

INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS and the BAHA'I FAITH

Historical Background

It is only a short period back in history to the time when most of the societies in the world were divided into distinct hierarchical classes. Typically it took the following form:

- the nobility – with special privileges and rights unique to them;
- the common freemen – merchants, craftsmen and free farmers – with limited privileges and rights;
- the persons owned and/or controlled by others – the serfs, bonded labourers and slaves – with few, if any, rights.

In this past system, the women and children often had few rights.

But the world changed dramatically in the twentieth century, faster than ever before in human history. And among the significant changes in this century was the worldwide spread of the idea that there were certain fundamental human rights of universal application to all peoples on the planet. Although this idea was of ancient origins, it had never been formally written down and promulgated by the nations of the world until the twentieth century. But it was included as a founding principle in the Charter of the United Nations of 1945, and the fundamental rights were set out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948. They have since been expanded upon in a variety of international Conventions, Declarations and other documents. Most countries are now parties to these documents, and a substantial international human rights legal system has grown up around them.

These international documents supplement the domestic Bills of Rights found in the Constitutions of most countries, except that the former apply to all peoples of the world on a universal basis without discrimination (including without discrimination on the basis of nationality), whereas the latter only apply within the particular country. Under these international documents, all people are now to be treated equally in respect of their human rights, irrespective of their race, colour, nationality, class, religion, sex, etc.

Now it is a well known fact that the practice in some countries falls well short of a fair and adequate system of implementation of these universal human rights standards. So much is obvious when looking at the record of particular countries,

but it is not now proposed to pick on any particular countries in this talk. This may be a matter for discussion at another time. The present objective is to be positive and not to criticise any government. But the fact that the practice of some countries may be regarded as inadequate in this respect does not mean that universal standards of human rights do not exist. We don't say, for example, that just because people commit traffic offences on the roads but are not caught that those traffic offences don't exist. Of course we don't say that. In the same way, the minimum standards of universal human rights are now an accepted global reality. In many cases these standards have become part of international customary law, not dependent upon a particular international document. In a few cases, these standards are now recognised as constituting "peremptory norms", that is, human rights standards from which at international law no derogation is permitted by any country in any circumstances. It may well be that better and fairer methods of enforcement of those standards are required, but that is a different matter.

What is of present interest, and is the subject of this talk, is why this new and virtually comprehensive international system of universal human rights only came into existence in the twentieth century, and from what source. In other words, what is so special about the twentieth century that such a significant event should occur in that century, and not at some other time? Humanity has survived for many thousands of years without such a system, so what caused it to appear so recently?

To answer this, it is necessary to look briefly at the history of humanity as a civilised society.

Progressive Development of Humanity

Human beings have been in the process of evolving socially from very humble beginnings to ever more sophisticated forms of civilisation. So much is evident from history. They must have originally collected together in very small groups, perhaps at the family level. The concept of rights (and obligations) must have evolved in this small group level between the members, those rights being necessary to maintain order and balance within the group.

In time, it is clear that these small groups coalesced into larger clan or tribal groupings, and the notion of rights and obligations expanded accordingly.

The emergence of sedentary civilisations in various parts of the world, with more permanent communities, was a further step in this development. The city-state was

one such example, with the notion of rights and obligations extending to all the citizens of that city-state. Natural law philosophical theories began to emerge in parts of Europe at about this time to support the concept of rights of the citizen, while in other places the concept was given a religious base.

With the recovery of Europe from the dark ages, the emergence of the sovereign nation state, with fixed boundaries, occurred. Notions of rights and obligations were developed further, in particular between the sovereign ruler and his subjects resident within those boundaries, to facilitate the maintenance of peace and order within that nation-state.

The revolutionary wars in France and the United States of America in the late eighteenth century lead to the written codification of the rights of the citizen in those new national republics. This practice lead the way for other countries to later adopt written Bills of Rights, usually in their constitutions, a practice that is now widespread.

