

ALTRUISM AND EXTENSIVITY IN THE BAHÁ'Í RELIGION

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Throughout history, religion has often been the cause of bitter, violent, and seemingly insolvable conflicts between groups of people. Yet religion also has the potential to transcend other group affiliations in uniting people into a community. Although religion has often been cited to justify prejudice and hostility against other groups, religious scriptures have furnished inspiring appeals to altruism and enduring exhortations to embrace the "other." This chapter will examine some of the ways in which one religious system, the Bahá'í faith, combines the unifying function of religion with altruism in its aspiration to develop an altruistically oriented global society.

Located in over two hundred countries, the Bahá'í faith has recently been identified as the second most widely distributed religion (geographically) after Christianity (Barrett 1988). Although the Bahá'í faith originated in nineteenth-century Iran, the vast majority of its multiracial and multicultural membership is now located in other countries, especially in the Third World, with the largest national community being in India. The Bahá'í faith has no clergy; its community administration is conducted by elected councils of nine members (at the local, municipal level by Local Spiritual Assemblies; at the national level by National Spiritual Assemblies; and at the international level by the Universal House of Justice). The Bahá'í teachings are contained in the writings of the religion's prophet-founder, Bahá'u'lláh (1817–1892); his son and successor, 'Abdu'l-Bahá (1844–1921); and 'Abdu'l-Bahá's

grandson and successor, Shoghi Effendi (1897–1957). Bahá'ís accept these works as authoritative texts and the definitive model for belief and behavior, as well as the blueprint for social transformation and for the global social order that is the religion's ultimate goal (see Universal House of Justice 1985).

Bahá'ís aim to transform civilization by transforming themselves and their own social institutions on the basis of principles contained in the Bahá'í scriptures. Both altruism and extensivity—a pattern of personal commitment and responsibility that embraces diverse groups of people (see Oliner and Oliner, this volume)—are fundamental components of Bahá'í belief and practice, a factor that has important implications for the community Bahá'ís are attempting to construct.

The social change envisioned by Bahá'ís involves processes of individual and structural transformation that are interrelated and interactive. Individual transformation embodies more than a profession of belief; it is viewed as a process of acquiring distinctive personal characteristics and demonstrating them in social interactions as well as in working, together with other Bahá'ís, to develop the emerging Bahá'í social institutions.

In the Bahá'í view, spiritual life is not separated from the realm of social relations but integrated with it. The Bahá'í teachings shift the focus of religious practice from individual salvation or enlightenment to the collective progress of humanity as a whole (Arbab 1987, 10). They address social conditions and global problems as directly related to the individual's spiritual life; issues of world peace, the equality of men and women, harmony between science and religion, the equitable distribution of wealth and resources, and the elimination of prejudice are, for Bahá'ís, inseparable from religious belief and practice.

Such an emphasis on collective progress has important implications for the relationship of individual entities—whether individual persons, nations, or other groups—to the larger society of which they form a part. As Shoghi Effendi wrote in 1938, essentially, that relationship is based on the principle of the subordination of “every particularistic interest, be it personal, regional, or national, to the paramount interests of humanity.” This, in turn, is based on the idea that

in a world of inter-dependent peoples and nations the advantage of the part is best to be reached by the advantage of the whole, and . . . no abiding

benefit can be conferred upon the component parts if the general interests of the entity itself are ignored or neglected. (1955, 198)

Yet the “interests of humanity as a whole” are not conceived in terms of a vague abstraction that could be appropriated by a particular dominant group and interpreted as identical with its own interests but, rather, as a complex dynamic relationship between the parts and the whole, in which the viability of the whole is served by ensuring the well-being of all its individual parts, an enterprise for which all share responsibility.

This conception is demonstrated at its most basic in the relationship of the individual person and society, in which a complex balance is sought between individual freedom and responsibility. Cooperation between society and the individual is stressed, as is the fostering of “a climate in which the untold potentialities of the individual members of society can develop.” Such a relationship, as it is envisioned, “must allow ‘free scope’ for ‘individuality to assert itself’ through modes of spontaneity, initiative and diversity that ensure the viability of society.” Thus, even while the will of the individual is subordinated to that of society, “the individual is not lost in the mass but becomes the focus of primary development” (Universal House of Justice 1989, 20–21).

The fulfillment of individual potential is to be sought not in pursuing self-centered desires but in contributing to the benefit and well-being of others, and “the honor and distinction of the individual consist in this, that he among all the world’s multitudes should be a source of social good” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá 1957, 2–3).

