



“The duty of kindness and sympathy towards strangers and foreigners”
as recommended by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and as reflected in the recent Italian
“Charter on the Values and Significance of Citizenship and Integration.”

The abandonment of racial, religious and nationalistic prejudice is one of the central issues in the talks ‘Abdu’l-Bahá delivered during His travels in the West. A ground-breaking concept in those days when the Western world was still “heaving with the explosive forces of a blind and triumphant nationalism,” the idea of integrating immigrants into the culture of the country where they have moved is slowly becoming a part of the policy of some Western states. In 2007, the Italian government issued a “Charter on the Values and Significance of Citizenship and Integration,” which upholds many of the concepts expounded by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá almost a century ago.

The abandonment of racial, religious and nationalistic prejudice in ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s talks

‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s first speech in Paris, on the 16th and 17th of October 1911, recorded in Paris Talks, was entirely devoted to “The duty of kindness and sympathy towards strangers and foreigners.” He asked His audience:

Let not conventionality cause you to seem cold and unsympathetic when you meet strange people from other countries. Do not look at them as though you suspected them of being evil-doers, thieves and boors . . . be kind to the strangers . . . help to make them feel at home . . . Put into practice the Teaching of Bahá’u’lláh, that of kindness to all nations. (PT 1-2, sec. 1, para. 2, 3, 7)

This recommendation was a first step towards the explanation of one of the central issues of His Western talks: the abandonment of racial, religious and nationalistic prejudice.¹ A few weeks later, in a speech to Paris’ Theosophical Society, He explained that “All the divisions in the world, hatred, war and bloodshed, are caused by one or other of these prejudices” (PT 134, sec. 40, para. 20). On other occasions He said that prejudice is “the destroyer of the body politic” (PUP 124, 13 May 1912)² and “an obstacle to realisation” (PUP 115, 12 May 1912).³ On 13 November 1911, He devoted a whole speech to “the abolition of prejudices . . . whether of religion, race, politics or nation,” presented as “the fifth principle” of “the Teaching of Bahá’u’lláh” (PT 151-6, sec. 45).⁴ In that circumstance He presented prejudice as “a grave malady which, unless arrested, is capable of causing the destruction of the

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¹ See for example ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, PT 36; 134, 40:19-21; 151-6, 45:121; PUP 107, 287, 316, 455; ADP 24, 25, 82; ABL 28, 55, 59-60; Isabel Fraser. “Abdul-Baha at Clifton, England,” in *Star of the West* 4.1 (21 March 1913): 4-6.

² See also “Reception to Abdul-Baha by the New York Peace Society at Hotel Astor, May 13 1912. Dr. Stephen S. Wise, Rabbi. Mrs. Anna Garland Spencer, Ethical Society. Rev. Percy Stickney Grant, Church of Ascension. Mr. Topakyan, Persian Consul General. Prof. William Jackson, Columbia University. Mr. W. H. Short, Sec’y. New York *Peace Society*. Stenographic Notes by E. Foster,” in *Star of the West* 3.8 (1 August 1912): 10-5:

³ See also “Abdul-Baha at Unity Church, Montclair New Jersey (Rev. Edgar S. Wiers, Pastor). Sunday, May 12, 1912, 11 A. M. Stenographic Notes by E. Foster,” in *Star of the West* 3.7 (13 July 1912): 12-14.

⁴ The Persian notes taken during His speech are recorded in *Majmú‘ih* 164-9.

whole human race” (ibid. 151, sec. 45, para. 1). In North America He repeatedly mentioned this principle, sometimes as “the fifth principle or teaching of Bahá’u’lláh . . . the abandoning of religious, racial, patriotic and political prejudices, which destroy the foundations of human society” (PUP 107, 7 May 1912, see 316).⁵ On 1st September 1912, at the Church of the Messiah in Montreal, Canada, He delivered another whole talk on this subject (PUP 297-302).⁶ He said that all prejudices are “opposed to reality . . . [and] against the will and plan of God” (ibid. 299), that they are “nothing but superstition . . . as they are against the plan and purpose of reality, they are false and imaginary” (ibid.), “falsehoods and violations of the will of God” (ibid. 300).

As to religious prejudice, which He described in a talk wholly devoted to this issue and delivered in Paris on 27 October 1911 as the consequence of “the misrepresentation of religion by the religious leaders and teachers” (PT 37, sec. 13, para. 2),⁷ He said:

The Prophets of God have been inspired with the message of love and unity. The Books of God have been revealed for the upbuilding of fellowship and union. The Prophets of God have been the servants of reality; Their teachings constitute the science of reality. Reality is one; it does not admit plurality. We conclude, therefore, that the foundation of the religions of God is one foundation. (PUP 295, 29 August 1912)

All the wars and enmities that have ravaged the world throughout the centuries among the followers of the various religions are also the consequence of the ignorance and waywardness of human beings, who have turned a deaf ear to the teachings of God. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explained on that occasion:

All the Prophets have promulgated the law of love. Man has opposed the will of God and acted in opposition to the plan of God. Therefore, from the beginning of history to the present time the world of humanity has had no lasting

⁵ See also “Address by Abdul’Baha at Hotel Schenley, Pittsburgh, Pa.,” in *Star of the West* 3. 6 (24 June 1912): 2-4, 8.

⁶ The Persian notes taken during His speech are recorded in *Star of the West* 5.5 (5 June 1914): 80 (Persian section 1) and *Majmú’ih* 224-33.

⁷ The Persian notes taken during His speech are recorded in *Majmú’ih* 85-93.

rest; warfare and strife have continuously prevailed, and hearts have manifested hatred toward each other. (PUP 297-8, 1 September 1912)

As to racial prejudice, “the worst of all” prejudices (ABL 55), it is a denial of the principle of the oneness of humankind, “created . . . from the dust of earth . . . fashioned . . . from the same elements . . . descended from the same race” (PUP 297). This principle is undeniable: “There can be no multiplicity of races, since all are the descendants of Adam. This signifies that racial assumption and distinction are nothing but superstition” (PUP 298).

