

The Best Beloved of All Things

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JUSTICE IN THE BAHÁ'Í FAITH

Abstract

The Baha'i Faith presents a concept of justice closely linked to its core belief in the oneness and interconnectedness of all humanity. Baha'is are urged to think about all people as members of one human family. In the same way that the cells of a body work together to keep the body healthy and functioning, our responsibility is to work together to establish a just society. Oppression and violence against any one part causes damage to the whole. Justice, therefore, requires striving to safeguard the right of all to develop their capacities and contributions toward the advancement of civilization. The role of education is vital to this process. Through reflection on my personal history – from fleeing religious persecution in the land of my birth to becoming a social psychologist researching discrimination – I explore Baha'i perspectives on justice, unity, and the concept of collective trusteeship, with a particular emphasis on education.

Keywords: education, unity, collective trusteeship, religious persecution, Baha'i Faith

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When I was one and a half years old, soldiers came to our home in Tehran with a message for my father. At the time the newly created Islamic Republic of Iran was solidifying out of the aftermath of the Iranian Revolution. The Shah had been overthrown and Ayatollah Khomeini had quickly risen as head of the new regime. The new government began to crack down on what it saw as violations against its version of Islam – e.g., women who left the house without a full-length black chador were harassed by morality police, many forms of music were suddenly prohibited, and members of the press faced new restrictions. The new government also began to target certain groups and individuals that it deemed subversive or heretical.

The soldiers came to our door because we were members of the Baha'í Faith, and as such, were considered fair targets of persecution. They offered my father a choice. They told him they would leave us alone if he gave them the names and addresses of twenty other Baha'í families. We had until the next day to decide.

Baha'is constitute Iran's largest non-Muslim religious minority (U.S. Department of State, 2011). Since the religion's inception in 1844, the followers of this faith have been persecuted by successive Iranian governments. In the first six years of its existence alone, over twenty thousand followers were killed – some gruesomely tortured in public – in an effort to curb the growth and influence of the budding religion (Momen, 2005; Nabil-i-'Azam, 1887/1970). Its founder, Mirza Husayn Ali, known as Baha'u'llah ("The Glory of God"), was imprisoned, tortured, and exiled for 40 years. Since then, successive Iranian regimes have continued to scapegoat the Baha'í community, directing waves of persecution and violence against its members (Martin, 1984; Momen, 2005). At the moment I am writing this, more than a hundred Baha'is are in prison in Iran for their beliefs (Baha'í World News Service, June 26, 2012).

Despite this persecution, almost a hundred and seventy years since it began, the Baha'í Faith has grown and spread throughout the world, with members from nearly every conceivable ethnic, national, cultural, and religious background. The Baha'í sacred texts have been translated into hundreds of languages. With approximately seven million people, all participating as part of the same global community, Baha'is are developing an understanding of justice through study and application of Baha'u'llah's writings. In this paper I hope to explore the Baha'í perspective of justice, with a particular emphasis on its relationship to education, and how it has shaped my life.

To explore the concept of justice as presented in the Baha'í Faith, it may help to first elaborate on some basic Baha'í beliefs. Baha'is believe that all major religions originated from the same unknowable Divine Source. The founders of these religions are known to Baha'is as the Manifestations of God, and include personages such as Abraham, Krishna, Moses, Buddha, Jesus Christ, and Muhammad. Each one of these Divine Educators successively appeared at a different time with a specific and unique mission. They all renewed the spiritual guidance that has remained the same throughout the ages. An example of this is the Golden Rule, which refers to treating others the way one would like to be treated; this exhortation can be found in almost identical formulations across many different religious scriptures. The Manifestations of God also brought guidance that was tailored to the needs of the time and place, and suited to the capacity of those alive at the time. Many dietary restrictions, for example, can be linked to preventing disease due to lack of capacity for sanitation or preservation. The new guidance also served to clear up questions or elucidate previous teachings which had been corrupted in the intervening

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centuries by other, less noble interests. It addressed challenges specific to the time and to the evolving needs and capacities of humanity, serving as a unique remedy to the ills of the age. Baha'u'llah wrote:

The All-Knowing Physician hath His finger on the pulse of mankind. He perceiveth the disease, and prescribeth, in His unerring wisdom, the remedy. Every age hath its own problem, and every soul its particular aspiration. The remedy the world needeth in its present-day afflictions can never be the same as that which a subsequent age may require (The Tabernacle of Unity, p. 5).

