

## Forging More Perfect Unions

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### Abstract

The author believes that, to avoid disintegration, social advances toward more inclusive political structures must be accompanied by a moral advance toward more universal values. This article discusses the three stages of humanity's global political unification, as these are described in the Bahá'í writings: confederation, federation, and commonwealth. Since in the author's view forms of government are outer expressions of inner levels of collective unified consciousness, each of these forms of government also marks a stage of humanity's deepening inner unification. Of particular note is the discussion of the changing concept of competition. Competition has been the dynamic power behind humanity's advance to this point. Competition will remain the driving power of advance, but, based on statements from the Bahá'í writings, the author argues that if human beings are to create a united world they must stop competing selfishly to obtain individual, national, or regional goals and, instead, compete selflessly to forge cooperative structures that will benefit all humanity.

### Résumé

L'auteur croit que, pour éviter la désintégration, toute progression sociale visant à établir des structures politiques plus englobantes doit nécessairement s'accompagner d'une progression morale vers des valeurs plus universelles. L'article traite des trois étapes de l'unification politique globale de l'humanité telles que décrites dans les écrits bahá'ís: confédération, fédération, et commonwealth. Puisque, de l'avis de l'auteur, les formes de gouvernement sont l'expression extérieure de niveaux intérieurs d'une conscience collective unifiée, chacune de ces formes de gouvernement représente une nouvelle étape de l'unification intérieure grandissante de l'humanité. L'auteur traite aussi de l'évolution du concept de la compétition. Alors que la compétition a constitué jusqu'à maintenant—et continuera d'être—la puissance dynamique à l'origine de la progression de l'humanité, l'auteur croit, en se fondant sur les écrits bahá'ís, que pour réaliser l'unification mondiale, il faut que les humains cessent d'être en compétition égoïste les uns avec les autres en vue d'atteindre un objectif personnel, national, au régional; il leur faudrait plutôt rivaliser entre eux de façon désintéressée en vue de mettre en place des structures coopératives susceptibles de bénéficier à toute l'humanité.

### Resumen

El autor es partidario de que para evitar la desintegración, los avances sociales hacia estructuras políticas más inclusivas deben ser acompañadas por un avance moral hacia valores más universales. Esta disertación presenta las tres etapas de la unificación política global de la humanidad de acuerdo con los escritos bahá'ís: confederación, federación, mancomunidad. Puesto que, según opina el autor, los modos de gobierno son expresiones externas de niveles internos de conciencia colectiva unificada, cada uno de estos modos de gobierno señala una etapa de profundización de la unificación interna de la humanidad. Vale especialmente mencionar la exposición sobre la alteración del concepto de la competencia. Hasta el presente, la potencia dinámica tras el avance de la humanidad ha sido la competencia. La competencia seguirá siendo la fuerza motriz del progreso, no obstante que, basado en declaraciones extraídas de los escritos bahá'ís, el autor sostiene que si los seres humanos esperan crear un mundo unido, precisan abandonar, en la obtención de metas individuales, nacionales, o regionales, la competencia egoísta y, en vez, competir desinteresadamente para forjar instituciones cooperativas que beneficiarán a toda la humanidad.

If peace and security are to mean something more than the temporary exhaustion that is the outcome of nations periodically clubbing each other senseless, then cooperation is essential. Conflict is inevitable so long as narrow self-interest drives human desire, but cooperation takes different forms. It can be either the result of a convergence of interests that immediately dissolves when these interests wane, or it can be a form of being, as for example the organs of the body acting in concert to manifest growth and life. The first form of cooperation is that of separated units temporarily connecting to work together for some common end or for some individual purpose that needs another to be realized. The second kind of cooperation is that of units manifesting an enduring unity.

The Bahá'í writings indicate that the political unification of humanity will progress from the present emphasis upon the first form of cooperation to an emphasis upon the second kind. However, they warn that this outer movement must be paralleled by a psychological shift from selfish competition that divides humanity into warring camps, to selfless competition, which will be the means by which stronger cooperative structures may be created. If such a psychological transformation does not occur, humankind will experience an unprecedented violent upheaval that could destroy civilization. This article explores the stages of the social and psychological movement of humanity as it is presented in the Bahá'í writings.

## **Competition**

Competition comes out of the child's self-protecting, self-aggrandizing "me first" attitude, a stage of life in which selfishness and self-development are the same thing. However useful an attitude during the early years, this child's world of value becomes self-destructive when carried into maturity with its give-and-take relationships. The same principle may be applied to the growth of nations and their relationships.

