

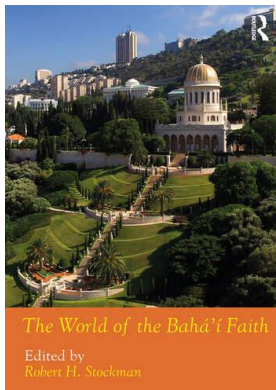
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The World of the Bahá'í Faith

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The Writings of the Universal House of Justice

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THE WRITINGS OF THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE

Todd Smith

The chapter considers how the Universal House of Justice, through its constant flow of writings, guides the Bahá'í world in a global learning process aimed at progressively translating the revelation of Bahá'u'lláh into reality. Given its responsibility for addressing issues regarding the social, material, and spiritual advancement of humanity, the range of subjects it covers is vast. The aim of this chapter is simply to provide an introduction to the ocean of its guidance. It does so, first, by contextualizing its guidance within the Bahá'í concept of history, and second, by considering some of its writings concerning the development of the Bahá'í community, the promulgation and application of Bahá'í law, and the life and development of society more generally.

History and the consummation of social evolution¹

Bahá'ís believe that humanity has purpose and that it is inexorably moving towards its ultimate goal, the acme of its evolutionary process, referred to by the Universal House of Justice as 'the hallmark of the age of maturity' (2013c). Humanity has gone through many stages in its maturation process, developing ever more complex societies that have been organized successively around the family, the tribe, the city-state, and now, most predominantly, the nation-state. The next natural stage in this evolutionary process is the oneness of humankind, a consummation that will entail a momentous transformation in our current state of material, social, and spiritual existence as a species. The result will be a global commonwealth that 'is organically unified in all the essential aspects of its life, its political machinery, its spiritual aspiration, its trade and finance, its script and language, and yet infinite in the diversity of the national characteristics of its federated units' (Shoghi Effendi 1931). As such, it will be a world in which unity and diversity pulsate in dynamic interplay, continuously propelling humanity to ever-evolving heights of material and spiritual prosperity.

Given humanity's present state of development, Bahá'ís are under no illusion that humanity's path to maturity will be easy. Currently, humanity is facing what is characterized as its age of adolescence—an age fraught with contention, conflict, self-absorption, recalcitrant narrow-mindedness, alienation, and torpor. It is a painful time, but, as Shoghi Effendi (*The Promised Day Is Come*) explains, we are 'destined to emerge, sooner or later, out of the carnage, agony, and havoc of this great world convulsion' and achieve a world civilization that will 'flourish, and perpetuate itself, a civilization with a fullness of life such as the world has never seen nor can as yet conceive'.

That we will do so, moreover, is understood to be inherent in who we are as a species. Just as the fruit of a tree is latent within the seed, so the fruit of divine civilization is latent within the reality of humanity. The mandate of each Manifestation of God, accordingly, has been to progressively awaken ‘humankind to its capacities and responsibilities as the trustee of creation’ (*One Common Faith* 2005) and to its evolving potential to effect personal and social transformation and palpably contribute to an ever-advancing civilization. Now, with the revelation of Bahá’u’lláh, unprecedented powers have been released in the world that make it possible to advance towards a state of oneness that will enable a level of individual and collective flourishing never achievable under any erstwhile condition. This oneness of humankind is ‘the pivot round which all the teachings of Bahá’u’lláh revolve’ (Shoghi Effendi 1931).

Finally, according to this view of history, humanity is being impelled towards its maturity by two interacting processes. One is disintegrative, and the other is integrative. Together, these processes are giving rise to what the Universal House of Justice describes as ‘a mixed catalogue of world-shaking tribulations and world-shaping developments [that] keeps humanity concurrently dazed and dazzled’ (1998). The integrative process is apparent in developments such as technological advancements that facilitate international connections,² heightened collective awareness of the deteriorating state of the environment, growing concern for human rights, and the efforts of various organizations and individuals to contribute to social and economic development. The disintegrative process is evident in the splintering of institutions, the demise of social norms, persistent conflict in all corners of the world, the intransigence and ineptitude of certain political leaders when dealing with matters of global impact, and the fragmentation, alienation, and anxiety that tenaciously burden human consciousness. And while painful, Bahá’ís recognize that the disintegrative process is finally necessary for dismantling and sweeping aside anachronistic, obdurate practices, conventions, ideologies, and habits of mind that impede the realization of our true potential.

