

Toward a New Environmental Stewardship

BY MICHAEL KARLBERG

IN JANUARY 1990 leading thinkers from around the world convened in Moscow for the Global Forum on Environment and Development for Human Survival. One thousand delegates, representing a cross section of the world's scientific, political, and religious communities, attended the week-long conference. One of the outstanding features of the historic gathering was an appeal, by consensus of the entire assemblage, for humanity to "find a new spiritual and ethical basis for human activities on Earth" and to "enter into a new communion with Nature."¹

During the course of the gathering, a number of prominent scientists expanded on the theme. In a proclamation entitled "Preserving and Cherishing the Earth: An Appeal for Joint Commitment in Science and Religion," they asserted that the problems facing humanity today must "be recognized from the outset as having a religious as well as scientific dimension," that the "environmental crisis requires radical changes . . . in individual behavior," and that the "historical record makes clear that religious teaching,

example, and leadership are powerfully able to influence personal conduct and commitment." They further stated:

As scientists, many of us have had profound experiences of awe and reverence before the universe. We understand that what is regarded as sacred is more likely to be treated with care and respect. Our planetary home should be so regarded. Efforts to safeguard and cherish the environment need to be infused with a vision of the sacred. . . . Thus, there is a vital role for both religion and science.²

The statements made at the Global Forum reflect an unprecedented acknowledgment by the scientific community that the moral, ethical, and inspirational aspects of human nature—which have always been the very substance of religious thought—must play a prominent role in efforts to safeguard the environment.

In October 1990 the appeal for a new level of spiritual commitment was echoed in the "Universal Code of Environmental Conduct" issued by the Non-Governmental Organization/Media Symposium on Communication for Environment convened in Bangkok, Thailand. This second declaration, however, took the message one step further than the Global Forum proclamation by appealing not only to spiritually based changes in individual behavior, conduct, and commitment but to a unified response by all the "citizens of this earth." "The world," it began, is in a deep environmental crisis. This crisis is rooted in global patterns of hu-

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1. Moscow Declaration of the Global Forum on Environment and Development for Human Survival, 15–19 January 1990.

2. "Preserving and Cherishing the Earth: An Appeal for Joint Commitment in Science and Religion," prepared for the Global Forum on Environment and Development for Human Survival, 15–19 January 1990.

man behaviour that are ecologically unsustainable, socially alienating and economically unjust. We need a transformation of human purpose that unites material and spiritual realities and creates a common conscience. . . .

. . . unity is essential if diverse people are to work towards a common future. . . .³

Both the Bangkok and Moscow proclamations invoke elements common to all of the world's religions—namely, a spiritual world view and a concomitant change in standards of human behavior. The Bangkok Declaration in particular explicitly states the need for global unity in this “transformation of human purpose.”

In light of the essential need for unity, the Bahá'í Faith, a newly emerging world religion, merits attention.⁴ Not only does it promulgate the spiritual values common to all religions, but it also offers social teachings that speak directly to the problems of this global age. Its pivotal teachings are world unity and the establishment of unity among the peoples and nations of the world. Whereas the social teachings of past religions were concerned with the relationship of the individual to family, tribe, or even state—according to the exigencies of the age in which

the religions appeared—the Bahá'í Faith expands the scope of social teachings to include the relationship of the individual, and any group of individuals (racial, ethnic, political or other), to the entire world community.

Given its emphasis on world unity and global cooperation, the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith provide a unique “new spiritual and ethical basis for human activities on Earth.” Four aspects of the Bahá'í model must be examined: the Bahá'í Faith's vision of nature; Bahá'í principles that bear directly on humanity's relation to the natural world; the Bahá'í perspective on the underlying causes of the environmental crisis; and the Bahá'í prescription for world unity and global cooperation.

