

# From Oppression to Empowerment

NADER SAIEDI

## *Abstract*

This article discusses the Bahá'í understanding of the nature of oppression. The first section identifies and discusses four main contemporary types of oppression involving the international political order, forms of the state, economic structures, and forms of cultural identity. The second section explores Bahá'u'lláh's personal response to oppression in the form of His three historic declarations. The final section draws implications from the previous discussions in order to identify features of a Bahá'í approach to empowerment and liberation from oppression.

## *Resumé*

Le présent article porte sur la compréhension, d'un point de vue bahá'í, de la nature de l'oppression. Dans la première partie, l'auteur relève quatre grands types d'oppression dans le monde d'aujourd'hui, qui mettent en cause l'ordre politique international, les types d'État, les structures économiques et les formes d'identité culturelle. Dans la deuxième partie, il explore la réponse personnelle de Bahá'u'lláh à l'oppression, à la lumière de ses trois déclarations historiques. Enfin, l'auteur tire des implications des discussions abordées dans les deux premières parties dans le but de définir les caractéristiques d'une approche bahá'íe de l'autonomisation et de la libération à l'égard de l'oppression.

## *Resumen*

Este artículo discute el entendimiento bahá'í sobre la naturaleza de la opresión. La primera sección identifica y discute cuatro principales tipos contemporáneos de opresión involucrando el orden político internacional, formas del Estado, estructuras económicas y formas de identidad cultural. La segunda sección explora la respuesta personal de Bahá'u'lláh a la opresión en la forma de Sus tres declaraciones históricas. La sección final extrae implicaciones de las discusiones previas para identificar características de un enfoque bahá'í al empoderamiento y a la liberación de la opresión.

In the millenarian promises of all the religions, it is commonly expected that the coming of the Promised One will take place at a time when oppression, tyranny, and darkness have overtaken the world, and that through the Savior, the world will be filled with justice and enlightenment.<sup>1</sup> Bahá'u'lláh asserted that His Faith was the fulfillment of those promises. The question of oppression and empowerment is

1 The Arabic word *zulm*, meaning "oppression" and "injustice," comes from the same root as the word *zulma*, meaning "darkness." Bahá'u'lláh frequently uses the ambiguity of these terms to characterize true knowledge and enlightenment as the polar opposite of oppression. The themes of darkness and light are also central to Zoroastrianism, in which the world is viewed as a battleground between good and evil, light and darkness, God and Ahriman, and it is with the coming of the Promised One that oppression is to be defeated and enlightenment rule the world.

in fact central to the identity of the Bahá'í Faith and a frequent theme in the Writings of its Central Figures, which analyze the root causes of oppression and provide a comprehensive approach to its elimination.

During the nineteenth century, humanity became intensely conscious of the issue of oppression. In the past, most people considered their own fate to be a consequence of the natural or divinely ordained order of things, but nineteenth-century social and political philosophers began to view the existing order of things as arbitrary, unjust, and morally indefensible. A search for the causes of oppression ensued and has continued into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. But none of those efforts actually identified the root cause of oppression. The dominant discourse on oppression and injustice, while offering great insights, accepts—and thus at times reproduces—some of the tacit premises of the very culture of oppression that it criticizes.

Hopeful and optimistic rationalists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were convinced that atheism would replace religion; reason would rule; and peace, freedom, and prosperity would reign. In the twentieth century, oppression, rather than receding, reached unprecedented levels of intensity, culminating in the genocide of millions. As a result, the confident rationalism of modernity was replaced by an inconsistent postmodernism that simultaneously rejects the possibility of universal values and

yet paradoxically condemns practices like racism, colonialism, patriarchy, and cultural intolerance as universally immoral. The end of the Cold War brought a temporary optimism, which was subsequently shattered by the events of the last twenty years, and we are now witnessing a growing attitude of pessimism, cynicism, and hopelessness.

It is useful at the outset to review the meaning of the concept of oppression. Oppression refers to the exercise of power to keep others in a state of subjection and to treat them unjustly by denying what is due them as their right by virtue of their humanity. Oppression therefore, by definition, is the essence of injustice. Although it encompasses material deprivations of every kind, it also includes forms of psychological and spiritual oppression. The act of oppressing others—denying them their rights as human beings—presupposes the dehumanization of the oppressed. Historically, attempts to justify oppression as morally acceptable have relied on defining the oppressed group as outside the boundaries of the moral community and therefore as subject to exclusion, exploitation, degradation, abuse, and deprivation of the rights due to those to whom we owe moral duties.

#### THE LAW OF NATURE AS ROOT CAUSE

In recent times, the most prominent and influential theoretical approach to the problem of oppression and injustice has been Marxism. Marxian theory

rejects the causal primacy of both individuals and human consciousness in favor of social structures. In this view, the only thing that truly exists is material reality, defined as the economic structure of society; oppression is manifested in inequalities of class. Thus, according to Marxist theory, the root cause of all varieties of oppression in the present world is capitalism. According to this logic, the solution to the problem is communism.

Despite the good intentions of Marxist theory, its analysis of oppression is incomplete and inadequate and, as a result, its implementation only created new forms of oppression. This fact is exemplified in the language of Karl Marx himself, who in his own writings degrades, dehumanizes, and humiliates anyone who dares to disagree with him. Furthermore, his theory creates and justifies extreme forms of hatred and violence against the “enemies of the people.” Individual autonomy and human rights are rejected, and despite Marxism’s claim to offer emancipation, it instead would institutionalize what is in effect a collective slavery.

Marxist theory could not offer a complete theory of emancipation because it did not address the root causes of oppression. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s words concerning the issue of economic injustice, in one of His table talks recorded in *Some Answered Questions*, go directly to the heart of the matter. Chapter 78 of that book is devoted to the question of industrial strikes. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá deals very briefly with

the short-term and immediate causes of strikes—namely, the greedy attitude of both capitalists and workers. But then He identifies the real cause of the problem and devotes His entire discussion to an elaboration of that structural analysis. The 1908 translation of *Some Answered Questions* does not capture the main point made by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. The new translation, however, accurately conveys the meaning of His words: “Now, the root cause of these difficulties lies in the law of nature that governs present-day civilization, for it results in a handful of people accumulating vast fortunes that far exceed their needs, while the greater number remain naked, destitute, and helpless” (78.2).

While ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is addressing the underlying social structure that leads to extremes of inequality, He criticizes both the inequality in capitalist society and the forced and artificial equality imposed under communism because He finds both to be merely different expressions of the same root cause of injustice. That root cause is “the law of nature that governs present-day civilization.” In an article entitled “On the Importance of Divine Civilization,” published in 1913 in *The Asiatic Quarterly*,<sup>2</sup> ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains further what is meant by this “law of nature”: “In the world of nature the dominant note is the struggle for existence—the result of which is

---

<sup>2</sup> A revised version of this article is quoted in J.E. Esslemont’s *Bahá’u’lláh and the New Era*.

the survival of the fittest. The law of the survival of the fittest is the origin of all difficulties. It is the cause of war and strife, hatred and animosity, between human beings" (174).

