The Permanence of Change: Contemporary Sociological and Bahá'í Perspectives on Modernity

HODA MAHMOUDI

Abstract

This paper examines social change and modernity through the two lenses of the Bahá'í Faith and sociology. Premised on the vital role of religion in effecting social change, it progresses in three parts. First, it examines the sociohistorical changes of the Axial Age, and the forces which brought about the Renaissance and Reformation. Second, it reviews some of the sociological views on modernity, tracing its contemporary challenges. Finally, it outlines the key features of modernity as identified in the Bahá'í writings and considers the Bahá'í perspective of modernity as "the universal awakening of historical consciousness," wherein Divine Civilization is the essential impetus for advancing and transforming material civilization.

Résumé

L'auteur examine l'évolution sociale et la modernité à travers deux prismes : la foi bahá'íe et la sociologie. Partant de la prémisse que la religion joue un rôle vital dans l'avènement du changement social, l'auteur fait une analyse en trois volets. Elle examine d'abord les changements sociohistoriques de l'âge axial ainsi que les forces qui ont conduit à la Renaissance et à la Réforme. Puis elle passe en revue certaines perspectives sociologiques sur la modernité, dressant les défis contemporains de celle-ci. Enfin, l'auteur souligne les principales caractéristiques de la modernité, telles que présentées dans les écrits bahá'ís, et elle se penche sur la perspective bahá'íe de la modernité comme « l'éveil universel d'une conscience historique », où la civilisation divine imprime l'élan vital à l'avancement et à la transformation de la civilisation matérielle.

Resumen
Este artículo examina el cambio social y la modernidad mirando a través de los dos lentes de la fe Bahá'í y de la sociología. Con la premisa que la religión tiene un rol vital en la creación de cambios sociales, este artículo se desarrolla en tres partes. La primera examina los cambios sociohistóricos de la Edad Axial, y las fuerzas que dieron luz al Renacimiento y a la Reforma. La segunda echa un vistazo a algunas de las teorías sociológicas sobre el modernismo, hasta llegar a sus desafíos contemporáneos. La tercera, en fin, delinea los aspectos fundamentales del modernismo según los Escritos Bahá'ís y considera la perspectiva Bahá'í sobre la modernidad como el "el despertar universal de la conciencia histórica", en donde la Divina Civilización constituye el ímpetu esencial para el avance y la transformación de la civilización material.

The Bahá'í Faith was conceived in the time of modernity, as was the young discipline of sociology. The field of sociology examines the origins, organization, institutions, and development of human society. The discipline was founded during a period in which society was undergoing a torrent of change. As a new emerging field, sociology was shaped by the complex problems of the nineteenth century, in particular the challenge of how to preserve order in society without sacrificing progress. Sociologist Alain Touraine explained that classical sociology, in its aim to study social life, "came into being by defining the good in terms of the social utility of the modes of behaviour it observed" (*Critique* 352). "Sociology," according to Zygmunt Bauman, "aimed to know its object [human reality] in order to guess unerringly where it tends to move and so to find out what could and should be done if one wished to prod it in the right direction" (*Society* 1). Understanding the antecedents of the social changes introduced by modernity and its contemporary influence on society are core concerns of sociology.

Likewise, the Bahá'í Faith was founded during a period in which the social order was undergoing tremendous change. As the newest of the world's religions, the Bahá'í Faith provides its own viewpoint on social change and modernity, resolute in its claim that the foundation of such change is the infusion of spirituality and moral obligation into all human

affairs. It views social change as a "necessary and an essential attribute of this world" (*Kitáb-i-Aqdas* 4). Concerning the importance of the role of religion in the advancement of the social order, the commentary *One Common Faith*, commissioned by the Universal House of Justice, states, "Throughout history, the primary agents of spiritual development have been the great religions" (13). To exclude religion from the sociological examination of modernity and social change would lead to only a partial and artificial understanding of its significant influence. From the standpoint of the Bahá'í Faith, enduring change is a natural state of human existence, especially when examined from the spiritual dimension.

This paper examines social change and modernization from the perspective of the Bahá'í Faith and from a sociological comparative history of civilization. The term *modernity* is defined as the structural and institutional changes and transformations which developed in the West with what is commonly referred to as the Enlightenment. For the purposes of this study, sociologist Yves Lambert's periodized schema of modernity is relevant. He explains modernity as beginning in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries with what he describes as not only "'the modern age,' but also that of modern science, and of the birth of capitalism and the bourgeoisie." He further points out that "modernity only becomes a major phenomenon at the end of this period with the Enlightenment, the English and, especially, the American and French Revolutions, the birth of scientific method and thought, and the birth of industry" (*Religion in Modernity* 306).

Premised on the vital role of religion throughout history in effecting social change, this paper consists of three sections. The first covers several periods in history that experienced sociohistorical changes during a significant shift from primitive to civilized societies referred to as the "Axial Age." A brief survey follows, covering the social forces that brought about the Renaissance and the Reformation, leading to the revolutionary changes that took shape with the growth of the Enlightenment in Western Europe. The second section examines modernity from various sociological perspectives, reviewing its evolution and tracing the challenges that

contemporary society is undergoing as a consequence of the sweeping changes brought on by modernity. The last section examines the meaning and characteristics of change and modernity as described in the Bahá'í writings in correlation with the sociological perspectives.

The Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, although founded in mid-nineteenth-century Iran, established a blueprint for the transformation of society which not only accepts but goes well beyond the general changes brought about through modernity. The Bahá'í writings view the emergence of modernity as yet another phenomenon of social change reflecting the "transformative power that has been responsible for all of humanity's development over the ages" (Universal House of Justice, 26 November 2003). "Transformative power" is explained in the writings of Bahá'u'lláh as the gift of the human spirit which consists of the reasoning or rational "faculty with which God hath endowed the essence of man" (*Gleanings* 163). It is the rational faculty that is the source of the advancement of civilization throughout history.

Humanity, as described in the Bahá'í writings, has traversed stages which are likened to the organic development in the life cycle of human beings—including stages of infancy, childhood, and adolescence—and is now entering the age of maturity. This new age is associated with the unification of the whole of humankind, the formation of a world commonwealth, and far-reaching advances in the intellectual, spiritual, and moral life of the entire human race. As the social order advances on that course, humanity finds itself participating in two multifaceted but simultaneous processes of decline and rise. On the one hand, there is significant decline among the antiquated social structures, institutions, and cultural practices currently prevalent in all societies. This pattern is responsible for the increasing levels of turbulence, violence, and the breakdown of the social order. On the other hand, there is the emergence of the Bahá'í Faith: a movement whose aim is to integrate the affairs of humankind, building new institutions and social structures responsive to the challenges and requirements of an ever-changing social order. In so doing, the Bahá'í Faith offers a model for the construction of a complex worldwide social order moving gradually towards the development of a

planetary civilization. The emerging civilization, according to Bahá'í texts, is grounded on a firm spiritual foundation based on divine revelation.

