

Achieving Reconciliation in a Conflicting World

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Abstract

This paper explores the dynamics of conflict—philosophical, personal, communal, and sociopolitical—against the backdrop of globalization, with a focus on religion’s role to both foster and overcome it. It argues that behind the Bahá’í principle of unity lies a “logic of reconciliation” by which we continuously seek, and continuously find, new capacity to contain paradox, transcend contradiction, and find harmony among ideas, individuals, communities, and nations. Far from denying or ignoring conflict, the Bahá’í writings push us to face it and find reconciliation. This process is an important contribution to the emergence, from the fractious present, of a sustainable and prosperous world order.

Résumé

L’article explore les dynamiques du conflit dans ses dimensions philosophique, personnelle, communale, et sociopolitique, sur fond de mondialisation, et examine le rôle que joue la religion dans la naissance du conflit et dans sa résolution. L’auteur fait valoir que derrière le principe bahá’í de l’unité il y a une logique de réconciliation, par laquelle nous cherchons et trouvons continuellement une capacité nouvelle à contenir les paradoxes, à transcender les contradictions, et à découvrir l’harmonie entre des idées, des individus, des collectivités, et des nations. Les écrits bahá’ís, loin de nier ou d’ignorer le conflit, nous poussent à y faire face et à trouver la réconciliation. Ce processus constitue une importante contribution à l’émergence d’un ordre mondial durable et prospère.

Resumen

Este ensayo explora la dinámica del conflicto—filosófico, personal, comunal, y sociopolítico—con la globalización como telón de fondo y con enfoque sobre el

papel de la religión en tanto fomentar como superarlo. Se argumenta que detrás del principio bahá'í de la unidad se encuentra una "lógica de reconciliación," a través de la cual continuamente buscamos, y continuamente encontramos, nuevas capacidades para contener paradojas, trascender contradicciones, y lograr armonía entre ideas, individuos, comunidades, y naciones. Lejos de negar o ignorar el conflicto, las escrituras bahá'ís nos alentan a encararlo y encontrar la reconciliación. Este proceso es un contribuyente importante al surgimiento, desde fracturado presente, de un orden mundial sostenible y próspero.

As the nineteenth century approached its term, Nietzsche's madman was pondering the death of God, and coming face to face with the awesome puzzle of its aftermath: "Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What did we do when we unchained this earth from its sun? Wither is it moving now? Wither are we moving now? Away from all suns? Are we not perpetually falling? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there any up or down left?" (142).

His lone, demented voice had in fact visioned the shape of things to come: "For some time now we have realized it," Italo Calvino adverts,

[T]he storeroom of humanity's accumulated materials—mechanisms, machines, merchandises, markets, institutions, documents, poems, emblems, photograms, *opera picta*, arts and trades, encyclopedias, cosmologies, grammars, topoi and figures of speech, ties of kinship, tribe and enterprise, myths and rituals, operational models—no way remains to keep them in order. . . . all the parameters, the categories, the antitheses, that had served to imagine, classify, and project the world, are up for discussion. And not only those closest to historic attributions of values: the rational and the mythic, to work and to exist, masculine and feminine, and even the poles of more elementary topologies, like affirmation and negation, the tall and the short, the living and the thing.

It should not surprise that such conditions should have had a profoundly destabilizing effect not only on our societies but on our very notions of self, engendering what Appadurai describes as a "new order of instability

in the production of modern subjectivities" (4). Bahá'u'lláh Himself had prefigured this development, declaring with the tongue of prophecy in richly symbolic language: "The heaven of every religion hath been rent, and the earth of human understanding been cleft asunder. . . . The mountains have passed away, and the heavens have been folded together. . . . Every woman that hath had a burden in her womb hath cast her burden. We see men drunken in this Day, the Day in which men and angels have been gathered together" (*Gleanings* 45).

On the one hand, such processes, such collapses, such implosions of seemingly reified schemas, disclose possibilities for more inclusive and harmonious interpretations of the grand narratives that ordered for centuries our sense of ourselves and of others, enabling unprecedented degrees of cross-cultural insight and participation in shared meaning. On the other hand, the selfsame speed and nature of these changes furnishes fresh incentives for cultural conflict, for entrenchment in ever-hardening identities to serve as barricades to hold the tide of cultural relativism, "where meanings, in a chaotic pattern rather than neatly ordered, are of necessity relativized to one another."¹ This is perhaps nowhere more so than in the religious sphere, as the Universal House of Justice most recently highlighted, "The greater part of organized religion stands paralyzed at the threshold of the future, gripped in those very dogmas and claims of privileged access to truth that have been responsible for creating some of the most bitter conflicts dividing the earth's inhabitants. The consequences, in terms of human well-being, have been ruinous. It is surely unnecessary to cite in detail the horrors being visited upon hapless populations today by outbursts of fanaticism that shame the name of religion" ("Religious Leaders").

Faced with such politics of difference, grounded and legitimated in the religious sphere on the basis of conflicting claims and narratives that the attentive reader soon discovers within and between the sacred texts of the world's religions, it becomes clear that a full reappraisal of the doctrinal and philosophical underpinnings of interreligious conflict is a matter as challenging as it is urgent. "What cannot be morally justified," in the words of the Universal House of Justice, "is the manipulation of cultural

legacies that were intended to enrich spiritual experience, as a means to arouse prejudice and alienation. The primary task of the soul will always be to investigate reality, to live in accordance with the truths of which it becomes persuaded and to accord full respect to the efforts of others to do the same" ("Religious Leaders").

"As it turns out," reflects Donald Kalb, "globality can foster both, an ecumenical humanism or the fundamentalist rejection of just that" (4), and what we are left with is a fundamental uncertainty in our identities. Identity has become a fragmented, fissiparous space, and we are confronted with the spectacle of a world seeking for itself, its gender, its ethnicity, its religion or want of it, seeking everywhere, questioning everything, clinging to landmarks of once coherent, or more coherent selves, like another madman, this time not Nietzsche's but Nizami's: "It is related that one day they came upon Majnún sifting the dust, and his tears flowing down. They said, 'What doest thou?' He said, 'I seek for Laylí.' They cried, 'Alas for thee! Laylí is of pure spirit, and thou seekest her in the dust!' He said, 'I seek her everywhere; haply somewhere I shall find her'" (Bahá'u'lláh, *Seven Valleys* 6).

"Indeed," Kalb remarks, "the cultural economy that marks the global age revives all sorts of identity-movements, in particular those associated with religion and ethnicity" (3). Sometimes the processes of this search are powerfully ennobling, while at other times, as in the case of ethnic cleansing or religious intolerance, the pursuit of identity degrades the human spirit.

