

## **Learning from History Moojan Momen**

### **Abstract**

This is an adapted form of a paper read as the Hasan Balyuzi Memorial Lecture at the Thirteenth Annual Conference of the Association of Bahá'í Studies in 1988. This paper considers the challenges caused by the influx of Third World villagers into the Bahá'í world community. The author examines what light a study of the history of the Bahá'í Faith can shed upon this phenomenon. In particular, he examines the way in which a study of Bahá'í history can assist with the problems of how to adapt our presentations of the Bahá'í Faith to the context of different cultures; how to adapt our methods of presenting the Bahá'í teachings; and how to accelerate the process of realizing these teachings in the lives of the villagers.

### **Résumé**

Cet article est adapté de la Conférence commémorative Hasan Balyuzi présentée à la 13<sup>e</sup> Conférence annuelle de l'Association des études bahá'íes en 1988. L'article étudie le défi présenté par l'adhésion en masse de villageois du Tiers-Monde au sein de la communauté mondiale bahá'íe. L'auteur y examine comment l'étude de l'histoire de la Foi bahá'íe peut nous éclairer sur ce phénomène. Plus spécifiquement, il cherche à savoir comment l'étude de l'histoire bahá'íe peut nous aider à mieux adapter notre façon de présenter la Foi bahá'íe à des cultures différentes, à adapter nos méthodes de présentation des enseignements bahá'ís et à accélérer le processus de mise en application de ces enseignements dans la vie des villageois.

### **Resumen**

Esta es una forma adaptada de una disertación hecha como la Lectura Conmemorativa Hasan Balyuzi en la Decimotercera Conferencia Anual de la Asociación de Estudios Bahá'ís en 1988. Este artículo da consideración a los retos presentados por el incremento en la comunidad mundial Bahá'í de aldeanos del Tercer Mundo. El autor analiza cuanta iluminación un estudio de la historia de la Fe Bahá'í podría impartir sobre este fenómeno. Expresamente, examina la forma en que un estudio de la historia Bahá'í puede ayudar con los problemas de como adaptar nuestras presentaciones de la Fe Bahá'í al contexto de las culturas diferentes; como adaptar nuestros metodos de exponer las enseñanzas Bahá'ís; y como acelerar el proceso de actualizar estas enseñanzas en las vidas de los aldeanos.

**T**here are numerous reasons why Bahá'ís may be interested in studying Bahá'í history. Some may find the stories of the early heroes of the religion inspiring; others may see such figures as Mullá Husayn and Táhirih as role models to be emulated; while many Bahá'ís may simply be interested in finding out more about their religion, for there is no better way of understanding the present of the Bahá'í Faith than by studying how the present arose out of the past. These are all understandable and fully appropriate reasons for undertaking a study of the history of the religion.

However, in this paper, I want to look at one further reason for the study of Bahá'í history and that is to see what the past can tell us about the future directions for the Bahá'í Faith. The thesis of this presentation is, in brief, that a close look at the patterns of the past may give us valuable guidance regarding the challenges that face the religion at present. If we carefully study the actions of such figures as 'Abdu'l-Bahá in the past, this may give us guidelines as to the most useful directions in which to turn our energies in dealing with these challenges and facing the future. The challenges that I want to deal with in particular are those created by the massive influx of poor Third World villagers into the Bahá'í community in the last three decades. I will deal with three main areas in which this challenge exists: the adaptation of the Bahá'í teachings to suit different cultural contexts; the method of presentation of these teachings; and the realization of these teachings in the lives of villagers.

