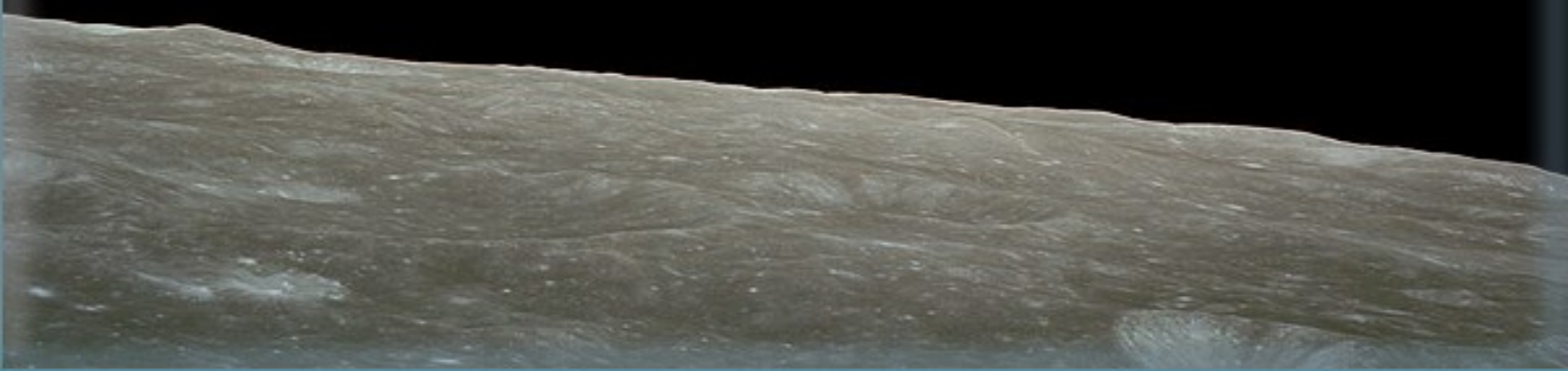


THE BAHÁ'Í WORLD

A Selection of Articles on

JUSTICE, UNITY AND
PEACE



THE BAHÁ'Í WORLD¹

TOPICS

JUSTICE, UNITY & PEACE

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Contents

‘Abdu’l-Bahá *Champion of Universal Peace*

‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Reading of Social Reality

A Power of Implementation

Spiritual Foundations of Peace

Strategic Plan for the Achievement of Peace

Significance of the *Tablets of the Divine Plan*

Looking Ahead

Spatial Strategies for Racial Unity

The Bahá’í Plans and Spatial Unity

Place and the Institute Process

Addressing Racial Unity through Institutes

Furthering the Racial Unity Agenda

The Bahá'í Response to Racial Injustice and Pursuit of Racial Unity 1912-1996 (Part 1)

‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Visit: Laying the Foundation for Racial Unity, 1912-1921

Race Amity Activities: The Bahá'í Community's Responses to Racial Crises, 1921-1937

The Most Challenging Issue: Preparing the American Bahá'í Community to Become a Model of Racial Unity

A Steady Flow of Guidance on Race Unity: The 1950s and the Turbulent 1960s

Expanding the Circle of Unity: Multiracial Community Building, 1970s and 1980s

The 1990s: Models and Visions of Racial Unity and the Los Angeles Riots

Conclusion

The Bahá'í Response to Racial Injustice and Pursuit of Racial Unity 1996-2021 (Part 2)

1996 – 2006: Building capacity through focus on a single aim

2006 – 2016: Unlocking the “society-building powers of the Faith”

2016 – 2021: Envisioning the movement of populations

Conclusion: Forging a Path to Racial Justice

Reading Reality in Times of Crisis *‘Abdu’l-Bahá and the Great War*

‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Radical Analysis of the Causes of War

The Great War

The Birth of a New Society

Addressing the immediate needs

Reading Reality in Times of Crisis

The Cause of Universal Peace *‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Enduring Impact*

A Vision of Peace *Stories from the Democratic Republic of the Congo*

A path to collective prosperity

Towards unity, youth lead the way

A village named 'Peace'

A luminous community

Rethinking Migration from a Global Perspective

Migration and Social Transformation

Humanity's response to migration and displacement

Replacing the Sword with the Word *Bahá'u'lláh's Concept of Peace*

Bahá'u'lláh and the Removal of the Sword

From Word Order to World Order

Main Theories of Peace

Bahá'u'lláh's Approach to Peace

‘Abdu’l-Bahá
Champion of Universal Peace

BY
HODA MAHMOUDI AND JANET KHAN

FRIDAY OCTOBER 22, 2021



‘Abdu’l-Bahá with a group of friends in Stuttgart, Germany, 4 April 1913.

Credit: media.bahai.org.

In October 1911, as the world teetered towards collapse and the prospects of war loomed large, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá delivered a speech in Paris to a group of individuals who were seeking creative solutions to the issues of the day. He spoke about the pragmatic relationship between “true thought” and its application. “If these thoughts never reach the plane of action,” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explained, “they remain useless: the power of thought is dependent on its manifestation in deeds.”²

In this paper we explore ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s active promotion of the broad vision of peace set out in the teachings of the Bahá’í Faith and examine His contributions to mobilizing widespread support for the practice of peace. The realization of peace, as outlined in the Bahá’í writings and elucidated by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, is dependent on spiritual thoughts based on spiritual virtues expressed through human deeds.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Reading of Social Reality

‘Abdu’l-Bahá is a figure unique in religious history. Understanding His critical role is essential to understanding the workings of the Bahá’í Faith – in its past, present, and future.

For forty years ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was a prisoner of the Ottoman Empire, having been exiled as a nine-year-old child, when members of Bahá’u’lláh’s family

were expelled from Iran to the Ottoman domains. Undeterred by the restrictions to His freedom and the challenges of daily life, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá directed His attention to administering the affairs of the growing Bahá’í community and to easing the plight of humanity by actively promoting a vision of a just, united, and peaceful world.

Keenly aware of the events transpiring in the world at large, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá viewed the establishment of universal peace as one of the most critical issues of the day. His writings and public talks outline the Bahá’í approach to peace and methods for its attainment and explain and illuminate the teachings of Bahá’u’lláh. They reflect a profound and sensitive understanding of the state of the world and demonstrate the relevance of the Bahá’í teachings to the alleviation of the human condition. The Bahá’í approach stresses a reliance on the constructive power of religion and on the forces of social and spiritual cohesion as a way to impact the world.³

‘Abdu’l-Bahá saw in World War I a harrowing lesson of the human necessity for peace – and of the darkness that can ensue without peace. He knew and wrote extensively that nothing short of the establishment of the spiritual foundations for peace could result in lasting peace and security for humanity. In His written works, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá repeatedly draws our attention to the need for establishing the spiritual prerequisites for peace, requisites which, in turn, remove the barriers to peace, such as racial prejudice, sexism, economic inequalities, sectarianism, and nationalism.

That remarkable time in the history of the world provides the backdrop to the *Tablets of the Divine Plan*, a series of letters ‘Abdu’l-Bahá addressed to the Bahá’ís of North America. A study of these letters together with two

detailed letters⁴ on peace addressed to the Executive Committee of the Central Organization for a Durable Peace at The Hague provides an opportunity to better understand the nature of universal peace as envisioned in the Bahá'í writings, the prerequisites of peace, and how peace can be waged. The *Tablets of the Divine Plan* set out a systematic strategy aimed at strengthening embryonic Bahá'í communities, founded on the principle of the oneness of humankind, and mobilizing their members to engage in activities associated with spreading the values of peace. The Tablets to The Hague are examples from among 'Abdu'l-Bahá's tireless efforts to contribute to the most relevant discourses of His time and to engage like-minded individuals and groups throughout the world in the pursuit of peace.⁵

A Power of Implementation

'Abdu'l-Bahá's caveat that "the power of thought" depends on "its manifestation in action,"⁶ is particularly relevant to the idea of peace.

Consider! Nearly 20 million men, women and children were killed during the four years of World War I!

'Abdu'l-Bahá took the principles of global peace revealed by Bahá'u'lláh and shaped them into a practical grand strategy for how to understand, practice, and pursue peace. Among the voluminous writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the fourteen letters of the *Tablets of the Divine Plan* outlined detailed instructions and systematic actions for the spread of the spiritual teachings of the Bahá'í Faith throughout the world. Their aim was the establishment of growing communities throughout the world that would embody the values of peace, would comprise the diverse populations of the human

family, and would contribute to the spiritualization of the planet—a vision that was being promoted as the world was witnessing the horrors and sufferings of the war:

Black darkness is enshrouding all regions... all countries are burning with the flame of dissension...the fire of war and carnage is blazing throughout the East and the West. Blood is flowing, corpses bestrew the ground, and severed heads are fallen on the dust of the battlefield.⁷

‘Abdu’l-Bahá called on the recipients of the *Tablets* to arise and take action, establishing throughout the planet new communities founded on the spiritual principles of love, goodwill, and cooperation among humankind. Through such calls for acts of sacrificial service that arising to spread the divine teachings would entail, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was promoting an antidote to the social and spiritual illnesses that contribute to the conditions of war. He reminded the recipients of His letters of the power of spiritual forces to transform hatred, division, war, and destruction into love, unity, dignity, and the nobility of every human being. “Extinguish this fire,” He wrote, “so that these dense clouds which obscure the horizon may be scattered, the Sun of Reality shine forth with the rays of conciliation, this intense gloom be dispelled and the resplendent light of peace shed its radiance upon all countries.”⁸

‘Abdu’l-Bahá explained that if we desire peace in the world, we must begin by planting peace in our own hearts. This principle can be found throughout the writings of Bahá’u’lláh:

What is preferable in the sight of God is that the cities of men's hearts, which are ruled by the hosts of self and passion, should be subdued by the sword of utterance, of wisdom and of understanding. Thus, whoso seeketh to assist God must, before all else, conquer, with the sword of inner meaning and explanation, the city of his own heart and guard it from the remembrance of all save God, and only then set out to subdue the cities of the hearts of others. ⁹

While 'Abdu'l-Bahá sought to mobilize the Bahá'ís of North America to spread the unifying message of Bahá'u'lláh throughout the world, He also pursued numerous opportunities to introduce into the discourses of His time essential concepts and principles that would help the thinking of His contemporaries to evolve and assist humanity to move towards the realization of peace.

Indeed, in His letters to the Central Organization for a Durable Peace, written in 1919 and 1920 after the war's conclusion, 'Abdu'l-Bahá gently but unequivocally challenged His audience to broaden its conception of peace. Specifically, in His first letter, 'Abdu'l-Bahá explored "many teachings which supplemented and supported that of universal peace," such as the "independent investigation of reality," "the oneness of the world of humanity," and "the equality of women and men." Some other related teachings of Bahá'u'lláh that were explained by 'Abdu'l-Bahá included the following: "that religion must be the cause of fellowship and love," "that religion must be in conformity with science and reason," "that religious, racial, political, economic and patriotic prejudices destroy the edifice of humanity," and "that although material civilization is one of the means for the progress of the world of mankind, yet until it becomes combined with

Divine civilization, the desired result, which is the felicity of mankind, will not be attained.”¹⁰ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá then reiterated His point, stating:

These manifold principles, which constitute the greatest basis for the felicity of mankind and are of the bounties of the Merciful, must be added to the matter of universal peace and combined with it, so that results may accrue. ¹¹

In the Second Tablet to the Hague, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá observed that for peace to be realized in the world, it would not be enough that people were simply informed about the horrors of war. “Today the benefits of universal peace are recognized amongst the people, and likewise the harmful effects of war are clear and manifest to all,” wrote ‘Abdu’l-Bahá.

But in this matter, knowledge alone is far from sufficient: A power of implementation is needed to establish it throughout the world.... It is our firm belief that the power of implementation in this great endeavour is the penetrating influence of the Word of God and the confirmations of the Holy Spirit. ¹²

Abdu’l-Bahá asserted that it is through this power of implementation that “the compelling power of conscience can be awakened, so that this lofty ideal may be translated from the realm of thought into that of reality.” “It is clear and evident,” He explained, “that the execution of this mighty endeavour is impossible through ordinary human feelings but requireth the powerful sentiments of the heart to transform its potential into reality.” ¹³

Spiritual Foundations of Peace

Understanding ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s approach to peace also demands we understand Bahá’u’lláh’s direct engagement with the world and His doctrinal declarations concerning the Bahá’í Faith. Bahá’u’lláh’s writings describe a “progressive revelation” of religion in which individual religions arise to meet the need of their times. Bahá’u’lláh stated that particular religions were entrusted with a message and a spirit that “best meet the requirements of the age in which” that religion appeared.¹⁴ In this context, religions are viewed as the gradual unfolding of one religion that is being renewed from age to age. The variations in the teachings of these religions are attributable to a world that is constantly changing and needing spiritual renewal and spiritual principles. Because “ancient laws and archaic ethical systems will not meet the requirements of modern conditions,” then, as a new religion takes shape, new sets of laws and principles are revealed to humanity and new spiritual beliefs must always emerge.¹⁵

Bahá’u’lláh’s Revelation calls on individuals to internalize spiritual principles and express them through actions. He proclaimed “to the world the solidarity of nations and the oneness of humankind.”¹⁶ He described “a human race conscious of its own oneness.”¹⁷ Complex concepts such as human oneness and the global order were transformed from utopian ideals to spiritual commands of the highest order; the Bahá’í writings unfold and clarify how such commands might be fulfilled. Bahá’u’lláh’s vision also details the need for the construction of a World Order, an order comprising administrative institutions at the local, regional, national, and international levels. Such institutions, among other things, serve as channels for the application of spiritual principles. As the institutions evolve over decades and centuries, a new world order will eventually produce the conditions conducive to global peace. Yet, even as the Bahá’í writings envision a long-

term process of global transformation and maturation of the human race, they also assert that change will also arise from individual and collective efforts at the grassroots of society. In exploring the creative Word and learning to apply it to their individual and collective lives, individuals are spiritually transformed from the inside-out, and they contribute to the transformation of communities, institutions, and society at large.

In describing the Bahá'í Faith's strong prohibition on waging war, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, stated that Bahá'u'lláh "abrogated contention and conflict, and even rejected undue insistence. He exhorted us instead to 'consort with the followers of all religions in a spirit of friendliness and fellowship.' He ordained that we be loving friends and well-wishers of all peoples and religions and enjoined upon us to demonstrate the highest virtues in our dealings with the kindreds of the earth....What a heavy burden was all that enmity and rancour, all that recourse to sword and spear!" 'Abdu'l-Bahá wrote of the impact of war on humanity. "Conversely, what joy, what gladness is imparted by loving-kindness!"¹⁸

'Abdu'l-Bahá viewed peace as a central facet of the work of the Bahá'í Faith. There was no separating peace from the Bahá'í Faith, nor was there any separation between the Faith and peace. Peace was both medium and message, and the Bahá'í Faith itself was the vehicle for establishing peace. He explained, in His Second Tablet to the Hague, that the followers of Bahá'u'lláh were actively engaged in the establishment of peace, because their

desire for peace is not derived merely from the intellect: It is a matter of religious belief and one of the eternal foundations of the Faith of God.

That is why we strive with all our might and, forsaking our own advantage, rest, and comfort, forgo the pursuit of our own affairs; devote ourselves to the mighty cause of peace; and consider it to be the very foundation of the Divine religions, a service to His Kingdom, the source of eternal life, and the greatest means of admittance into the heavenly realm.”¹⁹

Strategic Plan for the Achievement of Peace

‘Abdu’l-Bahá dedicated His life to the advancement of the Cause of Bahá’u’lláh and to the establishment of universal peace. His peace activities in the West include many talks given in Europe and North America. He had close contact with civic leaders and social activists and participated in the 1912 Lake Mohonk Conference on Peace and Arbitration in upstate New York attended by over 180 prominent people from the United States and other countries. He addressed a variety of American women’s organizations, gave presentations at universities and colleges, spoke in Chicago at the NAACP’s annual conference, and gave lectures at churches and synagogues.

Yet for all His courageous activities, and all the efforts of the Bahá’ís, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was greatly saddened by the world’s apparent indifference to Bahá’u’lláh’s call for global peace and to the efforts He Himself had made in the course of His travels. Shoghi Effendi, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s grandson and His appointed successor, wrote: “Agony filled His soul at the spectacle of human slaughter precipitated through humanity’s failure to respond to the summons He had issued, or to heed the warnings He had given.”²⁰

Given the turbulent condition of the world and the dangers facing humankind, He devised a detailed strategic plan to address the situation and to assign responsibility for its implementation. His plan, devised in 1916 to 1917 and set out in fourteen letters, known collectively as the *Tablets of the Divine Plan*, was entrusted to the members of the Bahá'í community in the United States and Canada. The pivotal goal of the *Tablets of the Divine Plan* is directly associated with the long-range process that will lead to the achievement of peace in the world as envisaged in Bahá'u'lláh's writings.

Designated as “the chosen trustees and principal executors of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Divine Plan,”²¹ the North American Bahá'ís were called upon to assume a prominent role in taking the message of Bahá'u'lláh to all the countries of the world and for effecting the transformation in values necessary for the emergence of a world order characterized by justice, unity, and peace. This great human resource – the body of willing believers in the West – was notable for its enthusiasm, determination, and deep commitment to Bahá'u'lláh's vision for change. These communities were ideal incubators for the processes of peace.

At the time the messages of the *Tablets of the Divine Plan* were being written, North American Bahá'ís comprised but a small percentage of the total Bahá'ís in the world (though many had met ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in 1912). Commenting on ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s choice of the North American Bahá'ís and the link between World War I and the *Tablets of the Divine Plan*, Shoghi Effendi indicated that the Divine Plan “was prompted by the contact established by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá Himself, in the course of His historic journey, with the entire body of His followers throughout the United States and Canada. It was conceived, soon after that contact was established, in the

midst of what was then held to be one of the most devastating crises in human history.”²² Shoghi Effendi offered further comment concerning the historic bond between ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and the North American community: “This is the community,” he reminded us,

which, ever since it was called into being through the creative energies released by the proclamation of the Covenant of Bahá’u’lláh, was nursed in the lap of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s unfailing solicitude, and was trained by Him to discharge its unique mission through the revelation of innumerable Tablets, through the instructions issued to returning pilgrims, through the despatch of special messengers, through His own travels at a later date, across the North American continent, through the emphasis laid by Him on the institution of the Covenant in the course of those travels, and finally through His mandate embodied in the Tablets of the Divine Plan.²³

It is clear that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was aware of the potential capacity of the North American Bahá’ís to carry out the task with which they had been entrusted. His extensive travels in North America afforded the opportunity to assess, at first hand, the spiritual, social, and political environment of the continent and to appreciate the freedoms – intellectual, artistic, political, and, particularly, the religious freedom—inherent in North American society. And it is also apparent that He understood the spiritual possibilities of the West and the desire of women and men to seek a fuller expression of all things – of themselves, of their society, of the world.

Significance of the *Tablets of the Divine Plan*

As described above, the *Tablets of the Divine Plan* constitute the charter for the propagation of the Bahá'í Faith and outline 'Abdu'l-Bahá's plan for the spiritual regeneration of the world. The letters therein set out the prerequisites for peace and assign responsibility to the North American believers "to plant the banner of His Father's Faith . . . in all the continents, the countries and islands of the globe."²⁴ They focus on the work of promulgating and implementing Bahá'u'lláh's salutary message of unity, justice, and peace in a systematic and orderly manner. They represent a strategic intervention put in place by 'Abdu'l-Bahá to ensure the ongoing and systematic dissemination of the values of peace and the promotion of activities associated with moral and social advancement. They describe a spiritually based approach to peace that is pragmatic, long-term, flexible, and durable.

In those darkest days of World War I, the means of communication between 'Abdu'l-Bahá in Palestine (then under the rule of the Ottoman Empire) and the community of His followers around the world were disrupted and, for a period, severed. The first eight Tablets were written in the spring of 1916, and the second group was penned during the spring of 1917. The first group did not arrive in North America until the fall of 1916, while the delivery of the remaining Tablets was delayed until after the cessation of hostilities.²⁵

The Great War of 1914-1918 rocked the very foundations of society and dramatically changed the shape of the world. The historian Margaret MacMillan provides a telling summary of the impact of the War:

Four years of war shook forever the supreme self-confidence that had carried Europe to world dominance. After the western front Europeans

could no longer talk of a civilizing mission to the world. The war toppled governments, humbled the mighty and overturned whole societies. In Russia the revolutions of 1917 replaced tsarism, with what no one yet knew. At the end of the war Austria-Hungary vanished, leaving a great hole at the centre of Europe. The Ottoman empire, with its vast holdings in the Middle East and its bit of Europe, was almost done. Imperial Germany was now a republic. Old nations—Poland, Lithuania, Estonia, Latvia—came out of history to live again and new nations—Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia—struggled to be born.²⁶

The Tablets captured the mood of the day—the complex fusion of anxiety and despair, the burning desire to end a war more brutal than any the world had ever known, and a desire for a new approach to peaceful existence. Addressing this heartfelt yearning, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá offered a contrasting vision of how the world might be if it lived in harmony:

This world-consuming war has set such a conflagration to the hearts that no word can describe it. In all the countries of the world the longing for universal peace is taking possession of men. There is not a soul who does not yearn for concord and peace. A most wonderful state of receptivity is being realized. This is through the consummate wisdom of God, so that capacity may be created, the standard of the oneness of the world of humanity be upraised, and the fundamental of universal peace and the divine principles be promoted in the East and the West.²⁷

In another Tablet, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá reflected on the impact of World War I on humankind and offered a context for understanding the “wisdom of this

war”:

In short, after this universal war, the people have obtained extraordinary capacity to hearken to the divine teachings, for the wisdom of this war is this: That it may become proven to all that the fire of war is world-consuming, whereas the rays of peace are world-enlightening. One is death, the other is life; this is extinction, that is immortality; one is the most great calamity, the other is the most great bounty; this is darkness, that is light; this is eternal humiliation and that is everlasting glory; one is the destroyer of the foundation of man, the other is the founder of the prosperity of the human race.²⁸

‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s response to war, as set out in the *Tablets of the Divine Plan*, went far beyond providing an alternative vision. He called for constructive mobilization consistent with the local situation. For example, tapping into peoples’ receptivity to new ideas resulting from the sufferings associated with war, He directed the Bahá’ís to take steps to spread Bahá’u’lláh’s teachings, and He set out other concrete actions that could be immediately taken. These activities aimed not only to enlarge the Bahá’í community but were considered essential to spreading the values of peace in the wider society. To this end, He invited “a number of souls” to “arise and act in accordance with the aforesaid conditions, and hasten to all parts of the world.... Thus in a short space of time, most wonderful results will be produced, the banner of universal peace will be waving on the apex of the world and the lights of the oneness of the world of humanity may illumine the universe.”²⁹

The *Tablets of the Divine Plan* underlined the contribution of religion to individual and social development. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá stated:

Consider how the religions of God served the world of humanity! How the religion of Torah became conducive to the glory and honor and progress of the Israelitish nation! How the breaths of the Holy Spirit of His Holiness Christ created affinity and unity between divergent communities and quarreling families! How the sacred power of His Holiness Muḥammad became the means of uniting and harmonizing the contentious tribes and the different clans of Peninsular Arabia—to such an extent that one thousand tribes were welded into one tribe; strife and discord were done away with; all of them unitedly and with one accord strove in advancing the cause of culture and civilization, and thus were freed from the lowest degree of degradation, soaring toward the height of everlasting glory!³⁰

Within this context, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá affirmed that the Bahá’í community’s historic mission was at heart a spiritual enterprise, and He illustrated the capacity of the community to unite peoples of different background. He wrote:

Consider! The people of the East and the West were in the utmost strangeness. Now to what a high degree they are acquainted with each other and united together! How far are the inhabitants of Persia from the remotest countries of America! And now observe how great has been the influence of the heavenly power, for the distance of thousands of miles has become identical with one step! How various nations that have had no relations or similarity with each other are now united and

agreed through this divine potency! Indeed to God belongs power in the past and in the future! And verily God is powerful over all things!³¹

The community-building activities initiated by the Bahá'ís at the behest of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and the diversity of the Faith's emerging community constitute a powerful means to engage the interest and attract the collaboration of like-minded people who are also committed to the cause of enduring social change and are willing to work for the creation of a culture of peace.

The vision of the *Tablets of the Divine Plan* is a vision that regards all human beings as being responsible for the advancement of civilization. The Bahá'í Faith looks to ensure such advancement is possible by highlighting the pathways of unity. To initiate the processes of individual and social transformation, 'Abdu'l-Bahá calls on his followers to embrace a series of tasks – in a sense, to get to work – so that they might

occupy themselves with the diffusion of the divine exhortations and advices, guide the souls and promote the oneness of the world of humanity. They must play the melody of international conciliation with such power that every deaf one may attain hearing, every extinct person may be set aglow, every dead one may obtain new life and every indifferent soul may find ecstasy. It is certain that such will be the consummation.³²

Humankind is asked to flee “all ignorant prejudices” and work for the good of all. In the West, individuals are charged to commit to “the promulgation of the divine principles so that the oneness of the world of humanity may

pitch her canopy in the apex of America and all the nations of the world may follow the divine policy.”³³

The great changes described in the Tablets will evolve slowly. For though the Tablets call for a time when “the mirror of the earth may become the mirror of the Kingdom, reflecting the ideal virtues of heaven,”³⁴ translating this poetic vision into a concrete plan will take time. But this delay is not cause for slowing the activities of peace, rather the scale of change demands a systematic approach to peace.³⁵ For instance, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá lists countries by name and specifies the order in which tasks are to be completed.³⁶

But along with all His specificity, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá also describes a lofty vision meant to inspire. He calls upon His followers to become “heavenly farmers and scatter pure seeds in the prepared soil,” promises that “throughout the coming centuries and cycles many harvests will be gathered,” and asks followers to “consider the work of former generations. During the lifetime of Jesus Christ, the believing, firm souls were few and numbered, but the heavenly blessings descended so plentifully that in a number of years countless souls entered beneath the shadow of the Gospel.”³⁷

Looking Ahead

Written just over a century ago during one of humanity’s darkest hours, the *Tablets of the Divine Plan* “set in motion processes designed to bring about, in due course, the spiritual transformation of the planet.”³⁸ These letters continue to guide Bahá’ís as they pursue the current Divine Plan under the

authority of the Universal House of Justice, the international governing council of the Bahá'í Faith, and they serve as an inspiration to many others who study them. In fourteen letters, 'Abdu'l-Bahá laid out a charter for the teaching, building, and communal activities that define the Bahá'í theatre of action. While its long-term vision encompasses all humanity, the Divine Plan's execution is tied to the Bahá'í community's spiritual evolution and the development of its administrative institutions. It is also tied to humanity's receptivity and willingness to pursue peace.

Today, Bahá'ís throughout the world are actively engaged in the application of the Divine Plan through a long-term process of community building inspired by the principle of the oneness of humankind. Embracing an outward-looking orientation, Bahá'ís maintain that to systematically advance a material and spiritual global civilization, the contributions of innumerable individuals, groups, and organizations is required for generations to come. The process of community building that is finding expression in Bahá'í localities throughout the world is open to all peoples regardless of race, gender, nationality, or religion.

In these communities, Bahá'ís aspire to develop patterns of life and social structures based on Bahá'u'lláh's principles. Throughout the process they are *learning* how to strengthen community life based on spiritual principles including the prerequisites for the establishment of global peace as identified in the Bahá'í writings. The Plan, in both urban and rural settings, is comprised of an educational process where children, youth, and adults explore spiritual concepts, gain capacity, and apply them to their own distinct social environment. As individuals participate in this ongoing

process of community building, they draw insights from science and religion's spiritual teachings toward gaining new knowledge and insights.

The acquisition of new knowledge is continually applied to nurturing a community environment that is free from prejudice of race, class, religion, nationality, and strives to achieve the full equality of women in all the affairs of the community as well as the society at large. A natural outcome of this transformative learning process of spiritual and material education is involvement in the life of society. In this regard, Bahá'ís are engaged in two interconnected areas of action: social action and participation in the prevalent discourses of society. Social action involves the application of spiritual principles to social problems in order to advance material progress in diverse settings. Second, in diverse settings, Bahá'í institutions and agencies, in addition to individuals and organizations, whether academic or professional, or at national and international forums, also participate in important discourses prevalent in society with the goal of exploring the solutions to social problems and contributing to the advancement of society. Aware of the complex challenges that lie ahead of them in this work, Bahá'ís are working jointly with others, convinced of the unique role that religion offers in the construction of a spiritual global order.³⁹

Stressing the vital significance of striving to enhance the learning processes associated with the implementation of peace, a recent message addressed to Bahá'ís and their collaborators, observed that

none who are conscious of the condition of the world can refrain from giving their utmost endeavour...The devoted efforts that you and your like-minded collaborators are making to build communities founded on

spiritual principles, to apply those principles for the betterment of your societies, and to offer the insights arising—these are the surest ways you can hasten the fulfillment of the promise of world peace.⁴⁰

The Divine Plan continues to unfold over the decades as the collective capacity of the Bahá'í community grows in tandem with the world's openness to change. Implementation of the Plan continues and will continue so that the world might achieve “the advent of that Golden Age which must witness the proclamation of the Most Great Peace and the unfoldment of that world civilization which is the offspring and primary purpose of that Peace.”⁴¹

ABOUT THE AUTHORS:

Janet Khan is the author or co-author of a number of books on the history and teachings of the Bahá'í Faith, including *A World Without War, 'Abdu'l-Bahá and the Discourse for Global Peace, Call to Apostleship, Reflections on the Tablets of the Divine Plan* (2016), *Heritage of Light, The Spiritual Destiny of America* (2009), *Prophet's Daughter, The Life and Legacy of Bahíyyih Khánum, Outstanding Heroine of the Bahá'í Faith* (2005), and *Advancement of Women, A Bahá'í Perspective* (1998).

Hoda Mahmoudi holds the Bahá'í Chair for World Peace at the University of Maryland, College Park. She is co-author with Dr. Janet Khan of *A World Without War: 'Abdu'l-Bahá and the Discourse on Global Peace* (2020). She is also co-editor of *Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Human Dignity and Human Rights* (2019), *Children and Globalization: Multidisciplinary Perspective* (2019), and *The Changing Ethos of Human Rights* (2020).

Spatial Strategies for Racial Unity

BY
JUNE MANNING THOMAS

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Lack of unity among people of various races, ethnicities, and classes is a major problem for human society. Many nations face such disunity, which can cause social conflict, lack of empathy for “others,” discrimination, and exploitation. Bahá’ís think of such problems as symptoms; the illness is absence of the unity of the human race. One subset of the unity that is necessary is racial unity. As the term is used here, racial unity focuses on unity among various racial and ethnic groups.

Eliminating individual prejudice is a necessary, but insufficient, part of promoting racial unity. Human beings have embedded racial disunity within geographic space, where it is hard to change and is reinforced by political, economic, and social boundaries. Thus, individual people may believe

themselves free of racial prejudice, but they may face no or weak testing of this belief if they are isolated in geographic circumstances that solidify racial disunity. Spatial geography can reinforce systemic racial discrimination.

This is a difficult problem, but throughout its history the Bahá'í Faith has always championed racial unity, even in difficult circumstances. Direct guidance from the Head of the Faith, in each period of Bahá'í history, has consistently counseled the Bahá'ís to abandon prejudice against different races, religions, ethnicities, and nationalities. In addition, the Bahá'í community has purposefully aimed to increase diversity within its own religious community by inviting people of diverse races, ethnicities, and nationalities into its ranks. The approach that the worldwide Bahá'í community now uses builds on these historic principles and strategies, while extending beyond them to offer lasting social transformation for all people in a community. It offers the world a process that can help promote racial unity, even in situations of geographic disunity. Considering how to accomplish this requires strategic thinking.

The Bahá'í Plans and Spatial Unity

The worldwide Bahá'í community's dedication to the principle of racial unity dates back to the founding of the religion. Bahá'ís have held fast to key principles related to the unity of humanity, in general, and to racial unity, specifically, while learning to develop flexible new strategies that recognize contemporary challenges. They have done so within the framework of global plans that guide the growth and development of the Bahá'í community worldwide.

Since its birth in Iran in the mid-nineteenth century, the Bahá'í Faith has given rise to a religious community with significant capacity to unite people across traditional barriers of race, class, nationality, gender, and creed. Its cardinal teaching is the oneness of all humanity. Bahá'í administrative institutions have paid special attention to the issue of racial disunity in North America; much guidance on the subject relates to that continent. This has been true ever since the head of the Faith at that time, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, visited North America in 1912. Through both word and deed, He emphatically encouraged interracial fellowship and disavowed traditional norms of racial segregation and discrimination. He urged people to overcome racial barriers through means such as intermarriage and multiracial meetings, and He praised the beauty of such diversity. These were remarkable exhortations for that time, when interracial marriage was illegal in many American states and Jim Crow laws discouraged free association between people of different racial backgrounds.⁴² The principles He enunciated for North America also pertained to the world with all its various forms of prejudice and social conflict.

Following His visit, in letters sent to the North American Bahá'í community and later published collectively as *Tablets of the Divine Plan*, Abdu'l-Bahá presented a visionary spatial strategy for unity of the world's peoples. He asked North American Bahá'ís to travel first to other states and provinces in their own countries and then to a long list of countries, territories, and islands in the Americas, Africa, Asia, and Europe, spreading the unifying teachings of the Bahá'í Faith to peoples of diverse race and ethnicity. He also placed great importance on teaching America's indigenous populations. His vision was to “establish the oneness of the world of humanity.”⁴³

When leadership of the worldwide Bahá'í community passed to Shoghi Effendi, the grandson of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, in 1921, he continued to emphasize interracial fellowship as a path to racial unity, even when custom discouraged such fellowship. Starting in the 1920s, his letters to North American Bahá'ís addressed these issues, with his most forceful communication being the book-length 1938 letter *The Advent of Divine Justice*. In that work, he laid out principles for the success of a global plan for the growth and development of the Bahá'í community. This Seven Year Plan covered the years 1937 through 1944 and encouraged North American Bahá'ís to travel to other North, Central, and South American states, provinces, territories, and countries—many of them mentioned in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's *Tablets of the Divine Plan*—to share with peoples of all races, nationalities, and ethnicities the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh. Bahá'ís were encouraged to reach out in particular to “the Negro, the Indian, the Eskimo, and Jewish races. ... No more laudable and meritorious service can be rendered ...”⁴⁴ Among the three major requirements for success of that plan was freedom from racial prejudice, a necessary precondition in that momentous spiritual endeavor to share the Faith with diverse people.⁴⁵ The assumption in the two subsequent global plans that Shoghi Effendi initiated, the second Seven Year Plan (1946-53) and the Ten-Year Crusade (1953-63), was that freedom from racial prejudice would continue to be important as the geographic scope of the Faith expanded to the entire world.⁴⁶ Notably, each global plan aimed to increase the number of nationalities, tribes, ethnicities, and races represented within a faith that could then shelter its members from the pernicious influences of division, prejudice, and materialism. As “pioneers” spread the Bahá'í teachings, thus increasing the Faith's reach and diversity, Shoghi Effendi illustrated detailed global maps

showing the increasing number of tribes, ethnicities, and peoples who were joining the Bahá'í Faith worldwide.⁴⁷

Since its first election in 1963, the worldwide governing body of the Bahá'í Faith, the Universal House of Justice, has continued to champion the central principles of racial unity and diversity. Between 1964 and 1996, it launched five global plans that reached the world's diverse peoples in various ways, such as by sending travelers to various countries.⁴⁸ As time passed, however, it became increasingly obvious that the ability of the Bahá'í community to effectively contribute to constructive social change and new models of social organization was limited. One reason was that, despite its wide geographic spread, the Bahá'í community was still relatively small in number. The other was the lagging moral and spiritual state of the world's people in the face of rapid social, scientific, and technological developments and of a rampant materialism.