As to “patriotic prejudices” (PUP 12),⁸ which He also described as “political prejudice” (PT 154, sec. 45, para. 15), He said:

This is one globe, one land, one country. God did not divide it into national boundaries. He created all the continents without national divisions. Why should we make such division ourselves? These are but imaginary lines and boundaries. Europe is a continent; it is not naturally divided; man has drawn the lines and established the limits of kingdoms and empires. Man declares a river to be a boundary line between two countries, calling this side French and the other side German, whereas the river was created for both and is a natural artery for all. (PUP 299-300)

The only division among human beings that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá recognises as “real” is that “there are heavenly men and earthly men” (PT 154, sec. 45, para. 15). Then He adds: “If these are God’s divisions, why should we invent others?” (ibid.).

‘Abdu’l-Bahá’ said: “It is evident that prejudices . . . have hindered the progress of humanity thousands of years” (PUP 39, 21 April 1912).⁹ On another occasion, He added: “until national and international prejudices are effaced in the reality of this spiritual brotherhood, true progress, prosperity and lasting happiness will not be attained by man” (PUP 142-3, 24 May 1912). It is time to forsake all prejudices,

⁸ See also “Address by Abdul-Baha at Church of the Ascension, Fifth Avenue and Tenth Street, New York City. Rev. Percy Stickney Grant, Rector, April 14, 1912. Compiled from the Persian Notes by Mirza Ahmad Sohab (sic) and Mr. Howard MacNutt,” *Star of the West* 4.1 (21 March 1913): 7-8.

⁹ See also “Report of Meeting at Universalist Church, 4 P. M. Sunday, April 21, 1912,” in *Star of the West* 3.3 (28 April 1910): 10-2.

“our own small trivial notions” (PT 139, sec. 41, para. 7). He suggested several remedies against prejudice. The first remedy is to search for truth. He said in this regard:

Man must cut himself free from all prejudice and from the result of his own imagination, so that he may be able to search for truth unhindered . . . Being one, truth cannot be divided, and the differences that appear to exist among the nations only result from their attachment to prejudice. If only men would search out truth, they would find themselves united. (PT 131, sec. 40, paras. 8, 9)

Other remedies are “training and instruction” (PUP 300, 1 September 1912) and sowing “the seed of love and universal brotherhood in the heart of man” (PT 10, sec. 5, para. 2). However, the most significant remedy is the assistance “of a superior power to overcome human prejudices, a power which nothing in the world of mankind can withstand and which will overshadow the effect of all other forces at work in human conditions. That irresistible power is the love of God” (PUP 68, 30 April 1912).¹⁰

These were ground-breaking concepts in those days when the Western world was still “heaving with the explosive forces of a blind and triumphant nationalism” (ADJ 47). As to racism, in those years, Tommaso Carletti, the Italian governor of Benadir (the old name of Italian Somaliland), wrote to the Italian Ministry of Exterior: “There are races (I am sorry for not agreeing with the old Aristotle) that, either for an inborn intellectual inferiority or for their historical development, seem destined to be slaves or at least to be unable of enjoying an unconditioned freedom” (19 July 1907, qtd. in Del Boca, *Italiani* 805). As to religious prejudice, Christianity was still steeped in the atmosphere of an age-long, intransigent exclusivism. The *Catechism of Saint Pius X*, issued in 1905, said: “Can one be saved outside the Catholic, Apostolic and Roman Church? . . . No, no one can be saved outside the Catholic, Apostolic Roman Church, just as no one could be saved from the flood outside the Ark of Noah, which was a figure of the Church” (ninth article, 27 Q). As to nationalism, on the 8 October 1911, a few weeks before ‘Abdu’l-Bahá lamented “the sad picture of Italy carrying war into Tripoli” (PUP 6, 12 April 1912) and the fact that people remained “cold and indifferent to the fact that thousands of Italians, Turks, and Arabs . . . [were] killed in Tripoli!” (PT 116, sec. 37, para. 1, 24 November

¹⁰ See also “Address of Abdul-Baha at Hull House, Chicago, April 30, 1912. Translated by Dr. Ameen U. Fareed and taken stenographically by Joseph H. Hannen,” in *Star of the West* 3.3 (28 April 1910): 29-30.

1911),¹¹ the Italian poet Gabriele D'Annunzio (1863-1938), considered “the leading writer of Italy in the late 19th and early 20th centuries” (*Encyclopædia Britannica*), published in the most important Italian newspaper “Corriere della sera” a poem entitled “La canzone d’oltre mare [Song from overseas].” In this poem he sang the praises of that war that, in his opinion, was opening a “wonderful season” and a “holy springtime,” in which a song was raised for a renewed and glorious Italy “from the round muzzle of the gun.” On 30 June 1952 Shoghi Effendi still described the inhabitants of towns and cities of the Western world as “either immersed in crass materialism,” or breathing “the fetid air of an aggressive racialism,” or finding themselves “bound by the chains and fetters of a haughty intellectualism,” or having “fallen a prey to the forces of a blind and militant nationalism or . . . steeped in the atmosphere of a narrow and intolerant ecclesiasticism” (MBW 36).

The second half of the twentieth century has seen the gradual decline of nationalism and racism in many parts of the world. As to religious exclusivism, Christianity is slowly moving towards inclusivism and interreligious dialogue. At the beginning of the new century, the mounting tide of immigration obliges a sometimes reluctant European population to take people of different colours, religions, and cultures into account. Globalisation has forced their governments to issue special laws for previously unknown minorities. In the wake of these events, the Italian government has recently issued a Charter on the Values and Significance of Citizenship and Integration.

What is the Charter on the Values and Significance of Citizenship and Integration?

The website of the Ministry of the Interior presents this Charter¹² as a document “essentially of a programmatic nature setting out guidelines for the Ministry of the Interior” aiming at expounding “the values and principles for all those wishing to have permanent residence in Italy irrespective of whatever religious, ethnic and/or cultural group or community they may belong to” (*Charter*, “Introduction”) and

¹¹ See also “Talk by Abdul-Baha given in Paris, France, November 23, 1911, during the war between Italy and Tripoli. Translated by Dr. Zia Bagdadi, June, 19 1916, Chicago, Ill.” *Star of the West* 7. 11 (27 September 1916): 106-7. The Persian notes taken during His speech are recorded in *Majmú‘ih* 210-3.