Baha'is believe that Baha'u'llah was the most recent of this line of Manifestations or Divine Educators. His teachings, therefore, represent for Baha'is the most recent guidance from God for how to live our lives and interact with others, how to conceptualize human nature and our relationship with the divine, and how to build institutions and societies that will contribute towards the advancement of both material and spiritual civilization.

Perhaps the most fundamental principle of Baha'u'llah's teachings is the essential unity and interconnectedness of humanity. It is only relatively recently in human history that we have been able to travel and communicate with people around the entire globe. It was in the past century that we caught our first glimpse of the earth as a whole, and even more recently that we have been able to communicate with people on the other side of the planet almost instantaneously. These dramatic changes have had a transformative effect on individuals and institutions, creating new opportunities and challenges in the fields of economics, politics, security, health, communication, environmental stewardship, and others. In a sense, humanity is evolving, and reaching a new phase of maturity. The writings of Baha'u'llah address this new phase of human relationships in calling humanity to a sense of unity in diversity: "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" (The Tabernacle of Unity, p. 40), and "It is not for him to pride himself who loveth his own country, but rather for him who loveth the whole world. The earth is but one country and mankind its citizens" (Tablet of Maqsd, p. 167).

For these beliefs in the oneness of humanity, my family was forced to make a choice between ourselves and others—to give ourselves up to the authorities, or instead condemn twenty other families to that fate. However, what seemed on the surface to be a choice between our own wellbeing and the safety of others was, on deeper inspection, not a choice at all. If we gave ourselves up, we could expect to be tortured for more names, and others would be hurt. If we did the unthinkable and provided the names and addresses of other families, we still were not guaranteed any measure of safety from the government. We could not escape a fate by consigning others to it; what would happen would affect us all.

As evening approached, my parents consulted and took the only possible course of action. We quickly packed some clothes into two black plastic bags, and escaped in the night. With our belongings in hand, we went first to the homes of friends, but knew we could not stay long without putting them in danger. At last, the decision was made that our family – which included my father and mother, my grandmother, my four-year old sister and myself – would escape Iran by crossing the border into Pakistan. We were joined by a young cousin whose only chance at education lay outside Iran. Despite impeccable grades, she was barred from attending college and fulfilling her dream of becoming a physician because she was Baha'i. Altogether we were six people, ranging widely in age. In many ways, the composition of our little party could allay suspicions, for who would be foolish or desperate enough to try to escape the country with a disabled grandmother and two small children? With the loan of a substantial amount of money

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from a relative, we were able to enlist the services of guides who would help us cross the desert. We said goodbye to friends and family, most of whom we would never see again, and set off.

Thus began a grueling journey that would take us across the globe. We would ride camels through the desert, hide in the back of a truck, stay in a refugee camp, and fly across an ocean. Over and over again, we would put our lives in the hands of complete strangers, and hope that they would treat us with compassion on no basis other than our common humanity. Eventually, through the efforts and kindness of many people, we would arrive in the United States, where we would be able to enjoy two precious things: the right to attend school and receive an education, and the right to believe and seek spiritual truth as we saw fit. Access to both material and spiritual education has been a tremendous gift, one that I do not take for granted; it also connects closely to my understanding of justice.

In the Baha'i Writings, the concept of justice is intimately tied to the acquisition of knowledge. Justice is described as the "best beloved of all things" in the sight of God:

The best beloved of all things in My sight is Justice; turn not away therefrom if thou desirest Me, and neglect it not that I may confide in thee. 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 (The Hidden Words, Arabic, #2).

Here, justice is presented not as an invented construct or something devised to maintain social order, but is elevated to the level of spiritual truth. From this perspective, justice or fair-mindedness is a spiritual quality, latent in the human soul, which is essential to the investigation of reality, allowing us to "see with" our "own eyes". Through justice we are enabled to free ourselves from blindly imitating others in the form of superstitions or religious dogma, perpetuating patterns of ethnic/ racial or religious prejudice and hatred, and being manipulated for the purposes of materialism or partisan political interests.

The expression of justice confers a certain measure of responsibility on individuals to develop and apply it in their daily lives:

At the individual level, justice is that faculty of the human soul that enables each person to distinguish truth from falsehood...It calls for fair-mindedness in one's judgments, for equity in one's treatment of others, and is thus a constant if demanding companion in the daily occasions of life (Baha'i International Community, 1995).

If each human being has the capacity for justice, then how does one develop it? Expression of this spiritual quality requires the freedom, opportunity, and tools to explore reality and understand it for ourselves, and to contribute that understanding to the benefit of the world. This has profound implications for human rights, a topic which is explored more thoroughly elsewhere (see Weinberg, 1998).

