

Equality and Bahá'í Principles in Northern Ireland

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Abstract

This paper examines the extent to which equality legislation in Northern Ireland has developed and compares it with the legislation regarding the teachings on equality that are enshrined in the Bahá'í Faith. The paper is in two parts: the first examines the development of equality legislation; the second examines Bahá'í Teachings in relation to equality and considers the extent to which the Northern Irish legislation applies or does not apply them.

Part 1: The Development of the Equality Agenda in Northern Ireland

Over the past hundred and fifty years, the development of equality across the globe has been remarkable, from the virtual abolition of slavery throughout the British Empire during Queen Victoria's reign (1837-1901) until the democratisation of society during much of the twentieth century and the hoisting of the standard of human rights since the 1960s. Equality became a defining issue on the Northern Ireland political stage with the emergence of the Civil Rights movement in the late sixties (Purdie, 1990). During the thirty years of conflict in Northern Ireland, the equality agenda was dominated by political issues. The Fair Employment Agency was established to deal with employment equality between Roman Catholics and Protestants. The Fair Employment Agency (FEA) was deemed to be rather toothless, and new legislation was introduced to provide the way for increased powers and a new name - the Fair Employment Commission (FEC).

When the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) was created to deal with issues of gender, there were many (not least those in the EOC) who felt that it was something of a Cinderella. The legislation in relation to issues of Protestant/Catholic fair employment under the FEC was somewhat stronger than that for fair employment for women/men under the Equal Opportunities Commission. At that time, there was no effective legislation to deal with discrimination on the grounds of race and very little to deal with discrimination on the grounds of disability: the concept of a "hierarchy of inequalities" existed.

In 1997 new legislation was introduced to establish the Commission for Racial Equality and the Disability Council. This provided the basis on which issues of equality in Northern Ireland could be considered in a much wider context.

Parallel to the development of equality legislation was the development of Government guidelines in relation to policy appraisal and fair treatment (PAFT). PAFT provided, theoretically, an equality-proofing mechanism through which Government departments and agencies were required to test their policies for any bias. In practice PAFT did not work very well in Government departments. The PAFT guidelines had no statutory basis, no teeth; there were no statutory powers by which they could be imposed. The civil servants did not like them because they imposed an extra burden on their activities. Because there was no enforcement mechanism, PAFT was effectively shunted into the sidings.

In 1994, when the European Community agreed a Special Programme for Peace and Reconciliation in Northern Ireland and the Border Counties of the Republic of Ireland (the Peace Programme), the Government departments stipulated that the funding mechanisms to be established under the Peace Programme should abide by PAFT. This was somewhat ironic, given their previous performance in relation to PAFT.

Under the Peace Programme, there were some 70 different funding bodies that were allocated £700 million. Many of the funding bodies involved partnerships of groupings that had never previously come together. In this context, PAFT was seen to play a significant role. It provided an effective “whistle-blowing” mechanism for those involved in such partnerships to challenge attempts at discrimination by their partners. So, for the first time, PAFT developed a meaningful role and consequently has had a far-reaching effect on the development of equality legislation in Northern Ireland. The PAFT guidelines required public authorities to ensure that their policies did not disadvantage anybody from one of the named categories.

The named categories in the PAFT guidelines were as follows:

- People of different religious beliefs or political opinions;
- men and women;
- married and unmarried people;
- people with or without dependents (including women who are pregnant or on maternity leave);
- people of different ethnic groups;
- people with or without a disability;
- people of different ages;
- people of differing sexual orientation.

It is worth noting that the first PAFT category linked religious beliefs and political opinions. This reflected the prevalent understanding at the time that there were “two communities” in Northern Ireland - the Protestant/Unionist community and the Catholic/Nationalist one. When PAFT was developed, there was no public recognition that there were religious communities outside of Christianity.

In the late nineties, as PAFT was being implemented, the political talks were beginning to bear fruit. In this way, there was the coming together of a series of distinct processes that were going to merge to have a major impact: the development of distinct equality legislation in the areas of religion, gender, race, and disability; the development of Government guidelines on policy appraisal and fair treatment (PAFT); developing political discussions. The consequence of these separate developments was that the Belfast Agreement of April 1998 contained significant sections on equality and provided the basis for the establishment of a number of new equality institutions.