Nor were observers—even (or perhaps particularly) the most influential—expecting such a denouement to the seemingly indisputable death of God. "This," political scientists advert, "is a new phenomenon . . . instead of the Weberian iron cage and the progressive disenchantment of the world that was supposed to be congruent with modernization within the nation-state framework, we now face the spread of religion, ethnicity, and identity politics [where] . . . an as yet unknown and inflammatory cultural politics is produced, a politics of difference that cannot be contained within the 'cordon sanitaire' of the inevitably homogenizing modern nation-state" (Kalb 8).

It may indeed be true, in a mythic way, that in the course of the nineteenth century, “we killed God,” as Nietzsche so percipiently observed; as the process of expunging the sacred from the narrative of modernity, begun long before, was all but completed by the time “the Age of Extremes” (Hobsbawm) opened in the twentieth century.

But in religious consciousness this was not the first time God had been killed, and those times too the deed proved to be very far from final. In the Christian story, for example, such a cosmic act had already been perpetrated once in Jesus’s crucifixion. This did not, for Christians, prove to be the *end* of God, but rather a temporary obscuration, which at the term of a mere “three days” led Jesus’s followers to declare His resurrection, and the society that had discounted Him to reappraise the situation—as it perplexingly discovered the resurgence of an apparently moribund Christianity on a scale and vitality hitherto undreamt and inconceivable. It likewise would seem that the much later murder of God, whose perpetration Nietzsche recorded with a mixture of exhilaration and dismay, turns out to have been but a preliminary—and “after three days” God appears as strong as ever in the fractious and disturbing “return of the religious” into the consciousness, if not yet the language, of modernity. This return has not, indeed, been uncomplicated or harmonious. On the contrary, “inflammatory cultural politics” increasingly characterizes our discourses on religious identity, tragically illustrated in the iconic moment of 11 September 2001.

The problem arises when visions and discourses of modernity—fundamentalist, conservative, liberal, radical, or alternative—seek actively to become hegemonic. Without the gradual emergence of new, nonhegemonic, paradigms of identity East and West, global North and global South, it seems difficult to see a resolution or even containment of conflicts driven by the reciprocal and inevitable encroachments on identity attendant to global information and demographic flows.² Rather, one anticipates an exacerbation of these very tendencies towards social and political fragmentation and towards demands for restitution of intangibles like threatened values, pride, and familiarity.

While law and policy have an undoubted role to play in curbing to a

greater or lesser degree the conflicts, discrimination, human rights violations, and hate-mongering which cultural, and particularly interreligious, conflict and difference can engender, sustain, or legitimate, it is suggested that they need to be buttressed by, and themselves buttress, a more fundamental and far-ranging change of values, a revision of the grand narratives that sustain and promote cultural conflict today, in the absence of which even the most rigorous and enlightened legislative framework, national or international, backed by criminal sanctions and effective powers of enforcement will prove inadequate to the challenge before us.

A clear example and case study of this fact is the impact of the 1976 Race Relations Act in the UK, one of the most robust, long-established, institutionally backed pieces of legislation in this field in the world, counting on the full resources of the British police and judiciary for its enforcement. Notwithstanding the milestone it undoubtedly represents in the history of race relations in that country, the signal it sends and the abuses it does redress, it is unarguable that as a means of combating the evil of racism it has proven, with all the legislators' best intentions and the most advanced expert advice behind its formulation, a dismally inadequate instrument in the fight against racism. Thus in the year 2000 a Joseph Rowntree Foundation report found that nine out of ten complaints of racial harassment to the police in the UK did not result in prosecution. In civil law the situation is not much different, and the scale of the disparity is indeed shocking: forty-thousand incidents of racial abuse, harassment, or discrimination resulted in 124 injunctions and three antisocial behavior orders. If we add to this that the majority of such incidents go unreported, and those that are reported largely represent the culmination of a frequently protracted and painful history, we see that, for all its rigor, the Race Relations Act of 1976 is but a straw in the chill winds of racism, incapable of prosecuting, let alone preventing or diminishing, its blight.

If this is so under such comparatively optimum legislative and policy conditions within a strong and democratic nation-state, how much more impotent is law and policy likely to be in an field as politically and culturally fraught, as globally diffuse yet interconnected, as the cultural conflict

associated with interreligious tensions. Clearly, the springs of conflict are deeper and wider than law and policy can touch, and demand a sympathetic and receptive reevaluation of each other's cultural heritage, and an active, large-scale, and systematic search for nonhegemonic modes of discourse. The primary contribution of Bahá'u'lláh to this intellectual challenge, so acutely present in the motivating thrust of His vision for humanity, is what might be described the "logic of reconciliation" that constitutes the heart and soul of a Bahá'í hermeneutic, with the "reality of reconciliation" its a priori assumption.

EMBRACING PARADOX: THE EXPERIENCE OF CONTRADICTION
AND THE LOGIC OF RECONCILIATION

Shoghi Effendi is unequivocal on the reconciliatory logic of the Bahá'í Faith, "a Faith which is . . . the reconciler . . . of all religions" (*Promised Day* 112): "its avowed, its unalterable purpose is to widen their basis, to restate their fundamentals, to reconcile their aims" (*World Order* 114). "The aim of Bahá'u'lláh . . . is . . . to reconcile rather than accentuate the divergences of the conflicting creeds which disrupt present-day society" ("Faith of Bahá'u'lláh") inasmuch as "the revelation identified with Bahá'u'lláh reconciles [previous dispensations] seemingly divergent claims and doctrines" (*God Passes By* 100).

Such passages induce, on a superficial reading, a feeling of well-being, a promise of coherence, a sense of arrival at some kind of solid ground at a time when "every solid thing hath been made to flow" (Bahá'u'lláh, *Prayers and Meditations* 226), when all around we hear the voices, in the words of Spanish writer Fernando Savater, of those "for whom clamoring equally against everything—against slavery and against those that abolished it, against the liberty that establishes laws in defense of values capable of being universal and against those that reduce it to the intransigent whim of a few, against force utilized against tyrants and against such as is exerted by demagogic autocrats" ("Armagedon").

In such a context, Bahá'u'lláh's declaration of "the reality of reconciliation" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation* 354) beckons with a promise of coherence

which seems an oasis in a desert of fragmentation. But enticing though one finds Bahá'u'lláh's witness to the reality of reconciliation, and emboldened though one becomes by the directions and signals left in His writings to guide the way to its location, a closer look—"Repeat the gaze," as Bahá'u'lláh writes (*Gleanings* 146)—perhaps portends that the instinctual feelings of relief are premature. For it must be recognized that the very word "reconciliation" implies and necessitates a starting point of conflict, and that the reality of reconciliation, declared by Bahá'u'lláh, must be laboriously and imaginatively sought if it is to be found at all. Bahá'u'lláh's exposition of the reality of reconciliation, 'Abdu'l-Bahá's assertion of "the primal oneness deposited at the heart of all created things" (*Selections* 119), and like texts, impart to Bahá'í hermeneutics a sense of direction, a goal, and an interpretive starting point against which progress may be measured—but it is some way from obviating the necessity of the journey itself, or even warranting attainment.