Some countries rejected these revolutionary ideologies of France and USA, in particular Great Britain, but even in that country advances in human rights occurred before the twentieth century. Thus the medieval system of feudalism came to an end, slavery was abolished, prison reform occurred, child labour was controlled, the rights of combatants, prisoners of war and civilians in war were codified for the first time, and more recently the emancipation of women through the vote occurred. But this was done on a national basis and did not extend to the whole planet.

The two World Wars of the twentieth century had a profound effect on the notion of human rights and their application to human society. The global reach of these Wars, the devastation they caused, and the gross human rights abuses that resulted, moved the consciences of many people. The pressures to frame new international standards became intense, particularly after the extent of Nazi concentration camp horrors became known. There was a widespread recognition that such gross abuses could no longer be tolerated by the international community. The cause of human civilisation required global action. And it was significant that this occurred at a time when Western colonialism was in retreat, and new third world nations were appearing, the governments of which were seeking equal treatment for their new citizens. No longer could they be assigned to some second class colonial status.

These sentiments found their global expression in secular form in the Charter of the United Nations, and in more complete form in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, as already mentioned. That Declaration begins by reciting the recognition of

the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human race in a foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world. It then proclaims the Declaration to be a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations. It can be regarded as the global “Charter” of human rights, on which all subsequent international human rights statements are based. Article 1 of the Declaration emphatically states:

“All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.”

The adoption by the nations of the world of such a universal statement would have been impossible had not humanity begun to evolve into a global society, one that is increasingly transcending national boundaries. Shoghi Effendi, the Guardian of the Baha’i Faith, wrote of this a few years ago:

“Unification of the whole of mankind is the hallmark of the stage which human society is now approaching. Unity of family, of tribe, of city-state, and nation have been successively attempted and fully established. World unity is the goal towards which a harassed humanity is striving.”

Such a global society, if it is to be cohesive, just and peaceful, must have universal standards of human rights, among other things. Globalisation without such effective standards runs the grave risk of leading to disunity, injustice, tyranny and eventually chaos, adversely affecting the mass of the peoples of the world. In a world of very powerful international commercial interests, this is increasingly becoming of concern in the absence of a genuinely effective global system of universal human rights. While we now have a near comprehensive written codes of those rights, we are still a long way from their effective and fair global enforcement.

Religion, Morality and Human Rights

What is the source of these written codes of universal human rights? On their face, they are purely secular in derivation, something that has occurred completely separately from religion and its associated morality, even though some of the codes seek to protect freedom of religion and belief. No religious source is identified in them. The basis of this universal human rights system is said to be human reason and human conscience, so-called “enlightened self-interest” if you like, applied on a planetary scale.

But is this secular view correct? Universal human rights necessarily have an inherent moral quality, rooted in the dignity of the human being, of whatever race, colour, class, nationality, religion, sex, etc. There is also an underlying notion of justice based on equality and equal opportunity. These factors immediately raise issues of the moral nature of human beings, and the necessity of them having certain rights and obligations in a moral society. And morality is an essential aspect of all the great religions and their teachings. This is itself suggestive of some links between religion and human rights, links that are borne out by reference to historical sources.

But secular thinkers may reply that organised religion has forfeited any claim to be a source of human rights by the consistent abuses perpetrated in the name of religion down through the centuries. Many wars and other abuses have been caused by religious organisations and their followers, particularly against the followers of other religions. This continues even up to the present day in some parts of the world. The Baha'is, for example, are still persecuted in Iran. This, it may be claimed, proves that there can be no religious base to universal human rights.

But in the Baha'i view, these abuses in the name of religion are not the expression of a valid religious belief from God, but are the expression of hatred and prejudice dressed up as religion. The fundamentals of all the great religions are based on principles such as love, unity, justice and peace. In the Baha'i view, it is a gross abuse of these great religions, and a complete misinterpretation of them, to distort such fine principles in seeking to justify hatred, prejudice, injustice and violence.

