One Common Faith

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Foreword
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Foreword

At Riḍván 2002, we addressed an open letter to the world's religious leaders. Our action arose out of awareness that the disease of sectarian hatreds, if not decisively checked, threatens harrowing consequences that will leave few areas of the world unaffected. The letter acknowledged with appreciation the achievements of the interfaith movement, to which Bahá'ís have sought to contribute since an early point in the movement's emergence. Nevertheless, we felt we must be forthright in saying that, if the religious crisis is to be addressed as seriously as is occurring with respect to other prejudices afflicting humankind, organized religion must find within itself a comparable courage to rise above fixed conceptions inherited from a distant past.

Above all, we expressed our conviction that the time has come when religious leadership must face honestly and without further evasion the implications of the truth that God is one and that, beyond all diversity of cultural expression and human interpretation, religion is likewise one. It was intimations of this truth that originally inspired the interfaith movement and that have sustained it through the vicissitudes of the past one hundred years. Far from challenging the validity of any of the great revealed faiths, the principle has the capacity to ensure their continuing relevance. In order to exert its influence, however, recognition of this reality must operate at the heart of religious discourse, and it was with this in mind that we felt that our letter should be explicit in articulating it.

Response has been encouraging. Bahá'í institutions throughout the world ensured that thousands of copies of the document were delivered to influential figures in the major faith communities. While it was perhaps not surprising that the message it contained was dismissed out of hand in a few circles, Bahá'ís report that, in general, they were warmly welcomed. Particularly affecting has been the obvious sincerity of many recipients' distress over the failure of religious institutions to assist humanity in dealing with challenges whose essential nature is spiritual and moral. Discussions have turned readily to the need for fundamental change in the way the believing masses of humankind relate to one another, and in a significant number of instances, those receiving the letter have been moved to reproduce and distribute it to other clerics in their respective traditions. We feel hopeful that our initiative may serve as a catalyst opening the way to new understanding of religion's purpose.

However rapidly or slowly this change occurs, the concern of Bahá'ís must be with their own responsibility in the matter. The task of ensuring that His message is engaged by people everywhere is one that Bahá'u'lláh has laid primarily on the shoulders of those who have recognized Him. This, of course, has been the work that the Bahá'í community has been pursuing throughout the history of the Faith, but the accelerating breakdown in social order calls out desperately for the religious spirit to be freed from the shackles that have so far prevented it from bringing to bear the healing influence of which it is capable.

If they are to respond to the need, Bahá'ís must draw on a deep understanding of the process by which humanity's spiritual life evolves. Bahá'u'lláh's writings provide insights that can help to elevate discussion of religious issues above sectarian and transient considerations. The

responsibility to avail oneself of this spiritual resource is inseparable from the gift of faith itself. "Religious fanaticism and hatred", Bahá'u'lláh warns, "are a world-devouring fire, whose violence none can quench. The Hand of Divine power can, alone, deliver mankind from this desolating affliction...." Far from feeling unsupported in their efforts to respond, Bahá'ís will come increasingly to appreciate that the Cause they serve represents the arrowhead of an awakening taking place among people everywhere, regardless of religious background and indeed among many with no religious leaning.

Reflection on the challenge has prompted us to commission the commentary that follows. *One Common Faith*, prepared under our supervision, reviews relevant passages from both the writings of Bahá'u'lláh and the scriptures of other faiths against the background of the contemporary crisis. We commend it to the thoughtful study of the friends.

The Universal House of Justice

Naw-Rúz, 2005

One Common Faith

There is every reason for confidence that the period of history now opening will be far more receptive to efforts to spread Bahá'u'lláh's message than was the case in the century just ended. All the signs indicate that a sea change in human consciousness is under way.

Early in the twentieth century, a materialistic interpretation of reality had consolidated itself so completely as to become the dominant world faith insofar as the direction of society was concerned. In the process, the civilizing of human nature had been violently wrenched out of the orbit it had followed for millennia. For many in the West, the Divine authority that had functioned as the focal centre of guidance—however diverse the interpretations of its nature—seemed simply to have dissolved and vanished. In large measure, the individual was left free to maintain whatever relationship he believed connected his life to a world transcending material existence, but society as a whole proceeded with growing confidence to sever dependence on a conception of the universe that was judged to be at best a fiction and at worst an opiate, in either case inhibiting progress. Humanity had taken its destiny into its own hands. It had solved through rational experimentation and discourse—so people were given to believe—all of the fundamental issues related to human governance and development.

This posture was reinforced by the assumption that the values, ideals and disciplines cultivated over the centuries were now reliably fixed and enduring features of human nature. They needed merely to be refined by education and reinforced by legislative action. The moral legacy of the past was just that: humanity's indefeasible inheritance, requiring no further religious interventions. Admittedly, undisciplined individuals, groups or even nations would continue to threaten the stability of the social order and call for correction. The universal civilization towards the realization of which all the forces of history had been bearing the human race, however, was irresistibly emerging, inspired by secular conceptions of reality. People's happiness would be the natural result of better health, better food, better education, better living conditions—and the attainment of these unquestionably desirable goals now seemed to be within the reach of a society single-mindedly focused on their pursuit.

Throughout that part of the world where the vast majority of the earth's population live, facile announcements that "God is Dead" had passed largely unnoticed. The experience of the peoples of Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Pacific had long confirmed them in the view not only that human nature is deeply influenced by spiritual forces, but that its very identity is spiritual. Consequently, religion continued, as had always been the case, to function as the ultimate authority in life. These convictions, while not directly confronted by the ideological revolution taking place in the West, were effectively marginalized by it, insofar as interaction among peoples and nations was concerned. Having penetrated and captured all significant centres of power and information at the global level, dogmatic materialism ensured that no competing voices would retain the ability to challenge projects of world wide economic exploitation. To the cultural damage already inflicted by two centuries of colonial rule was added an agonizing disjunction between the inner and outer experience of the masses affected, a condition invading virtually all aspects of life. Helpless to exercise any real influence over the shaping of their futures or even to preserve the moral well-being of their children, these populations were plunged into a crisis different from but in many ways even more devastating than the one gathering momentum in Europe and North America. Although retaining its central role in consciousness, faith appeared impotent to influence the course of events.

As the twentieth century approached its close, therefore, nothing seemed less likely than a sudden resurgence of religion as a subject of consuming global importance. Yet that is precisely what has now occurred in the form of a groundswell of anxiety and discontent, much of it still only dimly conscious of the sense of spiritual emptiness that is producing it. Ancient sectarian conflicts, apparently unresponsive to the patient arts of diplomacy, have re-emerged with a virulence as great as anything known before. Scriptural themes, miraculous phenomena and theological dogmas that, until recently, had been dismissed as relics of an age of ignorance find

themselves solemnly, if indiscriminately, explored in influential media. In many lands, religious credentials take on new and compelling significance in the candidature of aspirants to political office. A world, which had assumed that with the collapse of the Berlin Wall an age of international peace had dawned, is warned that it is in the grip of a war of civilizations whose defining character is irreconcilable religious antipathies. Bookstores, magazine stands, Web sites and libraries struggle to satisfy an apparently inexhaustible public appetite for information on religious and spiritual subjects. Perhaps the most insistent factor in producing the change is reluctant recognition that there is no credible replacement for religious belief as a force capable of generating self-discipline and restoring commitment to moral behaviour.

Beyond the attention that religion, as formally conceived, has begun to command is a widespread revival of spiritual search. Expressed most commonly as an urge to discover a personal identity that transcends the merely physical, the development encourages a multitude of pursuits, both positive and negative in character. On the one hand, the search for justice and the promotion of the cause of international peace tend to have the effect of also arousing new perceptions of the individual's role in society. Similarly, although focused on the mobilization of support for changes in social decision-making, movements like environmentalism and feminism induce a re-examination of people's sense of themselves and of their purpose in life. A reorientation occurring in all the major religious communities is the accelerating migration of believers from traditional branches of the parent faiths to sects that attach primary importance to the spiritual search and personal experiences of their members. At the opposite pole, extraterrestrial sightings, "self-discovery" regimens, wilderness retreats, charismatic exaltation, various New Age enthusiasms, and the consciousness-raising efficacy attributed to narcotics and hallucinogens attract followings far larger and more diverse than anything enjoyed by spiritualism or theosophy at a similar historical turning point a century ago. For a Bahá'í, the proliferation even of cults and practices that may arouse aversion in the minds of many serves primarily as a reminder of the insight embodied in the ancient tale of Majnún, who sifted the dust in his search for the beloved Laylí, although aware that she was pure spirit: "I seek her everywhere; haply somewhere I shall find her."[1]

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The reawakened interest in religion is clearly far from having reached its peak, in either its explicitly religious or its less definable spiritual manifestations. On the contrary. The phenomenon is the product of historical forces that steadily gather momentum. Their common effect is to erode the certainty, bequeathed to the world by the twentieth century, that material existence represents ultimate reality.

