

The Next Stage

DOUGLAS MARTIN

Abstract

The failure of the generality of humankind to recognize the relevance of Bahá'u'lláh's message results largely from a prevailing prejudice against any spiritually-based solutions for social dysfunction. With the opening of the twenty-first century, however, the efficacy of the solutions proffered by Bahá'u'lláh could not be more obvious. The Bahá'í community itself constitutes unarguable evidence of the transformative power of His Message. Consequently, its members—and particularly the scholars among them—find themselves at a stage in the Faith's development wherein they can and must construct a discourse that will free the subject from the presumptions of what Shoghi Effendi termed a "haughty intellectualism." As Bahá'ís take on this challenge, the Association for Bahá'í Studies will indeed open avenues through which knowledge of the Bahá'í Cause may legitimately find expression in institutions of higher learning.

Résumé

Si l'humanité en général n'a pas reconnu la pertinence du message de Bahá'u'lláh, cela est imputable en bonne partie à un préjugé dominant contre toute solution fondée sur la spiritualité pour enrayer les maux de la société. En ce début du vingt et unième siècle, cependant, l'efficacité des solutions mises de l'avant par Bahá'u'lláh ne saurait être plus évidente. La communauté bahá'íe constitue, en elle-même, une preuve irréfutable du pouvoir transformateur de la Cause. Par conséquent, ses membres, en particulier ses érudits, se voient arrivés à un stade du développement de la foi où ils peuvent – et se doivent – d'instaurer un discours qui libérera le sujet des présomptions de ce que Shoghi Effendi a appelé « un intellectualisme arrogant ». Alors qu'on est à relever ce défi, l'Association d'études bahá'íes pourra, certes, ouvrir des voies par lesquelles la connaissance de la cause bahá'íe pourra s'exprimer, à juste titre, dans les établissements d'enseignement supérieur.

This article is based on the talk "Abdu'l-Bahá's Challenge to North America" delivered at the 2012 Annual Conference of the Association for Bahá'í Studies.

Resumen

El fracaso de la humanidad en general en reconocer la relevancia del mensaje de Bahá'u'lláh resulta en gran medida de un prejuicio prevaleciente en contra de cualesquiera soluciones para la disfunción social basadas en la espiritualidad. Con la apertura del siglo 21, sin embargo, la eficacia de las soluciones proferidas por Bahá'u'lláh no puede ser más obvia. La propia comunidad Bahá'í constituye evidencia indiscutible del poder transformativo de la Causa. Consecuentemente, sus miembros—y particularmente los eruditos entre ellos—se encuentran en una etapa en el desarrollo de la Fe donde pueden y deben construir un discurso que liberará al sujeto de las presunciones de lo que Shoghi Effendi denominó un “intelectualismo arrogante”. A medida que se responde a este desafío, la Asociación para los Estudios Bahá'ís de hecho abrirá avenidas a través de las cuales el conocimiento de la Causa Bahá'í puede legítimamente encontrar su expresión en instituciones de educación superior.

Bahá'ís can perhaps be forgiven if we occasionally give in to a sense that our Faith is the world's best-kept secret. Objectively speaking, the Cause is a unique achievement. As a community, it can fairly claim to represent a cross section of the entire human race; as a system of thought, it operates confidently at the leading edge of discourse on the evolution of civilization; as an example of what moral integrity can achieve—in the case of the Bahá'í community under decades of persecution aimed at its total extermination—it has no parallel in modern history. Moreover, in the view of no less an observer than *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, the Bahá'í Faith has today become the world's most widespread of the independent religions, second only to Christianity.

Why, then, is the Faith still so relatively little known? One says “relatively,” as some readers may be familiar with a number of countries where the Bahá'í community has become a significant, if still modest, voice in civil society. The same is true, although on a greater scale, of the role that the community's institutions play at the international level, in the consultative work of agencies connected with the United Nations, as well as in the collaborative undertakings of the world's influential nongovernmental organizations.

While these circumstances are gratifying, Bahá'í impact on public consciousness, at least in most Western countries, remains low. To take one example, a professional survey commissioned in 2001 by the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States indicates that, while most of those persons polled who were to some extent familiar with the word "Bahá'í" held a quite positive view of it, such respondents still represented, at best, only an estimated 28 percent of the total population of the country. This is a welcome advance over the 5 percent calculated in surveys conducted twenty years earlier, but the number is still surprisingly small. It is safe to suggest that comparable studies in European countries would be substantially lower.

Sensitive to the responsibility for the promotion of the Faith, laid on all its members in the Writings, some Bahá'ís may view the situation simply as evidence of their own and others' failure. There is no doubt a measure of truth in such painfully candid assessments. Certainly, the injunction "Bring thyself to account each day" (Hidden Words, Arabic no. 31) has to be the guiding standard for the individual believer in teaching as in all other aspects of life.