During his travels in America in 1912, 'Abdu'l-Bahá spoke about the nature of the changes taking place throughout the social order as a result of the advent of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh. Addressing the Unitarian Conference in Boston, Massachusetts, He said: "Creation is the expression of motion. Motion is life. . . . nothing is stationary in the material world of outer phenomena or in the inner world of intellect and consciousness" (*Promulgation* 140). He explained the role of religion as a divine, living, vitalizing, progressive institution. Drawing attention to the nature of the enormous positive changes that have taken place in modern times, He stated that "[a]ncient laws and archaic ethical systems will not meet the requirements of modern conditions, for this is clearly the century of a new life, the century of the revelation of reality and, therefore, the greatest of all centuries" (*Promulgation* 140). He then asked His audience to

> [c]onsider how the scientific developments of fifty years have surpassed and eclipsed the knowledge and achievements of all the former ages combined. Would the announcements and theories of ancient astronomers explain our present knowledge of the suns and planetary systems? Would the mask of obscurity which beclouded medieval centuries meet the demand for clear-eyed vision and understanding which characterizes the world today? Will the despotism of former governments answer the call for freedom which has risen from the heart of humanity in this cycle of illumination? It is evident that no vital results are now forthcoming from the customs, institutions and standpoints of the past. (*Promulgation* 140)

'Abdu'l-Bahá thus challenged His audience to envision a future in which a new and radically different civilization would be built on principles of justice, equality, and unity. Before exploring in more detail the influence of modernity on contemporary society and its potential for transforming the

current social order, an examination of the rise and fall of past civilizations is in order.

The sociologist Rollin Chambliss, in his work on *Social Thought*, likens history to a river. He explains,

> As the passing waters have come from somewhere and do not cease to be when they are no longer in sight, so it is with events. The modern world is to a large extent the medieval and the ancient worlds. The languages we speak, the institutions to which we adhere, and the values we cherish are for the most part not modern at all. Nevertheless, just as the waters of a river change in appearance and motion, as crystal-clear streams receive discolouring tributaries or are broken up by cataracts, so do patterns of human behaviour and thought undergo transformations. (283)

Similarly, when examining the significant changes that have taken place at pivotal points in history, it is evident that such events were not merely isolated incidents without effect. On the contrary, change— both gradual and, at times, rapid—results from discoveries, developments, and interactions which to some extent had their roots in the past. The "passing waters" of the river of human history, as expressed by Chambliss, to some extent describes Bahá'u'lláh's teachings on the progressive nature of divine revelation and its continual influence on the evolution of human consciousness throughout history. Religion, as it traverses human history, draws from the timeless universal spiritual teachings revealed in all the major world religions. However, each successive religious revelation unfurls new knowledge and understanding that conform to the changes and challenges of its particular age, causing the steady edification of human consciousness.

Without a balanced and unfettered examination of religion's influence on civilization, a full grasp of the forces affecting historical and contemporary events, including the influence of modernity, is not possible. As a further elaboration on Bahá'u'lláh's concept of "progressive revelation," in *One Common Faith*, the role that the founders of religion perform in relation to the development and progress of humanity is explained as follows:

> It is . . . an inadequate recognition of the unique station of Moses, Buddha, Zoroaster, Jesus, Muḥammad—or of the succession of Avatars who inspired the Hindu scriptures—to depict their work as the founding of distinct religions. Rather are they appreciated when acknowledged as the spiritual Educators of history, as the animating forces in the rise of the civilizations through which consciousness has flowered: "He was in the world," the Gospel declares, "and the world was made by him. . . ."[1]
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> . . . Religion, thus conceived, awakens the soul to potentialities that are otherwise unimaginable. (21, 33–34)

Spiritual educators throughout history have provided humanity with the prerequisite conditions, the vitalizing forces responsible for the rise and progress of civilizations. A case in point is the approximately one thousand years from 500 BC to the first century of the Christian era when, over time, civilizations crystallized as either dynasties or empires, bringing about major transformations. The German philosopher Karl Jaspers referred to these as "Axial Age civilizations" (*Origin and Goal*).

The Axial Age

Jaspers explains that during the "Axial Period" the Mythical Age came to an end. Exceptional changes were brought about in relation to human consciousness in this period, which Jaspers described as an era in which "Man is no longer enclosed within himself," further stating that the "overall modification of humanity may be termed spiritualization" (*Origin and Goal* 3).

Sociologist Shmuel Eisenstadt has referred to the Axial Period as having brought about "revolutionary breakthroughs" which changed the course of human history. These changes were the result of a growing awareness, a consciousness of "new types of ontological visions and conceptions of a basic tension between the transcendental and the mundane orders" (Eisenstadt, *Japanese Civilization* 13).[2] Recognition of the incompleteness or inferior nature of the mundane order led to views which saw this order as "evil or polluted, and therefore in need of reconstruction"

(Eisenstadt, *Fundamentalism* 4). Emerging conceptions about life first developed among what Eisenstadt described as autonomous small groups of "intellectuals" such as prophets or visionaries, who were "carriers of models of cultural and social order" (*Fundamentalism* 4). As such models prevailed over time, they became institutionalized into the dominant orientation of the ruling class and a large portion of the secondary elites. Eisenstadt gives as examples the "institutionalization of the monotheistic vision attributed to Moses in ancient Israel, the Pauline vision in Christianity, and Confucian metaphysics in China" (*Japanese Civilization* 1). In these civilizations, tension between the transcendental and the mundane orders led to the construction of distinct civilizational frameworks, the emergence of an autonomous sphere of law and the notion of rights, and the evolution of the concept of the accountability of rulers and the community to a higher authority—that of divine law or God. In other words, in these civilizations which became centers of continuous struggle and change, new conceptions of social organization evolved.

It was also during the Axial Age that the first universal religions appeared. The historian David Christian explains, "It is no accident that universal religions appeared when both empires and exchange networks reached to the edge of the known universe, controlling populations with diverse belief systems and lifeways. Nor is it an accident that one of the earliest religions of this type, Zoroastrianism, appeared in the largest empire of the mid-first millennium BC, that of the Achaemenids, and at the hub of trade routes that were weaving Afro-Eurasia into a single world system" (319). It was during this same period that not only the Zoroastrian religion appeared, but also Manichaeism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Judaism, Christianity, and beyond the Axial Age proper, Islam.

As these societies crystallized, enormous changes took place in ancient Israel and the period of Second-Temple Judaism and Christianity, as well as in Zoroastrian Iran, ancient Greece, and early imperial China. Travel along trade routes such as the Silk Road brought Buddhism, Manichaeism, and Nestorian Christianity to China. Beyond the Axial Age, the Mesopotamian region came under the control of Islam, which would

eventually spread to Spain, East Africa, Central Asia, North China, and eventually to India and regions of Southeast Asia. Christianity spread in the Mediterranean region but retreated as Islam was introduced to the area, although it would return again in the late second millennium.

