Some Reflections on Bahá'í Approaches to Social Change

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Introduction

Bahá'u'lláh, the founder of the Bahá'í Faith, envisioned a future society with the hallmarks of social peace, equality, and justice. This society's foundation would be the unity of the human race. The Bahá'í writings use different terms to express dimensions and stages of future social reality—including the "Kingdom of God on Earth," a "Golden Age," and a "New World Order." This vision, animated by a theology and ontology of oneness, will manifest the unity of God, unity of religion, and unity of humanity in the contingent world through patterns of unity in diversity. At all levels of human existence, Bahá'u'lláh, calls for deeper expression of patterns of unity:

> The tabernacle of unity hath been raised; regard ye not one another as strangers. Ye are the fruits of one tree, and the leaves of one branch. We cherish the hope that the light of justice may shine upon the world and sanctify it from tyranny. If the rulers and kings of the earth, the symbols of the power of God, exalted be His glory, arise and resolve to dedicate themselves to whatever will promote the highest interests of the whole of humanity, the reign of justice will assuredly be established amongst the children of men, and the effulgence of its light will envelop the whole earth. . . .
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> Were man to appreciate the greatness of his station and the loftiness of his destiny he would manifest naught save goodly character, pure deeds, and a seemly and praiseworthy conduct. If the learned and wise men of goodwill were to impart guidance unto the people, the whole earth would be regarded as one country. Verily this is the undoubted truth. This servant appealeth to every diligent and enterprising soul to exert his utmost endeavour and arise to rehabilitate the conditions in all regions and to quicken the dead with the living waters of wisdom and utterance, by virtue of the love he cherisheth for God, the One, the Peerless, the Almighty, the Beneficent.[1]

While Bahá'í aspirations to social change have been well represented in secondary literature, there has been less systematic analysis of the Bahá'í method of social change. The primary Bahá'í sources—comprising the writings of the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Shoghi Effendi, and the Universal House of Justice—are filled with guidance and teachings about methods and means for effecting change. Indeed, the Universal House of Justice has recently written of Bahá'ís and the Bahá'í community as "protagonists of social change" learning "to apply with increasing effectiveness elements of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation, together with the contents and methods of science, to their social reality."[2] However, the primary Bahá'í writings and teachings related to the means and methods of social change have not been the subject of much scholarly analysis and consideration.[3] The main exception throughout Bahá'í history

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[1] Bahá'u'lláh, "Lawh-i-Maqsud" in Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh Revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, trans. Habib Taherzadeh et al. (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1988), 164, 172.

[2] Universal House of Justice, The Five Year Plan 2011–2016: Messages from the Universal House of Justice (West Palm Beach, Florida: Palabra Publications, 2011) 20.

[3] For a recent work that discusses Bahá'í approaches to social change, see Paul Lample, Revelation and Social Reality: Learning to Translate What is Written into Reality (West Palm Beach, Florida: Palabra Publications, 2009).

has been a negative statement—that Bahá'ís should not seek to advance social change through power-seeking within contemporary political processes. This element of Bahá'í doctrine, often labeled as non-participation in politics, has been the subject of some discussion and in general terms encompasses a critique of existing models of politics, including, but certainly not limited to, the partisanship that predominates in contemporary democratic models.[4]

A current challenge of the Bahá'í community is to move towards a positive and constructive articulation of how Bahá'ís as individuals and as a community will set out to advance social change towards unity as envisioned by Bahá'u'lláh. Not surprisingly, current answers often focus on the growing Bahá'í community and its efforts to build a pattern of global community life and a system of administration that holds as its starting premise a commitment to unity in diversity, spiritualization of daily life, consultative decision-making, and non-partisan democratic structures. Although there is value and merit in such an answer, it begs the question of whether and how Bahá'ís may be interested in the welfare of humanity as a whole, short of a conversionist paradigm of salvation. Within the Bahá'í community there is a very strong ethic and discourse of teaching the Bahá'í Faith to others that leads some to state that the path towards social change is primarily, or perhaps exclusively, through increasing the number of Bahá'ís. From this position, the answer to the question, "What is the Bahá'í method of social change?" would likely include, "teaching the Bahá'í Faith" and perhaps, "The world will change towards unity when masses of people become Bahá'ís." There is ample evidence within the Bahá'í writings, however, that processes of growth of the Bahá'í community and processes of social change, while interrelated, cannot be conflated and understood as one and the same. To cite but one example, when calling Bahá'ís to "social action," the Universal House of Justice recently stated that "we feel compelled to raise a warning: It will be important for all to recognize that the value of engaging in social action and public discourse is not to be judged by the ability to bring enrollments."[5]

In this short paper we offer some reflections on the Bahá'í method of social change, in particular, how the Bahá'í writings foresee Bahá'ís pursuing social change. These reflections suggest that Bahá'u'lláh expects of His followers dynamic and distinct forms of engagement in the life of society at large that are primarily, though not exclusively, focused on what might be called epistemic social action. At the same time, it is suggested that the work of building up particular patterns and structures of Bahá'í community life is best conceptualized as part of a broader model of social change in which Bahá'ís are engaged both externally in the life of society and

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[4] Arash Abizadeh, "Democratic Elections without Campaigns? Normative Foundations of National Bahá'í Elections," *World Order* 37.1 (2005): 7–49.
[5] *The Five Year Plan 2011–2016: Messages from the Universal House of Justice* (West Palm Beach, Florida: Palabra Publications, 2011), supra note 2, 21.

internally in their community-building projects. Finally, it is suggested that a discourse within and about the Bahá'í community would benefit from a positive shift towards an emphasis on what Bahá'ís can and should be doing to advance social change, rather than framing discourse about Bahá'í efforts at social change through what Bahá'ís do not do, such as the limitations on participation in partisan political processes.

Elements of a Bahá'í Approach to Social Change

The following four principles, listed here in logical order and building upon each other, form the foundation for understanding a Bahá'í method and approach to social change.