At the community level, however, such an attitude would be more than merely misleading; to ignore a truth expressed repeatedly and with great force throughout the Writings would deny the Faith the historical perspective needed to illumine its path. The point is fundamental to Bahá'u'lláh's description of the unfoldment of the Divine purpose:

Consider the sun. How feeble its rays the moment it appeareth above the horizon. How gradually its warmth and potency increase as it approacheth its zenith, enabling meanwhile all created things to adapt themselves to the growing intensity of its light. . . . In like manner, if the Sun of Truth were suddenly to reveal, at the earliest stages of its manifestation, the full measure of the potencies which the providence of the Almighty hath bestowed upon it, the earth of human understanding would waste away and be consumed . . .
(*Gleanings* 87-88)

The relevance of the principle to the teaching of the Faith was expressed succinctly in a brief address given by 'Abdu'l-Bahá shortly after His arrival in America:

In this world we judge a cause or movement by its progress and development. Some movements appear, manifest a brief period of activity, then discontinue. Others show forth a greater measure of growth and strength, but before attaining mature development, weaken, disintegrate and are lost in oblivion. Neither of these mentioned are progressive and permanent.

There is still another kind of movement or cause which from a very small, inconspicuous beginning goes forward with sure and steady progress, gradually broadening and widening until it has assumed universal dimensions. The Bahá'í Movement is of this nature. (*Promulgation* 43-44)

Since 'Abdu'l-Bahá was not given to providing anodynes for the comfort of the indolent and feckless, His remarks invite an effort to achieve perspective. This discussion seeks to take up the invitation.

THE BAHÁ'Í COMMUNITY

As it entered the twenty-first century, the Bahá'í Cause represented a phenomenon unlike anything else on the world scene. After decades of painfully slow growth, in which brief surges alternated with long stretches of only incremental expansion shadowed by setbacks of one form or another, the Bahá'í community today comprises several million people representative of virtually every ethnic, tribal, social, and religious background on earth. The estimated 100,000 or more localities in which Bahá'ís have put down roots are found in every country, territory, and island, from the Arctic to the Falklands, from Africa to the Pacific. The assertion in popular Bahá'í literature that the community today may constitute the most socially diverse and geographically widespread of any organized body of people on the planet is unlikely to be seriously challenged by objective observers familiar with the evidence.

More distinctive even than the community's diversity and geographical reach is the system by which it conducts its collective affairs. Not only is the Administrative Order unique in itself, but no undertaking so ambitious in the field of human governance has ever been conceived in any other quarter. Through its means, a cross-section of humankind is training itself decade after decade, generation after generation, in the critical art of collective decision-making through which a community alone can assume responsibility for the conduct of its affairs. Although infinitely diverse in methods, dictated by culture and circumstance, the system responds to a universal set of administrative principles. The incomparable gift thus bestowed is unity. "He Who is your Lord, the All-Merciful," Bahá'u'lláh writes, "cherisheth in His heart the desire of beholding the entire human race as one soul and one body" (*Gleanings* 214).

This phenomenon is not one reflected merely in statistics. Once every five years, it takes on compelling expression in the international convention at which elected delegates of this heterogeneous global society gather to choose, by secret ballot, the members of the international governing body of the Bahá'í Faith. To say that the process is democratic is to understate its character. Most of the features popularly regarded as inseparable from democratic governance are entirely absent from the Bahá'í electoral process, at all levels. Electioneering, nominations, and particularly the adversarial party structure that institutionalizes conflict are entirely excluded. As a result, those persons selected for service in Bahá'í governing institutions are those whom a majority of electors can truly say they chose, in the confidence of their own private evaluations.

In a dramatic intervention, Amatu'l-Bahá Rúhíyyih Khánum concluded the 1993 International Convention by pointing out to the representatives of the large and rapidly growing communities throughout Asia, Africa, and Latin America that the time had clearly come for them to arise and assume their full role in the conduct of the affairs of the Faith. Nothing could have demonstrated more convincingly the spiritual and intellectual substance of the community than the dramatic change that occurred between that gathering—which had already marked a major advance over the previous one—and the Convention that followed in 1998. The central

theme of the agenda was the launching of the "institute process," and the House of Justice had invited discussion of various communities' initial experience.

At this International Convention, scores of articulate delegates from every corner of the so-called "developing world" stood up confidently to explain to their fellow believers the responses they were making to the newly called-for creation of "training institutes." As delegates from Western lands listened intently, spokespersons from Senegal, Bangladesh, Paraguay, Tanzania, Malaysia, Nepal, Mongolia, Ghana, Bolivia, and a long roster of neighboring countries shared their experiences with the methods employed by the Ruhi Curriculum, outlined their strategies, and analyzed the reasons for the success they were enjoying.