Throughout history, as in Axial Civilizations, examples of continual economical, social, and cultural interactions are evident even where there has been clear mutual hostility, conflict, and war among such societies. Of such interactions between civilizations, historian Amin Banani wrote, "Throughout history societies seemingly independent of one another, and indeed often mutually hostile, have been deeply in each other's debt. An outstanding example can be found in the Middle Ages, when the Western Christian world was engaged in a bitter struggle with the Islamic east; and yet the flow of commerce and the bonds of spiritual and intellectual endeavor held the two together" (*Modernization of Iran* 1).

Lambert points out that the concept of the Axial Age "has not been utilized by sociologists to analyze modernity" (305). As an exception, he cites Szakolczai and Füstös: "An axial moment occurs when there is a global collapse of the established order of things, including the political system, the social order of everyday life, and the system of beliefs—a very rare event—leading to a major spiritual revival . . . that, as an answer, locates the source of order inside the individual" (Szakolczai and Füstös 213).

The authors give several examples of axial moments throughout history: the first centuries BC and AD, which saw the collapse of the Roman Republic and the rise of Christianity; the fifth through the seventh centuries, during which occurred the collapse of the Roman Empire and the rise of Islam; the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, which saw the decline of Middle Ages and the emergence of the Renaissance and Protestantism; and lastly, "the two major stages of the dissolution of political absolutism and the traditional European social order, the Enlightenment and the growth of socialism" (Szakolczai and Füstös 213).

The section that follows examines the axial moment during which the collapse of the established order brought about a significant renewal with the emergence of the Renaissance and Reformation.

The Renaissance, the Reformation, and the Age of Enlightenment

The Renaissance in Western Europe marked the transition from medieval to modern times, a period of cultural rebirth from about the fourteenth through the eighteenth centuries, which brought about transformations in the arts, literature, and learning. The scientific revolution changed individual perceptions of the world, ushering in a revolution in human knowledge. The origins of the Renaissance may be traced back to the Islamic civilization, a fact not acknowledged by Eurocentric historians. The advent of Islam in the seventh century led to the gradual emergence of a series of empires that brought about the largest networks of culturally, socially, technologically and economically advanced societies in world history up to that time (Hobson).[3]

'Abdu'l-Bahá mentions this fact in *The Secret of Divine Civilization*, stating that "in every particular the basic elements of [Europe's] civilization are derived from Islám" (92). In a letter dated 27 April 1936 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, the impact of Islam on European culture during the Renaissance is explained as follows:

> The so-called Christian civilization of which the Renaissance is one of the most striking manifestations is essentially Muslim in its origins and foundations. When medieval Europe was plunged in darkest barbarism, the Arabs, regenerated and transformed by the spirit released by the religion of Muḥammad, were busily engaged in establishing a civilization the like of which their contemporary Christians in Europe had never witnessed before. It was eventually through Arabs that civilization was introduced to the West. It was through them that the philosophy, science and culture which the old Greeks had developed found their way to Europe. The Arabs were the ablest translators and linguists of their age, and it is thanks to them that the writings of such well-known thinkers as Socrates, Plato and Aristotle were made available to the Westerners. It is wholly unfair to attribute the efflorescence of European culture during the Renaissance

> period to the influence of Christianity. It was mainly the product of the forces released by the Muhammadan Dispensation. (In Hornby 496)

In the sixteenth century, the Protestant Reformation awakened a new curiosity concerning nature, human beings, and God. The movement was successful in making way for a clean break with tradition and authority in both sacred and secular matters. Shoghi Effendi wrote the following about the contribution of the Reformation in defining the societal role of religion, which at that time had become corrupted by the leaders of the Church: "What contribution the Reformation did really make was to seriously challenge, and partly undermine, the edifice which the Fathers of the Church had themselves reared, and to discard and demonstrate the purely *human* origin of the elaborate doctrines, ceremonies and institutions which they had devised. The Reformation was a right challenge to the *man-made* organization of the Church, and as such was a step in advance. In its origins, it was a reflection of the new spirit which Islam had released. . . ." (in Hornby 494; emphasis added).

The Age of Enlightenment developed as a European intellectual movement centered on the celebration of reason and the capacity of humans to understand the universe and improve the human condition. The notion (with its roots in ancient Greek thought) of society as a social contract underwent innovative changes during the Enlightenment. Voltaire in France, Hobbes in England, and Jefferson in America challenged the rights of monarchies and aristocracies and the authoritarian state, establishing instead the principles of freedom, justice, and democracy. Eventually the French and American Revolutions replaced old institutions. Church and state were separated, bringing about a secular and materialistic modernity in which humans ruled over nature. Historian Gertrude Himmelfarb describes the common traits of the Enlightenment as respect for reason and liberty, science and industry, justice, and welfare (20).

Although outwardly the Enlightenment brought about a significant decline in the role of religion due to rigid attachments to man-made dogmas, from the standpoint of the Bahá'í writings religious decline, whenever it

occurs, signals the progressive and continuous nature of divine revelation. Bahá'u'lláh, in describing the principle of progressive revelation, wrote: "Know of a certainty that in every Dispensation the light of Divine Revelation hath been vouchsafed unto men in direct proportion to their spiritual capacity" (*Gleanings* 87). From the Bahá'í viewpoint, the institution of religion was once again undergoing renewal and leading humanity to its next stage of development. It was around 1873 that Bahá'u'lláh revealed his Most Holy Book, The Kitáb-i-Aqdas, and claimed that the challenge of his Message was "to build anew the whole world" (*Gleanings* 99). This text "is the Charter of the future world civilization that Bahá'u'lláh has come to raise up" (*Kitáb-i-Aqdas* 1–2). In a statement prepared by the Bahá'í World Centre about the publication of the first authorized English translation of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, the following observation is made about the timing of its unveiling soon after the age of Enlightenment: "The Kitáb-i-Aqdas makes its appearance in a world which, since the Enlightenment's rejection of religion as the ultimate moral authority, has engaged in an increasingly urgent search for an alternative place to stand. Today, it is apparent that this effort has failed. Neither Marxist determinism nor popular faith in situational or consensus ethics offers a basis upon which the system of values required by an emerging global society can be erected" (*Bahá'í World* 107).

The role of religion as a relevant progressive institution did not stop with the emergence of the Age of Reason or the Enlightenment. Indeed, the period after the Enlightenment saw the rise of modern culture, the modern world, and the birth of a new religion in the nineteenth century.