1. Social change begins and ends with unity

Unity, or oneness, is the central concept of Bahá'í theology, ontology, and social theory; as such, it is also positioned as the central teaching of Bahá'u'lláh. As Bahá'u'lláh describes His own station and purpose, "Through Him the light of unity hath shone forth above the horizon of the world, and the law of oneness hath been revealed amidst the nations, who, with radiant faces, have turned towards the Supreme Horizon, and acknowledged that which the Tongue of Utterance hath spoken in the kingdom of His knowledge."[6] In describing His own revelation, He states:

> I testify that no sooner had the First Word proceeded. . . out of His mouth. . . than the whole creation was revolutionized, and all that are in the heavens and all that are on earth were stirred to the depths. Through that Word the realities of all created things were shaken, were divided, separated, scattered, combined and reunited, disclosing, in both the contingent world and the heavenly kingdom, entities of a new creation, and revealing, in the unseen realms, the signs and tokens of Thy unity and oneness. Through that Call Thou didst announce unto all Thy servants the advent of Thy most great Revelation and the appearance of Thy most perfect Cause.[7]

Three aspects of the Bahá'í concept of unity are helpful to understanding its social expressions. First, unity is a state of knowledge or awareness, as well as a state of action. Bahá'u'lláh often spoke of the need for our vision and perception of the world around us to be firmly rooted in unity. He exhorted human beings to "let your vision be world embracing. . . " and to see with the "eye of oneness."[8] This vision of unity, which reflects the fundamental interconnectedness of social reality, is found throughout the writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi that explain social issues and challenges, and include prescriptions for the future. For example, 'Abdu'l-Bahá writes:

> Continents remained widely divided, nay even among the peoples of one and the same continent association and interchange of thought were well nigh impossible. Consequently intercourse, understanding and unity amongst all the peoples and kindreds of the earth were unattainable. In this day, however, means of communication have multiplied, and the five continents of the earth have become increasingly

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[6] Bahá'u'lláh, *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*, trans. Shoghi Effendi, rev. ed. (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1988), 1.
[7] Bahá'u'lláh, *Prayers and Meditations*, trans. Shoghi Effendi, rev. ed. (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1987), 295–96.
[8] Bahá'u'lláh, "Lawh-i-Dunya" and "Asl-i-Kullu'l-Khayr" in *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh Revealed after the* Kitáb-i-Aqdas, trans. Habib Taherzadeh et al. (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1988), 87, 157.

interdependent. For none is self-sufficiency any longer possible, inasmuch as political ties unite all peoples and nations, and the bonds of trade and industry, of agriculture and education, are being strengthened every day. Hence the unity of all mankind can in this day be achieved. Verily this is none other but one of the wonders of this wondrous age, this glorious century.[9]

From this perspective, advancing towards unity is not something that human beings blindly stumble towards. Unity must be a consciously chosen and pursued state, expressed as a result of our conscious knowledge of the fundamental interconnectedness of humanity as one human race. Indeed, human beings, absent this conscious knowledge, will often label various conditions as unity, when indeed they are not. History is rife with egregious examples of hatred and oppression masquerading as so-called unity. Perhaps most evident in history has been the association of the term unity with a limited racial unity, which carries with it an assumption of the inferior status, and in some cases subhuman status, of much of humanity standing outside of that limited unification. Because its inclusiveness is limited rather than universal, this false unity, achieved through uniformity, is antithetical to the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh.

Understanding unity also entails a particular orientation to the relationship between oneness and difference (sometimes referred to as the relationship between unity and diversity). Oneness and difference, in this vision, are seen as essential and integrated concepts that are not in tension as values or constructs. The Bahá'í writings use frequent metaphors to describe this relationship. Bahá'u'lláh states, "Please God, that we avoid the land of denial, and advance into the ocean of acceptance, so that we may perceive, with an eye purged from all conflicting elements, the worlds of unity and diversity, of variation and oneness. . . ."[10] 'Abdu'l-Bahá uses the metaphor of a garden to explain this relationship between unity and diversity:

> If the flowers of a garden were all of one color, the effect would be monotonous to the eye; but if the colors are variegated, it is most pleasing and wonderful. The difference in adornment of color and capacity of reflection among the flowers gives the garden its beauty and charm. Therefore, although we are of different individualities, different in ideas and of various fragrances, let us strive like flowers of the same divine garden to live together in harmony. Even though each soul has its own individual perfume and color, all are reflecting the same light, all contributing fragrance to the same breeze which blows through the garden, all continuing to grow in complete harmony and accord. Become as waves of one sea, trees of one forest, growing in the utmost love, agreement and unity.[11]

More than merely an aspiration, this statement is an ontological assertion about the nature and structure of reality. Patterns of distinct entities coming together to form complex unities are

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[9] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1982), 31–32.
[10] Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán: The Book of Certitude,* trans. Shoghi Effendi, first pocket-size edition (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1989), 160.
[11] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace,* comp. Howard MacNutt, 2nd ed. (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982), 24.

understood, in Bahá'í thought, as the most accurate description of the process of creation. As one scholar writes:

> According to the Bahá'í view, the nature of reality is ultimately a unity, in contrast to a view that would postulate a multiplicity of differing or incommensurate realities. In a talk delivered in New York City in December 1912, 'Abdu'l-Baha stated that "oneness is truth and truth is oneness which does not admit of reality." In a similar vein, during a talk in Paris in October 1911, 'Abdu'l-Baha stated that "Truth has many aspects, but it remains always and forever one."[12]

Second, unity is a comprehensive concept that carries within it implications not only for individual perceptions, knowledge, and vision but also for political ethics, organization, and our political action as individuals. This comprehensive concept can be seen in one of the foundational themes of Bahá'u'lláh's political ethics—stated in His first public declaration in 1863—that "in this Revelation the use of the sword is prohibited."[13]

As analyzed by Saiedi, Bahá'u'lláh roots this concept in a re-interpretation of nusrat, or assisting the cause of God to give it victory.[14] Islamic interpretations of nusrat, which have often supported violence and coercion, are challenged by Bahá'u'lláh Who calls His followers to "[a]ssist ye the Lord of all creation with works of righteousness, and also through wisdom and utterance."[15] Saiedi further demonstrates that Bahá'u'lláh's rejection of the sword is not limited to a narrow condemnation of violence; rather, it encompasses a range of social ethics:

> The prohibition of killing, violence, and religious coercion; the promotion of love, unity, and fellowship among peoples; the call for peace among the nations; the condemnation of militarism and of the proliferation of arms; the assertion of the necessity for education and productive employment; the condemnation of sedition; the assertion of the need for religion and social justice—all these are presented by Bahá'u'lláh as systematic expressions of the same underlying principle of the removal of the sword.[16]

Employing this principle, Bahá'u'lláh describes how He put an end to Bábí militancy as a means of social change and shifted the Bahá'í community to effecting social change through non-coercive means reflective of the dynamics of unity:

> Strife and conflict befit the beasts of the wild. It was through the grace of God and with the aid of seemly words and praiseworthy deeds that the unsheathed swords of the Bábí community were returned to their scabbards. Indeed through the power of good

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[12] Dann May, "The Bahá'í Principle of Religious Unity: A Dynamic Perspectivism," *Revisioning the Sacred: New Perspectives on a Bahá'í Theology*, ed. Jack McLean, vol. 8, Studies in the Bábí and Bahá'í Religions series (Los Angeles: Kalimát, 1997), 8.

