

The Universal House of Justice

1 March 2017

To the Bahá'ís of the World

Dearly loved Friends,

In an increasingly interconnected world, more light is being cast on the social conditions of every people, giving greater visibility to their circumstances. While there are developments that give hope, there is much that should weigh heavy on the conscience of the human race. Inequity, discrimination, and exploitation blight the life of humanity, seemingly immune to the treatments applied by political schemes of every hue. The economic impact of these afflictions has resulted in the prolonged suffering of so many, as well as in deep-seated, structural defects in society. No one whose heart has been attracted to the teachings of the Blessed Beauty can remain unmoved by these consequences. “The world is in great turmoil,” Bahá'u'lláh observes in the *Lawḥ-i-Dunyá*, “and the minds of its people are in a state of utter confusion. We entreat the Almighty that He may graciously illuminate them with the glory of His Justice, and enable them to discover that which will be profitable unto them at all times and under all conditions.” As the Bahá'í community strives to contribute at the level of thought and action to the betterment of the world, the adverse conditions experienced by many populations will more and more demand its attention.

The welfare of any segment of humanity is inextricably bound up with the welfare of the whole. Humanity's collective life suffers when any one group thinks of its own well-being in isolation from that of its neighbours or pursues economic gain without regard for how the natural environment, which provides sustenance for all, is affected. A stubborn obstruction, then, stands in the way of meaningful social progress: time and again, avarice and self-interest prevail at the expense of the common good. Unconscionable quantities of wealth are being amassed, and the instability this creates is made worse by how income and opportunity are spread so unevenly both between nations and within nations. But it need not be so. However much such conditions are the outcome of history, they do not have to define the future, and even if current approaches to economic life satisfied humanity's stage of adolescence, they are certainly inadequate for its dawning age of maturity. There is no justification for continuing to perpetuate structures, rules, and systems that manifestly fail to serve the interests of all peoples. The teachings of the Faith leave no room for doubt: there is an inherent moral dimension to the generation, distribution, and utilization of wealth and resources.

The stresses emerging out of the long-term process of transition from a divided world to a united one are being felt within international relations as much as in the deepening fractures that affect societies large and small. With prevailing modes of thought found to be badly wanting, the world is in desperate need of a shared ethic, a sure framework for addressing the crises that gather like storm clouds. The vision of Bahá'u'lláh challenges many of the assumptions that are allowed to shape contemporary discourse—for instance, that self-interest, far from needing to be restrained, drives prosperity, and that progress depends upon its expression through relentless competition. To view the worth of an individual chiefly in terms of how much one can accumulate and how many goods one can consume relative to others is wholly alien to Bahá'í thought. But neither are the teachings in sympathy with sweeping dismissals of wealth as inherently distasteful or immoral, and asceticism is prohibited. Wealth must serve humanity. Its use must accord with spiritual principles; systems must be created in their light. And, in Bahá'u'lláh's memorable words, “No light can compare with the light of justice. The establishment of order in the world and the tranquillity of the nations depend upon it.”

Although Bahá'u'lláh does not set out in His Revelation a detailed economic system, a constant theme throughout the entire corpus of His teachings is the reorganization of human society.

Consideration of this theme inevitably gives rise to questions of economics. Of course, the future order conceived by Bahá'u'lláh is far beyond anything that can be imagined by the present generation. Nevertheless, its eventual emergence will depend on strenuous effort by His followers to put His teachings into effect today. With this in mind, we hope that the comments below will stimulate thoughtful, ongoing reflection by the friends. The aim is to learn about how to participate in the material affairs of society in a way that is consistent with the divine precepts and how, in practical terms, collective prosperity can be advanced through justice and generosity, collaboration and mutual assistance.

Our call to examine the implications of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh for economic life is intended to reach Bahá'í institutions and communities but is directed more especially to the individual believer. If a new model of community life, patterned on the teachings, is to emerge, must not the company of the faithful demonstrate in their own lives the rectitude of conduct that is one of its most distinguishing features? Every choice a Bahá'í makes—as employee or employer, producer or consumer, borrower or lender, benefactor or beneficiary—leaves a trace, and the moral duty to lead a coherent life demands that one's economic decisions be in accordance with lofty ideals, that the purity of one's aims be matched by the purity of one's actions to fulfil those aims. Naturally, the friends habitually look to the teachings to set the standard to which to aspire. But the community's deepening engagement with society means that the economic dimension of social existence must receive ever more concentrated attention. Particularly in clusters where the community-building process is beginning to embrace large numbers, the exhortations contained in the Bahá'í Writings should increasingly inform economic relationships within families, neighbourhoods, and peoples. Not content with whatever values prevail in the existing order that surrounds them, the friends everywhere should consider the application of the teachings to their lives and, using the opportunities their circumstances offer them, make their own individual and collective contributions to economic justice and social progress wherever they reside. Such efforts will add to a growing storehouse of knowledge in this regard.