The exchange was an arresting demonstration of the principle of unity in diversity that lies at the heart of Bahá'u'lláh's vision of humankind. Not the least of the immediate results was the consultation's impact on delegates from long-established Western communities. Convinced by what they had heard, the representatives of a significant number of these latter National Assemblies returned home to adapt their own institute programs to the model that was proving so effective in a range of cultural and social situations radically different from one another. The contrast to international relationships prevailing among the nations and peoples of the world, in general, was eloquent testimony of the changes taking shape by Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation. In a number of cases, North American and European Bahá'ís who had been accustomed to lending aid and guidance to Bahá'í communities in developing lands now found themselves and their assemblies benefiting from training by these same former pupils.

The intensity with which the process is accelerating was made unforgettably apparent two years later, at a conference at the World Centre of nearly nine hundred members of the Faith's appointed institutions, the Counsellors, and their Auxiliary Board members. Once again, confident and persuasive participants from Africa, Asia, and Latin America took the lead in the consultations. The social and cultural experience of many of these individuals must have been confined to small and isolated regions of the world. They left no doubt in their hearers, however, that they had not

only internalized the global strategy of the Five Year Plan¹ but had also successfully become its agents in assisting the regional councils and the local spiritual assemblies to implement national initiatives at the grassroots level. The display of focused, mature intelligence powerfully illustrated the advances that the Universal House of Justice referred to in its announcement that the long anticipated "fifth epoch" of the Faith's Formative Age had begun:

As the time for the Conference drew near, there were signs that the Faith had arrived at a point in its development beyond which a new horizon opens before us. Such intimations were communicated in our report last Ridván of the change in the culture of the Bahá'í community as training institutes emerged, as the construction projects on Mount Carmel approached their completion, and as the internal processes of institutional consolidation and the external processes towards world unity became more fully synchronized. They were elaborated in the message we addressed to the Conference of the Continental Board of Counsellors a few days ago. But the extraordinary dynamics at work throughout the Conference crystallized these indications into a recognizable reality. With a spirit of exultation we are moved to announce to you: the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh now enters the fifth epoch of its Formative Age. (16 January 2001)

SUMMONS TO CHANGE

The larger significance of the rise and expansion of this infinitely diverse global community is that it serves as the voice of a summons to revolutionary change in both human consciousness and social organization. For long decades before ideals such as racial oneness, equality of the sexes, and global governance began slowly to emerge as central features of public

1. The Five Year teaching plan announced in 2001 was the first in a series of four such successive plans, the last ending with the completion of the first century of the Formative Age of the Bahá'í Faith in 2021.

discourse throughout the world, these principles were being vigorously applied in the life of the Bahá'í community, in all lands, as expressions of the Will of God for our age. Similarly, undeterred by the dominant view that the claims of science and religion are fundamentally incompatible, Bahá'í writers and speakers were asserting the need to recognize that science and religion are in fact the two complementary systems of knowledge jointly responsible for the advancement of civilization throughout the ages. Nor did increasing violence, wars, and the repeated failure of efforts at international accord discourage the Bahá'í proclamation to all who would listen that global peace is not only a realistic goal but also is, in fact, the natural and inevitable next stage in social evolution. Far from being merely a collection of unrelated objectives, these moral commitments have consistently been presented by Bahá'ís as inherent features of a radical transformation underway in the life of humankind, a transformation summed up in Bahá'u'lláh's declaration that "[t]he earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens" (*Gleanings* 250).

The community members' success in exemplifying their principles has made the message persuasive to growing numbers of inquirers. Over a period of years, the number of women elected to national and local spiritual assemblies rose dramatically, reaching an average today unthinkable in the political world—even in the West, where the relevant Bahá'í statistics are significantly higher than those outside the Cause. The same is true of the racial and cultural makeup of these bodies. In areas where racial prejudice was not only a social blight but where it regularly incited outbreaks of violence—South Africa and the southern states of the United States particularly come to mind—Bahá'í communities at the local level early and persistently won a reputation as models of what integrated social relationships could produce, given the opportunity. Much the same could be said of the reputation of the Cause established by raising successive generations of members willing to serve voluntarily and intelligently in a host of nongovernmental organizations dedicated to promoting international development, at both local and national levels. Perhaps even more influential in promoting the growth of the Faith was the fact that believers matched this record of leadership in social advancement by exemplifying

in their personal lives the moral standards taught by their Faith.

