efforts like this, or the Earth Charter with respect to environmental issues, work to create a global ethic by articulating standards that can be agreed worldwide—not by seeking the lowest common denominator but by encouraging all people to learn from each other and to move forwards in the development of their own thought and traditions. The global moral dialogue continues. In the meantime, the worldwide Bahá'í community is both contributing to this process and learning from it, while devoting primary effort to bringing into being the spiritualized habits, rela-

tionships, and institutions that it believes are ultimately necessary to the maturity and unity of humanity.

### Conclusion—Some New Assumptions: Transcending Self to Find Self

Blending the ideals of East and West does not require abandoning most of the assumptions underlying the Western human rights tradition or even individualism itself, but it does require adding new dimensions. In addition to assuming that members of society require physical security and moral autonomy, the Bahá'í writings assume that we also require community, an environment of mutual support and cooperation. The individual is a political and economic actor but is more fundamentally a spiritual being, requiring relationships and community to achieve full human potential. This requires that we operate on the principle of unity in all of our affairs, in order to achieve unity through justice. This sounds circular, but is quite rational. Unity in diversity is not only the ultimate social goal in the Bahá'í writings; it is also the basic operating principle, the means and method. As a recent letter of the U.S. National Spiritual Assembly states, "Unity is the precondition of all progress. The expectation of unity, the perspective of unity, and unswerving compliance with the requirements of unity are the disciplines that every member must master..."<sup>26</sup> These new assumptions about human spiritual reality are what require a realignment of our sense of self and community, of rights and responsibilities.

It is awkward or impossible to carry out this realignment piecemeal. The necessary changes in attitude, environment, and institutions are tightly interrelated. For example, it is a blessing for an individual to act selflessly, putting the concerns of others first, in a situation where this can build intimacy and community. It is dangerous to be selfless in a situation where it would lead to being abused or taken advantage of. Likewise, Bahá'ís are enjoined to trust their institutions (Local and National Spiritual Assemblies and the Universal House of Justice), not only because they are divinely ordained but because they are organized to function in ways that render them deserving of trust. All component parts of the system, at the individual, community, and institutional levels, must function together for any of them to achieve their purpose.

An analysis of any part of the Bahá'í system must take into account other components as well. To compare in isolation parallel aspects of entirely distinct systems is unproductive. For example, the issue addressed in the Rights Statement of the Universal House of Justice—the form and manner of expression that is appropriate and necessary in Bahá'í community life—can only be understood in the context of the Bahá'í governance and community system. Contrast the article on the media in the Universal Declaration of Human Responsi-

bilities with an excerpt from the Rights Statement. Article 14 of the Declaration states:

The freedom of the media to inform the public and to criticize institutions of society and governmental actions, which is essential for a just society, must be used with responsibility and discretion. Freedom of the media carries a special responsibility for accurate and truthful reporting...

The Universal House of Justice wrote in the Rights Statement:

[T]he code of conduct of the press must embrace the principles and objectives of consultation as revealed by Bahá'u'lláh. Only in this way will the press be able to make its full contribution to the preservation of the rights of the people and become a powerful instrument in the consultative processes of society, and hence for the unity of the human race.<sup>27</sup>

Both of these passages prescribe ethical standards for the media. The first emphasizes truthfulness, accuracy, responsibility and discretion, but is predicated on the belief that it is necessary to a just society for the media to criticize social institutions and governmental actions. The second prescribes for the press the principles and objectives of Bahá'í consultation, which would not include criticism of the kind assumed to be necessary in the first. These two prescriptions, different as they are, are each consistent with their own frame of reference. They diverge because they are based on different assumptions about the overall purposes of their governing institutions and about how these institutions most effectively evolve and mature.