As Farzam Arbab (1987), a member of the International Teaching Centre, a Bahá’í advisory institution, has noted, such emphasis on the progress of humanity is also reflected in a shift of emphasis on the particular qualities that Bahá’ís are enjoined to acquire; for example, justice is stressed more than charity, and the acquisition of attitudes conducive to unity is valued over simple tolerance. Even the qualities of love and of detachment from the material world are conceived as active and social rather than passive and inward directed:

The social dimension is also enhanced through the expansion of the meaning of most qualities to include a social vision. Love includes the abolition of social prejudices and the realization of the beauty of diversity in the human race. Detachment from the world is not taught in a way that leads to idleness and to the acceptance of oppression; it is acquired to free us

from our own material interests in order to dedicate ourselves to the well-being of others. To this . . . is also added a constant endeavor to acquire social skills, to participate in meetings of consultation, to work in groups, . . . to reach and carry out collective decisions. (Arbab 1987, 11)

Thus, he concludes, the Bahá'í path of spiritualization "should not be confused with one that defines goodness passively and produces a human being whose greatest virtue is not to harm anyone; it is a path to create social activists and agents of change" (11).

Altruism is a major component of that desired social change and figures prominently in the Bahá'í texts. Many scriptural exhortations delineate altruistic norms explicitly, holding in high regard those who "nurture altruistic aims and plans for the well-being of their fellow men" ('Abdu'l-Bahá 1978, 72). Other teachings reflect values and attitudes conducive to an altruistic orientation (see Oliner and Oliner 1988), including a sense of unity with and responsibility toward others beyond one's own social group; a strong family orientation; emphasis on relationship rather than status; generosity; trustworthiness; appreciation of diversity; as well as ethical values of justice and caring.

Unity and interdependence, and their link to helping behavior, are prominent themes in the Bahá'í texts, often expressed through organic metaphors, as in this passage from the writings of Bahá'u'lláh (1952):

The utterance of God is a lamp, whose light is these words: Ye are the fruits of one tree, and the leaves of one branch. Deal ye one with another with the utmost love and harmony. . . . So powerful is the light of unity that it can illuminate the whole earth. (288)

Explaining this metaphorical reference, 'Abdu'l-Bahá (1978) writes that because all humans are interconnected and mutually dependent, they must "powerfully sustain one another" by caring for each other:

Let them at all times concern themselves with doing a kindly thing for one of their fellows, offering to someone love, consideration, thoughtful help. Let them see no one as their enemy, or as wishing them ill, but think of all humankind as their friends; regarding the alien as an intimate, the stranger as a companion, staying free of prejudice, drawing no lines. (1-2)

The theme of inclusiveness is emphasized in every aspect of Bahá'í individual and community life, beginning with the fundamental teachings of the oneness of humanity and the unity of re-

ligion. The Bahá'í teachings view divine revelation not as a static, unique event, but as a continuing process that is the central feature of human history. The spirit that inspired all the founders of the great religions of the past, the Manifestations of God, is recognized as one and the same. Their original teachings contain the same basic ethical and moral precepts, prominent among which are the teachings that promote altruism. The tenets that change from one religious dispensation to another are the social laws and practices. Thus, religious truth is understood to be relative, progressive, and developmental.

Such a perspective implies more than tolerance for the equality of individual religions as separate entities to be respected in a pluralistic society. It redefines the nature of their relationship to one another and thus sets new terms for a definition of identity that is based on connection rather than separation. Unlike religious groups that define themselves by their distinction from other groups based on the claim that their founder was the sole or the final source of truth, or their practices the only correct form of worship, the Bahá'í religious tradition accepts all the great spiritual teachers as equals. Bahá'ís are expected to revere Buddha, Zoroaster, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad, as well as their own founder, Bahá'u'lláh, recognizing in them the same spirit of the Mediator between God and humanity. Thus, although the body of teachings composing the Bahá'í religion itself cannot accurately be called eclectic, the Bahá'í religious *tradition* includes all of the previous dispensations, which are viewed as "different stages in the eternal history and constant evolution of one religion, Divine and indivisible, of which it [Bahá'í] itself forms but an integral part" (Shoghi Effendi 1955, 114).

