

Transcript of Talk by Mr. Paul Lample,
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at the Bahá'í House of Worship,

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Friends, it's such a pleasure to be here with you this evening, and especially at such an auspicious time.

You know from the two wonderful letters that the Universal House of Justice sent out on the 26th of March that this is the occasion of the centenary of the Tablets of the Divine Plan. In those letters, there's a testimony to the tremendous sacrifices and efforts that Bahá'ís have made—both the heroes of the Faith, but also the rank and file—over a century to try to translate whatever 'Abdu'l-Bahá said in the Tablets of the Divine Plan into reality and action. Of course, those letters also capture the unique role that your community [the Bahá'í community of the United States] and its spiritual forebears have played in this process both directly and in the way that it contributed to raising up [Bahá'í] communities in so many parts of the world.

This centenary is an occasion, I think, to pause and reflect a little bit about who we are and what we're doing, so I wanted to share some thoughts along those lines with you.

As we look around the world and review the news, on almost a daily basis we see a cacophony of problems that hit us in the face every day—these problems and habits of humanity that reflect a breakdown of the world around us, of the fabric of the society. I don't know about you, but I have to confess to my own shortcoming here: Whenever I get up in the morning and start looking at the news, my blood starts to boil! I can't imagine how people can do this, how this guy can say this, and so on. Then I have to pause and calm myself down and remind myself, "Well, Paul, the old world order is winning all of its goals!" It's disintegrating at quite a rapid pace, so I should take heart and not be so upset.

When we look around us, we see, for example, the effects of corruption—especially political corruption; of moral laxity and an ingrained prejudice. We see all of these things especially in the United States. These are the things you [find] in the conversations that are really at the heart of this disintegrative process. These were the evil tendencies that Shoghi Effendi identified in *The Advent of Divine Justice*. He might as well have been reading the headlines today. Now everywhere we look we see these [evils] in various manifestations, these elements [that] are eating away at the fabric of our society. This behavior is a reflection of the way human beings think. "*The reality of man is his thought*," 'Abdu'l-Bahá said. The world we see around us reflects the thought and actions of the peoples of the world. You think this way, and then you behave this way, and this is the world you get. If you don't like this world, if there's a problem with it, then you have to learn how to think in a different way and act in a different way.

Human beings live in this bubble of their own reality and this is the society that they produce. The question becomes, for Bahá'ís, "Well, what shapes our reality?" For example, if we make a posting on our Facebook page, if we begin to [make use of the] social media and so on, what ideas are we reflecting in our engagement with the wider community? Is it what we're taking in from the news every day? Is it what we studied in school? Is it what politicians are telling us? Is it what advertisers are telling us? Are we just echoing the ideas of other individuals on social media? Is the old world order shaping us in our thoughts, in our action, and [are] we [being] pulled into that conversation?

Or does it come from somewhere else? Is our thought and reality [being] shaped by Bahá'u'lláh? So that [regardless of] whatever we see around us, we're able to take from the pages of His revelation concepts and ideas. So that when we enter into a conversation, that's what we're reflecting—not the processes of a disintegrating old world order, even though it completely surrounds us. Even though we're bombarded by billions of dollars' worth of media and advertising and everything that's trying to shape our reality and our thought, we're not supposed to be shaped by that. We have to use what Bahá'u'lláh said to us to shape our thinking so that then we can contribute to a conversation of humanity that changes human thought. Then we'll change human action, then we'll change the structure of reality around us. What Bahá'u'lláh gives us as a picture of reality is sharply different than what the world gives us.

The Guardian reminded us [of this]—he said, "The friends must at all times bear in mind that they are in a way like soldiers under attack. The world is at present in an exceedingly dark condition spiritually; hatred and prejudice of every sort are literally tearing it to pieces. We, on the other hand, are the custodians of the opposite forces, the forces of love, of unity, of peace and integration and we must continually be on our guard, whether as individuals or as an Assembly or community, lest through us these destructive, negative forces enter into our midst. In other words, we must beware lest the darkness of society become reflected in our acts and attitudes, perhaps all unconsciously. Love for each other, the deep sense that we are a new organism, the dawn-breakers of a new World Order, must constantly animate our Bahá'í lives, and we must pray to be protected from the contamination of society which is so diseased with prejudice." This he said long ago, but it applies to us today more than ever.

This difference between what the world is telling us and what it's trying to imprint on us, and what Bahá'u'lláh is trying to tell us—to liberate ourselves us from these tendencies and these conceptions—is part of the mental tests that 'Abdu'l-Bahá warned would come to the believers in the West. When our conceptions are overtaken by these ideas from the old world order, they become these idle fancies and vain imaginings Bahá'u'lláh warned us against. Sometimes it's very hard to [discern] how those forces are at such fundamental variance with what Bahá'u'lláh said, and soon—as the Guardian warned—we're bringing those dark forces into our own thoughts and into our communities.

This condition of the world was diagnosed by Bahá'u'lláh long ago. He warned that "*should the lamp of religion be obscured, chaos and confusion will ensue, and the lights of fairness and justice, of tranquility and peace cease to shine.*" The condition of the world is a reflection of this

dimming of the light of religion. As a result of that, Bahá'u'lláh says, it manifests itself in two forms. One is religious fanaticism. He warned that "*religious fanaticism and hatred are a world-devouring fire, whose violence none can quench.*" He also warned about the other form, which is materialism and ungodliness. He said that "*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. On the one hand, He diagnoses this flame of religious fanaticism and on the other this corrosive effect of materialism and ungodliness. He said only the revelation of God can provide a healing remedy for these two elements.

Now 'Abdu'l-Bahá analyzed this a bit further. He said that this dimming of the light of religion is actually the fault of religion! [That for] this condition that we find ourselves in, the fault primarily lies with religion. Because He said what happens is, the clergy starts making interpretations of the divine text, and then they claim that there are two trees. One tree is divine, the other one is satanic and, of course, we happen to be the ones that are on the divine tree and everybody else is on the satanic one. Once you introduce that idea, then the concepts of religion start to change. They're twisted. Division begins, hatred, strife. The truths of religion are replaced by superstitious ideas and ideology. Sedition, warfare, bloodshed, and strife all arise from this, 'Abdu'l-Bahá explained. Religion starts to become equated with faith in unbelievable things. Blind faith in unbelievable things that [are] nothing you can see, but believing [in] what you can't see.

