



for Bahá'ís and world federalists, therefore, would be to try to find a non-traditional set of terms which (a) connote citizen dignity and participation, (b) are more specific and leave less room for negative outcomes, and (c) can be elaborated by auxiliary concepts that themselves are more positive, specific, and accurate. In this way advocates could perhaps better avoid the slippery semantic slope that leads so easily from “world government” to Orwell’s Big Brother, the totalitarian (read “Soviet”) world empire, and, theoretically, to the anti-Christ that millions of Christians are taught to see in the concept of a world government under human control — a slippery slope which has so tragically decimated support for the world federalist movement from its high point in the early 1950s when over 20 state legislatures in the United States passed official resolutions calling on the United States to lead the world toward the convocation of a world constitutional convention, the same basic type of convention that the Universal House of Justice is now calling for over 30 years later.

It seems to me that the general way to proceed with this type of project is simply to focus on precision in communication and arrive at alternative concepts and terminologies which are at once less ambiguous, intellectually honest, and more acceptable.

I believe that “self-government” and “improving our patterns and methods of self-government at the global level” are far better metaphors on which to begin basic discussions about world order issues than is the traditional “we need world government” approach for the following reasons:

The basic functional question confronting humanity is, indeed, how do we improve our patterns and methods of self-government at the global level? If we can find and implement answers to this question, we will begin to escape our present paralysis and move toward peace. Furthermore, it is self-evident that there is more than one answer, that in fact there are many answers, and that they all work together. World federation may be one possible answer, but it is clearly not the only aspect or way in which we can improve international relations.

“Self-government” is a concept that applies across the entire range of human groupings from the individual to the world community as a whole. It links them all together within one organic conceptual framework. Individuals govern themselves, families govern themselves, corporations govern themselves both domestically and internationally — all in various ways, to various extents, with more or less autonomy, using better or worse methods. As part of this process these groups interact with and influence one another, thus creating the process of self-government and decision-making on earth. Conceptually, self-government at any particular level of this overall process, including the international or global-issue level, affects self-government at the other levels in ways that can be examined from many angles. This allows us to focus on the factors that create the considerable amount of order which already exists at the international level.

The term “self-government” is distinctly more participatory, respectful of dignity, and process-oriented in connotation than “world government.” By calling for the overall improvement of our patterns and methods of self-government, particularly at the global level, we are automatically calling at the same time for a greater sense of human dignity and for a more active participation in that overall process. By pointing to such things as Costa Rica’s proposal for world consultative referendums on issues of public international concern, which is an official suggestion in the program for the International Year of Peace, we can easily show how citizens can in fact participate more directly and actively in the international decision-making process which determines their fate and the fate of the earth. By participating in such a process, citizens would tend to impose on themselves a heightened sense of planetary stewardship and a felt need for education on the issues, resulting in a healthy and fear-reducing decentralization of the self-government process at the global level. This in turn would make it possible for citizens and governments to feel more comfortable in creating securely financed and legally efficacious institutional organs for global action. Global advisory referendums could have beneficial participatory side-effects within nations as well. In general, they are one way by which the “general consultation” called for by the Bahá’í Scriptures and involving the world’s people as a whole along with their leaders could take place. The need for people’s participation and consent is a fundamental corollary of the basic spiritual principle of the oneness of humanity and flows right along with the concept of self-government. In talk involving “world government,” however, it is all too easy to forget about ordinary citizens and to simply focus instead on institutions and the elites that would inhabit them. Despite the talk about human rights which is always tacked onto “world government” discussions, there is no necessary, organic connection between the two concepts as there is in the concept of self-government.

Auxiliary concepts by which one can elaborate the concept of self-government include the principle of the oneness of humanity and the need for universal participation, the concepts of justice, respect for human dignity, basic and universal human rights (many human rights are relevant here), and the concepts of the global maturity of the human species, of citizen sovereignty and responsibility, and of the need for better communications and consultation.

On the other hand, “world government” is usually elaborated by reference to concepts such as “necessity,” “surrendering national sovereignty,” and the need for “order.”