### **Patterns of the Past: The Spread of the Bahá'í Faith**

The Bahá'í Faith has certainly spread throughout the world at an impressive rate in its 140-year history. Indeed, so successful has it been in this regard that it is now considered by one authoritative source to be the second most

widespread religion in the world after Roman Catholicism.<sup>1</sup> This geographical diffusion has not, however, been a steady process throughout Bahá'í history. Rather, the spread of the Bahá'í Faith is most usefully considered as one of gradual spread and consolidation within one cultural world followed by a breakthrough into another.<sup>2</sup>

If we start with the earliest phase of Bábí-Bahá'í history, we find that the religion of the Báb was addressed primarily to the Shí'í 'ulamá. The Báb's writings are, for the most part, written in such a difficult style of Arabic and contain so many esoteric allusions and philosophical terms that the majority of Iranians, even those with a reasonable degree of literacy, cannot easily understand them. Only those who had undertaken study in the Shí'í religious colleges, and in particular those who had studied under Siyyid Kázim Rashtí in the Shaykhí school at Karbilá, would have understood the allusions and symbolism in these writings. Therefore, it is not surprising to find that the early followers of the Báb were indeed mainly members of the religious classes and, in particular, former Shaykhís. All of the Letters of the Living, for example, had been students of Siyyid Kázim Rashtí. During the later period of the Báb's ministry when a wider group of people became Bábís, these were still most often enrolled as a consequence of the conversion of a leading local religious figure. In the case of the town of Zanján, for example, where several thousand of the population became Bábís, they were for the most part following the lead of the local religious leader, Mullá Muhammad 'Alí Hujjat.

Thus, the Bábís were initially confined during most of the Báb's ministry to a narrow grouping of Shí'í clerics together with those who followed them into the religion. Geographically also the religion was confined to Iran and southern Iraq. The first breakout from these confines came under the inspiration of Bahá'u'lláh. During the period of his exile in Baghdad, Bahá'u'lláh initiated a number of new directions for the Bábí movement. First, He began to write books in a plain style that was easily understood by ordinary Iranians. His books such as the *Kitáb-i-Íqán* [the Book of Certitude] were able to make a direct appeal to literate Iranians (rather than the indirect appeal mediated through members of the 'ulamá as had been the case with the Báb's writings). These books were enthusiastically received by many Bábís.<sup>3</sup> Second, Bahá'u'lláh widened the circle of those attracted to the new religion by entering into dialogue with Iraqi Sunnís: He spoke with prominent SunnÍ 'ulamá of Baghdad such as Shaykh 'Abdu'l-Hamíd, known as Ibn al-Álúsí, and Shaykh 'Abdu's-Salám ash-Shawwáf. Third, while the Shaykhís and early Bábís had been somewhat antagonistic to the more mystically inclined Sufis, Bahá'u'lláh spent some time at a Sufi *takiyya* in Sulaymáníyyih and later through books such as *The Seven Valleys and The Four Valleys* opened lip the Bábí religion to the Sufis.

As Bahá'u'lláh moved through the successive stages of his exiles, new geographical areas were opened up to the new religion, which was now transformed from the Bábí into the Bahá'í Faith. New communities were established in Turkey, Syria, Egypt, the Caucasus, India, and Turkistan. But the religion remained attractive only to Muslims until the 1880s when there was a significant breakthrough with the conversions of numerous Jews and Zoroastrians in Iran and, a little later, Christians in Egypt and Syria. The groundwork for this breakthrough had been laid as early as the Baghdad period when Bahá'u'lláh addressed a number of biblical themes in his *Kitáb-i-Íqán* and *Jawáhir al-Asrár*, but it was, in particular, the work of Mírzá Abu'l-Fadl Gulpaygání, relating the Bahá'í Faith to Jewish and biblical prophecies and themes, that took this process further.

Until the 1890s, despite the fact that the Bahá'í Faith had broken out of the world of Shí'í Islam and had spread across geographic and religious boundaries, it was still confined to the cultural world of the Middle East. Iranian Jews and Egyptian Christians had become Bahá'ís, but these people were still culturally and psychologically part of the world of the Middle East. They had far more in common with their Muslim neighbors than with their co-religionists in Europe and North America. Then in the decade following the death of Bahá'u'lláh, a major breakthrough occurred for the Bahá'í Faith when the new religion was taken to North America. This critically important event was achieved by Syrian Christians (such persons as Ibrahim Kheiralla and Anton Haddad). Coming from a Christian background, it was of course much easier for such people to address the populations of the Christian West.

