

## CHAPTER 12

# The Canadian Baha'is 1938 –2000: Constructions Of Oneness In Personal And Collective Identity

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Globalization theorist Roland Robertson defines globalization, in its basic sense, as involving ‘the compression of the entire world on the one hand and a rapid increase in consciousness of the whole world, on the other’ (1998a: 29). This consciousness, he argues, is not a corollary to globalisation but rather intrinsic to it (1998b: 376). In this paper I will focus on the second part of Robertson’s definition, ‘the consciousness of the whole world’, and how this consciousness has been nurtured within the Canadian Baha’i community.

Since the inception of the Baha’i Faith the concept of a global community has been vigorously promoted in the teachings of the religion. While this world vision was not immediately understandable to early Canadian Baha’is, it gradually became realized through their engagement with the teachings of their Faith, the social processes of Baha’i community life and the administrative structure of the religion. My analysis of the life histories of Canadian Baha’is shows that an integral aspect of the construction of a Baha’i identity involves the process of incorporating world-mindedness into the self-concept.

### **Background to the Study**

This paper is framed through a sociological perspective and draws upon data from my doctoral research on religion and identity in the Baha’i Faith, conducted in the late 1990s. The sample of twenty people, ages sixty-eight to ninety-three, are from diverse racial and ethnic

backgrounds, and live/lived in nine of the Canadian provinces.<sup>1</sup> Additional interviews brought to a total of thirty, the number of people who were interviewed about their Baha'i experience. The people participating in this qualitative study became Baha'is in the 1938 –1950s time period, and so their life stories mirror understandings that have been gleaned and reflected upon over the course of fifty to sixty years.

The life story interviews took place over a three-year period from 1993-1996. The interviews were open-ended, self-directed, and supplemented with a questionnaire only when necessary. In this type of life history, participants speak about their life course at length - from childhood to their present age. This method is different than an interview, which is conducted for a few hours and where the person shares memories about certain events, or gives answers to specific questions.

The stories of the cohort were audiotape recorded and transcribed verbatim.<sup>2</sup> Besides participant observation over the course of many years, I also undertook archival research at the National Baha'i Centre in Toronto, Ontario. Perusing personal correspondence, bulletins, newsletters, official correspondence and minutes of national agencies and committees, enabled me to acquire a broader picture of the 1940s-1960s time period in the National Canadian Baha'i community.

I chose these people because of their age, and not according to their achievements in the religion or in society. I knew that a few had a reputation of being outstanding in one way or another for their contributions to Canadian society in social and economic development, or to the service of the religion in general. It did not become apparent until later, however, that all these people were very involved in the private and public activities of the religion. In fact, nearly all were avid students of the Baha'i teachings, all were travel speakers and/or lecturers for the Baha'i Faith, many are people of distinguished administrative experience, many are

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<sup>1</sup> The life-history participants of my doctoral study represent various ethnic and immigrant backgrounds, including Hungarian, Jewish-Canadian, Scot, French-Canadian, Black-Canadian, Iranian, and Anglo-Canadian. The religious background of the people in my sample is not as diverse. All of the women came from a Christian background except one who was born into an Iranian Baha'i family, and one who was born into a Canadian Jewish family. The men in the study followed a similar religious background. All of their families were from the main Christian churches, except for three men who came from diverse religious backgrounds such as an Iranian Baha'I, a British spiritualist, and a Thai Buddhist. The age groupings of the women, when interviewed, included two in their late sixties, six in their late seventies, and three in their early nineties. The men were all in their late seventies.

<sup>2</sup> Copies of the life narratives were sent to all those participants who wanted them. The length of interviews varied: the longest was 990 tape-recorded minutes or 16.5 hours, the shortest was 135 minutes, or 2.25 taped hours, and the average was 7.5 taped hours.

greatly loved and respected within and without the Baha'i community, and all, with two exceptions, were pioneers<sup>3</sup> to other parts of Canada or overseas.

The reader of this paper may have questions about the life-history participants this paper: 'Do these people reflect the range of people in the Baha'i community of the last century, and does this paper reflect the understandings of Baha'is of the present day?' In response, I found, through conducting five full life-history interviews of middle-aged Baha'is that the primary socialization experiences were almost identical in the lives of both the older and the middle-age Baha'is – i.e. engagement with the teachings of the religion, and participation in the social processes of community life deepened the sense of self and religious identity. Any differences would be cultural and historically based—for example, the youth culture that came into the religion in the 1960s, and the changes that occurred within the administrative structure as a result of different goals, plans, and institutions.

As a final word in this introduction I wish to note that, although the short excerpts in this paper do not do justice to the rich accounts of experience transmitted through the life story process, I hope they give the reader some sense of how the Baha'is made meaning of their lives.