Central to the provisions of the Belfast Agreement was the establishment of the Equality Commission (EC) as a unified equality agency bringing together the previously disparate Commission for Racial Equality, the Disability Council, the Equal Opportunities Commission and the Fair Employment Commission.

A far-reaching provision of the Belfast Agreement was the obligation to be imposed on public authorities to produce equality schemes. This anti-discrimination legislation that was introduced in the Northern Ireland Act represents a powerful

instrument to promote equality. There are a number of distinct aspects of the legislation that make it robust:

1. The consequence of bringing together the separate legislative frameworks (for gender, religion, race and disability) underneath a single unitary Equality Commission is going to have a very significant impact on the development of equality in Northern Ireland. There will be significant cross-fertilisation from the experience of dealing with inequality in one context to the treatment of inequality in a differing context.

2. The combination of the experience of bodies such as the FEC, the EOC, the Disability Council and the Commission for Racial Equality will result in a greatly strengthened Equality Commission - the total is greater than the sum of the parts.

3. The coupling of the experience of anti-discrimination legislation with the experience of implementing PAFT guidelines has produced a very strong impetus to challenge public authorities on the impact of their policies in relation to equality.

4. The legislation that introduced the statutory duty for public authorities to publish equality schemes (section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act) stipulated that public authorities must consult widely in the development of their schemes. This statutory obligation to consult represents a significant advance in public participation in the region.

The scope of the legislation enshrined in the Northern Ireland Act is wider than any anti-discrimination legislation previously introduced in Northern Ireland, covering nine categories, whereas in the past, the legislation covered only five areas: religion, politics, gender, race and disability.

Part II: The Relationship between the Legislation and the Principles of the Bahá'í Faith

The development of the equality agenda in Northern Ireland is a process that has happened alongside the development of the Bahá'í Faith. There has been no direct Bahá'í input into the development of the equality instruments that are enshrined in the legislation, though some individual Bahá'ís have been involved in consultation processes in relation to some of the developing legislation.

At this juncture there are several critical questions to be addressed:

How does the existing legislation relate to the principles of the Faith?

How does the practice of the Bahá'í community measure up to the standards that are established in the legislation?

What are the implications for the Bahá'í community of the development of this equality agenda in society?

How and in what ways should the Bahá'í community be seeking to influence the further development of the equality agenda?

As it is beyond the scope of this paper to cover all of these areas, the remainder will focus on the relationship between the legislation and the principles of the Faith.

Equality as a Key Social Teaching

The Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh contains many quotations that have direct implications for our understanding of equality. During the nineteenth century, when Bahá'u'lláh was writing, the concept of equality was not understood in the way that we have come to understand it in the twenty-first century. It is therefore not surprising that

there are few direct references to equality in the Writings. However, there are many references to concepts - such as justice and the unity of the human race - that are central to any understanding of equality. Many such references are oft-cited by Bahá'ís:

O SON OF SPIRIT!

The best beloved of all things in My sight is Justice; turn not away therefrom if thou desirest Me, and neglect it not that I may confide in thee. By its aid 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. Ponder this in thy heart; how it behoveth thee to be. Verily justice is My gift to thee and the sign of My loving-kindness. Set it then before thine eyes (Arabic 2).

The most glorious fruit of the tree of knowledge is this exalted word: Of one tree are all ye the fruit, and of one bough the leaves. Let not man glory in this that he loveth his country, let him rather glory in this, that he loveth his kind (*Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 127).

By the life of God! The word 'Equity' shineth bright and resplendent even as the sun. We pray God to graciously shed its radiance upon everyone (*Tablets*, p. 18).

Moreover We counsel them to observe justice, equity, honesty, piety and that whereby both the Word of God and their own station will be exalted amongst men (*Tablets*, p. 78).