[13] Bahá'u'lláh, quoted in Nader Saiedi, *Logos and Civilization: Spirit, History, and Order in the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh* (Bethesda: University Press of Maryland, 2000), 242.

[14] Ibid., 243–47.

[15] Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1992), para 73.

[16] Nader Saiedi, *Logos and Civilization: Spirit, History, and Order in the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh* (Bethesda: University Press of Maryland, 2000), 243–44.

words, the righteous have always succeeded in winning command over the meads of the hearts of men. Say, O ye loved ones! Do not forsake prudence. Incline your hearts to the counsels given by the Most Exalted Pen and beware lest your hands or tongues cause harm unto anyone among mankind.[17]

This new form of politics required by the removal of the sword is one in which unity as an end is privileged over other ends. The practical effects of this shift are far-reaching. To look at one example, consider the role of religion in political discourse. One of the most discussed and analyzed topics in political and legal theory is the proper role (if any) of religion in public discourse. From a Bahá'í perspective, the removal of the sword, which aims to result in unity, places clear limitations on how Bahá'ís can and should engage in political discourse and for what purposes. Politics, in Bahá'u'lláh's vision, is not a legitimate avenue to convince others of the correctness of one's religious beliefs or to try to convince others to convert. A public discourse of conversion would violate the requirement of religious respect and tolerance, the necessity to demonstrate and express love, and the underlying reality of the unity of religion.

Similarly, this limitation on a political discourse of conversion raises broader concerns about the role of religion in politics. The Bahá'í writings are clear in their anti-majoritarian stance. In situations where Bahá'ís might in the future find themselves as a majority population, Shoghi Effendi has articulated a principle of preferential treatment for minorities:

> Unlike the nations and peoples of the earth, be they of the East or of the West, democratic or authoritarian, communist or capitalist, whether belonging to the Old World or the New, who either ignore, trample upon, or extirpate, the racial, religious, or political minorities within the sphere of their jurisdiction, every organized community enlisted under the banner of Bahá'u'lláh should feel it to be its first and inescapable obligation to nurture, encourage, and safeguard every minority belonging to any faith, race, class, or nation within it.[18]

While undoubtedly interested in seeing the inculcation of morality and virtues in public life, and believing that religion is an indispensable foundation for civilization, Bahá'u'lláh nonetheless rejects a public virtue that would allow the entrenchment of majority views at the expense of minorities. Shoghi Effendi equates a violation of the rights of nonbelievers with an action that would subvert the essence of the religion itself. He clarifies that a violation of the "legitimate civil rights of individuals in a free society" would effectively reignite "in men's breasts the fire of bigotry and blind fanaticism, cut themselves off from the glorious bestowals of this promised Day of God, and impede the full flow of divine assistance in this wondrous age."[19]

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[17] Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh Revealed after the* Kitáb-i-Aqdas, trans. Habib Taherzadeh et al. (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1988), 85.
[18] Shoghi Effendi, *The Advent of Divine Justice,* first pocket-size edition (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1990), 35.
[19] Shoghi Effendi, letter to the Bahá'ís of Iran, July 1925 (copy on file with author).

Third, and following from the previous two points, unity is both a means and an end. Bahá'u'lláh positions the goal of social relations, communities, and structures as expressing and reflecting the fundamental unity of humanity. The individual and collective purposes and potentialities of humanity can best be accomplished and achieved through recognition of this fundamental unity and by learning to express it in action. Through this lens, human social history is understood as humanity's long effort to construct social patterns where an encompassing unity is increasingly recognized and actualized. Shoghi Effendi describes this view of history:

> Unification of the whole of mankind is the hall-mark of the stage which human society is now approaching. Unity of family, of tribe, of city-state, and nation have been successively attempted and fully established. World unity is the goal towards which a harassed humanity is striving.[20]

This vision of history is understood to be a dynamic and on-going process. It is also a contingent one, rooted in humanity's conscious knowledge and effort.

The Bahá'í teachings make clear that the process of building social unity must take place in a manner that reflects the principles of unity. Simply stated, the ends do not justify the means; indeed, from a Bahá'í perspective the nature of unity that is sought as an end cannot be achieved through means that violate unity. As Bahá'u'lláh states on page 77 in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, "We have assigned to every end a means for its accomplishment. . . ." With respect to unity, one could impose "unity" on diverse peoples through coercion and the threat of force. Indeed, from ancient to contemporary times one can find examples of human beings using force to create a coerced unity. From a Bahá'í perspective, such coercion is not a legitimate means for creating unity, nor is that end a true state of unity in diversity. Rather, such a forced state is understood as a state of oppression. Relatedly, one finds clear statements throughout the Bahá'í writings to the effect that the genesis of conflict is due to a lack of established of unity in diversity. This perspective has been summarized as follows:

> Only through the dawning consciousness that they constitute a single people will the inhabitants of the planet be enabled to turn away from the patterns of conflict that have dominated social organization in the past and begin to learn the ways of collaboration and conciliation. "The well-being of mankind," Bahá'u'lláh writes, "its peace and security, are unattainable unless and until its unity is firmly established."[21]

Unity through uniformity, in Bahá'í terms, is both unjust and unsustainable. It is not a state of unity born out of conscious knowledge of human beings and of how difference and oneness

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[20] Shoghi Effendi, World Order of Bahá'u'lláh: Selected Letters, first pocket-size edition (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1991), 202.
[21] Bahá'í International Community, Office of Public Information, *The Prosperity of Humankind* (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1995), 3.

interact. Unity through uniformity does not give expression to actions that promote justice or equality for all.