Place and the Institute Process

In a new series of global plans initiated in 1996 with the call for a “network of training institutes,” the worldwide Bahá'í community began to approach expansion in a different way.⁴⁹ One innovation was the creation of training institutes. These “centers of learning” aim to build human resources and improve communities through a spiritually-based training program designed for different age groups, ranging from children to adults.⁵⁰ They embody a form of distance education that can reach even remote areas of the globe. By 1999, these centers of learning had made “significant strides in developing formal programmes and in putting into place effective systems

for the delivery of courses.”⁵¹ The program involves direct education as well as participatory study circles open to youth and adults, with all activities open to people of all faiths, races, and creeds. The Universal House of Justice calls the efforts for capacity building for advancing community building and propelling social change the “institute process.” After a few years of reflective learning, the worldwide Bahá’í community adopted, from among several options, the curriculum that first arose from the Ruhi Institute in Colombia.

As the Universal House of Justice learned more about the institute process and as Bahá’ís gained more experience with Ruhi educational materials, they began to focus their efforts on neighborhoods and villages.⁵² The Universal House of Justice sent messages between 2010 and 2016 that described salutary experiences in several such receptive locations. It advised the world’s Bahá’ís to look for “smaller pockets of the population” that would benefit from the institute process. It defined such pockets: “in an urban cluster, such a centre of activity might best be defined by the boundaries of a neighbourhood; in a cluster that is primarily rural in character, a small village would offer a suitable social space for this purpose.”⁵³

In such places, the role of the institute would be both to nurture the population spiritually and to enable the building of capacity and community. The means for doing so were deeply participatory: to “enable people of varied backgrounds to advance on equal footing and explore the application of the teachings to their individual and collective lives.”⁵⁴ By 2013, the Universal House of Justice could report clear evidence for the power of “community building by developing centers of intense activity in

neighbourhoods and villages.” In 2016, the Universal House of Justice reported that, because of such strategies, the Teachings of the Faith were influencing people in many different spaces: “crowded urban quarters and villages along rivers and jungle paths.”⁵⁵

All of this was an effort to support salutary transformation in the lives and fortunes of the world’s people. In 2015, the Universal House of Justice described the following: “A broader cross section of the population is being engaged in conversations, and activities are being opened up to whole groups at once—bands of friends and neighbours, troops of youth, entire families—enabling them to realize how society around them can be refashioned. ... Prevailing habits, customs, and modes of expression all become susceptible to change. ... Qualities of mutual support, reciprocity, and service to one another begin to stand out as features of an emerging, vibrant culture among those involved in activities.”⁵⁶

Addressing Racial Unity through Institutes

In 2010, the Universal House of Justice bemoaned that “prejudices of all kinds—of race, of class, of ethnicity, of gender, of religious belief—continue to hold a strong grip on humanity.” It noted, however, that its current global plans could “build capacity in every human group, with no regard for class or religious background, with no concern for ethnicity or race, irrespective of gender or social status, to arise and contribute to the advancement of civilization.” It expressed the hope that the process set in place by these plans would steadily unfold to “disable every instrument devised by humanity over the long period of its childhood for one group to oppress another.”⁵⁷

Indeed, institute-related activities began to bring into collaboration members of diverse faiths, creeds, and ethnicities, as whole villages, cities, and neighborhoods around the world studied unifying spiritual principles and turned away from separations by race, ethnicity, caste, or class. In 2018, the Universal House of Justice reported on results “from country to country.” “As the work in thousands of villages and neighbourhoods gathers momentum,” it wrote, “a vibrant community life is taking root in each.” The House of Justice then explained that, as this happens, a “new vitality emerges within a people taking charge of their own development. Social reality begins to transform.”⁵⁸

The Universal House of Justice sent special assurances to North American believers about the effectiveness of the institute process. Steady promotion of the institute process “will usher in the time anticipated by Shoghi Effendi ... when the communities you build will directly combat and eventually eradicate the forces of corruption, of moral laxity, and of ingrained prejudice eating away at the vitals of society.”⁵⁹ In this letter and in many others, the Universal House of Justice affirmed the potential benefits of the institute process as a tool for racial unity.

The North American community needed such assurance. The United States, especially, continues to experience problems of racial disunity, characterized by lingering racial segregation, social and economic lags for minority-race people, and political/cultural confrontation. Racial prejudice continues to be a problem ingrained in society and in its geographic places. Metropolitan areas in the United States demonstrate spatial inequality, implanted by historic federal and state policies or by ongoing discrimination and exclusionary zoning. Efforts to resolve problems falter:

“Any significant progress toward racial equality has invariably been met by countervailing processes, overt or covert, that served to undermine the advances achieved and to reconstitute the forces of oppression by other means.”⁶⁰

Not just in the United States, but in other countries, place-based action in small geographic areas could encounter such built-in racial disunity. Many metropolitan areas and cities around the world contain sectors or neighborhoods set aside for specific racial, ethnic, or national groups and habitually marginalize the poor. Spatial segregation by race, ethnicity, or income level persists, often oppressing the disadvantaged. How, then, could the current plan’s institute process, an educational initiative based in discrete neighborhoods or localities—some of them defined by racial exclusion—promote racial unity?

Consider two hypothetical families as examples. The first family lives in a modern metropolitan area. That family lives a life of relative prosperity, is not a “minority,” and holds no antagonism toward people of minority races—although its everyday life is isolated by race and income level. Only families of its own, comfortable income bracket live in its section of the city, because of historic circumstances or municipal laws limiting access. Because of longstanding exclusionary practices, the city where this family lives is home to few minority-race people. Schools are similarly homogeneous, and the family’s children have no friendships with diverse people. How might this family help promote racial unity?

The second family lives in the same metropolitan area. That family is of a minority race and has low income. It lives in an isolated neighborhood,

housing families with very similar characteristics to its own. Like the first family, this family also has no antagonism toward other racial groups. Its most challenging issue is not overcoming its own individual prejudices, but surviving in a hostile environment. Its children go to inferior schools; its adults suffer from underemployment or unemployment; and the public services it receives are grossly inferior to the norms for its nation. How might this family make sense of the concept of racial unity, while hemmed in by the geographic proof of disunity?

The Universal House of Justice has explained that different circumstances call for different approaches. Both families and the neighborhoods they live in contain people who can benefit from the institute process, but the utility of the process may manifest itself differently in the two neighborhoods. The specific approach to racial unity would vary as well. Here are four of several possible approaches:

Become free from racial prejudice

The first principle is individual freedom from racial prejudice. The Bahá'í Writings offer much guidance on exactly what this means, but they refer to both attitudes and actions. What binds this guidance is a fundamental recognition of our common humanity and an unwillingness to prejudge people because of race, color, or other exterior characteristics. The Bahá'í teachings also counsel action. In 1927 Shoghi Effendi gave specific spatial advice; he told Bahá'ís to show interracial fellowship “in their homes, in their hours of relaxation and leisure, in the daily contact of business transactions, in the association of their children, whether in their study-classes, their playgrounds, and club-rooms, in short under all possible

circumstances, however insignificant they appear.”⁶¹ Bahá’í institutions have continually confirmed the importance of mirroring forth freedom from racial prejudice in both attitude and action.

Both the family of comfortable means and the family of circumscribed means should treat others without racial prejudice, but their charges differ. Although Shoghi Effendi noted that both blacks and whites should make a “tremendous effort,” he called on whites to “make a supreme effort in their resolve to contribute their share to the solution of this problem.” Blacks, in turn, were to show “the warmth of their response” when whites did reach out.⁶² In conditions of geographic isolation, a majority-race family may need to make special efforts to help promote racial unity. This might require seeking diverse friendships, associations, and social activities, as a matter of general principle and as a service to its own children. It is important to replace racism with “just relationships among individuals, communities, and institutions or society that will uplift all and will not designate anyone as ‘other.’ The change required is not merely social and economic, but above all moral and spiritual.”⁶³

Reach out to minority peoples

This, too, is a principle enshrined within Bahá’í history and widely assumed in the present activities of the global community.⁶⁴ This principle applies to both families in our hypothetical examples. Assume they are all Bahá’í. The more privileged family might consider how to help greater numbers of minority people gain access to the capacity-building potential inherent in the institute process. This would require some form of access and

communication; fortunately, a range of possibilities exists. In a letter, the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States recommended that Bahá'ís consider homefront pioneering into communities predominantly populated by African-Americans, Native Americans, or immigrants.⁶⁵ Alternatively, such a family might steer toward mixed-race neighborhoods when it makes its next move from one domicile to another. Another strategy would be to befriend and engage minorities in their own locality, or to reach across municipal boundaries and associate with people who live in areas segregated from their own. This may require a concerted, conscious effort to overcome the geographic boundaries that exist and to offer genuine friendship. The second family, living in a high-minority, low-income area, could find it easier because of location to offer neighbors local opportunities for collaboration as part of the institute process, although that family, too, may face challenges of agency and receptivity.

Utilize the institute process as a matrix for racial unity

The institute process can help build community as a part of a process of social transformation. Both hypothetical neighborhoods could benefit; usefulness of the institute process is not dependent on the socio-economic status or racial characteristics of any geographic area. The institute process can support racial unity in part because it allows people to converse on related topics in a warm and loving atmosphere, and because it allows them to walk together along several paths of service to humanity.⁶⁶ This process would work best as a tool for racial unity, of course, with diverse participants. For the two families that we have described, both in homogeneous areas, it could be difficult to arrange activities for racially diverse participants, dampening the ability of the institute process to

support racial unity. Even so, the spiritual principles enshrined within the institute curriculum are a useful foundation for raising consciousness in people about the importance of racial unity, since those principles include such virtues as respecting the nobility of human beings, valuing kindness and generosity, seeking justice, and nurturing the life of the soul as opposed to materialistic pursuits. If more people of privilege understood and acted on such principles, this would help counteract self-righteousness, prejudice, and lack of empathy, shortcomings that pose major barriers for racial unity. Likewise, understanding such principles could be of tangible, even life-saving importance for a minority-race family living in a low-income area experiencing social disintegration. Indeed, a main protection against pernicious influences in such a situation may be spiritual education for themselves and for their surrounding neighbors, giving rise to a process of social transformation.

Aim toward social and economic development

We have already mentioned several benefits that could come from engagement in the institute process, including elevation of spiritual dialogue, the education of children, the nurturing of junior youth, and the promotion of moral conduct. All of this could lead to various forms of social action. Built into the institute process is the idea that groups of people can raise up protagonists for social action from within their own communities. This happens by nurturing individuals' capacity and then enhancing collective capacity as the community consults on possibilities for action that address complex needs. These needs could range from health and welfare to water safety, the provision of food, or neighborhood beautification. Although this level of collective action is still, in some

nations, only in embryonic form, in other nations the institute process has led to a flowering of social and economic development initiatives that are borne out of a deep understanding of the needs of local inhabitants of all faiths, races, and ethnicities, joined together in unified action.

Such action could take place in a wide variety of neighborhoods of various economic means. This characteristic would be of particular importance, however, to the hypothetical low-income family. From their perspective, a necessary aspect of “racial unity” could indeed be support for their movement toward sustenance and survival. The training institute could offer short-term support from visiting helpers, teachers, or study circle tutors. The aim, however, would be for residents to arise to become tutors within their own neighborhoods, becoming indigenous teachers and accompanying growing numbers of their fellow residents to contribute to the betterment of their community. The institute process is “not a process that some carry out on behalf of others who are passive recipients—the mere extension of the congregation and invitation to paternalism—but one in which an ever-increasing number of souls recognize and take responsibility for the transformation of humanity.”⁶⁷ People living in a particular place could begin to reshape their destinies as they engaged growing numbers of friends and neighbors in collective action.

Furthering the Racial Unity Agenda

The struggle for the unity of humanity is a long-term one that requires much concerted action along the way. Members of the Bahá’í Faith have continued to advance international, national, and local plans and efforts designed to further such unity. On the specific matter of racial unity, both

‘Abdu’l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi provided unifying spiritual guidance within the framework of visionary, international plans designed to bring the world’s people into one human family. They also addressed such matters as how to change both attitudes and actions in order to overcome racial prejudice and help bring about unity. The Universal House of Justice has supported and advanced these strategies.

This worldwide governing body has now offered humanity a potent tool in the form of the institute process, an educational strategy that can help prepare people to build up their communities and contribute their share to the betterment of humanity. The Universal House of Justice has also turned the attention of Bahá’ís to the challenge of helping to bring about such social transformation within small *portions* of nations, such as villages or neighborhoods that are part of cities or metropolitan areas. This article concerns one of the dilemmas connected with efforts to advance unity, particularly racial unity, in such places: society has segmented people and communities by divisive lines that have cemented disunity. This poses a spatial problem that needs thoughtful action in response.

We used two hypothetical (but realistic) examples to serve as thought experiments, efforts to think through the implications of geographic space for race unity action within the framework of the institute process. The examples were just that; the point is that people in many places face difficulties of various kinds in promoting a race unity agenda in contemporary times. The challenge is to assess our own situations and to take appropriate action. We do know, based on experience from around the globe, that the institute process offers a powerful tool for social transformation and for bringing about several forms of social unity,

including racial. It is also capable of raising up individual protagonists who can begin to reshape themselves and their communities in myriad positive ways, a matter of great importance particularly to neighborhoods suffering the consequences of historic racial inequality.

Study circles, a fundamental element of the institute process, have an essential function in what the Universal House of Justice sees as a process of community building starting with spiritual empowerment and moral education, extending to social action at a small scale, and ultimately expanding to include progressively complex community-building projects. The experience that is being gained opens the possibility for the greater influence of spiritual principles in important matters of public discourse, such as racial unity, the environment, health, and other areas of concern. In such ways, the process of implementing Bahá'u'lláh's vision, furthered by the institutions of His Faith, is advancing.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

June Manning Thomas, Professor Emerita of Urban and Regional Planning at the University of Michigan, specializes in social equity and racial justice related to urban planning and civil rights. She is author of a number of books and articles.

The Bahá'í Response to Racial Injustice and Pursuit of Racial Unity 1912-1996 (PART 1)

BY
RICHARD THOMAS

SATURDAY JANUARY 16, 2021

This is the first of two articles focusing on the American Bahá'í community's efforts to bring about racial unity. This first article is a historical survey of nine decades of earnest striving and struggle in the cause of justice. A second article, to be published in the future, will focus on the profound developments in the Bahá'í world over the past twenty-five years, beginning with 1996, and explore their implications for addressing racial injustice today and in the years to come.



Photo: The second Bahá'í race amity convention in America, held in the auditorium of Central High School, Springfield, Massachusetts, 5-6 December 1921

Once again, as the United States finds itself embroiled in racial conflicts and decades-old struggles for racial justice and racial unity, the Bahá'í community of the United States stands ready to contribute its share to the healing of the nation's racial wounds. Neither the current racial crisis nor the current awakening is unique. Sadly, the United States has been here before.⁶⁸ The American people have learned many lessons but have also forgotten other lessons about how best to solve the underlying problems facing their racially polarized society. For decades the country has seen countless efforts by brave and courageous individuals and dedicated organizations and institutions to hold back the relentless tide of racism. Many of these efforts have achieved great outcomes, but the tide has repeatedly rushed back in to test the resolve of every generation after the fall

of Reconstruction, the Civil Rights Movement, and the historic election of the first African American president.⁶⁹

During some of America's worst racial crises, the Bahá'í community has joined the gallant struggle not only to hold back the tide of racism but also to build a multiracial community based on the recognition of the organic unity of the human race. Inspired by this spiritual and moral principle, the Bahá'í community, though relatively small in number and resources, has, for well over a century, sought ways to contribute to the nation's efforts to achieve racial justice and racial unity. This has been a work in progress, humbly shared with others. It is an ongoing endeavor, one the Bahá'í community recognizes as "a long and thorny path beset with pitfalls."⁷⁰

As the Bahá'í community learns how best to build and sustain a multiracial community committed to racial justice and racial unity, it aspires to contribute to the broader struggle in society and to learn from the insights being generated by thoughtful individuals and groups working for a more just and united society.

This article provides a historical perspective on the Bahá'í community's contribution to racial unity in the United States between 1912 and 1996. The period of 1996 to the present—a "turning point" that the Universal House of Justice characterized as setting "the Bahá'í world on a new course"⁷¹ and increasing its capacity to contribute to social progress—is still underway.

During the past twenty-five years, the Bahá'í community's capacity to contribute to humanity's efforts to overcome deep-rooted social and spiritual ills has advanced significantly, and a subsequent article will focus on the

implications of this distinctive period on the community's ability to foster racial justice and unity.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Visit: Laying the Foundation for Racial Unity, 1912-1921

The Bahá’í community’s first major contribution to racial unity began in 1912 when ‘Abdul’-Bahá, the son of the Founder of the Bahá’í Faith, Bahá’u’lláh (1817-1892), visited the United States. His historic visit occurred during one of the worst periods of racial terrorism in the United States against African Americans. According to historians John Hope Franklin and Alfred A. Moss, “In the first year of the new century more than 100 Negroes were lynched and before the outbreak of World War 1 the number for the century was 1,100.”⁷² In 1906, riots broke out in Atlanta, Georgia, where “whites began to attack every Negro they saw.”⁷³ That same year, race riots also occurred in Brownsville, Texas.⁷⁴ Two years later, in 1908, there were race riots in Springfield, Illinois.⁷⁵ And in 1910, nationwide race riots erupted in the wake of the heavyweight championship fight between Jack Johnson (Black) and Jim Jeffries (White) in Reno, Nevada, in July of that year.⁷⁶

Racial turmoil prevailed before and after ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s visit. Yet, in this raging period of racial terrorism and conflict, He proclaimed a spiritual message of racial unity and love, and infused this message into the heart and soul of the fledgling Bahá’í community—a community still struggling to discover its role in promoting racial amity. Before His visit to the United States, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá sent a message to the 1911 Universal Race Conference in London in which He compared humankind to a flower garden adorned

with different colors and shapes that “enhance the loveliness of each other.”⁷⁷

The next year, in April, 1912, He gave a talk at Howard University, the premier African-American university in Washington D.C. A companion who kept diaries of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Western tours and lectures wrote that whenever ‘Abdu’l-Bahá witnessed racial diversity, He was compelled to call attention to it. For example, His companion reported that, during His talk at Howard University, “here, as elsewhere, when both white and colored people were present, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá seemed happiest.” Looking over the racially mixed audience, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá had remarked: “Today I am most happy, for I see a gathering of the servants of God. I see white and black sitting together.”⁷⁸

After two talks the next day, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was visibly tired as He prepared for the third talk. He was not planning to talk long; but, here again, when he saw Blacks and Whites in the audience, He became inspired. “A meeting such as this seems like a beautiful cluster of precious jewels—pearls, rubies, diamonds, sapphires. It is a source of joy and delight. Whatever is conducive to the unity of the world of mankind is most acceptable and praiseworthy.”⁷⁹ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá then went on to elaborate on the theme of racial unity to an audience of Blacks and Whites who had rarely, if ever, heard such high praise for an interracial gathering. He said to those gathered that “in the world of humanity it is wise and seemly that all the individual members should manifest unity and affinity.”⁸⁰

In the midst of a period saturated with toxic racist and anti-Black language, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá offered positive racial images woven into a new language of

racial unity and fellowship. He painted a picture for his interracial audience: “As I stand here tonight and look upon this assembly, I am reminded curiously of a beautiful bouquet of violets gathered together in varying colors, dark and light.”⁸¹ To still another racially mixed audience, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá commented: “In the clustered jewels of the races may the blacks be as sapphires and rubies and the whites as diamonds and pearls. The composite beauty of humanity will be witness in their unity and blending.”⁸²

Through His words and actions, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá demonstrated the Bahá’í teachings on racial unity. Several examples stand out. Two Bahá’ís, Ali-Kuli Khan, the Persian charge d’affaires, and Florence Breed Khan, his wife, arranged a luncheon in ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s honor in Washington D.C. The guests were members of Washington’s social and political elite. Before the luncheon, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá sent for Louis Gregory, a lawyer and well-known African American Bahá’í. They chatted for a while, and when lunch was ready and the guests were seated, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá invited Gregory to join the luncheon. The assembled guests were no doubt surprised by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s inviting an African American to a White, upper-class social affair, but perhaps even more so by the affection and love ‘Abdu’l-Bahá showed for Gregory when He gave him the seat of honor on His right. A biographer of Louis Gregory pointed out the profound significance of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s action: “Gently but yet unmistakably, ‘Abdul-Bahá has assaulted the customs of a city that had been scandalized a decade earlier by President’s Roosevelt’s dinner invitation to Booker T. Washington.”⁸³

The promotion of interracial marriage was yet another example of how ‘Abdu’l-Bahá demonstrated the Bahá’í teachings on racial unity. Many states outlawed interracial marriage or did not recognize such unions; yet, ‘Abdu’l-

Bahá never wavered in his insistence that Black and White Bahá'ís should not only be unified but should also intermarry. Before his visit to the United States, He had first broached the subject in Palestine with several Western Bahá'ís and explored the sexual myths and fears at the core of American racism. His solution was to encourage interracial marriage. Once in the U.S., He demonstrated the lengths to which the American Bahá'í community should go to show its dedication to racial unity when He encouraged the marriage of Louis Gregory and an English Bahá'í, Louisa Mathew. Their marriage was the first Black-White interracial marriage that was personally encouraged by 'Abdu'l-Bahá. This demonstration of Bahá'í teachings proved difficult for some Bahá'ís who doubted that such a union could last in a racially segregated society, but the marriage lasted until the end of the couple's lives, nearly four decades later. Throughout this period, Louis and Louisa became a shining example of racial unity.⁸⁴

Race Amity Activities: The Bahá'í Community's Responses to Racial Crises, 1921-1937

Although working endlessly to promote racial unity through inspiring talks and actions, 'Abdu'l-Bahá understood the persistent reality of racism in the U.S. In a letter to a Chicago Bahá'í, He predicted what would happen if racial attitudes did not change: "Enmity will be increased day by day and the final result will be hardship and may end in bloodshed."⁸⁵ Several years later, 'Abdu'l-Bahá repeated this warning to an African American Bahá'í that "if not checked, 'the antagonism between the Colored and the White, in America, will give rise to great calamities.'"⁸⁶

Tragically, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s predictions came true. Five years after His visit to the U.S. where He laid the foundation for the American Bahá’í community’s future contributions to racial unity, race riots broke out in 1917 in East St. Louis, Illinois, and other cities. Two years later, in 1919, “the greatest period of interracial strife the nation had ever witnessed”⁸⁷ rocked the country. From June to the end of the year, there were approximately twenty-five race riots.⁸⁸ With the country still in the throes of racial upheaval, ‘Abdul-Bahá, frail and worn, gathered the strength to rally the American Bahá’í community for what would become one of its signature contributions to racial amity in the U.S. In 1920, He mentioned the tragic state of race relations in the U.S. to a Persian Bahá’í residing in that country: “Now is the time for the Americans to take up this matter and unite both the white and colored races. Otherwise, hasten ye towards destruction! Hasten ye to devastation!”⁸⁹

That same year, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá initiated a plan to address the racial crisis in America. As Louis Gregory wrote in his report on the First Race Amity Convention held in Washington, D.C., May 19 to 21, 1921: “ It was following His return to the Holy Land...after the World War that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá set in motion a plan that was to bring the races together, attract the attention of the country, enlist the aid of famous and influential people and have a far-reaching effect upon the destiny of the nation itself.”⁹⁰ In His message to this first Race Amity Convention, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá wrote: “Say to this convention that never since the beginning of time has one more important been held. This convention stands for the oneness of humanity; it will become the cause of the enlightenment of America. It will, if wisely managed and continued, check the deadly struggle between these races which otherwise will inevitably break out.”⁹¹

This first race amity convention could not have come at a better time. Ten days later, on May 31 and June 1, a race riot, also known as “the Tulsa race massacre,” occurred in Tulsa, Oklahoma. “It has been characterized as ‘the single worst incident of racial violence in American history’” when “mobs of white residents, many of them deputized and given weapons by city officials, attacked black residents and businesses.”⁹² They not only attacked Blacks on the ground but also used private aircrafts to attack them from the air. The attacks resulted in the destruction of the Black business district known as Black Wall Street, “at the time the wealthiest black community in the United States.”⁹³

One can only imagine what went through the minds of participants in the interracial gathering at that historic first race amity convention in Washington D.C. as the news of the Tulsa race riot swept the nation. Perhaps their minds raced back to a similar but less destructive race riot that had ravaged their own city during the “red summer”⁹⁴ two years earlier. Some were probably thankful that they were part of a budding interracial movement dedicated to racial amity.

Louis Gregory reflected this optimism after the first race amity convention when he reported: “Under the leadership and through the sacrifices of the Bahá’ís of Washington three other amity conventions...were held....Christians, Jews, Bahá’ís, and people of various races mingled in joyous and serviceable array and the reality of religion shone forth.”⁹⁵ He related that “the Washington friends continued their race amity work in another form by organizing an interracial discussion group which continued for many years and did a very distinctive service, both by its activities and

its fame as the incarnation as a bright ray of hope amid scenes where racial antagonism was traditionally rife.”⁹⁶

From the year of the passing of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in 1921 to 1937, the Bahá’í-inspired race amity movement—a lighthouse of racial hope—cast a sometimes small but powerful beam of light through a thick fog of racism. Notwithstanding setbacks, it made a mighty effort to steady that beam of light. In city after city across the country, brave and courageous peoples of all races and religions joined the movement. In December of 1921, Springfield, Massachusetts, followed Washington D.C. Three years later, New York joined the ranks of race amity workers. That same year Philadelphia—”the City of Brotherly Love”—held its first Race Amity Convention and followed it up six years later (1930) with another one.⁹⁷

In 1927, a year Louis Gregory called “that memorable year for amity conferences,”⁹⁸ a race amity conference was held in Dayton, Ohio. The Dayton community hosted a second race amity conference in 1929.⁹⁹ According to Gregory, “Race amity conferences at Green Acre, the summer colony of the Bahá’ís in Maine, cover[ed] the decade beginning in 1927,”¹⁰⁰ a decade which he referred to as “this fruitful period,”¹⁰¹ when Geneva, New York, Rochester, New York, Portsmouth, New Hampshire, and Boston all contributed their share to the race amity movement.¹⁰² “The friends in Detroit, under the rallying cry, ‘New Views on an Old, Unsolved Human Problem,’ raised the standard of unity in a conference March 14, 1929.”¹⁰³ In Atlantic City, with only one “active Bahá’í worker in the field,” not even the opposition of “the orthodox among the clergy...which unfavorably affected the press”¹⁰⁴ could stem the tide of the race amity movement. On

April 19, 1931, assisted by the Bahá'ís of Philadelphia, The Society of Friends, and other organizations, close to four hundred people attended a gathering.¹⁰⁵ Five months later, in October, the Pittsburgh Bahá'ís arranged a conference.¹⁰⁶

Bahá'ís and their friends and associates in Denver, Portland, Seattle, and Los Angeles all joined hands as they expanded the circle of unity beyond Black and White to include Native Americans, Chinese-Americans, and Japanese-Americans.¹⁰⁷ The Bahá'ís also held interracial dinners and banquets. Such banquets “appeared to give to those who shared them a foretaste of Heaven,”¹⁰⁸ Gregory wrote. One of the last race amity conferences was held in Cincinnati, Ohio, in April of 1935, and was considered one of the most interesting and influential of all. The Bahá'ís...having with one mind and heart decided upon such an undertaking, under the guidance of their Spiritual Assembly—the local Bahá'í governing council—proceeded to work the matter out in the most methodical and scientific way. [In addition] they succeeded in laying under the tribute of service some sixteen others noted for welfare and progress.¹⁰⁹

The Bahá'í racial amity activities also included three interracial journeys of Black and White Bahá'ís “into the heart of the South.” They were inspired by the wishes of Shoghi Effendi, who became the Head of the Bahá'í Faith after the passing of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and was designated the title “Guardian.”¹¹⁰ Interracial teams of two Bahá'í men, Black and White, traveled South in the autumn of 1931, the spring of 1932, and the winter of 1933. “One of the most interesting discoveries of [the 1931 team’s] trip was to find the same interest at the University of South Carolina, for Whites, as

at Allan University and Benedict College, located in the same City of Columbia, for Colored.”¹¹¹

The Most Challenging Issue: Preparing the American Bahá'í Community to Become a Model of Racial Unity

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, the American Bahá'í community contributed its share to promoting racial unity and to lessening, to some degree, the relentless forces of racism. They brought people together in conferences to discuss delicate racial issues and created intimate spaces, such as banquets and interracial dinners in which to break bread, at a time when sitting down and eating together was the prevailing social taboo.

These were no small accomplishments. These experiences seeded future interracial meetings and friendships. More work had to be done, however, before the Bahá'í community could move to the next stage of its contribution to racial unity in the larger society. It had to prepare itself to become, at the very least, a work in progress of a model of racial unity.

Foremost among the Guardian's concerns for the United States was racial prejudice and its influence on the American Bahá'í community. In his lengthy letter to the American Bahá'í community, which was published as *The Advent of Divine Justice* (1939), he characterized racism as “the corrosion of which, for well-nigh a century has bitten into the fiber, and attacked the whole social structure of American society” and said it should be “regarded as constituting the most vital and challenging issue confronting the Bahá'í community at the present stage of its evolution.” He told Bahá'ís of both races that they faced “a long and thorny road beset with pitfalls” that

“still remained untraveled.”¹¹² Both races were assigned specific responsibilities. White Bahá’ís were to

make a supreme effort in their resolve to contribute their share to the solution of this problem, to abandon once for all their usually inherent and at times subconscious sense of superiority, to correct their tendency towards revealing a patronizing attitude towards the members of the other race, to persuade them through their intimate, spontaneous and informal association with them of the genuineness of their friendship and the sincerity of their intentions, and to master their impatience of any lack of responsiveness on a part of a people who have received, for so long a period, such grievous and slow-healing wounds.¹¹³

Black Bahá’ís were to “show by every means in their power the warmth of their response, their readiness to forget the past, and their ability to wipe out every trace of suspicion that may still linger in their hearts and minds.”¹¹⁴ Neither race could place the burden of resolving the racial problem within the Bahá’í community on the other race or to see it as “a matter that exclusively concerns the other.”¹¹⁵

As well, the Guardian cautioned Bahá’ís that they should not think the problem could be easily or immediately resolved. They should not “wait confidently for the solution of this problem until the initiative has been taken, and the favorable circumstances created, by agencies that stand outside the orbit of their Faith.”¹¹⁶ Rather, Shoghi Effendi encouraged Bahá’ís to believe, and be firmly convinced, that on their mutual understanding, their amity, and sustained cooperation, must depend, more than any other force or organization operating outside the circle of their

Faith, the deflection of that dangerous course so greatly feared by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, and the materialization of the hopes He cherished for their joint contribution to that country’s glorious destiny.¹¹⁷

The American Bahá’í community now had their specific marching orders. During the 1940s, they engaged in a range of efforts designed to eliminate racism and promote unity among its members and continue their decades-old commitment to promote racial unity in the wider society. In 1940, the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá’í of the United States set the example during its meeting in Atlanta, Georgia — their first meeting in the Deep South. This was timely because the predominantly White Bahá’í community was “far from enthusiastic about putting racial unity into practice.”¹¹⁸ Racially integrated meetings were held for both Bahá’ís only and for the general public.¹¹⁹ “White Bahá’ís were put on notice, even at the risk of their withdrawal from the Faith, that they had to come to terms with the principle of oneness both in their Bahá’í community life and in their approach to the public.”¹²⁰ Before long, the Local Spiritual Assembly of the Atlanta Bahá’í community mirrored the interracial makeup of the community.¹²¹

A new generation of Bahá’ís had to be educated about race if the community hoped to play a role in the pursuit of racial justice and racial unity. In a series of articles, a new Race Unity Committee (RUC) began educating the Bahá’í community on “the most challenging issue.” The Bahá’í Children Education Committee (CEC) reviewed and recommended to Bahá’í parents a major book on racial attitudes in children. The RUC also suggested Bahá’í books on race relations emphasizing the link between minority history and culture and the work on racial unity. It urged Bahá’í communities to make

race unity a topic of consultation at the Nineteen Day Feasts¹²² community gatherings held once a month on the Bahá'í calendar.

As tens of thousands of southern Blacks migrated to northern industrial centers during World War II, racial tensions and conflicts exploded. On June 20, 1943, the worst race riot of the war period broke out in Detroit, leaving death and destruction in its wake.¹²³

For decades, the Bahá'ís had been warned that such racial turmoil would continue unless racial justice and racial unity were established. So they continued their work. In the fall of 1944, the *Bahá'í News* claimed, “The past year has reported the most progress in race unity since the movement began.”¹²⁴ In short, as terrible and destructive as race riots and racial injustice could be, they would not dampen the spirit nor hold back the Bahá'í community's mission of promoting racial justice and racial unity.

Responding to the dynamic nature of racism, however, has always required of the Bahá'ís agility and an ability to read the signs of the time and respond accordingly. During World War II, anti-Japanese racism had, for instance, become widespread, and thousands of Japanese Americans were interned in concentration camps.¹²⁵ Conscious of the dangers of rising xenophobic sentiments, Shoghi Effendi, in December 1945, sent a letter through his secretary to the RUC pointing out that “to abolish prejudice against any and every race and minority group, it is obviously proper to include in particular any group that is receiving especially bad treatment—such as the Japanese-Americans are being subjected to.”¹²⁶

A Steady Flow of Guidance on Race Unity: The 1950s and the Turbulent 1960s

In 1953, at the historic All-American Conference celebrating the centenary of the birth of Bahá'u'lláh's revelation, the dedication of the completed Bahá'í Temple in Wilmette, Illinois, and the start of a ten-year plan for the worldwide Bahá'í community to advance its growth and development, Dorothy Baker, a White Bahá'í and veteran race unity worker, had just returned from the Holy Land with a message from the Guardian. The Guardian, she reported, had said

one driving thing over and over—that if we did not meet the challenging requirements of raising to a vast number the believers of the Negro race, disasters would result. And...that it was now for us to arise and reach the Indians of this country. In fact, he went so far as to say on two occasions that this dual task is the most important teaching work on American shores today.¹²⁷

Over the years, the predominantly White Bahá'í community had accomplished a great deal in promoting race unity conferences, interracial dinners, and other interracial activities, but times were changing. The state of race relations in the Bahá'í community and the wider society required much more radical action. Shoghi Effendi's instructions to bring in "vast numbers" of African-Americans presented a challenge to many White Bahá'ís. Others probably felt they were already doing enough participating in periodic race unity programs. This level of Bahá'í activity would not, however, raise "to a vast number the believers of the Negro race." Shoghi Effendi instructed the Bahá'ís to establish two committees: one to teach

African Americans and another to teach Native Americans. He wanted the Bahá'ís “to reach the Negro minority with this great truth in vast numbers. Not just publicity stunts...”¹²⁸

Bahá'ís continued to promote racial unity. In 1957, the National Assembly, with the approval of the Guardian, instituted Race Amity Day, to be “observed on the second Sunday of June beginning June 9, 1957.”¹²⁹ It was established as an exclusively Bahá'í-sponsored event different from Brotherhood Week and Negro History Week, events sponsored by other organizations in which Bahá'ís had participated. The purpose of Race Amity Day was to “celebrate the Bahá'í teachings of the Oneness of Mankind, the distinguishing feature of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh.”¹³⁰

That same year, the Bahá'í Interracial Teaching Committee started holding a race amity meeting in conjunction with the annual observance of Negro History Week. Eighty-three Bahá'í communities in thirty-three states conducted some form of public meeting addressing the concerns of the African-American community. The Association for the Study of Negro Life and History distributed Bahá'í literature to its exclusive mailing list of distinguished African Americans. In turn, the committee gave the association 500 copies of “Race and Man,” a Bahá'í publication featuring discussions on race.¹³¹

As well, in 1957, Americans also witnessed as “segregationists cheered the active opposition of Governor Orval Faubus to the desegregation of Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas. Not until President Eisenhower sent federal troops to Little Rock in response to the governor’s defiance of a court order did the Negro children gain admission to the school.”¹³² The

forces of racial justice and race unity prevailed, however, with the passage of the 1957 Civil Rights Act, “the first civil rights act since 1875.”¹³³

The annual Bahá’í Race Amity Day observances stood out among other “points of light” and hope during the racially volatile period of the 1960s.

