

Baha'i Principle - Abolition of Economic Extremes

"Hearken, O King (Sultan Abdu'l-'Aziz), to the speech of Him that speaketh the truth, Him that doth not ask thee to recompense Him with the things God hath chosen to bestow upon thee, Him Who unerringly treadeth the straight Path. He it is Who summoneth thee unto God, thy Lord, Who showeth thee the right course, the way that leadeth to true felicity, that haply thou mayest be of them with whom it shall be well.

Beware, O King, that thou gather not around thee such ministers as follow the desires of a corrupt inclination, as have cast behind their backs that which hath been committed into their hands and manifestly betrayed their trust. Be bounteous to others as God hath been bounteous to thee, and abandon not the interests of thy people to the mercy of such ministers as these. Lay not aside the fear of God, and be thou of them that act uprightly. Gather around thee those ministers from whom thou canst perceive the fragrance of faith and of justice, and take thou counsel with them, and choose whatever is best in thy sight, and be of them that act generously.

Know thou for a certainty that whoso disbelieveth in God is neither trustworthy nor truthful. This, indeed, is the truth, the undoubted truth. He that acteth treacherously towards God will, also, act treacherously towards his king. Nothing whatever can deter such a man from evil, nothing can hinder him from betraying his neighbor, nothing can induce him to walk uprightly....

Overstep not the bounds of moderation, and deal justly with them that serve thee. Bestow upon them according to their needs, and not to the extent that will enable them to lay up riches for themselves, to deck their persons, to embellish their homes, to acquire the things that are of no benefit unto them, and to be numbered with the extravagant. Deal with them with undeviating justice, so that none among them may either suffer want, or be pampered with luxuries. This is but manifest justice.

Allow not the abject to rule over and dominate them who are noble and worthy of honor, and suffer not the high-minded to be at the mercy of the contemptible and worthless, for this is what We observed upon Our arrival in the City (Constantinople), and to it We bear witness. We found among its inhabitants some who were possessed of an affluent fortune and lived in the midst of excessive riches, while others were in dire want and abject poverty. This ill

beseemeth thy sovereignty, and is unworthy of thy rank.

Let My counsel be acceptable to thee, and strive thou to rule with equity among men, that God may exalt thy name and spread abroad the fame of thy justice in all the world. Beware lest thou aggrandize thy ministers at the expense of thy subjects. Fear the sighs of the poor and of the upright in heart who, at every break of day, bewail their plight, and be unto them a benignant sovereign. They, verily, are thy treasures on earth. It behoveth thee, therefore, to safeguard thy treasures from the assaults of them who wish to rob thee. Inquire into their affairs, and ascertain, every year, nay every month, their condition, and be not of them that are careless of their duty.

Set before thine eyes God's unerring Balance and, as one standing in His Presence, weigh in that Balance thine actions every day, every moment of thy life. Bring thyself to account ere thou art summoned to a reckoning, on the Day when no man shall have strength to stand for fear of God, the Day when the hearts of the heedless ones shall be made to tremble.

It behoveth every king to be as bountiful as the sun, which fostereth the growth of all beings, and giveth to each its due, whose benefits are not inherent in itself, but are ordained by Him Who is the Most Powerful, the Almighty. The King should be as generous, as liberal in his mercy as the clouds, the outpourings of whose bounty are showered upon every land, by the behest of Him Who is the Supreme Ordainer, the All-Knowing.

Have a care not to entrust thine affairs of state entirely into another's hands. None can discharge thy functions better than thine own self. Thus do We make clear unto thee Our words of wisdom, and send down upon thee that which can enable thee to pass over from the left hand of oppression to the right hand of justice, and approach the resplendent ocean of His favors. Such is the path which the kings that were before thee have trodden, they that acted equitably towards their subjects, and walked in the ways of undeviating justice."
(Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah, p. 232-7)

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"The fourth principle or teaching of Bahá'u'lláh is the readjustment and equalization of the economic standards of mankind. This deals with the question of human livelihood. It is evident that under present systems and conditions of government the poor are subject to the greatest need and distress while others

more fortunate live in luxury and plenty far beyond their actual necessities. This inequality of portion and privilege is one of the deep and vital problems of human society. That there is need of an equalization and apportionment by which all may possess the comforts and privileges of life is evident. The remedy must be legislative readjustment of conditions. The rich too must be merciful to the poor, contributing from willing hearts to their needs without being forced or compelled to do so. The composure of the world will be assured by the establishment of this principle in the religious life of mankind." (Abdu'l-Baha, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 107) (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania) (bold added)

