

## A Change of Culture

The recent messages of the Universal House of Justice have signalled to the Bahá'í world that the Bahá'í community is undergoing a change of culture. In the Ridvan message of 2000, they referred to a "critical qualitative difference" in the Bahá'í community and that the "culture of the Bahá'í community experienced a change." In the same message they stated that during the Four Year Plan, the "members of the community came gradually to appreciate how systematization would facilitate the processes of growth and development." They then state that this "raising of consciousness was a huge step that led to . . . a change in the culture of the community."

What then does a change of culture mean and what processes surround such a change? The culture of a community is defined by sociologists as "constituting the `way of life' of an entire society,"<sup>1</sup> including language, norms of behaviour and systems of belief. Human beings create the world in which they live. They live in communities and come to a communal agreement as to the meaning and significance that they will assign to the entities in their world. These entities may be in the natural world (they may agree that a certain rock or mountain is sacred), or may be certain activities (they may determine a particular ritual for funerals) or certain individuals (they may make one person their ruler, another a priest and another an outcast). Even such a basic thing as language itself is a creation of human culture. In this way human beings create their reality. And so "Culture may be defined as the entire array of symbols, including objects, acts, utterances, and events, with which reality is apprehended, given meaning and communicated."<sup>2</sup> This reality is then passed on from one generation to the next - it becomes taught to the children as the way the world is and the way they should live their lives in order to be part of that world. It becomes unquestioned because it is unquestionable - it is part of "common sense" and is taken for granted therefore it is usually outside of the area that we question.

It can be seen from the above description of culture that it is something in which human beings invest a great deal of energy and time. It can also be discerned that a culture is self-perpetuating and resistant to change. In general, since the dawn of civilization (in its literal meaning of the time when human beings have lived in cities), human prosperity has depended on stability and continuity. Therefore there are many inbuilt psychological and social mechanisms that resist change. Parts of it may change gradually over time - British culture that regarded owning slaves as a normal part of its world in the 17th century, had by the end of the 19th century come to regard the practice as unethical and inhuman. Under the influence of catastrophic events such as a major natural disaster or a conquest, parts of human culture may even change quite quickly. But in general terms, the core values of a culture do not change. Human culture has an inherent resistance to change. Since it creates reality, the way the world is, it has itself usually not been seen and observed, and thus not criticized or subjected to pressure for change. It was a feature of the nineteenth and twentieth century that human societies became more reflexive, more able to examine and criticize their own culture

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<sup>1</sup> *Unwin Hyman Dictionary of Sociology* (ed. David Jary and Julia Jary), 2nd ed., Enderby, Leics.: Bookmart, 1999, p. 139

<sup>2</sup> Robert Wuthnow, "Comparative Ideology," *International Journal of Comparative Studies* 22 (1981), p. 121

and hence more able to initiate change in that culture. Even this ability to reflect on our own culture does not lessen the resistance of cultures to change, however. For example, the realization that women and men are equal and that women should therefore play an equal role in society has been with Western societies for almost a century and yet change in that direction has been painfully slow - the glass ceiling on advancement still exists for women in most walks of life.

It can thus be seen what a difficult task it is to change a culture. At present the Bahá'í community is in the middle of a change of culture initiated by the Universal House of Justice. It is, therefore, difficult to see the wood for the trees - one cannot discern the overall features of the change going on when one is in the midst of it. Perhaps a better way of gaining perspective on the process underway is to look at a historical example of such a change.

During the early years of Shoghi Effendi's ministry, he initiated a change in the Bahá'í culture. With the hindsight of history, we can now discern the main features of that change. During the ministry of `Abdu'l-Bahá, the Bahá'í community had been run much like a large family with `Abdu'l-Bahá as the head of the family. Most things were done on a person-to-person basis. For example, when `Abdu'l-Bahá wanted to implement an initiative, he would ask an individual to do this. Examples of such initiatives include `Abdu'l-Bahá's instructions to Agnes Parsons to organize the Race Amity Conferences in the United States;<sup>3</sup> his encouraging Corinne True to lead the work on the American temple;<sup>4</sup> and his direction to John Esslemont to restart the Bahá'í Council in England.<sup>5</sup>