¹² An English text has been published by the Italian Ministry of Interior. Its text will be used in this paper and denoted as *Charter*. The numbers in () refer to its paragraphs.

“also intended as a useful instrument for immigrants, religious communities, and Italian citizens, especially the young, in order to spread a better understanding of the problems concerning immigration and religious freedom” (ibid.). Giuliano Amato, who, as the Minister of the Interior, has set in motion, in the second half of 2006, the process from which the Charter was born in a framework of initiatives aiming at integration and social cohesion, writes that the document shows the foundations of the rights and duties of immigrants in the Italian identity and in the Constitution of the Italian Republic; establishes a relation between the history of the Italian nation and the principles upon which its Republic has today its foundations; assists new and old immigrants and Italian citizens to find a practical relation between the Constitution of the Republic and the Italian legislation in force, on the one hand, and their daily life as to the issues of integration. Therefore, the Charter illustrates the rights and duties of the immigrants, opens a discussion and a dialogue “between old and new Italians on the issue about which they are called sometimes simply to understand one other, sometimes to accept each other, sometimes to change their reciprocal attitudes” and, last but not least, points to the road towards practical integration (Amato, “Prefazione” 2-3).

When and by whom was it written?

Approved by a decree issued on the 23rd of April 2007, the Charter is the second document of this type issued in Europe after the *Contrat d'accueil et d'intégration*, Welcome and Integration Contract, passed in France in July 2003. It was written by a scientific committee formed by Carlo Cardia, professor of Philosophy of Law of the Jurisprudence Faculty of the Roma Tre University, who was its president, Roberta Aluffi Beck Peccoz, lecturer of Muslim Law at the University of Turin, Khaled Fouad Allam, lecturer of Sociology of the Muslim World and History and Institutions of the Islamic Countries at the University of Urbino and a member of the Italian Parliament, Adnane Mokrani, Muslim theologian and lecturer of Islamic Studies at the Gregorian University of Rome and Francesco Tannini, lecturer of Arabic Studies at the Pontifical Institute for Arabic and Islamic Studies (PISAI) in Rome. The scientific committee's work has also been followed by Mr. Franco Testa and Ms. Maria Patrizia Paba, prefect and prefect deputy, respectively, at the Ministry of the Interior. The committee has also consulted several religious, social, trade unions, and civil society associations and organisations of

the world of immigration. Specifically, it has consulted the Council of Italian Islam, an exclusively consultative body formed by 16 members, among which are some of the most significant voices of the many-sided Italian Islamic world, and the Youth Council for Cultural and Religious Pluralism Issues, a body created by the Ministry of the Interior together with the Ministry for Juvenile Politics to promote dialogue among youth of different faiths and cultures.

Which are its themes?

The Charter comprises seven sections. The first and the last ones describe the identity of the Italian nation on the grounds of its ancient and more recent history and of its geographical position and mention the seminal values of Italian society as expounded in its Constitution and its present international commitment. The other five sections deal with fundamental issues described in their respective titles: “Dignity of the Individual, Rights and Duties, Social Rights,” “Employment and Health, Social Rights,” “School, Education and Information,” “Family, New Generations and Laicity” and “Religious Freedom.”

By which documents was it inspired?

The Charter is inspired in the first place by the Constitution of the Italian Republic of 1947, which the Charter defines as “the great divide from the totalitarianism and anti-Semitism trend which poisoned twentieth-century Europe with the persecution of the Jews and their culture” (*Charter*, sec. 1). It also refers to other contemporary international documents, mentioned by Cardia in his commentary on the Charter (see Table 1). Finally, it reflects other Italian laws, such as the Legislative Decree of 25 July 1998, no. 286, Consolidated text of the law on immigration and provisions governing the status of foreigners (*Charter*, art. 1 n5).

Table 1

International documents to which the Charter refers

Universal Declaration of Human Rights, signed in Paris on 10 December 1948, whose writing was promoted by the United Nations so that it may be applied by all Member States (Charter , art. 12 n15, art. 16 n22, art. 17 n24, art. 23 n35, art. 28 n41),

Declaration of the Rights of the Child, adopted by the UN General Assembly on 20 November 1959 (ibid., art. 13 n18, art. 16 n23),

International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, adopted by the UN General Assembly on 21 December 1965 (ibid., art. 14 n20),

International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, adopted by the UN General Assembly on 16 December 1966 and entered into force on 23 March 1976 (ibid., art. 16 n22, art. 16 n23, art. 17 n24, art. 31 n44),

Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, adopted by the UN General Assembly on 18 December 1979 (ibid., art. 4 n7, art. 16 n23),

International Covenant against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, adopted by the UN General Assembly on 10 December 1984 and entered into force on 27 June 1987 (ibid., art. 28 n41),

Convention on the Rights of the Child, adopted by the UN General Assembly on 20 November 1989 (ibid., art. 12 n16, art. 15 n21, art. 16 n23, art. 19 n28, art. 25 n38, art. 28 n41).

European documents to which the Charter refers:

Framework Convention of the Protection of National Minorities, signed by the Council of Europe on 1st February 1995 and entered into force on 1st February 1998 (Charter, art. 25 n38),

Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, signed and proclaimed by the Presidents of the European Parliament on the occasion of the European Council in Nice on the 7th of December 2000 (ibid., art. 12 n17),

A Common Agenda for Integration, Framework for the Integration of Third-Country Nationals into the European Union, written by the European Commission on the 1st of September 2005 (ibid., art. 5 n8),

European Parliament Resolution of 24 October 2006 on equality between women and men (ibid., art. 4 n7, art. 17 n25, art. 18 n26, art. 19 n29).

