

## ***Century of Light: New Trends in Understanding by Earl Redman***

### **Abstract**

*Century of Light is a remarkable book in that it illustrates what the Universal House of Justice believes are the significant points in the century just passed; but it often turns conventional wisdom on its head. It strips away the clutter of history and lifts, if just a little, the veil on Bahá'u'lláh's simple statement about the world's equilibrium being upset by His new World Order. The book examines the twentieth century in a holistic sense and describes the simultaneous moral downfall of humanity in general with the respiritualization of a small but ever-growing portion of that same humanity. In many instances, Century of Light gives interpretations of processes and events that are quite different from the common perception. The twentieth century was the most horrific in history but, unknown to the mass of humanity, it led to the 'fundamental change of direction the Divine purpose required.' All Bahá'í scholars should benefit from a careful study of this unique historical analysis. This paper attempts to illustrate some of the examples where the Universal House of Justice has given us a new perspective on historical events.*

### **Introduction**

When Bahá'u'lláh revealed the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* in 1873, it contained a short paragraph that said simply:

The world's equilibrium hath been upset through the vibrating influence of this most great, this new World Order. Mankind's ordered life hath been revolutionized through the agency of this unique, this wondrous System – the like of which mortal eyes have never witnessed.<sup>1</sup>

During the following century and a quarter, few probably realized the prophetic significance of these two sentences.

In the year 2000, we 'crossed a bridge to which we shall never return.'<sup>2</sup> The Universal House of Justice marked this point in the history of the world with a Twelve Month Plan that

had an importance beyond the objectives specifically assigned. The Plan was a dynamic link between a highly eventful epoch in Bahá'í history, and the immensely

promising prospects of a new one ... It has been etched in our annals, too, for the enduring effects of the Faith's activities at the end of the twentieth century – a century that deserves to be reflected upon by any Bahá'í who wishes to understand the tumultuous forces that influenced the life of the planet and the processes of the Cause itself at a crucial time in humanity's social and spiritual evolution.<sup>3</sup>

As an aid for Bahá'ís struggling to understand the significance of the twentieth century, the Universal House of Justice had the book, *Century of Light* (Bahá'í Publishing Trust, New Dehli, India, 2001), prepared under its supervision.

*Century of Light* strips away the clutter of history and lifts the veil on Bahá'u'lláh's simple statement in the *Aqdas*, if just a little. It examines the twentieth century in a holistic sense and describes the simultaneous moral downfall of humanity in general with the respiritualization of a small but ever-growing portion of that same humanity. It recounts a human history guided by a Spiritual Force recognized by few. It demonstrates how the Hand of God has guided humanity throughout the last century on to a new path. 'What the struggles of the twentieth century achieved,' it says, 'was the fundamental change of direction [uniting humanity into a global society] the Divine purpose required. The change is irreversible.'<sup>4</sup> So fundamental was this change that it is as if 'A corner had been turned that left behind six or more millennia of history ... a new authority was at work in human affairs to which all might reasonably hope somehow to appeal.'<sup>5</sup>

In their Ridván message in 1996, the Universal House of Justice began preparing the Bahá'í world for a change in mindset:

As for the institutions, entry by troops will act upon them as much as they will act upon it. The evolution of local and national Bahá'í Assemblies at this time calls for a new state of mind on the part of their members as well as on the part of those who elect them, for the Bahá'í community is engaged in an immense historical process that is entering a critical stage.<sup>6</sup>

Part of this change in mindset was defined by the Universal House of Justice in its 9 January 2001 document, which states that the

core of the Five Year Plan 'is a spiritual process in which communities and institutions strive to align their pursuits with the Will of God.'<sup>7</sup> In the Ridván message of 2001, the House assures the believers that this change of mindset is happening: 'With great joy in our hearts and high expectations, we come to this Ridván season at a change of time, when a new state of mind is evident among us all.'<sup>8</sup>

Following its own insistence on a new mindset, the Universal House of Justice examines in *Century of Light* the historical sweep of the twentieth century by using a unique perspective that visualizes a human history guided by a Spiritual Force. Though this concept is not unknown in the worlds of intellectual and theological thought today, the House of Justice is alone in having the guidance of Bahá'u'lláh for this time. Its occasionally radical conclusions, therefore, commonly turn conventional wisdom on its head. All Bahá'í scholars should benefit from a careful study of this unique historical analysis. This paper attempts to illustrate some of the examples where the House of Justice has given us a new perspective on historical events.