From the Bahá'í perspective, the principle of the unity of religion and progressive revelation restores the unifying role of religion in society, providing a basis for resolving long-standing, apparently unbridgeable division among religious communities as well as a resolution of the dilemma posed by the existence of numerous religions, each claiming divine origin. For Bahá'ís, the principle removes any pretext for disunity deriving from religious affiliation; in fact, all religious conflict is forbidden. The Bahá'í writings direct Bahá'ís to "love . . . all religions and all races with a love that is true and sincere and show that love through deeds" ('Abdu'l-Bahá 1978, 69). "That the divers communions of the earth, and the manifold systems of religious belief," Bahá'u'lláh (1952) writes,

“should never be allowed to foster the feelings of animosity among men, is, in this Day, of the essence of the Faith of God and His Religion” (287).

Affirming the preeminence of the principle of religious inclusiveness and unity, the Bahá'í writings go so far as to state that if religion becomes the cause of division and disunity, it is better to have no religion at all ('Abdu'l-Bahá 1945).

Closely linked to the principle of the unity of religion is the distinguishing feature of the Bahá'í dispensation: the principle of the oneness and wholeness of humanity. The full equality of all members of the human species and their close relationship to one another mandates that Bahá'ís regard people from all racial, religious, ethnic, class, and national backgrounds as members of one global human family. Rather than offering mere “symbols of internationalism” in the hope that these might, as Allport (1954) suggested, “provide mental anchorage points around which the idea of world-loyalty may develop” (44), the Bahá'í religion begins with the underlying principle of world loyalty and human unity, which is itself the anchorage point, “the pivot,” according to Shoghi Effendi (1955), “round which all the teachings of Bahá'u'l-láh revolve” (42). The extension of the individual's personal commitments and relationships to include the diverse groups that compose humanity is repeatedly urged in Bahá'í texts in the strongest terms possible—that is, as no less than a divine commandment:

In every dispensation, there hath been the commandment of fellowship and love, but it was a commandment limited to the community of those in mutual agreement, not to the dissident foe. In this wondrous age, however, praised be God, the commandments of God are not delimited, not restricted to any one group of people, rather have all the friends been commanded to show forth fellowship and love, consideration and generosity and loving-kindness to every community on earth. ('Abdu'l-Bahá 1978, 20–21)

Far from being an abstract principle removed from real social conditions, the unity of humankind must be lived in practice, as 'Abdu'l-Bahá (1969) told a gathering in Europe in 1912:

Do not be content with showing friendship in words alone. . . . When you meet a [stranger], speak to him as to a friend; if he seems to be lonely try to help him, give him of your willing service; if he be sad console him, if poor succour him, if oppressed rescue him. . . .

What profit is there in agreeing that universal friendship is good, and

talking of the solidarity of the human race as a grand ideal? Unless these thoughts are translated into the world of action, they are useless. (16)

Although the Bahá'í writings speak of the absolute equality of all, the intent is not sameness or conformity to a dominant culture, nation, race, class, or any other group. In theory and in practice, cultural and racial diversity are valued in the Bahá'í community. Along with the expression of the ideal, a conscious awareness exists that effort is necessary to break down age-old barriers of prejudice and separation. The cultivation of friendships with people of different backgrounds is repeatedly encouraged, but perhaps the most notable evidence of the Bahá'í commitment to interracial unity is the attitude toward interracial marriage, which is actively welcomed and encouraged in the Bahá'í writings.

In consonance with the prosocial orientation of the Bahá'í teachings, the ideal Bahá'í personality as implied in the Bahá'í scriptures is other centered, extensive, and altruistic. In one passage, 'Abdu'l-Bahá (1945) makes altruism itself the touchstone for a new definition of true human nature:

Man should be willing to accept hardships for himself in order that others may enjoy wealth; he should enjoy trouble for himself that others may enjoy happiness and well-being. This is the attribute of man.

... He who is so hard-hearted as to think only of his own comfort, such an one will not be called man.

Man is he who forgets his own interests for the sake of others. His own comfort he forfeits for the well-being of all. Nay, rather, his own life must he be willing to forfeit for the life of mankind. (42)

Although personal transformation is seen as a life-long process, according to the Bahá'í texts the foundations of altruistic behavior can be developed in childhood. Children are believed to be born with the capacity for good or bad behavior; during the course of their development they can be influenced by their social interactions, especially in the family. The Bahá'í writings urge parents to "teach [children] to dedicate their lives to matters of great import, and inspire them to undertake studies that will benefit mankind" ('Abdu'l-Bahá 1978, 129). So crucial is the teaching of prosocial behavior that "training in morals and good conduct is far more important than book learning" ('Abdu'l-Bahá 1978, 135).