The crucial task for the new Bahá'ís of North America was the adaptation of the Bahá'í teachings to the context of the West culturally and of Christianity religiously. The early publications of the North American Bahá'ís reflect this concern.<sup>4</sup> This task was also given great attention by 'Abdu'l-Bahá. The adaptation of teachings of the Bahá'í Faith for a Christian audience was the subject of much of *Some Answered Questions*, talks given by 'Abdu'l-Bahá to the Western Bahá'ís (Laura Clifford Barney in particular) in 'Akká during the period 1904 to 1906. The adaptation of the Bahá'í teachings to make them more understandable for a Western audience culturally was undertaken by 'Abdu'l-Bahá during his journeys to the West in 1911–1913. From the vast range of the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá picked a number of topics that were the subject of interest and concern to his audiences in the West. His talks were very successful in attracting the attention of the press and of many of the leading intellectuals of the West. From North America, this adaptation of the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith was spread to Europe and other areas of the Christian West: Canada, Hawaii, Australia, and South Africa.

The next major breakthrough in the expansion of the Bahá'í world community came in the 1950s and 1960s when the Bahá'í Faith began to spread rapidly among the villagers of the poorer nations of the world. Again, the foundations of this new phase can be traced back to earlier periods, perhaps to the spread into the villages of Iran in the earliest days. Although small numbers of Bahá'ís had gone to Latin America from the 1930s and to the rest of the world in the 1950s in an ambitious program of expansion initiated by Shoghi Effendi, there had been few conversions of indigenous peoples. Then, in the late 1950s and more particularly in the 1960s, large numbers of villagers from the poorer nations of the world (India, Southeast Asia, Africa, South America, and the Pacific) began to become Bahá'ís. This breakthrough occurred principally, it would seem, as a result of the decision of the Bahá'ís to change the focus of their activities from the urban, Western-influenced élites in these countries to the rural, illiterate masses. This represents a further major breakthrough both geographically and culturally since these Third World villagers have very little in common culturally and religiously with either the Muslim Middle East or the Christian West.

The influx of large numbers of rural peoples from various Third World cultural backgrounds has certainly made a great change in the make-up of the world Bahá'í community. Some idea of the extent of this comparatively sudden change can be gleaned from the fact that prior to 1954, Iranians comprised approximately 94% of the world Bahá'í population. Today, little more than thirty years later, that figure is about 6%; while Bahá'ís from the non-Muslim Third World represent almost 90% of the Bahá'í world.<sup>5</sup>

The Bahá'í Faith is currently still in the phase of dealing with the consequences of this latest breakthrough that has left the Bahá'í world with a large number of poor, illiterate villagers with whom the Bahá'ís of the West or Middle East have little in common culturally. And yet somehow, these peoples' knowledge of the Bahá'í teachings has to be deepened, and they have to be incorporated into the life of the Bahá'í world community. Let us see what lessons our survey of Bahá'í history has for this enormous task.

### **Adaptation of the Teachings of the Bahá'í Faith**

When 'Abdu'l-Bahá came to the West in 1911–1913, he had a large range of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings from which he could have chosen to present to his audiences in the West. From this range, he chose a number of topics that were of current interest to his audiences. These have now become enshrined in the current formulations of the Bahá'í Faith as “the twelve principles” of the Bahá'í Faith.<sup>6</sup> They are regularly presented in talks, pamphlets, and books as though they are a complete presentation of teachings of the Bahá'í Faith.

And yet, if we carefully examine the circumstances of the original presentation of these social teachings by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, we find that he made no claim that this list of teachings he presented during his Western travels was an exhaustive list. We do not even find 'Abdu'l-Bahá stating that these are the most important teachings of Bahá'u'lláh. In his addresses in Europe and North America, we find that 'Abdu'l-Bahá often introduces these teachings with words such as, “Among the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh is . . .” and concludes the listing with such words as, “these are a few of the principles proclaimed by Bahá'u'lláh.”<sup>7</sup> What 'Abdu'l-Bahá did was to consider the whole range of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings and select those teachings that would be of particular interest to his audiences in North America and Europe. He chose those teachings that addressed the topical issues of the day and were of most concern to the sort of people that he was addressing—issues such as women's rights (this period saw a peak in the activities of the suffragette movement), the harmony of religion and science (this was still a hotly debated issue following the controversies over Darwin's theories),

etc. We do not find 'Abdu'l-Bahá addressing these issues in this way in his correspondence with the Eastern Bahá'ís.<sup>8</sup>