And for what it is worth, the secular governments of the world have a great deal to account for in their failure to secure the universal human rights of all peoples over the last half century since they were codified. Human rights abuses still abound with little restraint, and half the world continues to live in abject poverty while a few wealthy people live in palatial conditions beyond the dreams of even the pharaohs and the caesars of old.

Past religious abuses therefore prove nothing in this context. It clearly is possible to assert a definite link between religion and universal human rights, and that such human rights are not merely a human invention.

The Source of Human Rights – the Baha’i View

In the Baha’i view, the true source of such human rights lies in the religious teachings of the one supreme God of all peoples, as revealed through the founders of the great religions. This view states that all the great religions came from that one spiritual source, but are revealed at different times to different peoples in different places. The founders of these religions, the real educators of humanity, are spiritually one as they all came from that one spiritual source. Each founder accepts, but builds upon, the essential spiritual teachings of the great religions that came before. As mankind progresses in the manner already discussed, so must the spiritual message from God be renewed to meet the evolving needs of mankind.

So in this present age, as we enter upon a global society, the religion of God must establish the necessary global standards as are required for a united, just and peaceful world society. By turning to the religious teachings of God for this age, and by putting those teachings into practice on a global basis, mankind can achieve that kind of world society.

Mankind, on this view, must be endowed by God with the necessary qualities, virtues and powers required to be able to freely choose to put these spiritual teachings into practice. This divine endowment is seen as the purpose of human existence in this life. By accepting and putting them into practice, the person draws closer to God and gives effect to the Will of God. At the same time, that person advances the cause of human civilisation by assisting in the maturation of human society.

The Oneness of Mankind

The Baha’i Faith teaches that every age has its own requirements and purpose. The formation of a united, just and peaceful world order is the primary obligation placed by God on humanity in this present age as part of His revealed Will for this age. The progressive development of humanity is inextricably linked with the progressive development of religion, for both are in essence spiritually derived. The central teaching for achieving such a new world order is the Baha’i principle of the “oneness of mankind”, that is, that mankind is to be viewed as one organic whole. Baha’u’llah wrote:

“The Tabernacle of unity hath been raised; regard ye not one another as strangers. Ye are the fruits of one tree, and the leaves of one branch. We

cherish the hope that the light of justice may shine upon the world and sanctify it from tyranny.”

This principle of oneness of mankind requires a new perspective and a new vision, extending beyond a person’s own self, beyond family, beyond community, beyond nation, to the peoples of the world as a whole. Baha’u’llah wrote:

“Let your vision be world-embracing, rather than confined to your own self.....It is incumbent upon every man, in this Day, to hold fast unto whatsoever will promote the interests, and exalt the station, of all nations and just governments....It is not his to boast who loveth his country, but it is his who loveth the world.”

Such a principle does not admit of any distinctions or prejudices as to race, colour, class, nationality, religion, sex, etc.; that is, no head of discrimination that is outlawed by universal human rights law. Abdu’l-Baha, the son of Baha’u’llah, wrote:

“Prejudices of all kinds – whether religious, racial, patriotic or political, are destructive of divine foundations in man. All the warfare and bloodshed in human history have been the outcome of prejudice. The earth is one home and native land. God has created mankind with equal endowment and right to live upon the earth.”

Further, such a principle requires an equal standard of treatment for all people. Abdu’l-Baha, many decades before any comprehensive international codes of universal human rights had even been thought of, wrote:

“Baha’u’llah teaches that an equal standard of human rights must be recognised and adopted. In the estimation of God all men are equal.”

Here we see the direct link between religion and universal human rights. The teachings of the one supreme God for this age are directly reflected in the later formulation of written codes of international human rights law. But the teachings of God are more than a mere code of laws, merely requiring outward observance. They are in the form of a command from God, expressed through the Writings of His Manifestation on earth for this age. They require both an inner conviction and belief, as well as outward observance. One reinforces the other and assures the result.