### **'Abdu'l-Bahá and the Persian Bahá'í Community**

The tragic persecution that afflicted the early believers in Persia is well known, as is the steadfastness and sacrifice of those Bahá'ís in the face of such tribulations. It is well known that the sacrifices and martyrdoms in Persia led directly to the blossoming of the Faith elsewhere. Most Bahá'ís are also familiar with the herculean efforts of 'Abdu'l-Bahá to maintain and stimulate that harassed community.

But *Century of Light* illuminates something unexpected:

'Abdu'l-Bahá was able not only to stimulate the expansion of the Persian Bahá'í community, but to shape its consciousness and collective life. The result was the emergence of a culture, however localized, that was unlike anything humanity had ever known.<sup>9</sup>

This dramatic statement refers to the development of 'rudimentary consultative bodies', not what most people think about when pondering those times. *Century of Light*, however, states

categorically that the importance of these bodies is ‘impossible to exaggerate. In a land and among a people’ it says,

accustomed for centuries to a patriarchal system that concentrated all decision-making authority in the hands of an absolute monarch or Shi’ih mujtahids, a community representing a cross-section of that society had broken with the past, taking into its own hands the responsibility for deciding its collective affairs through consultative action.<sup>10</sup>

In relation to the development of the Bahá’í New World Order in the early twentieth century, therefore, the creation of consultative bodies in an autocratic land illustrated the power of the Hand of God.

### **The Industrial Revolution**

The Industrial Revolution has been defined as the ‘complex of social and economic changes resulting from the mechanization of industry.’<sup>11</sup> This mechanization led to the increased manufacture of goods, more efficient technology, increased productivity, and enhanced efficiency created by the formation of large enterprises. It also began the process of urbanization with the movement of farming people to the cities for factory jobs.

*Century of Light* acknowledges the above but exposes a distinctly darker side during the beginning of the twentieth century:

Large-scale industrial production, fuelled by the arms race, had accelerated the movement of populations into urban centres. By the end of the preceding century, this process was already undermining inherited standards and loyalties, exposing growing numbers of people to novel ideas for the bringing about of social change, and exciting mass appetites for material benefits previously available only to elite segments of society.<sup>12</sup>

*Century of Light* pointedly illuminates the undermining of loyalties as a darker result of the Industrial Revolution. This may have been the result of factory owners who were more concerned with profits than the welfare of their employees. This lack of concern led to the

masses being drawn to the 'novel ideas for the bringing about of social change.'

The last phrase in the above quote, 'exciting mass appetites for material benefits previously available only to elite segments of society,' implies both positive and negative results with the same wording. On the positive side, the masses of society began to acquire those things previously available only to the rich, while on the negative, it highlights the dawning of materialism.

### **'Abdu'l-Bahá's journey to the West**

'Abdu'l-Bahá's journeys through Europe and North America were, according to Shoghi Effendi, 'a turning point of the utmost significance in the history of the century'<sup>12</sup> and 'marked the culmination of His ministry.'<sup>13</sup> Thousands of people were brought into contact with the message of Bahá'u'lláh due to direct contact with 'Abdu'l-Bahá and His attendant publicity. *Century of Light*, though, declares that the journeys resulted in an immense moral failure, not on the part of 'Abdu'l-Bahá or the Western Bahá'ís, but on the part of the masses and their leaders:

However much one may rejoice in the praise poured on the Master from every quarter, the immediate results of His efforts represented yet another immense moral failure on the part of a considerable portion of humankind and of its leadership. The message that had been suppressed in the East was essentially ignored by a Western world which had proceeded down the path of ruin long prepared for it by overweening self-satisfaction, leading finally to the betrayal of the ideal embodied in the League of Nations.<sup>14</sup>

The world had failed for a second time: first the kings and rulers rejected Bahá'u'lláh's proclamation, then the people of Europe and North America ignored 'Abdu'l-Bahá's message.