The Bahá'í Vision of Nature

THE BAHÁ'Í FAITH is founded on a belief in one God—the “inmost Reality of all things,” the “Primal Will,” the “unknowable Essence.”⁵ The natural world, the Bahá'í writings assert, is a reflection of this unknowable Essence on earth. “Nature,” wrote Bahá'u'lláh, the Founder of the Bahá'í Faith, “is God's Will and is its expression in and through the contingent world.”⁶ Therefore,

whatever is on the earth is a direct evidence of the revelation within it of the attributes and names of God, inasmuch as within every atom are enshrined the signs that bear eloquent testimony to the revelation of that most great Light. . . . How resplendent the luminaries of knowledge that shine in an atom, and how vast the oceans of wisdom that surge within a drop!⁷

On another occasion Bahá'u'lláh, addressing Himself to God, wrote:

Every time I turn my gaze to Thine earth, I am made to recognize the evidences of Thy power and the tokens of Thy bounty. And when I behold the sea, I find that it speaketh to me of Thy majesty, and of the potency of Thy might, and of Thy sovereignty and Thy grandeur. And at what-

3. Universal Code of Environmental Conduct, Declaration of the NGO/Media Symposium on Communication for Environment, 10–16 October 1990, Bangkok, Thailand.

4. The Bahá'í Faith is recognized as the second most widespread religion in the world, after Roman Catholicism. See “World Religious Statistics,” *Britannica Book of the Year*, 1988.

5. Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Íqán: The Book of Certitude*, trans. Shoghi Effendi, 1st ps ed. (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1983) 99, 98.

6. Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh Revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, comp. Research Department of the Universal House of Justice, trans. Habib Taherzadeh et al., 1st ps ed. (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1988) 142.

7. Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán* 100–01.

ever time I contemplate the mountains, I am led to discover the ensigns of Thy victory and the standards of Thine omnipotence.

. . . I can hear from the whisper of the winds the sound of Thy glorification and praise, and can recognize in the murmur of the waters the voice that proclaimeth Thy virtues and Thine attributes, and can apprehend from the rustling of the leaves the mysteries that have been irrevocably ordained by Thee in Thy realm.⁸

Such passages in the Bahá'í writings portray the natural world as beautiful and mysterious, a sacred reflection of the divine. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Bahá'u'lláh's eldest son and appointed successor, urged humanity to

contemplate these mysteries of nature.⁹ Calling attention to the order and balance underlying the physical universe, 'Abdu'l-Bahá wrote:

Reflect upon the inner realities of the universe, the secret wisdoms involved, the enigmas, the inter-relationships, the rules that govern all. For every part of the universe is connected with every other part by ties that are very powerful and admit of no imbalance.¹⁰

In another passage, 'Abdu'l-Bahá expanded His explanation of the balance and unity of nature; His definition of ecology seems a necessary lesson at the end of the twentieth century. He explains that

even as the human body in this world, which is outwardly composed of different limbs and organs, is in reality a closely integrated, coherent entity, similarly the structure of the physical world is like unto a single being whose limbs and members are inseparably linked together.

Were one to observe with an eye that discovereth the realities of all things, it would become clear that the greatest relationship that bindeth the world of being together lieth in the range of created things themselves, and that co-operation, mutual aid and reciprocity are essential characteristics in the unified body of the world of being, inasmuch as all created things are closely related together and each is influenced by the other or deriveth benefit therefrom, either directly or indirectly.¹¹

Such passages in the Bahá'í writings provide a unique scriptural basis for revering and appreciating nature. They also convey the subtleties, interrelationships, and delicate balances of the physical world.

The appreciation of nature is further reinforced in the Bahá'í writings by extensive use of analogy and metaphor drawn from the physical world—the imagery of nature is embedded in the very language of the Bahá'í writings and is often used to represent spiri-

8. Bahá'u'lláh, *Prayers and Meditations*, trans. Shoghi Effendi, 1st ps ed. (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1987) 272.

9. 'Abdu'l-Bahá was appointed by Bahá'u'lláh in His Will and Testament as the authoritative interpreter of Bahá'u'lláh's writings and as the one to whom the Bahá'í community should turn after His passing. In turn, Shoghi Effendi, the grandson of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, was appointed the Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Will and Testament. After Shoghi Effendi's passing, the authoritative center of the Bahá'í world community is now the Universal House of Justice, the highest institution of the Bahá'í administrative order. It is elected by the Bahá'í world every five years. This chain of succession, which was established by Bahá'u'lláh, ensures the preservation of the unity of the Bahá'í world and frees it from schism. The writings of these four successive "centers" constitute the authoritative writings of the Bahá'í Faith, from which the substance of this paper is drawn.

10. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, comp. Research Department of the Universal House of Justice, trans. Committee at the Bahá'í World Centre and Marzieh Gail (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1978) 157.

11. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, in "Conservation of the Earth's Resources," *Compilation of Compilations Prepared by The Universal House of Justice, 1963–1990, Volume 1* (Maryborough, Victoria, Australia: Bahá'í Publications Australia, 1991) 71.

tual realities. A Bahá'í prayer for children illustrates this:

O God! Educate these children. These children are the plants of Thine orchard, the flowers of Thy meadow, the roses of Thy garden. Let Thy rain fall upon them; let the Sun of Reality shine upon them with Thy love. Let Thy breeze refresh them in order that they may be trained, grow and develop, and appear in the utmost beauty. Thou art the Giver. Thou art the Compassionate.¹²

Daily reading of Bahá'í writings can cultivate a world view that cherishes and reveres the wonders of nature. They articulate, in the words of the Moscow Declaration, an appreciation for nature that is "infused with a vision of the sacred." This, however, is only a starting point for practical environmental stewardship.

Spiritual Principles Guiding Humanity's Relationship to Nature

BAHÁ'ÍS believe that "There are spiritual principles, or what some call human values, by which solutions can be found to every social problem." The challenge in dealing with the complex social issues currently facing humanity, Bahá'ís assert, is "to raise the context to the level of principle, as distinct from pure pragmatism."¹³

12. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Bahá'í Prayers: A Selection of Prayers Revealed by Bahá'u'lláh, the Báb, and 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, new ed. (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1991) 35–36.

13. The Universal House of Justice, *The Promise of World Peace: To the Peoples of the World* (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1985) 28.

14. The Universal House of Justice, *Promise of World Peace* 28.

15. Bahá'u'lláh, *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*, trans. Shoghi Effendi, 1st ps ed. (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1988) 24.

16. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá* 290.

The necessity of spiritual solutions for social problems bears on individual as well as collective actions. For the individual, commitment to spiritual principles guides behavior. It provides a moral reference point in common daily actions, and requires, in some cases, the submission of self-centered impulses in consideration of the common good. For society, commitment to shared principles provides a means for agreement and a guide for action. It thus facilitates collective decision making and problem solving.

As the Universal House of Justice, the supreme governing and legislative body of the Bahá'í Faith, explains:

The essential merit of spiritual principle is that it not only presents a perspective which harmonizes with that which is immanent in human nature, it also induces an attitude, a dynamic, a will, an aspiration, which facilitate the discovery and implementation of practical measures. Leaders of governments and all in authority would be well served in their efforts to solve problems if they would first seek to identify the principles involved and then be guided by them.¹⁴

The Bahá'í writings identify the principles to which Bahá'ís around the world are committed; many of these principles relate, either directly or indirectly, to humanity's relationship with the natural world. A few of the principles most pertinent to the environmental dialogue are outlined below.

Stewardship of the Earth. A central principle of the Bahá'í environmental ethic is stated emphatically by Bahá'u'lláh: "There is no glory for him that committeth disorder on the earth after it hath been made so good."¹⁵ 'Abdu'l-Bahá reinforced this principle by affirming that the earth should be tended with "the care of a skilful gardener."¹⁶

The full implications of the principle of stewardship may be understood in light of the Bahá'í teaching that the physical universe

is a matrix for the refinement and development of the human soul, even as the womb of the mother is the matrix for a child's initial physical development.¹⁷ Bahá'u'lláh informs humanity that God has "ordained for thy training every atom in existence and the essence of all created things."¹⁸ One aspect of training, in turn, is learning the principle of stewardship of the earth. Thus the Bahá'í teachings associate stewardship of the earth with one of the purposes of human life—namely, spiritual training and development.

