

Towards a Spiritual Civilization*

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The theme of this conference is “Towards a Spiritual Civilization” and, in a sense, everything that is being discussed relates to this goal. This morning I would like to examine briefly three principal methods which are being used to achieve Bahá'u'lláh's purpose for the spiritualization of humankind. The proper use of each method depends on our knowledge of the Faith while, conversely, the process of acting upon them deepens our knowledge. Bahá'í scholarship, in its many levels and aspects, is a thread which runs through them all. As Bahá'u'lláh says, in the Third Tajalli: “In truth, knowledge is a veritable treasure for man, and a source of glory, of bounty, of joy, of exaltation, of cheer and gladness unto him” (*Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh* 52).

The first of the three methods is the perpetual striving of each Bahá'í to draw closer to God in mind, action, and spirit.

Second is the persistent and fundamental work of teaching His Message and building His Administrative Order.

Third is the participation of Bahá'ís in humanitarian service and the betterment of the life of society.

Finally, we shall consider the nature of the goal towards which all this is leading. Having this clear in our minds illuminates the stages we pass through on our path towards it.

I have used the words “first,” “second” and “third” because such a priority can be seen both in the strength which the earlier gives to the later, and in the experience of the Bahá'í community. In the earliest years of the Dispensation, the love and obedience to God and His Manifestation in the heart of each believer was almost all there was. The Scriptures themselves were only then being revealed, there was no community structure as such, and collaboration with other people in the work of advancing human society was impossible. However, I shall not discuss the three methods sequentially. At the present time, all three are being fully used. They reinforce and supplement each other.

We are only in the year 158 of the Bahá'í era. The range of tasks that demand our attention are infinite in range and number. How are we to know what is the most urgent?

It was Shoghi Effendi who taught us how to build systematically, using plans to focus our endeavors, lest we dissipate our time and energy. When the Bahá'í community was small, the plans could be simple. Growth has led to the opening of new possibilities, and an increase in complexity. The progressive decentralization of the work which this requires does not lessen the importance of planning and collaboration. We are still in the condition in which, as 'Abdu'l-Bahá explained, the important often has to be sacrificed so that the most important can be achieved.

United Action and Individual Initiative

Over the decades, and especially in recent years, Bahá'ís have been learning to think in terms of process—of attuning their activities to the current stage in any particular process. This requires a breadth of vision in both space and time. One needs to evaluate experiences of past events, understand the implications of current actions for future developments, and measure their interaction with other activities being pursued at the same time. Such a method of planning and working is, in the long run, far more productive than pursuing successive, isolated, bright ideas, the immediate effect of which may be striking, but can soon die away without enduring benefit to the work as a whole.

Nevertheless, it is essential that creative individuals continue to have “bright ideas.” One of the skills which Bahá'í institutions are learning is how to evaluate and encourage these ideas and relate them to the work as a whole, so that they will contribute to overall progress, rather than be mere diversions. The resultant interplay of united action and individual initiative is an enrichment of Bahá'í community life. It is especially noticeable in the field of social and economic development. We not only have Bahá'í projects directed by Spiritual Assemblies, but also many activities which are characterized as “Bahá'í-inspired projects.” While under the overall aegis of a Spiritual Assembly, such projects are largely independent, do not need detailed guidance by the institutions of the Faith, are

not a drain on the limited Bahá'í funds, and often, being designed for general humanitarian purposes, can make use of funds allocated by non-Bahá'í foundations and institutions. They are also perfect vehicles for collaboration with non-Bahá'í individuals and agencies who have similar humanitarian aims.

Although the pursuit of social and economic development can draw people to the Faith and so, indirectly, support the teaching work, we must always be careful to observe a clear distinction between the two. Our humanitarian work must be seen, both by Bahá'ís and by others, as a bona fide contribution to the betterment of life, and not a mere front for teaching the Faith. At the same time, whatever we do in this area must not be in conflict with the teachings and principles of the Faith. For example, here, as in all our activities, we must guard against involvement in partisan politics.

This illustrates the vital need for every believer to acquire a sound and penetrating knowledge of the teachings. This is essential not only to ensure that we act in accordance with the principles of the Faith, but also for the spiritual development of our souls. On this too depends our ability to teach the Faith to others, which is the ultimate source of all well-being for ourselves and for those to whom we convey the Message.

However, because all of us are still learning, and are imperfect in our understanding of the Faith, we inevitably make mistakes. It is clear, therefore, how important is the development of the Administrative Order and the evolution of its national and local institutions. The consultation employed by these institutions, and the authority they exercise in guiding the believers, help to avoid the ill effects of unwisdom or lack of knowledge on the part of individuals.

