

Baha'i Faith and Marxism: Foreword, Introduction, Bios

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Foreword

The nineteenth century saw the origins of both Marxism and the Bahá'í Faith, Teach with its central figures, its basic writings and documents, its vision of the future, and its plans to achieve world unity. The ideas of Karl Marx, either in their original form or in one of their many variations, have influenced political, social, and economic thought and action in a large part of the world. They are based on a materialistic view of mankind and of reality, and they have appealed to intellectuals, reformers, revolutionaries, and common people alike. The ideas of Bahá'u'lláh, in the tradition of the world's great religions, are based upon a spiritual view of mankind and of reality, and appeal to an equally wide range of people.

These two views of reality--the material and the spiritual--each claiming to be the right view, the truth, the way things really are, compete in the world arena for the allegiance of mankind, each with its particular analysis and diagnosis of the human predicament, each with its remedy based on its distinctive view of the real world. Over the last century, both Marxism and the Bahá'í Faith have grown and expanded, have attracted followers and critics, champions and opponents. Though based on different premises and principles, each has a program for social reform and reconstruction, a plan for improving the human condition.

To help Bahá'ís understand Marxist principles and practices, the Association for Bahá'í Studies, with the encouragement of the Universal House of Justice, convened a meeting in January 1986 at the Louhelen Bahá'í School in Michigan. There, a dialogue was initiated between a number of Bahá'ís and Marxists in an effort to create better understanding on both sides, through scholarly presentations and discussions aimed at substituting fact for fancy, presenting solid substance instead of idle speculation, exploring common ground, and identifying important differences in goals and strategies.

The sessions focussed on three major themes:

- The nature of the human being and of society: assumptions about human nature and societies; philosophical origins, influences, and traditions, as expressed in Marxist and Bahá'í thought.
- Strategies and processes for social change: how is change best brought about; how do basic principles apply to real situations; what dynamics and processes of change are advocated; what is the ultimate objective?
- Social and economic development: a study and analysis of current examples drawn from Marxist societies and from Bahá'í communities.

The papers collected here formed the basis of lively and far-reaching discussions, which, unfortunately proved too difficult to summarize. Besides, as most of the ninety participants would say, "You had to be there!"

A very special note of appreciation must be extended to the three Marxists, who, outnumbered as they were, patiently, graciously, generously, and with great good humour, contributed to the dialogue:

Ms. Laurie E. Adkin, Queen's University
Dr. Howard Buchbinder, York University
Dr. Colin Leys, Queen's University

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The Bahá'í viewpoint was clearly and ably presented by Dr. Farzam Arbab of Cali, Colombia; Mrs. Sheila Banani, Santa Monica, California; Dr. William Hatcher, Laval University, Quebec City, Canada; and Mr. John Huddleston, International Monetary Fund, Washington, DC.

While the papers published here do not pretend to be definitive or comprehensive about either Marxism or the Bahá'í Faith, they do identify some issues of paramount importance in the conduct of human affairs. It is the hope of the Association for Bahá'í Studies that this dialogue, so well begun, will continue, not only between Marxists and Bahá'ís but also among all people concerned with carrying forward an ever-advancing civilization. It is through such consultation that unity of purpose can be created as we come closer to understanding our essential nature.

On behalf of all those who attended this memorable meeting, we express our sincere thanks to the Directors of Louhelen Bahá'í School at that time, Drs. Geoffry Marks and William Diehl, and to their associates for their unstinting hospitality, quiet efficiency, good food, and good cheer.

Glen Eyford, PhD
Conference Convenor

Introduction

When the different papers from the dialogue between a number of Marxists and a group of Bahá'ís were put together for this volume, the editors saw the necessity for an introduction that would somehow clarify the position of Association for Bahá'í Studies, both in sponsoring the meeting and in producing this publication. Such an introduction seems to be especially necessary since the volume includes only the original papers presented at the conference and makes no reference to the resulting discussions that pointed to areas of mutual concern and also to rather profound differences. The reader, then, reads about two groups, each presenting their own points of view, and sees no account of the ensuing interaction. The result may be confusing, and, therefore, a brief discussion of some of the shared concepts as well as the disagreements and divergences is in order.

