

Challenge to Chaos: The Mission of the Baha'i Faith

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The Mission of the Bahá'í Faith

Horace Holley

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BECAUSE WE ARE GATHERED HERE in the Bahá'í house of Worship, dedicated to the Unity of God, the Unity of His Prophets and the Unity of Mankind, it seems befitting to summarize the mission of Bahá'u'lláh in accordance with these three essential truths.

The Unity of God

What do we mean by the "Unity of God"? Who is God? What is God? Where is God?

We look out into the measureless universe that transcends all our human notions of time and area. God is not there.

We examine all the manifold aspects of life in our earthly home — we probe into the psychology, the philosophy of the human heart. God is not there.

God the Omniscient. God the Omnipotent. God the Source of Love, is known by His Creation, through the signs of His wisdom and power, but we human beings do not know God nor shall we ever behold

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Him in His Essence, because man is a created reality, and the created cannot contain the reality of the Creator.

We have a sign of the Unity of God in that, the scientists tell us, this universe is dominated and controlled by one Will. There is no duality in the universe because it is all under the governance of the one supreme Being. There is no principle of evil, although, through absence of good, people have created within their souls that gloomy vacuum we call evil.

To understand this duality let us think of the distinction between light and darkness.

Any man who has been lost on a dark night feels that darkness is a positive force. It stabs into one's eyes, it oppresses one's heart, it seems to stretch out hands to seize one as he struggles to find the path. Then! one ray of light and there is no darkness! Darkness is the absence of light. It is not an independent force.

Therefore there are not two principles in the universe — there is but one. But men, having free will, can withhold obedience and understanding, and then life becomes like that of a pilot whose ship suddenly

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flies through a vacuum. You cannot float an airship on a vacuum and you cannot rest a human life on the absence of good. The airship crashes, and the evil man goes to ruin.

But the searcher does not find God in the physical universe. There is but one revealer of God to the human heart — His Prophet. His Manifestation.

In majestic words we find this mystery unfolded in the writings of Bahá'u'lláh,

"Praise be to God, the All-Possessing, the King of incomparable glory, a praise which is immeasurably above the understanding of all created things, and is exalted beyond the grasp of the minds of men." [1]

"A sprinkling from the unfathomed deep of His sovereign and all-pervasive Will hath out of utter nothingness, called into being a creation which is infinite in range and deathless in its duration. The wonders of His bounty can never cease, and the stream of His merciful grace can never be arrested. The process of His creation hath had no beginning, and can have no end." [2]

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Unity of the Prophets

"The door of the knowledge of the Ancient Being hath ever been, and will continue forever to be, closed in the face of men. No man's understanding shall ever gain access unto His holy court. As a token of His mercy, however, and as a proof of His loving-kindness, He hath manifested unto men the Day Stars of His divine guidance, the symbols of His divine unity, and hath ordained the knowledge of these sanctified Beings to be identical with His own Self. Whoso recognizeth them hath recognized God. Whoso hearkeneth to their call, hath hearkened to the Voice of God, and whoso testifieth to the truth of their Revelation, hath testified to the truth of God Himself. Whoso turneth away from them, hath turned away from God, and whoso disbelieveth in them, hath disbelieved in God. Every one of them is the Way of God that connecteth this world with the realms above, and the Standard of His Truth unto every one in the kingdoms of earth and heaven. They are the manifestations of God amidst men, the evidences of His Truth, and the signs of His glory."

The Prophet or Manifestation of God

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comes to this earth as the instrument of the Divine Will. He is the instrument of Omniscience and Omnipotence and what He says or what He writes — His message has the power behind it of the Divine Will. We human beings have betrayed ourselves in thinking that because the physical body of the Manifestation can be tortured; can be exiled; can be crucified, that in human will there is a way to overcome the Will of God. The test is one we impose upon ourselves. Because the sign of God in this world is the unique power of the Prophet to rekindle the extinct spirit of faith in the soul. Faith is not belief in a formula. Faith is a realization of the Will of the Omniscient and the Omnipotent. The realization that there has been made a connection through the Prophets between man and God. And faith, when it is quickened in the soul, is a new and higher realm of human being.