References to surrendering (relinquishing, ceding, abandoning) national sovereignty are particularly objectionable and counterproductive in settings of advocacy. The idea of surrendering national sovereignty is simply inaccurate, at least under some definitions of the term. What national governments must surrender, abandon, and replace is not their sovereignty — that is, their legitimate control over areas or activities — as continuously determined and redetermined by the world community — but rather perverted international

egoism and unilateralism, their noncooperation, their ridiculous games of ideological one-upmanship.

To get a crude picture of sovereignty and of why it is not correct to talk about “surrendering national sovereignty,” we can imagine a row of containers of increasing physical size. Each size represents a “level” of society, starting with the individual, the family, the city, the state, the nation, and so on, and winding up with the world as a whole. Each container signifies also the concept of “legitimate control.” Into each container various objects can be placed, representing areas or activities controlled by the container in which they are placed. What we have to see is that there is an overall social process in the world which decides how many sizes of container there shall be between the two physical limits of the individual and the world community and which also decides what objects to put into each container. What each level of human society has sovereignty over at any particular time in history is variable, as is the number of levels itself.

To “relinquish national sovereignty” means literally to do away with the container marked “nation,” to do away with national governments. This is obviously not what we really mean to say, but it is what we are saying, and we should not be surprised, therefore, if people tend to disagree rather strongly. We must cease confusing containers with contents. Unfortunately, this is a very frequent confusion, even among people whose training should make them know better. It does nothing, however, but damage the credibility and appeal of those who make it, and it plays straight into the hands of those who would deliberately retard the progress of multilateral relations.

What we could say — and say very specifically — instead of “surrendering national sovereignty” is that “we [the citizens of the world, the ultimate physical level of sovereignty on planet Earth] must transfer the armed forces of the world from control by national governments acting separately to control by national governments acting collectively under the Military Staff Committee of the United Nations Security Council.” The UN Charter, Article 47, sets up a Military Staff Committee “to advise and assist the Security Council’s military requirements for the maintenance of international peace and security, the employment and command of forces placed at its disposal, the regulation of armaments, and possible disarmament.” Because of the games that the superpowers have played for 40 years, this part of the UN Charter has never been implemented, the Security Council has never been activated to initiate general and complete disarmament under international supervision, and national governments have gone ahead on the basis of their Article 51 “inherent right of individual or collective self-defense” to create self-defense alliances, the strategy of nuclear deterrence, and now the Strategic Defense Initiative.

The most immediately turnable key to unlocking the Lesser Peace, therefore, is not the program of “surrendering national sovereignty” to some totally new international organization but the program of demanding that governments implement the opportunities and obligations given to them under Article 47/Chapter 7 of the present UN Charter. The world does not so much lack

adequate global institutions for the Lesser Peace as it lacks the unity to make them work. No institutions can function in an atmosphere of extremely severe political disunity. Until this essentially spiritual disease or immaturity is sufficiently diagnosed as such and arrested, peace will not happen either through the United Nations or outside it.

Finally the basic metaphor of “self-government” allows us to compare self-government in the Bahá’í context right alongside self-government in various non-Bahá’í contexts. This allows the benefits of the Bahá’í context to stand forth clearly and with explicit reference to our globally prophetic and yet rational and humane mission.

My hope and aim in all of this is simply to point to the possibility and necessity of improving the way we advocate the oneness of humanity in terms of institutions. At some point, however, we do have to talk about the actual institutions of the world federation. How do we best do this to avoid negative reactions?

The answer is simply to be as specific as possible and to keep in mind that the world federation refers to the people of the world as a whole, not just to people working in national governments or the institutional organs of the world federation. Furthermore, in the Bahá’í vision, the participation of the world’s people is essential to the success of this federation. There is thus a vital difference between world federation and the institutional government of that federation, and one should not simply use the lazy man’s short-hand term “world government” when one means “world federation.” If one is referring to the specific institutional government of the world federation, then speak in those precise terms or at least use the term “world federal.” Likewise describe the components of this federal institution by their precise terms: “world federal legislature,” world federal executive,” “world federal judiciary,” “world federal court,” and so on. The word “federal” may not really turn people on, but adding it consistently to our discussion may at least help them to listen. There is all the difference in the world between Hitler’s vision of a unitive, all-encompassing elite world government ruling everything on earth and the Bahá’í vision of a world federation of peoples actively governing themselves and solving their problems through a divinely guided world federal government that protects as sacred the diversity of its components.

