
Philosophical and Religious Contributions to the Emergence of Human Rights: The Bahá'í Perspective

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Introduction

The British journalist and writer Melanie Phillips has asserted the idea that human rights have become “Britain’s secular religion.” Those familiar with Ms Phillips writing will appreciate that this comment may not perhaps have been offered as praise.

Whether human rights and religion work in cooperation or are mutually antagonistic forces, contesting for acceptance as a basis for a just social order is a point of some significant academic debate, a debate captured in the imaginative question; “Does God believe in human rights?” and the title of a collection of essays published by Martinus Nijhoff in 2007. Barney Leith, a Bahá'í contributor towards this publication, observes that; “Human rights discourse has a compelling quality at a time when religion no longer holds the centre of the public square.” This sense that human rights offers a parallel or perhaps alternative value system to religion has perhaps received greater impetus at a time when the more aggressive forms of religious extremism are clearly contemptuous of human rights, as Leith notes.

Leith’s chapter goes on to illuminate that from the perspective of the Bahá'í teachings, religious faith and human rights are more than just compatible value systems, they operate more or less in synergy with Bahá'is finding affirmation for the founding principles of rights in their religious texts. A century ago, ‘Abdul-Bahá, the head of the Bahá'í Faith from 1892 to 1921 clearly enunciated a vision for the future of human rights, stating that one day, “there shall be an equality of rights and prerogatives for mankind.”

The concepts and values of human rights are often associated with the ideas of a secular and post-religious society. There is also a sense that rights are viewed as a set of new and very modern ideas, detached and perhaps somehow in opposition to longstanding moral traditions, directly or indirectly connected to religion or arising from established or historic philosophical ideas. This article seeks to explore the emergence of human rights as a normative tool of law and politics in the aftermath of World War Two and examines the claims of various systems of values and beliefs to have influenced the development of these ideas. In the concluding section of the essay the author will explore how the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith align or diverge from the concepts of human rights and will attempt to analyse to what degree the Bahá'í position on human rights differs from other religious and intellectual paradigms.

The proclamation on 10 December 1948 of 30 articles delineating the parameters of a set of fundamental and inalienable rights that every person on earth should have as their birthright simply for being a member of the human race represents a collective act of moral daring and ethical ambition. The Declaration, promulgating that all human beings were born free and equal

in dignity and rights, proclaiming the right to life, the right to freedom from torture, the right to fair trial, the right to asylum, and perhaps boldest of all, claiming a universality for these rights, is now seen as landmark of accomplishment in humanity's efforts to advance the processes of civilisation. The Holocaust survivor who dedicated his life to bringing Nazi war criminals to justice, Simon Wiesenthal, once said, "Human rights is the only ideology that deserves to survive."

It is difficult to fully appreciate the enormity of these claims without reflecting on the historical context from which the ideas of human rights emerged: millions of European Jews, Slavs, Roma and the disabled put to death in industrially-designed genocide. History has of course seen mass-murder on multiple occasions before and a bitter debate rages still over the deaths of 1 – 1.5 million Armenians from 1915 - 1923. Armenian groups and scholars of human rights describe these events as genocide whilst the Turkish government strongly contests this claim, asserting that massacres of both Armenians and Turks were perpetrated during episodes of inter-ethnic violence during World War One and the break-up of the Ottoman Empire. Accounts from Thucydides history of the Peloponnesian Wars, describing events that occurred in the year 416 BC, narrate the manner in which Athens invaded Melos, a small and neutral island, and put all the menfolk to death, enslaved the women and colonized its land. Neither the Melians neutrality, nor their pleas for peace prevented Athens – a democratic city-state – from perpetrating what today would be judged to be major violations of humanitarian law. Mass actions of violence, of cruelty, of oppression are not a new characteristic of human history. The moral response of humanity to such brutality, however, is new.

The Nazi Holocaust is believed to have murdered 11 million human beings, including 6 million Jews, in addition to millions of Slavs, Romany, homosexuals and Jehovah's Witnesses as well as the disabled, who were in fact the first group in society that the Nazis selected for deliberate destruction. At the end of the conflict when Russian, American and British troops liberated the concentration camps the world witnessed the appalling evidence of state-sponsored mass murder. As early as 1941, however, British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill spoke of "a crime without a name" – believed to be a reference to reports he was privy to of the mass execution of Jews and "Jewish Bolsheviks" by mobile killing squads in the recently invaded territory of the Soviet Union.

