

Psychological and Spiritual Dimensions of Persecution and Suffering

Abdu'l-Missagh Ghadirian

Abstract

At the root of human suffering and persecution, one can often discern the traces of prejudice that have plagued humanity throughout history. Parallel with the waves of oppression and suffering in society, there has been an awakening of human souls not only to the spiritual meanings and mysteries of these adversities but also to their effect on personal development and transformation. Beyond the psychological understanding of persecution is the spiritual realm of this experience. What are the spiritual meanings of suffering and adversity? While confronted with inevitable persecution, torture, and even death, why do some individuals rise with such resilience and radiance? What role does faith and belief play, and what are some of the spiritual responses as compared to the psychological reactions to life crises and religious persecutions? This article cites persecution of the Bahá'ís of Iran as an example of spiritual resilience.

Résumé

À la source de la souffrance et de la persécution humaine, nous pouvons souvent discerner la trace de préjugés qui ont assailli l'humanité tout au long de son histoire. Parallèlement aux vagues d'oppression et de souffrance qui sévissent dans la société, il s'est produit un éveil spirituel chez l'homme, qui s'est traduit par une compréhension, non seulement des mystères et de la signification spirituelle de l'adversité, mais aussi de ses retombées sur le développement personnel et de la transformation qui en résulte. Par delà une compréhension purement psychologique de la persécution, un facteur spirituel vient s'y inscrire. Quelles sont les significations spirituelles de la souffrance et de l'adversité? Confrontés à d'inévitables persécutions, à la torture et même à la mort, pourquoi certains individus y font-ils face avec une telle force et un tel rayonnement? Quel est le rôle de la foi et de la croyance? Quelles sont les réponses spirituelles aux crises de la vie et aux persécutions religieuses, comparativement aux réactions purement psychologiques? Cet essai se penche sur la persécution des bahá'ís d'Iran pour en illustrer la composante spirituelle.

Resumen

Implantado en el sufrimiento y en la persecución humana, se disciernen con frecuencia las huellas de los prejuicios que han azotado la humanidad a través de la historia. Paralelo a las olas de opresión y de sufrimiento de la comunidad, ha ocurrido un despertar de almas humanas, no solo hacia los significados espirituales y los misterios inherentes en estas adversidades sino también hacia el efecto sobre el desarrollo y transformación personal. Mas allá de la comprensión psicológica de la persecución esta la morada espiritual que resulta de esta experiencia. ¿Cuales son los significados espirituales del sufrimiento y de la adversidad? ¿Por que, al enfrentárseles con persecución inevitable, tortura, y aun hasta con la muerte, pueden superar esto algunos individuos poseidos de tanta flexibilidad y

refulgencia? ¿Cómo entran en juego la fe y la creencia? ¿Cuales son algunas de las reacciones espirituales, en comparación a las reacciones psicológicas, a las crisis de la vida y a las persecuciones religiosas? Este escrito cita la persecución de los bahá'ís de Iran como ejemplo de resurgimiento espiritual.

Persecution and torture in physical and psychological forms have been associated with religious and societal movements throughout history. With the advancement of science and technology, humankind has acquired new skills for inflicting physical and psychological pain and suffering.

Torture has been used in different forms and in many countries of the world. According to Amnesty International, the use of "brutal torture and ill-treatment" was practiced in more than ninety countries in 1980 (Turner and Gorst-Unsworth, "Psychological Sequelae of Torture"). This figure has risen considerably in recent years. The 1995 Amnesty International annual report reveals that despite the extraordinary global political changes since 1989, violation of human rights increased in virtually every category (Wright, "Governments Ignoring Rights Abuses"). Accordingly, in 1994, torture was documented in at least 120 countries—this is 80 per cent of the world's major countries. The report indicates that opposition groups and governments no longer try to hide evidence of their atrocities because they do not believe that the international community will make them pay the price. Sadly, some countries even legislate freedom from prosecution. The human atrocities are not limited to ethnic cleansing, religious persecution, or political strife. They extend to the family, the basic unit of society, and more specifically to women. Amnesty's report shows that "countless women are battered to death by their husbands, burned alive for bringing 'disgrace' on the family, killed for non-payment of dowries, bought and sold in unacknowledged slave markets." The Amnesty International's report (1995) includes the following conclusions:

- At least 54 governments or their agents have carried out extrajudicial executions;
- At least 78 countries have detained or imprisoned prisoners of conscience;
- In 34 countries, prisoners died of poor treatment;
- In 29 countries, people "disappeared" under suspicious circumstances;
- In 36 countries, torture, hostage-taking, and deliberate or arbitrary killings were undertaken by armed opposition groups. (Wright, "Governments Ignoring Rights Abuses")

The Report of the Task Force of the American Psychiatric Association on Human Rights outlines the techniques of torture used in certain countries (including those in South America) as consisting of "beatings, electric shocks, sexual abuse, drugs, underwater submersion, deprivation of food, water and/or sleep, various forms of personal humiliation, confinement to very small spaces, sham executions and death threats against family members" (1393). The task

force concluded that the impact of these tortures was felt psychologically and physically. However, the physical effect disappeared earlier, while the psychological impact lasted longer.

The purpose of this article is threefold: (1) to examine the nature and characteristics of persecution and suffering in the light of current knowledge and the Bahá'í teachings as well as to elaborate on tests and trials in personal development and the role of empowerment in overcoming personal adversities; (2) to explore the psychological as well as spiritual dimensions of adversity and martyrdom and to dispel myths and misconceptions about them; and (3) to elaborate on the recent persecution of the Bahá'ís of Iran as an example of human rights violation in a land where that religion was born and its followers subjected to atrocities. They transcended physical and psychological pain and suffering in their expression of faith and affirmation of their belief. With these objectives in mind, I set out a general outline of physical and psychological aspects of persecution and suffering in the life of humanity. I then examine the concepts of suffering and martyrdom by bringing individual cases from the lives of persecuted Bahá'ís of Iran as tangible examples of human atrocities.

Trauma of Persecution: Definition and Characteristics

Torture is defined as a wilful act of inflicting severe pain or suffering (physical or psychological) on a human subject for the purpose of obtaining information, exerting discrimination and punishment, and creating intimidation or coercion against the will of the victim (Turner and Gorst-Unsworth, "Psychological Sequelae of Torture" 475).