The Value of Diversity. Related to the principle of stewardship is that of the value the Bahá'í teachings place on diversity. 'Abdu'l-Bahá states that diversity in this world is "the essence of perfection" and "contributeth to the beauty, efficiency and perfection of the whole."¹⁹ The preservation of genetic and biotic diversity, a central issue in the environmental movement, is thus a logical conclusion of the application of this principle.

Impressing upon humanity the importance of environmental stewardship, 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains that diversity of form is an expression of a universal law underlying the vast evolutionary processes of the physical universe and that

in the beginning matter was one, and that one matter appeared in different aspects in each element. Thus various forms were

produced, and these various aspects as they were produced became permanent, and each element was specialized. . . . Then these elements became composed, and organized and combined in infinite forms. . . .

. . . from the composition and combination of elements, from their decomposition, from their measure, and from the effect of other beings upon them, resulted forms, endless realities and innumerable beings. . . . this terrestrial globe, having once found existence, grew and developed in the matrix of the universe, and came forth in different forms and conditions, until gradually it attained this present perfection, and became adorned with innumerable beings. . . .²⁰

'Abdu'l-Bahá further urges humanity to learn from the lessons inherent in nature:

Consider the world of created beings, how varied and diverse they are in species, yet with one sole origin. All the differences that appear are those of outward form and colour. This diversity of type is apparent throughout the whole of nature.

. . . Let us look . . . at the beauty in diversity, the beauty of harmony, and learn a lesson. . . .²¹

Preservation of the earth's diversity is thus a practical expression of the application of the fundamental Bahá'í principle of unity in diversity.

Kindness to All Beings. Yet another principle related to that of the stewardship of the earth is that of kindness to all beings. This principle is expressed throughout the Bahá'í writings. In one passage 'Abdu'l-Bahá writes:

it is not only their fellow human beings that the beloved of God must treat with mercy and compassion, rather must they show forth the utmost loving-kindness to every living creature. . . .

Train your children from their earliest days to be infinitely tender and loving to animals.

17. For further discussions on the comparison of the physical world to the womb, see 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá* 170–171, 177, 185.

18. Bahá'u'lláh, *The Hidden Words*, trans. Shoghi Effendi (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1939) 32.

19. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá* 291.

20. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, comp. and trans. Laura Clifford Barney, 1st ps ed. (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1984) 180–83.

21. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks: Addresses Given by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in 1911*, 11th ed. (London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1969) 51–52.

... Tenderness and loving-kindness are basic principles of God's heavenly Kingdom.²²

Thus the expression of "tenderness and loving-kindness" toward all living beings is not a matter of mere ethical speculation or moral debate. It is a firmly established spiritual principle that bears directly on humankind's relationship with the natural world.

Responsible Uses of Science. The Bahá'í Faith teaches that science and religion are, by their very nature, in accord—that they reveal complementary aspects of one truth. 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains that religion is the "promoter of truth" and cannot, consequently, oppose scientific knowledge.²³ He also states that religion without science quickly falls into "the quagmire of superstition," while science without religion descends into "the despairing slough of materialism."²⁴ The Bahá'í writings thus encourage scientific pursuit but assert that its application must be morally guided. Commenting on the responsibility humanity has in the realm of science, the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice writes that

Man, possessed of an inner faculty which plants and animals do not have, a power which enables him to discover the secrets of nature . . . has a special responsibility to use his God-given powers for positive ends. The Universal House of Justice indicates that "the proper exercise of this responsibility is the key to whether his inventive genius produces beneficial results, or creates havoc in the material world."²⁵

At the turn of the last century 'Abdu'l-Bahá stated that the capacity for scientific endeavor "is the most praiseworthy power of man, for through its employment and exercise the betterment of the human race is accomplished, . . . and the spirit and mysteries of God become manifest."²⁶

'Abdu'l-Bahá tempers His praise, however, with the caution that "any agency whatever, though it be the instrument of mankind's greatest good, is capable of misuse. Its proper use or abuse depends on the varying degrees of enlightenment, capacity, faith, honesty, devotion and highmindedness" of those who exercise responsibility over it.²⁷