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"And among the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh is voluntary sharing of one's property with others among mankind. This voluntary sharing is greater than equality, and consists in this, that man should not prefer himself to others, but rather should sacrifice his life and property for others. But this should not be introduced by coercion so that it becomes a law and man is compelled to follow it. Nay, rather, man should voluntarily and of his own choice sacrifice his property and life for others, and spend willingly for the poor, just as is done in Persia among the Bahá'ís." (Abdu'l-Baha, *Selections from the Writings of Abdu'l-Baha*, p. 302) (bold added)

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"Among the results of the manifestation of spiritual forces will be that the human world will adapt itself to a new social form, the justice of God will become manifest throughout human affairs, and human equality will be universally established. The poor will receive a great bestowal, and the rich attain eternal happiness. For although at the present time the rich enjoy the greatest luxury and comfort, they are nevertheless deprived of eternal happiness; for eternal happiness is contingent upon giving, and the poor are everywhere in the state of abject need. Through the manifestation of God's great equity the poor of the world will be rewarded and assisted fully, and there will be a readjustment in the economic conditions of mankind so that in the future there will not be the abnormally rich nor the abject poor. The rich will enjoy the privilege of this new economic condition as well as the poor, for owing to certain provisions and restrictions they will not be able to accumulate so much as to be burdened by its management, while the poor will be relieved from the stress of want and misery. The rich will enjoy his palace, and the poor will have

his comfortable cottage.

The essence of the matter is that divine justice will become manifest in human conditions and affairs, and all mankind will find comfort and enjoyment in life. It is not meant that all will be equal, for inequality in degree and capacity is a property of nature. Necessarily there will be rich people and also those who will be in want of their livelihood, but in the aggregate community there will be equalization and readjustment of values and interests. In the future there will be no very rich nor extremely poor. There will be an equilibrium of interests, and a condition will be established which will make both rich and poor comfortable and content. This will be an eternal and blessed outcome of the glorious twentieth century which will be realized universally. The significance of it is that the glad tidings of great joy revealed in the promises of the Holy Books will be fulfilled. Await ye this consummation." (Abdu'l-Baha, The Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 131)

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"What could be better before God than thinking of the poor? For the poor are beloved by our heavenly Father. When Christ came upon the earth, those who believed in Him and followed Him were the poor and lowly, showing that the poor were near to God. When a rich man believes and follows the Manifestation of God, it is a proof that his wealth is not an obstacle and does not prevent him from attaining the pathway of salvation. After he has been tested and tried, it will be seen whether his possessions are a hindrance in his religious life. But the poor are especially beloved of God. Their lives are full of difficulties, their trials continual, their hopes are in God alone. Therefore, you must assist the poor as much as possible, even by sacrifice of yourself. No deed of man is greater before God than helping the poor. Spiritual conditions are not dependent upon the possession of worldly treasures or the absence of them. When one is physically destitute, spiritual thoughts are more likely. Poverty is a stimulus toward God. Each one of you must have great consideration for the poor and render them assistance. Organize in an effort to help them and prevent increase of poverty. The greatest means for prevention is that whereby the laws of the community will be so framed and enacted that it will not be possible for a few to be millionaires and many destitute. One of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings is the adjustment of means of livelihood in human society. Under this adjustment there can be no extremes in human conditions as regards wealth and sustenance. For the community needs financier, farmer, merchant and laborer just as an army must be composed of commander, officers and privates. All cannot be

commanders; all cannot be officers or privates. Each in his station in the social fabric must be competent -- each in his function according to ability but with justness of opportunity for all....

Difference of capacity in human individuals is fundamental. It is impossible for all to be alike, all to be equal, all to be wise. Bahá'u'lláh has revealed principles and laws which will accomplish the adjustment of varying human capacities. He has said that whatsoever is possible of accomplishment in human government will be effected through these principles. When the laws He has instituted are carried out, there will be no millionaires possible in the community and likewise no extremely poor. This will be effected and regulated by adjusting the different degrees of human capacity. The fundamental basis of the community is agriculture, tillage of the soil. All must be producers. Each person in the community whose need is equal to his individual producing capacity shall be exempt from taxation. But if his income is greater than his needs, he must pay a tax until an adjustment is effected. That is to say, a man's capacity for production and his needs will be equalized and reconciled through taxation. If his production exceeds, he will pay a tax; if his necessities exceed his production, he shall receive an amount sufficient to equalize or adjust. Therefore, taxation will be proportionate to capacity and production, and there will be no poor in the community.