Modernity

The events that took shape in Western Europe over several centuries, as described above, led to the onset of what sociologists, among others, refer to as modernity. The advent of modernity in the late eighteenth century radically transformed every aspect of human life. Modernity gave rise to new organizations, social structures, and a new type of society. In discussing the emergence of modernity, Eisenstadt explains that "some of

these processes manifested themselves in dramatic events like the great political revolutions of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; others appeared in more general and cumulative trends, like the scientific revolution or the development of rationalism—all of them very strongly reinforced by and connected with developments and trends in the economic life" (*Tradition* 203–4). Although fraught with many setbacks and uncertainties, modernity has now become a global phenomenon with a new set of challenges.

One of the prominent features of modernity, from the Bahá'í perspective, "has been the universal awakening of historical consciousness" (*One Common Faith* 53). Modernity has aroused a historical awareness of the progressive nature of the role of the institution of religion. Throughout history, religion, looked upon as the series of prophetic revelations, has not only guided the individual on the path of spiritual salvation, but has prepared him or her for the appearance of the latest revelation, that of Bahá'u'lláh. This point is further elucidated in *One Common Faith*:

> The declared purpose of history's series of prophetic revelations, therefore, has been not only to guide the individual seeker on the path of personal salvation, but to prepare the whole of the human family for the great eschatological Event lying ahead, through which the life of the world will itself be entirely transformed. The revelation of Bahá'u'lláh is neither preparatory nor prophetic. It *is* that Event. Through its influence, the stupendous enterprise of laying the foundations of the Kingdom of God has been set in motion, and the population of the earth has been endowed with the powers and capacities equal to the task. That Kingdom is a universal civilization shaped by principles of social justice and enriched by achievements of the human mind and spirit beyond anything the present age can conceive. (54)

Sociological Views of Modernity

With this vision in mind, we will now examine various sociological views about modernity and the alterations it continues to bring about in an ever-

changing social order. Sociologist Philip Selznick has stated that modernity refers to the technologically "advanced industrial, commercial, urban society that has taken shape in the West since the eighteenth century, anticipated . . . by earlier trends and ideas" (4).[4] Modernity brought about the shift from traditional to modern societies, separating "household and work, church and state, religion and community, ownership and management, education and parenting, law and morality, private and public life" (4). Kinship connections, sense of community, the extended family, and other social ties weakened under modernity. Modernity brought about efficient the coordination of activities through contract and bureaucracy. Secularization diminished the role and authority of religion, making it a strictly personal matter. Selznick wrote that modernity's break with tradition "has been a powerful engine for the release of energies, the achievement of excellence, and the protection of rights" (6). As an example he gives the rule of law, which requires an independent judiciary and the concept that no official is above the law, and that because of the legitimacy of the law a wide range of fundamental rights are protected.

Sociologist Anthony Giddens wrote the following about modernity:

> At its simplest, modernity is a shorthand term for modern society or industrial civilization. Portrayed in more detail, it is associated with (1) a certain set of attitudes towards the world, the idea of the world as an open transformation by human intervention; (2) a complex of economic institutions, especially production and a market economy; (3) a certain range of political institutions, including the nation-state and mass democracy. Largely as a result of these characteristics, modernity is vastly more dynamic than any previous type of social order. It is a society— more technically, a complex of institutions—which unlike any preceding cultures lives in the future rather than the past. (*Conversations* 94)

Another sociologist, Zygmunt Bauman, describes modernity as "a historical period that began in Western Europe with a series of profound

social-structural and intellectual transformations of the seventeenth century and achieved its maturity (1) as a cultural project—with the growth of Enlightenment; (2) as a socially accomplished form of life—with the growth of industrial society (capitalist and later communist)" (*Modernity and Ambivalence* 4). In the modern world, the traditional order was replaced by the nation-state, which is synonymous with society.

Among the many goals that modernity has aspired to achieve is that of bringing about order in society. Modernity attempted to tame the unruly nature of human affairs by creating a man-made society based on control. "The very project of modernity," according to Bauman, "is born out of the desire for a world without surprise, a safe world, a world without fear" ("The Unwinnable War"). Bauman explains that the "Enlightenment philosophers dreamed of an orderly world obedient to human will: mild and hospitable. And humans would not be forced to rely on the wisdom of divine creation, but were to realize these dreams on their own" ("The Unwinnable War"). The hope was that in the modern world reason would bring about predictability.

From the outset, modernity, like the historical civilizations of the past, did not spread in a systematic fashion to all parts of the globe. Some sociologists were under the assumption that modernity would develop throughout the world in the same manner as it did in modern Europe: all societies would eventually experience structural changes both organizationally and institutionally similar to those occurring in the West. After World War II, the "Convergence" theory, advocating "the unity of mankind," was put forth as a single institutional model for "modern society" (Eisenstadt, "Tradition, Change and Modernity" 15). The theory suggested that major institutional features of modernity would ultimately develop in all modern societies (Eisenstadt, *Fundamentalism* 196–98). This, of course, did not happen.

In theory, it was reasoned, as articulated by Eisenstadt, that "the cultural program of modernity as it developed in modern Europe and the basic institutional constellations that emerged there would ultimately take over in all modernizing and modern societies; with the expansion of modernity, they would prevail throughout the world" ("Multiple Modernities" 1).

As it spread unevenly to different regions of the world, modernity was likened to the "crystallization of a new type of civilization," as Eisenstadt described it, "not unlike the spread of great religions, or great imperial expansion of past times. . . . But while modernity has spread to most of the world in one form or another, it has not given rise to a single civilization" or to any one pattern of ideological or institutional model (Eisenstadt, "Cultural Tradition" 502–3). These variations as identified by Eisenstadt have led to his formulation of the theory of "multiple modernities," which challenges classical sociological theories of modernization widely accepted after World War II. Multiple modernities are not identical with Westernization but explain the history of modernity and its multiplicity of cultural programs.

A leading example of multiple modernities is the modernization of nineteenth-century Japan and the Meiji state, which although culturally distinctive and different from modern Europe and the United States, showed "far-reaching similarities to the West" in relation to its institutional capacity (Eisenstadt, *Japanese Civilization* 2). Other examples of multiple modernities include modernization in India, as well as the various social movements such as fundamentalism, fascism, and communism which advocate a complete reconstruction of the social order through political action, using an aggressive missionary stance to achieve their goal. These movements combine protest and construction in bringing about a new social and cultural order (Eisenstadt, *Fundamentalism*). The theory of multiple modernities addresses two important factors. The first is that new social movements continually evolve with new and different ideologies reacting, sometimes violently, and in competition with the changes that modernity has already brought about. The second is that no matter how hard certain social movements, such as fundamentalism, aim to stop or destroy the changes taking place in society, they are unable to bring about fixity or finality in the continuously changing modern social order.

