

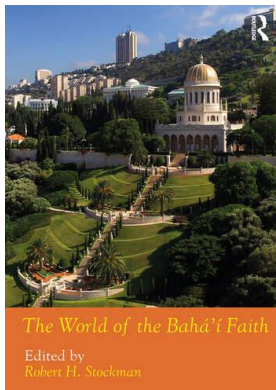
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## **The World of the Bahá'í Faith**

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### **Oneness and Unity**

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## ONENESS AND UNITY

*Robert H. Stockman*

The concepts of oneness and unity are central to understanding the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith. Shoghi Effendi describes the oneness of humankind as the 'pivot round which all the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh revolve' (*World Order of Bahá'u'lláh* 42). Superficially, the concept appears simple and universal; the statement that humans have been created in God's image (Gen. 1:26) is a statement of the oneness of humanity. But for Bahá'ís, the principle of the oneness of humanity includes a concept of the nature of human beings (see the chapter on 'Physical and Spiritual Nature of Human Beings'). Bahá'u'lláh states that

according to what thy Lord, the Lord of all men, hath decreed in His Book, the favors vouchsafed by Him unto mankind have been, and will ever remain, limitless in their range. First and foremost among these favors, which the Almighty hath conferred upon man, is the gift of understanding. His purpose in conferring such a gift is none other except to enable His creature to know and recognize the one true God—exalted be His glory. This gift giveth man the power to discern the truth in all things, leadeth him to that which is right, and helpeth him to discover the secrets of creation.

*(Gleanings XCV)*

In this passage, Bahá'u'lláh emphasizes the supreme importance of reasoning as a human trait, not only for human beings' spiritual development ('to recognize the one true God') but also in all other matters ('to discern the truth in all things').

While the gift of understanding is 'foremost', Bahá'u'lláh notes that on the reality of human beings, God has 'focused the radiance of all of His names and attributes, and made it a mirror of His own Self'. He adds that 'alone of all created things', humanity has 'been singled out for so great a favor, so enduring a bounty' (*Gleanings XXVII*). These capacities—to love, be patient, be compassionate, be just, to listen and be empathetic, to recognize beauty, and many others—exist in us only in potential unless we develop them. As a mirror of the divine, the physical world reflects many of these names and attributes, and through our marriages, families, friends, and communities we have myriad opportunities to perfect these attributes in our souls. When death comes, we cannot take anything physical with us, but we do take our capacities, and we

continue to develop them infinitely in all the worlds of God (see the chapter ‘Progress of the soul: life after death’). Thus personal spiritual development is one purpose of our existence, accomplished through prayer, fasting, daily study of scripture, and our love and worship of God (see chapters on ‘Devotional life,’ ‘Mysticism,’ and ‘Spirituality and Spiritual Practices’).

Our efforts to ‘carry forward an ever advancing civilization’ (Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings* CIX) in concert with others is both an equally important purpose of human life and another means for personal development. In Bahá’u’lláh’s call that we contribute to the advancement of humanity, we see the source of another Bahá’í principle, the obligation of all (women and men) to engage in useful work, and that such work performed in the spirit of service to others is a form of worship (see the chapter ‘Work and business’).

Bahá’u’lláh’s view of humanity rejects the notion of original sin and rather emphasizes that because we potentially can reflect all the attributes and qualities of God, we are noble: ‘Noble have I created thee, yet thou hast abased thyself. Rise then unto that for which thou wast created’ (Arabic Hidden Words no. 20). ‘Abdu’l-Bahá adds that ‘the honor and distinction of the individual consists in this, that he among all the world’s multitudes should become a source of social good’ (*Secret* 2).

### Equality of all people

From this certitude about human spiritual and rational capacities comes the Bahá’í principle of the equality of all races and ethnic groups and of the equality of women and men—for this ability is not concentrated in a particular group (see the chapters on ‘Diversity’ and ‘Equality of the Sexes’). The Bahá’í Writings makes the implication of this oneness clear:

Know ye not why We created you all from the same dust? That no one should exalt himself over the other. Ponder at all times in your hearts how ye were created. Since We have created you all from one same substance it is incumbent on you to be even as one soul, to walk with the same feet, eat with the same mouth and dwell in the same land, that from your inmost being, by your deeds and actions, the signs of oneness and the essence of detachment may be made manifest.