The decade of the Civil Rights Movement and Black urban rebellion and race riots was also the decade when many predominantly White local Bahá’í communities worked tirelessly to promote racial unity. Years after the first Bahá’í race amity observances, scores of these communities throughout the country, through interracial picnics, panel discussions, media events, and official proclamations, provided people from diverse racial backgrounds with hope and inspiration that racial unity was possible. By 1960, Race Amity Day observances were increasingly being recognized by government officials. For example, in 1967, eleven mayors and one governor officially proclaimed Race Unity Day.¹³⁴ Yet, in July of that same year, “Detroit experienced the bloodiest urban disorder and the costliest property damage in U.S. history,” when forty-three people died and over one thousand were injured.¹³⁵

Expanding the Circle of Unity: Multiracial Community Building, 1970s and 1980s

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the American Bahá’í community experienced a remarkable increase in the racial and ethnic diversity of its membership. In the early 1970s, thousands of African Americans in rural South Carolina and many in other southern states joined the Bahá’í Faith.¹³⁶ In 1972, the American Bahá’í Northeast Oriental Teaching Committee began reaching out to Asian American populations of the Northeastern States.¹³⁷

In 1986, the Interracial Teaching Committee described the great influx of southern rural Blacks as well as other racial groups into the Bahá'í community as an indication of the American Bahá'í community becoming “a truly multiethnic community with fully one-third of its members Black and rural, and a significant percentage from the Native-American, Hispanic, Iranian, and Southeast Asian populations.” ¹³⁸

Bahá'ís were expanding their circle of community, embracing more and more diverse peoples and knitting them into the fabric of their collective life. In 1985, Milwaukee Bahá'ís, in cooperation with the Midtown Neighborhood Association, a social-service agency, and the Hmong-American Friendship Association, worked to serve the needs of the Hmong people in the neighborhood by opening the Bahá'í Center on weekends for adult English classes and after-school classes for culture and language for children ages 8 to 13. ¹³⁹ In their response to the unprecedented waves of Asian immigrants arriving to America during the 1980s, the American Bahá'í community published guidelines to facilitate the integration of Indo-Chinese refugees into the Bahá'í community.

In 1989, the U.S. Bahá'í Refugee Office visited ten cities throughout central California to help integrate refugees into the larger Bahá'í community. The Bahá'í community did not limit its concern to Bahá'í refugees only. For example, the Bahá'ís in Des Moines, Iowa, resolved to adopt all Cambodian refugees in that state as a service goal for the 1989-90 year. The persecution of Iranian Bahá'ís in Iran during the late 1970s forced many Iranian Bahá'ís to seek refuge in the United States where they were assisted by the Bahá'í Persian-American Committee to become part of the increasingly diverse American Bahá'í community. ¹⁴⁰

The Bahá'í community was becoming what Shoghi Effendi had hoped for a half-century ago when he wrote:

No more laudable and meritorious service can be rendered the Cause of God, at the present hour, than a successful effort to enhance the diversity of the members of the American Bahá'í community by swelling the ranks of the Faith through the enrollment of the members of these races. A blending of these highly differentiated elements of the human race, harmoniously interwoven into the fabric of an all-embracing Bahá'í fraternity, and assimilated through the dynamic process of a divinely appointed Administrative Order and contributing each its share to the enrichment and glory of Bahá'í community life, is surely an achievement the contemplation of which must warm and thrill every Bahá'í heart.¹⁴¹

The 1990s: Models and Visions of Racial Unity and the Los Angeles Riots

The American Bahá'í community entered the 1990s with increased commitment to racial justice and racial unity. The Association for Bahá'í Studies held a conference, “Models of Racial Unity,” in November of 1990 to explore examples of racial unity. This conference produced a joint project, “Models of Unity: Racial, Ethnic, and Religious,” conducted in the spring of 1991 by the Human Relations Foundation of Chicago and the National Spiritual Assembly to “find examples of efforts that have successfully brought different groups of people together in the Greater Chicago area.”¹⁴²

The next year, the National Assembly published a statement, “The Vision of Race Unity: America’s Most Challenging Issue,” as the cornerstone of a

national race unity campaign. They distributed it to a wide range of people including teachers, students, organizations, and public officials. In April, 1992, several months after the publication of the joint-project report on Models of Unity in Chicago, the National Assembly sponsored a race unity conference at the Carter Presidential Center in Atlanta, Georgia¹⁴³: “The purpose of this conference is to explore specific actions which may be taken by different groups and institutions to establish racial unity as the foundation for the transformation of our society.”¹⁴⁴ Several weeks later, Los Angeles exploded into violence in the wake of the not guilty verdict of four White policemen caught on tape beating Rodney King, a Black motorist.¹⁴⁵ It seemed that the Bahá’í community’s constant efforts to promote racial unity were “water in the sand” of racial turmoil.

The National Assembly sent a message, on behalf of the U.S. Bahá’í Community, to Los Angeles Mayor Tom Bradley:

We join you in your appeal to all our fellow-citizens not to be blinded by anger and hate....the American Bahá’í community, faithful to the teachings of its Founder, has worked for the establishment of racial unity in a country blighted by race prejudice that confronts its cherished values, threatens its peace, and poisons the soul of its citizens.¹⁴⁶

The National Spiritual Assembly referred to its recently published statement on race, “The Vision of Race Unity,” and informed the mayor of its readiness to share its message with “city authorities, private organizations, and individuals who seek such a solution.”¹⁴⁷ In addition, the National Assembly presented to the mayor and the city, the Chicago-based study,

Models of Unity: Racial, Ethnic, and Religious. Concluding their letter to the mayor, the Assembly left him with this message of hope:

We offer you, Mr. Mayor, our cooperation, and pray that Los Angeles will emerge from its trials more enlightened and dedicated to the realization of the great truth that we are all “the leaves of one tree and the drops of one ocean”.¹⁴⁸

The National Assembly then published a letter to President George H. W. Bush that appeared in several national newspapers. It opens:

No American can look with indifference upon the tragedy relentlessly unfolding in our cities. Its causes lie beyond a particular verdict or a particular act of oppression. The fires and deaths in Los Angeles are only symptoms of an old congenital disease eating at the vitals of American society, a disease that has plagued our country ever since slaves were brought from Africa to these shores by their early settlers.¹⁴⁹

The letter described the path of racial progress in American history as a “history of advance and retreat,” and, though acknowledging that the solution to the racial problems “is not simple,” stated that it is clear that “America has not done enough to demonstrate her commitment to the equality and the unity of races.” For this reason, “ever since its inception a century ago the American Bahá’í community has made the elimination of racism one of its principle goals.”¹⁵⁰ The National Assembly concluded its letter with an appeal:

We appeal to you, Mr. President, and all our fellow citizens, not to turn away from this “most vital and challenging issue.” We plead for a supreme effort on the part of the public and private institutions, schools, and the media, business and the arts, and most of all to individual Americans to join hands, accept the sacrifices this issue must impose, show forth the “care and vigilance it demands, the moral courage and fortitude it requires, the tact and sympathy it necessitates” so that true and irreversible progress may be made and the promise of this great country may not be buried under the rubble of our cities.¹⁵¹

The National Spiritual Assembly then turned to the Bahá’í community. In mid-May 1992, it met in Atlanta with representatives of twenty-nine local Bahá’í assemblies from the surrounding area and members of Local Spiritual Assemblies in fourteen cities in which rioting had taken place to review the Bahá’í communities’ responses to the riots and their aftermath and to consult with an international board of advisers on courses of action. The consultation resulted in a “decision to channel all national effort in the coming year into one mission—the promotion of race unity.”¹⁵²

For the next four years, Bahá’ís labored on in the diverse and often confusing maze of race relations. They and others were sincere workers in their efforts. Following the long tradition of Bahá’í race unity work, the Bahá’í Spiritual Assembly of Detroit created a task force in 1993 to carry out a faith-based mandate to promote racial unity. Two years later, the task force became a non-profit organization called the “The Model of Racial Unity, Inc.” and expanded its membership to include members of the Episcopal Diocese of Detroit and the Catholic Youth Organization. The task force launched its first conference on June 11, 1994, “to promote unity

among the diverse populations of Detroit Metropolitan area by bringing together people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds in an atmosphere of cooperation and mutual respect.”¹⁵³

A day before the conference, the Detroit Free Press commented: “The Bahá’í Faith Community of Greater Detroit is a main sponsor of the conference, which is an outgrowth of the religion’s guiding principles: unity across racial and ethnic lines.”¹⁵⁴ The Second Annual Model of Racial Unity Conference in 1995 demonstrated how far the organization had progressed since the first conference. General Motors was now the major sponsor. Other sponsors included the owner of Azar’s Oriental Rugs and Mag-Co Co Investigations. Both owners were members of the Metropolitan Bahá’í community—the former, an Iranian American, and the latter, African American.¹⁵⁵

It was a great honor and tribute to the efforts of the Bahá’í community when Mayor Dennis W. Archer designated May 20, 1995, as “Model of Racial Unity Day.” The Third Annual Model of Racial Unity Conference occurred on May 18, 1996.¹⁵⁶ The Bahá’ís attending and participating in that conference and the larger American Bahá’í community would soon be entering a new stage of spiritual guidance on race relations.

Earlier in the year, the House of Justice had advised the Bahá’ís: “With respect to principles, it would assist the friends greatly if the issue of addressing race unity can be formulated within the broad context of the community. The distinctiveness of the Bahá’í approach to many issues needs to be sharpened.” Bahá’ís should be “future oriented, to have a clear vision and to think through the steps necessary to bring it into fruition. This is

where consultation with the Bahá'í institutions will provide a critical impulse to your own efforts.”¹⁵⁷

Several months later, the 1996 Ridván Message provided that “clear vision” stating: “The next four years will represent an extraordinary period in the history of our Faith, a turning point of epochal magnitude...”¹⁵⁸ In 1996, a twenty-five year period of intensive learning commenced during which Bahá'í endeavors worldwide have become increasingly focused on capacity building in local populations to take greater ownership of their spiritual, intellectual, and social advancement, opening new possibilities in the long-term effort of the Bahá'ís to root out racial prejudice and contribute to the emergence of a society based on racial justice and unity.

Conclusion

The pursuit of racial justice and unity have been defining aspirations of the Bahá'í community of the United States since the earliest days of its establishment in the country. Indeed, for well over a century, it has dedicated itself to racial unity. During periods of racial turmoil, it has contributed its share to the healing of the nation's racial wounds. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá provided the example during his visit in 1912 and set in motion a race amity movement in 1921 for the Bahá'í community to build upon. Bahá'ís continued this work for decades with some fits and starts, but always moving forward under the inspired guidance of the Guardian of the Faith and then the Universal House of Justice.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Richard Thomas is Professor Emeritus of History at Michigan State University. He is author and coauthor of several books on race relations, the African American experience, and the Baha'i Faith.

The Bahá'í Response to Racial Injustice and Pursuit of Racial Unity 1996-2021 (Part 2)

By

EMILY LAMPLE AND RICHARD THOMAS

WEDNESDAY JANUARY 12, 2022

This is the second of two articles focusing on the American Bahá'í community's efforts to contribute to racial unity and justice in the United States. Part 2 explores how developments in the Bahá'í world from 1996 to 2021 have helped foster new capacities in the American Bahá'í community to contribute to social change. Photo: Panelists of a three-day online symposium held by the U.S. Bahá'í Office of Public Affairs titled Advancing Together: Forging a Path Toward a Just, Inclusive and Unified Society. Credit:
<https://news.bahai.org/story/1514/>



The quarter century between 1996 and 2021 was a period of mounting racial contention in the United States. Marked by increased police killings of unarmed African Americans, race riots, burning of Black churches in the Deep South, the rise and spread of white supremacy movements, and widespread racial polarization, it resembled some of the worst racial strife of the 1960s. Not even the historic election of the first Black president, which many hoped would usher in a post-racial society, could turn the tide.¹⁵⁹

During that period, the American Bahá'í community's longstanding dedication to racial harmony and justice continued to be expressed in numerous initiatives undertaken by individuals and organizations. These initiatives unfolded amidst a period of profound advancement across the Bahá'í world. In 1996, the worldwide Bahá'í community entered a new stage in its development, propelled by a series of global Plans that successively guided “individuals, institutions and communities” to build the

capacity to “[translate] Bahá’u’lláh’s teachings into action.”¹⁶⁰ In turn, this progress made the possibilities for social transformation more and more visible to those laboring in the field of service and had implications for the efforts of Bahá’ís to combat racial prejudice and injustice.

In July 2020, for the first time in more than 30 years, the House of Justice addressed the American Bahá’í community, as it had done during other periods of racial turmoil in the United States:

A moment of historic portent has arrived for your nation as the conscience of its citizenry has stirred, creating possibilities for marked social change. ... you are seizing opportunities—whether those thrust upon you by current circumstances or those derived from your systematic labors in the wider society—to play your part, however humble, in the effort to remedy the ills of your nation. We ardently pray that the American people will grasp the possibilities of this moment to create a consequential reform of the social order that will free it from the pernicious effects of racial prejudice and will hasten the attainment of a just, diverse, and united society that can increasingly manifest the oneness of the human family.”¹⁶¹

In the letter, the House of Justice pointed out the difficult path ahead amidst inevitable setbacks, saying: “Sadly, however, your nation’s history reveals that any significant progress toward racial equality has invariably been met by countervailing processes, overt or covert, that served to undermine the advances achieved and to reconstitute the forces of oppression by other means.” The “concepts and approaches for social transformation developed in the current series of Plans,” explained the House of Justice, could be

“utilized to promote race unity in the context of community building, social action, and involvement in the discourses of society.”¹⁶²

The sections below review developments in the US Bahá’í community during the period between 1996 and 2021, exploring their implications for the community’s response to racial injustice and the pursuit of racial unity.

1996 – 2006: Building capacity through focus on a single aim

For the Bahá’í world, the Four Year Plan (1996 – 2000), the first in the series of global Plans spanning the quarter century, marked a “turning point of epochal magnitude.”¹⁶³ The Plan assisted the Bahá’í community to mature in its understanding of transformation—both internally and in the world at large.

First clumsily and then with increasing ability, more and more Bahá’ís from diverse national communities learned to take action within a common framework. While it took more than a decade for new patterns of thought and action to take root across the US, the systematic approach called for by the House of Justice came to be appreciated as a vital facet of the American community’s efforts to combat deeply entrenched social ills, especially racism.

In parallel to the processes unfolding in the Bahá’í world, the 1990s and early 2000s saw Bahá’ís in the US continue to participate in a range of race-related activities in the wider society, often taking part in, and sometimes leading, initiatives in support of racial harmony. For example, many local Bahá’í communities participated in annual celebrations in honor of Dr.

Martin Luther King, Jr., a leader of the nonviolent civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. In June 1965, the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States sent a telegram to Dr. King's organization, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, supporting the historic march on Montgomery: "YOUR MORAL LEADERSHIP HUMAN RIGHTS IN SOUTH PRAISEWORTHY HISTORY MAKING FREEDOM IN UNITED STATES. SENDING REPRESENTATION MONTGOMERY AFFIRM YOUR CRY FOR UNITY OF AMERICANS AND ALL MANKIND."¹⁶⁴

This relationship between the annual Martin Luther King Day celebrations and the Bahá'í race unity work has continued through the years. In 2002, the Bahá'í community of Houston was asked to lead and close their local parade, which attracted some 300,000 people to the parade route and was partially broadcast on four national television networks.¹⁶⁵ Similarly, a number of Bahá'í communities participated in interfaith services responding to the burning of Black and multiracial churches.¹⁶⁶

At the same time, Bahá'ís were initiating their own efforts to promote racial harmony and justice in light of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings. The Local Spiritual Assembly of Detroit, Michigan appointed a task force with a mandate to promote racial unity, which for seven years (ending in 2000) promoted and conducted an annual Models of Racial Unity Conference involving Bahá'í and non-Bahá'í speakers from a range of diverse professional, racial, ethnic and religious community groups and associations.¹⁶⁷

In 1998, the US National Spiritual Assembly launched a national campaign to raise awareness of issues related to race unity in the country. The campaign included a television program called *The Power of Race Unity*, which aired on several national broadcast stations, as well as many local and

regional channels, and a document penned by the National Assembly entitled *Race Unity: The Most Challenging Issues*, which was mailed to several thousand homes. It was estimated that 80 percent of local Bahá'í communities in the country hosted activities in support of the campaign, ranging from private viewings of the video to workshops and public discussions about racial unity.¹⁶⁸

The opening of the Louis G. Gregory Bahá'í Museum in Charleston, South Carolina, on 8 February 2003,¹⁶⁹ was among the most special developments of the period. The museum honored a dedicated champion who personified the American Bahá'í community's long and unyielding commitment to racial unity and justice. According to one source, this was the "first Bahá'í museum in the world." It honored "both a descendant of a black slave and a white plantation owner" in a city "through whose port an untold number of Africans passed into slavery and whose citizens witnessed the shots that came to symbolize the beginning of the Civil War."¹⁷⁰ It was hailed by one speaker at the dedication as a "beacon of unity" for the world.¹⁷¹

Additionally, this decade saw ongoing efforts to tend to the hearts of, and build capacity among, African Americans within the Bahá'í community, especially African-American men, long subject to injustice in the form of harmful stereotypes, police brutality, staggering community violence, and mass incarceration. Many of these Bahá'ís did not find within the dynamics of their Bahá'í communities the patterns of worship, praise, and mutual support for which they longed. In many cases, their participation faded until they were invited back by the warmth of a series of gatherings known as the Black Men's Gathering.¹⁷²

Between 1987 and 2011, the Black Men's Gathering was dedicated to "soothing hearts" of black Bahá'í men who "had sustained slow-healing wounds" and "cultivating capacity for participation in a world-embracing mission."¹⁷³ From the growing numbers of African-American men involved in the process arose melodies of praise and worship resonant with the African-American tradition, and gatherings led to travels to share the message of the Faith throughout many countries in Africa and the Caribbean. In July 1996, for example, more than one hundred Black Bahá'í men from the US, the Caribbean, Canada, and Africa attended the Tenth Annual Black Men's Gathering in Hemingway, South Carolina, at the Louis Gregory Institute. In response to the call of the Universal House of Justice to "be a unique source of encouragement and inspiration to their African brothers and sisters who are now poised on the threshold of great advances for the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh,"¹⁷⁴ forty-five of the participants "pledged to visit Africa over the following three years to share Bahá'u'lláh's message with the people there."¹⁷⁵

In 2004, the editors of a national Bahá'í publication, *World Order* magazine, published a special issue with the following introduction: "We found that the fiftieth anniversary of *Brown v. Board of Education*, the landmark 1954 decision of the United State Supreme Court that started the judicial desegregation of U.S. schools, afforded an opportunity to look at the matter from a number of perspectives." The issue included articles examining the historic decision from the contexts of law, the teaching of history, and psychology, among others, written by Bahá'ís from diverse professional fields, racial and cultural backgrounds, and experience in promoting racial unity."¹⁷⁶

These highly meritorious efforts carried forward the American Bahá'í community's legacy of dedicated service to the cause of race unity, yet the community had a considerable distance to go in making the shift called for by the House of Justice to an approach focused on systematic *processes* that would build capacity in individuals and groups, and eventually in whole populations, to contribute to the kind of transformation that could ultimately dismantle the disease of racism.

In the country's history, every time racism appeared to have been dealt a major blow—with the end of slavery, or the end of legal segregation, for example—it managed to rear up in a new form. It has proven itself deeply entrenched in American society. For this reason, notwithstanding the many activities that Bahá'ís had undertaken to address racial concerns, and their obvious merits and achievements, the ultimate results of such efforts had often been limited in their effect. As the Universal House of Justice noted, such efforts have often been characterized by “a cyclical pattern, with fits and starts,” presented with fanfare while failing to elicit universal participation.¹⁷⁷ Activities, often accompanied by great enthusiasm and energy, would reach a peak and then, after a period of time, lose momentum and atrophy. For this reason, developing the capacity for collective, systematic action needed to receive a greater share of the attention of the American community. The groundwork for such an advance was more firmly laid in the next decade.

2006 – 2016: Unlocking the “society-building powers of the Faith”

During the second decade, through two consecutive Five Year Plans, the Universal House of Justice guided the worldwide Bahá'í community to

explore how Bahá'í teachings can be applied at the grassroots to give rise to a new kind of community. As the House of Justice itself described in 2013:

Bahá'ís across the globe, in the most unassuming settings, are striving to establish a pattern of activity and the corresponding administrative structures that embody the principle of the oneness of humankind and the convictions underpinning it, only a few of which are mentioned here as a means of illustration: that the rational soul has no gender, race, ethnicity or class, a fact that renders intolerable all forms of prejudice ... that the root cause of prejudice is ignorance, which can be erased through educational processes that make knowledge accessible to the entire human race, ensuring it does not become the property of a privileged few. Translating ideals such as these into reality, effecting a transformation at the level of the individual and laying the foundations of suitable social structures, is no small task, to be sure. Yet the Bahá'í community is dedicated to the long-term process of learning that this task entails, an enterprise in which increasing numbers from all walks of life, from every human group, are invited to take part.¹⁷⁸

Much of the development witnessed during these years had long-term implications for the American Bahá'í community's approach to racial justice and unity. This section will focus on two developments in particular. First, significant progress was made in learning to channel the energies of youth toward social progress. Second, the Bahá'í community, for which the betterment of society is a primary aim, evolved in its approach to, and understanding of, social transformation. As experience accumulated, the community also came to understand better the relationship between its own growth and development and its participation in the life of society at large.

Youth at the Vanguard

Regarding the first development, in December 2005, the House of Justice drew attention to the latent potential of young people ages 12 to 15, referring to them as “junior youth” and noting that they “represent a vast reservoir of energy and talent that can be devoted to the advancement of spiritual and material civilization.”¹⁷⁹ The junior youth spiritual empowerment program began to take off in diverse settings around the world and showed great promise in preparing adolescents to contribute to social change. At an age when intellectual, spiritual, and physical powers rapidly develop, junior youth in the program were assisted to explore the social conditions around them, to analyze the constructive and destructive forces operating in their lives, and to develop the tools needed to combat negative social forces such as materialism, prejudice, and self-centeredness.¹⁸⁰

In the US, the junior youth spiritual empowerment program was established in neighborhoods representing a range of racial and ethnic diversity—some on indigenous lands, some in primarily Latino areas, others in predominantly African-American locations, and some in the most diverse neighborhoods in the country, comprising immigrants from all parts of the world. Through the program, young people in each of these contexts developed the capabilities necessary to contribute to the betterment of their communities. In an unjust social system that has tended to exclude racial and ethnic minorities from the American promises of equity and economic opportunity, in which forces of materialism distract those not benefitting from the system with harmful vices and mindless consumerism, the junior youth program, little by little, planted the seeds of possibility for change.

Central to the program is an educational curriculum that enhances participants' intellectual capacities, helps build moral structure, and cultivates spiritual qualities and perception. The texts of the program seek to address the root causes of prejudice. For example, the text *Glimmerings of Hope* presents the story of a junior youth whose parents are killed in civil strife between two different ethnic groups. In the stories that follow, he learns that, even in the face of very painful and difficult circumstances, people have choices to make; they can opt for hope and love or let themselves fall prey to forces of hatred and division. In *Observation and Insight*, as a young girl learns to observe her physical environment and the social conditions of her village, she comes to question the prejudice in her community and is helped to think about ways to combat prejudice, both within herself and in the world around her.

As the junior youth program began to advance in the US, it also highlighted the distinctive role that youth play, not only in nurturing those younger than them, but in all facets of community life. The spiritual empowerment of the population between ages 15 and 30 became a central focus of this period. As more and more youth engaged in the sequence of courses offered by training institutes, they were assisted to apply what they learned in the context of community transformation. Foundational to the efforts was the concept of a “twofold moral purpose,” that is, “to attend to one’s own spiritual and intellectual growth and to contribute to the transformation of society.”¹⁸¹ In 2013, the Universal House of Justice called for a series of worldwide youth conferences. In the US, approximately 5,800 young people of varied backgrounds, including roughly 2,000 youth of indigenous, Asian, African-American, and Latino heritages, attended.^{182 183}

Contributing to Social Transformation

Regarding the second process, the work unfolding at the grassroots in numerous societies naturally drew members of the Bahá'í community into closer contact with diverse populations—comprising individuals, families, and organizations with whom they worked side by side—on city blocks in major urban centers and in neighborhoods, villages, and towns.

A new pattern emerged. Whereas many Bahá'ís were accustomed to bringing people one by one into their existing faith community—which has its own culture, habits, and ways of doing things—Bahá'í communities were now learning to take the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh to whole populations, creating the possibility for such populations to investigate the Bahá'í teachings and apply them for the progress of their own people. To approach the masses of humanity in such a manner required a substantial shift in orientation for many in the Bahá'í community.

The Universal House of Justice on numerous occasions helped the Bahá'í world expand its vision and clarify its sense of mission, cautioning the community not to close in on itself or to separate itself from the world at large:

A small community, whose members are united by their shared beliefs, characterized by their high ideals, proficient in managing their affairs and tending to their needs, and perhaps engaged in several humanitarian projects—a community such as this, prospering but at a comfortable distance from the reality experienced by the masses of humanity, can never hope to serve as a pattern for restructuring the whole of society. That the worldwide Bahá'í community has managed to avert the dangers of

complacency is a source of abiding joy to us. Indeed, the community has well in hand its expansion and consolidation. Yet, to administer the affairs of teeming numbers in villages and cities around the globe—to raise aloft the standard of Bahá'u'lláh's World Order for all to see—is still a distant goal.¹⁸⁴

During this period, American Bahá'ís established the basic elements of Bahá'í community building activities in an increasing number of localities across the country. Those communities experienced, to varying degrees, the multiplication of devotional meetings open to all inhabitants, spiritual education classes for children, groups seeking to empower adolescents and older youth, and courses designed to develop the capacity of individuals to become active contributors to the betterment of the world around them. Critically, Bahá'ís learned to open these activities to the wider society. As they did so, some Bahá'ís whose backgrounds had afforded them relative freedom from exposure to prevalent injustices became cognizant of the reality faced by many of their fellows, with whom they were working for meaningful change.

Efforts in a predominantly African-American community, for instance, led to a tight fellowship between a growing number of residents and two Iranian-American Bahá'ís who had moved into the neighborhood. Members of the community came together weekly to pray and speak with one another about their lives, their struggles, and their aspirations for their children and grandchildren. A growing number of residents also studied courses of the training institute and offered classes for the spiritual education of children. Out of the rhythm of action and reflection that characterized these activities, there also emerged efforts to address local needs, with residents themselves

taking the lead. The person responsible for cooking for children's classes, for example, had faced challenges finding dignified employment. As he engaged in the progress of the community, he was inspired to prepare homecooked meals as a small business—an enterprise that was greatly valued in a locality with no grocery store nearby. Similarly, conversations in the community led to the formation of an organization dedicated to providing affordable eyeglasses to neighbors; at the writing of this article, more than 90 pairs of glasses had been distributed through this effort.¹⁸⁵ The united and spiritually uplifted community forged through such activities offered a stark contrast to negative portrayals of the neighborhood in the media. Though nascent, this and many other examples demonstrate the deep wells of capacity, creativity, and desire for progress that exist in the masses of the country, the potentialities of which can be released when individuals and populations become spiritually empowered.

With such promising efforts underway, the Universal House of Justice helped members of the US Bahá'í community see the implications of what was being learned through efforts to combat the effects of racism. A letter written on its behalf to an individual believer in 2011 explained:

Only if the efforts to eradicate the bane of prejudice are coherent with the full range of the community's affairs, only if they arise naturally within the systematic pattern of expansion, community building, and involvement with society, will the American believers expand their capacity, year after year and decade after decade, to make their mark on their community and society and contribute to the high aim set for the Bahá'ís by 'Abdu'l-Bahá to eliminate racial prejudice from the face of the earth.¹⁸⁶

That same year, as those organizing the Black Men's Gathering considered next steps, the Universal House of Justice offered encouragement to extend their efforts to many others in their local communities, drawing upon what was being learned in expansion and consolidation. A letter on its behalf explained that "the time has now come for the friends who have benefited from the Gathering to raise their sights to new horizons" and encouraged participants to "Let the well-prepared army you have assembled advance from its secure fortress to conquer the hearts of your fellow citizens," for what was needed was "concerted, persistent, sacrificial action, cycle after cycle, in cluster after cluster, by an ever-swelling number of consecrated individuals."¹⁸⁷ The same ethos of loving support, the spiritual devotion, and the dedication to service that had characterized the activities of the Black Men's Gathering for over two decades could be extended locally to bring more people into circle of unity drawn by Bahá'u'lláh—including neighbors, co-workers, families, and friends. Toward this lofty objective, participants of the Gathering could find in the methods and approaches of the Plan being strengthened during this period the tools necessary to address the challenges of racism in the country. As was explained in the same letter:

The experience of the last five years and the recent guidance of the House of Justice should make it evident that in the instruments of the Plan you now have within your grasp everything that is necessary to raise up a new people and eliminate racial prejudice as a force within your society, though the path ahead remains long and arduous. The institute process is the primary vehicle by which you can transform and empower your people, indeed all the peoples of your nation.¹⁸⁸

In 1938, in *Advent of Divine Justice*, Shoghi Effendi noted that the US Bahá'í community was too small in number and too limited in influence to produce “any marked effect on the great masses of their countrymen,” but that as the believers intensified efforts to remove their own deficiencies, they would be better equipped for “the time when they will be called upon to eradicate in their turn such evil tendencies from the lives and hearts of the entire body of their fellow-citizens.”¹⁸⁹ During the ten-year period between 2006 and 2016, the number of people, particularly young people, drawing insight from the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh with the aim of effecting the transformation of society grew, as did their capacity to begin contributing to profound social change. The national Bahá'í community had laid the groundwork for new possibilities to address racial injustice and pursue racial harmony—possibilities that began to manifest in the final five years of this twenty-five-year period.

2016 – 2021: Envisioning the movement of populations

The beginning of the most recent Five-Year Plan (2016 – 2021) coincided with an upsurge in racial turmoil in the US. Heart-wrenching incidents of racism continued to make national news during these years, including the fatal shootings of Trayvon Martin, an unarmed 17-year-old African-American boy in Florida, by a Hispanic-American private citizen in 2012, and of Michael Brown, an unarmed young African-American man with his hands in the air, by police in Missouri in 2014.¹⁹⁰ On 17 June 2015, the country was shocked by the horrific mass shooting of nine African Americans in Charlestown, South Carolina, during Bible study at one of the oldest African-American churches in the South, by a 21-year-old self-identified white supremacist.¹⁹¹

As the country geared up for a new presidential election in 2016, voices of racism on the national stage became more overt. In his farewell speech in January 2017, President Obama acknowledged the harsh reality of racism that still plagued the country. “After my election, there was talk of a post-racial America. Such a vision, however well-intended, was never realistic. For race remains a potent and often divisive force in our society.”¹⁹² That same year, groups of white supremacists and neo-Nazis held a Unite the Right Rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, where they fought with anti-racism counter-protesters. Dozens were injured and one person was killed when a man drove into the anti-racism protesters.¹⁹³

Racially motivated acts of terror continued alongside entrenched social and economic injustice. In 2020, the *Washington Post* reported, “The black-white economic divide is as wide as it was in 1968.” And in January 2021, a National Public Radio investigation found that, since 2015, police officers had fatally shot at least 135 unarmed black men and women nationwide; in at least three-quarters of these shootings, the officers were white.¹⁹⁴

Meanwhile, in those settings where developments had gone the furthest, the American Bahá’í community could see new models of community life emerging and glimpses of transformation at the grassroots. These lessons offered hope for genuine advancement in the community’s pursuit of race unity at the local and national levels.

Most notable, of course, were advances at the grassroots, where, in certain neighborhoods and city blocks, substantial numbers of local inhabitants became engaged in Bahá’í activities. Youth, in particular, took their place at the forefront of service, engendering hope and energy in their communities.

Though nascent and modest in their scope, such experiences multiplied across the country, representing the first stirrings of the spiritual empowerment of populations.¹⁹⁵

A neighborhood surrounding a historically Black university in the Carolinas became home to exactly such a movement. In the US, it was legal to deny access to higher education solely on the basis of skin color as recently as the 1950s. Colleges and universities like this one, founded within that context to serve African-American populations, hold special significance. In 2016, what started as a small group of friends comprising Bahá'ís and their neighbors extended in five short years to embrace scores of youth, junior youth, and families. Cohorts of African-American university students, some the first in their families to attend college, spearheaded the emergence of dynamic community life that addressed both the spiritual and intellectual needs of children, youth, and adults. African-American and Latino junior youth groups formed and were increasingly empowered to undertake service projects that sought to address the needs of their community. Noticing that many children were assessed as having low levels of literacy, for example, the junior youth created a small lending library, wrote their own simple stories for the children, and set a regular time each week to read to them. At the same time, their families became active participants in community life. The parents of the junior youth in the program, for instance, brought neighbors together in community gatherings in which they could share a meal and discuss what they would like to see on their block. Devotional gatherings multiplied, and neighbors gathered together to pray, reflect, and share experiences, questions, and concerns. As participation grew and activities multiplied, social action initiatives emerged. Among them was a vaccination clinic.¹⁹⁶ The dynamic being experienced generated not only

hope but also the first stirrings of the release of the potential of a population. Similar patterns were emerging, to varying degrees, in region after region in the United States.

