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# The Bahá'í Principle of Civilization

*by*

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# THE BAHÁ'Í PRINCIPLE OF CIVILIZATION

## I. A SPIRITUAL ORGANISM HAS BEEN CREATED

**F**OR FIFTY YEARS the North American continent has been the scene of an unprecedented spiritual development. The mysterious and resurgent power of faith, acting upon a small and inconspicuous community of believers, has germinated, nurtured and brought to flower a new quality of soul and a new order of human relations.

The visible manifestation of this power lies in the capacity for union with which the community of believers has become charged—a capacity which, flowing outward to others, will make of them, if they can respond, members of one body, elements of one spirit. This power entered the hearts of a few persons in one city fifty years ago, making an

intimate group of those who had been strangers one to another. Multiplied in energy by the unity of the group, the capacity acquired force to produce similar groups in other cities. Eventually by association of many unities it created one organic community sustaining the many local groups.

A spiritual organism has been created by slow but steady evolution throughout the course of years which now reveals a continental solidarity and a world impetus and dimension. To fulfill their passion for unity, members have gone forth from North America to many lands, seed-bearers intent upon sharing this mysterious devotion with all races and peoples. In Europe, in the Near and Far East, in Australia and New Zealand, in Africa, in Central and South America, the community of American believers has projected itself, shared itself, renewed itself and sacrificed itself until that same capacity for union could work through new souls and build new communities like itself.

The union created embraces persons of the most diverse racial, social and sectarian origin. All human beings can receive the faith into their souls who are able to realize when acted upon by its creative spirit that they are parts of a oneness which becomes for them a revealed and divine order of social existence. The world of disunity and strife in which they perforce had been parts of chaos has by their valid experience undergone destruction. They realize that a supreme Victory has been won in the world of reality which now surges through them like a renewal of flame within the blood. A new world has been created, a world of God which He wills to share with man.

Let no one fail to perceive the significance of this potent spiritual consummation because in its early stage it has been visibly identified with so few persons and these unimpressive and unimportant. The germination of life in one tiny seed reflects the energy of the entire universe. In



comparison, mountains of granite and oceans of salt brine are things lower in the scale of cosmic values. For here at last, in this age of consuming strife and bitter discord, a principle has been revealed which in its operation is so simple in essence, so universal in possibility, so tender and healing in its method, that any human being touched by it and immersed within it can assert its saving grace against all the powers of evil by which mankind is now assailed. What the Bahá'í community of North America, followers of Bahá'u'lláh, have realized in experience and demonstrated in action is the fact that God has given our age the principle of true civilization—a truth and a spirit which are creative of eternal union among human beings: no less than the divine truth and spirit required to unify the entire world.

## 2. THE SOURCE OF UNION

Nothing can stay this power, this grace, this capacity with which true

faith in God has become charged. It is neither a minority movement which can be suppressed, nor a philosophy which can be laid away, nor an argument which can be countered, nor a theology which can be banned. The passion for unity which the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh quickens within human souls brings with it the overwhelming conviction that they have been reborn into a higher world where unity is the life, the truth and the law. Outside His Faith, the nations and peoples have no such capacity nor can they produce it by themselves, nor can they seize it and make it operate for any save divine and universal ends.

The appearance of this grace in an American community does not mean that the capacity for union originated here, or is a form of Americanism, or an attitude which certain Americans evolved within themselves or distilled from their tradition. This sacred and creative energy, this renewer of human existence, this guardian of the destiny of mankind, came to the world

in the Person of the Manifestation of God. From Him many known and unknown spiritual influences have gone forth to bless humanity. Each blessing has been the impulse of a spirit universal and placeless in itself but requiring some human agency to incorporate and convey its mysterious grace to men. Since America has been the meeting-place of the races and peoples, and is itself neither a race nor a nation but a union of races and nations, no other land could exemplify and serve the principle of the oneness of mankind. Hence America, because of destiny and not merit, has been the scene of the consummation of love and justice in the evolution of humanity. Here in this new continent of the West, farthest removed from superstition and decadence, the hand of Providence has established the Balance that equilibrium may be attained in the next era of man's life—the Balance between man's inner and outer life, between body and soul, between hostile nations and embittered races,



between classes distorted by poverty and war, between passive and aggressive sects and creeds, between religion and civilization.