One of the common features of torture is subjugation of the will of the victim by the perpetrator (Turner and Gorst-Unsworth, "Psychological Sequelae of Torture" 475). For each person who suffers torture and persecution there are many more who suffer with them, such as family and friends. Federico Allodi refers to one study in which 500 victims of eight hostage-taking episodes were followed up in the Netherlands ("Terrorism and Torture" 144). In an examination nine years after the incident, it was reported that 50% of the victims and 29% of the families showed symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) such as anxiety, phobias, and psychosomatic symptoms. Allodi summarized the following symptoms experienced by the victims of persecutions ("Terrorism and Torture" 152):

- Denial is the most common and first defence to appear. Allodi describes the variants of denial as avoidance, forgetfulness, shifting themes, silences, confusion, etc.
- Fearfulness, anxiety;
- Feeling of vulnerability, aberration, distress, helplessness, and apocalyptic fear
- Depression and inability to experience other emotions, particularly love or pleasure;
- Acting out in the form of alcohol or drug abuse.

Individuals who are traumatized have low tolerance toward psychological and physical irritation (van Kolk, "Psychological Consequences" 3). Their reaction to a stressor is either physical aggression toward self or others, or passivity and withdrawal. They may experience emotional excitement or emotional numbness depending on their personality and their coping defence mechanisms.

Dehumanization of victims is another phenomenon often observed in persecuted subjects. A closer look and deeper reflection on the plight of those who suffered in the Nazi concentration camps during the Second World War and in the refugee camps in Asia after the Vietnam War or, in more recent times, the tragic events of genocide in Bosnia and Rwanda show that victims of violence were treated as less-than-human objects. They could be entirely innocent, but innocence did not count because the perpetrators saw virtually everyone else as a real or potential enemy.

Concept of Pain and Suffering

Although pain and suffering are often used interchangeably, a distinction between them is necessary. Suffering is usually perceived as a psychological experience, while pain is quite often referred to as a physical experience.

Eric Cassell, who makes this distinction, believes, for example, that patients may tolerate severe pain and not consider it as suffering if they know that the pain is controllable and will end. In contrast, a minor pain may become the source of suffering if that pain stems from a dire and uncontrollable cause such as cancer. In such circumstances the feeling of helplessness and hopelessness may intensify suffering (Cassell, "Relief of Suffering" 522–23).

Suffering can be defined "as the state of severe distress associated with events that threaten the intactness and wholeness (or integrity) of the person. Suffering continues until the threat is gone or the integrity of the person can be restored in some other fashion" (Cassell, "Relief of Suffering" 522).

Suffering, Masochism, and Fanaticism

Masochism has been described as "pleasure derived from physical or psychological pain inflicted either by oneself or by others" (Stone, *American Psychiatric Glossary* 97). Today it is very tempting and even fashionable to think of contentment in personal suffering as a masochistic response to life crisis. Very often such a judgment not only is inspired by the materialistic orientation of contemporary psychology but also indicates an inability to see beyond the limitations of the present "state of the art" psychology and discover the spiritual dimension of human reality. The power of faith and its effect in the transformation of human character, as noted in each religious epoch, have baffled many behavioral scientists.

I believe that acceptance of pain and suffering for persevering in one's belief in truth, whether spiritual or scientific, should not be confused with masochism.

Scientists who make new discoveries will often face the challenge of resistance, rejection, or opposition until the new thesis is proven to be true. Likewise, a person who chooses to tread the path of a new spiritual truth may have to be content with adversities for having dared to be different from those who oppose his or her views. Neither the former nor the latter person intentionally seeks pain and torment for personal satisfaction in the pursuit of perfection. In masochistic pursuit, however, the individual seeks or incites situations where pain or punishment becomes a means of gratification for certain emotional or instinctual needs.

Fanaticism is defined as an excessive and unreasonable enthusiasm or zeal, often involving blind religious fervor and superstitions. When a religious belief departs from logic and proven scientific knowledge, it may very easily lend itself to superstition and fanaticism. However, the Bahá'í concept of proclaiming truth is compatible with neither masochism nor fanaticism: it rejects asceticism and intentional infliction of pain upon one's physical or psychological self. The human body is viewed as a temple of the soul to be cared for and protected. Moreover, the Bahá'í Faith teaches harmony between science and religion, and repudiates superstition, fanaticism, and any form of prejudice.

The Bahá'í view of suffering differs from that of other religions in that suffering is not seen as a means for personal salvation or for the reward of paradise. Nor is it believed that an individual is born sinful and therefore should suffer. The Bahá'í Faith teaches the nobility of the human being and sees in inevitable suffering a challenge for personal growth. The human soul is believed to be unaffected by physical pain and afflictions ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Reality of Man* 26). An example of this can be seen in the life of persecuted Bahá'ís of Iran and early believers of other religions of the world. In spite of every conceivable type of torture and inhuman adversity, they remained calm and content, reflecting many noble attributes. Indeed, undergoing suffering may have transformed their lower and material qualities into higher and spiritual attributes.

In many of these circumstances, the faith and certitude of the victim may empower him or her to endure pain and suffering. But the victim can also become an embodiment of fanatic emotions and prejudices within a certain movement. The question is then, what is the prime motive and nature of the movement that has led to this struggle? Does it promote an altruistic, mature, and peace-loving attitude toward humanity, or does it encourage a power struggle for personal or political gain? What is the difference between the gentle disciples of Christ who suffered brutal persecution and devout followers of Hitler, many of whom also suffered in their plight? The message of the former was a message of true love and fellowship, while the dictum of the latter was hate and power. At the root of suffering and adversity, one can find prejudices of many kinds. From Auschwitz to Hiroshima, from Vietnam to Bosnia, from Kampuchea to Lebanon and Rwanda, one can discern the impact of various forms of prejudice disguised in struggles for ethnic cleansing, religious intolerance, or political dominance.

On Martyrdom

The term *martyrdom* has also been misused by various groups for political reasons to exploit opportunities for enhancement of certain objectives toward which a group or society is striving. Thus the meaning of slaying has been modified and controlled by the societies of the slayer and the slain in order to convey to the world a desired perception of martyrdom or a judicial retribution depending on the suitability of the one that can serve them best (*Encyclopedia of Religion* 9: 230). As a result, an IRA (Irish Republican Army) soldier who died of self-imposed starvation in a British jail, or a Muslim suicide bomber who attacked an Israeli military post or public place in the name of Allah, or a self-immolating Buddhist monk in Vietnam can all be declared “martyrs” along side of disciples of Christ or other prophets who were subjected to violent persecution and death. In the former cases, the “martyrdom” becomes a means to break through the ideological and social boundaries between conflicting groups, which often have a politically or religiously based power (*Encyclopedia of Religion* 9: 230) while in the latter case it is a form of submission to a higher spiritual power and unifying divine force for which the prophets themselves suffered grievously.

It has been said that “the martyr dies convinced of his or her legitimate authority, an authority challenging that of executioners. . . . Such charismatic authority discards an older order in a breakthrough to a new social and cultural order, often convinced as a spiritual order” (*Encyclopedia of Religion* 9: 231). It has furthermore been stated that “with martyrdom, the culture of the minority, its ideology and law, is sanctified, a covenant established, stamped with blood. It is written in Mekhilta, a Jewish interpretative work, that every commandment that the Israelites have not died for is not really established, and every commandment that they have died for will be established among them” (*Encyclopedia of Religion* 9: 233).

