

Essay

The Spiritual Nature of Reality: Has the Future Already Been Written?*

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Abstract

If the twentieth century was a “century of light” rather than of consummate horror, and if we are to contemplate the future as being written by anyone other than those with the most insatiable appetite for power, we desperately need to resolve four questions related to the essential premise of the document *Who Is Writing the Future?* First, if the individual is an essentially spiritual being, why did a wise Creator have us begin our eternal lives in a reality ostensibly contrary to spiritual development? Second, why must individual spiritual development necessarily be a social process and not a purely personal and private matter? Third, if our purpose in this stage of our existence is knowledge of reality, what is the epistemological methodology by which advancement can be attained? Finally, in what way is this methodology distinct from “materialistic” methodologies, and how is it related to the Greater and Lesser Covenants?

Résumé

Si le vingtième siècle a été un «siècle de lumière» plutôt qu'un siècle d'horreur sans nom et si nous considérons que ce ne sont pas les plus assoiffés de pouvoir, amis et si nous considérons que écrivent l'avenir, nous devons absolument répondre à quatre questions, liées à la prémisse fondamentale du document intitulé *Écrire l'avenir*. Premièrement, si l'être humain est un être essentiellement spirituel, par quelle sagesse le Créateur a-t-il permis que notre vie éternelle débute dans une réalité en apparence contraire au développement spirituel? Deuxièmement, pourquoi le développement spirituel, par de l'être humain doit-il être un processus social et non pas une question d'ordre purement personnel? Troisièmement, si notre but, à ce stade de l'existence, est la connaissance de la réalité, quelle est la méthodologie épistémologique qui nous permettra de progresser dans cette voie? Enfin, en quoi cette méthodologie se distingue-t-elle des méthodologie «matérialistes», et en quoi est-elle liée la Grande et à la Moindre Alliance?

Resumen

Si el siglo veinte fue un siglo de eliminación y no de horror consumado, y si hemos de contemplar el futuro escrito por alguno aparte de aquellos insaciablemente sedientos de poder, necesitamos resolver en forma apremiante cuatro temas relacionados a la premisa esencial del documento *¿Quién está escribiendo el futuro?* El primero es, si el individuo es un ser esencialmente espiritual, ¿por qué un Creador sabio nos hizo empezar nuestras vidas eternas dentro de una realidad ostensiblemente contraria al desarrollo espiritual? Segundo ¿por qué es necesario que el desarrollo espiritual del individuo sea un proceso social y no solo un asunto puramente personal y privado? Tercero, si nuestro propósito en esta etapa de nuestra existencia es el conocimiento de la realidad, ¿cuál es la metodología epistemológica por la cual el progreso se pueda lograr? Por último, ¿en qué se distingue esta metodología a las metodologías “materialistas,” y cómo se vincula tanto al Convenio Mayor como al Menor?

And to think that at a distance of eight centuries from this remote age of ours, so coloured and so sepulchral, the men of the twentieth century are torturing themselves in ceaseless anxiety to know how their fates and fortunes will work out? Whereas you are already in history with me. . . . Everything determined, everything settled.

– Henry IV speaking in *Henry IV*, by Luigi Pirandello

One of the more vexing issues in academia these days is whether or not there exists a reality independent of our individual perception of reality and if there is, how can we use something so imprecise as language to convey our experiences with that reality to one another. Religions have always attempted to deal with various aspects of the same issue, especially as the question relates to the course of human history in the context of monotheistic belief systems. Those who affirm a belief in an unseen reality governed by a loving Creator are challenged to explain how an omnipotent, just, and loving God could remain ostensibly passive throughout a sequence of historical events more inclined to teach us the benefits of tyranny, selfishness, and outrageous power than they do the felicity of divine attributes of benignity, selflessness, and love.

Simply to respond, as some theologians and philosophers have, that God has endowed humankind with free will, hardly suffices to justify why this same Creator would design a reality where arbitrary so-called acts of God can wipe us out at any second and where we can ignore (ostensibly with impunity) our own essential purposes and freely destroy each other and the very environment which, we presume, God created for the purpose of instructing us.