Shoghi Effendi realized that, for the Bahá'í Faith to grow, it was necessary to implement the outlines of the Bahá'í administrative framework that had been given in the writings of Bahá'u'lláh and `Abdu'l-Bahá - especially in the latter's Will and Testament. Only the most rudimentary elements of this order were then in existence. In order to bring about the change that he had envisaged, it was necessary for Shoghi Effendi to bring about a change of culture. He had to redirect the energies of the Bahá'í community into a new channel. From the earliest years of his ministry, therefore, Shoghi Effendi's communications to the Bahá'í world were focussed on this goal of establishing the Bahá'í administration. This is the subject of almost all of his major letters of this period. Those Baha'is who were the most useful to Shoghi Effendi in this period were those who were the most willing to allow themselves to be remoulded in accordance with the new culture. A story is told of Amelia Collins who went to see Shoghi Effendi in Haifa in 1923 wanting to speak to him about how to become more spiritual and was instead given detailed instructions on Bahá'í election procedure and consultation.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>. Gayle Morrison, *To Move the World*, Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982, pp. 134-6

<sup>4</sup>. Bruce Whitmore, *The Dawning Place*, Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1984, p. 31

<sup>5</sup>. Moojan Momen, *John E. Esslemont*, London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, p. 21

<sup>6</sup>. The writer first heard this story about Amelia Collins during a talk by Counsellor Leo Niedermeyer in Lisbon on 20 July 1981. It is given in substantially the same form in A. Q. Faizi, *Milly: a Tribute to Amelia Collins*, Oxford: George Ronald, pp. 3-6. Of course, it may be that Shoghi Effendi's reply to Amelia Collins was more pertinent than it appears, for the workings of the Bahá'í administrative order are also mystical and assist in the spiritual development of the individual, see Moojan Momen, "Mysticism and the Bahá'í Community", *Lights of `Irfan*, vol. 3 (2002) pp. 107-20

One result of this initiative of Shoghi Effendi was that growth and expansion of the Faith ground to a halt for more than a decade. The Faith even went into decline numerically in these years. When the requirement to register oneself formally as a Bahá'í in order to participate in Bahá'í elections was enforced in Iran, many individuals who had previously been considered Bahá'ís refused to do this and drifted away from the community in subsequent years. The US Census for 1916 shows 2,884 Bahá'ís, while that for 1926 shows 1,247 Bahá'ís, a decline of over 50% (although part of this decline is due to a stricter definition of who was a Baha'i, nevertheless it is clear that there had been no growth in the community). Outside observers even considered the Bahá'í Faith close to demise. Richards, a British Christian missionary, writing in 1932, described the Baha'i Faith in the West as being on the wane ("its day is past") and in England as having "practically ceased to exist".<sup>7</sup>

Not surprisingly, some Bahá'ís were deeply unhappy about the changes that Shoghi Effendi was making. They were attached to the way that the Bahá'í community had been in the first two decades of the 20th century. They could not see the advantage of jettisoning that culture for the sake of what appeared to be a remote bureaucratic organization - especially when the only results of that process appeared to be a marked decline in the fortunes of the Faith. Looking around themselves they saw the Bahá'ís apathetic and depressed and felt in themselves disappointment and frustration.

Some Bahá'ís responded to this situation by drifting away from the Faith. In Britain, for example, several individuals who were major figures in the community during the ministry of `Abdu'l-Bahá, such as Wellesley Tudor Pole and Johanna Dawud, drifted away from the community during these years, unable to come to terms, no doubt, with the new culture of the Bahá'í community. Some even came out in outright opposition to Shoghi Effendi's drive to establish the administrative order. In the United States of America, a prominent and wealthy Bahá'í from the time of `Abdu'l-Bahá, Ruth White, decided to oppose Shoghi Effendi, basing herself on a report that `Abdu'l-Bahá had said that the Bahá'í Faith could not be organized. She tried unsuccessfully to establish that `Abdu'l-Bahá's Will and Testament, the document on which Shoghi Effendi's authority was based and which gave many of the instructions for the setting up of the administrative order, had been forged. Shoghi Effendi referred to her efforts with the words "I am at a loss to explain that strange mentality that inclines to uphold as the sole criterion of the truth of the Baha'i Teachings what is admittedly only an obscure and unauthenticated translation of an oral statement made by `Abdu'l-Bahá, in defiance and total disregard of the available text of all of His universally recognized writings."<sup>8</sup>

