

**THE BAHÁ'Í INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY
AND THE UNITED NATIONS**

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I. INTRODUCTION

The Bahá'í Faith is a fast-growing worldwide religion. It has members in over 110,000 localities in more than 160 countries. Over the past 30 years, the number of Bahá'í communities has increased almost 50-fold. Bahá'í Scriptures have been translated into more than 700 languages and dialects.

Bahá'ís believe that the dramatic spread of their Faith reflects the increasing worldwide recognition that it has a particularly relevant message for today's world.

Many of the basic principles of the Bahá'í Faith must have sounded extraordinary and even revolutionary when they were first enunciated over a century ago — principles such as the unity and interdependence of all the world's nations; the equality of all races and of the sexes; and the need for a world authority, for an international police force, for arms control and for a new international economic and social order. Yet these principles are now widely accepted, and some progress has been made towards their realization — in particular, through the United Nations and its agencies.

The Bahá'í International Community, comprising all Bahá'í communities around the world, therefore feels a special commitment to the United Nations. It has been associated with the Organization since 1948, through its representatives in New York and other United Nations centres. The purpose of this booklet is to explain what the Bahá'í International Community stands for, what it is trying to achieve, and how it is working with the United Nations and its agencies to achieve a new world order of peace and justice.

II. WHAT IS A BAHÁ'Í?

"The gift of God to this enlightened age is the knowledge of the oneness of mankind and of the fundamental oneness of God." (Bahá'í Scriptures)

"To be a Bahá'í simply means to love all the world: to love humanity and try to serve it; to work for universal peace and universal brotherhood." (Bahá'í Scriptures)

The Bahá'í Faith was founded by Bahá'u'lláh in Persia in the mid-19th Century (see Section VIII for summary history of the Faith).

The central beliefs of the Bahá'í Faith are the existence of one God for all mankind, and the fundamental unity of the human race. Bahá'ís believe

that God is manifested through a series of prophets, and recognize the divine message of the founders of all the world's major religions — Buddha, Krishna, Zoroaster, Moses, Jesus Christ and Muhammad. They regard Bahá'u'lláh as the latest in this line of prophets, with a message of unique relevance to the present era.

The Bahá'í message is both spiritual and practical. Bahá'ís consider that it is their duty to promote a spiritual regeneration throughout the world, and that this includes working for practical causes such as peace, universal education, and social and economic development. They must carry out this duty without proselytizing or engaging in partisan politics, and are required to show loyalty and obedience to the governments of the countries in which they live.

III. BAHÁ'Í ATTITUDES TO THE UNITED NATIONS

"The world is but one country, and mankind its citizens." (Bahá'í Scriptures)

"The well-being of mankind, its peace and security are unattainable unless and until its unity is firmly established. . . . Soon will the present day Order be rolled up, and a new one spread out in its stead." (Bahá'í Scriptures)

Bahá'u'lláh repeatedly stressed the fundamental principle of the unity and interdependence of mankind. He envisaged the eventual emergence of a world commonwealth, freely mandated by the world's nations to bring about an era of universal peace and justice.

The principle of the unity and interdependence of mankind has become much more widely accepted since the time of Bahá'u'lláh. "Spaceship earth" is now a cliché, and most people recognize the economic and political interdependence of North and South, and of East and West, and the shared threat to all mankind of nuclear and environmental disaster.

Bahá'ís consider that the United Nations has played a crucial role in increasing this international awareness, and in advancing the eventual achievement of a new world order through, for example, its promotion of the decolonization process; through its formation of international humanitarian agencies such as UNHCR and UNICEF; through its development of a global approach to international economic issues and to disarmament — however inadequate the results have been so far; through its recognition of the universal principles of the equality of all races and of the sexes, and of the inadmissibility of all forms of discrimination;

through its despatch of United Nations peace-keeping forces to various troubled areas of the world; and through its establishment of international human rights organs to monitor the treatment by states of their own citizens—an issue previously regarded as exclusively a domestic concern of states.

Certainly much more needs to be done. But even these limited measures would have been extraordinary a century ago, when Bahá'u'lláh first pointed the way towards a new world order. And they have been accompanied by other equally remarkable steps in the same direction, such as the development of international peace movements and the formation of regional political and economic entities on all the world's continents. So Bahá'ís do not share the pessimism and apathy which characterize some approaches to the international situation, and to the United Nations in particular. On the contrary, they are convinced that further progress is not only necessary but inevitable.