Even more significant, there are other major social teachings of Bahá'u'lláh that were not presented by 'Abdu'l-Bahá during these journeys. Bahá'u'lláh, for example, in his writings stresses agriculture. In the *Lawh-i-Dunyá* [Tablet of the World], Bahá'u'lláh states: “Special regard must be paid to agriculture. Although it hath been mentioned in the fifth place, unquestionably it precedeth the others” (*Tablets* 90). Interestingly, in the *Lawh-i-Dunyá*, among the teachings over which agriculture is stated to have precedence, there are two used by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in his Western journeys (an international language, promotion of education for all). Agriculture is even stated to take precedence over the promotion of the Lesser Peace by the House of Justice. And yet, 'Abdu'l-Bahá apparently judged that this teaching of Bahá'u'lláh would be of little interest to the predominantly urban audiences whom he addressed. Therefore, this teaching gets only passing mention in his Western talks (*Promulgation* 217) and is never in the lists of the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh that 'Abdu'l-Bahá gave during these addresses.

I would submit that Bahá'ís have overlooked the *spirit* or principle of what 'Abdu'l-Bahá did, which was to choose those aspects of the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh that were of relevance and concern to his intended audience. Instead they have clung to the form of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's presentations, i.e., the lists of social teachings that he produced.

Much of what we have constructed in the West and now call “the Bahá’í Faith” has arisen from this and other similar exercises in adapting the Bahá’í teachings. This is not to say that these adaptations are now completely irrelevant. They are still of interest and relevance to those for whom they were originally intended—city-dwellers in the West. Moreover, it is perhaps not surprising that we have eked to these particular adaptations of the Bahá’í Faith. For after all, the majority of those in high positions in the Bahá’í administration and who have been the writers and expositors of the Bahá’í Faith since the time of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, have themselves predominantly been city-dwellers from either the West or from the Western-educated élite of Iran. Such people are comfortable with this presentation of the Bahá’í Faith and have repeated and amplified it to the point that it is almost universally thought of as *the* Bahá’í Faith. Whereas, in fact, this is only a Western conceptualization of the Bahá’í Faith.

The urban Bahá’ís of the West are now a small minority of the Bahá’í world, yet we continue to present the Bahá’í Faith in a way that is particularly suited to this small group. What we have done is to construct a version of the Bahá’í Faith that is oriented towards and suitable for Western urban populations and are now trying to use this version as the basis for presenting the Bahá’í Faith to the 90% of the world who do not fit that category.

It would, of course, be highly desirable if I could at this stage of my paper now present you with an alternative adaptation of the Bahá’í teachings suitable for use in the Third World. But of course, I too am bound and limited by my background and upbringing. Ultimately, it will be the people of the rural Third World themselves who will derive a full presentation of the Bahá’í teachings for themselves. All I can do is to present a number of avenues worth exploring.

The first of these avenues concerns the importance of agriculture. Any presentation of the Bahá’í teachings for the rural Third World would undoubtedly give this teaching the same prominence that Bahá’u’lláh indicates in the *Lawh-i-Dunyá*. If rural areas were to be given the same degree of priority that urban areas are now given, if amenities and services were extended to rural areas to the same extent that they exist in towns, if agricultural work were given the status and respect that it deserves as the “fundamental basis of the community” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Foundations* 37), then this would lead to a great alleviation of many of the problems that now beset so many Third World countries caused by the flight of the population from the rural areas to the towns.

Furthermore, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá has set out a system for solving the problems of rural villages. This involves setting up a community storehouse to which contributions would be made in accordance with certain principles that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá gives. This store would then be used to cushion the effects when one of the community falls into debt and also to provide for the needy of the village (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Foundations* 39–41). This system would allow the village to be largely self-sufficient and independent. It would allow a basis of cooperation from which other activities such as sales and purchasing cooperatives, and community loan schemes could arise. Clearly, such teachings are of far greater interest to rural populations than an international language, the harmony of religion and science, or many of the other teachings that are emphasized in current presentations of Bahá’í teachings.