An even stronger challenge to the new culture that Shoghi Effendi was trying to create was provided by Ahmad Sohrab and Julie Chanler. They had set up the New History Society as a way of introducing people gradually to the Bahá'í Faith. Using the generous financial support given by Mrs Chanler, Ahmad Sohrab had been able to set up large meetings with an impressive list of speakers at prestigious venues in New York. Sohrab and Chanler were indignant, however, when it was suggested to them that their activities should come under the jurisdiction of the appropriate Local Spiritual Assembly (in other words that they should

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<sup>7</sup> J. R. Richards, *The Religion of the Baha'is*, London: Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge, 1932, chapters 9 and 18

<sup>8</sup> Shoghi Effendi, *World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1991, p. 4

incorporate themselves into the new culture that Shoghi Effendi was trying to create). In the end a confrontation with the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States resulted in their expulsion from the Faith. They proclaimed themselves the defenders of individual freedom and rights in the Bahá'í Faith and publically and vehemently protested that the Bahá'í administration had become an instrument of authoritarian control and totalitarianism - far removed from the liberal attitude fostered by `Abdu'l-Bahá.

Sohrab and Chanler claimed that they had considerable support among the generality of the Bahá'ís but that these had been silenced by the tyranny of the National Spiritual Assembly. They certainly did not have considerable support among the Bahá'ís but it may well be that many Bahá'ís had misgivings about the new culture towards which Shoghi Effendi was leading the Bahá'í community. The fact is that a change of culture is unnerving for human beings who have been used to the old culture. They have felt comfortable in the old culture - it was reality for them. Many Bahá'ís of that period had grown up in the old culture and so this represented for them the reality of the Bahá'í Faith. Thus some Bahá'ís in the United States must have had twinges of doubt when people like Ruth White and Ahmad Sohrab claimed that this new culture was not really the Bahá'í Faith but rather a distortion being foisted upon them.

It is important, however, to retain a balanced perspective on these events and not to overemphasize the importance of people like Sohrab and Chanler. This dissent did not really enter into the thinking of vast majority of the Bahá'ís of that time. Indeed, most were completely unaffected by it. Some of the New York Bahá'ís and a few Bahá'í intellectuals entered into the discussions but almost all of these rejected Sohrab and Chanler's position. The dissidents found more support among the liberal establishment outside the Bahá'í Faith than they found in the Bahá'í community itself. The vast majority of Bahá'ís whatever misgivings they may have had, immersed themselves in the work that Shoghi Effendi had set them and slowly managed to create the Bahá'í administrative order.

Considered with the wisdom of hindsight, however, there is no doubt that the direction in which Shoghi Effendi was leading the Bahá'í community was the right direction if the community was going to flourish and expand in the future. Speaking sociologically, the charisma of Bahá'u'lláh and `Abdu'l-Bahá needed to be routinized - to be institutionalized - if the Bahá'í Faith was to progress to the next stage of its development. It could not continue to be run as a large family if it was going to expand. `Abdu'l-Bahá had spoken of the fact that good ideas, noble principles and well-considered plans are not enough, "we need an army to attain victory in the spiritual world."<sup>9</sup> The new institutions created by Shoghi Effendi, the National Spiritual Assemblies and Local Spiritual Assemblies, would act in the subsequent decades as the generals and officers of that army, leading on to the successful spread of the Bahá'í Faith to all parts of the world.

