

Global Prosperity for Humankind: The Bahá'í Model

by **Noojan Kazemi**

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Global Prosperity is a multifaceted theme which has an association with every aspect of human existence. As a theme, global prosperity suggests social justice on an international scale including elements such as welfare and personal well-being. Furthermore, in the words of the economist Gregory Dahl, global prosperity is inextricably linked to world order which he defines as 'the organisation of laws and institutions of the world to promote global prosperity.' Therefore global prosperity is tied to the contemporary socio-economic structure and system that is prevailing in the current world climate.

Post-cold war, our global systems are changing so rapidly, predictions about what elements will ensure global prosperity are difficult. Neither are we sure anymore of the fundamental socio-economic system - capitalism or socialism, to name the main - that our contemporary system will use to bring us that prosperity. Overall, a feeling of uncertainty is created about our current system's ability to deliver prosperity on a global scale. The ensuing confusion that has occurred, however, has given us the distinct opportunity of seeing the increasing emphasis an importance attached to newer global systems of achieving prosperity such as that of the Bahá'í faith. The Bahá'í faith provides an interesting and balanced strategy for social justice as its teachings emphasise a spiritual basis behind human needs and solutions. This spiritual basis is the key point of the Bahá'í model.

In this paper, I would like to make a comparison between two systems - one of a contemporary socio-economic model looking for prosperity and stability and that of a new yet firmly established religious structure, claiming that the 'bedrock of any strategy towards global prosperity, must be the consciousness of the oneness of mankind.' (Bahá'í Office of Public Information, 1995). Due to the broad range of themes within prosperity, this paper will focus on three areas of comparison in the areas of economic, social and peace and conflict resolution themes.

The vast majority of socio-economic systems in the world are a mixture of two systems whose remnants remain with us in one way or another - that is, either capitalism or socialism.

Let us briefly look at how prosperity is achieved in each of these dual ideologies. Australian and other Western systems which have relied on the capitalist method, have drawn strength on the principle that people need freedom to develop their natural capacities, the ability to follow their initiative and creativity as well as being allowed the liberty to work hard so as to yield the fruit of their endeavours.

As an aside, according to Bahá'u'lláh, the prophet founder of the Bahá'í Faith, not only is this freedom an integral part of human nature, but also a necessary thing.

The problem with capitalism, as stated by Holly Hanson (1991), is that it promotes greed and in the past has caused tremendous suffering, largely because it focuses on the individual and ignores humanity. For example, in an economy most resembling prosperity (and whose economic backbone has been the free market and competition), the United States, around 8 percent or 19 million of its people are chronically unemployed, 33 million are malnourished and the infant mortality rate in its inner-city slums is higher than that of most developing countries.

Socialist ideology recognises the interdependence between members of society and stresses that the individual can work for the common good of the community through personal sacrifice. Again prosperity is sought for, often through a partisan approach which is restrictive and over watchful. However, like capitalism, the socialist model cannot get people motivated enough to sustain change and the populace returns to thinking about themselves.

Is it possible to put the beneficial parts of both systems together? According to Andrew Theophanous, a politician and author in *Social Justice (Understanding Social Justice, 1993)*, the resultant equation is a contemporary welfare state, much like Australia where the successful are motivated to cheat on their taxes, the poor are motivated to remain unemployed and the entrepreneurs move to Spain. So what model does claim to motivate people towards change? More importantly, what model is there that can sustain enough commitment from its devotees as to be able to implement its social, economic and other policies designed to achieve global prosperity? This is a good introduction for the Bahá'í faith - a new religious socio-global system.

The Bahá'í Faith is an interesting model to study, as it perceives reality as far more than just restricted to the material. Fundamental to its basis is the belief in spiritual reality as the motivating force for attaining prosperity. In other words, it tackles social and economic needs with another dimension considering the spiritual demands of man and allows principles arising from this spiritual wholeness of man to answer the question material resources and the distribution of those resources.

Prosperity, especially global prosperity must include an analysis of the spiritual well-being of man using predictors such as achievement of unity among different ethnic groups or the attainment of equality among the sexes. In this way, prosperity takes a wider and more comprehensive role.

For any useful comparison for factors in achieving prosperity, we must restrict ourselves. Here, we will look at the areas of economic, social and peace and conflict resolution themes.

1) **Economics** - The Bahá'í faith does not claim to bring a completely new system of economics to the world. However, it serves to continue the beneficial and healthy effect that uncorrupted spirituality brings to a global economic system, as had been the case in the early stages of past religious dispensations. Rather the aim of the Bahá'í Faith, according to Shoghi Effendi (*Lights of Guidance*), is to bring a fundamental change in man's nature, so as to enable him to adjust the economic relationships of society. Such a fundamental change brings with it the adoption of new and responsible economic practices, such as profit sharing. It also necessarily brings an overall foresight by large international economic institutions, such as multinational companies about the global impact of their produce, rather than the current emphasis on short term and temporary goals based purely on a monetary profit basis. According to the governing body of the Bahá'í faith today, the Universal House of Justice, such new economic relationships would tackle first the inordinate disparity between rich and poor - a great source of acute suffering and a source of great instability to the world. Secondly, it would put into place institutions with safeguards to avoid the crisis of poverty and destitution globally. It remains to be seen what impact on traditional economic thinking and application there will be when the spiritual dimension of man is accounted for.