The most obvious cause of these re-evaluations has been the bankruptcy of the materialist enterprise itself. For well over a hundred years, the idea of progress was identified with economic development and with its capacity to motivate and shape social improvement. Those differences of opinion that existed did not challenge this world view, but only conceptions as to how its goals might best be attained. Its most extreme form, the iron dogma of "scientific materialism", sought to reinterpret every aspect of history and human behaviour in its own narrow terms. Whatever humanitarian ideals may have inspired some of its early proponents, the universal consequence was to produce regimes of totalitarian control prepared to use any means of coercion in regulating the lives of hapless populations subjected to them. The goal held up as justification of such abuses was the creation of a new kind of society that would ensure not only freedom from want but fulfilment for the human spirit. At the end, after eight decades of mounting folly and brutality, the movement collapsed as a credible guide to the world's future.

Other systems of social experimentation, while repudiating recourse to inhumane methods, nevertheless derived their moral and intellectual thrust from the same limited conception of reality. The view took root that, since people were essentially self-interested actors in matters pertaining to their economic well-being, the building of just and prosperous societies could be

ensured by one or another scheme of what was described as modernization. The closing decades of the twentieth century, however, sagged under a mounting burden of evidence to the contrary: the breakdown of family life, soaring crime, dysfunctional educational systems, and a catalogue of other social pathologies that bring to mind the sombre words of Bahá'u'lláh's warning about the impending condition of human society: "Such shall be its plight, that to disclose it now would not be meet and seemly."[2]

The fate of what the world has learned to call social and economic development has left no doubt that not even the most idealistic motives can correct materialism's fundamental flaws. Born in the wake of the chaos of the Second World War, "development" became by far the largest and most ambitious collective undertaking on which the human race has ever embarked. Its humanitarian motivation matched its enormous material and technological investment. Fifty years later, while acknowledging the impressive benefits development has brought, the enterprise must be adjudged, by its own standards, a disheartening failure. Far from narrowing the gap between the well-being of the small segment of the human family who enjoy the benefits of modernity and the condition of the vast populations mired in hopeless want, the collective effort that began with such high hopes has seen the gap widen into an abyss.

Consumer culture, today's inheritor by default of materialism's gospel of human betterment, is unembarrassed by the ephemeral nature of the goals that inspire it. For the small minority of people who can afford them, the benefits it offers are immediate, and the rationale unapologetic. Emboldened by the breakdown of traditional morality, the advance of the new creed is essentially no more than the triumph of animal impulse, as instinctive and blind as appetite, released at long last from the restraints of supernatural sanctions. Its most obvious casualty has been language. Tendencies once universally castigated as moral failings mutate into necessities of social progress. Selfishness becomes a prized commercial resource; falsehood reinvents itself as public information; perversions of various kinds unabashedly claim the status of civil rights. Under appropriate euphemisms, greed, lust, indolence, pride—even violence—acquire not merely broad acceptance but social and economic value. Ironically, as words have been drained of meaning, so have the very material comforts and acquisitions for which truth has been casually sacrificed.

Clearly, materialism's error has lain not in the laudable effort to improve the conditions of life, but in the narrowness of mind and unjustified self-confidence that have defined its mission. The importance both of material prosperity and of the scientific and technological advances necessary to its achievement is a theme that runs through the writings of the Bahá'í Faith. As was inevitable from the outset, however, arbitrary efforts to disengage such physical and material well-being from humanity's spiritual and moral development have ended by forfeiting the allegiance of the very populations whose interests a materialistic culture purports to serve. "Witness how the world is being afflicted with a fresh calamity every day", Bahá'u'lláh warns. "Its sickness is approaching the stage of utter hopelessness, inasmuch as the true Physician is debarred from administering the remedy, whilst unskilled practitioners are regarded with favour, and are accorded full freedom to act."[3]

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In addition to disillusionment with the promises of materialism, a force of change undermining the misconceptions about reality that humanity brought into the twenty-first century is global integration. At the simplest level, it takes the form of advances in communication technologies that open broad avenues of interaction among the planet's diverse populations. Along with facilitating interpersonal and intersocial exchanges, general access to information has the effect of transmuting the cumulative learning of the ages, until recently the preserve of privileged elites, into the patrimony of the entire human family, without distinction of nation, race or culture. With all the gross inequities that global integration perpetuates—indeed intensifies—no informed observer can fail to acknowledge the stimulus to reflection about reality that such changes have produced. With reflection has come a questioning of all established authority, no longer merely

that of religion and morality, but also of government, academia, commerce, the media and, increasingly, scientific opinion.

Apart from technological factors, unification of the planet is exerting other, even more direct effects on thought. It would be impossible to exaggerate, for example, the transformative impact on global consciousness that has resulted from mass travel on an international scale. Greater still have been the consequences of the enormous migrations that the world has witnessed during the century and a half since the Báb declared His mission. Millions of refugees fleeing from persecution have swept like tidal waves back and forth across the European, African and Asiatic continents, particularly. Amid the suffering such turmoil has caused, one perceives the progressive integration of the world's races and cultures as the citizenry of a single global homeland. As a result, people of every background have been exposed to the cultures and norms of others about whom their forefathers knew little or nothing, exciting a search for meaning that cannot be evaded.

It is impossible to imagine how different the history of the past century and a half would have been had any of the leading arbiters of world affairs addressed by Bahá'u'lláh spared time for reflection on a conception of reality supported by the moral credentials of its Author, moral credentials of the kind they professed to hold in the highest regard. What is unmistakable to a Bahá'í is that, despite such failure, the transformations announced in Bahá'u'lláh's message are resistlessly accomplishing themselves. Through shared discoveries and shared travails, peoples of diverse cultures are brought face to face with the common humanity lying just beneath the surface of imagined differences of identity. Whether stubbornly opposed in some societies or welcomed elsewhere as a release from meaningless and suffocating limitations, the sense that the earth's inhabitants are indeed "the leaves of one tree"[4] is slowly becoming the standard by which humanity's collective efforts are now judged.

Loss of faith in the certainties of materialism and the progressive globalizing of human experience reinforce one another in the longing they inspire for understanding about the purpose of existence. Basic values are challenged; parochial attachments are surrendered; once unthinkable demands are accepted. It is this universal upheaval, Bahá'u'lláh explains, for which the scriptures of past religions employed the imagery of "the Day of Resurrection": "The shout hath been raised, and the people have come forth from their graves, and arising, are gazing around them."[5] Beneath all of the dislocation and suffering, the process is essentially a spiritual one: "The breeze of the All-Merciful hath wafted, and the souls have been quickened in the tombs of their bodies."[6]

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Throughout history, the primary agents of spiritual development have been the great religions. For the majority of the earth's people, the scriptures of each of these systems of belief have served, in Bahá'u'lláh's words, as "the City of God",[7] a source of a knowledge that totally embraces consciousness, one so compelling as to endow the sincere with "a new eye, a new ear, a new heart, and a new mind".[8] A vast literature, to which all religious cultures have contributed, records the experience of transcendence reported by generations of seekers. Down the millennia, the lives of those who responded to intimations of the Divine have inspired breathtaking achievements in music, architecture, and the other arts, endlessly replicating the soul's experience for millions of their fellow believers. No other force in existence has been able to elicit from people comparable qualities of heroism, self-sacrifice and self-discipline. At the social level, the resulting moral principles have repeatedly translated themselves into universal codes of law, regulating and elevating human relationships. Viewed in perspective, the major religions emerge as the primary driving forces of the civilizing process. To argue otherwise is surely to ignore the evidence of history.

Why, then, does this immensely rich heritage not serve as the central stage for today's reawakening of spiritual quest? On the periphery, earnest attempts are being made to reformulate the teachings that gave rise to the respective faiths, in the hope of imbuing them with new

appeal, but the greater part of the search for meaning is diffused, individualistic and incoherent in character. The scriptures have not changed; the moral principles they contain have lost none of their validity. No one who sincerely poses questions to Heaven, if he persists, will fail to detect an answering voice in the Psalms or in the Upanishads. Anyone with some intimation of the Reality that transcends this material one will be touched to the heart by the words in which Jesus or Buddha speaks so intimately of it. The Qur'án's apocalyptic visions continue to provide compelling assurance to its readers that the realization of justice is central to the Divine purpose. Nor, in their essential features, do the lives of heroes and saints seem any less meaningful than they did when those lives were lived centuries ago. For many religious people, therefore, the most painful aspect of the current crisis of civilization is that the search for truth has not turned with confidence into religion's familiar avenues.