Returning now to the present-day Bahá'í world, there is a similar situation to the one that Shoghi Effendi faced at the beginning of his ministry and again a change of culture is needed. Insofar as it is possible to visualize the situation at present and to assess the thinking of the Universal House of Justice in instituting the change, the following appear to be the main

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<sup>9</sup>. `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982, p. 250

features. The last half of the twentieth century saw the spread of the Bahá'í Faith to and the establishment of the administrative order in all parts of the globe. Most of the plans initiated by Shoghi Effendi with the Ten Year Crusade and continued by the Universal House of Justice in the Nine Year Plan and subsequent plans were centred on quantitative goals which resulted in this spread of the Bahá'í Faith to all parts of the world and the establishment of the Bahá'í administration there. The last phase of this process was completed with the fall of the Iron Curtain and the establishment of the Bahá'í administration in the former communist countries during the 1990s.

During these decades, an increasing number of Bahá'ís have been perceiving that the community lacked spiritual depth. The spread of the Bahá'í Faith has resulted in a large increase in the number of Bahá'í communities, but many of these new communities have little understanding of the Bahá'í Faith and almost no appreciation of the depths of the Bahá'í teachings. This problem has been most acute in some of the countries of the Third World where there have been large-scale enrollments into the Faith, but little success in making these new converts into knowledgeable and deepened members of the Bahá'í community. It is clear that the mechanisms that existed in the Bahá'í community previously for the consolidation of belief of new converts and their transformation into active members of the Bahá'í community are insufficient for the new situation. After a time, even the large-scale enrollments themselves began to dry up as the Bahá'í community tried to grapple with this problem. The number of conversions has dropped to a very low level and even those who are converted frequently do not remain in the community. The Bahá'í community as it currently stands does not appear to be sufficiently inviting to retain those who do become Bahá'ís. The extent of the problem has been highlighted in a recent report by the National Teaching Committee<sup>10</sup> of the United States which points out that the rate of conversions to the Bahá'í Faith compares favourably with that of other religious movements in the United States, but the rate of retention of new converts is lower than many. Various solutions have been attempted with varying degrees of success, but it is undoubtedly true that there has been no satisfactory resolution of the problem within the old culture.

Beginning with some earlier plans but coming to the fore in the Four Year Plan of 1996-2000, the Twelve-Month Plan of 2000-2001 and the current Five Year Plan, the Universal House of Justice has set the Bahá'ís on a new pathway towards solving the problems facing it. The goals of these plans are qualitative rather than quantitative. The aim is a transformation of Bahá'í community life. The following is an attempt to analyse the change in culture that the Universal House of Justice is seeking to bring about. The old culture from which the Universal House of Justice has stated that it is seeking to free the Bahá'í community is one which is dominated by "the mode of religious activity that characterizes the general society--in which the believer is a member of a congregation, leadership comes from an individual or individuals presumed to be qualified for the purpose, and personal participation is fitted into a schedule dominated by concerns of a very different nature."<sup>11</sup> Clearly, the Universal House of Justice considers that the Bahá'í community is still tainted by certain characteristics that it considers should not be part of the Bahá'í Faith and that it is these

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<sup>10</sup> National Teaching Committee of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States, *Issues Pertaining to Growth, Retention and Consolidation in the United States*, 12 December 1999

<sup>11</sup> Letter of the Universal House of Justice to an individual, dated 22 August 2002

characteristics that are holding back the progress of the Faith. These are, broadly speaking, characteristics which exist in current religious communities and which Baha'is have brought with them into the Baha'i community.

These unwanted traits include the passivity implied by the words "member of a congregation." Members of a congregation play a receptive role - receiving sermons, sacraments and advice from the priest. They are told what their scriptures mean and how to apply that to their lives. In some congregations, it is even considered to be within the priest's powers to hear confessions and pardon sins. Bahá'ís can no longer, in the new culture, play such a passive role. They must actively participate in their communities, study and interpret their scriptures for themselves, and work out their own salvation. Each Bahá'í must be his or her own priest.