While experience at the grassroots took root in a growing number of communities, the US National Spiritual Assembly initiated various actions to galvanize the entire national community to play its part in the advancement of racial justice and unity. These lines of action were, in part, laid out in a series of letters to the US Bahá'í community, calling attention to the “pivotal juncture in our nation’s history” during which Bahá’ís would be called to intensify their efforts to eliminate prejudice and injustice from society. The National Assembly drew the attention of the American Bahá’ís to their “twofold mission,” which is “to develop within our own community a pattern of life that increasingly reflects the spirit of the Baha’i teachings” and “to engage with others in a deliberate and collaborative effort to eradicate the ills afflicting our nation.” In pursuing this mission, the Bahá’ís had inherited “a priceless legacy of service spanning more than a century, originally set in motion by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá Himself,” as well as “the framework of action given to us in the current Five Year Plan.” The more that the latter is understood, the Assembly asserted, “the better we can appreciate that it is precisely suited to the needs of the times.”¹⁹⁷ Bahá’ís were directed to deepen their “understanding of the forces at work in our society and the nature of our response as Bahá’ís—especially as outlined in the current set of Plans.” In their search “for answers and for a way forward,” the American people “are daily treated to a cacophony of competing voices” resting on “faulty foundations” and are longing for some “credible source” to which they can turn “for insight and hope.”¹⁹⁸ In response, the Bahá’í community was guided to engage with “specific

populations mentioned numerous times by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Shoghi Effendi, and the Universal House of Justice for the unique and vital contribution they will make to the creation of the new social order envisaged” in the teachings of Bahá’u’lláh.¹⁹⁹

The National Spiritual Assembly also pursued ways, within the offices of its National Center, to give further attention to questions of racial justice and race unity in the context of already occurring work. Permanent and seasonal schools made race relations one of their central issues of study and discussion for several years. The Assembly’s Social Action Desk—which focuses on the emergence of social action in communities across the country—directed its attention to efforts at the grassroots that were addressing aspects of racial injustice. Furthermore, a national media project collected and told stories of community life characterized by building across racial and cultural divides through the pursuit of the aims of the Five Year Plan.²⁰⁰

In the nation’s capital, the US Bahá’í Office of Public Affairs allocated an increasing number of staff to participation in the national discourse on race through attendance at numerous conferences, workshops, and roundtables. Bahá’í representatives met with leading thinkers and organizations working to eradicate racism. In its contributions to the complex and polarizing discourse, the Office sought ways to offer novel perspectives based on the Bahá’í teachings, seeking insights into questions relating, for example, to the perceived tension between the pursuit of unity and the pursuit of justice and to the relationship between means and ends as they relate to social change. Its contributions included the opening of new forums that fostered genuine consultation and common understanding among diverse individuals and organizations.

In May 2021, the Office brought together prominent national voices and social actors in the race discourse for a three-day symposium, *Advancing Together: Forging a Path Toward a Just, Inclusive and Unified Society*.²⁰¹ Held exactly 100 years after the first race amity conference called for by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, the event reflected the growing collaboration of the Bahá’í community with likeminded individuals and groups working to overcome racial disparities and promote justice.

Finally, as tensions heated up in the country in the summer of 2020, the National Spiritual Assembly issued a public statement addressing the current realities of race that ran in the *Chicago Tribune* and several newspapers across the country. It began:

“The Bahá’ís of the United States join our fellow-citizens in heartfelt grief at the deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery, and so many others whose lives were suddenly taken by appalling acts of violence. These heartbreaking violations against fellow human beings due only to the color of their skin, have deepened the dismay caused by a pandemic whose consequences to the health and livelihood of people of color have been disproportionately severe.”²⁰²

As the Bahá’í community’s efforts to contribute to racial unity were advancing with newfound capacity at the grassroots and national levels, the Baha’i Chair for World Peace at the University of Maryland was breaking new ground in the examination of race in the academic sphere. As “an endowed academic program that advances interdisciplinary examination and discourse on global peace,”²⁰³ the Bahá’í Chair, held by Dr. Hoda Mahmoudi, focused on “Structural Racism and the Root Causes of

Prejudice” as one of the central themes of its work. Among its initiatives was the creation of a dynamic, ongoing space where experts and scholars from many disciplines—including Public Health, Sociology, History, Communications, Psychology, Technology, Government and Politics, and the Arts—brought ground breaking research from their diverse fields into a collective effort to better understand the impact of race and racial discrimination on society in pursuit of a more peaceful and equitable future.²⁰⁴ Applying Baha’i ideals concerning human dignity, human achievement, and human excellence, the Chair introduced into discussions on race and racial discrimination a spiritual perspective, highlighting humanity’s shared destiny. By 2021, the work initiated by the Chair nearly a decade before had garnered substantial support and high regard in the field. Dr. Mahmoudi and her colleague at the University of Maryland, Dr. Rashawn Ray, had, by 2021, initiated an ambitious project to bring together the perspectives of some of academia’s most well-respected and thought-provoking social scientists to analyze racism in America in a volume entitled, *Systemic Racism in America: Sociological Theory, Education Inequality, and Social Change*. Edited by Drs. Mahmoudi and Ray, the volume is scheduled to be published by Routledge Publishing later this year.

This period also witnessed countless initiatives undertaken by individuals and groups of Bahá’ís. One such initiative was the work of the Bahá’í-inspired organization, National Center for Race Amity (NCRA). Established in 2010 at Wheelock College in Massachusetts, the NCRA attracted experts on issues of racial discrimination and promoters of racial amity to its annual Race Amity Conferences and Race Amity Observations/Festivals not only in Boston but in more than a hundred other localities. By the second half of the decade, its efforts gave rise to a number of noteworthy outcomes. In 2015,

for example, the Massachusetts Legislature had established an annual Race Amity Day, to be celebrated on the second Sunday of June. The following year, similar efforts by the NCRA resulted in Senate Resolution 491 passed on 10 June 2016, “Designating June 12, 2016, as a national day of racial amity and reconciliation.”²⁰⁵ And in 2018 the NCRA produced the film *An American Story: Race Amity and The Other Tradition*. As one of a number of individual initiatives across the US, the NCRA had an example of the continuity of the American Bahá’í community’s century-long response to racial injustice and the pursuit of racial unity.

As the period of 2016 to 2021 came to a close, the American Bahá’í community could see that its learning through the series of global Plans enhanced its efforts to contribute to the cause of racial justice at different levels of society.

Conclusion: Forging a Path to Racial Justice

The identity and mission of the American Bahá’í community, fundamentally shaped by the hand of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, is intertwined with the nation’s struggle to transcend the crippling legacy of racism and its current manifestations. At each stage of its development, the Bahá’í community’s long-term commitment to apply the teachings of Bahá’u’lláh for the betterment of the world and to dismantle the insidious social ill of racism has required the development of new capacities.

Over the past quarter century, as American Bahá’ís continued to work for race unity in numerous ways, the entire Bahá’í world was set on a new path of learning about its own growth and development and its efforts to

contribute to social transformation. The Bahá'í community in the United States, by the end of the period, had advanced its collective efforts to contribute to racial justice and unity at all levels of society. It had made strides in learning to build a new dynamic of community life at the grassroots—a dynamic in which individuals, families, and, in some instances, segments of a population became empowered to take ownership of the transformation of their own communities. While many of the developments described are modest and nascent, they hold promise for the long-cherished hope that the American Bahá'ís will play an increasing share in efforts to eradicate the blight of racism from their society.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS:

Emily Lample served on the Learning Desk of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States from 2013 to 2020.

Richard Thomas is Professor Emeritus of History at Michigan State University. He is author and coauthor of several books on race relations, the African American experience, and the Baha'i Faith.

Reading Reality in Times of Crisis

‘Abdu’l-Bahá and the Great War

BY

AMIN EGEA

SATURDAY MAY 8, 2021

In this article, Amín Egea looks at how ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s analysis of the crises of His time was profoundly distinct from contemporaneous “progressive” movements and thinkers. “‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s warnings about the causes of war could not be understood by societies immersed in paradigms of thought totally different from the ones He presented,” writes the author. “And just as the meanings and diagnoses of the causes of war differed between those provided by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and the dominant discourses of the time, so did proposals for the establishment of peace.” The article also explores three ways that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá addressed the crises He foresaw.



‘Abdu’l-Baha visits Green Acre in 1912. (from centenary.bahai.us)

When ‘Abdu’l-Bahá visited Europe and North America between 1911 and 1913, the West was experiencing a period of great prosperity and peace. Europe had gone almost forty years without a battle on its soil, while the United States had spent nearly half a century healing the wounds of its civil war. The accelerating technological and industrial advances on both sides of the Atlantic were proudly displayed year after year at international expositions visited by citizens and rulers from all corners of the globe. The Western economies had reached unprecedented prosperity, which brought about changes in social organization. It is not surprising, then, that decades later, when describing the gestalt of public opinion in the years preceding the outbreak of World War I, a famous Austrian writer would state: “Never had Europe been stronger, richer, more beautiful, or more confident of an even better future.”²⁰⁶

Such confidence in a peaceful and prosperous future was also supported by rapid changes in international politics. The peace conferences held in The

Hague in 1899 and 1907 convinced many statesmen and prominent thinkers that the possibility of war was increasingly remote. For the first time, most of the world's nations had collectively reached global agreements aimed at preventing war, perhaps the most promising of which was the establishment of an International Court of Arbitration. Experts in international law believed that, through arbitration, countries in conflict could resolve their disputes without resorting to arms or shedding a drop of blood. From 1899 until the outbreak of the Great War, hundreds of arbitration agreements were signed to secure peace between signatory countries. Even Great Britain and Germany signed an agreement in 1904.²⁰⁷ Each of these advances was applauded by the many statesmen who were interested in internationalism as a path to peace. The Inter-Parliamentary Union, for example, which brought together more than 3,000 politicians from around the world, supported the court without reservation. Leaders such as President Theodore Roosevelt and his successor, William Taft, supported the court. Philanthropist Andrew Carnegie, who was president of the New York Peace Society—an organization that had invited 'Abdu'l-Bahá to speak to its members—paid for the construction of the Peace Palace in The Hague. The building was inaugurated with great pomp in August 1913, just one year before the outbreak of the Great War.



William Howard Taft, the 27th president of the United States and the tenth Chief Justice of the United States.

The conviction that the solution to war lay primarily in international organization was so strong that the Hague Convention of 1907 agreed on the establishment of an International Court of Justice, which would not merely arbitrate but also administer justice and enforce international law. The details of such a court were postponed to a future Hague Conference, planned for the fateful year of 1915.

The academic world also gave credibility, through individuals' works and studies, to this optimistic vision of the future. Scholars reasoned that a war between world powers would be so costly economically and so devastating militarily that the business world, the banks, the political parties, and public opinion in general would undoubtedly impose reason on any warlike temptation.

“The very development that has taken place in the mechanism of war has rendered war an impracticable operation,” wrote Ivan S. Bloch (1836–1902) in *The Future of War*. He added, “The dimensions of modern armaments and the organization of society have rendered its prosecution an economic impossibility.”²⁰⁸



Ivan S. Block

Along similar lines, Norman Angell presented psychological and biological arguments in *The Great Illusion* (1911)—which was translated into more than twenty languages—to show that war would be an exercise in irrationality and suicide for the contending parties.

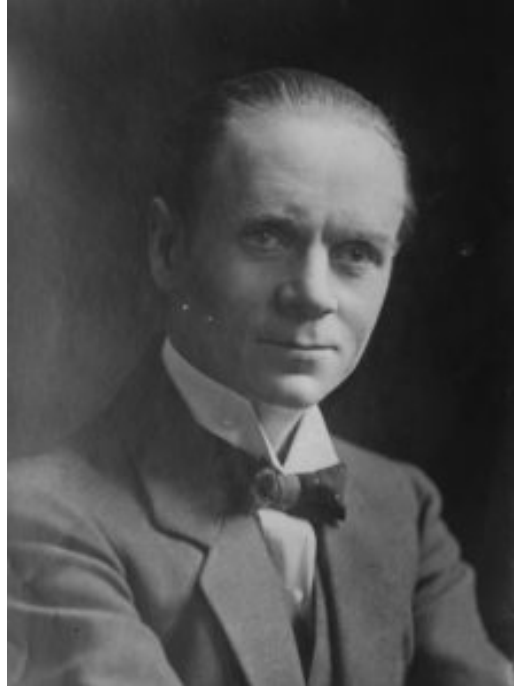
Optimism also spread to the peace movement, which was not only more influential than it is today but enjoyed far more resources and support. David Starr Jordan, who held a leading position in the World Peace Foundation and was the first president of Stanford University—and who invited ‘Abdu’l-Bahá to speak at Stanford—went so far as to ask in 1913, “What shall we say of the Great War of Europe, ever threatening, ever impending, and which

never comes? Humanly speaking, it is impossible. ... But accident aside—the Triple Entente lined up against the Triple Alliance—we shall expect no war.”²⁰⁹



David Starr Jordan (Credit: Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.)

Andrew Carnegie, who had met ‘Abdu’l-Bahá personally and received at least three letters from Him, would speak in similar terms a year before the war: “Has there ever been danger of war between Germany and ourselves, members of the same Teutonic race? Never has it been even imagined ... We are all of the same Teutonic blood, and united could insure world peace.”²¹⁰



Norman Angell

As in other spheres, many in the internationalist movement expressed absolute faith in arbitration as the ultimate means of ending war. “I am able to prove, and this is very essential,” said J. P. Santamaria, an Argentinian representative at the Lake Mohonk Conference on International Arbitration in the same year that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá spoke at the distinguished event (1912), “that the majority of the Latin American republics have already exchanged treaties whereby armed conflicts become practically impossible.”²¹¹

“We believe not only that France, but Germany and Japan as well, would gladly join with England and the United States in treaties of arbitration which would make war forever impossible,” said another of the event’s speakers.²¹²

Whether as a result of faith in technological progress, hope in the positive influence of international policy aimed at peace, assurance in the power of the economy, or confidence in the supremacy of scientific reason, the prevailing visions for the future of humanity at the time of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s visit to the West were strictly based on material criteria. The outbreak of World War I demonstrated the fallacy of that premise.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Radical Analysis of the Causes of War

The diagnosis of the world situation presented by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was very different from that of His contemporaries. Although on numerous occasions He referred to the need to establish international bodies with global reach and sufficient executive power to intervene in conflicts between countries,²¹³ He also impressed on His audiences the urgent need to focus on the moral causes of war and the spiritual requirements for the establishment of peace.

Far from arguing that war was simply the result of deficient international organization, He asserted that it was also rooted in erroneous conceptions of the human being, which led irremediably towards division and contention. He especially warned of the dangers of racism and nationalism, which define the individual according to material parameters—bodily appearance and community of birth, respectively—and prioritize human beings and entire societies according to these factors, thus generating inequality and injustice, and fostering hatred and alienation, among human groups. He also referred to religious hatred, which He described as contrary not only to the foundation of religions but also to divine will.

“All prejudices, whether of religion, race, politics or nation, must be renounced, for these prejudices have caused the world’s sickness,” He said in a talk in Paris in 1911. Prejudice, He asserted, is “a grave malady which, unless arrested, is capable of causing the destruction of the whole human race. Every ruinous war, with its terrible bloodshed and misery, has been caused by one or other of these prejudices.”²¹⁴

“Man has laid the foundation of prejudice, hatred and discord with his fellowman,” He explained in 1912 in a speech at a Brooklyn church, “by considering nationalities separate in importance and races different in rights and privileges.”²¹⁵

“As long as these prejudices prevail, the world of humanity will not have rest,” He wrote years later.²¹⁶

‘Abdu’l-Bahá rejected the premises on which each of these models of thought were based. He denied, for example, the objective existence of races, stating instead that “humanity is one kind, one race and progeny, inhabiting the same globe.”²¹⁷ He also denied that nations are natural realities, referring to national divisions as “imaginary lines and boundaries.”²¹⁸ He denied any essential differences between religions, since they all have a common origin, share the same spiritual foundations, and are essentially one and the same. Furthermore, He affirmed that religious differences are due to “dogmatic interpretation and blind imitations which are at variance with the foundations established by the Prophets of God,”²¹⁹ stressed that these aspects of religion must disappear, and even went so far

as to declare that “if religion be the cause of enmity surely the lack of religion is better than its presence.”²²⁰

He spoke at a time when the ideologies characteristic of a culture of inequality (racism, nationalism, sexism, and so on) were on the rise, gradually pushing humanity into what would be the bloodiest and most catastrophic century of its history. Racism, for example, was endorsed by a significant portion of the scientific community of the time and was firmly established in large parts of the world in the form of discriminatory and segregationist laws. It was even undergoing a major transformation equipped by new “scientific” techniques—such as craniometry, phrenology, and physiognomy—that inspired new and abhorrent “social reform” initiatives, such as eugenics and racial hygiene. Nationalism, for the first time in history, had instilled in the majority of humanity the vision of a globe divided into parcels of land defined by races, cultures, and languages. It drove imperialist and colonialist policies, while colonialism, in turn, exported nationalism, imposing previously nonexistent categories and definitions on citizens and territories worldwide. At the same time, longstanding religious conflicts were still very much present, reviving old grievances and warlike moods—as exemplified by the chronic problems in the Balkans, which were in full swing when ‘Abdu’l-Bahá visited the West.

Even individuals and organizations with noble goals held such doctrines of inequality. Many pacifists, for example, saw war not so much as a moral problem, but as a biological one. Influenced by racism and social Darwinism, they based their criticism of war on the argument that “fit” men were sent to the battlefield, where they died, while “unfit” men stayed

behind and reproduced. The consequence of such a phenomenon, they believed, was “racial weakening.”

“Only the man who survives is followed by his kind,” wrote the aforementioned David Starr Jordan. “The man who is left determines the future. From him springs the ‘human harvest’ ...”²²¹

Along the same lines, Norman Angell also criticized colonial expansion in biological terms, arguing that domination and contact between civilizations prolonged the life of “weak races.”

“When we ‘overcome’ the servile races,” Angell reasoned in his internationally best-selling book, “far from eliminating them, we give them added chances of life by introducing order, etc., so that the lower human quality tends to be perpetuated by conquest by the higher. If ever it happens that the Asiatic races challenge the white in the industrial or military field, it will be in large part thanks to the work of race conservation, which has been the result of England’s conquest ...”²²² In 1933 Angell would be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

Benjamin Trueblood, secretary of the American Peace Society, who met ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in Washington, D.C., raised the possibility of a future world federation as a consequence of a “great racial federation” in the Anglo-Saxon world.²²³ This idea was similar to that put forward by Andrew Carnegie.

In this context, we can understand—with the perspective provided by the passage of more than a century since His travels—that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s

warnings about the causes of war could not be understood by societies immersed in paradigms of thought totally different from the ones He presented.

And just as the meanings and diagnoses of the causes of war differed between those provided by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and the dominant discourses of the time, so did proposals for the establishment of peace. As explained, the international community had placed its hope in legislation and international institutions as mechanisms for ensuring peace; some pacifists sincerely believed that such changes also required the racial hegemony of certain peoples. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, however, emphasized a completely different concept: peacemaking would only be possible when humanity reached the understanding that it is one and acted in accordance with this principle. He brought this idea forward in a great number of His talks. For instance, in Minneapolis, He stated that human beings “must admit and acknowledge the oneness of the world of humanity. By this means the attainment of true fellowship among mankind is assured, and the alienation of races and individuals is prevented ... In proportion to the acknowledgment of the oneness and solidarity of mankind, fellowship is possible, misunderstandings will be removed and reality become apparent.”²²⁴

By making such a statement, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá presented His listeners with a radical challenge. The recognition of the oneness of the human race implies, on one hand, the acceptance that there is a primordial identity common to all human beings, which goes beyond any physical or accidental diversity between individuals. It also implies the abandonment of any vision of the human being—foundational to beliefs such as racism, sexism, unbridled nationalism, and religious exclusivism—that justifies human inequality.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s approach, therefore, clashed head-on with the discourses of the time and the materialistic premises that underpinned them.

The Great War

Although ‘Abdu’l-Bahá praised on numerous occasions progress that humanity was experiencing, for example in economics, politics, science, and industry, He also warned that material progress alone would not be capable of bringing true prosperity without a commensurate spiritual advancement.

“Material civilization concerns the world of matter or bodies,” He explained during His visit to Sacramento, “but divine civilization is the realm of ethics and moralities. Until the moral degree of the nations is advanced and human virtues attain a lofty level, happiness for mankind is impossible.”²²⁵

From this perspective, the ideologies of inequality that permeated all areas of human endeavor were totally incapable of promoting lasting peace, including in movements that promoted pacifism, internationalism, and diplomacy.

“The Most Great Peace cannot be assured through racial force and effort,” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explained in an address in Pittsburgh:

It cannot be established by patriotic devotion and sacrifice; for nations differ widely and local patriotism has limitations. Furthermore, it is evident that political power and diplomatic ability are not conducive to universal agreement, for the interests of governments are varied and selfish; nor will international harmony and reconciliation be an outcome

of human opinions concentrated upon it, for opinions are faulty and intrinsically diverse. Universal peace is an impossibility through human and material agencies; it must be through spiritual power ...

For example, consider the material progress of man in the last decade. Schools and colleges, hospitals, philanthropic institutions, scientific academies and temples of philosophy have been founded, but hand in hand with these evidences of development, the invention and production of means and weapons for human destruction have correspondingly increased ...

If the moral precepts and foundations of divine civilization become united with the material advancement of man, there is no doubt that the happiness of the human world will be attained and that from every direction the glad tidings of peace upon earth will be announced.²²⁶

Based on this premise, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá challenged a falsely optimistic vision of the world, noting that, if the moral and spiritual dimensions of social reality were also assessed, it would become apparent that the world was experiencing a moment of great decadence. “If the world should remain as it is today,” He said in Chicago in 1912, “great danger will face it.”²²⁷

“Observe how darkness has overspread the world,” he explained in Denver:

In every corner of the earth there is strife, discord and warfare of some kind. Mankind is submerged in the sea of materialism and occupied with the affairs of this world. They have no thought beyond earthly possessions and manifest no desire save the passions of this fleeting,

mortal existence. Their utmost purpose is the attainment of material livelihood, physical comforts and worldly enjoyments such as constitute the happiness of the animal world rather than the world of man.²²⁸

‘Abdu’l-Bahá warned of the acute risk of an impending international conflict on no less than seventeen occasions. “Europe itself,” He said in Paris in 1911, “has become like one immense arsenal, full of explosives, and may God prevent its ignition—for, should this happen, the whole world would be involved.”²²⁹

Despite this and other explicit warnings, His audiences remained for the most part unmoved. Confidence in material well-being weighed more heavily on public opinion than His diagnosis of the moral state of the world.²³⁰

He reiterated his warnings in the years between the end of World War I and His passing in 1921. In His correspondence, He explained that a second world conflagration was imminent, despite the terror caused by the first world war and the enormous progress that had been made in international governance with the establishment of the League of Nations.

“Although the representatives of various governments are assembled in Paris in order to lay the foundations of Universal Peace and thus bestow rest and comfort upon the world of humanity,” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá wrote in 1919, “yet misunderstanding among some individuals is still predominant and self-interest still prevails. In such an atmosphere, Universal Peace will not be practicable, nay rather, fresh difficulties will arise.”²³¹

“For in the future another war, fiercer than the last, will assuredly break out,” He wrote in 1920. “Verily, of this there is no doubt whatever.”²³²

In another letter sent the same year, He was even more explicit. After presenting—as He had done in His addresses in the West—some of the spiritual requirements for the establishment of peace, He closed by enumerating some of the elements that would eventually lead humanity to World War II just nineteen years later:

The Balkans will remain discontented. Its restlessness will increase. The vanquished Powers will continue to agitate. They will resort to every measure that may rekindle the flame of war. Movements, newly born and worldwide in their range, will exert their utmost effort for the advancement of their designs. The Movement of the Left will acquire great importance. Its influence will spread.²³³

The Birth of a New Society

No reader of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá should be tempted to think that, in His exposition of Bahá’u’lláh’s teachings, He moved only within the theoretical realm. On the contrary, while His efforts to spread Bahá’u’lláh’s message were enormous, His endeavors to bring those teachings into the realm of action were colossal. In a conversation in London, for example, referring to one of the many congresses held at the time, bringing together philanthropists eager to improve the world, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá stressed, “To know that it is possible to reach a state of perfection, is good; to march forward on the path is better. We know that to help the poor and to be merciful is good and pleases God, but knowledge alone does not feed the starving man ...”²³⁴

Throughout His ministry, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá directed the Bahá’í community to make itself a model of the future society foretold by Bahá’u’lláh—one through which humanity might witness the transformations that accompany the application of Bahá’u’lláh’s teachings to social and interpersonal relations.

In several of His talks, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá described the Bahá’ís of Persia (now Iran) as one such example. They lived in an environment in which religious segregation was a social reality. Zoroastrians, Jews, Christians, and other religious minorities lived in isolation from their Muslim neighbors and also separated from each other. Being considered impure beings (*najis*), the minority groups were subject to strict rules that regulated not only their relations with Muslims, but also the jobs they performed and even the clothes they wore. In this environment, bringing people from different religious backgrounds together in the same room was not just taboo, but unthinkable. Despite this, the Bahá’í community in Persia managed to become—first under the guidance of Bahá’u’lláh and then of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá—a cohesive group comprising people from all religious backgrounds. Having in common their faith in the transformative capacity of Bahá’u’lláh’s teachings, they were able to set aside prejudices inherited from the surrounding society and their ancestors and work together to improve conditions for their fellow citizens. It was not long before Persian Bahá’ís—men and women alike—learned to make decisions collectively and to implement them without regard for different backgrounds or genders.

Such a change not only resulted in the unprecedented growth of the Bahá’í community, but also in the proliferation of numerous social and charitable projects throughout the country. For example, during the ministry of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, the Persian Bahá’ís managed to establish no less than twenty-

five schools, including some of the country's first schools for girls. Beginning in the first decade of the twentieth century, Bahá'ís in Persia also established health centers in several cities, including the Sahhat Hospital in Tehran, which followed the instructions of 'Abdu'l-Bahá to include in its mission statement that it would provide "service to mankind, regardless of race, religion and nationality," a revolutionary statement at that time and place.²³⁵

While this was happening in the East, American Bahá'ís were working under the leadership of 'Abdu'l-Bahá to racially integrate their community.

"Strive with heart and soul in order to bring about union and harmony among the white and the black and prove thereby the unity of the Bahá'í world wherein distinction of color findeth no place, but where hearts only are considered," He wrote in one of His letters to them. "Variations of color, of land and of race are of no importance in the Bahá'í Faith; on the contrary, Bahá'í unity overcometh them all and doeth away with all these fancies and imaginations."²³⁶

He also exhorted them to "endeavor that the black and the white may gather in one meeting place, and with the utmost love, fraternally associate with each other."²³⁷

"If it be possible," He wrote on another occasion, "gather together these two races—black and white—into one Assembly, and create such a love in the hearts that they shall not only unite, but blend into one reality. Know thou of a certainty that as a result differences and disputes between black and white will be totally abolished."²³⁸

The process by which the Bahá'í community in the United States became a model of racial integration was accelerated by 'Abdu'l-Bahá's visit to North America—through His personal example, His participation in integrated meetings, His encouragement to Bahá'ís who held them, and His constant instructions in all the cities He visited on the issue of race.

After the war, 'Abdu'l-Bahá commissioned Agnes Parsons, a Bahá'í and member of high society in Washington, D.C., to organize the first Race Amity Conference, which took place in May 1921. The event, promoting racial unity and harmony, triggered a national movement that replicated the Conference in different parts of the United States in the following years, involving not only the American Bahá'í community, but also many other organizations and societal leaders. The result of these efforts was the transformation of the Bahá'í community into a group actively engaged in banishing the racial prejudices so present in its surrounding society.

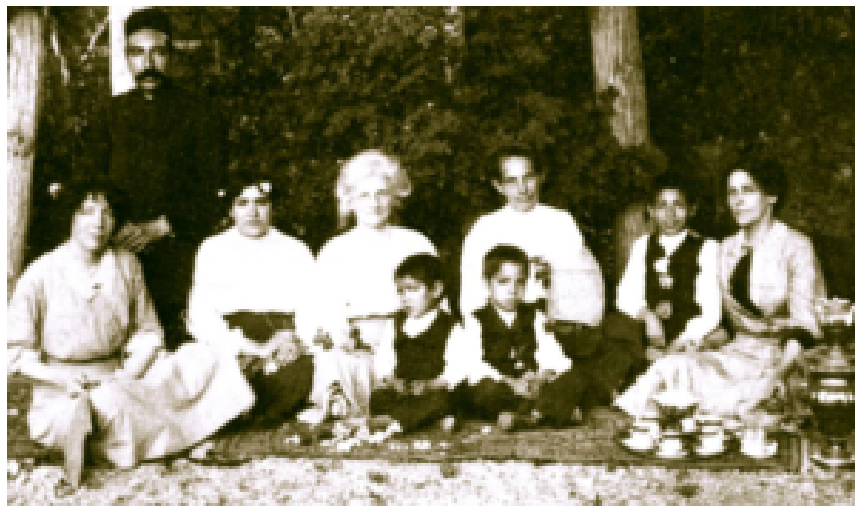


Agnes Parsons

In His efforts to demonstrate, through the global Bahá'í community, empirical proof that unity and freedom from prejudice leads to peace, 'Abdu'l-Bahá also promoted collaborative ties between the Bahá'ís of the West and the East. Beginning in the early twentieth century, He encouraged Persian Bahá'ís to travel to Europe and North America, and Western Bahá'ís to visit Persia or India. He promoted communications between Bahá'í communities. For example, the *Star of the West*, the journal of the Bahá'ís of the United States, included a section in Persian and was regularly sent to Persia. As development projects in Persia grew and became more complex, 'Abdu'l-Bahá encouraged Western Bahá'ís to support them and extend assistance. As a result, in 1909, Susan Moody, M.D., moved to the country to work at the Sahhat hospital in Tehran. Moody was followed by other Bahá'ís, including teacher and school administrator Lilian Kappes, nurse Elizabeth Stewart, and fellow doctor Sarah Clock. In 1910, the Orient-Occident Unity was founded with the aim of establishing collaboration in different fields between the people of Persia and the United States.²³⁹ The work of this organization involved not only many Bahá'ís, but other prominent organizations and individuals.



Susan Moody



From left to right: Lillian Kappers, Muhibbih Sultan, his wife Muchul Khanum, Dr Susan Moody, Dr. Sarah Clock, and Elizabeth Stewart, 1911 in

Tehran.

All these transformations provided glimpses of the social implications of the principles promulgated by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and presented examples of the effects generated by applying in the field of action the principle of world unity and the conception of the human being enunciated by Bahá’u’lláh.

Addressing the immediate needs

On 24 June 1914, Archduke Franz Ferdinand, the heir to the throne of Austrian-Hungarian Empire, was assassinated in Sarajevo. A few weeks later, the European powers were at war, and the disaster predicted by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá only a few years earlier became a reality.

The Ottoman regions of Syria and Palestine did not escape the dire consequences of the conflagration. The area was hit by famine caused by pillaging Ottoman troops as they crossed the territory to reach Egypt, where they were defending the strategic Suez channel. In the Haifa area, circumstances were particularly complicated. The local population held diverging alliances. The Arabs were divided between those sympathizing with the French and those supporting the Ottoman Empire, while the members of the large German colony supported their own country. These divisions caused tension and sometimes produced violence. The city was also the target of bombings from the sea. Thus, within a few weeks, Haifa and its surroundings experienced a rapid transition from a relative state of peace to severe insecurity associated with a humanitarian crisis. The conflict caused acute needs that required urgent attention.

Before the war, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá had taken steps that would allow Him to ameliorate these conditions. His most visible contribution was to provide food for the people of Haifa and its vicinity. At the beginning of the twentieth century, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá had established various agricultural communities around the Sea of Galilee and the Jordan Valley, with the most important one in ‘Adasiyyih, in present-day Jordan. During the hardest years of the war, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá sent shipments of foodstuffs from this location to Haifa, using some two hundred camels for just one trip, which gives an idea of the scale of the aid.²⁴⁰ To distribute the food within the population, He organized a sophisticated rationing system using vouchers and receipts to ensure that the food reached all those in need while preventing abuse.

“He was ever ready to help the distressed and the needy,” a witness was quoted as saying in 1919 in London’s *Christian Commonwealth*:

... often He would deprive himself and his own family of the necessities of life, that the hungry might be fed and the naked be clothed. ... For three years he spent months in Tiberias and Adassayah, supervising extensive works of agriculture, and procuring wheat, corn and other food stuffs for our maintenance, and to distribute among the starving Mohamedan and Christian families. Were it not for his prevision and ceaseless activity none of us would have survived. For two years all the harvests were eaten by armies of locusts. At times like dark clouds they covered the sky for hours. This, coupled with the unprecedented extortions and looting of the Turkish officials and the extensive buying of foodstuffs by the Germans to be shipped to the “Fatherland” in a time of scarcity, brought famine. In Lebanon alone more than 100.000 people died from starvation.²⁴¹

“Abdul Baha is a great consolation and help to all these poor, frightened, helpless people,” another report read.²⁴²

A few years later—just after the war—a British army officer described ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s role in reuniting the divided peoples of Haifa, saying, “Many are looking to him to solve the problems arising between Moslem and Christian sects.”²⁴³

Reading Reality in Times of Crisis

The three levels of action taken by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá on the issue of war— participation in the discourses of His time, building a community based on spiritual principles, and paying attention to the immediate needs arising from the outbreak of war—offer us an opportunity to reflect, nearly one hundred years after His passing, on the appropriateness of the models of thought that currently influence global decision-making.

Today, as then, the world is beset by a large number of threats. The progressive environmental decline, the deficient global economic system—which allows for the existence of extremes of wealth and poverty and, at the same time, periodically causes major economic crises—the prevalence of war in a multitude of forms and its constant threat in a context of unprecedented technological development, the rapid spread and assimilation of hate mongering of all kinds and of all orientations, and the rise of an unfettered nationalism with an associated drive against human diversity and resistance to the processes of global convergence, are just some of the challenges facing humanity. In addition to these, which have been created by human beings themselves, there are others of an unexpected and natural

character which, like the current global pandemic, highlight the fragility of a human ecosystem that has been greatly weakened by internal divisions and inequalities.

If the response to these crises—some of them unprecedented—is to be based on contradictions similar to those of the internationalists or pacifists of the years before the Great War, we can anticipate that any remedy applied will be dramatically limited in its influence. Can, for instance, a humanity that still clings to a nationalistic world view provide an adequate response to global problems? Is it possible for societies that perceive consumerism and the accumulation of goods as a path to true happiness to find solutions to crises such as global warming?

If we heed ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s advice, the diagnosis of these and future crises should not depend solely on an analysis of the material circumstances that converge in each of them, but should also address the ultimate, moral causes of these phenomena. Some of these include the pursuit of self-interest, submission to materialism, the perception that struggle and strife are legitimate means of resolving conflicts, the persistence of prejudices that deny human equality, and the distortion of the purpose of religion. As ‘Abdu’l-Bahá consistently stated in His talks and writings, the solutions to the problems that afflict the human race depend not only on a change in the material conditions of humanity but also on a transformation in our understanding of what it means to be human, of our existential purpose, and of the moral framework upon which we base our actions.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Amín Egea lives in Barcelona, Spain. He is the author of various works on the life and teachings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, including the two volumes of The Apostle of Peace (George Ronald, 2017 and 2019), Un clamor por la paz (“A Clamor for Peace”, Editorial Bahá’í de España, 2021), and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, la construcción de un nuevo mundo (“‘Abdu’l-Bahá: The building of a new world”, Editorial Bahá’í de España, 2021).