As superstition is promoted in the name of religion then religion only becomes about power and ideology. As one Bahá'í author wrote, "[W]hen religious leaders call superstitious ideas religion, then rational scientific-minded people start to call religion superstition." There's a connection there. As the realm of religion declines, it opens this space for materialism, as 'Abdu'l-Bahá said, "*When the sun sets, it is the time for bats to fly.*" 'Abdu'l-Bahá actually takes the side of materialists in this argument because He points out that the greatest cause of human alienation has been religion, because each considers himself to be receiving the blessings of God and everyone else to be anathema. Bahá'u'lláh, on the other hand, says that religion has to be the creator of concord and love. 'Abdu'l-Bahá agrees that if religion becomes this cause of darkness, it's better not to have it at all, just as materialists are saying. But then He calls upon us to reignite this light of religion in the world.

What happens with the spread of materialism? It becomes propelled both by the power of science and by the framework of evolutionary thought, but what is it that materialists are saying to people? What are they describing and telling humanity as a result of a materialistic outlook in the world? Well, one thing is that human beings are insignificant—a mere speck in an arbitrary part of the universe. Maybe you've seen these charts of the universe and all the different galaxies and so on. Then there's a little arrow pointing to one little corner and it says, "You are here." This is [their] conception, we're just one little insignificant speck in the corner.

Another thing is that science is the only way to know things and that whatever science can't know actually isn't real. That human life is just an accident; that if you do this thing over and over again—if you have a universe where you have evolution and so on—the human being *won't* appear. It was just a chance that, in all of these possibilities, we happened to emerge. There's even

a conception of a “multiverse.” Because the idea of intelligent life is so remote from this perspective, it’s proposed that, well, actually there are multiple universes none of which have intelligent life, and it just so happens that we are living in the one where this intelligent life has appeared.

Another conception is that human beings are no more than animals. That if you’re intelligent, then you can’t be religious. One [thinker] noted that human beings are nothing but chemical scum on a moderate-sized planet. Another seeking to analyze the meaning of consciousness concluded that consciousness is not real, it’s actually just an illusion your brain evolved in order to help you survive. It creates this sense in you that there’s a “you,” but actually this is just an artifact of the brain fooling you. So a rational thinker writes a rational book with rational arguments trying to explain to other rational people that there is no such thing as rationality!

Another argument is that there’s no purpose or meaning in the universe. Therefore it’s just up to human beings to invent their own meaning. All of these things I’m describing—these arguments of materialists—are not the findings of science. They’re an interpretation of science [by individuals with] a materialistic philosophy. One could easily have a different interpretation. The problem with all of these arguments is that they destroy meaning—they create an ideology of indulgence. One commentator talked about the idea that we’ve reached an age of exhaustion, when ideas on the right and the left fail to inspire people, fail to help them to rise above their own condition, and so people become immersed in just this material indulgence. The meaning of truth is undermined. Even science itself—its findings become attacked or science itself becomes prostituted [by] money, which can then buy scientists to do all kinds of studies proving, for example, that cigarette smoking does not cause cancer or that the science on this is unclear and so on.

The other thing is that morals also disintegrate. The sense of what’s right and wrong. In European thought, the idea is that the individual can do anything up to the point where they begin to hurt others. That was the framework of liberal morals that admittedly contributed greatly to the advancement of human civilization, taking us to the adolescent stage [in the maturation] of the human race, but now, when we look around us, we see that this standard is disintegrating as well. Because now people can’t believe, can’t agree on what’s right or wrong. What a few years ago people agreed on, [saying,] “This is wrong”—let a little time go by, and pretty soon there are people arguing, “Well, no, that’s not so bad, that seems to be okay.”

Plenty of studies, for example, have been done to show [the] harmful effects of pornography on young people, or on objectifying women, and so on. But let a little time go by, and soon you see arguments saying, “No, there’s nothing you can do to restrict it. It has to be free on the Internet. Maybe it’s actually good for humanity,” and so on. Every aspect of truth, every aspect of goodness, every aspect of right and wrong [that] were standards and pillars by which human beings aligned themselves, appeals to something greater about reality than the human being—and the human being had to conform to this—all are beginning to erode, and the things are adapted so it’s not about truth that I have to accept, it’s about *my* truth and *my* views. It’s not about morals [that] I have to live up to, it’s about—well, whatever *I* do is the standard of morality.

As these elements of the disintegrative nature of a materialist outlook in the world become clearer, and as materialism hits its limits—for example, it's not able to adequately explain how the human mind works and how consciousness appears—as it runs up against its own limits, a number of philosophers now and social commentators are beginning to question this idea of a material outlook and asking [if it's time for an intellectual revolution]. They're not necessarily calling for a religious one, they're not theist, but they're saying that materialism now no longer works and being shackled to such an ideology is actually preventing the human race from advancing its thought and action. This wall that materialism has now hit is gradually beginning to open up investigation of new possibilities. For example, I just want to share one book I was just recently reading.

This is an author who does not believe in a God who is a creator of the universe, but in looking at society has kind of identified the limitations of just the materialistic outlook and has called for an understanding of God as an emergent property of human consciousness. That out of evolution there's a God capacity in human beings and without it civilization can't advance. These are some of the concepts identified in this book. People's sense of identity has drastically expanded over history: from members of a family and tribe to members of an industry, country, or world religion. It's time to take the next step, but not a half step, a giant leap. Today may seem ordinary to us, but it will be mythic in the future of our planet because it is a pivotal moment. The fate of countless human generations is riding on what we who are now alive decide to do while humanity still has the resources and ability to solve global problems. We need our "God capacity" to generate the spiritual power. The motivation, trust, and faith in each other to bring about good.