Therefore, if we are to consider this century as a century of *light* rather than of consummate horror, and if we are to contemplate a future as being written by anyone other than those who possess the greatest armed forces, we desperately need to respond to several critical assumptions implied in the document *Who Is Writing the Future?*: (1) that the individual is an essentially spiritual being, (2) that the individual spiritual development is inherently a social process, (3) that the epistemological methodology by which we can best understand reality should be nonmaterialistic, and (4) that the epistemological methodology advocated in this document necessarily involves a relationship with the Greater and Lesser Covenants. In order to sound the keynote for our conference, let us attempt to deal with these assumptions which seem so enigmatic and paradoxical.

A Century of Light?

At the outset of the document *Who Is Writing the Future?*, we discover (1) that there is indeed an objective reality; (2) that we are part of that reality; (3) that both this reality and we ourselves, though having material expression, are essentially spiritual in nature; and (4) that the history of human civilization is the result of a systematic divine intervention:

The mainspring of Bahá'u'lláh's message is an exposition of reality as fundamentally spiritual in nature, and of the laws that govern that reality's operation. It not only sees the individual as a spiritual being, a "rational soul," but also insists that the entire enterprise that we call civilization is itself a spiritual process, one in which the human mind and heart have created progressively more complex and efficient means to express their inherent moral and intellectual capacities. (Bahá'í International Community 5)

In case this forthright and unambiguous statement were not totally clear in its implication for the contemporary scholar, the document goes on to assert that human history—until now the product of meticulous research by the anthropologist's study of cultures, the archeologist's study of artifacts, and the historian's study of archival documents, all leading to various theories of causality inferred by this data—is, in truth, accurately understood only by the scholar with a perspective into the essentially spiritual nature of reality. In short, the study of human civilization becomes a subject as fit for theologians and philosophers as it is for scholars in any other field of study: "Rejecting the reigning dogmas of materialism, Bahá'u'lláh asserts an opposing interpretation of the historical process. Humanity, the arrowhead of the evolution of consciousness, passes through stages analogous to the period of infancy, childhood, and adolescence in the lives of its individual members" (Bahá'í International Community 5).

From this perspective, then, the analysis of human history derived from traditional materialistic models might be considered fundamentally inaccurate: instead of perceiving the story of humankind (and the progress of civilization in this century in particular) as a catalogue of war, tyranny, and catastrophe, the Bahá'í views the last hundred years as a "century of light" and history overall as a spiritual or religious dynamic. Indeed, history becomes an evolutionary, systematic, logical, and divinely guided pathway towards an age of maturation and the fruition of human capacity.

Likewise, this century just passed and this precise moment in which we find ourselves are, according to this document, properly viewed not as the end of time (in any common sense of the term), but as the true beginning of human history. This age is, indeed, the confluence of all previous planetary and social change, a period of transformation inherent in earth's creation from its inception in the Divine Will of the Creator and as urged along systematically by His divinely empowered educators, the Manifestations of God: "The journey has brought us to the threshold of our long-awaited coming of age as a unified human race. The wars, exploitation, and prejudice that

have marked immature stages in the process should not be a cause of despair but a stimulus to assuming the responsibilities of collective maturity” (5).

“Collective Maturity” in Relation to Writing the Future

Clearly it is crucial when we read such statements about “collective maturity” that we understand that maturity does not imply a point in organic development when life has been completed, when an organism has finished its mission and is ready for demise. The term maturation as applied to organic life implies the end point of a period of preparation, the point of beginning when all the faculties and powers of an organism are in place. Put more succinctly, the point of maturation is the true birth of an organism’s readiness to produce the fruit for which it was created in the first place.

Thus, the glory of this period of transition in which we find ourselves is realized only when we understand that the millions and millions of years of planetary evolution during which this earth, this tiny seed in the matrix of the infinite universe, evolved through a virtual infinitude of geological and finally anthropological and sociological stages, has been a process intentionally structured to bring humankind to a point of self-awareness, a point of true awakening and real beginning: “Viewed through Bahá’u’lláh’s eyes, the history of tribes, peoples, and nations has effectively reached its conclusion. What we are witnessing is the beginning of the history of humankind, the history of a human race conscious of its own oneness” (Bahá’í International Community 21).

Consequently, the “process of unification”—which Shoghi Effendi, Guardian of the Bahá’í Faith, discusses most specifically as the various stages of the “Lesser Peace”—is but the final pathway of those incremental steps towards “putting in place new systems of global organization that would have been unthinkable at the century’s beginning” (Bahá’í International Community 8).

