

## FOREWORD

# Bahá'í-Inspired Perspectives on Human Rights

A bibliographical review<sup>1</sup> indicates that the earliest use of the terminology of human rights in publications by Bahá'í institutions coincided with the inception of their official relationship with the United Nations. In fact, three of the first four documents<sup>2</sup> submitted to the newly established international organization in 1947 and 1948 were statements on various aspects of this subject intended as contributions to the preparatory work on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.<sup>3</sup> The first of these was an eight-page statement entitled “A Bahá'í Declaration of Human Obligations and Rights”, which was presented to the Human Rights Commission in February 1947 on behalf of eight national Bahá'í administrative bodies. During the sixties and seventies, this statement was reprinted a number of times and supplemented by others with such titles as “Human Rights: Basis for World Peace”, “Human Rights are God-Given Rights” and “Divine Law, Source of Human Rights”.

The first attempt at an analytic approach by an individual believer appears to be Philip Hainsworth's *Bahá'í Focus on Human Rights*, a 64-page booklet published in 1985, which may be viewed as the antecedent of the present volume.

While these early publications were clearly stimulated by developments outside the Bahá'í community and employed a pre-existing vocabulary, certain distinctive elements can be identified in the approach adopted, reflecting an effort to root it in the teachings of the Bahá'í religion. This was done primarily by reference to the basic concept that every person is an essentially spiritual being endowed by the Creator with talents and capacities, and that the purpose of life is to realize that potential for the benefit of society as well as the individual concerned. The equal dignity of all human beings and the need for both solidarity and legal equality among them are clearly posited in many passages of the Bahá'í sacred scriptures. Furthermore, these ideas are encapsulated in the concept of the “oneness of mankind”, which is described as the “pivot round which all the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh revolve”.<sup>4</sup> From these elements, the early literature derived two key principles:

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- To the extent that human rights refer to conditions of existence that are necessary to enable human beings to realize the purpose of their existence, one may infer that such rights have a source in the Divine Will.
- To avoid nurturing a sense of personal entitlement that is fundamentally selfish and anti-social, there must be a clear linkage and a proper balance between rights and privileges, on the one hand, and obligations and responsibilities, on the other.

While neither of these ideas broke totally new ground, each challenged to some extent the secular liberalism of Western culture, which was clearly the dominant influence in the framing of the Universal Declaration.

Another point is worth making, if only because cynics may be quick to attribute to mere expediency any interest in human rights manifested by a religious community that represents one-thousandth part of the world population and is a minority nearly everywhere.<sup>5</sup> In actual fact, the primary substantive focus of the human rights discourse of the Bahá'í community, as reflected in the early literature, was racial and gender equality. The writers made it quite clear that it was not their purpose to advocate any particular course of action, but rather to demonstrate that the Bahá'í Faith could make a contribution to questions of topical interest. Only after the recrudescence of active persecution directed against the Bahá'í community in Iran did religious liberty emerge as a significant theme in this discourse.

Bahá'í discourse on human rights has matured considerably since those early days. It has been enriched as much by the continuing struggle with systematic repression, experienced directly by the Bahá'ís of Iran and vicariously by their fellow believers around the world, as by the publication of a book on freedom of religion<sup>6</sup> and a number of articles<sup>7</sup> and statements examining different aspects of the subject. The thought-provoking pieces collected in this virtual volume will propel it forward another stage.