2. Bahá'ís should privilege action at the level of social meanings, as distinct from social forms and social norms, in their efforts to effect social change in the broader society

The positioning of unity as both the means and end of social change frames the central challenge, and analytical lens, for thinking about how Bahá'ís may legitimately pursue social change. What are methods of social change that may be consistent with the means of unity in diversity?

To develop an answer to this question, it is necessary to provide a framework for organizing and thinking about different approaches to social change. One useful framework is to think about efforts at social change as potentially focused on three distinct but interrelated levels: social forms, social norms, and social meanings.

Social forms, in this framework, do not refer to any particular sociological theory of forms. Rather, in this context, the term refers to public, outward, and shared phenomena that play roles in structuring and ordering the life of society. Most obviously, these are institutions and organizations, including public and government institutions. The term "social forms" also refers to the central tools such entities use to perform their ordering functions, including, for example, laws and policies. It might also be said that social forms are constructs through which formal public power is organized and exercised within society, including through the institutions of government.

Social forms are distinct from *social norms*, which generically can be described as the shared principles of behavior within a group or society. In any given group or society, there will be certain shared rules or principles of behavior that express the expectedness or unexpectedness of behaviors and associated attitudes and values. These shared principles of behavior—which may be implicit or explicit—constitute a type of group infrastructure, where certain modes of acting and engaging in relation to others may be pursued or avoided.

Social meanings remove us from the realm of shared institutions and structures (social forms) and shared rules and principles of behavior (social norms) and are focused on the shared mental constructs within a particular society or group. In this understanding, social meanings might be defined as the "semiotic content attached to various actions, or inactions, or statuses, within a particular context."[22] Such meanings may be consciously constructed by social actors,

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[22] Lawrence Lessig, "The Regulation of Social Meaning," *The University of Chicago Law Review* 62.3 (1995): 951.

including governments, corporations, or groups of individuals, in order to reinforce sets of behaviors, understandings, or outcomes. The most powerful meanings are those that appear most natural and are taken for granted—uncontested—and such meanings will have the most significant impact on shaping the contexts within which individuals act and relate. Legal scholar Lawrence Lessig states three propositions with respect to social meanings and their strength:

> …first, that social meanings exist; second, that they are used by individuals, or groups, to advance individual or collective ends; and third, that their force in part hangs upon their resting upon a certain uncontested, or taken-for-granted, background of thought or expectation—alternatively, that though constructed, their force depends upon them not seeming constructed.[23]

Further, Lessig writes:

> If social meanings exist, they are also used. They not only constitute, or guide, or constrain; they are also tools—means to a chosen end, whether an individually or collectively chosen end. They are a resource—a semiotic resource—that society provides to all if it provides to any. They are a way "for hitting each other and coercing one another to conform to something [one has] in mind"; or for inspiring another or inducing another to do, or believe, or want, in a certain way.[24]

As Lessig describes, social meanings may be contested or uncontested, foregrounded or backgrounded. Where a social meaning is uncontested and in the background—meaning it is almost subconsciously taken for granted and assumed—it has the most power. These social meanings shape our choices and behaviors with little conscious cognitive intermediation. Conversely, when social meanings are contested and foregrounded, they have the least power in dictating our choices and behaviors. In such a context, various competing meanings are the subject of on-going public debate. The process of changing social meanings is ultimately a process of social meanings being moved from being contested to uncontested and from foreground to background.

Change at the level of social meanings can be distinguished from change at the level of social norms, as well as from change at the level of social forms. As distinct from the cognitive association ascribed to a particular action, social norms refer to the behavioral expectations that indicate the established and accepted ways of acting. Where meanings are about mental associations, norms are preoccupied with behavioral choices. Social forms, however, refer to the actual institutions and structures that are given social expression and are the most transparent, directly observable influencers of social action. Implicit with social forms is that, for the purposes of adherence, they are capable of harnessing and utilizing social coercion and force.

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[23] Ibid.
[24] Ibid., 956.

In its efforts to advance broad social change in the contemporary world at large, the Bahá'í community prioritizes action to effect change at the level of social meanings. Specifically, the Bahá'í community privileges action at the level of meanings which will increase awareness, understanding, consciousness, and shared associations that reinforce the realities of unity and its associated concepts of equality and justice.

The privileging of action at the level of meanings is done for a number of reasons. First, action at the level of meanings fits the Bahá'í emphasis on the paradigm of unity. The idea of unity as a conscious, deliberate state and the necessity that it be advanced in a non-coercive manner require that it emerge at the levels of our ways of perceiving and knowing, as well as in our actions, relationships, and collective life. Social unity is the shared outward expression of a consciousness of the diverse, interrelated, and mutually interdependent dimensions of our existence in relation to others. Certain architectures of social meanings will reinforce such a reality of unity—and concomitantly encourage behaviors that reflect it—while others will be in tension with it. As these architectures increasingly reflect and reinforce unity-centered ones, the potentiality for unity-centered social norms and forms will deepen and in some respects accelerate. The Bahá'í International Community describes this process in its identification of how social forms for a global age will only emerge once collective shifts in consciousness take place:

> Laying the groundwork for global civilization calls for the creation of laws and institutions that are universal in both character and authority. The effort can begin only when the concept of the oneness of humanity has been wholeheartedly embraced by those in whose hands the responsibility for decision making rests, and when the related principles are propagated through both educational systems and the media of mass communication. Once this threshold is crossed, a process will have been set in motion through which the peoples of the world can be drawn into the task of formulating common goals and committing themselves to their attainment.[25]

The Bahá'í method of focusing at the level of social meanings is seen throughout Bahá'í history. It finds its genesis in Bahá'u'lláh's emphasis on focusing on individuals' "hearts." We see examples of such an approach to social action throughout the life of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, a particularly powerful one being His approach to the question of racial equality and unity. An illustrative example is from 'Abdu'l-Bahá's journey to the United States in 1912. At the home of Morgan Shuster, He attended a dinner with leading social and political figures of the Washington, DC area, which was the location of the temporary office of the Iranian government in America. After witnessing the seating and the company, He rearranged the seating so that Louis George Gregory, a prominent African-American attorney, would be placed at His right

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[25] Bahá'í International Community, Office of Public Information, *The Prosperity of Humankind* (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1995), 3.