In His letter to the Executive Committee of the Central Organization for a Durable Peace, known as the Tablet to The Hague, 'Abdu'l-Bahá further states that "as long as man is captive to nature he is a ferocious animal, as the struggle for existence is one of the exigencies of the world of nature. This matter of the struggle for existence is the fountain-head of all calamities and is the supreme affliction" (*Selections* 227). The "law of nature" thus is the Darwinian struggle for existence. In this model, progress is the result of constant struggle and predatory competition between, but also within, species. When the model is applied to human beings, society is viewed essentially as a jungle in which the regulating principle is the pursuit, by any means necessary, of particularistic self- or group interests against those of other individuals and groups. According to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, when human beings reduce themselves to the realm of beasts and apply the law of animal nature to the realm of human social relations, the result is not progress but oppression. From this perspective, it is not capitalism itself that is the problem; the issue is not whether individuals or the collectivity own the means of production, because both types of structures lead to oppression when they operate according to the law of nature, which is itself the root cause.

'Abdu'l-Bahá frequently discusses what happens when human beings act according to the law of nature—their natural instincts—without the restraint provided by education, specifically moral education grounded in a spiritual worldview. In *Paris Talks*, He says that when human beings turn "towards the material side, towards the bodily part of [their] nature," they become "inferior to the inhabitants of the lower animal kingdom." They become worse than animals because they are "more savage, more unjust, more vile, more cruel, more malevolent than the lower animals themselves. All [their] aspirations and desires being strengthened by the lower side of the soul's nature," and they become "more brutal. . . . Men such as this plan to work evil, to hurt and to destroy; they are entirely without the spirit of Divine compassion, for the celestial quality of the soul has been dominated by that of the material" (31.6).<sup>3</sup>

3 Ironically, when humans forget their spiritual reality and reduce themselves to the level of animals, they also oppress the realm of nature. Since humans are not constrained by instinctual limits, both their desires and their destructive power transcend all bounds. When intelligence becomes a blind tool of material desires, in the context of a worldview glorifying selfishness, consumerism, and struggle for existence, human beings shatter the balance of nature, pollute the earth, and destroy other species. For a summary of the discussion, in the Writings of the Báb, about the responsibility of human beings to assist all creatures to attain their "paradise"; see Saiedi, *Gate of the Heart*, 315–17.

## FOUR FORMS OF OPPRESSION

Oppression takes four main forms, all of which are ultimately rooted in a materialist worldview that sees human beings in terms of the law of nature and the logic of the jungle. They pertain to the international political structure, the economic structure of various societies, forms of the state, and forms of cultural identity. Most discussions of oppression focus on forms related to the economy and the state, while neglecting the other two types.

## INTERNATIONAL ANARCHY

The first form of oppression is related to the current political structure of the world. Although it is increasingly recognized that humanity has arrived at the global stage of its development, contemporary globalization has been characterized by anarchy and the law of the jungle at the level of international relations. It is ironic that although both Marxist theory and political science realism emphasize the causal primacy of structures over individual units, both theories ignore the fact that the existence of anarchy in international relations constitutes one of the most important reasons for inequality, tyranny, and oppression in the world. Because of the oneness and interconnectedness of the world today, most of humanity's problems cannot be solved through a nationalistic political approach. Nor, as noted by Shoghi Effendi, are merely pious

slogans about the equality of all human beings sufficient if the international order does not embody those ideas (*World Order* 42–43). It is notable that Marxist theory has never proposed a global approach to social problems. While Marxism advocates the international solidarity of the workers of the world, its actual approach to globalism is the demolition of all the states in the world—in other words, the extension of anarchy to the global level of social reality.

Organic theories of state and society were prevalent in the nineteenth century, but Bahá'u'lláh found them inadequate because they centered on the nation, and it was not merely the nation but all of humanity which had now assumed an objective organic and interconnected character. As He wrote in His Tablet to Queen Victoria, addressing the elected representatives of governments,

Regard the world as the human body which, though at its creation whole and perfect, hath been afflicted, through various causes, with grave disorders and maladies. Not for one day did it gain ease, nay its sickness waxed more severe, as it fell under the treatment of ignorant physicians, who gave full rein to their personal desires and have erred grievously. And if, at one time, through the care of an able physician, a member of that body was healed, the rest remained afflicted as before. (Súriy-i-Haykal, ¶174)

The key implication of this metaphor is that the component parts of an organic entity are not alien others to be repulsed, exploited, suppressed, or annihilated. Just as all parts of the body operate to their mutual benefit and for the good of the whole, so too must all the different parts of humanity recognize their essential connection and dependence on one another, as well as the responsibility inherent in partaking of that reciprocal relationship and the shared identity it confers. However, such recognition is impossible if human beings regard themselves as merely creatures of nature—that is, as solely material beings without obligation to those outside their own narrowly defined group.

One of the ironic features of modernity is that it proclaims the inalienable rights of all and yet accepts as natural and moral the injustice and inequality associated with the status of citizenship. For today the most important determinant of the destiny of individuals—that is, of the rights, opportunities, and life chances they will enjoy—is national citizenship. By virtue of being born in a particular country, multitudes of children are condemned to an uncertain future of poverty and lack of access to resources. The same accident of birth, in a different nation, provides other children with opportunities that are guaranteed by the right of citizenship.

In the past, various parts of the world were relatively similar in terms of their level of development, so citizenship, or membership in a political

territory, was not the main determinant of human destiny, in comparison to other accidents of birth, such as class. But we now live in a global world, yet one without recognized global rights and one whose peoples suffer from extremes of inequality. Although 'Abdu'l-Bahá wrote *The Secret of Divine Civilization* to address the issue of the development and modernization of nineteenth-century Iran, He includes in that treatise a call for *universal* peace through collective security; indeed, His discourse on the liberation and development of the nation of Iran is itself inseparable from His critique of international anarchy.

Paradoxically, there is one kind of international oppression that is now universally condemned: colonialism and imperialism. Yet colonialism is condemned without questioning the structural reality behind it, namely, international anarchy. Some scholars try to evade this theoretical contradiction by defining colonialism, or imperialism, as a mere effect of capitalism. However, colonialism and imperialism have always existed. Under capitalism they took a capitalistic form, but they did not come into existence as a consequence of that system. In the writings of Marx himself, the slave mode of production was the essence of the colonial economic logic of the Roman Empire. Colonialism is the product of applying the law of the jungle in the realm of human relations.

In modern capitalism, the structure of economic relations within the colonizing country (capitalist relations)



is entirely different from the economic structure that was allowed in colonized territories (slavery and feudalism) because not only the principles of capitalism but also those of nationalism contribute to defining the way the colonized alien people are treated. Furthermore, as realists have correctly pointed out, the relation of states to one another is partly autonomous from the internal economic structures of those units. International relations are not mere expressions of an economic system; rather, they are significantly affected by the anarchic structure of the international system.

In His Writings, Bahá'u'lláh frequently and explicitly condemned colonialism, linking colonial wars with the anarchic logic of nature. Following the British invasion of Egypt in 1882, which began the formal colonization of the Middle East by the British, Bahá'u'lláh denounced British colonial aggression. Referring to wars, including the British colonial invasion, He noted: "The vast majority of wars in the world are waged out of mere corrupt desires, yet they are falsely attributed to religion, honor, and country. Religion and country bear witness to the falsehood of these people. Say: The world is but one country, and all are created by the same Word. Wherefore wage ye wars, and whom do ye regard as your enemy?"<sup>4</sup>

All the various forms of oppression associated with international anarchy

can be traced to the dominance of the law of nature in international relations. International anarchy therefore provides the clearest example of the application of the logic of the jungle applied to the world of humanity.