Thus, no matter how important is work in the area of social and economic development it always complements, but cannot take the place of, the work of directly teaching the Faith and establishing its institutions on a sound basis.

Tolerance and Righteousness

One area in which there is increasing activity on the part both of Bahá'í institutions and of Bahá'í-inspired projects is that of moral education. Governments and educational institutions in many parts of the world are coming to recognize the pressing need for moral, and even spiritual, education, if their societies are not to decline still further into crime, anarchy, and chaos, and many of them have been turning to the Bahá'ís to fill this gap.

It is in such activities that Bahá'ís and Bahá'í institutions can fulfil Bahá'u'lláh's injunction to "associate with all the peoples and kindreds of the earth with joy and radiance" (*Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh* 36), working with them for the reduction of human misery, and the betterment of human society.

Here, I think, a specific example can be helpful in understanding how difficult problems can be solved by the application of wisdom, breadth of vision, and clear understanding.

A distinction must be made between the standards that Bahá'ís uphold, on the one hand, and what we can expect of other people, on the other. In one African country, where AIDS is already a scourge of a magnitude that is not even dreamt of in the United States—the statistics are always changing, but I heard recently of one country where 60 percent of the population is now HIV positive—in one such country, as I said, the government decided to launch a nationwide campaign to get people to use condoms, and it appealed to the various religious bodies to help in this campaign.

Among the religious bodies, the Catholics and the Muslims refused, because they said it would countenance, and even encourage, extramarital sex. The National Spiritual Assembly wrote to ask the Universal House of Justice for advice. The advice given was this: The Assembly should follow two courses. Within the Bahá'í community it should increase the intensity of educating the believers in Bahá'í moral standards, including complete abstinence from sex outside the marriage bond; the friends, in duty to God, should uphold this standard, and it would be their best protection against infection. In relation to those outside the Bahá'í community, however, the Assembly should recognize, and should explain to the believers, that the majority of the people were not Bahá'ís, that they were not subject to Bahá'í law, and that they lived in a society where extramarital sex was the norm. In order to do at least something to protect them, the National Assembly would actively support the government's campaign.

A similar distinction between what can be expected of Bahá'ís and what standards can be applied to others, is found in many areas of moral education and social interaction. It is in relation to such situations that one can appreciate the force of Bahá'u'lláh's words in the Lawh-i-Maqsúd: "The heaven of true understanding shineth resplendent with the light of two luminaries: tolerance and righteousness" (*Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh* 169–70). And, again, in the Tablet of Tarázát He wrote: "This Wronged One exhorteth the peoples of the world to observe tolerance and righteousness, which are two lights amidst the darkness of the world and two educators for the edification of mankind. Happy are they who have attained thereto and woe betide the heedless (*Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh* 36).

A Growing Thirst for Spirituality

Beyond the need for moral education, there is also a growing thirst for spirituality in people at large, and this is one reason why the House of Justice has encouraged Bahá'í communities to hold gatherings for prayer, meditation, and reading of the Writings. These not only help raise the level of spirituality among the Bahá'ís themselves, but help spiritually thirsty non-Bahá'ís to enrich their lives and learn of the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh.

While pursuing all our activities in the Bahá'í community with due vigor and commitment, we must nevertheless recognize that whatever we do in humanitarian service, the conveying of moral standards and the encouragement of spirituality and, indeed, in the teaching of the Faith itself, can have only a limited effect unless and until people fully accept the claim of Bahá'u'lláh. These activities are parts of a process and are not complete or adequate in themselves. One finds, for example, that some seekers have a kind of “buffet” attitude to religion—indeed this attitude can be found even among registered Bahá'ís who, after having accepted the Faith, have failed to deepen their understanding of it—they are interested only in what they feel they need for themselves, so they take a little of this and a bit of that, and leave all the rest. Thus, increasing their spirituality and exposing them to the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh may not be sufficient to lead to a complete acceptance of His Message.

There is a well-known passage from *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, which is frequently quoted: “The well-being of mankind, its peace and security, are unattainable unless and until its unity is finally established” (286). Some understand this to mean that all that is necessary to attain the unity of which Bahá'u'lláh writes, is to establish a general attitude of tolerance among all people, accepting that every ideal, teaching, and program is as valid as any other. But if we really wish to know how to establish unity, we should remember that this quotation continues: “This unity can never be achieved so long as the counsels which the Pen of the Most High hath revealed are suffered to pass unheeded.”