This recognition, that we must still find the way to reconciliation along a trail of seemingly irreducible contradictions, may well induce what Muslim mystics and Bahá'í texts alike designate *ḥayra*, the wonderment, amazement, bewilderment, astonishment, marvel, and perplexity which make up the sixth valley of both Bahá'u'lláh's Seven Valleys and Attar's *Conference of the Birds*. Such astonishment may be elevated, but it is also a troubling condition, one which connotes a sensation that is unexpected and perhaps confusing difficult to reconcile. Such a state is expounded by Burckhardt as "a feeling of dismay or perplexity in front of a situation which appears as having no way out, or in front of incompatible truth on the rational level. It is the ultimate crisis of a mind which meets with its own limits" (ad-Darqáwí 11).

This is not an unusual experience, but is on the contrary typical, though we may do all we can to push it to the margins of our consciousness. As Bahiyyih Nakhjavani reminds us,

Religion . . . brings man to an encounter with the contradictions within himself again and again . . . Such confrontation not being the most comfortable experience in the world, what is more instinctive than that

man will find every possible means to avoid it? . . . one of the startling proofs of the validity of the Bahá'í Faith is that it requires us to face these contradictions, that it explores them, glorifies them, sets them at its very centre. From the simplest detail of function on an administrative committee to abstract speculations on the Word of God, we are challenged to beware of slipping into one extreme or the other, of losing sight of one facet of truth in order to support another. (109)

It is probable that no discourse—the Bahá'í writings included—having to communicate high spiritual truths through the crude instrument of human language will be free of the need for reconciliation, as the essential oneness of reality is refracted through the variegated multiplicity of words: “If I speak forth, many a mind will shatter, / and if I write, many a pen will break” (Bahá'u'lláh, *Seven Valleys* 29).

We are reminded of Shoghi Effendi's dictum: “One might liken Bahá'u'lláh's teachings to a sphere; there are points poles apart, and in between the thoughts and doctrines that unite them” (in *Compilation of Compilations* 1: 228).

We are thus confronted, within a Bahá'í theological perspective, with the validity of paradox; where positions polarize and yet are held to be harmonious, though “the thoughts and doctrines that unite them” may not be immediately apparent. Such paradox goes to the heart of very many related issues in Bahá'í hermeneutics. As Bahiyyih Nakhjavani insists,

A close textual study of Bahá'u'lláh's language as well as an investigation of any one of his teachings, challenges us to bear various elements in mind simultaneously. Though we may crave for some hard and fast rule, though we may wish for a ready solution to the restless dilemma we have to face in daily decisions, yet we find . . . that the secret of dealing with dilemmas is not elimination but reconciliation, not by exclusion but inclusion. The purpose of the Manifestation of God is not to give us a tidy set of rules that lead to the death of the spirit, but to toss us in the paradox of choice where we might live and burn. To be a Bahá'í is to have the courage to do this. (112–13)

Not unusually, in looking at the diverse claims, values, and worldviews that engage us, we find ourselves before what the Greek skeptics after Sextus Empiricus called *equipollence*,³ meaning the equal strength of seemingly contradictory arguments or postulates, an equipollence which they valued and we fear for its capacity to induce *epochee*, the suspension, not of belief as is generally held, but of assent; a rationality poised at the very threshold where doubt and conviction meet or separate. While for the Greek Pyrrhonists this led to a carefully nurtured state of philosophical and religious doubt, for Montaigne, for instance, it did the very opposite, as exemplified in his amusing yet profound *Apology for Raymond Sebond*, which may not be irrelevant to our exploration.

For Montaigne, equipollence did not consist of merely positing equally convincing arguments for irreconcilable conclusions, but rather in cultivating emotional empathy simultaneously for superficially antithetical stances and points of view, giving his deep religious faith a breadth of humanity that made his embrace of paradox perhaps an act of compassion and intellectual, even epistemic, magnanimity; an expression of respect for the relatively puny yet truly sacred efforts of frail humanity to make sense of an immense and bewilderingly various universe, in both its grandeur and its seemingly prosaic minutiae. This perspective has some relevance to the Bahá'í logic of reconciliation, which likewise depends on creative empathy for seemingly exclusive claims and qualities, on the imaginative embrace of paradox. As William Collins propounds, "The vision inspired by Bahá'u'lláh is a progression of images that is intended to heighten the experience of the paradoxical in a succession of contrasting yet related imageries, provoke a crisis of understanding, [and] inspire the leap to new knowledge" (13).

For paradox, it may be readily perceived, is not simply a literary device, but inherent in the art of living. "Once we have grasped that man is a bundle of contradictions," Nakhjavani concludes, "we see that his power to survive, to create and revive his civilizations depends upon his ability to find structures, capable of serving his individual and social needs, that contain the maximum paradox. A study of the Bahá'í Faith shows us such a structure and confronts us with such paradoxes. It is a religion, uniquely

flexible and disturbingly comprehensive, which requires us to sustain and support conflicts without abdication or compromise. . . . This requires something akin to artistry. We need to exert our utmost creativity and become spiritual artists, so to speak” (116).

FROM THE ABSTRACT TO THE PERSONAL: EMBRACING THE OTHER
IN THE FACE OF HOSTILITY

From the perspective of the Bahá'í teachings therefore, the key to resolving the cultural wars that arise from, or are legitimated in terms of, religious difference, and the all-pervasive conflicts of identity more generally, is to embrace the other. “O ye lovers of this wronged one!” exclaims ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, “Cleanse ye your eyes, so that ye behold no man as different from yourselves. See ye no strangers; rather see all men as friends, for love and unity come hard when ye fix your gaze on otherness” (*Selections* 24).

“Souls are inclined toward estrangement. Steps should first be taken to do away with this estrangement, for only then will the Word take effect” (*Selections* 265). This, as the Bahá'í sacred writings aver, is a revolutionary step in the history of religious identity:

Religionists have considered the world of humanity as two trees: one divine and merciful, the other satanic; they themselves the branches, leaves and fruit of the divine tree and all others who differ from them in belief the product of the tree which is satanic. Therefore, sedition and warfare, bloodshed and strife have been continuous among them. The greatest cause of human alienation has been religion because each party has considered the belief of the other as anathema and deprived of the mercy of God.