#### ECONOMIC STRUCTURES

The second form of oppression is related to economic structures. In the past, both feudal serfdom and slavery played a fundamental role in economic structures. Both those institutions were based on an explicit and literal dehumanization of people. Modern societies are faced with the two polar opposites of capitalism and communism. However, both these systems in their pure forms are also defined by dehumanization and the application of the law of the jungle to human society. Pure capitalism is based on the reduction of individuals to selfish, isolated, profit-seeking, and utilitarian entities. From such a perspective, humans are defined as bundles of infinite desires, for whom reason is simply an efficient means for the pursuit of self-interest. Extremes of inequality, unequal opportunities, the exploitation of the weak, the destruction of the environment, the commodification of values, consumerism, the cold logic of monetary calculation, and lack of sensitivity to the plight of others are prominent features of this system. Like the anarchy of international relations, pure capitalism is impersonal anarchy at the level of economic relations.

---

<sup>4</sup> From a previously untranslated Tablet; provisional translation.

Equally dehumanizing is the system of communism. Although communist ideology uses lofty slogans to criticize the cruelties of capitalism, in practice communism itself is no less cruel or dehumanizing. All experiments in implementing communism so far have only produced the crudest forms of totalitarianism and state tyranny. The positive aspects of a capitalist system—namely, the formal freedom of individuals, property rights, political democracy, and the autonomy of civil society from the state—are all obliterated in this system. Although Marx conceived of the communist utopia as a society where the state would wither away, in reality all communist experiments have witnessed the predatory expansion of the state as the sole regulator of all aspects of life.

Like religious fundamentalism, communist totalitarianism dictates the details of the individual's life and suppresses human freedom. Contrary to the prevalent views of Marxists, these features of communist societies are not a result of misapplying Marxist ideas. Rather, the very logic of forced equalization creates a situation in which the detailed aspects of life in society must be regulated and controlled by the state. In other words, both pure capitalism and communism exemplify the application of a naturalistic logic of materialism that imposes the law of the jungle at the level of human society.

#### FORMS OF THE STATE

The third form of oppression deals with the political characteristics of the individual units within the overall anarchic structure of international relations—the form of the state and authority within the society. The form taken by the state is determined in response to two main questions. The first concerns who should rule. Two main answers to this question are the polar opposites of democracy and despotism. The second question involves the limit of the legitimate interference of the state in the life of the people. The polar answers to this question are anarchism and totalitarianism. Both questions have significant implications for whether the state fosters justice or oppression.

For most of human history, various forms of despotism prevailed. The despotic state makes a distinction between the naturally superior rulers and the inferior masses. Rulers were defined as the representatives of God on earth, figures whose relation to the masses replicated the relation of God to His creatures. Whether theocratic or secular, such despotism reduces the masses of the people to the level of animals and natural objects, suppressing consciousness, participation in decision-making, individual freedom, human rights, and self-determination.

However, even democracy—without a framework of spiritual values and employed in the service of the divisive struggle for dominance—can become the vehicle of oppression



and the “tyranny of the majority.” The divisiveness, electioneering, and obsession with winning power at the expense of other groups that characterize the existing democracies reflect a more civilly ritualized, but still dysfunctional and ultimately destructive, expression of the struggle for existence.

The second question also directly relates to issues of oppression and freedom. Regardless of the identity of the rulers, states can be defined in terms of the limits and extent of their interference in society. In the totalitarian state, whether secular or religious, the state determines all aspects of the institutions of society and regulates the lives of individuals. Obviously such a type of state also negates the freedom and autonomy of individual human beings and degrades them to the level of natural objects. It is partly in reaction to these forms of dehumanization that the anarchic theory of the state defines freedom as the elimination of all impediments to individual liberty, and thus perceives the state itself as a major obstacle to human rights. For this theory, the solution to the problem of oppression is the abolition of the state so that its interference eliminated altogether. But this theory also reduces society to a jungle—although a jungle that is imagined to be paradise.

Liberal theory recognizes the necessity of the state yet perceives it as a necessary evil and attempts, therefore, to reduce its interference in the life of individuals to a minimum. The state, in

other words, must protect the freedom of individuals to pursue their private interests. One of the main contradictions of Marxist thought is that the theory actually maintains an extreme negative conception of the state, finding the state to be a product of class inequality, as the state promotes the interests of the dominant economic class; yet Marxists in all capitalist societies continually call for the expansion of the state and higher levels of interference and regulation of society.

#### CULTURAL IDENTITY

While the three types of oppression discussed thus far are related to social structures, the next to be considered is related to moral orientation, values, and the identity of individuals. Materialistic philosophy is blind to this form of oppression because it is a necessary consequence of that same materialistic orientation; in reality, however, it is one of the most important root causes of injustice. From a Bahá'í perspective, materialist assumptions about human nature are the source of prejudice: the presumption of a purely material identity for human beings leads to viewing them as members of groups defined by material and social characteristics, and all those who are different are thereby perceived to be the “other.”

In the Bahá'í view, human differences must be understood in light of the following ontological framework, set out in the Writings of the Báb. All things consist of the two aspects of

divinity and servitude, or existence and essence. They are as mirrors which consist of two parts: a glass that has the property of reflection and an image that shows in the glass. Our particularistic essences are what differentiate us from each other. But in those diverse mirrors, one and the same image of God is reflected.

This second part is our aspect of “divinity.” The difference in our essences creates the illusion of separateness and ego identity. Our existence, or our divine aspect, however, affirms our unity in that we are all reflections of the attributes of God, Who is one. Although the Bible affirms this concept in the *imago dei*, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness” (Gen. 1:26), nevertheless throughout history, human cultures have defined identity by material characteristics that differentiate people from one another.

The Báb reaffirms that our true reality as human beings is our common spiritual unity, as mirrors and signs of God. If we define ourselves in this way, we see the oneness of God reflected in the oneness of humanity—a unity that is diverse in its reflections of the divine attributes. But if we define identity in terms of difference—focusing on distinctions of race, gender, social class, nationality, language, religion, and other particularistic aspects—we can easily perceive others as strangers, enemies, or even as sub-humans. Violence, conflict, and oppression then become easy to justify. As Durkheim noted, the limits of morality are defined by group boundaries. The interests

and needs of one set of people become moral imperatives, whereas those of others are ignored or suppressed. The determining logic of social relations becomes the struggle for existence, coercion, and the politics of deception and conquest.

In His Tablet to The Hague, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá draws a direct connection between the natural law of struggle for existence and various forms of prejudice:

In every period war has been waged in one country or another and that war was due to religious prejudice, racial prejudice, political prejudice or patriotic prejudice. It has therefore been ascertained and proved that all prejudices are destructive of the human edifice. As long as these prejudices persist, the struggle for existence must remain dominant, and bloodthirstiness and rapacity continue. Therefore, even as was the case in the past, the world of humanity cannot be saved from the darkness of nature and cannot attain illumination except through the abandonment of prejudices and the acquisition of the morals of the Kingdom. (*Selections 313*)

In other words, for ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, prejudice is the same as the dehumanization of the self and others—or perceiving and treating humans as if they were animals. The interests

In one way or another, all forms of oppression relate to some kind of prejudice and thus to some form of denying the spiritual essence of human beings. However, the word “prejudice” is inadequate to fully describe the meaning of the original Persian term used by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. The original word is *ta‘aṣṣub*, which refers to an excessive particularistic identification with a group. Such a one-dimensional social identity becomes the source of partiality, prejudicial judgment, and an attitude toward other groups that views them as strangers, enemies, and, consequently, as threats. *Ta‘aṣṣub*, therefore, easily leads to “social death,” or avoidance of other groups and a readiness to act toward them in ways that would be immoral if directed at those who are regarded as belonging to one’s own moral community—for those who are by definition outside the moral community can be treated like beasts.