From 1943 onwards a Jewish Polish lawyer, named Raphael Lemkin, who had experienced the Nazi persecution first hand, and had an historical interest in the massacres of minorities including Armenian and Assyrian communities, began the task of legally codifying this crime. He gave this crime a name, genocide, the etymology coming from two ancient Greek terms, "to kill" and "the race or tribe", and the term may be defined as "the deliberate killing of a

people or a nation.” Lempkin’s work led to the creation of the 1948 Genocide Convention, a cornerstone of human rights law, which recognizes genocide as “acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group.”

In 1945 film footage and photographs of the survivors of Auschwitz, Bergen-Belsen and other sites of the Holocaust emerged to shock global consciousness and to shame humanity. Yet the horrors of the death camps provided the moral impetus and political will that allowed a remarkable moment in world history when the nations of the earth, as represented in the nascent United Nations Organisation, drafted and adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, an international document that proclaimed a set of rights that were envisioned as the birthright of every human being.

Historical context

In 1868 Bahá'u'lláh, the Prophet-Founder of the Bahá'í Faith, and Himself a prisoner of conscience, exiled from the land of His birth and under a form of what we might today comprehend as house arrest, addressed a series of remarkable tablets, communicating the compelling message of His Revelation to Kings and Rulers of the world at that time.

One of the central themes of Bahá'u'lláh's message to these world leaders, including Napoleon III of France, the Ottoman Sultan and Queen Victoria of Britain, was the urgent need for them to reduce their spending on armaments and make provisions for the needs of the poor. Superficial examinations of human rights may sometimes fail to apprehend that economic, social and cultural rights form a substantive element of the Declaration. Whilst many of the most visible human rights stories in our media focus, perhaps rightly, on the abuse of civil and political rights – right to life, freedom from torture etc. – one of the founding human rights treaties – the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights – addresses itself to the needs for social justice, a concept that was central to Bahá'u'lláh's Ministry and writings.

In one of His Tablets, addressed to Queen Victoria, Bahá'u'lláh writes:

O Rulers of the earth! Be reconciled among yourselves, that ye may need no more armaments save in a measure to safeguard your territories and dominions. ...

Writing to the German Kaiser, Bahá'u'lláh warns against the catastrophe that will befall the country if it continued to follow the path of militarization, prophesying the violence that would devastate that land not once, but twice in the future:

O banks of the Rhine! We have seen you covered with gore, inasmuch as the swords of retribution were drawn against you; and so you shall have another turn.

As twentieth century tragically records, Bahá'u'lláh's call for unity and peace went unheeded by the leaders of the powerful nations of the earth and many nations were engulfed in the World Wars of 1914 – 1918 and 1939 – 1945, in which tens of millions perished. It was from the crucible of violence and cruelty and hatred of this tumultuous period of history that at the end of the Second World War, the modern ideas of human rights emerged. In the years immediately after the conflict the cornerstone documents of human rights were drafted and adopted by the United Nations, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Genocide Convention and the UN Charter.

Ancient notions of rights

There are those who will argue that the notions of human rights have origins that lie as far back as the Ancient World. Several artefacts or documents from civilizations pre-dating the Christian era or indeed the ascendancy of the Roman Republics have been interpreted (in modern retrospect) as proto-human rights charters.

The “Cyrus cylinder “, a charter of freedom, believed to have been authored by the Persian Emperor Cyrus the Great in the year 539 BC and intended to safeguard the rights of Babylonians, who had submitted to Persian rule, is advanced by some as evidence of the existence of concepts of rights in ancient societies. Its text appears to promise to protect the Babylonian population from being terrorized by the Persian army. Cyrus states that he has freed all slaves, brought relief to dilapidated housing and he also appears to respect the religious practice of the land, by safeguarding their sanctuaries and giving specific acknowledgement to Marduk, the Babylonian deity. Thus the cylinder may be seen to contain elements of some of the core rights of modernity; protection of civilians in a conflict or post-conflict zone, housing rights, abolition of slavery and freedom of religious belief.

