

WHO IS WRITING THE FUTURE?

REFLECTIONS ON THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

15.04

Acc. No 1999/22



BAHÁ'Í INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

Office of Public Information, New York

February 1999

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On May 28, 1992, Brazil's Chamber of Deputies met in special session to commemorate the centenary of the passing of Bahá'u'lláh, whose influence is becoming an increasingly familiar feature of the world's social and intellectual landscape. His message of unity had clearly struck a deep chord with the Brazilian legislators. During the course of the proceedings, speakers representing all parties in the Chamber paid tribute to a body of writings which one deputy described as "the most colossal religious work written by the pen of a single Man," and to a conception of our planet's future which, "transcending material frontiers", in the words of another, "reached out to humanity as a whole, without petty differences of nationality, race, limits, or beliefs."¹

The tribute was all the more striking because of the fact that, in the land of his birth, Bahá'u'lláh's work continues to be bitterly condemned by the Muslim clergy who rule Iran. Their predecessors had been responsible for his banishment and imprisonment in the middle years of the nineteenth century, and for the massacre of thousands of those who shared his ideals for the transforming of human life and society. Even as the proceedings in Brasilia were under way, refusal to deny beliefs that have won high praise throughout most of the rest of the world were bringing the 300,000 Bahá'ís living in Iran persecution, privation, and, in all too many cases, imprisonment and death.

Similar opposition characterized the attitudes of various totalitarian regimes over the past century.

What is the nature of the body of thought that has aroused such sharply divergent reactions?

I

The mainspring of Bahá'u'lláh's message is an exposition of reality as fundamentally spiritual in nature, and of the laws that govern that reality's operation. It not only sees the individual as a spiritual being, a "rational soul", but also insists that the entire enterprise that we call civilization is itself a spiritual process, one in which the human mind and heart have created progressively more complex and efficient means to express their inherent moral and intellectual capacities.

Rejecting the reigning dogmas of materialism, Bahá'u'lláh asserts an opposing interpretation of the historical process: Humanity, the arrowhead of the evolution of consciousness, passes through stages analogous to the periods of infancy, childhood, and adolescence in the lives of its individual members. The journey has brought us to the threshold of our long-awaited coming of age as a unified human race. The wars, exploitation, and prejudice that have marked immature stages in the process should not be a cause of despair but a stimulus to assuming the responsibilities of collective maturity.

Writing to the political and religious leaders of his own day, Bahá'u'lláh said that new capacities of incalculable power—beyond the conception of the generation then living—were awakening in the earth's peoples, capacities which would soon transform the material life of the planet. It was essential, he said, to make of these coming material advances vehicles for moral and social development. If nationalistic and sectarian conflicts prevented this from happening, then material progress would produce not only benefits, but unimagined evils. Some of Bahá'u'lláh's warnings awaken grim echoes in our own age: "Strange and astonishing things exist in the earth", he cautioned. "These things are capable of changing the whole atmosphere of the earth and their contamination would prove lethal".²

II

The central spiritual issue facing all people, Bahá'u'lláh says, whatever their nation, religion, or ethnic origin, is that of laying the foundations of a global society that can reflect the oneness of human nature. The unification of the earth's inhabitants is neither a remote utopian vision nor, ultimately, a matter of choice. It constitutes the next, inescapable stage in the process of social evolution, a stage toward which all the experience of past and present is impelling us. Until this issue is acknowledged and addressed, none of the ills afflicting our planet will find solutions, because all the essential challenges of the age we have entered are global and universal, not particular or regional.

The many passages of Bahá'u'lláh's writings dealing with humanity's coming of age are permeated by his use of light as a metaphor to capture the transforming power of unity: "So powerful is the light of unity", they insist, "that it can illuminate the whole earth".³ The assertion places current history in a perspective

sharply different from the one that prevails at the end of the twentieth century. It urges us to find—within the suffering and breakdown of our times—the operation of forces that are liberating human consciousness for a new stage in its evolution. It calls on us to re-examine what has been happening over the past one hundred years and the effect that these developments have had on the heterogenous mass of peoples, races, nations, and communities who have experienced them.