The problem is, of course, twofold. The rational soul does not merely occupy a private sphere, but is an active participant in a social order. Although the received truths of the great faiths remain valid, the daily experience of an individual in the twenty-first century is unimaginably removed from the one that he or she would have known in any of those ages when this guidance was revealed. Democratic decision-making has fundamentally altered the relationship of the individual to authority. With growing confidence and growing success, women justly insist on their right to full equality with men. Revolutions in science and technology change not only the functioning but the conception of society, indeed of existence itself. Universal education and an explosion of new fields of creativity open the way to insights that stimulate social mobility and integration, and create opportunities of which the rule of law encourages the citizen to take full advantage. Stem cell research, nuclear energy, sexual identity, ecological stress and the use of wealth raise, at the very least, social questions that have no precedent. These, and the countless other changes affecting every aspect of human life, have brought into being a new world of daily choices for both society and its members. What has not changed is the inescapable requirement of making such choices, whether for better or worse. It is here that the spiritual nature of the contemporary crisis comes into sharpest focus because most of the decisions called for are not merely practical but moral. In large part, therefore, loss of faith in traditional religion has been an inevitable consequence of failure to discover in it the guidance required to live with modernity, successfully and with assurance.

A second barrier to a re-emergence of inherited systems of belief as the answer to humanity's spiritual yearnings is the effects already mentioned of global integration. Throughout the planet, people raised in a given religious frame of reference find themselves abruptly thrown into close association with others whose beliefs and practices appear at first glance irreconcilably different from their own. The differences can and often do give rise to defensiveness, simmering resentments and open conflict. In many cases, however, the effect is rather to prompt a reconsideration of received doctrine and to encourage efforts at discovering values held in common. The support enjoyed by various interfaith activities doubtless owes a great deal to response of this kind among the general public. Inevitably, with such approaches comes a questioning of religious doctrines that inhibit association and understanding. If people whose beliefs appear to be fundamentally different from one's own nevertheless live moral lives that deserve admiration, what is it that makes one's own faith superior to theirs? Alternatively, if all of the great religions share certain basic values in common, do not sectarian attachments run the risk of merely reinforcing unwanted barriers between an individual and his neighbours?

Few today among those who have some degree of objective familiarity with the subject are likely, therefore, to entertain an illusion that any one of the established religious systems of the past can assume the role of ultimate guide for humankind in the issues of contemporary life, even in the improbable event that its disparate sects should come together for that purpose. Each one of what the world regards as independent religions is set in the mould created by its authoritative scripture and its history. As it cannot refashion its system of belief in a manner to derive legitimacy from the authoritative words of its Founder, it likewise cannot adequately answer the multitude of questions posed by social and intellectual evolution. Distressing as this may appear to many, it is no more than an inherent feature of the evolutionary process. Attempts to force a

reversal of some kind can lead only to still greater disenchantment with religion itself and exacerbate sectarian conflict.

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The dilemma is both artificial and self-inflicted. The world order, if it can be so described, within which Bahá'ís today pursue the work of sharing Bahá'u'lláh's message is one whose misconceptions about both human nature and social evolution are so fundamental as to severely inhibit the most intelligent and well-intentioned endeavours at human betterment. Particularly is this true with respect to the confusion that surrounds virtually every aspect of the subject of religion. In order to respond adequately to the spiritual needs of their neighbours, Bahá'ís will have to gain an in-depth understanding of the issues involved. The effort of imagination this challenge requires can be appreciated from the advice that is perhaps the most frequently and urgently reiterated admonition in the writings of their Faith: to "meditate", to "ponder", to "reflect".

A commonplace of popular discourse is that by "religion" is intended the multitude of sects currently in existence. Not surprisingly, such a suggestion at once arouses protest in other quarters that by religion is intended rather one or another of the great, independent belief systems of history that have shaped and inspired whole civilizations. This point of view, in turn, however, runs up against the inevitable query as to where one will find these historic faiths in the contemporary world. Where, precisely, are "Judaism", "Buddhism", "Christianity", "Islám" and the others, since they obviously cannot be identified with the irreconcilably opposed organizations that purport to speak authoritatively in their names? Nor does the problem end there. Yet another response to the enquiry will almost certainly be that by religion is intended simply an attitude to life, a sense of relationship with a Reality that transcends material existence. Religion, so conceived, is an attribute of the individual person, an impulse not susceptible of organization, an experience universally available. Again, however, such an orientation will be seen by a majority of religiously minded persons as lacking the very authority of self-discipline and the unifying effect that give religion meaning. Some objectors would even argue that, on the contrary, religion signifies the lifestyle of persons who, like themselves, have adopted severe regimens of daily ritual and self-denial that set them entirely apart from the rest of society. What all such differing conceptions have in common is the extent to which a phenomenon that is acknowledged to completely transcend human reach has nevertheless gradually been imprisoned within conceptual limits—whether organizational, theological, experiential or ritualistic—of human invention.

The teachings of Bahá'u'lláh cut through this tangle of inconsistent views and, in doing so, reformulate many truths which, whether explicitly or implicitly, have lain at the heart of all Divine revelation. Although in no way a comprehensive reading of His intent, Bahá'u'lláh makes it clear that attempts to capture or suggest the Reality of God in catechisms and creeds are exercises in self-deception: "To every discerning and illumined heart it is evident that God, the unknowable Essence, the divine Being, is immensely exalted beyond every human attribute, such as corporeal existence, ascent and descent, egress and regress. Far be it from His glory that human tongue should adequately recount His praise, or that human heart comprehend His fathomless mystery."[9] The instrumentality through which the Creator of all things interacts with the ever-evolving creation He has brought into being is the appearance of prophetic Figures who manifest the attributes of an inaccessible Divinity: "The door of the knowledge of the Ancient of Days being thus closed in the face of all beings, the Source of infinite grace ... hath caused those luminous Gems of Holiness to appear out of the realm of the spirit, in the noble form of the human temple, and be made manifest unto all men, that they may impart unto the world the mysteries of the unchangeable Being, and tell of the subtleties of His imperishable Essence."[10]

To presume to judge among the Messengers of God, exalting one above the other, would be to give in to the delusion that the Eternal and All-Embracing is subject to the vagaries of human preference. "It is clear and evident to thee", are Bahá'u'lláh's precise words, "that all the Prophets

are the Temples of the Cause of God, Who have appeared clothed in divers attire. If thou wilt observe with discriminating eyes, thou wilt behold Them all abiding in the same tabernacle, soaring in the same heaven, seated upon the same throne, uttering the same speech, and proclaiming the same Faith."[11] To imagine, further, that the nature of these unique Figures can be —or needs to be—encompassed within theories borrowed from physical experience is equally presumptuous. What is meant by "knowledge of God", Bahá'u'lláh explains, is knowledge of the Manifestations Who reveal His will and attributes, and it is here that the soul comes into intimate association with a Creator Who is otherwise beyond both language and apprehension: "I bear witness", is Bahá'u'lláh's assertion about the station of the Manifestation of God, "...that through Thy beauty the beauty of the Adored One hath been unveiled, and through Thy face the face of the Desired One hath shone forth...."[12]

Religion, thus conceived, awakens the soul to potentialities that are otherwise unimaginable. To the extent that an individual learns to benefit from the influence of the revelation of God for his age, his nature becomes progressively imbued with the attributes of the Divine world: "Through the Teachings of this Day Star of Truth", Bahá'u'lláh explains, "every man will advance and develop until he ... can manifest all the potential forces with which his inmost true self hath been endowed."[13] As humanity's purpose includes the carrying forward of "an ever-advancing civilization",[14] not the least of the extraordinary powers that religion possesses has been its ability to free those who believe from the limitations of time itself, eliciting from them sacrifices on behalf of generations centuries into the future. Indeed, because the soul is immortal, its awakening to its true nature empowers it, not only in this world but even more directly in those worlds that lie beyond, to serve the evolutionary process: "The light which these souls radiate", Bahá'u'lláh asserts, "is responsible for the progress of the world and the advancement of its peoples.... All things must needs have a cause, a motive power, an animating principle. These souls and symbols of detachment have provided, and will continue to provide, the supreme moving impulse in the world of being."[15]

Belief is thus a necessary and inextinguishable urge of the species that has been described by an influential modern thinker as "evolution become conscious of itself".[16] If, as the events of the twentieth century provide sad and compelling evidence, the natural expression of faith is artificially blocked, it will invent objects of worship however unworthy—or even debased—that may in some measure appease the yearning for certitude. It is an impulse that will not be denied.