Human Rights and Diversity in a New World Order

Eventually these teachings require the establishment of a new world order, which in the Baha'i view must be based on the principle of world federalism and on unity in diversity. The Guardian of the Baha'i Faith after the passing of Abdu'l-Baha, Shoghi Effendi, wrote:

“In the Baha’i view, recognition of the oneness of mankind calls for no less than the reconstruction and demilitarization of the whole civilised world – a world organically unified in all the essential aspects of its life, its political machinery, its spiritual aspiration, its trade and finance, its script and language, and yet infinite in the diversity of the national characteristics of its federated units.”

Thus it is clear that the creation of such a new world order, and with it a code of universal human rights, is completely compatible with cultural diversity. In fact, such a world order and such a code must guarantee the rights of cultural minorities, otherwise it would represent some form of global tyranny. The unity of the peoples of the world cannot be achieved without recognising in a fair and balanced way the rights of the component cultures that go to make up the whole. Unity does not mean uniformity. And the expression of love and goodwill towards the people of different cultures is essential for a peaceful world.

Nor does it mean that the existing nations must disappear in such a new world order. The rise of the sovereign nation-state was an important stage in human social development, and that nation-state will still have an important part to play in the future global scenario, as one of the primary component parts of a federated world. However it should be obvious that in an era of global interdependence, the best interests of the component parts cannot be divorced from the best interests of the whole. No country can now survive and prosper in isolation. Issues of human rights, as with the other contemporary issues of global relevance, must inevitably now transcend national sovereignty and purely national concerns.

The Call for World Unity and Human Rights

Once a direct link between religion and universal human rights is accepted, it becomes quite understandable why written codes of those rights have only emerged in the twentieth century. In earlier ages, humanity was divided and dispersed, with no capacity to create a united world order. The revealed religions of those earlier ages did not overly emphasise the importance of world unity. This was notwithstanding the fact that all these great religions prophesied the coming at a later time of a “Golden Age” on earth.

But in this present age, the conditions are such that there is the capacity to establish world unity; all that is lacking is the human will. Baha'is believe that Baha'u'llah, the Prophet-Founder of the Baha'i Faith, has continued this cycle of Divine Revelation by affirming the essential spiritual message of past religions, but in addition by bringing the necessary teachings of the one God of all peoples for this age. Baha'u'llah has laid down the essential requirements for a united, just and peaceful world, and is calling on humanity to put them into practice. The universal standards of human rights now in force are an essential part of Baha'u'llah's teachings, even though not labeled as such by the wider world community.

In this context, the one supreme God of all peoples can no longer be expressed in terms of racial or ethnic selectivity, nor in terms of particular class rights and privileges, nor by reference to the alleged priorities of national sovereignty and survival over the interests of mankind as a whole, nor in terms of some particular spiritual monopoly nor gender preference. In this age, the spiritual unity of all the great religions should be affirmed and the oneness of mankind under the one supreme God accepted. All assertions to the contrary should be exposed for what they are – a form of prejudice in conflict with religion and universal human rights. An equal standard of rights for all must prevail in a united, just and peaceful world. The one God of us all is now calling upon us to fulfil our potential on earth and to make full use of our divine endowments for this purpose. We all have an important role in the ongoing process of human development

Baha'u'llah states:

“O Friends! Be not careless of the virtues with which ye have been endowed, neither be neglectful of your high destiny. Suffer not your labours to be wasted through the vain imaginations which certain hearts have devised....With utmost unity, and in the spirit of perfect fellowship,

exert yourselves, that ye may be enabled to achieve that which beseemeth this Day of God.”

Let us pray that we may yet see an era of universal peace and respect for human rights on earth, effective throughout the world, relying on the forces of the Holy Spirit and the teachings of the one God of all peoples. Let us pray for the establishment of the New World Order based on unity and justice, as called for by Baha'u'llah. By the Will of God, this is destined yet to occur, as all the great religions, including the Baha'i Faith, assure us. To assist in its realisation must be the greatest goal in this life by which to benefit all humanity. There could be no greater gift to leave to our children and our childrens' children.

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