Without in any way diminishing the credit due to those who have labored to bring forth this important new publication, it is not inappropriate to remind ourselves that much remains to be done. On the one hand, the subject of the rights and obligations of human beings is as vast and as intricate as it is critical to the future of the planet. On the other, the Bahá'í revelation is replete with fresh insights on the nature of the human being, of civilization and of the interactive relationship between the individual and his or her social environment. Bahá'u'lláh consciously set out to provide a spiritually-based legal framework for a new civilization, albeit in seminal form, and there are innumerable passages in the Bahá'í scriptures which speak in the language of rights and obligations. In a summary of the principal teachings of the Bahá'í Faith during a talk given in Philadelphia in 1912, 'Abdu'l-Bahá stated:

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Bahá'u'lláh taught that an equal standard of human rights must be recognized and adopted. In the estimation of God, all men are equal; there is no distinction or preferment for any soul in the dominion of His justice and equity.<sup>8</sup>

In our ongoing exploration of various facets of this complex subject, it is important that due attention continue to be devoted to human rights principles as they apply within the Bahá'í community. We may take some comfort in the fact that the unique legal and institutional structure that forms an integral part of this religion provides safeguards against the kinds of gross abuse that have blackened the annals of past centuries, as well as in the likelihood that it will be a long time indeed before Bahá'í institutions wield temporal power. Shoghi Effendi's warnings against the proliferation of detailed regulations at this early stage in the development of the Bahá'í administrative order should also be borne in mind. Nonetheless, it may well be that the healthy development and continued vitality of Bahá'í communities will depend on an ever-deeper understanding of the distinctive approach to individual rights and responsibilities mandated by the Bahá'í teachings.<sup>9</sup>

In any case, as the Bahá'í community emerges from obscurity, the world at large will increasingly weigh the credibility of its human rights discourse and the value of its contribution on matters of general interest against the actual performance of Bahá'í communities in the management of their internal affairs. Our collective pursuit of excellence in this critical area can be powerfully assisted by the work of scholars and thinkers such as those who have contributed to this commendable undertaking.

Dr. Albert Lincoln

## Footnotes

- 1 Based on Collins, W. P. (1990). Bibliography of English-Language Works on the Bábí and Bahá'í Faiths, 1844-1985. Oxford, United Kingdom: George Ronald.
- 2 The fourth was the response of Shoghi Effendi Rabbani, Head of the Bahá'í Faith, to letter from the United Nations Special Committee in Palestine asking his position on the future of the Holy Land. See *The Bahá'í Relationship with the United Nations*. (1956) The Bahá'í World, vol. XII. Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust. p. 597.
- 3 The drafting, which began in early 1947, was completed in June 1948, and the Declaration was adopted on 10 December 1948.
- 4 Shoghi Effendi (1955). The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh. Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust. p. 42.
- 5 The only exceptions being a few small villages in remote areas of the third world.

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- 6 Bahiyih Tahzib (1995). Freedom of Religion or Belief: Ensuring Effective International Legal Protection. The Hague, The Netherlands: Kluwerlaw International.
- 7 E.g., Matthew Weinberg (1998). *The Human Rights Discourse: A Bahá'í Perspective*. The Bahá'í World 1996-97. Haifa, Israel: World Centre Publications. pp. 247-273.
- 8 'Abdu'l-Bahá (1982). Promulgation of Universal Peace. Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust. p. 182.
- 9 See letter from the Universal House of Justice to the Followers of Bahá'u'lláh in the United States of America dated 29 December 1988, published separately as Universal House of Justice (1989). *Individual Rights and Freedoms in the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*. Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust.

## INTRODUCTION

The discipline of human rights is a colorful arena filled with various perspectives and experiences. Some argue that the quest for human rights has been present “at every stage of history”<sup>1</sup> while others see the discipline as a more recent phenomenon. What stands clear is the fact that the conscious process of recognizing the need for human rights for the entire planet began in 1948, with the establishment of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.<sup>2</sup> As one of the first collective expressions of an international community, the Declaration was conceived after the atrocities of the two World Wars, which left no room for a bewildered humanity to continue its sufferings in the face of ongoing crimes and violations.<sup>3</sup>

This body of articles represents an expression of a collective desire to value human life and preserve its dignity and development. Eleanor Roosevelt, perhaps the most prominent figure in the conception of this Declaration,<sup>4</sup> called it “the international Magna Carta of all men everywhere”<sup>5</sup> Many rejoiced at the accomplishment of this “epoch-making event.”<sup>6</sup> The Universal Declaration, combined with the subsequent Covenants on Civil and Political Rights, and Economic, Social and Cultural Rights represent the basic standards for the protection and development of human life regardless of race, religion, gender or class.