Let us now consider another aspect of the way in which we can make our presentation of the Bahá’í teachings more concordant with the culture with which we are in contact. This involves the different ways that some societies look at religion itself. We have already seen that in spreading from the Islamic Middle East to the Christian West, the Bahá’í Faith had to adapt its presentation. In the West, for example, the life of the Báb was seized upon for its parallels with the life of Christ, and this comparison became an important part of the Bahá’í presentation in the West. But Christianity and Islam are very close to each other. They share many of the same concepts. To take the Faith to the much more radically different religious cultures of the East will require a correspondingly radical rethinking of our presentation of the Faith.

Currently, our presentation of the Bahá’í Faith is based on Western concepts of what a religion should be. Thus, in their presentations Bahá’ís emphasize the concepts of God, the prophet or messenger of God, the revelation of a Holy Book, the establishment of a sacred law, etc. These revolve around Western Judaeo-Christian-Islamic concepts of what a religion should be. But the religions of the East do not have these concepts. Buddhism, for example, does not have a concept of God in the same way as the Judaeo-Christian-Islamic religions have, and therefore there is also no concept of a prophet from God. Instead of trying to present the Bahá’í Faith in such a way as to take account of Buddhist attitudes and the Buddhist way of seeing things, Bahá’ís have insisted on reformulating Buddhism in a manner conformable to the Bahá’í Faith (or rather to the Western conceptualization of the Bahá’í Faith that is accepted as the norm). Hence the attempt to find a God in Buddhism and thereby to recast Buddhism with all the trappings of Western religions: a prophet, a Holy Book, prophecies, etc. When Bahá’ís are challenged with the fact that this is not how Buddhists see their own religion, the usual response is that the original teachings of the Buddha have been lost. Not surprisingly, Buddhists are not very convinced by the exercise. However politely they may listen to such an exposition, most are not likely to be sympathetic to a viewpoint that says, in effect, the whole basis of their religious belief is false and the civilization which they have erected over the past 2,500 years and the writings of all of their most respected saints and scholars have been founded on error.

A more constructive approach to Buddhism can begin with those statements of Bahá'u'lláh that are most akin to Buddhist viewpoints. Take, for example, the following passage that is in tune with a Buddhist viewpoint:

Pleasant is the realm of being welt thou to attain thereto; glorious is the domain of eternity shouldst thou pass beyond the world of mortality; sweet is the holy ecstasy if thou drinkest of the mystic chalice from the hands of the celestial Youth. Shouldst thou attain this station, thou wouldst be freed from destruction and death, from toil and sin. (Bahá'u'lláh, *Hidden Words* 46)

As a further example, we can consider the problem of the absence of a concept of God in Buddhism. Although Buddhism has no concept of God in the same sense as the Western religions, it does have a concept of Ultimate Reality. One could say that at the heart of all religion is the relationship of the individual human being with the Ultimate Reality. Since this relationship has no similarity with any other relationship that we experience in our lives, it is beyond the ability of words to describe it. Therefore, every culture has developed a set of metaphors and symbols to express this relationship. However, in the process of bringing that relationship from the level of experience to the level of words, the innate biases of particular cultural viewpoints come to the fore. As a result, the relationship may be expressed in quite different, even seemingly contradictory, ways. For example, the Ultimate Reality may appear positive, personal, and active according to one view point (God in Western Judaeo-Christian-Islamic culture) but an empty void according to another viewpoint (the concept of Shunyata in Mahayana Buddhism). These contradictions only arise when two terms from two different cultures are placed side by side and then interpreted as though they occurred within the same culture, i.e., from only one viewpoint. If an empty void is seen from a Western viewpoint as a description of God, it immediately appears faulty and wrong—a pointless, fruitless dead-end. (If God is an empty void, what can that possibly lead to in terms of religious expression?) But seen within the context of Mahayana Buddhism, Ultimate Reality viewed as an empty void is a rich and fruitful concept leading to a wide diversity of religious expression.<sup>9</sup>

Since each set of metaphors and symbols is specific to that culture, an outsider cannot appreciate the full significance of a given term or expression. The real problem is that each individual is only capable of adopting one cultural viewpoint at a time. This is true even with those who have expended a great deal of effort in getting inside a culture that is different from their own so that they can see things from a different viewpoint. Even with such people, all they can say is that what appears right from one cultural viewpoint appears wrong from another. There is no absolute standard by which to judge humanity's relationship with Ultimate Reality.