In this context, the Bahá’í authoritative texts are not exhorting us to “write the future” by making a virtue of necessity, but are proclaiming instead that the maturation of human society culminating in the creation of a global community based on spiritual principles is a natural, inherent, and inevitable part of our planet’s evolution and of human history as that history has been carefully guided by a wise and loving Creator. Indeed, the Guardian states that this process of putting in place the finished form of that stage of maturity, the Bahá’í Commonwealth, sometimes referred to as the Golden Age of the Bahá’í Dispensation, is also the final stage in the progressive development of human social structures because this system devised through and by Bahá’u’lláh is destined to become the paradigm upon which all future progress will be based:

The emergence of a world community, the consciousness of world citizenship, the founding of a world civilization and culture—all of which must synchronize with the initial stages in the unfoldment of the Golden Age of the Bahá’í Era—should, by their very nature, be regarded, as far as this planetary life is concerned, as the furthestmost limits in the organization of human society, though man, as an individual, will, nay must indeed as a result of such a consummation, continue indefinitely to progress and develop. (*World Order of Bahá’u’lláh* 163)

In short, all future planetary social progress will be but a refinement of the system devised by Bahá’u’lláh.

Consequently, though this planet will doubtless reach an end point in its existence (as all composite bodies must), the most important part of human history lies in the future, not in the past. For however finished the fundamental organization of our global society may become during the Dispensation of Bahá’u’lláh, Bahá’u’lláh’s design for a global community is capable of infinite refinement.

Has Not the Future Already Been Written?

But is there not another axiom we must inevitably deduce from the verities articulated in this document? If we accept the notion that the Greater Covenant has been in place from the planet’s inception (the Eternal Covenant that human society will never be without divine guidance), must we not also conclude that its future was written from the beginning, at least in its fundamental form? And if we accept this premise, must we not conclude that such a future includes not only the evolution of the planet and human society until this point of maturation, but also from this point on when, according to Bahá’u’lláh’s own Writings, there will come about further evolutionary and progressive refinement of the global commonwealth resulting from the influence of future Manifestations?

Furthermore, if we read carefully the vision of the future in the authoritative writings of the Bahá’í Faith, we find more than mere sweeping generalizations. We discover specific descriptions about the steps that human society will go through to reach the final paradigm of a global civilization, the Divine Economy of the Bahá’í Commonwealth during this Dispensation. For example, Shoghi Effendi describes three specific stages of the process that will occur between where we are now and the ultimate emergence of the Bahá’í Commonwealth.

Stage One

The first stage has been underway for some time but is not yet complete—the process of putting in place the ingredients of a global federal government. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá seems to imply that what will signal the firm establishment of this “Lesser Peace” will be the formation of a pact setting up this system, an agreement in which national governments will voluntarily form a binding “all-embracing” (*Secret* 64) accord that will, among other things, (1) establish territorial boundaries, (2) devise principles of international relations, (3) establish international agreements and obligations, and (4) secure arms limitations.

The next step in this first stage is the setting up of a world federal government, something Shoghi Effendi in *The World Order of Bahá’u’lláh* discusses in great detail, even suggesting what the fundamental structure of such a federal system might be. This “world Super-State” (40), at least “as far as we can visualize it” (203), will consist of an “International Executive,” a “World Parliament,” and a “Supreme Tribunal” (40–41). Elsewhere Shoghi Effendi employs slightly different terms to designate similar components: a “world legislature,” an “international Force,” and a “world tribunal” (2113). Notice that he includes in this paradigm an “international Force” (203), not as a fourth component of the government, but as a multinational force employed to safeguard the decisions of “this world legislature.” He also uses other appellations for these same components: the “Supreme Tribunal” is sometimes alluded to as the “International Tribunal” (Universal House of Justice, *Messages* 422.13) and elsewhere as the “Universal Court of Arbitration” (*Bahá’í Administration* 47).