*Ta‘aṣṣub*, or particularistic identity, in reducing human identity and rationality to the narrow vision and sentiments of a group, denies individual autonomy, independence of mind, objectivity, and independent investigation of truth. In other words, it is the process by which one reduces oneself to the level of a natural object, renouncing one’s spiritual reality. Frequently these forms of prejudice interact with each other. For example, the persistence of discrimination on the basis of religion, ethnicity, or gender in a society implies that the class position of individuals is not only

determined by economic status but also (at least partly) by their personal characteristics as members of those specific categories.

#### A PARADOXICAL UNDERSTANDING OF HUMAN NATURE

To some extent, *Some Answered Questions* is the elaboration of a spiritual logic as the alternative to a materialist and naturalistic orientation. In the final chapter of the book, which deals with the relevance of spiritual orientation to ethical behavior, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá proposes a general rule: knowledge of God is love of God. Love of God necessarily leads to love of all creatures, including all human beings. This universal love leads to good will. Good will leads to ethical behavior. In other words, spiritual culture is a culture of the unity and interconnectedness of all things. Love is the supreme law of this spiritual consciousness, and it leads to a free, united, and just society.

We can immediately distinguish two alternative responses to this universal love. The first is the materialist doctrine that rejects God and degrades humans to the level of beasts. The second is religious fanaticism, which also rejects universal love for all human beings and, instead, fosters extremes of hatred, prejudice, and violence against other religions and cultures and against women. For ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, love of God must lead to universal love; when it does not, as in the case of religious fanaticism, it is really just another form of that naturalistic

logic that degrades human society to the level of the jungle. In both cases, lack of spiritual orientation leads to oppression.

In this context, a spiritual definition of the human being requires a paradoxical understanding of human nature. On the one hand, the human soul is a mirror of divine attributes including divine oneness: thus human beings are defined by individuality, uniqueness, autonomy, freedom, and personal responsibility. On the other hand, the human being is one with all other humans and is expressive of the unity, interconnectedness, and solidarity of all beings. To ignore either of these features of spiritual consciousness would reduce the human being to the level of an object. When the individual is reduced to the collectivity, humans are deprived of their humanity, namely their uniqueness, freedom, self-determination, and personal autonomy, as well as their capacity for independent thinking. Conversely, when individuals are reduced to atomistic selves who are isolated, self-seeking, narcissist, and violent beings who perceive life as a competitive arena for maximizing egotistic pleasures and manufactured commercial needs, society becomes a jungle inhabited by wild beasts.

Although oppression is rooted in humanity's forgetfulness of its spiritual truth, this does not mean that abstract ideas determine social reality. In fact, a distinguishing feature of the Bahá'í worldview is that ideas are inseparable from their crystallization in

the structure of society and in social institutions. True liberation, therefore, is dependent on the realization of a social order that affirms both individual autonomy and the oneness of humanity. The first teaching of Bahá'u'lláh is the affirmation of individual freedom and independence from all others, in the principle of the independent investigation of truth, which requires seeing with one's own eyes and not through the eyes of others.<sup>5</sup> Yet His ultimate teaching is the oneness of humanity. These two aspects of human reality are interdependent: one cannot be realized without the other. A just society is one that institutionalizes both the autonomy of individuals and the unity of humanity.

Thus it is logical that unity in diversity is the principle that must regulate a just global order as well. In this model, nations are both autonomous and united. The anarchy of international relations is replaced by a federated structure characterized by decentralization; people see themselves both as citizens of the world and as citizens of their own country. Similarly, the economic order is defined by unity in diversity, safeguarding both individual autonomy and freedom while maintaining opportunity and prosperity for all human beings.

---

<sup>5</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, when presenting the Bahá'í principles in His talks, frequently began with independent investigation of truth as the "first teaching of Bahá'u'lláh." See, for example, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, 180.

## OPPRESSION OF THE HEART

So far we have discussed external forms of oppression, but the worst is oppression of the heart and soul. Here, the oppressor is truly successful in tyranny if the victim becomes a participant. As various sociologists and philosophers have noted, the highest form of domination takes place when the victim internalizes the viewpoint of the oppressor and thus willingly contributes to the victim's own degradation and corruption. In such situations, we are accomplices to tyranny against our own selves.

The internalization of the culture of the oppressor manifests itself in different ways. In its most elementary expression, the victim comes to believe that he or she is indeed inferior to the oppressor and accepts the legitimacy of an unjust system of inequality and oppression. In a more subtle form of internal oppression, the oppressed internalizes the fabricated ideology of the oppressor that defines the victim as immoral, irrational, violent, or preoccupied with immediate gratification. Hopelessness, another form of dehumanization, is a frequent outcome of such internalization.

There is yet another way in which the culture of the oppressor is internalized. Here, the victim comes to share the philosophical worldview of the oppressor, including the oppressor's own self-definition. In this way, both parties are engaged in self-oppression, for if we forget our spiritual reality and act only according to the

law of nature and instinct, we are oppressing our own hearts. Hence, in reality, all acts of oppression imply an act of self-oppression as well. If we oppress others because we see the world as a jungle, we are also defining ourselves merely as beasts. For example, by acting in a racist manner against others, we are indicating that we define our own reality, worth, or identity in terms of skin color or other material characteristics. Thus, even before dehumanizing others, we must first dehumanize ourselves.

It is in this connection that the Bahá'í Writings frequently talk of the "self-oppressor" (*ẓálim li-nafsih*), or one who commits tyranny against oneself. In self-oppression, the oppressor and the oppressed become one and the same. Based on a Qur'anic phrase,<sup>6</sup> the central figures of the Bahá'í Faith have distinguished between three types of people: self-oppressors, moderates, and those who precede others in doing good deeds.<sup>7</sup> The Báb defines the self-oppressor as one who revolves around his essence and forgets his true reality, namely his aspect of divinity. The moderate is a practical person who balances the two. Those who precede others in good deeds

---

<sup>6</sup> See Qur'án 35:32.

<sup>7</sup> The Báb discusses this in several of His works, including *Risálah fi'l-Ghiná* (Iran National Bahá'í Archives [henceforth, INBA] 14:444). 'Abdu'l-Bahá mentions it, in a number of places, in regard to His brother's self-oppression. For example, see Ishráq Khávarí, *Rahíq-i-Makhtúm* 1:295.

revolve around their true spiritual reality, which is their aspect of divinity. Overcoming oppression is not possible without addressing both external and internal forms of oppression.

We have seen that oppression, whatever its form, is ultimately rooted in the materialist denial of the spiritual reality of human beings, who are defined instead as creatures of nature. This principle reflects itself in the most important structural contradiction of our contemporary civilization. In nature itself, the struggle for existence is not a destructive or harmful principle. Animals are ruled by instinct, but their instincts have limits: they kill for food but they do not set out to exterminate other species. They live in patterns of interdependence with other creatures, and nature operates as an interconnected and integrated whole. Therefore, when animals act according to the law of the jungle, the result is overall ecological balance and flourishing of life on the planet. The principle of struggle for existence becomes a problem only when it is applied to the realm of human society, for humans are not merely natural entities. Because they are spiritual beings who possess reason and free will, they are not constrained by instinctive limits but are able to discover the laws of nature and, through science and technology, overcome them.

