

AUTHOR'S RESPONSE TO COMMENTARY ON "FORGING MORE PERFECT UNIONS"**Commentator:** John A. Grayzel**Published:** *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies* 5.4 (1994): 63–66

I read with interest John A. Grayzel's response to my article, and I welcome the opportunity to elaborate further on some of the ideas stated in that article.

Dr. Grayzel finds two serious limitations with my analysis. One, my "overemphasis on the importance of competition" and two, my "portrayal of the human spiritual and social capacity for cooperation as being *per se* an evolving phenomenon" (63). I would like to address these two points in order.

As for my overemphasizing the importance of competition, the quotations I employed in the article prove that all competition is not to be discarded. Grayzel believes so, too, for he writes that "reasonable competitiveness is a healthy factor that can challenge and increase performance . . ." (63). But this energy of competition must find the proper outlet in today's world. The proper outlet is mainly through spiritual actions, through sacrifice and selflessness. In fact, spiritual competition not only is a driving force shaping the behaviors of individuals but also has been part of the Bahá'í Faith's collective growth from early times. For example, regarding the spiritual leadership of the Western Bahá'í world, Shoghi Effendi wrote seventy years ago, "Will it be America, will it be one of the nations of Europe, that will seize the torch of Divine Guidance from Persia's fettered hands and with it set the western world aflame?"¹ Clearly a healthy rivalry is set up here. At least in 1925, determining which national Bahá'í community would be the new standard-bearer of the Bahá'í Faith in the West was an open race.

However, as always, the real competition is with oneself, to better oneself by bringing out one's spiritual capacities. We see this in the numerous admonitions within the Bahá'í writings to "strain every nerve" to "rise up" to "strive," and the like. We can never be content, never stand still. The point is that spiritual competition is characterized by an eagerness to assist others in this process, to applaud happily their victories, and to use their marvelous successes to push ourselves to excel in the same way.

Competition in the best sense is this urge to excel spiritually, always to reach higher. Can this be overemphasized, when this urge is an essential quality of human beings? The Universal House of Justice said the human spirit has a "mysterious nature" which "inclines it towards transcendence. . . ."² But the urge to excel does not necessarily mean the need to win over others, but

1. *Bahá'í Administration: Selected Letters 1922–1932*, 5th ed. (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1968) 89.

2. *The Promise of World Peace* (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1985) 17.

over one's self. The need to win over others is a degenerate psychological form that quickly falls into ruthlessness.

I am told that competition, as the economist uses the word, is a value-free system for arranging resources by market dynamics to meet society's needs. The competition that sets out to produce better quality goods at cheaper prices is legitimate and socially beneficial. Unfortunately, competition outside of pure economic theory is a psychological attitude laden with values, namely, "us" versus "them" rivalry. This value enters into economic relations and distorts the value-free system, creating all the insecurity and power-maximizing tendency that is one unfortunate result of unrestricted competition. One aspect of the spiritual solution to the economic problem, as I see it, is that any innovation which improves economic performance should be universally available as soon as possible. Then competition would not slide into an unwholesome rivalry for market share. This spiritual solution would naturally lead to more economic cooperation.

Two examples of competitive thinking, one strictly economic and leading toward global cooperation, one with the poison of national political rivalry involved, will illuminate the point. The first is taken from *Time Magazine*, May 24, 1993, p. 32:

Worldwide, Germany, like other industrialized countries, may need to invent new ways to nurture its economy, ways that stress cooperation over competition. "Markets cannot be reached purely by export activities," says Edzard Reuter, chairman of Daimler-Benz and acknowledged dean of German industrial leaders. "If you want to stay competitive, you have to invest in other countries. You have to go where the markets are." That, says Reuter, suggests a different way of doing business. "In the past the practice was to buy other companies or shares of other companies. This is being replaced by cooperation, by so-called strategic alliances. These alliances are becoming more and more international, creating companies with shareholders in Japan, America and Europe, companies with international executives."