In short, through the ongoing process of revelation, the One Who is the Source of the system of knowledge we call religion demonstrates that system's integrity and its freedom from the contradictions imposed by sectarian ambitions. The work of each Manifestation of God has an autonomy and an authority that transcend appraisal; it is also a stage in the limitless unfolding of a single Reality. Because the purpose of the successive revelations of God is the awakening of humankind to its capacities and responsibilities as the trustee of creation, the process is not simply repetitive, but progressive, and is fully appreciated only when perceived in this context.

In no sense can Bahá'ís profess to have grasped at this early hour more than a minute portion of the truths inherent in the revelation on which their Faith is based. With reference, for example, to the evolution of the Cause, the Guardian said, "All we can reasonably venture to attempt is to strive to obtain a glimpse of the first streaks of the promised Dawn that must, in the fullness of time, chase away the gloom that has encircled humanity."[17] Apart from encouraging humility, this fact should serve also as a constant reminder that Bahá'u'lláh has not brought into existence a new religion to stand beside the present multiplicity of sectarian organizations. Rather has He recast the whole conception of religion as the principal force impelling the development of consciousness. As the human race in all its diversity is a single species, so the intervention by which God cultivates the qualities of mind and heart latent in that species is a single process. Its heroes and saints are the heroes and saints of all stages in the struggle; its successes, the successes of all stages. This is the standard demonstrated in the life and work of the Master and exemplified today in a Bahá'í community that has become the inheritor of humanity's entire spiritual legacy, a legacy equally available to all the earth's peoples.

The recurring proof of the existence of God, therefore, is that from time immemorial He has repeatedly manifested Himself. In the larger sense, as Bahá'u'lláh explains, the vast epic of humanity's religious history represents the fulfilment of the "Covenant", the enduring promise by which the Creator of all things assures the race of the unfailing guidance essential to its spiritual and moral development, and calls on it to internalize and give expression to these values. One is free to dispute through historicist interpretations of the evidence the unique role of this or that Messenger of God, if that is one's purpose, but such speculation is of no help in accounting for developments that have transformed thought and produced changes in human relationships critical to social evolution. At intervals so rare that the known instances can be counted on one's fingers, the Manifestations of God have appeared, have each been explicit as to the authority of His teachings and have each exerted an influence on the advance of civilization incomparably beyond that of any other phenomenon in history. "Consider the hour at which the supreme Manifestation of God revealeth Himself unto men", Bahá'u'lláh points out: "Ere that hour cometh, the Ancient Being, Who is still unknown of men and hath not as yet given utterance to the Word of God, is Himself the All-Knower in a world devoid of any man that hath known Him. He is indeed the Creator without a creation."[18]

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The objection most commonly raised against the foregoing conception of religion is the assertion that the differences among the revealed faiths are so fundamental that to present them as stages or aspects of one unified system of truth does violence to the facts. Given the confusion surrounding the nature of religion, the reaction is understandable. Chiefly, however, such an objection offers Bahá'ís an invitation to set the principles reviewed here more explicitly in the evolutionary context provided in Bahá'u'lláh's writings.

The differences referred to fall into the categories of either practice or doctrine, both of them presented as the intent of the relevant scriptures. In the case of religious customs governing personal life, it is helpful to view the subject against the background of comparable features of material life. It is most unlikely that diversity in hygiene, dress, medicine, diet, transportation, warfare, construction or economic activity, however striking, would any longer be seriously advanced in support of a theory that humanity does not in fact constitute one people, single and unique. Until the opening of the twentieth century, such simplistic arguments were commonplace, but historical and anthropological research now provides a seamless panorama of the process of cultural evolution by which these and countless other expressions of human creativity came into existence, were transmitted through successive generations, underwent gradual metamorphoses and often spread to enrich the lives of peoples in far distant lands. That present-day societies represent a wide spectrum of such phenomena, therefore, does not in any way define a fixed and immutable identity of the peoples concerned, but merely distinguishes the stage through which given groups are—or at least until recently have been—passing. Even so, all such cultural expressions are now in a state of fluidity in consequence of the pressures of planetary integration.

A similar evolutionary process, Bahá'u'lláh indicates, has characterized the religious life of humankind. The defining difference lies in the fact that, rather than representing simply the accidents of history's ongoing method of trial and error, such norms were explicitly prescribed in each case, as integral features of one or another revelation of the Divine, embodied in scripture, their integrity scrupulously maintained over a period of centuries. While certain features of each code of conduct would eventually fulfil their purpose and in time be overshadowed by concerns of a different nature brought on by the process of social evolution, the code itself would lose none of its authority during the long stage of human progress in which it played a vital role in training behaviour and attitudes. "These principles and laws, these firmly-established and mighty systems", Bahá'u'lláh asserts, "have proceeded from one Source, and are the rays of one Light. That they differ one from another is to be attributed to the varying requirements of the ages in which they were promulgated."[19]

To argue, therefore, that differences of regulations, observances and other practices constitute any significant objection to the idea of revealed religion's essential oneness is to miss the purpose that these prescriptions served. More seriously, it misses the fundamental distinction between the eternal and the transitory features of religion's function. The essential message of religion is immutable. It is, in Bahá'u'lláh's words, "the changeless Faith of God, eternal in the past, eternal in the future".[20] Its role in opening the way for the soul to enter into an evermore mature relationship with its Creator—and in endowing it with an ever-greater measure of moral autonomy in disciplining the animal impulses of human nature—is not at all irreconcilable with its providing auxiliary guidance that enhances the process of civilization building.

The concept of progressive revelation places the ultimate emphasis on recognition of the revelation of God at its appearance. The failure of the generality of humankind in this respect has, time and again, condemned entire populations to a ritualistic repetition of ordinances and practices long after these latter have fulfilled their purpose and now merely stultify moral advance. Sadly, in the present day, a related consequence of such failure has been to trivialize religion. At precisely the point in its collective development where humanity began to struggle with the challenges of modernity, the spiritual resource on which it had principally depended for moral courage and enlightenment was fast becoming a subject of mockery, first at those levels where decisions were being made about the direction society should take, and eventually in ever-widening circles of the general population. There is little cause for surprise, then, that this most devastating of the many betrayals of trust from which human confidence has suffered should, in the course of time, undermine the foundations of belief itself. So it is that Bahá'u'lláh repeatedly urges His readers to think deeply about the lesson taught by such repeated failures: "Ponder for a moment, and reflect upon that which has been the cause of such denial...."[21] "What could have been the reason for such denial and avoidance...?"[22] "What could have caused such contention...?"[23] "Reflect, what could have been the motive...?"[24]

More detrimental still to religious understanding has been theological presumption. A persistent feature of religion's sectarian past has been the dominant role played by clergy. In the absence of scriptural texts that established unarguable institutional authority, clerical elites succeeded in arrogating to themselves exclusive control over interpretation of the Divine intent. However diverse the motives, the tragic effects have been to impede the current of inspiration, discourage independent intellectual activity, focus attention on the minutiae of rituals and too often engender hatred and prejudice towards those following a different sectarian path from that of self-appointed spiritual leaders. While nothing could prevent the creative power of Divine intervention from continuing its work of progressively raising consciousness, the scope of what could be achieved, in any age, became increasingly limited by such artificially contrived obstacles.

Over time, theology succeeded in constructing in the heart of each one of the great faiths an authority parallel with, and even inimical in spirit to, the revealed teachings on which the tradition was based. Jesus' familiar parable of the landowner who sowed seed in his field addresses both the issue and its implications for the present time: "But while men slept, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat, and went his way."[25] When his servants proposed to uproot them, the landowner replied, "Nay; lest while ye gather up the tares, ye root up also the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest: and in the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, Gather ye together first the tares, and bind them in bundles to burn them: but gather the wheat into my barn."[26] Throughout its pages, the Qur'án reserves its severest condemnation for the spiritual harm caused by this competing hegemony: "Say: The things that my Lord hath indeed forbidden are: shameful deeds, whether open or secret; sins and trespasses against truth or reason; assigning of partners to God, for which he hath given no authority; and saying things about God of which ye have no knowledge."[27] To the modern mind it is the greatest of ironies that generations of theologians, whose impositions on religion embody precisely the betrayal so strongly denounced in these texts, should seek to use the warning itself as a weapon in suppressing protest against their usurpation of Divine authority.

