The Process of Social Transformation

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The Process of Social Transformation

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Introduction

Every theory of social change has at its foundation a set of profound and often implicit convictions, which must be made explicit if the corresponding analysis of social reality is to achieve a reasonable degree of clarity. Beliefs about human nature, already discussed by previous speakers, are examples of such convictions; another set of equally important ideas has to do with the role of the individual and of social structures in the process of social transformation. In this respect, two opposing views can easily be identified. At one extreme, a number of ideologies tend to seek social change as a mere outcome of the upgrading of the individual, be it through secular education and training, or through religious conversion. To these belong numerous religious movements that seek the solution of all human problems in the salvation of souls, either offered to fixed numbers, or finally to every human being on the planet. It is implicitly assumed by these groups that change in social structures will somehow be an automatic consequence of the salvation of a sufficient number of individuals and the victory of the righteous. In practice, of course, it is not difficult to find the
righteous fully participating in oppressive social structures without even noticing the slightest contradiction. It is interesting to note that this type of ideological stand is so prevalent in the internationally supported development plans of the governments of many countries, plans that hope to overcome poverty with minimum structural change, by upgrading the skills of individuals through elaborate training programs and by offering them some means for improving their conditions, usually jobs or credit.

Views opposing this individualistic approach to social change may argue that the human being is entirely a product of society. No change is then possible unless social structures, mainly those related to matters of political power, are changed first. The greater social consciousness of adherents to such views, however, does not guarantee freedom from

oppression either. It is possible for certain extremes to accept easily that ends completely justify means and to define moral codes entirely in terms of the objectives of the destruction of old structures, at least during the period of revolutionary change. This position can be further strengthened by the adoption of extreme views of social determinism laws of transformation inherent to the logic of history that shape individual and collective will, and when necessary, justify almost any act of violence and oppression.

The Bahá'í concept of social change does not fall in either of these two categories. We tend to see the transformation of human society as a result of a very complex set of interactions between profound changes that have to occur within the individual and deliberate attempts at changing the structure of society.

Moreover, the change of social structures is not understood as mere political change, it involves total change in all structures, mental, cultural, economic, and social, including a complete change in the very concept of political leadership and power.

Individuals, whose behavior is highly influenced by society do possess a spiritual dimension, which can be illumined by divine teachings and free them from the bounds of oppressive social forces. These individuals, by no means perfect or saved, try to walk a path of spiritual transformation defined by the teachings of the central figures of the Bahá'í Faith. This path of spiritual growth, however, is not one of individual salvation; it exactly implies constant efforts to create and strengthen new social institutions. The new structures, even when perfectly designed, may not function in a perfect way at first, but they do make it possible for an ever-increasing number of human beings to walk farther and farther on this path of spiritual transformation. The vision, then, is one of an iterative process, which unfolds within a few generations, is propelled by forces inherent in the very purpose of the creation of the universe, and in turn generates forces that continuously accelerate the processes of change, leading finally to what Shoghi Effendi has called an "organic change in the structure of presentday society, a change such as the world has not yet experienced."1

The spiritualization of the individual, one half of the process of social change, is by itself too vast a subject to be treated here. I would only like to discuss a little further the importance of its social dimension. It is often said that the acquisition of spiritual qualities and moral behavior is what the Bahá'í Faith has in common with all other religions. While this is true, a few important differences must be noted. The fact that the goal of religious practice is shifted from individual salvation to the

collective progress of the entire human race is reflected in the Bahá'í teachings in the change of emphasis on the qualities to be acquired by each believer. For example, while charity, so essential to Christian theology is still highly praised, justice is given a far more central place. Bahá'u'lláh has told us:The best beloved of all things in My sight is Justice; turn not away therefrom if thou desirest Me, and neglect it not that I may confide in thee. By its aid thou shalt see with thine own eyes and not through the eyes of others, and shalt know of thine own knowledge and not through the knowledge of thy neighbor. Ponder this in thy heart; how it behoveth thee to be. Verily justice is My gift to thee and the sign of My loving-kindness. Set it then before thine eyes.2In the same way, while tolerance is recommended, those attitudes that lead to unity and human solidarity are far more appreciated. In general, moral behavior is analyzed from the point of view of the achievement of human potential, individually and collectively, thus liberating the believer from the feelings of guilt so common in many religions.