The second example appeared in my local English-language newspaper of April 9, 1993, but is taken from a *New York Times* article by Keith Bradsher. In the article United States Senator Max Baucus, discussing the unpredictability of the Clinton administration's foreign economic policy, is quoted as stating:

Do we really want to be predictable as we sit down with our trading partners? Do we want them to know exactly what we'll do—and when? Or do we want to keep them guessing and get the best deal for our exporters?

One can only gasp at a logic that sees virtue in deliberately manipulating one's "trading partners." It is a textbook example of what Shoghi Effendi called "the anarchy inherent in state sovereignty. . . ."³ The dangers in this anarchic

3. *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh: Selected Letters*, rev. ed. (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1974) 202.

my-country-first attitude for fomenting trade wars and creating unpleasant economic difficulties are readily apparent. Selfish competition always thinks in terms of winners and losers; selfless competition is a kind of on-going sacrifice and can have only winners. With selfless competition, the wealthy peoples and nations would compete to bring up their less advantaged brethren:

And among the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh is voluntary sharing of one's property with others among mankind. This voluntary sharing is greater than equality, and consists in this, that man should not prefer himself to others, but rather should sacrifice his life and property for others. But this should not be introduced by coercion so that it becomes a law and man is compelled to follow it. Nay, rather, man should voluntarily and of his own choice sacrifice his property and life for others. . . .⁴

This leads me to a discussion of the second limitation that Grayzel found with my analysis, namely my portrayal of "the human spiritual and social capacity for cooperation" as "*per se* an evolving phenomenon." To answer his argument I want to return to his statement that "reasonable competitiveness is a healthy factor that can challenge and increase performance." I agree that reasonable material competitiveness is healthy. But spiritual competitiveness has no qualifier to it, in my view. However, I quoted Grayzel only in part. His full thought is: "Reasonable competitiveness is a healthy factor that can challenge and increase performance, but it is not the *sine qua non* for human progress. In fact the very opposite is the case." Because I do not see competition and cooperation as opposites, I cannot agree with the full idea.

The question I sought to answer in the article is: How can the energy of competition be transmuted into cooperative actions? To answer this question adequately, I had to resist the urge to set up in my mind a moral dichotomy between competition and cooperation, labeling the former bad and the latter good. This black hats–white hats way of thinking is itself competitive, and cooperation has already lost if the argument is set up this way. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá warned: "Much of the discord and disunion of the world is created by these man-made oppositions and contradictions."⁵

My approach, then, had to be evolutionary and developmental. I wanted to trace the evolution of cooperation as a form of human interaction that grew out of competition. There is linguistic basis for this since the word *competition* means "to seek together." *Cooperation* means "to work together." We are cooperating to compete, but we must compete to cooperate. What was essential was finding the elixir of transmutation.

4. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, comp. Research Dept. Bahá'í World Centre, trans. Marzieh Gail et al., (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1978) 302.

5. *Paris Talks: Addresses Given by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in Paris in 1911*, 11th ed. (London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1969) 144.

All things evolve in this world, most especially the human spiritual condition. But this evolution of the spirit does not occur with its innate capacities (I agree with Grayzel that "collaboration is an innate capacity of human beings" [64]), which are always infinite in their essence. What evolves is the form capacity takes over time, what Grayzel, I believe, means by "an expansion of the social breadth in which this capacity can express itself" (64). Forms evolve. The human spirit evolves by a progressive revelation from God. Our material conditions evolve through the same power, even when human beings repudiate the Source of that power. 'Abdu'l-Bahá said that " 'progress' is the expression of spirit in the world of matter."⁶ There is, 'Abdu'l-Bahá said, a "spiritual significance of the law of progress; how all moves from the inferior to the superior degree."⁷ "... spirit in itself is progressive. . . ."⁸ Hence, whatever is progressing is motivated by some spirit.