(Bahá’u’lláh, Arabic Hidden Words no. 68)

‘Abdu’l-Bahá further elaborated on this principle in His talks. Regarding the diversity of race, He stated at Howard University in April 1912:

I see white and black sitting together. There are no whites and blacks before God. All colors are one, and that is the color of servitude to God. Scent and color are not important. The heart is important. If the heart is pure, white or black or any color makes no difference. God does not look at colors; He looks at the hearts. He whose heart is pure is better. . . . In the vegetable kingdom the colors of multicolored flowers are not the cause of discord. Rather, colors are the cause of the adornment of the garden because a single color has no appeal; but when you observe many-colored flowers, there is charm and display.

The world of humanity, too, is like a garden, and humankind are like the many-colored flowers. Therefore, different colors constitute an adornment. . . . Animals, despite the fact that they lack reason and understanding, do not make colors the cause of conflict. Why should man, who has reason, create conflict?

This is wholly unworthy of him. Especially white and black are the descendants of the same Adam; they belong to one household. In origin they were one; they were the same color.

(Promulgation 44–45)

He also emphasized equality of men and women in His talk to the Federation of Women's Clubs in Chicago in May 1912:

The truth is that all mankind are the creatures and servants of one God, and in His estimate all are human. *Man* is a generic term applying to all humanity. The biblical statement 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness' does not mean that woman was not created. The image and likeness of God apply to her as well. . . .

To accept and observe a distinction which God has not intended in creation is ignorance and superstition. The fact which is to be considered, however, is that woman, having formerly been deprived, must now be allowed equal opportunities with man for education and training. There must be no difference in their education. Until the reality of equality between man and woman is fully established and attained, the highest social development of mankind is not possible.

(Promulgation 76)

In His talks, 'Abdu'l-Bahá often describes men and women as being like two wings of a bird, which must be equal in strength for the bird to fly (*Selections* 302). At a time when women did not have the vote in most of North American or Europe, 'Abdu'l-Bahá called for women's suffrage.

### Independent investigation of truth and education

Another consequence of the Bahá'í understanding of the nature of human beings is the certitude that humans have a basic capacity to investigate reality; this is referred to as the principle of independent investigation of truth. Because it is unjust that some people have access to basic opportunities to develop their physical, mental, and spiritual capacities while others do not, Bahá'u'lláh strongly emphasizes the importance of universal education. He says human beings are 'a mine rich in gems of inestimable value. Education can, alone, cause it to reveal its treasures, and enable mankind to benefit therefrom' (*Gleanings* CXXII) (see chapter on 'Education'). 'Abdu'l-Bahá describes the promotion of education as the 'primary, the most urgent requirement' for a country (*Secret*, 109). He notes that there are three kinds of education: material, human, and spiritual:

Material education aims at the growth and development of the body, and consists in securing its sustenance and obtaining the means of its ease and comfort. This education is common to both man and animal.

Human education, however, consists in civilization and progress, that is, sound governance, social order, human welfare, commerce and industry, arts and sciences, momentous discoveries, and great undertakings, which are the central features distinguishing man from the animal.

As to divine education, it is the education of the Kingdom and consists in acquiring divine perfections. This is indeed true education; for by its virtue man becomes the focal centre of divine blessings and the embodiment of the verse 'Let Us make man in

Our image, and after Our likeness' [Gen. 1:26]. This is the ultimate goal of the world of humanity.

(*Some Answered Questions*, no. 3)

Parents, especially mothers, have the primary (but not exclusive) responsibility for the spiritual education and training of small children. If parents are unable to afford to educate their children, the government should cover the cost. If they can afford to educate only some of their children, they should favour the education of girls over boys because they are the first educators of the next generation, but the curriculum for boys and girls should be the same. If Bahá'í institutions open schools, they should be available to all, regardless of their religion and economic class.

### The earth is one country

Bahá'u'lláh emphasizes that 'the light of men is Justice. Quench it not with the contrary winds of oppression and tyranny. The purpose of justice is the appearance of unity amongst men' (Words of Paradise, in *Tablets* 66–67). Unity is not possible when injustices fester in society. Many social principles in the Bahá'í Writings address the causes of injustice and inequality, such as the need for vocational training, fair compensation for work, a progressive income tax, a minimum income for the poor, socially supported health care, the Ḥuqúqu'lláh (a Bahá'í form of tithing), and a just government that includes consultation with the people.