Bahá'u'lláh advised his believers to act with prudence and care and not volunteer to give their lives. “Martyrdom in the path of God is . . . the greatest bounty provided it takes place through circumstances beyond one’s control” (Taherzadeh, *Revelation* 4: 305). Indeed, in response to a believer who asked Bahá'u'lláh “whether it was more meritorious to lay down one’s life for the love of God or to teach the Cause with wisdom and the power of utterance,” Bahá'u'lláh replied “that the latter was preferable” (Taherzadeh, *Revelation* 4: 305). This view stands in contrast to some of the fundamentalists’ indoctrination for wilfully engaging in violent suicide attacks and “martyrdom” to promote their cause. Bahíyyih Nakhjavání states that fundamentalism by itself has become an expression of certain mental attitudes rather than a religious belief per se: “There is a difference between the spiritual message at the core of a religion and the blind expression of that faith grounded in fear” (*Asking Questions* 59). The above mental attitude of fanatics is charged with emotions such as hate and rage culminating in a self-imposed “martyrdom.” In

contrast, the pages of the history of the persecution and martyrdom of Bahá'ís show that these individuals, even in the moments before their deaths, were submissive and prayed that their tormentors and executioners be guided and forgiven (Nabíl, *Dawnbreakers* 430–64).

Table 1 illustrates my reflections on the differential features of true (natural) martyrdom and self-imposed “martyrdom.” It is to be noted, however, that the boundaries separating these two can be extremely elusive and subjective, shrouded in mystery, with many unknown areas yet to be explored.

For example, recently, a fifteen-year-old Muslim teenager in Gaza City planned to strap eight kilograms of TNT to his body and to blow himself up in Israel. His plan was foiled by his parents a few nights before it was to be carried out. He later admitted to having been indoctrinated by fundamentalist mentors with the notion of “martyrdom” and “special privileges enjoyed by a Muslim who is willing to sacrifice himself for the sake of his homeland and Alláh” (Bhatia, “Luring Children” B1). He was so strongly brainwashed by the promise of paradise and face-to-face encounter with Alláh that he could hardly bear to wait. His training included daily learning of the Qur’án by rote. He was instructed to carry a dummy pack of explosives around his waist or his shoulders. In his will, addressed to his parents, he expressed his clear expectation to die a martyr and consoled them with these words, “Oh parents, rejoice. For by becoming a martyr I have opened the gates of Paradise for you and all other members of our family. Farewell with my hopes of meeting you all soon in Paradise.” He later confessed to Palestinian Gaza police that he indeed had been serious about blowing himself up with the aim of killing “as many Jews as possible” (Bhatia, “Luring Children” B1).

Suffering and Human Values

Human values are the highest expression of a person’s conviction, integrity, and character. They are the fruits of acquired and innate knowledge and personal development. To defend one’s spiritual values in the face of adversity is an act of faith and fulfillment. “To realize the relative validity of one’s convictions and yet stand for them unflinchingly is what distinguishes a civilized man from a barbarian” (Alexander Herzen, quoted in Hartmann “Presidential Address” *Am. J. Psych.* 149.9 [Sept. 1992]:1135).

Viktor Frankl, a noted psychiatrist who survived the Nazi concentration camps, identifies three types of values:

- Values that are actualized by action;
- Values that are experiential and are realized through passive receiving;
- Attitudinal values that are actualized when a person is faced with something unalterable, “something imposed by destiny.” (*The Doctor and the Soul* 121–22)

Table 1**Natural Martyrs**

Condemned to death due to their refusal to recant their belief

Empowered with a universal love and compassion

Death is imposed by external forces beyond one's control; true martyrdom preordained

Victim prays for forgiveness and guidance of tormentors

Faithfulness to covenant rather than the desire to attain paradise is the primary goal

Self-abnegation, detachment and utter submission to the Will of God are the hallmarks of final hours with martyr seeking no material power

Accepts suffering and sacrifice with altruism and freedom from prejudice toward others

Death becomes the ultimate witness to the truth of one's belief when all other alternatives are refused

Acknowledges absolute nothingness and seeks no name or fame save the good pleasure of God

Self-Imposed "Martyrs"

Not condemned to death. Suicide wilfully planned and often intended to cause death and destruction to others to promote a cause

Often inspired by hate and instigated to punish or kill those perceived as enemies

Death is chosen by free will to serve dogmatic ideology and is avoidable

Victim may pray for victory of self against the evil of those who are wrong

The reward of paradise is often the motivating force to choose death

Self-righteousness and seeking entitlement with passion to destroy in the name of God or an ideology and search for power a driving force for the action

Accepts suffering and sacrifice for specific religious or political reward and is motivated by prejudice

Death intended to arouse emotional support for a religious or political ambition

Seeks power and sympathy in the name of "martyrdom" when other attempts to that effect fail

He further states that

from the manner in which a person takes these things upon himself, assimilates these difficulties into his own psyche, there flows an incalculable multitude of value-potentialities. This means that human life can be fulfilled not only in creating and enjoying, but in suffering! Those who worship the superficial cult of success obviously will not understand such conclusions. (*The Doctor and the Soul* 121–22)

In the Bahá'í writings we find some parallel views:

It is only through suffering that the nobility of character can make itself manifest. The energy we expend in enduring the intolerance of some individuals . . . is not lost. It is transformed into fortitude, steadfastness and magnanimity. . . . Sacrifices in the path of one's religion produce always immortal results, "Out of the ashes rises the phoenix." (Letter on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, quoted in *Lights of Guidance* 604)

Expression of human values depends not only on personal will but also on the circumstances that confront an individual wishing to make his or her values known to others. These circumstances may involve day-to-day, non-threatening interpersonal situations or situations that would challenge the individual's values and beliefs. Thus, expression of personal values may occur in a friendly or life-threatening environment. Perseverance in one's religious belief in the face of persecution is a process that enables the person to actualize spiritual values. Denying one's belief prevents one from actualizing it and thus impedes personal progress.

Resilience in Adversity

Although severe life stressors and adversities may increase the risk of emotional disturbance (i.e., depression in the face of personal losses), usually most people do not succumb to these diseases (i.e., most of those who suffer personal losses do not necessarily become clinically depressed and incapacitated, although they are affected by them) (Rutter, "Resilience in the Face of Adversity" 598). According to Rutter, "Resistance to stress is relative, not absolute; the bases of the resistance are both environmental and constitutional; and the degree of resistance is not a fixed quality—rather it varies over time and according to circumstances" ("Resilience" 599). Resistance can also have a spiritual dimension, which has not yet been fully explored in modern psychology. This dimension is based on spiritual education, belief, and insight into the nature of human beings and the purpose of their creation.