The teachings specialized in Bahá'u'lláh are addressed to humanity. He says, “Ye are all the leaves of one tree.” He does not say, “Ye are the leaves of two trees: one divine, the other satanic.” He has declared that each individual member of the human family is a leaf or branch upon the Adamic tree; that all are sheltered beneath the protecting

mercy and providence of God; that all are the children of God, fruit upon the one tree of his love. God is equally compassionate and kind to all the leaves, branches and fruit of this tree. (Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation* 230)⁴

As a personal orientation, this is an outlook that Bahá'ís have been cultivating since Bahá'u'lláh first attracted a company of God-intoxicated lovers (*‘áshiqán*) to “the Abode of Peace,” a designation for Baghdad today brimming with pathos, near the banks of the Tigris. We find it evidenced in a letter written in 1867 by the Bahá'ís of that city to the United States Congress petitioning for support against the oppression of the Persian government and Ottoman Empire, at a time when religious segregation remained a fact upheld, institutionalized, and sustained by religious belief. The letter was delivered to Secretary of State William H. Seward, immersed in dreams of grandeur that drove him to finally purchase Alaska in the course of that same year, even as the union struggled to rebuild the country after the carnage of the Secession. It is not known whether that former cabinet colleague of Lincoln and master of political intrigue read the exotic letter, telling of “a perfect, wise and virtuous Man” Who

appeared in Persia, he had knowledge of all religions, laws and knew the history of wise men, kings and the rules of nations; he saw that the people oppose, hate and kill, abstain and [are] afraid to mix with each other. Nay, they consider each other unclean, though they are all human beings, having different and numerous religions, and that the people are like unto sheep without a shepherd—That learned and wise man wrote many works containing the rules of union, harmony and love between human beings, and the way of abandoning the differences, untruthfulness, and vexations between them, that people may unite and agree on one way and to walk straightforwardly in the straight and expedient way, and that no one should avert or religiously abstain from intercourse with another, of Jews, Christians, Mohammadans and others. That wise man revealed himself till he appeared like the high sun in midday. (“Petition”)

The embrace of the other is thus a long-standing Bahá'í aspiration going back to the very origins of the Bahá'í community.

But even this is not enough. For beyond the theological, cultural, and sociological constructs that separate us there lies something deeper, much harder to overcome, which invests these divisive conceptual boundaries with personal meaning, moral suasion, and emotional conviction. I refer to the self-perpetuating legacies of pain, the personal experiences of hurt of each individual, as we wound one another and are wounded, intentionally or accidentally, in the course of our lives. Whether it be in situations of armed conflict, where both sides have lost brothers, or wives, or sons, or grandmothers, or fiancés, or best friends, to enemy fire, or in the more prosaic, yet cumulatively perhaps as divisive wounds of prejudice, discrimination, and hostility, we can all find footholds in polarizing discourses to explain and counter the wrongs we have been made to endure.

Indeed, it is probably true to say that hostility, indifference, and hurt are a universal part of the human experience. From childhood, we each have experienced at many points in our lives the barbs of sarcasm, cold responses, and, for very many, recurrent violence—whether physical or verbal. As we grow older, the context changes, but the experience of antagonism does not disappear. We may experience it at work, at home, in the street. Some of us suffer hostile treatment because of our personality, our color, or our faith. Some for no reason other than for being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Sometimes opposition is the result of our own lack of wisdom or moderation. Others' hostility is blind and impervious to our actions. For many Bahá'ís, the experience of enmity extends to severe and savage oppression in many lands and throughout our history, and nowhere more so, or more persistently, than in Iran, where the deprivation of an entire sector of society of the most basic human rights worryingly persists in an acute manner up to the present moment.

The way we respond, not only in public, but in our own inner life, in our hearts, to hurt and indifference, unfairness and offence, oppression and injustice, is a choice of far-reaching consequences for the character of our communities and the quality of our lives and of our souls. The challenge presented by the Bahá'í writings in this regard is truly formidable:

Bahá'u'lláh has clearly said in His Tablets that if you have an enemy, consider him not as an enemy. Do not simply be long-suffering; nay, rather, love him. Your treatment of him should be that which is becoming to lovers. Do not even say that he is your enemy. Do not see any enemies. Though he be your murderer, see no enemy. Look upon him with the eye of friendship. Be mindful that you do not consider him as an enemy and simply tolerate him, for that is but stratagem and hypocrisy. To consider a man your enemy and love him is hypocrisy. This is not becoming of any soul. You must behold him as a friend. You must treat him well. This is right. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation* 225)

Such a response does not seem possible without the transcendent frame of reference and the depth of spiritual motivation and resources that the world religions have incomparably proven themselves, at their best, capable of engendering from even the most unlikely personal starting point. To offer love, or rather "great love" to the person who thirsts for your blood and that of your loved ones, or who has claimed the life of one of your beloved, tests the limits of human compassion to the utmost. Only, the Bahá'í writings assert, through divine assistance is such an act achievable. In this context, our readiness to be vulnerable can act both as healing water that gently fills the gaps in our understanding and our insight into each other, or as fuel to feed the flame of disharmony when tied to expectations of each other that are unrealistic, or when expressed in language that is immoderate, or when touched by bitterness or lingering resentment. The individual, in this case, may be taken as an index of humanity, and the very same choices, the very same tensions that, in the last analysis, tear apart nations and societies, and their solution, may be traced to the replication in a myriad individual responses to this spiritual dilemma.

"Ultimately," the Bahá'í writings assert, "all the battle of life is within the individual. No amount of organization can solve the inner problems or produce or prevent, as the case may be, victory or failure at a crucial moment. In such times as these particularly, individuals are torn by great forces at large in the world, and we see some weak ones suddenly become miraculously strong, and strong ones fail" (Shoghi Effendi, in *Compilation*

of *Compilations 2: 12*). When the act of vulnerability is divorced from a consciousness of the presence and almighty assistance of God, it generally comes to depend on human or material means for fulfillment, exposing one to disappointment in others, to hopelessness, and to disconnection. When, on the contrary, the act of vulnerability is “linked with the Source of divine grace” (Bahá’u’lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán 232*), then spiritual abundance sustains the act of self-exposure, confidence in ultimate fruition in God’s will informs the manner and tone of our communication, and the possible outward disappointments and rejections we might suffer are powerless to disillusion or divide us. For such a link with the Source of grace implies a trust in Him above and beyond this world, which is the source of true inner peace and contentment.

The fearless exposure of our hearts in love before the experience of pain, injustice, and conflict, then, begins in a keen consciousness of God’s omnipotence and mercy:

Look ye not upon the creatures, turn ye to their Creator. See ye not the never-yielding people, see but the Lord of Hosts. Gaze ye not down upon the dust, gaze upward at the shining sun, which hath caused every patch of darksome earth to glow with light. O army of God!

When calamity striketh, be ye patient and composed. However afflictive your sufferings may be, stay ye undisturbed, and with perfect confidence in the abounding grace of God, brave ye the tempest of tribulations and fiery ordeals. (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections 75*)

In so doing, we are but following Bahá’u’lláh’s own example, which invests His summons with its immense moral authority and emotional force to trigger transformation in the receptive heart. “His reason,” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá elucidates, “for putting on the heavy iron chains and for becoming the very embodiment of utter resignation and meekness, was to lead every soul on earth to concord, to fellow-feeling, to oneness; to make known amongst all peoples the sign of the singleness of God, so that at last the primal oneness deposited at the heart of all created things would bear its destined fruit” (*Selections 264*).