Nor indeed is this more constructive view of Buddhist teaching in any way contradictory to the Bahá'í teachings. While it is true that the Bahá'í writings do contain the idea that the true teachings of a religion can become obscured by the passage of time and human attempts to interpret them, the principle is also laid down in the *Kitáb-i-Íqán* that once the physical presence of the Manifestation of God is withdrawn from the earth, God would not cause the teachings of the Manifestation to be lost also, for this would be contrary to his Mercy and Grace (Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán* 57–58). From this it would appear that, according to the Bahá'í teachings, the saving or liberating aspects of the message of the Buddha must still be present in the Buddhist teachings as handed down in the Buddhist tradition.

In summary then, taking Buddhism as an example, the point is that Buddhism and Buddhist culture enshrine a certain worldview that predetermines how Buddhists see the world. If the Bahá'í Faith is presented to Buddhists in a manner incongruous with that worldview, then it is unlikely to receive a sympathetic hearing. If Bahá'ís try to change the Buddhist worldview to make it conform to a Western vision of the Bahá'í Faith, they are equally unlikely to be successful. Only a presentation of the Bahá'í Faith that is fully congruent with the Buddhist worldview is likely to succeed in any major way. This is similarly true for all other cultures and societies.

There may be some who feel somewhat uneasy about what I have written thus far. Are Bahá'ís not being dishonest, are they not dissimulating their religion, if they dress it up differently to suit each different culture that they meet? I would maintain that this is not the case. To think this way presupposes that there is some essential exposition of the Bahá'í Faith that is the “real thing,” and this is then being disguised in various ways to suit different cultural worlds. The only “given” element in the Bahá'í Faith is the writings of Bahá'u'lláh and the Báb and the authorized interpretation of ‘Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi. This represents a vast body of material. Every time that any individual Bahá'í picks something out of these writings to make a statement about the Bahá'í Faith, the very act of selection imposes an element of personal and cultural bias, a particular viewpoint.

Thus, there is no particular presentation of the Bahá'í Faith that is “the Bahá'í Faith,” “the real thing,” “the correct understanding.” There are only the five million or so interpretations of the individual Bahá'ís around the world. And each of these interpretations is from a particular psychological, social, and cultural viewpoint. What we are doing when we adapt our presentation of the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith for a particular culture is to see what

the reality of the Faith is relative to that culture. That reality, that interpretation is just as valid as the Western conceptualization of the Bahá'í Faith that has predominated for so long.

### **Methods of Presentation of the Teachings of the Bahá'í Faith**

If we now proceed from the matter of the adaptation of the Bahá'í teachings and consider the manner in which these are taught to the peoples of the Third World, we again find that unspoken and unrecognized assumptions are being made by Bahá'ís based on Western patterns of thought. For example, much of the teaching effort is done on the basis of a direct appeal to individuals. The assumption behind this is that individuals are able to change their lives and the society around them. These assumptions are based on a Western, Protestant type of individualism that is the cultural background of many of the Western Bahá'ís who settle in culturally diverse parts of the world. The assumption that "genuine" religion is a matter of personal convictions arrived at individually (and its converse that all other religious phenomena are suspect and second-rate) is so inherent in our ways of thinking that we are scarcely aware it is a culturally defined approach to religion confined almost exclusively to North America and northern Europe (and even there only for the last five hundred years). It is not, in fact, the way that the majority of humanity and traditional societies, in particular, think. Traditional societies function as a whole and that whole includes the religious activities of the community. Individuals have little freedom to regulate their own lives or to alter the society around them.<sup>10</sup> In these societies, it is the community as a whole that decides on the path to be followed. Therefore, it is the leaders of the community, the decision makers, who must be addressed. If they accept the new message (if it is the Bahá'í Faith that is being presented) or the new idea (if it is a development project that is being suggested), then the rest of the community follows.