The Charter, “firmly anchored in the Constitution and European and international charters” (Cardia, “Introduzione” 6) as it is, reflects the best human rights culture of the contemporary world. It also is founded upon the four pillars upon which, according to René Cassin (1887-1976), the French jurist who was one of the leading drafters of the Universal Declaration of 1948, the “temple” of human rights is founded: (1) personal rights and liberties, (2) individual rights in one’s relations with his social groups and the affairs of the outer world (3), spiritual faculties, public liberties and fundamental political rights and (4) economic, social and cultural rights (Agi, *René Cassin* 232). Its 31 articles also reflect the “three main ideas that,” according to the Norwegian Johan Galtung, the father of peace studies, “are a gift by the West to humankind”: “the sacredness of the body,” “the sacredness of the human spirit” and “the equality in front of the law” (“Lo stato nazionale” 300). It complies with all the most essential principles mentioned in the International Bill of Human Rights (see Table 3). Finally, the Charter runs again through the road of the three generations of human rights, civil and political rights, economic and social rights and cultural rights, in which Karel Vasak, the French [Czech] jurist, former director of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)’s Division of Human Rights and Peace, saw in 1979 an achievement of the three watchwords of the French Revolution: *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité* [Liberty, Equality, Fraternity] (see Table 2).

Table 2

THREE GENERATIONS OF HUMAN RIGHTS (VASAK)			
Civil and political rights	Liberty	Rights to liberty	Freedom <i>from</i> the State Liberties <i>within</i> the State
Economic and social rights	Equality	Rights to work	Liberties <i>through</i> the State Rights to education Rights to health
Cultural rights	Fraternity		

Table 3

Principles mentioned in the Bill of Human Rights and reflected in the Italian Charter	
1.	the principle of the “dignity of the human person” (Universal Declaration of Human Rights, article 1)
2.	“the principle of equal rights... universal respect for, and observance of, human rights and fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language or religion” (Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples, 14 December 1960)
3.	“the principle of the dignity and equality of all human beings” (Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, 20 November 1963)
4.	the “principle of freedom of expression” (Declaration on race and racial prejudices adopted by the General Conference of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), 27 November 1978)
5.	“the principle of non-discrimination” (Convention against Discrimination in Education, 14 December 1960)
6.	the “principle of equality of men and women” (Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, 18 December 1979)
7.	“the principle of equal remuneration for men and women workers for work of equal value” (Equal Remuneration Convention, 29 June 1951)
8.	the principle of “compulsory primary education, free of charge” for all (International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights)
9.	the “Social and Legal Principles relating to the Protection and Welfare of Children” (Convention on the Rights of the Child, 20 November 1989)
10.	the “principle of self-determination of peoples” (United Nations Charter, International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights)
11.	the “Basic Principles on the Independence of the Judiciary” (UN General Assembly, 13 December 1985)

A Bahá’í point of view on the Charter on the Values and Significance of Citizenship and Integration

The Bahá’ís are particularly sensitive to this document, whose text is reminiscent of many of the teachings that Bahá’u’lláh has set forth throughout the years of His Mission (1853-1892). The Bahá’í Faith, born in the second half of the nineteenth century when the modern idea of human rights had already begun to

flourish at the national level in some parts of the world, not only offers principles of interpersonal morality central to human rights, as the other religions (see Henkin, *Age of Rights* 183-4) but has a straightforward relation with human rights. Its copious Writings¹³ explicitly and repeatedly mention them, explain and uphold virtually all the principles upon which the modern human rights system is built, and expound other principles where that system could get good ideas for future agendas. The Bahá'í Writings illustrate human rights in at least four different perspectives: as “an element of the soul’s search for God,” as “a divine obligation imposed on the rulers of society,” as “foundational elements of the ordering of the ‘divine’ society,” and as “aspirations for the future,” for “the healing of society’s ills and the redemption of humanity” (Curtotti, ‘Human Rights’ 67-8). These are some of the reasons why a document that constantly considers the great European and international Charters on Human Rights, such as the Italian Charter, cannot but meet the full approval of the Bahá'ís. A few considerations on this modern document will now be offered in light of the Bahá'í teachings.

The Charter and its laicity

The first section of the Charter, “Italy, a community of peoples and values,” immediately clarifies that Italy is a lay country. The issue is then resumed in Section 6, “Laicity and religious freedom,” in which the Charter states that “the lay state recognises the positive contribution that religions bring to the community and intends to emphasise the moral and spiritual patrimony of each one of them” (art. 21). Cardia comments upon Section 6, art. 21, as follows:

The principles stated in this article describe the positive and friendly character of the Italian laicity, which thus distinguishes itself from the laicity prevailing in the nineteenth century that considered religion a “private affair” and refused to acknowledge its public and social role. The friendly and positive aspect of the Italian laicity has several applications. The Constitutional Court, for example, stated that the lay character of the State is one of the supreme principles of the constitutional order but has also added

¹³ In this paper the author has adopted the Bahá'í habit of writing whatever pertains God or His Manifestations, i.e. the Founders of revealed religions, with the capital letter as a sign of reverence and respect.

that our order recognises the role that religion plays in society and the community. In harmony with this approach, the Charter states that Italy founds its laicity on two essential points: the recognition of the moral and spiritual patrimony of each religion as a positive factor in community life and the promotion of interreligious and intercultural dialogue to support the respect for human dignity and the exhaustion of any form of prejudice and intolerance. Therefore, religion is an active component of society and can converse with the State in several ways. (Cardia, “Note” 22-3, art 21 n32)

This position places the Italian legislative order, in its laicity, that is, in its total autonomy from the various religious confessions existing in Italy, in the van on the international theatre because of its high consideration of religion and makes its laicity a guarantor of equal rights and opportunities for all its citizens and a form of respect for all religious conceptions, since it does not favour anyone above the others.