The expression of justice, furthermore, requires a commitment to the independent investigation of truth. Each person is encouraged to independently seek out and investigate truth for themselves. An example of this in the Baha'i Faith is that children do not automatically inherit the faith from their parents; rather, children of Baha'i parents are encouraged to investigate and learn about other beliefs, and are ultimately free to choose how they identify themselves. Another example is that the Baha'i Faith has no clergy. The individual believer is

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called upon to develop a relationship with God unmediated by any religious authority, as well as take responsibility to administer to the needs of others. While there is an administrative order which utilizes consultative decision-making processes which keep the community unified, the interpretive role which clergy needed to fill in earlier times has been obviated with the advent of widespread literacy, and the belief in this individual capacity to seek out and understand truth.

To assist in the investigation of truth, one must not only have the opportunity but also the tools. Baha'is believe that both science and religion are valuable and reconcilable ways of understanding truth, and both are necessary to the advancement of humankind. In fact, to have one without the other could have negative consequences, religion without science resulting in superstition, while science without religion leading toward materialism. If truth is one, then this calls for a more complex understanding of the relationship between these two sources of knowledge.

Therefore, for an individual to express justice in this form, to develop their ability to see with their own eyes and know of their own knowledge, and to be able to use insights from both science and religion, the role of education is paramount. Each human being is like “a mine rich in gems of inestimable value,” Baha'u'llah wrote, “Education can, alone, cause it to reveal its treasures, and enable mankind to benefit therefrom” (Tablet of Maqsur, p. 162). Education, or the acquisition of knowledge, not only allows the gems of our own skills, virtues, and capacities to be revealed and refined for our own development, but to be contributed to the greater good. On the broader level, education can serve to sharpen our ability to recognize injustice, and strengthen our commitment to justice and fair-mindedness, to support the rights of others.

At the broader level, this connection between education and justice grows out of the core Baha'i belief in the unity of the human race. We are urged to think about ourselves as members of one human family. An understanding of justice based on unity has profound implications for the relationships between individuals and society. These relationships are described in the Baha'i writings using the metaphor of the component parts of a human body:

It [justice and impartiality] means to consider the welfare of the community as one's own. It means, in brief, to regard humanity as a single individual, and one's own self as a member of that corporeal form, and to know of a certainty that if pain or injury afflicts any member of that body, it must inevitably result in suffering for all the rest (The Secret of Divine Civilization, p. 39)

In the same way that the diverse parts of a body work together to keep the body healthy and functioning, our responsibility is to work together to establish a just and peaceful society. In the human body, all cells have a role to play; likewise, all human beings have capacities to contribute to the well-being of the whole human race. And as in the human body, the whole must work together to provide nutrients and a suitable environment for the development of the diverse individual members as well¹.

When this mutual relationship is ignored or neglected, the body of humanity suffers. Take, for example, a situation where certain cells of the body grow at a cost to other parts of the body, depriving the rest of necessary nutrients to be healthy. In the human body, this is called

¹ Body metaphors have been used in the past to justify hierarchical structures and disempower select groups of people, particularly in the presence of diversity. That is not at all the approach here. The key to ensuring that the call for unity is not used to justify oppression against one group, but instead values each member and the diversity present in the whole, is justice. See Karlberg (2012) for a more thorough exploration.

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cancer. If we think of certain groups as separate entities, opposed to each other, then all we see is one group benefiting from extra resources while the other group suffers from the lack of necessities. However, if we understand humanity's essential oneness, then this injustice becomes cancerous, and a threat to the balance and wellbeing—even existence—of the whole. Thus we must question formulations which pit people against each other or justify the exploitation of some people by others. Any form of prejudice or beliefs that one group of people is inferior to another—be it based on race, religion, gender, class, or any other reason—is contrary to the principles of unity and justice. As members of one human body, injustice against any part of the whole causes damage to the whole.

From this perspective on the oneness of humanity and its implications for justice emerges the principle of collective trusteeship. Briefly put, this is “the idea that each one of us enters the world as a trust of the whole and, in turn, bears a measure of responsibility for the welfare of all” (Baha’i International Community, 2012, p. 1). Collective trusteeship provides a lofty goal in the realization of justice. It calls for a careful analysis of our individual choices, community norms, and societal institutions and structures. It has implications for human rights, in terms of the obligations of the broader community to provide certain basic fundamentals to ensure the health and well-being of its individual members; for economics and development, as a spiritually-impelled antidote to the growing chasm between the extremely wealthy and the destitute; for national sovereignty, in rethinking the limited loyalties that keep nations at odds with each other and prevent them from taking actions for the common good; and for environmental sustainability, because trusteeship applies not just in geographic terms but also inter-generationally, requiring that we take future generations into account in our use of resources (Baha’i International Community, 1995, 2010, 2012; Karlberg, 2010, 2012; Weinberg, 1998).