hand. This action was taken at a time when only one restaurant in all of Washington, DC would permit white and black Americans to sit together. In undertaking this action, 'Abdu'l-Bahá was challenging the conventional and predominant meanings of skin color that pervaded American society—and in particular the association of dark skin with inferiority. At the same time, He was reinforcing the meanings of unity that were the direct subject-matter of many of His talks throughout His journey—and in particular that unity meant demonstrating a universal love for humanity and honoring the qualities and capacities of all individuals rather than drawing false and arbitrary distinctions based on, for example, race and gender. In the Century of Light, a connection is drawn between this episode and 'Abdu'l-Bahá's method of changing social meanings:

> Appreciating these limitations on the part of His hearers, 'Abdu'l-Bahá did not hesitate to introduce into His relations with Western believers actions that summoned them to a level of consciousness far above mere social liberalism and tolerance. One example that must stand for a range of such interventions was His gentle but dramatic act in encouraging the marriage of Louis Gregory and Louise Mathew—the one black, the other white. The initiative set a standard for the American Bahá'í community as to the real meaning of racial integration, however timid and slow its members were in responding to the core implications of the challenge.[26]

Another example of this privileging of social meanings is seen in how the Universal House of Justice and the worldwide Bahá'í Community sought to make contributions to the cause of peace during the height of the Cold War. The Universal House of Justice wrote a document called The Promise of World Peace, which was then distributed globally to leaders, thinkers, and populations at large. At the heart of the document was an argument for the shared meanings of peace to be associated with a positive state of unity (as distinct from, for example, an absence of war) and relatedly to serve as a pathway for individuals and communities to play a constructive role in the building of a peaceful global civilization. The message opens by associating meanings of peace with meanings of unity:

> The Great Peace towards which people of good will throughout the centuries have inclined their hearts, of which seers and poets for countless generations have expressed their vision, and for which from age to age the sacred scriptures of mankind have constantly held the promise, is now at long last within the reach of the nations. For the first time in history it is possible for everyone to view the entire planet, with all its myriad diversified peoples, in one perspective. World peace is not only possible but inevitable. It is the next stage in the evolution of this planet—in the words of one great thinker [Teilhard de Chardin], "the planetization of mankind."[27]

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[26] Universal House of Justice, *Century of Light* (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 2001), 22.
[27] Universal House of Justice, *The Promise of World Peace* (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1985), 1.

It goes on to locate the genesis of change as an expression of people's minds—the way we understand and perceive:

> The endowments which distinguish the human race from all other forms of life are summed up in what is known as the human spirit; the mind is its essential quality. These endowments have enabled humanity to build civilizations and to prosper materially.[28]

Building on this theme, the message argues that the failure to achieve peace is ultimately tied to a "paralysis of will." Among other things, overcoming this paralysis requires a fundamental shift in the arena of the mind—a shift in consciousness. In particular,

> [w]orld order can be founded only on an unshakeable consciousness of the oneness of mankind, a spiritual truth which all the human sciences confirm. Anthropology, physiology, psychology, recognize only one human species, albeit infinitely varied in the secondary aspects of life. Recognition of this truth requires abandonment of prejudice—prejudice of every kind—race, class, colour, creed, nation, sex, degree of material civilization, everything which enables people to consider themselves superior to others.

> Acceptance of the oneness of mankind is the first fundamental prerequisite for reorganization and administration of the world as one country, the home of humankind. Universal acceptance of this spiritual principle is essential to any successful attempt to establish world peace. It should therefore be universally proclaimed, taught in schools, and constantly asserted in every nation as preparation for the organic change in the structure of society which it implies.[29]

This statement is a call to shared meanings of unity and oneness; and it puts forward the argument that through such changes in shared meanings individuals and groups of individuals will be propelled towards, and find openings for, new forms of social action.

Bahá'u'lláh's elevation of change at the level of meanings as being fundamental is a direct reflection of His positioning of unity as central to ontology and as the fundamental force in existence. Focusing on change at the level of social meanings is fundamentally an epistemic vision of social action. It is one in which shared mental associations and understandings come into existence and then act as a social force to shape different patterns of social norms and the evolution of new social forms. When primacy is placed on unity as the centrifugal element of social change, it is only such an epistemic vision that could manifest the change while remaining true to the vision and reality of unity. By contrast, promoting social change primarily through changes in social forms fundamentally involves the use of coercion and ultimately is a source of social conflict because inherent within it is the exercise of social power. Similarly, placing primary focus on changes in behavioral norms, absent the requisite change in meanings, often

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[28] Ibid.
[29] Ibid., 10.

results in the emergence of and ethic of division and difference. Focus comes to be placed on those who do, or do not, follow the new behavioral norms. In religious terms, what often appears is a litmus test for those who believe (or are pure or saved), and those who do not believe and are not saved. Conversely, when focus is placed on social meanings, the commitment is that, as the architecture of social meanings increasingly emerges as one conducive to the development of patterns of unity, a context is thus created in which movement towards changing social norms and social forms can take place in a manner that is increasingly less coercive and more organic in nature.

By targeting change at the level of social meanings, the constructive principle of social action also frames and gives limits and definition to the Bahá'í principle of non-participation in politics.[30] As mentioned earlier, this principle can be understood as speaking to the issue of involvement by Bahá'ís and the Bahá'í community in existing political processes and structures, and to the question of whether to focus energies on acquiring power within or on reforming existing systems. Bahá'u'lláh's teachings on the non-participation of politics indicate His view that emphasis was not to be placed on these existing systems because the methods used to secure power in existing systems and the institutions in place for the exercise of power do not reflect the primacy of unity. Furthermore, attempting to impose a religious program, including through contemporary political methods and institutions, is antithetical to unity.[31] It is thus not surprising to find in the Bahá'í writings statements that clearly distinguish the Bahá'í Administrative Order from existing political institutions. As Shoghi Effendi states:

> It would be utterly misleading to attempt a comparison between this unique, this divinely-conceived Order and any of the diverse systems which the minds of men . . .have contrived. . . .Such an attempt would in itself betray a lack of complete appreciation of the excellence of the handiwork of its great Author. . . .

The divers and ever-shifting systems of human polity, whether past or present, whether originating in the East or in the West, offer no adequate criterion wherewith to estimate the potency of its hidden virtues or to appraise the solidity of its foundations.[32]

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[30]For example, Shoghi Effendi writes:

We should—every one of us—remain aloof, in heart and in mind, in words and in deeds, from the political affairs and disputes of the Nations and of Governments. We should keep ourselves away from such thoughts. We should have no political connection with any of the parties and should join no faction of these different and warring sects.