The completion of this first stage, then, will be the formation of a world government to secure the “Lesser Peace” which will probably include a world parliament, an executive body, a world court, and an international military force to assist the government and to enforce the decisions of the court. It is absolutely clear in the Guardian’s writing of the future, however, that these agencies will not be parts of a Bahá’í state. Furthermore, he states that the “Lesser Peace” will not come about as the direct result of the Bahá’í Faith, nor will these components of the initial federal system even be directly associated with the Bahá’í teachings: The “Lesser Peace will come about through the political efforts of the states and nations of the world, and independently of any direct Bahá’í plan or effort. . . .” (qtd. in Universal House of Justice, *Messages* 422.17).

We must conclude, then, that necessity and obvious logic will be the mother of this restructuring of planetary society. Of course many essential parts of such a system are already in place, yet no pact has yet been effected. True, we do have a global system of communication, a *de facto* global economy, many peace accords, and a tacit agreement among nations that it is no longer acceptable for one nation to make an armed attack on another nation. Yet clearly the founding of a recognized global authority has not yet occurred, however much the United Nations seems at present to represent the best hope for such a system.

Stage Two

The second stage in the future progress towards the Bahá’í Commonwealth the Guardian alludes to as the stage of “establishment.” In this stage of evolving, the global federal government will remain secular (even while its institutions will, doubtless, begin to parallel more closely those that are also evolving within the Bahá’í Faith, the fundamental structure for which is already in place). But the stage of “establishment” is a point at which the “the civil authorities” of the world community will indicate their approval of the foundational principles of the Bahá’í teachings by recognizing the Bahá’í Faith “as the state religion,” a stage “similar to that which Christianity entered in the years following the death of the Emperor Constantine, a stage which must later be followed by the emergence of the Bahá’í state. . . .” (*Messages to the Bahá’í World* 155).

Stage Three

The third and final stage, of course, will be the transition from a secular government to a Bahá’í state, a Divine Economy, the Commonwealth of Bahá’u’lláh. The Guardian states that this final step will occur when the dual systems of the secular state and the Bahá’í administrative institutions merge into one universal system, a theocracy unlike any the world has ever known:

The unity of the human race, as envisaged by Bahá’u’lláh implies the establishment of a world commonwealth in which all nations, races, creeds and classes are closely and permanently united, and in which the autonomy of its state members and the personal freedom and initiative of the individuals that compose them are definitely and completely safeguarded. . . . (Shoghi Effendi, *World Order of Bahá’u’lláh* 203)

This vision of the future as written in the Bahá’í texts is very explicit: the “elected councils” of the Bahá’í

Administrative Order (“universal, secondary and local”) will continue to have “legislative, executive, and judicial powers over the Bahá’í community. . . .” (Universal House of Justice, *Constitution* 8). The powers which on the world level will, during the Lesser Peace, become vested in the World Parliament, the World Executive, and the World Tribunal will become merged in the context of the Bahá’í Commonwealth, something Shoghi Effendi confirms by observing that when “the Bahá’í state will be established,” the International Tribunal (sometimes alluded to as the “Universal Court of Arbitration”) will be “merged in the Universal House of Justice” (qtd. in Universal House of Justice, *Messages* 422.13). Likewise, Shoghi Effendi states that only when in the emergence of the Most Great Peace the truth of the Bahá’í Revelation is embraced by the peoples of the world, “will the Universal House of Justice attain the plenitude of its power, and exercise, as the supreme organ of the Bahá’í Commonwealth, all the rights, the duties, and responsibilities incumbent upon the world’s future super-state” (*World Order of Bahá’u’lláh* 7).

Furthermore, the Universal House of Justice will not only function as the “supreme organ” of that future commonwealth, but also the powers of the Universal House of Justice, as well as those of the other elected councils, will increase, not decrease. Therefore, when ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states that “the House of Justice, whether National or Universal, has only legislative power and not executive power. . . .” (qtd. in *Lights of Guidance* 314),¹ He is not delimiting the powers of that body but making a broad distinction about the general functions of the institution. As the Universal House of Justice has already noted, “While ultimately the major function of the Universal House of Justice will be that of legislation, it has continuing responsibility for executive and judicial functions of the institution” (qtd. in *Lights of Guidance* 318).²

A Vision of the Future Bahá’í Commonwealth

In an even more specific writing of that future society, Shoghi Effendi states that in “such a world society, science and religion, the two most potent forces in human life, will be reconciled, will cooperate, and will harmoniously develop” and that this system will blend and embody “the ideals of both the East and the West.” He likewise notes that the advent of such a society will signal the permanent cessation of the prejudices and hostilities that have until now become such a sad characterization of human history in general and of religious history in particular: “National rivalries, hatred, and intrigues will cease, and racial animosity and prejudice will be replaced by racial amity, understanding and cooperation. The causes of religious strife will be permanently removed, economic barriers and restrictions will be completely abolished, and the inordinate distinction between classes will be obliterated” (*World Order of Bahá’u’lláh* 204).