If, as Bahá'u'lláh asserts, “the well-being of mankind, its peace and security, are unattainable unless and until its unity is firmly established”,⁴ it is understandable why Bahá'ís view the twentieth century—with all its disasters—as “the century of light”.⁵ For these one hundred years witnessed a transformation in both the way the earth's inhabitants have begun to plan our collective future and in the way we are coming to regard one another. The hallmark of both has been a process of unification. Upheavals beyond the control of existing institutions compelled world leaders to begin putting in place new systems of global organization that would have been unthinkable at the century's beginning. As this was occurring, rapid erosion was overtaking habits and attitudes that had divided peoples and nations through unnumbered centuries of conflict and that had seemed likely to endure for ages to come.

At the midpoint of the century, these two developments produced a breakthrough whose historic significance only future generations will properly appreciate. In the stunned aftermath of World War II, far-sighted leaders found it at last possible, through the United Nations organization, to begin consolidating the foundations of world order. Long dreamed of by progressive thinkers, the new system of international conventions and related agencies was now endowed with crucial powers that had tragically been denied to the abortive League of Nations. As the century advanced, the system's primitive muscles of international peacekeeping were progressively exercised in such a way as to demonstrate persuasively what can be accomplished. With this came the steady expansion throughout the world of democratic institutions of governance. If the practical effects are still disappointing, this in no way diminishes the historic and irreversible change of direction that has taken place in the organization of human affairs.

As with the cause of world order, so with the rights of the world's people. Exposure of the appalling suffering visited on the victims of human perversity during the course of the war produced a worldwide sense of shock—and what can only be termed deep feelings of shame. Out of this trauma emerged a new kind of moral commitment that was formally institutionalized in the work of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights and its associated agencies, a development inconceivable to the nineteenth century rulers to whom Bahá'u'lláh had addressed himself on the subject. Thus empowered, a growing body of nongovernmental organizations have set out to ensure that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is established as the foundation of normative international standards and is enforced accordingly.

A parallel process took place with respect to economic life. During the first half of the century, as a consequence of the havoc wrought by the great depression,

many governments adopted legislation that created social welfare programs and systems of financial control, reserve funds, and trade regulations that sought to protect their societies from a recurrence of such devastation. The period following World War II brought the establishment of institutions whose field of operation is global: the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, and a network of development agencies devoted to rationalizing and advancing the material prosperity of the planet. At century's end—whatever the intentions and however crude the present generation of tools—the masses of humanity have been shown that the use of the planet's wealth can be fundamentally reorganized in response to entirely new conceptions of need.

The effect of these developments was enormously amplified by the accelerating extension of education to the masses. Apart from the willingness of national and local governments to allocate greatly increased resources to this field and the society's ability to mobilize and train armies of professionally qualified teachers, two twentieth century advances at the international level were particularly influential. The first was the series of development plans focussed on educational needs and massively financed by such bodies as the World Bank, government agencies, major foundations and several branches of the United Nations system. The second was the information technology explosion that has made all of the earth's inhabitants potential beneficiaries of the whole of the race's learning.

This process of structural reorganization on a planetary scale was animated and reinforced by a profound shift of consciousness. Entire populations found themselves abruptly compelled to face the costs of ingrained habits of mind that breed conflict—and to do so in the full glare of worldwide censure of what were once considered acceptable practices and attitudes. The effect was to stimulate revolutionary change in the way that people regard one another.

Throughout history, for example, experience seemed to demonstrate—and religious teaching to confirm—that women are essentially inferior in nature to men. Overnight, in the historical scheme of things, this prevailing perception was suddenly everywhere in retreat. However long and painful may be the process of giving full effect to Bahá'u'lláh's assertion that women and men are in every sense equal, intellectual and moral support for any opposing view steadily disintegrates.

Yet another fixture of humanity's view of itself throughout past millennia was a celebration of ethnic distinctions which, in recent centuries, had hardened into various racist fantasies. With a swiftness that is breathtaking in the perspective of history, the twentieth century saw the unity of the human race establish itself as a guiding principle of international order. Today, the ethnic conflicts that continue to wreak havoc in many parts of the world are seen not as natural features of the relations among diverse peoples, but as willful aberrations that must be brought under effective international control.

Throughout humanity's long childhood, it was also assumed—again with the full concurrence of organized religion—that poverty was an enduring and inescapable feature of the social order. Now, however, this mind-set, an assumption that had

shaped the priorities of every economic system the world had ever known, has been universally rejected. In theory at least, government has come to be everywhere regarded as essentially a trustee responsible to ensure the well-being of all of society's members.