The Bahá’í teachings agree with the two above-mentioned points: “the recognition of the moral and spiritual patrimony of each religion, as a positive factor in community life, and the promotion of interreligious and intercultural dialogue to support the respect for human dignity and the exhaustion of any form of prejudice and intolerance”. The Bahá’í International Community (BIC)¹⁴ is working with the United Nations so that they may recognise the role religions deserve, at least in the promotion of the human rights culture (see BIC 97-0401), on the grounds of some important observations. All religions teach “people who they are and why they are here and call them to transcendence and service” (BIC 97-0401). They “teach love, and . . . are intended to promote the well-being of the human family” (BIC 93-0612), and this teaching “could be viewed as a goal common to them all” (BIC 95-0110). They educate “individuals to confront their own character defects” (BIC 97-0401), to “root out undesirable behaviour” (BIC 97-0401), “to discipline their baser propensities” (BIC 99-0112), “to cultivate such

¹⁴ The acronym BIC is used to indicate a document by the Bahá’í International Community (BIC). The first group of two numbers indicates the year in which the document was published and the second group of four numbers indicates the order number of the document. The text of all the documents by the Bahá’í International Community may be retrieved on the Internet in the “Bahá’í International Community Statement Library” at < <http://www.bic-un.bahai.org/list.cfm> >.

virtues as truthfulness, compassion, trustworthiness, and generosity” (BIC 97-0401), “courage, and willingness to sacrifice for the common good” (BIC 99-0112), guiding them to respect such “universal spiritual principles” as “tolerance . . . love, justice, humility . . . dedication to the well-being of others, and unity” (BIC 97-0401). All these virtues and principles, inculcated by all religions, are “conducive to nobility and to respect for the rights of others” (BIC 97-0401) and imply “social order and cultural advancement” (BIC 99-0112). Since these virtues and principles are the core of all religions, every religion has a vital role in promoting “unity among all the peoples of the world” and in outlawing “war and violence in human affairs” (BIC 87-0303).

The numerous religious conflicts that obscure the world seem to disqualify the world’s religions for this delicate task; however, the Bahá’í International Community invites us “to look to the remarkable development of interfaith relations and the expansion of interfaith initiatives” and points out the many initiatives undertaken by the various religious and spiritual traditions, intending to foster “friendliness, fellowship and understanding among their diverse communities,” and of “working together on policies, programs and initiatives with secular bodies ranging from private enterprises and organisations of civil society, to governments and international institutions” (BIC 01-0430). In the theoretic field, this shared commitment of religions has produced “numerous joint declarations and agreements in which the religions have articulated a common vision of humanity’s future based on such universal principles as love, justice, compassion, moderation, humility, sharing, service, peace and the oneness of the human family” (BIC 01-0430). In practice, “the recent trend towards interfaith dialogue around the globe offers a positive example of how disparate communities can work together to broaden vision and shape public discourse in a unifying way” (BIC 01-1123). An undoubtedly “increasing interchange among spiritual leaders and their followers, especially children, will no doubt lead to new understandings of what is possible for human beings and how peaceful patterns of collective life can be nurtured” (BIC 01-1123). These results, beside the previously mentioned virtues and principles inculcated by religions, denote that religions can provide a “values-centered education” that is indispensable in view of the promotion of human rights (BIC 96-0315).

Although the Charter recognises the Italian lay legacy from “the cultures of Ancient Greece and Rome” (*Charter* 1), from which Italy has drawn “its

enunciation of the principle of liberty” (Cardia, “Note” 10 n1), it does not forget “Italy grew and developed within a Christian framework which dominated its history and together with Judaism prepared the way for its opening towards modernity and the principles of freedom and justice” (ibid.). Rich in this twin legacy, the Charter states that Italy undertakes, in the noblest spirit of modernity, to realise “an international order based on human rights, equality and solidarity among peoples” (*Charter* 11) and offers “all that which makes up the patrimony of Italy, its artistic and natural beauty, its economic and cultural resources, and its democratic institutions . . . to serve the men, women and the young not only of this but also of future generations,” safeguarding and promoting “inalienable human rights so as to sustain the weak, and to guarantee the development of every individual not only with regard to work possibilities and aptitude but also with regard to the moral and spiritual disposition of each one” (ibid.).

The Charter also meets the prerequisites of the Bahá’í teachings that suggest their concept of the relation between the State and its citizens. On the one hand, Bahá’u’lláh enjoins “*obedience unto them that are in authority*” (GWB 206, sec. CII) and denies “*the right to act in any manner that would run counter to the considered views of them who are in authority*” (Lawḥ-i-Dḥabíḥ 241, para. 3), because, He explains, “*The instruments which are essential to the immediate protection, the security and assurance of the human race have been entrusted to the hands, and lie in the grasp, of the governors of human society*” (GWB 206, sec. CII). On the other, He writes to the world’s rulers: “*your subjects are God’s trust amongst you. Watch ye, therefore, over them as ye watch over your own selves*” (Súriy-i-Haykal 75, para. 143). They “*that are in authority*” are expected to be as loyal as all their subjects. Good governance is born from this reciprocal loyalty. The ideal rulers should be “*protectors of the people and dispensers of Divine justice . . . powerful champions of the people’s rights,*” they should “*give no thought to amassing enormous fortunes for themselves*”; they should instead be eager to enrich “*their subjects*” and “*take no pride in gold and silver, but rather in their enlightenment and their determination to achieve the universal good*” (SDC 20). Both rulers and ruled ones should aim at becoming “*a source of social good*” and consider this as their most cherished honour and highest distinction” (ibid. 2).

The seven sections of the Charter

The first section of the Charter also refers to the concept of “service” when it states that “All that which makes up the patrimony of Italy, its artistic and natural beauty, its economic and cultural resources, and its democratic institutions are there to serve the men, women and the young not only of this but also of future generations” (*Charter* 2). The concept of service is central to the Bahá’í conception of life. Bahá’u’lláh writes: “*Man’s merit lieth in service and virtue and not in the pageantry of wealth and riches*” (Lawḥ-i-Ḥikmat 138).

The contents of the second section, “Dignity of the Individual, Rights and Duties,” confirm the Bahá’í persuasion that the principle of the oneness of humankind, according to which “*all men are the sheep of God, and God is their loving Shepherd, caring most tenderly for all without favouring one or another*” (SWAB 248, sec. 202), the central principle of their Faith, is gradually becoming established in the world, because of the intrinsic force deriving from its being a fundamental part of human sociality. The principle of the oneness of humankind implies at least four important corollaries that may be summarised as follows: first, all human beings have the same spiritual origin and thus are equal; secondly, the human person has a priceless value; thirdly, the highest moral imperative is service to humanity; and fourthly, all human beings are united to one another by close bonds (see Curtotti 66-7). In light of these implications, “each member of the human race is born into the world as a trust of the whole” and this relationship between the individual and the collective, on the one hand, “constitutes the moral foundation of most of the human rights,” on the other, defines “an overriding purpose for the international order in establishing and preserving the rights of the individual” (BIC 95-1001, *Turning* 247; see BIC 95-0303, *Prosperity* 281).