Any attempt to unite the self-interests of competing sovereign nations, such as the various regional associations now emerging, is difficult to maintain if cooperation is only a marriage of mutual convenience. For such unions are really a means to promote national interests and hold together only as long as these interests are served. Nations also enter into regional unions to gain competitive economic advantage over other regions. Awareness of this fact causes other nations to form blocs to protect their economies and improve their competitive edge. Thus the anxiety and tension that competition arouses are perpetuated on a larger scale.<sup>1</sup> Such cooperation cannot create true unity, only a guarded, uneasy truce between watchful rivals.

One hundred years ago Bahá'u'lláh counselled against making "a union that would lead to disunity or a concord which would create discord" (*Tablets* 167). Today we see the wisdom in this counsel. For even as greater cooperative economic and political structures are built within the existing world system, the competition among peoples for physical and intellectual resources makes the system breakdown faster and more destructively.

Any political structure that is less than global can only exacerbate "us" versus "them" feelings. If the world's peoples are truly to unite, divisive feelings must be overcome. Political unity alone can only indicate that such unity is possible. Even the creation of a global political structure could not by itself overcome the antipathy, suspicion, and mistrust that have long divided nations and peoples, nor stop competing nations from instinctively throwing in front of each other hindrances that cause frustrations to boil over into angry name-calling and finger-pointing, and, sometimes wars. Outward unity cannot stand upon inward divisions. As Shoghi Effendi warned:

Not even, I venture to assert, would the very act of devising the machinery required for the political and economic unification of the world...provide in itself the antidote against the poison that is steadily undermining the vigor of organized peoples and nations. (*The World Order* 34)

The poison is in the heart. Bahá'ís contend that humanity's outer social growth toward a global order must occur in tandem with inner moral growth toward universal human values, since a new social order would function neither properly nor for long without a grounding in new inclusive ways of thought and feeling. Bahá'u'lláh wrote: "The earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens" (*Tablets* 167). Nations and peoples must outgrow the tendency to see themselves as separate pieces of humankind. Instead, they must perceive themselves as the limbs and members of the organic body of humanity. In this new view, national growth must be measured according to how well a nation's people and institutions act in relation to noble, moral standards rather than how voraciously they can consume a greater variety of goods or how forcefully they can make their expressions of self-interest felt in international politics. In their outlook nations must conform to the organic principle that "the welfare of the part means the welfare of the whole, and the distress of the part brings distress to the whole" (Shoghi Effendi, *Promised Day* 122).

Unless humankind makes this bold inner leap toward unity, Shoghi Effendi forecasts that "the forces of a world catastrophe can alone precipitate such a new phase of human thought ..."<sup>2</sup> (*The World Order* 46).

## **The Vision of Bahá'u'lláh**

Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation is a vision of human society revolving around the pivotal principle of the oneness of humanity. His mission was to guide humankind toward full social and psychological realization of this principle. Toward this end Bahá'u'lláh reaffirmed in peerless language those eternal human values of love, peace, justice, compassion, respect, and tolerance: that great symphony of ethical virtues common to all the great religions and which alone constitute the only proper foundation for a global social order. But more than revitalizing these individual moral ideals Bahá'u'lláh

as well as 'Abdu'l-Bahá after Him, has, 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 and justice upon the earth. (Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order* 19)

The system fashioned by Bahá'u'lláh to govern the worldwide Bahá'í community offers itself as a means to integrate and harmonize divergent interests by incorporating them within a framework of dynamic cooperative relationships. So new is this system that Bahá'u'lláh said it revolutionizes humankind's ordered life and upsets the world's equilibrium (*Gleanings* 136).

This earlier equilibrium was established on the principle that human beings are only clever, contentious monkeys whose proper goals are material. Bahá'ís believe that “all were made for harmony and union” (Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets* 164). Hence people are essentially peaceful and cooperative beings whose proper goals are spiritual. We have not perceived this until now because, as Bahá'u'lláh wrote: “Lack of a proper education” has deprived us “of that which [we] ... inherently possess” (*Gleanings* 259).

A harmonious and unified world does not mean the end of competition, however. Competition is an essential drive in human beings and the means of human development. One of the unique features of Bahá'u'lláh's system grows out of a call to every individual to use the innate creative drive of competition as the means to advance the entire human race and not just that part to which one is immediately connected.<sup>3</sup> This great transformation in thought is part of what Shoghi Effendi called “an organic change in the structure of present-day society, a change such as the world has not yet experienced” (*The World Order* 43).

Organic change means a living thing grows into a new form of itself. However, in organic advances, prior stages are never lost. They are conserved and absorbed into the higher stage and put to new but logically related purposes, thus continuing the advance toward a perfect (i.e., complete) form called maturity, after which physical decline toward death begins.

