

FORGING MORE PERFECT UNIONS**Author:** William Barnes**Published:** *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies* 5.1 (1992): 1-11

The article "Forging More Perfect Unions," while focusing on the connection between spiritual and political development, presents both critical insights to which Bahá'ís must awaken the present world and a challenge to Bahá'ís to transform Bahá'í insights from words into deeds:

There is a great difference between sounding a great general principle and finding its application to actual prevailing conditions.¹

In developing Bahá'í words into Bahá'í deeds, a major challenge for Bahá'ís in general, as well as for Bahá'í professionals, scholars, and specialists, is to escape from the ethnocentrism of our present cultural milieu. The article itself reflects the impediment this challenge sometimes presents.

William Barnes sees competition as the critical factor for human progress.² This claim reflects the theology of the materialistic, free-market economy that increasingly dominates the global economy.³ With no deeper spiritual principles to expound, this system's shallow theology is that human material desire is the highest achievement and competition is the greatest means.

In contrast, Bahá'í teachings maintain that reasonable competitiveness is a healthy factor which can challenge and increase performance, but it is not the *sine qua non* for human progress. In fact, the very opposite is the case:

In the contingent world there are many collective centers which are conducive to association and unity between the children of men. . . . identity of interests is a collective center . . . political alliance is a collective center . . . and the prosperity of the world of humanity is dependent upon the organization and promotion of the collective centers.⁴

I find two serious limitations with the analysis in this article: its overemphasis on the importance of competition and its portrayal of the human spiritual and social capacity for cooperation as being *per se* an evolving phenomenon. Rather, I would suggest, it is collaboration not competition that is and has always been

1. Shoghi Effendi, quoted in Badi Shams, *A Bahá'í Perspective on Economics of the Future* (New Delhi: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1989) 1.

2. "Competition is an essential drive in human beings and the means of human development" (5).

3. Thus Barnes cites the popular business classic *In Search of Excellence* as an authoritative source on human motivation (5, n. 3).

4. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Bahá'í World Faith* (Wilmette, Illinois: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1956) 419.

fundamental to human progress (and a fundamental truth of all the revelations). As with all spiritual qualities, collaboration is an innate capacity of human beings but is only revealed in the context of its time. What changes with each revelation is the reawakening of this capacity in a new context and an expansion of the social breadth in which this capacity can express itself.

In fact, if we look back on human history (as clearly articulated by such thinkers as the great Arab historian Ibn Khaldun and further elaborated by the English historian Arnold Toynbee), we can see it is challenges and creative responses that have produced progress. Competition is one type of challenge, but probably more important challenges have been environmental changes, invasions, disease, starvation, etc. In fact, competition, as currently understood, often functions as an artificial stimulus to increase participation in what are often activities of very marginal worth, especially if valued from a spiritual perspective. However, regardless of the stimulus, it is collaboration and harmonious symbiotic actions that produce the fruits of human progress.

For example, the sharing of knowledge, a hallmark of the scientific age (in contrast to traditional guarded secret knowledge), has been a major cause of modern scientific progress. It is through mutual aid that new lands are generally cleared and new organizations formed. The flowering of the arts has always depended on creative moments of similar minds financially supported by others. A frightening example of the power of collaboration, mutual aid, and self-sacrifice is the way war itself pulls groups of people together (and why suicide rates fall during wartime when the sense of personal anomie almost disappears). Even though cities and communities may have in some sense competed to have the most monumental churches, the great cathedrals were nevertheless successfully built only because of the capacity of those communities to mobilize immense long-term cooperative behavior. When we look at the "social insects" such as wasps and ants, we see altruistic cooperation rather than competition as the key to their survival.

The author's emphasis on competition and his downplaying existent human capacity for cooperation may stem from his largely ignoring the "non-nation state" cultures. Such ethnocentrism not only deprives us of intellectual appreciation of other cultures but also denies us practical access to their special skills and talents. Unlike previous revelations, the Bahá'í revelation specifically recognizes the unique talents of all peoples and specifically recognizes that many groups considered marginal by today's prevailing dominant cultures have very powerful contributions to make to the new Bahá'í civilization. If we look at what are today often called "indigenous traditional groups," we find that many particularly excel in skills and institutions for cooperation and collaboration—skills which most people in modern competitive economies lack. Since these skills, as Barnes notes, are directly related to spiritual qualities, it is not surprising that deep spiritual qualities often permeate such cultures and that its members include many individuals with already developed profound spiritual capacities.

The problem facing the present world is that many of these indigenous groups have only been consistently able to exhibit and apply those skills or spirituality within the context of their smaller communities and not the nation state, let alone the global commonweal. The problem therefore is one of the breadth of their understanding of community and the appropriate welcoming and nurturing application of their insights, skills, and spirituality—not the lack of skills or spirituality *per se*. This is but one of the reasons participation of these groups in framing the new Bahá'í civilization and new world commonweal is critical. The Bahá'í Faith, by bringing such people into the global Bahá'í community with respect for their diversity and special skills, is thereby fulfilling one of the preconditions for the world commonweal to come:

With the appearance of great revolutions and upheavals, all these collective centers are swept away. But the Collective Center of the Kingdom, embodying the Institutes and Divine Teachings, is the eternal Collective Center. It establishes relationship between the East and the West, organizes the oneness of the world of humanity. . . . Consider! When the rain, the heat, the sun and the gentle zephyrs cooperate with each other, what beautiful gardens are produced! . . . In a similar manner, when the divine Collective Center and the outpouring of the Sun of Reality and the breaths of the Holy Spirit are brought together, the variety of races and the differences existing between countries will become the cause of the embellishment, decoration and elegance of the world of humanity.⁵

Bahá'í scholarship can contribute greatly to humankind's progress to the new world order not only by applying insights from Bahá'í writings to specific challenges but also by applying Bahá'í principles to the exercise of scientific and disciplinary analysis. I am suggesting that one of these fundamental principles is the need to understand and call upon the diversity of human experience whenever seeking to draw lessons from the past, as well as when making projections for the future in terms of humankind's capabilities, existing or potential, to create a new world order. This diversity of relevant skills and historic experience is found in all peoples and groups, and its relevance and power is not a factor of that group's position of domination or submission, either economically, demographically, or culturally, in the present nation-state structure.

If we relook in a more universal and cross-cultural light at the challenge posed by Barnes's article—the creation of a commonweal—we will see that many examples of the creation of such an interactive type of association on a lesser scale, often directly tied to previous revelations, have existed and that humankind has tremendous existing knowledge as to the fundamental mechanisms for achieving and maintaining it. Unfortunately such capacities remain largely obfuscated by the competitive and materialistic dominant

5. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Bahá'í World Faith* 419–20.

mindset of our current socioeconomic order. The Bahá'í revelation is the proverbial light at the end of the tunnel that will eventually lead us out from this morass. It is also Bahá'í revelation that should provide Bahá'í scholarship with the capacity to escape the confines of the established civilizations' walls of limited understanding and the pervasive darkness that hampers creative collaborative interaction among its inhabitants on a global scale.

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