

THE VISION OF THE BAHÁ'Í FAITH

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ALL RELIGIONS OFFER some sort of ultimate vision for the future. Usually these visions are conveyed in symbol or myth; for example, the four beasts of the Apocalypse of St John are mythological images that have been interpreted and reinterpreted by Christians for thousands of years. Eschewing myth, the Qur'an offers images of mountains crushed to dust and heavens cleft in two when the Day of Judgement comes.¹ It has long been the task of theologians, religious leaders, or even the rank-and-file believers themselves to offer scenarios explaining how the myths or symbols will be played out in history.

The Bahá'í faith is no different in that its scriptures² contain symbols and images of uncertain meaning and that the Bahá'í community has often constructed scenarios of future events to explain them. The Bahá'í scriptures, however, are different from the Bible and Qur'an in that their vision of the future is more concrete and this-worldly; they envision a peaceful, united human society, built on this earth primarily by human hands. And they claim to provide the blueprint that guides the construction.

A comparison of the Bahá'í concept of the future with Christian visions of the kingdom of God on earth reveals both similarities and differences. In the nineteenth century Protestants found it convenient to divide their scenarios of the end of times into two major types. Many views were *postmillennialist*: they believed the millennium, or age of human happiness and perfection, would result from the process of building human civilization and culture, and Christ would return only after that process was complete. These scenarios tended to be very optimistic about humanity's perfectibility – for humanity would largely perfect itself – and thus were usually associated with liberal Protestants. Other views were *premillennialist*: they argued that humanity, burdened by sin, was not perfectible and only Christ's return and direct intervention would make the millennium possible. In the nineteenth century premillennial views were the minority and often were linked to extreme ideas, such as setting exact dates of Christ's return. But two world wars and the repeated failure of social programmes inspired by liberal Protestant ideals destroyed the optimism behind the postmillennial views. Simultaneously the premillennial scenarios have become more sophisticated. Consequently the latter dominate popular Christianity in the late twentieth century.

The Bahá'í vision contains elements from both approaches; or, to be more exact, it has a premillennial framework but draws many postmillennial conclusions. Bahá'u'lláh made the remarkable claim that He was the promised one of all the world's religions and was the return of Jesus Christ.³ He claimed that all the world's religions have promised a time when the swords will be beaten into ploughshares and peace will reign on earth, and that these prophecies refer to His dispensation. The promises will find concrete fulfilment when humanity accepts Bahá'u'lláh's revelation, internalizes it and implements it, thereby reforming society and culture.

The Bahá'í vision, thus, is 'premillennial' in that Christ must return – in the form of Bahá'u'lláh – before the millennium can be established. But the millennium will not be actualized through divine fiat, voiced by Christ and enacted by angels; it is heavily dependent on human effort. Thus there is an element of 'postmillennial' optimism in the Bahá'í vision as well. The Bahá'í concept of humanity certainly does not deny the evil human beings are capable of inflicting; no theology in the nuclear age can deny it. But the Bahá'í scriptures argue that a new divine revelation has set forces in motion that transcend human society, and that human beings are capable of enough transformation to play a significant role in bringing about the millennium.

The name the Bahá'í scriptures give the millennium itself constitutes a description of it: the Most Great Peace or, in Arabic, *solh-i-akbar*. It will be a time when humanity will not be divided by barriers of race, nationality or religion. The Bahá'í scriptures do not define precisely how much of the effort to create the Most Great Peace will come from Bahá'ís, though the scriptures state the revelation of Bahá'u'lláh will be foundational to its creation. The Most Great Peace is preceded by the Lesser Peace (Arabic, *solh-i-asghar*), a time when nations will have implemented tentative mechanisms for ending war and fostering a world economy. The establishment of the Lesser Peace is a task not of the Bahá'í community, but of the governments of the world. The Bahá'í writings clearly suggest that the process whereby the Lesser Peace is instituted may be extremely tumultuous.