In effect, each new stage in the progressively unfolding revelation of spiritual truth was frozen in time and in an array of literalistic images and interpretations, many of them borrowed

from cultures which were themselves morally exhausted. Whatever their value at earlier stages in the evolution of consciousness, conceptions of physical resurrection, a paradise of carnal delights, reincarnation, pantheistic prodigies, and the like, today raise walls of separation and conflict in an age when the earth has literally become one homeland and human beings must learn to see themselves as its citizens. In this context one can appreciate the reasons for the vehemence of Bahá'u'lláh's warnings about the barriers that dogmatic theology creates in the path of those seeking to understand the will of God: "O leaders of religion! Weigh not the Book of God with such standards and sciences as are current amongst you, for the Book itself is the unerring Balance established amongst men."[28] In His Tablet to Pope Pius IX, He advises the pontiff that God has in this day "stored away ... in the vessels of justice" whatever is enduring in religion and "cast into fire that which befitteth it".[29]

* * *

Freed from the thickets with which theology has hedged religious understanding about, the mind is able to explore familiar scriptural passages through the eyes of Bahá'u'lláh. "Peerless is this Day," He asserts, "for it is as the eye to past ages and centuries, and as a light unto the darkness of the times."[30] The most striking observation that results from taking advantage of this perspective is the unity of purpose and principle running throughout the Hebrew scriptures, the Gospel and the Qur'án, particularly, although echoes can readily be discerned in the scriptures of others among the world's religions. Repeatedly, the same organizing themes emerge from the matrix of precept, exhortation, narrative, symbolism and interpretation in which they are set. Of these foundational truths, by far the most distinctive is the progressive articulation and emphatic assertion of the oneness of God, Creator of all existence whether of the phenomenal world or of those realms that transcend it. "I am the Lord," the Bible declares, "and there is none else, there is no God beside me",[31] and the same conception underpins the later teachings of Christ and Muḥammad.

Humanity—focal point, inheritor and trustee of the world—exists to know its Creator and to serve His purpose. In its highest expression, the innate human impulse to respond takes the form of worship, a condition entailing wholehearted submission to a power that is recognized as deserving of such homage. "Now unto the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only wise God, be honour and glory for ever and ever."[32] Inseparable from the spirit of reverence itself is its expression in service to the Divine purpose for humankind. "Say: All bounties are in the hand of God: He granteth them to whom He pleaseth: and God careth for all, and He knoweth all things."[33] Illumined by this understanding, the responsibilities of humanity are clear: "It is not righteousness that ye turn your faces towards East or West", the Qur'án states, "but it is righteousness—to believe in God ... to spend of your substance, out of love for Him, for your kin, for orphans, for the needy, for the wayfarer, for those who ask...."[34] "Ye are the salt of the earth",[35] Christ impresses on those who respond to His call. "Ye are the light of the world."[36] Summarizing a theme that recurs time and again throughout the Hebrew scriptures and will subsequently reappear in the Gospel and the Qur'án, the prophet Micah asks, "...what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?"[37]

There is equal agreement in these texts that the soul's ability to attain to an understanding of its Creator's purpose is the product not merely of its own effort, but of interventions of the Divine that open the way. The point was made with memorable clarity by Jesus: "I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me."[38] If one is not to see in this assertion merely a dogmatic challenge to other stages of the one ongoing process of Divine guidance, it is obviously the expression of the central truth of revealed religion: that access to the unknowable Reality that creates and sustains existence is possible only through awakening to the illumination shed from that Realm. One of the most cherished of the Qur'án's surihs takes up the metaphor: "God is the Light of the heavens and the earth.... Light upon Light! God doth guide whom He will to His Light."[39] In the case of the Hebrew prophets, the Divine intermediary that was later to appear in Christianity in the person of the Son of Man and in Islám as the Book of God assumed

the form of a binding Covenant established by the Creator with Abraham, Patriarch and Prophet: "And I will establish my covenant between me and thee and thy seed after thee in their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee."[40]

The succession of revelations of the Divine also appears as an implicit—and usually explicit—feature of all the major faiths. One of its earliest and clearest expressions occurs in the Bhagavad-Gita: "I come, and go, and come. When Righteousness declines, O Bharata! When Wickedness is strong, I rise, from age to age, and take visible shape, and move a man with men, succouring the good, thrusting the evil back, and setting Virtue on her seat again."[41] This ongoing drama constitutes the basic structure of the Bible, whose sequence of books recounts the missions not only of Abraham and of Moses—"whom the Lord knew face to face"[42]—but of the line of lesser prophets who developed and consolidated the work that these primary Authors of the process had set in motion. Similarly, no amount of contentious and fantastical speculation about the precise nature of Jesus could succeed in separating His mission from the transformative influence exerted on the course of civilization by the work of Abraham and Moses. He Himself warns that it is not He Who will condemn those who reject the message He bears, but Moses "in whom ye trust. For had ye believed Moses, ye would have believed me: for he wrote of me. But if ye believe not his writings, how shall ye believe my words?"[43] With the revelation of the Qur'án, the theme of the succession of the Messengers of God becomes central: "We believe in God, and the revelation given to us, and to Abraham, Ismā'īl, Isaac, Jacob ... and that given to Moses and Jesus, and that given to (all) Prophets from their Lord...."[44]

For a sympathetic and objective reader of such passages what emerges is a recognition of the essential oneness of religion. So it is that the term "Islám" (literally "submission" to God) designates not merely the particular dispensation of Providence inaugurated by Muḥammad but, as the words of the Qur'án make unmistakably clear, religion itself. While it is true to speak of the unity of all religions, understanding of the context is vital. At the deepest level, as Bahá'u'lláh emphasizes, there is but one religion. Religion is religion, as science is science. The one discerns and articulates the values unfolding progressively through Divine revelation; the other is the instrumentality through which the human mind explores and is able to exert its influence ever more precisely over the phenomenal world. The one defines goals that serve the evolutionary process; the other assists in their attainment. Together, they constitute the dual knowledge system impelling the advance of civilization. Each is hailed by the Master as an "effulgence of the Sun of Truth".[45]

It is, therefore, an inadequate recognition of the unique station of Moses, Buddha, Zoroaster, Jesus, Muḥammad—or of the succession of Avatars who inspired the Hindu scriptures—to depict their work as the founding of distinct religions. Rather are they appreciated when acknowledged as the spiritual Educators of history, as the animating forces in the rise of the civilizations through which consciousness has flowered: "He was in the world," the Gospel declares, "and the world was made by him...."[46] That their persons have been held in a reverence infinitely above those of any other historical figures reflects the attempt to articulate otherwise inexpressible feelings aroused in the hearts of unnumbered millions of people by the blessings their work has conferred. In loving them humanity has progressively learned what it means to love God. There is, realistically, no other way to do so. They are not honoured by fumbling efforts to capture the essential mystery of their nature in dogmas invented by human imagination; what honours them is the soul's unconditioned surrender of its will to the transformative influence they mediate.

* * *

Confusion about the role of religion in cultivating moral consciousness is equally apparent in popular understanding of its contribution to the shaping of society. Perhaps the most obvious example is the inferior social status most sacred texts assign to women. While the resulting benefits enjoyed by men were no doubt a major factor in consolidating such a conception, moral justification was unquestionably supplied by people's understanding of the intent of the scriptures

themselves. With few exceptions, these texts address themselves to men, assigning to women a supportive and subordinate role in the life of both religion and society. Sadly, such understanding made it deplorably easy to attach primary blame to women for failure in the disciplining of the sexual impulse, a vital feature of moral advancement. In a modern frame of reference, attitudes of this kind are readily recognized as prejudiced and unjust. At the stages of social development at which all of the major faiths came into existence, scriptural guidance sought primarily to civilize, to the extent possible, relationships resulting from intractable historical circumstances. It needs little insight to appreciate that clinging to primitive norms in the present day would defeat the very purpose of religion's patient cultivation of moral sense.