This pattern should not surprise Bahá'ís. Once again we can turn to the past for a clue to the way forward. For if we look into the history of the Faith, we find that this is the way that the religion was spread initially. In Iran, which is after all basically a Third World community, the greatest spread of the new religion occurred when whole villages or sections of towns came into the Faith following the lead of their local religious leaders. In Náyíríz and Zanján, as well as in many smaller villages, the conversion of a local dignitary was the reason that a large number of others came into the religion, often with very little knowledge about it. This is the way that traditional societies work, and for Bahá'ís to try to approach these societies in any other way leads ultimately to frustration and disappointment. Another factor we may examine concerning the manner in which the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith are being taught is that the presentation is principally done in the form of talks or lectures. This again is a result of the Western cultural tradition in which the lecture is the usual means of delivering a religious message, whether in church or in the mosque. However, in many other cultures the medium of religious communication is chanting, songs, stories, dances, drama, pictures, statues, etc. If Bahá'ís are not communicating to these other cultures in these media, then there is not full empathy and rapport in the exchange. Somehow Bahá'ís have to develop ways of expressing their message in the medium that best communicates itself to the culture in which they find themselves. This does not, of course, mean that Bahá'ís themselves have to develop these new ways of presenting the teachings but rather that they have to be sufficiently flexible to allow these new presentations to evolve from among the indigenous Bahá'ís.

### **Consolidation of Bahá'í Communities**

Finally, let us look at the way forward for these large numbers of Bahá'ís in the Third World. What is the best way to proceed with these village communities? How can these village peoples be so imbued with the Bahá'í teachings that they begin to demonstrate these teachings in their lives both individually and collectively? Once again, we find preconceptions from the West hamper our progress in this field. Just because the way of deepening in the West is through studying the writings and attending lectures, this does not mean that these are suitable methods for illiterate, rural peoples.

Once again, a review of history provides the clue for the way ahead. Iran may be considered a Third World country, and a large number became Bábís and Bahá'ís in the early period of the Faith. For many years, this resulted in almost no change at all in their way of life. They knew little about the teachings, and life continued in its traditional paths. But as time went by, there was a slow change in the life of these communities. The main catalyst for this change was 'Abdu'l-Bahá's encouraging them to undergo what would in these days be called social and economic development. In particular, 'Abdu'l-Bahá encouraged them to establish Bahá'í schools. 'Abdu'l-Bahá also encouraged a number of American Bahá'ís, principally women, to settle among the Bahá'ís of Iran and engage in a number of projects to improve education and health there. This had an enormous effect on the Bahá'í community in Iran. Apart from the obvious effect of confirming the supranational character of the religion, it gave the Bahá'í women of Iran some idea of what they could achieve as they sought to improve their position in society. Partly as a result of the efforts of these Americans and partly as a result of the endeavors of the Iranian Bahá'ís themselves, the Iranian Bahá'í community, which had until that time been scarcely any different from the rest of Islamic Iran, began

to put into practice such Bahá'í teachings as the importance of education and the elevation of the role of women and thus began to emerge as a progressive and vital force in Iran.

This analysis seems to indicate that we should not consider the establishment of social and economic development projects to be a side issue in the future of the Bahá'í Faith. It may be so in the countries of the West, but in the rest of the world, social and economic development is the main source of the future progress of the religion. It is only in those villages where the majority are Bahá'ís that there can be said to exist the potential for the development of Bahá'í communities in the fullest sense of that word.<sup>1</sup> That potential, if we draw the correct lesson from the history of the Faith, will only be realized through the implementation of social and economic development projects. It is through these that the reality of the Faith can be demonstrated to the village peoples. In the West, the Bahá'í administration is still basically a bureaucracy for organizing the community. As such, it can have little appeal to Third World rural communities. Concepts such as the Bahá'í administrative order and consultation will only really be appreciated once they are being put to obvious beneficial use in the community through the implementation of development projects. Thus the projects become the catalysts for the development of the community. It is inconceivable that the Bahá'í communities in these countries will progress and assume their full role and responsibilities in the Bahá'í world except through these projects. This has a major significance in the development of the Bahá'í world as a whole. For it is through this process that the first seeds of a future Bahá'í civilization can be considered to be already sprouting.