At the same time, the peoples of the world have an active role to play in determining how long humanity takes to reach its state of maturity and how it gets there.³ We are not simply caught up in the sweep of history: we have agency.

Aligning the community with the integrative process

With this conviction in mind, Bahá’ís strive to align themselves with the forces of integration. They do so by drawing on the writings of their Faith and by participating in endeavors they deem essential for bringing about a society in which true felicity can be achieved. To this end, the Universal House of Justice helps the Bahá’í community understand what it is seeking to accomplish at every stage in its development. The following passage is a clear example of such guidance:

Bahá’u’lláh’s Revelation is vast. It calls for profound change not only at the level of the individual but also in the structure of society. ‘Is not the object of every Revelation’, He Himself proclaims, ‘to effect a transformation in the whole character of mankind, a transformation that shall manifest itself, both outwardly and inwardly, that shall affect both its inner life and external conditions?’ The work advancing in every corner of the globe today represents the latest stage of the ongoing Bahá’í endeavour to create the nucleus of the glorious civilization enshrined in His teachings, the building of which is an enterprise of infinite complexity and scale, one that will demand centuries of exertion by humanity to bring to fruition. There are no shortcuts, no formulas. Only as effort is made to draw on insights from His Revelation, to tap into the accumulating knowledge of the human race, to apply His teachings intelligently to the

life of humanity, and to consult on the questions that arise will the necessary learning occur and capacity be developed.

(Universal House of Justice 2010a)

As the Bahá'í community engages in such efforts, it 'beckons to new horizons' (Universal House of Justice 2011), creates new possibilities, and encounters new challenges. In response, the Universal House of Justice, based on the experience generated across the globe, synthesizes and disseminates this knowledge and provides a steady stream of guidance that encourages and facilitates the organic development of the community. It is present every step of the way, both learning from and lovingly shepherding the endeavours of Bahá'ís in every corner of the world. The result is a dynamic relationship between the governing institution of the Faith and the Bahá'í community as a whole—a relationship that is fundamental to cultivating the ongoing expansion and consolidation of the Faith in all its evolving complexity.

This dynamic has been in place since the establishment of the Universal House of Justice in 1963. However, to gain further insight into how it works and the type of guidance the Universal House of Justice provides in response, it is fruitful to narrow the focus to developments since 1996, when major changes within the Bahá'í community began to take place, a key factor being the progressive articulation of a conceptual framework which 'gives shape to [the] collective powers' (2008a) of the community and 'which becomes more elaborate as experience accumulates' (2013b). The elements of this framework are discussed in some depth in the chapter 'A Culture of Learning' (Karlberg and Smith) in this volume, but it is helpful to highlight a few of them here, paying particular attention to how the Universal House of Justice assists the community to 'apply [Bahá'u'lláh's] teachings intelligently to the life of humanity' (2010a).

Framing the development of the community

At the core of the conceptual framework is a commitment to being in a learning mode, as the foregoing suggests. The Universal House of Justice explains that in exploring the many questions associated with how to 'best contribute to the civilization-building process as its resources increase' (2013c), the Bahá'í community 'has adopted a mode of operation characterized by action, reflection, consultation and study—study which involves not only constant reference to the writings of the Faith but also the scientific analysis of patterns unfolding' (*ibid.*). This involves regular examination of

how to maintain such a mode of learning in action, how to ensure that growing numbers participate in the generation and application of relevant knowledge, and how to devise structures for the systemization of an expanding worldwide experience and for the equitable distribution of the lessons learned.