Bauman refers to the current state of affairs in the late modern era as "liquid modernity," referring to the uncertainties and the rapidly changing nature of contemporary life (*Liquid Modernity*). The Bahá'í writings,

in contrast, describe change and its acceleration as a main component and enduring feature of contemporary life. Shoghi Effendi refers to Bahá'u'lláh's World Order as "involving the reconstruction of mankind" (*Promised Day* 123), describing it "as a living organism" with features that allow for its expansion and adaptation to "the needs and requirements of an ever-changing society" (*World Order* 23). Although at present the rapidly changing social order has brought about a dangerously fragmented world with rampant individualism and excessive materialism, from the Bahá'í perspective the current confusion is viewed as a natural outcome of the progressive nature of divine revelation and the purpose of religion in guiding human affairs. *One Common Faith* places such pervasive changes in contemporary life squarely on the arrival of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh. For example, in examining religious differences that are often highlighted as barriers to a unified system of truth, the Bahá'í teachings point out that throughout history progressive revelation has benefited from a system of knowledge emanating from one Source or one religion with integrity and freedom, and totally removed "from the contradictions imposed by sectarian ambitions" (22). This point is further expounded upon in *One Common Faith* by comparing the customs governing personal life with the features of the material life of humankind:

> It is most unlikely that diversity in hygiene, dress, medicine, diet, transportation, warfare, construction or economic activity, however striking, would any longer be seriously advanced in support of a theory that humanity does not in fact constitute one people, single and unique. Until the opening of the twentieth century, such simplistic arguments were commonplace, but historical and anthropological research now provides a seamless panorama of the process of cultural evolution by which these and countless other expressions of human creativity came into existence, were transmitted through generations, underwent gradual metamorphoses and often spread to enrich the lives of peoples in far distant lands. That present-day societies represent a wide spectrum of such phenomena, therefore, does not in any way define a fixed and immutable identity of the peoples concerned,

> but merely distinguishes the stage through which given groups are—or at least until recently have been—passing. Even so, all such cultural expressions are now in a state of fluidity in consequence of the pressures of planetary integration. (25)

The "state of fluidity" mentioned in the above extract is analogous to Bauman's notion of "liquid modernity" or the variable nature of modernity in contemporary life. From the Bahá'í perspective the "state of fluidity" as experienced in material life is similar to the evolutionary process characterizing the continuous role of religion in human history. Religion is progressive, concerned with the requirements of a world in flux, as it gradually advances toward the crystallization of a new civilization. The contemporary challenge into future centuries, as addressed in the Bahá'í writings, is how to establish an integrated planetary system which, while rightly upholding the diversity of the peoples, cultures and nations of the world, aims to achieve the oneness of humankind and construct institutions and an administrative structure capable of establishing and protecting a permanent universal peace and thus ensuring the happiness and well-being of humankind.

Another outcome of the uncertainties brought about as a result of the changes introduced by modernity is the role of the nation-state. By the early twentieth century, many scholars began to question the efficacy of the nation-state, suggesting that it was losing its power. Among some historians and sociologists a strong consensus is put forth indicating that the nation-state was an "unfinished project" which at best was made up of "frail coalitions of but partly compatible forms of life" (Huntington 9–10).[5] The Bahá'í perspective, on the other hand, not only recognizes the importance of the formation of nation-states, but sees their legitimate establishment as necessary to the foundation of the future Bahá'í world commonwealth.[6] Ideally, nation-states establish and sustain territories, create and uphold laws, and protect the rights of citizens. However, under the present global system, the powers of the sovereign state are curtailed, giving rise to a variety of identities formed around ethnicity, religion, ideology, and the like. Despite such emerging patterns and views, it is evident

that nation-states still play a major role in the development of globalization.[7] Eisenstadt explains the role of nation-states, global markets, and the colossal changes that have brought about globalization as follows:

> The multiple and divergent instantiations of the "classical" age of modernity crystallized during the nineteenth century and above all in the first six or seven decades of the twentieth century into very different territorial nation—and revolutionary states and social movements in Europe, the Americas, and, after World War II, in Asia. The institutional, symbolic, and ideological contours of modern national and revolutionary states, once thought to be the epitome of modernity, have changed dramatically with the recent intensification of forces of globalization. These trends, manifested especially in the growing autonomy of world financial and commercial flows, intensified international migrations and the concomitant development on an international scale of such social problems as the spread of diseases, prostitution, organized crime, and youth violence. All this has served to reduce the control of the nation-state over its own economic and political affairs. . . . Nation-states have also lost a part of their monopoly on internal and international violence . . . to local and international groups of separatists or terrorists. ("Multiple Modernities" 16)

Although not an entirely new term, in the twenty-first century, "globalization" has become a popular word for describing the astonishing changes occurring in the world, especially in the global market economy. Bauman refers to globalization as "that uncanny experience of the 'world filling up'" (*Society* 13). Over the decades there was much talk about an interdependent world, but never before has this interdependence been, as it is today, more tangible. We can no longer hide behind borders, guard boundaries, and view the world as being comprised of "insiders" and "outsiders." Bauman put it most aptly when he said, "Of this full world we are all insiders and permanent residents with nowhere to go" (12).

Some have referred to the changes brought about by globalization as the "postmodern society". Others, such as Bauman, reject the postmodern

theory, indicating that whereas "models of modernity articulated a shared vision of modern history, *as a movement with a direction*—and differed solely in the selection of ultimate destination or the organizing principle of the process, be it universalization, rationalization, or systemization. . . . none of those principles can be upheld in the light of postmodern experience" ("Sociological Theory" 150). Touraine describes postmodern culture as being "incapable of creating anything" and warns about the return of "nationalisms, particularisms, fundamentalisms—religious and otherwise" (*Critique* 3, 4).

In addition to globalization, some of the characteristics of postmodern society are described as consumerism, the fragmentation of authority, and knowledge as a commodity. "In postmodern politics," Bauman explains, "individual freedom is the supreme value and the yardstick by which all merits and vices of society at large are measured" (*Postmodernity* 206). The excessive and dangerous emphasis on individual freedom is explained by Bauman as a consequence of the loss of power on the part of nation-states in confronting social, political, and economic problems requiring solutions that would acknowledge the integrative nature of the emerging global social order. Some have suggested that with the diminishing influence of the nation-state, no alternative legitimate agency has emerged upon which the individual can rely on to bring order to global relations. For the individual, the sense of safety is lost. The lack of security endangers individual freedom, which in turn brings about a desire for individual protection. But as history has shown, the individual alone cannot act as a catalyst in bringing about individual freedom or happiness. This dilemma has led some sociologists to remark on the incapacity of postmodern society to create the one condition which can secure freedom for all: the condition of solidarity or unity.