No known religion yet emphasizes what really matters: Identifying with the human species, seeing its challenges as our own, seeking knowledge of our planetary moral involvement, and demanding that God be a real player in this cosmic drama. No religion can inspire young people even to understand, let alone lead these transitions. . . . Okay, agree to disagree on that one!

The spiritual challenge for us is to accept the scientific picture of the universe and with the real help of a God, figure out how to act accordingly in every way. Not just technologically, but sociologically, psychologically, spiritually, educationally, politically, and every other way.

It may not be obvious how to become this coherent. But for the first time it's possible and focusing on it as a goal could re-energize our civilization. Spiritual transformation doesn't require a majority vote. It [doesn't] matter if most people don't get it. All it takes is a committed minority, because the committed lead culture. This is the finding of somebody who sees the necessity of God to overcome this materialistic quagmire that we found ourselves in—then he's reaching out and sees these possibilities that I think we would all say we find recognizable!

Now in contrast to this materialistic outlook, of course, 'Abdu'l-Bahá takes exception to it. He said if there is no meaning, then human beings become trapped in the struggle for existence and "*the struggle for existence is the fountainhead of all calamities and is the supreme affliction.*" He argues against the idea that the human being is merely an animal. He argues that among the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh is man's freedom and within the revelation of Bahá'u'lláh are those concepts and ideas

that allow human nature to rise, that liberate human nature from these chains of the struggle for existence. This is a concept that the House of Justice talked about in its Ridván 2015 message when it explained that the social consensus around ideals that have traditionally united and bound together a people are increasingly worn and spent, and then quoted Bahá'u'lláh, "*They hasten forward to Hell Fire, and mistake it for light.*"

In response to this condition of the human race, Bahá'u'lláh has responded with the healing remedy. He's redefined religion and sought to rekindle its light as a solution to this problem of religious fanaticism and materialism. One thing He says to us is, although the world is in distress, no one considers what its cause may be, and He identifies this cause as: "[N]o two men can be found who may be said to be outwardly and inwardly united." He said, "*Ye are the fruits of one tree and the leaves of one branch.*" 'Abdu'l-Bahá analyzes this. Remember He said, "*Religionists have considered the world of humanity as two trees: one divine and merciful, the other satanic.*" Bahá'u'lláh—in this simple statement that every Bahá'í child knows and is deep in [his or her] heart—knows that "*ye are the fruits of one tree.*" There aren't two trees. There is only one tree and all humanity is on it.

'Abdu'l-Bahá said we have the duty to cultivate this tree until it reaches perfection. We might say that one of these leaves, one of these elements of the tree is ignorant. Well, then we have to help it to become knowing. Some are weak and ailing, we have to help them toward health and recovery.

Some are infants and they have to be assisted to attain maturity. He said we should never detest and consider anyone objectionable, [but] should show respect and kindness to all because God created everyone. This [notion of] "us and them" that has plagued the human race since its origins has, in a certain sense, created certain levels of unity, but [it] now holds us back from the highest stage of seeing unity across the entire planet. By this statement, Bahá'u'lláh has banished this conception. There is no "us and them." There is only us, so we're in this thing together.

Another thing Bahá'u'lláh talks about [is] how religion produces concrete results in the transformation of the inner life and outer character of humanity. Faith is not belief in the unbelievable, as He said. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá said, faith is conscious knowledge in action. In Bahá'u'lláh's conception, religion is a knowledge system like science. Science is a powerful instrument because in exploring material reality, it tests its ideas in the real world. It's not just what scientists think or what they say, but these conceptions have to be tested. If this is a medicine that's going to cure, well, we have to see that cure in reality—and so every aspect of science is tested concretely in the world. Bahá'u'lláh says religion proves itself the same way. It's not just about doctrines and concepts and ideas, it's about translating what's written into practical action to transform the inner life of humanity and its outer character.

All religions have this conception in some way. Like, for example, in the Bible—it talks about "*by their fruits ye shall know them.*" A good tree can't bring forth evil fruit and a corrupt tree cannot bring forth good fruit. [The truth of] religion also has to be tested [through] practical action. If the results you see [are] corruption and strife and war and so on, that's not true religion. That is

superstition mixed in with religious ideas—but if the fruits of it are love and unity and concord and the betterment of the world and the transformation of people, well that is true religion. Bahá'u'lláh [also] talks about harmony between science and religion as our way of investigating reality, and [of] understanding and making progress over time. In this relationship, science and reason protect religion from falling into superstition, but religion protects science and reason from falling into materialism. These two things are interactive and reinforcing.

As we look at this world we live in now, it begs in a certain sense for response to this revolution that was introduced by the [concept] of evolution, the theory of evolution and the understanding of nature on a cosmic scale: that the universe as we know it now existed for 14-and-a-half billion years. That life has existed for four billion years. You start to get a cosmic scale — [for example, that] human beings only appeared in their current form a couple of hundred thousand years ago. What's the story, a narrative that reflects that cosmic dimension of reality? Well, it's certainly not a voice of religion that comes at one point in history and says that's the pinnacle of truth and that everything that deviates from that truth is satanic. But what about Bahá'u'lláh's idea of progressive revelation—that God speaks again and again to humanity across time? What about 'Abdu'l-Bahá's statement that the Bahá'í cycle will last 500,000 years? [This] may be the first statement and religion that frames human development in a context of a cosmic scale—really at 500,000 years.

Shoghi Effendi [makes the] statement that this World Order of Bahá'u'lláh will represent in its conception of world community, world citizenship, world civilization, and culture the furthermost limits in the organization of human society on the planet. It's in that dimension that Bahá'u'lláh speaks. In this context you can see, as opposed to these prior statements, it's actually more rational to believe in a God that frames reality in this way than it is to look at the world from the perspective of materialism. It's that God [that] has put into the very seeds of the universe, its very beginning, this capacity for intelligent life to appear, whether it was [in] this form or some other. That this consciousness—just like moments after the Big Bang there could be carbon or there could be water or all the laws of physics were such that this physical world of time and space was shaped— so also the possibilities in this universe that conscious, intelligent life could appear, [life] that is conscious not only of self but conscious of the existence of the universe.