(*ibid.*)

To guide this learning, the House of Justice continually reminds the community of certain fundamental features of the growth process.

One feature is universal participation, which is informed by the conviction that every member of the human family is responsible for helping bring about the betterment of humankind. Consistent with this conviction, the Universal House of Justice states that 'the constructive contributions' of all are welcomed by the community (2010a). As such, in carrying out their community-building endeavours, Bahá'ís strive to nurture environments of collaboration where every person feels encouraged to contribute his or her share 'not in the abstract but on the basis

of that intimate knowledge which is only acquired by working side by side in the field of service' (Universal House of Justice 2010a). Bahá'ís are thus being assisted by the Universal House of Justice to envision themselves and their fellow learners as treading a common path of service, which is given shape by the conceptual framework and further refined as collective experience is accrued and analysed with reference to the guidance. They are correspondingly being guided to eschew paternalism and competitiveness and to instead develop a culture in which all are welcome to participate in the effort to continually generate, consolidate, and disseminate knowledge that impels humanity towards oneness and peace.

Central to this collective advance along the path of service is another feature of the growth process, namely, a focus on capacity building undertaken principally by training institutes, the establishment of which received a 'new thrust' by the Universal House of Justice in its message of 26 December 1995. Although training in techniques and the assimilation of knowledge have their place, the Universal House of Justice highlights the unique dynamics that underlie 'the transformative effects of the institute process'—specifically, 'the spirit of fellowship it creates, the participatory approach it adopts, the depth of understanding it fosters, [and] the acts of service it recommends', all 'without awakening the insistent self' (2010a). The primary focus of the institute is to cultivate the requisite capacities for advancing particular areas of service—such as teaching children's classes, animating junior youth groups, and holding devotional gatherings for the spiritual enrichment of a community—as well as those capacities that imbue all areas of service with vitality. These include the capacities to think and act systematically and coherently.

In this regard, the Universal House of Justice regularly guides the community to become ever-more methodical, balanced, and harmonious in carrying out the long-term action required for bringing about a prosperous civilization. Such action entails being neither haphazard nor rigid in approach. It also entails rejecting certain habits of mind, none of which conduce to lasting, organic growth and all of which foment fragmentation and disunity. Among these is the habit of thinking in terms of false dichotomies or stifling binaries, such as us versus them, the individual versus the community, and faith versus reason. Another is the proclivity to seek out rigid formulas for growth or 'to reduce a complex process of transformation into simplistic steps' (Universal House of Justice 2010a). Yet another is to think in terms of silos of activity, allowing for no interplay between them.

As an antidote to such habits of mind, Bahá'ís and their collaborators strive to promote coherence between the various community-building activities—for example, to perceive children's classes, junior youth groups, and devotional gatherings in, say, a village or a neighbourhood as complementary and jointly reinforcing—and to act accordingly. On this point, the Universal House of Justice stresses how 'the diverse elements of a healthy pattern of growth . . . are to be integrated into a cohesive whole' (2008b) and how there is a 'need to examine the dynamics of growth on a regular basis and analyse the way in which these elements are working together' (2007). Analogously, one can view the various activities as diverse strands with their own unique characteristics and needs, but which, when woven together into a coherent whole, also sustain, reinforce, and fortify one another, thereby further catalyzing the process of growth and promoting heightened levels of collective consciousness within the community.

Yet another core feature of the enterprise in which the Bahá'í community is engaged is the spirit of unity that is to be nurtured under all circumstances. Bahá'ís, for example, reject approaches that have traditionally been used to enact radical societal change, as such approaches presume that conflict and discord must be consciously employed to sweep away the old and usher in the new. From a Bahá'í perspective, there can be no legitimate dissonance between humanity's ultimate goal of unity and the strategies that are deliberately employed to achieve it. The Universal House of Justice is firm on this point:

...Bahá'ís are to bear in mind the principle, enshrined in their teachings, that means should be consistent with ends; noble goals cannot be achieved through unworthy means. Specifically, it is not possible to build enduring unity through endeavours that require contention or assume that an inherent conflict of interests underlies all human interactions, however subtly.