The pre-Revolutionary government of Iran prior to 1979 described the cylinder as “the first declaration of human rights”, a view that was endorsed by Shah Reza Pahlavi as part of his “White Revolution” thinking, even describing the cylinder as a precursor to human rights at a UN conference in Tehran in 1968. Even today it is not uncommon to see the idea of Cyrus as the founding father of human rights appear in political discourse (and not least as a sop to Iranian patriotic sentiment by those political actors seeking to engage Iran or the Iranian people on issues of human rights.)

However, some historical context offers a rather more sober interpretation. The cylinder can also be read as a propaganda tool of the Persian monarch having established suzerainty over the Babylonian people and having deposed the incumbent monarch, Nabonidus. Its precepts played a useful role in persuading Babylon to submit to Persian rule. Archaeologists and academics have questioned the lofty claims made in the name of the cylinder. The German academic, Josef Wiesehofer, has described it as a “propaganda inscription” and noted that Cyrus was involved in an expansionist “land-grab” at the time of the inscription. Other academics have suggested that the original intention of the cylinder has been misinterpreted. Professors Bill Arnold and Piotr Michalowski have stated; “Generically, it belongs with other foundation deposit inscriptions; it is not an edict of any kind, nor does it provide any unusual human rights declaration as is sometimes claimed.”

The Babylonian people themselves had another and older claim to a document that can contend as an ancient source of law at least and perhaps human rights also. The Code of Hammurabi was a set of laws inscribed on a number of stone tablets some 1700 years before the birth of Christ by Hammurabi, the King of Babylon. The code is accepted as one of the first examples of written law in human history. It contains 282 laws, many of which prescribe the principle of “lex talonis” (the law of retaliation), such as an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. Hammurabi also provided laws for punishments graded on social status; the punishment for harming a noble is greater than for harming a freeman and a lesser punishment is provided for harming a slave.

Severe as the punishments laid down by Hammurabi’s code are to the modern world (a slave who has said to his master, “you are not my master” shall have his ear cut off), viewing the laws through wider historical context it can be seen as progressive. In Babylonian society prior to Hammurabi’s edicts a powerful noble could harm or kill a freeman or a slave with total impunity. The code sets punishments, albeit unequal ones, on harming any member of society, high or low. The drive to curtail impunity is a central impulse of the modern human rights movement.

In the years immediately after World War Two the first meaningful effort to address impunity mass crimes was put into practice at the Nuremberg and Tokyo tribunals, where a number of military and political leaders of the defeated Axis powers were put on trial for their actions during the conflict. This new dawn for international justice was swiftly etherized in the period of Cold War politics and crimes of mass-murder remained largely unaccountable and unpunished for most of the remainder of the 20th century. After the swift and unexpected dissolution of the Berlin Wall in 1989 the ideal of global courts to curtail the worst abuses of human rights re-emerged in response to the perpetration of genocide and crimes against humanity in several of the former Yugoslav states and the African state of Rwanda where 800,000 people perished.

In His writings, Bahá'u'lláh very directly addresses the imperative to end impunity for such crimes. In His tablets to the world’s rulers He warns; “If ye stay not the hand of the oppressor, if ye fail to safeguard the rights of the down-trodden, what right have ye to vaunt yourselves among men.” In addition to this and other verses where Bahá'u'lláh sedulously advises those who governed their nations of the dangers of moral bankruptcy of those that perpetrate tyranny and the ascendancy of justice in this new world, He foresaw the need for the practical institutions to improve the world, and calls for the establishment of a “Supreme Tribunal” to fulfill the needs of universal peace.

Religious notions of rights

The relationship between religious thinking and human rights can sometimes be a vexed one. In the United Kingdom the question over exceptions granted to religious communities in relation to services and public functions, premises and associations remains a point of dispute between secular and religious organisations, particularly as this relates to issues of human sexuality and marriage.

Human rights principles and religious worldviews can clash with more dramatic and violent consequences. Decisions by a number of newspaper and magazine editors across Europe to publish cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed often cited the desire to defend the right of freedom of expression. These publications have met with visceral anger from many Muslims, and there have been attacks on people and property, including an attempt to murder the Danish cartoonist, Kurt Westergaard.