This statement echoes a passage of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá which Shoghi Effendi cites in this same analysis: “Religious and sectarian antagonism, the hostility of races and peoples, and differences among nations, will be eliminated. All men will adhere to one religion, will have one common faith, will be blended into one race and become a single people. All will dwell in one common fatherland, which is the planet itself” (qtd. in *World Order of Bahá’u’lláh* 205).

Shoghi Effendi notes that among the more practical results of such a system will be the elimination of warfare together with a renovated worldwide economic system that will unleash untold resources for the betterment of the human condition:

Destitution on the one hand, and gross accumulation of ownership on the other, will disappear. The enormous energy dissipated and wasted on war, whether economic or political, will be consecrated to such ends as will extend the range of human inventions and technical development, to the increase of the productivity of mankind, to the extermination of disease, to the extension of scientific research, to the raising of the standard of physical health, to the sharpening and refinement of the human brain, to the exploitation of the unused and unsuspected resources of the planet, to the prolongation of human life, and to the furtherance of any other agency that can stimulate the intellectual, the moral, and spiritual life of the entire human race. (*World Order of Bahá’u’lláh* 204)

In part, such gains will be accomplished through the intelligent, systematic, coordinated, and worldwide management of the earth’s resources through a “world federal system, ruling the whole earth and exercising unchallengeable authority over its unimaginably vast resources. . . .”: “The economic resources of the world will be organized, its sources of raw materials will be tapped and fully utilized, its markets will be coordinated and developed, and the distribution of its products will be equitably regulated” (*World Order of Bahá’u’lláh* 204).

Shoghi Effendi discusses some of the systems which will produce these amazing results, systems which Bahá’u’lláh has in His own Writings foretold in some detail:

A mechanism of world inter-communication will be devised, embracing; the whole planet, freed from national hindrances and restrictions, and functioning with marvelous swiftness and perfect regularity. A world metropolis will act as the nerve center of a world civilization, the focus towards which the unifying forces of life will converge and from which its energizing influences will radiate. A world language will either be invented or chosen from among the existing languages and will be taught in the schools of all the federated nations as an auxiliary to their mother tongue. A world script, a world literature, a uniform and universal system of currency, of weights and measures, will simplify and facilitate intercourse and understanding among the nations and races of mankind (*World Order of Bahá'u'lláh* 203)

Shoghi Effendi concludes this general assessment of the World Commonwealth by describing the emergence of this Most Great Peace as the explicit fulfillment of the vision in the Book of Revelation of the “new Jerusalem”:

“And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, ‘Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God. And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away.’” (*World Order of Bahá'u'lláh* 205–6)

Such a world federal commonwealth will be capable of rendering these results, he concludes, because it will be a system “in which Force is made the servant of Justice, whose life is sustained by its universal recognition of one God and by its allegiance to one common Revelation. . . .” (204). He is careful to note, however, that this “the goal towards which humanity . . . is moving” will not be imposed by force; rather it will be “impelled by the unifying forces of life. . . .” (204).

What Is Left for Us to Write?

We see, then, that in the authoritative and infallible Bahá'í texts, a great deal of the future has already been written. So what is left for anyone else to write, and why does this document conclude by exhorting us to action if this marvelous outcome is predestined to occur?

The answer in part is that while the future in large is written, the precise pathway to and time frame for the attainment of these three stages, these lofty and glorious victories, are in the hands of humanity and, even more particularly, in the hands of individual Bahá'ís and the Bahá'í community as a whole. For the inevitability of this destiny does not obviate our individual free will, our personal obligation to participate in this process.

