

# BAHÁ'U'LLÁH AND LIBERATION THEOLOGY

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The tragedy of global poverty in the late twentieth century has increasingly preoccupied thinkers of all religions, both lay and clerical, as secular strategies for overcoming it have achieved only limited and sectional successes. New theologies addressing the concerns of the poor are in many ways attempting to recover the voice of the prophets, rather than limiting themselves to the otherworldly concerns of scholastic theologians.<sup>1</sup> Prophets throughout history have, after all, tended to side with the poor against the rich, if not politically then at least morally and spiritually. The prophets of the Hebrew Bible decried injustice toward the downtrodden. The Buddha, a prince, forsook the ephemeral material world to wander with destitute monks in the forests near Benares. Jesus, an artisan-peasant, was a partisan of the needy and the outcasts in his society, and had a low estimation of the likelihood that the rich would enter the kingdom of heaven. The Prophet Muhammad, an orphaned member of the noble Quraysh tribe, thunderously condemned in his early preaching the callousness of Mecca's wealthy elite toward the indigent. Bahá'u'lláh, as well, made the amelioration of the condition of the poor a prime goal of his religion, laying heavy obligations in this regard upon private individuals, religious institutions, and the state.

Bahá'u'lláh's commitments are all the more remarkable given that he was from the class of wealthy government officials and was raised in the lap of luxury. For the sake of principle (first his embrace of the



Bábí religion, then his revelation of the Baha'i Faith) he relinquished his wealth and threw in his lot with the laborers, cobblers, tailors, shopkeepers, housewives, and peasants who constituted the majority of Bábís and then Baha'is. As a result, not only was he left impoverished, but he was also subject to exile and harsh jailings. He said that when he was imprisoned in the shah's dungeon in Tehran in 1852, he did not have a dinar to his name and at one point was given nothing to eat or drink for two days, but he was at that point the richest person in the world.<sup>2</sup>

The idea of liberation is integral to the Baha'i Faith, for Bahá'u'lláh wrote, "the Ancient Beauty hath consented to be bound with chains that mankind may be released from its bondage, and hath accepted to be made a prisoner within this most mighty Stronghold that the whole world may attain unto true liberty."<sup>3</sup> Bahá'u'lláh was a Manifestation of God become poor to enrich humankind, become inmate to set us all free. Elsewhere he specifies that he acquiesced in his imprisonment in order to free human beings from the chains of "self and passion" (*nafs va hava*).<sup>4</sup> Selfishness is intimately wrought up with questions of the distribution of wealth in society. The Baha'i scriptures, like the life of their Author, evince a special commitment to the poor, though they embrace universally all human beings.

This faith in the downtrodden may help explain why most Baha'is have been, and are today, drawn from the ranks of the poor. Such groups as the impoverished weavers of Kashan or the suffering tailors of Shiraz constituted the bulk of early Bahá'ís.<sup>5</sup> Since the 1960s, masses of peasants, both men and women, have entered the Baha'i Faith in India, Africa, and Latin America. The typical Baha'i in the 1990s is a poor villager in the global South. Even in the United States, about one-third of the national community consists of African-Americans, and a third of them in turn live in South Carolina and northern Georgia, two of the least wealthy areas in the country.<sup>6</sup> The Baha'i Faith lacks any class of official clergy, and since local Baha'i affairs are directed not by a seminary-trained clergyman appointed from above, but by elected Spiritual Assemblies, Baha'i peasants, sharecroppers and workers have a real voice in the spiritual governance of their communities.

It is therefore appropriate, in a volume aimed at exploring the possibilities of a Baha'i theology, that we consider the scriptural sources of a Baha'i theology of liberation. As I intimated above, the

starting point for any serious such line of thought must be the groundbreaking work of Catholic theologians (especially Gustavo Gutierrez) and laypeople in Latin America, to whom I am grateful for many key insights that resonate across religious boundaries, and my debt to whom will be apparent below to anyone familiar with this literature.<sup>7</sup> It is desirable that Baha'i pioneers and anthropologists inform us more fully about the daily, lived theology of poor Bahá'ís in the global South, so that we in the North can gain essential spiritual insights from them. My purpose here is simply to make a beginning, by examining what I think are key texts by and about Baha'u'llah, for even theology done from the underside of history must have a foundation in scripture and in theophany (the Person of the Manifestation of God). I will focus here on Baha'u'llah (even though extremely important perspectives exist on this issue in the writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Shoghi Effendi, and the Universal House of Justice) simply for reasons of lack of space and the desirability of beginning with the revelation of the Manifestation of God himself.

It is worth saying briefly that by a Bahá'í theology of liberation I mean a theology that is grounded in a special commitment to the poor and the workers (male and female, adult and child), that includes their perspective in the consideration of scriptural meaning, and that underpins reformist thought and social action by them and by others in solidarity with them. It recognizes that late international capitalism, while capable of creating much wealth, also does a very poor job of distributing it equitably, thereby contributing to continued poverty in some regions and social sectors. This capitalist order also subjects the poor disproportionately to the dangers of an excessive industrialism, especially environmental pollution and hazards of the workplace.