Beyond the headline-grabbing stories that may portray a state of siege between religious and human rights principles, there are less noted but more widespread interactions between human rights and religious communities. An article on “The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life” addresses the role of religion as a source of ideas for the foundational human rights documents. The article notes the assertion by human rights scholar Micheline Ishay that each great religion contains humanistic elements that have contributed towards the conceptualisation of human rights. Christian representatives worked during the war and post-war periods to contribute towards the shaping of a new set of international institutions that would honour human rights. Churches and Synagogues worked at local level to build popular support for the new UN and its human rights documents.

Whilst much comment has been made of the decision by the Saudi Arabian delegation to abstain from the vote on the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights on 10 December 1948, the secularist critique of religion as an obstacle rather than asset in the evolution of human rights may overlook the fact that seven other states chose to abstain at this historic vote: apartheid South Africa and six Communist states. Officially “atheist” states were far less helpful to the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights than “religious” states, whether Christian or Islamic. The scholar Susan Waltz has written in detail about the Islamic contributions to human rights, challenging the assumption that this is an exclusively Western concept.

Human rights have evolved since 1948 to take increasing influence through the expression of enforceable law. This is both the cause of its greatest triumph, but as Conor Gearty explores in

his Hamlyn Lecure, “Can Human Rights Survive?” a cause of its crisis as resistance and hostility builds in some societies to the legal powers of human rights. It is perhaps worth recalling that Islam’s 1400-year history of development of law through the Sharia has made a profound contribution to a wide range of legal areas. UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Antonio Guterres, in a foreword to a comparative study on Islam and modern day refugee law notes that “all the principles embodied in modern international refugee law are to be found in the *Shari'a*. Protection of refugees, their property and families, non-refoulement [forced return], the civilian character of asylum, voluntary repatriation – all are referred to in the Holy Koran.”

The Bahá'í community had taken an active interest in the emerging international efforts to build global structures to advance peace and human rights from the start. Indeed, representatives of the Bahá'í Faith had been present at the League of Nations and a Bahá'í presence was maintained when the United Nations was erected to replace the League after the turmoil of the Second World War. Bahá'ís were amongst those who gave active support to the new ideas of human rights. The language of the preamble to the Declaration, recognizing as it does that all human beings are created equal in rights and in dignity was highly congruent with the principles that Bahá'ís hold as sacred beliefs, specifically the oneness of humankind, the recognition of equality of men and women, and the primacy of justice in the sight of God.

In February 1947 representatives of the Bahá'í International Community were present at the first session of the UN Commission on Human Rights, and this delegation presented a statement of “A Bahá'í Declaration of Human Obligations and Rights”. The document presents the Bahá'í perspective on human rights, observing that “The source of human rights is the endowment of qualities, virtues and powers which God has bestowed upon mankind...” More recently, Matthew Weinberg has authored a substantive essay that explores the Bahá'í perspective of the human rights discourse. Weinberg references the research and writings of a number of contemporary scholars and intellectuals that support the ideal of universal human rights. The anthropologist Richard Beis has identified a series of moral precepts which appear to be transcultural, such as the prohibition on murder and provision for the poor. Nobel laureate and writer, Wole Soyinka, addresses the question of whether “Western” human rights standards are inapplicable to other parts of the world: “...We are all agreed what torture is. What rape means. What child prostitution is. What genocide entails. Then let us not pretend not to know what human rights truly represent.” Weinberg’s research illuminates an evolution in the trends of a global discourse on human rights in the years since the adoption of the Universal Declaration that suggest a widening of the acceptance of the universality of human rights and the significance of human rights as a basis for an increase in human development.

The Bahá'í view on human rights, explained in considerable nuance and detail in Weinberg's comprehensive article, offers a specific and unique feature: The emergence and flowering of human rights in this age is understood by Bahá'ís as one feature of a wider and far-reaching process, that of the collective maturation of the human race. At this epochal shift in human development, 'Abdu'l-Bahá states that now humanity must become, "imbued with new virtues and powers, new moral standards and new capacities." This is perhaps one of several unique features of how the Bahá'í Faith understands the phenomenon of human rights and it is arguable that the view of human rights as an innovation of the modern age can be linked to this central tenet of the Bahá'í teachings, that in this age humanity is undergoing a process of development as a species, the hallmark of which is the recognition of the oneness of humanity. Yet it is also through the recognition of God as the source of all rights and prerogatives that Bahá'ís comprehend the validity and significance of human rights, for it is in the estimation of God that all men and women are equal.