This is why inner transmutation of hostility and rancor into love and acceptance of the other, even when his otherness consists in nothing less than implacable hostility toward oneself, not only holds the promise of breaking the millennial cycle of conflict, but, in the nearly impossible challenge it represents to our natural emotional instincts, is held out as both test and proof of the message of Bahá'u'lláh to regenerate a world in the firm grip of war and estrangement:

[All] the friends [have] been commanded to show forth fellowship and love, consideration and generosity and loving-kindness to every community on earth. . . . The meaning of this is that ye must show forth tenderness and love to every human being, even to your enemies, and welcome them all with unalloyed friendship, good cheer, and loving-kindness. When ye meet with cruelty and persecution at another's hands, keep faith with him; when malevolence is directed your way, respond with a friendly heart. To the spears and arrows rained upon you, expose your breasts for a target mirror-bright; and in return for curses, taunts and wounding words, show forth abounding love. Thus will all peoples witness the power of the Most Great Name, and every nation acknowledge the might of the Ancient Beauty, and see how He hath toppled down the walls of discord, and how surely He hath guided all the peoples of the earth to oneness; how He hath lit man's world, and made this earth of dust to send forth streams of light. (Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections* 21)

This approach, it must be emphasized, need not involve naivete, still less ignoring, much less abetting, injustice. Rather, it takes an inner hold upon our psyche, transcending and transmuting the self-destructive, self-defeating element of resentment and bitterness. The application of this ethic of compassion, moreover, is different for the individual and for the collective:

O ye beloved of the Lord! The Kingdom of God is founded upon equity and justice, and also upon mercy, compassion, and kindness to every living soul. Strive ye then with all your heart to treat compassionately all humankind—except for those who have some selfish,

private motive, or some disease of the soul. Kindness cannot be shown the tyrant, the deceiver, or the thief, because, far from awakening them to the error of their ways, it maketh them to continue in their perversity as before. No matter how much kindliness ye may expend upon the liar, he will but lie the more, for he believeth you to be deceived, while ye understand him but too well, and only remain silent out of your extreme compassion. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections* 21)

From this passage one may conclude that equity and justice rule our actions in relation to the collective welfare of society, while mercy, compassion, and kindness rule our personal attitudes in relation to “every living soul.” We are called to express in action such a primary attitude of mercy whenever doing so will not be destructive to the social fabric. What 'Abdu'l-Bahá is advocating, it becomes clear, is responsible social action against injustice, coupled with inner freedom from the shackles of hostility.

We are thus brought, once more, to the fundamental challenge of reconciliation, this time in our own moral compass, as is so beautifully, and so challengingly expressed by Shoghi Effendi: “Nothing short of the spirit of a true Bahá'í can hope to reconcile the principles of mercy and justice, of freedom and submission, of the sanctity of the right of the individual and of self-surrender, of vigilance, discretion, and prudence on the one hand, and fellowship, candour, and courage on the other” (in *Compilation of Compilations* 1:52).

FROM THE PERSONAL TO THE COLLECTIVE:
THE PRACTICE OF RECONCILIATION IN BAHÁ'Í COMMUNITY LIFE

As in the realms of religious discourse, and of personal response, so also in collective interaction: the Bahá'í teachings trace the goal of unity, furnish the impulse and energy required to face and gradually overcome its obstacles—not in a linear, but in an organic way, paved not just with advances but reverses also—and give us an array of potent tools to transform millennia upon millennia of disunity. But it does not save us from walking the distance with our own feet.

For a Bahá'í, “the ultimate issues *are* spiritual. The Cause is not a political

party nor an ideology, much less an engine for political agitation against this or that social wrong. The process of transformation it has set in motion advances by inducing a fundamental change of consciousness, and the challenge it poses to everyone who would serve it is to free oneself from attachment to inherited assumptions and preferences that are irreconcilable with the Will of God for humanity's coming of age" (*Century of Light* 150).

In the course of that journey, we discover we are but poorly shod, the road is thorny, and sometimes our feet bleed. When a person joins the Bahá'í community, they might legitimately carry very high expectations of the maturity and freedom from prejudice within a community committed like no other to the unity of humanity in all its diversity, and it can be very hard to discover that the Bahá'í community is not, as in the Christian monastic ideal, a "community of the elect," but rather, as the passages cited above make clear, a community of people, in all their variegated degrees of awareness and spiritual development. What brings Bahá'ís together is not a common level of spiritual achievement, but rather a common sincerity of aspiration. It is that, whatever their starting point, they are jointly committed to advancing and improving, day by day a little more by means of an inner strength imparted, and along a path traced, by the guidance, exhortations, and beauty of the writings of Bahá'u'lláh.

And yet, this no more than that, a point of departure in a journey of healing ancestral rifts in the prosaic arena of close personal interaction with individuals who may have very little in common, outside of the Bahá'í teachings themselves, with oneself. In fact, one of the greatest challenges of being a Bahá'í lies in the fact that the Bahá'í community brings one to a frontal encounter with cultural diversity, and, inevitably, with cross-cultural tension. No one can be expected to know adequately and relate effectively to a culture to which they have been but little exposed, more so when some kind of stigma attaches in wider society to a given ethnic or cultural group. In practice, an inevitable effect of bringing diversity together—not only of ethnicity or culture (and the Bahá'í community incorporates a formidably daunting 2,100 ethnicities and nationalities), but also of temperament, inclination, personality, emotional strength, economic position, educational background, and more—is the

mutual encounter with blind spots that keep us from appreciating or effectively honoring each other's distinctiveness.

The very diversity brought together under the unifying framework of the Bahá'í community means that of necessity, as believers from widely differing backgrounds get to know each other, they will tread on each other's sensibilities, display ignorance about each other's values, and, generally inadvertently, act occasionally in ways that unconsciously impede heartfelt and unfettered participation in an ever-evolving community.

From one perspective it is distressing, since it negates the very aims that sustain our aspirations, albeit generally unconsciously. From another perspective it is truly encouraging. It means that we are encountering one another beyond the surface, and are confronting, not avoiding, the very real and deep-seated factors that have so bitterly and intractably divided our societies. As events, they are discouraging, but seen within a process of reconciliation on a global scale, they are in fact important milestones in our painstaking advance toward unity. If conflict were not in place, reconciliation would be irrelevant. But, our writings state, the purpose of this Faith is the reconciliation of the contending peoples of the world. If there were no pain in this encounter, chances are that the encounter, in an authentic way, was not taking place. Without friction, there is no movement possible.