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1. Shoghi Effendi, The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh, 2d cd. (Wilmette, Il.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1974), 43.
2 Bahá'u'lláh, The Hidden Words, tr. Shoghi Effendi (London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1932), 5-6.

In addition to the change of emphasis on specific qualities, the social dimension IS also enhanced through the expansion of the meaning of most qualities to include a social vision. Love includes the abolition of social prejudices and the realization of the beauty of diversity in the human race. Detachment from the world is not taught in a way that leads to idleness and to the acceptance of oppression; it is acquired to free us from our own material interests in order to dedicate ourselves to the well-being of others. To this expansion of the meaning of almost all qualities is also added a constant endeavor to acquire social skills to participate in meetings of consultation, to work in groups, to express opinions with fairness and clarity, to understand the points of view of others, to reach and carry out collective decisions. Thus, the path of spiritualization mentioned here should not be confused with one that defines goodness passively and produces a human being whose greatest virtue is not to harm anyone; it is a path to create social activists and agents of change.

This path of the spiritualization of the human being, the mystical-practical path of social activity and inner transformation, is described in great detail in the Bahá'í teachings. However, the other aspect of social

transformation, that of the organic change in the structure of human society, is treated in a different way. The writings of the central figures of the Faith contain numerous statements and explanations of social principles, of laws and ordinances, as well as of institutions and processes of change. But many of the theoretical and practical tasks are left to be accomplished by the growing Bahá'í community through a global and constant process of consultation and scholarly inquiry into social reality. The final goal of the transformation is also given in the form of the design of a new World Order, which is to be entirely different in all its cultural, social, political, economic, and religious structures from the present order that has been called lamentably defect ive by Bahá'u'lláh.

The complex and intricate workings of this new World Order will be intimately based on the teachings of the Founder of the Bahá'í Faith but at the same time, much of it will be the fruit of the process of integration of now isolated or even hostile races, groups, and nations who, as they come together and unite in the same cause, become transformed and help transform each other and bring to the rising institutions of a new World Order the richness of different cultures and of different social thought and experience. This is an essential aspect of the process of social transformation as envisioned by the Bahá'í Faith. Its universality has two distinct dimensions: one consists of the original teachings of Bahá'u'lláh, who is accepted as a universal manifestation, revealing the deepest of principles and laws of human existence, and the other results from the fact that social concepts, institutions, and practices are organically growing from unified efforts of diverse peoples--Europeans, North Americans, Latins, the indigenous peoples of the Americas, the African tribes, the people of India and China--and are not based on the conditions of one people at a given historical moment. In the remarks that follow, each statement must be seen as accompanied by numerous questions that would need to be resolved through a great deal of individual and collective reflection and by challenges that must be met as the Bahá'ís actively participate in social action and increasingly contribute to the processes of change.

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THE BAHA'I FAITH AND MARXISM

Twin Processes of Change

At a first level of generality, Bahá'ís see the organic change in the structure of human society as being propelled by two parallel processes, which have been described by Shoghi Effendi in the following terms:As we view the world around us, we are compelled to observe the manifold evidences of that universal fermentation which, in every continent of the globe and in every department of human life, be it

