

Individual Freedom

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In this country we are blessed to have many individual freedoms, among them the freedom to express our opinions on social media about the legitimacy of the presidential election, and the freedom to follow or ignore the health guidelines related to the Covid-19 pandemic. Regardless of where we stand on these issues, the country has experienced much turmoil and suffering in the past year.

“Freedom is indeed essential to all expressions of human life,” Baha’i writings say. “Freedom of thought, freedom of expression, freedom of action are among the freedoms which have received the ardent attention of social thinkers across the centuries. The resulting outflow of such profound thought has exerted a tremendous liberating influence in the shaping of modern society. Generations of the oppressed have fought and died in the name of freedom.” But “where does freedom limit our possibilities for progress, and where do limits free us to thrive?”

Rapid advances in communication and transportation systems have indeed turned our planet into a global village and made us more interconnected than ever before. As a result, our words and actions can impact a greater number of people than ever before.

In response to these rapid societal changes, social media companies and government agencies are increasingly adopting policies to regulate our interactions. At first, these regulations may seem to “limit our possibilities,” and yet to the extent that they are conducive to humanity’s peace and progress, those “limits free us to thrive.”

Aside from such regulations, what can inform and guide our discourses and actions? Both science and religion, according to Baha’i writings, as these are the “two complementary systems of knowledge and practice by which human beings come to understand the world around them and through which civilization advances.”

“Arts, crafts and sciences uplift the world of being, and are conducive to its exaltation,” these writings say. “Great indeed is the claim of scientists and craftsmen on the peoples of the world.”

The spiritual teachings of all the great religions have also uplifted humanity through the ages. Hence the Golden Rule – the ethic that we should treat others as we ourselves would wish to be treated – should continue to guide our physical and virtual interactions, but in this age its scope needs to be expanded:

“Every imperfect soul is self-centered and thinketh only of his own good,” Baha’i writings say. “But as his thoughts expand a little, he will begin to think of the welfare and comfort of his family. If his ideas still more widen, his concern will be the felicity of his fellow citizens; and if still they widen, he will be thinking of the glory of his land and of his race. But when ideas and views reach the utmost degree of expansion and attain the stage of perfection, then will he be interested in the exaltation of humankind.”

As we exercise our individual freedoms, let us put aside the inordinate mistrust of our institutions; let us treat one another with the utmost love, respect, and fairness; and let us weigh every belief in the light of science and reason.