

THE SEARCH FOR A JUST SOCIETY

Author: John Huddleston

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In today's tumultuous world, perspective is in dire demand. *The Search for a Just Society*, in 500 pages, demonstrates in suggestive rather than exhaustive detail that despite the global wars of the twentieth century, humankind is objectively moving towards a more just society. The book reviews the critical but quiet roles of ethics and religion in this progress and cogently argues for the need for a comprehensive philosophy to guide humankind in the future. Using language familiar to historians, economists, and political scientists, *The Search* offers the Bahá'í Faith as such a comprehensive perspective—one that applies sound spiritual approaches to the real problems confronting humankind. Even the most cynical reader will be hard pressed to avoid the conclusion that the Bahá'í Faith offers a (if not the only) healthy and pragmatic prescription for building a just society.

In some books the preface is surplusage, devoted to comments on how the book came to be or extending thanks to those individuals who assisted the author. The preface in *The Search* contains the answer to the first question raised by its title, what is a just society. It is "a society which gives freedom to all its citizens and encourages them to achieve their full potential—physical, mental and spiritual" (xiii). This requires, in addition to physical security, a responsive government open to all citizens and "an ethical system that inspires a sense of the oneness of mankind, intellectual integrity, and responsibility both for development of the self and for promoting the welfare of others . . ." (xiii).

The Search is divided into three parts. "The Past" presents the general principles, the theorems on which the author constructs his thesis. "The Present" is the longest part and presents the author's original and insightful analysis of the developments in the last two centuries. "The Future" presents the Bahá'í Faith as the inspiration for the author's perspective and as the wisest choice for the present and future guidance of humanity. The book has a straightforward pragmatic style that should appeal to all readers and which may be particularly challenging to those unfamiliar with the Bahá'í Faith.

The Past

The first ten chapters of Part I reveal the fundamental role of religion in the evolution of the concept of a just society. Religions have provided humanity with ethics, "the basic motivations of the individual and the community, and a sense of distinction between right and wrong" (3). The author sketches the contributions of the major religions from the early Egyptian civilization (3200 B.C.) through Muhammad and the spread of Islam. He also includes short chapters on "Greece and the Rational Philosophers" and "Pax Romana."

Part I concludes with an unexpected twist, a chapter covering the English Revolution, the American Revolution, and the French Revolution. The author

views these as brightly burning flames that "were to spread across the whole western world and in the nineteenth century to become a mighty blaze of ideas and movements for the creation of the just society" (63). This claim seems reasonable in light of the worldwide dominance of "Western" culture over the last 200 years.

The Present

Since the process of recording the present reduces it to the past, it is not surprising that Part II is actually three perspectives on modern history: "Greater Political and Social Equality," "Reducing Material Poverty," and "From War to Peace." Each section is rich enough to merit its own volume, and the first two are particularly valuable because they present history in terms of the evolution of values rather than as a chronology of wars and individuals. *The Search's* unique and intuitively correct approach to Greater Political and Social Reality focuses on three broad themes: (1) the abolition of slavery and serfdom; (2) the widespread emergence of the national state; and (3) the development and spread of democracy.

The discussion of the abolition of slavery is inspired. The author explains that the abolition of slavery was "the greatest moral triumph of the nineteenth century . . ." (84). Huddleston notes that it was arguably the result of the ascendancy of moral development in the oppressor countries over their static economic interests.

Unfortunately, the voluntary abolition of slavery is sketched in a mere ten pages, tantalizing the serious scholar but denying the pleasure of a more thorough treatment. The scholar also may be frustrated by the author's use of a selected bibliography at the end of the book rather than specific citations within each chapter. However, the multiple footnotes required to document all the issues discussed in *The Search* would make the volume difficult to read and unreasonably expand its length.

Another of *The Search's* limitations, one which is perhaps understandable considering the realities of international politics over the last two centuries, is its almost total concentration on "Western civilization," particularly England, France, and the United States. For example, seven of the ten pages on slavery are devoted to these countries, and the remaining three pages primarily concern the activities of other European countries and Russia.

The Search connects the abolition of slavery to the subsequent emergence of nation states; "the process of [developing] self-determination for peoples with a common cultural heritage" (94). Consistent with its treatment of the voluntary abolition of slavery, *The Search* lists among the reasons for the decline of colonialism after World War II, a growing doubt on the part of citizens of colonial powers as to the legitimacy of their rule over other peoples. The discussion concludes with the comments that (1) a system of nation states is a firmer foundation on which to build a new world order than the previously existing system of dynastic rights and conquest, and (2) patriotism is a practical safeguard against a future world government ever declining into dictatorship (118).