As has been the case with the record the community established, the coherence of its message has succeeded in endowing the Bahá'í enterprise with a character unlike anything else on the contemporary scene. By the time the twentieth century ended, principles that had once been patronized by the general public as hopelessly unrealistic had become the subjects of global discourse, institutionalized in powerful agencies at the international, national, and often local levels; buttressed by the findings of scientific research and the conclusions of learned commissions; and accorded sustained publicity in the public media on five continents. By that time, the Bahá'í community itself had evolved to the point that it could, with confidence, invite study of its life and operations as a workshop in which Bahá'u'lláh's vision of the nature and processes of human advancement is being progressively validated, in both individual and social life.

The body of Bahá'í believers in Iran propelled the development of the Faith through their immense sacrifices. With the advent of the Islamic revolution, the Muslim clergy, who had incited successive pogroms ever since the new religion's inception, made a concerted attempt to entirely obliterate the Faith, mobilizing the full resources of the Iranian government in support of their campaign. Despite the suffering caused to Iranian Bahá'ís, the attempt ultimately proved a decisive failure. Renouncing entirely the kinds of retaliation and political agitation to which such abuse commonly gives rise, the Iranian Bahá'ís placed their trust in God and in the human rights system of the United Nations. Co-religionists in over 180 countries of the world, who sought the intervention of their own governments, supported the Iranian Bahá'ís' renunciation, securing unprecedented international publicity for the issue.

In a short space of time, the Iranian regime found itself enmeshed in the gears of an international human rights system it had until then treated with scorn. Over the period of two decades, the abuse of Iran's Bahá'í citizens was effectively exposed in the annual sessions of the Human Rights Commission, and a reporting procedure was established to monitor compliance with the resulting Resolutions. Step by step, and despite the overwhelming resources at its immediate disposal, the Islamic clerical regime

appears to be recognizing the unacceptable cost of the large-scale assassinations that had been central to its campaign of persecution. A relatively small religious minority that should theoretically have been crushed by the violence of the attacks it suffered is instead becoming strengthened by the oppression it is being made to endure. In the perspective of history, the experience may well come to be regarded as not merely a victory of the Bahá'í community but a dramatic vindication of the human rights system that the community of nations has succeeded in establishing.

A LIMITED CURIOSITY

We live in an age that prides itself on being scientific in its approach to all phenomena. Products and projects of every kind are subjected to a continuous process of testing aimed at weeding out the inadequate and the second-rate and identifying options that, at any given time, show the greatest promise. Our contemporary culture gives short shrift to the lingering appetite for unsubstantiated theory inherited from the preceding two centuries. Wherever the Bahá'í Faith is permitted to operate without interference, it serves as a universal benefactor to the contemporary world. By all objective standards, therefore, the Bahá'í Cause should today be the object of intense study—political, scholarly, and personal—an examination made all the more urgent by the deepening crisis of civilization. One need not accept its claims to divine origin—or, indeed, any other metaphysical conception—to be attracted to such a study. The opposite is the case. The willing suspension of belief or disbelief is a fundamental precondition of serious research in any field. Taken simply as this-worldly phenomena, the nature and achievements of the Bahá'í Cause are their own justification for serious attention.

Clearly, therefore, some factor other than scholarly objectivity is inhibiting such examination. An influence not adequately evaluated has had the effect of checking the operation of humanity's highly refined critical faculties when the subject at issue is the Bahá'í Faith. To say this is not to suggest that the Cause has somehow fallen victim to a malign hidden conspiracy. On the contrary, the inhibiting factor at work is open, vocal,

and supremely unapologetic about its mode of operation. The problem is simply the perennial one of prejudice. Throughout most of the twentieth century, phenomena associated with a spiritual conception of reality, no matter how significant or accessible to objective examination they might be, have been habitually ignored as relics of a discredited past. Until now the Bahá'í Faith, struggling to express itself, has been the victim of this frozen mindset. Consequently, however impressive its own achievements, the Bahá'í community today necessarily operates within the confines of a world order (if it can be so described) whose misconceptions about both human nature and social evolution are so fundamental as to often paralyze even the most intelligent and well-intentioned efforts to construct a peaceful global society. The dual challenge facing Bahá'ís, then, is that of freeing our minds from widely held fallacies while framing discussions that can stimulate similar reflection on the part of those with whom we associate.

Certainly, there is a degree of encouraging evidence that science's house-cleaning has grown both more liberated and more rigorous. Habits of mind and patterns of behavior that handicap progress but still cling tenaciously to the structure of the mind are being challenged everywhere. Bahá'í agencies working in United Nations circles note encouraging advances in the lexicon of international discussion: analysis that had once limited its attention to "economic" and "social" developmental issues has been steadily broadening consideration first to "cultural" areas and eventually to the "spiritual" dimension of human life.