An event sponsored by the Association for Bahá'í Studies as a dialogue between Marxist thinkers and a group of Bahá'ís should be understood in the general context of the attempts of Bahá'ís everywhere to share ideas with diverse groups away from the usual environment of conflict, accusations, and propaganda. Such efforts carried out in an atmosphere of friendship help to bring people of diverse ideologies closer instead of contributing to the separation and alienation that abound in today's society. The Louhelen meeting certainly achieved this essential condition of harmonious exchange of ideas and led to richer understanding of the issues by all the participants.

It must be remembered that the dialogue was about two systems of thought, one a religion, and the other, in spite of the efforts at reconciliation with certain religious groups, inherently and explicitly materialistic. Yet, there is a difference between the materialism of a well-informed Marxist and a typical atheist or agnostic immersed in the liberal tradition of the West. The latter, explicitly or implicitly, questions the very act of believing, adopts as absolute truth the claim that all truth is relative, and in a certain sense, sees truth as a product of the negotiations and the compromises of well-meaning liberal people. The Marxist, however, does not label firm belief and commitment as fanaticism and does not accept the simplistic definitions of objectivity as a norm for social exploration. One's belief system does shape the way one sees and interprets social reality, and the totally open mind of the objective individual divorced from all

social commitment and vision is an element of fantasy of the liberal tradition. This attitude towards the understanding of reality was a welcome aspect of the Louhelen meeting and allowed both groups to begin their conversations by making explicit the very framework used by each to look at reality and analyze relevant issues.

In examining the Marxist conceptual framework, Bahá'ís need to separate in their minds the part that corresponds to the criticism of "bourgeois" or "liberal" thought and the actual assertions of Marxism about topics such as

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human nature, the purpose of life, and the meaning of history--parts that Marxists often mix in their introductory presentations. Separating these two sets of ideas, Bahá'ís would easily agree with much of the criticism, the utter rejection of a view of the human being as a bundle of appetites needing satisfaction, or a possessor of things (including capacities, talents, and the ability to work) that are to be sold in the market place. Bahá'ís would also agree wholeheartedly with the criticism of a concept of liberty that considers the individual as supreme, defines the limits of freedom as the points of contact of the sphere of liberty of one supreme individual with those of others, and leads human beings to see in others not the fulfilment but the limitation of their own freedom. The validity of the Marxist belief in the potentials of the human being for their own sake, in the fact that man is a social being, or in a society in which the full and free development of each individual is the ruling principle, would not be denied either. But it must be remembered that at the basis of these convictions lies the fundamental principle of Marxism, that of historical materialism.

Taken in its strictest form or even with modifications, historical materialism finally sees both the human being and society as a product of the interaction of man with nature, and all social institutions, including the family, as mainly (if not solely) determined by the mode of production. Although collective human action is regarded as the most essential factor of historical progress, the underlying force of the liberation of man from bondage is technological progress, which allows the necessary changes in the relations of production. The point, of course, is not that the mode of production affects human behaviour or social structures (which is after all a trivial statement) but that it is the main determining factor explaining historical development. Here the differences with the Bahá'í view of the spiritual nature of the soul (not simply in terms of the production of art and beauty, but in terms of its connection with the Creator and the spiritual worlds He has created) as well as the concepts of Manifestation and Revelation are of an irreconcilable nature. Unfortunately, the difference is not simply in words, it does affect both the proposed solutions to the human predicament and the methods and means chosen for the implementation of those solutions.