So far we have been considering three ways in which the Bahá'í community is helping humankind to raise the standards of morality and spirituality and well-being in society, and conveying to all people the Message of Bahá'u'lláh. But, as He wrote in the *Lawh-i-Maqsúd*, “At the outset of every endeavour, it is incumbent to look to the end of it” (*Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh* 168). What do we have in mind as the attainment of a spiritual civilization? And should we not, within our own community and in our personal lives, strive towards a far greater realization of the meaning of true spirituality than we can expect of the world at large? This is dependent upon full recognition of Bahá'u'lláh as the Manifestation of God for this age, and is also a principal means whereby we attain to such full recognition. In the last extract quoted in *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh* is this passage:

The supreme cause for creating the world and all that is therein is for man to know God. In this Day whosoever is guided by the fragrance of the raiment of His mercy to gain admittance into the pristine Abode, which is the station of recognizing the Source of divine commandments and the Dayspring of His Revelation, hath everlastingly attained unto all good. Having reached this lofty station a twofold obligation resteth upon every soul. One is to be steadfast in the Cause with such steadfastness that were all the peoples of the world to attempt to prevent him from turning to the Source of Revelation, they would be powerless to do so. The other is observance of the divine ordinances which have streamed forth from the wellspring of His heavenly-propelled Pen. For man's knowledge of God cannot develop fully and adequately save by observing whatsoever hath been ordained by Him and is set forth in His heavenly Book. (268)

The recognition of Bahá'u'lláh establishes a personal relationship and connection between the Manifestation of God and the believer. As we study the attitudes towards Bahá'u'lláh evinced by ‘Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi and, above all, as we study the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh Himself and use His prayers, we become profoundly aware of the fact that in all things we are but willing instruments in His Hand, and that He can achieve things which we could never dream of attempting on our own strength. With closeness to Bahá'u'lláh, one learns to rely with confidence on His help and guidance in all that happens.

Three Stories of Faith

I would like to tell you three stories. I relate them from my own faulty memory, but I think I am being reasonably accurate, and they demonstrate a truth to which hundreds and thousands of pioneers and other Bahá'ís can testify from their own experience: If one does all that one can to serve the purpose of Bahá'u'lláh, He will do the rest.

The first relates to a Bahá'í who had a shop in ‘Akká during the lifetime of Bahá'u'lláh. One day ‘Abdu'l-Bahá came to him and told him that Bahá'u'lláh wished him to go immediately to Jeddah—the port on the Red Sea to which pilgrims came on their way to Mecca. The Bahá'í promptly shut up his shop and asked if he might first go to Bahjí to take his leave of Bahá'u'lláh. But ‘Abdu'l-Bahá said, no, there was no time, he must take the ship for Jeddah at once. So the Bahá'í went.

In the Red Sea a storm blew up and the sailors were afraid of drowning. The Bahá'í thought to himself: "I am embarked on a mission for Bahá'u'lláh; He will not let us drown." The boat arrived in Jeddah and, as the Bahá'í stepped ashore, he realized that he had forgotten to ask why he was to come there. But he thought, "Never mind, that will be shown to me". As he walked through the streets he came upon Hájí Mírzá Haydar-'Alí, who he thought was still imprisoned in the Sudan, and he realized he must have been sent to bring Hájí Mírzá Haydar-'Alí to Bahá'u'lláh, which he did. Bahá'u'lláh, when greeting the Bahá'í, assured him: "We were with you in that storm on the Red Sea."

The second is the story of the opening of Spitsbergen. This is a group of islands north of Norway, about the same latitude as the north of Greenland, about ten degrees from the pole. The only industries there were coal mining and hunting, and unless one had a job there was nowhere to live. Several Bahá'ís were eager to get there, for it was One of the goals of the Ten Year Crusade. One of them, Paul Adams, a young Englishman, had, like the others, applied for work, but none was forthcoming. He then thought whether there was *anything* else that he could do which he had not done, and he realized that he could at least get closer geographically. So he went from London to Tromsø in the north of Norway, and there he learned of Hilmar Nøis, a hunter from Spitsbergen, who needed an apprentice for the coming winter. Paul took the job and became the Knight of Bahá'u'lláh for Spitsbergen.

The third, which is similar, concerns the secretary of a National Spiritual Assembly. The Universal House of Justice had learned that the president of one of the Muslim countries was visiting Europe and it was eager to have a letter delivered to him. So it sent the letter to the National Assembly and the secretary did all he could to get the embassy to give him an interview with the ambassador in order to deliver the letter. The embassy was courteous but there was no result; clearly they were being evasive. So the secretary wondered what else he could do, and decided that, even without an appointment, he could at least go to the capital where the embassy was situated. He took the letter and went. As he approached the gates of the embassy, a lady also approached them, so he stood back to let her pass. She smiled and thanked him, and asked if she could help. He told her he had an important letter for the ambassador. She said, "Come with me, I am his secretary."

I do not relate these stories as evidences of miracles, but rather to illustrate a natural spiritual phenomenon. God and His Manifestation are not just satisfying philosophical concepts, They are the most fundamental of the realities of our lives Whose purpose and presence should always be in our thoughts.