Encouraging as these circumstances are, they do not address the fundamental needs of the situation in which humanity finds itself. Implicit in contemporary intellectual discourse is the assumption that social and other moral values either are self-generating or derive from fortuitous intercourse between science and legislation. Nothing in human experience supports such blithe hope. Nor, since the related issues are central to human progress, whether at the individual or the collective level, can the subject be set aside. That the latter is broadly the case—and generally unexamined—is reflected in the determination of the Western development movement in imposing its cultural views on programs global in design and purpose.

RESURRECTION DAY

Achieving its present eminence has taken the Bahá'í Cause 150 years. During those decades, humanity as a whole entered on a stage in its evolution for which nothing in the past six thousand years of civilization had in any way prepared it. Shoghi Effendi describes the forces impelling the transition as the "simultaneous processes" of integration and disintegration (*Advent* 72). One by one, all of the standards and certainties by which the world's peoples had explored the potentialities of human nature and shaped their respective societies were being swept away in an ever-accelerating maelstrom of disasters beyond the capacity of anyone—rulers, scholars, or religious institutions—to comprehend, much less to master. At the same time, breakthroughs in every field of scientific and technological endeavor were producing an apparently inexhaustible cornucopia of inventions, discoveries, resources, and opportunities that no segment of the human race was equipped to manage in anything like a just and rational fashion aimed at serving the welfare of the whole. At best, the resulting mix of anxiety and intoxication would have left the general public and its leadership handicapped in objectively considering the claims of the spiritual enterprise on which the small and struggling company of Bahá'ís in various lands were engaged.

"The validity of men's belief in God is dying out in every land," Bahá'u'lláh had warned. "The corrosion of ungodliness is eating into the vitals of human society" (*Gleanings* 200). His Writings are uncompromising in attributing the principal responsibility for this rupture of the fabric of human existence to the leadership of organized religion, and here is where clarification of the nature of the Bahá'í encounter with contemporary society must begin.

An inherent feature of religion's past had always been the success of various clerical elites in arrogating to themselves, at a relatively early stage in the process, exclusive control over successive Revelations of the Divine intended for the enlightenment and empowerment of the general body of humanity. Whatever the diverse motives of those responsible, the unhappy effect has been to impede the current of inspiration, obscure its

ideals, discourage independent intellectual activity, focus attention on the minutiae of rituals, and, all too often, to engender hatred and prejudice toward those following a different sectarian path from that of the self-appointed spiritual leaders. Ultimately the most serious consequence of the failure of religious leadership was to trivialize religion. At precisely the point in its collective development that humanity began to struggle with the challenges of the modern age, the resource on which it had principally depended for courage and inspiration was becoming an object of easy mockery, first at those levels at which decisions were being made about the direction society should take, and subsequently in ever-widening circles of the general population. That this most devastating of the many betrayals of trust from which human faith has suffered should, in the course of time, undermine the foundations of belief itself is little wonder.

Briefly, the twentieth century's totalitarian regimes sought clumsily to outfit the new worldview with an artificial apparatus of prophetic vision, doctrines, rituals, and evangelical zeal. Extinction of faith in God was obviously not, however, the product chiefly of ideological manipulation. Although emboldened by the bankruptcy of organized religion and by what passed for scientific insights, the advance of the new creed was essentially no more than the triumph of animal impulse, as instinctive and blind as appetite, released at long last from the irksome restraints of supernaturalism. The vulgarity of the rush to judgment did not prevent it from harnessing to its ends the energies of countless academics, journalists, agencies of social reform, artists, businessmen, legislators, politicians, self-help cults, communications experts, and a not inconsiderable number of underemployed clerics and theologians. In due course, mankind's ideological efforts followed theology into history's trashcan.

The magnitude of the consequence is without parallel in history. Whatever material form its violence occasionally assumed was trivial in comparison to its intellectual, moral, and emotional devastation. The word "dumbfounded" surely came of use in the twentieth century to describe the condition into which the masses of humankind in Western lands were abruptly precipitated. Despoiled of the most precious legacy bequeathed them by countless generations of heroes, martyrs, and mystics;

mocked and bullied into surrendering even a sense of confidence in a right to protest, whole populations found themselves unable to call their souls their own. "What 'oppression,'" Bahá'u'lláh asks in reference to a biblical prophecy of the latter days, "is more grievous than that a soul seeking the truth, and wishing to attain the knowledge of God, should know not where to go for it and from whom to seek it?" (*Kitáb-i-Íqán* 31).

The resulting demoralization has elicited a wide variety of responses. For the moment, at least, the disillusionments of the twentieth century appear to have left populations of most lands relatively unresponsive to the prescriptions of would-be political saviors. Great numbers prefer to seek refuge from the culture of doubt in religious fanaticism and pseudo-scientific cults of the kind that now proliferate freely in both East and West. Hedonism, violence, and the obsessive acquisition of material possessions claim multitudes of others. For many, a climate of profound despair, unfocused, crippling, and apparently inescapable, expresses itself in emotional and other psychological disorders.