Moderation. Another Bahá'í teaching pertains to humanity's relation to the natural world not to overstep "the bounds of moderation."²⁸ Bahá'u'lláh warns that if "carried to excess, civilization will prove as prolific a source of evil as it had been of goodness when kept within the restraints of moderation."²⁹

Moderation bears on every aspect of humanity's relation to and impact on the natural world. It is a standard that guides patterns of consumption, waste, and the accumulation of material possessions. All aspects of human activity, Bahá'u'lláh makes clear, "are subject to this same principle of moderation."³⁰

The principle of moderation attains a yet fuller significance in light of the Bahá'í belief that human dignity and happiness are not found solely in materialistic pursuits. While

22. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá* 158–160.

23. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 137.

24. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks* 143.

25. Research Department of the Universal House of Justice, "Conservation of the Earth's Resources," *Compilation of Compilations* 1: 68.

26. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace: Talks Delivered by 'Abdu'l-Bahá during His Visit to the United States and Canada in 1912*, comp. Howard MacNutt, 2d. ed. (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982) 31.

27. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Secret of Divine Civilization*, trans. Marzieh Gail, 1st ps ed. (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1990) 16.

28. Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, trans. Shoghi Effendi, 1st ps ed. (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1983) 235.

29. Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* 343.

30. Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* 343.

Bahá'u'lláh encourages humanity to enjoy the richness of the earth and "partake of the benefits it can bestow," he also warns against "attachment to this world and the vanities thereof."³¹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains that "the honor and exaltation of man must be something more than material riches. Material comforts are only a branch, but the root of the exaltation of man is the good attributes and virtues which are the adornments of his reality."³²

The Bahá'í Faith thus rejects the materialistic philosophy that has become one of the dominant features of twentieth-century life. It replaces that philosophy with the belief that the attainment of "good attributes and virtues" is the highest human achievement and that the exercise of moderation in material pursuits is a means of attaining this end. This principle has special relevance in the industrialized countries of the world where rampant materialism has generated gross patterns of consumption, accumulation, and waste, creating inordinate pressures on the world's ecological systems.

Alleviation of Poverty. The counterpart of the principle of moderation, the alleviation of poverty, pertains to the significant portion of the global population who suffer not from excess but from a lack of the means of subsistence. Environmental degradation is closely linked to human social and economic conditions; poverty, as much as excessive wealth, exerts extreme pressures on the earth's eco-

logical systems. The deforestation of the Amazon, the desertification of Sub-Saharan Africa, the pollution in Eastern Europe—all are examples of the deleterious effects of poverty on the natural environment.

The alleviation of poverty is a basic Bahá'í teaching, and the consequences of "inordinate disparity between the rich and poor" are clearly anticipated in the Bahá'í writings.³³ Bahá'u'lláh alludes to the consequences of having extremes of wealth and poverty: "O Children of Dust! Tell the rich of the midnight sighing of the poor, lest heedlessness lead them into the path of destruction. . . ."³⁴

Generosity, equity, and fairness in economic relations are emphasized throughout the Bahá'í writings as divine virtues. 'Abdu'l-Bahá states that

Men must bestir themselves in this matter, and no longer delay in altering conditions which bring the misery of grinding poverty to a very large number of people. The rich must give of their abundance, they must soften their hearts and cultivate a compassionate intelligence, taking thought for those sad ones who are suffering from lack of the very necessities of life.³⁵

It is important to note, however, that the Bahá'í writings do not advocate absolute equalization of wealth.³⁶ Rather, Bahá'ís appeal for the elimination of *extremes* of wealth and poverty. The solution, the Universal House of Justice writes,

calls for the combined application of spiritual, moral and practical approaches. A fresh look at the problem is required, entailing consultation with experts from a wide spectrum of disciplines, devoid of economic and ideological polemics, and involving the people directly affected in the decisions that must urgently be made.³⁷

Unity in World Undertakings. The Bahá'í writings assert that "unity of thought in world undertakings" is an essential requirement of

31. Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* 276.

32. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 79.

33. The Universal House of Justice, *Promise of World Peace* 12.

34. Bahá'u'lláh, *Hidden Words* 39.

35. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks* 153.