### **An Integrative Global Narrative: The Unifying Concept of Progressive Revelation**

'For the first time in human history, self and society are interrelated in a global milieu...', Anthony Giddens observes, 'and this results in "transformations in self identity" involving every aspect of personal life' as well as the establishment of 'social connections of very wide scope...' (1991: 32). When we consider how religion contributes to this process, James Beckford points out that religions provide: '[M]any of the symbols of common humanity and are therefore implicated in globalization' (2000: 4, 90). Robertson similarly has argued that it is 'a mistake to consider that material-economic forces are the prime mover in the formation of a world as a whole', and that this type of thinking has a 'long history in theology and metaphysical thinking' (1994:123,131).

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<sup>3</sup> Pioneering is the term used for a person who volunteers to teach the religion in other places or countries.

Usually these people are self-subsistent, except in cases where it is impossible (due to circumstances out of their control) to work in the receiving country. In the case of individuals who intend to travel for the religion or perform these missionary services, they are encouraged to take their families into consultation and consideration, sacrificing if the circumstances dictate, to remain with their families (Shoghi Effendi 1983: 448, 450-1).

The teachings of the Baha'u'llah, in keeping with the traditions of the major world religions, provide a theology that enables people to understand the meaning and purpose of their life. It stands to reason, therefore, that in any examination of the construction of Baha'i consciousness we first need to address fundamental theological concepts.

The concept 'progressive revelation' was referred to by all the Baha'is as very significant to their understanding of religions in the world and their understanding of themselves as Baha'is. According to the Baha'i teachings, humanity has undergone a maturation process guided by God's spiritual teachings revealed through a series of Messengers - the world's principal educators. And further, that God's divine revelation is continuous, progressive, and suited to the requirements of humanity. It is a part of God's eternal covenant to unite humankind and facilitate the advancement of world civilization.<sup>4</sup>

The Baha'is in my study found that the concept of progressive revelation enabled them to 'place' themselves historically within the sometimes-confusing array of world religions. It also gave them a means by which to understand the connections and universality of spiritual teachings in all the major world religions. Progressive revelation was an interpretative tool for them to understand religion and civilization on a continuum:

To me I believe in Baha'u'llah because he taught me progressive revelation, to recognize all the founders of all the past [religions] and in the future also.... I was born as Buddhist and didn't believe in God, and being Baha'i I am able to accept God. (Tony Panalaks 1994)

Well, progressive revelation was the main one (teaching)...that in each age God guides mankind. I always used to think, 'Why would God leave out the Hindus or the Buddhists or the Moslems, or whatever? Why are they heathens?' You know, people would talk about them as if they were bad or evil. (Joanie Anderson 1995)

The important thing...that was the concept of Progressive Revelation. Oh, sure because that's purely a scientific concept. Ruby China said - she gave me the idea, you know, that revelation came in direct proportion to the spiritual capacity of the people! Just like any natural law, or physical law. And I was stumped! That was it! That was the first thing that impacted on me - progressive revelation.... (Bob Donnelly 1994)

Now this one is one that we are very familiar with now. That God is like the sun, Baha'u'llah is one of the more recent reflections of the Sun, and all the different Prophets in between are listed there. Now for me, at that school in that year, and my first year as a Baha'i, that visual depiction of ...progressive revelation, was very easy for me to understand. (Ruth Eyford 1995)

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<sup>4</sup> In this regard, the Baha'i writings observe that the maturation of humankind has developed in ever-widening circles of unity - from the family to the tribe, from the city-state to the nation. The next circle or stage in this collective growth, the Baha'i teachings observe, is the 'organization of society as a planetary civilization' (Hatcher & Martin 1985: 76).

These people indicated that the concept of progressive revelation gave them a feeling of certitude about their connection as Baha'is to people of other religious belief systems. The story of progressive revelation serves as a meta-narrative through which to view humanity's history and evolving religious and global identity.

### **The Consciousness of Oneness: Building a Vision**

While the concept of progressive revelation provided a universal construct for Baha'is to understand the historical evolution and connection of all world religions, it was another theological concept - Baha'u'llah's teaching about the oneness of humanity - that provided an understanding of the potential for unity of the entire human race:

That feeling of love and, of course peace...the teachings about peace. Yes, progressive revelation was the most important. But ... in that is that all the people in the world were included. You know, they were Black, Japanese, or whatever...the oneness of mankind. That was very, very wonderful to me because I couldn't see how, if somebody else was a different colour, they should be less important or not be cared about. It really upset me.... All the teachings seemed so wonderful, the equality of men and women especially, of course. I think a lot of women are attracted to that, and men, too...and unity, and the love within the Faith, and the love of all humanity. (Joanie Anderson 1995)

This foundational teaching of oneness permeates every Baha'i precept. According to the Baha'i writings: God is one, though the Creator has been given different names; religion is one, each religion is a part of the plan of God for humanity's evolution to a stage of global peace and unity; and, humanity is one - all humanity has been created equal with the 'same God-given capacities' and is as one organic unit in the sight of the Creator (Hatcher & Martin 1985: 75-76).