(2013c)

In working towards a world civilization in which humanity is organically unified in all its essential aspects, the Bahá'í community must aspire, with unshakable conviction and discipline, to promote harmony in every one of its endeavours. It can only do so, moreover, out of love for Bahá'u'lláh, Whose essential teaching is the unity of humanity. The Universal House of Justice explains that

all activity begins with this simple strand of love. It is the vital thread from which is woven a pattern of patient and concentrated effort, cycle after cycle, to introduce children, youth, and adults to spiritual ideas; to foster a feeling for worship through gatherings for prayer and devotion; to stimulate conversations that illuminate understanding; to start ever-growing numbers on a lifetime of study of the Creative Word and its translation into deeds; to develop, along with others, capacity for service; and to accompany one another in the exercise of what has been learned.

(2015)

Promulgating and applying Bahá'í law

As discussed in the chapter 'The Universal House of Justice' (Smith), among the powers and duties of this world-governing institution is '[t]o promulgate and apply the laws and principles of the Faith' (1972). In that chapter, mention was made of the universal application, in December 1999, of the law of reciting the Greatest Name ninety-five times a day and of the relationship between individual devotion, community worship, and the law of the House of Worship. The full implementation of the Bahá'í calendar in 2014 was also discussed.

Directly related to the promulgation and application of the laws and principles of the Faith is the Universal House of Justice's power and duty 'to safeguard and enforce that rectitude of conduct which the Law of God enjoins' (Universal House of Justice 1972). An example of this is how the Universal House of Justice safeguards and enforces the teachings on chastity and marriage in an age that has succumbed to consumerism, individualism, and moral license. In a letter dated 19 April 2013 written on its behalf, the Universal House of Justice acknowledges the challenges that young people face in the West, which 'puts itself forward in various ways as a model and measure for others' and in which the assumptions of materialism hold formidable sway over how individuals think and interact:

We live in an age when the role of religion in shaping human thought and in guiding individual and collective conduct is increasingly discounted. In societies that have bowed to the dictates of materialism, organized religion is seeing the sphere of its influence contract, becoming confined mostly to the realm of personal experience. Not infrequently the laws of religion are regarded as arbitrary rules blindly obeyed by those incapable of independent thought or as a prudish and outdated code of conduct hypocritically imposed upon others by advocates who, themselves, fail to live up to its

demands. Morality is being redefined in such societies, and materialistic assumptions, values, and practices pertaining to the nature of humankind and its economic and social life are taking on the status of unassailable truth.

(2013a)

Moreover, the effect of such materialism on how we understand ourselves as beings in the world—and thus on what we pursue in life—is profound. As the Universal House of Justice continues:

Indeed, the expenditure of enormous energy and vast amounts of resources in an attempt to bend truth to conform to personal desire is now a feature of many contemporary societies. The result is a culture that distorts human nature and purpose, trapping human beings in pursuit of idle fancies and vain imaginings and turning them into pliable objects in the hands of the powerful.

(*ibid.*)

In such a society, for example, it may be observed that the compulsion to be praised and idolized dominates the disposition to serve; profit in business is systemically pursued without regard for what is, in fact, fair and just; friendships can easily become hollow and transactional; and freedom often manifests as the quest to gratify base desires. Yet, from a Bahá'í perspective, the search for this type of gratification is largely in vain. More generally, humans never achieve satisfaction within such a culture—at least, not for very long. Because we are not, in fact, tapping into our true selves, lasting contentment persistently evades us. Instead, 'the happiness and well-being of humanity depend upon the opposite' of what a consumerist society—and the hyper-individualism it pampers—lulls us into valuing, namely, 'cultivating human character and social order in conformity with reality' (*ibid.*). It is, furthermore, 'Divine teachings' that

shed light on reality, enabling every soul to investigate it properly and to acquire, through the exercise of personal discipline, those attributes that are to distinguish the human being. 'Man should know his own self', Bahá'u'lláh states, 'and recognize that which leadeth unto loftiness or lowliness, glory or abasement, wealth or poverty'.