Comparable considerations have pertained in relations between societies. The long and arduous preparation of the Hebrew people for the mission required of them is an illustration of the complexity and stubborn character of the moral challenges involved. In order that the spiritual capacities appealed to by the prophets might awaken and flourish, the inducements offered by neighbouring idolatrous cultures had, at all costs, to be resisted. Scriptural accounts of the condign punishments that befell both rulers and subjects who violated the principle illustrated the importance attached to it by the Divine purpose. A somewhat comparable issue arose in the struggle of the newborn community founded by Muḥammad to survive attempts by pagan Arab tribes to extinguish it—and in the barbaric cruelty and relentless spirit of vendetta animating the attackers. No one familiar with the historical details will have difficulty in understanding the severity of the Qur'án's injunctions on the subject. While the monotheistic beliefs of Jews and Christians were to be accorded respect, no compromise with idolatry was permitted. In a relatively brief space of time, this draconian rule had succeeded in unifying the tribes of the Arabian Peninsula and launching the newly forged community on well over five centuries of moral, intellectual, cultural and economic achievement, unmatched before or since in the speed and scope of its expansion. History tends to be a stern judge. Ultimately, in its uncompromising perspective, the consequences to those who would have blindly strangled such enterprises in the cradle will always be set off against the benefits accruing to the world as a whole from the triumph of the Bible's vision of human possibilities and the advances made possible by the genius of Islamic civilization.

Among the most contentious of such issues in understanding society's evolution towards spiritual maturity has been that of crime and punishment. While different in detail and degree, the penalties prescribed by most sacred texts for acts of violence against either the commonweal or the rights of other individuals tended to be harsh. Moreover, they frequently extended to permitting retaliation against the offenders by the injured parties or by members of their families. In the perspective of history, however, one may reasonably ask what practical alternatives existed. In the absence not merely of present-day programmes of behavioural modification, but even of recourse to such coercive options as prisons and policing agencies, religion's concern was to impress indelibly on general consciousness the moral unacceptability—and practical costs—of conduct whose effect would otherwise have been to demoralize efforts at social progress. The whole of civilization has since been the beneficiary, and it would be less than honest not to acknowledge the fact.

So it has been throughout all of the religious dispensations whose origins have survived in written records. Mendicancy, slavery, autocracy, conquest, ethnic prejudices and other undesirable features of social interaction have gone unchallenged—or been explicitly indulged—as religion sought to achieve reformations of behaviour that were considered more immediately essential at given stages in the advance of civilization. To condemn religion because any one of its successive dispensations failed to address the whole range of social wrongs would be to ignore everything that has been learned about the nature of human development. Inevitably, anachronistic thinking of this kind must also create severe psychological handicaps in appreciating and facing the requirements of one's own time.

The issue is not the past, but the implications for the present. Problems arise where followers of one of the world's faiths prove unable to distinguish between its eternal and transitory features, and attempt to impose on society rules of behaviour that have long since accomplished their

purpose. The principle is fundamental to an understanding of religion's social role: "The remedy the world needeth in its present-day afflictions can never be the same as that which a subsequent age may require", Bahá'u'lláh points out. "Be anxiously concerned with the needs of the age ye live in, and centre your deliberations on its exigencies and requirements."[47]

* * *

The exigencies of the new age of human experience to which Bahá'u'lláh summoned the political and religious rulers of the nineteenth century world have now been largely adopted, at least as ideals, by their successors and by progressive minds everywhere. By the time the twentieth century had drawn to a close, principles that had, only short decades earlier, been patronized as visionary and hopelessly unrealistic had become central to global discourse. Buttressed by the findings of scientific research and the conclusions of influential commissions—often lavishly funded—they direct the work of powerful agencies at international, national and local levels. A vast body of scholarly literature in many languages is devoted to exploring practical means for their implementation, and those programmes can count on media attention on five continents.

Most of these principles are, alas, also widely flouted, not only among recognized enemies of social peace, but in circles professedly committed to them. What is lacking is not convincing testimony as to their relevance, but the power of moral conviction that can implement them, a power whose only demonstrably reliable source throughout history has been religious faith. As late as the inception of Bahá'u'lláh's own mission, religious authority still exercised a significant degree of social influence. When the Christian world was moved to break with millennia of unquestioning conviction and address at last the evil of slavery, it was to Biblical ideals that the early British reformers sought to appeal. Subsequently, in the defining address he gave regarding the central role played by the issue in the great conflict in America, the president of the United States warned that if "every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said 'the judgements of the Lord are true and righteous altogether'."[48] That era, however, was swiftly drawing to a close. In the upheavals that followed the Second World War, even so influential a figure as Mohandas Gandhi proved unable to mobilize the spiritual power of Hinduism in support of his efforts to extinguish sectarian violence on the Indian subcontinent. Nor were leaders of the Islamic community any more effective in this respect. As prefigured in the Qur'án's metaphorical vision of "The Day that We roll up the heavens like a scroll",[49] the once unchallengeable authority of the traditional religions had ceased to direct humanity's social relations.

It is in this context that one begins to appreciate Bahá'u'lláh's choice of imagery about the will of God for a new age: "Think not that We have revealed unto you a mere code of laws. Nay, rather, We have unsealed the choice Wine with the fingers of might and power."[50] Through His revelation, the principles required for the collective coming of age of the human race have been invested with the one power capable of penetrating to the roots of human motivation and of altering behaviour. For those who have recognized Him, equality of men and women is not a sociological postulate, but revealed truth about human nature, with implications for every aspect of human relations. The same is true of His teaching of the principle of racial oneness. Universal education, freedom of thought, the protection of human rights, recognition of the earth's vast resources as a trust for the whole of humankind, society's responsibility for the well-being of its citizenry, the promotion of scientific research, even so practical a principle as an international auxiliary language that will advance integration of the earth's peoples—for all who respond to Bahá'u'lláh's revelation, these and similar precepts carry the same compelling authority as do the injunctions of scripture against idolatry, theft and false witness. While intimations of some can be perceived in earlier sacred writings, their definition and prescription had necessarily to wait until the planet's heterogeneous populations could set out together on the discovery of their nature as a single human race. Through spiritual empowerment brought by Bahá'u'lláh's revelation the Divine standards can be appreciated, not as isolated principles and laws, but as facets of a single,

all-embracing vision of humanity's future, revolutionary in purpose, intoxicating in the possibilities it opens.

Integral to these teachings are principles that address the administration of humanity's collective affairs. A widely quoted passage in Bahá'u'lláh's Tablet to Queen Victoria expresses emphatic praise of the principle of democratic and constitutional government, but is also an admonition about the context of global responsibility in which that principle must operate if it is to realize its purpose in this age: "O ye the elected representatives of the people in every land! Take ye counsel together, and let your concern be only for that which profiteth mankind and bettereth the condition thereof, if ye be of them that scan heedfully. Regard the world as the human body which, though at its creation whole and perfect, hath been afflicted, through various causes, with grave disorders and maladies. Not for one day did it gain ease, nay its sickness waxed more severe, as it fell under the treatment of ignorant physicians, who gave full rein to their personal desires and have erred grievously. And if, at one time, through the care of an able physician, a member of that body was healed, the rest remained afflicted as before."[51] In other passages, Bahá'u'lláh spells out some of the practical implications. The governments of the world are called upon to convene an international consultative body as the foundation, in the words of the Guardian, of "a world federal system"[52] empowered to safeguard the autonomy and territory of its state members, resolve national and regional disputes and coordinate programmes of global development for the good of the entire human race. Significantly, Bahá'u'lláh attributes to this system, once established, the right to suppress by force acts of aggression by one state against another. Addressing the rulers of His day, He asserts the clear moral authority of such action: "Should any one among you take up arms against another, rise ye all against him, for this is naught but manifest justice."[53]

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The power through which these goals will be progressively realized is that of unity. Although to Bahá'ís the most obvious of truths, its implications for the current crisis of civilization appear to escape most contemporary discourse. Few will disagree that the universal disease sapping the health of the body of humankind is that of disunity. Its manifestations everywhere cripple political will, debilitate the collective urge to change, and poison national and religious relationships. How strange, then, that unity is regarded as a goal to be attained, if at all, in a distant future, after a host of disorders in social, political, economic and moral life have been addressed and somehow or other resolved. Yet the latter are essentially symptoms and side effects of the problem, not its root cause. Why has so fundamental an inversion of reality come to be widely accepted? The answer is presumably because the achievement of genuine unity of mind and heart among peoples whose experiences are deeply at variance is thought to be entirely beyond the capacity of society's existing institutions. While this tacit admission is a welcome advance over the understanding of processes of social evolution that prevailed a few decades ago, it is of limited practical assistance in responding to the challenge.

