Social and Moral Teachings

There has never been a futurist, a forecaster, or a prophet whose vision has so accurately foreseen the critical features of the landscape before humanity — or whose social teachings have been so utterly appropriate for the current age.

One of the extraordinary features of the writings of Bahá’u’lláh is the degree to which they accurately identify the issues and changes that have most preoccupied humanity in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

From women’s equality to racial justice, from the explosion of scientific knowledge and information to the dynamic processes that have shrunk our planet into a global village, issues central to our modern world were prophetically and profoundly addressed by the Founder of the Bahá’í Faith. Bahá’u’lláh’s vision of renewal touches on all aspects of life, from personal morality to economics and governance; from community development to religious practice.

The central theme of Bahá’u’lláh’s social teachings is that humanity is one single race and the day has come for its unification into one global society.

The recognition of our essential oneness, the Bahá’í writings state, gives rise to a number of progressive social principles and ideals, which Bahá’ís everywhere seek to promote in the world at large.

These essential social principles include the elimination of all forms of prejudice, establishment of full equality between the sexes, recognition of the essential oneness of the world’s great religions, elimination of extremes of poverty and wealth, provision of universal education, promotion

“Possess a pure, kindly and radiant heart, that thine may be a sovereignty ancient, imperishable and everlasting.”
— Bahá’u’lláh
of a high standard of personal conduct, recognition of the harmony of science and religion, pursuit of a sustainable balance between nature and technology, and establishment of a world federal system based on collective security.

When one considers how closely these principles match the social concerns — from race relations to economic justice — that fueled the twentieth century's most dynamic movements, it is clear that there has never been a futurist, a forecaster, or a prophet whose vision has so accurately foreseen the critical features of the social landscape.

Far from fading into irrelevance, the issues that Bahá’u’lláh focused on have come to dominate the collective life of humanity in the twenty-first century.

Unity the theme
The Bahá’í Faith’s progressive approach to human society originates with Bahá’u’lláh’s emphasis on unity. Indeed, if one were to characterize His teachings in a single word, that word would be unity.

Throughout His writings, Bahá’u’lláh emphasized the importance — and the reality — of unity and oneness. First, God is one. All of the world’s great religions are also one. They represent humanity’s common origin and purpose of the great religions lies at the heart of the concept of unity in Bahá’u’lláh’s teachings.

From this fundamental concept of divine and religious unity, other principles emerge. Bahá’u’lláh teaches that all humans, as creations of one God, are also one people. Distinctions of race, nation, class, and ethnic origin are ephemeral when understood in this context. Likewise, any notions of tribal, provincial, and national superiority are discarded in the Bahá’í Faith.

Speaking through Bahá’u’lláh, the voice of God proclaims: “Know ye not why We created you all from the same dust? That no one should exalt himself over the other. Ponder at all times in your hearts how ye were created. Since We have created you all from one same substance it is incumbent on you to be even as one soul, to 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.”

The oneness of humanity
The idea that all humanity is one race forms the foundation for the other principles of social justice in the Bahá’í Faith. Bahá’u’lláh condemned racial and ethnic prejudice, urging: “Close your eyes to
For the first time in history, the Founder of a major world religion has explicitly stated that women and men are equal. The Bahá’í writings also state:

- Girls should be given preference over boys when educational opportunities and resources are limited.
- In Bahá’í marriage, neither the husband nor the wife has a dominant voice.
- Any apparent inequality between the capacities of women and men is due solely to the lack of educational opportunities so far open to women.

In response to these principles, Bahá’í communities around the world are striving on a number of fronts to uplift and empower women, seeking to improve the education of women, establishing committees to promote equality, or simply stimulating a broad discussion about the role of women in community life. While the rate of progress in each country and region is affected by historical factors and local traditions, one significant statistic that marks the degree of progress is the high percentage of women — relative to similar institutions in their countries — who have been elected to national-level Bahá’í governing bodies.

Although both women and men are eligible to serve in elective and appointive institutions of the Bahá’í Faith at all other levels, the membership of the Universal House of Justice, the international governing body of the Bahá’í Faith, is limited to men. Bahá’u’lláh Himself outlined this stipulation and it is therefore unchangeable. Further, He gave no clarification for this feature of Bahá’í law. Accordingly, although individual Bahá’ís may speculate on the reasons, there is no official explanation. It remains, simply, a matter of faith.

Members of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá’ís of Bermuda in the year 2000.

**Women: unambiguous equality**

**Percentage of women on national Bahá’í governing bodies (National Spiritual Assemblies)**

- **Africa**
- **Americas**
- **Asia**
- **Australasia**
- **Europe**

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racial differences, and welcome all with the light of oneness.”

Bahá’u’lláh also unequivocally proclaimed the equality of the sexes — at a time when the women’s movement was only beginning its fight for suffrage in the West and such ideas were unheard of in the Middle East — thus becoming the first Founder of a world religion to explicitly uphold complete equality for women and men.

