

understand God's will. The spiritual education of humans has been a process of "progressive revelation," said Bahá'u'lláh. Humanity has been maturing, like a child growing in the ability to grasp complex ideas as it grows in years and passes through grade school and college. Each time a divine messenger appeared, the message was given at levels appropriate to humanity's degree of maturity. Bahá'u'lláh proclaimed his own message as the most advanced and the one appropriate for this time. It contains the same eternal truths as the earlier revelations, but with some new features which humanity is now ready to grasp, such as the oneness of all peoples, prophets, and religions, and a program for universal governance for the sake of world peace and social justice. Contemporary Bahá'ís are active in trying to develop a just order in the world, creating projects such as schools promoting global awareness, the European Business Forum encouraging business ethics, environmental awareness campaigns, and rural development projects.

Bahá'í Houses of Worship are open to all, with nine doors and a central dome symbolizing the simultaneous diversity and oneness of humanity. Devotional services include readings from the scriptures of all religions, meditations, unaccompanied singing, and prayers by the Bab, Bahá'u'lláh, and his successor 'Abdu'l-Bahá, his oldest son. 'Abdu'l-Bahá describes the unified world which Bahá'ís envision: The world will become the mirror of the Heavenly Kingdom... All nations will become one, all religion will be unified ... the superstitions caused by races, countries, individuals, languages and politics will disappear, and all men will attain to life eternal under the shadow of the Lord of Hosts ... The relations between the countries, the mingling, union and friendship of the people ... will reach to such a degree that the human race will be like one family ... The light of heavenly love will shine, and the darkness of enmity and hatred will be dispelled from the world.

Islam opposes Bahai as theological heresy, for Bahá'í denies that Muhammad is the final prophet. Bahá'í also finds theological legitimacy in religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism, which Islam does not consider acceptable God-worshipping traditions of revealed scriptures. Bahais in Iran have been subjected to persecution since the 1979 Revolution, and 170 were reportedly killed in the first five years after the revolution.

Bahá'ís' attempts to unite the earth in faith extend into the political sphere, where they actively support the United Nations' efforts to unify the planet. Their goal is the building of a unified, peaceful global society. To this end, they work for these principles:

The end of prejudice in all forms.

Equality for women.

Acceptance of the relativity and unity of spiritual truth.

just distribution of wealth.

Universal education.

The individual responsibility to seek truth.

Development of a world federation.

Harmony of science and true religion.

If the religions are true it is because each time it is God who has spoken, and if they are different it is because God has spoken in different "languages" in conformity with the diversity of the receptacles. Finally, if they are absolute and exclusive, it is because in each of them God has said "I."

Frithjof Schuon

Not only Bahais but also an increasing number of people within all faiths are coming to the conclusion that we have allowed our religious preferences to divide us so that we no longer recognize ourselves as members of one species, of one human family. The final chapter of this book will examine efforts to draw closer across religious boundaries, as well as other trends in religion as a whole at the turn of the century.

The Bahá'í Model for Governance of this World

One of the most unusual features of the Bahá'í faith is its own organization, which it sees as a good model for democratic governance of the whole world. Everywhere that people have converted to Bahá'í faith, there is a highly organized framework designed not only to propagate the faith but also to democratize its leadership. Campaigning, electioneering, and nominations are prohibited, avoiding the empty promises to voters, corruption, and negative campaigning which tarnishes elections in contemporary worldly democracies.

In the Bahá'í "administrative order," each local group yearly elects nine or more people to, a local Spiritual Assembly. Each local member is asked to pray and meditate and then write down the names of nine adults from the local Bahá'í community who seem best qualified to lead the community. The necessary qualities are those of "unquestioned loyalty, of selfless devotion, of a well-trained mind, of recognized ability and mature experience." By this simple and unusual process, Bahá'ís feel they choose leaders who are mature and humble rather than politically bold and egotistical. By the same process, the Local Spiritual Assemblies elect the National Spiritual Assemblies, and by the same process, the National Spiritual Assemblies choose the nine members of the Universal House of Justice, seated In Haifa. Bahá'ís feel that this framework allows both grassroots, access to decision-making, and a superstructure for efficient international coordination of activities.

Within these elected groups -- and also within business, school, and family settings -- Bahá'ís attempt to reach decisions by a non-adversarial process of "consultation." The point of the process is to investigate truth in depth and to build consensus rather than struggle for power. Participants are enjoined to gather information from as many sources as possible and to be at once truthful and courteous to each other. Any idea once proposed is thereafter considered group property; it does not belong to one person or group to cling to, but rather is investigated impartially. As Svetlana Dorzhleva, formerly Executive Secretary of the National Spiritual Assembly of Bahá'ís of Russia, Georgia, and Armenia, explains, "What is wonderful is that when a person says his opinion, he just forgets that it belonged to him. It is offered and then it is discussed." Attempts are made to reach unanimous consensus, but falling that, a

majority vote may be taken. The success of this process is demonstrated in the fact that people from very diverse backgrounds manage to work and worship together.

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