It is this spiritual crisis, Bahá'u'lláh explains, for which the scriptures of past religion employed the imagery of "the Day of Resurrection":

The shout hath been raised, and the people have come forth from their graves, and arising, are gazing around them. Some have made haste to attain the court of the God of Mercy, others have fallen down on their faces in the fire of Hell, while still others are lost in bewilderment. The verses of God have been revealed, and yet they have turned away from them. His proof hath been manifested, and yet they are unaware of it. And when they behold the face of the All-Merciful, their own faces are saddened, while they are disporting themselves. (*Gleanings* 41-42)

"HIS CLEAR EVIDENCE"

In this spiritual wilderness, Bahá'ís have been struggling to promote their Faith. In many of the addresses He gave in the West, 'Abdu'l-Bahá direct-

ed the believers' attention to the implications of this prevailing condition of humankind. The progress of the Cause, while evolutionary in nature, has proceeded and will continue to proceed through a series of surges.

For a Bahá'í to imagine that conditions have been otherwise is to miss entirely the evolutionary nature of the Cause of God. Nothing short of the meteoric force of the Báb's life—its incandescent purity, the intellectual power of His message, and the breathtaking example of the thousands who willingly sacrificed themselves for it—could have penetrated the crust of disbelief and planted its first seeds in human consciousness. Similarly, the proclamation of Bahá'u'lláh's mission, despite its dramatic immediate consequences, did not in itself lay the foundations of Divine order. For nearly three decades, through imprisonment and exile, the Manifestation of God, like the sun in the phenomenal world, gradually brought into existence the elements of the promised Kingdom, revealed the related laws and institutions, and cultivated in His followers the capacities of mind and heart needed for its establishment. In the process, the spiritual revolution in the consciousness of those who had turned toward the Cause began to exert a magnetic attraction on the minds and hearts of others whose lives touched with theirs.

Subsequently, at an early stage in both the West and the Orient, the work had the incomparable advantage of the direct guidance and inspiration of 'Abdu'l-Bahá as Centre of Bahá'u'lláh's Covenant. Again, without such intervention, the success of the Persian and other Eastern believers in expanding and consolidating the Cause in the face of the fanatical opposition they encountered during the early part of the twentieth century would be impossible to believe. Further, without the genius of Shoghi Effendi in capturing history as the vehicle of Revelation, the Faith could not have established throughout Europe and North America groups of believers that would have been anything more than replicas of the various millenarian sects that were ambitious to fill the age's spiritual vacuum. However discouraging external circumstances appeared, the luminous figures of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and the Guardian provided an unarguable demonstration of the reality of the world of the spirit and the processes inherent to it.

As pressure intensified during the second half of the twentieth century, members of the Faith began slowly to come to terms with the implications of their experience. With the gods of humanity's inherited belief systems disappearing, not even the most strongly fortified bastions of fundamentalism could ensure immunity from the spirit of doubt that penetrated every least recess like an airborne infection. Members of the Faith gradually are realizing that their community is destined to find itself alone in the task of vindicating to a skeptical age the truth that material existence is—as the words imply—no more than rough matter, shaped and animated by forces that transcend it. Does any evidence exist, Bahá'ís come finally to ask themselves, of processes outside the Cause capable of maintaining faith in Divine Will as the motive power of history? Indeed, is a sense of history, by itself, any longer a significant influence in most peoples' minds?

Because Bahá'ís are not merely part of humanity but are conditioned by everything in their beliefs to regard their own destiny as inextricably bound with that of the entire race, their reaction to the spiritual condition of humankind cannot escape a degree of distress. Those who follow Bahá'u'lláh have not enrolled in a self-absorbed, triumphalist cult. For them, all of the great religions derive from the same source as their own; all faiths have been stages in the gradual unfoldment of the Divine purpose impelling the advancement of civilization, "the changeless Faith of God, eternal in the past, eternal in the future" (*Kitáb-i-Aqdas* 85). One unimpeachable and recurring proof of the existence of God has been present in every period of history. That proof has been His succession of Messengers. Whatever problem scholars may have with the barnacles of theology gradually imposed on the work of each of these Messengers by the ecclesiastical elites that have taken ownership of them, it is impossible to deny that each One achieved a fundamental transformation in the moral, social, artistic, and philosophical life of humankind. So universal a transformation cannot be attributed to the life of any other historical figures, however impressive their achievements.

