

Selected Passages from 'Century of Light'

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The conclusion of the twentieth century provides Bahá'ís with a unique vantage point. During the past hundred years our world underwent changes far more profound than any in its preceding history, changes that are, for the most part, little understood by the present generation. These same hundred years saw the Bahá'í Cause emerge from obscurity, demonstrating on a global scale the unifying power with which its Divine origin has endowed it. As the century drew to its close, the convergence of these two historical developments became increasingly apparent.

(Foreword)

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Addressing in 1931 the friends in the West, [Shoghi Effendi] opened for them a brilliant vista:

"The principle of the Oneness of Mankind - the pivot round which all the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh revolve - is no mere outburst of ignorant emotionalism or an expression of vague and pious hope. Its appeal is not to be merely identified with a reawakening of the spirit of brotherhood and good-will among men, nor does it aim solely at the fostering of harmonious cooperation among individual peoples and nations. Its implications are deeper, its claims greater than any which the Prophets of old were allowed to advance. Its message is applicable not only to the individual, but concerns itself primarily with the nature of those essential relationships that must bind all the states and nations as members of one human family.... It implies an organic change in the structure of present-day society, a change such as the world has not experienced.... It calls for no less than the reconstruction and the emilitarization of the whole civilized world - a world organically unified in all the essential aspects of its life, its political machinery, its spiritual aspiration, its trade and finance, its script and language, and yet infinite in the diversity of the national characteristics of its federated units." ¹

A concept that showed itself strongly in the Guardian's writings was the organic metaphor in which Bahá'u'lláh, and subsequently 'Abdu'l-Bahá, had captured the millennia-long process that has carried humanity to this culminating point in its collective history. That image was the analogy that can be drawn between, on the one hand, the stages by which human society has been gradually organized and integrated, and, on the other, the process by which each human being slowly develops out of the limitations of infantile existence into the powers of maturity. It appears prominently in several of Shoghi Effendi's writings on the transformation taking place in our time:

"The long ages of infancy and childhood, through which the human race had to pass, have receded into the background. Humanity is now experiencing the commotions invariably associated with the most turbulent stage of its

evolution, the stage of adolescence, when the impetuosity of youth and its vehemence reach their climax, and must gradually be superseded by the calmness, the wisdom, and the maturity that characterize the stage of manhood." ²

Deliberation on this vast conception was to lead Shoghi Effendi to provide the Bahá'í world with a coherent description of the future that has since permitted three generations of believers to articulate for governments, media and the general public in every part of the world the perspective in which the Bahá'í Faith pursues its work:

"The unity of the human race, as envisaged by Bahá'u'lláh, implies the establishment of a world commonwealth in which all nations, races, creeds and classes are closely and permanently united, and in which the autonomy of its state members and the personal freedom and initiative of the individuals that compose them are definitely and completely safeguarded. This commonwealth must, as far as we can visualize it, consist of a world legislature, whose members will, as the trustees of the whole of mankind, ultimately control the entire resources of all the component nations, and will enact such laws as shall be required to regulate the life, satisfy the needs and adjust the relationships of all races and peoples. A world executive, backed by an international Force, will carry out the decisions arrived at, and apply the laws enacted by, this world legislature, and will safeguard the organic unity of the whole commonwealth. A world tribunal will adjudicate and deliver its compulsory and final verdict in all and any disputes that may arise between the various elements constituting this universal system.... The economic resources of the world will be organized, its sources of raw materials will be tapped and fully utilized, its markets will be coordinated and developed, and the distribution of its products will be equitably regulated." ³

Writing a definitive interpretation of the Administrative Order in "The Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh", Shoghi Effendi made particular reference to the role that the institution he himself represented would play in enabling the Cause "to take a long, an uninterrupted view over a series of generations...." This unique endowment expressed itself with particular clarity in his description of the dual nature of the historical process that he saw unfolding in the twentieth century. The landscape of international affairs would, he said, be increasingly reshaped by twin forces of "integration" and "disintegration", both of them ultimately beyond human control. In the light of what meets our eyes today, his previsioning of the operation of this dual process is breathtaking: the creation of "a mechanism of world inter-communication ... functioning with marvellous swiftness and perfect regularity";⁴ the undermining of the nation-state as the chief arbiter of human destiny; the devastating effects that advancing moral breakdown throughout the world would have on social cohesion; the widespread public disillusionment produced by political corruption; and - unimaginable to

others of his generation - the rise of global agencies dedicated to promoting human welfare, coordinating economic activity, defining international standards, and encouraging a sense of solidarity among diverse races and cultures. These and other developments, the Guardian explained, would fundamentally alter the conditions in which the Bahá'í Cause would pursue its mission in the decades lying ahead.