Exposure to adversity as it comes about in the course of life may improve our adaptational capability in facing life events. Indeed, on the one hand, hardship and difficult experiences of an earlier period of life may serve as a form of psychological vaccination and personal preparation that would

strengthen the individual to cope better in the future. On the other hand, unresolved traumatic conflicts of childhood may create a psychological climate that would complicate personal development in later life. These kinds of traumatic experiences requiring treatment should not be confused with hardship and difficulties due to, for example, socioeconomic deprivations that many have had to face at some point in life.

Shoghi Effendi, states that “an essential characteristic of this world is hardship and tribulation and that it is by overcoming them that we achieve our moral and spiritual development” (quoted in *Lights of Guidance* 494). ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains that “sorrow is like furrows, the deeper they go, the more plentiful is the fruit we obtain” (quoted by Shoghi Effendi in *Lights of Guidance* 494).

Recent research studies on the survivors of torture show that repeated exposure to stress may immunize some survivors against subsequent traumatic stress experiences. Social and emotional support by the family and friends plays an important role in protecting against or overcoming traumatic experiences (Basoglu et al., “Psychological Effects” 81). Researchers have debated about the impact of stress on individuals and development of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). While some believe that a person develops a form of neurosis if the stress is strong enough, others maintain that although the stressor is a necessary element, it is not sufficient to cause PTSD in every person exposed to a stressor (Choy and de Bosset, “Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder” 579). (By stressor is here meant a distressing life event that is beyond the range of usual human experience.) These divergent views show the complex and multidimensional nature of human vulnerability and resilience to stressful events.

In addition to psychological defence mechanisms for coping, one also needs to come to terms with the reality of the stressful life events and their meaning. This is a process of making an internal adjustment to a difficult problem of an external nature. Depending on educational and cultural attitudes, the coping mechanisms may vary greatly from person to person. In a life crisis of serious proportion, such as a death in the family, the following phases of mourning may take place: shock, denial, despair, recognition, and acceptance. Individual attitude toward death and belief in life after death will have an important bearing on the individual’s ability to cope. Therefore, adaptational responses are not elicited universally in an identical fashion, and there are considerable variations, depending on individual belief, character, and life experience.

Tolerance and magnanimity have been observed among the early believers of each religion and even among certain pioneers of science who defied opposition with peaceful tolerance and raised questions concerning the validity of stress response theory in the face of life crisis. One explanation could be that when the life threat, whether psychological or physical, can be explained and made sense of in the light of scientific or spiritual conviction, that insight will

arouse considerable courage, which will, in turn, abate the fear and anxiety created by the threat. Moreover, faith itself is a potent force in which human beings find their “ultimate fulfillment” (Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* 2). With true faith, one sees in an inevitable death a fulfillment of one’s spiritual convictions. Thus, faith gives a new meaning to suffering that can transform fear into joy and despair into hope. The heroic life of the martyrs, their determination and perseverance for their cause in spite of torture and torments inflicted upon them testify to the strength of their faith and the loftiness of their belief for which they give their most precious possession: life itself. I believe that this is a triumph of the soul in the pursuit of the truth for which contemporary science is at a loss to find an answer.

The history of religions shows that human tolerance to suffering goes far beyond the psychological formulation of defences and stress adaptation. In such cases, I think, suffering is perceived neither as a destructive force of despair and agony, nor as a grievous blow to human defences. Rather, it is welcomed with faith and contentment. This does not imply that victims of religious persecution are always entirely free from pain and sorrow; rather it suggests that their spiritual conviction and faith have changed their perception and attitude toward suffering and have empowered them to gain greater tolerance. As to how a profound spiritual conviction can raise the physiological threshold of pain and suffering, no one knows with scientific certainty at present, since neither spirituality nor suffering is an experience that can be measured and quantified biochemically or physiologically.

The Triad of Oppression–Resilience

On the basis of the above analysis, the impact of a stressor such as oppression may depend on three factors as follows:

- Intensity of oppression;
- Personal endurance and resilience;
- Spiritual or ideological perception and attitude toward oppression (personal interpretation of the event).

Based on this model, the severity of oppression (e.g., trauma, torment, persecution) may not significantly disturb the subject if the person is prepared to endure for a cause and finds a meaning in it that would give a life purpose. Although the severity of oppression directed toward an individual is usually beyond his/her control, resilience and behavioral attitude are important factors within his/her power, and both resilience and attitude are influenced by spiritual or sociocultural beliefs. In this process, the attitude will strengthen the will to endure and to resist the oppression. In concentration camp experience reportedly those who maintained a hopeful positive attitude or displayed active resistance fared better in survival over those who were passive victims because the resistance activated self-esteem and contact with the outside world (Berger, “Recovery and

Regression" 54–59). This experience of resistance, however, took place in a circumscribed environment different from a closed prison environment where active resistance can cause punitive reprisal. One of the most common forms of resistance in the persecution of the Bahá'ís of Iran was the refusal of the believers to recant their faith and instead actively proclaim their belief. This refusal angered the authorities who intensified their repression.

Transformation of Hate into Love

The mystic transformation of hate into love is the result of a spiritual education free from prejudice that empowers a person to change. It would be very difficult if not impossible for one to develop such a capacity for personal transformation without the aid of spiritual insight and faith. This insight and faith can be acquired through the knowledge of and love for God.

Prejudices, whether religious or political, play a powerful role in the perception of suffering of the victim in the persecutor's mind. Under the influence of political ideology or religious fanaticism, the mind can dissociate the knowledge of pain and suffering from its real feeling and experience. When feeling is dissociated from the reality of perception and when the conscience is no longer in contact with the mind, the behavioral consequences can be tragic (MacLeish, "The Poet and the Press" 44–46). A distinguishing feature of responses elicited by the brutal persecution of the Bahá'ís of Iran is the non-violent and peaceful attitude of this people in the face of adversity. They reacted with patience and tolerance to aggression and hatred. A case in point is seen in the following letter of an eyewitness of recent persecutions of this minority in Iran:

We need your prayers so that God will grant so much love and power to our hearts, which encounter hatred, cruelty, hostility, that we shall be capable of replacing them with love, kindness, and eternal brotherhood. (Hakim-Samandari, "Victory over Violence" 28)

Clearly, this is a supplication for transformation.