The theology of oneness is so important to the Baha'i Faith that it is embedded in the sacred symbol of the religion. This symbol is displayed in the homes of believers and worn as a personal adornment in the form of a pendant, pin or ringstone. The symbol is a signifier of belief and affiliation, and has been used by the Baha'is as a means to illustrate the teachings of progressive revelation and 'the three onenesses' (as the Canadian Baha'is liked to describe that spiritual principle).

The symbol is also a mnemonic for Baha'i theology and signifies linkages of oneness for the Baha'is: 'It is an attraction . . . it is like a picture, it tells a thousand words . . .it tells the story of the two prophets . . . the connection between God and man . . . and you know that's the sort of meaning to it . . .' (Ethel Martens 1994). Another person said the symbol was a means for introducing the religion: 'It was teaching. Those who saw it were curious, so you

would tell them [about]...God, mankind and the messengers etc. . . .' (Joanie Anderson 1995). Yet another saw that the symbol and its depiction of the three onenesses was, as she termed it, a 'summary of the whole theology of the Baha'i Faith!' (Aqdas Javid 1994).

Over the course of the last century the oneness concept has been incorporated into the basic and advanced curriculum of Baha'i schools for all ages. Lyrics of a Baha'i children's song, still current and well loved in the 1970s, reflects the popularization of this concept in the Baha'i community: 'God is one, man is one, and all the religions agree...If everyone learned the three onenesses, we'd have world unity' (King 1948). Also very popular among the Canadian Baha'is were the statements of Baha'u'llah, '[L]et your vision be world embracing rather than confined to your own selves', and 'the world is but one country and mankind its citizens' (1949: 94, 250). These sayings were memorized and shared with others as an integral part of being a Baha'i. This teaching about oneness provided the Baha'is with the notion of a wider loyalty as world citizens.

### **The Particular and the Universal: The Work of Shoghi Effendi Rabbani in Building Transnational Identity**

While religions provide symbols of common humanity, they also transmit 'particularistic ideas about humanity', and in this manner they 'appropriate and filter the experience of global in local terms' (Beckford 2000: 491). Ursula King articulates the importance of the global to religion as:

[A] different kind of consciousness which takes into account a new order of complexity wherein the particular and the universal, the local and the regional, interact in quite a new and previously unknown way. There is a search for new identities both transnational and personal. . . which seeks a new unity and expresses itself in the search for a collective will and for a new global order (1992: 153).

When we consider that the Baha'i religion was brought from Iran to the Western world - a radically different cultural and religious context from the religion's origins - it is useful to examine how the Canadians (1926-1957) were socialized to a Baha'i identity.

In the early part of the last century the infant Canadian Baha'i community was comprised of scattered groups of locally-focused individuals; there was no national community until 1948. Shoghi Effendi Rabbani, the head of the Baha'i Faith, who lived in Haifa Israel, conducted an extensive correspondence with Canadian Baha'is. A study of thirty-nine of his letters to Canada, dated 1926-1957, shows a purposeful process of educating and empowering this young Baha'i community toward an understanding of its potential identity.

The first aspect of Shoghi Effendi's work that we will briefly consider is the articulation of a religious history for the Canadians. In his letters, and in his major book of that time,<sup>5</sup> he refers often to the accomplishments and service of the early North America Baha'is, and also to the early Persian Baha'is. Not only does he advance the idea of a shared religious history between the Baha'is of the East and the rest of the world, he also assigns the Canadians a role in this history. To the Baha'is of North America he gave the appellation the 'spiritual descendants of the dawnbreakers of a heroic age' (Shoghi Effendi 1963: 6). The term 'dawnbreakers' refers to the early Babi and Baha'i believers in Iran who devoted their lives to teaching and travelling, many becoming martyrs, for their newly-adopted Faith.<sup>6</sup> This spiritual appellation was conveyed to a group of people who, in general, had no idea about Iran or its peoples, and knew little about other peoples in the world at that time. We can understand retrospectively that applying the title 'spiritual descendants' to the Canadians could, and indeed did, evoke for them a sense of a spiritual inheritance, a familial legacy from the early believers of their religion.

The second important aspect in the construction of religious identity is the effect of Shoghi Effendi's plans for expansion of the religion. The parochialism of the Canadian Baha'is would change radically as a result of these plans, which were, in and of themselves, a major turning point in the history of the Canadian community, as we shall see.