However, teaching children lofty ideas is not considered sufficient on its own. Emphasis is repeatedly placed upon behavior, rather than professions of belief—on deeds, not words. Thus the

most powerful method by which children can be taught a prosocial orientation is the model of parents whose actions reflect the ideal personality characteristics.

The impact of modeling on children has received significant support in the literature on altruism and prosocial behavior. According to Mussen and Eisenberg-Berg (1977), "a substantial proportion of the individual's helping and sharing responses is acquired through observation and imitation of a model's behavior without direct reinforcements" (31). Yarrow, Scott, and Waxler (1973) conclude that "generalized altruism would appear to be best learned from parents who do not only try to inculcate the principles of altruism, but who also manifest altruism in everyday interactions" (256). The role of parental influence in fostering the development of the altruistic personality has been further underscored by Oliner and Oliner (1988).

Another area of related emphasis is parental discipline. The development of good character and behavior in children is to be encouraged through the love, understanding, and wise guidance of the parents, using reason rather than force. Bahá'í texts strongly discourage the use of physical punishment or verbal abuse of children, a view supported by contemporary social psychologists. Hoffman (1975), as well as others, suggests that the use of physical power or material resources to control the child's behavior (power assertion) is least effective in developing consideration for others. In contrast, the disciplinary technique of induction—reasoning and explanation based on the impact of the child's behavior on others—encourages prosocial behavior (Mussen and Eisenberg-Berg 1977).

Bahá'í child socialization aims to develop a prosocial orientation in children, who are encouraged to recognize themselves as members of a community that begins with the family and extends to include all of humanity. They are encouraged to develop a sense of personal spiritual responsibility to act toward others with empathy and compassion as well as justice and equity, and to sacrifice their own material self-interests for others in need. As adults, Bahá'ís are expected to make a commitment to continue internalizing such patterns until they become the foundation of the personality itself. Spiritual development is seen as an infinite process of self-transformation—that is, a continual, conscious refining of one's behavior in the crucible of social interaction. The cultivation of spiritual, altruistic qualities remains the aim and central focus of life for the adult Bahá'í.

In the light of recent research, it is noteworthy that both the ethical principles of justice and of caring, important motivators of altruistic behavior (Oliner and Oliner 1988), are emphasized in the Bahá'í writings, where they are not viewed as contradictory or exclusive but as inseparably connected. Even when the ethic of justice is enjoined, it is usually as a practice to be performed out of concern for others. Justice is presented as the practice of equity, often linked with "safeguard[ing] the rights of the downtrodden" (Bahá'u'lláh 1952, 247). The Bahá'í conception of justice means that all have a right to receive care.

Well over half a century before Carol Gilligan (1982) called attention to the complementarity of the "masculine" ethic of justice and the "feminine" ethic of caring, 'Abdu'l-Bahá (1978) had written, "The Kingdom of God is founded upon equity and justice, and also upon mercy, compassion, and kindness to every living soul. Strive ye then with all your heart to treat compassionately all humankind." Yet, he then qualified this statement, asserting that oppression must be opposed: "Kindness cannot be shown the tyrant, the deceiver, or the thief, because, far from awakening them to the error of their ways, it maketh them to continue in their perversity as before" (158).

The Bahá'í teachings recognize that the transformation of individuals into altruistic persons cannot take place outside the social context, which must provide a matrix for that transformation. Recent research has drawn attention to the importance of group norms in motivating moral behavior, whether directly, as a response to the social expectations as such, or indirectly, as internalized personal norms (Reykowski 1982). The findings of Oliner and Oliner (1988) further underscore the importance of the normocentric orientation in motivating the altruism of rescuers of Jews during World War II.

Such findings imply that not only must altruistic qualities be fostered in individuals, but a social framework must also be provided within which extensivity and altruism are valorized and represent the norms of the group itself. The creation of such a society is inseparable from the development of individual altruistic personalities, for so long as groups value egocentrism, unfettered individualism, status seeking, dominance, and a materialistic orientation, altruism will remain an exception to the rule, and the altruistic personality will appear as deviant in comparison to the rest of the group. In Bahá'í society, this situation is reversed: al-

truism is not an aberrant behavior contrary to convention, because the normative expectations (which individuals are ultimately expected to internalize) are altruistic.