By a theology of revolution I do not, and cannot as a Baha'i, intend, on the one hand, any way of thinking that sanctions violence or class warfare, or indeed, entanglement in the petty squabbles of party politics. On the other hand, a Baha'i theology of liberation must involve speaking out against injustice and engaging in social activism in order to have any meaning. Liberation, in this view, would consist in nothing less than a truly Bahá'í society, which would provide employment at a fair wage to every citizen; would ensure a decent and dignified life to all; would guarantee basic human rights as outlined in United Nations declarations and covenants; would give the less well-off a voice in their own governance and scope for expressing their

spiritual and creative energies; and would eliminate the vast gap between the wealthy and the poor characteristic of late capitalist societies. In the post-Cold War world, wherein the materialist and totalitarian vision of state-imposed economic equality has collapsed, wherein the excesses of industrialism and of laissez-faire capitalism are largely unrestrained and the gap between the poor in the global South and the rich in the North is growing, the world desperately needs a new vision of spiritual and social justice such as Bahá'u'lláh enunciates.

### **THE POOR IN THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY MIDDLE EAST**

The struggle of the poor is not everywhere and always the same, depending rather on the sort of social system and the historical moment in which they subsist. Bahá'u'lláh was addressing a society very different from any that still exists today. The Middle East of his day was ruled by the absolute monarchies of the Ottoman Empire and Qajar Iran, and a variety of political economies uneasily coexisted therein. In the 1860s and 1870s, perhaps a third of Iranians were still pastoral nomads, most of them organized into tribes (the percentage was less in most Ottoman possessions, with the exception of Iraq). Although the tribes often lacked formal title to land, they did possess substantial wealth in the form of livestock, and every tribal family had at least a few sheep or goats. But in subsequent decades, most nomads were made to settle by the state, and in the process, tribespeople frequently lost their herds and any claim to tribal lands, being reduced to the worst of fates—that of landless peasants. Some fifty percent of the population of Iran consisted of villagers, divided into landless peasants, smallholders, and medium and rich peasants. Many villages were still actually owned by semi-feudal landlords, and all paid heavy taxes to nobles, to governors, and to the king. Some twenty percent of the population lived in cities (less in Ottoman lands), where the majority were laborers and artisans. In the cities also lived the absentee landlords, landholding government officials, and the great merchants.

This social structure of cities, villages and tribes was anything but static, coming under new pressures throughout the period 1850–1900. This half-century saw a vast expansion of agrarian capitalism (but not yet much substantial industrialization in the area).

Subsistence farming was giving way to the cash-cropping of cotton, tobacco, grains, and opium. Imported European industrial goods were putting thousands of Middle Eastern artisans out of work. Governments, used to taxing land, were not very good at adapting to the new importance of commerce, with many great merchants enjoying an exemption from taxes. The population of the region began growing by leaps and bounds from about 1850, increasing the supply of labor faster than the numbers of new job opportunities (and therefore keeping wages low), and reducing the size of family farms through estate fragmentation. The landless and smallholding peasants, day laborers, and displaced artisans (such as weavers) were or became the poorest of the poor, sometimes even starving to death during famines such as that of 1869-1872 in Iran.<sup>8</sup>

## **BAHÁ'U'LLÁH AND THE POOR**

The first indication we have of Bahá'u'lláh's attitude toward the poor comes in his Baghdad-era collection of mystical aphorisms, *The Hidden Words* (1858). His emphasis at this point is largely personal and ethical rather than institutional.<sup>9</sup> He continually draws a contrast between the dangers and powerful temptations of wealth versus the virtue of poverty. "Busy not thyself with this world," he writes, "for with fire We test the gold, and with gold We test Our servants." (Arabic, No. 55) He adds, "Thou dost wish for gold and I desire thy freedom from it." (Arabic, No. 56) Baha'u'llah castigates wealth as "a mighty barrier between the seeker and his desire" and warns that "the rich, but for a few, shall in no wise attain the court of His presence nor enter the city of contentment and resignation." (Arabic, No. 53) Hardheartedness and selfishness especially afflict the wealthy: "Tell the rich of the midnight sighing of the poor lest heedlessness lead them into the path of destruction, and deprive them of the Tree of Wealth." (Persian, No. 49) Wealth is, then, a test, a barrier, an obstacle to spiritual progress and the attainment of union with the beloved (a Sufi metaphor for a feeling of oneness with the divine that is the goal of the seeker). It carries with it the risk of indifference to the plight of the less fortunate, a moral and spiritual lapse that inexorably ends in doom.

If being rich is a drawback on the path, being poor is an asset. Baha'u'llah says, "Yet to be poor in all save God is a wondrous gift,

belittle not the value thereof, for in the end it will make thee rich in God.” (Persian, No. 51) Since he recognizes the grief of the impoverished, having spoken of the “midnight sighing of the poor,” Bahá’u’lláh does not glamorize their lives. He does say that they are beloved of God because of their poverty, and that the undeniable hardships they face can be aids to spiritual advance, aids not naturally available to the comfortable bourgeoisie or opulent nobility. By the poor, Bahá’u’lláh makes it clear that he is referring to the working poor and the poor who want to work if only they might find employment, for he commands all to engage in arts and crafts, and to provide for their loved ones. (Persian, Nos. 80, 82)