Bahá'u'lláh, likewise, commanded the rich to give freely to the poor. In the Kitáb-i-Aqdas it is further written by Him that those who have a certain amount of income must give one-fifth of it to God, the Creator of heaven and earth." (Abdu'l-Baha, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 217)

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The Universal Declaration of Human Rights proclaims that everyone is entitled to a standard of living adequate to provide for the health and well-being of oneself and one's family. Moreover, in accordance with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, International Covenants recognize that freedom from fear and want can be achieved only if everyone enjoys economic, social and cultural rights, in addition to civil and political rights. In this light, the Bahá'í International Community would like to offer a few thoughts about human rights and extreme poverty.

The increasing disparity between the rich and the poor is a major destabilizing influence in the world. It produces or exacerbates regional and national

conflicts, environmental degradation, crime and violence, and the increasing use of illicit drugs. These consequences of extreme poverty affect all individuals and nations. Increasingly we are becoming aware that we are all members of a single human family. In a family the suffering of any member is felt by all, and until that suffering is alleviated, no member of the family can be fully happy or at ease. Few are able to look at starvation and extreme poverty without feeling a sense of failure.

The Bahá'í approach to the problem of extreme poverty is based on the belief that economic problems can be solved only through the application of spiritual principles. This approach suggests that to adjust the economic relationships of society, man's character must first be transformed. Until the actions of humankind promote justice above the satisfaction of greed and readjusts the world's economies accordingly, the gap between the rich and the poor will continue to widen, and the dream of sustainable economic growth, peace, and prosperity must remain elusive. Sensitizing mankind to the vital role of spirituality in solving economic problems including the realization of universal equitable access to wealth and opportunity will, we are convinced, create a new impetus for change.

A new economic order can be founded only on an unshakable conviction of the oneness of mankind. Discussions aimed at solving problems related to extreme poverty based on the premise that we are one human family rapidly expand beyond the current vocabulary of economics. They demand a wider context, one which anticipates the emergence of a global system of relationships resting on the principles of equity and justice.

Although it will resemble the present system in many ways, the evolving economic system which Bahá'ís envision will have significant points of distinction.

Let us take as an example the Bahá'í view of income distribution, which allows for differences but would eliminate both extreme wealth and extreme poverty. The accumulation of excessive fortunes by a small number of individuals, while the masses are in need, is, according to Bahá'í teachings, an iniquity and an injustice. Moderation should, therefore, be established by means of laws and regulations that would hinder the accumulation of excessive fortunes by a few individuals and provide for the essential needs of the masses.

The Bahá'í writings anticipate the development of communities in which the

well-being of every member is the concern of the community as a whole. The centre of such a community would include social service institutions which shall afford relief to the suffering, sustenance to the poor, shelter to the wayfarer, solace to the bereaved, and education to the ignorant.

In the New World Order envisaged by Bahá'u'lláh, rights are inseparable from responsibilities. A fundamental purpose of life is to contribute to the advancement of civilization. Idleness and begging are unacceptable in a well-functioning society, while work performed in the spirit of service is elevated to the station of worship. Thus the right to work, the right to contribute to society, takes on a spiritual dimension, and the responsibility to be productive applies to everyone. This attitude toward work profoundly influences the Bahá'í approach to social and economic development. Communities are encouraged to identify their own needs and initiate their own projects, many of which focus on alleviating poverty. Such locally initiated projects often receive support from national or international Bahá'í institutions.

The fostering of grassroots initiative is essential to the elimination of poverty; this concept has both moral and educational implications which demand profound study.

(HUMAN RIGHTS AND EXTREME POVERTY: Statement by the Bahá'í International Community to the 49th session of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, Geneva, Switzerland, 12 February 1993)

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The increasing disparity between the rich and the poor is a major de-stabilizing influence in the world. It produces or exacerbates regional and national conflicts, environmental degradation, crime and violence, and the use of illicit drugs. These consequences of extreme poverty increasingly force themselves on our attention. As the United Nations Secretary-General states in his Agenda for Development, "The effects of deprivation, disease and strife in one part of the globe are felt everywhere." Increasingly we are becoming aware that as members of a single human family, we are all touched in some way by the suffering of every human being. Until that suffering is alleviated, no member of the family can be fully happy or at ease. The Special Rapporteur, Mr. Leandro Despouy, argues persuasively in his report (E/CN.4/Sub.2/1994/19) that "at this juncture the fight against poverty concerns all of humanity."