However, until the nineteenth century, scientific and technological advancement was relatively modest. Even when humans acted on the basis of the law of the jungle, they could

not pose a major threat to the survival of the human race or the planet. At the present stage of human history, however, we have become capable of instantly exterminating millions of people, destroying the natural environment, and in the process eliminating ourselves as well. Yet, materialist philosophies have only extended the implications of their main premise, defining human beings as nothing more than sophisticated animals and thus maintaining various forms of particularistic identities that breed prejudice, ignorance, and conflict. Materialist doctrines, however well intentioned they may be, are an intrinsic part of this destructive contradiction.

#### BAHÁ'U'LLÁH'S RESPONSE TO OPPRESSION: THE THREE DECLARATIONS

Bahá'u'lláh's own life and words were centered on rejecting various forms of oppression. Years before His Riḍván declaration, He condemned slavery by affirming that all people are servants of God and therefore no human being can own another. He denounced both the spiritual despotism of the clerics and the political despotism of monarchs. He condemned British colonialism and rejected the anti-Semitic policies of European states. He abolished *jihad* and rejected all types of prejudice, fanaticism, and violence. His repeated exhortations to spiritualize every aspect of life are essentially a call to extirpate the root cause of oppression.



In order to understand more fully the Bahá'í attitude toward oppression, it is instructive to examine how Bahá'u'lláh Himself responded when He personally faced injustice and tyranny. To examine this question we shall concentrate on the most important defining moments of His Revelation, namely His declarations. The Bahá'í Faith was born through Bahá'u'lláh's concealed revelation in late 1852 in the Síyáh-Chál dungeon of Tehran. This event was followed eleven years later by His manifest declaration in the Garden of Riḍván, near Baghdad, on the eve of His exile to Constantinople (Istanbul). His universal declaration took place in 1868 when He was banished to 'Akká. These three declarations are characterized by progressive levels of disclosure of His mission and station. But why did Bahá'u'lláh choose these occasions to unveil His mission, and why did He choose the particular themes? These two questions are in fact integrally related to each other.

A consistent logic underlies the three declarations and their timing. Bahá'u'lláh Himself has frequently and clearly explained His main reason for choosing these specific times as the occasion for His proclamations. In general, when oppression reaches its maximum point, and it appears that the tyrants have succeeded in defeating the Cause of God, Bahá'u'lláh turns this apparent defeat into victory by infusing a new spiritual energy into the world, enkindling the divine light of justice and proclaiming a new

spiritual culture of hope in order to render justice and love victorious over tyranny and hatred. In other words, the declarations of Bahá'u'lláh represent a dialectic of crisis and victory: they are all systematic responses to oppression and victimization through the affirmation of the power of the spirit.

In Hindu and Buddhist scriptures, the lotus is the symbol of the heart, spirit, and enlightenment. Among its various meanings, the lotus represents the dialectic of light and darkness: out of the impure mud of ignorance, tyranny, and darkness, the pure and exquisite flower of knowledge, justice, and enlightenment emerges. It represents the triumph of love over prejudice and hatred, the transformation of captivity to nature into emancipation through the spirit. In circumstances of oppression and tyranny, chained in the darkness of the subterranean prison, Bahá'u'lláh refuses to accept the role of victim, to remain silent and surrender to tyranny. Instead, He transforms the darkness of ignorance and oppression into the light of wisdom and love.

This fact is central in Bahá'u'lláh's life and Revelation, and for that reason in at least twenty tablets He discusses it explicitly. The following are a few examples:

Prison is the revealer of the Cause of God. By reason of that which the hands of the people of mischief have wrought, We have, through Our word, sounded the trumpet.<sup>8</sup>

---

8 INBA 26:278, provisional translation.

Say! Verily this Bird hath winged His flight from the branches of Iraq and hath sought other branches. This departure is for the sake of the exaltation of the Cause, and is by reason of a hidden wisdom. . . . By God! Verily those who rejoice in the departure of this Bird are in manifest error.<sup>9</sup>

Know that verily We did not wish to reveal Our face to anyone. . . . However, inasmuch as those who associate partners with God imprisoned Us in this Remote Prison, We have lifted the veils of concealment, and revealed Our face like unto a shining and exalted sun.<sup>10</sup>

Verily tribulations have not prevented Bahá from extolling the Source of all things. . . . Upon Our arrival in this prison we transmitted to the kings the messages of the Lord, the Sovereign, the Mighty and the Beauteous, that they might be made aware that He doeth whatsoever He willeth, and that the inhabitants of the heavens and the earth cannot prevail against Him. (*Áthár-i-Qalam-i-A'lá* 1:125)<sup>11</sup>

The reason for the timing of Bahá'u'lláh's declarations can help us understand the content and the

message of those three revelations. Obviously, Bahá'u'lláh's declarations unveil His fundamental teachings and worldview. But if these declarations are also a response to oppression, then they should also explain the cause of oppression, the nature of liberation, and the method of resisting tyranny. That is precisely what we find.

#### THE CONCEALED DECLARATION

The inception of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation took place at the lowest point in the fortunes of the Bábí community, as it was facing the threat of extermination after the attempt, by a few Bábís, on the life of the shah in revenge for the martyrdom of the Báb. Bahá'u'lláh was imprisoned in the vile subterranean dungeon in Tehran known as the Síyáh-Chál. As He later recounted, "One night, in a dream, these exalted words were heard on every side: "Verily, We shall render Thee victorious by Thyself and by Thy Pen" (*Epistle* 21). Bahá'u'lláh's account of the experience implies several fundamental features of His message. The first is the abolition of the law of the sword, namely, jihad. The Cause of God is to be rendered victorious not through violence but through the power of love, as well as through the transforming and enlightening power of speech and discourse (the pen). Coercion is therefore rejected. Bahá'u'lláh consistently distinguishes between the kingdom of the heart and the kingdom of earth. In the kingdom of the heart coercive methods are impermissible. Religion

9 INBA 71:17; provisional translation.

10 INBA 36:72; provisional translation.

11 Provisional translation.

belongs to the realm of the heart. It is not a question of biology, tribal identity, or race. Freedom of conscience is the essential attribute of a free and spiritual dominion.

A further implication of this message is expressed in His description of the truth of His Revelation as a female entity:

While engulfed in tribulations  
I heard a most wondrous, a most  
sweet voice, calling above My  
head. Turning My face, I beheld a  
Maiden—the embodiment of the  
remembrance of the name of My  
Lord—suspended in the air before  
Me. . . . Betwixt earth and heaven  
she was raising a call which cap-  
tivated the hearts and minds of  
men. She was imparting to both  
My inward and outer being tid-  
ings which rejoiced My soul, and  
the souls of God's honoured ser-  
vants. (Súriy-i-Haykal ¶6)

Sociologically, the culture of patriarchy is not only a culture of violence against half of the population of the world; it also perpetuates violent forms of character and attitude that lead to other kinds of oppression. The oneness of the human race and universal peace are already inseparable from the equality and unity of men and women.

Yet another implication of the statement quoted above is the rejection of miracles as the proof of the

truth of the prophets of God.<sup>12</sup> In this age, it is no longer supernatural events that are the proof of divine revelation—not because the Manifestation of God cannot do miracles, but rather, because now it is the liberating Word itself that is the sign of the presence of the Holy Spirit. By emphasizing the Word as the proof, we enter the realm of spirit, beyond the realm of physical nature. We can see that the very first declaration is a call to transcend the logic of violence and the struggle for existence as well as a call to recognize the power of the spirit in the Word itself rather than in phenomena pertaining to physical nature.