One of the striking developments of this kind that Shoghi Effendi discerned in the Writings he was called on to interpret concerned the future role of the United States as a nation, and, to a lesser extent, its sister nations in the Western hemisphere. His foresight is all the more remarkable when one remembers that he was writing during a period of history when the United States was determinedly isolationist in both its foreign policy and the convictions of the majority of its citizens. Shoghi Effendi, however, envisioned the country assuming an "active and decisive part ... in the organization and the peaceful settlement of the affairs of mankind". He reminded Bahá'ís of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's anticipation that, because of the unique nature of its social composition and political development - as opposed to any "inherent excellence or special merit" of its people - the United States had developed capacities that could empower it to be "the first nation to establish the foundation of international agreement". Indeed, he foresaw the governments and peoples of the entire hemisphere becoming increasingly oriented in this direction.⁵

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As the Bahá'í community was constructing administrative foundations which would permit it to play an effective role in human affairs, the accelerating process of disintegration that Shoghi Effendi had discerned was undermining the fabric of social order. Its origins, however determinedly ignored by many social and political theorists, are beginning, after the lapse of several decades, to gain recognition at international conferences devoted to peace and development. In our own time, it is no longer unusual to encounter in such circles candid references to the essential role that "spiritual" and "moral" forces must play in achieving solutions to urgent problems. For a Bahá'í reader, such belated recognition awakens echoes of warning addressed over a century earlier by Bahá'u'lláh to the rulers of human affairs: "The vitality of men's belief in God is dying out in every land.... The corrosion of ungodliness is eating into the vitals of human society...." ⁶

The responsibility for this greatest of tragedies, the Guardian emphasized, rests primarily on the shoulders of the world's religious leaders. Bahá'u'lláh's severest condemnation is reserved for those who, presuming to speak in God's name, have imposed on credulous masses a welter of dogmas and prejudices that have constituted the greatest single obstacle against which

the advancement of civilization has been forced to struggle. While acknowledging the humanitarian services of countless individual clerics, He points out the consequences of the way in which self-appointed religious elites, throughout history, have interposed themselves between humanity and all voices of progress, not excluding the Messengers of God Themselves. "What 'oppression' is more grievous," He asks, "than that a soul seeking the truth, and wishing to attain unto the knowledge of God, should know not where to go for it...?"⁷ In an age of scientific advancement and widespread popular education, the cumulative effects of the resulting disillusionment were to make religious faith appear irrelevant. Impotent themselves to deal with the spiritual crisis, most of those clerics of various Faiths who became aware of Bahá'u'lláh's message either ignored the moral influence it was demonstrating or actively opposed it.⁸

Recognition of this feature of history does not diminish the harm done by those who have sought to take advantage of the spiritual vacuum thus left. The yearning for belief is inextinguishable, an inherent part of what makes one human. When it is blocked or betrayed, the rational soul is driven to seek some new compass point, however inadequate or unworthy, around which it can organize experience and dare again to assume the risks that are an inescapable aspect of life. ...

Like opportunistic infections, aggressive ideologies took advantage of the situation created by the decline of religious vitality. Although indistinguishable from one another in the corruption of faith they represented, the three belief systems that played a dominant role in human affairs during the twentieth century differed sharply in their secondary and more conspicuous characteristics to which the Guardian drew attention. In denouncing "the dark, the false, and crooked doctrines" that would bring devastation on "any man or people who believes in them", Shoghi Effendi warned particularly against "the triple gods of Nationalism, Racialism and Communism".⁹

Of Fascism's founding regime, created by the so-called "March on Rome" in 1922, little need be said. Long before it and its leader had been swept into oblivion during the concluding months of the second world war, Fascism had become an object of ridicule among the majority of even those who had originally supported it. Its significance lies, rather, in the host of imitators it spawned and which were to proliferate throughout the world like some malignant series of mutations, in the decades since then. Fuelled by a manic nationalism, this aberration of the human spirit deified the state, discovered everywhere imaginary threats to the national survival of whatever unhappy people it had fastened upon, and preached to all who would listen the notion that war has an "ennobling" influence on the human soul. The comic opera parade of uniforms, jackboots, banners and trumpets usually associated with it should not conceal from a contemporary observer the virulent legacy it has

left in our own age, enshrining in political vocabulary such anguished terms as desaparecidos ("the disappeared").

While sharing Fascism's idolatry of the state, its sister ideology Naziism made itself the voice of a far more ancient and insidious perversion. At its dark heart was an obsession with what its proponents called "race purity". The single-minded determination with which it pursued its murderous ends was in no way weakened by the demonstrably false postulates upon which it was based. The Nazi system was unique in the sheer bestiality of the act most commonly associated with its name, the programme of genocide systematically carried out against populations considered either valueless or harmful to humanity's future, a programme that included a deliberate attempt literally to exterminate the entire Jewish people. Ultimately, it was Naziism's determination that a "master race" of its own conception must rule over the entire planet which was principally responsible for fulfilling 'Abdu'l-Bahá's prophetic warning of twenty years earlier that another war, far more terrible than the first, would ravage the world. Like Fascism, Naziism has left a detritus in our own time. In its case, this takes the form of a language and symbols through which fringe elements in present-day society, demoralized by the economic and social decay around them and made desperate by the absence of solutions, vent their impotent rage on minorities whom they blame for their disappointments.

The false god that the Master was moved to identify explicitly, and the one denounced by name by Shoghi Effendi, had demonstrated its character at its outset by brutally destroying, during the latter part of World War I, the first democratic government ever established in Russia. For long years, the Soviet system created by Vladimir Lenin succeeded in representing itself to many as a benefactor of humankind and the champion of social justice. In the light of historical events, such pretensions were grotesque. The documentation now available provides irrefutable evidence of crimes so enormous and follies so abysmal as to have no parallel in the six thousand years of recorded history. To a degree never before imagined, let alone attempted, the Leninist conspiracy against human nature also sought systematically to extinguish faith in God. Whatever view of the situation political theorists may currently hold, no one can be surprised that such deliberate violence to the roots of human motivation led inexorably to the economic and political ruin of those societies luckless enough to fall under Soviet sway. Its longer-term spiritual effect, tragically, was to pervert to the service of its own amoral agenda the legitimate yearnings for freedom and justice of subject peoples throughout the world.

