

## Disaster Capitalism and the Bahá'í Faith: Similarities and Differences

Naomi Klein, in her book *The Shock Doctrine*, provides a thorough criticism of free market capitalism and challenges the view that it has been spread throughout the world peacefully. Her main premise is that disaster capitalists take advantage of opportune moments—moments in which societies find themselves in states of shock—to impose free market, neoliberal policies. The economic theories of Milton Friedman and the Chicago School are portrayed as forming an ideology that has dedicated followers and is responsible for grave injustices and suffering around the world. The Bahá'í Faith, a global religion founded in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Persia, seemingly shares some ideological ground with Friedmanite capitalism as depicted in *The Shock Doctrine*. This paper will take a critical perspective and compare and contrast the two belief systems with an eye to exposing the elements of each which have led or could potentially lead to the perpetration of injustice and oppression.

Before examining the similarities and differences between free market capitalism and the Bahá'í system, we will briefly outline the bases for the beliefs of each. Free market capitalism is based on the writings of such classic economic theorists as Adam Smith, David Ricardo, and Jean-Baptiste Say and the more recent neoclassical theories of Milton Friedman and the Chicago School of economics. Its fundamental tenet is that individuals are self-interested and that the pursuit of this self-interest is the best means to achieve the well-being of society as a whole. It espouses private enterprise with little

to no government intervention, promotes individual freedom and property rights, and considers markets to be the most effective regulators of the economy.

The Bahá'í religion, on the other hand, is based on the teachings of Mirza Husayn Alí, titled Bahá'u'lláh, whom Bahá'ís consider to be the most recent in a line of divine messengers that includes Buddha, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad. The overarching Bahá'í narrative is that Bahá'u'lláh has come to usher in a new era of global peace and prosperity that revolves around the principle of the oneness of mankind. Mainstream Bahá'í doctrine is based on the writings of Bahá'u'lláh as well as those of his generally recognized successors: his son, 'Abdu'l-Bahá; his great-grandson Shoghi Effendi Rabbani (referred to as the Guardian); and the Universal House of Justice, the highest governing body of the worldwide Bahá'í community. Basic tenets include belief in one God, the essential harmony of science and religion, equality of men and women, abolition of all forms of prejudice, and individual investigation of truth, and its main goal is the establishment of a new world order based on Bahá'u'lláh's teachings. The Bahá'í International Community has consultative status with several agencies of the United Nations and is involved with several other organizations concerned with international development.<sup>1</sup>

## **Crisis and Change**

The following quote by Milton Friedman is cited towards the beginning of Klein's book and provides a succinct encapsulation of what she terms the Shock Doctrine:

“Only a crisis—actual or perceived—produces real change.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “The Bahá'í Faith”, <<http://info.bahai.org/>>

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in *The Shock Doctrine*, p. 6

This crisis can sometimes be a natural disaster, such as Hurricane Katrina in 2005 and the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake, or a man-made event, such as the 1976 coup in Argentina and the invasion of Iraq by the US in 2003. Whatever the case may be, the state of shock that people find themselves in is thought to provide something of a “blank slate” for the implementation of policies that would normally be extremely unpopular. In other words, real change only happens following extreme situations that shake society to its core.

The following quote, taken from an extended letter of Shoghi Effendi to the Bahá'ís of the world in 1931, reveals a very similar line of thinking:

That so fundamental a revolution, involving such far-reaching changes in the structure of society, can be achieved through the ordinary processes of diplomacy and education seems highly improbable. We have but to turn our gaze to humanity's blood-stained history to realize that nothing short of intense mental as well as physical agony has been able to precipitate those epoch-making changes that constitute the greatest landmarks in the history of human civilization.<sup>3</sup>

Thus it can be seen that both belief systems consider crisis to be an inevitable precursor to the implementation of policies and systems that they consider necessary for society to advance.