On the social and human plane, Bahá’u’lláh insists that all human beings are equal: “Know ye not why We created you all from the same dust? That no one should exalt himself over the other.” (Arabic, No. 68) Elsewhere, he wrote, in the same vein: “O ye rich ones on earth! If ye encounter one who is poor, treat him not disdainfully. Reflect upon that whereof ye were created. Every one of you was created of a sorry germ.”<sup>10</sup> The rich and their apologists in every age have a tendency to justify their affluence, often by asserting their innate superiority. But this is not a claim that Bahá’u’lláh will countenance, insisting instead on the universal unity of humankind: “Since We have created you all from one same substance it is incumbent on you to be even as one soul, to walk with the same feet, eat with the same mouth and dwell in the same land.” (Arabic, No. 68) The poor, then, are spiritually superior to the rich and are their equals in civil society. Bahá’u’lláh’s attitude in this regard is extremely challenging. Certainly, many in the Ottoman and Iranian upper classes would have shrunk in horror from the idea of sitting down to eat with the poor, or from being one with them in any meaningful way. Bahá’u’lláh was just as antagonistic to the hierarchies of Mediterranean society as Jesus Christ had been nearly two millenia before. His call for unity among persons of the various social classes clearly requires an active attempt on their part to mix and break down neighborhood and cultural barriers.

Bahá’u’lláh is also clear about what the rich can do to lessen the spiritual opprobrium he has laid upon them: They must “cleanse themselves” of the “defilement of riches,” for only through detachment from material things can they pursue the spiritual path. (Persian, No. 55) Nor is it enough, for instance, to make over one’s wealth to a family member and then pursue the cleansing of the soul. “Bestow My

wealth," he commands, "upon My poor, that in heaven thou mayest draw from stores of unfading splendor and treasures of imperishable glory." (Arabic, No. 57) Elsewhere he speaks of the absolute responsibility of the wealthy for the welfare of the needy: "O ye rich ones on earth! The poor in your midst are My trust; guard ye My trust, and be not intent only on your own ease." (Arabic, No. 54)

The vast inequalities of wealth characteristic of modern societies can often only be maintained by authoritarian and repressive state structures acting on behalf of the wealthy elite. Here, too, Bahá'u'lláh is unequivocal: "O oppressors on earth! Withdraw your hands from tyranny, for I have pledged Myself not to forgive any man's injustice. This is My covenant which I have irrevocably decreed in the preserved tablet and sealed it with My seal of glory." (Persian, No. 64) When Bahá'u'lláh praises the wealthy who are not "hindered" by their "riches from the eternal kingdom" (Persian, No. 53), it seems in view of these other passages that provision for the poor and commitment to social and political justice are implied along with faith as a prerequisite for attaining such splendor.

The circumstances of Bahá'u'lláh's life threw him in with the poor. In 1854-56, he lived the life of a wandering holy man or dervish (*darvish*, a word literally meaning "poor") in Iraqi Kurdistan, dwelling alone in a cave for a while and then consorting with other dervishes and Sufis in Sulaymaniyyah. Even once he had returned to Baghdad, where he lived as a despised exile expelled from his country for heresy, his life was by no means one of ease. "There was a time in 'Iraq," he recalled, "when the Ancient Beauty . . . had no change of linen. The one shirt He possessed would be washed, dried and worn again."<sup>11</sup> Communal sharing and an obliteration of the usual social hierarchies characterized the life of the Bábí partisans of Bahá'u'lláh. They lived in very humble dwellings in Baghdad, and the disciple Nabil-i A'zam Zarandi occupied, with two other men, a room that had no furniture. Bahá'u'lláh, he says, came to the room one day and remarked: "Its emptiness pleases Me. In my estimation it is preferable to many a spacious palace, inasmuch as the beloved of God are occupied in it with the remembrance of the Incomparable Friend."<sup>12</sup> Nabil reports: "Many a night no less than ten persons subsisted on no more than a pennyworth of dates. No one knew to whom actually belonged the shoes, the cloaks or the robes that were to be found in their houses. . . . Their own names they had forgotten, their hearts were emptied of aught else

except adoration for their Beloved.”<sup>13</sup> The severity of a room without furniture, the comradeship of intermingled possessions, the nights of communal meditation and ecstatic worship in the presence of their beloved Bahá’u’lláh, make this band of his Bábí followers icons for the virtues of the poor.

In Baghdad in the early 1860s, Baha’u’llah used to meet occasionally with Iranian princes of the Qajar house. Often such persons were out of favor with the shah and had taken refuge outside Iran near the Shi’i shrine cities of Karbala and Najaf, not far from Baghdad in Ottoman Iraq. He would inquire as to the political situation in Tehran. They complained at one point, however, that he never discussed spiritual issues with them, only worldly ones. In reply, Baha’u’llah set very stringent standards for his willingness to converse on things of the spirit. To one of the princes, Bahá’u’lláh said, “My purpose in coming to this corrupt world where the tyrants and traitors, by their acts of cruelty and oppression, have closed the doors of peace and tranquillity to all mankind, is to establish, through the power of God and His might, the forces of justice, trust, security and faith.”<sup>14</sup> He says that when these aims have been achieved, an attractive woman wearing jewelry should be able to travel all over the earth without fear of molestation, given the high standards of trustworthiness and justice that would have been attained. Bahá’u’lláh’s choice of example is interesting in that it focuses on sexual harrassment as a prevailing evil he wishes to see eliminated. Although the example he gives is of a wealthy woman being protected from the lust and greed of men, it goes without saying that most women likely to be sexually harrassed were poor, and so would be the primary beneficiaries of a true Bahá’í society.