Human Rights are a combination of individual and collective values and standards that may be viewed as a response to human needs. They are “a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations.”<sup>7</sup> As explained by the Bahá’í International Community, “a human right is an expression of man’s divine endowment given social status by a moral and sovereign body. A right attains social status only after it has become a moral value asserted and maintained as a necessary quality of human relationships by the members of the community.”<sup>9</sup> Their universalization offers a pattern for attitudes and actions that are conducive to preservation of “justice, progress and peace”<sup>8</sup> for all humanity.

Over the past century, the Bahá’í community has played an active role in the promotion of universal spiritual verities that enhance a culture of human rights. One of the most prominent features of this active role is the introduction and integration of Bahá’u’lláh’s teachings to the discipline of human rights. With the presentation of A Bahá’í Declaration of Human Obligations and Rights in 1947, the

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Bahá'í International Community began its contribution to the rising United Nations and its agencies in upholding human rights as an essential feature of governance in the global community. Having released scores of statements on various aspects of human rights from a Bahá'í perspective, the Bahá'í community favors one main approach to the promotion and protection of human rights, that of education.

As debates on emerging dimensions of human rights continue, one may pause to reflect on exploring a Bahá'í-inspired perspective. Based on the body of Sacred Writings of the Bahá'í Faith, documents by the Bahá'í International Community, contributions by authors and scholars in human rights and related fields, we may enhance our understanding of the relation between the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh and the discipline of human rights. Such a comprehensive approach is an integral part of enhancing human rights discourse as explained by the Bahá'í International Community:

Concern for human rights can be found throughout the Bahá'í Writings. Bahá'u'lláh, urges the rulers of the earth to “rule with justice ... safeguard the rights of the down-trodden, and punish the wrong-doers.”<sup>10</sup> In *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, ‘Abdu'l-Bahá emphasizes the importance of educating for human rights: “Bahá'u'lláh taught that an equal standard of human rights must be recognized and adopted” and, “there shall be an equality of rights and prerogatives for all mankind.” Shoghi Effendi, in the *World Order of Bahá' u' lláh*, stresses that “[t]he unity of the human race, as envisaged by Bahá'u'lláh, implies the establishment of a world commonwealth in which .... the autonomy of its state members and the personal freedom and initiative of the individuals that compose them are definitely and completely safeguarded.” Moreover, in *The Promise of World Peace*, the Universal House of Justice underscores the importance of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* and its related conventions, asserting that “all such measures, if courageously enforced and expanded, will advance the day when the specter of war will have lost its power to dominate international relations.”<sup>9</sup>

It is in light of the above that from the earliest days of the Bahá'í Faith, its community of followers has made every effort to help establish a global community committed to the protection of universal human rights. As the Bahai International Community continues its services to the peoples of the world, the promotion of human rights and human rights education evolves into a permanent feature of the efforts by its institutions and supporters. The formal statement on *The Work of Bahá'is in Promotion of Human Rights* published in 1948, demonstrates the dedication of the Bahá'í community to the integration of human rights in every aspect of global community life.<sup>11</sup>

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With a fresh wave of persecution against the Bahá'ís in Iran during the latter years of the Twentieth Century, the Bahá'í International Community once again intensified its efforts to help restore the rights of the Iranian Bahá'ís. But more importantly, it reaffirmed the Bahá'í commitment to the promotion of human rights through education “as the essential factor in eradicating prejudice”<sup>11</sup> deemed as a root-cause of intolerance, based on religion, race or gender.