36. For a discussion of equalization of wealth, see *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá* 115, 302.

37. The Universal House of Justice, *Promise of World Peace* 12.

this age.³⁸ Bahá'ís believe that conscious, unified, global determination is necessary to resolve transnational problems.

Environmental problems provide a prime example of the necessity of global unity. Ecological problems do not respect political boundaries, and it is now generally acknowledged that no nation can resolve them alone. The Universal House of Justice accordingly cites the urgent need in this day for "global cooperation of the family of nations in devising and adopting measures designed to preserve the ecological balance."³⁹

In an age when the technical means for addressing environmental concerns and for coordinating global efforts are largely at hand, international cooperation continues to remain elusive. Commenting on this dilemma, the Universal House of Justice notes that

The scientific and technological advances occurring in this unusually blessed century portend a great surge forward in the social evolution of the planet, and indicate the means by which the practical problems of humanity may be solved. They provide, indeed, the very means for the administration of the complex life of a united world. Yet barriers persist. Doubts, misconceptions, prejudices, suspicions and narrow self-interests beset nations and peoples in their relations one to another.⁴⁰

38. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá* 32.

39. The Universal House of Justice, quoted in Research Department of the Universal House of Justice, "Conservation of the Earth's Resources," *Compilation of Compilations* 1: 85.

40. The Universal House of Justice, *Promise of World Peace* 14.

41. The Universal House of Justice, *Promise of World Peace* 28.

42. Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh: Selected Letters*, 1st ps ed. (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1991) 41-42.

43. Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh* 87, 127-28, 167.

"The primary question to be resolved," the Universal House of Justice continues, "is how the present world, with its entrenched pattern of conflict, can change to a world in which harmony and cooperation will prevail." These changes, the House of Justice concludes, "can be founded only on an unshakable consciousness of the oneness of mankind. . . ."⁴¹

The Oneness of Humanity

THE PRINCIPLE of the oneness of humankind, the fundamental unity of all peoples of the earth, is perhaps the most fundamental Bahá'í teaching. It protects against all forms of prejudice and division and "calls for a wider loyalty, for a larger aspiration than any that has animated the human race."⁴² Bahá'ís believe that the acceptance of this principle by the generality of humanity is a prerequisite for the unity of thought and global cooperation necessary for the advancement of environmental stewardship. Promotion of the principle of the oneness of humanity is thus a central aspect of Bahá'í life.

The principle of unity is emphasized repeatedly throughout the Bahá'í writings. "Let your vision be world-embracing, rather than confined to your own self," Bahá'u'lláh writes. And again: "Let not man glory in this that he loveth his country, let him rather glory in this that he loveth his kind." Most concisely, Bahá'u'lláh states that "The earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens."⁴³

Shoghi Effendi, the grandson of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and appointed Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith after 'Abdu'l-Bahá's passing, explains that

The principle of the Oneness of Mankind—the pivot round which all the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh revolve—is no mere outburst of ignorant emotionalism or an expression of vague and pious hope. Its appeal is not to be merely identified with a reawakening of the spirit of brotherhood and good-will among men. . . . Its mes-

sage is applicable not only to the individual, but concerns itself primarily with the nature of those essential relationships that must bind all the states and nations as members of one human family. . . . It implies an organic change in the structure of present-day society, a change such as the world has not yet experienced.⁴⁴

Bahá'ís believe that only this "organic change in the structure of present day society," based on a recognition that all of humanity is part of one global community, can ultimately engender the international will and determination needed to address the world's current environmental concerns.

Such a change requires a recognition that the wealth and wonders of the earth are the common heritage of all people. It requires just and equitable access to the earth's resources by all the peoples of the earth. And it requires that the conservation of these resources become the conscious and determined goal of a global society unified in its commitment to both the stewardship of the earth and the well-being of its people.

The Bahá'í Historical Perspective

THE VISION of a unified world community, so fundamental to Bahá'í thought, is regarded by many as unattainable. Bahá'ís hold, however, that its establishment is not only possible, but inevitable.⁴⁵ This conviction is based on a historical perspective, enunciated by Bahá'u'lláh in the middle of the last century, that gives meaning to the current condition of human affairs and instills faith in the eventual outcome.