The challenge of Bahá'u'lláh's redefinition of religion is simply that the peoples of the world now have to either reform their own religion—recognize the seeds within it of these same conceptions that Bahá'u'lláh raised and purge out the superstitious ideas that have crept in over time—or recognize that God reforms His religion and see in the concept of progressive revelation this renewal of religion in every age. As diagnosed by Bahá'u'lláh, we live in this world that's wildly out of touch with reality. It's engulfed in this fire of religious fanaticism. It's consumed by this corrosive element of materialism and ungodliness. Then He prescribes the remedy of religion in a radically different form. Then comes the effort to translate what He said into reality—and particularly our systematic effort in the Formative Age. Now we have the writings of the Guardian that help us reflect and put this process into context.

For example, Shoghi Effendi describes for us these three different ages of the Faith: the Heroic Age, the Formative Age, and, ultimately—when the promises of the Faith are achieved—this Golden Age that is to appear. Of course, if we had all [had] our choice, if we [had been] allowed to pick, we might have liked to pick being around in that Golden Age—to see all these wonderful things that Bahá'u'lláh [forecast] actually become a reality. Or we might have liked to be [alive] in the Heroic Age, when we could have been with the Central Figures [of the Faith] and carried out some of these heroic deeds, and so on. Well, whatever your choice might be—lo and behold, you find yourself in the Formative Age! What does this mean? It means that all of these teachings that Bahá'u'lláh gave have to take shape in the world and it's your job to make that happen!

Early on in his writings, Shoghi Effendi said [paraphrasing], “I feel it my duty to warn every believer that the promised glories of Bahá'u'lláh’s revelation can only be revealed in the fullness of time.” We are attracted, maybe we become Bahá’ís because we were attracted to all these beautiful teachings of Bahá'u'lláh, then we come into the Bahá’í community and we wonder: “Wait a minute! Where [are] all these wonderful things I read [about]?”

Well, it's the Formative Age, my friends. The idea is we shouldn't be surprised that these problems are there. We shouldn't be surprised that these struggles are there. What it means to be a Bahá’í in this age is that we take those challenges and problems on. If we see a problem, we'll have to be the one who fixes it. It's not enough just to tell the National Spiritual Assembly, “Hey, there's a problem over here that you have to look into.” Shoghi Effendi says [paraphrasing], “Now that you see these problems, now that you can address these issues in your own life, you have to set an example. You have to become the one that contributes to a new pattern of life in your community, to the solution of this problem or to the overcoming of that particular challenge. That's the work of the Formative Age.”

Shoghi Effendi reminds us that this process of disintegration actually creates the condition for the process of integration to accelerate. He describes these two forces at work—that the old world order is disintegrating and a new one is rising in its stead. He said “the present Plan”—this was the first Seven Year Plan—“embodying the budding hopes of a departed Master, must be pursued, relentlessly pursued, whatever may befall them in the future, however distracting the crises that may agitate their country or the world. . . . [T]hey should, at no time, however much buffeted by circumstances, forget that the synchronization of such world-shaking crises with the progressive unfoldment and fruition of their divinely appointed task is itself the work of Providence.” “Reflections such as these should steel the resolve of the entire Bahá’í community, should dissipate their forebodings, and arouse them to rededicate themselves to every single provision of that Divine Charter whose outline has been delineated for them by the pen of ‘Abdu'l-Bahá.”

It's the very process of disintegration that paves the way for this process of integration to go forward. ‘Abdu'l-Bahá says wherever we see a thought of hatred we have to oppose it with a stronger and more powerful thought of love. Wherever we see around us these disintegrative forces at work, we have to resist it with communities that become a bulwark against that disintegration. With social and economic development activities that apply Bahá'u'lláh’s teachings to remedy some of these ills. With an elevated discourse to participate in all these spaces of

human thought and discussion so a Bahá'í can be there and bring insights from Bahá'u'lláh's teachings not to be affected by this wider disintegrative conversation, but to introduce the seeds of ideas that begin to reverse it.

Another thing besides this idea of the three ages of the Faith and the process of integration and disintegration—another aspect that the Guardian gives us—is an understanding of how the Faith will grow and develop over time. He talks about the growth of the Faith in three stages. One of these, he says, is a “steady flow” of “fresh recruits.” The next stage is a process of “entry by troops of people of divers nations and races” into the Faith. Then, following some series of events out of our control—“possibly catastrophic in nature”—that will “derange the equilibrium of the world” will come a stage of mass conversion to the Faith of these same nations and peoples.

At the beginning of his ministry, Shoghi Effendi patiently guided us in the processes of the steady flow of fresh recruits. There were certain methods and certain approaches Bahá'ís had to the work of teaching and the expansion of the Faith. It involved having public meetings, putting articles in the paper, distributing books. To carry the Faith internationally, people would sail on a boat, go into a harbor, give a talk, distribute some books, get back on the boat, go to the next place, and so on. Gradually, as Shoghi Effendi guided the community, new patterns of activity grew and emerged from that.

The concept of firesides, for example: when you can invite people into your home and show them hospitality and overcome their concerns, allow them to ask questions and raise objections and so on and come to understand the Faith more fully. The concept of pioneering, whether internationally or on the home front, was born out of practical experience. The idea of going and staying in a place until you raised up an Assembly and not moving until the community was well established. This proved by experience, he said, to be the most effective way, and then he recommended it to every national community as part of their Plan.

Now, concepts like firesides, pioneering, all of these elements which are integral parts of a more effective approach to a steady flow of fresh recruits are well known to us and parts of our community. But then, in the Ten Year Crusade—the culmination of all the Guardian's efforts to educate the community and to get it to advance on a more systematic basis—the Guardian noted that the process of entry by troops was born: first in Uganda and other countries in Africa, later in Indonesia, and, after the Guardian's passing, in South America, in India, and other parts of the world. This ability not to attract people one by one but by tens, by hundreds, by thousands, by hundreds of thousands and so on began to emerge in the Bahá'í world. But unlike this long period where he was able to guide us in developing the methods and instruments for a more effective approach to a steady flow of fresh recruits, we found ourselves in this new stage and he passed away. We were struggling to figure out, well, “How do we do this process of entry by troops?”