The contents of the third section, “Social Rights. Employment and Health,” are reminiscent of the Bahá’ís of a talk delivered by Abdu’l-Bahá in 1911 in Paris:

Every human being has the right to live; they have a right to rest, and to a certain amount of well-being. As a rich man is able to live in his palace surrounded by luxury and the greatest comfort, so should a poor man be able to have the necessities of life. Nobody should die of hunger; everybody should have sufficient clothing; one man should not live in excess while another has no possible means of existence. (PT 134, sec. 40, para. 23)

The fourth section, “Social Rights. School, Education and Information,” is related to one of the main principles of the Bahá’í Faith, “Universal education is a universal law” (PUP 300, 1 September 1912). The Kitáb-i-Aqdas, the book of Bahá’í laws, explains this principle in detail. For example:

Unto every father hath been enjoined the instruction of his son and daughter in the art of reading and writing and in all that hath been laid down in the Holy Tablet. He that putteth away that which is commanded unto him, the Trustees are then to take from him that which is required for their instruction if he be wealthy and, if not, the matter devolveth upon the House of Justice. Verily have We made it a shelter for the poor and needy. He that bringeth up his son or the son of another, it is as though he hath brought up a son of Mine; upon him rest My glory, My loving-kindness, My mercy, that have compassed the world. (37, para. 48)

The fifth section, “Family, New Generations,” is a source of encouragement and assurance for the Bahá’ís. We certainly cannot say that the health condition of the institution of the family is good in the West. A document that “considers family education a necessary tool for the upbringing of new generations” (*Charter* art. 16) inspires great confidence. This confidence is strengthened by the emphasis placed by the Charter on the Values “on the equality of duties and obligations between husband and wife” (*Charter* art. 17) and on “the freedom of minors in developing their personality” (*Charter* art. 19). The Bahá’í family is founded on bonds of love and loyalty among all its components. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá said about the family on the 2nd of June 1912 while He was in the United States:¹⁵

According to the teachings of Bahá’u’lláh the family, being a human unit, must be educated according to the rules of sanctity. All the virtues must be taught the family. The integrity of the family bond must be constantly considered, and the rights of the individual members must not be transgressed. The rights of the son, the father, the mother—none of them must be transgressed, none of them must be arbitrary. Just as the son has certain obligations to his

¹⁵ See also “Address of Abdul-Baha at Protestant Episcopal Church of the Ascension, Fifth Ave. and 10St., New York City, Sunday, June 2, 1912, 8 P.M., Rev. Doc. Percy Strickney Grant, Rector,” *Star of the West* 3.10 (8 September 1912): 24-9.

father, the father, likewise, has certain obligations to his son. The mother, the sister and other members of the household have their certain prerogatives. All these rights and prerogatives must be conserved, yet the unity of the family must be sustained. The injury of one shall be considered the injury of all; the comfort of each, the comfort of all; the honor of one, the honor of all. (PUP 168, 2 June 1912)¹⁶

The sixth section, “Laicity and Religious Freedom,” has been previously analysed.

The seventh section, “Italy’s International Commitment,” confirms Italy’s commitment to carry out “a policy of peace and respect towards all people in the world to promote the peaceful coexistence between nations and defeat war and terrorism” and to safeguard “the environment and wealth of life on the planet” (*Charter* art. 27), to reject “war as a means for resolving international disputes, weapons of mass destruction, as well as any form of torture and punishment that degrades human dignity” (*Charter* art. 28), to reject “any form of xenophobia” (*ibid.*), to find “a peaceful resolution to the main international crises” (*Charter* art. 30), to promote “respect for human rights and the dignity of man throughout the world” and to encourage “the success of political democracy as the form of State government that allows citizens to take part in matters of public interest and the ever-increasing respect for the rights of the person” (*Charter* art. 31).

Italy is catching the best of Western civilisation and modernity in this commitment. Among the merits ascribed by the Bahá’í writings to Western civilisation, the most important is that it gave birth to “a philosophical culture,” which has liberated “the energies of its populations,” produced “a revolutionary impact throughout the entire world,” nurtured “constitutional government,” and prized “the rule of law and respect for the rights of all of society’s members” (*Century of Light* 5, cf. 72-3). The Bahá’ís, therefore, ascribe to the West the merit of having established for the first time in human history “the minimum standards for conduct by a government towards its people” (BIC 95-1001, *Turning* 255) and promoted an international debate that is gradually producing a “new culture conducive to the universal enjoyment

¹⁶ See also “Address of Abdul-Baha at Protestant Episcopal Church of the Ascension, Fifth Ave. and 10th St. New York City, Sunday, June 2, 1912, 8 P.M., Stickney Grant, Rector,” in *Star of the West* 3.10 (8 September 1912): 24-9.

of human rights” (BIC 96-0315). The positive aspects of the Western civilisation are thus summarised by the Universal House of Justice, the supreme governing body of the Bahá’í Community, in a message “To the Believers in the Cradle of the Faith [Iran]” of the 26th of November 2003: “constitutional and democratic government, the rule of law, universal education, the protection of human rights, economic development, religious tolerance, the promotion of useful sciences and technologies and programmes of public welfare” (2). All these features are reflected in the last section of the Charter, and the Bahá’ís wholeheartedly agree.

The Charter speaks about peace and respect towards all people, and the Bahá’ís remember ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s encouragement: “*Consort with all the peoples, kindreds and religions of the world with the utmost truthfulness, uprightness, faithfulness, kindness, good-will and friendliness*” (WT 14).