The Bahá'í Writings advocate a world governing system to maintain peace and devise international legal and economic standards, promulgate an international system of weights and measures, establish a world currency, and support an international auxiliary language to supplement local languages (see the chapters on 'Economics' and 'Governance'). In its statement *The Promise of World Peace*, the Universal House of Justice notes that world order 'can be founded only on the unshakable consciousness of the oneness of mankind' and this 'spiritual principle' should be 'universally proclaimed, taught in schools, and constantly asserted in every nation as preparation for the organic change in society which it implies' (1985, 28–29). In another statement, they add:

Humanity's crying need will not be met by a struggle among competing ambitions or by protest against one or another of the countless wrongs afflicting a desperate age. It calls, rather, for a fundamental change of consciousness, for a wholehearted embrace of Bahá'u'lláh's teaching that the time has come when each human being on earth must learn to accept responsibility for the welfare of the entire human family.

(Universal House of Justice 2001)

Bahá'u'lláh advocates an environmental ethic that recognizes that

every created thing in the whole universe is but a door leading into His knowledge, a sign of His sovereignty, a revelation of His names, a symbol of His majesty, a token of His power, a means of admittance into the straight Path.

(*Gleanings* LXXXII)

Additionally, every man of discernment,

while walking upon the earth, feeleth indeed abashed, inasmuch as he is fully aware that the thing which is the source of his prosperity, his wealth, his exaltation

and power is, as ordained by God, the very earth which is trodden beneath the feet of men.

(Epistle to the Son of the Wolf, 44)

Thus, humanity needs to preserve nature and the environment, both for our spiritual education and for our material prosperity (see the chapter on ‘Environment and sustainability’).

‘Abdu’l-Bahá states that the purpose of Bahá’u’lláh’s life and the reason He endured enormous hardships was to ensure that ‘the oneness of humankind become a reality, strife and warfare cease and peace and tranquility be realized by all’ (*Promulgation* 145). Shoghi Effendi describes the Faith’s ‘watchword’ alternately as ‘unity’ and ‘unity in diversity’ (*Messages to America* 27; *World Order of Bahá’u’lláh* 42).

### Unity as process

The Bahá’í Writings describe unity not as a static accomplishment but as an ongoing process with various levels or stages. The ultimate, idealized form of unity is expressed in the metaphor that the Bahá’ís should be ‘one soul in many bodies’ (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, in Shoghi Effendi, *Light of Divine Guidance*, 2:50). This form of spiritual unity is rarely achieved in practice. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá describes it in these words:

Another unity is the spiritual unity which emanates from the breaths of the Holy Spirit. . . . Human unity or solidarity may be likened to the body, whereas unity from the breaths of the Holy Spirit is the spirit animating the body. This is a perfect unity. It creates such a condition in mankind that each one will make sacrifices for the other, and the utmost desire will be to forfeit life and all that pertains to it in behalf of another’s good. This is the unity which existed among the disciples of Jesus Christ and bound together the Prophets and holy Souls of the past. It is the unity which through the influence of the divine spirit is permeating the Bahá’ís so that each offers his life for the other and strives with all sincerity to attain his good pleasure.

(*Promulgation* 191–92)

Spiritual unity is a goal behind many efforts of Bahá’ís. Almost every Bahá’í event starts with prayers from the Bahá’í scriptures in order to establish a spiritual atmosphere and invoke a spiritual dynamic that allows the gathering to achieve its true purpose. The creation of spiritual unity is a principal purpose of the Nineteen-Day Feast, the monthly Bahá’í community gathering for worship, consultation, and socializing. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá composed a prayer to use at the start of meetings of Spiritual Assemblies (local or national Bahá’í coordinating councils) that asks that ‘our thoughts, our views, our feelings may become as one reality, manifesting the spirit of union throughout the world’ (*Bahá’í Prayers* 138), a prayer designed to foster spiritual unity. Spiritual unity is also a goal of Bahá’í conventions, where Spiritual Assemblies are elected. Many Bahá’í prayer books contain a section titled ‘meetings’ filled with prayers that seek, in their poetic language and the divine power they invoke, to create spiritual unity.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá contrasted ‘spiritual unity’ with a lesser form, ‘human unity’, a practical and collaborative unity. Bahá’u’lláh offers a pragmatic metaphor for it: ‘be ye as the fingers of one hand, the members of one body’ (*Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, para. 58). A hand needs fingers in order to function; a body depends on the complementary efforts of its organs. Spiritual unity, however, need not be achieved for unity in action to be possible. While spiritual unity is the ideal, a

lower level of unity is adequate to work together and may be a stage on the path to creating spiritual unity. Efforts to work together are emphasized and highly praised in the Bahá'í authoritative texts.