From a Bahá'í point of view, humanity's worship of idols of its own invention is of importance not because of the historical events associated with these forces, however horrifying, but because of the lesson it taught. Looking back on the twilight world in which such diabolical forces loomed over humanity's future, one must ask what was the weakness in human nature that rendered

it vulnerable to such influences. To have seen in someone like Benito Mussolini the figure of a "Man of Destiny", to have felt obliged to understand the racial theories of Adolf Hitler as anything other than the self-evident products of a diseased mind, to have seriously entertained the reinterpretation of human experience through dogmas that had given birth to the Soviet Union of Josef Stalin - so wilful an abandonment of reason on the part of a considerable segment of the intellectual leadership of society demands an accounting to posterity. If undertaken dispassionately, such an evaluation must, sooner or later, focus attention on a truth that runs like a central strand through the Scriptures of all of humanity's religions. In the words of Bahá'u'lláh:

"Upon the reality of man ... He hath focused the radiance of all of His names and attributes, and made it a mirror of His own Self.... These energies ... lie, however, latent within him, even as the flame is hidden within the candle and the rays of light are potentially present in the lamp.... Neither the candle nor the lamp can be lighted through their own unaided efforts, nor can it ever be possible for the mirror to free itself from its dross." ¹⁰

The consequence of humanity's infatuation with the ideologies its own mind had conceived was to produce a terrifying acceleration of the process of disintegration that was dissolving the fabric of social life and cultivating the basest impulses of human nature. The brutalization that the first world war had engendered now became an omnipresent feature of social life throughout much of the planet. "Thus have We gathered together the workers of iniquity", Bahá'u'lláh warned over a century earlier. "We see them rushing on towards their idol.... They hasten forward to Hell Fire, and mistake it for light." ¹¹

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At a relatively early point in the second world war, the Guardian set that conflict in a perspective for Bahá'ís that was very different from the one generally prevailing. The war should be regarded, he said, "as the direct continuation" of the conflagration ignited in 1914. It would come to be seen as the "essential pre-requisite to world unification". The entry into the war by the United States, whose president had initiated the project of a system of international order, but which had itself rejected this visionary initiative, would lead that nation, Shoghi Effendi predicted, to "assume through adversity its preponderating share of responsibility to lay down, once for all, broad, worldwide, unassailable foundations of that discredited yet immortal System." ¹²

These statements proved prophetic. With the end of hostilities, it gradually became apparent that a fundamental shift in consciousness was under way throughout the world and that inherited assumptions, institutions and

priorities that had been progressively undermined by forces at work during the first half of the century were now crumbling. If the change could not yet be described as an emerging conviction about the oneness of humankind, no objective observer could mistake the fact that barriers blocking such a realization, which had survived all the assaults against them earlier in the century, were at last giving way. One's mind turns to the prophetic words of the Qur'án: "And you see the mountains and think them solid, but they shall pass away as the passing away of the clouds." (27:88) The effect was to inspire in progressive minds a sense of confidence that it would be possible to construct a new kind of society that would not only preserve the long-term peace of the world, but enrich the lives of all of its inhabitants.

Primarily, this new birth of hope had resulted, as Shoghi Effendi had foreseen, from the "fiery ordeal" that had at last succeeded in "implanting that sense of responsibility" which leaders earlier in the century had sought to avoid.¹³ To this new awareness had been added the effects of the fear induced by the invention and use of atomic weapons, a reaction calling to mind for Bahá'ís the Master's prescient statements in North America that ultimately peace would come because the nations would be driven to accept it. The Montreal Daily Star had quoted Him as saying: "It [peace] will be universal in the twentieth century. All nations will be forced into it." ¹⁴ The years immediately following 1945 witnessed advances in framing a new social order that went far beyond the brightest hopes of earlier decades.

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As Shoghi Effendi had prophetically warned, forces undermining inherited systems and convictions of every kind were continuing to advance in tandem with the integrating processes at work in the world. It is not surprising, therefore, that the euphoria induced by the restoration of peace in both Europe and the Orient proved to be of the briefest duration. Hardly had hostilities ended than the ideological divisions between Marxism and liberal democracy burst out into attempts to secure dominance between the respective blocs of nations they inspired. The phenomenon of "Cold War", in which the struggle for advantage stopped just short of military conflict, emerged as the prevailing political paradigm of the next several decades.

The threat posed by a new crisis in the international order was heightened by breakthroughs in nuclear technology and the success of both blocs of nations in equipping themselves with an ever-growing array of weapons of mass destruction. The horrific images of Hiroshima and Nagasaki had awakened humanity to the appalling possibility that a series of relatively minor mishaps, as uncalculated as the process set in motion by the 1914 incident in Sarajevo, might this time lead to the annihilation of a considerable portion of the world's population and leave large areas of the globe uninhabitable. For Bahá'ís, the prospect could only bring vividly to

mind the sombre warning uttered by Bahá'u'lláh decades earlier: "Strange and astonishing things exist in the earth but they are hidden from the minds and the understanding of men. These things are capable of changing the whole atmosphere of the earth and their contamination would prove lethal."

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By far the greatest tragedy resulting from this latest contest for world domination was the blight that it cast over the hopes with which formerly subject peoples had welcomed the opportunity they believed they had been given to build a new life of their own devising. The obstinate determination of some of the surviving colonial powers to suppress such hopes, though doomed to failure in the eyes of any objective observer, had left the urge for liberation in many countries with no recourse but to assume the character of revolutionary struggle. By 1960, such movements, which had already been a feature of the political landscape during the earlier decades of the century, were coming to represent the principal form of indigenous political activity in most subject nations.