Principles Defining the Most Great Peace

The Most Great Peace may be further characterized by describing the Bahá'í principles on which it is to be based. Centrally important to understanding the Most Great Peace is the Bahá'í concept of the oneness of humankind. It has been described as 'the pivot round which all the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh revolve'.⁴ The oneness of humankind is not simply a call to recognize the biological fact of our common origin as a single species, nor is it a mere plea that we all must love and assist each other. Both are aspects of the oneness of humankind, and are as yet inadequately understood and practised. Rather, the oneness of humankind goes

beyond both. It necessitates the inculcating of new attitudes of tolerance and the appreciation of diversity in the consciousness of the body politic and all of humanity. It requires the creation of an almost mystical understanding of our common humanity, an innate sense of responsibility towards all and, above all, a faculty of the conscience that evaluates every idea and action, of one's own or of others, based on its impact on all. Inculcating a consciousness of the oneness of humankind is a specific goal of the Bahá'í faith, implemented through its literature and educational programmes; it is an element of faith inculcated in every believer. In the Bahá'í faith it is concretely demonstrated through support for interracial marriages and through the creating of ethnically and racially diverse local Bahá'í communities.⁵ Many passages in the Bahá'í scriptures offer symbolic descriptions of the oneness of humankind, such as this one:

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.⁶

In addition to implying the oneness of the races, the oneness of humankind implies equality of the sexes. Bahá'u'lláh Himself, though living in the late nineteenth-century Middle East, emphasized that women should have equal access to education and should receive training for a vocation. 'Abdu'l-Bahá added that should a family be forced to choose between educating a son and a daughter they should choose the latter. In 1912 He stated that in the future women would become equals to men at all levels of service to humankind, even as heads of state.⁷ Bahá'í communities have a long history of striving to foster equality of men and women, and women have served on Bahá'í governing bodies since these were first created at the beginning of the twentieth century.

The oneness of humankind also implies a single future for all of humanity. The Bahá'í scriptures describe the human species as steadily ascending a ladder of social evolution that has led to larger and larger social units. Today, with instantaneous communication and efficient global transport, the logical social unit is no longer the nation or the empire, but the entire world. A global society is a key element in the Bahá'í scriptures' vision of the future:

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 . . . a world executive . . . [and] a world tribunal . . . A world metropolis will act as the nerve center 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 . . . 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 cooperate, and will harmoniously develop . . . 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.⁸

A key mechanism for converting the ideal of the oneness of humankind into a social reality is the Bahá'í concept of consultation. Consultation is not a single Bahá'í principle, but a collection of Bahá'í principles and concepts about the nature and purpose of communication and decision making. Consultation includes principles concerning people: that all are capable of finding truth and that all must be empowered to contribute to the decision-making process. In order to encourage all to contribute, an environment of sharing, of tolerance yet frankness, of detachment from one's own opinions, and of prayer must be created. All must feel respected and free to contribute. Consultation involves principles about truth itself: that all ideas contain elements of truth and thus must be affirmed even if their eventual contribution is limited. It includes principles regarding the group process: that after one has contributed an idea to the group it is the group's property, and therefore one need not feel an obligation to advocate the idea or defend it if someone proposes a modification to it. Bahá'ís have been struggling to internalize and express these principles in their Bahá'í community life and in their contributions to society for over a century. A world based on such principles would be one where race, sex, and ethnicity would not be barriers to equal contribution to the betterment of humanity; a world where tyranny would be forever banished and where freedom of thought and conscience could reign.