This makes of the Bahá'í community, properly viewed, a training ground for conflict resolution, progressively (and painfully) endowing an ever-growing and truly representative segment of humanity with skills which, honed in constant, arduous, and imaginative effort within a community setting, make Bahá'ís humble but effective catalysts of world unity at the grassroots, from the most intimate and domestic sphere of family relations to the more intangible yet no less vital elements of social cohesion.

FROM THE COMMUNAL TO THE POLITICAL

We have seen that for the individual Bahá'í the logic of reconciliation—the imperative toward embracing the other so as not to allow the poison of his hostility to take hold and enchain our own inner life—does not negate the individual responsibility for protecting the rights of the community and actively intervening to stop and redress injustice. In the same way the focus

of the Bahá'í community on overcoming the legacies of estrangement within the powerful spaces for conflict resolution that are systematically engendered by its administrative and community structures, does not entail its nonengagement with the wider, entrenched, and frequently bellicose conflicts that so direly afflict the world today, conflicts increasingly, and inflammatorily, framed or cloaked in the language of religion.

“The programme of the Bahá'í Cause itself operates in the political realm to the extent that it is concerned with inducing changes in public policy and behaviour at local, national and international levels . . . in doing so, its efforts are scrupulous to avoid entanglement in the agendas that serve the interests of particular parties, factions, or similarly biased political forces.” In this labor, “The most obvious parameter . . . is, of course, the moral obligation to demonstrate in our lives the sense of justice that the Faith teaches” (Universal House of Justice, 27 November 2001). In its unremitting quest for justice, in the personal, community, and social spheres, the logic of reconciliation gives to Bahá'í social action a distinctive character, which is embodied, inspired, and guided by the example of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Four key elements may be seen in His approach to injustice, prejudice, and conflict, which may be said to embody Bahá'u'lláh's logic of reconciliation to the field of social action, of which we take the case of race relations as an example:⁵

1. Uncompromising in His upholding of the principle of the unity of humanity, the equality of the races, and the fundamental harmony of religions. Without respect for the occasion, He took every opportunity to demonstrate in His own actions the principle of the oneness of humankind, whether by encouraging Bahá'ís to intermarry at a time when the traveling of blacks and whites in a single train was outlawed in various states; breaking protocol very publicly at high-level meetings to honor minorities within the very environment that excluded them; instructing the Bahá'ís to hold integrated meetings when they were unthinkable or highly controversial in wider society, and uniquely challenging to an American Bahá'í community that was split down the middle on the wisdom of doing this and thus courting social opprobrium and controversy.

2. Unconfrontational in His engagement with the issues. Not once in His talks or the accounts of pilgrims or in His writings does ‘Abdu’l-Bahá directly condemn an individual or a specific segment of the population as racist, even as His actions loudly, uncompromisingly, and unmistakably challenge the very foundations of prejudice.

3. Long-term in His strategy. When they arrived in ‘Akká, Bahá’u’lláh and His companions were ostracized, jeered, deprived of food, and mistreated. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá set out to undermine the very root of prejudice by establishing bonds of friendship and respect with the very source of the attacks—resulting, by the end of Bahá’u’lláh’s imprisonment, in the passive disobedience of His jailers of their orders to maintain the stringent confinement and isolation of Bahá’u’lláh and His followers, indeed allowing Him to move out of his prison! Prejudices had, it must be admitted, become severely eroded—over a period of decades of consistent and systematic cultivation of genuine bonds of love. With the American Bahá’ís, rather than condemn those who opposed interracial marriages, flouting His explicit and widely circulated guidance—or those who persisted in holding segregated meetings when He called for integrated ones—He focused on reinforcing the progressive tendencies and proscribing, without aggressively condemning, the regressive tendencies in the community. The Bahá’í community, with all its imperfections, was well in advance of any other community of a similar size and make-up in its journey to overcome the legacy of centuries of prejudice, resentment, oppression, and hostility between the races.

4. Reliant on the power and divine impulse in the Faith, which transforms copper into gold. Not for an instant, in the gloomiest moments, was His hope and confidence shaken, or His certitude in the regenerating power of Bahá’u’lláh’s message and its capacity to heal the prejudices of mankind. Consequently, His response was grounded in a peacefulness and a joy and an abundance that stand in sharp contrast to the (legitimate) anger, hopelessness, and alienation that characterizes much of today’s noble efforts to heal racism.

FROM THE COMMUNAL TO THE SOCIAL: THE BAHÁ'Í COMMUNITY AND
THE RECONCILIATION OF THE CONTENDING PEOPLES OF THE EARTH

The conclusion of the twentieth century, the Universal House of Justice tells us, provides “a unique vantage point” to observe what they designate as the “convergence” between the profound changes that took place in the world in that period, and the emergence from obscurity of a globally unified and unifying Bahá'í community (in *Century of Light* i). At the heart of this convergence lies a planet-wide process of technological, economic, and cultural transition that may be said to be unique in history, which has come to be known as globalization—a controversial, polarizing concept, five defining features of which, however, have been authoritatively identified by Held and McGrew as cutting across the full compass of the theoretical and ideological divide:

- a growth in economic interconnectedness within and among regions, with multifaceted and uneven consequences
- interregional and global competition that challenges old hierarchies and generates new inequalities
- new transnational and transborder problems that call into question the role, functions and accountability of national government. An expansion of international governance at regional and global level
- an inherent requirement for new modes of thinking about politics, economics and cultural change (38–39)

We are immediately reminded of Bahá'u'lláh's prophetic disclosure: “Soon, will the present-day order be rolled up, and a new one spread out in its stead” (*Gleanings* 7).

In considering the significance of the Bahá'í community to this vast, conflict-ridden, and in many ways as-yet unpredictable process, we are confronted with the question mark globalization places on the very meaning of community itself. An “untidy, confusing, and difficult term,” according to Jacqueline Scherer in a thought-provoking monograph from 1972 (1). If anything, the concept of community has become even more confusing and untidy in the intervening decades, as the entropic pull of

globalization, social dislocation, and technological advance have eroded time-honored markers in localities around the world. George Hillery's common-sense definition of *community* as a collection of "persons in social interaction within a geographic area and having one or more common ties" (9) seems in retrospect increasingly inadequate to the point of quaintness. The bonds of place, creed, and even family have become more and more fluid (more and more fragile) in the tumultuous period which Hobsbawm designated the Age of Extremes and the Bahá'í writings boldly call the Century of Light.

Scherer, in the early 1970s, had already emphasized the destabilizing influence which the modern potential for mobility—social, psychological, and geographical—has had on traditional geographic communities, making place a far less determinant factor of identity.⁶ And while traditional views of community involved an expectation of more or less significant numbers, Scherer questioned the importance of size as a criterion for defining community, conceiving of a grouping of as little as six people potentially functioning as a community.⁷ Rather, for Scherer, first and foremost, "community represents a particular set of social relationships" (37). She considered the "essentials" characterizing the distinctive social relationships that make up a community as "a 'core of commonness' or commonality that includes a collective perspective, agreed upon definitions, and some agreement about values." Members "are committed to the community to the extent of identifying directly or indirectly with the whole" (122n). Scherer's definition of community demonstrates striking and perhaps unexpected "family resemblances" (to invoke the later Wittgenstein) to the earliest English usage of the word.