Forty years went by, 40 years of effort from the mid-'50s to the mid-'90s, where we made efforts and we saw a continual process of this process taking off and then collapsing, and then beginning in another place then collapsing—until 1996, when the House of Justice said, “No, we need a systematic approach to learning about this avenue and we need to develop concepts,

methods, and instruments to identify how to move the process of entry by troops forward in a systematic way." It wasn't ever in the statements of the House of Justice that these other elements were to be discontinued. They were effective methods. In a certain sense, they were necessary to our work but not sufficient to our work. They by themselves were not sufficient to be able to sustain this process of entry by troops. A new stage of learning had to open up. One in which we would gradually learn the methods and elements and instruments necessary to sustain entry by troops. This is what we've been learning for the last 20 years, as the House of Justice describes.

Another element of this that we learned is that the concept of entry by troops is not just about getting a lot of enrollments—which we thought at one period of time, but [it] kept leading to this process of an explosion of enrollments, then[collapsing]. It's actually a pattern of action in which expansion and consolidation go hand in hand. It's about community building. It's about groups of people, Bahá'ís with others, learning how to put the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh into action to transform our inner character and also to change the society around us. It's about integrating our conception of what it means to teach the Faith with the conception of what it means to consort with the wider society. This tension that we have between direct and indirect methods [of teaching the Faith]: that "We should teach everyone directly," or, "No, we should take the indirect posture," and so on. So indirect that we actually forget to come back around and do some direct teaching from time to time!

Well, this question was actually raised to Bahá'u'lláh at one point. Where somebody posed the question of "What is this idea, some religions proselytize and they're quite aggressive in getting new recruits, other ones seem not to have any conception of teaching at all, so what is it? What is the proper balance here?" Bahá'u'lláh explained that . . . He said the children of men are all brothers and the prerequisites of brotherhood are manifold. He said "*it behooveth him who is the recipient of an inward or outward gift or who partaketh of the bread of heaven to inform and invite his friends with the utmost love and kindness.*" This is a spiritual obligation. We're all the leaves of one tree, we're all one family. I possess a wonderful gift. I am obligated to share that gift with my family, with my brother. "*If they respond favourably,*" He said, "*his object is attained; otherwise he should leave them to themselves without contending with them or uttering a word that would cause the least sadness.*"

In this context, it's not that we shared this fruit of the divine tree and cast them onto this tree, this satanic tree. No, all are part of this one tree. If we share this gift and people accept it, our object is achieved. If they don't, they're still in the family, they're still part of us, and our pattern of life has to reflect that. In the communities that we're building, we're able to do that. We're able to create this pattern, and the House of Justice discussed it in the recent Plan in terms of this idea of carrying on various conversations. We should be able to engage the people of the world. Elevate these conversations that are going on. Each book in the sequence of courses gives us an idea of the kinds of conversations we could be carrying on. Of course, there's many others inspired by the teachings: To learn how to speak about spirituality, or the education of young children, or about the history of the Faith and its meaning for humanity. Or about the purpose of life of a young person and the way of mentoring other younger people and so on.

These are all conversations we could have with people—as well as this conversation of a direct presentation of Bahá'u'lláh—then become adept [at] engaging the people of the world and consorting with everybody and knowing when we should be more indirect and when we should be more direct. Whether that direct teaching comes very early or whether it comes much later. It all depends on the receptivity of the person [to whom you're speaking]. Our ability to engage people in that wide range of conversations and to act in these areas of community building, social action, and involvement in the discourse of society starts to create a new dynamic that reverses this process of disintegration in the world and it brings to the conception of this idea of leaven that's talked about in the writings. The leaven is not the entire loaf of bread. It's an ingredient in the whole and the whole then rises. Bahá'ís are called to be this, to create this context and to be this agent, this catalyst in the wider society.

What we're learning how to do in these clusters is gather a thousand or thousands of people and participate in this process of community building in conversations and in social action that can gradually translate what Bahá'u'lláh said into action that quenches this flame of religious fanaticism and is the remedy for this ungodliness and is the creation for the dawning of a new process of civilization building.

That takes us then to what we're doing now, and, again, I don't have time. Obviously the House of Justice has written about this and you're quite familiar, you've studied the various recent letters. You know the processes of the last 20 years, how we've gradually developed one element after another. In this last Five Year Plan, what we've seen finally is all of these elements coming together in a way where there's nothing new that needs to be discovered. We've [already] basically discovered [these] elements and we see that when we can put them together in [a] mature way, what we have is a process of growth that can get bigger and bigger and is sustainable over time.

What we're seeing at these most advanced clusters in the world that have moved beyond the third milestone [is] that pattern of activity we now have to draw from and take insights from and see how we move clusters along this whole path. Again you look around you and you say, "Well, I don't immediately see that around me," but again there are about 15,000 or more clusters in the world. Right now, Bahá'ís are only working in about 5,000 of them, so that's two-thirds of the world where we don't even have a program of growth begun. Out of those 5,000 programs of growth, we have 200 that are at this really advanced stage and maybe another 800 to a thousand which are kind of right behind that—at the second milestone or struggling at that level or having moved beyond it. That leaves some 3,500 to 4,000 clusters which are only at the beginning of this movement. Things that are quite fragile. The House of Justice described [it] —again, not to define it, but [provide] a sense of it in numerical terms. This first milestone is one or two people who are engaging maybe two or three families, 10 or 12 people, or whatever. By the time [you] reach the second milestone, you have maybe 20 to 30 workers able to engage 100 or more people, and by the time you get to the third milestone, 100 or more workers engaging 1,000 or more people. On a quantitative level, it's an order of magnitude of about 10. You're multiplying the number of workers and the people they're able to embrace roughly by 10 times across each of these

milestones, but, of course, there's also an element of organic complexity that comes with it as well. As a kind of an analogy, I think of the first milestone as kind of like a fertilized egg. It's just the dawning of a new life that comes into existence, but very simple, not complex at all. [I]t faces certain challenges, can't do everything, but must multiply cells and, thus, must learn how those different cells are organized and so on.