religious, social, economic or political, is purging and reshaping humanity in anticipation of the Day when the wholeness of the human race will have been recognized and its unity established. A two-fold process, however, can be distinguished, each tending, in its own way and with an accelerated momentum, to bring to a climax the
forces that are transforming the face of our planet. The first is essentially an integrating process, while the second is fundamentally disruptive. The former, as it steadily evolves, unfolds a System which may well serve as a pattern for that world polity towards which a strangely-disordered world is continually advancing; while the latter, as its disintegrating influence deepens, tends to tear down, with increasing violence, the antiquated barriers that seek to block humanity's progress towards its destined goal.3The following passage
from The Promised Day is Come gives an indication of the range and the intensity of the destructive process:A tempest,
unprecedented in its violence, unpredictable in its course, catastrophic in its immediate effects, unimaginably glorious in its ultimate consequences, is at present sweeping the face of the earth. Its driving power is remorselessly gaining in range and momentum. Its cleansing force, however much undetected, is increasing with every passing day. Humanity, gripped in the clutches of its devastating power, is smitten by the evidences of its resistless fury. It can neither perceive its origin, nor probe its significance,
nor discern its outcome. Bewildered, agonized and helpless, it watches this great and mighty wind of God invading the remotest and fairest regions of the earth, rocking its foundations, deranging its equilibrium, sundering its nations, disrupting the homes of its peoples, wasting
its cities, driving into exile its kings, pulling down its bulwarks, uprooting its institutions, dimming its light, and harrowing up the souls of its inhabitants.4It is important
to note here that Bahá'ís do not find it necessary to
participate in this destructive process; the destruction of the structures of an old world order comes about by forces that are already working within it and, in a certain sense, do not need any extra help. As painful as the destruction of a world is for every human being living in this age of transition, its necessity has to be accepted, since old structures that impede the establishment of a new world order must be swept away in one way or another. Thus, for example, the persistence of racism, in an age when it must necessarily be abolished forever, gives rise to forces that imply painful strife and a great deal of human sacrifice. Yet, these

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3. Shoghi Effendi. World Order of
Bahá'u'lláh, 170.
4. Shoghi Effendi, The Promised
Day is Come, 2d cd. (Wilmette, Il: Bahá'í Publishing Trust,
1961), 1.

same forces gradually topple racist structures in every region, a process that began more than a hundred years ago has achieved a great deal both concretely and in terms of its influence on the convictions of millions of human beings and will necessarily move forward to bring down the many bulwarks that still remain.

The economic and political structures of human society have certainly been shaken by the forces unleashed through strife and struggle among classes, groups, and nations in the past century. Gone already are the kings and potentates of the nineteenth century. Many of the strongholds of colonialism have already been vanquished. New but inadequate structures that have taken the place of the old ones, originating in the East or the West, are in constant crisis. The economic and political relations among nations and within countries Continuously deteriorate while the arsenals of the world are being stocked with arms of increasingly destructive capacity. Not only do governments spend fortunes on armaments, but also in many countries, large numbers of people from among the masses of humanity are being armed, including 13 and 14-year-old adolescents. The process of the destruction of these structures is, of course, not a simple one. New economic and political empires have been and continue to be built. New formulas are constantly proposed, and the energies of entire generations in every country are spent to prove their validity. Yet, there is no doubt that the political and economic institutions of present-day society are only surviving from crisis to crisis. The process of the liberation of humankind from a defective world order is well under way, as every conquest or defeat of the contending parts shows with more clarity the utter inadequacy of any social organization based on the dictates of the lower nature of man and his insatiable desires whether for material goods or for political and economic power.

In the same way, the longstanding structures that have perpetuated inequality between men and women are also being destroyed, preparing the way for a very different organization of human society. Parallel to this, the structure of family has undergone profound changes, at times destroying valuable bonds and indispensable conditions for human growth, but at the same time, paving the way for the establishment of a new kind of family where the two sexes cooperate and help each other develop, and where children learn the skills of living as world citizens rather than being slaves of blind loyalty to a small nucleus of relatives.