In the social advance of human beings from families to clans to city-states to nation-states and now the final surge into a world order, the spiritual capacity to collaborate, to keep Grayzel's term, has remained unchanged as a potential. But the material range within which this capacity could be expressed expanded slowly. The means to effect a world order were not in place. Now with the appearance of world-embracing technologies, the spirit of collaboration can be expressed fully. But to express that capacity fully requires a reordering of the human mental landscape. There can be no more "us-them." In this regard, even the cooperation exhibited by the "non-nation state cultures," the already "existent human capacity for cooperation" (64), however noble and encouraging these are and however necessary, are not sufficient to create world order, because their principles of cooperation unite only relatively small groups of people.

I said that I sought to know how to transmute a manifestly competitive world system into a manifestly cooperative one. I use this word *transmute* deliberately, in the same sense that Bahá'u'lláh uses it when he says that he is able to transmute "satanic strength into heavenly power."⁹ As I wrote in my article, the transmutation of competition into cooperation occurs by giving competition "new moral direction and purpose . . ." (6). An inner change of attitude toward the nature and uses of competition itself is required. For me, cooperation has always been an evolving phenomenon. In this view, selfish competition is an immature form of cooperation, selfless competition is the inner transmutation process at work; cooperation is the social result. Fostering this new moral attitude transmutes competition into cooperation.

A final point concerns Grayzel's statement: "In developing Bahá'í words into Bahá'í deeds, a major challenge for Bahá'ís in general, as well as for Bahá'í

6. *Paris Talks* 90.

7. *Paris Talks* 94.

8. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation of Universal Peace* (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982) 101.

9. *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, trans.: Shoghi Effendi, 2d ed. (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1976) 200.

professionals, scholars, and specialists, is to escape from the ethnocentrism of our present cultural milieu" (63). This is certainly true. But to escape our cultural milieu in any important sense means to be aware, first, of our own conditioning. It is not enough merely to denounce our present cultural milieu and uncritically champion another. This is just as one-sided and half-blind. Escape can only mean to find some sort of harmonious coexistence (if not integration) between differing cultural milieus. Toleration and relativity of view, and this includes knowing what is of value in our present cultural milieus, are needed for mature reflection.

Let us remember that every nation-state culture of today was once a non-nation state culture whose members, like the members in such cultures today, cooperated with each other, but mostly only with each other. Some cultures advanced into nation-states, using broader cooperative principles of life and practices of social organization that brought their people wealth and power. Because they did not embrace all humankind, these principles and practices degenerated and have brought danger to all. However, there is nothing I can find in the historical record to indicate that this divisiveness is a peculiar trait of Western peoples. They simply created the largest system short of a global one. As I argued in my article, any system that is less than global will exacerbate "us" versus "them" feelings, and this moral canker will eventually bring down the entire system.

Of course, people in these material centers of power have much to learn from the spirituality of other lands and peoples. The New World Order must include the "non-nation state" peoples and their spiritual traditions, but it must also incorporate the best of the present order.

The following statements from 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi indicate the high regard they had for the spiritual capacities of those people living within what Grayzel calls the "theology of the materialistic free-market economy" (63):

It [America] will lead all nations spiritually.¹⁰

. . . America hath developed powers and capacities greater and more wonderful than other nations. . . . The American nation is equipped and empowered to accomplish that which will adorn the pages of history, to become the envy of the world, and be blest in both the East and the West for the triumph of its people.¹¹

Japan with . . . [another country] will take the lead in the spiritual reawakening of the peoples and nations that the world will soon witness.¹²

10. Shoghi Effendi, *Advent of Divine Justice*, 4th ed. (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1984) 86.

11. Shoghi Effendi, *Advent* 86.

12. *Japan will Turn Ablaze: Tablets of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Letters of Shoghi Effendi and the Universal House of Justice, and Historical Notes about Japan*, comp. Barbara R. Sims, rev. ed. (Tokyo: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1992) 73.

By virtue of Germany's "spiritual potentialities and geographical situation" it is destined to take the leading role spiritually in Europe.¹³

I see and feel that there is much spiritual aspiration among the Western peoples, and that in some cases their spiritual perception is even keener than among their Eastern brothers.¹⁴

I again thank Dr. Grayzel for this opportunity to elaborate further on my paper.

WILLIAM BARNES

13. Shoghi Effendi, *Advent* 2-3.

14. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks* 70.