The second phrase in the above statement points to the fact that leadership and decision-making in the new culture should no longer be the prerogative of ambitious or learned individuals. We live in societies that are patriarchal -- where leadership is by a small number of individuals, mainly men. Such societies are hierarchical and, because men are inherently more aggressive and competitive, they tend to end up at the top of these hierarchies. And Baha'is have unconsciously imported these tendencies into their Baha'i communities in many areas, resulting in a situation where a small number of individuals, usually men, run the community in those localities. It is clear, however, that the Baha'i community should be one in which there are no hierarchies of power -- only a hierarchy of opportunities for service. Any situations of power or hierarchy that exist in the community, structures that inherently favour men who are more competitive and aggressive, must come to an end. Decision-making must be through consultative processes and collective leadership - a community structure that is more conducive to women and minorities playing an active part in the community. The third element in the statement of the Universal House of Justice signals that it is no longer sufficient, in the new culture, for Bahá'ís to fit in their Bahá'í activities into odd nooks and crannies of their lives. Their participation in the community must become a central feature of their personal and family lives. This may be the most difficult of the three elements for Bahá'ís in the West to implement, with the enormous and never-ending materialistic demands that modern life places on the individual.

The new culture towards which the Universal House of Justice is pointing the way is one in which "groups of Bahá'u'lláh's followers explore together the truths in His Teachings, freely open their study circles, devotional gatherings and children's classes to their friends and neighbours, and invest their efforts confidently in plans of action designed at the level of the cluster, that makes growth a manageable goal."<sup>12</sup> The new culture of the Bahá'í community is one in which the individual and the family take a much more central role. While responsibility for instituting the process lies with the institutions of the Bahá'í Faith, without the participation of the generality of the Bahá'ís, the goals set by the Universal House of Justice cannot be achieved. By its very nature, this new culture cannot be imposed from on top - it cannot be created by decree. It is the responsibility of every Bahá'í to initiate or participate in his or her own community in a coming together of groups of Bahá'ís for the purposes of forming study circles, instituting devotional gatherings and setting up children's

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<sup>12</sup> Letter of the Universal House of Justice to an individual, dated 22 August 2002

classes. This process will expose the Bahá'ís to their scriptures, thus increasing the knowledge and understanding of the community and make more effective teaching of the Baha'i Faith possible; bring the Bahá'ís together in prayer and devotions, thus increasing the spiritual depth of the community; and ensure that children of the community become thoroughly immersed in its teachings and in the new culture with the result that each succeeding generation of Bahá'ís will be able to take this process further. All of this activity needs to be put onto a systematic footing such that it becomes an automatic part of each individual Bahá'í's life and of their family life.

Furthermore, this new culture should be "a culture of learning".<sup>13</sup> This implies that Baha'is must not only learn from their scriptures and from the collective wisdom of the group in the process of consultative deepening that occurs in the study circles, but they must also learn from their own experiences. The Baha'i teachings were never intended to be applied in a uniform way across the globe, but rather in ways that are specific to local situations and customs. The Baha'is must therefore be ready to apply the Baha'i teachings in their own communities and to learn from what happens as a result of this process -- thus instituting a cycle of learning, action and reflection that results in a gradually evolving understanding of how the Baha'i teachings can be applied and what they mean in any given situation.

The type of learning that goes on in the study circles is not carried out within the usual pedagogic framework. The intention of the study circle is not to impart learning but to bring about the transformation of the individual. That is why each phase of the study circle programme is accompanied by a practice that helps the participants to embed and bring into their lives the spiritual truths that are taught in the study circle. Furthermore the ethos of the study circle is very different to that of the usual educational institution, where there is a teacher, who is presumed to know, and learners, who do not know. In the study circle all are collaborators in the process. Although one person leads in taking the participants through the book, that person is not presumed to know more than the other participants; the whole group is learning together. This is the reason that, for some, the books seem childish. Because the intention is for all to be able to participate, it is necessary to assume the lowest common denominator in terms of the educational abilities of the participants. And so the attitude of those who are more advanced educationally should be not "this is so childish, I am bored and frustrated" but rather "this is an opportunity to be of service to those who have not had the educational advantages that I have had". The situation is rather like that of the speed limit on a road. It may be that an experienced driver could drive safely at higher speed than the speed limit, but that limit is set for all drivers, even those who have only just learned to drive. The more advanced has to drive at a slower speed than he is capable of driving safely for the sake of the beginner. Similarly, the attitude of a school teacher towards Book 3 of the programme (which is designed to help people to teach children's classes) should not be "I do not need to do Book 3 because I am a trained teacher" but rather "I look forward to doing Book 3 and hope that my experience as a teacher will contribute to the group's learning."