The contemporary crisis of faith eventually compels a Bahá'í to recognize that today the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh alone constitutes this proof: "hadst Thou not revealed Thyself unto me, I would not have known Thee"

(*Selections* 203). In this intervention, the unknowable Reality that transcends existence has today again expressed Its will, provided guiding principles for the reconstruction of society, and demonstrated, beyond reasonable doubt, limitless creative powers available for the purpose. Through God's self-manifestation in our age—and through this alone—Divine Authority is reassuming its creative role in human life and in the civilizing of human character:

Is there any doubt concerning God. Behold how He hath come down from the heaven of His grace, girded with power and invested with sovereignty. Is there any doubt concerning His signs? Open ye your eyes, and consider His clear evidence. Paradise is on your right hand, and hath been brought nigh unto you, while Hell hath been made to blaze. (*Gleanings* 45–46)

Again, one can ignore both the message and the objective evidence if one wishes, but one cannot claim, in doing so, to be seeking truth. One cannot credibly claim to be motivated by a devotion to the scientific spirit while ignoring phenomena that give every appearance of being critical to humanity's future. The fact that, as civilization steadily disintegrates around them, most people in contemporary Western society appear to experience no great discomfort with the irreconcilable contradictions of their lives, presents Bahá'ís with a new and sobering perspective on Bahá'u'lláh's warning: "And be ye not like those who forget God, and whom He hath therefore caused to forget their own selves" (*Kitáb-i-Íqán* 101).

LEARNING PREREQUISITE

Protesting against the ruin that materialism inflicts on present-day society, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, in a challenge that impinges directly on the work of this Association, goes on to identify the focal centre of the crisis:

In schools and temples of learning, knowledge of the sciences acquired is based on material observations only. There is no realization of Divinity in the methods and conclusions. . . . Beyond these

evidences they are without susceptibilities; they have no idea of the world of inner significance and are utterly out of touch with God, considering this to be an indication of a reasonable attitude and philosophical judgement, whereof they are self-sufficient and proud. (*Promulgation* 261–62)

What 'Abdu'l-Bahá addresses here goes beyond behavioral issues and focuses on an intellectual justification for conditions that today undermine human consciousness. His reference is to the dogmatic materialism that, wrapped in a professed devotion to scientific principle and methodology, suffocates all intellectual impulses arising from the spiritual level of human consciousness. The subject is not some benign, detached system of thought that is content with simply offering its genius to the service of humankind; rather, it is an unacknowledged ideology that permits no freedom of dispute on issues central to its purpose, an ideology that, in its academic milieu, penalizes deviation from its dogma—whether in respect to term papers, seminar discussions, dissertations, tenure-track appointments, publication reviews, foundation grants, or simple mockery. In short, a culture of intellectual suppression reminiscent, to a disquieting degree, of behavior denounced in the medieval Church and the unlamented Soviet Union, now reigns essentially unchecked in contemporary Western academia. Here, the phenomenon is not a formalistic belief system with a program of sociopolitical goals in mind; the reference is instead to a self-perpetuating culture that has steadily and aggressively seeped into the vacuum created by the gradual extinction of spiritual life.

Ironically, this self-assertive culture reigns side by side with an increasingly distraught perception of the very dangers that 'Abdu'l-Bahá first exposed in His countless public addresses—in America particularly—a century ago. We are now told, with scrupulous adherence to the scientific method, that the foundations of civilization are imperiled; that the economic, environmental, social, moral, and public security areas of human life are all at risk. The prescription urgently advanced for this derangement, and earnestly pursued in lectures and publications, is that humanity must somehow learn to act together in addressing problems all

of which are now, at long last, recognized as global in nature. That is to say, the pressing need of humanity is to find unity: unity of purpose, unity of understanding, unity of commitment.

But how can this modern society achieve such an objective? Here, an all too obvious impotence is exposed. Any facile assurance that unity will passively result from the eventual solution to practical afflictions is clearly a fantasy, contradicted by everything in contemporary experience. The dangers and disasters looming over humanity's future are essentially the symptoms of the crisis, not the source.

This brings us to the familiar image of the unacknowledged elephant in the room. The distinguishing feature of the Bahá'í community is precisely its unity. The Cause constitutes the only association of human beings in all history—religious, political, or social—that has successfully maintained its unity unimpeachably intact, despite every conceivable effort to undermine it from outside and from within. A cross section of the human race, the Bahá'í community is united in its social and moral principles, in its allegiance to a guiding authority, in the candor and courage with which it addresses the challenges facing it, in the planning of its future, in its promotion of the unification of humankind, in its respect for civil government, in its devotion to the cause of international peace, and in an impassioned commitment to learning.

This unrivaled eminence has been achieved without surrender to any form of partisan political entanglement or recourse to the possession of great wealth. Moreover, exhaustive information on its nature, its beliefs, and its practices is readily available to millions of people across the planet, particularly to leaders of thought. In short, the Bahá'í community today constitutes the response to the desperate need identified by the contemporary global dialogue—the one body of people in existence that demonstrates conclusively, in itself, the irrepressible ability to generate unity.