Indeed, girls should receive priority in education, if by some circumstance a family (or a society) cannot afford to educate its children equally. “Until the reality of equality between men and women is fully established and attained, the highest social development of mankind is not possible,” the Bahá’í scriptures state.

This summons to equal treatment does not ignore natural differences between the sexes. Bahá’u’lláh emphasized the importance of motherhood, fatherhood, and family life. The challenge before society is to enable women to participate as equals in every field of human endeavor — whether scientific, economic, or political — while also allowing them to fulfill their essential roles as the bearers and first educators of children.

Bahá’u’lláh’s theme of oneness is also upheld in a general summons to promote economic justice. Addressing the “rich ones on earth,” Bahá’u’lláh writes: “The

▼ Responding to Bahá’u’lláh’s message of human oneness, people from virtually every background have become Bahá’ís.
In Thailand, many members of the Karin indigenous group, such as Rong Sujipong, headman of Pongdin village, and his family, have become Bahá’ís.

Marriage and family life

Bahá’ís understand that the family is the basic unit of society. Unless this all-important building block is healthy and unified, society itself cannot be healthy and unified. Monogamous marriage between a man and a woman stands at the foundation of family life.

Bahá’u’lláh said marriage is “a fortress for well-being and salvation.” The Bahá’í writings further state that married couples should strive to become “loving companions and comrades and at one with each other for time and eternity....”

Bahá’ís view preparation for union as an essential element in ensuring a happy marriage. The process of preparation includes a requirement for parental approval of the choice of a spouse. This does not mean that Bahá’í marriages are arranged. Individuals propose marriage to the persons of their own choice. However, once the choice is made, the parents have both the right and the obligation to weigh carefully whether or not to give consent to, and thus guide, their offspring in one of life’s most important decisions.

Bahá’ís believe that this requirement helps to preserve unity within the marriage and within the extended family. Like previous Messengers of God, Bahá’u’lláh taught His followers to honor their parents. Obtaining parental permission for marriage reaffirms the importance of the bond between child and parent. It also helps to create a supportive network of parents for the newly married couple.

Simple vows and ceremony

Once parental permission is obtained, the marriage takes place, requiring only the simplest of ceremonies. In the presence of two witnesses designated by the Local Spiritual Assembly, the local Bahá’í governing council, the couple recites the following verse: “We will all, verily, abide by the will of God.” For Bahá’ís, that simple commitment to live by God’s will implies all of the commitments associated with marriage, including the promises to love, honor, and cherish; to care for each other regardless of material health or wealth; and to share with and serve each other.
Beyond these simple requirements, Bahá’ís are free to design their own marriage celebration. Depending on personal tastes, family resources, and cultural traditions, Bahá’í ceremonies run the gamut from small to large, including all manner of music, dance, dress, food, and festivity.

The marriage vow is considered sacred in the Bahá’í Faith. The partners are expected to be absolutely faithful to each other.

The Faith’s emphasis on the equality of women and men, however, and its promotion of consultation as a tool for problem solving mean that the roles of husband and wife within a Bahá’í marriage are not the traditional ones. Women are free to pursue careers that interest them; men are expected to share in household duties and child rearing.

So-called “interracial marriage” is also encouraged in the Bahá’í teachings, which stress the essential oneness of the human race.

**Divorce is allowed but discouraged**

If a Bahá’í marriage fails, divorce is permitted, although it is strongly discouraged. If Bahá’ís choose to seek a divorce, they must spend at least one year living apart and attempting to reconcile. If a divorce is still desired after that year, it is then granted, dependent on the requirements of civil law. This “year of patience,” as it is known to Bahá’ís, is supervised by the Local Spiritual Assembly.

The key purpose of Bahá’í marriage — beyond physical, intellectual, and spiritual companionship — is children. Bahá’ís view child rearing not only as a source of great joy and reward, but as a sacred obligation. “Enter into wedlock, O people,” is Bahá’u’lláh’s injunction, “that ye may bring forth one who will make mention of Me amid My servants. This is My bidding unto you; hold fast to it as an assistance to yourselves.”

While stating firmly that women must enjoy full equality with men, Bahá’u’lláh’s teachings also recognize explicitly the innate differences between the feminine and masculine natures — both physical and emotional. Bahá’ís understand, accordingly, that mothers have a special role to play in the early education of children — especially during the first few years of life, when the basic values and character of every individual are formed. Since Bahá’ís believe that the soul comes into existence at the moment of conception, the parents pray for the well-being of the unborn child while it is still in the womb. Education in general, and Bahá’í education in particular, is of paramount importance in Bahá’í families. From their earliest years, the children are encouraged to develop the habits of prayer and meditation and to acquire knowledge, both intellectual and spiritual.
Among the principles emphasized by Bahá’u’lláh are:

- the oneness of humanity
- the equality of women and men
- the elimination of prejudice
- the elimination of extremes of wealth and poverty
- the independent investigation of truth
- universal education
- religious tolerance
- the harmony of science and religion
- a world commonwealth of nations
- a universal auxiliary language

Bahá’ís strive to uphold a high moral standard. Bahá’u’lláh stressed the importance of:

- honesty
- trustworthiness
- chastity
- service to others
- purity of motive
- generosity
- deeds over words
- unity
- work as a form of worship

Bahá’ís follow the moral code of the Ten Commandments — and more. Bahá’u’lláh forbids:

- killing
- stealing
- lying
- adultery and promiscuity
- gambling
- alcoholic drinks
- drug abuse
- gossip and backbiting

Science and religion

The theme of unity also emerges in Bahá’u’lláh’s teachings on science. His writings present science and religion as the two most powerful channels for the advancement of civilization, with different yet harmonious approaches to the comprehension of reality. These two paths are essentially compatible and mutually reinforcing.