The source and origin of this recreative power lies in far-distant, unfamiliar, medieval Persia one hundred years ago. There, in Islám, as in Christian Europe and America, spiritual schools existed for cherishing the hope that in this age the promised One might appear. The longing for a Person endowed with the mission to connect humanity with God kindled fire in many souls who felt that the world had sunk to its lowest state, incapable of salvation save through its Creator's mercy.

### 3. THAT HOLY DAWN

To these humble servants of the altar of the heart the Báb revealed Himself in 1844. He was twenty-five years of age. The Báb, His title meaning "door" or "gate", exemplified a radiance, a beauty of being and

of person, a power of spirit, a penetration of love which became the adoration of a mighty host. In that darkened, ignorant, tyrannical land the Báb arose as with the light of a dawning Sun. So powerful was He in quickening the human spirit, in establishing the standard of reality dividing the people into believers and non-believers, that within the span of six years His earthly destiny was fulfilled. Condemned for heresy, denounced as rebel, the Báb was imprisoned and executed in the city of Tabríz. It was a time of profound spiritual experience. Thousands of His followers advanced to martyrdom for His sake and in tribute to the pure religion He revealed for the world. The attitude of the true worshipper has been described by Bahá'u'lláh in these words of promise: "Great is his blessedness whosoever hath set himself towards Thee, and entered Thy presence, and caught the accents of Thy voice. . . . Whosoever hath recognized Thee will turn to none

save Thee, and will seek from Thee naught else except Thyself."

Every testimony reveals the splendor of that holy Dawn, when men of sincerity and truth attained the purpose of their being in becoming filled with a new spirit and a new life. They had full assurance that this was no personal and no local experience, but a new enlightenment and impetus for the regeneration of the world. In the Báb they touched the mystery of the oneness of God, and in His spiritual being they felt the presence of all the Prophets through whom God has manifested in the past. The Báb restored the power of providence to human affairs. Against Him sped the arrows of bitterest ecclesiastical and civil rancor. The Báb was the chosen Victim by whose sacrifice the human spirit could be given life, and a new direction established for the course of man's spiritual and social evolution. These words, addressed by the Báb to His nearest disciples, express the beauty of His teaching: "Such

must be the purity of your character and the degree of your renunciation, that the people of the earth may through you recognize and be drawn closer to the Heavenly Father who is the Source of purity and grace."

Concerning His mission and the import of His teachings, the Báb declared that He prepared the way for the coming of Bahá'u'lláh, the Glory of God, the promised One in whom the prophetic hopes of the peoples would be fulfilled.

In such pure sacrifice was opened the door of divine guidance, and the mission of the Báb initiated the release of forces and powers which since, with increasing intensity, have acted upon mankind.

#### 4. THE LAW IS REVEALED

Nineteen years after the Declaration of the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh's mission became known to the Báb's followers, and all save a few persons thereafter centered their faith in Him.

Through Bahá'u'lláh the ecstasy of

spiritual renewal acquired substance in knowledge of spiritual truth and law. The Dawn of holiness became the risen Sun of a new Dispensation for mankind. Bahá'u'lláh suffered exile and imprisonment throughout forty years as the dominant powers of Islám tried in every way to extirpate this new Faith. What they accomplished was to establish Bahá'u'lláh in 'Akká, at the foot of Mount Carmel, where His spirit soared in majesty above the restless skirmishing of the sects who were exploiting the Holy Land in the name of their separate religions.

Bahá'u'lláh gave forth in writing a body of teachings for the new era. He provided for the needs of a united humanity and an ordered world civilization. He declared that all the Prophets had revealed one continuous, evolving and divine Faith, each as the Manifestation of God for one cycle and one stage in man's development. He stated that the law of the present cycle revolves around the principle of



the oneness of mankind, which requires one social order and one universal Faith. Bahá'u'lláh interpreted the Holy Books of the past. He identified the Báb and Himself with the essence of reality in Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Muhammád. He called upon the rulers to establish peace. He exalted the nature of man's soul and greatly amplified the body of spiritual knowledge concerning man and His destiny on earth and in the other worlds of God. Majesty and power, serene, glorious, heavenly, characterized this Person and this Message which is His blessed gift to mankind.

Bahá'u'lláh laid deep and strong the foundations of His Faith. His ordinances make it impossible for any clerical order to arise in this Dispensation and claim special authority, privilege or power. For the direction of affairs and the administration of activities He instituted elective bodies with defined duties and functions. He moreover appointed 'Abdu'l-Bahá to be the Interpreter of His Revelation

and the Center of His Covenant with mankind. In these provisions Bahá'u'lláh established a Faith which is no mere influence left for humanity to reflect to a lesser or greater degree according to its own volition. His Faith is a social organism imbued with a divine spirit, endowed with law and knowledge, provided with necessary institutions and agencies, and inspired by a sustaining power of guidance conveyed through His appointed representative 'Abdu'l-Bahá.