No sketch of the Bahá'í vision of the future would be complete without some mention of the Bahá'í concept of justice. Bahá'u'lláh links justice to the future when He says that 'the purpose of justice is the appearance of unity among men'.⁹ A unified world is impossible unless it is a just world. Bahá'ís see the Lesser Peace as a time when social mechanisms for creating justice will steadily improve. However, Bahá'u'lláh created a special institution, the house of justice, to be established by Bahá'ís in every locality, every nation, and at the world-wide level. The latter body, the Universal House of Justice, Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá envisioned as playing a key role in the eventual establishment of justice in the world, especially during the Most Great Peace. Already governments have occasionally turned to the Universal House of Justice for advice, a practice Bahá'ís expect will increase greatly in the future.¹⁰

Future Stages in the Development of Humankind

The division of the human future into two stages – the Lesser Peace and the Most Great Peace – is further nuanced by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in a famous work of His called the ‘Seven Candles of Unity’:

The first candle is unity in the political realm, the early glimmerings of which can now be discerned. The second candle is unity of thought in world undertakings, the consummation of which will ere long be witnessed. The third candle is unity in freedom which will surely come to pass. The fourth candle is unity in religion which is the corner-stone of the foundation itself, and which, by the power of God, will be revealed in all its splendour. The fifth candle is the unity of nations – a unity which in this century will be securely established, causing all the peoples of the world to regard themselves as citizens of one common fatherland. The sixth candle is unity of races, making of all that dwell on earth peoples and kindreds of one race. The seventh candle is unity of language, i.e., the choice of a universal tongue in which all peoples will be instructed and converse. Each and every one of these will inevitably come to pass, inasmuch as the power of the Kingdom of God will aid and assist in their realization.¹¹

‘Abdu’l-Bahá does not claim to be giving developments in chronological order. Only one of the seven candles – unity of the nations – does He ascribe to the twentieth century. Political unity – glimmerings of which, He said, already could be seen in 1906, when He wrote the ‘Seven Candles’ – perhaps refers to the myriad international organizations that have been created to carry out tasks as diverse as co-ordinating postal regulations, sharing weather information and counting whales.

One cannot help but wonder whether the political events of the last decade have not represented the achievement of some of the other ‘candles’. Unity of thought in world undertakings was impossible when the world was divided into communist and capitalist spheres of influence. The end of the Cold War, the creation of a new treaty on world trade, the holding of a summit in Rio de Janeiro about the environment and one in Copenhagen about development, and the convening of conferences in Vienna, Cairo and Beijing about human rights, population and the advancement of women respectively – all have laid foundations for a unity of thought in world undertakings inconceivable a decade ago. The collapse of totalitarianism in most countries of the world, the rising emphasis on human rights, and the remarkable spread of democracy in Latin America in the 1980s – and now to some extent in Africa in the 1990s – suggests that ‘unity in freedom’ will soon be achievable.

Unity of language may also have taken a major step forward in the last decade with the advent of satellite television, which has further strengthened the

position of English. The Bahá'í principle of a universal language does not call for the elimination of other languages, but for supplementing them with an auxiliary tongue. The role of that tongue may easily change from decade to decade; its fortunes may wax and wane, and it may even be replaced, eventually, by another auxiliary language. Regardless of the language that ultimately serves as the international auxiliary tongue, its role will be to facilitate communication among humanity, for everyone would need to learn only two languages – their own and the auxiliary – in order to be able to speak to any other human being.

'Abdu'l-Bahá promises that the unity of nations will be 'securely established' in this century; its consequence He describes as 'all the peoples of the world [will] regard themselves as citizens of one common fatherland'.¹² It will be easier in retrospect – say, fifty years from now – to know what event represented the establishment of the 'unity of the nations' than it is to imagine that event before its occurrence. The event or chain of events will apparently be such that it will promote a consciousness of world unity or citizenship. This consciousness inevitably will have consequences – at some point further in the future – in fostering world peace and eliminating barriers between the nations.

The other candles describe unities that are more difficult to envision. How can 'unity of the races' be achieved in a world torn by racism and ethnic cleansing? If establishment of a consciousness of the oneness of humankind is an essential foundation for the unity of the races – for racial unity is an aspect of human unity – then the oneness of the races will require more than the creation of political and social mechanisms. Rather, it will require a spiritual transformation of human culture. It thus appears to be a part of the distant future, perhaps of the Most Great Peace.