Objectively speaking, the fact that humanity's intellectual leadership could, so far, have ignored such a phenomenon is bewildering. Neglect of this kind is particularly eccentric in an establishment that devotes unlimited resources, human and material, to widely celebrated study of all aspects of the human condition (to take one diverting example, scrutiny of the genetic minutiae of the relationship between man and animal).

As early as 1941, in a searching message to the Bahá'í world, Shoghi Effendi called this delinquency to account. With reference to the rise of the Cause, he asked,

Which one of the multitudes of creeds, sects, races, parties and classes and of the highly diversified schools of human thought, considered it necessary to direct its gaze towards the rising light of the Faith, to contemplate its unfolding system, to ponder its hidden processes, to appraise its weighty message, to acknowledge its regenerative power, to embrace its salutary truth, or to proclaim its eternal verities? Who among the worldly wise and the so-called men of insight and wisdom can justly claim, after the lapse of nearly a century, to have disinterestedly approached its theme, to have considered impartially its claims, to have taken sufficient pains to delve into its literature, to have assiduously striven to separate facts from fiction, or to have accorded its cause the treatment it merits? (*Promised Day* 13–14)

OUR NEXT STAGE

The over-arching question is why? Why not at least look? After all, that is the prerequisite of all serious scholarship. The issue is not a matter of promotion of the Bahá'í Cause, much less of conversion to it. Nor, as has already been noted, need the discussion appeal to any metaphysical layer of reality. The question—to repeat—is why an objective phenomenon so centrally related to what has been identified as the crisis of civilization in every department of life, a phenomenon readily susceptible to examination, has been studiously ignored by those professedly most concerned to seek a solution?

So serious an intellectual—and indeed moral—failure as the one reviewed here obviously faces the Bahá'í community with one of its greatest challenges. Does this failure not call for a particularly courageous and imaginative response from believers such as ourselves—from Bahá'ís who enjoy the immense privileges that advanced education provides? Such a challenge begins in our personal lives, as an “inside job” of systematically freeing ourselves from what Shoghi Effendi termed “the chains and fetters

of a haughty intellectualism" (*Messages* 37) of overcoming the artificial inhibitions imposed on our minds—and on our behavior—by a self-appointed authority that has failed the first test of scientific inquiry, the willing suspension of disbelief. As we ourselves accept empowerment, and appreciate the circumstances in which we work, an objective presentation of the relevancy of the Bahá'í phenomenon must in due course, and in an academic milieu, increasingly find expression in challenging discussion with our peers. In many cases, indeed, it may lead gradually to reflection on spiritual issues as well as on the historical and phenomenal evidence itself.

In responding to the summons, it is vital that we not misstate the nature of the issue. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá made emphatically clear in His addresses across this continent, we are a community that is guided by two complementary knowledge systems: science and revelation. Both of these we see as essential to any social life that can be termed "human." True civilization, in our view, has advanced most creatively during those periods of history in which the two have worked together. Moreover, no religion in the history of humankind has more emphasized, as the Bahá'í teachings do, the principle of respect both for the learned, as a class, and for the contributions they make—and must go on making—to the well-being of the world. The Bahá'í Faith, Shoghi Effendi asserts, "is scientific in its method" (*Bahá'í Faith* n.p.). Bahá'u'lláh does not call on us to free ourselves from knowledge but from the dust of assumptions that settle so easily and thickly upon learning when ambition, indolence, and prejudice override objective evidence.

This Association came into existence in 1975, through response to an act of will on the part of the Universal House of Justice.² The mission given was to open avenues through which knowledge of the Bahá'í Cause

2. In 1974, at the inception of the Five Year Plan, the Universal House of Justice specifically called upon the Canadian Bahá'í community to "cultivate opportunities for formal presentations, courses and lectureships on the Bahá'í Faith in Canadian universities and other institutions of higher learning" (Five Year Plan 1974). In 1975, the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Canada established the Canadian Association for Studies on the Bahá'í Faith, which became the Association for Bahá'í Studies for North America in 1981.

may legitimately find expression in institutions of higher learning. The anxieties gathering around contemporary society, and the dramatic advances made by the Bahá'í global community, argue strongly that a new doorway is now opening. The themes that 'Abdu'l-Bahá addressed one hundred years ago, some in this very city, only a block or two from where we sit, now express themselves in a universal model, a model demonstrating unarguably that humanity, in all its diversity, can learn to live and work and meet any and all challenges, as a single people in one global homeland.

At hand is all of the objective evidence that this new phase of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's work requires. We need only the courage and clarity of His convictions.

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