When in 1994 UNESCO launched a Decade for Human Rights Education, the Bahá'í International Community welcomed the proclamation and stated “Education which instills in hearts and minds an awareness of and a sensitivity to the human rights of all persons constitutes, in our opinion, an essential tool for the promotion and implementation of international human rights standards.” One of the main goals of the decade-long campaign is to advance “the fabric of rights knowledge”<sup>12</sup> and enrich the grassroots level with a new understanding that “education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms.”<sup>13</sup>

Human rights education is perceived as “a young academic venture”<sup>14</sup> and an organic process focusing on the holistic development of the internal realities of man with the advancement of the world at large. Part of this process relies upon the *Plan of Action* brought forth by the Decade for Human Rights Education:

- i. Strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms
- ii. Developing the human personality and the sense of dignity
- iii. Promoting understanding, tolerance, gender equality, and friendship among nations, indigenous people, racial, ethnic, religious, and linguistic groups
- iv. Enabling all peoples to operate effectively in a free society
- v. Furthering the activities of the UN in peace maintenance

From a Bahá'í perspective, Human Rights Education is a process of transformation of thoughts, values and attitudes. To affect any degree of transformation, it is essential to create a new mindset in accordance with the realities of life at this juncture in human history. The essence of such perspective “derives directly from Bahá'u'lláh's vision of humanity as one people.”<sup>15</sup> The recognition of the oneness of humankind, the Bahá'í Writings suggest, is the most potent means of emancipating humanity from oppressive forces that have made human rights a universal longing.

It is in light of such understanding that the present volume was launched. To maximize the impact of this important work, a selected number of individuals were invited to contribute to the first volume of this publication. After careful

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review and consultation ten articles on various aspects of human rights by a diverse group of scholars from Africa, Asia, Australia, America and Europe formed the inaugural edition of this e-book. Inspired by the universal truths embedded in all Sacred Scriptures, including the body of Bahá'í Writings, and a wide range of experiences, the contributors explore a number of important topics from their own individual perspective. Some of the articles describe findings from practical and personal experiences, while others address the conceptual framework that enriches the debates in human rights. All are offered in a spirit of service and in order to further our collective understanding of this field through a process of progressive reflection and integration of the spiritual and the scientific. Accordingly, this collection grants a nascent format for a collaborative and insightful dialogue among members and friends of the Bahá'í Faith centered on the overarching principles of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation in making human rights a universal reality.

## Footnotes

- 1 Ishay, M. R. (1997). The Human Rights Reader: Major Political Essays, Speeches, and Documents from the Bible to the Present. New York, NY: Routledge, p. xiii.
- 2 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 1 at [www.un.org/Overview/rights.html](http://www.un.org/Overview/rights.html).
- 3 See Bahá'í International Community (February 1947) *A Bahá'í Declaration of Human Obligations and Rights*. Presented to the first session of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, Lake Success, NY. (Bahá'í International Community Document #47-0200).
- 4 Bahá'í International Community (2000). *Human Rights Education: An External Affairs Initiative*. See section 4 on Human Rights Education Resources.
- 5 Lauren, P. G. (1998). The Evolution of International Human Rights: Visions Seen. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania. p. 237.
- 6 Bahá'u'lláh (1972). Proclamation of Bahá'u'lláh. Haifa, Israel: Bahá'í World Centre. p. 11.
- 7 Universal Declaration of Human Rights.
- 8 Thuynsma, P., Thuynsma, H. (1998). *Human Rights Education: The Humanizing of a Global Society*. In Danieli, Y. Stamatopoulou, E., Dias, C. J. (1998). The Universal Declaration of Human Rights: Fifty Years and Beyond. Amityville, NY: Baywood Publishing Company. p. 253.
- 9 For a discussion see the United Nations Resolution establishing the UN Decade for Human Rights Education.
- 10 Thuynsma, P., Thuynsma, H. p. 256
- 11 See Bahá'í International Community. *Processes of Development: The Bahá'í Approach*. [www.bahai.org/article-1-8-1-2.html](http://www.bahai.org/article-1-8-1-2.html).