### **Man-made Ideologies**

During the twentieth century, the world developed many ideologies for governing, including theocracy, monarchy, aristocracy, oligarchy, republican, and democracy, as well as capitalism, Communism, Nazism, and nationalism. Each of these creations were looked on, temporarily at least, as the path to

world peace and tranquillity. *Century of Light*, however, unambiguously declares that they did little more than accelerate humanity's decline:

The consequence of humanity's infatuation with the ideologies its own mind had conceived was to produce a terrifying acceleration of the process of disintegration that was dissolving the fabric of social life and cultivating the basest impulses of human nature. The brutalization that the first world war had engendered now became an omnipresent feature of social life throughout much of the planet.<sup>15</sup>

Bahá'ís, *Century of Light* explains, are not creating a new system of governance. Instead, they are simply fulfilling the plan sent by God through Bahá'u'lláh:

Theirs is the duty to hold, aloft and undimmed, the torch of Divine guidance, as the shades of night descend upon, and ultimately envelop the entire human race. Theirs is the function, amidst its tumults, perils and agonies, to witness to the vision, and proclaim the approach, of that re-created society, that Christ-promised Kingdom, that World Order whose generative impulse is the spirit of none other than Bahá'u'lláh Himself, whose dominion is the entire planet, whose watchword is unity, whose animating power is the force of Justice, whose directive purpose is the reign of righteousness and truth, and whose supreme glory is the complete, the undisturbed and everlasting felicity of the whole of human kind.<sup>16</sup>

The book dramatically contrasts the man-made versus the God-made by paraphrasing Rúhiyyih Khánum, Hand of the Cause of God and widow of Shoghi Effendi:

powerful nations were launching armies of invasion whose goal was to seize the natural resources of neighbour states – or simply to satisfy an appetite for conquest. During this same period, Shoghi Effendi was mobilizing the painfully small band of pioneers available to him, and dispatching them to the teaching goals of the Plan he had created. Within

a few short years, the vast battalions of aggression would be shattered beyond recovery, their names and conquests erased from history. The little company of believers who had gone out with their lives in their hands to fulfil the mission entrusted to them by the Guardian would have achieved or exceeded all of their objectives, objectives that soon became the foundations of flourishing communities.<sup>17</sup>

While the plans of humankind, when not following the Word of God, can be brought to naught, the plan of God is unstoppable.

### **The League of Nations**

In the aftermath of the First World War, U.S. President Woodrow Wilson proposed a 'general association of nations ... formed under specific covenants for the purpose of affording mutual guarantees of political independence and territorial integrity to great and small states alike.'<sup>18</sup> He said that this League of Nations would ensure that the world would be a fit and safe place in which to live, and that all the peoples of the world were partners in this program for world peace. Wilson called for open covenants of peace, freedom of the seas, the removal of trade barriers, and the reduction of national armaments to a point consistent with national safety. Unfortunately, Wilson's own country, the United States, refused to take part in this, the world's first attempt at global governance, and its European adapters proved not to have the moral integrity to follow the path marked out by Wilson.

*Century of Light* affirms that the failure of the world to follow Wilson's vision made the next world war inevitable:

In sum, at precisely the moment in human history when an unprecedented outbreak of violence had undermined the inherited bulwarks of civilized behaviour, the political leadership of the Western world had emasculated the one alternative system of international order to which experience of this catastrophe had given birth and which alone could have alleviated the far greater suffering that lay ahead.<sup>19</sup>

### **World War II**

After the First World War, the United States retired from the world scene to live behind its protective oceans. It rejected the League of

Nations which Wilson had forcefully promoted to a devastated world, preferring to let the Europeans extricate themselves from the horror which they themselves had created. Both Bahá'u'lláh<sup>20</sup> and 'Abdu'l-Bahá<sup>21</sup> prophesied the Second World War and Shoghi Effendi stated that: 'The war should be regarded "as the direct continuation" of the conflagration ignited in 1914.'<sup>22</sup>