Another example which Bahá’u’lláh provided the princes had to do with self-renunciation:

Suppose there is a very rich person whose wealth is enormous and beyond measure. And suppose that gradually and in the course of time he bestows so much of his wealth upon a poor person that he himself is reduced to absolute poverty while the poor man has turned into a very rich man. . . Suppose in his poor and distressed state he reaches a situation in which he incurs some small debt. Being unable to pay it, he is brought to a public square in town where he is humiliated and punished. He is further informed that his release will not be considered until he pays his debt. At this point suppose he sees his friend (who once was poor and as a result of his generosity has become rich). Should the thought



flash through his mind that he wishes that in return for all his generosity to him, this friend would now come forward and relieve him of this calamity, immediately all his deeds would become void, he would become deprived of the virtue of contentment and acquiescence, and would be shut away from the virtues of the human spirit.<sup>15</sup>

Personal obligations or individual gratitude, BahB'u'llah says, are not the point of his teachings on detachment from the material world. Thus, he says, if the second man, grown rich at the expense of the first, is tempted to help him out of specific gratitude, he too is lost. The only worthy motive is a universal one, irrespective of person. Love, giving, and responsibility to others must be all-encompassing. This principle is crucial, since otherwise the rich will help only the poor they know personally, and the poor so assisted will be more clients than simply fellow human beings.

In Edirne, where BahB'u'llah was kept in exile (1863–1868) by the Ottoman government, he continued to address the problem of the poor. His discourse here, however, takes on a more institutional tone, as he begins elaborating the bases of the new Bahá'í religion and considering its relationship to the governments of the world. In the Surah of God (*Suratu'llah*, ca. Spring, 1866), BahB'u'llah writes that a subject is better than a thousand rulers, a subordinate is more exalted than a myriad of superiors, and one oppressed is more excellent than a city full of tyrants. He urges the Bahá'ís to emulate Baha'u'llah himself in severing themselves from all things.<sup>16</sup> These pronouncements have the effect of turning upside down conventional social distinctions based on wealth and power. The subaltern is better than the elite, and the oppressed superior to the oppressor. Here, as in the Hidden Words and Five Treasures, Baha'u'llah condemns political tyranny along with excessive attachment to the things of this world, perhaps a clue that he thought the two things went together. Later, in the 'Akká period, he pointed out that many of the rich had been prevented by their riches from accepting the Bahá'í Faith, whereas many of the poor had attained to the mystical knowledge (*irfan*) of God.<sup>17</sup>

In the early-'Akka-period Surah of Utterance (*Surátu'l-Bayán*), BahB'u'llah reaffirmed the ethical foundations of his teachings on wealth and poverty. "Withhold not from the poor," he wrote, "the gifts which the grace of God hath bestowed upon you. He, verily, shall recompense the charitable, and doubly repay them for what they have bestowed."<sup>18</sup> In the same work, he reaffirms that God loves the poor, not because they are good, but because they are poor and suffering. He says:



If ye meet the abased or the down-trodden, turn not away disdainfully from them, for the King of Glory ever watcheth over them and surroundeth them with such tenderness as none can fathom except them that have suffered their wishes and desires to be merged in the Will of your Lord, the Gracious, the All-Wise. O ye rich ones of the earth! Flee not from the face of the poor that lieth in the dust, nay rather befriend him and suffer him to recount the tale of the woes with which God's inscrutable Decree hath caused him to be afflicted. By the righteousness of God! Whilst ye consort with him, the Concourse on high will be looking upon you, will be interceding for you will be extolling your names and glorifying your action. 19

The rich are urged, not simply to "give to the poor" in a cold or abstract way, but to actually befriend them and listen to their accounts of the travails through which they have lived. This very act of listening is itself raised to the station of a deed that brings the intercession of the Concourse on High.

In his Tablet to the Kings (*Surátu'l-Mulúk*) of the late Edirne period, Bahá'u'lláh, virtually alone and a political and religious prisoner under house arrest and in internal exile, dared address the Ottoman Sultan 'Abdu'l-'Aziz, his jailer. He urged the sultan not to pay his ministers and aides so well that they would be enabled to "lay up riches for themselves" or to be "numbered with the extravagant." He attacks the vast extremes of wealth he witnessed in the Ottoman imperial capital, where destitute rural immigrants lived near rich landlords, tax-farmers, and import-export merchants. He says: "We observed upon Our arrival in the City [Istanbul]" that some of its inhabitants "were possessed of an affluent fortune and lived in the midst of excessive riches, while others were in dire want and abject poverty. This ill beseemeth thy sovereignty, and is unworthy of thy rank."<sup>20</sup> The huge wealth inequalities visible in a Mediterranean city like Istanbul during the incipient Age of Capital shocked and dismayed Bahá'u'lláh. He correctly saw that government officials were among the chief exploiters of the people, amassing private fortunes from their public service, and warned the sultan not to "aggrandize thy ministers at the expense of thy subjects. Fear the sights 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." He calls the poor the ruler's "treasures on earth" and urges him to safeguard them from those who wish to rob and expropriate them. "Inquire into their affairs, and ascertain, every

year, nay every month, their condition, and be not of them that are careless of their duty.”<sup>21</sup> Not only do the rich owe an absolute responsibility to the poor, but so does the government. The state is charged with intervening against excessive extremes of wealth and poverty, and of continually monitoring the welfare of the citizenry.