Progress in modern democratic systems is thought to depend on continuous public comment and criticism of government and direct, often accusatory, challenge. Progress in the Bahá'í governance system depends on "consultative processes." Briefly, Bahá'í consultation is collective truth-seeking. It is a way to make decisions, solve problems, and increase understanding, whether in a meeting of a Spiritual Assembly, between wife and husband, within a Bahá'í community, or in any other group. The spirit required for consultation is selflessness and detachment from one's own ideas, as well as frankness, respect, and courtesy. Other essential elements in the Bahá'í governance system include a structured appeals process, from the local to national to international levels, as well as appointed institutions whose members work closely with individuals and communities in a support and advisory role but without decision-making authority. Frequent and regular opportunities for the members of a Bahá'í

community to consult with its Local Spiritual Assembly are intended to create an intimacy, trust, and sense of co-partnership that have no parallel in other models of governance. Other structures in the Bahá'í system serve a similar purpose at the national level. In this system, cooperating with (rather than publicly criticizing) an institutional decision that one believes to be in error is what creates the encouraging (rather than confrontational) environment in which mistakes can most readily be recognized, learned from, and corrected. It should not be surprising that operating this way within the Bahá'í institutional system, based on the expectation, perspective, and requirements of unity, could be more productive than the methods we see around us, that create neither unity nor sufficient change to meet urgent needs.

Thus, the first principles of the Bahá'í order regarding the spiritual nature of human beings are complemented by an institutional system worthy of spiritual beings, and conducive not only to individual growth but to collective spiritual transformation. In order to evolve in this direction, the individualist must look beyond herself, to see herself as part of a community that has a value greater than the sum of its parts. It requires the communitarian to look within himself, to see himself as an individual that has value as more than a constituent element of a group. Which is easier? Is the American culture or the Japanese culture better positioned to evolve toward the golden mean? As people of the West fear conformity and oppression as destructive of what they value most, people of the East fear excessive self-indulgence and social chaos as destructive of their most cherished values. But Bahá'u'lláh has called us all to change, and this demands courage as well as detachment from cultural conditioning. The most profound way to achieve independence of thought and spirit is to immerse oneself in the Bahá'í writings, the Creative Word of God for this age, and thereby approach a divine knowledge that transcends human limitations.

Ultimately the next advance in human civilization would seem to depend, most fundamentally, not on new structures or systems but on a change in how people conceive of their own selves. In the Bahá'í writings, the word "self" is used in two senses:

[O]ne is self, the identity of the individual created by God. This is the self mentioned in such passages as "he hath known God who hath known himself," etc. The other self is the ego, the dark, animalistic heritage each one of us has, the lower nature that can develop into a monster of selfishness, brutality, lust and so on. It is this self we must struggle against, or this side of our natures, in order to strengthen and free the spirit within us and help it to attain perfection.

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Self-sacrifice means to subordinate this lower nature and its desires to the more godly and noble side of our selves. Ultimately, in its highest sense, self-sacrifice means to give our will and our all to God to do with as He pleases. Then He purifies and glorifies our true self until it becomes a shining and wonderful reality.<sup>28</sup>

The Western human rights tradition has established and vigilantly sought to protect our right to choose what we do with our God-given talents and capacities. Beyond that it cannot take us, as the modern democratic state is intended to allow for as wide a range of moral choices in a pluralistic society as possible. It seems, unfortunately, that in becoming preoccupied with protecting our right to choose we may forget to think about our greater purpose in making choices. For a Bahá'í, "an individual finds fulfillment of his potential not merely in satisfying his own wants but in realizing his completeness in being at one with humanity and with the divinely ordained purpose of creation."<sup>29</sup>

[T]he honor and distinction of the individual consist in this, that he among all the world's multitudes should become a source of social good. Is there 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 fellowmen? No, by the one true God, there is no greater bliss, no more complete delight.<sup>30</sup>

World religions have invariably called believers to transcend self, to discover a spiritual perfection that is both beyond themselves and within themselves, and to put others before themselves. Selflessness has always been identified as spiritual freedom. In the Bahá'í era, this freedom now finds not only individual but community and institutional expression as well, in an order conducive to close relationships and loving communities. Shoghi Effendi wrote that the Bahá'í community is "one spiritual family, held together by bonds more sacred and eternal than those physical ties which make people of the same family."<sup>31</sup> The institutional order has been ordained solely to facilitate community building, in the broadest sense and on a global scale. "World order is nothing else than the administrative aspect of brotherhood."<sup>32</sup>

Bahá'ís are among the staunchest supporters of human rights, because we know their spiritual value. Human rights are necessary in order to allow free reign to our higher selves. But we also know that our purpose lies beyond gratification of the individual will, and that our happiness depends on what we do in relationship with others.