The Seven Year Plan (1937-1944) was designed to establish governing councils (assemblies) across Canada and to missionize the religion in North and South America. A description of the initial response of the Canadians reflects the self-focus and inward nature of the Baha'i communities at that time:

... [A]nd then the Plan came along and we thought - oh dear we will never do that! How can we have an assembly in every province of Canada, and at the same time have a Baha'i in every country of Latin America. Latin America nobody ever went there! (Audrey Robarts 1994).

Baha'is did, however, respond to fulfil the goals of this plan, and by the time the Ten Year Plan (1953-1963) was introduced, their orientation was much more receptive such that: 'Thirty-one percent of Baha'is during this time moved more than once, some even as much as ten times' (van den Hoonaard personal communication 1996). The Ten Year Plan was mentioned as very significant by the people in this study. All but two of these people moved

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<sup>5</sup> See Shoghi Effendi *God Passes By* (Wilmette, Illinois: Baha'i Publishing Trust 1957).

to establish new communities, mostly to other countries, during this Plan. Simply put, the Plan changed their lives. It was the catalyst for them to become outer-focused, and it provided them with a mandate for agency:

I think that, really the Ten Year Crusade was a maturing for the Canadian Baha'i community. And that's when there were Canadians spread all around the world as pioneers. And they still have a wonderful outlook for the worldwide Baha'i community, and outpouring of pioneers from Canada. (Bill Carr 1995)

The act of people moving to other places facilitated a new perspective that the community could/would be a national and, indeed, a global community. This shift in understanding occurred not only for those who moved, but also for their families and Baha'i friends and communities back home.<sup>7</sup> At the same time plans were being given to the Baha'is in other countries to pioneer. One of the Iranian pioneers, who moved to Canada in the 1960s, had this to say about the compelling effect of Shoghi Effendi's (the Guardian) directives on the Persian Baha'is:

Oh, the messages of the Guardian was what galvanized the whole society. The Guardian's messages was what really brought all the pioneers to move from Iran and go. There was a time that you wouldn't see a picture of any assembly all across the world without Persians in the middle. What happened - the Guardian made people rise up and pioneer. His letters were just magnificent. We lived for it; we lived to receive letters of the Guardian. It was like a lifeblood for everybody in Iran. That was what galvanized the community and corrected the community. (Aqdas Javid 1994)

The idea of international co-operation in these plans also brought a sense of world solidarity as Baha'is learned that people in other countries were also pioneering. As one person explains: '[W]e combined with the rest of the world, and so our outlook was *out* to pioneering and the fulfilment of the Ten Year Crusade' (Francoise Smith, 1994 emphasis mine).

The shift of thinking that took place in 1953 was facilitated in direct response to the ethic of dispersion Shoghi Effendi had promoted in his plans and directives. It enabled the community to move from an ideological perception of the world as one country to a conscious realization that, as Baha'is, they possessed a transnational identity, both in a Baha'i world community *and* in a global community. This understanding was grounded in personal experience and agency, as we shall now examine.

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<sup>6</sup> This description of spiritual dawnbreakers, was given to the Baha'is of North America in 1939 in *The Advent of Divine Justice*, which describes the potentials and the destiny of the western Baha'i community and the American nation. See Shoghi Effendi *The Advent of Divine Justice* (Wilmette, Illinois: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1963).

## **Pioneering: Cross-Pollinating A Consciousness of World Citizenship**

Let us look a little closer at the dimensions of pioneering and its effect on the identity of Baha'is. All of the Baha'is I interviewed responded to the plans of Shoghi Effendi and spent their whole lives engaged in community building. In response to the plans of expansion, all of the Baha'is in my study, except two, became pioneers to such places as South Africa, India, Iceland, French Africa, St. Helena, as well as to many places in Canada. The two people who did not pioneer are of Black-African Canadian heritage. Their life stories parallel the Black experience in Canada from 1920-1960 - lives critically affected by institutionalized racism. This racism constrained their opportunity for higher education or job choice, and thus they were denied the flexibility and mobility to settle in new places and restricted in their life choices. Instead, they devoted their lives to combating racism and working for social change in their secular and Baha'i communities (Echevarria-Howe, 1992).

When pioneering, Baha'is leave their own country and culture, and commit themselves to a new life. This involves 'enlarging and enriching one's circle of association' and the 'expansion of inherited boundaries and norms' (Drewek 1997:166-7). Pioneering was central to their lives - it became a core part of their identity:

Gale Bond, pioneer to Jamaica and the Canadian North (1994): 'I have no idea what would have become of me but I know now from this perspective that the Baha'i Faith gave me a goal a purpose...a conscious purpose.... I was willing to pioneer...'