However for human beings, individually and collectively, maturity means that physical growth reaches its highest form so a new spiritual kind of growth can supersede it ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections* 285). Advance from this point of completion is not according to new forms of established physical and psychological laws but, rather, according to new laws. Hence at maturity the physical order becomes distinct from the spiritual order. Yet to achieve continuity of identity through this great reorientation, the laws and principles of life that governed physical growth must be conserved and incorporated within the spiritual order. This is done by a transformation in the meaning and purpose of human life. For the individual it means a change from selfish to selfless, to stop living for self and to begin living for others—spouse, family, children, friends.

This same principle applies to humanity's development. Its collective form was stated by 'Abdu'l-Bahá:

According to an intrinsic law, all phenomena of being attain to a summit and degree of consummation, after which a new order and condition is established. As the instruments and science of war have reached the degree of thoroughness and proficiency, it is hoped that the transformation of the human world is at hand and that in the coming centuries all the energies and inventions of man will be utilized in promoting the interests of peace and brotherhood. (*Bahá'í World Faith* 232)

Bahá'ís believe that humanity has reached its stage of maturity.<sup>4</sup> Hence a unified, cooperative world order must be created. However, this order of peace cannot logically grow out of the divisive, competitive order of war. It can only replace war. New spiritual and social principles must emerge to unify humankind. Yet the competitive principles that ruled human society until now, whose extreme and degenerate expression is the world wars of this century, must in some measure be conserved within the new order. To accomplish this, competition must be given new moral direction and purpose. A new cooperative social structure must conserve competition but put this energy to use building rather than destroying human unity. To answer this need Bahá'u'lláh wrote:

Vie ye with each other in the service of God and of His Cause. This is indeed what profiteth you in this world, and in that which is to come. (Quoted in Shoghi Effendi, *Advent* 83)

'Abdu'l-Bahá echoed this statement:

Happy the soul that shall forget his own good, and like the chosen ones of God, vie with his fellows in service to the good of all.... (*Secret* 116)

To “vie” in spiritual matters means to compete individually to advance the development of such human virtues as self-sacrifice, love, justice, and humility, and to strive to be of service to the common good. Collectively, it is a challenge to stop cooperating to compete better to advance national or regional interests and, instead, compete to advance the whole of humanity. Any individual may help humanity advance toward a cooperative and unified world order by supporting just government everywhere it is found:

It is incumbent upon every man, in this Day, to hold fast unto whatsoever will promote the interests, and exalt the station, of all nations and just governments. (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* 94–95)

Bahá'ís are to do this by spiritual means:

Let them obey the government and not meddle in political affairs, but devote themselves to the betterment of character and behaviour, and fix their gaze upon the Light of the world. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections* 319)

### Stages of Unity

Achieving an inwardly and outwardly united world will take time and work through several stages. The Bahá'í writings envision three distinct stages of humanity's collective political evolution. First, the confederation of nations, growing out of the present United Nations; second, a federation of nations under a world government; third, a global commonwealth whose greatest development will be the peace and security of all people.<sup>5</sup> Each of these stages will have substages of development. Each is a more perfect political unity because each is a more comprehensive embodiment of unifying moral values.

Humankind is in the first stages of creating a world confederation of states and nations. The principle of national sovereignty still dominates and limits the cooperative possibilities of nations, though, as mentioned earlier, associations of states and organizations representing states are forming with increasing rapidity and enduring for longer periods of time. A confederation is an association of sovereign states, each of which may delegate rights and powers to a central government but does not delegate its sovereignty. To confederate is to unite through alliances, leagues, and compacts formed for the purpose of acting together as a group, but not as one.

'Abdu'l-Bahá said the early glimmerings of political unity could be discerned in his lifetime because the creation of the League of Nations was “the dawn of universal peace ...” (*Selections* 311). The League of Nations was formed after the first global war to put an end to the threat of future wars. Representatives gathered from leading nations at The Hague, Netherlands, to consider ways to create a durable peace. They asked 'Abdu'l-Bahá for his thoughts on this topic, and he sent a powerful message to its executive committee in which he explained the essential requirements for world peace.<sup>6</sup> The Hague Convention did not adopt 'Abdu'l-Bahá's ideas. Protecting national interests was still uppermost in their minds.

'Abdu'l-Bahá wrote about The Hague Assembly:

It is evident that this meeting is not what it is reputed to be and is unable to order and arrange affairs in the manner which is befitting and necessary.... The meeting at the Hague should have such power and influence that its word will have an effect on the governments and nations. (*Selections* 307)

Because they lacked this power and since the collective psychological structures of unity necessary to ensure enduring peace were not understood, 'Abdu'l-Bahá prophesied that “in the future another war, fiercer than the last, will assuredly break out; verily, of this there is no doubt whatever. What can the Hague meeting do?” (*Selections* 307).

