

Ḥuqúqu’Iláh and Our Economic Life

This workshop provides an overview of key Bahá’í Teachings to help us obtain an orientation to economic life, and particularly to understand how Ḥuqúqu’Iláh (Right of God) relates to these Teachings.

“Thou hast enquired about the Ḥuqúq. From one’s annual income, all expenses during the year are deductible, and on what is left 19% is payable to the Ḥuqúq.”

-Abdu’l-Baha; Compilation #45

1. Introduction

All of us participate in the economy and have our own personal understanding of it. One of its formal descriptions is: “Economics examines how economic activity (production, consumption, and trade of goods and services) is organized, how individuals and societies structure economic activity, and the relative effectiveness of different institutions in managing scarcity¹.” There is no current definition of “Baha’i economics”, but there are principles that can be used to gradually evolve an approach. Shoghi Effendi wrote:

“Abdu’l-Bahá has developed in various of His talks... the principles upon which the Bahá’í economic system would be based. A system that prevents among others the gradual control of wealth in the hands of a few and the resulting state of both extremes, of wealth and poverty.”

- From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, October 28, 1927

The evolution of a Bahá’í economic system is not necessarily expected to take place in isolated academic discussions, but rather within the evolving life of society at large and the Baha’i community. One of the fundamental practices that will facilitate this is the law of Ḥuqúqu’Iláh, a subject about which we are gradually learning more, with its implications for economic life becoming more evident over time in the context of gradual societal transformation.

Of course, it is important to fully understand the spiritual significance of the law of Ḥuqúqu’Iláh before exercising its material expression. As for its implications, we recognize that there are three inter-linked areas of importance for the law of Ḥuqúqu’Iláh :

1. How the observance of this law in its full spirit can affect the spiritual condition of the individual.

¹ <https://www.ucalgary.ca/student-services/degree-guide/arts/economics#:~:text=Economics%20is%20the%20systematic%20study,organized%20when%20resources%20are%20scarce.>

2. How the application of this law is vital for the functioning of Baha'i institutions
3. How the application of this law can help lead to reconstructing the social and economic life of society

The first two aspects have been better explored and understood by the Bahá'í community. Our focus here will be primarily on the third aspect: how Ḥuqúqu'lláh can increasingly play a role in regenerating the economic life of society.

Objectives of the Workshop:

- To explore how Bahá'í Teachings, and the law of Ḥuqúqu'lláh in particular, can provide direction for the way our economic life should ultimately be arranged
- To help strengthen our capacity to engage in discourses on current economic challenges
- To gain a better understanding of the way Ḥuqúqu'lláh forms an intrinsic part in “reorganizing human society”
- To encourage thinking about the interrelatedness of Ḥuqúqu'lláh and social action

Overview of the Workshop:

- 1) Challenges of Our Current Economic Systems: highlighting why a new, transformative approach is needed
- 2) Oneness of Humankind: Learning about our collective life, including oneness, reciprocity, equality, unity with nature and how the observance of Ḥuqúqu'lláh can have the potential to reinforce them
- 3) Individual Qualities And the Economy: Examining some personal qualities needed to gradually evolve a more enlightened economic system
- 4) Teachings Regarding Economic Life: Exploring the relationship between and transforming our economic life

Please note that each section will contain selected quotations along with discussion questions to encourage sharing and deeper learning. The discussion does not need to be limited to answering these questions, but due to time constraints, it may be best to reserve some longer discussion topics until the end.

1 Challenges of Our Current Economic Systems: A Discussion

This workshop will not enter into details about the deficiencies of our current economic system, but it is worth reflecting briefly about this subject, as we prepare to explore the implications of Ḥuqúqu'lláh for the economy.

Discussion Questions:

1. What are some of the main concerns about the economy that you have?

Please consider your own responses before reviewing the following examples:

- a) Corrosive consumerism
- b) Increasing inequality and disparity, within households and societies
- c) Lawlessness & corruption
- d) Greed & competitiveness
- e) Apathy
- f) A scarcity mindset
- g) Overexploitation of natural resources
- h) Contamination of air, water, soil
- i) Social injustices, prejudices, biases
- j) Challenges of governance & scale
- k) Inadequate Measures of economic growth and wealth distribution
- l) Limitations of current economic models & ideologies
- m) Media influences
- n) Human nature as currently envisaged

2. What may be some Bahá'í principles that inform our approach to the economy?

2 Oneness of Humankind

As Baha'is we recognize that there is a twofold purpose in life: to know and worship God and that "All human beings have been created to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization."² This section focuses on the latter aspect.