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God has given us eyes, that we may look about us at the world, and lay hold of whatsoever will further civilization and the arts of living. He has given us ears, that we may hear and profit by the wisdom of scholars and philosophers and arise to promote and practice it. Senses and faculties have been bestowed upon us, to be devoted to the service of the general good; so that we, distinguished above all other forms of life for perceptiveness and reason, should labor at all times and along all lines, whether the occasion be great or small, ordinary or extraordinary, until all mankind are safely gathered into the impregnable stronghold of knowledge. We should continually be establishing new bases for human happiness and creating and promoting new instrumentalities toward this end. How excellent, how honorable is man if he arises to fulfil his responsibilities; how wretched and contemptible, if he shuts his eyes to the welfare of society and wastes his precious life in pursuing his own selfish interests and personal advantages. Supreme happiness is man's, and he beholds the signs of God in the world and in the human soul, if he urges on the steed of high endeavor in the arena of civilization and justice.<sup>33</sup>

## Footnotes

- 1 Donnelly, J. (1989). Universal Human Rights in Theory & Practice. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press. pp. 55-57.
- 2 For a comprehensive introduction to Bahá'í history, teachings, and practice, see Hatcher. W. S. and Martin, J. D. (1984). The Bahá'í Faith: The Emerging Global Religion. San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row. More specifically, see Weinberg, M. (1998). The Human Rights Discourse: A Bahá'í Perspective. In Bahá'í International Community. The Bahá'í World 1996-97. Haifa, Israel: World Centre Publications. p. 266.
- 3 Universal House of Justice (1972). Declaration of Trust of the Universal House of Justice. Haifa, Israel: Bahá'í World Centre. The Universal House of Justice is the international governing body of the global Bahá'í community, elected every five years by all of the members of all National Spiritual Assemblies. The latter are national Bahá'í governing bodies, elected annually and currently numbering about 180.
- 4 Shoghi Effendi (1974). The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh. Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust. p. 203. Shoghi Effendi was the grandson of Bahá'u'lláh, the Founder of the Bahá'í Faith. Shoghi Effendi served as the appointed Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith until his death in 1957, and his writings constitute an authoritative source of Bahá'í teachings. Since 1957 there has been no individual head of the Faith, this role now having passed to the Universal House of Justice, first elected in 1963.
- 5 Shoghi Effendi, quoted in Universal House of Justice (1989). Individual Rights and Freedoms in the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh, a Statement to the Followers of Bahá'u'lláh in the United States of America. Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust. p. 20. This guidance is given in general terms and is stated as a "principle," but it may be useful to note that it was written in the context of answering a question concerning "absolute pacifists." Shoghi Effendi explained that not only is non-cooperation "too negative" and "too passive a philosophy to become an effective way for social reconstruction," which requires spiritual vitalization, but the attitude of absolute pacifists "is quite anti-social and due to its exaltation of the individual conscience leads inevitably to disorder and chaos in society. Extreme pacifists are thus very close to the anarchists, in the sense that both these groups lay an undue emphasis on the rights and merits of the individual." Shoghi Effendi (1981). Letter dated 21 Nov. 1936 to the Bahá'ís of the British Isles. Unfolding Destiny: The