Particularly significant—because of its intimate relationship with the roots of human motivation—was the loosening of the grip of religious prejudice. Prefigured in the “Parliament of Religions” that attracted intense interest as the nineteenth century was drawing to a close, the process of interfaith dialogue and collaboration reinforced the effects of secularism in undermining the once impregnable walls of clerical authority. In the face of the transformation in religious conceptions that the past hundred years witnessed, even the current outburst of fundamentalist reaction may come, in retrospect, to be seen as little more than desperate rear-guard actions against an inevitable dissolution of sectarian control. In the words of Bahá'u'lláh, “There can be no doubt whatever that the peoples of the world, of whatever race or religion, derive their inspiration from one heavenly Source, and are the subjects of one God.”⁶

During these critical decades the human mind was also experiencing fundamental changes in the way that it understood the physical universe. The first half of the century saw the new theories of relativity and quantum mechanics—both of them intimately related to the nature and operation of light—revolutionize the field of physics and alter the entire course of scientific development. It became apparent that classical physics could explain phenomena within only a limited range. A new door had suddenly opened into the study of both the minute constituents of the universe and its large cosmological systems, a change whose effects went far beyond physics, shaking the very foundations of a world view that had dominated scientific thinking for centuries. Gone forever were the images of a mechanical universe run like a clock and a presumed separation between observer and observed, between mind and matter. Against the background of the far-reaching studies thus made possible, theoretical science now begins to address the possibility that purpose and intelligence are indeed intrinsic to the nature and operation of the universe.

In the wake of these conceptual changes, humanity entered an era in which interaction among physical sciences—physics, chemistry, and biology, along with the nascent science of ecology—opened breathtaking possibilities for the enhancement of life. The benefits in such vital areas of concern as agriculture and medicine became dramatically apparent as did those brought about by success in tapping new sources of energy. Simultaneously, the new field of materials science began providing a wealth of specialized resources unknown when the century opened—plastics, optical fibers, carbon fibers.

Such advances in science and technology were reciprocal in their effects. Grains of sand—the most humble and ostensibly worthless of materials—metamorphosed into silicon wafers and optically pure glass, making possible the creation of worldwide communications networks. This, together with the deployment of ever

more sophisticated satellite systems, has begun providing access to the accumulated knowledge of the entire human race for people everywhere, without distinction. It is apparent that the decades immediately ahead will see the integration of telephone, television, and computer technologies into a single, unified system of communication and information, whose inexpensive appliances will be available on a mass scale. It would be difficult to exaggerate the psychological and social impact of the anticipated replacement of the jumble of existing monetary systems—for many, the ultimate fortress of nationalist pride—by a single world currency operating largely through electronic impulses.

Indeed, the unifying effect of the twentieth century revolution is nowhere more readily apparent than in the implications of the changes that took place in scientific and technological life. At the most obvious level, the human race is now endowed with the means needed to realize the visionary goals summoned up by a steadily maturing consciousness. Viewed more deeply, this empowerment is potentially available to all of the earth's inhabitants, without regard to race, culture, or nation. "A new life", Bahá'u'lláh prophetically saw, "is, in this age, stirring within all the peoples of the earth; and yet none hath discovered its cause or perceived its motive."⁷ Today, more than a century after these words were written, the implications of what has since taken place begin to be apparent to thoughtful minds everywhere.

III

To appreciate the transformations brought about by the period of history now ending is not to deny the accompanying darkness that throws the achievements into sharp relief: the deliberate extermination of millions of helpless human beings, the invention and use of new weapons of destruction capable of annihilating whole populations, the rise of ideologies that suffocated the spiritual and intellectual life of entire nations, damage to the physical environment of the planet on a scale so massive that it may take centuries to heal, and the incalculably greater damage done to generations of children taught to believe that violence, indecency, and selfishness are triumphs of personal liberty. Such are only the more obvious of a catalogue of evils, unmatched in history, whose lessons our era will leave for the education of the chastened generations who will follow us.

Darkness, however, is not a phenomenon endowed with some form of existence, much less autonomy. It does not extinguish light nor diminish it, but marks out those areas that light has not reached or adequately illumined. So will twentieth century civilization no doubt be assessed by the historians of a more mature and dispassionate age. The ferocities of animal nature, which raged out of control through these critical years and seemed at times to threaten society's very survival, did not in fact prevent the steady unfoldment of the creative potentialities which human consciousness possesses. On the contrary. As the century advanced, growing numbers of people awakened to how empty were the allegiances and how insubstantial the fears that had held them captive only short years before.