"Darkness hath encompassed every land, O my God," Bahá'u'lláh cried in prayer, "and caused most of Thy servants to tremble. I beseech Thee, by Thy Most Great Name, to raise in every city a new creation that shall turn towards Thee."

## 5. BAHÁ'U'LLÁH'S COVENANT

Having revealed His truth and law, Bahá'u'lláh returned to His heavenly abode. In 'Abdu'l-Bahá the spirit of obedience to Bahá'u'lláh and passionate zeal for serving His Faith

became a torrent of spiritual energy. Though 'Abdu'l-Bahá Himself was restrained physically under the terms of His imprisonment for sixteen years after Bahá'u'lláh ascended, nevertheless His irresistible will to serve found human instruments through which to some degree it might influence the whole world. In one single year a sequence of events had been set up which produced public reference to Bahá'u'lláh in the Parliament of Religions conducted by the Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893, and the formation of the first Bahá'í group in the West in 1894.

From 1894 until His own ascension in 1921, 'Abdu'l-Bahá maintained constant, direct and intimate spiritual communion, interrupted only by the tragic period of the first world war, with the American Bahá'í community. His was the love that nourished its infancy, trained its childhood, guided its youth and educated its development from stage to stage of a collective experience unlike any

which had ever before existed on earth. A great and decisive part of His time and strength was expended in establishing that community on a basis of integrity and truth. He poured forth the rich treasures of soul, mind and heart for the sake of the part which these believers were destined to accomplish for the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh. He imbued them with something of His devotion, His passion and His zeal. Their unity He cemented with the bonds of the love of God. Within them collectively He deposited as His sacred trust the capacity for union which can dissolve all prejudice and consume all opposition. He lived for nine months among them, and His sacrifice of strength was as the offering of His flesh and blood that they might become strong. To bring their latent unity to flower He gave the American Bahá'ís the sacred collective undertaking of constructing the first Bahá'í House of Worship in the western world. To deepen their spirit. He gave them a



teaching mission embracing mankind.

“The continent of America”, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá wrote many years ago, “is in the eyes of the one true God the land wherein the splendors of His light shall be revealed, where the mysteries of His Faith shall be unveiled, where the righteous will abide and the free assemble.” Again: “May this American democracy be the first nation to establish the foundation of international agreement. May it be the first nation to proclaim the unity of mankind.”

His vision of the ultimate unfoldment of world civilization under the impetus of the Holy Spirit reflected through the Báb and Bahá’u’lláh concentrated ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s effort on the most important task of this age: the development of capacity within souls to obey divine law and thereby rid the world of that degrading curse, that corrosive poison — acceptance of the struggle for existence as the underlying condition of man’s social experience. That acceptance lay upon the



nations like a doom. To transform this most grievous and perverted error into truth was 'Abdu'l-Bahá's destiny, His mission, His glory to the end of time.

One must realize this to grasp the essence of His teaching: His assurance that in no region of human action and no realm of human experience has the struggle for existence any sanction or validity from God. Neither in the nature of man, nor in the conflict of races, nor in the clash of nations, nor in the rancor of creeds did 'Abdu'l-Bahá admit the operation of any divine law reducing mankind to the level of the beast. Where He encountered inveterate prejudice and crystallized hate in which the struggle for existence had apparently become entrenched for ever, such a lamentable condition, He explained, was not part of the divine creative will for man, but man's self-inflicted punishment for repudiation of God—the darkness that supervenes when doors are closed against the Light, the ter-

ror that surrounds him when he leaves his home and lives in the jungle with the serpent and the tiger.

## 6. CHARTER OF WORLD ORDER

The exquisite passion which 'Abdu'l-Bahá poured forth upon the humblest believer lives on for us in His written word. "O ye friends of God! The world is like the body of man—it hath become sick, feeble and infirm. Its eye is devoid of sight, its ear hath become destitute of hearing and its faculties of sense are entirely dissolved. The friends of God must become as wise physicians, and care for and heal this sick person, in accord with the divine teachings. . . .