IV. WORLD PEACE

"The Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh. . . should. . . be regarded as signaling through its advent the coming of age of the entire human race." (Bahá'í Scriptures)

In the Bahá'í view, mankind is now emerging from adolescence to maturity, and the recent era of decolonization and nation-building will be succeeded by an era of peace-making and world-building.

Bahá'u'lláh called for a great meeting of all the world's leaders to advance this process; for reconciliation between the great powers and the establishment of arms limitation agreements under international control—needs which have never been more urgent than today; for the establishment of a world parliament of all the world's nations, who should commit themselves on the basis of collective security to a united and, if necessary, armed response to aggression by any member—a procedure provided for in the United Nations Charter but seldom utilized; for the establishment of a world court capable of making binding decisions—a need which the International Court of Justice was designed to fulfil; and for an international auxiliary language.

Bahá'ís believe that all these measures will in due course come to pass, and will bring a lasting peace to the world. They are not designed to discourage patriotism, or suppress the differences between states. Bahá'ís consider that the intrinsic and particular value of every nation and culture—as of every individual—should be recognized and respected. It is

not the differences between states which cause international problems, but the way these differences are perceived and handled.

The peoples of the world share a natural, strong desire for a world order of peace and security, for themselves and their children. But all too often they lack the education, knowledge and influence to articulate or promote these objectives. There is also a widespread reluctance among governments and opinion-leaders to recognize the arrival of a new era of peace-making and world-building, which calls for the establishment of an effective international authority to assure protection and security for all, particularly the weakest communities and nations.

Bahá'ís therefore, around the world and at the United Nations, are working to promote the idea of the world as one family, to spread the cause of internationalism, to break down hostility and suspicion between nations and groups, to eliminate ignorance and prejudice and thereby to advance the achievement of a new world order. In view of the overriding importance of this objective, the international governing council of the Bahá'í Faith is taking the unprecedented step of issuing a major statement on peace to the peoples of the world, for delivery to the Heads of State of all the world's nations between 24 October and 31 December 1985.

V. EDUCATION OVER IGNORANCE; EQUALITY OVER DISCRIMINATION

"Inasmuch as ignorance and lack of education are barriers of separation among mankind, all must receive training and instruction. Through this provision the lack of mutual understanding will be remedied and the unity of mankind furthered and advanced. . . In addition to this widespread education, each child must be taught a profession, art or trade."
(Bahá'í Scriptures)

Many of the world's problems are caused by ignorance and prejudice; and ignorance and prejudice can only be removed through education.

Over a century ago, Bahá'u'lláh called for compulsory universal education, including universal literacy. Today, that objective can be achieved, if the world's available resources are used properly. Bahá'ís are contributing to this process by running literacy programmes, educational radio programmes and primary and secondary schools in some 50 developing countries, mainly in rural areas where no schooling was previously available.

But Bahá'ís consider that education must be spiritual as well as academic; that it must be governed by both religion and science. Religion and

science are not opposites. On the contrary, they are two vital aspects of the same reality. Neither of these aspects should be neglected. For religion without science produces superstition and fanaticism; while science without religion produces a crude materialism and a lack of moral standards and humanitarian concern for others.

To help meet the need for spiritual education, Bahá'ís are providing educational services in over 100 countries to teach basic principles such as the unity of mankind, the equality of all human beings, the virtues of tolerance, trustworthiness, justice and respect for others, and the need to combat discrimination and prejudice.

Bahá'ís regard all mankind as one, and so regard all discrimination and prejudice—whether based on race, religion, sex or any other characteristic—as equally abhorrent and illogical.

The Bahá'í Scriptures state unequivocally about racism: "Concerning the prejudice of race, it is an illusion, a superstition pure and simple, for God created us all of one race." The Bahá'í Scriptures also consistently stress the importance of paying special regard to the rights and needs of minority groups.

The Bahá'ís similarly regard religious discrimination as based on an illusion of differences, since all religious faiths represent manifestations of the same truth. The world's tragic history of religious conflicts reflects misunderstandings and perversions of the divine messages of God's prophets, and not fundamental differences between the messages they brought.

As for sexual discrimination, the Bahá'í Faith was the first religion to proclaim the equality of men and women over a century ago. Bahá'u'lláh stressed the rights of women to equality with men in educational opportunity and in professional and public life. Tahirih, a distinguished poetess who was one of the earliest Bahá'í martyrs, said when advised of her death sentence in 1852: "You can kill me as soon as you like, but you cannot stop the emancipation of women."