### Consultation

The Bahá'í authoritative texts contain a mechanism for fostering unity called *consultation* (q.v.). It is premised on the oneness and equality of all human beings, the innate capacity of individuals to investigate truth, and the need to investigate reality collectively and arrive at consensus. The concept (*shúrá* in Arabic) is Qur'anic (42:38), but Bahá'u'lláh emphasized it ('in all things it is necessary to consult') (*Consultation: A Compilation* 3), and 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi elaborated on the ethical principles necessary for it to be efficacious. Consultation is a process based on the expression of virtues:

[T]he prime requisites for them that take counsel together are purity of motive, radiance of spirit, detachment from all else save God, attraction to His Divine Fragrances, humility and lowliness amongst His loved ones, patience and long-suffering in difficulties and servitude to His exalted Threshold.

(‘Abdu'l-Bahá, in *Consultation: A Compilation* 5)

Some of them—such as purity of motive, detachment, and humility—have obvious value in a decision-making context. Others, such as servitude to God, are relevant when one remembers that the ultimate purpose of consultation is to create spiritual unity, not just a practical level of unity. For this reason, Bahá'ís often pray before they begin consulting or stop to pray if the atmosphere in the room has become unfavourable to proper consultation.

Consultation cannot succeed without ‘absolute freedom’ to express one’s opinions. It must be based on respect for and trust in the participants. Although ‘no occasion for ill-feeling and discord’ should arise, and one should ‘on no account feel hurt’, disagreement is not prohibited; indeed, ‘the shining spark of truth cometh forth only after the clash of differing opinions’ (‘Abdu'l-Bahá, in *Consultation: A Compilation* 5). Consultation thus calls on individuals to express themselves freely and frankly and to offer differing views without giving or taking offence, a combination that requires great maturity and tact. Consultation also includes detachment from one’s views so that once one offers an idea to the group, it belongs to them and is not an extension of one’s ego.

Since consultation is a process for arriving at truth that involves human beings, it often may be imperfect, and opposing views may not be reconciled: ‘if, after discussion, a decision be carried unanimously, well and good; but if, the Lord forbid, differences of opinion should arise, a majority of voices must prevail’ (‘Abdu'l-Bahá, in *Consultation: A Compilation* 5). In this way, a decision will not be undermined by disunity, which allows the decision to be implemented and the results evaluated impartially for its rightness. Consultation is essential to the effective functioning of the Bahá'í Administrative Order.

### Partisanship and the Bahá'í election process

The effort to build unity is not without setbacks and complications. A distinctive aspect of the Bahá'í concept of unity is the rejection of partisanship. Partisanship implies loyalty to an idea or ideology; a political party or faction; or a national, ethnic, or racial identity that overrides one’s loyalty to humanity or to the totality of Bahá'u'lláh’s revelation. Partisanship is unity with strings

attached, for it exalts loyalty to one group over others. Partisanship is a roadblock to the spiritual unity that is the ultimate goal of Bahá'í social and spiritual processes.

Bahá'u'lláh abolished the institution of clergy and established consultative councils to lead Bahá'í communities. The consultative bodies are elected according to a process that explicitly forbids nominations, campaigning, or even discussion of individuals before an election. A typical Bahá'í election begins with the gathering of the voters together. (Those unable to attend may vote by absentee ballot.) Bahá'í prayers are read to create a spiritual atmosphere of unity. They are often followed by passages from the Bahá'í authoritative texts that stress the qualities or virtues one should consider when deciding privately whom one will vote for. A frequently read passage by Shoghi Effendi advises:

It is incumbent upon the chosen delegates [the voters] to consider without the least trace of passion and prejudice, and irrespective of any material consideration, the names of only those who can best combine the necessary qualities of unquestioned loyalty, of selfless devotion, of a well-trained mind, of recognized ability and mature experience.