The effects of the process of disintegration can be further enumerated to include religious, educational, and cultural structures, and even to touch upon some of the basic structures of scientific thought that have been cherished for the last two or three centuries as the foundation of progress and modern civilization The important point to be mentioned here is that,

according to the Bahá'í interpretation of recent history, all
these destructive processes are simply paving the way for the first stages
of a world order described by Shoghi Effendi in the following
terms:The unity of the human race, as envisaged by
Bahá'u'lláh, implies the establishment of a world
commonwealth in which all nations, races, creeds, and classes are closely
and permanently united and in which the autonomy of its state members and
the personal freedom and initiative of the individuals

that compose them are definitely and completely safeguarded.
This commonwealth must, as far as we can visualize it, consist of a world
legislature, whose members will, as the trustees of the whole of mankind,
ultimately control the entire resources of all the component nations, and
will enact such laws as shall be required to regulate the life, satisfy the
needs, and adjust the relationships of all races and peoples. A world
executive, backed by an international Force, will carry out the decisions
arrived at, and apply the laws enacted by, this world legislature, and will
safeguard the organic unity of the whole commonwealth. A world tribunal
will adjudicate and deliver its compulsory and final verdict in all and any
disputes that may rise between the various elements constituting this
universal system. A mechanism of world inter-communication will be
devised, embracing the whole planet, freed from national hindrances and
restrictions, and functioning with marvellous swiftness and perfect
regularity. A world metropolis will act as the nerve centre of a world
civilization, the focus towards which the unifying forces of life will
converge and from which its energizing influences will radiate. A world
language will either be invented or chosen from among the existing
languages and will be taught in the schools of all the federated nations as an
auxiliary to their mother tongue. A world script, a world literature, a
uniform and universal system of currency, of weights and measures, will
simplify and facilitate intercourse and understanding among the nations and
races of mankind. In such a world society, science and religion, the two most
potent forces in human life, will be reconciled, will co-operate, and will
harmoniously develop. The press will
, under such a system, while giving full scope to the expression of the
diversified views and convictions of mankind, cease to be mischievously
manipulated by vested interests, whether private or public, and will be
liberated from the influence of contending governments and peoples. The
economic resources of the world will be organized, its sources of raw
materials will be tapped and fully utilized, its markets will be coordinated
and developed, and the distribution of its products will be equitably
regulated.5The other process
mentioned by Shoghi Effendi is one of integration and construction. It is
clearly related to the thousands of efforts by diverse groups and

individuals throughout the world who search for new solutions to human existence on this planet in all the economic, political, educational, cultural, and organizational realms. As far as the Bahá'í community is concerned, it refers specifically to building a sufficiently large and consolidated Bahá'í world community with its own local, national, and international institutions--a community that, in addition to its direct role, can also offer humanity a working model and provide it with insights into the process of the construction of a new world order.

To do justice to this last theme, a careful examination would have to be made of the very large number of diverse programs that occupy Bahá'ís at any given moment in thousands of villages, towns, and cities under the guidance of more than 140 National Spiritual Assemblies, as well as the systematic measures taken by the World Centre of the Bahá'í Faith to consolidate a well-organized

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5. Shoghi Effendi, Guidance for Today and Tomorrow (London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1953), 167-68.

world community and, at the same time, to familiarize humanity and its leaders with the remedies that the revelation of Bahá'u'lláh offers a suffering society. Such an examination is clearly beyond the scope of this presentation. Instead, I would simply like to examine some of the processes of change that are set in motion in many of the villages of the world as the influence of the Bahá'í teachings expands systematically even to the remotest areas of the planet.

Processes of Change in Villages

There are many ways of seeing and analyzing a village. A convenient way for the purposes of this presentation may be to consider the large number of interacting processes within which the villagers carry out their daily activities and to examine the changes that occur in the corresponding structures. Depending on the nature of the village, it is easy to categorize activities in terms of processes such as various kinds of productive processes, the exchange of goods and marketing, different types of educational processes, a process of technological adaptation or even innovation, socialization, spiritual and religious processes, cultural enrichment, flow of information, and decision-making. Corresponding to each one of these processes, there are important structures, the family, the school, the village council, the market, storehouses, religious organizations, and many other formal and informal organizational patterns. It can easily be seen from the examination of almost any rural area in the world that under the influence of forces (especially from outside the

village) these processes are becoming ineffective; village economy and culture is disintegrating; and the corresponding structures are proving to be inadequate for the exigencies of present-day life, let alone a prosperous and more advanced future. It may prove useful to look at the work of the Bahá'ís in terms of the reorientation and sometimes redefinition of an increasing number of these community processes as well as the construction of viable village structures to be coupled to the national and international institutions of a new world order.