Philosophical notions of rights

It is accepted by a number of scholars, writers and commentators that the modern ideas of human rights had roots in earlier thinking about the human condition and about what rights people should have within various legal systems. Some of the most influential concepts that may be seen to precede and lay the ground for the human rights we find in the Universal Declaration today can be seen to flow from the writing and thinking of the great philosophers such as John Locke, Thomas Hobbes, Thomas Paine, Jefferson, Voltaire and Rousseau.

A succession of thinkers, many associated with the period known as “the age of enlightenment,” advanced a number of (at that time) revolutionary ideas, ideas that fuelled, accompanied or followed significant historical events such as the English civil war, the French Revolution and the American War of Independence.

In the late 17th century parliamentarians in England began to challenge the concept of “the Divine Right of Kings” and the idea that the monarch was answerable only to God and not accountable to any earthly authority. The reigning monarch, the Stuart King, Charles the First, defended this principle to the point that it contributed to the civil war (1642 – 1651) after which he became the first king to be tried and then executed in English history. Unfortunately for Charles, other ideas were on the rise. The English philosopher John Locke advanced the idea of “natural rights” including those of life, liberty and property. The implications that all men possessed inalienable rights from birth had significant implications, not least in that it challenged the power of a king to remove life, remove liberty or remove property at will.

Lockean ideas of property rights were later used by those seeking to defend the institution of slavery, reasoning that human slaves constituted a form of property, and were therefore protected under the language of rights. In point of fact, Locke explicitly affirmed that where “the legislators endeavor to take away, and destroy the property of the people, or to reduce them to slavery...they put themselves in a state of war with the people.” This thinking influenced other writers and philosophers such as Thomas Jefferson, Thomas Paine and Voltaire, and can be seen as an intellectual impetus that contributed towards revolutionary movements in France and in America a century later. It is important to set Locke’s thinking within the historical context of the 17th century to appreciate that his ideas were highly advanced for the time in which he lived.

The French writer Voltaire, who paid tribute to Locke, argued for the right to a fair trial, freedom of religion and other civil rights. Concepts found in the writings of Voltaire, Locke and others are in evidence in the 1794 Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen, another document

contending for the status as a pre-cursor to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Its' first article proclaims, "Men are born and remain free and equal in rights." The idealist vision of the French Revolution was significantly tainted, however, by the period of "le terreur" when Robespierre's "Committee for Public Safety" arrested and summarily executed between 16,000 to 40,000 French citizens, but the revolutionary period had advanced the ideas of rights another step further.

Elements of the rights agenda that had advanced in France travelled across the Atlantic and permeated another revolutionary movement, that of the American colonists seeking independence from the British monarchy. The founding American statesman Thomas Jefferson addressed questions of rights, developing existing thinking on those rights that were inalienable, and those that were alienable. One of the fruits of this thinking finds its most famous expression in the oft-quoted line from the American Declaration of Independence, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights."

Another English-born philosopher who was influential in France and America and who played his part in the intellectual buttressing of revolutionary movements in both countries was Thomas Paine. Born in England, Paine became famous as a writer and pamphleteer, and it is a quirk of history that the document that arguably offered the most eloquent case for American independence, Paine's 1776 monograph "Common Sense" was authored by an Englishman. It was, however, after his move from newly independent America to post-revolutionary France, that Paine wrote a document that has a claim to feature in the development of human rights, his 1791 publication on "The Rights of Man."

Paine wrote the article largely as a defence of the French Revolution and one of the central themes it contains is that people have the right to revolt against a government that does not respect the rights of its citizens. The publication also reflected Paine's growing skepticism of organized religion and his contention that rights originate in nature – hence the term "natural rights".

The qualification of Paine's publication as a "proto-human rights document" shares some of the concerns raised by academics over the claims made for the Cyrus Cylinder. Whilst the original purpose of the Cyrus Cylinder was clearly the subjugation or establishment of suzerainty over Babylon, and a "regime change" to remove Nabonidus from the throne, Paine's "Rights of Man" was written as a direct response to an earlier publication by his fellow Englishman, Edmund Burke, which had critiqued the nature and the achievements of the French Revolution. The content of Paine's writing has therefore something of a polemical quality, accusing Burke of

applying “the poison drawn from his horrid principles”. The fundamental point here is that, as with the Cyrus Cylinder, the primary purpose of the text is not in fact to propagate a doctrine of human rights, but rather to respond to and defeat an intellectual opponent in a political and highly partisan debate.