Since the driving force of colonialism itself was economic exploitation, it was perhaps inevitable that most movements of liberation assumed a broadly socialistic ideological cast. Within only a few short years, these circumstances had created a fertile ground for exploitation by the world's superpowers. For the Soviet Union, the situation seemed to offer an opportunity to induce a shift in the existing alignment of nations by gaining a preponderating influence in what was by now beginning to be called the "Third World". The response of the West - wherever development aid failed to retain the loyalties of recipient populations - was to resort to the encouragement and arming of a wide variety of authoritarian regimes.

As outside forces manipulated new governments, attention was increasingly diverted from an objective consideration of developmental needs to ideological and political struggles that bore little or no relation to social or economic reality. The results were uniformly devastating. Economic bankruptcy, gross violations of human rights, the breakdown of civil administration and the rise of opportunistic elites who saw in the suffering of their countries only openings for self-enrichment - such was the heartbreaking fate that engulfed one after another of the new nations who, only short years before, had begun life with such great promise.

Inspiring these political, social and economic crises was the inexorable rise and consolidation of a disease of the human soul infinitely more destructive than any of its specific manifestations. Its triumph marked a new and ominous stage in the process of social and spiritual degeneration that Shoghi Effendi had identified. Fathered by nineteenth century European thought, acquiring enormous influence through the achievements of American capitalist culture, and endowed by Marxism with the counterfeit credibility peculiar to that system, materialism emerged full-blown in the second half of

the twentieth century as a kind of universal religion claiming absolute authority in both the personal and social life of humankind. Its creed was simplicity itself. Reality - including human reality and the process by which it evolves - is essentially material in nature. The goal of human life is, or ought to be, the satisfaction of material needs and wants. Society exists to facilitate this quest, and the collective concern of humankind should be an ongoing refinement of the system, aimed at rendering it ever more efficient in carrying out its assigned task.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, impulses to devise and promote any formal materialistic belief system disappeared. Nor would any useful purpose have been served by such efforts, as materialism was soon facing no significant challenge in most parts of the world. Religion, where not simply driven back into fanaticism and unthinking rejection of progress, became progressively reduced to a kind of personal preference, a predilection, a pursuit designed to satisfy spiritual and emotional needs of the individual. The sense of historical mission that had defined the major Faiths learned to content itself with providing religious endorsement for campaigns of social change carried on by secular movements. The academic world, once the scene of great exploits of the mind and spirit, settled into the role of a kind of scholastic industry preoccupied with tending its machinery of dissertations, symposia, publication credits and grants.

Whether as world-view or simple appetite, materialism's effect is to leach out of human motivation - and even interest - the spiritual impulses that distinguish the rational soul. "For self-love," 'Abdu'l-Bahá has said, "is kneaded into the very clay of man, and it is not possible that, without any hope of a substantial reward, he should neglect his own present material good." ¹⁶ In the absence of conviction about the spiritual nature of reality and the fulfilment it alone offers, it is not surprising to find at the very heart of the current crisis of civilization a cult of individualism that increasingly admits of no restraint and that elevates acquisition and personal advancement to the status of major cultural values. The resulting atomization of society has marked a new stage in the process of disintegration about which the writings of Shoghi Effendi speak so urgently.

To accept willingly the rupture of one after another strand of the moral fabric that guides and disciplines individual life in any social system, is a self-defeating approach to reality. If leaders of thought were to be candid in their assessment of the evidence readily available, it is here that one would find the root cause of such apparently unrelated problems as the pollution of the environment, economic dislocation, ethnic violence, spreading public apathy, the massive increase in crime, and epidemics that ravage whole populations. However important the application of legal, sociological or technological expertise to such issues undoubtedly is, it would be unrealistic to imagine that efforts of this kind will produce any significant recovery without a fundamental change of moral consciousness and behaviour.

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Somewhere ahead lie the further great changes that will eventually impel acceptance of the principle of world government itself. The United Nations does not possess such a mandate, nor is there anything in the current discourse of political leaders that seriously envisions so radical a restructuring of the administration of the affairs of the planet. That it will come about in due course Bahá'u'lláh has made unmistakably clear. That yet greater suffering and disillusionment will be required to impel humanity to this great leap forward appears, alas, equally clear. Its establishment will require national governments and other centres of power to surrender to international determination, unconditionally and irreversibly, the full measure of overriding authority implicit in the word "government".

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Realization of the uniqueness of what Bahá'u'lláh has brought into being opens the imagination to the contribution that the Cause can make to the unification of humankind and the building of a global society. The immediate responsibility of establishing world government rests on the shoulders of the nation-states. What the Bahá'í community is called on to do, at this stage in humanity's social and political evolution, is to contribute by every means in its power to the creation of conditions that will encourage and facilitate this enormously demanding undertaking. In the same way that Bahá'u'lláh assured the monarchs of His day that "It is not Our wish to lay hands on your kingdoms",¹⁷ so the Bahá'í community has no political agenda, abstains from all involvement in partisan activity, and accepts unreservedly the authority of civil government in public affairs. Whatever concern Bahá'ís may have about current conditions or about the needs of their own members is expressed through constitutional channels.