Let My counsel be acceptable to thee [Sultán 'Abdu'l-'Azíz], and strive thou to rule with equity among men, that God may exalt thy name and spread abroad the fame of thy justice in all the world. Beware lest thou aggrandize thy ministers at the expense of thy subjects. Fear the sighs of the poor and of the upright in heart who, at every break of day, bewail their plight, and be unto them a benignant sovereign. They, verily, are thy treasures on earth. It behoveth thee, therefore, to safeguard thy treasures from the assaults of them who wish to rob thee. Inquire into their affairs, and ascertain, every year, nay every month, their condition, and be not of them that are careless of their duty (*The Proclamation of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp. 50-1).

When 'Abdu'l-Bahá expounded the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, He made much reference to the concept of equality. During His travels in North America and Europe, He often referred to "the principles of the Faith." When He made such references, He invariably included "equality." Furthermore He often referred in detail to issues pertaining to gender or race equality. Therefore it is clear that the issue of equality is central in the Teachings of the Faith. Indeed, "equality" is seen as one of its key social teachings.

The Focus on Equality of Opportunity

‘Abdu’l-Bahá specifically refers to “equality of opportunity”. Such references raise questions for those engaged in the equality debate at the present time. Consider, for example, the following quotations:

He [Bahá’u’lláh] promulgated the adoption of the same course of education for man and woman. Daughters and sons must follow the same curriculum of study, thereby promoting unity of the sexes. When all mankind shall receive the same opportunity of education and the equality of men and women be realized, the foundations of war will be utterly destroyed (*The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 175).

Woman’s lack of progress and proficiency has been due to her need of equal education and opportunity. Had she been allowed this equality there is no doubt she would be the counterpart of man in ability and capacity. The happiness of mankind will be realized when women and men coordinate and advance equally, for each is the complement and helpmeet of the other (*Bahá’í World Faith*, p. 241).

A number of statements from the Bahá’í International Community reiterate this point:

The new age will surely be one in which the so-called masculine and feminine elements of civilization will be more properly balanced. As women receive the same opportunity of education and the equality of men and women is universally recognized, the natural inclination of women to peace and the fact that they find it more difficult to sacrifice their children and to sanction war will prove of great benefit to the world (Statements 3a, *Universal Values for the Advancement of Women*).

The Bahá’ís Writings make clear that “when all mankind shall receive the same opportunity of education and the equality of men and women be realized, the foundations of war will be utterly destroyed. Equality between men and women is conducive to the abolition of warfare for the reason that women will never be willing to sanction it” (*Proposals for International Women’s Year*).

In some countries, the process of legal reform along these lines has proceeded a great distance in recent times. Women and men are guaranteed equal civil and political rights as well as equality of opportunity in education and employment, under laws which, by and large, are enforceable and enforced. (*Creating Structures for Gender Equality*).

These quotations raise an interesting issue because some commentators on equality law have observed that a focus on equality of opportunity alone does not guarantee that inequalities in society are eradicated (see, for example, Wilson, 2000).

While equality of opportunity goes a long way to creating a “level playing field,” there are, nevertheless, factors in society that make it difficult for an approach on the basis of equal opportunities to have comprehensive results. It is clear that using such an approach enables some individuals to break through “the glass ceiling,” but large communities remain disadvantaged. For example, there are clear examples of Blacks in the United States who have done very well socially, but at the same time the most impoverished areas there are Black ones. Likewise in Northern Ireland, one can point to individual Roman Catholics who have done very well, but the areas that show the greatest evidence of disadvantage are those areas that have high populations of Catholics (Borooah, 2000). Wilson argues that there needs to be a focus on equality of outcomes in order to overcome this sort of problem.

In the quotations above, the reference to equality is made in the context of education. Clearly it would not be sensible to insist that everyone should have the same educational outcome. Therefore it seems reasonable to suggest that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá identified the issue of equality of opportunity specifically in relation to education, and that it is not possible to automatically transfer this concept to inequality that is experienced in different contexts.

Indeed, there are many passages where Bahá’u’lláh identifies the need to support the most disadvantaged in society. He goes further - He identifies the spiritual benefits of such actions: “Be as a lamp unto them that walk in darkness, a joy to the sorrowful, a sea for the thirsty, a haven for the distressed, an upholder and defender of the victim of oppression... Blessed is the man that hath, on the wings of longing, soared towards God, the Lord of the Judgment Day (*Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*, pp. 93-94).