Richard Tranter, pioneer to St. Helena and Saskatchewan (1995): 'And then, too, you know, another challenge was to pioneer. Give up my livelihood and go somewhere else to start all over again. You know...I'd spent eighteen years, or so, developing a business and my livelihood, getting well established. Then, all of a sudden, you...you just give that up and you go pioneering. I mean, in those days, you didn't have a job to go. You didn't go out there and look...see if you had a job or anything. You just...I'd never been out west, before. We just sold our business and away we went. Well, some of them [friends] thought we were nuts. Most of them thought we were crazy, but, uh...we knew what we were doing'.

Aqdas Javid, pioneer in Britain and Canada (1994): 'And I am very happy that I pioneered and this is one of the fulfilment of my wishes that as a young girl I wanted to pioneer. And I hope I die in pioneering post!'

Francoise Smith, pioneer in Quebec (1994): 'That's how the Faith could spread so fast. Because people put everything aside and went. That was impressive (sic)'.

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<sup>7</sup> Shoghi Effendi encouraged the Canadian Baha'is to sacrifice in order to reach the goals which were 'principally national and universal' and to 'centre their complete attention on the obligations of the Ten Year Crusade' (*Messages to Canada*), 43.

Bill Carr, pioneer to Greenland (1995): 'Yes. I think it started with the Ten Year Crusade. I think that really focussed the Baha'i community on the whole world, and then we had all Baha'i friends who had pioneered here or had...pioneered there. We've gone to far-off and exotic places.... So, for me, that was really this bringing into reality that oneness of mankind, and the oneness of the planet, and the oneness of the Baha'i world'.

For these Baha'is, the act of pioneering forever changed the course of their lives and, in turn, expanded their sense of self. In their letters, and the newsletters of the national community, these Baha'is spoke about diverse cultural expressions in the celebration and commemoration of Baha'i events, the local Baha'i history in their new homelands, and how people from other lands applied the Baha'i teachings to their society's needs (Archives National Spiritual Assembly of Canada). As the following excerpts illustrate:

From pioneers living in apartheid South Africa: 'Well you see there was a thing called the Round Robin, which was a pioneer letter, and we got that regularly. You see, as a pioneer those people were very dear to you back home, and so many of them wrote to us'. (Audrey Robarts 1994)

From a pioneer in Greenland: 'We had a Round Robin, published by the New Territories Committee - - a branch of the Canadian N.S.A. -- and they certainly did their best to keep all the Canadian Baha'i pioneers informed on what was going on'. (Bill Carr 1995)

From pioneers to the Yukon: '... We got some wonderful letters that really encouraged us, especially those first few years. Many people wrote and those letters were just a lifeline. ... And then, of course, we got the Canadian Baha'i news, and of course we got the [International News]...but the New Territories Committee Bulletin was the thing we just about tore out of each other's hand to read [laughter]. Hardly wait to read it. And you know, other people were in much more isolated places than we were. I wrote individual letters to all kinds of people that first year. We knew an awful lot of Baha'is in different places. We had been a number of places, already. And at summer schools we met people. So I would write them and tell them what it was like'. (Joanie Anderson 1995)

The people from this study, and their many hundreds of fellow pioneers, facilitated over the course of fifty years a 'cross pollination' process by their presence and service in Canada and new homelands. Through their contributions the Canadian Baha'is experienced a growing consciousness of the world community. This was done through the pioneers' stories in extensive personal correspondence and in newsletters to various countries, as I have mentioned, and through talks given on 'travelling-teaching' excursions and visits to conferences in Canada and other countries.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> There are many letters from pioneers of these times that describe these activities. This correspondence is stored in the National Archives of the Baha'is of Canada, Thornhill, Toronto.

## ‘Living the Life’: Development of a World Consciousness Through Study and Service

Reading the spiritual classics and following a traditional spiritual path is no longer enough.

Spirituality must be concretely embodied and lived; it must permeate the personal and the political, it must animate our thought, action, and imagination, so that we can work for the transformation of the global community, of the whole world and all life within it. (King 1992: 168)

Social processes in Baha’i community life have an important part to play in orienting the members to a world consciousness. Living a Baha’i life, or ‘living the life’,<sup>9</sup> is the metaphor most used by the Baha’is to encapsulate what being a Baha’i means to them. It describes a particular pattern of living over a lifetime. As there is no clergy in the religion, or a system of elders, each person has to take on the responsibility to learn about the religion. This learning is made dynamic through a process of individual daily study, prayer, and meditation on the sacred writings and teachings.