In his lecture entitled "Barbarism: A User's Guide," historian Eric Hobsbawm makes observations regarding the root cause of the decline of civility in modern society which are pertinent to the discussion of the present conditions found in so-called postmodern society. Hobsbawm is of the opinion that "after about 150 years of secular decline, barbarism has been on the increase for most of the twentieth century, and there is no

sign that this increase is at an end" (*On History* 223). He describes the two conditions of barbarism that have impacted the global culture:

> First, the disruption and breakdown of the systems of rules and moral behaviour by which all societies regulate the relations among their members, and to a lesser extent, between their members and those of other societies. Second . . . the reversal of what we may call the project of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, namely the establishment of a universal system of such rules and standards of moral behaviour, embodied in the institutions of states dedicated to the rational progress of humanity: to Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness, to Equality, Liberty and Fraternity or whatever. Both are now taking place and reinforce each other's negative effects on our lives. (253–54)

One Common Faith describes the present moribund condition of the world as the "bankruptcy of the materialistic enterprise," pointing out that for "over a hundred years, the idea of progress was identified with economic development and with its capacity to motivate and shape social improvement" (8). Instead, a "consumer culture" has evolved where for the few that "can afford them, the benefits it offers are immediate, and the rationale unapologetic." With the breakdown of traditional morality

> the advance of the new creed is essentially no more than the triumph of animal impulse, as instinctive and blind as appetite, released at long last from the restraints of supernatural sanctions. Its most obvious casualty has been language. Tendencies once universally castigated as moral failings mutate into necessities of social progress. Selfishness becomes a prized commercial resource; falsehood reinvents itself as public information; perversions of various kinds unabashedly claim the status of civil rights. under appropriate euphemisms, greed, lust, indolence, pride—even violence—acquire not merely broad acceptance but social and economic value. (10)

The multiple disorders confronting humanity in the early phase of the twenty-first century are issues about which sociologists are continually searching for solutions. As a discipline, sociology continues to explore the central question of how to maintain order in the rapidly changing modern world in which outdated institutions have lost their legitimacy. In an attempt to provide answers to such questions, Alain Touraine offers the following insightful view on the significance of change and its influence on contemporary sociology:

> Change is not simply the sum total of modifications of the environment; it is also a sign of cultural creativity and of a power which has expanded beyond the spheres of economy and politics into the production and diffusion of informations and—in a more general sense—symbolic goods, i.e. culture. In this sense, contemporary sociology can take the guidelines of classical sociology to their most extreme consequences. even more than before, it is concerned with the study of modernity, the self-transforming capacity of society; and it sees the struggle for social control over this capacity as the structuring principle of social life. ("Is Sociology" 183)

Today the social forces of change appear to have unleashed disorders that seem impossible to manage, whether by individuals, organizations, or sovereign states. When asked about his views regarding the current struggles between various political factions and ideologies that are at war with one another throughout the world, Bauman responded with the following statement: "In our disorganized world, the struggle currently taking place is not about the shape of the future world order, but rather about who is going to decide this shape" ("The Unwinnable War").

The sociological perspectives on the changing nature of modernity do not necessarily contradict the Bahá'í viewpoint. Rather, the descriptions of the nature and extent of the changes that the social order is to undergo, as described in the Bahá'í texts, correlate with various concepts put forth by sociologists. Describing the world as "ever-changing," Bahá'u'lláh explained that the fundamental purpose of the institution of religion is to

bring about change. He explained that every prophet who has been sent to "the peoples of the earth hath been entrusted with a Message, and charged to act in a manner that would best meet the requirements of the age in which he appeared" (*Gleanings* 111). As stated earlier, the Bahá'í writings explain the changing nature of the social order and the transformations that it will continue to undergo as permanent conditions of the present age, which is advancing towards its destiny. What follows is an examination of the features of modernity from the Bahá'í perspective, written when the Bahá'í Faith was founded in nineteenth-century Iran.

The Bahá'í Faith and Modernity

When Bahá'u'lláh's new Faith was founded, the European continent was already well into the age of modernity, with changes occurring in the educational, scientific, technological, economic, political and cultural arenas. The Middle East, on the other hand, was in decline, and Iran in particular had been in a state of decay and stagnation since the collapse of the Safavid dynasty in early 1700s (Lewis). The Qajar dynasty, which ruled the country at the time, was organized into a hierarchical system with the shah at the top, followed by members of his family in descending order, aristocratic families whose loyalty to the king established their position, tribal chiefs (khans) who would provide military support to the king when needed, bureaucrats indebted to the king, and religious leaders who gained power by participating in the secular government. Nineteenth-century Iran is generally described as a backward, morally bankrupt, intellectually impoverished society suffering from illiteracy, poverty, despotism, and traditionalism.[8] The writings of Bahá'u'lláh disclosed during this same period a radical vision of the world progressing toward a new civilization, "a universal civilization shaped by principles of social justice and enriched by achievements of the human mind and spirit beyond anything the present age can conceive" (*One Common Faith* 54).

In his voluminous writings, Bahá'u'lláh describes the function of the Manifestation of God and His revealed Word as the impulse for the creation of new possibilities in individual consciousness, human relation-

ships, and advancement in the social order: the impetus behind civilization building is divine revelation. Therefore, when in the late 1800s Bahá'u'lláh wrote, "Soon will the present-day order be rolled up and a new one spread out in its stead" (*Gleanings* 7), He clearly prognosticated the scope and magnitude of the changes that humanity would undergo as a result of the transforming role of His Revelation. In the book *Century of Light*, covering the second centenary of Bahá'í history and prepared under the supervision of the Universal House of Justice, the distinctive nature of that reconstruction is described as "the revolutionary change in the very structure of society and the willing submission of human nature to Divine Law that, in the final analysis, can alone produce the necessary changes in attitude and behaviour" (25) and ultimately bring about changes to the social, political, and economic life of humanity.

In Ishráqát ("Splendors"), Bahá'u'lláh writes, "[E]very atom in existence is moved to testify that such means as lead to the elevation, the advancement, the education, the protection and regeneration of the peoples of the earth have been clearly set forth by Us and are revealed in the Holy Books and Tablets by the Pen of Glory" (*Tablets* 130). In this and countless other passages, Bahá'u'lláh establishes the evolutionary nature of the social order and its continuous progression to higher stages of development. Renewal, exaltation, revival, and advancement are among some of the major themes of Bahá'u'lláh's writings. An enduring feature of these texts is the permanence of change in both the life of the individual and that of the social order.

The idea of continuous change as an enduring theme of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation is further expounded in the writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Who states, "[T]he times never remain the same, for change is a necessary quality and an essential attribute of this world, and of time and place" (qtd. in Universal House of Justice, *Messages* 35.7a). Shoghi Effendi describes the world as "moving on towards its destiny" (*Promised Day* 200), envisioning the future as one in which humankind will undergo a reconstruction which "as the result of the universal recognition of its oneness and wholeness, will bring in its wake the spiritualization of the masses, consequent to the recognition of the character, and the acknowledgement of

the claims, of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh—the essential condition to that ultimate fusion of all races, creeds, classes, and nations which must signalize the emergence of His New World Order" (202).