Etymologists, those fond genealogists of language, trace the literary emergence of the English word *community* as far back as the fourteenth century, to the proud if tenuous histories of John Barbour (the irreducible Scotsman credited with fathering Scottish literature), and to the radical mother-tongue Christianity of Wycliffe, whose ecclesiastical subversions anticipated Luther by a century. Barbour and Wycliffe introduced the word as a noun denoting a body of people associated by common status or pursuits. By the fifteenth century, Middle English had deepened the word *community* further to denote common character. Thus *community* came to

evoke not only an objective sociological relationship, but a psychological dimension as well, an inner likeness.

Where Scherer's definition and the early usage of the word *community* resemble each other most significantly is precisely in this marrying of the inner and the outer aspects of togetherness, making of physical or even social proximity (as in Hillery's definition) at most but half the equation of community.

The American psychiatrist and popular author M. Scott Peck goes even further in emphasizing the qualitative over the spatial and quantitative aspects of community, defining community as "a group of individuals who have learned how to communicate honestly with each other, whose relationships go deeper than their masks of composure, and who have developed some commitment to 'rejoice together, mourn together' and to 'delight in each other, make others' condition our own.'" Of the word *community*, Peck writes, "We apply it to almost any collection of individuals—a town, a church, a synagogue, a fraternal organization, an apartment complex, a professional association—regardless of how poorly those individuals communicate with each other. It is a false use of the word" (59).

For Peck, therefore, *community* is a prescriptive word, one that seeks not merely to describe, as Scherer and Hillery do, existing forms of community, but to actively cultivate a particular ideal of community life. In this Peck is heir to a long tradition of community dreaming. Indeed the very irruption of the word *community* into the English language had at its root impassioned revisionings of community. Barbour's great achievement was an extended, ardent poem that gave birth to Scottish literature, the romance of Robert the Bruce, which built, as Benedict Anderson would say, an "imagined community"⁸ around the chronicle of the very recent unification of a fiercely independent Scotland by the eponymous bandit-nobleman turned king. Wycliffe likewise is remembered for his radical questioning of contemporary ties of creed and sovereignty in the name of a higher vision of community, championed in passionate tracts and in his revolutionary vernacular translation of the Bible. Thus, throughout the ages, communities have been not merely social spaces we inhabit, but also destinations we envision and anticipate,

and the literature of community has encompassed both descriptive and prescriptive formulations.

It becomes apparent, then, that in sociological terms, the Bahá'í community falls into what Scherer described as a synthetic community: "an attempt to build and develop a community consciously and deliberately" (120–21). Unlike communities into which we are born, or communities with an established history into which we merely enter, synthetic communities involve a conscious effort at community building. The Bahá'ís are engaged in just such a venture, on an epic scale, for the very *raison d'être* of the Bahá'í community is precisely to engender, in Scherer's definition cited earlier, "a 'core of commonness' or commonality that includes a collective perspective, agreed upon definitions, and some agreement about values . . . a context for personal integration" (121) of truly global scope.

We are, however, yet to identify what Bahá'ís specifically mean by *community*, what it is that should be the end product of the sacrifices of nearly two centuries of community-building effort, and the centuries more that lie ahead for the community forged by Bahá'u'lláh's life and message? What, in the light of our understanding of the birth and evolution of a new world religion, is the Bahá'í meaning of community? The answer is perhaps most clearly and most directly articulated by the Universal House of Justice in their message to the Bahá'í world dated 21 April 1996: "A community is . . . a comprehensive unit of civilization composed of individuals, families and institutions that are originators and encouragers of systems, agencies and organizations working together with a common purpose for the welfare of people both within and beyond its own borders; it is a composition of diverse, interacting participants that are achieving unity in an unremitting quest for spiritual and social progress."

This definition is both descriptive and prescriptive. It describes a "comprehensive unit of civilization," emerging from the interaction of three key constituents (individuals, families, and institutions) originating and encouraging "systems, agencies and organizations." But the definition gifted to us by the Universal House of Justice is not merely descriptive, it also is prescriptive. It consists, yes, of a unit made up of individuals, families, and institutions originating and encouraging systems, agencies, and

organizations (nothing uniquely Bahá'í about that). But for a community to be associated with the vision of Bahá'u'lláh, it must, further, be “working together with a common purpose for the welfare of people both within and beyond its own borders.” The Bahá'í community, then, is an altruistic community, and the borders it expects itself to cross are not merely geographical but also, and most challengingly, of identity.

It is also important to recognize that, as a fundamental process, the labor of community building is not a new endeavor for us. On the contrary, it is a quintessential part of being a Bahá'í, since the earliest origins of the Bahá'í community in the second half of the nineteenth century. The Dawn-Breakers, after all, embodied the spiritual process indicated by the Universal House of Justice in their above-cited description of Bahá'í community as “a composition of diverse, interacting participants that are achieving unity in an unremitting quest for spiritual and social progress.”

“Most of those who surrounded Bahá'u'lláh,” wrote Nabil . . . “exercised such care in sanctifying and purifying their souls, that they would suffer no word to cross their lips that might not conform to the will of God, nor would they take a single step that might be contrary to his good-pleasure.” . . .

The joyous feasts which these companions, despite their extremely modest earnings, continually offered in honor of their Beloved; the gatherings, lasting far into the night, in which they loudly celebrated, with prayers, poetry and song, the praises of the Báb, of Quddús and of Bahá'u'lláh; the fasts they observed; the vigils they kept; the dreams and visions which fired their souls, and which they recounted to each other with feelings of unbounded enthusiasm; the eagerness with which those who served Bahá'u'lláh performed His errands, waited upon His needs, and carried heavy skins of water for His ablutions and other domestic purposes . . . these, and many others, will forever remain associated with the history of that immortal period. (Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* 134, 135)

Such stories are not merely inspiring, they are crucial to what it means to build a Bahá'í community today, and provide an indispensable lens

through which to understand the efforts of the last century. For Shoghi Effendi linked the “efficacy” of the “instruments” we fashion, the institutions, systems, agencies, and organizations of our communities, to the spirit of those breakers of the dawn, writing, “For upon our present-day efforts, and above all upon the extent to which we strive to remodel our lives after the pattern of sublime heroism associated with those gone before us, must depend the efficacy of the instruments we now fashion— instruments that must erect the structure of that blissful Commonwealth which must signalize the Golden Age of our Faith” (*World Order* 98).

The Bahá’í vision of community thus harmoniously integrates the structural approach of sociologists of community; the personal and interpersonal approach of psychiatrists; and the visionary approach of artists, idealists, and revolutionaries, embedding all three perspectives on community in the transformative context of the Day of God and the oneness of humanity.