The Charter speaks of “safeguarding the environment and wealth of life on the planet” (art. 27), and the Bahá’ís think of the call by the Universal House of Justice in its message “To the Bahá’ís of the World, Ridván 1989” to assist “in endeavours to conserve the environment in ways which blend with the rhythm of life of our community” (para. 12), in the name of the strong ties between human beings and the environment, described in a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi (1897-1957), the Guardian of the Bahá’í Faith, in 1933, as follows:

We cannot segregate the human heart from the environment outside us and say that once one of these is reformed everything will be improved. Man is organic with the world. His inner life moulds the environment and is itself deeply affected by it. The one acts upon the other and every abiding change in the life of man is the result of these mutual reactions. (qtd. in *Valuing* 249, BIC 98-0218)

And with a view to its improvement, as recommended by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá:

The Lord of all mankind hath fashioned this human realm to be a Garden of Eden, an earthly paradise. If, as it must, it findeth the way to harmony and peace, to love and mutual trust, it will become a true abode of bliss, a place of manifold blessings and unending delights. Therein shall be revealed the excellence of humankind, therein shall the rays of the Sun of Truth shine forth on every hand. (SWAB 275, sec. 220)

The Charter speaks of rejecting war and weapons of mass destruction. And the Bahá'ís remember the hope voiced by Bahá'u'lláh “*that through the earnest endeavours of such as are the exponents of the power of God . . . the weapons of war throughout the world may be converted into instruments of reconstruction and that strife and conflict may be removed from the midst of men*” (Bishárát 23).

The Charter speaks of rejecting any form of torture and punishment that degrades human dignity. And this rejection echoes the following words written by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá:

material civilisation, through the power of punitive and retaliatory laws, restraineth the people from criminal acts; and notwithstanding this, while laws to retaliate against and punish a man are continually proliferating, as ye can see, no laws exist to reward him. In all the cities of Europe and America, vast buildings have been erected to serve as jails for the criminals.

Divine civilisation, however, so traineth every member of society that no one, with the exception of a negligible few, will undertake to commit a crime. (SWAB 132, sec. 105)

Italy is determined to defeat xenophobia. And the Bahá'ís agree, according to the guidance received by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá Who wrote:

do all in your power to be as one, to live in peace, each with the others: for ye are all the drops from but one ocean, the foliage of one tree, the pearls from a single shell, the flowers and sweet herbs from the same one garden . . . Call none a stranger; think none to be your foe. (SWAB 279, sec. 221)

Similar guidance is given in a Talk He delivered in Paris on 16 and 17 October 1911:

I ask you not to think only of yourselves. Be kind to the strangers, whether come they from Turkey, Japan, Persia, Russia, China or any other country in the world.

Help to make them feel at home; find out where they are staying, ask if you may render them any service; try to make their lives a little happier.

In this way, even if, sometimes, what you at first suspected should be true, still go out of your way to be kind to them—this kindness will help them to become better. (PT 1, sec. 1, paras. 1-4)

Italy “is committed to seeing a peaceful resolution to the main international crises” (art. 30). And the Bahá’ís think that Italy also, like other countries, is beginning to fulfil the following auspice expressed by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in 1875:

True civilisation will unfurl its banner in the midmost heart of the world whenever a certain number of its distinguished and high-minded sovereigns—the shining exemplars of devotion and determination—shall, for the good and happiness of all mankind, arise, with firm resolve and clear vision, to establish the Cause of Universal Peace. They must make the Cause of Peace the object of general consultation, and seek by every means in their power to establish a Union of the nations of the world. (SDC 64)

The Charter states that Italy works “to encourage the success of political democracy as the form of State government that allows citizens to take part in matters of public interest and the ever-increasing respect for the rights of the person” (art. 31). And the Bahá’ís applaud because they believe in democracy. Bahá’u’lláh emphasised the importance of the participation of people in the management of the government when, at the end of the years 1860, He exalted Victoria, Queen of England, for having “*entrusted the reins of counsel into the hands of the representatives of the people*” (Súriy-i-Haykal 90, para. 173) and praised, in another Writing, “*the system of government which the British people have adopted in London appeareth . . . for it is adorned with the light of both kingship and of the consultation of the people*” (Lawḥ-i-Dunyá 93). ‘Abdu’l-Bahá exalted “*unity in freedom*” (SWAB 32, sec. 15) for all the people of the world and on 2 June 1912, when He was asked: “Is it not a fact that universal peace cannot be accomplished until there is political democracy in all the countries of the world?”, He answered that “Under an autocratic government the opinions of men are not free, and development is stifled, whereas in democracy, because thought and speech are not restricted, the greatest progress is witnessed” (PUP 167). He also said, “To cast aside centralisation which promotes despotism is the exigency of the time. This will be productive of international peace” (PUP 167). Shoghi Effendi wrote that the Bahá’í Administrative Order is inclined “to democratic methods in the administration of its affairs” (*World Order* 153). *Century of Light*, commissioned by the Universal House of Justice, recognises that “the process leading [in 1963] to the election of the Universal House of Justice . . . very likely constituted history’s first global democratic election” (92,

sec. 8, para. 15). The Bahá'í International Community remarks that “in many parts of the world, the first exercises in democratic activity have occurred within the Bahá'í community” (BIC 01-0528).

As to democracy, the Bahá'ís suggest it be perfected through a change in a number of features that weaken modern democracy. The first aspect is “the political theatre of nominations, candidature, electioneering, and solicitation,” which should be replaced, as people “become progressively educated,” by “electoral procedures that will gradually refine the selection of their decision-making bodies” (BIC 95-0303, *Prosperity* 294). Other reprehensible aspects are “the culture of protest . . . debate, propaganda, the adversarial method, the entire apparatus of partisanship that have long been such familiar features of collective action,” which “are all fundamentally harmful to its purpose: that is, arriving at a consensus about the truth of a given situation and the wisest choice of action among the options open at any given moment” (ibid. 283) and last but not least “the adversarial structure of civil government, the advocacy principle informing most of civil law” (ibid. 287). All these aspects of modern democracy show that in the West “conflict is accepted as the mainspring of human interaction” (BIC 95-0303, *Prosperity* 277), and even mistakenly “dignified . . . by institutionalising such concepts as the ‘loyal opposition’ which attach to one or another of the various categories of political opinion—conservative, liberal, progressive, reactionary, and so forth” (The Universal House of Justice, ‘Individual Rights and Freedoms’ 515).

