

## Human Rights – Consensus or Reason for Conflict between Religions

At the outset, what needs to be reaffirmed is the indivisibility and universality of the human rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. These form the basis on which the international human rights machinery functions and serve as the framework for all the Bahá'í International Community's efforts in the field of human rights.

However, it is important that the discourse on human rights continues to evolve, and that various actors be given the opportunity to present their thoughts and motivations in the fight against human rights violations.

### *The equality of all human beings*

In terms of contributing to this discourse, the principle at the heart of human rights is, for Bahá'ís, the equality of all human beings, regardless of their nationality, race, beliefs, gender, and other individual or collective characteristics – the principle of the oneness of humanity.

Bahá'u'lláh, the Founder of the Bahá'í Faith, stated in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century:

“Know ye not why We created you all from the same dust? That no one should exalt himself over the other.”<sup>1</sup>

He continues by saying:

“Since We have created you all from one same substance it is incumbent on you to be even as one soul, to walk with the same feet, eat with the same mouth and dwell in the same land.”<sup>2</sup>

The Bahá'í writings further state 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.”

Therefore, fundamental to the application of human rights is the recognition of the equality of all human beings.

One consequence is that all human beings are to be treated in the same way; all human beings, regardless of their individual or collective characteristics, are entitled to the enjoyment of the same rights. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights affirms this in its first two articles:

“Article 1.

All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. ...

Article 2.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://reference.bahai.org/en/t/b/HW/hw-69.html>

<sup>2</sup> Same as above

Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status. Furthermore, no distinction shall be made on the basis of the political, jurisdictional or international status of the country or territory to which a person belongs, whether it be independent, trust, non-self-governing or under any other limitation of sovereignty.”<sup>3</sup>

From this basic principle can be derived all other concepts regarding human rights. The human race being one, any claim by a group to be superior to the rest of humanity must be dismissed, and all must be given the opportunity to contribute to improving the world in which we live.

### Individual and collective rights

It is important to strike a balance between individual rights and collective rights. A consequence of the principle of the oneness of humanity is that the well-being of each of the parts is dependent on the well-being of humanity as a whole. An analogy that can help illustrate this is that of the human body, where the body as a whole cannot be healthy if parts of it are not.

The Bahá'í International Community emphasised this point recently in initial considerations it published on the issue of climate change, saying:

“...the principle of the oneness of humankind must become the ruling principle of international life. This principle does not seek to undermine national autonomy or suppress cultural or intellectual diversity. Rather, it makes it possible to view the climate change challenge through a new lens – one that perceives humanity as a unified whole, not unlike the cells of the human body, infinitely differentiated in form and function yet united in a common purpose which exceeds that of its component parts. This principle constitutes more than a call for cooperation; it seeks to remold anachronistic and unjust patterns of human interaction in a manner that reflects the relationships that bind us as members of one human race. The earnest consideration of the place of this principle in international relations should not be seen as an abstract exercise.... In order to progress beyond a world community driven by a largely economic and utilitarian calculus, to one of shared responsibility for the prosperity of all nations, such a principle must take root in the conscience of the individual. In this way, we come to recognize the broader human agenda – which subsumes those of climate change, poverty eradication, gender equality, development, and the like – and seeks to use both human and natural resources in a way that facilitates the progress and well-being of all people.”<sup>4</sup>

### Human interaction

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<sup>3</sup> [http://www.un.org/events/humanrights/2007/hrphotos/declaration%20\\_eng.pdf](http://www.un.org/events/humanrights/2007/hrphotos/declaration%20_eng.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> <http://bic.org/statements-and-reports/bic-statements/08-1201.htm>

Developing this idea further, human interaction must be cooperative and collaborative if we are to build a society in which each individual can grow and prosper. The Bahá'í writings say:

“The supreme need of humanity is cooperation and reciprocity. The stronger the ties of fellowship and solidarity amongst men, the greater will be the power of constructiveness and accomplishment in all planes of human activity.”<sup>5</sup>

Justice is a principle that will help us reformulate our relationships to each other, and remain focussed on building a society in which every individual can make his/her own contribution. The following is said about justice in the Bahá'í writings:

“By its aid thou shalt see with thine own eyes and not through the eyes of others, and shalt know of thine own knowledge and not through the knowledge of thy neighbor. Ponder this in thy heart; how it behooveth thee to be. Verily justice is My gift to thee and the sign of My loving-kindness. Set it then before thine eyes.”<sup>6</sup>

In the Bahá'í teachings justice is not seen as a static legalistic end or an unapproachable ideal, but as an evolving capacity that individuals, communities, and institutions must continually seek to develop. The realization of justice is therefore dependent on universal participation.

We can thus see that there is a virtuous circle in which the individual contributes to the well-being of the whole, and as he/she does, unity is built. Such individuals find fulfilment of their potential not only in satisfying their own needs but in realizing their completeness in being at one with humanity.

### Conclusion

These preliminary thoughts are one contribution to the discourse of society on human rights and what religions have to offer in this regard. As concerns the Bahá'í Faith, it does not simply outline a set of minimal conditions necessary for the protection of human dignity but rather offers a comprehensive vision of the purpose of human life and society.

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<sup>5</sup> <http://reference.bahai.org/en/t/ab/PUP/pup-107.html>

<sup>6</sup> <http://reference.bahai.org/en/t/b/HW/hw-3.html>