The significance, from this perspective, of the humble day-to-day labors of Bahá’ís across the world in raising up, sustaining, and maturing as-yet embryonic Bahá’í communities and institutions is therefore breathtaking. Bahá’ís, if we accept the perspective of the Bahá’í writings, are not building merely local communities in infinitely varied localities, but rather basic units of a civilization which Shoghi Effendi declares will constitute the “fairest fruit” of the revelation of Bahá’u’lláh, and signalize the advent of the promised “golden age.” Their progressively sharpening degree of awareness about the nature and significance of their task allows Bahá’ís to work towards this vision not merely consciously but, crucially, in a systematic manner. The pattern of evolution of Bahá’í communities, although enriched and influenced, is not ultimately dictated by accidents of geography or language, but by an overarching vision of a global society built from the bottom up, united in all its diversity by an understanding of organic growth, a focus on process, and vast stores of spiritual inspiration and guidance.

The achievement of a worldwide Bahá’í community made up of diverse individuals and families and a global infrastructure of local administrative institutions has thus enabled Bahá’ís, in this second half of the second Bahá’í century, to turn their attention at long last from the building up of

the Administrative Order to the birthing of Bahá'u'lláh's new World Order. Of this opportunity previous generations have been deprived, as Shoghi Effendi himself testifies, "The second century is destined to witness a tremendous deployment and a notable consolidation of the forces working towards the world-wide development of that Order, as well as the first stirrings of that World Order, of which the present Administrative System is at once the precursor, the nucleus and pattern—an Order which, as it slowly crystallizes and radiates its benign influence over the entire planet, will proclaim at once the coming of age of the whole human race, as well as the maturity of the Faith itself, the progenitor of that Order" (*Messages to America* 96–97).

It is now, in this second half of the second Bahá'í century, that the work of the Bahá'í community entails, as unveiled by Shoghi Effendi, the ushering in, on a global scale, of the first stirrings of Bahá'u'lláh's New World Order. The last one-hundred years saw the raising up of a wide-ranging network of basic administrative and spiritual instruments of community building. The task that faces Bahá'ís today is building a wide-ranging network of comprehensive units of civilization that, patterned on sublime heroism and working to a common purpose, promote the welfare of those within and outside their borders, achieving unity in a collective pursuit of spiritualization and social progress.

CONCLUSION

Wherefore, O ye beloved of the Lord, bestir yourselves, do all in your power to be as one, to live in peace, each with the others: for ye are all the drops from but one ocean, the foliage of one tree, the pearls from a single shell, the flowers and sweet herbs from the same one garden. And achieving that, strive ye to unite the hearts of those who follow other faiths. (Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections* 280)

The world today is riven by profound and intense divisions, predicated on seemingly unbridgeable polarities. The survival, some warn, else the prosperity, of humanity hangs upon our capacity to transcend and reconcile

the contradictions and paradoxes that divide, not only our countries and nations, or even our doctrines and theologies, but our individual hearts in the wear and tear of daily interaction. There is no shortage of theoretical alternatives, of moral exhortations, realist critiques, or utopian visions; and the Bahá'í writings clearly contribute fresh and compelling perspectives to each of these aspects of a possible solution to the trail of destruction wreaked by the combination of perhaps unprecedented global fractiousness and unprecedented global proximity. What is really missing, however, is the moral, or—more precisely—the spiritual impulse capable of motivating the depth of response required, not merely theoretical, but practical, personal, emotional, and ultimately existential.

No mere conceptual appeal has the authority to effect such a far-reaching change in human interaction. Not even some large-scale draconian coercion could effect, much less sustain such a change of attitude and behavior, as the tragic and genocidal tale of totalitarian attempts to shape and determine human conscience and conduct amply attest. It is only the moral authority of embodied example, on the one hand, and the proven, functional effectiveness of the ideas and mores thus exemplified, on the other, that alone can hope, in the long run (and to approach the task with short-term expectations would seem fatuous and self-defeating) to leverage consent and replication on the scale required to meet the challenges of the current moment of transition.

“Until the public sees . . . a true pattern, in action, of something better than it already has, it will not respond . . . in large numbers” (on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, 13 March 1944). This, then, is the difficult challenge that beckons to Bahá'ís as their most immediate, if not the only, contribution to the reconciliation of the contending peoples of the earth and the construction of a fairer, more beneficent, and more effective world order. A labor largely anonymous and unsung (dependent therefore primarily on purity of motive and depth of conviction), and yet, seen in the perspective of the long-term process at work in the world today, nonetheless truly significant and pregnant with potential. Nor should such a painstaking road of self-improvement and daily confrontation within and without the insidious and invidious legacies of prejudice, discrimination, suspicion,

and mistrust, of inherent tendencies toward estrangement, be misconstrued as a naive and politically barren journey of introspection. On the contrary, it is an increasingly compelling, long-term, and progressively influential platform for social and nonpartisan political action. In this respect the Universal House of Justice sounds a candid invitation: "Let those seriously concerned about the state and fate of the world give due attention to the claims of Bahá'u'lláh. Let them realize that the storms battering at the foundations of society will not be stilled unless and until spiritual principles are actively engaged in the search for solutions to social problems" (26 November 1992).

If the Bahá'í teachings luminously indicate these underlying spiritual principles, latent or explicit in the scriptures of every major world religion, the Bahá'í community presents an ever-approximate, yet surely compelling example of how these principles may be harnessed to effect the individual and collective transformation and evolution which the very demands of the age impose increasingly upon us as urgent steps away from self-destruction and toward global prosperity and inner maturation: "[The Bahá'í community's] existence is yet another convincing proof of the practicality of its Founder's vision of a united world, another evidence that humanity can live as one global society, equal to whatever challenges its coming of age may entail. If the Bahá'í experience can contribute in whatever measure to reinforcing hope in the unity of the human race, we are happy to offer it as a model for study" (Universal House of Justice, *Promise 5*).

As the ideological models of the past find their limits before emerging social realities, and religion itself makes its return to the sociopolitical arena felt in ever more perplexing, and often violence-ridden ways, there is perhaps no moment more timely than the present to "give due attention to the claims of Bahá'u'lláh," and study the Bahá'í experience as a model of real potential relevance to the quest for new paradigms and refined solutions to the political, social, psychological, and, increasingly, spiritual challenges of globalization.

NOTES

1. See Kalb.
2. See Appadurai, and Kalb's critique of the same.
3. On equipollence and the Greek skeptics, see Burnyeat.
4. This is recurrent theme in the writings and talks of 'Abdu'l-Bahá (see *Promulgation* 453, 266; *Selections* section 7, etc.).
5. See Morrison; Perry; McMullen.
6. See Scherer ch. 2, esp. pp. 13–15.
7. See Scherer ch. 3.
8. See Anderson.

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