Passages such as this indicate that rather than focusing on equality of opportunity, Bahá’í interventions that are aimed at addressing inequality should be targeted at benefiting the most disadvantaged in society.

Stereotyping and Acceptance of Prejudice in the Legislation

The focus of the legislation is directed towards communities. The legislation is drafted to identify specific categories and a remedy can be sought on the basis of belonging, or being perceived as belonging, to one of the specific categories. This focus on categories can have a tendency to increase the extent of stereotyping rather than breaking down stereotypes.

In the legislation, there is an implicit acceptance that prejudice is acceptable. It becomes unlawful only if somebody acts out his or her prejudice in the form of a behaviour that impacts on somebody else. This contrasts sharply with the Bahá’í Teachings:

Bahá’u’lláh spent His life teaching this lesson of Love and Unity. Let us then put away from us all prejudice and intolerance, and strive with all our hearts and souls to bring about understanding and unity between Christians and Mussulmans [Muslims] (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 34).

Absolute verities, no matter in what book they be recorded, must be accepted. If we harbor prejudice it will be the cause of deprivation and ignorance ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Foundations of World Unity*, p. 15).

We must not entertain prejudice, for prejudice is an obstacle to realization. Inasmuch as the effulgence is one effulgence, the human realities must all become recipients of the same light, recognizing in it the compelling force that unites them in its illumination ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 115).

These quotations demonstrate that the Teachings of the Faith declare prejudice to be unacceptable as well as making discrimination unlawful.

It is not possible to legislate against prejudice. Prejudice does not become unlawful until it is acted out in the form of discriminatory actions. Legislation is based on addressing the actions that are taken by individuals and therefore it is not possible to tackle prejudice directly.

So there is a view that prejudice is unavoidable. Indeed, there is a prevailing view in society that "You can do what you want so long as you're not doing any harm to someone else." Many people use this phrase as a benchmark for their own morality. Such a notion gives rise to the acceptance of increasingly explicit scenes of sex and violence on our television screens and the availability of a plethora of obscene sites on the Internet.

People who articulate such a notion would often subscribe to the view that the individual is paramount and that society exists to serve the individual. Such exaltation of the station of the individual is directly at odds with the Bahá'í understanding that is portrayed by the Writings quoted above.

However, although it is not possible to legislate to tackle prejudice directly, there are actions that can be taken to address prejudice in a more general sense. In the following paragraphs the role of education is explored in this context.

The Burden of Legislation

There is little doubt that legislation has done much to contribute to the development of equality. Its very existence has demonstrated a clear social policy. Its enforcement has empowered disadvantaged individuals and has brought organisational change, especially in employment matters. Indeed, many that are calling for reform are seeking for more legislation to be introduced.

However, there is an urgent need to examine the relationships between the existing legislation before further legislation is introduced. In a recent review of anti-discrimination legislation in the UK, Hepple, Cousseley and Chowdury comment: "The first and most obvious defect of the present framework is that there is too much law. At present there are no less than 30 relevant Acts, 38 statutory instruments, 11 codes of practice and 12 EC directives and recommendations directly relevant to discrimination."

But more than the relationship between existing legislations, we need to examine other ways in which we can create a society that is so advanced that the concept

of prejudice will be non-existent. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá describes the process that is needed to establish such a society:

One thing remains to be said: it is that the communities are day and night occupied in making penal laws, and in preparing and organizing instruments and means of punishment. They build prisons, make chains and fetters, arrange places of exile and banishment, and different kinds of hardships and tortures, and think by these means to discipline criminals, whereas, in reality, they are causing destruction of morals and perversion of characters. The community, on the contrary, ought day and night to strive and endeavor with the utmost zeal and effort to accomplish the education of men, to cause them day by day to progress and to increase in science and knowledge, to acquire virtues, to gain good morals and to avoid vices, so that crimes may not occur. At the present time the contrary prevails; the community is always thinking of enforcing the penal laws, and of preparing means of punishment, instruments of death and chastisement, places for imprisonment and banishment; and they expect crimes to be committed. This has a demoralizing effect.