## Conclusion

As long ago as 1947, Shoghi Effendi pointed out the themes explored in this presentation when he wrote advising those who were taking the Bahá'í Faith to new parts of the world that the “fundamental prerequisite” for success in their enterprise was “to adapt the presentation of the fundamental principles of their Faith to the cultural and religious backgrounds, the ideologies, and the temperament of the divers races and nations whom they are called upon to enlighten and attract” (*Citadel* 25).

What a thorough study of the history of the Bahá'í Faith teaches us about the ways of meeting the challenges that face the Bahá'í Faith at present may thus be summarized: first, as the Bahá'í Faith spread from one area to another, each stage of its development has necessitated an adaptation of the presentation of the religion to a new cultural world—we need to continue the process as we take the religion to areas that are culturally very different; second, we need to think about the method we use to present the Bahá'í teachings to ensure that it is the best way of communicating with the people of the culture with which we are in contact; third, we need to consider the ways in which we try to deepen the understanding of those who have become Bahá'ís—this may involve practical measures such as social and economic development projects as well as the more traditional study of scripture. In all three areas, we are confined by a natural tendency to think of the Bahá'í Faith only in terms of our own particular culture. In particular, we tend to think of the Bahá'í Faith in terms of the Western Judaeo-Christian-Islamic context in which it arose and had its early spread. However, if we continue to maintain such a narrow vision of the Faith, we are seriously limiting its potential and hampering our efforts to spread it. I have tried to give some indications of some ways of breaking out of this narrow view of the Bahá'í Faith. It is to be hoped that others will assume the challenge and explore these avenues more fully.

## Notes

1. See D. Barrett, ed., *World Christian Encyclopaedia* 6.
2. On this concept at cultural breakthroughs, see P. Smith, *The Bábí and Bahá'í Religions* 162–71.
3. See, for example, accounts of the reception of the *Kitáb-i-Íqán* in Isfáhán in Hájí Mírzá Haydar-‘Alí, *Bihjat as-Sudúr* 23; *Stories from the Delight of Hearts* 8–9.
4. See, for example, one of the earliest attempts to make a systematic presentation of the new religion, Thornton Chase’s *The Bahá'í Revelation*, which contains numerous quotations from the Bible.
5. For the derivation of these figures, see P. Smith and M. Momen, “The Bahá'í Faith, 1957–88: A Survey of Contemporary Developments.”
6. These are usually given as: the oneness of God, the oneness of humanity, the oneness of religion, the independent investigation of truth, a world commonwealth, world peace, the relinquishing of prejudices, a universal auxiliary language, equal status for men and women, harmony of religion and science, education for all humanity, and certain general economic principles. See the pamphlet entitled, *The Bahá'í Faith*, published by the Bahá'í Publishing Trust of the United Kingdom. Similar lists appear in most introductory books. See for example: J. Ferraby, *All Things Made New* 80–94; W.S. Hatcher and J. D. Martin, *The Bahá'í Faith: The Emerging Global Religion* 74–98.

7. For North America, listings of social teachings can be found in *Promulgation of Universal Peace* 62–64, 105–10, 127–29, 169–70, 174–76, 180–82, 230–33, 298–301, 3t4–18, 372–76, 433–35, 454–56. For Europe, see *Paris Talks* 127–66.

8. See, for example, the series of volumes *Makátib-i-Hadrat-i 'Abdu'l-Bahá*.

9. This subject is dealt with in more detail in let. Momen, “Relativism as a basis For Bahá’í Metaphysics,” *Studies in the Bábí and Bahá’í Religions*, vol.5.

10. This issue is explored in an article by the present author, “The Bahá’í Faith and Traditional Societies,” *Dialogue* 1.4(1988): 9–13.

11. What we have in the West, where Bahá’í groups meet for a few hours each week, can scarcely be called a community. The term “Bahá’í community” is more an expression of aspiration than of present reality.

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