A foundational concept to explore in this context is the spiritual reality of man. In the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, the nobility inherent to every human being is unequivocally asserted; it is a fundamental tenet of Bahá'í belief, upon which hope for the future of humankind is built. The soul's capacity to manifest all the names and attributes of God—He Who is the Compassionate, the Bestower, the Bountiful—is repeatedly affirmed in the Writings. Economic life is an arena for the expression of honesty, integrity, trustworthiness, generosity, and other qualities of the spirit. The individual is not merely a self-interested economic unit, striving to claim an ever-greater share of the world's material resources. “Man's merit lieth in service and virtue”, Bahá'u'lláh avers, “and not in the pageantry of wealth and riches.” And further: “Dissipate not the wealth of your precious lives in the pursuit of evil and corrupt affection, nor let your endeavours be spent in promoting your personal interest.” By consecrating oneself to the service of others, one finds meaning and purpose in life and contributes to the upliftment of society itself. At the outset of His celebrated treatise *The Secret of Divine Civilization*, 'Abdu'l-Bahá states:

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

Viewed in this light, many seemingly ordinary economic activities gain new significance because of their potential to add to human welfare and prosperity. “Every person must have an occupation, a trade or a craft,” explains the Master, “so that he may carry other people's burdens, and not himself be a burden to others.” The poor are urged by Bahá'u'lláh to “exert themselves and strive to earn the means of livelihood”, while they who are possessed of riches “must have the utmost regard for the poor”. “Wealth”, 'Abdu'l-Bahá has affirmed, “is praiseworthy in the highest degree, if it is acquired by an individual's own efforts and the grace of God, in commerce, agriculture, art and

industry, and if it be expended for philanthropic purposes.” At the same time, the Hidden Words is replete with warnings of its perilous allure, that wealth is a “mighty barrier” between the believer and the proper Object of his adoration. No wonder, then, that Bahá’u’lláh extols the station of the wealthy one who is not hindered by riches from attaining the eternal kingdom; the splendour of such a soul “shall illuminate the dwellers of heaven even as the sun enlightens the people of the earth!” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá declares that “if a judicious and resourceful individual should initiate measures which would universally enrich the masses of the people, there could be no undertaking greater than this, and it would rank in the sight of God as the supreme achievement”. For wealth is most commendable “provided the entire population is wealthy.” Examining one’s life to determine what is a necessity and then discharging with joy one’s obligation in relation to the law of Ḥuqúqu’lláh is an indispensable discipline to bring one’s priorities into balance, purify whatever wealth one possesses, and ensure that the share which is the Right of God provides for the greater good. At all times, contentment and moderation, benevolence and fellow feeling, sacrifice and reliance on the Almighty are qualities that befit the God-fearing soul.

The forces of materialism promote a quite contrary line of thinking: that happiness comes from constant acquisition, that the more one has the better, that worry for the environment is for another day. These seductive messages fuel an increasingly entrenched sense of personal entitlement, which uses the language of justice and rights to disguise self-interest. Indifference to the hardship experienced by others becomes commonplace while entertainment and distracting amusements are voraciously consumed. The enervating influence of materialism seeps into every culture, and all Bahá’ís recognize that, unless they strive to remain conscious of its effects, they may to one degree or another unwittingly adopt its ways of seeing the world. Parents must be acutely aware that, even when very young, children absorb the norms of their surroundings. The junior youth spiritual empowerment programme encourages thoughtful discernment at an age when the call of materialism grows more insistent. With the approach of adulthood comes a responsibility, shared by one’s generation, not to allow worldly pursuits to blind one’s eyes to injustice and privation. Over time, the qualities and attitudes nurtured by the courses of the training institute, through exposure to the Word of God, help individuals to see past the illusions that, at every stage of life, the world uses to pull attention away from service and towards the self. And ultimately, the systematic study of the Word of God and the exploration of its implications raises consciousness of the need to manage one’s material affairs in keeping with the divine teachings.

Beloved Friends: The extremes of wealth and poverty in the world are becoming ever more untenable. As inequity persists, so the established order is seen to be unsure of itself, and its values are being questioned. Whatever the tribulations that a conflicted world must confront in the future, we pray that the Almighty will help His loved ones to overcome every obstacle in their path and assist them to serve humanity. The larger the presence of a Bahá’í community in a population, the greater its responsibility to find ways of addressing the root causes of the poverty in its surroundings. Although the friends are at the early stages of learning about such work and of contributing to the related discourses, the community-building process of the Five Year Plan is creating everywhere the ideal environment in which to accrue knowledge and experience, gradually but consistently, about the higher purpose of economic activity. Against the background of the age-long work of erecting a divine civilization, may this exploration become a more pronounced feature of community life, institutional thought, and individual action in the years ahead.

[signed: The Universal House of Justice]