But if the community would endeavor to educate the masses, day by day knowledge and sciences would increase, the understanding would be broadened, the sensibilities developed, customs would become good, and morals normal; in one word, in all these classes of perfections there would be progress, and there would be fewer crimes.

It has been ascertained that among civilized peoples crime is less frequent than among uncivilized - that is to say, among those who have acquired the true civilization, which is divine civilization - the civilization of those who unite all the spiritual and material perfections. As ignorance is the cause of crimes, the more knowledge and science increases, the more crimes will diminish. Consider how often murder occurs among the barbarians of Africa; they even kill one another in order to eat each other’s flesh and blood! Why do not such savageries occur in Switzerland? The reason is evident: it is because education and virtues prevent them. Therefore, the communities must think of preventing crimes, rather than of rigorously punishing them (*Some Answered Questions*, p. 271).

This passage suggests that our resources should be directed away from penalties and targeted at large-scale educational initiatives. It is implied that nothing is to be gained by penalising offenders, but rather that the needs of society should be addressed in a more holistic manner.

Increasing Displays of Violent and Oppressive Behaviour

In a paper that was presented to a conference organised by the Association of Bahá’í Women in Dublin recently, an impassioned plea was made for action to address the injustice, oppression and inequality that is experienced by women across the globe (Smith, 2001). In the paper, Smith highlights the inadequacy of the legislation and argues eloquently that it is unduly based on economic considerations.

So, for example, childcare has been reduced to a child-minding role to enable the mother to do a “real” job. In this way, the family has become peripheral to the career, rather than the career supporting the family.

correct” in public; however, as we continue to prioritise the individual by providing for ever-greater freedom of choice and individual expression, we have become more corrupt in our private lives. Hence we have become more politically correct and more privately corrupt.

Concluding Remarks

From what has been said above, it is clear that the development of the equality agenda in Northern Ireland, though impressive, stills falls far short of the principles of the Bahá’í Faith. This paper has identified some key areas on which Bahá’ís should focus for the further development of the equality agenda. In sum, these areas are the following:

There is a need to move away from the categorisation of inequality (race, disability, gender, etc.) to the acceptance that inequality is unacceptable in whatever way it may be experienced.

The proliferation of anti-discrimination legislation demonstrates a commitment to promoting equality. Such proliferation creates undue confusion, however. Therefore there is a need to rationalise and simplify the legislation. This process is already underway in Northern Ireland.

Legislation on its own will not solve the problem of inequality. There is a need for large-scale educational initiatives that can tackle some of the deep-seated prejudices (e.g. religious bigotry) that are prevalent in our society.

There is a need for an acceptance that prejudice is itself harmful and damaging - even if such prejudice is not translated into discriminating behaviour.

Our society needs to develop to the extent that it establishes high standards for peoples’ private lives as well as for their public activities.

The current perception that “It’s OK so long as it doesn’t harm anyone else” needs to be exposed as a fundamentally flawed basis for morality.

We now have marvellous opportunities in Northern Ireland. The statutory duty that has been imposed on every public authority to develop equality schemes is paving the way for radical social change. As public authorities develop their equality schemes, they have to consult widely. Following the approval of their schemes, they have to undertake a rigorous equality impact assessment of all their policies. The conclusions of their impact assessments are subject to public scrutiny. In this way, every citizen in Northern Ireland has an opportunity to scrutinise public policy from an equality perspective.

We are hopeful that as a result of the equality statutory duty, we will see progress on significant areas that have been problematic for Bahá’ís for many decades. Examples include the development of a syllabus for Religious Education in schools that can accommodate Bahá’í pupils on an equal basis with their classmates, and the provision for Bahá’í marriage to be accepted.

More significant than these is the radical change that we are experiencing in society generally, as public authorities are forced to expose their policies to scrutiny. We are seeing a mechanism develop that will provide opportunities for public participation in a way that has not previously been experienced in Ireland.

At the start of the 21st century, the development of the equality agenda in Northern Ireland is only beginning.

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