(*ibid.*)

Also at stake is true freedom—our capacity to flourish both individually and collectively—which depends on our alignment with the will of God. This alignment, in turn, requires adherence to His laws since they 'express truths about the nature of the human being and the purpose of existence; they raise human consciousness, increase understanding, lift the standard of personal conduct, and provide the means for society to progress' (*ibid.*). Elaborating on this point, the Universal House of Justice goes on to state that the teachings of the Manifestation of God

serve, then, to empower humanity; they are the harbinger of human happiness, whose call, far from compelling obedience to an arbitrary and dictatorial regimen of behaviour, leads to true freedom. 'Were men to observe that which We have sent down unto them from the Heaven of Revelation,' Bahá'u'lláh states, 'they would, of a certainty, attain unto perfect liberty. Happy is the man that hath apprehended the Purpose of God in whatever He hath revealed from the Heaven of His Will, that pervadeth all created things.' 'Think not that We have revealed unto you a mere code of laws,' He declares further, 'Nay, rather, We have unsealed the choice Wine with the fingers of might and power'.

(*ibid.*)

Finally, the letter helps the believers to view themselves within the larger context of an unprecedented collective enterprise to advance the integrative process of society. This is critical because framing their lives in this way—and linking it specifically to the community-building endeavours the worldwide community is engaged in—gives meaning to their exertions to develop spiritually and adhere to Bahá'í standards. It also elevates vision, empowers, and arouses a longing to serve. The recipients of the letter are encouraged to remember that, 'in their efforts to achieve personal growth and to uphold Bahá'í ideals, they are not isolated individuals, withstanding alone the onslaught of the forces of moral decay operating in society.' Instead, '[t]hey are members of a purposeful community, global in scope, pursuing a bold spiritual mission—working to establish a pattern of activity and administrative structures suited to a humanity entering its age of maturity.' In addition, as discussed in the previous section, and as elaborated upon in the chapter 'The Universal House of Justice' (Smith), '[g]iving shape to the community's efforts is a framework for action defined by the global Plans of the Faith.' The framework of these global plans

promotes the transformation of the individual in conjunction with social transformation, as two inseparable processes. Specifically, the courses of the institute are intended to set the individual on a path in which qualities and attitudes, skills and abilities, are gradually acquired through service—service intended to quell the insistent self, helping to lift the individual out of its confines and placing him or her in a dynamic process of community building.

(*ibid.*)

Messages regarding the life and development of society

In addition to its messages on the growth of the community and the application of Bahá'í law, the Universal House of Justice, in accordance with its expansive mandate, provides guidance on a wide array of issues, such as those of pressing societal or ethical concern, the defense and protection of the Faith, the evolution of the administrative centre of the Faith, the development of administrative systems worldwide, the flow of financial resources, cultivating relations with governments and global institutions, and participating constructively in the life of society. Its messages are also a source of endless encouragement to the individual, community, and institutions alike. The following examples provide a glimpse of how the Universal House of Justice addresses various matters concerned with participating in the life of society and, more generally, with the process of integration so essential to bringing about the oneness of humankind. One can read many of these letters in full on the Bahá'í Reference Library online.

Notable among the communications of the Universal House of Justice are those it has written to the broader global community. These include its message of October 1985 to the peoples of the world, titled 'The Promise of World Peace', and its message of April 2002 to the world's religious leaders. In the first, everyone in the world is encouraged to investigate the conditions that will finally give rise to a peaceful, global civilization. To this end, the Universal House of Justice states the following before it proceeds to outline many of the prerequisites for reaching 'the next stage in the evolution of this planet':

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.