The development of human rights may then be seen to have many earlier ideas that lay contesting claims to their influence over the emergence of what we now understand as universal human rights. There is not time in this short piece to discuss a number of other historical documents that can be seen to have contributed significantly towards modern ideas of human rights, most notably the Magna Carta of 1215, also known as the Great Charter of Liberties, the first document to limit the arbitrary powers of the English King and described by the British lawyer and judge, Lord Denning as “the foundation of the freedom of the individual against the arbitrary authority of the despot.” An English lawyer might affirm that Magna Carta is the clear blueprint for the Universal Declaration of Human Rights with precisely the same certitude and conviction as an Iranian historian reading the rights and liberties enshrined in the cuneiform script of the Cyrus cylinder. Another pioneering publication was the 1862 monograph “Mémorial de Solferino”, an eyewitness account of a battle during the Italian wars of unification by a young Swiss social activist, Henry Dunant. His account of battlefield conditions inspired the Geneva Conventions and the foundation of the International Committee of the Red Cross, and proposed principles for humanitarian aid in theatres of conflict. His ideas became the basis for much of the corpus of humanitarian laws covering such issues as the treatment of the sick and wounded and prisoners of war.

The philosophical and political legacy of the Enlightenment philosophers has much to admire and clearly advanced many ideas that remain of import to this day; the right to resist abuse by an executive power, the rights to life, liberty and property and the concept of an implicit “social contract” between people and their government. There are, however, significant limitations in how far such thinking can be seen as providing what we would understand today as universal human rights. These documents speak exclusively of the rights of “man” rather than the human being, and women remained without a categorical affirmation of their rights. The Enlightenment philosophers had taken great inspiration from their predecessors in Ancient Greece, societies that had created the first concept of democracy, a word of Greek origin, but societies where only males, owning property and of indigenous stock were accorded rights and the franchise. Another important word for this discussion also of ancient Greek roots is xenophobia: a fear or even hatred of foreigners. Those outside the tribe or the nation did not qualify as civilized men, and had no claim of rights.

In its most egregious form this found its expression in the institution of slavery, and the fruits of the schools of natural law, the ideas of inalienable rights, which were not shared equally with the women of their societies, were withheld and abused on an historic scale against vast populations of human beings who were enslaved. The evil that is slavery has existed in many forms in many societies throughout history, but just as the phenomenon of massacres of civilians took a new and terrible form in the practice of genocide, slavery reached a nadir in the 17th and 18th centuries as European and American ships seized ever great numbers of Africans for brutal enslavement in the sugar and cotton plantations that fuelled the wealthiest elites of their nations. Some historical estimates suggest that as many as 12 million Africans were enslaved over several centuries. The majority had been taken from West Africa and were often worked to death in the in the plantations of the West Indies under European Colonial rule. Another discrete stream of slavery lasted many centuries with human beings from North and Eastern Africa taken by force to the Arab lands. Adam Hochschild's seminal work, "Bury The Chains" gives a powerful and sobering account of the British slave-trade and the eventually successful efforts to abolish it by liberated slaves and British campaigners, motivated largely by their religious convictions.

The French Revolution's "Declaration on the Rights of Man and the Citizen" specifically omits revoking slavery, although slavery was abolished in "French possessions" in 1794 and one might perhaps detect a rebuke to this failure in the ideas of natural law in the words of the famous leader of the Haitian Revolution, Toussaint L'Ouverture when he wrote, "I was born a slave but nature gave me the soul of a free man." He had at one stage entered into a military alliance with France, but he correctly foresaw that Napoleon would renege and restore slavery in 1802.

The American Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights, documents that strengthened the status of the citizen against the abuses of the executive and the tyranny of a distant monarchy, also failed to extend the rights of "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" to those human beings trapped on American shores and so grotesquely abused by slavery. Jefferson's original draft had contained a section addressing slavery but delegates from the southern states had objected to this, with much of their wealth dependent on the slave plantations (as incidentally was much of Jefferson's wealth.). This unfinished business was of course to return in 1861 as a significant factor, perhaps the central factor, in the American Civil War.