Speaking about the power of transformation in this religion, Bahá'u'lláh states:

Is it within human power, O Ḥakím, to effect in the constituent elements of any of the minute and indivisible particles of matter so complete a transformation as to transmute it into purest gold? Perplexing and difficult as this may appear, the still greater task of converting satanic strength into heavenly power is one that We have been empowered to accomplish. The Force capable of such a transformation transcendeth the potency of the Elixir itself. The Word of God, alone, can claim the distinction of being endowed with the capacity required for so great and far-reaching a change. (*Bahá'í World Faith* 113)

‘Abdu’l-Bahá illustrates the process of transformation of attributes by giving the example of iron, which ordinarily has the qualities of being solid, black, and cold. However, when the same metal absorbs heat from fire, its natural attributes will be sacrificed and transformed into new qualities: its solidity to fluidity; its darkness to light; and its cold to heat. Thus, as the original qualities of iron disappear, the qualities of fire appear in their place (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Reality of Man* 52). Likewise, in the fire of ordeals, one sacrifices one’s material desires and qualities for spiritual attributes.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá also describes the meaning of sacrifice through the example of the seed:

The seed sacrifices itself to the tree that will come from it. The seed is outwardly lost, destroyed but the same seed which is sacrificed will be absorbed and embodied in the tree, its blossoms, fruit and branches. . . . When you look at the tree you will realize that the perfections, blessings, properties and beauty of the seed have become manifest in the branches, twigs, blossoms and fruit; consequently the seed has sacrificed itself to the tree. Had it not done so, the tree would not have come into existence. His Holiness Christ like unto the seed sacrificed himself for the tree of Christianity. (*Reality of Man* 50)

Spiritual Perception of Suffering

In the Bahá’í writings, sufferings and privations are considered as blessings in disguise and through them “our inner spiritual forces become stimulated, purified and ennobled” (Shoghi Effendi, quoted in *Lights of Guidance* 493). Trials and tribulations are “preordained” (Bahá’u’lláh, *Bahá’í Revelation* 171). Moreover, there is a great wisdom in their occurrence as stated by Shoghi Effendi: “. . . whatsoever comes to pass in the Cause of God, however disquieting in its immediate effects, is fraught with infinite Wisdom and tends ultimately to promote its interests in the world” (*Bahá’í Administration* 27). Submission to the Will of God is an essential attitude of Bahá’ís who are faced with adversities beyond their control.

In materialistic societies, self-centeredness and material attachment become an impediment to one’s submission to the greater Will, and therefore discontentment is prevalent. In such an environment, personal contentment is often sought through material qualifications and success rather than through spiritual fulfillment. In *The Seven Valleys*, Bahá’u’lláh describes the traveller of the Valley of Knowledge with these words:

He in this station is content with the decree of God, and seeth war as peace, and findeth in death the secrets of everlasting life. With inward and outward eyes he witnesseth the mysteries of resurrection in the realms of creation and the souls of men, and with a pure heart apprehendeth the divine wisdom in the endless Manifestations of God. In the ocean he findeth a drop, in a drop he beholdeth the secrets of the sea. (12)

Through trials and tribulations, individuals fulfill their potential for personal growth in their journey through this world. They discover a new spiritual meaning and wisdom in personal suffering. Through the trials and difficulties, the sincerity of a believer is tested. "Were it not for tests, pure gold could not be distinguished from the impure. Were it not for tests, the courageous could not be separated from the cowardly. Were it not for tests, the people of faithfulness could not be known from the disloyal" (Bahá'u'lláh, *Divine Art of Living* 87). On the same subject, Bahá'u'lláh speaks with these emphatic words: "O Son of Man! If adversity befall thee not in My path, how canst thou walk in the ways of them that are content with My pleasure? If trials afflict thee not in thy longing to meet Me, how wilt thou attain the light in thy love for My beauty?" (*Hidden Words* 15). It is interesting to note that our interpretation of tests and trials can be very different from the wisdom inherent in the occurrence of these events. Our judgment is finite and limited, while the divine purpose of these calamities is limitless and infinite.

Suffering and Religion

The major religions of the world, at the height of their development, were the source of the renewal of civilization and progress in the material and spiritual affairs of humankind (Hofman, *Renewal of Civilization* 8). Later in their evolution, however, due to material and political interests of their followers, the original purpose of these religions and the mission of their founders were lost or distorted. Indeed, as the Báb stated, ". . . every religion of the past was fit to become universal. The only reason why they failed to attain that mark was the incompetence of their followers" (quoted in *Living the Life* 11). As a result, many became disillusioned with religion, considering it to be the cause of division and conflicts, responsible for countless wars and strife in many parts of the world.

The birth of every religion has been marked by fierce opposition to and oppression of its followers. Throughout history we have seen this pattern repeat itself. As the Bahá'í Faith is a new religion, the persecution of its followers in Iran is a human experience closer to our time, making it possible to analyze objectively the tragic events following its inception. Having discussed the nature and characteristics of persecution and adversity in general, I would now like to focus on the psychological and spiritual responses of persecuted Bahá'ís of Iran. The manner of these individuals' response and their attitude toward religious atrocities bring about a new vision of human response to suffering in light of the Bahá'í teachings.

Psychological Terror in Religious Persecution

With the progress of science and medicine, humankind has become progressively able to conquer diseases and prevent a great deal of pain and suffering. But suffering in different forms will continue to exist, and a world without suffering is but a dream. Humanity has always caused suffering to its

own species even though extolling the virtue of well-being and prosperity for all. Thus, justice has become the hallmark of a new world order to emerge.

In recent times, various forms of psychological intimidation and torture of the mind have become potent instruments for aggressors in the religious and political arena to crush human will and defences. Among different psychological methods used to torment and subjugate innocent Bahá'ís in Iran, the following are but a few examples:

Terrorizing the Mind—Dehumanization of the Subjects

- Forced exposure of the Bahá'ís to witness the torture of their family members and friends, or to witness the horrifying scene of the lacerated and injured bodies of these victims in order to arouse fear;
- Mock execution and other acts of terror as an attempt to force Bahá'ís to recant their faith or admit to false accusations;
- In some cases, after the death sentence of a group of Bahá'í prisoners was issued, the identity of those condemned was withheld by the government, causing enormous psychological stress and anguish among relatives and friends. The relatives were left to speculate constantly and painfully about the fate of their loved ones and possible reunion with them.

Deprivation of Human Contact

- Total solitary confinement in isolated cells (i.e., 1.72 x 2 meters) without verbal contact with anyone, including prison guards, for weeks or even months (Universal House of Justice, letter of May 13, 1984). Such sensory deprivation and human isolation for a long period of time usually leads to serious psychological consequences.

Shocking of Survivors

- Often, after the execution of Bahá'ís, close family members were not informed of the death, and when the death was eventually discovered, the authorities would refuse the family any access to the body, thus increasing the sorrow of the grieving survivors. Many of the martyrs whose bodies were not delivered to the family by prison authorities most likely were subjected to cruel physical torture and injuries prior to death;
- After the victim was executed, his/her house and belongings were confiscated, leaving the surviving spouse and children homeless. To add insult to injury, the survivors of those who were executed by firing squad were ordered to pay for the cost of the bullets that took the life of their loved ones, a cruelty unmatched in modern history. Family members in some areas were asked to make regular monthly payments for the expenses of the inmates, another example of contempt for the Bahá'ís.