The power that the Cause possesses to influence the course of history thus lies not only in the spiritual potency of its message but in the example it provides. "So powerful is the light of unity," Bahá'u'lláh asserts, "that it can illuminate the whole earth."¹⁹ The oneness of humankind embodied in the Faith represents, as Shoghi Effendi emphasized, "no mere outburst of ignorant emotionalism or an expression of vague and pious hope". The organic unity of the body of believers - and the Administrative Order that makes it possible - are evidences of what Shoghi Effendi termed "the society-building power which their Faith possesses."¹⁹ As the Cause expands and the capacities latent in its Administrative Order become ever more apparent, it will increasingly attract the attention of leaders of thought, inspiring progressive minds with confidence that their ideals are ultimately attainable. In Shoghi Effendi's words:

"Leaders of religion, exponents of political theories, governors of human institutions, who at present are witnessing with perplexity and dismay the bankruptcy of their ideas, and the disintegration of their handiwork, would do well to turn their gaze to the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, and to meditate upon the World Order which, lying enshrined in His teachings, is slowly and imperceptibly rising amid the welter and chaos of present-day civilization."

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Such an examination will focus attention on the power that has made it possible for Bahá'í unity to be achieved, consolidated and maintained. "The light of men," Bahá'u'lláh says, "is Justice." Its purpose, He adds, "is the appearance of unity among men. The ocean of divine wisdom surgeth within this exalted word".²¹ The designation "Houses of Justice" given to the institutions that will govern the World Order He conceived, at local, national and international levels, reflects the centrality of this principle in the teachings of the Revelation and the life of the Cause. As the Bahá'í community becomes an increasingly familiar participant in the life of society, its experience will offer ever more encouraging evidence of this crucial law in healing the countless ills which, in the final analysis, are the consequences of the disunity afflicting the human family. "Know thou, of a truth," Bahá'u'lláh explains, "these great oppressions that have befallen the world are preparing it for the advent of the Most Great Justice." ²² Clearly, that culminating stage in the evolution of human society will take place in a world very different from the one we know today.

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Throughout history, the masses of humanity have been, at best, spectators at the advance of civilization. Their role has been to serve the designs of whatever elite had temporarily assumed control of the process. Even the successive Revelations of the Divine, whose objective was the liberation of the human spirit, were, in time, taken captive by "the insistent self", were frozen into man-made dogma, ritual, clerical privilege and sectarian quarrels, and reached their end with their ultimate purpose frustrated.

Bahá'u'lláh has come to free humanity from this long bondage, and the closing decades of the twentieth century were devoted by the community of His followers to creative experimentation with the means by which His objective can be realized. The prosecution of the Divine Plan entails no less than the involvement of the entire body of humankind in the work of its own spiritual, social and intellectual development. The trials encountered by the Bahá'í community in the decades since 1963 are those necessary ones that refine endeavour and purify motivation so as to render those who would take part worthy of so great a trust. Such test are the surest evidences of that process of maturation which 'Abdu'l-Bahá so confidently described:

"Some movements appear, manifest a brief period of activity, then discontinue. Others show forth a greater measure of growth and strength, but before attaining mature development, weaken, disintegrate and are lost in oblivion.... There is still another kind of movement or cause which from a very small, inconspicuous beginning goes forward with sure and steady progress, gradually broadening and widening until it has assumed universal dimensions. The Bahá'í Movement is of this nature." ²⁴

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The image used by 'Abdu'l-Bahá to capture for His hearers the coming transformation of society was that of light. Unity, He declared, is the power that illuminates and advances all forms of human endeavour. The age that was opening would come in the future to be regarded as "the century of light", because in it universal recognition of the oneness of humankind would be achieved. With this foundation in place, the process of building a global society embodying principles of justice will begin.

The vision was enunciated by the Master in several Tablets and addresses. Its fullest expression occurs in a Tablet addressed by 'Abdu'l-Bahá to Jane Elizabeth Whyte, wife of the former Moderator of the Free Church of Scotland. Mrs. Whyte was an ardent sympathizer of the Bahá'í teachings, had visited the Master in 'Akká and would later make arrangements for the particularly warm reception that met Him in Edinburgh. Using the familiar metaphor of "candles", 'Abdu'l-Bahá wrote to Mrs. Whyte:

O honored lady!... Behold how its [unity's] light is now dawning upon the world's darkened horizon. The first candle is unity in the political realm, the early glimmerings of which can now be discerned. The second candle is unity of thought in world undertakings, the consummation of which will ere long be witnessed. The third candle is unity in freedom which will surely come to pass. The fourth candle is unity in religion which is the corner-stone of the foundation itself, and which, by the power of God, will be revealed in all its splendor. The fifth candle is the unity of nations - a unity which in this century will be securely established, causing all the peoples of the world to regard themselves as citizens of one common fatherland. The sixth candle is unity of races, making of all that dwell on earth peoples and kindreds of one race. The seventh candle is unity of language, i.e., the choice of a universal tongue in which all peoples will be instructed and converse. Each and every one of these will inevitably come to pass, inasmuch as the power of the Kingdom of God will aid and assist in their realization.²⁴

While it will be decades - or perhaps a great deal longer - before the vision contained in this remarkable document is fully realized, the essential features of what it promised are now established facts throughout the world.

In several of the great changes envisioned - unity of race and unity of religion - the intent of the Master's words is clear and the processes involved are far advanced, however great may be the resistance in some quarters. To a large extent this is also true of unity of language. The need for it is now recognized on all sides, as reflected in the circumstances that have compelled the United Nations and much of the non-governmental community to adopt several "official languages". Until a decision is taken by international agreement, the effect of such developments as the Internet, the management of air traffic, the development of technological vocabularies of various kinds, and universal education itself, has been to make it possible, to some extent, for English to fill the gap.

