

The Baha'i Faith: A Future-Oriented Religion

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A Future-Oriented Religion

Arthur Lyon Dahl

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The Bahá'í Faith, founded in Persia in the mid-nineteenth century but now established around the world as the second most geographically widespread religion after Christianity, is remarkable among the major religious traditions for the emphasis it places on future society and the influence of present actions on future generations. It explicitly appeals to those who care for the future of the human race, and aims to build a new world fit for our descendants. (1)

The concept of an evolutionary progression over time is fundamental to the Bahá'í perspective. For example, all the major religions are seen as steps in a progressive revelation of Divine Will, with each renewing the fundamental spiritual truths of all religion, while bringing social teachings adapted to the needs of its particular time and place.

The teachings of Bahá'u'lláh are seen as the most recent step in this progression, providing guidance to resolve the particular challenges of today and to lay the spiritual foundations for a coming world civilization. Thus for Bahá'ís, there is no exclusivity or finality in religion, and further Divine teachers are expected, at intervals of roughly one thousand years, as necessary for our continuing social and spiritual evolution.

In the Bahá'í view, just as nature is marked by many cyclical phenomena, such as seasons and life cycles, so has society seen the rise and fall of many past civilizations, accompanying the gradually increasing scales of social organization and unity from the family to the nation. Today, we are experiencing the difficult transition from a world of sovereign nation states to a unified world society. Our suffering is like the birth-pangs of a new civilization. Bahá'u'lláh wrote over a hundred years ago: "Soon will the present-day order be rolled up, and a new one spread out in its stead." (2) The world is in fact experiencing the end of a long cycle of religious prophecy about the future and the

beginning of a cycle of fulfilment, which the Christians refer to as the coming of God's kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. This cycle, the fruit of the physical unity of the human race, which Bahá'u'lláh anticipated and which science and technology are now making possible, will extend for at least 500,000 years. We are, in a sense, in the final stages of the turbulent adolescence of the human race, on the verge of our collective adulthood and maturity. As the institutions of a divided world collapse, and the material philosophies that have dominated our century demonstrate their failure to bring happiness and well-being to the majority of humanity, Bahá'ís see it as essential to lay new moral and spiritual foundations for the civilization that will inevitably be born out of this period of turmoil, and that will guarantee a better life of justice and peace for future generations.

The Bahá'í community condemns in no uncertain terms the short-sightedness and moral bankruptcy of our present society, referring to our callously abandoning "starving millions to the operations of a market system that all too clearly is aggravating the plight of the majority of mankind" and our "inability... to exorcise the spectre of war, the threatened collapse of the international economic order, the spread of anarchy and terrorism, and the intense suffering which these and other afflictions are causing to increased millions", and calling to account "those who preach the dogmas of materialism, whether of the east or the west, whether of capitalism or socialism." (1)

There is also in the Bahá'í teachings a clear vision of the future society that is already taking embryonic form even as the old order collapses. "Unification of the whole of mankind is the hall-mark of the stage which human society is now approaching. Unity of family, of tribe, of city-state, and nation have been successively attempted and fully established. World unity is the goal towards which a harassed humanity is striving. Nation-building has come to an end. The anarchy inherent in state sovereignty is moving towards a climax. A world, growing to maturity, must abandon this fetish, recognize the oneness and wholeness of human relationships, and establish once for all the machinery that can best incarnate this fundamental principle of its life." (3) To achieve this, a series of evolutionary steps are envisaged, from the relatively rapid agreement on a political peace between nations, through the gradual spiritualization of societies around the world, to the achievement of a world commonwealth and the flowering in centuries to come of a rich and diverse world civilization in a golden age, before the continuing development of new potentials and the inevitable loss of momentum and deterioration in any human system require another process of spiritual renewal.