Activities often begin when a number of the inhabitants of a village accept to walk the path of spiritualization offered by the Bahá'í teachings and, with the help of Bahá'ís from nearby villages or towns, establish a Bahá'í community. The first steps for the establishment of such a community, taught by their more experienced friends, involve the organization of the process of decision-making. Within the vision of the Bahá'í Faith, future villages will have a great deal of autonomy in the management of their social, economic, and religious activities. The emphasis on the decision-making process, then, results from the desire to initiate as soon as possible the very hard road that people, traditionall
y ruled by others in almost every aspect of their lives, have to walk in order to become full participants in a world civilization. Three institutions are created to make meaningful participation of the people in their own affairs possible. The first is the nineteen-day feast, celebrated once every nineteen days throughout the Bahá'í world, during which Bahá'ís, in addition to enjoying spiritual enrichment and fellowship, consult on community matters. The second is the Local Spiritual Assembly of nine people elected on a yearly basis and given the task of guiding and serving the community, and the third is a local fund (made up of voluntary and private contributions by Bahá'ís), which is administered by the Local Spiritual Assembly.

Effective participation in these institutions implies, from the beginning, profound changes in the attitudes of the Bahá'ís and the gradual development of many new skills and abilities. The election of the local assembly in itself is now a highly spiritual activity, and Bahá'ís are taught that they need to shun the usual political practices of propaganda, electioneering, and the use of power to influence votes and opinions. The village has to learn to elect those who will guide and serve it with serene thoughtfulness, with prayer, and with dispassionate analysis on the part of each individual voter without interference from others. The community is taught that the elected members of the assembly have no individual position and that the traditional concepts of leadership

must be totally rejected. The decisions of the assembly as a whole are binding, and the members are to consider their election for a year not as a position to be sought, but as a call to service; this is religious duty in the highest sense. The management of a community fund to be spent for the progress of the village is not a task that comes easy to most villages either; a long-term and persistent educational process is always needed to develop the necessary qualities and skills and to build up trust among the community members. Yet another challenge in many villages is the abolition of attitudes of prejudice within sometimes subtle existing social divisions as well as a continuous effort to establish the equality of men and women effectively at the decision-making level. The greatest challenge, however, has to do with the process of decision-making itself through the introduction of what the Bahá'ís call the art of consultation.
At first glance, consultation refers to a set of spiritual qualities, attitudes,
abilities, and skills, as well as rules and procedures, that allow for the frank
and sincere expression of every opinion and for joint exploration of possibilities in order to reach consensus and a common decision. Bahá'ís do not divide themselves into contending groups according to their opinions on issues or problems that confront them. The whole challenge is to see one's opinion as a contribution to group exploration and to do one's best to bring joint decisions to as successful an end as possible. At a deeper level, however, consultation is much more than a simple art of group discussion and self-expression. It is the very backbone of any Bahá'í methodology of community action. It is group action-reflection; it is exploration of reality, experimentation, deliberation on concrete directions of activity as well as the principles and concepts that must guide it; it is raising the level of awareness, community self-diagnosis and self-education.

The first important task given to these local decision-making structures from their very inception is that of the establishment and maintenance of unity. This, however, is not a childish, romantic idea of brotherhood; it is a unity that understands self-interest and conflict but strives to transcend them; it is a unity that must be constantly defended, especially during this period of human history when the most noticeable effects of the disintegrating forces attacking the villages are disunity and division--into sects, political factions, and conflicting groups of every nature divisions that weaken the community and open the doors to exploitation and oppression. Moreover, it is well understood that the maintenance of unity, even in its simplest form, whi
ch involves settling small differences among the inhabitants, points to the principle that the basis of the desired unity is justice. Thus, the local spiritual assemblies, besides being the basic structures of unity, are also the embryonic structures of justice, the local

courts if you wish, and indeed "local house of justice" is the name by which they will come to be known in the future.