A candid acknowledgement that prejudice, war and exploitation have been the expression of immature stages in a vast historical process and that the human race is today experiencing the unavoidable tumult which marks its collective coming of age is not a reason for despair but a prerequisite to undertaking the stupendous enterprise of building a peaceful world. That such an enterprise is possible, that the necessary constructive forces do exist, that unifying social structures can be erected, is the theme we urge you to examine.

In the second message, as explained in its foreword to the statement it commissioned entitled 'One Common Faith', the Universal House of Justice, concerned 'that the disease of sectarian hatreds, if not decisively checked, threatens harrowing consequences that will leave few areas of the world unaffected', expresses its 'conviction that the time has come when religious leadership must face honestly and without further evasion the implications of the truth that God is one and that, beyond all diversity of cultural expression and human interpretation, religion is likewise one' (2005). Its April 2002 letter to the world's religious leaders itself begins as follows:

The enduring legacy of the twentieth century is that it compelled the peoples of the world to begin seeing themselves as the members of a single human race, and the earth as that race's common homeland. Despite the continuing conflict and violence that darken the horizon, prejudices that once seemed inherent in the nature of the human species are everywhere giving way. Down with them come barriers that long divided the family of man into a Babel of incoherent identities of cultural, ethnic or national origin. That so fundamental a change could occur in so brief a period—virtually overnight in the perspective of historical time—suggests the magnitude of the possibilities for the future.

Tragically, organized religion, whose very reason for being entails service to the cause of brotherhood and peace, behaves all too frequently as one of the most formidable obstacles in the path; to cite a particular painful fact, it has long lent its credibility to fanaticism. We feel a responsibility, as the governing council of one of the world religions, to urge earnest consideration of the challenge this poses for religious leadership. Both the issue and the circumstances to which it gives rise require that we speak frankly. We trust that common service to the Divine will ensure that what we say will be received in the same spirit of goodwill as it is put forward.

(2002)

As discussed earlier, the Universal House of Justice frequently also addresses matters of evolving societal concern. Recent messages include letters written by it or on its behalf regarding science and sacred scriptures (2016), economic life (2017a), climate change (2017b), religious prejudice (2017c), world peace (2019a), social media and non-involvement in politics (2019b), and eradicating racial prejudice (2020b). In response to the racial strife in America, for example, the Universal House of Justice states:

Racism is a profound deviation from the standard of true morality. It deprives a portion of humanity of the opportunity to cultivate and express the full range of their capability and to live a meaningful and flourishing life, while blighting the progress of the rest of humankind. It cannot be rooted out by contest and conflict. It must be

supplanted by the establishment of just relationships among individuals, communities, and institutions of society that will uplift all and will not designate anyone as ‘other’. The change required is not merely social and economic, but above all moral and spiritual.

(2020b)

As just two more examples, the following passages from the letters on economic life and climate change, respectively, provide insight into how the teachings of the Faith relate to material progress. In the first case, the letter draws attention to the necessity for a common approach to justice. In the second case, the letter highlights the importance of relying on science:

The stresses emerging out of the long-term process of transition from a divided world to a united one are being felt within international relations as much as in the deepening fractures that affect societies large and small. With prevailing modes of thought found to be badly wanting, the world is in desperate need of a shared ethic, a sure framework for addressing the crises that gather like storm clouds. The vision of Bahá’u’lláh challenges many of the assumptions that are allowed to shape contemporary discourse—for instance, that self-interest, far from needing to be restrained, drives prosperity, and that progress depends upon its expression through relentless competition. To view the worth of an individual chiefly in terms of how much one can accumulate and how many goods one can consume relative to others is wholly alien to Bahá’í thought. But neither are the teachings in sympathy with sweeping dismissals of wealth as inherently distasteful or immoral, and asceticism is prohibited. Wealth must serve humanity. Its use must accord with spiritual principles; systems must be created in their light. And, in Bahá’u’lláh’s memorable words, ‘No light can compare with the light of justice. The establishment of order in the world and the tranquillity of the nations depend upon it’.