When in the aftermath of humanity's second experience of global war the exhausted nations formed the stronger confederation of the United Nations, much more than the glimmerings of the light of political unity could be perceived. The reality of a world government began to grow. However, for successful global governance, nations must sacrifice some of their sovereignty. Chiefly, they must cede the right to make war. This transfer of power means federation.

Politically a federation is a single sovereign power. Its component parts may have all sorts of powers and rights to manage their internal affairs, but they do not have sovereignty. Federation is union by mutual consent. The word is derived from the Latin *fides* and *fidere*, from which words we get *fidelity* and *faithfulness*. Its cement, in other words, is from the heart, a binding by feelings of loyal submission and trust embodied in legal compact. Being a union by faith, federation is much like what the Bible calls a covenant and thus implies deeper spiritual bonds than does confederation—bonds more difficult to break and which if broken portend greater destruction.

Bahá'ís believe that the next major step in humanity's political evolution is the creation of a world-embracing federation of nations and that the federal unification of humanity is fast approaching.<sup>7</sup> The American system is the model for the world system, said 'Abdu'l-Bahá: “The United States may be held up as the example of future government...” (*Promulgation* 167). Establishing this global federation is the foundation of what Bahá'u'lláh called the lesser or political peace. This peace, the Bahá'í writings indicate, will be brought about by conscious decision and mutual consent of the world's leaders.<sup>8</sup>

Although the Bahá'í community will not directly create this world government, Shoghi Effendi wrote that Bahá'u'lláh's appeal to governments and peoples laid down the "essentials of that social code, that Divine Economy, which must guide humanity's concerted efforts in establishing that all embracing federation which is to signalize the advent of the Kingdom of God on this earth..." (*The World Order* 61).

A world federal system is the political structure of world unity, but this outer creation only signalizes the advent of the emerging Kingdom of God. Humanity must go further than political unification and organize into an organic commonwealth. The cooperation of nations and peoples in the "World Commonwealth envisaged by Bahá'u'lláh..." (Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order* 168) is the true form and expression of humankind's collective being.

A political commonwealth is an association of independent states, but no part dominates any other. Commonwealth comes from common weal, which means the public good or general welfare. Thus commonwealth is related to such ideas as community and concord. Commonwealth implies fully matured democratic political institutions in which the whole body of humanity may participate.<sup>9</sup> But a true commonwealth is a government of the mind, binding people by common interest, shared sentiment and goals. This spiritual tradition is their real commonwealth.

The one embracing heritage of humanity, our common wealth, is that of the one eternal religion of the prophets. This religion has always and progressively overcome entrenched human differences and welded disparate peoples together into a common civilization and culture. Bahá'u'lláh revelation claims to be the heir and continuer of this tradition, organically connecting all previous revelations, civilizations, and cultures together as different expressions of one common essence. Shoghi Effendi asserted that

the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh is now visibly succeeding in demonstrating its claim and title to be regarded as a World Religion, destined to attain, in the fullness of time, the status of a world-embracing Commonwealth, which would be at once the instrument and the guardian of the Most Great Peace announced by its Author.<sup>10</sup>

By the Bahá'í Faith's aid, humanity will unite to such an extent that 'Abdu'l-Bahá could foresee that in the distant future

no nation with separate and restricted boundaries—such as Persia, for instance—will exist. The United States of America will be known only as a name. Germany, France, England, Turkey, Arabia—all these various nations will be welded together in unity. (*Promulgation* 19)

## **Conclusion**

The nations, unable from lack of a coordinated vision to do more than grope their way into the darkness of a divided future, exist in a present state that provides them no context with which to understand or build their common future. They painfully work toward the ideal of unity from a condition of disunity. From this perspective, world unity can only be achieved through an exasperating trial-and-error search for the right structure of social relations. The force and completeness of Bahá'u'lláh's vision of human society comes from his revelation that the world is already united, though humankind does not realize this. From this understanding, Bahá'u'lláh constructed integrated and integrating social institutions that manifest and develop this unity. For Bahá'ís the problem is not to find the right structure of relations, but to get people to see Bahá'u'lláh's structure as the right one:

The well-being of mankind, its peace and security, are unattainable unless and until its unity is firmly established. This unity can never be achieved so long as the counsels which the Pen of the Most High have revealed are suffered to pass unheeded. (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* 286)

Looking back over the past 150 years of global ferment, one can see this period of history either as a gradual unfoldment of more cooperative arrangements, or as the growth of larger and more ferocious collective selfhoods competing for influence. Actually, until the world achieves unity, both views are valid.