Not only is this fundamental belief shared by both systems, but similar strategies are adopted by both as well. Basically, rather than attempt to tweak the existing system, the idea is to develop an alternative and wait for an opportune time for it to be implemented. This similarity can be seen from the following statements, the first from Friedman and the second from Shoghi Effendi:

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<sup>3</sup> *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 45

When that crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around. That, I believe, is our basic function: to develop alternatives to existing policies, to keep them alive and available until the politically impossible becomes politically inevitable.<sup>4</sup>

That is why the Bahá'ís must turn all their forces into the channel of building up the Bahá'í Cause and its Administration...if they build up the Bahá'í pattern they can offer it as a remedy when all else has failed.<sup>5</sup>

### **Important Differences**

Despite the striking similarities between the mindsets of disaster capitalism and the Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith, there are important differences as well. Firstly, the systems they seek to implement are quite distinct from one another. Secondly, the manner in which the respective systems are to be implemented is different. Lastly, the underlying conceptions of humanity that shape their world views are at variance with one another.

It is important to note at this point that while disaster capitalism has been put into practice, the Bahá'í system still operates mainly in the realm of theory, at least in terms of implementation on a wide scale. Neoliberal revolutions have been staged and real consequences felt, whereas the Bahá'í pattern is still being “built up”: Bahá'ís believe that “an embryonic civilization, incomparable and world-embracing, is imperceptibly maturing” in the administrative order of the Bahá'í religion.<sup>6</sup> Thus, discussion of the Bahá'í system will inevitably be based more on ideals and speculation than on historical facts and empirical evidence. Nonetheless, an analysis of underlying

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<sup>4</sup> Quoted in *The Shock Doctrine*, p. 6

<sup>5</sup> *Directives From the Guardian* pp. 57-58

<sup>6</sup> *The Promised Day Is Come*, pp. 16-19

beliefs and attitudes as well as the current “embryonic civilization” developing in the Bahá’í administrative system has the potential to be instructive.

As for the world orders which each ideology seeks to establish, The Bahá’í system cannot be classified as either “capitalist” or “socialist”; it contains elements of both systems as well as elements found in neither. Shoghi Effendi writes that “in its broadest outline, the Order anticipated by Bahá’u’lláh” involves the establishment of “a world community in which all economic barriers will have been permanently demolished and the interdependence of Capital and Labor definitely recognized”. The demolition of economic barriers certainly sounds like pure neoliberal economic policy, but the following, which speaks of regulation and equality, sounds a bit more like socialism:

The economic resources of the world will be organized, its sources of raw materials will be tapped and fully utilized, its markets will be cöordinated and developed, and the distribution of its products will be equitably regulated...Destitution on the one hand, and gross accumulation of ownership on the other, will disappear.<sup>7</sup>

The manner in which disaster capitalist ideas are implemented often involves violence and imposition. The revolutions in the Southern Cone, for example, were carried out by military juntas and implemented from the top down based on the ideas of a few educated elite—the Chicago Boys. Bahá’ís, on the other hand, emphasize the need for collective decision-making and promote, at least ostensibly, grassroots development and action.<sup>8</sup> In one of its many statements, the Bahá’í International Community says that “Governance...will need to provide for the meaningful participation of citizens in

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<sup>7</sup> *The World Order of Bahá’u’lláh*, p. 204

<sup>8</sup> “Turning Point for All Nations”, Section II

the conceptualization, design, implementation and evaluation of programs and policies that affect them.”<sup>9</sup> This is quite different from the outlook of disaster capitalists, who, while professing commitment to individual freedom, tend to think of the population at large as incapable of knowing what is best for it.

In *The Shock Doctrine*, Klein illustrates the eagerness of the neoliberals to implement everything all at once in Chile following the coup: to apply “shock treatment” in order to have the greatest effect. Friedman is quoted as saying that “gradualism is not feasible”.<sup>10</sup> Bahá’í writings, on the other hand, clearly indicate a vision of the gradual emergence of a new order, speaking of “tentative steps” and “hopeful signs” since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.<sup>11</sup> These steps include the establishment of the League of Nations and its successor, the United Nations, which are considered to be far from the institutions that the world ultimately needs, but steps in the right direction to be applauded.