In the values behind the abolition of slavery and the emergence of nation states, the author perceives the development of a general view that "the only legitimate form of government was one freely chosen by all the people to whom it had to be fully accountable" (119). The essential requirements for universal suffrage (secret balloting, equal voting rights, and salaried elected offices that are open to all) are reviewed, and the development of democracy in Western civilization is outlined.

The Search also considers two critical, but less-often discussed, requirements for democracy. The first is the emancipation of women. *The Search* notes the obvious—that women constitute one-half of the world's population—and more profoundly contends that "feminine qualities are required just as much as masculine qualities in the development of a balanced and just society" (145). The other requirement is widespread access to objective information. The author recommends that the news media should not be controlled by the government and should instead be split into competing units to avoid the possibility of control by a single source (157–58).

The second major theme in Part II is progress towards the elimination of poverty. Huddleston suggests that those struggling to eliminate poverty have followed five broad avenues: trade unions, cooperatives, socialism, the welfare state, and the consumer society. To the average reader, these categories may seem arbitrary. The brief discussions of each avenue's historic development in Western countries does not explain the author's choice of categories. Nonetheless, the discussion of the welfare state contains some provocative thoughts on public health (preventing illness, curing illness, maintaining the ill), housing the poor, universal education, crime and punishment, and taxes as a means of sharing the cost of government.

In addition, the American reader will find *The Search's* comments on the consumer society particularly relevant. The term "consumer society" in itself implies a lack of balance, a decline in spiritual values and ethics and an elevation of manifestations of hedonism. These include a compulsive urge to collect material things, the "cult of sexual freedom," and the widespread use of alcohol and other drugs for stimulation and entertainment. The author is particularly critical of the consumer society's propensity to destroy the natural environment through consumption of scarce resources and pollution.

In fairness, it should be noted that the author is not enthusiastic about any of the identified avenues taken in the struggle for eliminating poverty. While he credits certain avenues with contributing to the development of a just society, Huddleston contends that further progress requires the recognition and adherence to a new path.

Before considering the nature of this new path, the author presents his third theme: the movement from war to peace, "the development of international cooperation and arrangements for the peaceful settlement of disputes" (271). This chronological presentation starts with "The Congress System, 1815–1914," considers the League of Nations, as well as the creation of the United Nations, and concludes with a short discussion of recent developments in the resolution

of international conflicts. Although a scholar may be frustrated by the summary descriptions of historic developments, the presentation is persuasive. The discussions on (1) how advancements in science and technology are turning the world into a global village, (2) the impact of a growing number of voluntary non-governmental organizations with global perspectives, and (3) the growing ability of the United Nations to encourage peaceful resolutions of international disputes, clearly show movement toward a just society in the twentieth century, despite (or perhaps because of) the intervention of the two World Wars.

The Future

The progress humanity has made is not enough. The author opines that "humanity today faces challenges greater in magnitude and complexity than at any time since the beginning of civilization" and that "pragmatic muddling through in the traditional political fashion is not likely to be enough" (399). The prescribed elixir is a revival of the movement of progressive forces, but one that will unite those that emphasize "a free society with a democratic form of government" with those who "give the highest priority to the removal of the obstacles to human development that come from extremes of wealth and poverty . . ." (399); provide a comprehensive program that gives direction and responds to the major issues facing humankind; and produce the great awakening of popular enthusiasm and sustained commitment necessary for its goals to be achieved.

The Search posits two alternatives: some new, syncretic philosophy incorporating all that is best from the movements of the past, or a return to the consistent force behind humanity's search for a just society—religion. The first alternative seems unlikely as the work of a committee is seldom all-embracing or enthusiastically supported. Instead, *The Search* offers the Bahá'í Faith as a comprehensive prescription for the development of a just society. In support of this proposition, the remainder of the book examines the Bahá'í Faith's broad vision to see if it is likely to motivate change; reviews the Bahá'í Faith's program of action to see if it is a practical approach to building a just society; briefly sketches the long-term goals of the Bahá'í Faith; and concludes with a short history of the Bahá'í community.