But as this article has argued, forms of government are outer expressions of inner levels of unified consciousness. Both are built upon shared collective values. It is these values that ultimately hold any human system together, not its treaties; the inner moral sentiments, not the outer legal fiats. The degree to which humanity may erect enduring forms of political and economic unity depends upon the degree to which human beings are united inwardly. The transformation of the present "lamentably defective" order of confederating states into a glorious federated one is the greatest political development in human history, and the one fraught with greatest perils. But the establishment of a global federation signals humanity's entry into mature social relations. Such a transformation can be navigated only if universal values, building on the principle of humanity's essential oneness, guide policy.

The evolutionary change of systems is the result of a great shift in the understanding of human purpose and the collective means to attain these purposes. The means through which humankind has progressed has been competition. This remains unchanged. But in Bahá'u'lláh's vision this creative potential is harnessed to the most sublime moral ends and for the benefit of all. Human beings should compete to create stronger cooperative structures. The final result will be to forge a perfect union embracing all humanity, a union where people's "outward conduct is but a reflection of their inward life, and their inward life a mirror of their outward conduct" (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* 271).

## Notes

1. Recently a spate of books and articles discussing these regional associations has appeared. Among the best of these discussions, and perhaps the most widely read, is Lester Thurow's *Head to Head*. The book is subtitled, "The Coming Economic Battle among Japan, Europe and America." Thurow sees the need for cooperation but also understands that competition will be around for some time. For example, he writes on page 24: "In the economic contest that lies ahead, the world is not divided into friend and foe. The game is simultaneously competitive and cooperative. One can remain friends and allies, yet still want to win." This is no doubt true, but the point is that within a united world everybody can win, and with selfless competition this is possible.

2. The nature of this catastrophe is anybody's guess. We cannot with certainty claim it means a third global war. An environmental disaster could accomplish the same thing. But, perhaps, the real calamity is nothing so singular and dramatic. A real calamity is swirling around us already in the form of moral degeneration, corruption, despair, and prejudice that make life such a burden to so many and which if not reversed will certainly bring about those awful fears that haunt our thoughts and invade our peace.

3. Internal competition is the innovative force in any well-run organization. But such competition must be for the purpose of realizing corporate goals. Analysts concur that such high-level functioning occurs only when the company has invested considerable time and effort in socializing its members in meaningful collective values. See, for example, Thomas Peters and Robert Waterman, *In Search of Excellence*.

4. 'Abdu'l-Bahá wrote that humanity "has entered its long-predicted phase of maturity, the evidences of which are everywhere apparent ..." (quoted in Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order* 165).

5. Numerous examples of all these have existed in the past, and exist today, of course. Few of these neatly fit under the definitions I have given. For example, the Commonwealth of Independent States is not a commonwealth, according to our definition. One may call oneself anything one likes. There is always the problem of squaring neat verbal definitions with messy political realities, because politicians and political theorists use the same word for different purposes. My point is that humanity will pass through these stages together once the globe is united.

6. See 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Selections 296-308 for extracts from this letter.

7. The talk of federating the European states is a most welcome sign of world federation. The change from a mere economic alliance into a political union is associated with a change of consciousness. Without inner union, "federal" structures fall apart once their political binding force is removed and the unresolved ethnic differences reemerge, as the present carnage in the former Yugoslavia shows. The American federal structure has remained intact because as 'Abdu'l-Bahá pointed out, in America one finds "a oneness of interest and unity of national policy. These are, indeed, United States" (*Promulgation* 396).

8. "We pray God—exalted be His glory—and cherish the hope that He may graciously assist ... the kings of the earth—may God aid them through His strengthening grace—to establish the Lesser Peace. This, indeed, is the greatest means for insuring the tranquillity of the nations. It is incumbent upon the Sovereigns of the world—may God assist them—unitedly to hold fast unto this Peace, which is the chief instrument for the protection of all mankind" (Bahá'u'lláh, *Epistle* 30).

9. Establishing the Kingdom of God does not bring an end to kings. As Bahá'u'lláh wrote: "Although a republican form of government profiteth all the peoples of the world, yet the majesty of kingship is one of the signs of God. We do not wish that the countries of the world should remain deprived thereof. If the sagacious combine the two forms into one, great will be their reward in the presence of God" (*Tablets* 28).

10. The quotation is from *The World Order* 196. The essential features of this commonwealth are discussed in *The World Order* 203-4.

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