The Cause of Universal Peace

'Abdu'l-Bahá's Enduring Impact

BY

KATHRYN JEWETT HOGENSON

TUESDAY FEBRUARY 23, 2021



Postcard of Lake Mohonk Mountain House, Mohonk Lake, N. Y. around 1930-1945. Credit: Boston Public Library, https://www.flickr.com/photos/boston_public_library/6967292620

In the late summer of 1911 in the United States, Albert Smiley found a letter sent from Egypt among the items in his mail. Dated August 9, it was from ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, head of a religion which Smiley had only briefly encountered the year before.²⁴⁴ The letter addressed Smiley as the founder and host of the Lake Mohonk Conferences on International Arbitration and praised those gatherings and their goal of establishing arbitration as the means to settle disputes between nations. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá stated emphatically, “What cause is

greater than this!” Explaining how His Father, Bahá’u’lláh, had advocated the unity of the nations and religions, He asserted that the basis of this unity was the oneness of humanity.²⁴⁵ To ensure that His message to the sponsors was received and considered, a second letter was sent on August 22 to the Conference secretary, Mr. C. C. Philips. It began, “The Conference on International Arbitration and Peace is the greatest results [sic] of this great age.”²⁴⁶ In response, the organizers invited ‘Abdu’l-Bahá to take part in the 1912 Conference and to address one of its sessions.²⁴⁷

Even though other groups in the United States and Europe were holding meetings to promote peace, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá singled out the Lake Mohonk Conferences; for this reason, these exceptional gatherings are worthy of close examination. At them, Albert Smiley and his identical twin brother, Alfred, created an atmosphere that not only illuminated the issue under discussion but resulted in practical action.

The devoutly religious, idealistic Smiley brothers were lifelong members of the Society of Friends, the Christian Protestant denomination better known as Quakers. In their youth, they worked as educators. Then, in 1869, they pursued a different direction by purchasing a dilapidated hunting lodge on the shore of Lake Mohonk in the Catskill Mountains, half a day’s travel by train from New York City, and they successfully developed it into a fashionable resort.

Albert gained a reputation for civic-mindedness and, out of a desire to ameliorate the ills of society, developed a keen interest in social movements. Consequently, Rutherford Hayes, then President of the United States, appointed him to the federal Board of Indian Commissioners. In the course

of this service, Smiley recognized an urgent need to create a space where issues regarding America's indigenous peoples could be explored, and solutions proposed and acted upon. To that end, in 1883, he invited his fellow commissioners and others working on behalf of indigenous populations to his resort for a conference, which proved useful enough to be held annually until 1916. The consultation which occurred during those sessions influenced the course of government policy. Pleased with the success of the Smiley efforts, President Hayes suggested that the brothers establish a similar conference focused on addressing injustices faced by Americans of African descent. The Smileys organized and hosted the first national conference on the situation of Black Americans in 1890, but the extraordinary challenge posed by the issue forced them, with great reluctance, to abandon the conference after just two years.²⁴⁸

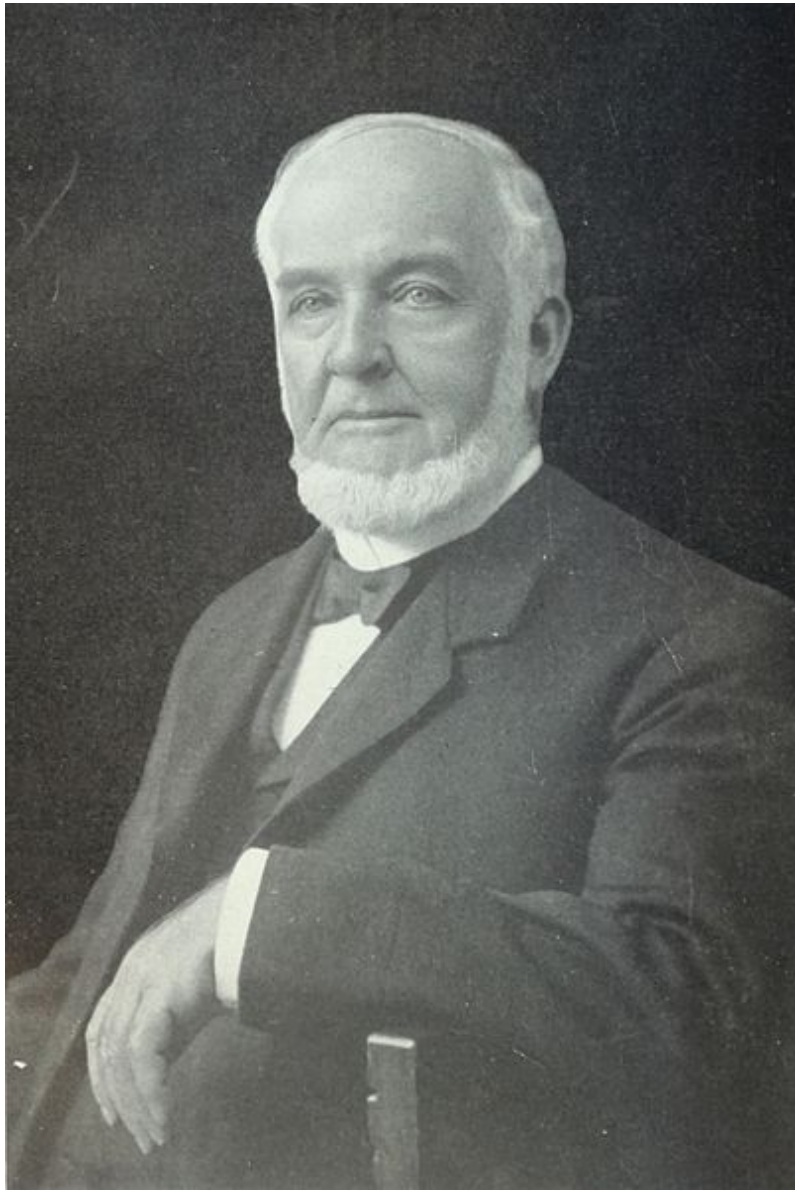
Unlike many of their fellow Quakers, the Smileys were not strict pacifists; however, their religious upbringing had instilled in them an unshakeable reverence for life.²⁴⁹ They were wholeheartedly committed to the cause of peace. Drawing upon what they had learned from experience, in 1895 they established the Conferences on Arbitration at Lake Mohonk. During that first gathering, a standing international court of arbitration was proposed and discussed at length. Among the participants was the man who would serve as head of the US delegation to the conference at the Hague a few years later when the Permanent Court of International Arbitration was established. The exploration of the ins and outs of such a court at Lake Mohonk informed the thinking of many of the participants, especially the American delegation.²⁵⁰ This would be the first tangible fruit of the arbitration conferences.

Managing two annual conferences, Albert Smiley developed a set of working principles. First, the topic had to be one that could lead to action. One reason the conferences on indigenous populations were influential was that all policy regarding the indigenous peoples in the United States was set by one national government agency, so a handful of officials could implement the recommendations that were made. In contrast, most of the laws and policies that affected the situation of African Americans were set and executed by countless state and local level governments.²⁵¹ The issue of international arbitration, while global in scope, shared more in common with the first example because a small number of highly placed politicians, officials, and diplomats determined policy. This meant that the number of people requiring educating and persuading was manageable.

Smiley's second underlying principle was that religion had a major role to play in resolving social problems, including the promotion of world peace. Religious leaders were invited to take part in all the conferences. The meetings themselves had a religious overtone and the participants were expected to adhere to the Quaker moral code, which included an unwritten prohibition against drinking alcoholic beverages and playing cards.²⁵²

The Smileys also learned how to conduct consultation effectively. A variety of points of view were welcome and fostered, and Albert chose chairmen who would not use their role to promote their own viewpoints or agendas and would be even-handed. The Smileys ensured that no group or position dominated the discussion portions of the sessions. Discussion was to be conducted at the level of principle rather than based upon specific matters, especially those that were controversial, such as the Spanish American War. The Smileys did not allow speakers at the arbitration conference to give talks

about the horrors of war, lest the consultation become less about solutions and more about sentiment. The conferences were, however, an opportunity to provide information about legislation, treaties, and other news related to the topic at hand.



Albert Smiley (1828-1912)

At the outset, idealistic leaders of social movements whose worldviews were not always practical filled the arbitration sessions, so the Smileys began to invite representatives of the business community. Nothing was worse for the average businessman than the economic disruption and uncertainty of a war. Women were always invited and fully participated, which was liberal for the time.

Finally, Albert Smiley recognized that the conference schedule must allow time for informal meetings and the networking that naturally occurs through socializing. The plenary sessions only lasted two hours in the morning and two hours in the evening, with the rest of the day unscheduled except for meals. The expansive property, much of which was woodlands with hiking trails surrounding the lake, provided welcome opportunities both to meditate in nature and to discuss ideas privately.²⁵³

By the time ‘Abdu’l-Bahá wrote to the organizers of the conferences, the gatherings had become influential. The groundwork necessary for the establishment of the Permanent Court of Arbitration at the Hague, for instance, was established there, and the American Society of International Law was also created at the conference, in the 1905 session.²⁵⁴

Establishing the Court of Arbitration was only the beginning, for as that institution undertook its work, other issues arose: How could countries be encouraged or required to bring matters to the Court rather than resort to war? How were the decisions of the Court to be upheld? Treaties became an obvious instrument and topic for discussion. Because the conferences were held annually with many of the same participants, different layers of the matter of arbitration were explored over their 21-year history.

When ‘Abdu’l-Bahá addressed the conference as its opening speaker on the evening session on May 15, 1912, He was introduced by the conference chairman, Nicholas Murray Butler, President of Columbia University, who would be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1931. Among the approximately 200 people in attendance were the future Prime Minister of Canada, W. MacKenzie King, ambassadors, jurists, journalists, academics, religious leaders, businessmen, trade unionists, and leaders of civic organizations, including peace activists. The speakers who followed Abdu’l-Bahá that evening came from Nicaragua, Argentina, Germany, and Canada—a sampling of the many countries represented.²⁵⁵

‘Abdu’l-Bahá was allotted twenty minutes for His talk, most of which was in the form of reading a previously submitted English translation. His address began with a discussion of Bahá’u’lláh’s emphasis on the oneness of humanity and His promise of the coming of the “Most Great Peace.” He explained to the audience that Bahá’u’lláh promulgated His Teachings during the nineteenth century when wars were raging throughout the world among religious sects, ethnic groups, and nations. His Father’s teachings, explained ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, inspired many people to put aside their prejudices and instead love and closely associate with their former enemies. The talk then turned to the importance of investigating reality and forsaking blind imitation; for, as He pointed out, once people see truth clearly, they will behold that the foundation of the world of being is one, not multiple. Following His discussion of the oneness of humankind, He explored the agreement of science and religion. Throughout the speech, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá stressed that religion should bring about a bond uniting the peoples of the world, not be the cause of disunity; that all forms of prejudice must be abolished, including racial, religious, national, and political; and that women

should be accorded equal status with men. He then briefly touched upon the problem of the disparities of wealth and poverty. Finally, He stated that philosophy is incapable of bringing about the absolute happiness of mankind: “You cannot make the susceptibilities of all humanity one except through the common channel of the Holy Spirit.”²⁵⁶

The members of His entourage recorded that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s talk was well-received and that many people approached Him afterward to thank Him and to speak with Him.²⁵⁷ The full translation of His talk was included in the widely distributed report of the conference and much of the press coverage also mentioned it.²⁵⁸

Earlier that day, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá had taken advantage of the unscheduled afternoon to give at least one informal talk and to speak with a number of the conference participants. He did not stay for the entire event but returned to New York the following morning after spending His last hours at the resort visiting with Albert Smiley.²⁵⁹

The 1912 conference was the last one attended by the far-sighted Albert Smiley. Alfred had already passed away and Albert followed his twin in December of that year. Their brother, Daniel, whose attention to detail in planning the conferences was part of their success,²⁶⁰ continued to host the conferences until circumstances forced him to discontinue them when the United States entered WWI in 1917. Years later, Dr. Butler, reviewing his own participation in the conferences between 1907 and 1912, reflected, “it is extraordinary how much vision was there made evident.” However, he concluded, “it is more than pathetic that that vision is still waiting for fulfilment.”²⁶¹

All the efforts of peace organizations and gatherings such as the Lake Mohonk Conferences culminated in the creation of the League of Nations at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919. However, although President Woodrow Wilson was given credit for conceiving the League, the US Congress refused to ratify the treaty that would make the United States a member. Thus, despite hopeful expectations, the League was born handicapped and, after a few initial achievements, proved to be ineffective at preventing wars. It was, nevertheless, a beginning.

Following the Great War, the United States returned to its default foreign policy position of isolationism; namely, the conviction that the country should stay out of the conflicts afflicting other parts of the world. It was as if all the work done before the war to promote world peace through internationalism had been undone. This situation was exacerbated by the 1919 “Red Scare,” during which anarchists and communists were accused of instigating several violent incidents. Moreover, in the 1920s, deep-seated prejudices took firmer hold of US public policy. Congress passed restrictive immigration legislation in 1924 to keep out Jews and Catholics. It became all but impossible for Africans to legally immigrate, and Chinese immigration was banned by law.

Meanwhile, in 1919, white people attacked and set fire to black neighborhoods in Chicago and, in 1921, attacked and even bombed from the air a prosperous black district in Tulsa, Oklahoma, leaving untold black citizens dead and the lives of the survivors ruined. The white supremacist, anti-Catholic, and anti-Semitic organization, the Ku Klux Klan, experienced a resurgence, demonstrating its strength with a large parade through Washington, D.C. in 1926, its members’ distinctive white-hooded uniforms

blending with the backdrop of the gleaming white marble of the U.S. Capitol building.

On the international front, fascism and communism arose quickly from the still-smoldering ashes of Europe. The armistice of 1918 would prove to be only an intermission before war erupted again in the 1930s. In the Far East, Japan's armies were on the move, beginning with the 1931 invasion of the Manchurian region of China. In country after country, rearmament accelerated. If ever the peoples of the world needed to grasp Bahá'u'lláh's message that humankind is one, it was during the period between the World Wars.

World peace remained the primary focus of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's talks when He visited California a few months after His appearance at the Lake Mohonk Conference. In a talk given at the Hotel Sacramento on 26 October 1912, He said that "the greatest need in the world today is international peace," and after discussing why California was well-suited to lead the efforts for the promotion of peace, He exhorted attendees: "May the first flag of international peace be upraised in this state."



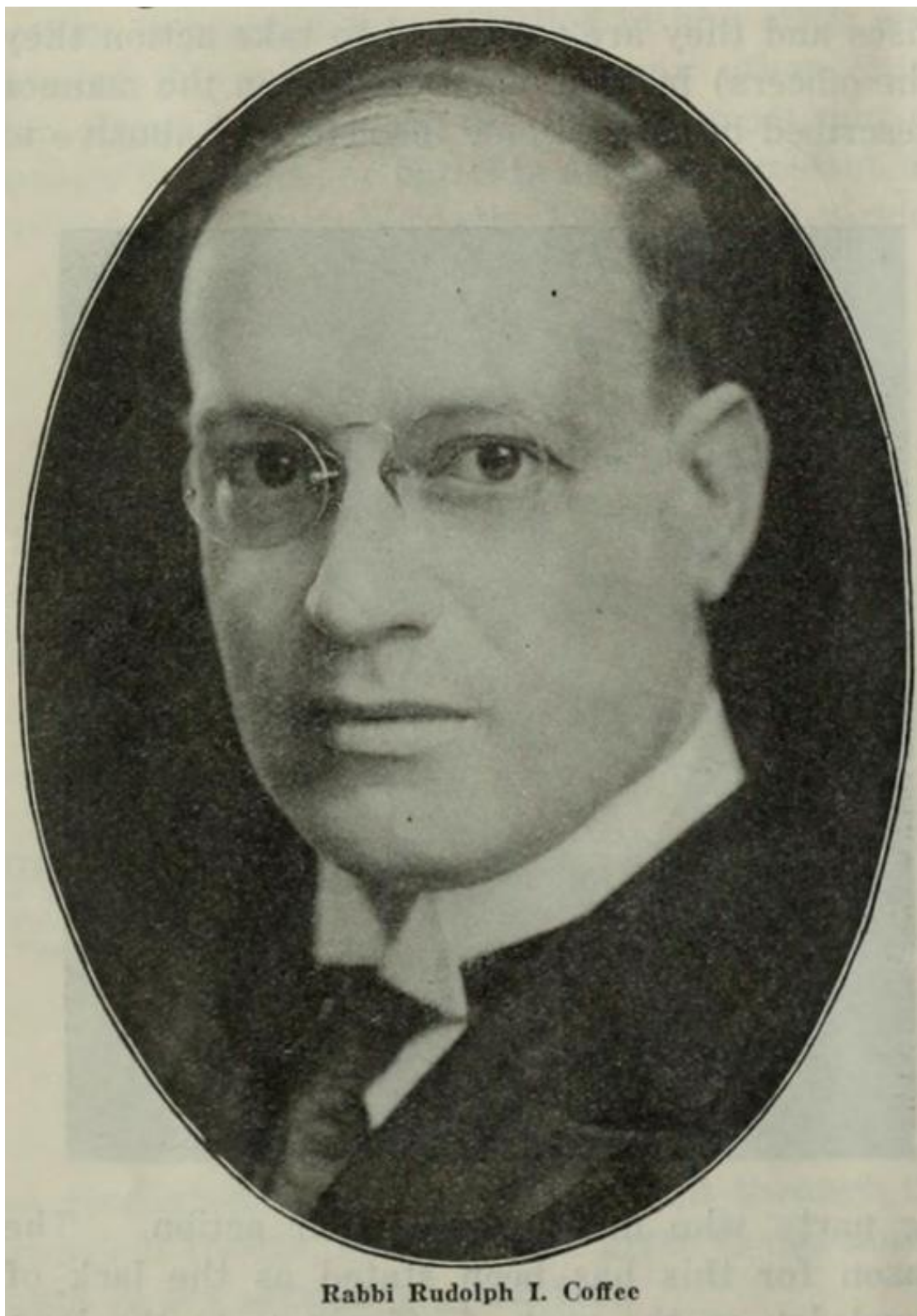
Leroy C. Ioas (1896-1965)

One of those inspired by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s vision of California as a leader in the promotion of world peace was Leroy Ioas, a twenty-six-year-old resident of San Francisco and rising railway executive. He remembered how ‘Abdu’l-Bahá had met with many prominent people during His ten months in the United States and, drawing upon His example, some years later Ioas became determined that Bahá’í principles should be widely promulgated among community leaders, especially those in positions to put them into effect or to influence the thinking of the citizenry. In 1922, Ioas wrote to Agnes Parsons in Washington, DC, to solicit her opinion and guidance about the prospect of a unity conference in his city. The previous year, at the express request of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, she had organized a successful, well-attended Race Amity Conference in her own racially polarized region of the South. Ioas noted in his letter that the challenge on the West Coast was not simply prejudice towards black people, for their numbers were few, but strong animosity towards the more numerous Chinese and Japanese citizens. Parsons responded with encouragement and suggestions. Armed with this guidance, Ioas approached two of the pillars of the Bay Area Bahá’í community—Ella Goodall Cooper and Kathryn Frankland—to gain their support for a conference. With this groundwork laid, he proposed a unity conference to the governing council for the San Francisco Bahá’í community, which decided it was not timely.



Ella Goodall Cooper (1870-1951)

Undeterred, Ioas approached Rabbi Rudolph Coffee, head of the largest synagogue in the Bay Area and the first Jewish person to serve as chaplain of the California State Senate. Coffee shared many of the Bahá'í ideals and became an enthusiastic ally. Ioas again turned to the Bahá'í council, and this time it supported his plan to form a committee that included Cooper and Frankland as members.



(1878-1955)

The committee's first order of business was to draft a statement of purpose. It said that the goals of the conference were "to present the public ... the spiritual facts concerning the beauty and harmony of the human family, the great unity in the diversity of human blessings, and the harmonizing of all elements of the body politic as the Pathway to Universal Peace." The group also decided that the expenses of the three-day conference set for March 1925 would be covered by the Bahá'í community so that participants would not be asked to contribute money—but, despite the Bahá'í underwriting of the event, the program would not have any official denominational sponsorship. The committee booked the prestigious Palace Hotel, the city's first premier luxury hotel, as the venue for the event.

Cooper, listed on the San Francisco Social Registry,²⁶² had access to the leading citizens of the area. As experienced event organizers, Cooper and Frankland set to work soliciting leading city residents to serve as "patrons". The greatest coup was enlisting Dr. David Starr Jordan, founding president of Stanford University, to serve as the honorary chairman of the conference. Jordan had met 'Abdu'l-Bahá and was known in peace movement circles for having developed his own peace plan. Other note-worthy speakers accepted, and the first World Unity Conference was born. The committee even hired a public relations firm to advertise the event and assist with arrangements.

Over the course of the evenings of March 21, 22, and 23, speakers addressed, before large audiences, the issues of the status of women and of the black, Chinese, and Japanese communities, as well as topics related to world peace. The roster of accomplished presenters included not only Rabbi Coffee and Dr. Jordan but also the senior priest of the Catholic Cathedral, a

professor of religion, a Protestant minister of a large African-American congregation, distinguished academics, and a foreign diplomat. The last one to address the conference was the Persian Bahá'í scholar, Mírzá Asadu'llah Fádil Mázandarání, the only Bahá'í on the program.

Measured by attendance and favorable publicity, the conference was an unqualified triumph. But as the last session drew to a close, the inevitable question was put to Ioas by Rabbi Coffee: What next? Hold such a conference annually? The planners did not have an answer. Just like the Smileys, Rabbi Coffee realized that the conference should lead to action. Undertaking one conference had stretched the financial and human resources of the San Francisco Bahá'í community. It had also provided a glimpse of what they could achieve. The ideas presented were, however, scattered to the wind with only the hope that some hearts and minds had been changed.²⁶³

Ioas provided the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States and Canada—the governing council for the Bahá'í communities of the two countries—with a report, and he suggested that similar World Unity Conferences be held in other communities. The National Assembly enthusiastically agreed and established a three-person committee, including two of its officers, to assist other localities in their efforts to hold conferences. The committee members were Horace Holley, Florence Reed Morton, and Mary Rumsey Movius.²⁶⁴ Human resources and all funds were to come from the sponsoring communities, but the national committee would help to promote the conferences and offer other assistance, including speakers.

During 1926 and into 1927, eighteen communities held World Unity Conferences. These included Worcester, Massachusetts; New York, New York; Montreal, Canada; Cleveland, Ohio; Dayton, Ohio; Hartford, Connecticut; New Haven, Connecticut; Chicago, Illinois; Portsmouth, New Hampshire; and Buffalo, New York. They followed the format of the San Francisco conference with three consecutive nights of programs featuring a diversity of speakers—the majority of whom were not Bahá'ís—on topics that were encompassed within Bahá'í principles. Among the presenters were clergy, academics, politicians, including the first woman to serve in the Canadian Parliament,²⁶⁵ but this guidance was not implemented systematically.

As the series of conferences drew to an end and attention turned to other matters, a growing sense of urgency motivated the three committee members because they took to heart 'Abdu'l-Bahá's warning that another war greater than the last one was coming; they hoped that bringing the Bahá'í message to the attention of important people might prevent it.²⁶⁶ They devised a plan to establish a World Unity Foundation that would both sponsor ongoing conferences and provide speakers to other events. In addition, they decided to create a proper organization—a movement—with local councils and a journal titled *World Unity*. The National Spiritual Assembly approved of the proposal but decided that it should be an individual initiative rather than an official activity of the Faith. The Assembly also encouraged the Bahá'í community to be supportive of the Foundation.²⁶⁷

Each of the three members²⁶⁸ made important contributions to the new endeavor.



Florence Morton (1875-1953)

Morton, a prosperous businesswoman who owned a factory, provided most of the funding and served as treasurer. Holley, with a professional background in writing, publishing, and advertising, assumed the management of the journal. Movius, a writer and another source of funds, became president of the board of directors. They hired Dr. John Herman Randall, an ordained Baptist minister and associate pastor of a non-

denominational, liberal church—The Community Church in New York City—to be the Foundation's public face as director and editor.²⁶⁹ Randall was a gifted, widely sought-after orator and author who was keenly interested in and sympathetic towards the Bahá'í Faith, even though he was not a professed adherent. Randall had spoken at several of the World Unity Conferences and shared the ideals underlying them. The four individuals then established a non-profit corporation, the World Unity Foundation, with Randall as director and journal editor.²⁷⁰



John Hermann Randall (1899-1980)

The original plan was that Dr. Randall, working full time for the Foundation, would ensure that World Unity Conferences were held all over the country. The talks from those events would provide the content for the journal, and

conference participants would be encouraged to form local councils to carry forward the work of spreading the cause of peace. None of this went as planned, despite a few early successes. Speakers rarely followed through with written versions of their talks. Local committees often dissolved within a year. Limited resources made it impossible to give attention to the innumerable details required to attract and retain a growing membership.²⁷¹

Despite setbacks associated with the conferences, in October 1927, the first issue of *World Unity* was published, providing an expansive view of the world and current international affairs. It covered not only important peace subjects such as the League of Nations and the Paris (Kellogg-Briand) Pact of 1928—the first attempt to make war illegal—but also articles introducing to the Western reader various countries, religions, arts, and other topics that would engender a sense of world citizenship. The contributors by and large were not Bahá'ís, though the three Bahá'í directors tried to ensure the publication reflected Bahá'í ideals. A number of those featured in its pages had been regular participants at the Lake Mohonk Arbitration Conferences, including leading peace activists Hamilton Holt, Edwin D. Mead and Lucia Ames Mead, and Theodore Marburg. A small number had spoken at World Unity Conferences, among them Dr. Jordan and Rabbi Coffee. Though the majority of articles were written specifically for the magazine, some were taken from speeches or other publications. Over seven years, the magazine published articles by notables such as Nobel Peace Prize recipient Norman Angell; eminent sociologist and advisor to President Wilson, Herbert Adolphus Miller; scholar of international law Philip Quincy Wright; the foremost scholar on auxiliary languages, Albert Léon Guérard, who heard 'Abdu'l-Bahá speak in California; the first president of the Republic of Korea, Syngman Rhee; the well-known writer and philosopher Bertrand

Russell; eminent U.S. foreign policy historian and official historian of the San Francisco Conference to establish the United Nations, Dexter Perkins; Charles Evans Hughes, chief justice of the US Supreme Court; philosopher and influential social reformer John Dewey; socialist, pacifist, and US presidential candidate Norman Thomas; Philip C. Nash, executive director of the League of Nations Association; and Robert W. Bagnell, a leader of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the preeminent American civil rights organization. The journal occasionally carried talks by or about the teachings propagated by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. Famed architect Frank Lloyd Wright designed one version of the masthead and also penned an article.²⁷² But perhaps one of the most praiseworthy attributes of the journal was its inclusion of well-reasoned articles by ordinary people who would have not found another national outlet for their voices.²⁷³

RELIGIOUS UNITY • RACIAL UNITY

WORLD UNITY

CLASS UNITY • INTERNATIONAL UNITY

March, 1935

VOLUME FIFTEEN

NUMBER SIX

RELIGION AND WORLD ORDER, VIII, *Horace Holley*.
INTER-AMERICAN POSSIBILITIES, *Philip Leonard Green*.
A MODERN CREED, *Ernst Janson*. WHAT IS SOCIETY?
Y. H. Krikorian. WORLD ADVANCE, A MONTHLY INTER-
NATIONAL REVIEW, *Oscar Newfang*. THE WORLD
FEDERATION MANIFESTO, PRELIMINARY DRAFT, *World
Federation Committee*. THE CRUSADES VIEWED THROUGH
EASTERN EYES, *John W. Kitching*. THE BREAKDOWN
OF AUSTRO-MARXISM, *Oscar Jászi*. NEW SOCIOLOGY
OF AGRICULTURE, *T. Swann Harding*. BOOK NOTES,
Joseph S. Roucek, *Paul Russell Anderson*, *Oscar Newfang*.
ANNOUNCEMENT. INDEX TO VOLUME FIFTEEN.

JUSTICE • BROTHERHOOD • PEACE

There were two aspects of the work of the Foundation that proved problematic. First, the objectives were lofty, but too broad. For example, the journal's subhead was: "A monthly magazine promoting the international mind." This allowed for wide participation in the Foundation's work, but it also left ambiguous the question of what exactly the journal stood for. In 1932, the Foundation sought to bring greater clarity to this question, first by explicitly promoting the Bahá'í concept of world federation and then by adopting the tenets set forth in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's 1919 letter to the Central Organisation for Durable Peace in The Hague.

A second challenge was that the initial approach taken by the Foundation confused and dismayed many Bahá'ís. In the beginning, the founders were concerned that associating the World Unity Foundation explicitly with religion would turn away some people who otherwise shared Bahá'í ideals and would cause their primary target audience, leaders of thought, to ignore its activities. In fact, the Bahá'í background of the Foundation was so well-concealed that most who have written about it after it was discontinued have also believed that Dr. Randall was its sole founder and proponent.²⁷⁴ To address the confusion that had arisen, the magazine began in 1933 to include articles explicitly based on the Bahá'í Faith.²⁷⁵ During its last years of publication, it was openly a Bahá'í journal.

Because of the controversy the Foundation generated within the Bahá'í community, Shoghi Effendi addressed the matter in a letter to the National Spiritual Assembly, discussing at length the approach of putting forth the Bahá'í message without mentioning the source of the ideas. Referring to the World Unity Conferences held earlier by Bahá'í communities, he wrote, "I desire to assure you of my heartfelt appreciation of such a splendid

conception.” He then explored why a variety of approaches, both direct and indirect, to conveying the teachings of the Faith were appropriate and desirable if executed with thoughtful care under the supervision of a National Spiritual Assembly.²⁷⁶

Just as the Foundation and its journal were gaining traction, they encountered one challenge that could not be overcome: The Great Depression of the 1930s. Morton could no longer pay her factory employees, much less continue to fund the organization. Movius experienced her own economic setbacks. Randall resigned at the end of 1932. In a last effort to save the journal, Holley took over as editor.²⁷⁷ But the times were against it. The world’s rapid march towards war was already underway. Peace movements seemed out of touch and magazines promoting their ideals became a luxury. No matter the sacrificial strivings of the proponents of the World Unity Foundation, their resources proved insufficient to further any interest that had been generated. As Movius wrote to Holley, “I like extremely the editorials you are writing for ‘World Unity,’ and only hope they will bear fruit. They will, undoubtedly, even if we never hear of it.”²⁷⁸

Finally, in 1935, after consulting the institutions of the Bahá’í Faith, it was decided to merge *World Unity* with another publication, *Star of the West* (renamed *The Bahá’í Magazine* in its later volumes) to become a new entity, *World Order*.²⁷⁹ This magazine was published from 1935 to 1949, revived in 1966, and ran until 2007. Like *World Unity*, its erudite articles covered a wide range of topics aimed at the educated public, but it was unmistakably a Bahá’í organ under the auspices of the US National Spiritual Assembly and never acquired as broad a readership as *World Unity*.

Did the World Unity Foundation and its journal have any impact? The renowned head of the Riverside Church in New York City, Harry Emerson Fosdick, said of *World Unity Magazine* that it represented, “one of the most serious endeavors ... to use journalism to educate the people as to the nature of the world community in which we are living.”²⁸⁰ Perhaps the foremost scholar of internationalism during the early twentieth century, Warren F. Kuehl, listed the magazine as one of only a tiny handful at the time discussing issues promoting peace through international order, noting that it seemed unique in its advocacy of a world federation.²⁸¹ Another scholar of diplomatic history, Anne L. Day, concluded that *World Unity's* primary contribution was creating a space for lesser-known people interested in international peace to put forth their ideas.²⁸²

... the conferences and the magazine helped foster a world outlook without prejudice and a faith in humanity which survived the horrors of World War II. *World Unity Magazine* gave young scholars a medium to which they could hone their insights toward global humanitarian values, thus broadening consciousness to recognize the moral and spiritual equality, “to realize that the interests of all men are mutual interests.”²⁸³

The World Unity Foundation was formally dissolved just as armies were moving into a growing number of hot spots in Europe and Asia. Within a few short years, much of the globe would be plunged into the most horrible conflict mankind had ever known. As the end of World War II came into view, a few far-sighted leaders became determined that such a catastrophe should never afflict humanity again and looked to the future. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt called for an international conference to be held in October 1945 to create a new organization of countries that would

improve upon the impotent League of Nations. The United Nations would be born that year.

That historic conference was held in San Francisco, fulfilling ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s wish that California would be the first place to hoist the banner of international peace. Seated in the audience were official representatives of the worldwide Bahá’í community, including Holley’s close friend and protégé, Mildred Mottahedeh, who would later serve as the Faith’s representative to the United Nations. Indeed, from the very inception of the United Nations, the Bahá’í International Community (BIC) has actively participated in its work as an official non-governmental organization.

Those representing the Bahá’í Faith to the United Nations and its agencies are building on the foundation laid by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’ over a century ago, drawing on His example and the lessons that have been learned since. First and foremost, they have been guided by the conviction that all participation in endeavors to remedy the ills of humanity should be based on moral and spiritual principles. This precept applies to the design, implementation, and evaluation phase of any initiative. Discussing difficult issues by first identifying underlying principles naturally enhances unity and understanding. Furthermore, over the course of the past century, Bahá’ís have consistently fostered the broad inclusion of voices in public discourse, enabling the diverse voices of humanity to contribute, on equal footing, to those discussions that impact the great issues of the day.



Bahá'í delegation to the United Nations International Conference of Non-Governmental Organizations. (L to R) Amin Banani, Mildred R. Mottahedeh, Hilda Yen and Matthew Bullock; Lake Success, NY, USA; 4-9 April 1949.

This deliberate approach, along with always adhering to the attributes of trustworthiness, inclusiveness, and dependability, has gained the BIC a positive reputation among Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). In 1970, the BIC representative was elected to serve on the Executive Board of the United Nations Conference of Non-Governmental Organizations.