#### THE RIDVÁN DECLARATION

As a response to the action of the Iranian and Ottoman states in exiling Bahá'u'lláh from Baghdad, Bahá'u'lláh decided to divulge His inner secret as He was about to depart from that city. He announced to the Bábís present in the Garden of Ridván that through Him a new and qualitatively unique stage of spiritual development of humanity had begun. Bahá'u'lláh Himself later recounted the three announcements He made on the first day of Ridván:

On the first day of His arrival in  
the garden designated the Ridván,  
the Ancient Beauty established  
Himself upon the Most Great

---

<sup>12</sup> See also Saiedi, "Concealment and Revelation."

Throne. Thereupon, the Tongue of Glory uttered three blessed verses. First, that in this Revelation the use of the sword is prohibited. Second, that whoso layeth a claim ere the expiration of a thousand years is assuredly in grievous error. . . . And third, that the one true God, exalted be His Glory, at that very moment shed the splendours of all His Names upon the whole creation.<sup>13</sup>

The message of the second declaration is a more elaborate version of the first. It begins by announcing the abolition of the law of the sword, which is a rejection of the culture of violence and an affirmation of the sanctity of conscience. The second statement reflects the principle of historical consciousness. Not only are the various aspects of human and social existence changing, dynamic, and progressive, but so is divine revelation itself. However, even more than merely establishing the minimum period of time for the duration of Bahá'u'lláh's Dispensation, this statement safeguards the unity of the religion, ensuring its freedom from the conflict generated by divisive authority claims. The third statement provides the philosophical foundation for a culture of unity. On this Day, Bahá'u'lláh says, God has revealed Himself to all beings, enshrining the signs of all His names and attributes in the hearts

of all people. Referring to these pronouncements, Bahá'u'lláh affirms in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* that "all created things were immersed in the sea of purification when, on that first day of Ridván, We shed upon the whole of creation the splendours of Our most excellent Names and Our most exalted Attributes" (¶75). Since from this moment all beings are sacred, when one looks upon one's fellow human beings, nothing should be seen in them except the attributes of God. Thus no one is impure and untouchable; no one can be denied the dignity inherent in their human nature; no one can any longer be defined as less than human and consequently treated as a beast. This is the day of the realization of human potentialities, and all must be viewed in terms of their truth, namely that each is a sacred reality endowed with spirit.

#### THE UNIVERSAL DECLARATION

In 1868 the Ottoman sultan and the shah of Iran moved to banish Bahá'u'lláh further to a remote location where, they hoped, He would not survive the hardships of exile. He was ordered imprisoned in the military fort in the city of 'Akká. Instead, however, once again crisis was turned into victory. He chose that moment to proclaim His cause explicitly and universally to the religious and temporal rulers of the world. It is the Prisoner Who addresses the kings with authority and majesty and announces the advent of the Lord, the universal

<sup>13</sup> In *Mázandarání* 4:22; provisional translation.

revelation of God, and the inception of the Day of God. The message of the universal declaration rejects the culture of tyranny and oppression and summons the world to embrace a new culture of justice and unity.

As we saw earlier, all oppression stems from the application of the law of nature and the logic of the jungle to the realm of human relations. We also saw that such an objectification of humans takes four main forms, manifested in international anarchy, political tyranny, economic injustice, and a culture of prejudice. The message of the universal declaration rejects all these forms of oppression. The main vehicle of that declaration is the *Súriy-i-Haykal*, or *Súrih* of the Temple, which also includes Bahá'u'lláh's messages to the individual rulers.

The word *haykal* means both “temple” and “human body.” Bahá'u'lláh uses the semantic ambiguity to create both a new individual culture and a new international structure, while emphasizing that both culture and social institutions need to be defined through the spiritualization of consciousness. His message constitutes a divine temple, the temple of God. However, the seat of the new temple is the heart and mind of human beings. He discusses His vision of a new type of human being and a new type of political, economic, and global institutions which are necessary to uproot violence and oppression from the world. Referring to this new vision, He concludes the *Súriy-i-Haykal* by affirming that He has thus constructed the true temple

of God, a temple that announces the coming of the Day of God, the day of peace, and the universal attainment of the presence of God.

The *Súriy-i-Haykal* begins with a discussion of “temple” as the body of the human being. This new body is a sacred body which is the throne of God, the realization of spiritual values. In other words, the true temple is the reality of the Manifestation of God—Bahá'u'lláh Himself. Human bodies are a reflection of that Holy Spirit. Thus He speaks of the eyes, ears, mouth, hands, feet, breast, and the heart of this human body. For example, addressing the eyes of this new spiritual race of humans, He says that they should “[l]ook not upon the heavens and that which they contain, nor upon the earth and them that dwell thereon, for We have created you to behold Our own Beauty” (¶19). Likewise, addressing the inmost heart of the temple, He says, “We have made thee the dawning-place of Our knowledge and the dayspring of Our wisdom unto all who are in heaven and on earth” (¶67). All aspects of the body, therefore, are transformed in accordance with the principle of spiritualization and detachment. In this way, a spiritual universalistic identity will replace the materialistic identity that is based in prejudice.

But then the word “body” or “temple” takes on an entirely new significance as well. Addressing all humanity and its leaders, Bahá'u'lláh says that the world has entered a new stage in its development when not only

individual societies and nations but humanity as a whole has assumed an organic character, like a human body. More than once, the *Súriy-i-Haykal* invites the leaders of the world to change their policies and attitudes in accordance with this new reality. The direct implication of this principle is a call to end international anarchy and to move toward collective security and universal peace. Bahá'u'lláh writes: "O ye the elected representatives of the people in every land! Take ye counsel together, and let your concern be only for that which profiteth mankind and bettereth the condition thereof, if ye be of them that scan heedfully. Regard the world as the human body which, though at its creation whole and perfect, hath been afflicted, through various causes, with grave disorders and maladies" (§ 174); and "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. Beware lest ye disregard the counsel of the All-Knowing, the Faithful" (§ 181).

In addition to addressing the tyranny that is international anarchy, the *Súriy-i-Haykal* calls for the democratization of state authority as well. Addressing Queen Victoria, after approvingly noting that she has "forbidden the trading of slaves," Bahá'u'lláh tells her:

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. It behoveth them, however, to be trustworthy among His servants, and to regard themselves as the representatives of all that dwell on earth. (§ 173)

Addressing the form of oppression related to economic justice, in a moving passage, Bahá'u'lláh states:

O kings of the earth! We see you increasing every year your expenditures, and laying the burden thereof on your subjects. This, verily, is wholly and grossly unjust. Fear the sighs and tears of this Wronged One, and lay not excessive burdens on your peoples. Do not rob them to rear palaces for yourselves; nay rather choose for them that which ye choose for yourselves. Thus We unfold to your eyes that which profiteth you, if ye but perceive. Your people are your treasures. Beware lest your rule violate the commandments of God, and ye deliver your wards to the hands of the robber. By them ye rule, by their means ye subsist, by their aid ye conquer. Yet, how disdainfully ye look upon them! How strange, how very strange! (§ 179)



OVERCOMING OPPRESSION  
AND ACHIEVING EMPOWERMENT

The foregoing discussions of the root cause of oppression and of Bahá'u'lláh's own response to tyranny suggest some implications for defining a Bahá'í approach to overcoming oppression. By now it should be evident that all of the teachings and principles of the Bahá'í Faith, including the equality of men and women, a spiritual solution to economic problems, the abolition of a clerical class, consultative and democratic principles of governance, and the like, are intrinsic parts of such an approach. To fully describe the Bahá'í approach to overcoming oppression is to describe the Bahá'í Faith itself. Thus, just a few overarching aspects of such an approach will be mentioned here in conclusion.