Our Own Futures Have not Been Written

Thus, while the future of humankind on this planet is ultimately secure, our own individual future has not been yet been written, even if it is foreknown by an omniscient Creator. As individuals we are entirely free to falter and fail. What is more, if the Bahá'í community as a whole stands aside and waits for the secular events of the Lesser Peace to come before it bothers to become actively involved in assisting the peace of humankind, it is neglecting both individual and collective spiritual development and responsibility and even retarding the pace at which these events will occur, an obligation for which Bahá'ís and the Bahá'í community bear full responsibility. Indeed, it is in this regard that the Universal House of Justice has written:

This does not mean, however, that the Bahá'ís are standing aside and waiting for the Lesser Peace to come before they do something about the peace of mankind. Indeed, by promoting the principles of the Faith, which are indispensable to the maintenance of peace, and by fashioning the instruments of the Bahá'í Administrative Order, which we are told by the beloved Guardian is the pattern for future society, the Bahá'ís are constantly engaged in laying the groundwork for a permanent peace, the Most Great Peace being their ultimate goal. (*Messages* 422.3)

In another instance, the Universal House of Justice states that while the mechanism for the Lesser Peace is being established, the Faith is capable of exerting an important influence on this process:

Undoubtedly, as these developments are taking place, the counsel the institutions of the Faith can give to governments, the pattern of world administration offered by the Bahá'í community and the great

humanitarian projects which will be launched under the aegis of the Universal House of Justice, will exercise a great influence on the course of progress. (Qtd. in *Lights of Guidance* 436)

Individual Effort Versus “Individualism”

Thus, while *Who is Writing the Future?* denigrates individualism when it becomes a slave to the “cult” of individualism as articulated and practiced in contemporary society, this document by no means implies that we have no individual responsibility:

No aspect of contemporary civilization is more directly challenged by Bahá'u'lláh's conception of the future than is the prevailing cult of individualism, which has spread to most parts of the world. Nurtured by such cultural forces as political ideology, academic elitism, and a consumer economy, the “pursuit of happiness” has given rise to an aggressive and almost boundless sense of personal entitlement. The moral consequences have been corrosive for the individual and society alike—and devastating in terms of disease, drug addiction and other all-too-familiar blights of century's end. (Baha'i International Community 17)

Of course, Bahá'ís may not consider themselves described by such a passage. Yet Bahá'ís are no less subject to the pathology of such thinking than anyone else. All of us are constantly subjected to the idea of achieving the “good life” by virtue of being immersed in a society calculated to indoctrinate us with the notion that we are only one or two products away from achieving true happiness. Furthermore, simply glancing at the Bahá'í scriptures, saying our prayers, and going to Feasts now and then will hardly safeguard us and our children from the infectious nature of a materialistic orientation to reality which acts subliminally upon our hearts and minds.

The “Good Life” Versus the “Calamity”

There is another more subtle reason that the Bahá'í may be tempted to pursue the foxfire of the “good life.” After all, ‘Abdu'l-Bahá seems to have assured us that the Lesser Peace would be well underway before the end of the century. Well, isn't the century at its end? Then the Lesser Peace must be here, so why need we do anything about it?

And what about the dire descriptions by Bahá'u'lláh and Shoghi Effendi regarding the calamities that would precede and ultimately instigate the Lesser Peace by galvanizing the will of world leaders to see the need for creating voluntarily a world federal system much as the Civil War in America welded the nation together?

But the century has ended, has it not? And surely such a calamity would precede and function as the catalyst in securing the Lesser Peace by creating turmoil of sufficient magnitude that it would reorient the hearts and minds of world leaders, unify their intentions, and galvanize their hearts and minds to cede a portion of their sovereignty to create a world federal system secured by a voluntary pact.

Could this mean that such a calamity has already occurred? And yet, surely it would have been in the newspapers. Perhaps it was World War II with all its horrors of genocide and world-engulfing effects?

No, the Guardian on 28 July 1954 stated that the Second World War was only a “foretaste” of that calamity:

It is this same cancerous materialism, both originally in Europe, carried to excess in the North American continent, contaminating the Asiatic peoples and nations, spreading its ominous tentacles to the borders of Africa, and now invading its very heart, which Bahá'u'lláh in unequivocal and emphatic language denounced in His Writings, comparing it to a devouring flame and regarding it as the chief factor in precipitating the dire ordeals and world-shaking crises that must necessarily involve the burning of cities and the spread of terror and consternation in the hearts of men. Indeed a foretaste of the devastation which this consuming fire will wreak upon the world, and with which it will lay waste the cities of the nations participating in this tragic world-engulfing contest, has been afforded by the last World War, marking the second stage in the global havoc which humanity, forgetful of its God and heedless of the clear warnings uttered by His appointed Messenger for this day, must, alas, inevitably experience. (*Citadel of Faith* 125)