Absolute impartiality in the matter of political parties should be shown by words and by deeds, and the love of the whole humanity, whether a Government or a nation, which is the basic teaching of Bahá'u'lláh, should also be shown by words and by deeds. . . .

According to the exhortations of the Supreme Pen and the confirmatory explanations of the Covenant of God Bahá'ís are in no way allowed to enter into political affairs under any pretense of excuse; since such an action brings about disastrous results and ends in hurting the Cause of God and its intimate friends. (Shoghi Effendi, Directives of the Guardian [Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1973], 56–57)

[31]Saiedi discusses at some length Bahá'u'lláh's rejection of coercion in public and social life. See Nader Saiedi, Logos and Civilization: Spirit, History, and Order in the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh (Bethesda: University Press of Maryland, 2000), 362–70.

[32]World Order of Bahá'u'lláh: Selected Letters, first pocket-size edition (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1991), supra note 20, at 152.

3. Bahá'ís should also seek to effect social change by building a global pattern of Bahá'í community life that ever increasingly reflects unity at the level of social meanings, norms, and forms

While there is a logical privileging of action at the level of social meanings in Bahá'í efforts to effect social change in society at large, the Bahá'í community is also directly active at the level of social forms and social norms. It goes without saying that the patterns of community organization and life within the Bahá'í community are based on a conscious effort to reflect the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh in action. This effort to actualize the Word in a collective community is also projected and understood as an experiment in expressing the fundamental principles and teachings of human equality, justice, and unity, and is expressed through all levels of how the Bahá'í community organizes and governs itself. For instance, the Bahá'í Administrative Order, which has both elected and appointed institutions, is rooted in an ethic of equality and is an effort to create patterns of engagement between the leaders and the population that are not power-based in orientation.[33] Shoghi Effendi has emphasized the relationship between the administrative order and its basis in unity, justice, and equality:

> The vitality which the organic institutions of this great, this ever-expanding Order so strongly exhibit; . . . the high courage, the. . . resolution of its administrators. . . the. . . unquenchable enthusiasm. . . the heights of self-sacrifice. . . the breadth of vision, the confident hope, the creative joy, the inward peace, the uncompromising integrity, the exemplary discipline, the unyielding unity and solidarity. . . the degree to which its moving Spirit has shown itself capable of assimilating the diversified elements within its pale, of cleansing them of all forms of prejudice and of fusing them with its own structure—these are evidences of a power which a disillusioned and sadly shaken society can ill afford to ignore.
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> Compare these splendid manifestations of the spirit animating this vibrant body of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh with the cries and agony, the follies and vanities, the bitterness and prejudices, the wickedness and divisions of an ailing and chaotic world. Witness the fear that torments its leaders and paralyzes the action of its blind and bewildered statesmen. How fierce the hatreds, how false the ambitions, how petty the pursuits, how deep-rooted the suspicions of its peoples! How disquieting the lawlessness, the corruption, the unbelief that are eating into the vitals of a tottering civilization![34]

In this effort to create a pattern of community organization and life on a global scale—which includes in its membership the full panoply of human diversity, experience, and background —a particular experiment is taking place at the level of social forms, norms, and meanings. Specifically, the Bahá'í community can be understood as a testing ground in which the social expressions of unity, cutting across a global audience, are being advanced, tested, and refined.

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[33] For a good discussion of the new kind of politics imagined by the Bahá'í administrative order, see Ulrich Gollmer, Udo Schaefer, and Nicola Towfigh, *Making the Crooked Straight: A Contribution to* Bahá'í *Apologetics,* trans. Geraldine Schuckelt (Oxford: George Ronald, 2000).
[34] Shoghi Effendi, *Call to the Nations* (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1977).

These collective efforts include the community's developing, maturing, and changing certain social meanings, striving to adopt certain social norms, and seeking to build institutional and organizational forms that exemplify unity.

The fact that within the Bahá'í community experimentation is taking place at all of these levels is explicit and clear from the Bahá'í writings. When Bahá'u'lláh first expressed the formation of His community, the "people of Bahá" in the Najibiyyih Garden in the outskirts of Baghdad in 1863, He immediately began the project of contesting existing architectures of social meanings while foregrounding the new social meanings of which people were to become conscious. This contesting of social meanings is seen, as discussed earlier, in His calling for the "removal of the sword," the implications of which include a warning to "beware lest ye shed the blood of any one. Unsheathe the sword of your tongue from the scabbard of utterance, for therewith ye can conquer the citadels of men's hearts. We have abolished the law to wage holy war against each other. God's mercy hath, verily, encompassed all created things, if ye do but understand."[35] But beyond this admonition, it is woven into the very fabric of Bahá'í community life that social meanings which reinforce and project towards unity are to be preferred over all others. This turn toward social meanings that reflect unity is seen in how the project of the Bahá'í community has been described by the Universal House of Justice:

> The experience of the Bahá'í community may be seen as an example of this enlarging unity. It is a community of some three to four million people drawn from many nations, cultures, classes and creeds, engaged in a wide range of activities serving the spiritual, social and economic needs of the peoples of many lands. It is a single social organism, representative of the diversity of the human family, conducting its affairs through a system of commonly accepted consultative principles, and cherishing equally all the great outpourings of divine guidance in human history. Its existence is yet another convincing proof of the practicality of its Founder's vision of a united world, another evidence that humanity can live as one global society, equal to whatever challenges its coming of age may entail. If the Bahá'í experience can contribute in whatever measure to reinforcing hope in the unity of the human race, we are happy to offer it as a model for study.[36]

At the same time, the Bahá'í community makes efforts to advance new patterns of social norms and social forms. From His earliest days Bahá'u'lláh reinforced the call to construct new norms of conduct, as well as new conceptions of law. These efforts are seen in numerous examples, including how the Bahá'í community of Iran challenged and broke established patterns that limited the educational opportunities and public roles of women in governing institutions. It is also seen in, as has been discussed elsewhere,[37] how Bahá'u'lláh changed

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[35] Bahá'u'lláh, *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf,* trans. Shoghi Effendi, rev. ed. (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1988), para. 43.
[36] Universal House of Justice, *The Promise of World Peace* (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1985), 14.
[37] Roshan Danesh, "Internationalism and Divine Law," *Journal of Law and Religion* 19.2 (2003–2004): 209–42.

established understandings and attitudes of Divine law, and in particular expected certain levels of individual understanding and social cohesion to have emerged prior to His laws becoming applicable. Indeed, the entire pattern of Bahá'í elections and consultative decision-making can be seen as an effort to simultaneously change meanings of democracy, inculcate a new set of normative behaviors for public officials, and create new institutional structures of participatory democracy.

