

## The Spiritual Basis of Equality

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Deriving both their inspiration and authority traditionally from religion, moral and ethical values have served to define individual attitudes and to motivate and orient human behavior.

The Baha'i Faith is committed to the establishment of justice and peace on earth. Its teachings, enunciated by the Prophet-Founder, Baha'u'llah, represent a matrix of values that give pattern and meaning to the lives of Baha'is and their communities, and project a vision of society, the very basis of which is spiritual. Fundamental to the Baha'i world-view is the concept of the oneness and wholeness of the human race, of which the equality of men and women is a vital and clearly stated spiritual and social principle, conducive to personal integration and social cohesion.

The encompassing nature of the precepts and values in the Baha'i Faith has implications for the definition of equality. While affirming that *"in reality, God has created all mankind, and in the estimation of God there is no distinction as to male and female,"* the Baha'i teachings assert that the rights of women and men *"are equal."* The equality of both sexes is therefore established as a basic right. The Baha'i writings also prescribe measures necessary to change individual attitudes and to redress social injustices. These measures include universal compulsory education, with a special emphasis on the education of women; the eradication of prejudice; and the involvement of women in positions of decision-making in all spheres of life -- all of which, in the Baha'i view, have divine authority.

The spiritually-based Baha'i concept of equality directly addresses two of the major challenges to the establishment of the equality of men and women, namely the intransigence of attitudes and the absence of a social milieu supportive of change.

### Changing Attitudes

In relation to attitudes, a number of important implications arise from a concept of equality founded on spiritual values. For example, for Baha'is, practice of the equality of men and women is a religious precept, an aspect of spiritual development to be pursued by women and men alike in their daily lives. The following brief extract from the Baha'i Writings simultaneously describes the ideal and the goal of personal development and envisages a society in which equality is the norm:

*In the estimation of God there is no distinction of sex. One whose thought is pure, whose education is superior, whose scientific attainments are greater, whose deeds of philanthropy excel, be that one man or woman, is entitled to full rights and recognition; there is no difference whatsoever.*

Equality is thus both a virtue and a right. Such authoritative statements of equality deriving from a divine source provide an unambiguous assurance of equality, an assurance which transcends self doubt and social barriers, and therefore has a profound effect on the individual's identity and sense of self worth.

A further implication of a spiritually-based concept of equality is that the implementation of this precept is a religious obligation. Awareness of this responsibility serves to inspire and motivate both men and women to conform their behavior to this important principle and to establish equality as an accepted and rewarded social practice. Acting on this injunction, women are not only encouraged but enjoined to accept responsibility for their development, to seek education and refinement of character, to demonstrate their latent potential, to participate in the world at large, to be involved as decision-makers, and to exert effort toward universal peace. In such strivings, woman is assured that *"God will confirm her in her efforts and endeavors."*

In implementing their spiritual responsibility, men, in turn, are called upon to recognize the equality of women, for *"when men own the equality of women there will be no need for them to struggle for their rights."* Men are further instructed to abandon any vestiges of prejudice, since *"the assumption of superiority by man will continue to be depressing to the ambition of woman, woman's aspiration towards advancement will be checked by it, and she will gradually become hopeless."* Finally, men are urged to actively encourage and foster the development of women: *"This will inspire her with hope and ambition, and her susceptibilities for advancement will continually increase."*

Since the rationale, and indeed the justification for action for both women and men is obedience to a universal spiritual principle, this framework for mutual support and cooperative efforts toward achievement of the goal of equality provides for the most complete development of men and women, and the enrichment of society. In fact, *"The happiness of mankind will be realized when women and men coordinate and advance equally, for each is the complement and helpmeet of the other."*

In addition, since equality is, for Baha'is, a religious obligation, and the potential development of a spiritual equality is unlimited, practice of the equality of men and women must necessarily continue to evolve over time to accommodate the needs of an ever-advancing civilization, rather than terminate once certain minimal rights are achieved.

## **The Social Environment**

Equality is facilitated by a social environment that encourages and actively supports this principle as a necessary ingredient of life. The Baha'i concept of a unified and just society not only stresses the importance of equality, but outlines specific measures to be implemented to translate the vision into a social reality. These measures include the establishment of an administrative system that actively promotes equal rights for both sexes, and ensures the participation of both men and women in decision-making in the community; a special emphasis on the education of women partly to redress past and present inequities; advocacy of universal education with the same curriculum for men and women, to provide equal access for women to all fields of study and employment; and an ongoing attention to giving equal value to work performed by both sexes, including the important contribution that women make to society as mothers and educators of children.

It can be seen therefore that the world-wide Baha'i community provides a model of a society in which both the individual and the group uphold the equality of men and women as a universal spiritual value. Further, both the individual and society are motivated to take steps to implement this principle. Their efforts interact and are mutually reinforcing, increasing the acceptance and practice of equality, and thereby helping to remove the cause of strife and disunity, to strengthen the foundations of a united world and to lay the basis for universal peace.

## **Notes**

All quotations in this statement are from the Baha'i Writings.

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