The implicit danger to the poor here is overtaxation, especially the imposition of fraudulent or unwarranted taxes by state officials seeking to line their own pockets. Bahá'u'lláh identifies, in addition, another motive for excessive levies on the destitute, the arms race engaged in by modern states. He instructs the rulers of the earth to “compose your differences, and reduce your armaments, that the burden of your expenditures may be lightened, and that your minds and hearts may be tranquillized.” He urges states to engage in proactive peace-making of a sort that will allow them to have low military expenditures, and to maintain something akin to militias for self-defense rather than armies for conquest. He complains bitterly: “We have learned that you are increasing your outlay every year, and are laying the burden thereof on your subjects. This, verily, is more than they can bear, and is a grievous injustice.” He reaffirms that the poor are “the trust of God” in the midst of the rulers, and warns them against betraying that trust.<sup>22</sup>

The Tablet to the Kings is remarkable in subordinating the issue of world peace, a key teaching of Bahá'u'lláh, to that of the elimination of poverty. That is, one of the primary reasons given for the implementation of a peaceful world order is that this step will reduce military budgets and in turn allow lower rates of taxation on those least able to afford it. The corollary of this principle is the implication that martial, praetorian states create poverty and social injustice. In the beginning of his own independent ministry, then, Baha'u'llah goes beyond the ethical and mystical aspects of wealth and poverty that had preoccupied him in his Baghdad-era works, now addressing the role of the state. The government is responsible, in his view, for keeping the salaries of officials reasonable and taxes low and for continually inquiring into the condition of the poor and the means of improving it. This view of the responsibilities of the state, it should be noted, differs radically from that espoused by most nineteenth-century reformers, whether in the Middle East or Europe. Bahá'u'lláh's anti-militarism and his dim view of extremes of wealth and poverty clearly place him on the progressive end of the spectrum in the political discourse of the time.

In the early 'Akká period, from 1868, Baha'u'llah denounced the tyranny of the Ottoman state in no uncertain terms (*Lawh-i Fu'ád*) and began praising British-style parliamentary democracy. He praised Queen Victoria, in his tablet to her, for abolishing slavery and putting the reins of democratic governance (which he called, in nineteenth-century Middle Eastern parlance, "counsel") in the hands of the people. The word he uses for "people" (an-nas) indicates the common people, and it is clear that here he not only advocates that the state work for the interests of the poor, but also insists that the poor should have a voice in their own governance. His abolition of slavery reaffirms the inherent dignity of every human being before God, and it implies, by analogy, that not only classical slavery but also any form of unpaid or barely paid bondage is illicit.

In his Most Holy Book (*Kitáb-i Aqdas*; 'Akká, 1873), Bahá'u'lláh reaffirms the democratic principle, predicting that Iran would undergo a revolution and be ruled by a democracy of the people (*jumhur an-nas*).<sup>23</sup> Bahá'u'lláh's principle that Baha'i communities should be administered by local Houses of Justice (currently called local Spiritual Assemblies) comprised of lay believers also gave a voice to the poor. In a village, local Baha'i community policy is not made by a clergyman from the urban middle class posted to the countryside, but rather by the villagers themselves, who enjoy universal adult suffrage and freely elect representatives to the local Spiritual Assemblies. Again, in the 1990s, the vast majority of local Spiritual Assembly members are what most of those in the global North would consider "poor." Baha'u'llah instructed that the local Spiritual Assemblies make their decisions through "consultation," a process that allows a multitude of voices to be heard and encourages individuals to seek the truth and the best course, rather than to cling stubbornly to their initial opinions.

Several of the laws Bahá'u'lláh enacted in the Most Holy Book were aimed at improving the situation of the poor. He designates them as appropriate recipients of gifts during the annual Bahá'í festival, Ayyam-i Ha, in which presents are given prior to the period of the Fast.<sup>24</sup> He insists on universal education for children (in most of the world at that time, children received schooling only if their parents could afford to pay for it, and this is still the case in much of the global South) and makes the House of Justice responsible for providing instruction to indigent children.<sup>25</sup> Since education is a key to improved skills and economic independence, and since the education

of women brings down birth rates and allows them greater economic independence, universal education provided by social institutions such as the state or religious bodies can have an important impact on poverty. Also in the Most Holy Book, Bahá'u'lláh ordains the payment by Baha'is of *zakat*, a form of alms originating in Islam.<sup>26</sup> In contemporary Muslim countries such as Pakistan, *zakat* is formally assessed as a 2.5 percent annual levy on liquid wealth (principally bank accounts), and the funds are distributed in poor neighborhoods. Bahá'ís in the West have not yet begun paying *zakat*, but its implementation would be a significant step forward in providing funds for a proactive role by Bahá'í institutions in working with the poor. Although the percentage is small, if the funds were wisely employed they could, alongside governmental and private charitable efforts, have an important impact.