Finally, 'Abdu'l-Bahá lists 'unity of religion' as 'the corner-stone of the foundation itself', thus stressing that its importance is the greatest of all. But what is unity of religion? The Bahá'í scriptures include this challenging and puzzling discussion of the concept:

The Faith standing identified with the name of Bahá'u'lláh disclaims any intention to belittle any of the Prophets¹³ gone before Him, to whittle down any of their teachings, to obscure, however slightly, the radiance of their Revelations, to oust them from the hearts of their followers, to abrogate the fundamentals of their doctrines, to discard any of their revealed Books, or to suppress the legitimate aspirations of their adherents. Repudiating the claim of any religion to be the final revelation of God to man, disclaiming finality for His own Revelation, Bahá'u'lláh inculcates the basic principle of the relativity of religious truth, the continuity of Divine Revelation, the progressiveness of religious experience. His aim is to widen the basis of all revealed religions and to unravel the mysteries of their scriptures. He insists on the unqualified recognition of the unity of their

purpose, restates the eternal verities they enshrine, coordinates their functions, distinguishes the essential and the authentic from the nonessential and spurious in their teachings, separates the God-given truths from the priest-prompted superstitions, and on this as a basis proclaims the possibility, and even prophesies the inevitability, of their unification, and the consummation of their highest hopes.¹⁴

The latter half of this passage – describing the unity of nature and purpose of the religions in the revelation of Bahá'u'lláh – may be seen as a clarification of the first part, which stresses their uniquenesses. In this passage one encounters the major claim of the Bahá'í faith to represent and continue the essential teachings of the previous religions, yet also to represent their unification. A 'fulfilment theology' is definitely implied. Clearly, Bahá'í scholars of religion have their work cut out for them by this passage. How are Bahá'ís to justify their belief that the Buddha was sent by God? How are they to explain to Christians that the Trinity is not an essential part of Christianity? How are they to explain to Hindus their rejection of reincarnation? How are they to explain to Muslims their rejection of common Muslim understandings of Qur'anic passages?

A major instrument for essentially redefining other religions is history. Scholarship has shown how difficult it is to reconstruct the life and teachings of the historical Jesus, and to date efforts to reconstruct the historical Abraham, Moses, Zoroaster and Buddha have yielded even less certainty. History shows that reincarnation was not a teaching in the Vedas – Hinduism's oldest and most venerated scriptures – and that only hints of the Trinity may be found in the Gospels. Much of religion is the cumulative tradition created by its adherents; it is here where much of its diversity and contradiction may be found.

Further complicating Bahá'í participation in interfaith dialogue is its apparent claim that the world civilization to be created will be 'sustained by its universal recognition of one God and by its allegiance to one common Revelation'.¹⁵ Of course, the language of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi may be symbolic or hyperbolic rather than literal. In any case, it may be five hundred years before the Bahá'ís can definitively decide how to interpret these passages.

All religions have truth claims that serve as barriers to interfaith understanding. One of the challenges facing Christian theologians has been to define Christianity in such a way as to maintain its distinctive teachings, yet eliminate or minimize any claims that it is better than other faiths. Bahá'í scholars face a similar challenge as they seek to understand the many statements in the Bahá'í scriptures about other religions in the light of those traditions' self-understandings. The fact that the Bahá'í faith itself claims not to be final, but that it will be superseded by another religion eventually, helps to eliminate claims that the Bahá'í faith ultimately is any different from or better than the other religions.

More important to Bahá'í involvement in interfaith dialogue is Bahá'u'lláh's exhortation to 'consort with the followers of all religions in a spirit of friendliness and fellowship'.¹⁶ This passage not only makes dialogue an imperative, but sets the tone of Bahá'í involvement in it. Bahá'í efforts in dialogue must be based on love, consultation, and a search for mutual understanding, not on a sense of superiority. Bahá'u'lláh urges Bahá'ís to be 'anxiously concerned with the needs of the age ye live in'¹⁷ and presumably such concern should be a major focus of interfaith efforts, for religions usually find the performing of acts of service together more useful than the debating of doctrines.