*Century of Light* strongly asserts that the War, beyond being unfinished world business, occurred to force the United States to assume its true position in the world:

It would come to be seen as the 'essential pre-requisite to world unification'. The entry into the war by the United States, whose President had initiated the project of a system of international order, but which had itself rejected this initiative, would lead that nation ... to assume through adversity its preponderating share of responsibility to lay down, once for all, broad, worldwide, unassailable foundations of that discredited yet immortal System.<sup>23</sup>

This understanding of the relationship between the Second World War and the United States makes the events of 11 September 2001 very thought-provoking. The United States has again become isolationist and has acquired a go-it-alone attitude. Then when we read Bahá'u'lláh's words to the 'Rulers of America and the Presidents of the Republics therein' quoted in *Century of Light*, we can only gaze in amazement at the confrontation between the United States and Iraq. 'Bahá'u'lláh Himself', states the *Century of Light*,

delivered a mandate that has no parallel in any of His other addresses to world leaders: 'Bind ye the broken with the hands of justice and crush the oppressor who flourisheth with the rod of the commandments of your Lord, the Ordainer, the All-Wise.'<sup>24</sup>

Is the United States unwittingly following the mandate of Bahá'u'lláh and, as a consequence, forcing the world to both confront oppression and learn to act in unity? [Note: this article was written during 2002]



## **The United Nations; uplift and unification of the peoples of the world**

Creation of the United Nations was a signal event in the history of the twentieth century. Unlike the League of Nations, the new international body had peace-keeping powers in addition to greater authority. It was the first serious step toward international governance, though it, too, failed to receive a mandate sufficient for world governance.

What the United Nations did do, according to *Century of Light*, was to help humanity break away from 6,000 years of history:

A corner had been turned that left behind six or more millennia of history. Beyond all the continuing educational disadvantages, the economic inequities, and the obstructions created by political and diplomatic manoeuvring – beyond all these practical but historically transient limitations – a new authority was at work in human affairs to which all might reasonably hope somehow to appeal. Representatives of once subject peoples, whose exotically clad warriors had brought up the rear of the Diamond Jubilee procession in London only five decades earlier, now began to appear as delegates to the Security Council and occupants of senior posts in the United Nations and non-governmental organizations of every kind.<sup>25</sup>

The masses of humanity finally had at least partial control over their destinies.

## **The Ten Year Crusade**

The Ten Year Crusade or Plan (1953-63) was the first international teaching plan, whose objectives were the development of the Bahá'í World Centre, the consolidation of national Bahá'í communities, the consolidation of all territories then open to the Faith, and the opening of the main unopened territories.<sup>26</sup> Shoghi Effendi called it a 'decade-long, world-embracing Spiritual Crusade.'<sup>27</sup> The Universal House of Justice has said that during the Crusade, 'the foundations of its Administrative Order were laid throughout the world, thus preparing the way for that awakening

of the masses which must characterize the future progress of the Faith.’<sup>28</sup> It also stated that

the Community of the Most Great Name spread with the speed of lightning over the major territories and islands of the globe, increased manifoldly its manpower and resources, saw the beginning of the entry of the peoples by troops into the Cause of God, and completed the structure of the Administrative Order of Bahá’u’lláh.<sup>29</sup>

*Century of Light*, however, reveals that the true significance of the Ten Year Crusade was that it

called for the Cause to make a giant leap forward over what might otherwise have been several stages in its evolution. What Shoghi Effendi saw clearly – and what only the powers of foresight inherent in the Guardianship made it possible to see – was that an historical conjunction of circumstances presented the Bahá’í community with an opportunity that would not come again and on which the success of future stages in the prosecution of the Divine Plan would entirely depend.<sup>30</sup>

What was significant was the moment; the Ten Year Crusade could not have happened at any other time. The result of this ‘giant leap’ was the election of the Universal House of Justice, ‘very likely ... history’s first global democratic election.’<sup>31</sup>

### **The Power of the Community of Nations**

The renewed persecutions of the Bahá’í community in Iran during the early 1980s created a world-wide outcry. Most Bahá’ís were eminently aware that the sacrifices of that beleaguered community were spreading the Faith across the globe to an unprecedented degree. *Century of Light*, though, underscores the power of the community of nations in alleviating the worst of the persecution:

Not only the Bahá’í community but the United Nations’ human rights system itself benefited from this long struggle. Initially, after the Islamic revolution, the community of believers in Iran had faced a threat to its very survival. In

time, the United Nations Human Rights Commission, however slow and relatively cumbersome its operations may appear to some outside observers, succeeded in compelling the Iranian regime to bring the worst of the persecution to a halt. In this way, the 'case of Iran's Bahá'ís' marked a significant victory for the Commission and the Bahá'í Faith alike ... It served as a startling demonstration of the power of the community of nations, acting through the machinery created for the purpose, to bring under control patterns of oppression that had darkened the pages of recorded history throughout the ages.<sup>32</sup>

*Century of Light* also marks this as demonstrating the relevance of the activities of the Faith to the larger world: 'This circumstance highlights the relevance of the Faith's activities to the life of the larger society in which these efforts are taking place.'<sup>33</sup>

### **Unification of the planet**

'Abdu'l-Bahá wrote that: 'The fifth candle is the unity of nations – a unity which in this century will be securely established, causing all the peoples of the world to regard themselves as citizens of one common fatherland.'<sup>34</sup> Bahá'ís have long known that the unity of the nations of the world was coming. Few, however, realized that while we gazed expectantly toward the future, this unity had arisen quietly behind us. *Century of Light* states unambiguously that this candle has been lit:

Yet, the unification of humankind under a system of governance that can release the full potentialities latent in human nature, and allow their expression in programmes for the benefit of all, is clearly the next stage in the evolution of civilization. The physical unification of the planet in our time and the awakening aspirations of the mass of its inhabitants have at last produced the conditions that permit achievement of the ideal, although in a manner far different from that imagined by imperial dreamers of the past.<sup>35</sup>

*Century of Light* further emphasizes this by saying:

The Master's promise of "unity of nations" ... looked forward to today's widespread acceptance among the peoples of the world of the fact that, however great the differences among them may be, they are the inhabitants of a single global homeland.<sup>36</sup>

### **Future world government**

Most Bahá'ís knew that the task of world governance was beyond the United Nations in its current form. Selfish nationalistic tendencies effectively block that body from fulfilling the ever-growing need for a world governing body:

Somewhere ahead lie the further great changes that will eventually impel acceptance of the principle of world government itself. The United Nations does not possess such a mandate, nor is there anything in the current discourse of political leaders that seriously envisions so radical a restructuring of the administration of the affairs of the planet. That it will come about in due course Bahá'u'lláh has made unmistakably clear. That yet greater suffering and disillusionment will be required to impel humanity to this great leap forward appears, alas, equally clear.<sup>37</sup>

*Century of Light* points out the obvious: that national governments will have to surrender a portion of their power before true world governance can be established. But the book also highlights 'other centres of power' as also having to relinquish authority: 'Its establishment will require national governments and other centres of power to surrender to international determination, unconditionally and irreversibly, the full measure of overriding authority implicit in the word "government".'<sup>38</sup> Of these other centres of power, *Century of Light* specifically mentions multinational corporations (unbridled exploitation of the masses of humanity by greed),<sup>39</sup> media conglomerates (the almost universal celebration in the arts and media of degeneracy and violence),<sup>40</sup> and religious leaders (who have imposed on credulous masses a welter of dogmas and prejudices that have constituted the greatest single obstacle against which the advancement of civilization has been forced to struggle).<sup>41</sup> The danger of religious prejudice, the Universal House of Justice has emphasized in its

letter of April 2002 to the religious leaders of the world, 'will ignite a worldwide conflagration the consequences of which are unthinkable.'<sup>42</sup>

### **Conclusion**

*Century of Light* is a remarkable book in that it illustrates the points which the Universal House of Justice believes are significant in the century just passed. In many instances, those points are quite different from the common, secular perceptions. The twentieth century was indisputably the most horrific in history but, unknown to the mass of humanity, it led to the 'fundamental change of direction the Divine purpose required.'<sup>43</sup>

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