Helping the poor is also among the purposes of the larger Bahá'í tax of nineteen percent on profits or accumulated wealth, called the Right of God (*huququ'lláh*).<sup>27</sup> In his own lifetime, Bahá'u'lláh supervised the distribution of the Right of God to indigent Baha'is. One community asked him if they should support the impoverished with these funds, and he replied that this should only be done with his permission—he wanted an accounting of Right of God contributions and the particulars of its possible recipients among the poor. He feared that giving blanket authority for such measures to the new Bahá'í communities in Iran might prove a cause of dissension.<sup>28</sup> (Some who thought themselves deserving might blame the local believers in charge of the funds if they were excluded, whereas no one would argue with Baha'u'llah). Bahá'u'lláh's personal attention to the needs of impoverished Baha'is is quite touching, and his solicitude comes through in his letters, as for instance when he directs that specific sums from the Right of God be given to individuals like "Mr. A. Z." in Khurasan because he is in debt and anti-Bahá'í enemies have mulcted him.<sup>29</sup> In a letter to a prominent believer in Shiraz probably written around 1879–80, Baha'u'llah instructs that half the Right of God collected in that city be given to the poor. He adds that the community should strive, however, to see that all are provided with gainful employment, since being reduced to dependence on charity is inappropriate to the station of a human being.<sup>30</sup>

Baha'u'llah makes the indigent an issue for governmental and religious institutions and gives the poor an active voice in the governance

of both (in contrast to the kings, caliphs, and popes who ruled absolutely in his own day). Nor does he intend by “the poor” only men, for here, as elsewhere, he is concerned to overturn the gender inequities of patriarchy. He says that “the servants of God and His handmaidens are regarded on the same Plane.” Devoted Baha’i women, he writes, “excel over men in the sight of God. How numerous are the heroes and knights in the field who are bereft of the True One and have no share in His recognition.”<sup>31</sup>

Baha’u’llah envisages the rich working with the poor to change the world:

They who are possessed of riches, however, must have the utmost regard for the poor, for great is the honor destined by God for those poor who are steadfast in patience. By My life! There is no honor, except what God may please to bestow, that can compare to this honor. Great is the blessedness awaiting the poor that endure patiently and conceal their sufferings, and well is it with the rich who bestow their riches on the needy and prefer them before themselves.

Please God, the poor may exert themselves and strive to earn the means of livelihood. This is a duty which, in this most great Revelation, hath been prescribed unto every one, and is accounted in the sight of God as a goodly deed. Whoso observeth this duty, the help of the invisible One shall most certainly aid him. He can enrich, through His grace, whomsoever He pleaseth. He, verily, hath power over all things.<sup>32</sup>

Bahá’u’lláh continually stresses the self-worth, agency, and independent action of the poor themselves, which explains his emphasis on the need to earn a livelihood. Of course, the other side of this coin is the responsibility of the state and the economic system to provide gainful employment for all who seek it, a responsibility implied by Bahá’u’lláh’s emphasis on governmental responsibility in his Tablet to the Kings.

The patience Baha’u’llah calls for in the poor (a patience he exercised himself, for most of his life) is not a passive, static suffering. It is the patience that eschews violence and hatred while working ceaselessly toward the creation of a new civilization wherein the extremes of wealth and poverty would be eliminated at last. Bahá’u’lláh, in a Persian tablet, says to the devoted Bahá’í poor that they should not despair, for *even in this life* innumerable doors exist, and that the poor should open them with the fingers of volition so as to witness new worlds in this one. He announces that he keeps company with all who are poverty-stricken, gives his solicitude to the oppressed, and gazes

upon the grief-stricken. The delights of the Word of God, he says, transform and efface the bitterness of this ephemeral world.<sup>33</sup> The Word of God does not only solace the poor in their suffering or offer them a “mystical” escape from their pitiful condition. Rather, they are called upon to exercise their own wills in order to take advantage of opportunities for change that exist in this world, with the help of divine benevolence and of the principles revealed in Baha'i scripture. The poor, like other Bahá'ís, are called upon to denounce tyranny and infractions against basic human rights, to work for parliamentary democracy, to allow the expression of the views of the humblest Bahá'í within the community, and to reform the world's economy so as to reflect the divine attribute of justice.

Subsequent Baha'i holy figures, such as Bahá'u'lláh's son and authorized interpreter, 'Abdu'l-Baha (1844–1921), and the latter's grandson Shoghi Effendi (Guardian of the Baha'i Faith, 1921–1957), have further elaborated on issues in the theology of liberation. A special commitment to the poor continues to be evident in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's teachings, which include corporate profit-sharing, binding arbitration of labor disputes, a graduated income tax, a commitment to the abolition of poverty, and the condemnation of workers being impoverished while capitalists grow rich—which he refers to as “industrial slavery.” Nevertheless, as 'Abdu'l-Baha makes clear, he does not envisage a classless society, simply a society in which everyone is at least comfortable. In 1875, 'Abdu'l-Baha wrote:

Wealth is most commendable, provided the entire population is wealthy. If, however, a few have inordinate riches while the rest are impoverished, and no fruit or benefit accrues from that wealth, then it is only a liability to its possessor. If, on the other hand, it is expended for the promotion of knowledge, the founding of elementary and other schools, the encouragement of art and industry, the training of orphans and the poor—in brief, if it is dedicated to the welfare of society—its possessor will stand out before God and man as the most excellent of all who live on earth and will be accounted as one of the people of paradise.<sup>34</sup>

Shoghi Effendi wrote that the “Cause neither accepts the theories of the Capitalistic economics in *full*, nor can it agree with the Marxists and Communists in their repudiation of the principle of private ownership and of the vital sacred rights of the *individual*.”<sup>35</sup>

From 1908, 'Abdu'l-Baha, in response to the turmoil of the Iranian Constitutional Revolution (1905–11) reversed his earlier support for it

and temporarily adopted a policy of political neutrality.<sup>36</sup> This policy has since been maintained, during this early stage of the expansion of the Baha'i faith into a world religion, so as to avoid divisions within the community along political lines. Non-intervention in party politics, however, does not necessarily impede social activism, as Baha'is showed in the United States in the 1980s when they mobilized to work with other groups to aid the ratification of the United Nations Convention on Genocide bill by the U.S. Congress. Practical action for the poor, as with the establishment by the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of India of numerous vocational schools in that country, are clearly key duties for all Baha'is. Bahá'u'lláh does not prescribe only a sort of paternalistic philanthropy, however. Rather, he urges that the voices of the poor themselves be heard, and that the poor exercise their own volition and agency in changing their condition.