One important step towards the elimination of discrimination and prejudice is the establishment of international standards outlawing these evils. Bahá'ís therefore attach great importance to the work of the United Nations in this field, such as the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenants on Human Rights, the two Conventions on the elimination of discrimination based on race and on sex, and the Declaration on the elimination of intolerance based on re-

ligion or belief. Bahá'ís around the world, of all races and ethnic origins, are working at the grassroots level to promote the effective implementation of these standards.

VI. DEVELOPMENT: A RIGHT AND A RESPONSIBILITY

"The economic resources of the world will be organized, its sources of raw materials will be tapped and fully utilized, its markets will be coordinated and developed, and the distribution of its products will be equitably regulated." (Bahá'í Scriptures)

The Bahá'í Faith, based as it is on the principles of the unity and equality of all mankind, is strongly committed to the abolition of poverty, hunger and the wide gulf between rich and poor.

The Bahá'í Scriptures describe economic injustice as a moral evil, and stress the economic interdependence of the world's nations, and the need for a fair distribution of the world's resources. They insist that chattel slavery and industrial slavery must be abolished, an adequate standard of living guaranteed for all and a system of graduated taxation of income established.

These ideas are far more widely accepted today. But hundreds of millions of human beings still suffer from poverty, hunger, preventable disease and illiteracy, and the gap between rich and poor is still immense, and widening. This shows that the current international economic order is incapable of arranging the effective use and just distribution of the world's resources.

Bahá'ís regard development as a right, and as a responsibility—of individuals, of local communities and of nations. Everyone has the right to be provided with the opportunity to achieve a dignified standard of living. It is the responsibility of the community as a whole—local, national and international—to provide this opportunity. But equally everyone has the responsibility to use this opportunity to fulfil their potential, to serve the rest of the community and to participate fully in the processes of personal and community development.

The principles of service and of participation in development are central to the Bahá'í Faith. Development programmes may well require outside assistance and support. But, if they are to be sound and sustainable, they must be understood and appreciated by local communities; must be planned and implemented by them; and must be directed at enhancing

the self-respect, self-sufficiency and self-reliance of the community concerned.

Development then becomes more than a list of projects. It becomes a process which leads to spiritual regeneration and to the enhancement of community spirit and pride, as well as to the achievement of social and material benefits and comforts. All too often in the past, development programmes have been imposed by outside institutions and experts, and have dislocated local communities and compounded instead of alleviating their problems.

Bahá'ís are not only arguing the need for change at the United Nations and elsewhere. Thousands of Bahá'í communities around the world, mostly in developing countries, are putting their principles into practice through the initiation and management of development processes and projects. These processes and projects are implemented from the bottom up, through a democratic process of consultation and cooperation at the grass roots level; they are focused on basic needs, particularly in the fields of education, health care and agriculture; and they are designed for the benefit of the community as a whole, not just for members of the Bahá'í community. Many of the projects are conducted in collaboration with the United Nations, with national or local governments or with other development agencies.

VII. THE BAHÁ'Í MORAL CODE

"[Bahá'ís] must serve the Lord with wisdom, teach others by their lives, and manifest the light of God in their deeds. The effect of deeds is in truth more powerful than that of words." (Bahá'í Scriptures)

Bahá'ís are not hermits, or ascetics. They are required by their Faith to go out into the world and contribute to society; and they are encouraged to enjoy the good God-given pleasures of life. Bahá'u'lláh urged them: "Deprive not yourselves of that which has been created for you."

But the Bahá'í Faith calls for high moral standards. Bahá'ís should strive to act with love, justice, modesty, courtesy and tolerance towards all their fellow human beings; to speak the truth at all times; to avoid petty criticism and backbiting; and to work hard in the service of others, as all such work is regarded as worship. Marriage is monogamous, and a solemn undertaking. Chastity is expected outside marriage, and divorce is strongly discouraged. Alcohol and narcotics are both forbidden, except when required for medicinal purposes.

VIII. HISTORY AND ORGANIZATION OF THE BAHÁ'Í FAITH

The Bahá'í Faith was founded by Bahá'u'lláh in Persia in the middle of the 19th Century.