A Bahá'í response to oppression would be determined by the understanding that oppression is shaped by both individual behavior and institutional structures; therefore, an adequate approach to overcoming oppression requires transforming both individuals and social structures. As the root cause of these individual and structural forms of oppression is located in the materialist reduction of human beings to the level of nature and the conceptualization of human reality as a jungle, the solution is the spiritualization of human consciousness. The first step in that process is recognition of the nature of the human being as essentially spiritual—defined not by material and social

characteristics and group affiliations but by possessing a soul that reflects divine attributes. From this spiritual consciousness comes the recognition that all human beings share in that same nature, and thus an understanding of the real meaning and the moral implications of the oneness of humankind—that no one can be excluded from the moral community, or defined and treated as less than human; no material characteristics can place one outside the sphere of those to whom we owe moral duties.

The most important implication of this principle, and the necessary outcome of such a transformation of consciousness, is a universalistic orientation. In the Bahá'í Writings it is explained that whatever is universal is divine, and whatever is particularistic is non-divine ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Majmú'iy-i-Khiṭábat* 2:7). For humans to act in accordance with their spiritual truth, they must feel, think, talk, and act in ways that are mindful of this fact and reflect such an orientation. In fact this is Bahá'u'lláh's definition of the human being as one "who, today, dedicateth himself to the service of the entire human race" (*Gleanings* 249). The supreme form of Bahá'í activism thus is a systematic endeavor to bring spiritual consciousness to the world. The practical manifestation of this approach can be seen in the community-building activities that Bahá'ís are engaged in throughout the world, as they work to create a "a new kind of collective life . . . which gives practical expression to all that is heavenly

in human beings," one characterized by systematic, conscious reflection on the nature and implications of such a spiritual consciousness, as well as "a culture of mutual support, founded on fellowship and humble service."<sup>14</sup>

Obviously another feature of the Bahá'í response to injustice is nonviolence. The commitment of Bahá'ís to justice is sometimes misunderstood because they refuse to engage in movements that employ violent tactics. But the nonviolent character of the Bahá'í community's response to oppression is the logical consequence of its understanding of oppression. Since oppression in all its forms is ultimately the result of the degradation of humans to the level of animals, oppression can only be eradicated through a categorical rejection of the logic of the jungle. When one engages in violence, one participates in that same logic and engages in that same dehumanization, which is itself the very cause of oppression. For the same reason, Bahá'ís do not participate in political or social movements that are particularistic or partisan, and therefore divisive, but they do support those that are compatible with the universalistic principle.

In fact, the true test of commitment to overcoming oppression is one's behavior when subjected to cruelty, violence, and injustice oneself. Although responding with hatred and violence when one is oppressed may be partly understandable, it is not a moral

position but an instinctive reaction and, as such, part of the same logic of the jungle. True moral achievement belongs to those who are subjected to dehumanization yet refuse to accept that status or to act like animals. In other words, the way to oppose oppression is not to become the mirror image of the oppressor, and to become as dehumanizing and cruel as the tyrant, but rather to efface the culture of dehumanization from the heart. Such a response can be seen in the attitude of the Bahá'ís of Iran, who, although suffering unrelenting brutal oppression including the denial of their human rights and their dignity, confiscation of their property, imprisonment, murder, and continuing efforts to eradicate their Faith and culture, have refused to adopt the culture of victimhood or to respond to their oppressors with hatred, but have met opposition with "constructive resilience."<sup>15</sup>

Bahá'u'lláh often expressed His satisfaction when the Bahá'í community's response to persecution was to continue to act like human beings in the face of oppression. In contrast to the distorted definition of honor in various tribal forms of consciousness where "evil" is the murder of a member of one's own group by an outsider, and "virtue" is the murder of the members of the other group, Bahá'u'lláh not only eliminated the difference between

---

<sup>14</sup> The Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the World, Ridván 2016.

---

<sup>15</sup> Universal House of Justice, 9 September 2007, to the Bahá'í students deprived of access to higher education in Iran.

insider and outsider, but He also affirmed that it is better for a Bahá'í to be killed than to kill. For example, He writes:

This is the exalted station of those who were killed and refused to kill. They are accounted in the sight of God as the loftiest of all creatures. . . . O My friends! Were your blood to be shed on the face of the earth, it would be far more beloved in My sight than were ye to shed the blood of anyone. . . . We have removed the law to wage holy war in Our Tablets on the day in which the Ancient Beauty was established upon the Throne of glory and majesty. . . . Quicken ye the souls through the reviving breath of your Merciful Lord. This is what is worthy of those who are favored by God.<sup>16</sup>

Praise be to God that ye did not commit oppression whilst ye were oppressed, that ye wished not to injure anyone though ye were afflicted with grievous injury, that with the utmost compassion ye beseeched God's mercy for all people though ye witnessed the onslaught of cruelty, that ye yearned for freedom though ye were imprisoned. All the trees of Paradise exclaim: How great the blessedness that awaiteth you. . . . This Wronged One counselleth

you never to forfeit this most exalted station, never to overstep the bounds of humaneness, and to leave the character and manners of the beasts and brutes to their like. Hear and say not, give and wish not to usurp. . . . Through your pure deeds and saintly character the lights of justice, which are veiled and hidden by the oppression of the tyrants, will most assuredly shine resplendent in the name of God.<sup>17</sup>

In the writings of Bahá'u'lláh, the word "empowerment" when opposed to "oppression" implies that empowerment is itself the method for eradicating oppression. This empowerment flows from the realization and actualization of the inner power of the spirit; it cannot be attained by the sword or any form of coercion but only through spiritual awakening and consciousness. Bahá'u'lláh says:

O thou servant! Be endowed with My attributes, for verily We have removed the law of bloodshed and discord, and revealed the Cause with power and might, through Our character, and without anyone turning to strife. For verily power lieth in My will, and not in war and discord.<sup>18</sup>

I swear by God, were outward power, which hath never been,

<sup>16</sup> From a previously untranslated Tablet; provisional translation.

<sup>17</sup> INBA 8:343; provisional translation.

<sup>18</sup> INBA 23:44; provisional translation.

and shall never be, of estimation in the sight of God, to be realized utterly and completely, and a swordsman to stand before Us ready to take Our life, We assuredly would not interfere with him and would leave him free.<sup>19</sup>

Thus the Bahá'í approach to overcoming oppression is not motivated by anger or hatred against the oppressors but by universal love for all people and belief in the dignity and sacredness of the entire human race. From this perspective, one opposes injustice not to degrade the oppressor but rather to help restore the human dignity and rights of the oppressed as well as to help the oppressor overcome self-alienation, self-dehumanization, and self-oppression. Such an approach requires rejecting not only physical violence but also violence of language and sentiments.

A further feature of this approach is to maintain vigilance against not only external but also internal oppression. When oppression is defined in purely materialist ways, it is usually understood to be a one-dimensional and external phenomenon. In this view, the victim is by definition unable to engage in self-oppression, nor is discourse based on that premise considered legitimate: frequently, talk of the need for internal reform of the oppressed group is denounced as blaming the victim. In the Bahá'í approach, however, as oppression is ultimately a

spiritual question, both the powerful and the powerless groups can contribute to oppression if their patterns of thought, sentiment, and action are based on the logic of dehumanization of the self and others. Therefore, an adequate battle against oppression requires both fighting against the tyranny committed by the oppressors and fostering a culture of spiritual empowerment within the oppressed community.