"My object is none other than the betterment of the world and the tranquility of its peoples. The well-being of mankind, its peace and security, are unattainable unless and until its unity is firmly established. This unity can never be achieved so long as the counsels which the Pen of the Most High hath revealed are suffered to pass unheeded..."

- Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*

Our economic life should be seen within this context, a laboratory within which we develop our capabilities and a practical means for fulfilling our fundamental purpose. Promotion of oneness provides the overall direction to individual development, as well. As the Universal House of Justice has written:

² Bahá'u'lláh, cited in BIC (2014): Contributing to an Ever-Advancing Civilization: The Baha'i International Community and the United Nations <https://www.bic.org/statements/contributing-ever-advancing-civilization-bahai-international-community-and-united-nations>

“Economic life is an arena for the expression of honesty, integrity, trustworthiness, generosity, and other qualities of the spirit. “Man’s merit lieth in service and virtue”, Bahá’u’lláh avers, “and not in the pageantry of wealth and riches.” And further: “Dissipate not the wealth of your precious lives in the pursuit of evil and corrupt affection, nor let your endeavours be spent in promoting your personal interest.”.

- Universal House of Justice, to the Bahá’ís of the World, 1 March 2017

“For the principle of the oneness of humankind... asks not merely for cooperation among people and nations. It calls for a complete reconceptualization of the relationships that sustain society.”

-Universal House of Justice, To the Baha'is of Iran, 2 March 2013, para. 6

Crucially, this orientation of the individual towards oneness is promoted by the law of Ḥuqúqu’lláh:

“Beyond the bestowal of such spiritual benefits upon the individual, this law promotes the common good and contributes to the spiritualization of humanity through the promotion of a new attitude towards the acquisition and use of material resources necessary for great collective enterprises designed to improve all aspects of life. Indeed, the institution of Huqúqu’lláh is a key instrument for constructing the foundation and supporting the structure of the New World Order of Bahá’u’lláh, serving as a powerful element in the growth of a world civilization.”

- The Universal House of Justice; 21 June 2016

Discussion Questions:

1. In what way could Ḥuqúqu’lláh be seen as a practice for strengthening the oneness of humankind?
2. How does this compare to the way the world is organized today?

2.1 Elimination of extremes of wealth and poverty³

In a talk given in New York in 1912 ‘Abdu’l-Bahá stated:

“Each one of you must have great consideration for the poor and render them assistance. Organize in an effort to help them and prevent increase of poverty. The greatest means for prevention is that whereby the laws of the community will be so framed and enacted that it will not be possible for a few to be millionaires and many destitute. One of Bahá’u’lláh’s

³ Drawing from discussion in

https://bahaipedia.org/Elimination_of_extremes_of_wealth_and_poverty#:~:text=Elimination%20of%20Extremes%20of%20Wealth%20and%20Poverty%20is%20a%20concept,of%20the%20Bah%C3%A1'%C3%AD%20Faith.

teachings is the adjustment of means of livelihood in human society. Under this adjustment there can be no extremes in human conditions as regards wealth and sustenance.”

- ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p 216

“The arrangements of the circumstances of the people must be such that poverty shall disappear, that everyone, as far as possible ... shall share in comfort and well-being.”

- Cited in *One Planet One Habitation*; Bahá’í International Community

Bahá’í Teachings do not advocate absolute equality:

“Social inequality is the inevitable outcome of the natural inequality of men. Human beings are different in ability and should, therefore, be different in their social and economic standing. Extremes of wealth and poverty should, however, be totally abolished. Those whose brains have contributed to the creation and improvement of the means of production must be fairly rewarded, though these means may be owned and controlled by others.”

- Shoghi Effendi, quoted in *Compilation on Social Action*; August 2020

Still, the Teachings are unequivocal on the need for reforms:

“The inordinate disparity between rich and poor, a source of acute suffering, keeps the world in a state of instability, virtually on the brink of war... The solution calls for the combined application of spiritual, moral and practical approaches. A fresh look at the problem is required, entailing consultation with experts from a wide spectrum of disciplines, devoid of economic and ideological polemics, and involving the people directly affected in the decisions that must urgently be made.”

- *Universal House of Justice, The Promise of World Peace*

An important aspect of the vision of Ḥuqúqu’Iláh is that it is meant to eventually help eliminate extremes of wealth and poverty.

