



We come full circle. Men search for community, for home and for hope amidst the forces of anti-community. They search for an integrating mechanism, a unifying agency, a common cosmology. Some seek within; some seek it in nature; some in belief systems and their institutions. Amidst the rag-and-bone shop of life, the search is long and, ultimately, we really do not know how successful we have been. But we continue to believe. We continue to make assumptions. The search goes on.

I have a nice little house in the great Australian outback. My wife makes it comfortable and tidy and I bring home the bread. It suits my purposes. It has a lovely garden. It's my home. This pattern is also true of most of my neighbors in this typical suburban setting. But the home I want to talk about here is the home of the heart: a certain serenity, a certain peace of mind, a spot to go fishing, a tranquil heart. Simple enough aspirations. Having given up on the others, many settle for a little fishing and a quiet place in the sun. My younger neighbors seek excitement, stimulation, relief from the boredom and anxiety of everydayness. The homes we seek for our minds and hearts have many mansions. We travel such different roads.

I am coming to my point. I want to talk about the home and the hope that my own restless spirit has been cultivating for a quarter of a century. The circuitous introduction, a chiaroscuro of past images and present images, provides some of the mise-en-scene. But not all. For the present is an inexplicable blend of past and future, history and vision. My own sense of home and hope circumambulates around the Seat of the Universal House of Justice. To me the building is a theme, not just concrete and marble: not a limited expression of reality, but a universal symbol which subsumes the aspirations and inclinations of many people. Here is home with all its flavors of safety, security, peace, and protection from the chaos of the world. Here is hope with all the dreams that men and women have had through the ages. But we don't all dream the same dreams. This is my home and hope.

In the Seat of the Universal House of Justice, I see the apotheosis of the religious traditions and classical culture of the West. This building is a window into the future and not, like so much of modern architecture, a cultural cliché in an art book on a coffee table. It's got a vision of history behind it; it's got the future in its bones. These are convictions that represent the organization of my emotions and thought around certain assumptions which are partly provable and partly beyond the scope of reductionist investigation.

Two great traditions occupy the core of history in the West ? one religious and one secular. The secular branch goes back to the Greeks and travels a sinuous route through the Romans, is reborn in the Renaissance and grows to a new stage of maturity in the twentieth century. Some have called this new stage the recrudescence of classical paganism. The sacred branch goes back to the Hebrews and travels a more direct but complex line through the Christians and the Muslims. It, too, seems subject to renewal in our era through sectarian revivalism or a social gospel.

At the heart of the classical tradition lies reason, the senses, and man. At the heart of the sacred tradition lies faith, the Prophet, and God.

Christianity conquered classical culture for about a thousand years. Greek and Roman culture gave way before a zealous and evangelizing Christianity in the fourth century before it found a new life in the fourteenth. But now these two great traditions are seen all around us in a multitude of forms that make up our pluralistic society. When we add the other traditions of an increasingly global community we get a mixed bag of tricks.

For 2,500 years the Acropolis and the Parthenon cast their shadow over western civilization. The great building program launched by Pericles in the mid-fifth century B.C. created an enduring architectural achievement. It towered over the architectural landscape with an aesthetic superiority that seemed to stifle damaging criticism. Indeed, it seemed so lofty in its perch that it got fenced off in western minds in an ancient cordon sanitaire. Along with the accoutrements of classical culture it was bludgeoned into the consciousness of generations of students who were the first recipients of education for the masses in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Greek and Latin are still taught. Like the Bible, they are still read, but increasingly post World War II education has gone in new directions. The classics are cliché, déclassé, passé. Is Ovid a new cleaning agent? For the masses of the middle class in search of “cultural awareness,” television programming and tours of the tourist traps suffices. Classical culture, like Shakespeare, is too heavy. It’s a thing for a coterie, for the literary sophisticates.

Our new Parthenon is up on a hill like the Acropolis, like ancient Rome. It is surrounded by dreams and visions that point to the future and not the past. It is made of the same Pentelikon marble from Greece and was built at a time when people were losing their ancestral moorings. This time it is the biblical tradition not the gods of Mount Olympus. The old Parthenon, smaller, lacking a dome and a basement, did not house the rooms which the administrative institution requires. It housed the goddess Athena, goddess of war, of wisdom and of victory. This virgin goddess symbolized in her virginity detachment as a quality of mind and life. She dominated the interior.

Pericles wanted Athenians to love Athens with heart and soul. He used an ancient mythology which he did not himself believe to reach this end. He wanted to marry old symbols with new ones, and thereby unite faith and reason. With his genius, his intellect, and his compendium of virtues, he partly succeeded. But like Socrates a few decades later, he was never quite able to lay a new foundation for community. Reason and emotion, the individual and community, did not find a balance.