Once the basic organizational elements mentioned earlier are in place, and without expecting a very high degree of maturity and effective functioning, the thoughts of the new community and those who help it usually turn towards educational processes. Education often begins with simple classes for the development of spiritual qualities and moral values in children, and gradually grows to include schools of different levels as well as nonformal learning centres. However, it is important not to view these activities as a mere extension of the present educational system of the so-called developed world to developing rural regions. The unbridled process of transfer of technology and education, promoted vigorously by governments and churches during the past decades, has already shown its devastating effects in the creation of a most alarming state of hopelessness, alienation, and confusion among millions of rural youth who see no future for themselves either in the villages or in the marginal neighborhoods of the cities to which they are forced to migrate. It would not be an exaggeration to say that many Bahá'ís all over the world, while acutely aware of the great value of education, show profound disagreement with present educational practices. At the same time, it is understood by all that Bahá'í education has not yet come into existence and must be developed by the painstaking work of a few generations. Some of the features of the future system, however, can already be discerned.

The educational objectives that are being sought are integration of the spiritual and the material, the theoretical and the practical, the technical and the social, the sense of individual progress with service to the community at large, all these as opposed to the increasingly fragmented educational content of the present-day systems. The form of education is also to undergo profound change, become more participative and less autocratic, more consultative and based on joint exploration of nature and social reality. There is, moreover, an extremely strong emphasis on excellence, but not excellence exclusively for the children born to certain social classes. The educational system being sought will foster social justice and will fulfil all the requirements of universal education.

An important characteristic of the process of search for this new and universal education is that the corresponding efforts are well scattered throughout the world among diverse peoples and cultures. It does not seem at all, then, that this future education will be the brainchild of a few groups of educationalists carrying out research in isolated centers and universities. While there is a great deal of room for such research, the search for new education is taking more and more the form of a popular movement with roots in the most diverse set of lifestyles, consisting of an

increasing number of formal and nonformal learning programs in which incremental progress is made and very small, often unnoticeable innovations are introduced by practitioners who may be highly educated or barely literate. A well-connected network of local and national communities, to the extent that it becomes consolidated, collects the knowledge that is being generated, analyzes and tests, conceptualizes, and slowly gains insights into the nature of a totally new educational process.

As educational activities, even in their most rudimentary form, get under way, the scope of activities in the villages is expanded to take on other processes

and structures such as health, housing, production, and infrastructure. Again, a detailed examination of the principles governing these activities is beyond the scope of this presentation, but I would like to discuss production, mostly because it sheds light on some of the more difficult challenges of the process of social transformation, which will have to be increasingly faced by Bahá'ís, both in villages and in urban centres. In order to do so, I would first like to mention very briefly some of the characteristics of what is usually called the peasant mode of production.

Alternative Economies

The first serious attempts to understand peasant economies seemed to have followed a model of an ideal type of peasant family that almost exclusively produces for its own consumption and for the reproduction of its own productive conditions. Later studies have clearly shown that such a model is too simplistic and that it hardly applies to even the remotest rural areas of today's society. Those who study rural societies now tend to look at peasant populations as highly heterogenous with diverse groups of people from full-time farmers to landless labourers, all engaged in a very complex set of interactions with the state, the private sector, and the market. However, in spite of this heterogeneity, a few important characteristics of their mode of agricultural production seems to persist even through the last few decades of accelerated change. There is a definite tendency in peasant economies towards self-sufficiency, a capacity to produce goods both for consumption and the market with a clear emphasis on the reproduction and the improvement of the conditions of production rather than on accumulation as an end in itself. There is a high awareness of risks and a tradition of the optimal use of local resources, coupled to a concrete set of activities to conserve resources. Peasant production systems all value diversity of species and include a very complex management of time and space unlike most monoculture systems of

commercial agriculture. The utilization of family labour on one's own farm and on others' follows a far more complex logic than simple wage earning, work is a social process that has inherent in it interchanges with other families, a concept of reciprocity and social responsibility, and usually a deep commitment to the community. What the researchers in this field tell us then is that there is a logic to this mode of production quite different from the logic of a commercial agriculture based on the rate of return on investment, or that of an agricultural operation planned by the state to produce cheap and abundant food for urban areas and industrial workers.