None of us will ever really understand the station of a Manifestation of God, but we know, from His own Writings, that He is the vehicle of the Message and Power of God sent to the world to take it to the next stage in its evolution, and we must bow to the fact that, whatever we learn and understand about Him is but a shadow of the reality. The essence of true spirituality, therefore, is the close relationship which grows between a believer and the Manifestation of God and, therefore, with God, which enables the believer to pass through the vicissitudes of this life in confidence and serenity and achieve things which he knows are far beyond his own capacity.

The stories I have told relate to drawing on divine power to carry out services for the Faith, but the same power can guide and reinforce every effort we make to obey the laws of God, uphold the principles of the Faith, and reform our characters.

Moreover, the more we can attain to that spirituality, the more we can awaken it in the hearts of others. As Bahá'u'lláh wrote: "Piety and detachment are even as two most great luminaries of the heaven of teaching. Blessed the one who hath attained unto this supreme station, this habitation of transcendent holiness and sublimity" (*Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh* 253).

This understanding of individual spirituality should indicate to us the characteristics of a spiritual civilization. It is not just a society in which the people engage in prayer and meditation and are aware of the spiritual things of life such as beauty, harmony, and kindness. It is a society which lives and functions in accordance with the will of God and in the consciousness of His guiding Hand and Spirit. To describe such a civilization and how we will move towards it, I can do no better than to read the closing paragraphs of *The Promised Day is Come*. This passage is undoubtedly familiar to you all, but it bears reading and rereading as we struggle with the problems, sufferings, and looming disasters of the present period in history.

To the general character, the implications and features of this world commonwealth, destined to emerge, sooner or later, out of the carnage, agony, and havoc of this great world convulsion, I have already referred in my previous communications. Suffice it to say that this consummation will, by its very nature, be a gradual process, and must, as Bahá'u'lláh has Himself anticipated, lead at first to the establishment of that Lesser Peace which the nations of the earth, as yet unconscious of His Revelation and yet unwittingly enforcing the general principles which He has enunciated, will themselves establish. This momentous and historic step, involving the reconstruction of mankind, as the result of the universal recognition of its oneness and wholeness, will bring in its wake the spiritualization of the masses, consequent to the recognition of the

character, and the acknowledgment of the claims, of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh—the essential condition to that ultimate fusion of all races, creeds, classes, and nations which must signalize the emergence of His New World Order.

Then will the coming of age of the entire human race be proclaimed and celebrated by all the peoples and nations of the earth. Then will the banner of the Most Great Peace be hoisted. Then will the worldwide sovereignty of Bahá'u'lláh—the Establisher of the Kingdom of the Father foretold by the Son, and anticipated by the Prophets of God before Him and after Him—be recognized, acclaimed, and firmly established. Then will a world civilization be born, flourish, and perpetuate itself, a civilization with a fullness of life such as the world has never seen nor can as yet conceive. Then will the Everlasting Covenant be fulfilled in its completeness. Then will the promise enshrined in all the Books of God be redeemed, and all the prophecies uttered by the Prophets of old come to pass, and the vision of seers and poets be realized. Then will the planet, galvanized through the universal belief of its dwellers in one God, and their allegiance to one common Revelation, mirror, within the limitations imposed upon it, the effulgent glories of the sovereignty of Bahá'u'lláh, shining in the plenitude of its splendor in the Abhá Paradise, and be made the footstool of His Throne on high, and acclaimed as the earthly heaven, capable of fulfilling that ineffable destiny fixed for it, from time immemorial, by the love and wisdom of its Creator.

Not ours, puny mortals that we are, to attempt, at so critical a stage in the long and checkered history of mankind, to arrive at a precise and satisfactory understanding of the steps which must successively lead a bleeding humanity, wretchedly oblivious of its God, and careless of Bahá'u'lláh, from its calvary to its ultimate resurrection. Not ours, the living witnesses of the all-subduing potency of His Faith, to question, for a moment, and however dark the misery that enshrouds the world, the ability of Bahá'u'lláh to forge, with the hammer of His Will, and through the fire of tribulation, upon the anvil of this travailing age, and in the particular shape His mind has envisioned, these scattered and mutually destructive fragments into which a perverse world has fallen, into one single unit, solid and indivisible, able to execute His design for the children of men.

Ours rather the duty, however confused the scene, however dismal the present outlook, however circumscribed the resources we dispose of, to labor serenely, confidently, and unremittingly to lend our share of assistance, in whichever way circumstances may enable us, to the operation of the forces which, as marshaled and directed by Bahá'u'lláh, are leading humanity out of the valley of misery and shame to the loftiest summits of power and glory. (123–24)

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