Discussion Questions:

1. How can Huququ’Ilah contribute to the change of our attitudes and eventually the policies in eliminating extremes of wealth & poverty?
2. What is meant in the first quote: “organize in an effort to help them and prevent increase of poverty”?
3. What is meant in the second quote: “arrangements of the circumstances of the people must be such that poverty shall disappear”?

2.2 Reciprocity

The ideas of reciprocity and cooperation are found throughout the Writings, as a key defining feature of oneness, and this sets the stage for the arrival and implementation of Ḥuqúqu'lláh around the Bahá'í world.

“Abdu'l-Bahá explains that the more the qualities of cooperation and mutual assistance are manifested by a people, “the more will human society advance in progress and prosperity”. In the Faith, this principle distinguishes and shapes the interactions of individuals, institutions, and communities, and it endows the body of the Cause with moral vigour and spiritual health.”

– Universal House of Justice, Dec. 30, 2021

Discussion Question:

1. How is Ḥuqúqu'lláh related to the concept of reciprocity?

2.3 Equality of women and men

One of the most fundamental Bahá'í Teachings is that of equality of women and men. Bringing gender equality implies equal opportunities to education as well as involvement in economic & social arenas. This is a principle which by now is espoused by most people, though it is very much a work in progress. As stated by the United Nations:

“Gender equality is not only a fundamental human right, but a necessary foundation for a peaceful, prosperous and sustainable world. There has been progress over the last decades, but the world is not on track to achieve gender equality by 2030.”

- United Nations, *SDG 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.*⁴

What does Ḥuqúqu'lláh have to do with gender equality? One possible implication is how Ḥuqúqu'lláh promotes a household consultation on needs and wants. As stated by UNICEF:

“...the Sustainable Development Agenda and The Beijing Platform for Action, among others—emphasize that for equality to be achieved, women and men must have equal freedom to make decisions and to control resources.”

- UNICEF, *Gender equality begins at home*⁵

Consultation is fundamental for Bahá'í families, communities and institutions

“The Great Being saith: The heaven of divine wisdom is illumined with the two luminaries of consultation and compassion. Take ye counsel together in all matters, inasmuch as consultation is the lamp of guidance which leadeth the way, and is the bestower of understanding.”

- Tablets of Baha'u'llah

⁴ <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/gender-equality/>

⁵ <https://unece.org/media/news/352812>

"...the exhortations contained in the Bahá'í Writings should increasingly inform economic relationships within families, neighbourhoods, and peoples... the friends everywhere should... make their own individual and collective contributions to economic justice and social progress wherever they reside."

- Universal House of Justice, to the Bahá'ís of the World, 1 March 2017

Discussion Question:

1. How can the practice of Ḥuqúqu'lláh promote consultation and equality in decision-making in families and in the household?

2.4 Organic unity of humans with nature

Another expression of oneness is with nature:

"Man is organic with the world. His inner life molds the environment and is itself also 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."

- Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, 17 February 1933, Compilation on Social and Economic Development, p. 4

Ḥuqúqu'lláh can help us learn that sustainable wellbeing depends on living with moderation and sharing our wealth for planetary wellbeing. We need to consider our use of resources and their impact on the environment.

Modern economic arrangements have resulted in both the degradation of ecosystems and the impoverishment of many local communities and individual lives. Inequalities are rising and the harm inherent in the perpetual creation and gratification of wants has been demonstrated beyond objection. Putting the world on more ecologically sustainable foundations requires a recasting of the global economic order. People and the planet need to be valued as explicitly today as profit and economic gain have been in the past.

As current imbalances are driven in large part by numerous forms of excess, the principle of moderation will need to find much fuller expression in global arrangements. Concepts of contentment, sufficiency, and simplicity, which find little place in growth-driven paradigms, will have to be reclaimed and expanded... The practical experience of individuals, communities, businesses, and nations leaves no room for doubt: there is an inherent moral dimension to the generation, distribution, and utilization of wealth and resources.

...Every choice leaves a trace. Economic decisions must therefore be taken in accordance with lofty ideals. Wealth must serve humanity. There is no justification for continuing to perpetuate views, structures, rules, and systems that manifestly fail to serve the common

good.

- Bahá'í International Community, *One Planet One Habitation*

Discussion Question:

1. How does the practice of Ḥuqúqu'lláh help us have more regard for how our economic activities affect the natural environment?