"The first remedy is to guide the people, so that they may turn unto God, hearken unto the divine commandments and go forth with a hearing ear and seeing eye. After this swift and certain remedy hath been applied, then according to the divine teachings they ought to be trained in the conduct, morals and deeds of the

Kingdom of Abhá. The hearts should be purified and cleansed from every trace of hatred and rancor and enabled to engage in truthfulness, conciliation, uprightness and love toward the world of humanity, so that the East and the West may embrace each other like unto two lovers, enmity and animosity may vanish from the human world and the universal peace be established.

“O ye friends of God! Be kind to all peoples and nations, have love for all of them, exert yourselves to purify the hearts as much as you can, and bestow abundant effort in rejoicing the souls . . . Consider love and union as a delectable paradise, and count annoyance and hostility as the torment of hell-fire . . . Supplicate and beseech with your heart and search for divine assistance and favor, in order that you may make this world the paradise of Abhá and this terrestrial globe the arena of the supreme Kingdom.”

‘Abdu’l-Bahá perfected the art of

intercourse between souls. He developed the faculty of kindness and consultation among the Bahá'ís as the foundation of existence in the new age. In the Will and Testament which He left as His final blessing and guidance for the Bahá'í community the believers of the world have been given the charter of their evolving Faith. By that momentous document 'Abdu'l-Bahá revealed the continuity of divine guidance for human affairs throughout this cycle in the succession of the station of Guardianship from generation to generation. To this station He attributed the sole power and authority to interpret the Bahá'í Sacred Writings, and this station He joined to the Universal House of Justice instituted by Bahá'u'lláh by making each successive Guardian its chairman for life.

The Bahá'í Dispensation combines and coordinates what in the world has become hopelessly separate and divided: divine truth and social authority; spiritual law and legislation; de-



votion to God and justice to man; the rights of the individual and the paramount responsibility of the social body.

“In this sacred Dispensation,” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá left as His direction to His loved ones, “conflict and contention are in no wise permitted. Every aggressor deprives himself of God’s grace. It is incumbent upon every one to show the utmost love, rectitude of conduct, straightforwardness and sincere kindliness unto all the peoples and kindreds of the world, be they friends or strangers. So intense must be the spirit of love and loving kindness, that the stranger may find himself a friend, the enemy a true brother, no difference whatsoever existing between them. For universality is of God and all limitations earthly.”

## 7. STRUGGLE FOR SPIRITUAL REGENERATION

Divine, indeed, is that creative spirit which can gather together ordinary persons and transmute them into



an expression of union when the whole world expresses contention and discord. No human agency can manufacture this spirit nor imitate its miraculous effect. Political and economic charters of world unity will not inaugurate the era of righteousness and peace save as they stem from a charter founded in the heavenly world of truth. Until the souls of men flow together ardently; until the spirits dissolve and the personalities are inwardly fused, no human organization can be more than temporary truce in the interminable struggle for group supremacy and individual distinction which man's life has become. As long as he is deprived of faith, man will remain victim to the struggle for existence which God created as the law of nature in the sub-human world. But when he becomes imbued with faith, man is freed from the burden of the beast. He need no longer creep and crawl through jungle darkness to his prey. Faith is light from which darkness flees. It is love which

will not contain hate. It is wings of impassioned devotion by which human consciousness can ascend into the luminous heaven of spiritual law—the true realm of mankind.

In nature, let us note, the struggle for existence opposes one life to another. In humanity the struggle has become an evil illusion which joins thousands and millions together in compact and conspiracy for the substitution of violence for love, and destruction for cooperative undertakings aimed at increased welfare for man. This illusion is man's downfall, his penalty, his bitter expiation; for the evil illusion can confederate only those who have inwardly denied the authority of God. Once the trend toward conflict has become organized by sect, class, race or nation, the descent into darkness grows swifter and swifter, until the area of destruction can encompass the entire world. The Manifestation of God is sent to break this iron chain of action and reaction by which mankind becomes linked to

disaster, and He establishes a more compelling and positive trend toward knowledge, love, unity and cooperation. The world today is in direst need of that spiritual power, that capacity for union, which can be invoked only through the name of Bahá'u'lláh. His creation has been perfected. His agency for union exists. His truth and His law will prevail.

The first Guardian of the Faith, Shoghi Effendi, has declared: "That the Cause associated with the name of Bahá'u'lláh feeds itself upon those hidden springs of celestial strength which no force of human personality, whatever its glamor, can replace; that its reliance is solely upon that mystic Source with which no worldly advantage, be it wealth, fame, or learning can compare; that it propagates itself by ways mysterious and utterly at variance with the standards accepted by the generality of mankind, will, if not already apparent, become increasingly manifest as it forges ahead toward fresh conquests

in its struggle for the spiritual regeneration of mankind."