Bahá’ís seek to reconnect heaven and earth through a global self-government process guided by the source of the world’s religions and value systems. Whereas “world government” seems far off, “self-government” is something up close. The Bahá’í self-government system is thus up close, of immediate practical relevance to the world. It is on this basis that we may more easily be able to make traditionally religious people aware of the Bahá’í message. The fulfillment they are awaiting is here. It is now. It consists of self-government in this Bahá’í context.

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2. Response by Leonard Godwin, from dialogue 2:1 pp. 6-7

Three rousing cheers for John T. Dale's "The Semantics of World Government" (dialogue, Summer/Fall, 1986). Dale's analysis is the most insightful statement I have encountered on Bahá'u'lláh's revelatory concept of "world government."

Bahá'ís would do well to take to heart Dale's suggestion that our promotional emphasis on behalf of this divinely inspired inevitability may be tactically self-defeating when we simply fling it in the teeth of humanity as a great revealed spiritual truth (often with an unconscious 'take-it-or-leave-it' attitude). A god has spoken on this subject, so a like-it-or-lump-it approach may be technically correct (get with God's program or be crushed by its irresistible unfoldment, but it is also a subtly self-righteous approach, and certainly one that provokes an unnecessary amount of resistance. Additionally, this approach is not only insensitive to the legitimate reservations and fears of our listeners on the nature of all governments, and especially some kind of ill-conceived super-world government, but it is also misleading.

Dale would have us consider presenting the idea of world government not as some remote master-system of elitist control over human affairs, but as a globally organized form of self-government with securely built-in checks and balances patterned after those of the American constitutional confederation; not as some sort of Orwellian nightmare designed to robotize every citizen, but as a logical extension of the democratic principles to the world arena; not as the worst elements of the nation state, but as the best; not as a road to universal slavery, but as one engendering expressions of greater freedom for all mankind.

The appeal embedded in the world government concept must be based on its positive benefits rather than its forceful elimination of social, political, and economic evils current today. In a similar vein, peace proposals and social programs suffer from the weakness of a negative emphasis—to stop war, to stop armaments build-up, to limit weaponry, etc.—rather than emphasis on positive accomplishments to be identified and worked for on a step-by-step basis. Peace is not just the absence of war; it is—and must be portrayed—as a reality of attitudes, events, behaviors, and accomplishments that are inherently better than war. What positive steps can be taken toward the realization of world brotherhood rather than negative stop-gap measures to "eliminate racial prejudice"? How can we positively promote equality among the sexes rather than expend our energy in stamping out sexual inequalities? Our orientation and thrust is for peace, for brotherhood, for sexual equality, because these are realities worth being for. I have no desire to expend my energies and make sacrifices against war, prejudice, and inequality. All sane men say they are against war, but beyond making such statements they do little to stop war.

If man is indeed “the perfecting agency in the structure of the universe” (Gershom Scholem), then the sooner we realize and accept the personal and collective responsibilities of this spiritual fact the sooner men and women conscious of so great a change will be able to alter the collective expressions of it through human institutions and governments. The alternative is, simply, that God will in His own way and time permit circumstances to affect the same realization.

The positive power that lies in cooperation must be emphasized and exploited as a creative channel of achievement while the spirit of competition—too long glorified as a major source of man’s best efforts—must be deprioritized into channels where its destructive components are controlled.

All efforts to give positive meaning to the idea of world government need to be made in order to defuse its image of worldwide enslavement, which, incidentally, is essentially what the human race now enjoys under the chaotic nation-state system.

The only thing “surrender” of national sovereignty should mean to the functioning of a true world government is the belief that it is a “right” to do unto one’s national neighbors whatever one wishes to do or can get away with. This nefarious rationalization is not of God. Christ condemned such behavior on the personal level; Bahá’u’lláh condemned such behavior on the collective level, and reason agrees with both.

Leonard Godwin  
Anaheim, California

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Response by Leonard Godwin, from dialogue 2:1 pp. 6-7 (1987)

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