As well, people learn to draw upon certain vocabularies of understandings in order to communicate with others in the same group. Baha’is acquired new perspectives from the Baha’i writings which, as we have spoken about previously, conceptualized humanity as one family and the earth as one home. This learning and sharing took place at informal and formal levels in personal interactions and correspondence, at community gatherings, and in collective study:

My Baha’i activities, and the people that I met, opened up a whole new world for me...I just learned by observing, by reading...and by my fellow Baha’is asking me to join them in their deepening and social activities. They just sort of took me under their wing and made sure I knew things were going on, that I had the opportunity to attend, and that I understood what I was going to.... Even going to a Feast [community gathering] was a whole new experience. It wasn’t like going to church; it wasn’t like any other experience I had. It’s different from anything you’ve done before, because there is no other pattern set up exactly like the Baha’i community...where there is so much opportunity for an individual to participate. So much encouragement to be independent in your thinking, and to share your thinking. (Ruth Eyford 1995)

The construction of the self through reading and speaking a language is an integral aspect of the formation of identity, inasmuch as language is critical in providing the images, ideals, and concepts around which a person can articulate their sense of self. The social principles of

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<sup>9</sup> The term “living the life” arises from the following quotation: ‘He is a true Baha’i who strives by day and night to progress and advance along the path of human endeavor, whose most cherished desire is to live and act as to enrich and illuminate the world, whose source of inspiration is the essence of Divine virtue, whose aim in life is to so conduct himself as to be the cause of infinite progress. Only when he attains unto such a perfect gift can it be said of him that he is a true Baha’i. For in this holy Dispensation, the crowning glory of bygone ages and cycles, true faith is no mere acknowledgment of the Unity of God, but *the living of a life* that will manifest all the perfections and virtues implied in such a belief’ (‘Abdu’l-Baha 1960: 25 my emphasis).

Baha'u'llah were the key source of this new vocabulary.<sup>10</sup> The principles conceptualize the world as a global community. The Baha'is of my study remember using, in their younger years, a summary of twelve of these principles as a means to communicate their beliefs to other people. The principles were printed on white cards that were convenient to carry around in purses and pockets:

I carried around with me a picture of 'Abdu'l-Baha...on one side of the frame, and on the other, the twelve principles. (Rena 'Millie' Gordon 1995)

I think the method of teaching, when I first became a Baha'i was to use the twelve basic principles, in one form or another. Sometimes in the Master's Tablets, there's more than twelve but we had twelve standardized principles. And the Baha'is memorized them and they used them in every public talk or spoke on only one of them, or all of them. So, that was really the focus for teaching when I first became a Baha'i. (Bill Carr 1995)

Studying these principles and writings enabled the Baha'is to think about world issues and what solutions the Baha'i teachings provided for them. The life stories of my participants confirm that knowing and sharing the twelve principles, and gradually understanding Shoghi Effendi's diagnosis of world conditions, served to orient and inform their attitudes and actions according to the exigencies of the times. Shoghi Effendi identified current political and religious trends, graphically portraying, for example, 'nationalism, racialism and communism' as the chief impediments to realizing world unification (1967:113). The life-history participants believed that the principles helped them to understand the barriers to achieving world unity, and the solutions to its realization. As one astute participant commented:

Today you can see what the alcohol is doing, you can see what the drugs are doing, we can see what corruption is doing, we can see what racism is doing, we can see what inequality is doing, what lack of education is doing. And all these principles that Baha'u'llah brought before our eyes...and we saw [the need for] them. (Audrey Robarts 1994)

Through Shoghi Effendi's explanations the Baha'is had the opportunity to understand the rapid social change occurring about them, and their concomitant responsibility to be of

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<sup>10</sup> 'The oneness of the entire human race, the pivotal principle and fundamental doctrine of the Faith; the basic unity of all religions; the condemnation of all forms of prejudice, whether religious, racial, class or national; the harmony which must exist between religion and science; the equality of men and women, the two wings on which the bird of human kind is able to soar; the introduction of compulsory education; the adoption of a universal auxiliary language; the abolition of the extremes of wealth and poverty; the institution of a world tribunal for the adjudication of disputes between nations; the exaltation of work, performed in the spirit of service, to the rank of worship; the glorification of justice as the ruling principle in human society, and of religion as a bulwark for the protection of all peoples and nations; and the establishment of a permanent and universal peace as the supreme goal of all mankind ...' (Effendi, 1957: 281-82).

service. The process of focusing upon these principles, when teaching others about the religion, assisted in integrating the local/global Baha'i identity into the self-concept:

[W]ell, you see, the Guardian was giving those plans and they were so astounding because we were still in the sinking sand...we didn't see the world condition and how Shoghi Effendi was telling us it. He gave us a picture of the society, the moral condition of it, and what was needed. And we had to teach, and he gave us Plans. (Audrey Robarts 1994)

### **The Administrative Order: Transforming Principles into Action Locally and Globally**

How is the Baha'i Faith different from other religions or high-minded organizations whose outreach and affiliation are worldwide? The difference lies in the administrative order - a system of governing councils worldwide.<sup>11</sup> According to the Baha'i writings and institutions, this system provides the means, the motivation, and the framework to transform spiritual principles of oneness into practice.

