

FAITH AND WORLD ECONOMY: A JOINT VENTURE, BAHÁ'Í PERSPECTIVE

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Faith and World Economy: A Joint Venture, Bahá'í Perspective is essentially an elaboration of the 1985 Peace Letter of the Universal House of Justice and of one of the inspirations for that message, Shoghi Effendi's *World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*.¹ Robiati excerpts extensively from these documents as they relate to certain themes that he wishes to highlight and elaborate upon. He spells out the symptoms of a world entering a deep crisis, filled with great dangers certainly, but forcing humanity to grow up at last. Robiati expresses characteristic Bahá'í optimism amid the gloom, noting that throughout history, "any change from an inferior to a superior level of aggregate life was preceded and attended by a deep crisis in values as well as in political, religious, and economic organization" (21).

The particular problem stressed in this book is resource depletion and despoliation of the environment. The periodic crises that have ushered in new eras have occurred "not because of a condition of abundance, but rather following the dissipation of available resources" (22). Robiati symbolizes our current plight by a driver whose car's gastank is nearly empty. Should one speed up in order to reach a gas station before running out of gas? Of course not! We know that the faster one goes, the more gas one uses per kilometer. Our problem is that "in modern economic systems, productivity is defined as speed per unit of production. . . . But now that the reserve of energy and matter is diminishing . . . , the old concept of productivity should be discarded and economy should conform to a new system" (49-50). Robiati suggests that productivity be defined as minimizing energy consumption (and pollution) per unit of production. Moreover, "budgets should not [only] be balanced within society, but between nature and society. . . . Society should not consume more quickly than nature produces" (50-51).²

As the title of the book suggests, the world economy will be brought into its new balance through faith. As humanity focuses more on spiritual goals, physical needs will come under a spontaneous and voluntary curtailment. Resources currently supplying extravagances for the well-off will be redirected

1. Shoghi Effendi. *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, 2d ed. (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1974).

2. The latter point is now getting serious attention in proposals for revising systems of national income accounting. See, for example, R. Repetto et al., *Accounts Overdue: Natural Resource Depletion in Costa Rica* (Washington: World Resources Institute, 1991).

toward the fundamental needs of the masses. New institutions—above all, a world government—will be needed, but more fundamentally, so will a new spiritualization that weans us from our materialism.

Such insights and sentiments have found wide acceptance in the last twenty years, so much so that there is a danger of getting carried away with them. Robiati's disillusionment with the hedonistic West verges on a nihilism that writes off any possibility of real economic progress. Generalizing the second law of thermodynamics from physics to economics, he asserts that "evidently available energy resources can only be transformed from an available state to a dissipated one, and . . . the end result . . . is but a temporary benefit" (48). Accumulation of wealth is only an ephemera, because resource use sooner or later amounts to nothing but depletion, pollution, and waste disposal.

Now it may be—indeed the Bahá'í writings categorically state—that everything which is composed eventually becomes decomposed,³ but critically important are the particular time constants characteristic of each phenomenon. The Great Pyramids will someday be rubble, but as of today they are awing a hundredth generation. And whereas the first law of thermodynamics warns us that energy and matter cannot be created, only transformed, the whole point of goods production is that resources can gain value when converted from one form to another. Generation of electricity from coal wastes more than 60% of the coal's energy content, but for many purposes, the 40% as electricity is still worth more than the 100% as heat: there are no steam-powered computers.

Robiati's revulsion at the current patterns of world trade also leads him, in my view, to a one-sided reading of *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*. To be sure, Shoghi Effendi's vision is nothing short of revolutionary. As Robiati points out, a world federal system will assume authority over and organize the world's natural resources, and "its markets will be coordinated and developed, and the distribution of its products will be equitably regulated." But he takes this to mean that resources will "escape the iniquitous law of demand and supply" (78). Abolition of markets would seem to go far beyond Shoghi Effendi's mention of *coordination* and *regulation*. Interestingly, too, Robiati's emphasis on a "low entropy" economy stands in some tension with passages he himself extensively quotes, in particular the world commonwealth's goals of "the exploitation of the unused and unsuspected resources of the planet" and "the exploitation of all the available sources of energy on the surface of the planet."⁴

The main themes of *Faith and World Economy* are unassailable; indeed, they have become a familiar litany to the growing numbers around the world who are concerned about social justice and ecologically sustainable development. What

3. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, comp. and trans. Laura Clifford Barney, 4th ed. (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1981) 151.

4. Shoghi Effendi, *World Order* 204.

can the Bahá'í Faith bring to the discussion? Bahá'ís have a fundamental spiritual insight—the oneness of humanity—and a plan for the infrastructure of a world commonwealth, including not least the transformation of the individual. But as growing numbers come to accept a global view and as the world moves toward acceptance of Bahá'í perspectives, we must realize that common concerns will not always translate into complete agreement with current ideas (which tend nowadays to run toward complete rejection of existing institutions).⁵ Keeping the goal of a spiritualized planet constantly in sight, we can put aside our anger and disgust at the world as it is and might find that there could be a few salvageable ideas and institutions (and people) to be cleaned up and carried into the New Era.

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5. Robert A. White, for example, in "Spiritual Foundations for an Ecologically Sustainable Society" (*The Journal of Bahá'í Studies* 2.1 [1989]: 33–57) has shown some of the subtleties and ironies in a Bahá'í perspective on humanity's relation to nature.