It is beyond the scope of this discussion to describe in its entirety the social order Bahá'ís envision and to which they are committed. But they believe that

much of it will be the fruit of the process of integration of now isolated or even hostile races, groups, and nations who, as they come together and unite in the same cause, become transformed and help transform each other, and bring to the rising institutions of a new World Order the richness of different cultures and of different social thought and experience. (Arbab 1987, 11)

Thus, in the Bahá'í view, it is through the individual practice as well as the institutionalization of the principle of unity in diversity that human society can evolve to an unprecedented level of cohesion and cooperation, and transcend the limitations implicit in the current state of separation and competitiveness. While the Bahá'í conception of unity in diversity should not be construed as merely a version of liberal pluralism, the safeguarding and encouraging of diverse elements within the Bahá'í community is a major institutional principle. It is embedded within Bahá'í institutions through practices that, because they apply at all levels of administrative and community functioning—local, national, and international—require the participation and support of the entire Bahá'í community.

Most prominent of these practices is consultation, a group decision-making process whose goal is to reach solutions to problems by consensus. Bahá'í consultation encourages the open and frank expression of diverse views on the topic under discussion, in an atmosphere of love and respect that also allows the “clash of differing opinions” that can strike the “shining spark of truth” (Shoghi Effendi 1968, 21). Each member of the consultative group has an equal right of expression, and no blocs or factions—or any subdivisions of the group—are permitted. Inseparable from the Bahá'í consultative process is the development of sensitivity and respect for the different voices whose expressions of opinion may not fit into conventional or dominant cultural modes of communication. Since the group attempts to work toward consensus on an issue, voting only as a last resort, the process does not necessarily require reduction to duality: alternatives need not be nar-

rowed down to the two poles “for” and “against.” Instead, the consultative process itself, drawing on the interactive contributions of all its diverse members, is looked to as the creative source of new solutions.

Consultation is regarded both as a method for generative decision making and conflict resolution as well as an instrument for reinforcing the unity of a diverse group. It is the method by which the Bahá’í administrative institutions conduct the affairs of the Bahá’í community, but Bahá’ís are also encouraged to use consultation in all aspects of their lives, whether in the family, neighborhood, or workplace.

Another way in which Bahá’í administrative institutions are structured to implement unity in diversity involves practices intended to ensure the participation of minority ethnic populations (the definition of what constitutes a “minority” is left to the discretion of the National Spiritual Assembly in each country). “To discriminate against any race, on the ground of its being socially backward, politically immature, and numerically in a minority,” is considered to be “a flagrant violation of the spirit” of the Bahá’í teachings (Shoghi Effendi 1963, 29). In principle, protecting the “just interests of any minority element within the Bahá’í community,” and ensuring that all have the opportunity to contribute their perspectives to the collaborative efforts of the group, is considered so important that representatives of minority populations “are not only enabled to enjoy equal rights and privileges, but they are even favored and accorded priority” (Universal House of Justice 1976, 49). Bahá’í communities are instructed that it is their duty to ensure that “Bahá’í representative institutions, be they Assemblies, conventions, conferences, or committees, may have represented on them as many of these diverse elements, racial or otherwise, as possible” (Shoghi Effendi 1963, 30).

One way in which this principle is practiced is the minority tie rule of Bahá’í elections. In the course of elections for Bahá’í administrative institutional membership—elections that are conducted without nominations or campaigning, and are decided by plurality vote—if voting results in a tie between persons, one of whom represents a minority, “priority should unhesitatingly be accorded the party representing the minority, and this for no other reason except to stimulate and encourage it, and afford it an opportunity to further the interests of the community” (Shoghi Effendi 1963, 30). In addition to its direct effect in increasing minority

representation in Bahá'í administrative institutions, the practice of this rule heightens the sensitivity of the group to its minority membership and reaffirms the group commitment to valuing and encouraging minority participation. For the individual believer, conceding a tie vote to the minority representative becomes a concrete opportunity to practice sacrifice of self-interest for the other, within a context of social approval.

Whether applied in community administration, in the family, in education, or in the economy, the Bahá'í principles and practices are viewed as catalysts whose application will ultimately bring about social transformation leading to the development of an altruistic global society. Such a society, in the Bahá'í context, begins with the individual striving daily toward personal transformation—the deliberate internalization of spiritual teachings incorporating altruistic, extensive values as personal norms. The Bahá'í teachings strive to imbue individuals with an inclusive orientation transcending—though not suppressing—other group loyalties and valuing the well-being of the entire planet and all its inhabitants. Throughout the Bahá'í writings, the vision imparted to the individual is that of a peaceful, just, and caring civilization whose foundation rests on the cornerstone of the unity of all human beings, a unity that is to be consolidated and protected by institutions that reflect and promote the principles of unity, equity, and altruistic service as normative expectations.

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