In the early years, however, the understanding that there was an individual responsibility in building this order was a big leap in thinking for some of the conservative Canadian Baha'is of the 1930s-1960s. The Canadian community of this era was comprised of many types of people. Some became immediately involved with the administration of the religion, while others did not see the relevance of it. Some understood the concept of a world community, but could not grasp the scope of the vision in the Plans to achieve it. As a perceptive observer from those times commented, there were the 'dreamy Baha'is who were lethargic and timid and [had] no sense of responsibility', the 'sparks' that helped with the Plans and inspired others to work, and 'the steadies' who were 'steadfast' and could be 'relied upon to do the job' (Audrey Robarts 1994).

As the same person notes, understanding that the administrative order would develop into a world-wide global system, and have implication for local Baha'is, was not understood

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<sup>11</sup> This institutional system, which Baha'u'llah outlined in his writings, was implemented and developed by 'Abdu'l-Baha. It provides the foundation and the agency that permit the Baha'i community, as the Baha'i writings state to: 'play an effective role in human affairs' (**Universal House of Justice 2001: 58**). The system encompasses two kinds of institutions: governing councils called spiritual assemblies, and a protection/propagation board consisting of 'Hands of the Cause', 'Counsellors and their Deputies'. The assemblies are democratically elected by the body of the believers and operate on local, national and international levels. The assembly's duties are oriented to the promotion of the religion and the care, organization and service of the community in their jurisdictions. The protection/propagation boards are an appointed body of individuals who also operate on local, national and international levels. Their duties involve counselling, advising, and encouraging local spiritual assemblies and individuals (Shoghi Effendi 1963).

immediately: 'You see, what Baha'u'llah is emphasizing is new. It is not just the salvation of the individual; it is the salvation of the society of the whole globe - the oneness. It was not really glimpsed; there was not enough vision at the time. Everything was quite close up' (Audrey Robarts 1994).

While some people in the 1940s liked the spiritual teachings of the new religion, they were cautious about the social teachings - those that challenged their sense of self and made it necessary to be active in change. There were people described as: 'out of the century' Baha'is, '...those that knew blacks and whites should meet but they hoped it wasn't in their lifetime' (Audrey Robarts 1994). The Baha'i administrative process, however, challenged prejudiced and narrow attitudes and behaviours, because Baha'is were being admonished by Shoghi Effendi and the Baha'i writings to work in groups within the administrative order.

However, when most Canadian cities and rural areas defined themselves as conservatively British or French and marginalized people of other races or ethnicities (Stark and Bainbridge 1985, Bibby 1990), many Baha'i communities were welcoming diversity:

When I was a boy they were over there and we were over here. We lived in a community that was British and we [the various cultures and races] were all separated. The Baha'i Faith opened our eyes to the world you know. And suddenly we are looking at the whole world instead of our own backyard. (Richard Tranter 1995)

This intermingling of diverse people in a local situation gave the Baha'is a sense of the coming together of the world globally. For example, a Nova Scotian white Baha'i explained that Baha'is in her community in the 1950s, such as African-Canadians, First Nations peoples, and whites, would find themselves working on committees or Spiritual Assemblies together, and would have to overcome their prejudices in order to achieve unity: 'You knew how these people felt because they would say things quite plainly. To follow the Baha'i writings you had to be friendly, courteous, and loving with these people of different cultures and backgrounds. I think that that was a hard thing to do, but I did it' (Audrey Rayne 1994).

The large influx of Native (First Nations) and young people into the Baha'i Faith in the 1960s, and the transference and settlement of Iranians in the 1970s and 1980s, would all serve to greatly diversify the largely immigrant or first-generation Canadians in the Baha'i community. This meant that many Baha'i assemblies and communities have, throughout the past fifty years, experienced working within a microcosm of the global community in their everyday and formal activities. The administrative order was the means, then, through which people were challenged to adopt new attitudes and behaviours towards oneness in their dealings with their fellow members.

It appears, from my study of the stories of early Canadian Baha'is, that there was little understanding of exactly *how* the administrative order would grow, nor how the administration would affect global endeavours. This began to change in the later part of the last century, as a world traveller and educator observes: 'In the beginning many people thought it was idealistic, utopian. They admired us, but that attitude has changed. There are more things that the Baha'is are actually doing - there are schools, we are involved with the United Nations, and they see the growth of the Faith around the world' (Ethel Martens 1994).