The Bahá'í approach to the problem of extreme poverty is based on the application of spiritual principles. The economic relationships of a society reflect the values of its members. Therefore, to transform those relationships man's character must be transformed. Until justice is valued over greed, the gap between the rich and the poor will continue to widen, and the dream of sustainable economic growth, peace and prosperity will elude our grasp. Sensitizing mankind to the vital role of spiritual values in solving economic problems will, we are convinced, create a new impetus for change.

In his Agenda for Development Mr. Boutros Ghali calls for development with a human face. "Development" he points out, "has to be oriented towards each person in the world" and must recognize a "human community." Indeed, a new economic order can be founded only on a vision of community that is world embracing and on an unshakable conviction of the oneness of mankind. When discussions aimed at solving problems related to extreme poverty are based on the premise that we are one human family, they rapidly expand beyond current economic constructs. They demand a wider context, one which anticipates the emergence of a global system of relationships resting on the principles of equity and justice.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights proclaims that everyone is entitled to a standard of living adequate to provide for the health and well-being of oneself and one's family. Bahá'ís believe a reordering of economic relationships can make an adequate standard of living universally attainable. The economic system anticipated in the Bahá'í Writings, although it will no doubt resemble the present system in many ways, will have significant points of distinction.

Let us take as an example the Bahá'í view of income distribution, which allows for differences but would eliminate both extreme wealth and extreme poverty. The accumulation of excessive fortunes by a small number of individuals while the masses are in need is, according to Bahá'í teachings, an intolerable injustice. Moderation should, therefore, be established by means of laws and regulations that would limit personal wealth and provide everyone with access to the means for living a dignified life.

The Bahá'í writings anticipate the development of communities in which the well-being of every member is the concern of the community as a whole. The center of such a community would include social service institutions which afford relief to the suffering, sustenance to the poor, shelter to the wayfarer, solace to the bereaved, and education to the ignorant. Citing the philosophy of

the UNCTAD Permanent Commission to Alleviate Poverty, Mr. Despouy asserts in his report that the "fight against poverty... is in the interest of all, poor and rich, givers and beneficiaries, at a national or an international stage."

Both the responsibility and the right to work are sacred. Idleness and begging have no place in a well-functioning society, while work performed in the spirit of service is elevated to the station of worship. The Special Rapporteur states that "the poorest, in general, in their capacity as citizens, are neither associated to the decision-making process nor are they allowed to exercise responsibilities within the community. "This situation is unacceptable, given that a fundamental purpose of life is to contribute to the advancement of civilization. Thus the right to work takes on a spiritual dimension, and the responsibility to be productive applies to everyone.

The belief in the sacredness of work and service profoundly influences the Bahá'í approach to social and economic development. Communities are encouraged to identify their own needs and initiate their own projects. These locally initiated projects, many of which focus on alleviating poverty, are based in moral values and encourage service to the community as a whole.

In India, for example, the Vocational Institute for Rural Women in Indore, established by Bahá'ís in the state of Madhya Pradesh and supported by the national Bahá'í community, offers free literacy and vocational training for underprivileged young women in the region. Reaching out to impoverished villages in a wide area, the Institute emphasizes training in locally useful and marketable skills. It has been observed that when the young women return to their villages, they affect their entire community, largely as a result of the moral education they have received at the institute. The acquisition of virtues not only helps them become positive influences on their families and friends, it makes them better business people. Such moral principles as honesty and trustworthiness are quite practical, in that they are essential for the success of cooperative enterprises.

In Bolivia a project in the Chaco region strives to uplift and empower a long-ignored population of impoverished farmers through an integrated program of technical training, community organization, and spiritual ideas. The goal is to cultivate self-sufficiency through community awareness in order to reduce dependency on outside aid and advice. The Bahá'í International Community believes that fostering grass-roots initiative is essential to the elimination of poverty. The concept of uplifting and empowering individuals and communities

has both moral and educational implications which demand profound study.

The Bahá'í International Community would like to take this opportunity to thank the Special Rapporteur, Mr. Leandro Despouy, for his interim report on human rights and extreme poverty. We hope to contribute to his future studies.

(HUMAN RIGHTS AND EXTREME POVERTY: Statement, by the Bahá'í International Community, to the United Nations Sub-Commission on the Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities, Geneva, Switzerland, August 1994)

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