The rationalism of many of the Enlightenment thinker, and in some cases their clear questioning of religion underlines the perception of human rights as an overtly secular concept. Thomas Paine, who in the Age of Reason states; "My own mind is my own church", had only 6 mourners present at his funeral having been ostracized for his ridiculing of Christianity. We should note

that the rational methodology of the natural law school in relying on reason and deduction to infer a philosophy of “the rights of man” arising from his natural state, and with no reference to God, signally failed to articulate a call for inalienable rights for those millions of the human family under the yoke of slavery. Their logic also neglected to address the rights of women.

From the perspective of the Bahá'í Faith clear positions on the rights of women and moral imperative to abolish slavery are to be found in some of the key tenets of the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh. In His tablet to Queen Victoria we find the following:

“We have been informed that thou hast forbidden trading in slaves, both men and women. This, verily, is what God hath enjoined in this wondrous Revelation. God hath, truly, destined a reward for thee because of this.”

What is noteworthy in the words of Bahá'u'lláh is that they represent a concise and clear position on the rectitude of the British state in the abolition of the slave trade. Moreover it is clear that the human right to liberty, the right that the institution of slavery abused in such vast numbers to constitute what we today term mass crimes against humanity, is the will of God. It is the sight of God that all humanity are equal, and human rights for Bahá'ís may be seen to flow from God's grace.

Another point that Bahá'ís might reflect further on is that the situation of slavery is addressed “in this wondrous Revelation.” Bahá'í theology holds that whilst God's message to humanity is renewed from age to age through a succession of what are termed Manifestations of God, understood in other religious traditions as prophets, and that the teachings are updated to meet the exigencies and requirements of the age in which they are revealed. Bahá'u'lláh's message therefore has a unique and specific purpose, summoning all of humanity to one common faith, one great and uniting purpose. Human rights, is one of the fruits of this particular age in which humanity will develop beyond its turbulent collective adolescence, figuratively speaking, and enter an age of self-realisation illumined by the acceptance of the oneness of humanity. A passage in a document entitled “One Common Faith”, published by the Bahá'í World Centre, reads: “Universal education, freedom of thought, the protection of human rights, recognition of the earth's vast resources as a trust for the whole of humankind, society's responsibility for the well-being of its citizenry, the promotion of scientific research, even so practical a principle as an international auxiliary language that will advance integration of the earth's peoples—for all who respond to Bahá'u'lláh's revelation, these and similar precepts carry the same compelling authority as do the injunctions of scripture against idolatry, theft and false witness.” Human rights are one element of God's will for this age.

From the very pen of the Bahá'í Faith's Prophet-Founder we may find a number of other unequivocal words that directly relate to the issue of human rights. His tablet to Queen Victoria contains an unambiguous affirmation of democracy. He writes,

"We have also heard that thou hast entrusted the reins of counsel into the hands of the representatives of the people. Thou, indeed, hast done well, for thereby the foundations of the edifice of thine affairs will be strengthened, and the hearts of all that are beneath thy shadow, whether high or low, will be tranquillized." The sentence speaks of the representatives of "the people", without limitation of gender, property or class. Democratic societies throughout history, whether championed by Cleisthenes in Athens in the 6th century before Christ or advanced by the British Chartists after the Great Reform Acts of the 19th century, had in many instances withheld the franchise from the poorest in their societies and the women.

The understanding then that members of the global Bahá'í community share about the phenomenon of human rights is that it is a concept that is explicitly linked to the teachings of their Faith, and that such rights emanate as a confirmation from God, rather than what may be adduced from nature by a process of enquiry, and equally reduced by a similar process of reasoning. At the first ever session of the UN Commission on Human Rights, the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States offered a statement which contains this assertion: "The source of human rights is the endowment of qualities, virtues and powers which God has bestowed upon mankind without discrimination of sex, race, creed or nation. To fulfill the possibilities of this divine endowment is the purpose of human existence." When viewed through this prism of faith, the unfoldment of human rights, conferring dignity and enabling human flourishing to all of the diverse but interconnected human family, represents part of God's will in this age. By aligning justice, human oneness and the rights and prerogatives due to all with the grace of a changeless Creator, human rights are afforded an irreducible and perhaps sacred station in the worldview of an adherent of Bahá'u'lláh's Faith.