The second milestone is like birth: When all of the elements are there and finally this organism is viable and can be born into the world. It's still quite simple in its operation. Finally, the third milestone and beyond are childhood and the stages beyond it.

We have to think of the nature of our work along these lines. You don't go to an embryo and say, "Why aren't you going to school?" I mean, what are you talking about?! You have to look at what stage that embryo is in and it's not doing everything at once. There's a time when it's just about multiplication. You can't think about developing a brain when you're one cell. You need a few more cells, at least.

Then there's also a time in the development of the embryo where developing that brain is the most critical thing, and if the mother doesn't get the right nutrients, well, the intelligence of that child is stunted forever. That's a critical period and the development of the brain is the most important thing—it needs the attention it needs at that particular time. We have to begin to think about this work along this organic line.

Just to give you a sense of where we're going: If we look at these most advanced clusters, these 200 or so, they have about 100 people engaging a thousand. Again, maybe there are some in this country, so maybe some of you have visited [them] or you used to live in some of these communities, and so on. Again, it's something known, something that's a reality. The most advanced cluster in the world has more than 10,000 people engaged in this activity. This is not theoretical, this is proven by experience to be effective, and we have to learn how to spread it to other people. What we know right now is enough to create a radical transformation in the Bahá'í community, if we can replicate what's already known in cluster after cluster. We need to advance these clusters and the primary focus of the Plan—one of the predominant, heaviest goals—is the movement of these 3,000 to 4,000 clusters to the second milestone by an order of magnitude of 10—from two to three people to 30 or more people, from 10 people participating to more than 100.

The House of Justice has gone into some detail to explain the nature of the effort that has to be done in order to get us there. Again, I'm not going to recapture that, but you can see it's a list of things that on the one hand might be looked at as a list—work with youth, work in the neighborhood, have reflection meetings, do cycles, and so on—but could also be looked at as organic elements that are intertwined. That you talk to youth in the neighborhood, you bring them together, you create study circles for them, you multiply core activities. You now have to appoint agencies to support the process. You talk to the parents and so on. You create devotional meetings. Very quickly you're working with more than 100 people as you work to establish five new youth groups. This is just one path to this process, there are others.

This process can be looked [at] from within the cluster, so every group of people—wherever they are, however few—needs to add one worker per cycle over the course of the 20 cycles and they can achieve and get to the second milestone. At the same time, there's a host of agencies: the Auxiliary Board members and their assistants, the reservoir clusters, the training institutes, the Regional Bahá'í Councils that are learning how to organize in a way that supports this organic development of these agencies of these clusters to the second milestone. Then, of course, is the second pattern of learning, which will be among you: You know, you have about 400 or 500 clusters you have to move along that level, but then you have another hundred clusters that are beginning to learn about this second path, which is the movement from the second and third milestone—again, an element of building capacity.

We can look at this on the one hand as multiplying activities, but if we do we're missing the point of the Plan. Activities are not an end in themselves, they are a space where people can come and be with us and interact with the Word of God—and then the dynamic begins to emerge where we can accompany [individuals], whether it's children or junior youth or young people or people of any age to begin to move along the path. Even a devotional meeting is not just a meeting that's an end in itself. It's a space, it's the seed of the *Mashriqu'l-Adhkár*. It's a space where people come, where they're touched by the Word of God, and then the host needs not just to tick off the fact that, "Okay, I held a devotional meeting this week," but has to look at those people who come and see how the Word of God is affecting them. Everything that we're doing in these clusters is about the development of the capacity of people, Bahá'ís or not, to work at ever higher levels to put Bahá'u'lláh's teachings into action.

This work of the growth and development of community life and teaching is not the only aspect of the Plan. Sometimes we think of the Plan as collapsed into just institute process or just core activities, but far from it! These are just a piece of the organic whole that is much greater, and that thing that is much greater goes beyond just the level of community-building processes. For example, the House of Justice has talked about this involvement in social action. And, again, in some of our most advanced clusters—but even in the weakest—where we have a junior youth group [in place], a process begins very early where people begin to apply Bahá'u'lláh's teachings and look at the material ills and problems of humanity and begin to address how to resolve them. In the Bahá'í world, we have thousands, maybe more than tens of thousands of small-scale Bahá'í social and economic development activities going [on].

We have hundreds of sustainable projects [in place] like schools or health clinics and so on. Then we have 100 or so Bahá'í-inspired agencies which are able to take on the work of social action on a more complex level. The Office of Social and Economic Development (OSED) [at the Bahá'í World Center] is working with Bahá'í communities and individual believers in different parts of the world to facilitate the process of learning about this effort. You saw in the video, *Frontiers of Learning*, one of the segments was on India. You began to see these friends talking about their impact on the thinking of the people, where this one woman says, "I'm not going to teach my children what caste they're in, because I don't want my children to feel inferior to anyone and I don't want my children to feel superior to anyone."

Here's this oppressive structure of the caste system. How long has it imposed itself on that society? But now, through the quickening power of the Word of God and this pattern of activity, it begins to erode the power of this thing. It begins to erase it. It's just a little stirring, a little signal but shows the potential capacity of these efforts to change the thought of humanity and then begin to change its action. One area of learning, for example, that OSED is facilitating is this idea of community schools. Where they have Bahá'í classes, but then, if you give the teachers a little more training in certain communities, they can create a kindergarten. A little more a first grade, a little more a second grade, and so on, until they actually build a little community primary school. This process has proven to be very effective. 'Abdu'l-Bahá originally had the vision in Iran that when the Bahá'ís created this one school and it proved to be effective, He said now create another and another and another so you go all throughout Iran so you educate all the people of Iran. Not just the Bahá'ís but whether they're Muslims, whether they're atheists, whether they're Christians, Jewish, or Zoroastrian, all the people of Iran should be educated both in material education and in moral education and character training and so on. He had this vision of the transformation of society through education. So in this area also—just learning about creating these small community schools—gradually the process is growing and developing in one country.