As a young man, Bahá'u'lláh (1817-1892) had been a follower of the Báb, a prophet who in 1844 proclaimed himself to be the forerunner of a far greater messenger of God who would bring peace to the world through his teachings. In 1863 Bahá'u'lláh (whose name means "Glory of God") proclaimed himself to be the messenger foretold by the Báb. Over the following 30 years, he outlined the basic principles of the Bahá'í Faith in copious writings, including letters to the main religious and political leaders of the day. By the time of his death in 1892, the Bahá'í Faith had spread beyond Persia and the Ottoman Empire to the Caucasus, Turkistan, India, Burma, Egypt and the Sudan.

Bahá'u'lláh appointed his eldest son, 'Abdu'l-Bahá ("Servant of the Glory": 1844-1921) as the leader of the Bahá'í community and the interpreter of his teachings. In this capacity, 'Abdu'l-Bahá not only administered and interpreted the Faith, but also spread it widely through his travels. The Bahá'í Scriptures consist of the writings of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá. In his turn, 'Abdu'l-Bahá appointed as his successor his eldest grandson, Shoghi Effendi Rabbani (1896-1957).

Since Shoghi Effendi's death, the administration of the Bahá'í Faith has been the responsibility of its international governing council, known as the Universal House of Justice, and based at the Bahá'í World Centre in Haifa. The Bahá'í World Centre has been located in Haifa since the 19th Century, in accordance with Bahá'u'lláh's writings. Bahá'u'lláh spent many years in forced exile near Haifa, and decreed that the world centre of the Faith should be established there.

The Universal House of Justice consists of nine Bahá'ís, elected at five year intervals at an international convention by the national spiritual assemblies of the Bahá'í Faith throughout the world. These national spiritual assemblies are themselves elected annually at national conventions, and are responsible for running Bahá'í affairs in their own country. The spiritual assembly at local level, also elected annually, brings its Bahá'í community together every 19 days for prayer, discussion of community issues, fellowship and social activities.

All Bahá'í elections are conducted by secret ballot. Bahá'ís are expected to serve, if elected. But electioneering and campaigning for office are

strictly forbidden; and election to office does not confer any special honour or privileges.

This administrative system ensures that the closest possible relationship is maintained between Bahá'ís and their governing councils at the various levels. There are no clergy, no sacraments, no preaching, and no initiation ceremonies in the Bahá'í Faith. The administration of Bahá'í communities is financed exclusively by voluntary contributions from individual Bahá'ís.

IX. HISTORY AND SCOPE OF THE BAHÁ'Í RELATIONSHIP WITH THE UNITED NATIONS

The importance Bahá'ís attach to the United Nations is reflected in the attention and resources which they have devoted to their relationship with the Organization since its foundation.

The Bahá'í International Community has been associated with the United Nations since 1948, and has maintained a permanent United Nations office in New York since 1967. It is now also represented in Geneva, Vienna and Nairobi, and is establishing representation with regional commissions. It has consultative status with the Economic and Social Council and UNICEF, and is associated with the United Nations Environment Programme, the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements and the Department of Public Information.

It participates actively in the work of an increasingly wide range of United Nations organs, including the Economic and Social Council and the Commissions on Human Rights, Status of Women, Social Development, Population, and Narcotic Drugs, as well as in almost all major UN conferences and international years. It also collaborates with an increasing range of United Nations development and humanitarian agencies, such as UNICEF and UNHCR. It has issued many brochures and statements on issues of concern to the United Nations, including international peace and disarmament, social and economic development, the elimination of racial discrimination, science and technology, world food, human rights, status of women, population, drug abuse, environment, children, youth, aging, the disabled, the family, water, crime prevention, desertification and human settlements.

The Bahá'í International Community takes seriously its responsibilities as a member of the community of non-governmental organizations associated with the United Nations. In the past three years, for example, its representatives have served as Chairman of the NGO Committee on UNI-

CEF and the NGO Committee on Human Rights, as Vice-Chairman of the DPI/NGO Executive Committee and the Committee on the UN Decade for Women, and as Secretary of the NGO Committee on Youth.

The Bahá'í International Community has made clear its commitment to working with the United Nations and its agencies, with national delegations and with its fellow NGOS, to create a better, more just and more peaceful world. It looks forward to increasing this collaboration in the years and decades ahead. In this way, it hopes to bring closer the day foreseen by Bahá'u'lláh, when the world will achieve universal peace and justice under an effective international authority established by agreement among all the world's nations.

More information about the Bahá'í Faith and about the activities of the Bahá'í International Community can be obtained from:

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