Assault on Conscience—Demoralization

- Many Bahá'í women or girls were victims of rape and assaults. Some were forced to marry Muslims under Islamic law and were deprived of the right to rear children as Bahá'ís.

Creating Hate among Children

- Bahá'í children have also been experiencing psychological pressure in their neighborhoods by being labelled as the offspring of heretics.

Desecration

- Mobs in some towns or cities attacked Bahá'í cemeteries, destroyed and desecrated graves, dug up and burned bodies. This reflects the extent of out-of-control violence. The attacks were also directed toward the Bahá'í sacred writings. (*Bahá'í Question*)

Profile of Persecutors

Persecution is very often the consequence of prejudice—either racial, economic, political, or religious. The primary aim of persecution arising from this source is twofold: (1) rejection of the belief to invalidate, discredit, or undermine the basic beliefs and precepts of the victim; and (2) rejection of the believer, characterized by physical assaults, torture, imprisonment, starvation, and death, or psychological insults and abuses by means of false accusations, humiliation, threats, and deprivation of personal and social rights and privileges.

In 1981, Professor Manúchíhr Ḥakím, an outstanding and much loved physician, was murdered in his office while caring for patients in Tehran. He was killed by an assailant posing as a patient who needed medical advice after office hours. Professor Ḥakím was a gentle, loving physician whose only “crime” was to be a member of the Bahá'í Faith. Five years earlier he had been decorated by the French government with the Legion of Honor for his humanitarian services. Well known for his scientific endeavors, he graduated from the Medical College of Paris and was cited in the prestigious *Le Rouviere*, the French medical encyclopedia, for his anatomical discoveries (Ḥakím-Samandari, “Victory over Violence” 9).

As a physician and an academician, he served thousands of his sick and suffering fellow citizens with the highest degree of dedication and professional integrity. But even his profile of service to humanity did not spare his life from those who could not come to terms with his belief as a Bahá'í. This is more evidence of the terrible influence of blind prejudice that dissociates human virtues and noble accomplishment from personal belief in another religion or ideology.

Steadfastness by the believer can evoke an even greater hatred in the persecutors, as this is seen as a sign of the latter's failure. Distortion of truth and

manipulation of public conscience as a means of discrediting the subject and justifying the hatred against the victim is quite common. In such circumstances, the public's ignorance and its refusal to search after truth create an ideal climate for accomplishing fanatical objectives. As an example, in the persecution of the Bahá'ís in Iran, the principle of equality of the rights of men and women in the Bahá'í community and the fact that there is no segregation of sexes in Bahá'í gatherings have been attacked by the clergy as immoral deviation in a society where male domination has been the rule for centuries (*Bahá'í Question* 24–26).

Motives for Accusation

The instigators of persecution know well that when someone with noble virtues is subjected to torment and atrocities that person evokes a great deal of sympathy. Hence, baseless allegations and manipulation become ways by which the persecutors counteract or undermine the development of sympathy. An innocent person may be accused of atrocities that he or she never committed. It is an attack on that person's integrity with the aim of breaking will and defences and forcing recantation. The process can arouse public emotion against the victim, which in turn encourages fanatics to redouble their attacks.

Accusations against Bahá'ís have taken different forms at various stages of the history of this religion in Iran. At one point Bahá'ís were accused of being connected to the Russian tzars; at another time they were labeled as servants of British or American imperialism. In recent times they have been accused of being agents of Israel and Zionism. The Bahá'ís were declared to be *mahdur ad-damm* (those whose blood may be shed) (Martin, "Persecution of the Bahá'ís" 54), or involved in the "corruption of the earth," "warring against God," and so on. Faced with mounting negative world opinion and pressured by the criticism of human rights violations, the Islamic Republic of Iran denied that the Bahá'ís were being killed because of their religious beliefs. Rather, they stated, they were being punished for the crime of serving as spies of foreign powers. This was a clear concealment of the earlier actions of their revolutionary courts, which sentenced Bahá'ís to death on religious grounds. Bahá'ís were viewed as pagans and heretics who were not people of the Book (Muslims, Jews, Christians, Zoroastrians) and thus must be eliminated. Hence, acts of violence toward Bahá'ís were sanctioned with the promise of paradise for the perpetrator. The condemned Bahá'ís reacted with forbearance and compassion and transcended their physical sorrow and suffering by relying on the Will of God. They embraced their ultimate destiny—an imposed death—and refused to recant their belief. This noble response to the brutal punishment of perpetrators further enraged and frustrated the clergy and government officials, as it was a clear affirmation of faith and reliance on an inner truth that no exterior power could eradicate. Ironically, if the victims had recanted their faith, their "sins"

would have been washed away, and they would have been freed with publicity and fanfare. This clearly unmasked their real intention of total extinction of a minority that the Islamic regime could neither tolerate nor recognize.

Response to Persecution

According to the Bahá'í teachings, the creative words of a divine revelation can empower the soul, transform the hearts of individuals, and create a new race of people as a result of their unique vision of life. This transformation gives a new meaning and purpose to life that dissipates existential fears and anxiety, replacing them with tolerance and contentment. When the vision of the true purpose of life and its ultimate destiny is blurred with doubts and superstitions, these individuals are no longer able to maintain that sense of security and forbearance at the time of trials and tribulations.

Bahá'u'lláh reveals that the suffering his followers experience is preordained to proclaim the Cause of God in this new dispensation. He, therefore, empathizes with his followers in their suffering:

Help them through Thy strengthening grace, I beseech Thee, O my God, to suffer patiently in their love for Thee, and unveil to their eyes what Thou hast decreed for them behind the Tabernacle of Thine unailing protection, so that they may rush forward to meet what is preordained for them in Thy path, and may vie in hasting after tribulation in their love towards Thee. (*Bahá'í Revelation* 171)

Moreover, Bahá'u'lláh elucidates that one's love of God will enable one to resist the powers arising against one and to overcome any fear (*Bahá'í Revelation* 175). The result is courage and confidence, as observed in the multitude of Bahá'ís who have experienced torture and atrocity.