“Peerless is this Day,” Bahá’u’lláh insists, “for it is as the eye to past ages and centuries, and as a light unto the darkness of the times.”⁸ In this perspective, the issue is not the darkness that slowed and obscured the progress achieved in the extraordinary hundred years now ending. It is, rather, how much more suffering and ruin must be experienced by our race before we wholeheartedly accept the spiritual nature that makes us a single people, and gather the courage to plan our future in the light of what has been so painfully learned.

I V

The conception of civilization’s future course laid out in Bahá’u’lláh’s writings challenges much that today imposes itself on our world as normative and unchangeable. The breakthroughs made during the century of light have opened the door to a new kind of world. If social and intellectual evolution is in fact responding to a moral intelligence inherent in existence, a great deal of the theory determining contemporary approaches to decision-making is fatally flawed. If human consciousness is essentially spiritual in nature—as the vast majority of ordinary people have always been intuitively aware—, its development needs cannot be understood or served through an interpretation of reality that dogmatically insists otherwise.

No aspect of contemporary civilization is more directly challenged by Bahá’u’lláh’s conception of the future than is the prevailing cult of individualism, which has spread to most parts of the world. Nurtured by such cultural forces as political ideology, academic elitism, and a consumer economy, the “pursuit of happiness” has given rise to an aggressive and almost boundless sense of personal entitlement. The moral consequences have been corrosive for the individual and society alike—and devastating in terms of disease, drug addiction and other all-too-familiar blights of century’s end. The task of freeing humanity from an error so fundamental and pervasive will call into question some of the twentieth century’s most deeply entrenched assumptions about right and wrong.

What are some of these unexamined assumptions? The most obvious is the conviction that unity is a distant, almost unattainable ideal to be addressed only after a host of political conflicts have been somehow resolved, material needs somehow satisfied, and injustices somehow corrected. The opposite, Bahá’u’lláh asserts, is the case. The primary disease that afflicts society and generates the ills that cripple it, he says, is the disunity of a human race that is distinguished by its capacity for collaboration and whose progress to date has depended on the extent to which unified action has, at various times and in various societies, been achieved. To cling to the notion that conflict is an intrinsic feature of human nature, rather than a complex of learned habits and attitudes, is to impose on a new century an error which, more than any other single factor, has tragically handicapped humanity’s past. “Regard the world”, Bahá’u’lláh advised elected leaders, “as the human body which, though at its creation whole and perfect, hath been afflicted, through various causes, with grave disorders and maladies.”⁹

Intimately related to the issue of unity is a second moral challenge that the past century has posed with ever increasing urgency. In the sight of God, Bahá'u'lláh insists, justice is the "best beloved of all things".¹⁰ It enables the individual to see reality through his or her own eyes rather than those of others and endows collective decision making with the authority that alone can ensure unity of thought and action. However gratifying is the system of international order that has emerged from the harrowing experiences of the twentieth century, its enduring influence will depend on acceptance of the moral principle implicit in it. If the body of humankind is indeed one and indivisible, then the authority exercised by its governing institutions represents essentially a trusteeship. Each individual person comes into the world as a trust of the whole, and it is this feature of human existence that constitutes the real foundation of the social, economic and cultural rights that the United Nations Charter and its related documents articulate. Justice and unity are reciprocal in their effect. "The purpose of justice", Bahá'u'lláh wrote, "is the appearance of unity among men. The ocean of divine wisdom surgeth within this exalted word, while the books of the world cannot contain its inner significance."¹¹

As society commits itself—however hesitantly and fearfully—to these and related moral principles, the most meaningful role it will offer the individual will be that of service. One of the paradoxes of human life is that development of the self comes primarily through commitment to larger undertakings in which the self—even if only temporarily—is forgotten. In an age that opens up to people of every condition an opportunity to participate effectively in the shaping of the social order itself, the ideal of service to others assumes entirely new significance. To exalt such goals as acquisition and self-assertion as the purpose of life is to promote chiefly the animal side of human nature. Nor can simplistic messages of personal salvation any longer address the yearnings of generations who have come to know, with deep certainty, that true fulfillment is as much a matter of this world as it is of the next. "Be anxiously concerned with the needs of the age ye live in," is Bahá'u'lláh's counsel, "and center your deliberations on its exigencies and requirements."¹²

Such perspectives have profound implications for the conduct of human affairs. It is obvious, for example, that, whatever its past contributions, the longer the nation state persists as the dominant influence in determining the fate of humankind, the longer will the achievement of world peace be delayed and the greater will be the suffering inflicted on the earth's population. In humanity's economic life, no matter how great the blessings brought by globalization, it is apparent that this process has also created unparalleled concentrations of autocratic power that must be brought under international democratic control if they are not to produce poverty and despair for countless millions. Similarly, the historic breakthrough in information and communication technology, which represents so potent a means to promote social development and the deepening of people's sense of their common humanity, can, with equal force, divert and coarsen impulses vital to the service of this very process.