The neoliberal/disaster capitalist conception of man is as an essentially selfish being who looks out for himself above all else. Individual freedom is of utmost importance; according to Friedman, “As liberals, we take freedom of the individual, or perhaps the family, as our ultimate goal in judging social arrangements.”<sup>12</sup> In contrast, Bahá’í writings consider the ultimate goal to be unity, and state that “by its very nature, unity requires self-sacrifice.”<sup>13</sup> This same principle applies to nation-states, who under

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<sup>9</sup> “Valuing Spirituality in Development”, Section V.

<sup>10</sup> *The Shock Doctrine*, p. 81

<sup>11</sup> “The Promise of World Peace”, p. 7

<sup>12</sup> *Capitalism and Freedom*, Chapter 1, pp. 7-17

<sup>13</sup> “One Common Faith”, p. 47

a Bahá'í commonwealth would give up a certain amount of sovereignty for the sake of maintaining world unity.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, Bahá'u'lláh states that, “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.”<sup>15</sup> This positive conception of human capacity for selflessness is foreign to neoliberal economics.

### **Ideological violence**

In *The Shock Doctrine*, Naomi Klein addresses the issue of evaluating ideologies and the extent to which they themselves can be held responsible for the injustices perpetrated by their followers. She suggests that, while this must be done with great caution, it is possible to identify certain characteristics of ideologies that are dangerous to society. She points to “closed, fundamentalist doctrines that cannot coexist with other belief systems; their followers deplore diversity and demand an absolute free hand to implement their perfect system.”<sup>16</sup> From this statement, we can discern three indicators of potentially harmful ideologies: fundamentalism and intolerance, absolutism, and belief in a perfect system. These characteristics will be explored in disaster capitalism and the Bahá'í Faith and implications discussed for each.

Market fundamentalism, Klein suggests, is responsible for the atrocities committed in the name of economic freedom around the world. She quotes Chicago School leader Frank Knight as calling the economic theories that make up the school of

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<sup>14</sup> *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 40

<sup>15</sup> *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 215

<sup>16</sup> *The Shock Doctrine*, p. 19

thought “sacred features of the system” that should be “inculcated” in students.<sup>17</sup> The perfect system is idealized and thought of as a hard science, backed up by mathematical equations and models that are revered for their beauty and simplicity. This creates a closed belief system that begins with the assumption that the system is perfect. Any problems are attributed to distortions and incomplete application of the perfect system, and the solution is to apply the fundamentals even more strictly.<sup>18</sup>

Likewise, numerous passages in Bahá’í documents reveal a strong belief in the perfection of the Bahá’í system. The following from Shoghi Effendi is quite illustrative of this point:

The [Bahá’í order], virile and unconquerable, is plucking asunder its chains, and is vindicating its title to be the one refuge within which a sore-tried humanity, purged from its dross, can attain its destiny.<sup>19</sup>

Briefly, Bahá’ís view Bahá’u’lláh as a messenger of God, and thus consider his system to be divine in origin. This makes it both sacred and difficult to challenge.

A common problem when revolutionaries come to power is how they deal with dissenters. Klein estimates that in the Southern Cone, between 100,000 and 150,000 people were “disappeared” and subjected to torture.<sup>20</sup> In a scenario replayed countless times around the world, political opponents and “subversives” are identified as enemies and dealt with accordingly. Books are burned, freedoms are curtailed, and fear is

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid, p. 50

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, p. 51

<sup>19</sup> *The Promised Day Is Come*, pp. 16-19

<sup>20</sup> *The Shock Doctrine*, p. 94

instilled into the citizenry. Those in power, averse to diversity of thought, use violence and oppression to rid society of those who disagree with their system.

While violent human rights abuses by Bahá'í institutions are as yet unheard of, certain ideological elements might be seen as foreboding signs. Bahá'ís believe that Bahá'u'lláh established a Covenant with his followers to protect his faith from schism and preserve its unity. In the Covenant, authority is passed down from Bahá'u'lláh to Abdu'l-Bahá, then to Shoghi Effendi and the Universal House of Justice, each of which is endowed with “supreme authority” and “divine guidance”.<sup>21</sup> Those who, while considering themselves Bahá'ís, reject the authority of Bahá'í institutions and seek to create divisions, or who actively oppose the administration, are declared Covenant-breakers. They are expelled from the religion and must be shunned by Bahá'ís.<sup>22</sup> According to Abdu'l-Bahá, “...one of the greatest and most fundamental principles of the Cause of God is to shun and avoid entirely the Covenant-breakers, for they will utterly destroy the Cause of God, exterminate His Law and render of no account all efforts exerted in the past.”<sup>23</sup> Considering this strong language, it is reasonable to be concerned about the protection of the rights of these individuals if Bahá'ís were to “come to power”, so to say.

