

The Bahá'í Influence on Life

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THE speaker who preceded me gave you a sketch of the history of the Bahá'í movement, as well as a statement of some of its fundamental principles and teachings. It now rests with me to explain briefly the significance of those principles and teachings, and describe the profound changes they have wrought in the lives of their followers.

At a time when the spirit of materialism was spreading all over Europe, when internal revolutions, diplomatic intrigues, political strife and economic rivalries were darkening the horizon of an agitated and suffering world, Bahá'u'lláh, from the prison city of Acca, addressed a number of epistles to the monarchs and rulers of the world, to whom he declared his teachings and principles.

To the Bahá'ís these teachings stand out as the only remedy for the divers ills of the present age and the only solution of its manifold problems.

Bahá'u'lláh saw the world like the surface of a glacier hopelessly divided by innumerable fissures and dark and deep crevasses. The development of modern science had opened the eyes of men to the bigotry and prejudice that existed in religion, and had so alienated them from it that even its pure and fundamental truths seemed, to their minds, to be darkened. The gulf existing between man and God was widening, and agnosticism was the fashion of the day.

The spirit of nationalism, embittered by fierce economic and political rivalries, had so widened the chasm separating the nations that nothing less than a great world war could be foreseen.

Within the individual nations also new lines of cleavage accentuated the divisions and differences of men, and class hatred and economic unrest were spreading fast over the European continent.

Bahá'u'lláh conceived the glorious vision of the Oneness of Mankind, and set before him the task of healing, by aid of his fundamental principles, every sore that afflicted the body of humanity. He knew well that unless all the crevasses were bridged over, and all the differences removed, unity and universal peace would not prove enduring, nor even attainable.

To bring back man to God, and at the same time to enable him to appreciate the advantages which science provides, he declared that true religion and science cannot possibly be antagonistic. For both, in their essence, are truths, and between truths there can be no conflict. Moreover, to reconcile the religious he laid it down, as a guiding principle, that the purpose of religion is to provide a social bond, to create a new force in man's life, to infuse in him the love of his neighbour. If, therefore, a religion, which he likened to a medicine, should aggravate the disease, it is far better to be without it.

In adjusting international difficulties he did not advocate political methods. He knew that war is only the result of a state of mind, a spirit of blind and narrow nationalism inherent in man's heart. He therefore dealt his first blow by declaring that "Glory is not his who loves his country, but glory is his who loves his kind." All men are the sheep of one fold and God the Divine and loving shepherd. Why, therefore, slay each other?

As one of the sources of misunderstanding is multiplicity of languages, he called upon the members of the International House of Justice either to create a new auxiliary language or to choose one of those already existing, and to have it taught in all the schools of the world, so that ideas might be more easily diffused and the risk of grave misunderstanding lessened. He then laid down the broad lines that should direct the formation of the International House of Justice, a supreme and all-inclusive body, whose members should be fully accredited representatives of all the peoples of the world. They should assemble, and, after mature deliberation, arbitrate on all questions, social, political and economic, that might lead to war.

In order to eliminate the root cause of all forms of class hatred he proclaimed, "Do ye know why we have created you from one clay? That no one should exalt himself over the other. Ponder in your heart how ye were created. It behoveth you, since we have created you all from the same substance, to be even as one soul, in such wise that ye may walk with the same feet, eat with the same mouth and dwell in the same land; that from your inmost being, by your deeds and actions, the signs of oneness and the essence of detachment may be made manifest. This is my counsel unto you, O ye concourse of Light! Heed ye this counsel, that ye may obtain the Fruit of Holiness from the Tree of Wondrous Glory."

Thus, by taking away all the causes of differences, Bahá'u'lláh sought to establish the Oneness of Mankind and to abolish definitely international and class war.

Up to the present religion has been static in nature. At the time of its appearance it satisfies the needs of humanity, solves its

problems and improves its condition, but, being rigid in its laws, fails to keep pace with civilization, and slowly falls behind, loses its influence and becomes a drag on development. Bahá'u'lláh, however, laid down some basic principles which can be applied to all stages of human progress, and then empowered the International House of Justice, which is a purely democratic institution, to amend these laws, and mould them to the needs of the time. He says: "Inasmuch as for each time and day a particular law and order is expedient, power is given to the Ministers of the House of Justice so that they may execute that which they deem advisable at the time." So according to the Bahá'i ideal religion will become a progressive and dynamic institution, and remain a source of inspiration and progress.

During the last two or three decades various progressive movements have appeared with rather similar aims, proclaiming very much the same principles. Yet hardly has any one of them, to my knowledge, given such a comprehensive and perfect programme of reform. They have each, as a rule, confined themselves to only a number of the vast and varied problems of the age, oblivious of the fact that, so long as one single sore remains neglected, germs may find their way in and endanger the life of humanity. For how could universal peace be ensured when religious and racial differences breed hatred, or even when the multiplicity of languages hampers mutual understanding?

The service rendered by these various progressive movements is undeniably great, and their efforts are highly valued by all Bahá'is, who on this occasion would like to place on record their sincere and profound appreciation.