4. Although the Bahá'í community's external and internal programs of social change are distinct, they interact and reinforce each other in dynamic and evolving ways, and ultimately form part of one dynamic process

So far, we have outlined two distinct efforts to effect social change pursued by the Bahá'í community—one focused externally on the world at large, and one focused internally within the Bahá'í community. Externally, action at the level of social meanings is privileged, while internally actions at the levels of social forms, norms, and meanings are all pursued. Across both external and internal spheres of activity, the centrality of unity stands firm. Given that unity is the central theological, ontological, and social construct of the Bahá'í Faith, all efforts at progress and change are to be focused on building and deepening patterns of unity.

While these external and internal efforts at social change are distinct, they ultimately can be seen as forming part of one multifaceted process of advancing humanity towards unity. Specifically, the two processes should be understood as intersecting and interacting with one another in dynamic and increasingly complex ways. The Bahá'í writings are full of descriptions of a future where processes internal to the Bahá'í community will eventually exert degrees of influence on society at large. As the Universal House of Justice states, quoting Shoghi Effendi:

> That this process [development of the global Bahá'í Community] will continue to gain in scope and influence and the Administrative Order demonstrate in time "its capacity to be regarded not only as the nucleus but the very pattern of the New World Order" is clear from his writings. "In a world the structure of whose political and social institutions is impaired, whose vision is befogged, whose conscience is bewildered, whose religious systems have become anaemic and lost their virtue," he asserted so emphatically, "this healing Agency, this leavening Power, this cementing Force, intensely alive and all-pervasive," is "taking shape," is "crystallizing into institutions," and is "mobilizing its forces."[38]

One way of understanding these statements is that as social meanings continually become unity-centered in the world at large, and as the Bahá'í community continually develops and matures

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[38]Shoghi Effendi, quoted in The Five Year Plan 2011–2016: Messages from the Universal House of Justice (West Palm Beach, Florida: Palabra Publications, 2011), supra note 2, 38.

in its expressions of unity at the levels of meanings, norms, and forms, the interaction of internal and external processes will increase. For example, as unity-centered social meanings take root, there will be greater receptivity and demand for ideas about how social norms and forms may emerge to reflect the dynamics of unity. Thus, the experiment and learning of the Bahá'í community at the level of social forms may be of more relevance. The Bahá'í community may become a model for emerging patterns of unity. For example, the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States has described the experience of that community in dealing with race relations in the following terms:

> From its inception in 1863 the Bahá'í community was dedicated to the principle of the unity of humankind. Bahá'ís rely upon faith in God, daily prayer, meditation, and study of sacred texts to effect the transformation of character necessary for personal growth and maturity; however, their aim is to create a world civilization that will in turn react upon the character of the individual. Thus the concept of personal salvation is linked to the salvation, security, and happiness of all the inhabitants of the earth and stems from the Bahá'í belief that "the world of humanity is a composite body" and that "when one part of the organism suffers all the rest of the body will feel its consequence."
>
> Guided and inspired by such principles, the Bahá'í community has accumulated more than a century of experience in creating models of unity that transcend race, culture, nationality, class, and the differences of sex and religion, providing empirical evidence that humanity in all its diversity can live as a unified global society. Bahá'ís see unity as the law of life; consequently, all prejudices are perceived as diseases that threaten life. Rather than considering that the unity of humankind can be established only after other problems afflicting it have been solved, Bahá'ís believe that both spiritual and material development are dependent upon love and unity.[39]

This increased interaction between internal and external efforts at social change raises another set of more complex questions. As the two efforts interact, does this create an increased legitimate role for Bahá'í social forms in social affairs and governance at large? This matter has been written about at some length elsewhere, in the context of Bahá'í teachings about the relationship between religious and political institutions, as well as the meaning of world order in the Bahá'í writings.[40] The Universal House Justice, in commenting on this matter, seems to contemplate the possibilities of increased interaction between Bahá'í and civil political institutions, as well as an increased role for Bahá'í institutions, but the form of this interaction is somewhat open and dynamic:

> The second fundamental principle which enables us to understand the pattern towards which Bahá'u'lláh wishes human society to evolve is the principle of organic growth which requires that detailed developments, and the understanding of detailed developments, become available only with the passage of time and with the help of the

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[39] National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States, *The Vision of Race Unity: America's Most Challenging Issue* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1991).
[40] Roshan Danesh, "Church and State in the Bahá'í Faith: An Epistemic Approach," *Journal of Law and Religion* 24.1 (2008–2009): 21–63.

guidance given by that Central Authority in the Cause to whom all must turn. In this regard one can use the simile of a tree. If a farmer plants a tree, he cannot state at that moment what its exact height will be, the number of its branches or the exact time of its blossoming. He can, however, give a general impression of its size and pattern of growth and can state with confidence which fruit it will bear. The same is true of the evolution of the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh.[41]

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[41] Universal House of Justice, *Message to a Bahá'í Friend* (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1995), http://bahai-library.com/uhj/theocracy.html, accessed May 22, 2011.

Conclusion

The four elements of the Bahá'í approach to social change outlined above highlight a diffuse, grassroots, creative, and epistemic process. This approach, at heart, relies on changing how individuals and groups of individuals work to think in new ways and, stemming from those new ways of thinking, work to inculcate new patterns of behavior and ultimately new patterns of social organization. The centrality of unity to this approach demands that the Bahá'í community pursue external social change at the level of social meanings. Within the Bahá'í community the action for social change is more integrative, focused simultaneously on the levels of meanings, norms, and forms.

Like any other method of social change, this particular rendering of the Bahá'í approach has certain challenges. The model will work best in certain conditions and when certain parameters are adhered to, and will be less successful in other contexts. Although it will be for future papers to examine and assess the relative successes or failures of this model as it has been implemented by the Bahá'í community to date, one can see generally where the challenges lie within such a model.

