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BAHAISM: ITS ETHICAL AND SOCIAL TEACHINGS

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‘The Divine Manifestations are sent and manifested to train the souls of men in such wise that the divine qualities may overcome the animal imperfections, and that the heavenly light may shine universally.’

These are the words of Abdul Baha, the eldest son of the great founder of this faith, Baha u’llah, to whom was entrusted the charge of establishing and carrying on his father’s teaching. Baha u’llah in his writings puts forward the great claim to be a Universal Manifestation of God — a universal teacher — appealing not more especially to the East than to the West, but equally to the whole world of mankind; and Bahaism possesses for us one unique point of interest in the fact that it is a great world-religion which has taken its rise in our own era. This great movement was started in 1844, when the young Ali Mohammad, known as the Bab, first declared his mission to his countrymen in Persia; and for a brief period of six years, which ended with his martyrdom, devoted his life to teaching the true meaning of religion. With him started that movement of living reform, elaborated and completed by the teachings of Baha u’llah and his son Abdul Baha, of which we are now witnessing the effect in the wonderful awakening now taking place in that country. Had the inspiration of this religious movement been confined to the teaching of the Bab, it is quite possible that it would have effected merely a reformation within the religion of Islam. But the Bab’s teachings and prophetic utterances were largely directed towards the preparation of the minds of his hearers for the advent of a far greater teacher than himself, who would shortly appear. These predictions were realized in the declaration of his mission by Baha u’llah, nineteen years after the beginning of the movement inaugurated by the Bab. In his hands the teaching became world-wide in its appeal. At the present time nearly one-third of the people of Persia are followers of Bahaism, and in the United States of America its adherents may be counted by thousands. At Chicago the site has been purchased, and the preliminary steps taken, for the erection of the first house of worship for the Bahais of America. This is not intended to be a church, as we understand it, but a place of meeting which will be used as a spiritual

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and educational centre. Actually the first building of this kind to be erected, is now being completed at Ishkabad in Russian Turkestan. In Europe there are groups of Bahais at Stuttgart, Paris, London, &c., &c. Bahaism is also beginning to spread amongst the natives of India and Burmah, where its teachings are enthusiastically adopted by its adherents, as a means of establishing real unity and brotherhood amongst the numerous races and creeds of those countries.

Most thinkers acknowledge this present time in which we are now living to be a period of great spiritual unrest, of deep searching after truth, and of intense desire for a restatement of the fundamental realities of religion, in terms harmonizing with the needs and aspirations of our particular age. Baha u’llah claims to have answered this need, and I wish to try to indicate as briefly as possible a few of the ways in which he has done this.

Baha u’llah’s teaching is intensely practical. He says that no longer will mere words and talk about religion be accepted by the divine Assayer, but only true and righteous deeds. He has pointed out to his followers certain rules of conduct, certain acts that they must do, if they wish to learn from him. He says that work of any kind done in a faithful spirit of service is accepted before God as an act of worship, and that the first duty of a man is rightly to fulfil his part in the world and to the whole of society. Therefore it is enjoined upon all Bahais that they must have a definite employment, that is, an art, trade or profession of some kind, which they must practise for their own benefit and that of other men. Also, he teaches that one of the greatest works a man or woman can do, is to bring up a family of rightly trained and educated children, fitted to carry on the upward evolution of the race. To this end he makes it obligatory on all his followers to provide the best possible education that can be obtained for their children, both boys and girls equally. In this connexion he uses these beautiful words: ‘He that educateth a child shall be to me as if he educated my own son,’ and he enacts that special honour shall be rendered and a special provision shall be made for all teachers and educators.

Baha u’llah strictly forbids mendicancy, but at the same time directs that the community of believers must provide work for all who need it.

The care of the sick and disabled not otherwise provided for, and for children and widows who are left without means of support, also falls upon the general community. The funds for these purposes are to be supplied by proportionate contributions from all the Bahais and are to be administered by the elected councils called Houses of Justice.

It is directed that each body or community of believers is to elect

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a council called Beit-ul-Adl or House of Justice, from among those of its members who are most respected for their upright life, good character, and intelligence. There is also to be established a General House of Justice for each nation, and besides this a Universal House of Justice, consisting of members elected to represent every nation, which will form a kind of permanent board of arbitration and conciliation to which all international disagreements and difficulties are to be submitted, and whose decisions must be accepted by all Bahais as final and authoritative. Baha u’llah enjoined that there should be no special class of priests, or clergy, set apart from the rest of the people for the purpose of teaching spiritual truths. This duty must be undertaken by those who are pre-eminently fitted for it, by their character and learning; they are to receive no payment or salary, but must earn their own support in the same way as the rest of the Bahais. Also the perfect civil and religious equality of women with men is asserted in the clearest possible manner.