There are too many concrete proposals in the Bahá'í Writings concerning the pattern for future society to be able to cite more than a few here. Bahá'u'lláh called for a federated world government with the means of collective security and decision-making necessary to prevent war between nations and to manage the resources of the planet for the benefit of all peoples. This would be balanced against a decentralized,

organic social and administrative structure that would encourage human diversity, responsibility and individual initiative. He said the nations should agree on an international auxiliary language to facilitate communications

and understanding between all peoples. He called for a spiritual solution to economic problems, with the elimination of extremes of wealth and poverty, equality of men and women, and the harmony of science and religion. He emphasized the importance of marriage and the family, because it is within the family that children are first educated. There is such emphasis on the importance of universal education for future generations that, if there are insufficient means to educate all the children, then preference should be given to educating girls, because they will then be able to pass on their knowledge to their own children, and the progress of future generations will be more rapid.

Bahá'u'lláh warned a hundred years ago about the hazards to the planet of too much material development. "The civilization, so often vaunted by the learned exponents of arts and sciences, will, if allowed to overleap the bounds of moderation, bring great evil upon men...." (4) Environmental problems and their future consequences are thus of major concern to Bahá'ís, who appreciate the relationships and interdependence of all created things and the importance of preserving the ecological balance of the planet. (5) One of the major responsibilities of a future world society will be to organize the economic resources of the world, tap and fully utilize its raw materials, and regulate the equitable distribution of its products. It is no wonder that a recent statement of the Bahá'í International Community calls for a determined campaign to implement Agenda 21, the action plan for sustainable development adopted at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. (6)

It is natural in this context that Bahá'ís see their individual efforts as directed towards improving the world that future generations will inherit. For each Bahá'í, religion is not only a means to his or her own spiritual perfection and refinement of character, but also a means of service to others in contributing to an ever-advancing civilization. The central focus of life is not self-interest, but the good of the whole, both present and future. In fact, it is the central spiritual impulse of all religion, turning away from the self in love towards the unknown outside of us, that provides the real motivation for human progress (rather than the invisible hand of cumulative self interest so central to western economics). By learning to love rather than fear the unknown, an individual is motivated to explore the unknown potential in his or her own self, to appreciate the unknown possibilities and qualities in others, and to push forward the frontiers of science, technical invention and social progress. The golden rule of all religious traditions is extended in the Bahá'í Faith to preferring others to oneself, in the recognition that the good of any part depends on the good of the whole. Bahá'u'lláh likened humanity to a human body, where the suffering of any one member

or organ is the suffering of the whole. This sense of justice and solidarity with others applies both in space and in time, such that Bahá'ís will willingly make present sacrifices for the benefit of the future.

The central focus of the Bahá'í teachings is thus on providing the spiritual foundations for the oneness of humankind, with the abolition of all forms of prejudice and appreciation of our unity in diversity. This oneness extends not only to the geographic, racial and cultural diversity of humanity in space, but to the temporal diversity of our progression into the future. All peoples are challenged to draw on their collective inheritance to take up, consciously and systematically, the responsibility for the design of their future, a future whose beneficiaries must be all of the planet's inhabitants. (7)

The highest station that an individual can achieve is that of service to others. As generations are educated in this way, altruism will increasingly replace the self-centredness of today. The logical implication of this Bahá'í moral and ethical perspective is that the present generation, and particularly those individuals and societies that are wealthy, should voluntarily sacrifice some of their immediate advantages, restrain their appetites, and share of their wealth to ensure a stable and productive future for humanity on this planet. This future should be seen as sustainable over half a million years, equivalent to at least 20,000 future generations. While it may take centuries to see the full fruits of this fundamental transformation in human society, those alive at present have a moral and spiritual obligation to live in ways that advance the realization of this future vision.

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* Arthur Lyon Dahl has a Ph.D in Biology from the University of California, and is presently Deputy Assistant Executive Director, Environmental Information and Assessment, United Nations Environment Programme. He is the author of many publications including Unless and Until: A Bahá'í Focus on the Environment. The views expressed are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect those of the United Nations Environment Programme.

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