A Baha'i theology of liberation must begin from and take account of key themes in the Revelation of the Manifestation of God for this day. In the passage quoted at the beginning of this essay, Bahá'u'lláh speaks of having been chained in order to win the release (*itlaq*) of the world from its bondage, and having been imprisoned in the Most Great Fortress in order to emancipate (*'itq*; literally, to manumit from slavery) all peoples. The theme of emancipation is therefore central to Bahá'u'lláh's message and intimately bound up with Bahá'í theophany. God loves the poor because of their suffering, watching over them and surrounding them with supreme tenderness. The poor, because of their lack of material means, are "rich in God," and their sufferings can aid them on the spiritual path, even if not all among the poor avail themselves of this natural advantage. The rich, in contrast, labor under a vast spiritual disability that can only with the greatest difficulty be overcome. To draw near to the divine Beloved, the rich must invest substantial amounts of their wealth in improving the conditions of the poor, ensuring that the latter are no longer needy. They must be motivated in so doing by nothing less than universal love.

The state has a key role to play, according to Bahá'u'lláh. It must intervene through tax policy and in other ways to prevent the accumulation of vast disparities in wealth between rich and poor, must ensure that taxes on the less-well-off are as low as possible, and must work for peace and world government in order to keep the military budget minimal. It must prevent slavery (and therefore bonded labor) and must give even the poor a voice in government through democratic, parliamentary elections.



Bahá'í institutions themselves have a responsibility to the destitute, to ensure the education of their young and to distribute to the needy the proceeds of the *zakat* alms-tax and some of the Huququ'llah, the "Right of God." Since Baha'i administrative institutions are elected by the local community, the Bahá'ís already have thousands of grassroots village communities governed by and for the poor, which are experimenting with new societal values. Baha'ís have a constant duty to remind the rich of the "midnight sighing of the poor." Baha'u'llah throws down the false idol of the market as the unchallenged system for distributing wealth (whatever its virtues in distributing goods). The emphasis here on social action in addition to spiritual concerns is characteristic of the Baha'i Faith, which inherited from Islam both a strong mystical strain and a this-worldly orientation, combining these with a distinctly modern vision. All human beings, Baha'u'llah says, "have been created to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization."<sup>37</sup>

The challenge for Baha'ís while they are a relatively small community of six million, mostly themselves poor, is to ever remain mindful that involuntary poverty is evil and illegitimate, that the vast wealth of capitalism has frequently been the fruit of the exploitation of workers and peasants ("industrial slavery"), and that structural changes must be introduced and society transformed if things are to change. Charitable work is highly praiseworthy, but within the context of rapaciously materialist societies it always faces the danger of being coopted by the *laissez-faire* status quo.

Another danger lies in becoming absorbed in the economic theories and minutiae that might underlie a Baha'i social democracy. In the end, what is wanted in a Baha'i theology of liberation is not social policy alone but universal love, not only new bureaucracies but also steadfast faith in the Promised of all Ages, not class struggle but class transcendence, not a patronizing of the poor but their empowerment and enrichment. Social action must be grounded in mystical perception and in faith. As Baha'u'llah instructed us: "Be a treasure to the poor, an admonisher to the rich, an answerer of the cry of the needy, a preserver of the sanctity of thy pledge."<sup>38</sup>

What is needed is not choirs singing to one side as corporate union busters intimidate on the shop floor or as the shock troops of an excessive industrialism murder Yanomamo Indians in order to despoil the Amazon rain forest. We are all challenged to listen to the poor—"suffer

him to recount the tale of the woes with which God's inscrutable Decree hath caused him to be afflicted"-and join with them in radically critiquing the conditions of our collective existence.

### NOTES

I am grateful for substantive comments on earlier drafts of this paper to John Walbridge, Todd Lawson, Seena Fazel, Khazeh Fananapazir, and J. A. (Jack) McLean.

1. See Dan Cohn-Sherbok, *ed.*, **World Religions and Human Liberation** (Maryknoll, MD: Orbis, 1992).

2. Bahá'u'lláh, quoted in *Ma'idih-i Asmani*, 9 vols. (Tehran: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1972) vol. 4, p. 96.

3. **Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh**, trans. Shoghi Effendi (Wilmette, Ill.: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1976) p. 99. This passage is from a late-'Akka period work; see Bahá'u'lláh, *al-Kitáb al-Mubin* (Bombay, n.d.) p. 307. All passages in **Gleanings** can be found in the original languages in Bahá'u'lláh, *Muntakhabati az athar-i Hadrat-i Bahá'u'lláh* (Hofheim: Bahá'í Verlag, 1984).

4. Bahá'u'lláh, *Athar-i Qalam-i A'la*, 7 volumes (Bombay and Tehran: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1890-1978), vol. 7, p. 5.