"Unity of thought in world undertakings", a concept for which the most idealistic aspirations at the opening of the twentieth century lacked even reference points, is also in large measure everywhere apparent in vast programmes of social and economic development, humanitarian aid and concern for protection of the environment of the planet and its oceans. As to "unity in the political realm", Shoghi Effendi has explained that the reference is to unity which sovereign states achieve among themselves, a developing process the present stage of which is the establishment of the United Nations. The Master's promise of "unity of nations", on the other hand, looked forward to today's widespread acceptance among the peoples of the world of the fact that, however great the differences among them may be, they are the inhabitants of a single global homeland.

"Unity in freedom" has today, of course, become a universal aspiration of the Earth's inhabitants. Among the chief developments giving substance to it, the Master may well have had in mind the dramatic extinction of colonialism and the consequent rise of self-determination as a dominant feature of national identity at century's end.

Whatever threats still hang over humanity's future, the world has been transformed by the events of the twentieth century. That the features of the process should also have been described by the Voice that predicted it with such confidence ought to command earnest reflection on the part of serious minds everywhere.

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Those who long to believe the visionary statements of world leaders struggle at the same time in the grip of two phenomena that undermine such confidence. The first has already been considered at some length in these pages. The collapse of society's moral foundations has left the greater part of humankind floundering without reference points in a world that grows daily more threatening and unpredictable. To suggest that the process has nearly reached its end would be merely to raise false hopes. One may appreciate

that intense political efforts are being made, that impressive scientific advances continue or that economic conditions improve for a portion of humankind - all without seeing in such developments anything resembling hope of a secure life for oneself, or more importantly, for one's children. The sense of disillusionment which, as Shoghi Effendi warned, the spread of political corruption would create in the minds of the mass of humankind is now widespread. Outbreaks of lawlessness have become pandemic in both urban and rural life in many lands. The failure of social controls, the effort to justify the most extreme forms of aberrant behaviour as primarily civil rights issues, and an almost universal celebration in the arts and media of degeneracy and violence - these and similar manifestations of a condition approaching moral anarchy suggest a future that paralyzes the imagination. Against the background of this desolate landscape the intellectual vogue of the age, seeking to make a virtue out of grim necessity, has adopted for itself the appellation and mission of "deconstructionism".

The second of the two developments undermining faith in the future was the focus of some of the Millennium Summit's most anguished debates. The information revolution set off in the closing decade of the century by the invention of the World Wide Web transformed irreversibly much of human activity. The process of "globalization" that had been following a long rising curve over a period of several centuries was galvanized by new powers beyond the imaginations of most people. Economic forces, breaking free of traditional restraints, brought into being during the closing decade of the century a new global order in the designing, generation and distribution of wealth. Knowledge itself became a significantly more valuable commodity than even financial capital and material resources. In a breathtakingly short space of time, national borders, already under assault, became permeable, with the result that vast sums now pass instantly through them at the command of a computer signal. Complex production operations are so reconfigured as to integrate and maximize the economies available from the contributions of a range of specializing participants, without regard to their national locations. If one were to lower one's horizon to purely material considerations, the earth has already taken on something of the character of "one country" and the inhabitants of various lands the status of its consumer "citizens".

Nor is the transformation merely economic. Increasingly, globalization assumes political, social and cultural dimensions. It has become clear that the powers of the institution of the nation-state, once the arbiter and protector of humanity's fortunes, have been drastically eroded. While national governments continue to play a crucial role, they must now make room for such rising centres of power as multinational corporations, United Nations agencies, non-governmental organizations of every kind, and huge media conglomerates, the cooperation of all of which is vital to the success of most programmes aimed at achieving significant economic or social ends. Just as the migration of money or corporations encounters little hindrance

from national borders, neither can the latter any longer exercise effective control over the dissemination of knowledge. Internet communication, which has the ability to transmit in seconds the entire contents of libraries that took centuries of study to amass, vastly enriches the intellectual life of anyone able to use it, as well as providing sophisticated training in a broad range of professional fields. The system, so prophetically foreseen sixty years ago by Shoghi Effendi, builds a sense of shared community among its users that is impatient of either geographic or cultural distances.

The benefits to many millions of persons are obvious and impressive. Cost effectiveness resulting from the coordination of formerly competing operations tends to bring goods and services within the reach of populations who could not previously have hoped to enjoy them. Enormous increases in the funds available for research and development expand the variety and quality of such benefits. Something of a levelling effect in the distribution of employment opportunities can be seen in the ease with which business operations can shift their base from one part of the world to another. The abandonment of barriers to transnational trade reduces still further the cost of goods to consumers. It is not difficult to appreciate, from a Bahá'í perspective, the potentiality of such transformations for laying the foundations of the global society envisioned in Bahá'u'lláh's Writings.

Far from inspiring optimism about the future, however, globalization is seen by large and growing numbers of people around the world as the principal threat to that future. The violence of the riots set off by the meetings of the World Trade Organization, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund during the last two years testifies to the depth of the fear and resentment that the rise of globalization has provoked. Media coverage of these unexpected outbursts focused public attention on protests against gross disparities in the distribution of benefits and opportunities, which globalization is seen as only increasing, and on warnings that, if effective controls are not speedily imposed, the consequences will be catastrophic in social and political, as well as in economic and environmental, terms.