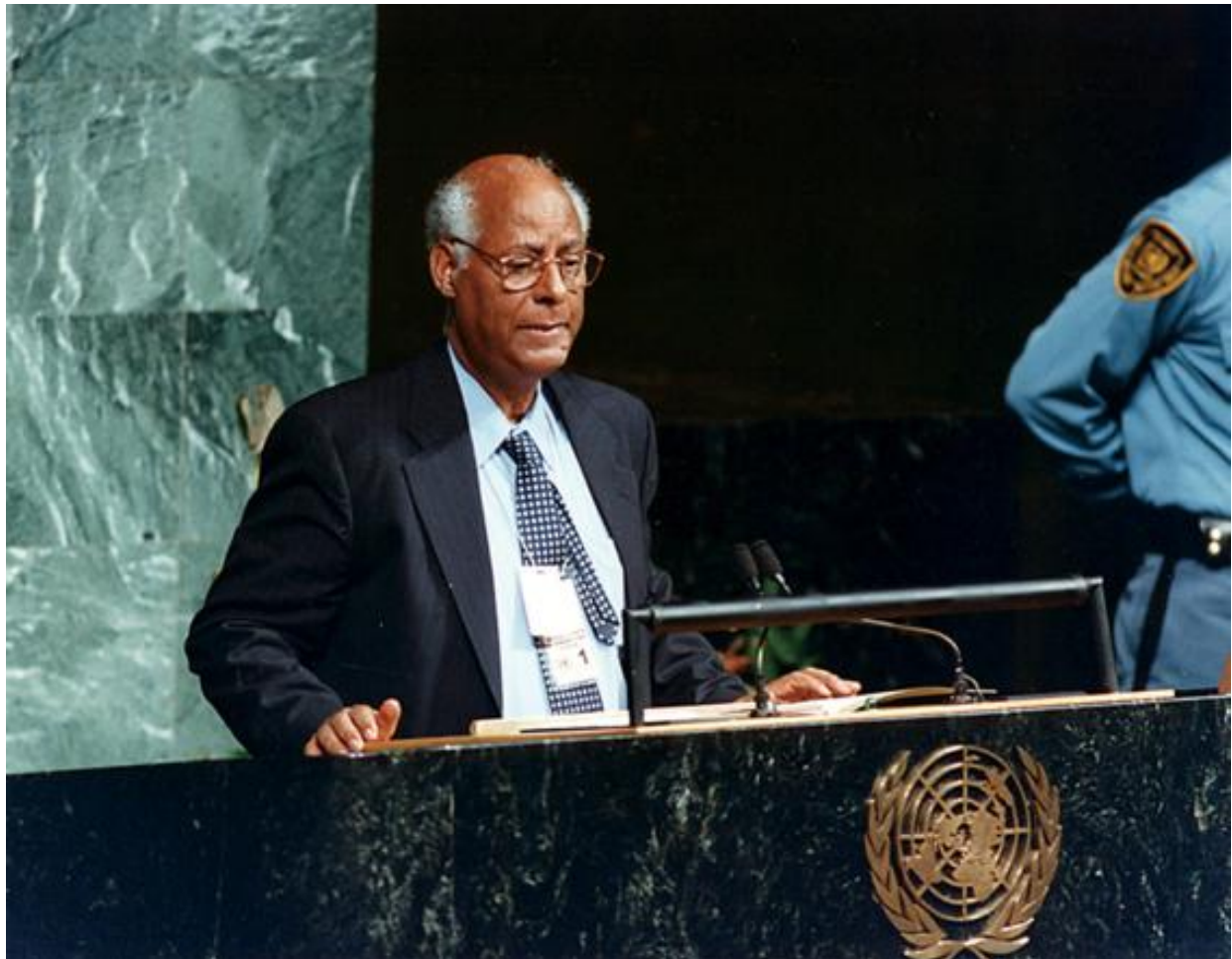
Subsequently, Bahá'í representatives have been elected or appointed to officer positions on a number of significant NGO committees and advisory bodies to the United Nations, often serving as chairpersons, such as the election of BIC Representative Mary Power as Chair of the NGO Commission on the Status of Women from 1991-1995.

The BIC's wide-ranging engagement in the world's most pressing issues has not gone unnoticed. As early as 1976, Kurt Waldheim, then United Nations Secretary-General, addressed the Bahá'í community with the following statement:

Non-governmental organizations such as yours, by dealing comprehensively with the major problems confronting the international community and striving to find solutions which will serve the interests of all nations, make a very substantial and most important contribution to the United Nations and its work.²⁸⁴

In 1987, Secretary-General Javier Pérez de Cuéllar designated the BIC as "Peace Messengers," an honor bestowed upon only three hundred organizations. Approaching the turn of the century, Secretary-General Kofi Annan called for both a Millennium Summit for the leaders of the world and a Millennium Forum for the world's peoples, represented through non-governmental agencies. In recognition of its consistently principled approach to its work, its integrity, and its even-handedness, the BIC was chosen to co-chair the Forum and to provide the speaker from the Forum to address the Summit.

On September 8, 2000, Dr. Techeste Ahderom, then the BIC Principle Representative to the United Nations, addressed the assembled heads of state of more than 150 nations on behalf of the peoples of the world.²⁸⁵ In his talk, Ahderom reminded the assembled leaders that the very idea of the League of Nations and, later, the United Nations, arose through the participation of civil society in various forms. He closed with the words from the Millenium Forum Declaration: “In our vision we are one human family, in all our diversity, living on one common homeland ...”²⁸⁶



Techeste Ahderom, principal representative of the Bahá'í International Community to the United Nations, speaking before the Millenium Summit,

September 2001 in his capacity as co-chairman of the Millennium Forum.

As resources have allowed and capacity has increased, the BIC has addressed vital issues including racial discrimination, human rights, the status of women, protection of the environment, science and technology, the rights of indigenous peoples, education, health, youth, freedom of religion or belief, global governance, and UN reform.

According to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in His address at Lake Mohonk, the issue of peace is multifaceted, and it will not be attained until an environment is created that will ensure a lasting end to conflict. In its approach to the promotion of peace, the Bahá’í community has always sought a holistic approach to the question of global peace. In this light, the BIC New York Office in 2012 instituted a regular forum where ideas could be discussed freely, on the condition that the identity of the person or organization offering the information is not disclosed. Participants in these forums have thereby, regardless of their functions and roles, had the freedom to engage in consultation without it being assumed that their comments represent the official position of their country or organization. By mid-2020, more than sixty of these discussions had been held covering a wide range of topics.²⁸⁷ Through this and many other efforts, the BIC has been learning to draw on the unseen power of consultation to create environments where those entrusted with global leadership and whose decisions impact the fortunes of the planet are able to deliberate in a distinctive environment on the major issues of our time..

To mark the 75th anniversary of the founding of the United Nations, the BIC issued a statement asserting that to meet the needs of the twenty-first century will require a far greater level of global integration and cooperation than anything that has existed before.²⁸⁸ The statement calls for the strengthening and evolution of the consultative process of international dialogue and for world leaders to give priority to that which will benefit the whole of humankind. It argues that what is needed now is a radical change in the approach to solving the problems of the world—a process that conceives of the world as an organic whole and takes into consideration the essential need for spiritual and ethical advancement to be commensurate with scientific and technological progress.²⁸⁹

Ultimately, the goal of the Bahá'í Faith is to bring about a universal recognition that we are all one people—with the profound implications that carries through all areas of life, requiring no less than a restructuring of society. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá through His words and actions pointed out the way to promote this most essential of all truths, and a clear thread can be seen from His contributions to peace to the efforts of the Bahá'í community since. Such efforts will doubtless continue for decades, perhaps centuries, until the time arrives when all decisions will rest upon the indisputable reality of the oneness of humankind and the world will transform into a new world—a peaceful world where war is relegated to the sad accounts found only in history books.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Historian and lawyer Kathryn Jewett-Hogenson is the author of *Lighting the Western Sky: The Hearst Pilgrimage and the Establishment of the Baha'i Faith in the West* and *Infinite Horizons: The Life and Times of Horace Holley*

A Vision of Peace

Stories from the Democratic Republic of the Congo

BY

BAHÁ'Í WORLD NEWS SERVICE

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Ditalala—a village named “peace.”

The sun rises in the Congolese village of Ditalala, and the aroma of freshly brewed coffee fills the air. For generations, the people of this village have been drinking coffee, which they grow themselves, before heading out to work on their farms.

Over the past few years, this morning tradition has come to take on a deeper significance. Many families in the village have been inviting their neighbors to

join them for coffee and prayers before starting the day.

“They’ve transformed that simple act of having a cup of coffee in the morning,” says a recent visitor to Ditalala, reflecting on her experience. “It was truly a community-building activity. Friends from the neighboring houses would gather while the coffee was being made, say prayers together, then share the coffee while laughing and discussing the issues of the community. There was a sense of true unity.”



Neighbors enjoy a morning coffee together in Ditalala.



In Ditalala, villagers prepare for the day by gathering for prayers.

The central African nation of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) has experienced, for over a century, a series of violent struggles. The most recent war from 1998–2002 is estimated to have claimed over 5.4 million lives, making it the world’s deadliest crisis since World War II. For the last two years, it has been the country with the highest number of people displaced by conflict—according to the United Nations, approximately 1.7 million Congolese fled their homes due to insecurity in the first six months of 2017 alone.

Yet, there are communities throughout the country that are learning to transcend the traditional barriers that divide people. Inspired by Bahá’u’lláh’s teachings, they are striving for progress both material and spiritual in nature. They are concerned with the practical dimensions of life, as well as with the qualities of a flourishing community like justice, connectedness, unity, and access to knowledge.

“What we are learning is that when there are spaces to come together and discuss the teachings of Bahá’u’lláh in relation to the challenges facing their community, people will come and consult about what we can do together to find solutions to our problems,” reflects Izzat Mionda Abumba, who has been working for many years with educational programs for children and youth.

“When everyone is given access to these spaces, there is nothing that separates us—it’s no longer about who are Bahá’ís and who are not Bahá’ís. We are all reading these writings and in discussing them we find the paths to the solutions for whatever we are doing. Inspiration comes from these writings and directives,” he says.

The story of this country is a remarkable one. The process which is unfolding seeks to foster collaboration and build capacity within all people—regardless of religious background, ethnicity, race, gender, or social status—to arise and contribute to the advancement of civilization. Among the confusion, distrust, and obscurity present in the world today, these burgeoning communities in the DRC are hopeful examples of humanity’s capacity to bring about profound social transformation.



A path to collective prosperity

The village of Walungu is in South Kivu, a province on the eastern side of the country, bordering Rwanda and Burundi. In recent years, a spirit of unity and collaboration has become widespread among the people of Walungu. They pray together in different settings, bringing neighbor together with neighbor, irrespective of religious affiliation. This growing devotional character has been complemented by a deep commitment to serving the common good.

At the heart of Walungu's transformation has been the dedication of the village to the intellectual and spiritual development of the children.

Walungu is a remote area of the country. Years ago, the community was not satisfied with the state of formal education available for their children. In response, a group of parents and teachers established a school in the village

with the assistance of a Bahá'í-inspired organization that provides teacher training and promotes the establishment of community-based schools.

Distinct from traditional educational institutions, community schools, such as the one in Walungu, are initiated, supported, and encouraged by the local community. Parents, extended family, other members of the community, and even the children have a deep sense of ownership and responsibility for the functioning of their school.

When the school opened in 2008, it was comprised of only one grade taught by a single teacher. After a year, the community was able to add another grade and employ a second teacher. Gradually, the school grew, adding more students, grades, and teachers. Today, it is a full primary school with over 100 students.



A teacher presents a lesson in a community school in Walungu,
Democratic Republic of Congo.



A student at a community school in Walungu, Democratic Republic of
Congo



Children in class at a community school in Walungu, Democratic Republic of Congo

However, the community faced certain challenges as the school began to grow larger. They did not have the funds to pay the teachers a salary or take care of the school. Realizing that something needed to be done to support the school financially, they called a meeting with all the parents and others involved. At the meeting, the director of the school suggested that he could teach them how to weave baskets, and that if they could sell the baskets in the market they would have some funds that could be used to pay the school fees. Sixty-seven parents signed up, happy at the prospect of learning a new skill and being able to support their children's education themselves. To this day, all of them are still weaving baskets, which are sold in the markets of the surrounding villages.

Basket-weaving has remained a collective activity—typically, the parents gather to work on them together, sometimes teaching each other new weaving

techniques. And these gatherings have become something more. They are a space to talk about spiritual and profound matters as well.

“The women and men are not coming only to weave,” explains Mireille Rehema Lusagila, who is involved in the work of building healthy and vibrant communities. “They begin with a devotional meeting, they read holy writings together. They are improving their literacy, teaching each other how to read and write. The people there have told me that this activity is helping them not only to progress in a material sense but also on a spiritual level.”



Members of the community in Walungu weave baskets and sell them in the markets to raise funds for the functioning of their community school.

Towards unity, youth lead the way

Along the eastern border of the country in the Kivu region, young people are taking ownership of the development of the next generation. In the village of Tuwe Tuwe, there are 15 youth working with some 100 young adolescents and children, helping them to develop a deep appreciation for unity and navigate a crucial stage of their lives.

For several years, youth have been at the vanguard of transformation in this community. In 2013, a group of young Bahá'ís and their friends returned from a youth conference with a great desire to resolve the tension and hostility between their villages.

At the conference, the group studied themes essential to a unified community, such as the importance of having noble goals, the idea of spiritual and material prosperity, the role of youth in serving and improving their localities, and how to support each other in undertaking meaningful action.

In reflecting on the experience, Mr. Abumba, who travels often in the region to support Bahá'í-inspired educational programs, shares a story about how these young people became a force for unity.

“When these youth returned to their respective communities they saw that hostilities were increasing between their two villages because of conflict over their agricultural fields. The youth asked themselves: ‘what can we do to find a solution and help the adults understand that we should live in harmony?’ And they decided to take action together,” says Mr. Abumba.

“The idea they came up with was to organize a football match involving the youth of both villages and to hold it in a field between the villages, in the hopes that the parents would come and watch. For them, it was not about who would win or lose the match. Their goal was to bring a large number of people from

both villages together to the same place and to try to give a message about how to live in unity.”

These young people prepared for the match—they bought a football and created the teams of each village with members of different tribes. Finally, the moment came. Quite a big crowd from both villages turned up because it was a Sunday. Those watching were impressed by the way the youth played for the joy of the game.

“Then at the end of the match, the youth spoke to the crowd,” explains Mr. Abumba. “They said ‘You have seen how we played and how there was no conflict between the youth of one village and the youth of the other village. And we believe that our villages are capable of this, of living like the children of one same family.’ Then the chiefs of the villages took the stage and told those gathered that it was time to turn a new page and start to live and work together.”

“In these villages, there are different tribes who are often in conflict,” Mr. Abumba concludes. “The people there are drawing on the teachings of Bahá’u’lláh to find ways to address these deep-rooted problems. And the Bahá’í-inspired educational programs are giving youth in particular a voice to be a force for positive change in their communities.”

A village named ‘Peace’

A remote village in the central part of the country, Ditalala is connected to the closest town by a 25 kilometer path, sometimes travelled on foot, sometimes via off-road vehicle.

Susan Sheper, who has lived in the DRC since the 1980s, recalls that on her first visit to Ditalala 31 years ago, some Bahá'ís had come to meet her at the train and walk with her on the five-hour journey by foot to the village. “We got off the train and were just enveloped by this group of singing, happy Bahá'ís, and then they said to us, ‘Can you walk a little bit?’”

And with that Mrs. Sheper was on her way, with an escort of singing Bahá'ís, walking 25 kilometers through the night.

“It was an extraordinary experience,” Mrs. Sheper recalls, “and they never stopped singing, they would just move from one song to the next. You know, they have that experience of having to walk long distances, and it’s the singing that keeps you going because your feet just move to the rhythm.”



Music infuses every aspect of life in the village of Ditalala.

Although at that time there was a vibrant Bahá'í community in the village, which used to be called Batwa Ditalala, there were distinct barriers between different groups, including the Bahá'ís.

“So flash forward 31 years, and I went back to Batwa Ditalala,” says Mrs. Sheper. “And one of the things I learned very quickly was that it was no longer called Batwa Ditalala.”

The term Batwa refers to the Batwa people, who are one of the main “Pygmy” groupings in the Democratic Republic of Congo. They have been marginalized and exploited because of discrimination against them based on their hunter-gatherer way of life and their physical appearance. This has created a complex reality of prejudice and conflict wherever they live in close proximity to settled agricultural populations.

“But today, those barriers have been so broken down by Bahá'u'lláh's teachings of oneness and the elimination of prejudice, they no longer call the village Batwa Ditalala. They just call it Ditalala,” Mrs. Sheper explains.

The word *ditalala* means peace in the local language—and the village itself has been transformed by a vision of peace.

“The people there told me that there used to be very distinct divisions between them in the village, but that because of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings they don't see themselves as different tribes anymore, they see themselves as being united,” Mrs. Sheper relates. “They told me that life is much better when there is no prejudice.”

Bahá'u'lláh's teachings have reached almost everyone in Ditalala and their influence is evident in many dimensions of the lives of the population. Today,

over 90 percent of the village participates in Bahá'í community-building activities, ranging from coffee and prayers in the mornings to spiritual and moral education classes for people of all ages.

Ditalala's chief often supports the activities of the Bahá'í community. He encourages the community to gather for consultation, a central feature of decision-making for Bahá'ís.



Singing at a community gathering in Walungu



Chiefs in the village of Ditalala, Democratic Republic of Congo

The people have also undertaken a number of endeavors to improve their social and material well-being, including agricultural, maternal healthcare, and clean water projects; constructing a road; and establishing a community school.



Weaving work in Ditalala

A luminous community

Throughout the DRC, tens of thousands of people have responded to the message of Bahá'u'lláh. The celebrations of the 200th anniversary of His birth in October were extraordinarily widespread—countless numbers participated in the festivities held across the country. It is estimated that as many as 20 million people saw the television broadcast of the national commemoration, attended by prominent government and civil society leaders.

The country has also been designated by the Universal House of Justice as one of two that will have a national Bahá'í House of Worship in the coming years.

Amidst all of its recent developments, what stands out so vividly about the community is that it is moving forward together.

The podcast associated with this Bahá'í World News Service story, can be found [here](#)²⁹⁰.

Rethinking Migration from a Global Perspective

BY
KERILYN SCHEWEL

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In recent years, the scale of migration and displacement across the world has generated a sense of crisis in many societies. In 2015-2016, for example,

Europe experienced the largest influx of migrants since the Second World War. Many of these were asylum seekers from the Middle East and Africa, seeking security and well-being in Europe; over one million people applied for asylum in 2015 alone.²⁹¹ The European “migration crisis” received tremendous attention in news outlets around the world, yet the most dramatic consequences of displacement were arguably happening elsewhere. That same year, over 65.3 million people were forcibly displaced worldwide as a result of persecution, conflict, generalized violence, or human rights violations.²⁹² The vast majority of refugees were not hosted in Europe, but rather Turkey, Pakistan, Lebanon, Iran, Ethiopia and Jordan. Beyond those who count as forcibly displaced were a far greater number of peoples moving for other reasons, including education, work, or family. In 2015, there were over 244 million international migrants worldwide.

Although large-scale population movements are nothing new – global international migration rates have remained surprisingly stable, hovering around some three percent of the world’s population since at least the 1960s²⁹³ – the sense of crisis that present-day migration generates provides an opportunity to reflect on the root causes of this movement, to see the ways in which migration and displacement are expressions of deeper processes of integration and disintegration transforming our world.

In response to a letter seeking guidance about how to respond to the migration crisis in Europe in 2015, the Universal House of Justice wrote to one National Spiritual Assembly, “It is all too easy to be swept up in the immediacy of the crisis and echo the cries arising on one side or another of the contemporary debate surrounding the flow of refugees and migrants, seeking a rapid solution to a problem which is but the latest symptom of a much deeper and far-reaching concern.”²⁹⁴ The message goes on to suggest that, rather than becoming

enmeshed in the political divisiveness migration-related issues are now generating, a more productive line of inquiry is to consider the underlying drivers of migration and displacement and the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith that address them.

This article aims to make a modest contribution to the task suggested by the Universal House of Justice by examining the root causes of migration in the contemporary period. First, it reframes migration as a consequence of social transformation, a perspective that shows why migration is an intrinsic part of humanity's collective life, and why any fundamental shift in patterns of migration will require transforming the very fabric of global society. Second, it describes elements of a Bahá'í view of the present moment that can help us see beyond the tumult of today and look with hope towards a future of global integration. In doing so, this article argues that migration provides a lens to better understand the social forces shaping our world order, and the depth of transformation required to realize peace and prosperity for all of humanity.

Migration and Social Transformation

In debates about migration, there are two common yet polarized perspectives. The first sees migration as a problem to be solved, a temporary response to “push” and “pull” factors that may be remedied as socioeconomic opportunities become more equal between places. This perspective assumes sedentary life as the normal human condition, and migration as an aberration requiring explanation or intervention.²⁹⁵ It is often from this vantagepoint that governments and non-governmental organizations seek to address the root causes of migration. If livelihood opportunities can increase, development policy assumes, less people should need to leave their homes. A second perspective alternatively emphasizes that human beings have always moved, and that there is nothing unnatural about migration. “Ours is a migratory

species,” the author Mohsin Hamid reminds us.²⁹⁶ Indeed, almost everyone can find a story of migration in their family history. Rather than a problem to be solved, this perspective emphasizes that migration is the means by which human beings throughout history have solved their problems, explored the world and improved their lives.

Both perspectives contain a kernel of truth, yet both obscure important realities about migration trends today. The first perspective, for example, neglects a growing body of research that shows rising levels of income, health and education in poorer countries are associated with *greater* emigration.²⁹⁷ The pursuit of “development” in the modern period appears to stimulate, rather than reduce, migration. In particular, development ideologies that emphasize the free movement of goods, capital and ideas also seem to propel the movement of people. Similarly, the second perspective, which emphasizes the naturalness of migration, can fail to appreciate how and why migration patterns have changed over time. Indeed, people have always moved, but the forces driving and shaping migration patterns have changed in rather dramatic ways across the ages. Further, a singular emphasis on migration as “normal” can risk ignoring or even naturalizing the unjust social structures that widen inequalities between people and places and also motivate population movements.

Dissatisfied with prevalent framings and theories of migration, a group of researchers associated with the *International Migration Institute* at the University of Oxford and later the University of Amsterdam began articulating a “social transformation perspective” for the study of migration.²⁹⁸ This theoretical approach assumes that the ways in which people move and settle transform in patterned ways whenever social transformation, defined here as a “fundamental shift in the way society is organized that goes beyond the incremental processes of social change that are always at work,”²⁹⁹ occurs.

Migration is not *inherently* “good” or “bad” – indeed, examples abound of both – but rather reflects how humanity organizes its social life. A core implication of a social transformation perspective is that to understand the underlying causes of migration, we must look to the nature and transformation of society itself.

The relationship between migration and social transformation is easier to discern from a historical perspective, when one can step outside the complexities and sensitivities that surround migration today. Taking a long-term perspective, there are at least three fundamental turning points in the migration history of humankind, each of which corresponds to important shifts in the deep structure of humanity’s collective life. The first occurred when human beings first ventured off the African continent. It is perhaps no coincidence that these new ventures overlapped with another new development: speech, which emerged sometime between 90,000 to 40,000 years ago. Speech gave unprecedented advantages for survival by enabling heightened levels of collective organization. While we cannot be sure of the exact causes of our early human ancestors’ first great migrations, historians note a remarkable dispersal of human beings out of Africa across the globe relatively soon thereafter, between 40,000 and 10,000 BCE.³⁰⁰

Another turning point in humanity’s migration history began to take place around 10,000 BCE. Innovations surrounding the storage of food, and later the domestication of plants and animals, enabled and encouraged human beings to live together in larger groups, giving rise to the first agricultural villages. This Neolithic Revolution brought profound mobility consequences: it allowed human beings to settle down, seasonally or more permanently. The very act of settling created the conditions out of which the first cities, and later civilizations, emerged. In the several thousand years thereafter, the possibility of settlement gave rise to three distinct yet interlocking ways of life: the rural

agricultural, the nomadic pastoral, and the urban complex—each playing distinct and important roles in the emergence and spread of civilization throughout the centuries to come. The political strength and economic diversification possible in urban centers rested upon the acquisition and production of rural hinterlands, and pastoral communities played a crucial part of “trade and raid,” twin drivers of human movement and exchange.³⁰¹ During this time, urban centers were often perceived as the seats of civilization, yet the vast majority of humanity lived in rural settings.

Over the last several centuries, another fundamental shift in our collective migration history has been unfolding: urbanization, that is, the gradual displacement of rural and pastoral livelihoods by urban-centric social and economic organization. This process of urbanization, from a global perspective, has witnessed the mass movement of humanity from rural areas to urban centers, within their homelands or outside of them. While in 1800, only 15-20 percent of humanity lived in urban areas, this share increased to 34 percent in 1960 and by 2007 humanity reached a tipping point; the majority of humanity now lives in urban areas, a share that is projected to increase to 68 percent by 2050.³⁰² Transformations in recent international migration trends may be seen as an integral part of this global urbanization process. While a relatively high proportion of international migration in the 17th through 19th centuries was directed towards settling or conquering less population-dense territories – a kind of “frontier” or “settler” migration – today a growing share of international migration is directed towards “global cities” and large urban areas in wealthier countries. Humanity is thus in the midst of another migration transition,³⁰³ and the causes and consequences of these new population movements are what we are grappling to understand today.

The social forces driving humanity's urban transition are complex. Technological innovations in manufacturing and transport led to the wide-scale displacement of traditional systems of economic production, which often relied on producing goods by hand, with machine-based systems of production that tend to concentrate production processes in urban areas. This Industrial Revolution is intimately tied to a range of other social shifts: new conceptions of work based on wages rather than subsistence; the expansion of formal education designed to prepare students for the specialization and division of labor in industrial and post-industrial societies; rising levels of consumption and changing notions of the good life; investments in infrastructure to facilitate heightened levels of connectivity, to name but a few. As societies around the world experienced the political, economic, technological and cultural changes associated with industrialization, more people began to leave rural ways of life to work in neighboring towns or cities elsewhere.³⁰⁴ And as the world becomes increasingly connected, the destinations potential migrants consider become increasingly distant.

Globalization, what has been described as the “widening, deepening and speeding up of worldwide interconnectedness in all aspects of contemporary social life,”³⁰⁵ is thus another important process of social change shaping the nature and direction of migration trends. As processes of globalization accelerate, international migration flows follow global geopolitical and economic shifts. Consider the rise of the Gulf States after the discovery of vast reservoirs of oil in the mid-20th century, and the 1973 Oil Shock that suddenly increased the price of oil. This generated new financial resources to undertake major development projects in the region, as well as greater demand for foreign workers to carry out the work. While there were only some two million migrant workers in the Gulf region in 1975, some 68 percent of whom were from other Arab countries,³⁰⁶ the scale of migration increased dramatically over the

following decades. By 2017, Saudi Arabia alone hosted some 12.1 million migrants, comprising some 37 percent of its total population, and making it the second major migration destination after the United States.³⁰⁷ Most migrant workers now come from countries like India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. The incomes migrant workers can earn in Saudi Arabia far exceed any opportunity available to them at home, while in Saudi Arabia, the work they provide is considered “cheap.” Economic globalization has contributed to the emergence of new “migration systems” across long distances, to³⁰⁸ such a degree that a young woman in rural Ethiopia, for example, may find it easier to migrate to Saudi Arabia as a domestic worker than to find sustainable work in her home region.

Given the uneven nature of globalization in the modern period, particularly the growing divide between the richest and poorest countries and peoples, it is perhaps not surprising that, from a global perspective, migration scholars Mathias Czaika and Hein de Haas find that international migration occurs from an increasingly diverse array of origin countries, but concentrates on a shrinking pool of destination countries.³⁰⁹ While theorists once hoped that globalization would “flatten” the world and reduce levels of inequality in opportunity and welfare, globalization has thus far been a highly asymmetrical process, favoring particular countries, or powerful groups within these countries, at the expense of others.³¹⁰ Migration patterns, it seems, have followed these asymmetries.³¹¹

Because of these asymmetries, the drivers of internal and international migration should not be analyzed separately from patterns of displacement and refugee migration. The widescale displacement of populations around the world – due to conflict, natural disasters, or livelihood constraints – are also part of the social transformations of the modern period. The modern transformation has

forged a global civilization, and today, more than ever before, “the welfare of any segment of humanity is inextricably bound up with the welfare of the whole.”³¹² Yet, despite this reality, individuals, companies, and countries continue to prioritize their own well-being in isolation from their neighbors’. The gap between the humanity’s richest and poorest is widening as unprecedented quantities of wealth are amassed by a relative few.³¹³ The pursuit of power and economic gain continues to overrule concern for how the environment, which sustains all of humanity, is affected.³¹⁴ These social ills nurture the conditions within which prejudice, insecurity, and conflict take root. In this light, it is easier to see why, although common discourse and legal pathways for migration often make a hard distinction between “refugees” and “economic migrants,” the reality is much more blurred. People’s movement in response to these shifting forces may be conceptualized as occurring along a spectrum of “forced” to “voluntary,” with much contemporary migration occurring somewhere in the middle.

Humanity’s response to migration and displacement

Many governments remain ill-prepared to respond to the opportunities and challenges migration presents to their societies. Migration policies in many countries tend to favor the entry of the so-called “highly skilled” while restricting the entry of “low-skilled” workers, asylum seekers and refugees.³¹⁵ Yet, as one migration researcher Stephen Castles observed, “the more that states and supranational bodies do to restrict and manage migration, the less successful they seem to be.”³¹⁶ Stronger border controls, because they do not address the underlying reasons why people leave, push many migrants into more dangerous and precarious trajectories.³¹⁷ Development aid that does seek to address migration’s root causes is simply not large enough to meaningfully stymie the complex forces driving people’s movement,³¹⁸ nor eliminate the

persistent demand for immigrant labor in wealthy countries.³¹⁹ Further, millions of refugees now live in precarious situations, and despite unprecedented levels of generosity, the gap between needs and humanitarian funding is widening.³²⁰

Recognizing that contemporary migration patterns stem from the structure of society complicates the hope that addressing its root causes is an easy task. On the contrary, it points to the depth of transformation required to fundamentally reshape the drivers and dynamics of migration in the world today. As humanity grapples with the opportunities and challenges posed by migration, the Baha'i Writings provide a perspective from which we can situate our reading of the present reality and orient long-term approaches to migration and social change.

First, concerning the present: implicit within the Baha'i teachings is the assurance that we are living through a period of global transformation, in which humanity is progressing towards its collective maturity, characterized by the unity of the human race within one social order. In this period of transition, Bahá'ís are “encouraged to see in the revolutionary changes taking place in every sphere of life the interaction of two fundamental processes. One is destructive in nature, while the other is integrative; both serve to carry humanity, each in its own way, along the path leading towards its full maturity.”³²¹ As humanity proceeds through its collective adolescence and into maturity, all of humanity is affected by these twin forces of integration and disintegration simultaneously, and migration is but one of innumerable social processes affected by them.

In this light, the patterned relationships described above between industrialization and urbanization, or globalization and international migration, are not inevitable in any absolute sense. After all, the pursuit of

industrialization and globalization have been highly political and ideological processes, often shaped by narrow economic conceptions about how “modernization” or “development” ought to be achieved. While these processes most likely cannot be reversed, they can evolve in new directions. “However much such conditions are the outcome of history, they do not have to define the future,” the Universal House of Justice writes, “and even if current approaches to economic life satisfied humanity’s stage of adolescence, they are certainly inadequate for its dawning age of maturity. There is no justification for continuing to perpetuate structures, rules, and systems that manifestly fail to serve the interests of all peoples.”³²² To fundamentally reshape patterns of migration or to alleviate the structural drivers of displacement, then, will require long-term approaches to social change that strive for the material and spiritual prosperity of all of humankind while recognizing our global interconnectedness.

Second, concerning the future: the Baha’i Writings envisage a future global society unified in all aspects of its political and economic life, where “the flow of goods and persons from place to place is vastly freer than anything which now obtains in the world as a whole.”³²³ As Bahá’u’lláh wrote in 1882, “*The earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens.*” The task Bahá’u’lláh set before humanity is to recognize its fundamental oneness and transform its collective life in light of this reality. The principle of the oneness of humankind is, as Shoghi Effendi declared, “no mere outburst of ignorant emotionalism or an expression of vague and pious hope.” Its implications are deeper: “its message is applicable not only to the individual, but concerns itself primarily with the nature of those essential relationships that must bind all the states and nations as members of one human family. [...] It implies an organic change in the structure of present-day society, a change such as the world has not yet experienced.”³²⁴ This perspective suggests that debates surrounding migration

must go far beyond the question of whether countries should open or close their borders. Only when the earth functions as the common homeland of humankind can the full benefits of migration be realized and the drivers of displacement eliminated.

The magnitude of transformation the Bahá'í Writings envision could lead to a sense of paralysis in the face of the immediate and weighty challenges associated with migration: the needlessly lost lives of migrant men, women, and children seeking opportunities for a better life (in the Mediterranean Sea alone, more than 18,500 people have been recorded dead or missing since 2014)³²⁵ the strength of anti-immigrant sentiment and the flourishing of prejudice and racism that eclipse any opportunity for meaningful public debate about migration; the reality that young generations in many societies around the world can no longer envision building a future where they are. These challenges cannot be addressed by a single country or movement, no matter how benevolently motivated.

And yet, alongside these manifestations of disintegration, promising signs of global solidarity and new forms of international cooperation provide hope that processes of integration are also gaining strength. At the local level, examples abound of individuals and communities organizing in ways that increasingly reflect the counsel 'Abdu'l-Bahá gave to humanity over a century ago: *“Let them see no one as their enemy, or as wishing them ill, but think of all humankind as their friends; regarding the alien as an intimate, the stranger as a companion, staying free of prejudice, drawing no lines.”*³²⁶ This is not only the case in Europe or North America, whose immigration dynamics receive the bulk of scholarly and public attention, but also in countries like Uganda, which in 2018, hosted the largest number of refugees after Turkey and Pakistan. While migration brings many social and economic challenges in a country where

poverty levels remain high, many Ugandans are proud of their country's welcoming stance towards refugees. "They are our brothers and sisters" is a common sentiment..³²⁷ One might also consider the way the inhabitants of small Mexican towns fed, clothed, and sheltered thousands of Central American migrants traveling North in 2018. "This is a poor town, but we still did all this," one city councilwoman in Pijijiapan expressed. Another woman serving food explained, "We know that we are all brothers. What God gives us, we should share."³²⁸ Although the media and public discourse often suggest rising levels of social strain or xenophobia associated with migration around the world, examples of everyday kindnesses and solidarity, motivated by consciousness of our common humanity, are everywhere if one looks for them.

At the institutional level, an increasing number of spaces are also being created for national governments and international organizations to go beyond a focus on crisis management to consult on the positive potential of migration, and the need for greater policy coherence and global cooperation. The 2018 Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration is one such example. It is the first-ever United Nations global agreement on a common approach to international migration in all its dimensions, endorsed by 164 countries. Its objectives highlight the global cooperation required to alleviate the adverse structural conditions that hinder people from building and maintaining sustainable livelihoods in their countries of origin.³²⁹ At the same time, many countries that express strong fears about immigration in public and political discourse also experience a strong economic demand for immigration as their native populations age. Nation-states and international organizations are considering new ways to facilitate migration that can realize migration's powerful potential for good, for migrants themselves as well as origin and destination societies.³³⁰

Nevertheless, all actors involved recognize that such compacts and other promising developments will fail to achieve their aims without concerted effort on the part of individuals, communities, and institutions around the world to realize more profound transformations in the fabric of society and the relationships that govern it. This will require an approach to migration, development, and international cooperation that recognizes our common humanity and global interconnectedness and that the well-being of one place cannot be pursued in isolation from the well-being of the whole. This is the direction towards which the Bahá'í community and like-minded individuals and organizations are striving. Migration, then, is but one lens to better understand Baha'u'llah's injunction that, *“The well-being of mankind, its peace and security, are unattainable unless and until its unity is firmly established.”*³³¹

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kerilyn Schewel holds a PhD in Sociology from the University of Amsterdam, an MSc in Migration Studies from the University of Oxford, and a BA in Psychology from the University of Virginia. She has held research positions at Addis Ababa University, Princeton University, and the University of Amsterdam, where she managed the *Migration as Development* project.