Then possibly the “world-engulfing contest” and “devastation” must be referring to some recent catastrophic horrors that have also been an integral part of this “century of light.” Could it have been the “Gulf War”—after all, the Universal House of Justice did refer to it as “another of the ‘ominous signs . . . proclaiming the agonies of a disintegrating civilization. . . .’” (Ridván Message 1)

Could it be that the destruction of cities mentioned by Shoghi Effendi is only a metaphorical allusion to the present moral decay that even now renders none of our cities safe or without moral degradation? Perhaps the “fire”

he speaks of is only symbolic, the corrosive flame of “materialism” that has caused moral decline throughout the world.

If so, then can we not at least relax, study the Writings when we aren't on the Internet or at the golf course, teach the Faith when opportunities happen to arise, and enjoy talking to each other on our cell phones from our gated communities (at least, those few who are blessed with financial wherewithal) because, it would seem, the future which the Prophets have for thousands of years anticipated and humankind has for eons been waiting has at long last arrived!

The Response to Complacency in Writing the Future

The one thing we can be absolutely sure of regarding the calamity and the global transformation that will ultimately derive from it is that when such an event occurs, no individual on this planet will have any further need to ask whether or not it has occurred. Consequently, we would do well to consider how we should respond to the complacency within our community about writing the future and, even more importantly, the complacency within ourselves.

One response is that the Bahá'í texts clearly indicate that the benefits of this life are entirely based on the extent to which we invest ourselves in preparation for what lies ahead after this brief sojourn in the illusory experience of physical reality. As I have tried to explain in *The Purpose of Physical Reality*, this life is a classroom structured so as to introduce us to spiritual concepts and the spiritual powers latent within us, to develop those powers of perception and, through testing, to demonstrate those powers in action.

Like small children who learn abstraction through allegorical stories and dramaturgy, we in our adult state are doing exactly the same thing—dramatizing who and what we are with symbolic actions. Mabeth acknowledges as much with a sad recognition of his own wasted and misspent life of ambition: “Life is but a walking shadow, a poor player / That struts and frets his our upon the stage / And then is heard no more” (Shakespeare 5.5.4–6)

So it is that the Bahá'í writings assure us that the dramatic role we play in this life directly affects the continuation of our lives beyond the physical plane of existence because we begin the next stage of our lives with precisely those virtues and powers which we have freely developed in this illusory life.

And why do I stress the “illusory” nature of physical reality? Is this not the “real” world and the next world, the unseen reality, only a theory, a hope, a wish? The fact is that right now, at this very moment, each one of us is already in the spiritual world, a fact that more and more scientists are proving—the nonlocality and the essentially metaphysical nature of human consciousness. True, so long as our body is a fit temple, we are constrained to communicating one soul to another periscopically through what poet Delmore Schwartz calls “the heavy bear” (qtd. in Brooks and Warren 379), the intermediary of this hunk of flesh. That is the illusory nature of this “real world,” a fiction that at some final point in our earthly existence will be made plain to us in the twinkling of an eye.

Even the mind and its powers, which in the past have so often been attributed to the physicality of the brain, are, in truth, but powers of the soul, powers that associate through the brain so long as we are connected with this physical aspect of reality, but powers that do not derive from it. As ‘Abdu’l-Bahá stated to Auguste Forel: “Now concerning mental faculties, they are in truth of the inherent properties of the soul, even as the radiation of light is the essential property of the sun. The rays of the sun are renewed but the sun itself is ever the same and unchanged. Consider how the human intellect develops and weakens, and may at times come to naught, whereas the soul changeth not” (“‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Tablet” 8). Indeed, what we allude to as the “mental process,” that indirect epistemological method by which abstract knowledge is gained through inference from the senses, is no longer needful once the umbilical of what ‘Abdu’l-Bahá calls “the common faculty” is severed at the body’s or the brain’s dysfunction or demise: “For the mind to manifest itself, the human body must be whole; and a sound mind cannot be but in a sound body, whereas the soul dependeth not upon the body. It is through the power of the soul that the mind comprehendeth, imagineth and exerteth its influence, whilst the soul is a power that is free” (“‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Tablet” 8).