Such concerns appear well-founded. Economic statistics alone reveal a picture of current global conditions that is profoundly disturbing. The ever-widening gulf between the one fifth of the world's population living in the highest income countries and the one fifth living in the lowest income countries tells a grim story. According to the 1999 Human Development Report published by the United Nations Development Programme, this gap represented, in 1990, a ratio of sixty to one. That is to say, one segment of humankind was enjoying access to sixty percent of the world's wealth, while another, equally large, population struggled merely to survive on barely one percent of that wealth. By 1997, in the wake of globalization's rapid advance, the gulf had widened in only seven years to a ratio of seventy-four to one. Even this appalling fact does not take into account the steady impoverishment of the majority of the remaining billions of human beings

trapped in the relentlessly narrowing isthmus between these two extremes. Far from being brought under control, the crisis is clearly accelerating. The implications for humanity's future, in terms of privation and despair engulfing more than two thirds of the Earth's population, helped to account for the apathy that met the Millennium Summit's celebration of achievements that were, by every reasonable criteria, truly historic.

Globalization itself is an intrinsic feature of the evolution of human society. It has brought into existence a socio-economic culture that, at the practical level, constitutes the world in which the aspirations of the human race will be pursued in the century now opening. No objective observer, if he is fair-minded in his judgement, will deny that both of the two contradictory reactions it is arousing are, in large measure, well justified. The unification of human society, forged by the fires of the twentieth century, is a reality that with every passing day opens breathtaking new possibilities. A reality also being forced on serious minds everywhere, is the claim of justice to be the one means capable of harnessing these great potentialities to the advancement of civilization. It no longer requires the gift of prophecy to realize that the fate of humanity in the century now opening will be determined by the relationship established between these two fundamental forces of the historical process, the inseparable principles of unity and justice.

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In the perspective of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings, the greatest danger of both the moral crisis and the inequities associated with globalization in its current form is an entrenched philosophical attitude that seeks to justify and excuse these failures. The overthrow of the twentieth century's totalitarian systems has not meant the end of ideology. On the contrary. There has not been a society in the history of the world, no matter how pragmatic, experimentalist and multi-form it may have been, that did not derive its thrust from some foundational interpretation of reality. Such a system of thought reigns today virtually unchallenged across the planet, under the nominal designation "Western civilization". Philosophically and politically, it presents itself as a kind of liberal relativism; economically and socially, as capitalism - two value systems that have now so adjusted to each other and become so mutually reinforcing as to constitute virtually a single, comprehensive world-view.

Appreciation of the benefits - in terms of the personal freedom, social prosperity and scientific progress enjoyed by a significant minority of the Earth's people - cannot withhold a thinking person from recognizing that the system is morally and intellectually bankrupt. It has contributed its best to the advancement of civilization, as did all its predecessors, and, like them, is impotent to deal with the needs of a world never imagined by the eighteenth

century prophets who conceived most of its component elements. Shoghi Effendi did not limit his attention to divine right monarchies, established churches or totalitarian ideologies when he posed the searching question: "Why should these, in a world subject to the immutable law of change and decay, be exempt from the deterioration that must needs overtake every human institution?" ²⁵

Bahá'u'lláh urges those who believe in Him to "see with thine own eyes and not through the eyes of others", to "know of thine own knowledge and not through the knowledge of thy neighbour". Tragically, what Bahá'ís see in present-day society is unbridled exploitation of the masses of humanity by greed that excuses itself as the operation of "impersonal market forces". What meets their eyes everywhere is the destruction of moral foundations vital to humanity's future, through gross self-indulgence masquerading as "freedom of speech". What they find themselves struggling against daily is the pressure of a dogmatic materialism, claiming to be the voice of "science", that seeks systematically to exclude from intellectual life all impulses arising from the spiritual level of human consciousness.

And for a Bahá'í the ultimate issues are spiritual. The Cause is not a political party nor an ideology, much less an engine for political agitation against this or that social wrong. The process of transformation it has set in motion advances by inducing a fundamental change of consciousness, and the challenge it poses to everyone who would serve it is to free oneself from attachment to inherited assumptions and preferences that are irreconcilable with the Will of God for humanity's coming of age. Paradoxically, even the distress caused by prevailing conditions that violate one's conscience aids in this process of spiritual liberation. In the final analysis, such disillusionment drives a Bahá'í to confront a truth emphasized over and over again in the Writings of the Faith:

"He hath chosen out of the whole world the hearts of His servants, and made them each a seat for the revelation of His glory. Wherefore, sanctify them from every defilement, that the things for which they were created may be engraven upon them." ²⁶

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Shoghi Effendi describes this process of world unification as the "Major Plan" of God, whose operation will continue, gathering force and momentum, until the human race has been united in a global society that has banished war and taken charge of its collective destiny. What the struggles of the twentieth century achieved was the fundamental change of direction the Divine purpose required. The change is irreversible. There is no way back to an earlier state of affairs, however greatly some elements of society may, from time to time, be tempted to seek one.