In the Bahá'í writings, there is a significant association between true love and pain, as reflected in these words from *The Seven Valleys*:

The steed of this Valley [Love] is pain; and if there be no pain this journey will never end. In this station the lover hath no thought save the Beloved, and seeketh no refuge save the Friend. At every moment he offereth a hundred lives in the path of the Loved One, at every step he throweth a thousand heads at the feet of the Beloved. (Bahá'u'lláh, *Seven Valleys* 8–9)

Martyrdom and the Bahá'í Faith

The meaning of the word *martyr* both in English and Arabic is “witness.” It goes beyond bloodshed and physical suffering as commonly believed. Martyrs are those who bear witness to the truth of their belief by submitting themselves to death under circumstances beyond their control, rather than renouncing their faith. Hence, Bahá'ís do not seek martyrdom for its honor or entitlement. Death is imposed on them because of their refusal to deny their faith. Based on the

spiritual concept of martyrdom and the heavy emphasis placed on teaching their religion and serving humanity, it is possible for a person to survive and yet be counted as a martyr in the sight of God (Taherzadeh, *Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh* 4: 302–3).

True martyrdom cannot be analyzed and understood fully through intellectual argument. It is a spiritual and physical experience that epitomizes the strength of human love and will in recognition of a spiritual truth established by divine prophets.

A distinction should be made between those who die for their faith and those whose deaths are politically motivated. Fanaticism stems from a blind and prejudicial drive for power charged with emotion. It ignores universal love and altruism, and inspires radical and frequently hateful thinking often in the interest of political motives or fundamental religious ambitions. In modern times it is characterized by dramatic publicity and attention-seeking strategies in the realization of its objective. Therefore, true martyrdom should be distinguished from self-imposed death instigated for political gain. A true martyr neither seeks death nor instigates it to bring fame and power to a particular group for personal or political reasons. Here, death, like torture, is not solicited; it is imposed upon a person for his/her refusal to recant the truth he/she has discovered:

. . . martyrdom is never the design of men; for the true martyr is he who has become the instrument of God, who has lost his will in the will of God, not lost it but found it, for he has found freedom in submission to God. The martyr no longer desires anything for himself, not even the glory of martyrdom. (T.S. Eliot, quoted in Gollwitzer, ed., *Dying We Live* 15; also quoted in Taheri Bethel, "Psychological Theory" 25)

In the West, suffering and martyrdom are often regarded as signs of defeat and failure (Ghadirian, "Human Responses" 60). In some other areas of the world, suffering imparts a different meaning: it characterizes the victory of the soul. These differences stem from different concepts regarding the meaning of life and its purpose. Knowledge of God and love for God's kingdom gives a new meaning to life and creates a new spirit of faith. A person's faith in God is a dynamic force; it is not a static state of mind. As one's faith grows, so will one's ability to endure trials and tribulations that test one's sincerity and love of the divine reality. At the beginning of each religious period, the spiritual relationship between humankind and God is renewed and revitalized. Toward the end of each religious epoch, the purity of motive and the original purpose of such a relationship is lost or overcome by human egoism and superstition. Thus, faith turns into rituals, and the spirit of love and true knowledge of God are lost in hatred and superstition, resulting in a triumph of ambition and fanaticism. Disunity and corruption ultimately prevail, but at the appointed time, a new divine educator is ushered in bringing a new religious cycle.

For a true Bahá'í, to be forced to deny Bahá'u'lláh is the greatest anguish. However, aside from their profound love of Bahá'u'lláh, Bahá'ís who suffered persecution were no different from ordinary people. Many had homes and families with children, and many were looking forward to seeing their offspring grow and their businesses flourish. They had hopes and dreams to live and prosper. They came from all walks of life and diverse cultural and religious backgrounds and had embraced the Bahá'í Faith of their own free will. Some were simple farmers; others were teachers, physicians, and other professionals whose desire was to serve their fellow citizens. They pleaded with the authorities for their rights and freedom, but they were denied because of their belief.

As a testimony to the degree of faith and certitude displayed by Bahá'ís in facing life-threatening crises, I would like to cite the following examples from the lives of a number of persecuted Bahá'ís of Iran who were tortured and killed because of their religion. These examples reflect the magnitude of the spiritual dimension of human responses to persecution, which are outlined in Table 2 below. It shows a comparison of stress responses influenced by spiritual insight as compared to responses due to psychological defenses. The strength of spiritual responses depends largely on the individual's reliance on faith and capacity to reflect this reliance in deeds. Therefore, just as individuals vary, the strength of their spiritual response may not be the same. Indeed, some fail or falter when subjected to atrocities and are unable to respond with the necessary fortitude.

TABLE 2
Some Responses to Severe Social Stressors

Psychological Responses	Spiritual Responses
Denial or perplexity	Acknowledgement and forbearance
Amnesia or selective attention	Perceptivity and full attention
Fear	Courage
Avoidance and withdrawal	Affiliation and acceptance
Counterbehavior, e.g., fight or flight	Expression of love and tolerance
Disillusionment and discontent	Certitude and contentment
Dependence solely on self	Submission to Will of God
Coping through reason	Reaching beyond reason: faith

(Original version published in *Bahá'í Studies Notebook* 3.1/2 [1983]:60)

Fereshteh Taheri Bethel, a psychologist, studied the beliefs and responses of the Bahá'í martyrs of the recent persecutions in Iran, documenting the high frequency of these beliefs and responses ("Psychological Theory of Martyrdom").

The following are passages from handwritten wills, documents, and eyewitness accounts reported from the scene of martyrdom that demonstrate the impact and influence of the Bahá'í Faith on the personal development of its

believers. Marching toward a brutal destiny, each case presented here exemplifies a noble human virtue at the gloomiest moment of the person's earthly life.

Acknowledgement and Forbearance

One of the Bahá'ís expressed his thoughts in the last hours of his life in the following words in his will:

The value and personality of an individual are related to his patience and steadfastness in times of adversities. Two men were looking out through the bars of their prison. One looked heavenward and exclaimed, "What a bright sky! What glittering stars!" The other, gazing down to the earth, remarked, "What a dusty mess."

If one attains to the recognition of truth, he will never be tormented with worries. . . . ("Letters from the Martyrs" 1)

Perceptivity and Full Attention

A martyr wrote the following words in his will, addressed to his family:

It is five minutes to 11 p.m. . . . We have been summoned by the revolutionary court and called to the field of martyrdom. My wish is that you may share the tranquillity of conscience and confidence of heart that I feel in these last moments before my physical separation from you. . . .

Farewell, farewell to all of you. I wish you all success. . . .

My dear Parvín, take good care of the children. My children, take good care of Mama. May your father be sacrificed for you. I hope that you will not cry and mourn for this is against the wish of God.

Then, with soul-stirring words, he advised his wife to be "steadfast like a high mountain" ("Letters from the Martyrs" 2-3).

Courage

One of the martyrs, who was a strong man and an athlete, at the time of farewell with his family, addressed the chief of his prison ward as he pointed to his chest and uttered, "Ḥájí Áqá, do you see this breast, it is full of love of Bahá'u'lláh. Ordinary bullets will not hurt it. Tell them to shoot hard. Ḥájí Áqá I myself will give the command to fire, OK?" (quoted in *Khánimání*, "Three Accounts" 12).