Replacing the Sword with the Word

Bahá'u'lláh's Concept of Peace

BY
NADER SAIEDI

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Reed pens used by one of the secretaries of Bahá'u'lláh

Although the 20th century witnessed the increasing recognition of principles such as universal human rights, democratic ideals, the equality of human beings, social justice, the peaceful resolution of conflict, and condemnation of the barbarism of war, it was nevertheless one of the bloodiest centuries in all human history. Such a development was unpredicted by classical sociological theorists writing in the second half of the 19th century, who either did not devote much attention to the question of war and peace or were optimistic about the prospects for peace in the 20th century. While war and peace were central questions in the social theories of both Auguste Comte (1798–1857),³³² the founder of positivism, and Herbert Spencer (1820–1903),³³³ the founder of evolutionary and synthetic philosophy, for example, both conceived of social change as an evolutionary movement towards progress and characterized the emerging modern society as essentially peaceful—one in which military conquest aimed at the acquisition of land would be replaced with economic and industrial competition.³³⁴ Other classical theorists generally assumed that war among nations was a thing of the past.³³⁵ Such optimism was partly rooted in the relative security of Europe during the 19th century where, between the end of the Napoleonic wars in 1815 and the onset of World War I in 1914 there was a relatively long stage of peace, interrupted mainly by the German-French war of 1870. However, this security was a mere illusion, accompanied as it was by increasing militarism and nationalism in Europe and the vast scale of war and genocide perpetrated by European powers in their pursuit of colonial conquest in Africa and other parts of the world.

Standing in contrast to the misplaced optimism of the classical 19th century sociologists is the spiritual figure of Bahá'u'lláh, who was born in 1817 in Persia and initiated a transformative global religion centered on the urgency

and necessity of peace making. He perceived that both the institutional structures of the 19th century and their cultural orientation promoted various forms of violence, including international wars. The significance of Bahá'u'lláh and His insights as they apply to peace movements and peace studies is evident through an examination of His worldview and of the manner in which His writings reconstruct foundational concepts such as mysticism, religion, and social order—emphasizing the replacement of the sword with the word.



A facsimile of an original writing of Bahá'u'lláh, along with His pen and pen case

Bahá'u'lláh and the Removal of the Sword

Mírzá Ḥusayn ‘Alíy-i-Núrí, who took the title Bahá’u’lláh (the Glory of God), was born in Tehran, Iran, in 1817. As a young man, Bahá’u’lláh accepted the claim of the young merchant from Shiraz known as the Báb (the Gate) to be the Promised One of Shí‘ih Islam. Both the clerics and state authorities in Iran declared the Báb’s ideas heretical and dangerous and unleashed a systematic campaign of genocide directed at His followers, the Bábís. The Báb Himself was executed in 1850—only six years after the announcement of His mission. While the writings of the Báb provided fresh and innovative interpretations of religious ideas, they pointed to the imminent appearance of a new Manifestation (prophet or messenger) of God and defined His entire revelation as a preparation for the coming of that great spiritual educator. During a massacre of the Bábís in 1852, Bahá’u’lláh was imprisoned in a dungeon in Tehran, where He received an epoch-making experience of revelation and perceived Himself to be the Promised One of all religions, including the Bábí Faith. After four months of imprisonment, and the confiscation of all His property, He was exiled to the Ottoman Empire, first to Baghdad, then in 1863 to Constantinople (Istanbul), and from there to Adrianople (Edirne), and finally, in 1868, to the fortress city of ‘Akká in the Holy Land, where He died in 1892.

Although Bahá’u’lláh founded a new religion, the meaning, and particularly the end purpose, of religion is transformed in His writings. As traditionally conceived, religion is often focused on a set of theological doctrines about God, prophets, the next world, and the Day of judgment. While these concepts are discussed and elucidated in His writings, Bahá’u’lláh emphasizes that He has come to renew and revitalize humanity, to reconstruct the world, and to bring peace. In His final work, the Book of the Covenant, He describes the purpose of His life, sufferings, revelation and writings in this way:

The aim of this Wronged One in sustaining woes and tribulations, in revealing the Holy Verses and in demonstrating proofs hath been naught but to quench the flame of hate and enmity, that the horizon of the hearts of men may be illumined with the light of concord and attain real peace and tranquillity.³³⁶

In other words, affirming spiritual principles is inseparable from transforming the social order and from replacing hatred and violence with love and universal peace. From a Bahá'í point of view, then, religion must be the cause of unity and concord among human beings, and if it becomes a cause of enmity and violence, it is better not to have religion.³³⁷ Making peace is the essence of Bahá'u'lláh's normative orientation and worldview. It is ironic, therefore, that both the King of Iran and the Ottoman Sultan rose together against Bahá'u'lláh to silence His voice by intriguing to exile Him to the city of 'Akká; however, their oppressive decision in the end only exemplified the Hegelian concept of the cunning of Reason,³³⁸ in which Reason realizes its plan through the unintended consequences of actions by individuals whose intent is their own selfish desires. As Bahá'u'lláh has frequently stated, His response to this final exile ordered by these two kings was to publicly announce His message to the rulers of the world. Upon arrival in 'Akká, He wrote messages to world leaders, including those of Germany, England, Russia, Iran, and France, as well as to the Pope, explicitly declaring His cause and calling them all to unite and bring about world peace. The second irony is that it was through this exile that He was brought to the Holy Land, where the coming of final peace in the world is prophesied to take place, when the wolf and lamb will feed together and swords will be beaten into plowshares.³³⁹

In order to better understand the vital connection between Bahá'u'lláh's revelation and His concern with peace, let us examine that experience of revelation in the Tehran dungeon in 1852 which marks the birth of the Bahá'í Faith. Bahá'u'lláh describes this experience:

One night, in a dream, these exalted words were heard on every side:
Verily, We shall render Thee victorious by Thyself and by Thy Pen. Grieve Thou not for that which hath befallen Thee, neither be Thou afraid, for Thou art in safety. Erelong will God raise up the treasures of the earth—men who will aid Thee through Thyself and through Thy Name, wherewith God hath revived the hearts of such as have recognized Him.³⁴⁰

This brief statement epitomizes many of the central teachings of the Bahá'í Faith, one of the most important of which is the replacement of the *sword* with the *word*. The victory of the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh will take place through the person and character of Bahá'u'lláh and by means of His pen: words and their embodiment in deeds are the only means through which the message of Bahá'u'lláh can be promoted. Thus, the Islamic concept of jihad is abrogated, as is any concept of the religion and its propagation that includes violence, discrimination, coercion, avoidance, and hatred of others. Bahá'u'lláh continually presents the elimination of religious fanaticism, hatred, and violence as one of the main goals of His revelation.

This first experience of revelation defines the substantive message of the new religion in terms of the method of its promotion: A peaceful and dialogical method is the very essence of the new concept of peace and justice. Unlike doctrines that justify forms of violence and oppression as acceptable or even necessary methods of establishing peace and justice in

the world, Bahá'u'lláh's teachings categorically affirm the unity of substance and method in peace making: peace is realized through the way we live, the words we use, and the means we employ to bring about justice, unity, and peace. For Bahá'u'lláh, the time has come to reject the law of the jungle not only in our normative pronouncements about humanity but also in the methods we pursue in order to realize lofty ideals.³⁴¹

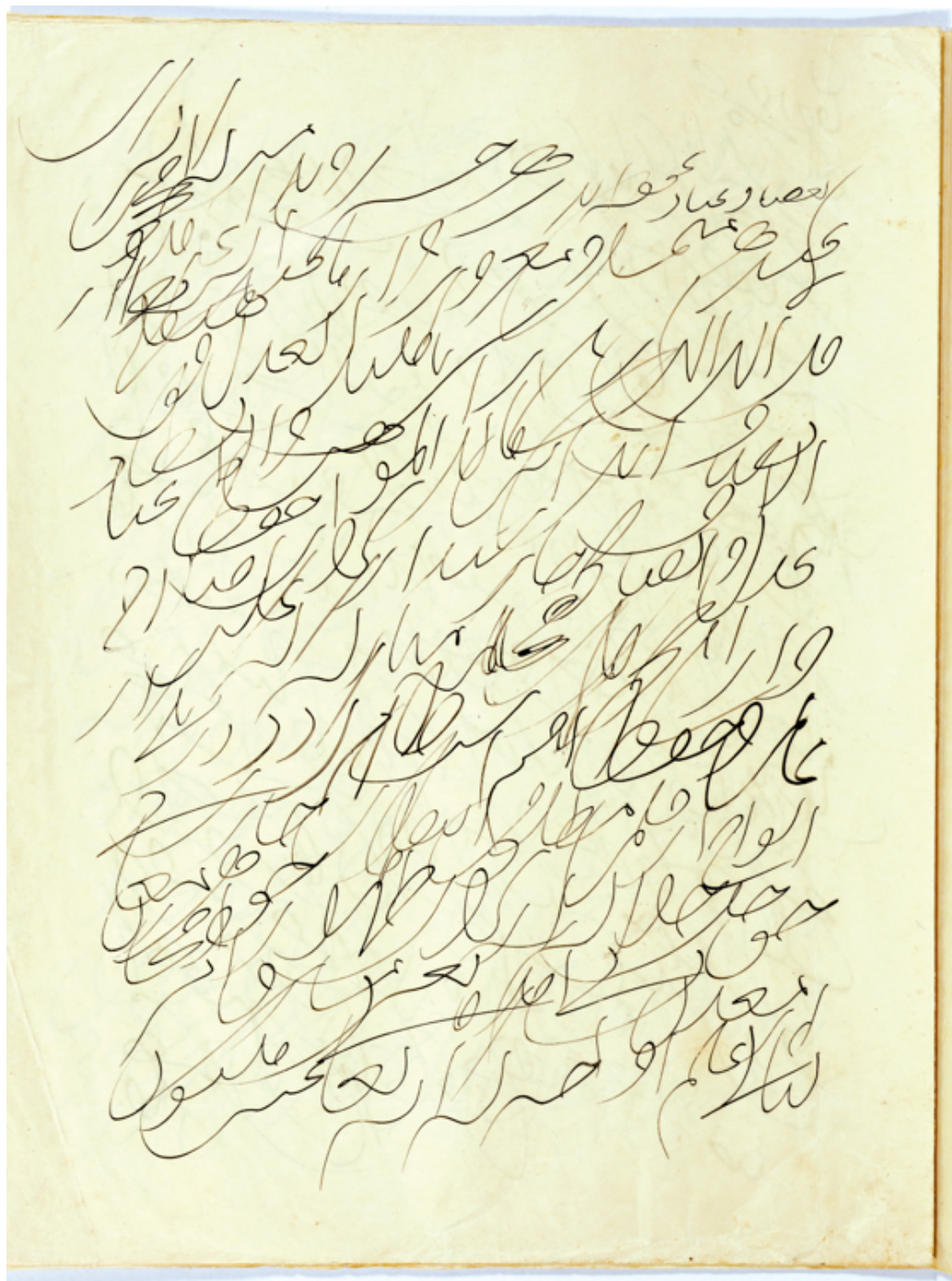
The word, or the pen, is central in Bahá'í philosophy. In the experience of revelation, there is a conversation between God and Bahá'u'lláh, which is an exact repetition of the conversation between God and Moses. According to the Qur'án, God gives two proofs to Moses: His staff and His shining hand. When Moses places His staff on the ground, it becomes a mighty snake, causing Him to become afraid and stand back. God tells Him: Be Thou not afraid, for Thou art in safety.³⁴² These same words are now uttered by God to Bahá'u'lláh,³⁴³ implying that the staff of Moses has been replaced by the pen of Bahá'u'lláh as His mighty proof of truth. Likewise, instead of the hand of Moses, the entire being and character of Bahá'u'lláh have become His new evidence. The immediate implication is the unity of Bahá'u'lláh and Moses. This reflects one of Bahá'u'lláh's central teachings: that all the Manifestations of God are one and that They convey the same fundamental spiritual truth, leading to the principle of the harmony and unity of all religions.

This replacement of the staff with the pen further emphasizes the fact that His cause is rendered victorious through the effect of His words, rather than the performance of supernatural phenomena, or miracles; His message and His teachings constitute the supreme evidence of His truth. This replacement of physical miracles with the miracle of the spirit, namely the Word, is one

of the central distinguishing features of Bahá'u'lláh's worldview. But the most direct expression of the centrality of the pen in Bahá'u'lláh's revelation is the new definition and conception of the human being offered in this first experience of revelation. The assertion that the cause of Bahá'u'lláh can only be rendered victorious by the pen implies that each soul possesses the capacity to independently recognize spiritual truth. Bahá'u'lláh frequently points out that all humans are created by God as mirrors of divine attributes, and because all individuals are responsible for realizing this divine gift, all the writings of Bahá'u'lláh, in one way or another, call for spiritual autonomy; no one should blindly follow or imitate any other in spiritual, political, and ethical issues. That is why priesthood has been eliminated in the Bahá'í religion and all Bahá'ís are equally and directly responsible before God. The implication of this spiritual autonomy is the utilization of democratic forms of decision making, as characterizes the Bahá'í administrative institutions. However, this form of democracy transcends the materialistic and partisan definition of the prevalent forms in society. Rather, it is a democracy of consultation based on a spiritual definition of reality that views all humans as noble beings endowed with rights.

One final implication of this first experience of revelation needs to be emphasized. According to Bahá'u'lláh's description, the message of God was brought to Him by a Maid of Heaven. While God, the unknowable, is neither male nor female, the revelation of God through this Word, the supreme sacred reality in the created world, is presented as a feminine reality. Bahá'u'lláh received His revelation not from a tree, a bird, or a male angel, but rather from a female angel who metaphorically symbolizes the inner mystical truth of all the prophets of God. Therefore, the very inception of the Bahá'í revelation is characterized by a fundamental re-examination of the station of women. They are no longer the embodiments and symbols of

selfish desires, irrationality, corruption, and worldly attraction; instead, they represent the supreme reflection of God in this world. At the same time, the removal of the sword in this first experience of revelation is a revolutionary critique of patriarchal culture and worldview. These two points are inseparable. The realization of a culture of peace requires the equality and unity of men and women, as violence and patriarchy are inseparable.



Revelation writing by one of Bahá'u'lláh's secretaries

From Word Order to World Order

The Writings of Bahá'u'lláh cover a period of forty years, from His imprisonment in the Tehran dungeon in 1852 to His passing in 1892. In the following passage, He describes the purpose and the stages of His writings:

Behold and observe! This is the finger of might by which the heaven of vain imaginings was indeed cleft asunder. Incline thine ear and Hear! This is the call of My Pen which was raised among mystics, then divines, and then kings and rulers.³⁴⁴

In the first part of this statement, Bahá'u'lláh presents the contrasting images of the finger of might and the heaven of vain imaginings. While the idea of cleaving the moon is attributed to the prophet Muhammad, now Bahá'u'lláh's pen is rending not only the moon but the entire heaven, which represents the illusions, idle fancies, superstitions, and misconceptions that have erected walls of estrangement between human beings, have enslaved them, and have reduced their culture to the level of the animal. Bahá'u'lláh emphasizes that violence, oppression, and hatred are embodiments of vain imaginings and illusions constructed by human beings. Now, through his pen, He has come to tear away these veils, extinguish the fire of enmity and hatred, and bring people together.

In the second part of this statement, Bahá'u'lláh identifies the stages and order of His words, which were first addressed to mystics, then to divines, and finally to the kings and rulers of the world. His first writings, those written between 1852 and 1859, including the time He lived in Iraq, primarily address mystical concepts and categories.³⁴⁵ Those of the second stage, encompassing His writings between 1859 and 1867, address the religious leaders and their interpretation of religion. Finally His writings

from 1868 on, directed both to the generality of humankind and to the kings and rulers of the world, address social and political questions. Each stage emphasizes a certain principle of Bahá'u'lláh's worldview, following the sequence of His spiritual logic. The principles corresponding to these stages are as follows: a spiritual interpretation of reality, historical consciousness—even the historicity of the words of God—and global consciousness. The worldview of Bahá'u'lláh is defined by the mutual interdependence of these three principles.

Each stage of the writings of Bahá'u'lláh aims to reinterpret and reconstruct traditional ideas and worldviews. Therefore, the dynamics of His writings can be described by His reconstruction of mysticism, religion, and the social order.

1. Reconstruction of Mysticism

In His earlier writings, Bahá'u'lláh directly engages with Persian and Islamic forms of mysticism; through these and His later writings, He reconstructs mysticism so as to realize its full potential. To understand this point, it is useful to refer to the twin concepts of the arc of descent (*qaws-i-nuzúl*) and arc of ascent (*qaws-i-ʿuṣṣá*) which comprise the spiritual or mystical journey. The arc of descent is normally perceived as the descent of reality from God—the dynamics of material creation, culminating in the emergence of human life. As a consequence, however, human beings are estranged from their origin and their own truth, which is the unity of God. This yearning for reunion, in turn, initiates the arc of ascent, the mystical journey of the soul's return to its source. The arc of ascent, as seen, for example, in the Seven Valleys, transcends the realm of conflict and plurality

to discover the underlying truth of all reality, namely God.³⁴⁶ With the annihilation of self that is found in this unity, one is assumed to have reached the zenith of the arc of ascent.

Although in traditional views of mystical consciousness, the zenith of the arc of ascent is the highest and end point of the spiritual journey, in reality this is just the beginning of a new stage. But in traditional consciousness all humans become sacred and equal only in God. In other words, only when living human beings, made of flesh and blood, are divested of their various determinations and turned into an abstraction do they become noble and sacred. For example, only when women are no longer women—that is, when their concrete determinations are negated and annulled in God—do they become equal to men. But concrete, living women remain inferior to men in rights, spiritual station, and rank. Thus despite the claim to see God in everything, the presence of social inequalities including slavery, patriarchy, religious discrimination, political despotism, and caste-like distinctions could go unchallenged.

For that reason, we need a further arc of descent to bring the fundamental insight and achievement of mystic oneness down to earth. In other words, after tracing the arc of ascent and attaining the consciousness of unity, one must be able to descend once again into the world of concrete plurality and time and maintain the consciousness of unity without being imprisoned in the consciousness of conflict and estrangement. In this way, the wayfarer is transformed into a new being who sees the unity of all in the concrete diversity of the world; in this arc of descent, one comes to see in all people their truth, or their divine attributes. The result of this consciousness is the end of the logic of separation, discrimination, prejudice, and hatred, and the

beginning of the culture of the oneness of the human race, encompassing equal rights of all humans, the equality of men and women, religious tolerance and unity, and universal love for all people. Thus, according to Bahá'u'lláh, the real task of the mystic is not just the inward transformation of the annihilation of self in God but to transform the world so that the mystical truth of all human beings is manifested in the relations, structures, and institutions of social order. Since all beings become reflections of God, God and his unity are recognized within the diversity of moments and beings, resulting in the worldview of unity in diversity.

2. Reconstruction of Religion

The reconstruction of religion is, in fact, the first stage of the new arc of descent. In this first step, one descends from the unity of God and eternity to the diversity of the prophets and Manifestations of God. Here, history reveals a unity in diversity that reflects in its dynamics the unity of God: the Bahá'í view finds all the Manifestations of God to be one and the same, because they are reflections of divine unity and divine attributes. Since God is defined in the Torah, Gospel, and Qur'án as being the First and the Last, all the Manifestations are also the first and the last.³⁴⁷ They are also the return of each other. Bahá'u'lláh views the realm of religion as the reflection of both diversity (of historical progress) and unity (of all the prophets). He says:

It is clear and evident to thee 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. Such is the unity of those Essences of Being, those Luminaries of infinite and immeasurable splendor! Wherefore, should one of these Manifestations of Holiness proclaim saying: I am the return of all the Prophets, He, verily, speaketh the truth. In like manner, in every subsequent Revelation, the return of the former Revelation is a fact, the truth of which is firmly established.³⁴⁸

In other words, the Word of God, which is the essence of all religions, is a living and dynamic reality. It is one Word that, at different historical moments, appears in new forms. The different prophets are like the same sun that appears at different times at a different place on the horizon. While the traditional approach to religion usually reduces the identity of the sun to its historically specific horizon and therefore emphasizes opposition and hostility among various religions, Bahá'u'lláh identifies the truth of all religions as one and calls for the unity of religions. In Bahá'u'lláh's view, a major cause of violence, war, and oppression in the world is religious fanaticism created by the vain imaginings of religious leaders. He warned: Religious fanaticism and hatred are a world-devouring fire whose violence none can quench. The Hand of Divine power can, alone, deliver mankind from this desolating affliction.³⁴⁹ The establishment of peace, then, requires overcoming such religious hatred and discord.

3. Reconstruction of the World

The second step of the new arc of descent relates to the wayfarer's descent into the world. Here, the consciousness of unity necessarily leads to the principle of the oneness of humankind as well as to universal peace. In

traditional religious consciousness, the relationship between the created and the Creator is repeated in all forms of social relations. Thus, the relation between men and women, kings and subjects, free persons and slaves, believers and non-believers, and even clerics and laymen repeat the relation between God and human beings. In this way, the illusion is created that domination, discrimination, violence, and opposition are legitimized by religion. In contrast, Bahá'u'lláh explains that the relation that truly obtains is that because all are created by God and are servants of God, all are equal. Instead of repeating in the realm of social order the relation of God to the created world, the servitude of all before God denotes the equality and nobility of all human beings. The task of true mysticism therefore is not to escape from the world, but rather to transform it so that it becomes a mirror of the republic of spirit or the kingdom of God. Bahá'u'lláh's global consciousness and His concept of peace are embodiments of this reinterpretation of the world and social order, as reflected in the following statement in which He redefines what it is to be human:

That one indeed is a man who, today, dedicateth himself to the service of the entire human race. The Great Being saith: Blessed and happy is he that ariseth to promote the best interests of the peoples and kindreds of the earth. In another passage He hath proclaimed: It is not for him to pride himself who loveth his own country, but rather for him who loveth the whole world. The earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens.³⁵⁰

The purpose of Bahá'u'lláh's reinterpretation of mysticism, religion, and social order is to bring about a culture of unity in diversity and to institutionalize universal peace in the world. To discuss His specific concept

of peace, it is necessary first to review the existing theories of peace in the social sciences and then identify the structure of Bahá'u'lláh's vision.

Main Theories of Peace

With the outbreak of World War I, most social theorists took the side of their own country in the conflict and, in some cases, glorified war. Georg Simmel identifies war as an absolute situation in which ordinary, selfish preoccupations of individuals living in an impersonal economy are placed in an ultimate life-and-death situation. Thus, he concludes, war liberates the moral impulse from the boredom of routine life and makes individuals willing to sacrifice their lives for the good of society.³⁵¹ On the other side, Durkheim and Mead both take strong positions against Germany. Discussing Treitschke's worship of war and German superiority, Durkheim writes of a German mentality which led to the militaristic politics of that country.³⁵² Emile Durkheim, *L'Allemagne au-dessus de Tout: La Mentalité Allemande et la Guerre* (Paris: Colin, 1915). A similar analysis is found in the writings of Mead, who contrasts German militaristic politics with Allied liberal constitutions. In a distorted and inaccurate presentation of Kant's distinction between the realm of appearances and the things in themselves, Mead argues that in Kantian theory, the substantive determination of practical life is left in the hands of military elites. Such a state could by definition only rest upon force. Militarism became the necessary form of its life.³⁵³ However, modern social scientific literature in general and peace studies in particular offer various theories in regard to war and peace, four of which are particularly significant: realism, democratic peace theory, Marxist theory, and social constructivism and cultural theory.

1. Realism

Realism, the dominant theory in the field of international relations, is rooted in a Machiavellian and Hobbesian conception of human beings. According to this model, states are the main actors in international relations. However, the main determinant of a state's decision to engage in war or peace is the international political and military structure. This structure, however, is none other than international anarchy; the Hobbesian state of nature is the dominant reality at the level of international relations, since there is no binding global law or authority in the world. In this situation, states are left in a situation necessitating self-help, with each regarding all others as potential or actual threats to its security. Thus, arms races and militarism are rational strategies for safeguarding national security. States must act in rational and pragmatic ways and must not be bound by either internal politics or moral principles in determining their policies. In this situation, war is a normal result of the structure of international relations. According to some advocates of this theory, the existence of nuclear weapons and a bipolar military structure (as seen in the Cold War) are, paradoxically, conducive to peace.³⁵⁴

2. Democratic Peace Theory

One of the most well-known theories in relation to war and peace is a liberal theory according to which democracies rarely—if ever—engage in war with each other. This doctrine was first advanced in 1795 by Immanuel Kant in his historic work *Perpetual Peace*.³⁵⁵ In contrast to realism, democratic peace theory sees the root cause of war or peace in the internal political structure of societies. Empirical tests have confirmed the existence of a

significant positive correlation between democracy and peace,³⁵⁶ with two sets of explanations offered. Institutional explanations emphasize the existence of systematic restraining forces in democracies. The vote of the people matters in democracies, and therefore war is less likely to occur because it is the people rather than the rulers who will pay the ultimate price of war. Cultural explanations argue that democracies respect other democracies and are therefore more willing to engage in the peaceful resolution of conflicts. The internal habit of the democratic resolution of conflicts is said to be extended to the realm of foreign relations.³⁵⁷

3. Marxist Theory

Marxist theory can be discussed in terms of three issues: the relation of capitalism to war or peace, the role of violence in transition from capitalism to communism, and the impact of colonialism on the development of colonized societies. The dominant Marxist views on these issues are usually at odds with Marx's own positions.

Marx did not address the issue of war and peace extensively. He shared the 19th century's optimism about the outdated character of interstate wars. In fact, he mostly believed that capitalism benefits from peace and considered Napoleon's wars a product of that ruler's obsession with fame and glory.³⁵⁸ As Mann argues, Marx saw capitalism as a transnational system and therefore regarded it as a cause of peace rather than war.³⁵⁹ He believed that violence is mostly necessary for revolution but affirmed the possibility of peaceful transition to socialism in the most developed capitalist societies. Furthermore, Marx saw the colonization of non-European societies as mostly beneficial for the development of non-European stagnant societies, which in

turn would lead to socialist revolutions. In the midst of World War I, Lenin (1870–1924) radically changed the Marxist theory of war and peace, arguing that imperialism or the competition for colonial conquest necessarily causes wars among Western capitalist states. According to Lenin, these wars would destroy capitalism and lead to the triumph of socialism. In his view, violence was the only possible way of attaining socialism.³⁶⁰

Marxist theory has inspired many sociological theories of war and peace, from C. Wright Mills's thesis of the military-industrial complex to Wallerstein's theory of the world capitalist system.³⁶¹ However, in general, most socialist theories see the root cause of war in the extremes of social inequality. Socialism, therefore, is perceived to be the economic order conducive to peace.

4. Social Constructivism and Cultural Theory

A sociological perspective that has influenced the field of international relations is the theory of social constructivism, which systematically criticizes the realist perspective. Emphasizing the symbolic and interpretive character of social relations and practices, this model, which is influenced by symbolic interactionism, states that war is a product of our socially constructed interpretations of ourselves and others. Mead's emphasis on the social and interactive construction of self is compatible with a host of philosophical and sociological theories that have emphasized the significance of language in defining human reality. Unlike utilitarian and rationalist theories that perceive humans as selfish and competitive, the linguistic turn emphasizes the social and cooperative nature of human beings. Since being with others is the very constitutive element of human

consciousness and self, the realization of peace requires a new social interpretive construction of reality.³⁶²

Cultural theories emphasize the causal significance of the culture of violence or peace as the main determinant of war or peace. John Mueller argues that prior to the 20th century, war was perceived as a natural, moral, and rational phenomenon.³⁶³ However, through the First and Second World Wars, this culture changed. According to Mueller, the Western world is moving increasingly in this direction, with the non-Western world lagging behind, although the future is bright since we are moving towards a culture of peace.

Bahá'u'lláh's Approach to Peace

After World War II and the rise of studies focusing on peace as a scholarly object of analysis, authors such as Johan Galtung distinguished between negative and positive definitions of peace, arguing that negative peace is both unstable and illusory, while positive peace is true peace.³⁶⁴ This preference for the positive definition provided the vision of a different theory of peace. According to the negative definition, war is a positive and objective reality, while peace simply refers to the absence of war and conflict. The positive definition of peace, on the other hand, views peace as an objective state of social reality defined by a form of reciprocal and harmonious relations that fosters mutual development and communication among individuals and groups. In this sense, war and violence indicate the absence of positive peace. Thus, even when there is no direct coercion and armed conflict, a state of war and aggression may still exist.³⁶⁵

It is interesting to note that both Bahá'u'lláh and His successor 'Abdu'l-Bahá (1844–1921) systematically and consistently advocate a unique positive definition of peace. Even the word that Bahá'u'lláh uses about the purpose of His revelation (*iṣláh*) means both reform or reconstruction and peace making. In many of his writings He calls for *'imár* (development) and *iṣláh* (peace making/reform/reconstruction) of the world.³⁶⁶ Thus, for Bahá'u'lláh, the realization of peace involves simultaneously a reform, reconstruction, and development of the institutions and structures of the world; mere desire is not a sufficient condition for the realization of a true and lasting peace, which requires a fundamental transformation in all aspects of human existence. While none of the existing theories provides an adequate path towards peace, each pointing only to aspects of the complex question of war and peace, Bahá'u'lláh's multi-dimensional, positive approach encompasses all the factors addressed by different contemporary theories. The most explicit expression of this is found in His addresses to the leaders of the world, the Súrih of the Temple (*Súriy-i-Haykal*).³⁶⁷

In 1868, in response to His exile to 'Akká, Bahá'u'lláh wrote individual messages to a number of world leaders, which comprise different parts of the Súrih of the Temple. Although this work constitutes a universal announcement of His revelation, the main message is His call to universal peace. From this call, we see that the real insight offered by the realist theory of peace is not its pessimism regarding the inevitability of war but rather its linking of war with the lack of collective security. In the Súrih of the Temple, Bahá'u'lláh consistently calls for a global approach to peace and the institutionalization of global collective security as a necessary means of realizing peace. Similarly, the concerns addressed in democratic peace theory are also valid, and, although Bahá'u'lláh's concept of democracy is

far more complex than existing definitions and practices, in the Súrih of the Temple He praises democracy as a necessary element for the realization of peace. Impediments to peace such as social inequality, identified in Marxist/socialist theories, are also addressed in this Tablet, which calls for social justice and the elimination of poverty, and points to the arms race as a main cause of social inequality and poverty in the world. Finally, the contribution of the cultural theory in pointing to the need for a culture of peace should be acknowledged; however, such a culture should not be confused with mere consensus regarding the necessity of peace. Rather, in the Súrih of the Temple Bahá'u'lláh calls for a culture of peace based on a new definition of identity, a rejection of patriarchy, and the elimination of all kinds of prejudice.

Bahá'u'lláh sees lasting peace as a multidimensional structure of social relations that includes a culture of peace, democracy, collective security, and social justice, among other elements. These are not random variables or opposed concepts; rather, for Bahá'u'lláh all four are inseparable, interdependent, and harmonious expressions of His spiritual definition of human reality.

The Súrih of the Temple begins with a discussion of the human being as a sacred temple of God. According to Bahá'u'lláh's writings, humans were created to exist in a state of cooperation, unity, and peace. The brutish culture of war and hatred is opposed to the reality of human beings, who are mirrors of God and reflect divine attributes; all are the thrones of God, created by the same Fashioner, brought into existence through the same creative divine Word and endowed with spiritual potentialities. That is why Bahá'u'lláh consistently calls the world the common home of all peoples and defines a human being as one who, today, dedicateth himself to the

service of the entire human race.³⁶⁸ This spiritual definition of humanity is centered on the rejection of the law of the jungle and the reduction of humans to that level. In the Tablet of Wisdom, Bahá'u'lláh says that humans are not created for enmity and hatred but rather for solidarity and cooperation. From this philosophical principle He deduces the necessity of a new definition of honor, in which true honor is associated with serving and loving the entire human race:

O ye beloved of the Lord! Commit not that which defileth the limpid stream of love or destroyeth the sweet fragrance of friendship. By the righteousness of the Lord! Ye were created to show love one to another and not perversity and rancour. Take pride not in love for yourselves but in love for your fellow-creatures. Glory not in love for your country, but in love for all mankind.³⁶⁹

This spiritual definition of human beings is equated with the true meaning of freedom. Explaining Bahá'u'lláh's message, 'Abdu'l-Bahá identifies true freedom as overcoming the logic of the struggle for existence. The time has come for humans to appear as human beings and not as beasts:

And among the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh is man's freedom, that through the ideal Power he should be free and emancipated from the captivity of the world of nature; for as long as man is captive to nature he is a ferocious animal, as the struggle for existence is one of the exigencies of the world of nature. This matter of the struggle for existence is the fountain-head of all calamities and is the supreme affliction.³⁷⁰

It is obvious that a culture of peace is a necessary reflection of Bahá'u'lláh's definition of human beings. In this culture, identities are defined in terms of the reciprocal interdependence of human beings rather than contrast or opposition. Such a definition is based upon the Bahá'í concept of unity in diversity, perhaps the most well-known expression of which is Bahá'u'lláh's aphorism:

O well-beloved ones! The tabernacle of unity hath been raised; regard ye not one another as strangers. Ye are the fruits of one tree, and the leaves of one branch.³⁷¹

It should be noted that in the above statement unity is not opposed to plurality but rather to estrangement. For Bahá'u'lláh, unity is unity in diversity. Like a tree, the human family consists of various fruits and leaves, but all belong to the same spiritual tree. In the original Persian, unity is *yigánigí*, and estrangement is *bígánigí*, its literal opposite. Therefore, a culture of peace is opposed both to a repressive negation of plurality and diversity and to an alienating concept of plurality that sees no possibility of communication, interdependence, and unity among the diverse units of social reality. The Bahá'í concept of unity affirms the diversity of communication but not a diversity of mutual alienation and estrangement.

In this new culture of peace called for in the Súrih of the Temple, a central component is the rejection of the violent culture of patriarchy. At the beginning of the Súrih, Bahá'u'lláh describes His first experience of revelation through the medium of the Maid of Heaven. As previously discussed, this means that the highest spiritual reality, the truth of all the Manifestations, is presented as a feminine reality:

While engulfed in tribulations I heard a most wondrous, a most sweet voice, calling above My head. Turning My face, I beheld a Maiden—the embodiment of the remembrance of the name of My Lord—suspended in the air before Me. So rejoiced was she in her very soul that her countenance shone with the ornament of the good pleasure of God, and her cheeks glowed with the brightness of the All-Merciful. Betwixt earth and heaven she was raising a call which captivated the hearts and minds of men. She was imparting to both My inward and outer being tidings which rejoiced My soul, and the souls of God’s honoured servants. Pointing with her finger unto My head, she addressed all who are in heaven and all who are on earth, saying: By God! This is the Best-Beloved of the worlds, and yet ye comprehend not.³⁷²

But if a culture of peace is the logical expression of Bahá’u’lláh’s spiritual definition of the human being, His praise of democracy is another organic expression of His spiritual worldview. As discussed earlier, Bahá’u’lláh’s understanding of humans as spiritual and rational beings is the reason for the replacement of the sword by the word. But His emphasis on the spiritual duty of each individual to think and search independently after truth is accompanied by His affirmation of the unity of all human beings. A natural consequence is His praise of consultation. For Bahá’u’lláh, both individuals’ independent thought and their spiritual unity are realized through the imperative of consultation. His statement, For everything there is and will continue to be a station of perfection and maturity. The maturity of the gift of understanding (*khirad*) is made manifest through consultation,³⁷³ indicates that consultation reflects the maturation and realization of human spiritual powers. The wider the expanse of consultation, the greater the likelihood of attaining truth. Democracy is a natural expression of this

principle. In the Súrih of the Temple, addressing the Queen of England (the only sovereign of a democratic nation who was addressed by Bahá'u'lláh), He praises both parliamentary democracy and the outlawing of the slave trade:

We have been informed that thou hast forbidden the trading in slaves, both men and women. This, verily, is what God hath enjoined in this wondrous Revelation. God hath, truly, destined a reward for thee, because of this...