A “unitary concept of citizenship”

While presenting all these noble concepts to citizens and immigrants, the Charter offers, in Cardia’s words,

a unitary concept of citizenship and coexistence among the different national, ethnic and religious communities that took root in recent years in the Italian territory and can be considered as a covenant between Italian citizens and immigrants in view of an integration determined to reconcile respect of legitimate and positive differences of culture and behaviour and respect of shared values. (“Introduzione” 4)

This concept of citizenship is a reality for the Bahá'ís throughout the world, who are committed everywhere to creating this new citizen of the world, a citizen heedful of the following words of Bahá'u'lláh:

All men have been created to carry forward an ever-advancing civilisation. The Almighty beareth Me witness: To act like the beasts of the field is unworthy of man. Those virtues that befit his dignity are forbearance, mercy, compassion and loving-kindness towards all the peoples and kindreds of the earth.
(GWB 214, sec. CIX, para. 2)

The Bahá'ís and the cultural diversity of the world

Bahá'u'lláh describes cultural diversity as a great wealth. He wrote: “*Ye are all the leaves of one tree*” (Bishárát 26), “*Ye are the fruits of one tree, and the leaves of one branch*” (Lawḥ-i-Maqṣúd 163), “*regard ye not one another as strangers*” (Lawḥ-i-Maqṣúd 163), “*Deal ye one with another with the utmost love and harmony, with friendliness and fellowship . . . So powerful is the light of unity that it can illuminate the whole earth*” (ESW 14). ‘Abdu’l-Bahá interpreted this metaphor offered by Bahá'u'lláh in three different perspectives. The first is that of the oneness of humankind. When Bahá'u'lláh says, “*Ye are all the fruits of one tree, the leaves of one branch,*” He likens “*this world of being to a single tree, and all its peoples to the leaves thereof, and the blossoms and fruits. It is needful for the bough to blossom, and leaf and fruit to flourish, and upon the interconnection of all parts of the world-tree, dependeth the flourishing of leaf and blossom, and the sweetness of the fruit*” (‘SWAB 1, sec. 1). The second aspect is that of the beauty of diversity:

Consider the flowers of a garden. Though differing in kind, color, form, and shape, yet, inasmuch as they are refreshed by the waters of one spring, revived by the breath of one wind, invigorated by the rays of one sun, this diversity increaseth their charm, and addeth unto their beauty . . . Diversity of hues, form and shape, enricheth and adorneth the garden, and heighteneth the effect thereof. In like manner, when divers shades of thought, temperament and character, are brought together under the power and influence of one central agency, the beauty and glory of human perfection will be revealed and made manifest.
(TDP 103)

The third aspect is harmony among followers of different religions. In the past, because of the different conditions of the world, some systems of religious belief have “boasted of . . . [their] superiority and excellence, abasing and scorning the validity of all the others” (PUP 230, 14 July 192), and have expressed this concept stating that humankind is divided into “two trees: one divine and merciful, the other satanic” (ibid.).¹⁷ But Bahá’u’lláh says: “‘Ye are all the leaves of one tree’. He does not say, ‘Ye are the leaves of two trees, one divine, the other satanic’” (ibid.). Therefore, “all are the children of God, fruit upon the one tree of His love . . . all are growing upon the tree of His mercy, servants of His omnipotent will and manifestations of His good pleasure” (ibid.). The division of humankind into two trees has implied in the past that some belief systems heaped “execration and abuse upon each other” (ibid. 266, 17 August 1912).¹⁸ But Bahá’u’lláh, explaining that there is but one “Adamic tree” and that “there is no satanic tree whatever – Satan being a product of human minds and of instinctive human tendencies towards error” (ibid. 230), teaches that ‘we have no right to look upon any of our fellow-mortals as evil’ (PT 153, ch.45, para.10, 10 November 1911), and that

it is not becoming in man to curse another . . . it is not meet that one human being should consider another human being as bad . . . There are no people of Satan; all belong to the Merciful. There is no darkness; all is light. All are the servants of God, and man must love humanity from his heart. He must, verily, behold humanity as submerged in the divine mercy. (PUP 266, 17 August 1912)

The Bahá’í International Community mentions “the right of every person to expect that those cultural conditions essential to his or her identity enjoy the protection of national and international law.” This right is specifically explained as follows:

Much like the role played by the gene pool in the biological life of humankind and its environment, the immense wealth of cultural diversity achieved over thousands of years is vital to the social and economic

¹⁷ See also “Address of Abdul Baha at All Souls Unitarian Church, Fourth Ave. and Twentieth St., New York City, Rev. Leon Harvey, Pastor, Sunday, July 14, 1912. Translated by Dr. Ameen U. Fareed; notes by Messrs. John G. Grundy and Howard MacNutt,” *Star of the West* 3.11 (4 November 1912): 12-6.

¹⁸ See also “‘Baha’u’llah has proclaimed the promise of the Oneness of Humanity.’ Address by Abdul-Baha at Green Acre, Maine, August 17, 1912,” *Star of the West* 8.7 (13 July 1917): 76-80.

development of a human race experiencing its collective coming-of-age. It represents a heritage that must be permitted to bear its fruit in a global civilisation. On the one hand, cultural expressions need to be protected from suffocation by the materialistic influences currently holding sway. On the other, cultures must be enabled to interact with one another in ever-changing patterns of civilisation, free of manipulation for partisan political ends. (BIC 95-0303, *Prosperity* 281-2)

In light of these statements, it is evident that all cultures are entitled to their own identity but are also responsible for re-examining those aspects of their beliefs and customs that conflict with the above-mentioned unifying vision, which is confirmed by the system of human rights and by reason itself.

Integration and interreligious dialogue must be completed to achieve humankind's oneness fully. However, documents like the Charter on the Values and Significance of Citizenship and Integration denote that this goal will be gradually attained.

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