3 Individual Qualities & the Economy

The Baha'i teachings describe human beings as intrinsically noble, with a capacity for love and knowledge. Our purpose is to develop spiritually, and to advance the progress of the soul in this world and into the next life. In this section we will explore how observance of the law of Huququ'llah can support our individual purpose in this way.

Developing our spiritual qualities is an essential prerequisite to eventually reforming economic systems:

"...the Writings are not so rich on this subject [economics] and many issues at present baffling the minds of the world are not even mentioned. The primary consideration is the spirit that has to permeate our economic life, and this will gradually crystallize itself into definite institutions and principles that will help to bring about the ideal conditions foretold by Bahá'u'lláh."

- From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States and Canada, December 20, 1931

3.1 Humility and Detachment

Ḥuqúqu'lláh helps us learn that our wealth comes from and belongs to God.

"Attach not thyself to anything unless in it thou seest the reality of God - this is the first step into the court of eternity. The earth life lasts but a short time, even its benefits are transitory; that which is temporary does not deserve our heart's attachment...Detachment does not consist in setting fire to one's house or becoming bankrupt or throwing one's fortune out of the window, or even giving away all of one's possessions. Detachment consists in refraining from letting our possessions possess us."

- Abdu'l-Bahá, *Divine Philosophy*, p. 135

Discussion Question:

1. What is meant by 'refraining from letting our possessions possess us' mean?

3.2 Wealth and moderation

*"In all circumstances they should conduct themselves with moderation."
– Baha'u'llah, Lights of Guidance, p. 294*

*"The civilization, so often vaunted by the learned exponents of arts and sciences, will, if allowed to overleap the bounds of moderation, bring great evil upon men. Thus warneth you He Who is the All Knowing. If carried to excess, civilization will prove as prolific a source of evil as it had been of goodness when kept within the restraints of moderation."
– Baha'u'llah, Gleanings, p. 342*

*"For wealth is most commendable "provided the entire population is wealthy." Examining one's life to determine what is a necessity and then discharging with joy one's obligation in relation to the law of Ḥuqúqu'lláh is an indispensable discipline to bring one's priorities into balance, purify whatever wealth one possesses, and ensure that the share which is the Right of God provides for the greater good. At all times, contentment and moderation, benevolence and fellow feeling, sacrifice and reliance on the Almighty are qualities that befit the God-fearing soul."
-March 1, 2017 from the Universal House of Justice*

Part of our inclination to consume more is driven by materialism, and the capacity for developing balance and moderation is important to regulate this drive. Ḥuqúqu'lláh can be used to raise consciousness and strengthen these capacities.

*"...to reject the opiate of consumerism; to turn away from materialist ideologies and the worldviews they aggressively promote and fix one's gaze upon the bright beacon that is the laws and principles of God."
- Universal House of Justice, Message to the Continental Board of Counsellors; December 2021, paragraph 36*

Discussion Questions:

1. What are the implications of limitless growth and consumption?
2. How does 'rejecting the opiate of consumerism' help fix our gaze on the laws of God – specifically the law of Huququ'llah?

3.3 Trust: Coherence between Individuals, Communities, and Institutions

As we observe the law of Huququ'llah, we recognize the role that trust plays in the development of the individual, the community, and the institutions. Since Huququ'llah is an act of conscience, each person or family is entrusted with its observance. Similarly, there is immense trust in the way that Huququ'llah funds are used by the Centre of the Faith.

"Trustworthiness is the greatest portal leading unto the tranquility and security of the people. In truth the stability of every affair hath depended and doth depend upon it."

-Bahá'u'lláh, Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 37

"Should a person acquire one hundred mithqáls of gold, nineteen mithqáls thereof belong unto God, the Creator of earth and heaven... "O people! Act not treacherously in the matter of Huququ'lláh and dispose not of it, except by His leave. Thus hath it been ordained in His Epistles as well as in this glorious Tablet."

- Bahá'u'lláh: Ibid., Extract No. 10

"Every choice a Bahá'í makes—as employee or employer, producer or consumer, borrower or lender, benefactor or beneficiary—leaves a trace, and the moral duty to lead a coherent life demands that one's economic decisions be in accordance with lofty ideals, that the purity of one's aims be matched by the purity of one's actions to fulfil those aims."

– Universal House of Justice, March 1, 2017

Discussion Question:

1. How does the practice of Huququ'lláh encourage and support trustworthiness?

4 Teachings Regarding Economic Life

The following are a few reminders of how the Baha'i Teachings, and the law of Huququ'lláh, can become instrumental in re-shaping the economy to be more aligned with our true purpose.