The new culture should also be "a culture of growth." The Universal House of Justice has stated that in the new culture:

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<sup>13</sup>: Letter of the Universal House of Justice to all National Spiritual Assemblies, dated 17 January 2003

a. The Baha'is will "see their duty to teach as a natural consequence of having accepted Baha'u'llah" and, quoting `Abdu'l-Baha, will "consecrate every fleeting moment of their lives to the diffusion of the divine fragrance and the exaltation of God's holy Word." In such a situation, their hearts become so enkindled "with the fire of the love of God that whoever approaches them feels its warmth." Thus teaching the Baha'i Faith becomes "the dominating passion" of their lives.

b. "Fear of failure finds no place. Mutual support, commitment to learning, and appreciation of diversity of action are the prevailing norms." In other words that the support coming from these transformed communities mitigates any fears that the individual may have and the "culture of learning" that has been instituted means that every teaching effort that is made becomes an opportunity for learning and so, even if it fails, it is not a wasted effort. A wide variety of efforts should be initiated at the local level and then as these initiatives produce results, lessons should be learned and either the existing initiative should be revised or new initiatives devised.<sup>14</sup>

Another feature of the new culture is that the activities initiated in each local community should be systematic and sustained. Although it is important to learn from trial and error, and the precise way in which certain activities are carried out may be radically altered over time, yet the overall process of developing study circles, devotional programmes, children's classes, teaching activities, service activities, etc. must be systematically implemented and sustained. Moreover the responsibility for doing this rests equally upon the individual, the Assemblies and the clusters.

The extent of the culture change involved here should not be underestimated. The change initiated by Shoghi Effendi at the beginning of his ministry was one that was far-reaching, but at least it was easily understandable. The overall concept of establishing an administration was easily comprehended and there were models in the wider community to which the Bahá'ís could turn, although of course many of the features of the Bahá'í administration were unique and not to be found elsewhere (one could say that even up to the present day, some aspects of this change such as the process of consultation and of Bahá'í elections have not been fully understood and put into effect by the Bahá'í community). The change of culture initiated by the Universal House of Justice is, however, more difficult to grasp because there are no precedents for the kind of community that it is seeking to create. It is a step into the unknown, where there are no models that can be used - thus it is largely a matter of trial and error.

Indeed it may appear strange to some to say that this change of culture is a change that seeks to create communities where individual Baha'is are initiating activities and decisions are made at a "grass-roots" level, and at the same time to say that this change is a process that is being initiated by the Universal House of Justice and is thus being directed from the top. However, one has to consider the question: how else would such a change of culture occur in a community that is used to receiving its directions from the top and is prevented, by the concept of the Covenant, from launching a grass-roots rebellion in order to achieve such a change? Moreover, it is clear that the Universal House of Justice also sees itself as a participant in the "culture of learning", noting the initiatives that have worked in one part of

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<sup>14</sup>. The Universal House of Justice, letter dated 9 January 2001

the world and passing this information on to other parts of the world that might benefit.<sup>15</sup> And perhaps, in the future, once the present guidance has been assimilated, the Universal House of Justice will issue further guidance as to the sort of culture that it envisages.

The change of culture that the Universal House of Justice seeks to bring about is, to a large extent, also a change of identity. Baha'is need to see themselves differently -- a new vision of what it means to be a Baha'i. This new vision involves Baha'is envisaging a new type of community in which they are actively involved, a new type of community that is open to the outside world, a new way of life that puts the Baha'i Faith at the centre of their lives. But this new vision need not be, and indeed should not be, just a mental process. It is precisely by participating in the processes that the Universal House of Justice have set in train (study circles, devotional programmes and children's classes) that this new vision can be formed in the mind of each Baha'i. Thus it is through a change in behaviour that the Baha'is can change their vision and hence their identity.