He teaches his followers that the first necessity for them is to labour to establish Universal Peace, to abolish war and to associate with men of every race and religion in the spirit of true brotherhood, love and sympathy, and to acknowledge all men as seekers of the One Truth.

The greatest stress is laid upon this, and it may be considered as one of the fundamental bases of his teaching.

All prophets and religious teachers of the past are to be acknowledged as from God; but, as the circumstances of every age are different, therefore it becomes necessary that from time to time a new teacher or prophet should appear, who can re-formulate the truth of the One Religion in a way which suits the needs of that age or period.

There are many other aspects of Baha u’llah’s writings which it would be most interesting to analyse, but I must confine myself to saying that his Spiritual teachings are of the widest and most universal character and are not confined merely to directions concerning conduct and morals.

Baha u’llah’s mission lasted forty years, and during his lifetime he wrote an immense number of short epistles, treatises, and books, some of them containing practical advice and directions, others of a purely mystical and spiritual nature; several of these have already been translated into most European languages as well as English. From some of them I will quote a few passages, showing far better than any words of mine can do, the gist and scope of these writings.

‘Religion is the greatest instrument for the order of the world and the tranquillity of all existing beings.’[[1]](#footnote-1)

‘Religion is the necessary connexion which emanates from the

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reality of things; and as the Universal Manifestations of God are aware of the mysteries of beings, therefore they understand this essential connexion, and by their knowledge establish the Law of God.’[[2]](#footnote-2)

‘In every country or government where any of this community reside, they must behave towards that government with faithfulness, trustfulness, and truthfulness.’[[3]](#footnote-3)

‘Members of the House of Justice must promote “The Most Great Peace” in order that the world may be freed from onerous expenditure. This matter is obligatory and indispensable, for warfare and conflict are the foundation of trouble and distress.’[[4]](#footnote-4)

‘Blessed is the prince who succours a captive, the rich one who favours the needy, the just man who assures the right of the wronged one from the oppressor, and the trustee who performs what he is commanded by the Pre-existent Commander.’[[5]](#footnote-5)

‘The light of men is justice, quench it not with the contrary winds of oppression and tyranny.’[[6]](#footnote-6)

‘Schools must first train the children in the principles of religion . . . but this in such a measure that it may not injure the children by leading to fanaticism and bigotry.’[[7]](#footnote-7)

‘Knowledge is like unto wings for the being of man, and is as a ladder for ascending. To acquire knowledge is incumbent upon all, but of those sciences which may profit the people of the earth, and not such sciences as begin merely in words and end in mere words.’[[8]](#footnote-8)

‘The kings — may God assist them — or the counsellors of the world, must consult together, and appoint one of the existing languages, or a new language, and instruct the children therein in all the schools of the world, and the same must be done in respect to writing[[9]](#footnote-9) also. In such cases the earth will be as one (or united).’[[10]](#footnote-10)

‘It is incumbent on every one of you to engage in some employment, such as arts, trades, and the like. We have made this, your occupation, identical with the worship of God, the True God.’[[11]](#footnote-11)

‘Oh people of Baha; ye are daysprings of love, and dawning places of the providence of God. Defile not the tongue with cursing or execrating any one, and guard your eyes against that which is not worthy. . . . Be not the cause of sorrow, much less of sedition and strife. . . . Ye are all leaves of one tree and drops of one sea.’[[12]](#footnote-12)

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‘Oh friends, it is the wish of Abdul Baha that the Friends may establish general unity. . . . We are all servants of one threshold, waves of one sea, drops of one stream, and plants of one garden. . . . The beloved of God must be friendly even with strangers. Assemblies must be established for certain objects. For example, assemblies for teaching the truth, gatherings for the spreading of the Fragrance of God, gatherings for the relief of orphans and for the protection of the poor, assemblies for the spread of learning, in a word there must be gatherings for matters which concern the well-being of man, such as the organization of a society of commerce, of societies for the development of arts or industries, and societies for the expansion of agriculture. . . . I hope all the Friends from the East and the West will rest in the same assembly and adorn one gathering, and appear with all heavenly attributes and virtues in the world of humanity.[[13]](#footnote-13)

It would be possible to compile many books of similar sayings from the writings both of Baha u’llah and of his son Abdul Baha; but I think I have quoted a sufficient number to show the very practical and helpful nature of these works, and also their universal application.

I much wish that some one more competent had been able to describe this great movement, but I can only crave your indulgence for this short account of Bahaism as it now exists.

1. From *The Words of Paradise*, Baha u’llah. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. From *Some Answered Questions*, by Abdul Baha (publ. Kegan Paul). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. From *The Glad Tidings*, B. uh. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. From *The Tablet of the World*. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. From *The Words of Paradise*, B. uh. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. From *The Tajalliyat*. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. i.e. the characters employed must be similar for all languages. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. From *The Glad Tidings*, B. uh. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. From an Epistle of Abdul Baha, addressed to Believers in Persia, July 4, 1906. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)