4.1 Economic Life: An arena for expression of qualities of spirit

"Although Bahá'u'lláh does not set out in His Revelation a detailed economic system, a constant theme throughout the entire corpus of His teachings is the reorganization of human society. Consideration of this theme inevitably gives rise to questions of economics . . . The aim is to learn about how to participate in the material affairs of society in a way that is consistent with the divine precepts and how, in practical terms, collective prosperity can be advanced through justice and generosity, collaboration and mutual assistance."

- Universal House of Justice, to the Bahá'ís of the World, 1 March 2017

Discussion Question:

1. The House of Justice reminds us that "the aim is to learn about how to participate in the material affairs of society in a way that is consistent with the divine precepts." What are the implications of this for Huququ'llah?

4.2 Economic System of the Future

Current discussions about economics can inform our learning but should not limit our thinking about future societal organization.

"Regarding your questions concerning the Bahá'í attitude on various economic problems, such as the problem of ownership, control and distribution of capital, and of other means of production, the problem of trusts and monopolies, and such economic experiments as social cooperatives; the Teachings of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá do not provide specific and detailed solutions to all such economic questions which mostly pertain to the domain of technical economics, and as such do not concern directly the Cause. True, there are certain guiding principles in Bahá'í Sacred Writings on the subject of economics, but these do by no means cover the whole field of theoretical and applied economics, and are mostly intended to guide further Bahá'í economic writers and technicians to evolve an economic system which would function in full conformity with the spirit and the exact provisions of the Cause on this and similar subjects. The International House of Justice will have, in consultation with economic experts, to assist in the formulation and evolution of the Bahá'í economic system of the future. One thing, however, is certain, that the Cause neither accepts the theories of the Capitalistic economics in full, nor can it agree with the Marxists and Communists in their repudiation of the principle of private ownership and of the vital sacred rights of the individual."

- From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer; June 10, 1930:
Ibid

Discussion Questions:

1. Are any of the current systems limiting our thinking about future economic possibilities?
2. How can Ḥuqúqu'lláh help us in re-envisioning our economic future?

4.3 Ḥuqúqu'lláh as a Means for Integrated Development of Society

While the economic system will need to be fundamentally recast, the international community is currently seeking to address some of the worst structural problems and support humanitarian and developmental programs. For example, many efforts are currently underway to eliminate poverty and hunger, increase access to quality education and health care, and strengthen the capacities of the protagonists of development. While hundreds of billions are currently being contributed for these purposes, the estimates for addressing poverty show that more fiscal and philanthropic measures are needed⁶. Ḥuqúqu'lláh will have an ever-evolving role in addressing such challenges.

The Universal House of Justice explains that Ḥuqúqu'lláh has specific purposes:

“The Sacred Texts affirm that the Ḥuqúqu'lláh is to be paid to the Authority in the Faith to whom all must turn, and indicate that these funds may be “expended for the relief of the poor, the disabled, the needy, and the orphans, and for other vital needs of the Cause of God”. Decisions concerning such factors as the timing, the methods of disbursement and the amount rest with the House of Justice.... the funds are spent for such purposes as, “promotion of the teaching and proclamation of the Faith worldwide; care, maintenance and restoration of Bahá'í Holy Places; building up of the Bahá'í World Administrative Centre; support of the work of the many Bahá'í institutions and agencies; erection and restoration of Bahá'í Houses of Worship; establishment and support of new institutions; charitable and benevolent undertakings; and support of the worldwide manifold interests of the Faith.”

- Universal House of Justice, letter to an individual, 16 February 1998; Ḥuqúqu'lláh compilation #110

⁶ For example, it is estimated that \$114 billion annually is needed to reach the goal of water and sanitation for all: Hutton, G., & Varughese, M. (2016). The Costs of Meeting the 2030 Sustainable Development Goal Targets on Drinking Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene. World Bank, Washington, DC.

The UN Food and Agricultural Organization estimates that between \$39 and 50 billion annually is needed to eliminate hunger. If the world's billionaires contributed 1% of their wealth, it would generate \$130 billion per year. Kharas, H. (2021, November 5). Elon Musk, billionaires, and the United Nations: The 1% solution to global development. Brookings. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/future-development/2021/11/05/elon-musk-billionaires-and-the-united-nations-the-1-solution-to-global-development/>.

Discussion Question:

1. In summary, what are some of your learnings or conclusions regarding Huququ'llah and economic life?