In fact, that was precisely Bahá'u'lláh's response when, following the attempt on the life of the shah, the state mobilized to murder all the Bábís and eradicate the Bábí Faith. There were two paths in front of the Bábí community: the first was one of hatred against the Qajar state, calling for holy war and inciting violence against the tyrants. This path was followed by the nominal leader of the Bábí community, Yahyá Azal, even though he personally followed a policy of concealment and passivity. In contrast, Bahá'u'lláh systematically and forcefully denounced the cruelty and oppression of both the state officials and the clergy, yet at the same time He addressed the internal cultural and moral state of the Bábí community, who, because of their subjection to extremes of oppression, had allowed themselves to think and act like beasts. Discussing His first declaration, He explains that while in prison He was constantly pondering the causes of the internal degradation of the Bábí community:

---

<sup>19</sup> INBA 7:36; provisional translation.

Day and night, while confined in that dungeon, We meditated upon the deeds, the condition, and the conduct of the Bábís, wondering what could have led a people so high-minded, so noble, and of such intelligence, to perpetrate such an audacious and outrageous act against the person of His Majesty. This Wronged One, thereupon, decided to arise, after His release from prison, and undertake, with the utmost vigor, the task of regenerating this people. (*Epistle 21*)

Bahá'u'lláh continued this same approach in all His later Writings. His stand against external oppression was always accompanied by admonishing His own community not to overstep the bounds of human dignity, not to engage in hatred and violence, and to adhere instead to detachment, truthfulness, sincerity, kindness, and goodly deeds. In fact, for Bahá'u'lláh the worst oppression against Him came not from the tyrants but from the immoral acts committed by those who claimed to be His followers. As He writes in the Epistle to the Son of the Wolf:

My imprisonment doeth Me no harm, neither the tribulations I suffer, nor the things that have befallen Me at the hands of My oppressors. That which harmeth Me is the conduct of those who, though they bear My name, yet commit that which maketh My

heart and My pen to lament. They that spread disorder in the land, and lay hands on the property of others, and enter a house without leave of its owner, We, verily, are clear of them. (23)

Recall that for Bahá'u'lláh oppression of the heart and soul is worse than oppression of the body. Being deprived of material resources belongs to oppression of the body. What was crucial for Him was that His community should not be oppressed in heart and spirit as well. If the oppressed forget their spiritual dignity, internalize their persecutors' logic of dehumanization, and allow themselves to succumb to degrading hatred and particularistic consciousness, they will become oppressed in both body and heart. He writes:

Be not afraid of death in the path of God, nor affrighted by the manifestations of iniquity and rebellion. I swear by the Most Great Light, no inhabitant of earth can exercise power over the confident believers of God, except that it be over their outward bodies, while they are powerless to establish ascendancy over the realms of spirit. Were those who associate partners with God to reflect awhile, they would never assault the divine beings, for the purpose, of those who oppose the Faith, of the deeds they commit is to humiliate those symbols of certitude.<sup>20</sup>

---

<sup>20</sup> INBA 57:65; provisional translation.

True liberation and empowerment, therefore, is realized when the oppressed refuse to permit the oppressor to succeed in controlling their heart and spirit.

As was seen in Bahá'u'lláh's response to oppression in His three declarations, being subjected to tyranny and injustice was not the occasion for despair and surrender to dehumanization but rather for turning crisis into the crucible from which victory emerges. Thus, the Bahá'í approach to oppression is characterized by hope. Such a view of the relationship of oppression and empowerment is only understandable within the context of a spiritual worldview because, in the end, that relationship is a mystical paradox. Even as the delicate and pure lotus rises out of the crude and impure mud, so too the human spirit, when it refuses to surrender to the instinctual forces of nature, rises out of its encounter with oppression liberated and transcendent. But the emergence of the lotus is impossible without the mud:

It is by reason of the cruelty of the enemies that the fire of divine love is enkindled within the hearts and souls, and it is the oppression of the adversaries that hastens the souls unto the Faith of God. It is by reason of the cruelty of the enemies that the lofty station of the friends is revealed amongst the people, and it is the oppression of the adversaries that makes manifest the exalted rank of the

lovers of the Most Holy Abhá Beauty of God. Blessed is the one who achieves it and attains unto that which has always been the desire of the devoted ones throughout centuries and ages. Therefore, the oppression of the tyrants is a bounty from God to His favored servants. For it is by reason of such cruelty that their station is exalted, they are enabled to draw nigh unto His sanctified and luminous Threshold, and the tongues of the righteous greet those who have attained it, gained admittance, entered the paradise of His good pleasure, and been counted as among the sincere servants.<sup>21</sup>

---

<sup>21</sup> From a previously untranslated letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi; provisional translation.



## WORKS CITED

- ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. *Majmú‘iy-i-Khiṭābat-i-Ḥaḍrat-i-‘Abdu’l-Bahá*. Hofheim: Bahá’í-Verlag, 1984. Print.
- . *Paris Talks: Addresses Given by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in 1911*. Wilmette, IL: Bahá’í Publishing, 2006. Print.
- . *The Promulgation of Universal Peace: Talks Delivered by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá during His Visit to the United States and Canada in 1912*. Comp. Howard MacNutt. 2nd ed. Wilmette: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1982. Print.
- . *Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*. Comp. Research Department of the Universal House of Justice. Trans. a Committee at the Bahá’í World Centre and Marzieh Gail. Haifa: Bahá’í World Centre, 1978. Print.
- The Báb. *Risálah fi’l-Ghiná*. In *Safíniy-i-‘Irfán* Book 1. Darmstadt: Asr-i-Jadíd, 1998. 85–95. Print.
- Bahá’u’lláh. *Áthár-i-Qalam-i-A’lá*. Vol. 1. Dundas: Institute for Bahá’í Studies, 1996. Print.
- . *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*. Trans. Shoghi Effendi. Wilmette, IL: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1988. Print.
- . *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh*. Trans. Shoghi Effendi. Wilmette, IL: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1976. Print.
- . *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas: The Most Holy Book*. Haifa: Bahá’í World Centre, 1992. Print.
- . Súriy-i-Haykal. *The Summons of the Lord of Hosts: Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh*. Haifa: Bahá’í World Centre, 2002. Print.
- Durkheim, Emile. *On Morality and Society: Selected Writings*. Ed. Robert N. Bellah. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973. Print.
- Esslemont, J. E. *Bahá’u’lláh and the New Era: An Introduction to the Bahá’í Faith*. 1923. Wilmette, IL: Bahá’í Publishing, 2006. Print.
- Ishráq Khávarí, ‘Abdu’l-Ḥamíd. *Rahíq-i-Makhtúm*. Vol. 1. Tehran: Mu’assiy-i-Millíy-i-Mabu’át-i-Amrí, 128–29 B.E./1965. Print.
- Mázandarání, Mírzá Asadu’lláh Fáḍil. *Asráru’l-Áthár*. Vol. 4. Tehran: Mu’assisiy-i-Millíy-i-Maṭbú’át-i-Amrí, 124–120 B.E./1968–73. Print.
- Saiedi, Nader. “Concealment and Revelation in Bahá’u’lláh’s Book of the River.” *The Journal of Bahá’í Studies* 9.3 (1999): 25–56. Print.
- . *Gate of the Heart: Understanding the Writings of the Báb*, Bahá’í Studies Series. [Waterloo, ON]: Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2008. Print.
- Shoghi Effendi. *The World Order of Bahá’u’lláh: Selected Letters*. Wilmette, IL: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1991. Print.