My purpose here is clearly not the defense of peasant economies, which at best offer meager subsistence to people, but I would like to make two points on the basis of this short description. The first is that economies with different "logics" are quite possible, and the only choices open to humanity are not the capitalist and socialist modes of production, both of which are products of two or three hundred years in the history of the European people. There is no doubt that peasant economies are defective and that there is no use romanticizing present and past peasant societies. But why should a mature humanity not be able to develop an economy with a totally new logic that is not based on greed or false precepts of absolute equality, that allows reasonable freedom yet promotes and safeguards justice? Moreover, why should the village Bahá'ís, in

their attempt to move forward, follow dreams of false modernization and become converted to the logic of one of the two dominant world ideologies?

This is exactly the second point I would like to emphasize. The best option for the villagers is indeed to understand the strengths and weaknesses of their own past and present economic system and then move forward and build on their own strengths. In doing so, they would incorporate into their schemes certain structures such as the village store with its unique functions in the abolition of extremes of wealth and poverty, as described in the writings of the Bahá'í Faith. Other elements may be borrowed from capitalism or socialism. The majority of the structures, however, would have to be discovered through a long process of experimentation and in conjunction with the changes that they gradually bring about in important processes of community life other than production. Their search for the elements of a new village economy, it should be remembered, is only meaningful when it is seen as a contribution to the larger global effort to discover a world economy entirely different from the present one, not only in its operation but also in its very logic and underlying purposes.

Knowledge and Structural Change

As a village community consolidates, its institutions develop the capacity to work on more and more of the processes of community life, and to establish and strengthen the corresponding structures. It is important, however, not to confuse this entire transformation process with what is usually known as the community development approach to rural development. Ours are not attempts to organize the poor in order to make integration into the present world system easier. To repeat what has already been said, the Bahá'í attempt is to set in motion a process of profound change both in the individual and in social structures; this implies very different attitudes towards the present order than community development programs have usually shown and involves a totally different set of challenges. I would like to conclude by discussing one of these challenges related to the process of generation, accumulation, and application of knowledge.

Any theory of change, if it claims to be a significant departure from current theories, must have its own theory of knowledge. The Bahá'í writings are rich in the detailed discussion of the question of knowledge, its sources, its nature, the limitations of human knowledge, and some of the mechanisms and conditions for its validation and accumulation. A discussion of a theory of knowledge based on the Bahá'í teachings is well beyond my abilities and beyond the limits of this conference. Yet, it is important to remember that in all kinds of activities mentioned here, Bahá'ís are explicitly working at important changes in the process and the structures of knowledge generation. Just to take the case of technological knowledge, where much of the flow today is from centres in the North to the people in the South, there is a clear tendency among Bahá'í programs to respect the technological logic and the knowledge base of all people. Villagers who become Bahá'ís are taught to look at their own past with more confidence. This becomes the starting point for the creation and the recreation of structures for the cultural expression of a people.

The best known example of such efforts in recent years is the establishment of a number of radio stations in rural areas of South America. These stations

are not by any means instruments for the extension of dominant cultures (as conventional stations are) but are embryonic structures for the recuperation, systematization, and the subsequent progress of the entire knowledge base and culture of the inhabitants of a region. This represents a very different pattern of knowledge generation than one depending entirely on a selected group of elite in certain more developed countries and an elaborate machinery of extension and education to take the corresponding fruits to the rest of humanity.

Bahá'ís tend to speak a great deal about the principle of universal participation. What is important to understand is that the principle has great implications for the process of generation and socialization of knowledge, as well as the many other processes that constitute different aspects of both the spiritual transformation of the individual and the organic change in present-day social structures. This, however, is by itself a vast subject that merits careful examination on another occasion.

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