5. For the nineteenth-century Baha'i community, see my "Religious Dissidence and Urban Leadership: Bahá'ís in Qajar Shiraz and Tehran," in Michael Bonine and Ahmad Ashraf, eds. *City and Society in Qajar Iran*, forthcoming. S.V. "Iran," by Moojan Momen, in Moojan Momen and John Walbridge, eds., *A Short Encyclopaedia of the Baha'i Faith*, 2 vols. (Wilmette, Ill.: Baha'i Publishing Trust, forthcoming); and Peter Smith, *The Babi and Bahá'í Religions: From Messianic Shi'ism to a World Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987) chapter 6: "The Iranian Baha'i Community, c. 1866-1921." For the impoverished weavers of Kashan, see Haydar 'Alí Isfahani, *Stories from the Delight of Hearts*, trans. A. Q. Faizi (Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 1980) p. 96.

6. See Peter Smith and Moojan Momen, "The Bahá'í Faith, 1957-1988: A Survey of Contemporary Developments," *Religion* 19 (1989) pp. 63-91.

7. Important works here include Gustavo Gutierrez, *The Power of the Poor in History* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1984) and Leonardo Boff, *On the Edge: Religion and Marginalized Existence*, trans. Robert R. Barr (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1989). Good discussions of the context of these works include Harvey Cox, *The Silencing of Leonardo Boff: The Vatican and the Future of World Christianity* (Oak Park, Ill.: Meyer Stone Books, 1988) and Penny Lernoux, *People of God: The Struggle for World Catholicism* (New

York: Viking Penguin, 1989). However, clearly both Bahá'í scripture and the lived experience of Bahá'ís as a distinct religious community have their own individuality, which will become apparent. I am taking the works cited above as starting-points for my own investigation, and am not attempting to simply clone them. Much of the impetus for what I have to say here comes from points made to me by Baha'i workers and villagers in Senegal, Gambia, India, Lebanon, and Jordan.

8. See Charles Issawi, ed., *The Economic History of Iran, 1800–1914* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), and John Foran, *Fragile Resistance: Social Transformation in Iran from 1500 to the Revolution* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1993).

9. Bahá'u'lláh, *The Hidden Words*, trans. Shoghi Effendi (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1979). Below, passages from this work will be cited by number and language (e.g., "Arabic, No. 4").

10. Baha'u'llah, *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*, trans. Shoghi Effendi (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1971) p. 55.

11. Quoted in Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* (Wilmette, Ill.: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1970) p. 137.

12. Bahá'u'lláh, *ibid.*

13. Nabil Zarandi, *Ibid.*

14. Baha'u'llah, quoted in Nabil-i Zarandi, *Panj Ganj* and translated in Adib Taherzadeh, *The Revelation of Baha'u'llah*, 4 vols. (Oxford: George Ronald, 1974/1987) vol. 2, p. 141.

15. *Ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 142.

16. Bahá'u'lláh, "Súrat Allah," in *Athar-i Qalám-i A'lá*, vol. 4 (Tehran: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 125B.E./1968) p. 23; Juan R. I. Cole, "Redating the Surah of God (Surat Allah): An Edirne Tablet of 1866?—Provisional Translation Appended" *Baha'i Studies Bulletin* vol. 6:4–7:2 (October 1992) p. 11.

17. Baha'u'llah, *Athar-i Qalám-i A'lá*, vol. 6, p. 241.

18. *Gleanings*, p. 278.

19. *Ibid.*, pp. 314–15.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 235.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 236.

22. *Ibid.*, pp. 250–51.

23. Baha'u'llah, *The Kitab-i-Aqdas: The Most Holy Book* (Haifa: Baha'i World Centre, 1992) para. 93.

24. *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, para. 16

25. *Kitab-i-Aqdas*, para. 48

26. *Kitab-i-Aqdas*, para. 146

27. Bahá'u'lláh in *The Compilation of Compilations*, 2 vols. (Sidney: Bahá'í Publications Australia, 1991) vol. 1, p. 504, cf. vol. 1, p. 515. I am grateful to Seena Fazel for this citation.

28. Baha'u'llah, *Athar-i Qalám-i A'lá*, vol. 7, pp. 236–37.

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29. *Majmu'ih-i Alváh-i Mubárakí*, p. 196.

30. *Athár-i Qalám-i A'lá*, vol. 6, p. 283.

31. Both passages from Baha'u'llah, quoted in *Compilation of Compilations*, vol. 2, p. 358.

32. *Gleanings*, pp. 202-3; Baha'u'llah, *Zqtidarat va Chand Lawh-i Digar* (Bombay: n.p., 1310A.H./1892-93) pp. 291-96.

33. Baha'u'llah, quoted in *Ma'idih-i Asmání*, vol. 4, p. 96.

34. *The Secret of Divine Civilization*, trans. Marzieh Gail (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1970) pp. 24-25.

35. Quoted in Badi Shams, *A Bahá'í Perspective on Economics of the Future* (New Delhi: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1989) pp. 1-2. Earlier points made in this paragraph about 'Abdu'l-Bahá's teachings can also be found in this useful compilation.

36. Juan R.I. Cole, "Iranian Millenarianism and Democratic Thought in the 19th Century." *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 24 (1992) pp. 1-26.

37. *Gleanings*, p. 215.

38. *Ibid.*, p. 285.