No one can do the work of the Prophet of God in quickening the soul and no one but the Prophet can be a point of unity to bring together into reconciliation and fellowship the hosts of the peoples of the world. We have had many forms of unity

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aside from faith, although every form of unity began, no doubt, as an aspect of faith, in the beginning. We have unity of race, unity of class, unity of nations and unity of creeds, and if you look at the world in which we live today I think you'll honestly agree with me that these forms of limited unity which operate outside faith in the universal Will of God, are actually instruments of disunity and violence. The only unity is the common experience of faith, in which man sees himself as the child of God and sees all other men as the children of God and therefore could not lift his hand against them because it would be against the will of God.

Why are there so many diverse religious systems each derived from a Prophet of the past?

The first generations of believers believe in God. They believe in the power of the Divine Will. They feel themselves caught up in a spiritual world and they give their lives and their fortunes because nothing that they have as human beings is commensurate with what they have been given by the Grace of God — immortality and joy. But as time goes on and the person

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of the Prophet recedes, the values begin to change. 'Abdu'l-Bahá described this as the succession of the seasons: the Prophet is the springtime, the Renewer of life, the Germinator of all the seeds of the past; and then you have your fruitful summer, and your harvest; and then the winter of unfaith. And therefore if we seek the reason for the diversity of systems in the world today we can only find it here in that, to the degree that any religious system differs from the original teachings of its own prophet, it will necessarily differ from other religious systems who also have repudiated much of the value

of their own Manifestation. They differ from each other because they differ from the standard of truth that was given them by God Himself. The prophetic teachings are not the foundation of human life today — their values, their truths, their principles, their devotion, their ardor — and therefore human life to day is menaced with destruction.

Now, Bahá'u'lláh brings us a new teaching. It is the teaching that the Prophet returns to this earth at intervals of approximately one thousand years, more or less — returns to this world in order to

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revive the extinct spirit of faith. And therefore the history of religion is the coming of many great Prophets. But alas! their followers have all said that their own Prophet was different and superior and therefore there could be no reconciliation with the people who were equally loyal to some other Prophet.

Bahá'u'lláh proclaimed this majestic truth — that in their inmost being, in their functions as Manifestations of God, in their powers and attributes — the Prophets are one! So that when Jesus came, He was Moses, and the people who did not accept Him did not accept Moses, because their idea of Moses was not Moses. It was their conception. And when the western world refused to accept Muhammad, the Bahá'ís say that in His inmost being He was also Christ. That is the test that God imposes — it is not ours. No human power could devise a test like that — that a great Being comes into this world at intervals, different in body, different in family name, different in circumstances, but with the same inner spirit. So that in reality there is but one continuous, eternal faith of God in this world.

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but it goes through stages of evolution because with this teaching of oneness the Bahá'ís also say religion is progressive.

That is to say, the human race is evolving; new powers and capacities unfold from age to age. There was a childhood of primitive man; there was youth; and now we enter the great age of maturity. So that we say that the Bahá'í message has revealed God more fully than the Prophets of the past because the trend required and had capacity for a greater revelation. Today religion is for humanity — not for one isolated race. At the time that Jesus walked upon this earth they did not even know that North and South America existed. Marco Polo made his journey to China and return from Italy in the eleventh century. So you see the limited world that those people around the Mediterranean Sea were aware of, and Christ gave them all of the truth that those peoples had capacity to receive. He was not limited. He sacrificed Himself to raise the people from that degree to a higher degree, so that this eternal process of spiritual evolution can go forward age after age, world without end.