Working locally, the Baha'is eventually realized that their efforts were paralleling the efforts of other people in faraway countries. The knowledge that people around the world were working in the administrative order at the same tasks with the same principles, teachings, and orientation of world-mindedness, brought a deep sense of connection to the Baha'is in Canada:

We all support one another you know...when you go to another part of the world you find people thinking the way that you are. I mean right away - it opens your eyes to the world community. You know that people from different races are thinking the same way that you are. You know that they have the same concerns! (Richard Tranter 1995)

There was also continuity and systematization in the administrative order to the development of a global community through every succeeding Plan, and this was felt as an assurance to the Baha'i communities, as these people observe:

I tell people...that administrative institutions are channels. When developed to the highest level [they] will be the means of establishing the kingdom of God on earth. And that it is an integral part of the spiritual teachings therefore that it is extremely important for us individually and collectively...to develop and deepen our knowledge along all these lines. (Gale Bond 1994)

And the second strength is Baha'i administration it is amazing how you see it coming into shape and is looking after the Baha'i community...And so the instrument for us growing and improving is the Baha'i administration after all. If we didn't have administration of organization how would we...be communicating, how could we be connected? (Aqdas Javid 1994)

Baha'u'llah's brought an Administrative Order that is so unique and so complete in terms of...of a pattern for future society.... I had an appreciation and a love for it. (Ruth Eyford 1995)

Over the years the Baha'is came to understand that the administrative system was the instrument to canalize the efforts and energies of the members. This system, whenever necessary, could create a concentrated focus for Baha'i communities worldwide, nationally, and locally:

But if you have sufficient guidance of an administrative body or from an institution, such as the Hands [of the Cause] or the Counsellors, then you can channel it in such a way that you not only get a real

spiritual high but you have a teaching plan to go out to afterwards—so it is not just a nice, life, self-realization project.... (Ted Anderson 1995)

The administrative order was a conduit for directives and news coming from the International Centre, and this was also a means through which Baha'is were socialized to a consciousness of the world as a whole:

But the Baha'i Faith gives you this world vision you know. And you're starting to think about Baghdad in 1963<sup>12</sup>...you know Iran, Persia, the Holy Land, 'Akka. All these new words are coming up and you're starting to think about the whole world. And then finding out about the Faith, things that happened in the Faith in different parts of the world - it opens up your vision. And the Baha'is pioneering out and coming back too and talking about it and things you know. (Richard Tranter 1995)

As historical accounts show, the Baha'is were, over the course of the past one hundred years, gradually trained within the administration to develop, support, and maintain this system. According to their capacity, and using the teachings of Baha'u'llah and the guidance of Shoghi Effendi, they learned, for example, to actualize the Baha'i consultative process, hold democratic elections, uphold the right of the minority in the Baha'i election, and advance and maintain women's equality in the community (van den Hoonaard 1996, Hatcher & Martin 1985). These people also left their country of birth and worked with others in their new homelands within the Baha'i administrative order. They were subject to the same religious teachings, and the news from the Baha'i World Centre; they worked under the umbrella of the same Plans as other Baha'is world-wide; and, they used the same administrative principles Baha'is use globally. In this way the administrative order socialized and moulded all the Baha'is, wherever they lived in the world, to be 'situated universalists' (McMullen 2000).

## **Concluding Remarks**

When we consider the overarching effects of globalization in the last century, we know Baha'is were subject to the rapid social change happening around the world. Their stories reflect their situational geography. For example, they were affected by World War II, trans-Atlantic travel and movement of peoples, the diversity of immigrants arriving in Canada, and the post-war economy, which socialized them to the consumption of global goods and technologies. If and how they were, in turn, influential in promoting a consciousness of the world is a topic of inquiry for other researchers. Nevertheless, what stands out as being most important to them are the spiritual concepts they learned from the Baha'i teachings, and their

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<sup>12</sup> Baghdad, Iraq, was the site chosen for the first Baha'i World Congress 1963, however, due to safety concerns, the venue was changed to London, England (Royal Albert Hall).

engagement with the social processes and administrative service of Baha'i life. This involvement compelled them to embrace a different way of living and thinking—one that constructed and consolidated their individual and collective identity as people working to overcome nationalist sentiments and racial prejudices.

The Baha'is' nascent understanding of the teaching 'let your vision be world embracing' was quickened by the process of moving out of their home communities, nationwide and worldwide, and by working with diverse peoples within the administrative order. Throughout the course of this service they learned, through adopting, applying, and promoting Baha'i principles, that they were a part of the organic development of a global grassroots movement. It appears that the Baha'is experienced a cognitive and altruistic shift toward a deeper consciousness of the oneness to regard themselves as world citizens.

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Mrs. Joan (Joanie) Anderson 1995

Mr. William (Bill) Carr 1995

Mr. Bob Donnelly 1994

Mrs. Gale Bond 1994

Mrs. Ruth Eyford 1995

Mrs. Rena (Millie) Gordon 1995

Mrs. Aqdas Javid 1994

Dr. Ethel Martens 1994

Mrs. Audrey Rayne 1994

Mrs. Audrey Robarts 1994

Mrs. Francoise Smith 1994

Mr. Richard Tranter 1995

Mr. Tony Panalaks 1994