Unity is a condition of the human spirit. Education can support and enhance it, as can legislation, but they can do so only once it emerges and has established itself as a compelling force in social life. A global intelligentsia, its prescriptions largely shaped by materialistic misconceptions of reality, clings tenaciously to the hope that imaginative social engineering, supported by political compromise, may indefinitely postpone the potential disasters that few deny loom over humanity's future. "We can well perceive how the whole human race is encompassed with great, with incalculable afflictions", Bahá'u'lláh states. "They that are intoxicated by self-conceit have interposed themselves between it and the Divine and infallible Physician. Witness how they have entangled all men, themselves included, in the mesh of their devices. They can neither discover the cause of the disease, nor have they any knowledge of the remedy."[54] As unity is the remedy for the world's ills, its one certain source lies in the restoration of religion's influence in human affairs. The laws and principles revealed by God, in this day,

Bahá'u'lláh declares, "are the most potent instruments and the surest of all means for the dawning of the light of unity amongst men."[55] "Whatsoever is raised on this foundation, the changes and chances of the world can never impair its strength, nor will the revolution of countless centuries undermine its structure."[56]

Central to Bahá'u'lláh's mission, therefore, has been the creation of a global community that would reflect the oneness of humankind. The ultimate testimony that the Bahá'í community can summon in vindication of His mission is the example of unity that His teachings have produced. As it enters the twenty-first century, the Bahá'í Cause is a phenomenon unlike anything else the world has seen. After decades of effort, in which surges of growth alternated with long stretches of consolidation, often shadowed by setbacks, the Bahá'í community today comprises several million people representative of virtually every ethnic, cultural, social and religious background on earth, administering their collective affairs without the intervention of a clergy, through democratically elected institutions. The many thousands of localities in which it has put down its roots are to be found in every country, territory and significant island group, from the Arctic to Tierra del Fuego, from Africa to the Pacific. The assertion that this community may already constitute the most diverse and geographically widespread of any similarly organized body of people on the planet is unlikely to be challenged by one familiar with the evidence.

The achievement calls out for understanding. Conventional explanations—access to wealth, the patronage of powerful political interests, invocations of the occult or aggressive programmes of proselytism that instil fear of Divine wrath—none have played any role in the events involved. Adherents of the Faith have achieved a sense of identity as members of a single human race, an identity that shapes the purpose of their lives and that, clearly, is not the expression of any intrinsic moral superiority on their own part: "O people of Bahá! That there is none to rival you is a sign of mercy."[57] A fair-minded observer is compelled to entertain at least the possibility that the phenomenon may represent the operation of influences entirely different in nature from the familiar ones—influences that can properly be described only as spiritual—capable of eliciting extraordinary feats of sacrifice and understanding from ordinary people of every background.

Particularly striking has been the fact that the Bahá'í Cause has been able to maintain the unity thus achieved, unbroken and unimpaired, through the most vulnerable early stages of its existence. One will search in vain for another association of human beings in history—political, religious, or social—that has successfully survived the perennial blight of schism and faction. The Bahá'í community, in all its diversity, is a single body of people, one in its understanding of the intent of the revelation of God that gave it birth, one in its devotion to the Administrative Order that its Author created for the governance of its collective affairs, one in its commitment to the task of disseminating His message throughout the planet. Over the decades of its rise, several individuals, some of them highly placed and all of them driven by the spur of ambition, did their utmost to create separate followings loyal to themselves or to the personal interpretations they had imposed on Bahá'u'lláh's writings. At earlier stages in the evolution of religion, similar attempts had proved successful in splitting the newborn faiths into competing sects. In the case of the Bahá'í Cause, however, such intrigues have failed, without exception, to produce more than transient outbursts of controversy whose net effect has been to deepen the community's understanding of its Founder's purpose and its commitment to it. "So powerful is the light of unity", Bahá'u'lláh assures those who recognize Him, "that it can illuminate the whole earth."[58] Human nature being what it is, one can readily appreciate the Guardian's anticipation that this purifying process will long continue—paradoxically but necessarily—to be an integral feature of the maturation of the Bahá'í community.

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A corollary of the abandonment of faith in God has been a paralysis of ability to address effectively the problem of evil or, in many cases, even to acknowledge it. While Bahá'ís do not attribute to the phenomenon the objective existence it was assumed at earlier stages of religious

history to possess, the negation of the good that evil represents, as with darkness, ignorance or disease, is severely crippling in its effect. Few publishing seasons pass that do not offer the educated reader a range of new and imaginative analyses of the character of some of the monstrous figures who, during the twentieth century, systematically tortured, degraded and exterminated millions of their fellow human beings. One is invited by scholarly authority to ponder the weight that should be given, variously, to paternal abuse, social rejection, professional disappointments, poverty, injustice, war experiences, possible genetic impairment, nihilistic literature—or various combinations of the foregoing—in seeking to understand the obsessions fuelling an apparently bottomless hatred of humankind. Conspicuously missing from such contemporary speculation is what experienced commentators, even as recently as a century ago, would have recognized as spiritual disease, whatever its accompanying features.

If unity is indeed the litmus test of human progress, neither history nor Heaven will readily forgive those who choose deliberately to raise their hands against it. In trusting, people lower their defences and open themselves to others. Without doing so, there is no way in which they can commit themselves wholeheartedly to shared goals. Nothing is so devastating as suddenly to discover that, for the other party, commitments made in good faith have represented no more than an advantage gained, a means of achieving concealed objectives different from, or even inimical to, what had ostensibly been undertaken together. Such betrayal is a persistent thread in human history that found one of its earliest recorded expressions in the ancient tale of Cain's jealousy of the brother whose faith God had chosen to confirm. If the appalling suffering endured by the earth's peoples during the twentieth century has left a lesson, it lies in the fact that the systemic disunity, inherited from a dark past and poisoning relations in every sphere of life, could throw open the door in this age to demonic behaviour more bestial than anything the mind had dreamed possible.

If evil has a name, it is surely the deliberate violation of the hard-won covenants of peace and reconciliation by which people of goodwill seek to escape the past and to build together a new future. By its very nature, unity requires self-sacrifice. "...self-love", the Master states, "is kneaded into the very clay of man."[59] The ego, termed by Him the "insistent self",[60] resists instinctively constraints imposed on what it conceives to be its freedom. To willingly forgo the satisfactions that licence affords, the individual must come to believe that fulfilment lies elsewhere. Ultimately, it lies, as it has always done, in the soul's submission to God.

Failure to meet the challenge of such submission has manifested itself with especially devastating consequences throughout the centuries in betrayal of the Messengers of God and of the ideals they taught. This discussion is not the place for a review of the nature and provisions of the specific Covenant by means of which Bahá'u'lláh has successfully preserved the unity of those who recognize Him and serve His purpose. It is sufficient to note the strength of the language He reserves for its deliberate violation by those who simultaneously pretend allegiance to it: "They that have turned away therefrom are reckoned among the inmates of the nethermost fire in the sight of thy Lord, the Almighty, the Unconstrained."[61] The reason for the severity of this condemnation is obvious. Few people have difficulty in recognizing the danger to social well-being of such familiar crimes as murder, rape or fraud, nor the need for society to take effective measures of self-protection. But how are Bahá'ís to think about a perversity which, if unchecked, would destroy the very means essential to the creation of unity—would, in the uncompromising words of the Master, "become even as an axe striking at the very root of the Blessed Tree"?[62] The issue is not one of intellectual dissent, nor even of moral weakness. Many people are resistant to accepting authority of one kind or another, and eventually distance themselves from circumstances that require it. Persons who have been attracted to the Bahá'í Faith but who decide, for whatever reason, to leave it are entirely free to do so.

Covenant-breaking is a phenomenon fundamentally different in nature. The impulse it arouses in those under its influence is not simply to pursue freely whatever path they believe leads to personal fulfilment or contribution to society. Rather, are such persons driven by an apparently ungovernable determination to impose their personal will on the community by any means available to them, without regard for the damage done and without respect for the solemn

undertakings they entered into on being accepted as members of that community. Ultimately, the self becomes the overriding authority, not only in the individual's own life, but in whatever other lives can be successfully influenced. As long and tragic experience has demonstrated all too certainly, endowments such as distinguished lineage, intellect, education, piety or social leadership can be harnessed, equally, to the service of humanity or to that of personal ambition. In ages past, when spiritual priorities of a different nature were the focus of the Divine purpose, the consequences of such rebellion did not vitiate the central message of any of the successive revelations of God. Today, with the immense opportunities and horrific dangers that physical unification of the planet has brought with it, commitment to the requirements of unity becomes the touchstone of all professions of devotion to the will of God or, for that matter, to the well-being of humankind.