The present calamities that beset human society and threaten the earth's ecological balance are seen by Bahá'ís as the expressions of a turbulent, transitional stage in human evolution. The Universal House of Justice explains that

The Bahá'í Faith regards the current world confusion and calamitous condition in human affairs as a natural phase in an organic process leading ultimately and irresistibly to the unification of the human race in a single social order whose boundaries are those of the planet. The human race, as a distinct, organic unit, has passed through evolutionary stages analogous to the stages of infancy and childhood in the lives of its individual members, and is now in the culminating period of its turbulent adolescence approaching its long-awaited coming of age.⁴⁶

The Bahá'í writings explain that, while humanity has already passed through the organizational stages of family, tribe, and city-state, the dominant feature of the present age is the passage from a system of autonomous and often antagonistic sovereign nations, to a single world society. Bahá'ís believe that this transition, while ultimately of immense benefit to humanity, will be accompanied by considerable strife and difficulty—as attested by the current widespread levels of environmental degradation that are seen by Bahá'ís as one manifestation of this process. Alluding to this process, Bahá'u'lláh wrote more than a century ago that

The winds of despair are, alas, blowing from every direction, and the strife that divideth and afflicteth the human race is daily increasing. The signs of impending convulsions and chaos can now be discerned, inasmuch as the prevailing order appeareth to be lamentably defective.⁴⁷

Such a perspective is not, however, a cause of despair for Bahá'ís. Rather, Bahá'ís believe that acknowledging this historical perspective is itself an essential prerequisite to hu-

44. Shoghi Effendi, *World Order of Bahá'u'lláh* 42–43.

45. The Universal House of Justice, *Promise of World Peace* 13.

46. The Universal House of Justice, *Promise of World Peace* 16.

47. Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* 216.

manity's further collective evolution. It is with confidence that Bahá'ís anticipate the fulfillment of Bahá'u'lláh's promise that "Soon will the present-day order be rolled up, and a new one spread out in its stead."⁴⁸

Elaborating on this theme, Shoghi Effendi explains that world unity is

the goal towards which a harassed humanity is striving. Nation-building has come to an end. The anarchy inherent in state sovereignty is moving towards a climax. A world, growing to maturity, must abandon this fetish, recognize the oneness and wholeness of human relationships, and establish once for all the machinery that can best incarnate this fundamental principle of its life.⁴⁹

The destructive trends associated with this period of transition toward unity, including environmental degradation, are, therefore, seen by Bahá'ís as cause for action, not resignation or paralysis. Bahá'ís around the world are striving, in accordance with the Bahá'í teachings, to actively address the many problems facing the world today and to rectify the damage that humanity is inflicting upon itself and its world in this transitional period. For the Bahá'í Faith confidently asserts that such problems are not insurmountable—that they represent, rather, the last expressions of an immature stage in a "vast historical process" of social evolution leading ultimately to a social order whose boundaries are those of the planet.⁵⁰

Prescription for a New World Order

THE essential features of the world order of Bahá'u'lláh are summarized by Shoghi Effendi:

The unity of the human race, as envis-

aged by Bahá'u'lláh, implies the establishment of a world commonwealth in which all nations, races, creeds and classes are closely and permanently united, and in which the autonomy of its state members and the personal freedom and initiative of the individuals that compose them are definitely and completely safeguarded. This commonwealth must . . . consist of a world legislature, whose members will, as the trustees of the whole of mankind, ultimately control the entire resources of all the component nations, and will enact such laws as shall be required to regulate the life, satisfy the needs and adjust the relationships of all races and peoples. A world executive, backed by an international Force, will carry out the decisions arrived at, and apply the laws enacted by, this world legislature, and will safeguard the organic unity of the whole commonwealth. A world tribunal will adjudicate and deliver its compulsory and final verdict in all and any disputes that may arise between the various elements constituting this universal system.⁵¹

Shoghi Effendi explains that the new world order seeks not to subvert "the existing foundations of society," but rather

to broaden its basis, to remold its institutions in a manner consonant with the needs of an ever-changing world. It can conflict with no legitimate allegiances, nor can it undermine essential loyalties. Its purpose is neither to stifle the flame of a sane and intelligent patriotism in men's hearts, nor to abolish the system of national autonomy so essential if the evils of excessive centralization are to be avoided. It does not ignore, nor does it attempt to suppress, the diversity of ethnical origins, of climate, of history, of language and tradition, of thought and habit, that differentiate the peoples and nations of the world. . . . It repudiates excessive centralization on one hand, and disclaims all

48. Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* 7.

