The rise of human rights as a system of values and ethics commanding respect and motivating action with quasi-religious force was a notable feature of the twentieth century, which was also a time of increasing secularisation and ‘privatisation’ of religion. The tension between human rights values and religious values has led some to wonder if religion and human rights are compatible. This tension has been reinforced by the emergence in the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century of an increasingly aggressive form of religious extremism which is clearly contemptuous of human rights.

This chapter will explore the relationship between religion and human rights from a Bahá’í perspective and will examine the work of the Bahá’í community in wholeheartedly supporting the theory and practice of universal human rights.

INTRODUCTION

Human rights discourse has a compelling quality at a time when religion no longer holds the centre of the public square. The value placed on human rights and human rights as values seem to have a transcendental quality that compels respect with, in some cases, a quasi-religious force.¹

In this paper I want to give an example of a religion that has emerged in modern times, which clearly and directly addresses modern concerns and which is wholeheartedly committed to universal human rights. The Bahá’í Faith, which has grown from its initial milieu in the Middle East of the mid and late nineteenth century into a religion with a following in all parts of the world, has very clear theological foundations for its commitment to universal human rights and has long worked to promote

the values that underpin human rights. This paper will adduce evidence from the Bahá’í sacred writings and other sources to demonstrate this commitment and will examine work done by the Bahá’í International Community (BIC) in support of the human rights of the Bahá’ís in Iran and of human rights more generally.

THEOLOGICAL UNDERPINNINGS

Bahá’u’lláh (1817–1892), founder of the Bahá’í Faith, firmly places religion in the public sphere. In his extensive writings (which form a major part of the Bahá’í scriptures) he addresses questions of good governance, of judicial, social, and economic justice, of the environment, of the relationship between science and religion, of social and familial relations, and, importantly in the present context, of the relationship between the individual and society. He envisages a future global society based on a deeply rooted understanding of human oneness in which principles of justice and equity are central to the form of government. This vision is expressed epigrammatically in the emblematic quotation from Bahá’u’lláh’s writings: ‘The earth is but one country and mankind its citizens’.

There is a close relationship between Bahá’u’lláh’s political vision and his teachings about the nature of the individual. Bahá’u’lláh holds that every individual has qualities and capacities that must be released and developed for the good of the individual and, indeed, for the good of society as a whole. The job of government is, amongst other things, to establish conditions under which these capacities can be developed and put to use. This is a key point in understanding the Bahá’í position on human rights.

Human beings are seen as being fundamentally spiritual in nature. Much is said in the Bahá’í scriptures of the importance of developing the intangible, but nonetheless effective, qualities and capacities that are deemed to be spiritual: the virtues, such as truthfulness, trustworthiness and generosity; rationality and the enquiring mind; the capacity to know and love God. Since these qualities and capacities are to be found in each and every individual, and since, according to Bahá’u’lláh, God intends these capacities to be developed, it follows that everyone has the right to a life that will allow this development to take place.