The Parthenon with its marble, yellowed with age, “Caesar white” as they once called it, only a shell for the last three hundred years, is an appropriate symbol for a tragic flaw: the inability to reconcile the feeling side of man with that of intellect. These two faces of Western man now have a new home on the slopes of Mt. Carmel. And so we Bahá’ís are called upon to continue the effort of reconciliation in which intellect and feeling are

balanced in our homebuilding work for a new order of life.

Like my wife, you may find the analogy of the Parthenon and Greek culture with this new edifice on Mt. Carmel inappropriate. But I am not telling you what to think. I am merely suggesting an equation. What I am after here is describing my house and painting my hopes and aspirations symbolized in my home. I am seeking standards of equivalence and reciprocity not identity and complete agreement. My home must maximize freedom and divergence while maintaining harmony and unity. In my mind and in my heart, the Seat of the Universal House of Justice symbolizes the home and hope of these two traditions within western civilization.

“Art’s true social use,” says Australian art critic Robert Hughes, “is not on the ideological plane. It is in opening the passage from feeling to meaning for all those who want to try.” In all great art forms, meaning emerges, adds up, unfolds and takes us through a process of discovery. In short: art educates. But only if we are willing to participate through our feelings, intuition, and imagination. Otherwise all we have is dead stones. And you can’t go home to that.

Poets, musicians, philosophers, mystics, executives, men and women of action will all translate the vision represented by the Seat of the Universal House of Justice. They will use their imaginations and intellects, their loyalties, devotion and perceptions to bring life to their visions. Cut, shaped, and carved in twenty-six months by twenty workman, a far cry from the two thousand workers who labored fifteen years at the Acropolis, this prodigy symbolizes a new basis for world order. If humanity does not find such a basis soon it may crucify itself as Athens did in the name of an ambitious nationalism.

“An architect has moral character,” notes Robert Hughes, which “includes the duty to work with the real world and its inherited content. Memory is reality. It is better to recycle what exists, to avoid mortgaging a workable past to a non-existent future.” The Seat of the Universal House of Justice is a monument to a memory and a myth. The memory is the historical record of western civilization and the myth is a dream only just born again after what seems many cycles in the western mind. “Myths,” says Arnold Toynbee, “are the instruments through which the farthest flights of human fancy are achieved.” They are made from the clay of history and the ineffable hidden mystery at the heart of life. They are both history and vision.

At the center of the new myth stands the figure of Bahá'u'lláh. The motif of revelation from the Iron-Semitic tradition and the motif of the individual with its Apollonian and Dionysian characteristics, brought into one integral whole in the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh. All myths need metaphors and symbols to assist in the realizing of the vision. We need something concrete, something visual. Pericles knew this. Hitler knew this, too. It seems that a gradual change in outlook, which the completion of this building has occasioned in certain quarters among skeptical and indifferent minds, is taking place. The merits of this new world Faith are more seriously considered while the

obscurity which has characterized its history is slipping away at last.

In this home on Mt. Carmel there is no high evangelism. There are no quick answers or fast fixes with relevant social or political policies. This is not a religion of contemporary relevance, although much of it is attractive even to the skeptic. Bahá'ís are not the leaders of any ban-the-bomb movement. Indeed, they are so radically disaffiliated from any partisan politics that they often appear aloof and disengaged. The institutions represented by the Bahá'í Faith are far removed from ameliorist reform policies. Such policies have been the concern of governments East and West for many decades now. Blueprints for the new society are as common as spores blowing in the wind. Capitol Hill, the Kremlin, Westminster, the Vatican: crystal concentrates of beauty with power wielded and empires gained and lost. We have so ordered our ways and embellished our dreams.

The vision of Bahá'u'lláh permeates to the very purpose of life with a conception of happiness far from the divisiveness of political interests and the selfishness of the affluent society. The oneness of humanity and world order, precious fruit of millennia of earnest labor, is confronted with a complex dialogue about relationships, uncertainties, enigmas, and contradictions. That is the reality of the latter part of the twentieth century as we search for unity.

On Mt. Carmel is a new home and a new hope. Here, it may just be that we are witnessing the great paradox of the future. In his assessment of what he considers the greatest and most daunting paradox in European history, Prof. Peter Green observes that "Christianity developed through the support of a civilization and an intellectual tradition to which it was profoundly antipathetic." It is just as paradoxical that a heterodox and seemingly negligible offshoot of an insignificant sect of Shi'i Islam should be transformed into a world religion that is profoundly antipathetic not only to nationalism and communism but virtually all the forces of orthodox politics and religion.

It took Christianity four hundred years to triumph over classical paganism. In this age of computer technology, space travel and the gravitation of the planet into a neighborhood, it will be interesting to watch the getting of wisdom of this new Athena. This time it is not wisdom and war that is personified but justice and peace. The Universal House of Justice has been in its new home for only two short years. One cannot help but sense that the story has just begun.

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