In the Central African Republic, where, again, this process of disintegration is very strong and the breakdown of the old world order is affecting the ability of the government to deliver education, suddenly [we have seen] the emergence of these Bahá'í-inspired schools. The government became interested and even did some testing and saw that in some of the schools that were started by the Bahá'ís, the fourth-grade students were outperforming the sixth-grade students of the government.

Now this agency, the [inaudible]Foundation in Central African Republic has been drawn into consultation with the government about the processes of education in the country. It's moved from developing these community schools to developing so many community schools in a single cluster that now they're trying to create agencies that can facilitate the continued development of these schools. They've also become involved in the design of curriculum from [a] Bahá'í-inspired perspective for the educational system. This program has proven to be effective and has been gradually spread. About 27 Bahá'í-inspired agencies in different parts of the world have developed 427 schools with over 1,300 teachers and some 28,000 students in 175 clusters in 20 countries. This is where the process is now. It's much further than it was five years ago. It will [in time] be much further than it is now. This whole sphere of learning about education which 'Abdu'l-Bahá saw fundamental to the transformation of society, we're now engaging in it at different levels. We have various schools, we're working at secondary education, we have a couple universities. We're trying to learn how to create systems of education that will complement these forces of our community-building and growth process. Beyond this is the level of [our] involvement in the discourses of society, and the House of Justice [has] said, "Well, this takes place at different levels." There's this one conversation on the international level guided by the Bahá'í International Community, especially at the United Nations, but in other fora.

Then there are also levels within a national community. One is discourses on a national level that the National Assembly is learning about. You look at some of the issues that are of concern for the society, you figure out "How can Bahá'ís participate in that conversation?" Understand the various voices that are being raised, figure out which ones are most closely related to the perspectives of Bahá'ís and 'Abdu'l-Bahá and then engage in that perspective and bring the light of the teachings to bear and elevate the conversation and change it. This space is also available in clusters where there's intensive activity in neighborhoods where it gets to a certain level Bahá'ís are naturally drawn into the conversations of their communities.

There are examples, like in a cluster in Sydney, that work with the youth and junior youth has now had an impact on the gangs in a certain neighborhood effectively dissolving the membership of these gangs as the young people are pulled into the conversations surrounding the junior youth program. But beyond this is also what the House of Justice envisions [about] every single social space that a Bahá'í occupies—meaning in your profession, in the agencies of civil society where you are, in the PTA, wherever a Bahá'í is placed, wherever a Bahá'í stands within the contact of that space, they can learn to be in that conversation, elevate that discourse, and bring the light of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings to bear so that gradually this process of thinking and action begins to change. Bahá'ís are doing this professionally. They're doing this as individuals. There are friends who are now writing books and articles. Maybe you've seen this book called *Eleven* that's [been] written by [a] Bahá'í from Canada, Paul Hanley.

It's about the future of this next century when it's expected that 11 billion people will be on the planet. He goes on to analyze these different forces at work in society, brings to the attention of people that the society is organized this way because this is the way people think, and if we continue to act this way, we're going to reach a crisis point in the century when we simply outpace the resources of the planet. We simply don't have enough resources to sustain water, food, energy, for 11 billion people, and so the result will be dislocation, war, [and] strife because of the disequilibrium of the world—unless we begin to think differently and act differently. The last chapter of this book begins to present the Bahá'í community's pattern of action with the Plan as one example of a community thinking differently and acting differently and creating patterns that can grow strong until they can begin to affect the patterns of society.

This capacity for involvement [in] discourse is growing and different national communities are developing these different capacities. We see [it] in all kinds of places in the Arab region, in Canada, in Germany about migration, in Colombia where they had civil war and now they're making peace. The Bahá'ís are in that conversation in the society about peacemaking between the rebels and the government and so on. In all these arenas, we're finding space to contribute the Bahá'í perspective to the conversation. But even this isn't all. You've seen in letters of the House of Justice discussions of certain new offices that are [being] created for helping National Assemblies to build their capacities in the area of their Treasuries and their Secretariat and their properties: agencies to assist National Assemblies in developing their capacities for involvement in the discourses of society; [to facilitate] the building of seven Temples, including those at the national and local level.

[There's the] letter to the Association for Bahá'í Studies talking about the importance of Bahá'í scholarship and saying how it plays a complementary role in these various aspects of our endeavors. [There's] disaster relief as an endeavor of the international Bahá'í community: You saw that story from Tanna [in Vanuatu] how the Bahá'ís were active in helping the community recover from the cyclone and so on. There's an accelerated process for the organization of the sacred texts: to gather all of the work, organize its basis, set type, proofread, and begin a process of accelerating publication in the original language, but also the translation into English and then by extension into other languages. The framework we have that we initiated very simply in 1996 now creates a broad context for the efforts of the Plan. The Plan is not a narrow thing. It's not a space for a few people who like to have a study circle.

That study circle is the irreplaceable element to be able to accelerate the training of human resources at a fast enough pace to keep up with an accelerated engagement with the wider society, but by itself it's like one cell or one organ in a whole organism. It has to be complemented by all these efforts, and like every cell in the body, it has to be a universal participation of all these cells harmonizing, combined together, fulfilling the role of all these various organisms if the organism is going to grow and be strong.

I know I'm going a little long, but I think it's important to make these points.

One of the things the House of Justice said in the March 26th letter [this year] is that hopefully now, the friends can appreciate the straight path that has been traced by heavenly inspiration from the dawning of the Formative Age, from the first revelation of these Tablets of the Divine Plan to today.

We tend to experience the development of the Faith as a bunch of twists and changes, so to us it's moving now. This thing seemed to be reversed, now it's going a different way, but if we can get some distance now after this lapse of a century, we can stand back and see for example how well Bahá'u'lláh predicted the ills that are afflicting humanity. How the Guardian gave us the vision of how we're going to deal with this thing and set us on the path of learning how to engage it in a systematic way, and how each stage of the Divine Plan built on the one that came before and took us to this particular place.