Changes already brought on by modernity were enhanced by the visionary teachings of Bahá'u'lláh. What is remarkable about the Bahá'í writings is the sweeping nature of the changes they introduce in relation to the reorganization of the world based on Bahá'u'lláh's central principle of the unification of humankind. His writings establish principles such as freedom of thought, an unfettered search after truth, religious tolerance, equal rights, opportunity and privileges for women and men, universal education, abolition of extremes of wealth and poverty, promotion of the harmony between science and religion, collective security, disarmament, globalization, and the establishment of a permanent and universal peace. All such principles form the social structure of a planetary civilization in which individuals, acting on spiritual principles, are expected to uphold their moral obligations and responsibilities, and divinely ordained institutions are responsible to apply justice.

Shoghi Effendi explains that the significance of Bahá'u'lláh's prophetic vision for the future world civilization was "uttered at a time when its possibility had not yet been seriously envisaged in any part of the world" (*World Order* 47). In one of his letters, "The Unfoldment of World Civilization," written in 1936, Shoghi Effendi renders the following vision of the sweeping changes that will bring about the future Bahá'í commonwealth:

> The causes of religious strife will be permanently removed, economic barriers and restrictions will be completely abolished, and the inordinate distinction between classes will be obliterated. Destitution on the one hand, and gross accumulation of ownership on the other, will disappear. The enormous energy dissipated and wasted on war, whether economic or political, will be consecrated to such ends as will extend the range of human inventions and technical development, to the increase of the productivity of mankind, to the extermination of disease, to the extension of scientific research, to the raising of the

> standard of physical health, to the sharpening and refinement of the human brain, to the exploitation of the unused and unsuspected resources of the planet, to the prolongation of human life, and to the furtherance of any other agency that can stimulate the intellectual, the moral, and spiritual life of the entire human race. (*World Order* 140)

Unlike the materialist perspective which has dominated the development of modernity, the Bahá'í Faith places emphasis on the need for a spiritually based civilization. In order to ensure success in the development of the material world, the Bahá'í writings stress the importance of its construction upon a spiritual, divine culture. This concept is elaborated in the following extract from 'Abdu'l-Bahá's writings:

> [A]lthough material civilization is one of the means for the progress of the world of mankind, yet until it becomes combined with Divine civilization, the desired result, which is the felicity of mankind, will not be attained. . . . Material civilization is like a lamp-glass. Divine civilization is the lamp itself and the glass without the light is dark. Material civilization is like the body. No matter how infinitely graceful, elegant and beautiful it may be, it is dead. Divine civilization is like the spirit, and the body gets its life from the spirit, otherwise it becomes a corpse. It has thus been made evident that the world of mankind is in need of the breaths of the Holy Spirit. Without the spirit the world of mankind is lifeless, and without this light the world of mankind is in utter darkness. (*Selections* 317–18)

Thus, the Bahá'í approach to modernity is completely at variance with the contemporary view that is focused on a materialist enterprise devoid of the divine or spiritual component. The Bahá'í standpoint seeks to reconcile the spiritual and material dimensions of civilization.[9] As stated in *Century of Light*, "as with every great civilization in history, until it is so animated, and its spiritual faculties awakened, it will find neither peace, nor justice, nor a unity that rises above the level of negotiation and compromise" (144).

The features and challenges of modernity have more recently been outlined in a letter dated 26 November 2003, written by the Universal House of Justice: "[The] challenge of modernity . . . has become the inescapable preoccupation of populations throughout the planet, not the least the peoples of the Islamic world." The letter provides the details of that challenge by defining the Bahá'í perspective on modernity as follows: "The meaning of modernity and the features of that rising flood of cultural revolution were explicitly identified in ['Abdu'l-Bahá's] message: constitutional and democratic government, the rule of law, universal education, the protection of human rights, economic development, religious tolerance, the promotion of useful sciences and technologies and programmes of public welfare."

It was in *The Secret of Divine Civilization*, a treatise written by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in 1875, that these features of modernity were first outlined. Shoghi Effendi described this unique work as an "outstanding contribution to the future reorganization of the world" (*World Order* 37). In it 'Abdu'l-Bahá challenges the reader to consider the achievements that are "emanations of the human mind," "to lay hold of whatsoever will further civilization and the arts of living," "to encourage the acquisition of useful arts and of general knowledge, to inform oneself as to the truths of such physical sciences as are beneficial to man, and to widen the scope of industry and increase the products of commerce and multiply the nation's avenues of wealth," "to establish law and order in the cities . . . facilitate transportation and travel . . . to stimulate the creation of new industries" (*Secret* 2, 3, 101–2).

He, furthermore, asserts that everyone should be involved in "continually . . . establishing new bases for human happiness and creating and promoting new instrumentalities toward this end" (*Secret* 3–4). The message which emanates from these desirable characteristics of the modern age, as put forth by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, is one which calls for constancy on the part of the individual to strive to stretch and broaden his or her endowments and capacities to their furthest limits in the promotion of the well-being and happiness of humanity and to ensure the continual progression of the social order both in the spiritual and the material realms. Thus, 'Abdu'l-Bahá places emphasis on the necessity for the application of

spiritual principles in shaping modern society and in guaranteeing its continual advancement.

The Universal House of Justice explains that 'Abdu'l-Bahá, in commending the material achievements of civilization, "made it clear [in *The Secret of Divine Civilization*] that He was not proposing simply a credulous imitation of the West. On the contrary," the House of Justice explains, "in uncompromising language, He portrayed European society as drowning 'in the sea of passion and desire', trapped in a materialistic perception of reality that could bring in its wake nothing but disillusionment" (26 November 2003).

The Secret of Divine Civilization provides a blueprint for the modernization of Iran written prior to the beginning of the twentieth century. 'Abdu'l-Bahá writes that Iran should do all in its power to bring about reforms already in place in other lands (referring in particular to the West), and insists that the "foreign importation" of "laws, principles and fundamentals of progress on the highest levels of a fully developed society, which are current in the other countries" is fitting to the needs of the people of Persia (115). Rather than rejecting modernization, 'Abdu'l-Bahá suggests embracing it as the means to ensure the progress and development of the society. He writes, "Today throughout the five continents of the globe it is Europe and most sections of America that are renowned for law and order, government and commerce, art and industry, science, philosophy and education" (10).