The scientific method is humanity’s tool for understanding the physical side of the universe. It can describe the composition of an atomic nucleus or the molecular structure of DNA. It is the key to discovering and unlocking new technologies. Science cannot, however, guide us in the use of such knowledge — a truth borne out by the excesses of the application of science and technology in the last century, exemplified at their worst in the atomic bomb and other weapons of mass destruction.

Bahá’ís believe that only in the revelation of God can humanity find a system of values that puts such developments into a proper perspective. Religion offers answers to those questions of morals, human purpose, and our relationship to God that science cannot approach.

At the same time, Bahá’ís believe, any religion that ignores modern scientific truths runs the risk of descending into fanaticism. It is only by recognizing the harmonious and complementary nature of science and religion, then, that human society can move safely forward.

The Bahá’í performance group Artworks presents the teachings of the Faith through a combination of rapid painting and dance routines. Based in Perth, Western Australia, Artworks takes its shows to schools and other venues where the energy and skill of its members attract an enthusiastic response.
The independent investigation of reality, whether scientific or religious, is strongly encouraged in Bahá’u’lláh’s writings. Individuals should strive, He said, to free themselves from prejudices, preconceptions, and blind obedience to tradition or traditional authorities. Consultation is a critical tool for discovering truth [see page 45].

Bahá’u’lláh also called for the adoption of a universal auxiliary language as a means to promote unity. “The day is approaching when all the peoples of the world will have adopted one universal language and one common script,” He wrote. “When this is achieved, to whatsoever city a man may journey, it shall be as if he were entering his own home.” The term “auxiliary” is important: Bahá’u’lláh’s injunction is not a mandate for cultural uniformity. Indeed, the Bahá’í teachings both value and promote cultural diversity.

When first outlined by Bahá’u’lláh more than 100 years ago, these principles were as radical as any social program ever drafted. The fact that they have not only survived the passage of time but have, indeed, become ever more widely proclaimed and recognized is a testimony to the vision that produced them.

Bahá’u’lláh’s moral code for the individual and His pattern for marriage and family life (see page 30) are consonant with the genuine needs of modern society. As with the social principles, the laws of Bahá’u’lláh on individual morality and family structure are aimed at the promotion of the unity and well-being of society at large. “They whom God hath endued with insight will readily recognize that the precepts laid down by God constitute the highest means for the maintenance of order in the world and the security of its peoples,” Bahá’u’lláh wrote.

This insight — that the standards for social justice and individual conduct outlined by Bahá’u’lláh offer an integrated and distinctive approach to the apparently intractable problems faced by humanity today — underlies the essential optimism of the worldwide Bahá’í community. Whether considering the threat of environmental degradation, the cancer of racism, or the erosion of the family, Bahá’ís firmly believe that answers are available in the writings of Bahá’u’lláh. Their commitment is to share these insights with the world.

While socially progressive, the Bahá’í teachings on personal morality are uncompromising

Bahá’u’lláh’s teachings on individual morality start with the notion that there is only one God. Although religious teachings in relation to society at large must change to fit the needs of the times, there are certain fundamental moral and ethical teachings that are common to all faiths. Bahá’ís understand that these teachings are fundamental to the happiness and well-being of the human species, and they do not change.

The moral code of the Ten Commandments, with its condemnation of murder, adultery, theft, lies, covetousness, and disrespect for parents, can be found in all religions. Likewise, those commandments that define the individual’s relationship with God have steadily emerged in the succession of divine revelations. Bahá’u’lláh reaffirmed these laws and elaborated them. He not only condemned murder and lying but particularly censured backbiting. Gambling, assault, and trespassing are interdicted. So is the use of alcoholic drinks and narcotic drugs — unless prescribed by a physician.

Honesty and trustworthiness are exalted in Bahá’u’lláh’s writings. “Trustworthiness is the greatest portal leading unto the tranquility and security of the people,” Bahá’u’lláh wrote. “In truth the stability of every affair hath depended and doth depend on it.” Although the world’s ever-shifting moral climate has led some modernists to reject or modify elements of God’s historic moral code, Bahá’ís believe that an unbiased survey of contemporary conditions leads inescapably to the conclusion that society will only suffer if human morality is not revitalized. Worldwide corruption in business and government, the epidemic of sexually transmitted diseases, and the dissolution of family life provide concrete examples of the need for a high standard of individual conduct.