The past 20 years were engaged with . . . Sometimes you experience a lot of difficulties and struggle. We had certain assumptions about what the Plan was. At one point, somebody said, "Well, we should have study circles and not firesides." Or "Local Assemblies used to do this thing for teaching," but now the friends were supposed to wait until the local Assembly made its plan. Now we're saying the friends should act before the local Assembly has even approved their plans and soon.

We might have had one idea of how Counselors and Auxiliary Board members were supposed to function. Suddenly each are seeing the other functioning in a different way. Sometimes these changes were the results of mistakes or misunderstanding of what the guidance was. Other times it was guidance that actually . . . That it's not the guidance that was misunderstood, it's the fact

that we had formed conceptions in our own mind that was at variance with the guidance. Again these are all parts of the organic development of the Faith. Parts of the tests that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá said we would face . . . severe mental tests. It’s not just something [that occurred during] this past 20 years. It’s the same pattern that existed at the beginning of the Formative Age, when Shoghi Effendi introduced the administration and it took 16 years of helping the friends understand the administration and then doing all kinds of things: nominations for membership on the National Spiritual Assembly, electing National Assembly members by proportionate vote, electing more than nine people to local Assemblies, and so on.

All these different things because they didn’t understand, and they made mistakes, and he gradually, patiently taught them. Then he had to teach them all about teaching and so on. Bit by bit, the friends learned things that we now take for granted, but [which] at the time caused a lot of stress and strife—both for those Bahá’ís who were sincere, but also for those who became disenchanted with the Faith and systematically went about to create problems and so on. What we’re experiencing has been experienced at every stage [in which] the Faith has been growing and developing. If you look at the organic development from a caterpillar to a butterfly—if you are very experienced with caterpillars, you wonder, “What the heck is this chrysalis? Where did the caterpillar go? Why is this caterpillar hiding from me?” [How much more] when it pops out as a butterfly! Now it’s like, “Oh, God, I don’t know what the heck that thing is!”

This is the nature of growth sometimes. [Things] change and develop in ways that we don’t understand, but from the perspective of the Covenant, we can walk in this light of divine guidance confident that we’re following a straight path. Whatever it looks like to us in the trenches, we’re confident in this divine guidance that will take us to where we need to be. The House of Justice has now raised for us this vision—not only of these [next] very important five years [during which] we have to achieve these very important objectives by the year 2021, the centenary of the passing of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and the dissemination of His Will and Testament, but also beyond that, to the year 2044, the end of the second Bahá’í century.

Now can begin to see as a straight path where Bahá’u’lláh diagnoses these ills. Shoghi Effendi identified these evil tendencies in our society as if he grabbed them right from [today’s] headlines. Then he called upon the Bahá’í community to develop itself to the point where it could eradicate these evil tendencies from the wider society. Because he said if America is to fulfill its destiny, then the majority of the people of the society have to be freed of these evil tendencies of corruption and moral laxity and ingrained [racial] prejudice. It’s up to the Bahá’í community to be the catalyst that facilitates that transformation so that the World Order of Bahá’u’lláh can be born. Shoghi Effendi said the first stirrings of that World Order will take place in the second Bahá’í century. Within this horizon of the year 2044, the first stirrings—not of the administration, but of the World Order.

Again, looking at this crisis of humanity and this emergence, when you look at some of these clusters in the world . . . there’s one island, for example, [where] there’s [a population] of about 100,000 and 50,000 [of them] live in the capital city. Some 2,000 of those 50,000 are participating in Bahá’í core activities—about four percent of the population of the capital. Over the course of

the Plan, they hope to raise that to 10,000 people, 20 percent of the population of the capital. Well, how long—especially in these intense spaces—before people start to see what you're seeing in Tanna and other places? This impact, this profound impact of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings on young people, on how they develop, on how they see themselves, on how they dedicate themselves to the betterment of the world. What parent doesn't want that? Who's going to dismiss that? All are going to want it and it's not just good for the few, it's for everybody. For the first time, we start to see the potential latent in entry by troops.

In Sydney, in Australia, the capacity of reaching out to youth is built into the six monthly efforts of the community. Every six months they have a youth gathering and they bring more youth into the conversation. Then they begin to systematically work with them over six months: To train them, bring them further, help them to become animators or children's class teachers, and integrate them into the pattern of [community] life. What is entry by troops if it's not the systematic ability every six months to reach out to another group of people and bring them in and integrate them in the process, and six months later begin to reach out and integrate them again?

When that dynamic grows to such an extent [that] you can see [it] —and as a population looks on at that process . . . then one can begin to see the possibilities of what Shoghi Effendi [said] about mass conversion. That as the old world order continues to disintegrate and people see the stark choice between the reality of what's happening in the world and the possibilities that exist in the Bahá'í community, then the idea of mass conversion is not so magical and mystical anymore. It becomes almost inevitable in the kind of context that we're seeing around us.

Friends, we have then the challenge of this next five years before us. This is a spiritually charged moment, intertwined in the centenary of the [revelation of the] Tablets of the Divine Plan at the beginning and the centenary of the Will and Testament [of 'Abdu'l-Bahá] at the end. In the middle of these two wondrous anniversaries, [we'll also have] the bicentennial of the Birth of Bahá'u'lláh and the bicentennial of the Birth of the Báb, [both of] which will [be] celebrated now by the whole Bahá'í world as a twin observance.

[With] this Most Great Festival, we'll be able to create a space where the peoples of the world will, with greater outreach than ever before, recognize this precious light that was introduced into the world. We're working to get 5,000 programs of growth to the second milestone and several hundreds more of these up to the third milestone, which will call for a tremendous multiplication not just of sheer numbers, [but] really moving hundreds of thousands—if not millions or more—into this circle of our activities. [There's]also the necessary work to create the structures that [will] support the “herculean labors” that the House of Justice called for.

What's more important than the work of just these five years is the capacities that these five years will create in our [worldwide] community—in the individuals, in the communities, and in the institutions that will lay the stage for all those Plans and cycles of effort that lay ahead for moving millions more people before the close of the second Bahá'í century.

Let's see what the results of our labors will be in the next five years and what achievements we'll have to offer as a gift to 'Abdu'l-Bahá on the centenary of His passing!

Thank you very much, friends, for your time.