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- Messages from the Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith to the Bahá'ís of the British Isles. London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust. pp. 435-36.
- 6 *ibid.* p. 1.
- 7 Bahá'u'lláh (1994). The Hidden Words. Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust. Arabic no. 2.
- 8 The term “communitarianism” has various connotations for social theorists, but here it is used for its essential meaning that values of the community or group are given moral and policy priority over individual rights or concerns.
- 9 It is interesting in comparison that punishment in the United States, rather than forced exclusion, is often in the form of grounding, a limitation on the child's autonomy.
- 10 Shoghi Effendi. World Order of Bahá'u'lláh. p. 204.
- 11 Whether being human means having a soul or simply being capable of reason depends on the particular variation of the concept, of which there are several. Also not addressed here is the fundamental contradiction between this basis for human rights and the fact that all women and many groups of men (based on race, ethnicity, or land ownership) were for long periods of history not considered entitled to many “human rights” in legal systems generally professing adherence to this concept.
- 12 Art. 4. Close to 150 states are parties to the Convention, including virtually all of Western Europe.
- 13 The validity of this assumption, given the dense concentration of ownership and control in the media industry today, may be questioned.
- 14 Karst, K. L. (1984). *Woman's Constitution*. Duke Law Journal. 448.
- 15 This consists of Bahá'u'lláh's Kitáb-i-Aqdas (The Most Holy Book) and the Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, which constitute “inseparable parts of one complete unit.” Shoghi Effendi (1974). God Passes By. Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust. p. 213; Shoghi Effendi. World Order of Bahá'u'lláh. p. 4. 'Abdu'l-Bahá was the son of Bahá'u'lláh, and served as his appointed successor and head of the Faith.
- 16 An intensely succinct summary of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas appears in Shoghi Effendi. God Passes By. pp. 213-16. For an attempted description of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas in relation to modern constitutional and international law, see Schweitz, M. (1994). *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas: Bahá'í Law, Legitimacy, and World Order*. Journal of Bahá'í Studies, vol. 5, no. 35.
- 17 Bahá'u'lláh (1988). Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas. Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, pp. 66-67.
- 18 Bahá'u'lláh, quoted in Shoghi Effendi (1971). The Advent of Divine Justice. Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust. p. 28.
- 19 It would be a valuable research effort to determine whether there is any explicit basis in the Bahá'í writings for tying legal rights to the performance of duties, but none are immediately evident. In fact, wholly unenforced duties are common, such as obligatory prayer, fasting, contributing to the Bahá'í funds, and being generous to those in need, suggesting that the fulfillment of certain responsibilities is most valuable when it springs from moral choice and understanding of purpose rather than from threat of punishment.
- 20 Universal House of Justice (19 May 1994). *Letter to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States*.
- 21 Bahá'u'lláh, quoted in Shoghi Effendi. World Order of Baha'u'llah. p. 109.
- 22 The InterAction Council is a group of some 35 former heads of state, from all regions of the world. It was founded by Takeo Fukuda. The text of the Declaration is available at [www.asiawide.or.jp/iac](http://www.asiawide.or.jp/iac).

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- 23 Küng, H. (1999). *Commentary on Two Declarations*. In Kunugi, T., Schweitz, M., eds. Codes of Conduct for Partnership in Governance: Texts and Commentaries. Tokyo: United Nations University. pp. 297-98.
- 24 For more on the Bahá'í teachings concerning economics, see Huddleston, J. (1996). *Principles of Economic Justice*. In Lerche, C. O., ed. Towards the Most Great Justice. London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust. pp. 137-52.
- 25 Universal House of Justice. *Letter to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States*. A Spiritual Assembly is a governing body of the Bahá'í community, at either the local or national level. An Assembly has nine members, elected annually by written ballot and without campaigning or nominations.
- 26 National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States (April 2001). *Annual Report of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States, Ridván 2001*.
- 27 Universal House of Justice. *Individual Rights and Freedoms in the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh, a Statement to the Followers of Bahá'u'lláh in the United States of America*. p. 17-18. Shoghi Effendi wrote about the press in the future age of a world commonwealth: "The press will, under such a system, while giving full scope to the expression of the diversified views and convictions of mankind, cease to be mischievously manipulated by vested interests, whether private or public, and will be liberated from the influence of contending governments and peoples." Shoghi Effendi. World Order of Bahá'u'lláh. p. 204.
- 28 Shoghi Effendi (10 December 1947). *Letter Written on his Behalf to an Individual Believer*. In Hornby, H., comp. (1994). Lights of Guidance: A Bahá'í Reference File. New Delhi, India: Bahá'í Publishing Trust. no. 386.
- 29 Universal House of Justice. *Individual Rights and Freedoms in the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh, a Statement to the Followers of Bahá'u'lláh in the United States of America*. p. 21.
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