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We must also realize that with the evolution of man from stage to stage, from

immaturity to maturity, his problems become more complicated with every successive cycle and the reason for the confusion in the world today is that so many people are trying to solve today's problems with the truths that were adapted to the past. I don't mean a truth like "Love thy neighbor as thyself" except that the word "neighbor" doesn't mean what it did a thousand years ago. But the social complications, the intricate relationships of human beings to politics, economics and culture, these raise problems which human beings can only solve by the teachings of their own day. So Bahá'u'lláh has come with a teaching for humanity, and a social order. The Prophets before Him could have brought the teachings for humanity, but there was no humanity. There were races, classes, nations and creeds. Humanity has just been born. And have we ever stopped to think that the unity of mankind is demonstrated by its present condition of interdependence? We can't get away. We are completely interdependent, and the first sign — the tragic sign — of man's capacity to

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enter one common faith is that we have already had one great emotional experience together — the whole human race. You say "What experience"? and I say "anguish." Anguish is the experience that has sought out and taken hold of people everywhere. It may not be the anguish of the American family who had sons in this war or that war; it may not be the anguish of Europe; but it is anguish, and anguish is the first of the purification of the human spirit.

We do not think deeply enough about religion. We bring religion down to human nature. Religion isn't human nature. Religion is God's Will, but God's Will so offered to human beings that that Will can penetrate and reinforce their will and raise them up into a new condition; unfold latent powers and attributes. That is religion.

The Unity of Mankind

Now we will speak about the unity of mankind.

From outer evidence nothing could be more impossible. Mankind is divided all the ways there are to divide. If there are

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any new ways we'll find them out tomorrow morning. They are not only divided in feeling, in thought, in habits, in actions, political interests, economic interests, and ever' in worship — people are not merely divided, they are armed! So our repudiation of the prophetic law carried forward generation after generation has come to its climax, in the two great armed camps into which humanity is divided in this hour — each capable of manipulating the laws of science and technology, to invent new and better ways of slaying multitudes of people with the pressure of one button. That is our world, and collectively all are responsible for it — we and our fathers. Because it didn't happen in a decade; it didn't happen in twenty or fifty or a hundred years — it slowly developed until the opportunity for this violence was handed to the spirit of unfaith in the human heart.

How, then, can one speak of the unity of mankind?

You remember, perhaps, that in the Qur'an, Muhammad spoke of Himself as the Seal of the Prophets. Among the people of Islam that is taken to mean that therefore He is the last of the Prophets. There

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will be no Prophet ever again, because He is the "Seal" of the Prophets.

The Bahá'í teachings throw that concept into a better perspective. We have lived through what is termed the "Prophetic Era," the era of preparation, the preliminary development of man's spiritual being, and each Prophet of the past gave a sign of assurance that the day would come when the Will of God would prevail over the entire earth, but not in His own day. He gave assurance that the day would come but not now, that is, the "now" of the Prophet. So those days of preparation, those ages, are called "The Prophetic Era." What Muhammad accomplished was to end the Prophetic Era and the Prophet after Him inaugurated the Dispensation of Reality; of understanding. Things are no longer veiled and symbolized; things are no longer kept secret among the occult few; truth is poured out for the whole world, and any man who climbs the ladder of truth can become an angel. He may be blacking your boots today and an angel tomorrow. Don't despise any man because of his economic condition, because God loves us all and He knows the qualities within the heart and

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He can use some very, very odd people that you and I would never select.

in this day of maturity, the problem of survival is the problem of cooperation and peace. That is where we stand. We cannot survive economically, politically nor physically with an extension of the present crisis many, many years more. What is the starting point toward unity? The starting point toward unity is unity with God; obedience to Divine Will; recognition of His Messenger; love for His Message and understanding of His sublime truth. That is the beginning. You say it's impossible?

Now, if we turn to the physical sciences we find that no matter how hard and resisting a material may be, the scientists can always find a way to overcome its resistance. Perhaps they find an element that will eat it away or a degree of heat that can melt it. Nothing is impossible any longer in the world of substance.

In the world of the soul, forces operate which are far beyond our understanding. All social movements are working toward the victory of a universal Faith. God employs the good and the evil alike as instruments for the victory of His plan of

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unity- Not what the press acclaims as important from day to day, hut the release of the Holy Spirit is the transcendent matter with which we are all

concerned.

The longer we resist its imperative call to unity, the more we will devise means of suffering for mankind, but we cannot turn back the Holy Spirit nor deny its ultimate achievement. God has expressed His Will through Bahá'u'lláh. His omnipotence and omniscience are its assurance.