To say that the conceptual frameworks are irreconcilable does not imply that the two systems of thought cannot see certain problems in the same way, cannot agree on a number of immediate (as opposed to basic) causes, or have some elements of their vision of the future world in common. That the problems faced by humanity should not be analyzed in isolation from the deep-rooted causes of social crisis; that there is an urgent need for change in the structure of human society; that worker alienation is a social evil, rooted in present-day structures, which must be eliminated; or that the causes of war are a set of complex and interrelated factors, which include exploitation and social injustice, are a few examples of common views that can be shared and used to further mutual understanding and respect. But other issues related to the course of history and the position individuals and groups must adopt as they work for the transformation of human society must be examined far more carefully, and the reader will not find the corresponding discussions in the present publication.

In looking for the needed answers, Bahá'ís will simply continue the present path of the development of their communities within their Administrative Order as they try to apply the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh to all aspects of human endeavour. Many of the Marxist answers will depend on how Marxism will emerge from the crisis of the past few decades and how it will modify its concepts of class, of conflict, of power, and finally of historical materialism especially in terms of the sources of ethical and moral judgements that have to be made in every attempt to bring about social change.

Biographical Notes

LAURIE E. ADKIN is a doctoral candidate in the Political Studies Department of Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario. Her doctoral thesis is on the relationship between the Labour Movement and the Environmental Movement in Canada. Ms. Adkin's previous work was in the area of Third World development, with Latin America as her area of specialty. Her master's thesis treated the development of rural classes in El Salvador. She has also taught in the area of British and Italian politics.

FARZAM ARBAB was born in Tehran and educated in the United States. He received a BA from Amherst College in 1964 and a PhD in theoretical physics from the University of California at Berkeley in 1968. In 1969, he travelled with his family to Colombia, where they now reside. Dr. Arbab is the director of FUNDEAC, a program of education and rural development in Colombia. He served on the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Colombia from 1970 to November of 1980, when he was appointed to the Board of Counsellors for the Propagation and Protection of the Bahá'í Faith in the Americas.

HOWARD BUCHBINDER is Professor of Political Science at York University, Downsview, Ontario.

GLEN EYFORD is Professor of Development Studies and Adult Education in the Faculty of Education, University of Alberta at Edmonton. Professor Eyford's master's and doctoral theses pertained to communication and mass media, nonformal education, international development, and culture and development. He is the author of numerous articles on international and community development. Professor Eyford is a member of the National Spiritual Assembly of Canada.

WILLIAM S. HATCHER is Professor of Mathematics in the Faculty of Science and Engineering at Laval University in Quebec City. After receiving bachelor's and master's degrees from Vanderbilt University, he received his doctorate in mathematics from the University of Neuchâtel, Switzerland in 1963 with a thesis in mathematical logic. He has since published numerous articles and research papers in the mathematical sciences. His most recent book on mathematics is *The Logical Foundations of Mathematics* (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1982), and he recently co-authored with Douglas Martin *The Bahá'í Faith: The Emerging Global Religion* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), which received mention as one of the year's best one hundred books by the Encyclopedia Britannica in 1986. Professor Hatcher is an active member of several scientific and professional organizations and, in 1979, was elected to serve a three-year term on the Council of the Association for Symbolic Logic. Professor Hatcher also serves on the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Canada.

JOHN HUDDLESTON holds an honour's degree in Modern History, Economics and Politics from the University of Manchester, England. He is currently the Chief of the Budget and Planning Division of the International Monetary Fund, Washington, DC. He is the author of *The Earth is But One Country* (London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1980), "Marxism: A Bahá'í Perspective," in *Circle of Unity* (Los Angeles: Kalimýt Press, 1984), and *The Search for the Just Society* (Cyprus: One World Publishing, forthcoming).

COLIN LEYS is Professor of Political Studies at Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario. He studied philosophy, politics, and economics at Oxford University and has taught at Kivukoni College, Dar es Salaam, and at the Universities of Oxford, Makeré (Uganda), Sussex, Nairobi, Chicago, and Sheffield.

Professor Leys has published extensively on Africa, and his most recent book is *Politics in Britain* (London: Verso, 1986).