In the history of the Bahá'í Faith, there are scores of shining examples of courage and certitude at harsh moments of tribulation. These individuals did not seek out torture for pleasure, but when the final verdict was announced against them, they welcomed it as a test of their true faith in their Beloved.

The following eyewitness account, given by a Bahá'í prisoner, is evidence of the brutal attempts of fanatical tormentors to break the resistance of a fellow inmate in Iran:

They tried to force her to recant, and the guards whipped her with wire cables. Because she was a woman they had covered her back with a cotton chador, because it would have been immodest for them to see her bare back. The wires had torn her back to shreds, so that you could see the bone, but they had also torn the chador to shreds and the pieces of rag had been whipped into the raw flesh on her back. They whipped her until she was unconscious and threw her in the cell. Then another group of guards came in and said they needed Yaldai for her trial. We all said she couldn't be tried because she was unconscious. They just grabbed her by the arms, with her feet trailing on the floor. She told us that when they were beating her they said they could stop if she would go on radio and television to publicly deny her faith and to say that the Bahá'ís spied for Israel. She was in the cell for 55 days without medical attention. Finally she was taken away and hanged with nine other women who had also refused to recant. (Quoted in *Newsweek* 57)

Affiliation and Acceptance

Another Bahá'í, who prior to his death refused to renounce his faith and thus was brought to his execution, wrote in his will the following words:

With great patience and forbearance, with utmost faith, I express my allegiance to Bahá'u'lláh, the Founder of the Bahá'í Faith; to the Báb, His unique Forerunner; to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the Mystery of God, Exemplar and Interpreter of His Teachings; to Shoghi Effendi, the Guardian of God's Cause; to the Universal House of Justice. . . . ("Letters from the Martyrs" 2)

Expression of Love and Tolerance

The following is an extraordinary example of tolerance and love while facing fanatical adversaries. It is an eyewitness description of a fateful day of a young martyr in the city of Shiraz. When he was brought to the scene of his martyrdom, he pleaded with the guards to tell him who would fire the bullets for his execution. No one responded. As he repeated his plea and wept sorely, his would-be executioner identified himself:

At this point Ihsán [the martyr] knelt before the man who spoke, and kissed his feet, and cried out: "Praise be to God, that in the last moments of my life I succeeded in carrying out an injunction of the Blessed Beauty. I am now ready and at your disposal."

The day after the funeral of her beloved father, [his eight-year-old daughter] took to her school flowers and sweets to distribute to the teacher and her classmates. The teacher was surprised and asked if it is a Bahá'í custom to do such a thing when one's father is killed? The little girl replied, "My father was not killed, he was martyred!" (*Bahá'í Canada* 19, 22)

Certitude and Contentment

In his will, a Bahá'í martyr wrote: "It is now 11 p.m. We have been transferred from the prison to the court premises. They are about to execute all seven of us. Praised be to God, we are in the utmost submission to His will and are most

content! . . . I hope that our insignificant blood will water the blessed tree of the Cause of God, that the Faith will soon gain its independence . . .” (“Letters from the Martyrs” 3).

Submission to the Will of God

The life and suffering of the martyrs of the present or the past clearly reflect their submission to the Will of God, who holds the reins of their destiny. The following words from the will of yet another martyr testify to this fact:

The means which change this fire (of tribulation) into a rose garden are the rains of reliance on God and the sweet breezes of devotion. “He doeth what He willeth . . .”

“Our hands are empty but our aspirations and resolve are high. When the test comes the resolve of people will be proven and their reliance will be manifested. . . .” (“Letters from the Martyrs” 1)

The foregoing examples show an absence of prejudice and the presence of love and forgiveness in those who faced their tragic end in the light of the teachings of Bahá’u’lláh. It also shows a clear contact with the reality of circumstances unperturbed by distressing events.

One of the striking characteristics of those who suffered severe persecution and martyrdom is that in the days and hours preceding their deaths, they rose to such a state of consciousness that they ignored their personal desires and interests. Instead, they radiated love and forbearance far beyond the expectations of their enemies. Moreover, they were imbued with contentment at a time when encircled by grievous assaults and afflictions. Eyewitness accounts of some of these martyrs after execution show a striking serenity and calmness and even in some cases smiles on their faces. “As if in those moments of torture the True Beloved had unveiled in their sight such effulgences of His limitless realms that they had experienced neither pain nor been conscious of their wounds. Instead, they had ascended in joy and eagerness, radiant and smiling” (*Khánimání*, “Three Accounts” 26). This indicates their spiritual strength and the nobility of their purpose. In such a state they ended their human journey in the Valley of True Poverty and Absolute Nothingness (Bahá’u’lláh, *Seven Valleys* 36–43), “the plane whereon the vestiges of all things (Kullu *Shay’*) are destroyed in the traveler, and on the horizon of eternity the Divine Face riseth out of the darkness, and the meaning of ‘All on the earth shall pass away, but the face of thy Lord . . .’ [Qu’rán 55: 26, 27] is made manifest” (Bahá’u’lláh, *Seven Valleys* 37).

In conclusion, the following words from Viktor Frankl on suffering are most befitting: “Suffering ceases to be suffering in some way at the moment it finds a meaning, such as the meaning of sacrifice” (*Man’s Search for Meaning* 179). Through the fire of these ordeals and from the ruins of destructive prejudice that the people of racial or religious minorities are experiencing today will rise the pillars of a new system of values and a new World Order in the community of humankind. As Christine Hakim-Samandari stated:

The Bahá'ís of the world work with certitude to temper violence and above all to create an organic system that will serve as a foundation for a world of justice and love. They are convinced that the pitch-dark night in which so many human beings are suffering will be brightened by a transformation of the consciousness as well as of the behavior of humanity, a transformation that will lead to its unity. . . . (“Victory over Violence” 29)

Conclusion

Persecution, suffering, and martyrdom characterize the evolution of world religions, particularly in their early stage of development and expansion. Although there is a general pattern of tolerance and submission to the Will of God in the persecution of the early believers of each religion, it is only recently that we have been able to explore the psychological dimension of these atrocities in relation to their spiritual aspects. The persecution of the adherents of the Bahá'í Faith, which is the most recent divine religion, allows us to study more closely the attitude of the persecuted individuals, more notably the martyrs close to our time, and to discover the uniqueness of their psychological and spiritual perceptivity and submission to the Will of God and dedication of their lives to humanity. The article also outlines the differential features between militant and self-imposed “martyrdom” and real martyrdom. It furthermore delineates different aspects of human values, resilience, and responses to various forms of human suffering and adversities. It is hoped that more research will be done in the future to illuminate this dark side of human suffering further in order to appreciate the true spiritual destiny of humankind on this planet.

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