Importantly, the principle of collective trusteeship also has implications for education and the acquisition of knowledge, which enable the fulfillment of the potential for justice at an individual level. When a person is withheld from opportunities to develop their full intellectual and spiritual potential, this is a tragedy not just for the person but for all humanity. In either case, the entire population is losing out from the ideas and inventions, insights and understandings that those individuals could have contributed, had they had equal access and opportunities.

Growing up in the U.S., I have had many freedoms and opportunities that Baha’i youth in Iran still do not have, especially in terms of access to education. I have had the ability to attend college and to get a graduate degree unhindered by the threat of imprisonment and violence. Knowing the sacrifices and risks my parents took which enabled me to have these opportunities, knowing that so many youth are denied the right to an education, has marked my trajectory in many ways. My education was a gift that came with a tremendous responsibility. As a child I found myself trying to learn more about historical injustices and surprised at how often they resonated with my family’s experience. I read books about the Holocaust, slavery, Jim Crow laws, and the long struggle of women to have equal rights, trying to understand why people would deny other human beings the right to live and to learn in safety.

At the same time, the sense of displacement that comes with being a refugee somehow melded with the understanding that the whole earth was my home to give me a strong sense that these struggles were my struggles. As a member of the human race, I had a claim on them and they had a claim on me. I may have never had the experience of being Black in America, for example, yet given the circumstances in the United States I believe it is a pressing need to investigate and dispel the racism directed at Black Americans, because in actuality it harms all of

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us. My senior thesis in college examined racial stereotypes in the context of use of lethal force against unarmed Black men by police officers. Attending graduate school in social psychology, I studied gender and religion in addition to race (Toosi & Ambady, 2011; Toosi, Babbitt, Ambady, & Sommers, 2012; Toosi, Sommers, & Ambady, 2012). Across all these different research topics, I have found affirmations of the oneness and the interconnectedness of the human family, and that “if pain or injury afflicts any member of that body, it must inevitably result in suffering for all the rest” (The Secret of Divine Civilization, p. 39). For example, the gender wage gap appears to be a woman’s issue on the surface, but in reality affects both males and females: if women were paid the same wages as men for the same work, poverty rates for U. S. households would be reduced dramatically (Boushey, Arons, & Smith, 2010). Imagine what profound effects this would have on the education and health of children of both sexes in these households who are now living with the burden of poverty. In whatever ways I can, I have tried to find ways in my professional life to contribute to addressing issues of justice.

In doing this, the role of education has been central. The education I’ve received is something for which I am extremely fortunate. If I had remained in Iran, I would have been barred from higher education, just like my cousin who chose to escape Iran with us in the hope of becoming a doctor, and just like thousands of Baha’i youth in Iran are today. The motivation underlying my research is really to make something of what I have been given—an education, the means to investigate reality—in order to contribute toward justice on a broader level. As one cell of the body of humanity, I am trying to do my part to heal the whole.

While my story began with what happened to my family decades ago, Baha'is in Iran today are still enduring intense persecution. Members are arrested, charged with “spreading corruption on earth,” and sentenced to years in prison. Over 200 people, including teenagers and elderly people, have been killed in the past few decades. Houses and possessions are burned, confiscated, looted, and families are chased out of their homes and villages. Cemeteries are desecrated. Children in primary school are abused and reviled, older youth are not allowed to go to college, adults are denied jobs and pensions and their businesses are shut down or fire-bombed (Baha’i World News Service, June 26, 2012; Iran Human Rights Documentation Center, 2006; U.S. Department of State, 2011).

These are part of a strategic plan on the part of the government to block the progress and development of the Baha’i community. A document known as the Golpaygani memorandum, written in 1991 and signed by Iran’s Supreme Leader, presented the governmental policy in response to “the Baha’i question” (Golpaygani, 1991). At the core, the intention to make life in Iran miserable for Baha’is – to identify and track individual believers, to deprive the young people of education and the adults of employment, to economically marginalize them while criminalizing their beliefs, to threaten them until they converted to another religion or left the country. The years since then have seen little respite from this explicit and systematic approach to suffocate a community; rather, additional policy documents of a similar nature have come to light (Affolter, 2005; Baha’i World News Service, August 27, 2007; Kazemzadeh, 2000). Small wonder, then, that one Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist recently described the Baha’is as facing “mind-boggling repression” (Kristof, June 24, 2012).