49. Shoghi Effendi, *World Order of Bahá'u'lláh* 202.

50. The Universal House of Justice, *Promise of World Peace* 16.

51. Shoghi Effendi, *World Order of Bahá'u'lláh* 203.

attempts at uniformity on the other. Its watchword is unity in diversity. . . .⁵² Bahá'ís assert that nothing short of the federation of all the nations and peoples of the earth into this world-embracing commonwealth can ultimately promote the best interests and safeguard the well-being of an emerging global civilization.

Elaborating on the implications of the theme for the global environment, the Universal House of Justice observes that the many problems of pollution are merely one aspect of the multitude of problems that will be solved when mankind accepts the reconstruction of human society as adumbrated by Bahá'u'lláh.⁵³

The Universal House of Justice also states that

Until such time as the nations of the world understand and follow the admonitions of Bahá'u'lláh to whole-heartedly work together in looking after the best interests of all humankind, and unite in the search for ways and means to meet the many environmental problems besetting our planet, . . . little progress will be made towards their solution.⁵⁴

While the reconstruction of human society is derided by many as a utopian vision, the Universal House of Justice has urged the peoples of the world to consider that "such an enterprise is possible, that the necessary constructive forces do exist, that unifying

social structures can be erected. . . ."⁵⁵ The Universal House of Justice goes on to say that "The experience of the Bahá'í community may be seen as an example" of "enlarging unity." It is a community of more than five million people drawn from many nations, races, cultures, classes, and creeds and "engaged in a wide range of activities serving the spiritual, social and economic needs of the people of many lands." The global Bahá'í community is a "single social organism, representative of the diversity of the human family, conducting its affairs through a system of commonly accepted consultative principles, and cherishing equally all the great outpourings of divine guidance in human history. Its existence is yet another proof of the practicality" of Bahá'u'lláh's "vision of a united world, another evidence that humanity can live as one global society, equal to whatever challenges its coming of age may entail."⁵⁶

Conclusion

THE TEACHINGS of the Bahá'í Faith, as well as the experience of its followers as an emerging world community, offer a unique model for those who recognize the vital role of religion—and world unity—in human affairs. It is a model that inspires reverence and appreciation for nature; identifies principles upon which a harmonious relationship with the natural world can be founded; makes sense out of the current disorderly state of human affairs; and prescribes fundamental changes in the ordering of affairs in a manner consonant with the needs of the present day. But, above all, it is a model that unites all of these aspects into a single belief system that is a source of purpose, faith, and inspiration—elements that have proven to be potent forces in human change. In its outlook on environmental stewardship, the Bahá'í Faith seeks to address both the human environment and the human heart and spirit. In the words of Shoghi Effendi:

52. Shoghi Effendi, *World Order of Bahá'u'lláh* 41–42.

53. From a previously unpublished letter dated 28 October 1971 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual.

54. The Universal House of Justice, quoted in Research Department of the Universal House of Justice, "Conservation of the Earth's Resources," *Compilation of Compilations* 1: 85.

55. The Universal House of Justice, *Promise of World Peace* 16.

56. The Universal House of Justice, *Promise of World Peace* 36.

We cannot segregate the human heart
from the environment outside us and say

57. Shoghi Effendi, quoted in Research Department of the Universal House of Justice, "Conservation of the Earth's Resources," *Compilation of Compilations* 1: 84.

that once one of these is reformed everything will be improved. Man is organic with the world. His inner life moulds the environment and is itself also deeply affected by it. The one acts upon the other and every abiding change in the life of man is the result of these mutual reactions.⁵⁷