Conclusion

The ultimate vision of the Bahá'í faith is decidedly this-worldly. The kingdom of God (to use a Christian phrase) is ushered in not through a purely divine intervention, but through the forces of history. The forces of history, of course, include God's periodic intervention in human affairs through prophetic figures, the latest one of whom lived a mere century ago. They also include divine forces working behind the scenes in a way difficult for mortals to discern.

The kingdom of God will not be heaven on earth; humans will still experience pain, struggles and suffering. However, they will struggle and suffer in a social climate that is far more equal and just, and far less violent and prejudiced, than the contemporary world. Bahá'u'lláh identifies two purposes for humanity; His short obligatory prayer gives one as knowing and worshipping God and in another work Bahá'u'lláh states that 'all men have been created to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization'.¹⁸ Presumably neither of these purposes will ever find an ultimate end as long as humanity exists, for humans will always have to struggle to know their God, and civilization will always be perfectible. In that sense no vision of humankind's future can ever be ultimate, because there will always be a road to travel until the human species, in the course of time, ceases to exist. If, as the Bahá'í scriptures assert, there is an afterlife, perhaps it will only be in collective retrospect from beyond the veil that humanity will know its true and ultimate purpose.

Notes

1. The Qur'an 69:14, 16.
2. The Bahá'í scriptures consist of the writings of Bahá'u'lláh (1817–92), founder of the faith; 'Abdu'l-Bahá (1844–1921), Bahá'u'lláh's son and successor, whom Bahá'u'lláh authorized to offer official interpretation of the Bahá'í teachings; and Shoghi Effendi (1897–1957), 'Abdu'l-Bahá's successor and Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith, whose writings are also regarded as official interpretation. Bahá'u'lláh wrote in Persian and Arabic; 'Abdu'l-Bahá in Persian, Arabic and

- a little in Turkish; Shoghi Effendi in Arabic, Persian and English. Bahá'ís regard Bahá'u'lláh as a messenger of God and His writings as the Word of God.
3. Bahá'u'lláh's claim to be the return of Christ is explicitly stated in His Tablet to Pope Pius IX; see *The Proclamation of Bahá'u'lláh to the Kings and Leaders of the World* (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1967), p. 83. The Bahá'í claim that Bahá'u'lláh fulfils the promises of all the world's religions is summarized by Shoghi Effendi in *God Passes By* (Wilmette, Illinois: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1944), pp. 93–100.
 4. Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh* (Wilmette, Illinois: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1938), p. 42.
 5. Unlike many religions, Bahá'ís are not divided locally into separate groups by ethnicity or race, nor are separate groups based on such criteria allowed. Because of their stress on the oneness of humankind, local Bahá'í communities, to a large extent, are racially and ethnically diverse.
 6. Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, trans. Shoghi Effendi (London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1935), p. 218.
 7. See, for example, Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas* (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1992), paras. 33, 48, note 76; 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* (Wilmette, Illinois: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 2nd edn., 1982), p. 375.
 8. Shoghi Effendi, *World Order*, pp. 203–4.
 9. Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh Revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas* (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1978), p. 67.
 10. The Universal House of Justice is the supreme governing body of the Bahá'í faith today. It was first formed in 1963 and is re-elected every five years at an international convention, where the members of the various national Bahá'í governing bodies (currently called national spiritual assemblies) serve as the voters.
 11. *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá* (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1978), p. 32.
 12. *Ibid.*
 13. By 'Prophets' is meant the major prophetic figures of the world religions: Abraham, Moses, Zoroaster, Krishna, Buddha, Jesus, Muhammad, the Báb (the forerunner of Bahá'u'lláh), and Bahá'u'lláh. Bahá'u'lláh asserts that God has always sent truth to humanity through such figures, the names of most of whom having been lost to history.
 14. Shoghi Effendi, *The Promised Day Is Come* (Wilmette, Illinois: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1941), p. 108.
 15. Shoghi Effendi, *World Order*, p. 204.
 16. Third Glad Tidings, in Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets*, p. 22.
 17. *Gleanings*, p. 213.
 18. *Ibid.*, p. 215.