The importance of the historic breakthrough that has thus occurred is in no way minimized by recognition that the process has barely begun. It must lead in time, as Shoghi Effendi has made clear, to the spiritualization of human consciousness and the emergence of the global civilization that will embody the Will of God. Merely to state the goal is to acknowledge the great distance that the human race has yet to traverse. It was against the most intense resistance at every level of society, among governed and governors alike, that the political, social and conceptual changes of the past hundred years were achieved. Ultimately, they were accomplished only at the cost of terrible suffering. It would be unrealistic to imagine that the challenges lying ahead may not exact an even greater toll of a human race that still seeks, by every means in its power, to avoid the spiritual implications of the experience it is undergoing. Shoghi Effendi's words on the consequences of this obduracy of heart and mind make sober reading:

"Adversities unimaginably appalling, undreamed of crises and upheavals, war, famine, and pestilence, might well combine to engrave in the soul of an unheeding generation those truths and principles which it has disdained to recognize and follow." ²⁷

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In calling on those who have recognized Him to share the message of the Day of God with others, Bahá'u'lláh turns again to the language of creation itself: "Every body calleth aloud for a soul. Heavenly souls must needs quicken, with the breath of the Word of God, the dead bodies with a fresh spirit." ²⁸ The principle is as true of the collective life of humankind, 'Abdu'l-Bahá points out, as it is of the lives of its individual members: "Material civilization is like the body. No matter how infinitely graceful, elegant and beautiful it may be, it is dead. Divine civilization is like the spirit, and the body gets its life from the spirit..." ²⁹

In this compelling analogy is summed up the relationship between the two historical developments that the Will of God propelled forward along converging tracks during the century of light. Only a person blind to the intellectual and social capacities latent in the human race, and insensitive to humanity's desperate needs, could fail to take deep satisfaction from the advances that society has made during the past hundred years, and particularly from the processes knitting together the earth's peoples and nations. How much more are such achievements cherished by Bahá'ís, who see in them the very Purpose of God. But this Body of humanity's material civilization calls aloud, yearns more desperately with each passing day, for its Soul. As with every great civilization in history, until it is so animated, and its spiritual faculties awakened, it will find neither peace, nor justice, nor a unity that rises above the level of negotiation and compromise.

Addressing the "elected representatives of the people in every land", Bahá'u'lláh wrote:

"That which the Lord hath ordained as the sovereign remedy and mightiest instrument for the healing of all the world is the union of all its peoples in one universal Cause, one common Faith." ³⁰

It is not, therefore, in providing support, nor encouragement, nor even example that the work of the Cause chiefly lies. The Bahá'í community will go on contributing in every way possible to efforts toward global unification and social betterment, but such contributions are secondary to its purpose. Its purpose is to assist the people of the world to open their minds and hearts to the one Power that can fulfil their ultimate longing. There are none, except those who have themselves awakened to the Revelation of God, who can bring this help. There are none who can offer credible testimony to a coming world of peace and justice but those who understand, however dimly, the words with which the Voice of God summoned Bahá'u'lláh to arise and undertake His mission:

"Canst thou discover any one but Me, O Pen, in this Day? What hath become of the creation and the manifestations thereof? What of the names and their kingdom? Whither are gone all created things, whether seen or unseen? What of the hidden secrets of the universe and its revelations? Lo, the entire creation hath passed away! Nothing remaineth except My Face, the Ever-Abiding, the Resplendent, the All-Glorious.

"This is the Day whereon naught can be seen except the splendors of the Light that shineth from the face of Thy Lord, the Gracious, the Most Bountiful. Verily, We have caused every soul to expire by virtue of Our irresistible and all-subduing sovereignty. We have, then, called into being a new creation, as a token of Our grace unto men. I am, verily, the All-Bountiful, the Ancient of Days." ³¹

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Notes:

1. Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, op. cit., pp. 42-43.
2. *ibid.*, p. 202.
3. *ibid.*, pp. 203-204.
4. Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, op. cit., p. 203.
5. Shoghi Effendi, *The Advent of Divine Justice*, op. cit., pp. 90, 19, 85.
6. *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, op. cit., p. 200, (section XCIX).
7. Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitab-i-Iqan* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1983), p. 31.
8. "In Europe at the start of the twentieth century, most people accepted the authority of morality.... [Then] reflective Europeans were also able to believe in moral progress, and to see human viciousness and barbarism as in retreat. At the end of the century, it is hard to be confident either about the moral law or about moral progress": Jonathon Glover, *Humanity: A Moral History of the Twentieth Century* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1999), p. 1. Glover's study concentrates particularly on the rise and influence of twentieth century ideologies.
9. *ibid.*
10. *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, op. cit., pp. 65-66, (section XXVII).
11. *ibid.*, pp. 41-42, (section XVII).
12. Shoghi Effendi, *Messages to America*, op. cit., p. 53.
13. Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, op. cit., p. 46.
14. 'Abdu'lBahá in Canada, op. cit., p. 51.
15. *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh revealed after the Kitab-i-Aqdas*, op. cit., p. 69.
16. 'Abdu'lBahá, *The Secret of Divine Civilization*, op. cit., pp. 96-97.
17. Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitab-i-Aqdas*, op. cit., paragraph 83.

18. Bahá'u'lláh, *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1988), p. 14.
19. Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, op. cit., pp. 43, 195.
20. *ibid.*, p. 24.
21. *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh revealed after the Kitab-i-Aqdas*, op. cit., pp. 66-67.
22. Shoghi Effendi, *The Advent of Divine Justice*, op. cit., p. 27.
23. 'Abdu'lBahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, op. cit., pp. 43-44.
24. *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'lBahá*, op. cit., pp. 34-36, (section 15).
25. Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, op. cit., p. 42.
26. *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, op. cit., p. 297, (section CXXXVI).
27. Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, op. cit., p. 193.
28. Shoghi Effendi, *The Advent of Divine Justice*, op. cit., pp. 82-83.
29. *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'lBahá*, op. cit., p. 317, (section 227.22).
30. *The Proclamation of Bahá'u'lláh to the kings and leaders of the world* (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1967), p. 67.
31. *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, op. cit., pp. 29-30, (section XIV).