Facing such dramatic persecution, some might expect the Baha’is to react by protesting in the streets, undertaking acts of civil disobedience, fighting back against attackers, or even trying to overthrow the regime. These adversarial methods might fit some definitions of justice, but not one that is based on unity of the human race. If we want to build a just society that recognizes the unity of its members, the means must match the ends. In the context of our interrelatedness, then,

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we cannot respond to injustice with adversarial tactics. How, then, in the face of such hostility and injustice, does one demonstrate an upholding of the principles of unity and justice?

The Baha'í community has engaged in what has been termed “constructive resilience” (Karlberg, 2010). It provides an example of application of the approach to justice and the principle of collective trusteeship as described above. With justice on the individual level being so closely tied to education, justice in the light of the principle of collective trusteeship also demands the preservation of that right for all the members of the human family. The Baha'ís in Iran have striven to apply the principle of justice by ensuring that each individual has access to the resources they need to acquire knowledge and enhance their understanding of the world. For example, although Baha'í youth are banned from state-sponsored colleges and universities, the Baha'í community, using donated supplies and textbooks, with the help of volunteers as faculty members and administrators, meeting online and in people's homes, has been able to offer university-level courses to the youth. This has come to be known as the Baha'í Institute for Higher Education (Ahmari, 2012; Baha'í International Community, 2006; Iran Human Rights Documentation Center, 2006; Karlberg, 2010).

These educational efforts extend far beyond Baha'í youth, though. Baha'ís in Iran and around the world work in their communities to provide for the education and empowerment of children and young people, including those from disadvantaged or more rural areas. This educational process is open to all, and covers topics such as the power of expression and use of language, social issues, math and science, and the development of a moral framework (but not in the mode of religious indoctrination). This grows out of a long tradition of making education accessible to all. In fact, the Baha'ís in Iran were the first in the country to open schools for girls, in the early 1900s, at a time when most formal education was limited to boys. Whereas the model of schooling at the time predominantly consisted of reciting and memorizing passages from religious scriptures, the Baha'í schools taught math and science, used maps and blackboards, and were open to and attended by children from many faith backgrounds, despite the oppression faced by the Baha'ís (Shahvar, 2009).

These efforts, then and now, are the community's response to injustice, in the context of the awareness of the unity of humanity and the role of education in ensuring individual capacity to express justice. They provide an example of an approach to justice that values the “gems of inestimable value” that are within each person. They demonstrate a sincere belief that justice is more than getting what is fair or rightfully yours, but also ensuring that every member of humanity has access to the same. They also indicate faith that developing the capacity for justice at the individual level can translate into a more just society (see Hanson, 2012). The right to acquire knowledge – both scientific and religious, both material and spiritual – is an indispensable element of justice and of the wellbeing of the body of humanity.

The efforts made by the Iranian Baha'í community have gained support not just from other Baha'ís, but from people from many faith backgrounds all around the world. For example, in response to recent government attacks and arrests of those involved in the Baha'í Institute for Higher Education, a campaign called “Education Under Fire” was initiated in support of the Baha'í youth. A documentary about the situation has been made and screened across dozens of college campuses, libraries, and meeting halls in the United States and Canada. Over 25,000 people have signed the online petition (<http://educationunderfire.com>). The global response to the plight of the Baha'ís is not limited to the issue of denial of education alone. Individual citizens, Nobel laureates, national governments, the United Nations and its agencies, and international human rights organizations have all passed resolutions, written letters, and made

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statements calling on the government of Iran to cease its campaign of persecution against the Baha'is (e.g. H.Res. 134 – 112th Congress, 2012; S.Res. 80--112th Congress, 2012; Tutu & Ramos-Horta, September 25, 2011; “We are ashamed,” February 3, 2009). To see the global community come to the aid of one of its parts in the name of justice, even as that group of people is striving to contribute to the well-being of the global community, may be a demonstration of the principle of collective trusteeship in action.

My family realized, in a moment decades ago, that a choice between ourselves and others had no meaning. That realization has shaped my life. It has given me opportunities for education that I would never have had otherwise, and a sense of responsibility to work for justice. If the goal is to construct a more just society overall—a better world—the role of education is vital. The right to knowledge and the ability to participate in its creation and application is something that belongs to everyone. It is, at least in part, our responsibility to ensure that this trust is not neglected.

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