2) **Social** - The Bahá'í model has a wider appeal through its universal consideration of a common people based on its fundamental belief that people are one. By fostering love between the many diverse races of people in the world, it believes it can eliminate many causes of social strife and discord. Fundamental to this is the belief in a common creator. Few systems have an omnipotent, all-providing, all-protecting head whose laws lie at the root of the decision making. While not making the Bahá'í Faith unique, we can now see where the unemptiable source of motivation towards change and global prosperity would arise.

Justice is one social policy which is heavily stressed in the Bahá'í Faith, especially on a global scale. It is seen as a 'power that can translate the dawning consciousness of humanity's oneness into a collective will through which the necessary structures of global community life can be confidently erected.' On an individual level, justice is a characteristic that progresses the individual, through developing honesty and independence of thought. On a global level, justice becomes the standard bearer for decision making and ensures the correct utilisation of all resources involved in instituting prosperity. Prosperity is the direction the ship of mankind is sailing towards, and justice is the breeze blowing against its sails. The implications of justice are very great indeed. Every social and development project which strictly ensures justice is carried through is securing needs to limited resources.

Inherent in the Bahá'í system is the social support structure known as the Bahá'í Community. This community is perhaps one of the greatest strengths of the Bahá'í model, especially when placed in comparison with the disintegration of traditional family and community values. One of its great strengths is the strong links created between the members of its community, as attested by its coming together every 19 days in the form of the 'feast'. The benefits derived from this are communication channels, the forging of strong relationships as well as the chance for a reaffirmation of spirituality in the community. These have the advantage of moulding the members together and motivating them to sacrifice and work towards achieving the goals of prosperity - for their community and globally.

3) **Peace** - There is no doubt that we live in a time where global conflict is a pressing problem. In fact, Abdu'l-Bahá, the son of the founder of the Bahá'í Faith, has mentioned that the problem of Universal Peace is the key problem for this century. While our contemporary global system, has had successes in averting or ending war, countless treaties for peace have been drawn and rescinded and there are many crippling conflicts today where the entire world stands helplessly by, such as Bosnia, Somalia etc. In addition, every day will bring numerous regional conflicts with diverse and fragmented agendas. The Bahá'í model recognises that the prerequisite for global peace is the establishment of unity among the nations of the world - a unity based on the recognition of oneness and upholding love between the members of this planet; not a unity set on material gain. In case this distinction is seen as obvious and not worthy of special emphasis, let it be known that our statesmen themselves may not see this emerging theme as necessarily able to achieve peace, as evidenced by a quote from the current Australian Foreign Affairs minister, Gareth Evans, "If there is an emerging one world vision among nations around the world, it is not that which in the past inspired the proponents of world government, but rather one based on an appreciation of environmental interdependence, combined with a recognition of the inexorable logic of science and technology and financial markets.....".

Abdul-Bahá, the son of the founder of the Bahá'í Faith, however, states:

'... every means that produces war must be checked and the causes that prevent the occurrence of war be advanced - so that physical contact may become an impossibility. These services ought to be rendered by an impartial, international Commission.' (*Lights of Guidance*)

A few other key strengths are found in the Bahá'í model.

A strength in the Bahá'í model is the lack of partisanship approach. 'Debate, Propaganda, the adversarial method and the entire apparatus of partisanship' have been long known features and discrepancies present in the current system of truth seeking and

debate in all areas of development. Through the lack of partisanship in the Bahá'í model, it does not allow itself to be aligned with approaches and attitudes that must necessarily isolate a group of people, from its universal appeal and teachings. Its emphasis is on a unity of thought and action in tackling social and economic problems. To carry this goal out for its future, it spells out distinct roles for its future institutions such as that of the World Court or the World Parliament to tackle the international problems of conflict resolution and social order. In addition, this model is committed to the flourishing of advanced institutions dedicated learning, health and social and economic development especially in less developed nations. Furthermore, this is given physical acknowledgment by the establishment of hospitals, universities, schools and centres for development around the Mashriqu'l Adhqars, or the Bahá'í Houses of Worship, in each continent. In this way, the Bahá'í Faith is the only model to have its future roles and institutions' evolution charted well on its course, prior to their establishment.

The consultative approach is firmly adhered to by not only such institutions, but it is also decreed for the individual Bahá'í. In this way, consultation becomes the light of justice in all economic and development strategies aiming to find prosperity. According to the Bahá'í model, prosperity cannot be attained except through such consultation. As Bahá'u'lláh writes, "No man can attain his true station, except through his justice. No power can exist except through unity. No welfare and well-being can be attained except through consultation."

The greatest assurance however that the Bahá'í model can give itself in terms of achieving prosperity is its belief that it is a divinely inspired system and hence not subject to the theoretical justification from man at least. This deific basis to the Bahá'í model adds a constancy and motivation little seen or more importantly, little able to be maintained in past and present socio-economic systems. In addition, it is widely acknowledged that by far the vast majority of the world's population have the spiritual dimension as an integral part of their culture.

It is also correct that the majority of development projects do not take this spiritual influence in their planning or application. To this extent, it is one of the fundamental aims of the Bahá'í model to increase knowledge both technical and spiritual for all groups involved in development towards prosperity. Only then is consultation, forward thinking, planning and hence full utilisation of resources available made possible.

As an alternative to the world's pressing need for stability and prosperity, the Bahá'í model is an interesting and balanced proposition.

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