It is useful to cross reference the writings and reflections of Bahá'í scholars and writers on this subject with other writers and thinkers addressing human rights during this period of time. Professor Conor Gearty is a legal academic specializing in the study of human rights and has held a number of prestigious posts in this field. Since 2009 he has been a professor of human rights law at the London School of Economics. His 2005 lecture, and subsequent publication of the same title, "Can Human Rights Survive?" reflects a wider and growing disquiet amongst human rights advocates that the concept of rights is facing ever greater challenges in the face of demotic perceptions of the term as a "villain's charter" and hostility to the jurisdiction and rulings of the European Court of Human Rights. In his foreword to the lecture, Gearty writes; "The idea of human rights is a fine one; it has clearly been successful but that does not mean that

it is guaranteed to be so in perpetuity... The subject faces serious challenges. Unless these are squarely confronted and seen off there is a risk that the idea will be destroyed forever, or at best subverted out of all recognition.” His piece goes on to address such concerns as the challenge of authority, exploring the accusations of “moral colonialism” that have been levelled against the human rights paradigm. He then turns to a discussion of the crisis of legalism, and the use of human rights for “...brutal projects, such as colonial-style militarism or the abuse of persons within their power.” Nabonidus of Babylon might murmur his agreement across the millennia.

There is an irony that human rights appears to be experiencing something of a “mid-life crisis” at a time when its ideals and principles have greater and more impactful meaning in the world than any time before. The articles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights have found expression in the force of law in a widening proliferation of national and transnational laws. Human rights have acquired justiciability in courts and most governments frame policy and statements in human rights terms, although with a variance of integrity or sincerity in the eyes of their critics. Yet as the lexicon of human rights has acquired such capacity to shape the reality of national and transnational societies, hostility to rights has entered the political and social discourse of some countries, issues examined in depth by Gearty’s ideas.

One dimension of the apparent crisis for human rights is that of power. One Bahá'í writer who has addressed the issue of political power and the proper use of it is Paul Lample. In his 2009 publication, “Revelation and Social Reality: Learning to Translate What Is Written into Reality” he addresses the issue of power and social order. In their broadest and not specific to human rights Lample states; “It is not a matter of power-free relations, not utopian social structures, nor the faultless implementation of universal principles of peace, justice or unity. Instead, the Bahá'í teachings envision striving and struggle towards a dynamic balance of relations in order to construct a pattern of social advancement that is at the same time incremental and surging, systematic and chaotic, integrated and diverse.”

Lample’s discussion of power is intrinsically bound up with profound questions of the true nature of human existence. He notes that within the boundaries of law “human beings are not inert and submissive, but empowered to make their mark on the world...” urging for a society in which individuals seek to do active rather than passive good. We should not live or behave a certain way because law or other channels of power compel us to do so, but rather we should behave a certain way because we wish to do active good, and we wish to please God through the development of the highest level of our human and spiritual potentialities.

Those who are anxious for the future of human rights – and they are not inconsiderable in number, nor without reasoned doubts – might find some comfort and reassurance on the validity

of human rights in the writings of the Bahá'í Faith, and the studies and writings of members and institutions of the Bahá'í community. At the 60th anniversary of the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 2008, the Bahá'í International Community offered a statement that invites the reader to re-conceptualise the implementation of human rights within; “The maturing consciousness of a global community...” and states with conviction that; “...a global order capable of upholding the dignity and nobility of the individual will be realized.” In the concluding thoughts of his essay, Weinberg states that in regards of the Bahá'í understanding of human rights, “its affirmative response to the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh from within virtually every national, racial and ethnic group on the planet cannot be casually dismissed.” Constituting as they do a global community of some 5 – 6 million souls drawn from every nation and land on earth, the Bahá'í community offers a form of organic laboratory; “In its models of unity and justice now being put into practice throughout the world, the Bahá'í community is demonstrating the universal applicability of the concepts it propounds. The Bahá'í perspective on human rights draws its legitimacy not only from its belief in a benevolent and omnipotent Source... but also from the content of that belief.”

Perhaps then, it is faith that can resuscitate and revitalize the ideal of human rights at this stage of its journey.

The purpose of justice is the appearance of unity among men. No radiance can compare with that of justice. The organization of the world and the tranquillity of mankind depend upon it.

—Bahá'u'lláh