V

What Bahá'u'lláh is speaking of is a new relationship between God and humankind, one that is in harmony with the dawning maturity of the race. The ultimate Reality that has created and sustains the universe will forever remain beyond the reach of the human mind. Humanity's conscious relationship with it, to the extent that one has been established, has been the result of the influence of the Founders of the great religions, Moses, Zoroaster, Buddha, Jesus, Muhammad and earlier figures whose names are, for the most part, lost to memory. Through responding to these impulses of the Divine, the earth's peoples have progressively developed the spiritual, intellectual, and moral capacities that have combined to civilize human character. This millennia-long, cumulative process has now reached the stage characteristic of all the decisive turning points in the evolutionary process, when previously unrealized possibilities suddenly emerge: "This is the Day", Bahá'u'lláh asserts, "in which God's most excellent favors have been poured out upon men, the Day in which His most mighty grace hath been infused into all created things."¹³

Viewed through Bahá'u'lláh's eyes, the history of tribes, peoples, and nations has effectively reached its conclusion. What we are witnessing is the beginning of the history of humankind, the history of a human race conscious of its own oneness. To this turning point in the course of civilization, his writings bring a redefinition of the nature and processes of civilization and a reordering of its priorities. Their aim is to call us back to spiritual awareness and responsibility.

There is nothing in Bahá'u'lláh's writings to encourage the illusion that the changes envisioned will come about easily. Far otherwise. As the events of the twentieth century have already demonstrated, patterns of habit and attitude which have taken root over thousands of years are not abandoned either spontaneously or in response simply to education or legislative action. Whether in the life of the individual or that of society, profound change occurs more often than not in response to intense suffering and to unendurable difficulties that can be overcome in no other way. Just so great a testing experience, Bahá'u'lláh warned, is needed to weld the earth's diverse peoples into a single people.

Spiritual and materialistic conceptions of the nature of reality are irreconcilable with one another and lead in opposite directions. As a new century opens, the course set by the second of these two opposing views has already carried a hapless humanity far beyond the outermost point where an illusion of rationality, let alone of human well-being, could once be sustained. With every passing day, the signs multiply that great numbers of people everywhere are awakening to this realization.

Despite widely prevalent opinion to the contrary, the human race is not a blank tablet on which privileged arbiters of human affairs can freely inscribe their own wishes. The springs of the spirit rise up where they will, as they will. They will not indefinitely be suppressed by the detritus of contemporary society. It no longer requires prophetic insight to appreciate that the opening years of the new century

will see the release of energies and aspirations infinitely more potent than the accumulated routines, falsities, and addictions that have so long blocked their expression.

However great the turmoil, the period into which humanity is moving will open to every individual, every institution, and every community on earth unprecedented opportunities to participate in the writing of the planet's future. "Soon", is Bahá'u'lláh's confident promise, "will the present-day order be rolled up, and a new one spread out in its stead."¹⁴

Notes

1. Remarks by Deputy Luis Gushiken and Deputy Rita Camata. "Sessão Solene da Câmara Federal em Homenagem ao Centenário da Ascensão de Bahá'u'lláh", Brasília, 28 May 1992.
2. Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh Revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1997), p. 69.
3. Bahá'u'lláh, *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1988), p. 14.
4. Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, section CXXXI.
5. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace: Talks Delivered by 'Abdu'l-Bahá during His Visit to the United States and Canada in 1912* rev. ed. (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982), pp. 74, 126.
6. Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, section CXI.
7. Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, section XCVI.
8. Bahá'u'lláh, quoted in Shoghi Effendi, *The Advent of Divine Justice* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1990), p. 79.
9. Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, section CXX.
10. Bahá'u'lláh, *The Hidden Words*, no. 2 from the Arabic.
11. Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh Revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1997), p. 67.
12. Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, section CVI.
13. Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, section IV.
14. Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, section IV.