## 8. A WORLD CIVILIZATION UNFOLDS

The principle of union holds people together in community as atoms are held together in the organism, but the union of human beings, no matter how intense, does not pass from a psychological experience to a social reality until that union has been given the institutional agencies of civilization. The sacred impulse toward harmony, agreement and co-operation characteristic of Bahá'ís provides the basis but not the organism of a regenerated era. Civilization is more than kinship of feeling: it is capacity to solve the collective problems of mankind under changing conditions, and to endow the individual with the status of citizenship in relation to recognized sources of authority, justice and efficient administration of affairs. Standards of truth and knowledge, as well as of feeling, are required.



The Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá is a document unique in the history of religion because it provides the visible link between faith and an organic society. It preserves the spiritual values created by Bahá'u'lláh for the soul; it at the same time brings into active operation the elements of social order which He had likewise ordained. With 'Abdu'l-Bahá's ascension in 1921, the age of divine creation initiated by the Báb in 1844 drew to a close. The present Bahá'í era witnesses the gradual unfoldment of that capacity for world order and peace with which God has endowed this sublime period in the evolution of mankind. Worship of God and service to men are become two aspects of one and the same revealed Truth.

This transcendent and majestic document transforms the community of believers into the "nucleus and pattern" of the future order. Its mysterious potency in the world of spirit and mind has been demonstrat-



ed by the ardent effort of Bahá'ís throughout the world to live in the new and higher pattern; but the full measure of its potency was revealed through the first of the Guardians given appointment in the Will. In Shoghi Effendi, descendent of both Bahá'u'lláh and the Báb, the Bahá'ís of East and West have providentially been given a leader who can instruct them in matters of worship and truth by authoritative interpretation of the revealed Word, and can guide them step by step, in exercise of the authority vested in his appointment, through the world's misery and darkness, to the Kingdom of justice on earth. The capacity for this unique and unprecedented leadership manifested by Shoghi Effendi since 1921—the very fact that his title and rank are commensurate with his quality of spiritual being and personal character—reveals the significant distinction between the works of God and the works of men. For, unlike human charters and constitutions whose words

and phrases are still-born; unlike creeds which reduce the Holy Spirit to the impotence of mental concepts, the Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá fills with power the human instrument chosen to apply its provisions to the world community of Bahá'u'lláh. Bahá'u'lláh's creative force continues to pour forth, not in added Revelation, but in guidance and inspiration for His Guardian and for His House of Justice when it shall come into being.

Herein lies the assurance that the unfoldment of world order in this age realizes the vision of the divine Kingdom on earth—the Kingdom based upon divine justice, sustained by God's grace, its gates open to the people of unity from among all the races and nations of earth; the Kingdom forever displacing the secular tribes, cities and nations whose struggle for existence has given over the world to consuming war. The promise of this Kingdom has been deposited as a sacred trust in the

heart of every race, but the divine civilization foretold by the Prophets of the past can result only from the beneficent action of a new and universal Faith. It can never be the predominance of one sectarian group or the result of temporary alliance between civil and ecclesiastical powers.

"Gather them . . . together around this Divine Law," was Bahá'u'lláh's prayer, "the covenant of which Thou hast established with all Thy Prophets and Thy Messengers." Therein lies the core of the new spiritual and social experience distinguishing the Bahá'í: that his faith is a world ethics, his creed a loyalty to mankind, his worship an action invoking the power of God to unite all the peoples of earth.

"The exploded theories and the tottering institutions of present-day civilization," the Guardian has written, "must needs appear in sharp contrast with those God-given institutions which are destined to arise upon their ruin.

“For Bahá’u’lláh . . . has not only imbued mankind with a new and regenerating Spirit. He has not merely enunciated certain universal principles, or propounded a particular philosophy, however potent, sound and universal these may be. In addition to these He, as well as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá after Him, have, unlike the Dispensations of the past, clearly and specifically laid down a set of Laws, established definite institutions, and provided for the essentials of a Divine Economy. These are destined to be a pattern for future society, a supreme instrument for the establishment of the Most Great Peace, and the one agency for the unification of the world, and the proclamation of the reign of righteousness upon earth. . . . That the forces of a world catastrophe can alone precipitate such a new phase of human thought is, alas, becoming increasingly apparent.”



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