The Holy Spirit has been working upon the human race since 1844. That is the reason why men are again concerned with religion. They feel the Presence but associate it with their own Prophet of a thousand years ago.

The starting point of unity is unity with God. But every man who turns to God turns with new eyes to his fellow-men. And there's a nucleus of people forming all around the world who love humanity; who understand that we're going through a new stage of development and they are prepared to accept the principle order. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá said, principle today is to extend the principle of federation until it of a new the great American embraces

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the nations of the world. He said that in 1912 in the United States.

What is the obstacle? Many people say, "Oh, these great powerful institutions with vested interests!" But there's nothing weaker than institutions. The only thing that has any strength is human beings. The obstacle, my friends, is simply that ever)' child is born with a spirit from God, with a soul, latent, undeveloped, feeble; he may not even be aware of it, but it's there, because it's God's gift to every human being. That little child, growing up, then comes under a racial culture, family influence, all kinds of indoctrination, the fanciful sociological notions of his particular day, or a theology. And then what happens is that around those God-given powers we have a thin but hard cover that prevents that child from reaching out to God. And that child's infinite spiritual treasure is wasted on secondary matters that have no reference to God whatsoever. They're human schemes and devices.

God is giving us an experience that is going to crack through the hard shell of indoctrination and reduce every human being to the degree of his elemental human

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self, and then those gifts will be released and after the trend toward peace begins to be more consciously arrayed, many, many thousands and millions will say "Oh, thank God, it's come!" because God has given us a hunger for righteousness and peace. We do not prefer war. Wars are the institutionalization of human society. And institutions are quite necessary. We have to extend them until they serve mankind as a whole.

"O kings of the earth! He who is the sovereign Lord of all is come. The Kingdom is God's the omnipotent Protector, the Self-subsisting. Worship none but God, and, with radiant hearts, lift up your faces unto your Lord, the Lord of all Names. This is a Revelation to which, whatever ye possess, can never be

compared, could ye but know it."[4]

"Wash from your hearts all earthly defilements, and hasten to enter the Kingdom of your Lord, the Creator of earth and heaven, Who caused the world to tremble and all its peoples to wail except them that have renounced all things and clung to that which the Hidden Tablet hath ordained."[5]

While the fundamental mission of the

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Bahá'í Faith is to reverse the human trend toward violence and inspire mankind with the spirit of universal peace, the teachings establish landmarks along the path to spiritual understanding. One landmark is the application of Divine Law to rulers and governments as well as to the mass of human beings. One is the command that no follower of Bahá'u'lláh is to engage in political affairs nor take part in any seditious movement. Obedience to government is incumbent upon Bahá'ís, including the civil authorities of countries where they may travel or reside, in addition to their native land.

Already there are Bahá'ís in more than two hundred thirty countries and territorial divisions, the actual demonstration of the power of unity manifested through the Prophet by the Divine Will.

All doors to security and progress are closed except that which opens upon the new world of Revelation. Truth has become law, and the power of Law is Omnipotence.

This last passage from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh is addressed to every human soul. It strips the veils of superstition and self-interest from all people.

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"Tear asunder, in My Name, the veils that have grievously blinded your vision, and, through the power born of your belief in the unity of God, scatter the idols of vain imitation. Enter, then, the holy paradise of the good pleasure of the All-Merciful. Sanctify your souls from whatsoever is not of God, and taste ye the sweetness of rest within the pale of His vast and mighty Revelation, and beneath the shadow of His supreme and infallible authority. Suffer not yourselves to be wrapped in the dense veils of your selfish desires, inasmuch as I have perfected in every one of you My creation, so that the excellence of My handiwork may be fully revealed unto men. It follows, therefore, that every man hath been, and will continue to be, able of himself to appreciate the beauty of God, the Glorified. Had he not been endowed with such a capacity, how could he be called - to account for his failure? . . . For the faith of no man can be conditioned by any one except himself."[6]

Public address delivered in Bahá'í Temple Foundation Hall, Wilmette, Illinois, August 26, 1954.

Notes:

Gleanings, p.60;

ibid., p. 61;

ibid., pp. 49-50;

ibid., p. 210;

ibid., p. 210;

ibid., p. 143.

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