A cursory survey of the intellectual history of nineteenth-century Iran, and the range of ideas set forth by the Iranian intellectuals of the time, reveals the far-sightedness of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's vision in relation to the scope and nature of the reforms necessary for the progress of the Iranian people and nation as well as for all societies.[10]

In examining the influence of modernity within the context of contemporary society, *One Common Faith* offers a thought-provoking overview of the positive historical changes which the application of the features of modernity brought about and places them in the context of the twenty-first century. At the same time, the role of religion is clarified—in this case

the Bahá'í Faith—as the impetus which drives the advance of society both materially and spiritually:

> The rational soul does not merely occupy a private sphere, but is an active participant in a social order. Although the received truths of the great faiths remain valid, the daily experience of an individual in the twenty-first century is unimaginably removed from the one that he or she would have known in any of those ages when this guidance was revealed. Democratic decision-making has fundamentally altered the relationship of the individual to authority. With growing confidence and growing success, women justly insist on their right to full equality with men. Revolutions in science and technology change not only the functioning but the conception of society, indeed of existence itself. Universal education and an explosion of new fields of creativity open the way to insights that stimulate social mobility and integration, and create opportunities of which the rule of law encourages the citizen to take full advantage. Stem cell research, nuclear energy, sexual identity, ecological stress and the use of wealth raise, at the very least, social questions that have no precedent. These and countless other changes affecting every aspect of human life, have brought into being a new world of daily choices for both society and its members. What has not changed is the inescapable requirement of making such choices, whether for better or worse. It is here that the spiritual nature of the contemporary crisis comes into sharpest focus because most of the decisions called for are not merely practical but moral. In large part, therefore, loss of faith in traditional religion has been an inevitable consequence of failure to discover in it the guidance required to live with modernity, successfully and with assurance. (*One Common Faith*, 15–16)

The moral dilemma which today challenges the well-being of humanity has caused sociologists and other leading thinkers to search deep for viable solutions to the moral decay and bankruptcy so prevalent in today's society.

> Sociologist Keith Tester: "[T]he world is . . . a producer of horror and atrocity yet seemingly there are no resources which might be the basis of the generation of a moral response to many of these instances of suffering." (qtd. in Bauman, *Society* 211)

> Sociologist Ulrich Beck: "[E]verything revolves around the axis of one's personal ego and personal life." (135)

> Zygmunt Bauman, referring to sociologist Stanley Cohen's book on denial: "Denial is what makes both the perpetration of evil and the refraining from reacting to evil psychologically and sociologically feasible." (203)

> Sociologist Alain Touraine: "The world is moving too fast for it still to be possible to explain why it cannot move." (*Is Sociology* 197)..

> Bauman: "It is a very cynical concept to misuse a religion for the realisation of goals which have nothing whatsoever in common with religion." ("The Unwinnable War")

One of the most powerful observations which 'Abdu'l-Bahá made in *The Secret of Divine Civilization*, and which provides insights into the sociological observations regarding modernity's dark side, concerns the consequences that result from the lack of spiritual education and refinement of the human character. He wrote:

> There are some who imagine that an innate sense of human dignity will prevent man from committing evil actions and insure his spiritual and material perfection. That is, that an individual who is characterized with natural intelligence, high resolve, and a driving zeal, will, without any consideration for the severe punishments consequent on evil acts, or for the great rewards of righteousness, instinctively refrain from inflicting harm on his fellow men and will hunger and thirst to do good. And yet, if we ponder the lessons of history it will become evident that this very sense of honor and dignity is itself

> one of the bounties deriving from the instructions of the Prophets of God . . . It is therefore clear that the emergence of this natural sense of human dignity and honor is the result of education. (97–98)

Within the emerging worldwide Bahá'í community, now over 160 years old, an organic process of civilization building has been set in motion whose aim is the unity of the human race. Within this highly diverse community, all the features of modernity, as set forth in the Bahá'í texts, are painstakingly in the process of development. 'Abdu'l-Bahá explained the all-encompassing power and influence of the Bahá'í Faith on all societies by stating that "[t]he teachings of Bahá'u'lláh are such that all the communities of the world, whether religious, political or ethical, ancient or modern, find in them the expression of their highest wish" (*Selections* 304). Although Bahá'í laws and principles, as revealed by Bahá'u'lláh, cannot be forced on any individual or society, they, nevertheless, belong to all who inhabit the earth regardless of culture, ethnicity, race, nationality, and the like.

In its Peace Statement written in 1985, the Universal House of Justice offered to the world the experience of the Bahá'í community as the milieu in which the application of Bahá'í principles, including the features of modernity, is advancing toward the construction and unification of a global community:

> It is a community of . . . people drawn from many nations, cultures, classes and creeds, engaged in a wide range of activities serving the spiritual, social and economic needs of the peoples of many lands. It is a single social organism, representative of the diversity of the human family, conducting its affairs through a system of commonly accepted consultative principles, and cherishing equally all the great outpourings of divine guidance in human history. Its existence is yet another convincing proof of the practicality of its Founder's vision of a united world, another evidence that humanity can live as one global society, equal to whatever challenges its coming of age may entail. (*Promise* 36)

The Bahá'í perspective, far from being naive, faces the challenge of

modernity head on, suggesting that responsibility rests with the members of humankind acting with determination to heal the many social ills plaguing the global community, thereby ensuring the progress and advancement of civilization. It is the inescapable responsibility of the individual to take on resolutely the contemporary challenges, and through hard work, discipline, and sacrifice, apply the relevant solutions to the current problems. Just as in former times history has shown humanity's resilience in responding to the need for breakthrough and transcendence under the most difficult of circumstances, so too can the present generation and those to follow accomplish the goal of transforming the continuously changing social order.

In *The Secret of Divine Civilization* 'Abdu'l-Bahá astutely describes the nature of our current crisis: "Today we have closed our eyes to every righteous act and have sacrificed the abiding happiness of society to our own transitory profit. We regard fanaticism and zealotry as redounding to our credit and honor, and not content with this, we denounce one another and plot each other's ruin. . . . The edifice of religion has crumbled, the foundations of faiths have been blown to the winds . . . the whole world has fallen into error; when it comes to repelling tyranny all are soft and remiss" (56).

In closing, we come back to the power and influence of knowledge and education, especially regarding spiritual values, on human development, which 'Abdu'l-Bahá identifies as a fundamental means for the progress of society. On this theme the Universal House of Justice writes: "All the evidence inescapably demonstrates that the principal influence in the gradual civilizing of human character, far from being a simple endowment of nature, has been the effect produced on the rational soul by the guidance of the successive Messengers of God." It is through the application of this guidance that humanity is capable of renewal, progress, and refinement. It is through the intervention of the Manifestations of God, writes the Universal House of Justice, "that the peoples of the world, of whatever nation or religion, have learned the values and ideals that have empowered them to put material resources and technological means at the service of human betterment. It is They who, in each age, have defined the meaning and requirements of modernity" (26 November 2003). As in the

former civilizations of the Axial Age, or the society that blossomed during the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, and now in the modern world, the waters of the river of divine revelation continue to channel the whole of humanity toward "an ever-advancing civilization" (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* 214), destined to progressively and over time evolve into a planetary commonwealth.

Notes

1. John 1:10.

2. See also Eisenstadt, "The Axial Age."

3. See also Abu-Lughod.

4. See Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity.*

5. See Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism* 161–92.

6. Shoghi Effendi elaborates on this point, describing the Bahá'í world commonwealth as follows: "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" (*World Order* 203).

7. See Sassen.

8. See Martin.

9. For further reading on the Bahá'í approach to social and economic development, see Readings.

10. See Gheissari; Ringer; and Behnam.

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