All Individual Effort Is Necessarily a “Social” Enterprise

Perhaps, then, these are some of the valid and effective responses to the complacent individual, but there is another response to complacency as regards what writing the future has to do with ourselves as members of a community and with the complacency of the community as a whole. As I have tried to explain at length in the book *Arc of Ascent*, each of us is essentially and inevitably a social being. Our individual spiritual development is predicated on social interaction, not solely on a personal mystical and internal condition. That is the reason that Bahá'u'lláh forbade monasticism, mandated work in the world, and shaped the building of a vast and integrative commonwealth on the foundational entities of individuals interacting in families and in communities. The majority of the Most Holy Book, the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, deals not with the relationships among nation states and territorial entities operating in the

context of a vast global system, but with laws governing individual relationships within a family or within communities where we spend our daily lives.

Stated another way, we cannot become human beings by ourselves, let alone good human beings, as experiments involving feral children have most clearly revealed. Our personal progress is utterly dependent on education and participation within a family and within a community because spiritual development is only theoretical until it becomes understood and expressed through a social environment.

And why is that? Because almost every spiritual attribute is a social virtue, a quality that is learned, developed, and demonstrated through interaction with others. One may be said to be just, fair, and wise, but how do we know for sure until such a one interacts with others in a just, fair, and wise manner? We may think ourselves patient. How do we know for sure until we have successfully raised children, and especially when we have done so in the context of a society at war with every concept we hold dear and every virtue we are trying to instill in our progeny?

The Responsibility of the Bahá'í Community as a Whole in Writing the Future

Finally, let us respond to the matter of the temptation to be complacent with regard to writing the future in terms of interaction on a larger scale. Why has there been such emphasis within the Bahá'í community for the last few decades on participating in forms of social and economic development beyond the Bahá'í community and within the larger context of the global community in UN activities, in Health for Humanity and a myriad other noble projects? Why is this participation essential if the Lesser Peace is inevitable, is already written down for us, and if it will be brought about primarily through secular forces, even if we allow that these forces inevitably derive historically from the appearance of the Manifestation?

Part of the answer can be found in an anecdote from the life of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. During the First World War when the people of surrounding communities could not feed themselves, 'Abdu'l-Bahá used produce grown on Bahá'í properties to feed the hungry, an act of such nobility that he was knighted by the British government. We, too, may see the written future in our collective vision of a global Bahá'í Commonwealth, but at present we live in a world community which, Bahá'u'lláh states, has already become one country wherein each and every human being on the planet is a citizen and an integral part of a global family, whether or not they bear the name "Bahá'í."

In conclusion, the response to complacency with regard to writing the future can be found in a statement by Shoghi Effendi about how believers have historically responded to the Prophets of God:

In the "Bayán" the Báb says that every religion of the past was fit to become universal. The only reason why they failed to attain that mark was the incompetence of their followers. He then proceeds to give a definite promise that this would not be the fate of the revelation of "Him Whom God would make manifest," that it will become universal and include all the people of the world. This shows that we will ultimately succeed. But could we not, through our shortcomings, failures to sacrifice and reluctance to concentrate our efforts in spreading the Cause, retard the realization of that ideal? And what would that mean? It shall mean that we will be held responsible before God, that the race will remain longer in its state of waywardness, that wars would not be so soon averted, that human suffering will last longer. (Qtd. in *Compilation of Compilations* 2:4-5)

Indeed, we know, as the document *Who is Writing the Future?* states, that the future to which we allude and for which we wait with eager anticipation is not some "distant, almost unattainable ideal to be addressed only after a host of political conflicts have been somehow resolved, material needs somehow satisfied, and injustices somehow corrected. The opposite, Bahá'u'lláh asserts, is the case" (17). Even the strictest materialist or empiricist will readily acknowledge that the human history has inevitably been written not by great masses of well-trained armies, but by small groups of individuals with a unified vision and boundless energy whose imaginations are enkindled and whose hearts are vibrant because of a vision they share.

Notes

1. *Star of the West* 7.14 (19th): 139.
2. Letter to the National Spiritual Assembly of Grenada, 19 May 1985.
3. Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, 19 January 1983.

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