Unkind Criticism

In addition to the constant and appalling persecution the Bahá'is have suffered at the hands of the fanatical elements in Persia, they have been the target of some misleading criticism from various writers of the West. Unable to deny the beauty and potency of the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh, these critics have not ceased to declare that such lofty principles were only inspiring ideals, and not practical reforms attainable by mankind. These progressive movements have fortunately opened the eyes of the world, not only to the practicability, but also to the absolute and urgent need, of our present civilization for the League of Nations. They have taught the world that a narrow nationalism was the curse of the present age and the recent past, and that the sooner we accustom ourselves to think supernationally the more easy it will become to manage our intricate international affairs.

Those critics imagined that the religions of the world could never be reconciled, but the modern developments of the science

of comparative religion, which has come into prominence only in the last three decades, together with conferences similar and leading up to this present one, will, before long, prove to the world that the fundamental principles underlying all the religions are one, that their only points of difference are the minor questions that relate to rites, ceremonies and external practices, which must be necessarily modified with the changes in human wants and environment. The world has already begun to realize that controversies over such secondary points only serve to alienate those sincere souls to whom the heart of religion is all-important, and who by nature would be willing rather to hold out the hand of fellowship to all religions who worship at the altar of the One Living God than to wrangle over forms that seem to their mind of only secondary value.

I have tried to give a picture of the high aim that Bahá'u'lláh has set before him, and now I pray your attention, for a few moments more, to a brief description of the far-reaching changes it has brought about in the life of its followers.

Influence on Daily Life

In the East, especially in the land of its birth, Persia, where it admittedly stands, amid the chaos and corruption of its heedless inhabitants, as the beacon-light of progress and reform, its achievements have been great. There, under an unceasing storm of persecution, abuse and calumny, the movement has not only wrought a fundamental revolution in the life of the individuals, but has also inaugurated various reforms, of which I shall mention only two.

Wherever the number of the Bahá'is is sufficiently great, and they can afford the means, a school has been established to provide the necessary primary education for girls as well as for boys. As even these schools are under the constant threat of being closed, the Bahá'is have not been able to pursue this course to its desired extent. Only three years ago one of the schools, which had been established after immeasurable sacrifices and difficulties, was burned down by the mob, and its poor students severely beaten and dispersed.

I need not dwell upon the degrading position of women in such a state as Persia. Not only are they debarred from the smallest measure of freedom and education, but are in many cases considered nothing more than a mere appendage—an indispensable but utterly servile member of the household. Wherever a Bahá'i community can provide schools for its boys it also institutes one for its girls. In fact, Bahá'u'lláh clearly states that, as the girls will be the mothers of the future generations, they must receive preferential treatment in education. In electing the members of

the Spiritual Assemblies which are the centre of Bahá'i activities, the women are given a position absolutely equal to that of the men. There remains only one more step to take, and that is to discard the veil. This has not yet been done. The Bahá'i women have, however, organized societies of their own to educate themselves and further their cause. Before long, we all hope, even the veil will be set aside and the women accorded a position in Persia equal to their sisters even in some of the most progressive States of Europe.

In the West, where enlightened and capable Governments are continuously enacting laws that provide for the material well-being of its citizens, this field of Bahá'i activity has not been so great. Its influence has been mainly to create the spirit of international brotherhood, and wipe out religious, social and economic prejudices. Those who have had the chance of attending a Bahá'i meeting, either in the East or in the West, can appreciate the important and far-reaching influence of the movement along that line. People of different, and at times conflicting, views assemble and enjoy mutual love and harmony. Even the most illiterate of the Bahá'is are free from prejudice. To them Christian or Jew, Muhammadan or Zoroastrian, Eastern or Western, all stand on equal footing, and are considered as brothers in the love of the One God.

Moreover, when I see that it is only since the appearance of Bahá'u'lláh and the declaration of his principles that many movements have been established with the hope of spreading principles similar to his; when I see that it is since then that the conception of a League of Nations and international brotherhood has come down from the field of mere idealism into common politics; that a movement for a universal language has been created; that women have been obtaining a better social and political position; and the cause of universal and free education advanced, I cannot but endorse Abdu'l-Bahá's saying that "the spirit of the Cause is pulsating in the arteries of mankind," that we are undergoing that social and intellectual revival that appeared at the advent of every prophet, and prepared the world for accepting his teachings.

In conclusion, it will be generally agreed that it would be far from God's infinite mercy to give His helpless creatures the freedom to tread on dangerous ground, and, whilst knowing the solution of their problems, to stand aside, heedless of their suffering and deaf to their constant prayers. It is in accordance with His Divine attributes to give them guidance when need arises, to send them a messenger with the necessary laws and commandments to put them on the right path of safety. And, now that the social unrest is becoming a real menace to civilization itself, when world problems in their acuteness and multiplicity are baffling the minds of men, we, a small yet determined band, fired by the unquenchable

enthusiasm of the promise of a new day, firmly believe that the sea of Divine compassion has surged, that the Lord has sent His messenger with the necessary solution of those intricate problems. The Bahá'is on their part have tried their utmost, have sacrificed their well-being, their property, their all, to diffuse this spirit far and wide. Is the world willing to answer their call, or at least deem it worthy of attention?