* * *

Everything in its history has equipped the Bahá'í Cause to address the challenge facing it. Even at this relatively early stage of its development—and relatively limited as its resources presently are—the Bahá'í enterprise is fully deserving of the respect it is winning. An onlooker need not accept its claims to Divine origin in order to appreciate what is being accomplished. Taken simply as this-worldly phenomena, the nature and achievements of the Bahá'í community are their own justification for attention on the part of anyone seriously concerned with the crisis of civilization, because they are evidence that the world's peoples, in all their diversity, can learn to live and work and find fulfilment as a single race, in a single global homeland.

This fact underlines, if further emphasis were needed, the urgency of the successive Plans devised by the Universal House of Justice for the expansion and consolidation of the Faith. The rest of humanity has every right to expect that a body of people genuinely committed to the vision of unity embodied in the writings of Bahá'u'lláh will be an increasingly vigorous contributor to programmes of social betterment that depend for their success precisely on the force of unity. Responding to the expectation will require the Bahá'í community to grow at an ever-accelerating pace, greatly multiplying the human and material resources invested in its work and diversifying still further the range of talents that equip it to be a useful partner with like-minded organizations. Along with the social objectives of the effort must go an appreciation of the longing of millions of equally sincere people, as yet unaware of Bahá'u'lláh's mission but inspired by many of its ideals, for an opportunity to find lives of service that will have enduring meaning.

The culture of systematic growth taking root in the Bahá'í community would seem, therefore, by far the most effective response the friends can make to the challenge discussed in these pages. The experience of an intense and ongoing immersion in the Creative Word progressively frees one from the grip of the materialistic assumptions—what Bahá'u'lláh terms "the allusions of the embodiments of satanic fancy"[63]—that pervade society and paralyze impulses for change. It develops in one a capacity to assist the yearning for unity on the part of friends and acquaintances to find mature and intelligent expression. The nature of the core activities of the current Plan—children's classes, devotional meetings and study circles—permits growing numbers of persons who do not yet regard themselves as Bahá'ís to feel free to participate in the process. The result has been to bring into existence what has been aptly termed a "community of interest". As others benefit from participation and come to identify with the goals the Cause is pursuing, experience shows that they, too, are inclined to commit themselves fully to Bahá'u'lláh as active agents of His purpose. Apart from its associated objectives, therefore, wholehearted prosecution of the Plan has the potentiality of amplifying enormously the Bahá'í community's contribution to public discourse on what has become the most demanding issue facing humankind.

If Bahá'ís are to fulfil Bahá'u'lláh's mandate, however, it is obviously vital that they come to appreciate that the parallel efforts of promoting the betterment of society and of teaching the Bahá'í Faith are not activities competing for attention. Rather, are they reciprocal features of one coherent global programme. Differences of approach are determined chiefly by the differing needs

and differing stages of inquiry that the friends encounter. Because free will is an inherent endowment of the soul, each person who is drawn to explore Bahá'u'lláh's teachings will need to find his own place in the never-ending continuum of spiritual search. He will need to determine, in the privacy of his own conscience and without pressure, the spiritual responsibility this discovery entails. In order to exercise this autonomy intelligently, however, he must gain both a perspective on the processes of change in which he, like the rest of the earth's population, is caught up and a clear understanding of the implications for his own life. The obligation of the Bahá'í community is to do everything in its power to assist all stages of humanity's universal movement towards reunion with God. The Divine Plan bequeathed it by the Master is the means by which this work is carried out.

However central the ideal of the oneness of religion unquestionably is, therefore, the task of sharing Bahá'u'lláh's message is obviously not an interfaith project. While the mind seeks intellectual certainty, what the soul longs for is the attainment of *certitude*. Such inner conviction is the ultimate goal of all spiritual seeking, regardless of how rapid or gradual the process may be. For the soul, the experience of conversion is not an extraneous or incidental feature of the exploration of religious truth, but the pivotal issue that must eventually be addressed. There is no ambiguity about Bahá'u'lláh's words on the subject and there can be none in the minds of those who seek to serve Him: "Verily I say, this is the Day in which mankind can behold the Face, and hear the Voice, of the Promised One. The Call of God hath been raised, and the light of His countenance hath been lifted up upon men. It behoveth every man to blot out the trace of every idle word from the tablet of his heart, and to gaze, with an open and unbiased mind, on the signs of His Revelation, the proofs of His Mission, and the tokens of His glory."[64]

* * *

One of the distinguishing features of modernity has been the universal awakening of historical consciousness. An outcome of this revolutionary change in perspective that greatly enhances the teaching of Bahá'u'lláh's message is the ability of people, given the chance, to recognize that the whole body of humanity's sacred texts places the drama of salvation itself squarely in the context of history. Beneath the surface language of symbol and metaphor, religion, as the scriptures reveal it, operates not through the arbitrary dictates of magic but as a process of fulfilment unfolding in a physical world created by God for that purpose.

In this respect, the texts speak with one voice: religion's goal is humanity's attainment of the age of "in-gathering",[65] of "one fold, and one shepherd";[66] the great age to come when "the Earth will shine with the glory of its Lord"[67] and the will of God is carried out "in earth, as it is in heaven";[68] "the promised Day"[69] when the "holy city"[70] will descend "out of heaven, from ... God",[71] when "the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established in the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow unto it",[72] when God will demand to know "what mean ye that ye beat my people to pieces, and grind the faces of the poor";[73] the Day when scriptures that have been "sealed till the time of the end"[74] would be opened and union with God will find expression in "a new name, which the mouth of the Lord shall name";[75] an age utterly beyond anything humanity will have experienced, the mind conceived or language as yet encompassed: "even as We produced the first Creation, so shall We produce a new one: a promise We have undertaken: truly shall We fulfil it."[76]

The declared purpose of history's series of prophetic revelations, therefore, has been not only to guide the individual seeker on the path of personal salvation, but to prepare the whole of the human family for the great eschatological Event lying ahead, through which the life of the world will itself be entirely transformed. The revelation of Bahá'u'lláh is neither preparatory nor prophetic. It ***is*** that Event. Through its influence, the stupendous enterprise of laying the foundations of the Kingdom of God has been set in motion, and the population of the earth has been endowed with the powers and capacities equal to the task. That Kingdom is a universal civilization shaped by principles of social justice and enriched by achievements of the human

mind and spirit beyond anything the present age can conceive. "This is the Day", Bahá'u'lláh declares, "in which God's most excellent favours have been poured out upon men, the Day in which His most mighty grace hath been infused into all created things.... Soon will the present-day order be rolled up, and a new one spread out in its stead."[77]

Service to the goal calls for an understanding of the fundamental difference distinguishing the mission of Bahá'u'lláh from political and ideological projects of human design. The moral vacuum that produced the horrors of the twentieth century exposed the outermost limits of the mind's unaided capacity to devise and construct an ideal society, however great the material resources harnessed to the effort. The suffering entailed has engraved the lesson indelibly on the consciousness of the earth's peoples. Religion's perspective on humanity's future, therefore, has nothing in common with systems of the past—and only relatively little relationship with those of today. Its appeal is to a reality in the genetic code, if it can be so described, of the rational soul. The Kingdom of Heaven, Jesus taught two thousand years ago, is "within".[78] His organic analogies of a "vineyard",[79] of "seed [sown] into the good ground",[80] of the "good tree [that] bringeth forth good fruit"[81] speak of a potentiality of the human species that has been nurtured and trained by God since the dawn of time as the purpose and leading edge of the creative process. The ongoing work of patient cultivation is the task that Bahá'u'lláh has entrusted to the company of those who recognize Him and embrace His Cause. Little wonder, then, at the exalted language in which He speaks of a privilege so great: "Ye are the stars of the heaven of understanding, the breeze that stirreth at the break of day, the soft-flowing waters upon which must depend the very life of all men...."[82]

The process bears within itself the assurance of its fulfilment. For those with eyes to see, the new creation is today everywhere emerging, in the same way that a seedling becomes in time a fruit-bearing tree or a child reaches adulthood. Successive dispensations of a loving and purposeful Creator have brought the earth's inhabitants to the threshold of their collective coming-of-age as a single people. Bahá'u'lláh is now summoning humanity to enter on its inheritance: "That which the Lord hath ordained as the sovereign remedy and mightiest instrument for the healing of all the world is the union of all its peoples in one universal Cause, one common Faith."[83]

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One Common Faith

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