(Universal House of Justice 2017a)

Among the Bahá’í teachings are those concerning the importance of science. ‘Great indeed is the claim of scientists . . . on the peoples of the world,’ Bahá’u’lláh observed. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá wrote that the ‘sciences of today are bridges to reality’ and repeatedly emphasized that ‘religion must be in conformity with science and reason.’ . . .

Scientific inquiry into the question of human contributions to global warming has gradually unfolded over a century of investigation and, more recently, with intense scrutiny. While there will naturally be differences of view among individual scientists, there does exist at present a striking degree of agreement among experts in relevant fields about the cause and impact of climate change. Sound scientific results, obtained through the employment of sound scientific methods, produce knowledge that can be acted upon; ultimately, the outcomes of action must stand the test of further scientific inquiry and the objective facts of the physical world.

(2017b)

Finally, it is instructive to draw attention to the ever-flowing encouragement from the Universal House of Justice, which is regularly coupled with its admonitions to be of service to humanity. During the early throes of the coronavirus pandemic, for example, it commends ‘the

resilience and undiminished vitality of the Bahá'í world in the face of a challenge which has no likeness in living memory' and reminds the community:

You draw from stores of hope, faith, and magnanimity, putting the needs of others before your own, enabling those who are deprived to be spiritually nourished, those who increasingly thirst for answers to be satisfied, and those who long to work for the betterment of the world to be offered the means.

(2020a)

The following passage from a letter written to the Bahá'ís of Iran is a similar reminder of how, when confronted by the disintegrative forces of society, Bahá'ís are to be constant contributors to the integrative process, persistently engaging and empowering others as they are. The letter is especially poignant given that it is written to a population that continues to be ceaselessly persecuted for its belief in Bahá'u'lláh.

Reflect upon the destructive forces at work that are destabilizing equilibrium across the face of the globe, including the situation that prevails in your own land. Power is seized and exercised in a manner that twists or obscures the truth to serve the special interests of the few at the expense of the many. Fanaticism is unleashed in the name of religion, such that it distorts human behavior and promotes social strife in a manner that stands in stark contrast to the spiritual qualities and social well-being which the Messengers of God sacrificed themselves to foster. Materialism dulls the human spirit, trapping that bird, which should soar in the heavens, in the mire of self-indulgence and animalistic tendencies. As human beings are buffeted by these forces, they long for truth and that which is right and become impelled to discover a way out of this morass. Inspired by the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh, you stand against such negative forces, you respond to this search for truth, and together with others of like mind you serve the process of the construction of a just and peaceful world. Praised be God that you are engaged in carrying out the admonitions of your Beloved. Continue then with confidence on your path. Challenged by self-serving power, pursue the acquisition of knowledge; in the face of fanaticism, build unity, and combat prejudices of all kinds; in response to enmity and hatred, offer love and show mercy and compassion; rather than surrendering to consumerism, live a selfless life of service and use your resources for the betterment of the world. Consort in fellowship and work with all who strive for these noble aims.

(2014)

Notes

- 1 Much of this section is adapted from content found in the author's article 'Crisis and the Power of an Inclusive Historical Consciousness: Progressing from Delusional Habits to Dynamic Freedom' (Smith 2020); in some places, the wording corresponds to the wording used there. The author is grateful to the editors of *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies* for permission to use this content.
- 2 Recognizing that technology also has deleterious effects on how we relate to one another. One recent example is the upsurge in political smear campaigns propagated on social media.
- 3 In its message to the Peoples of the World (October 1985) discussed later in this chapter, the Universal House of Justice states: 'Whether peace is to be reached only after unimaginable horrors precipitated by humanity's stubborn clinging to old patterns of behavior, or is to be embraced now by an act of consultative will, is the choice before all who inhabit the earth'.

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