First, it is vitally important, as was noted in the introduction, to ensure that internal means/ends and external means/ends are not conflated and confused. Bahá'ís must strive to have a sincerity of motive in their efforts at social change, and, as indicated by the Universal House of Justice, the value of social action is not to be measured through statistics of conversion. Rather, the ultimate motivating force must be that of service which stems from a conscious recognition of the fundamental unity of all humanity:

> That one indeed is a man who, today, dedicateth himself to the service of the entire human race. The Great Being saith: Blessed and happy is he that ariseth to promote the best interests of the peoples and kindreds of the earth. In another passage He hath proclaimed: It is not for him to pride himself who loveth his own country, but rather for him who loveth the whole world. The earth is but one country and mankind its citizens.[42]

This sustained focus on unity demands personal vigilance from each and every Bahá'í and by the entire community of Bahá'ís, to maintain a sincerity of purpose and motive when engaging in efforts at social change. As the Universal House of Justice stated:

> . . . we feel compelled to raise a warning: It will be important for all to recognize that the value of engaging in social action and public discourse is not to be judged by the ability to bring enrollments. Though endeavors in these two areas of activity may well

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[42] Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, comp. and trans. Shoghi Effendi, rev. ed. (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1976), 250.

effect an increase in the size of the Bahá'í community, they are not undertaken for this purpose. Sincerity in this respect is imperative.[43]

Second, the epistemic and long-term approach to social change requires caution in measuring success or failure through fixed or near-term criteria and standards. Envisioning social change as a process of changing social meanings implies a commitment to an epistemic and long-term vision of how social change occurs. Such change ultimately stems from alterations in how people perceive phenomena and the architecture of those perceptions in relation to each other. While some changes may happen quite quickly, this transformation ultimately is a gradual process where fundamental shifts in the perceptions of masses of human beings and human communities take place over the long term. One of the challenges of such an approach, especially when it is undertaken by a diverse and disparate (and ever-changing) community of people, is mobilizing and deepening an understanding of the long-term and epistemic nature of this process—and more pointedly that the process of change is often experienced in the first instance in something intangible (how people think) as opposed to something tangible (such as new social forms).

Throughout Bahá'í history one sees Bahá'í leaders reinforcing this orientation towards the lengthy process of change, whether speaking about the processes within or outside of the Bahá'í community. Bahá'u'lláh, when speaking of both the internal and external aspects of social change, constantly encouraged His followers to recognize the long-term epistemic nature of the process He was engaged in. For example, in relation to the internal processes of the Bahá'í community, Bahá'u'lláh was met frequently by requests from His followers for new social forms—laws and institutions in particular. In response to these requests, Bahá'u'lláh called upon His followers to see the process of change in different terms. For example, in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, in addition to focusing on "hearts and minds," Bahá'u'lláh also specifically positioned shifts in knowledge, understanding, and motivation, as being the lynchpins for further development and application of new norms and forms within the Bahá'í community.[44] Similarly, while He spoke of His Order and created its embryonic institutions, efforts were not made to begin building these institutions in earnest until later in Bahá'í history. When Shoghi Effendi fully inaugurated the development of institutions, he similarly emphasized how this transition was part of a lengthy process that stretches from new perceptions and knowledge to new forms.[45]

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[43] The Five Year Plan 2011–2016: Messages from the Universal House of Justice (West Palm Beach, Florida: Palabra Publications, 2011), supra note 2, 21.

[44] This is seen, for example, in the pattern of delay in the application of Bahá'u'lláh's laws. For a discussion of this theme, see Roshan Danesh, "The Politics of Delay—Social Meanings and the Historical Treatment of Bahá'í Law," World Order 35.3 (2004): 33–45.

[45] For example, see Shoghi Effendi's letter, "The Unfoldment of World Civilization," The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh: Selected Letters, first pocket-size edition (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1991), 161–206.

'Abdu'l-Bahá describes this long-term process, in somewhat metaphorical terms, in the following way:

> Development and progression imply gradual stages or degrees. For example, spiritual advancement may be likened to the light of the early dawn. Although this dawn light is dim and pale, a wise man who views the march of the sunrise at its very beginning can foretell the ascendancy of the sun in its full glory and effulgence. He knows for a certainty that it is the beginning of its manifestation and that later it will assume great power and potency. Again, for example, if he takes a seed and observes that it is sprouting, he will know assuredly that it will ultimately become a tree. Now is the beginning of the manifestation of the spiritual power, and inevitably the potency of its life forces will assume greater and greater proportions. Therefore, this twentieth century is the dawn, or beginning, of spiritual illumination, and it is evident that day by day it will advance. It will reach such a degree that spiritual effulgences will overcome the physical, so that divine susceptibilities will overpower material intelligence and the heavenly light dispel and banish earthly darkness. Divine healing shall purify all ills, and the cloud of mercy will pour down its rain. The Sun of Reality will shine, and all the earth shall put on its beautiful green carpet. Among the results of the manifestation of spiritual forces will be that the human world will adapt itself to a new social form, the justice of God will become manifest throughout human affairs, and human equality will be universally established.[46]

A third challenge to this vision of social change would be a failure to privilege unity at all times and in all contexts. The constant litmus test for individual and collective efforts at change is the measure and standard of unity, and includes our own thoughts and actions in relation to others, such as, for example, whether in one's own mind one draws distinctions between categories of individuals within the Bahá'í community, in society, or in the world as a whole. It also is the measure for community life as a whole. To the degree that community life is fractured, divided, uninspired, or apathetic, one will ultimately find weaknesses and misunderstandings in the nature and substance of unity that has been and must needs be created. Finally, in terms of external efforts at social change, it is sometimes hard to navigate the line between action at the level of social meanings to advance unity and involvement in activities or actions that may reinforce other social meanings or social norms, and forms that are not conducive to the appearance of unity.

Ultimately, it is through ever-increasing consciousness of Bahá'í methods of social change and frank, truthful, transparent, and open assessment of the challenges to meaningfully advancing those approaches (including the inevitable failures that can and must occur) that real social change will occur. Moving from a largely negative discourse of social change (non-participation in politics) or a conflation of conversion and social change to an epistemic vision that

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[46] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, The Promulgation of Universal Peace, comp. Howard MacNutt, 2nd ed. (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982), 129.

emphasizes what Bahá'ís can and must do will ultimately advance the Bahá'í community and its historic and world-changing enterprise.