There can be little doubt that just as the change of culture brought about by Shoghi Effendi was necessary for the Baha'i Faith to expand from the position that it was in the early 1920s, the change of culture which the Universal House of Justice wants to bring about is similarly necessary if the Baha'i community is going to expand now. For many decades now, most of the Baha'i activities in most communities have been on the shoulders of a small number of individuals. If large numbers of people are going to come into the Baha'i community, that situation cannot continue. The Baha'i community does not have a paid priesthood and the only way that community activities can be sustained if large numbers of people are to become Baha'is is by the abandonment of the model of passive congregations led by a small number of individuals and the adoption of the new culture of active and whole-hearted participation in the community by all Baha'is -- and also by the concept of groups of communities, the clusters, assisting and interacting with each other.

The sort of community which the Universal House of Justice envisages is one that encompasses characteristics that are often thought to be contradictory and mutually exclusive. Thus for example these communities should be both democratic and decentralized and yet also subject ultimately to the guidance and authority of the Bahá'í administrative order; there should be individual freedom and individual initiative, but individuals are also expected to act maturely and with self-discipline; the community should be united, and yet open to all. In the past, communities have been most united in the face of a threat from an "other", now the same or higher level of unity must be reached without any external threat, a community must be created that is both united and open to all.

Now, undoubtedly in all this, many Bahá'ís have misgivings. They feel uncomfortable in the new culture and look longingly back at the old culture - the Bahá'í Faith they knew and loved. Some Bahá'ís have, as in the early days of the ministry of Shoghi Effendi, drifted away from the Faith, because they do not feel comfortable in the new culture. Others have even opposed

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<sup>15</sup> "This consideration was an important element in the drafting of the relevant sections of the document 'Century of Light', to which you make reference. These passages of the document seek to acquaint believers everywhere with the profound change in Bahá'í culture that the preceding decades of struggle, achievement and disappointment made possible and that was capitalized on through the agency of the Four Year Plan." (The Universal House of Justice to an individual, dated 22 August 2002)

the new culture, claiming once again that their freedom and individual rights have been violated. They are even using the same quotations that Ahmad Sohrab used in presenting their case. As before, their numbers are minuscule and the majority of Bahá'ís have remained completely unaffected by them. Such individuals are, however, very vocal on the Internet, which has enabled them to have a voice far out of proportion to their numbers or importance. They have also found a platform, as Ahmad Sohrab did, in the liberal establishment. Still others do not yet see or understand the change in culture that is being called for, regard the instruments that have been created for its achievement (devotional meetings, study circles junior youth groups and children's classes) from the viewpoint of the old culture and therefore do not see the potential for change. Therefore they do not wholeheartedly support these instruments for change.

In 2002, The Universal House of Justice made it clear: "Where Bahá'í communities are unable to free themselves from an orientation to Bahá'í life that has long outlived whatever value it once possessed, the teaching work will lack both the systematic character it requires, and the spirit that must animate all effective service to the Cause."<sup>16</sup>

Of course it is early days yet -- it took more than a decade for the change in culture that Shoghi Effendi instituted to become established in the Baha'i community. But the tide is turning. Guided by the Counsellors and the National Spiritual Assemblies, the Baha'is are beginning to follow the instructions of the Universal House of Justice -- and increasingly it is those Baha'is who have previously played a passive "congregational" role in the community, who have not been leaders in the community, the women and the youth, who are responding and initiating the activities that the Universal House of Justice has asked for. Although they may not yet be able to visualize how the Bahá'í community will look in its new cultural manifestation and they may not yet discern any benefits from the new order, nevertheless they are pressing ahead with the process. The direction towards which the Universal House of Justice is pointing the Bahá'ís is clearly the next logical step in the development of the Bahá'í community and as Bahá'í communities respond to the call for a change of culture, it can be anticipated that the features of the new culture will gradually become clearer.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Letter of the Universal House of Justice to an individual, dated 22 August 2002

<sup>17</sup> A first draft of this paper appeared on an e-mail list in February 2003. It has subsequently been published in *Living Nation* and translated and published in a few languages. I am grateful to numerous people who commented on this paper in that list and subsequently by private correspondence and thus helped to shape the current (July 2011) version of the paper. To name any individuals would be to run the risk of omitting other important contributors.