The Bahá'í Faith proclaims to operate on a principle not of uniformity, but rather of “unity in diversity”.<sup>24</sup> Official documents place great emphasis on protecting

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<sup>21</sup> “The Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh”, <<http://info.bahai.org/covenant-of-bahauallah.html>>

<sup>22</sup> “The Covenant and Covenant-breaker”, <[http://bahai-library.com/index.php5?file=momen\\_encyclopedia\\_covenant](http://bahai-library.com/index.php5?file=momen_encyclopedia_covenant)>

<sup>23</sup> “The Will and Testament of Abdu'l-Bahá”, p. 20

<sup>24</sup> “The Protection of Diversity in the Bahá'í Community”, <<http://info.bahai.org/protection-of-diversity-in-bahai-community.html>>

minorities, encouraging diversity of opinion, and safeguarding the personal and civil rights of all individuals, regardless of race, religion, or ideological background.<sup>25</sup> Shoghi

Effendi in a letter written in July 1925 states:

...the mere fact of disaffection or estrangement, or recantation of belief can in no way detract from the legitimate civil rights of free citizens or otherwise impinge upon them, even to the extent of the eye of a needle. If the [Bahá'ís] were to act otherwise...they would frustrate the full revelation of God's grace and favour to men in this luminous age.<sup>26</sup>

These rights and freedoms, while not explicitly defined, are said to be guaranteed to all people, including Covenant-breakers, the worst enemies of the faith.

Despite the Bahá'í Faith's avowed commitment to encouraging diversity of opinion and thought, concerns have been voiced regarding the degree to which this is true in practice in the Bahá'í community. One controversial policy is that of literature review, which requires Bahá'ís to submit works for publication to a review process that has been criticized as contributing to historical revisionism and censorship.<sup>27</sup> There are also documented cases of Bahá'ís being summarily expelled from the faith due to views expressed in internet forums that were perceived as being in opposition to official doctrine.<sup>28</sup> An ex-Bahá'í academic—and participant in these internet forums—has written and published a report about what he views as an increase in fundamentalism in the Bahá'í community in the United States and at the world center in Haifa, Israel, pointing to such criteria as belief in scriptural inerrancy and strict authoritarianism in

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Salisbury, “An Examination of Suppression and Distortion in 20th-Century Baha'i Literature”

<sup>28</sup> “Expulsion”, <<http://www.whoisbahauallah.com/Alison/expulsion.html>>

his analysis.<sup>29</sup> Given these legitimate concerns, the onus is on Bahá'ís and their institutions to prove, in actions as well as words, their commitment to encouraging diversity of thought and protecting the rights of all people.

## **Conclusions**

Using Klein's definition of fundamentalism, both disaster capitalism and the Bahá'í Faith display tendencies toward fundamentalist attitudes and beliefs that have been or could potentially be responsible for violence and injustice. It is important to point out that while there are clear signs of fundamentalism in both ideologies being discussed, this is not to say that all believers in free market capitalism or all Bahá'ís are fundamentalists. Non-fundamentalist elements exist within both groups, though they may not be the most powerful or outspoken. Given the dismal track records of governments and political systems backed by fundamentalist ideologies, it is imperative to take heed of the dangers of fundamentalism and guard against its influence. The possibility of building a world order based on justice and that universally guarantees human rights and individual freedoms depends on it. In the final chapter of Klein's book, she points to the rise of grassroots "reconstruction" movements that seek to do just that.<sup>30</sup> Let us hope and/or pray that they are successful.

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<sup>29</sup> Cole, "Fundamentalism in the Contemporary U.S. Baha'i Community"

<sup>30</sup> *The Shock Doctrine*, p. 466

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