The Bahá'í Faith is introduced through several themes. Wisely first, considering the nature of *The Search*, is the teaching that religion and science cannot be in conflict; they are complementary views of the same truth. "If some aspect of a religious teaching is clearly in conflict with concrete evidence provided by science, then that teaching is superstition and it is science which is correct" (403). Science, however, is no inexorable march to truth. Scientists are human and consciously or unconsciously reflect the values of their cultures.

The next theme presented is the Bahá'í perspective of the two sides to humans, the physical and that which distinguishes humanity from animals. The second side finds expression in love and concern for the well-being of others, and in a need for "a meaning to life beyond mere physical existence" (407). It is the Bahá'í view that the purpose of humankind is to develop the "spiritual" side of human nature, to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization.

The reader is then introduced to the Bahá'í concept of progressive revelation and the Bahá'í approach to change. The universe and society are seen as in constant motion, growing and changing in a non-linear, organic manner. Belief in God and the divine attributes provides a sense of humility and protection that allows the individual to accept, and work for, change.

In considering whether the Bahá'í Faith is a practical approach, *The Search*, after noting the Bahá'í Faith's guidelines for individuals and the family, stresses its teachings on collective action. These include: a unique administrative system based on spiritual values that adopts some of the positive features of existing systems; an electoral system based on spiritual values that focuses on the election of the administrative body as a whole and prohibits campaigning; a decision-making process based on consultation that seeks unanimity, not just a majority, and which demands that decisions be supported by all (even if they did not vote in favor of the decision); and an obedience to authority that sanctions the pursuance of change only through lawful means.

The Search then outlines some of the Bahá'í Faith's long-range goals. Bahá'ís are working for the political and social unification of the world on the basis of diversity. A world federal government would have legislative, executive and judicial branches, backed up by a world police force (which would be the only significant armed group permitted). Such a government would ensure universal systems of education for women and men, promote a universal auxiliary language and script, and encourage that the provision of minimal social services were available equally to all.

The Bahá'ís also strive for a just distribution of economic resources. This means abolishing the excesses of wealth and poverty while continuing to reward those who contribute most to the welfare of society and withholding rewards from those able-bodied persons who contribute little. Steps that will promote economic justice include genuine worldwide free trade, a world currency, a worldwide calendar, and global concern with the conservation and development of natural resources. These goals are supported by teachings encouraging the rich to contribute to the communal treasury, favoring a genuine progressive income tax system, and prohibiting gambling.

The author urges that the Bahá'í Faith's vision is a realistic step-by-step approach to the establishment of a just society. There must be a global cessation of war before a general consensus of values can be achieved. The evolution to a just society requires both the cultivation of noble qualities by individuals and the simultaneous development of new ways of organizing collective action. Individuals must balance their freedoms and responsibilities, recognizing that the good of the community will require the curtailment of some individual freedoms. At the same time, institutions must remain flexible so that critical principles may be fairly applied to the wide range of issues that can, and will, arise in this diverse world.

The Search concludes with a brief sketch of the history of the Bahá'í Faith. In response to the obvious question of why such a comprehensive message has only five million adherents, the author notes: the Bahá'í Faith's rate of growth is

one of the fastest for any religion in the world; the Faith attracts people from every religious background (Zoroastrian, Hindu, Buddhist, Jewish, Christian, and Muslim); the Bahá'ís are incredibly diverse (formally educated and those without school learning; men and women, young and old, black and white, occidental and oriental, all work and worship together); and as witnessed by its treatment in Iran, the Bahá'í Faith has the ability to withstand persecution. The author concludes that the Bahá'í Faith is not merely an acorn from which great things are expected, but a young tree whose righteousness and potential are readily apparent to the discerning eye.

One reason for the proliferation of perspectives in Western culture may be the separation of secular studies from religious and spiritual approaches. *The Search for a Just Society* offers three valuable responses to this situation. First, it soundly demonstrates the limitations of the secularized approaches favored in the Western world. Second, Huddleston makes a compelling argument that the very values which fanned the flames of the English, American, and French Revolutions, lead the serious thinker to an investigation of the Bahá'í Faith. This thesis is the volume's most original contribution, as it suggests that spiritual values underlie, rather than contradict, Western approaches to the problems facing humankind. Third, the reader is challenged to consider whether, as the author believes, the Bahá'í Faith's spiritual approach is also a pragmatic prescription for building a just society. *The Search for a Just Society* should be compulsory reading for all who seek to shape the affairs of humankind.

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