...We have also heard that thou hast entrusted the reins of counsel into the hands of the representatives of the people. Thou, indeed, hast done well, for thereby the foundations of the edifice of thine affairs will be strengthened, and the hearts of all that are beneath thy shadow, whether high or low, will be tranquilized.³⁷⁴

Bahá'u'lláh's rejection of slavery and His call for political democracy are inseparable expressions of the same spiritual definition of human beings, but His concept of democracy is far more complex than current approaches. First, He extends democracy not only to the level of nation states but also to international relations. His concept of collective security is an expression of His concept of global consultation and democratic subjugation of the law of the struggle for existence at the level of international relations. Second, He sees democracy as the art of consultation and not a constant war of domination, dehumanization, insult, and enmity among contending parties who are never willing to engage in consultation with one another.

This spiritual definition of human beings and the consequent rejection of the struggle for existence as a legitimate regulating principle of human relations

necessarily calls for a system of collective security and for transcendence over a militaristic and animalistic culture of mutual estrangement. But this same definition of humans as noble beings is inseparable from the imperative of social and economic justice. While both pure communism and pure capitalism reduce humans to the level of the jungle and eliminate human freedom, social and economic justice are compatible with a culture of peace, democratic order, and collective security. In the Súrih of the Temple, Bahá'u'lláh calls for both an end to the arms race and movement towards economic justice as preconditions of a lasting peace:

O kings of the earth! We see you increasing every year your expenditures, and laying the burden thereof on your subjects. This, verily, is wholly and grossly unjust. Fear the sighs and tears of this Wronged One, and lay not excessive burdens on your peoples. Do not rob them to rear palaces for yourselves; nay rather choose for them that which ye choose for yourselves. Thus We unfold to your eyes that which profiteth you, if ye but perceive. Your people are your treasures. Beware lest your rule violate the commandments of God, and ye deliver your wards to the hands of the robber. By them ye rule, by their means ye subsist, by their aid ye conquer. Yet, how disdainfully ye look upon them! How strange, how very strange!

... Be united, O kings of the earth, for thereby will the tempest of discord be stilled amongst you, and your peoples find rest, if ye be of them that comprehend. Should any one among you take up arms against another, rise ye all against him, for this is naught but manifest justice.³⁷⁵

Thus, in Bahá'u'lláh's worldview, humanity has arrived at a new stage in its historical development, one that is defined by the realization of the unity in

diversity of the entire world—the manifestation of the spiritual truth of all human beings. While the modern global cultural turn towards the appreciation of peace is often understood as a product of the revolt against religion and spirituality, the opposite is, in fact, true. As recent postmodern and relativistic philosophies have made clear, a materialistic philosophy is most compatible either with relativity of values or affirmation of the law of nature, namely the struggle for existence. In contrast, a noble conception of all human beings and the affirmation of their equal rights are based upon a spiritual understanding of human reality. In the writings of Bahá'u'lláh, a reconstructed mystical and spiritual consciousness is the necessary foundation of the twin principles of the oneness of humankind and universal peace.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nader Saiedi teaches Bahá'í Studies at UCLA where he is an Adjunct Professor / Taslimi Lecturer on Bahá'í History and Religion in Iran. He was born in Tehran, Iran. He holds a master's degree in economics from Pahlavi University in Shiraz and a Ph.D. in sociology from the University of Wisconsin.

NOTES

[←1]

This eBook has been compiled from material published at <https://bahaiworld.bahai.org/library/category/oneness-justice/> It is one of a number of topics focusing on key issues faced by the world at large and the Bahá'í response to and analysis of those issues.

[←2]

‘Abdu’l-Bahá. *Paris Talks*.

[←3]

For a detailed discussion of the Bahá'í teachings on peace, see Hoda Mahmoudi and Janet A. Khan. *A World Without War: 'Abdu'l-Bahá and the Discourse for Global Peace* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing, 2020).

[←4]

Tablets to the Hague.

[←5]

Mahmoudi and Khan, *World Without War*.

[←6]

‘Abdu’l-Bahá. *Paris Talks*.

[←7]

‘Abdu’l-Bahá. *Tablets of the Divine Plan*.

[←8]

‘Abdu’l-Bahá. *Tablets of the Divine Plan*.

[←9]

Bahá'u'lláh. *The Summons of the Lord of Hosts*.

[←10]

‘Abdu’l-Bahá. First Tablet to the Hague

[←11]

‘Abdu’l-Bahá. First Tablet to the Hague.

[←12]

‘Abdu’l-Bahá. First Tablet to the Hague.

[←13]

‘Abdu’l-Bahá. Second Tablet to the Hague.

[←14]

Bahá'u'lláh. *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh.*

[←15]

‘Abdu’l-Bahá. *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*.

[←16]

‘Abdu’l-Bahá. *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*.

[←17]

Bahá'í International Community, *Who is Writing the Future?* (New York: Office of Public Information, 1999), V.2

[←18]

‘Abdu’l-Bahá. *Light of the World*.

[←19]

‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Tablets to the Hague.

[←20]

Shoghi Effendi. *God Passes By*.

[←21]

Shoghi Effendi. *This Decisive Hour*.

[←22]

Shoghi Effendi. *This Decisive Hour*.

[←23]

Shoghi Effendi. *God Passes By*

[←24]

Shoghi Effendi. *God Passes By*

[←25]

Amin Banani. Foreword to *Tablets of the Divine Plan*. (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1993), xxi.

[←26]

Margaret MacMillan. *Peacemakers: Six Months that Changed the World*. (London: John Murray, 2001), 2.

[←27]

‘Abdu’l-Bahá. *Tablets of the Divine Plan*.

[←28]

‘Abdu’l-Bahá. *Tablets of the Divine Plan*.

[←29]

‘Abdu’l-Bahá. *Tablets of the Divine Plan*.

[←30]

‘Abdu’l-Bahá. *Tablets of the Divine Plan*.

[←31]

‘Abdu’l-Bahá. *Tablets of the Divine Plan*.

[←32]

‘Abdu’l-Bahá. *Tablets of the Divine Plan*.

[←33]

‘Abdu’l-Bahá. *Tablets of the Divine Plan*.

[←34]

‘Abdu’l-Bahá. *Tablets of the Divine Plan*.

[←35]

‘Abdu’l-Bahá. *Tablets of the Divine Plan*. Ibid 3.3

[←36]

‘Abdu’l-Bahá. *Tablets of the Divine Plan*. Ibid., ¶6.11, ¶6.4, and ¶6.7.

[←37]

‘Abdu’l-Bahá. *Tablets of the Divine Plan*.

[←38]

Universal House of Justice. From a letter to the Bahá'ís of the World dated 21 March 2009.

[←39]

For more detailed information please refer to message dated 18 January 2019 from the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the World. Ridván 2021 message from the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the World.

[←40]

Universal House of Justice. From a message to the Bahá'ís of the World dated 18 January 2019.

[←41]

Shoghi Effendi. *Citadel of Faith: Messages to America, 1947-1957*.

[←42]

“Jim Crow” was the label given to a set of state and local laws upheld in the southern United States and dating mostly from the late nineteenth century. Designed to separate blacks and whites in most social and economic settings, they covered such institutions and places as public schools, public transportation, food establishments, and public facilities such as parks.

[←43]

‘Abdu’l Bahá, Tablets of the Divine Plan (Wilmette: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1993),
42.

[←44]

Shoghi Effendi, *The Advent of Divine Justice* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1984), 45. This letter was completed in December 1938 and published in book form the next year; these were the terms (“Negroes,” “Indians”) used for those populations at that time.

[←45]

The other two of three principles were rectitude of conduct, primarily for institutions, and a chaste and holy life for individuals.

[←46]

For confirmation of the current relevance of these principles, see Universal House of Justice, 4 March 2020, letter to an individual, par. 3, reprinted in “Extracts from Letters Written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to Individual Believers in the United States on the Topic of Achieving Race Unity, 1996-2020.”

[←47]

Pioneers are Bahá'ís who travel to other places in support of the global plans.

Usually moving without financial support from the Bahá'í Faith, they find jobs or other means of income and live among their new population as contributing members of the community. In addition to *The Advent of Divine Justice*, see for more description of the global plans: Melanie Smith and Paul Lample, *The Spiritual Conquest of the Planet: Our Response to Global Plans* (Palabra Press, 1993) and June Thomas, *Planning Progress: Lessons from Shoghi Effendi* (Association for Bahá'í Studies, 1999).

[←48]

“Preface,” *The Four Year Plan: Messages of the Universal House of Justice* (Palabra Publications, 1996), iii.

[←49]

The Universal House of Justice initiated in 1996 a series of five plans that would lead the worldwide community until 2021, the anniversary of the death of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá.

“Preface,” *The Five Year Plan, 2011-2016: Messages of the Universal House of Justice* (Palabra Publications, 2013), iii.

[←50]

Universal House of Justice, Riḍván 1996 letter, par. 28 and 29. Listed are only a few of the skills that the training institute facilitates.

[←51]

Universal House of Justice, 26 November 1999 letter, par. 2.

[←52]

Bahá'ís organized groups of metropolitan areas, cities, villages, or rural areas into “clusters,” defined by Bahá'ís but based on existing secular conditions, specifically “culture, language, patterns of transport, infrastructure, and the social and economic life of the inhabitants.” Universal House of Justice, 9 January 2001 letter, par. 10.

[←53]

Universal House of Justice, Ridván 2010 letter, par. 5.

[←54]

Universal House of Justice, Rīdván 2010 letter, par. 5, 14.

[←55]

Universal House of Justice, 26 March 2016 letter, par. 5.

[←56]

Universal House of Justice, 29 December 2015 letter, par. 24.

[←57]

Universal House of Justice, 28 December 2010 letter, par. 34.

[←58]

Universal House of Justice, Rīdván 2018 letter, par. 3

[←59]

Universal House of Justice, 26 March 2016 letter, par. 3.

[←60]

Universal House of Justice, 22 July 2020 letter, par. 2.

[←61]

Shoghi Effendi, Bahá'í Administration: Selected Messages, 1922-1932 (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1995), 130.

[←62]

Shoghi Effendi, *The Advent of Divine Justice*, 33.

[←63]

Universal House of Justice, 22 July 2020 letter, par. 4.

[←64]

Universal House of Justice, 29 December 2015 letter, par. 25.

[←65]

National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States, 31 January 2018
letter, par. 4.

[←66]

See for example Universal House of Justice, 10 April 2011 letter. Other relevant letters compiled in “Extracts from Letters Written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to Individual Believers in the United States on the Topic of Achieving Race Unity, 1996-2020.”

[←67]

Universal House of Justice, 10 April 2011 letter, par. 4.

[←68]

National Advisory Committee Report on Civil Disorders (New York: Bantam Books, 1968).

[←69]

John Hope Franklin and Alfred A. Moss, Jr., *From Slavery to Freedom*, 6th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill Publishing Company, 1988), 227-38; Eoin Higgins, “The White Backlash to the Civil Rights Movement” (May 22, 2014), available at <https://eoinhiggins.com/the-white-backlash-to-the-civil-rights-movement-1817ff0a9fc> ; David Elliot Cohen and Mark Greenberg, *Obama: The Historic Front Pages* (New York/London: Sterling, 2009); Adam Shatz, “How the Obama’s Presidency Provoked a White Backlash,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 30, 2016. Available at <http://www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-shatz-kerry-james-marshall-obama-20161030-story.html>

[←70]

Shoghi Effendi, The Advent of Divine Justice, Available at
www.bahai.org/r/720204804

[←71]

Universal House of Justice, from a letter dated 10 April 2011 in Extracts from Letters Written on Behalf of the Universal House of Justice to Individual Believers in the United States on the Topic of Achieving Racial Unity (Updated Compilation 1996-2020), [7],5. Available at

<https://greenlakebahaischool.files.wordpress.com/2020/06/compilation-uhj-on-race-unity-1996-2020.pdf>

One aim of this extraordinary period from 1996 to the present has been to empower distinct populations and, indeed, the masses of humanity to take ownership of their own spiritual, intellectual, and social development. A future article will look at the impact of this latter period on the approach to the racial crisis in the United States. Recent articles on community building and approaches to building racial unity in smaller geographic spaces provide valuable insights about developments during this period.

[←72]

Franklin and Moss, 282.

[←73]

Franklin and Moss, 283.

[←74]

Franklin and Moss.

[←75]

Franklin and Moss, 285.

[←76]

Matt Reimann, “When a black fighter won ‘the fight of the century,’ race riots erupted across America.” May 25, 2017. Available at <https://timeline.com/when->

[←77]

G. Spiller, ed., Papers on Inter-Racial Problems Communicated to the First Universal Races Congress Held at the University of London, July 26-29, 1911. Rev. ed. (Citadel Press, 1970), 208.

[←78]

‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*. Available
at www.bahai.org/r/098175321

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‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*. Available
at www.bahai.org/r/322003373

[←80]

‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*. Available
at www.bahai.org/r/635635504

[←81]

‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*. Available
at www.bahai.org/r/947904389

[←82]

‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*. Available
at www.bahai.org/r/635635504

[←83]

Gayle Morrison, *To Move the World: Louis G. Gregory and the Advancement of Racial Amity in America*, (Wilmette, Illinois: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982), 53.

[←84]

Gayle Morrison, *To Move the World: Louis G. Gregory and the Advancement of Racial Amity in America*, (Wilmette, Illinois: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982), 63-72, 309-10.

[←85]

Gayle Morrison, *To Move the World: Louis G. Gregory and the Advancement of Racial Amity in America*, (Wilmette, Illinois: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982), 59.

[←86]

Gayle Morrison, *To Move the World: Louis G. Gregory and the Advancement of Racial Amity in America*, (Wilmette, Illinois: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982), 59.

[←87]

John Hope Franklin and Alfred A. Moss, Jr., *From Slavery to Freedom*, 6th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill Publishing Company, 1988), 313.

[←88]

John Hope Franklin and Alfred A. Moss, Jr., *From Slavery to Freedom*, 6th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill Publishing Company, 1988), 313.

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Gayle Morrison, *To Move the World: Louis G. Gregory and the Advancement of Racial Amity in America*, (Wilmette, Illinois: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982), 59.

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Louis Gregory, “Racial Amity in America: An Historical Review,” in Gwendolyn Etter-Lewis & Richard Thomas, eds, *Lights of the Spirit: Historical Portraits of Black Bahá’ís in North American: 1898-2000* (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá’í Publishing, 2006), 180. Originally published in *The Bahá’í World: A Biennial International Record*, Vol. 7, 1936-1938, compiled by the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States and Canada (New York: Bahá’í Publishing Committee).

[←91]

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Wikipedia, “Tulsa Race Massacre”. Available at
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[←94]

John Hope Franklin and Alfred A. Moss, Jr., *From Slavery to Freedom*, 6th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill Publishing Company, 1988), 314

[←95]

Louis Gregory, “Racial Amity in America: An Historical Review,” in Gwendolyn Etter-Lewis & Richard Thomas, eds, *Lights of the Spirit: Historical Portraits of Black Bahá’ís in North American: 1898-2000* (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá’í Publishing, 2006), 182. Originally published in *The Bahá’í World: A Biennial International Record, Vol. 7, 1936-1938*, compiled by the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States and Canada (New York: Bahá’í Publishing Committee).

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[←97]

Louis Gregory, “Racial Amity in America: An Historical Review,” in Gwendolyn Etter-Lewis & Richard Thomas, eds, *Lights of the Spirit: Historical Portraits of Black Bahá’ís in North American: 1898-2000* (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá’í Publishing, 2006), 182-185. Originally published in *The Bahá’í World: A Biennial International Record, Vol. 7, 1936-1938*, compiled by the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States and Canada (New York: Bahá’í Publishing Committee).

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Louis Gregory, “Racial Amity in America: An Historical Review,” in Gwendolyn Etter-Lewis & Richard Thomas, eds, *Lights of the Spirit: Historical Portraits of Black Bahá’ís in North American: 1898-2000* (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá’í Publishing, 2006), 185

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Louis Gregory, “Racial Amity in America: An Historical Review,” in Gwendolyn Etter-Lewis & Richard Thomas, eds, *Lights of the Spirit: Historical Portraits of Black Bahá’ís in North American: 1898-2000* (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá’í Publishing, 2006), 186.

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Louis Gregory, “Racial Amity in America: An Historical Review,” in Gwendolyn Etter-Lewis & Richard Thomas, eds, *Lights of the Spirit: Historical Portraits of Black Bahá’ís in North American: 1898-2000* (34. Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá’í Publishing, 2006), 186

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[←104]

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[←107]

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[←109]

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“Bahai News,” *Christian Commonwealth* (London), 3 March 1915, 283. Text in *The Apostle of Peace*, vol. 2, 410.

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Larry E. Burgess, *The Smileys: A Commemorative Edition*, Moore Historical Foundation, Redlands, California, 1991, pp. 30-45.

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Davis, Calvin C., “Albert Keith Smiley”, Harold Josephson, editor, *Biographical Dictionary of Modern Peace Leaders*, Greenwood Press, Westport, Connecticut, 1985, p. 889.

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For a lengthy discussion of how the conferences were conducted, see Burgess, pp. 61-67.

[←254]

For a brief discussion of the fruits of the Lake Mohonk Arbitration Conferences see Burgess, p. 890.

[←255]

Report of the Eighteenth Annual Lake Mohonk Conference on International Arbitration, Published by the Lake Mohonk Conference on International Arbitration, 1919, pp. 42 – 63.

[←256]

Report of the Eighteenth Annual Lake Mohonk Conference on International Arbitration, Published by the Lake Mohonk Conference on International Arbitration, 1919, pp. 42 – 44.

[←257]

Mahmud's Diary, p. 101. Note that the chronicler, Mahmud, was confused about the dates.

[←258]

The conference published an annual report which was sent to all libraries across the United States with more than a 10,000 book collection (the average size of a small community or branch library). Burgess, p. 65. One of the promoters of the conferences was the wealthy industrialist, Andrew Carnegie, who established public libraries across the United States as well as for the Carnegie Endowment for Peace. (There are indications that Carnegie was present when ‘Abdu’l-Bahá spoke at Lake Mohonk, but that is unconfirmed.) For a thorough accounting of the press coverage of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s participation in the 1912 conference, see Egea, pp. 306. Press accounts of His arrival in the United States also frequently made mention of His intention to participate in the Lake Mohonk Conference. Ibid, pp. 197, 198, 201, 203, 217, 286, 298, 299.

[←259]

Mahmud's Diary, pp. 102 – 103.

[←260]

Larry E. Burgess, *The Smileys: A Commemorative Edition*, Moore Historical Foundation, Redlands, California, 1991, p.

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Butler, Nicholas Murray, *Across the Busy Years: Recollections and Reflections II*, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1940, p. 90.

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<https://www.sfgenealogy.org/sf/1932b/sr32maid.htm>. The social registry is a directory of socially-connected members of high society.

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Chapman, Anita Ioas, *Leroy Ioas: Hand of the Cause of God*, pp. 45-49.

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Bahá'í News Letter: The Bulletin of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'is of the United States and Canada, no. 12, June-July 1926, pp. 6-7.

[←265]

This was Agnes Macphail, who spoke at the Montreal Conference which was chaired by William Sutherland Maxwell. Nakhjavani, Violette, *The Maxwells of Montreal: Middle Years 1923-1937, Late Years 1937-1952*, George Ronald, Oxford, p. 74. and writers. Some conferences were held in church buildings, others on university campuses, and a few in hotels.

As in San Francisco, the World Unity Conferences provided valuable experience that enhanced the capacities of the hosting Bahá'í communities. They supplied a means for those fledgling communities to obtain positive local publicity and brought the nascent Faith to the attention of civic leaders as a new and growing force for good. Although the conferences were on the whole successful, as in San Francisco, they stretched to the limit local human and material resources. Shoghi Effendi urged the American community to follow-up with the conference attendees who showed the greatest interest, Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá'í Administration: Selected Messages 1922 – 1932*, p. 117.

[←266]

Horace Holley fled Paris, France with his wife and young child at the beginning of WWI in September 1914 and so keenly understood the significance of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s prediction that another war was coming in His second Tablet to the Hague, written after the Great War. Letter from Horace Holley to Albert Vail, October 21, 1925, Vail papers, U.S. Bahá’í National Archives. Mary Movius, in discussing Dr. Randall’s upcoming role as primary spokesman for the World Unity Foundation with him, mentions her concern about where the coming war will start. Letter from Mary Movius to John Randall, June 11, [1927?], U.S. Bahá’í National Archives.

[←267]

Bahá'í News Letter: The Bulletin of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'is of the United States and Canada, no. 20, November 1927, p. 5.

[←268]

Montfort Mills, a lawyer from New York City and former chairman of the National Spiritual Assembly was also part of this consultation, but at the time he was engaged in frequent travels abroad on behalf of the work of the Faith. As much as possible, Mills served as an advisor to and promoter of the World Unity Foundation.

[←269]

Randall was one of the two Christian clergymen from New York City who played active roles in the Bahá'í community during the 1920s and 1930s. Shoghi Effendi said, "I am delighted to learn of the evidences of growing interest, of sympathetic understanding, and brotherly cooperation on the part of two capable and steadfast servants of the One True God, Dr. [John] H. Randall and Dr. [William Norman] Guthrie, whose participation in our work I hope and pray will widen the scope of our activities, enrich our opportunities, and lend a fresh impetus to our endeavors."

Bahá'í Administration, p. 82. For a brief summary of Randall's life see, Day, Anne L., "Randall, John Herman", Kuehl, Warren F., editor, *Biographical Dictionary of Internationalists*, Greenwood Press, Westport, Connecticut, 1983, pp. 595 – 97. See also, "John Herman Randall Sr.: Pioneer liberal, philosopher, pacifist" by one of his grandsons [David Randall?] at

<http://freepages.rootsweb.com/~knower/genealogy/johnhermansrcareer.htm>.

[←270]

The Board of Trustees of the World Unity Foundation included the following Bahá'ís: Horace H. Holley, Montfort Mills, Florence Reed Morton, and Mary Rumsey Movius. The other members were: Reverend John Herman Randall (non-denominational Protestant), Reverend Alfred W. Martin (Unitarian), and Melbert B. Cary (friend of Dr. Randall). The Honorary Committee for the Foundation were: S. Parkes Cadman, Carrie Chapman Catt, Rudolph I. Coffee, John Dewey, Harry Emerson Fosdick, Herbert Adams Gibbons, Mordecai W. Johnson, James Weldon Johnson, Rufus M. Jones, David Starr Jordan, Harry Levi, Louis L. Mann, Pierrepont B. Noyes, Harry Allen Overstreet, William R. Shepherd, Augustus O. Thomas.

Bahá'í News Letter: The Bulletin of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States and Canada, no.22, March 1928, p. 8.

[←271]

Letter dated July 7, 1932 from Horace Holley to Florence Morton, U.S. Bahá'í Archives.

[←272]

Frank Lloyd Wright was a friend of Horace Holley, who convinced Wright to submit an article. Wright then suggested that he redesign the magazine's cover. His design, with some modifications, was first used for the October 1929 edition of *World Unity*.

Website: The Wright Library, <http://www.steinerag.com/flw/Periodicals/1930-39.htm>. (The article quoted on the website assumes that Holley and Wright met through their mutual friend, Dr. Guthrie. Actually, they first met in Italy in 1910. (Letter from Horace Holley to Irving Holley from Florence, Italy, dated Easter Sunday [1910], in the possession of the author.))

[←273]

Day, Anne L., “Randall, John Herman”, Kuehl, Warren F., editor, *Biographical Dictionary of Internationalists*, Greenwood Press, Westport, Connecticut, 1983, pp. 100-101.

[←274]

Most of what is published about Dr. Randall's work with the World Unity Foundation is derived from memorials to him written by his descendants or from his own books.

[←275]

The decision to make the magazine more openly Bahá'í was taken in 1932. Letter dated October 28, 1932 from Horace Holley to Florence Morton, page 2, U.S. Bahá'í Archives. In a 1933 letter to Morton, Holley pointed out to her how he was trying to “build a bridge of sympathetic understanding between World Unity readers and the Articles of the Cause which will be published later on” through his more recent editorials. Letter dated February 2, 1933 from Horace Holley to Florence Morton, page 2, U.S. Bahá'í Archives. See also an explanation of the careful transition to Bahá'í content in letter dated January 7, 1933 from Horace Holley to Mary Movius, U.S. Bahá'í Archives.

[←276]

Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá'í Administration*, pp. 124 -28.

[←277]

Both Randall and Holley were paid for their services, but after the financial crisis started, Holley took a cut in salary even as his responsibilities increased. For a time, he drew no pay but funded the journal from his own savings. Letter dated April 1, 1933 from Horace Holley to Florence Morton, U.S. Bahá'í National Archives.

[←278]

Both Randall and Holley were paid for their services, but after the financial crisis started, Holley took a cut in salary even as his responsibilities increased. For a time, he drew no pay but funded the journal from his own savings. Letter dated April 1, 1933 from Horace Holley to Florence Morton, U.S. Bahá'í National Archives.

[←279]

Bahá'í News, no. 90, March 1935, p. 8.

[←280]

Undated World Unity circular. U.S. Bahá'í Archives.

[←281]

Kuehl, Warren F. and Lynne Dunn, *Keeping the Covenant: American Internationalists and the League of Nations, 1920-1939*, Kent State University Press, 1997, p. 73

[←282]

Kuehl, Warren F. and Lynne Dunn, *Keeping the Covenant: American Internationalists and the League of Nations, 1920-1939*, Kent State University Press, 1997, pp. 100-101

[←283]

Day, Anne L., “Randall, John Herman”, p. 596.

[←284]

In a message dated 1 June 1976 to the International Bahá'í Conference in Paris.

Available at <https://www.bic.org/timeline/international-bahai-conference-paris>

[←285]

The Four Year Plan and The Twelve Month Plan, 1996 – 2001: Summary of Achievements, Bahá'í World Center, 2002.

[←286]

<https://www.bic.org/statements/statement-millennium-summit>

[←287]

Berger, Julia, *Beyond Pluralism: A New Framework for Constructive Engagement* (2008 – 2020), chapter 7, pp. 16–19. Pre-publication edition. I am grateful to Julia Berger and Melody Mirzaagha, for staff members of the Bahá'í International Community Offices in New York for their assistance and insights. I also wish to thank the BIC New York Office for directing me to Dr. Berger and Ms. Mirzaagha.

[←288]

In 1995, a statement titled “Turning Point for All Nations” was issued for the 50th Anniversary of the United Nations. It is available at <https://www.bic.org/statements/turning-point-all-nations>

[←289]

“A Governance Befitting: Humanity and the Path Toward a Just Global Order”, A Statement of the Bahá’í International Community on the Occasion of the 75th Anniversary of the United Nations, p. 5.

https://www.bic.org/sites/default/files/pdf/un75_20201020.pdf

[←290]

<https://soundcloud.com/bahaiworldnewsservice/podcast-a-vision-of-peace-stories-from-the-democratic-republic-of-the-congo>

[←291]

https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Asylum_statistics

[←292]

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<https://www.unhcr.org/576408cd7.pdf>

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Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, dated 1 October 2015

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Available from: <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/magazine/2019/08/we-all-are-migrants-in-the-21st-century/>

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[←299]

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[←300]

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McNeill, John Robert, and William Hardy McNeill. 2003. *The Human Web: A Bird's-Eye View of World History*. New York: WW Norton & Company.

[←302]

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[←303]

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[←306]

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[←309]

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[←310]

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[←312]

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[←318]

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[←320]

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[←321]

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[←322]

Letter from the Universal House of Justice addressed to the Bahá'ís of the World,
dated 1 March 2017

[←323]

From a letter dated 13 November 1985 written on behalf of the Universal House of
Justice to an individual believer

[←324]

Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, pages 42-43.

[←325]

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Available from: < <https://migrationdataportal.org/themes/migrant-deaths-and-disappearances>

[←326]

Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, pages 1-2.

[←327]

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https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/the_americas/mexicans-shower-the-caravan-with-kindness-and-tarps-tortillas-and-medicine/2018/10/26/b2f828b4-d7b0-11e8-8384-bcc5492fef49_story.html

[←329]

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[←330]

For example, see efforts to expand *Global Skills Partnerships*:

<https://www.cgdev.org/page/global-skill-partnerships>

[←331]

Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, page 286

[←332]

Auguste Comte, *Introduction to Positive Philosophy* (Indianapolis: Bobbs Merrill, 1970).

[←333]

Herbert Spencer, *Evolution of Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967).

[←334]

This is part of Comte's law of three stages. According to this idea, all societies evolve by going through religious/theological, metaphysical/philosophical, and scientific/positive stages. Spencer defined a military society as one in which the social function of regulation is dominant, while in an industrial society the economic function predominates.

[←335]

Contrary to the popular perception, Durkheim, Marx, and Weber rarely engaged in a direct discussion of war or peace. Only after the onset of the World War I did Durkheim, Simmel, and Mead side with their own countries and discuss the issue.

[←336]

Bahá'u'lláh, Kitáb-i-‘Ahd (Book of the Covenant), in *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas* (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1978), 219.

[←337]

See for example, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Paris Talks.

[←338]

Georg W. F. Hegel, *Reason in History* (New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1953), 25–56.

[←339]

Isaiah 11:6 and 2:4.

[←340]

Bahá'u'lláh, *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*, accessed 7 June 2018,

<http://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/bahauallah/epistle-son-wolf/#f=f2-35>

[←341]

See Saiedi, From Oppression to Empowerment, *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies* 26:1–2 (Spring/Summer 2016), 28–30.

[←342]

Qur'an 28:31.

[←343]

While in translation they may appear to be slightly different, they are identical in the original Arabic.

[←344]

Bahá'u'lláh, *Ishráqát* (Tehran: Mu'assisiy-i-Milliy-i-Matbú'át-i-Amrí, n.d.), 260.

Provisional translation.

[←345]

See *The Call of the Divine Beloved: Selected Mystical Works of Bahá'u'lláh* (Haifa, Bahá'í World Centre, 2018), <https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/bahauallah/call-divine-beloved/>.

[←346]

The stages of spiritual ascent are frequently referred to as seven valleys or seven cities. In ‘Aṭṭār’s *Conference of the Birds* these stages are: search/quest, love, knowledge, contentment/independence, unity, wonderment/bewilderment, and annihilation in God. Baha’u’llah’s *Seven Valleys* employs these stages, but He makes a slight change in the order, bringing contentment/independence after unity. See *The Call of the Divine Beloved*.

[←347]

Examples are Isaiah 44:6 and 48:12, Revelation 1:8 and 22:13, and Qur'án 57:2.

[←348]

Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Iqán: The Book of Certitude* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1983), 153–54.

[←349]

Bahá'u'lláh, *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*, accessed 8 June 2018,

<http://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/bahauallah/epistle-son-wolf/#f=f2-19>.

[←350]

Bahá'u'lláh, Lawḥ-i-Maqṣúd (Tablet of Maqṣúd), *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, 167.

[←351]

Georg Simmel, *Der Krieg und die Geistigen Entscheidungen* (Munich: Duncker and Humblot, 1917).

[←352]

Emile Durkheim, *L'Allemagne au-dessus de Tout: La Mentalité Allemande et la Guerre* (Paris: Colin, 1915).

[←353]

G. H. Mead, Immanuel Kant on Peace and Democracy in *Self, War & Society: George Herbert Mead's Macrosociology*. Ed. Mary Jo Deegan (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2008), 159–74.

[←354]

See, for example, John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: Norton, 2001).

[←355]

Immanuel Kant, *Perpetual Peace* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1939).

[←356]

See Bruce Russett and John R. Oneal, *Triangulating Peace: Democracy, Interdependence, and the International Organizations* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001).

[←357]

Among classical social theorists there is considerable sympathy for this theory.

Durkheim, Mead, and Veblen all identified the cause of World War I as the undemocratic culture and politics of Germany and Japan. Similarly, Spencer finds political democracy compatible with peace.

[←358]

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[←359]

Michael Mann, War and Social Theory: Into Battle with Classes, Nations and States, in *The Sociology of War and Peace*, ed. Colin Creighton and Martin Shaw (Dobbs Ferry: Sheridan House, 1987).

[←360]

Vladimir I. Lenin, *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism* (New York: International Publishers, 1939).

[←361]

See C. Wright Mills, *The Power Elite* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956) and Immanuel M. Wallerstein, *The Politics of the World-Economy: The States, the Movements, and the Civilizations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

[←362]

See, for example, Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

[←363]

John E. Mueller, *Retreat from Doomsday: The Obsolescence of Major War* (New York: Basic Book, 1989).

[←364]

Johan Galtung, *Peace by Peaceful Means* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1996).

[←365]

Concepts like structural, symbolic, and cultural violence are a few expressions of this new conception of the positive definition of peace.

[←366]

Shoghi Effendi has translated *isláh* as security and peace, betterment, ennoblement, reconstruction, and improvement. Similarly , he has translated *‘imár* as reconstruction, revival, and advancement.

[←367]

See *The Summons of the Lord of Hosts: Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh* (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 2010). <https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/bahauallah/summons-lord-hosts/>

[←368]

Bahá'u'lláh, Lawḥ-i-Maqṣúd (Tablet of Maqṣúd), *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, 167.

[←369]

Bahá'u'lláh, Lawḥ-i-Hikmat (Tablet of Wisdom), *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, 138, para 5.

[←370]

‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá* (Wilmette: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1997), 316, #227, para 20.

[←371]

Bahá'u'lláh, Lawḥ-i-Mánikchí Şáhib (Tablet to Mánikchí Şáhib), *The Tabernacle of Unity: Bahá'u'lláh's Responses to Mánikchí Şáhib and Other Writings* (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 2006), 9, para 1.15.

[←372]

Bahá'u'lláh, Súriy-i-Haykal (Súrih of the Temple), *Summons of the Lord of Hosts*, 5, para 6.

[←373]

Bahá'u'lláh, from a Tablet translated from the Persian, in *Consultation: A Compilation*, Prepared by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice (February 1978, rev. November 1990), 3. <http://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/compilations/consultation/>. The word khirad, rendered as gift of understanding in English, is, literally, reason.

[←374]

Bahá'u'lláh, Súriy-i-Haykal (Súrih of the Temple), *Summons of the Lord of Hosts*, 89–90, paras 172–73.

[←375]

Bahá'u'lláh, Súriy-i-Haykal (Súrih of the Temple), *Summons of the Lord of Hosts*, 93–94, paras 179 and 182.