*(Bahá'í Administration, 88)*

After passages such as this one are read, absolute silence falls over the room. Each voter prays silently, meditates about the various choices that come to mind, and votes. In some cases, a list of all adult Bahá'ís eligible to vote and thus also be voted for is available. The ballots are then collected and counted by tellers. Since only a plurality (those with the most votes), rather than a majority (50 percent plus one) is needed, one round of voting is adequate for electing a Bahá'í governing body, unless a tie needs to be broken. If the tie is between two persons, one of whom is a minority, the tie is automatically broken in favour of the minority member.

The Bahá'í authoritative texts give two reasons for avoiding the practice of nomination (and campaigning, which it implies). The first is that it is 'in fundamental disaccord with the spirit which should animate and direct all elections held by Bahá'ís' because it 'leads to the formation of parties' and produces 'corruption and partisanship' (on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, in *Light of Divine Guidance* 1: 67–68). The second is that it kills 'in the believer the spirit of initiative and of self-development', prevents 'the development in every believer of the spirit of responsibility', and limits the possibility of 'maintaining fully his freedom in the elections' (idem). The Bahá'í Faith thus protects the individual's right to vote according to his or her conscience, views the process of nominating as a fundamental infringement of that right, and seeks to make the election process another opportunity for personal spiritual development. Elections are not a secular act or a convenient habit imported from outside society, but a spiritual and sacred act central to the building of community.

Because Bahá'í elections involve a prayerful process that occurs without any mentioning of names or campaigning, there is no discussion of issues. In such an environment, no opportunities to express partisanship exist. Those elected, not having made any promises to the voters, are free from the need to represent a constituency or a particular platform and thus are not bound to support certain ideas and oppose others. They are considered responsible to God for their decisions, further weakening any sense of partisanship. They should

approach their task with extreme humility, and endeavor, by their open-mindedness, their high sense of justice and duty, their candor, their modesty, their entire devotion to the welfare and interests of the friends [the Bahá'ís], the Cause, and humanity, to win, not only the confidence and the genuine support and respect of those whom they serve, but also their esteem and real affection. They must, at all times, avoid the spirit of



exclusiveness, the atmosphere of secrecy, free themselves from a domineering attitude, and banish all forms of prejudice and passion from their deliberations. They should, within the limits of wise discretion, take the friends into their confidence, acquaint them with their plans, share with them their problems and anxieties, and seek their advice and counsel.

(Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá'í Administration* 64)

The consultation process itself serves as another obstacle to partisanship because of the important principle of nonadvocacy of one's ideas and recommendations. According to this principle, once one mentions an idea, it then belongs to the group; one can clarify it or elaborate on it but cannot advocate for it; indeed, one is free to speak against it.

### **Covenant and infallibility**

The goal of Bahá'í elections is to produce mature and capable consultative bodies at the local, national, and international levels. As the chapters on the Covenant and on the Universal House of Justice make clear, the Bahá'í authoritative texts state clearly that the Universal House of Justice, the supreme governing council of the Faith, is guaranteed divine guidance in its decisions. As a result, if a Bahá'í disagrees with a decision of the House of Justice, it represents more than a dilemma of conscience; it is also a dilemma of faith. If a Bahá'í is unable to resolve the dilemma, a logical consequence would be to re-evaluate his or her membership in the Bahá'í community and possibly to withdraw from it, on the grounds that the person no longer believes Bahá'u'lláh's claim to infallible divine revelation. Withdrawal from membership in the Bahá'í community is a right all Bahá'ís retain. If, on the other hand, a Bahá'í chooses to lobby against or undermine a decision of the House of Justice, such an effort may become partisan, a violation of Bahá'í principle that requires a response by the Bahá'í institutions. The most common response—after consultation with the individual has been attempted—is to sanction him or her in some way. Bahá'ís have various privileges of membership—the right to vote, to be voted for, to donate money to the Bahá'í Faith, to serve on Bahá'í institutions and their committees, and to attend the Nineteen-Day Feast—that can be suspended temporarily or indefinitely. Such rights are restored once the cause for their suspension is resolved. In rare circumstances, the Universal House of Justice has removed individuals from membership in the Bahá'í community. If the person continues to claim to be a Bahá'í but begins to work against the Bahá'í community and its administration, the person may be declared a Covenant-breaker (see the chapter on Covenant and Covenant-breaking).

To many it will seem ironic that, to maintain its unity, the Bahá'í Faith has a mechanism to expel members. But the Bahá'í Faith recognizes that any effort to raise up a community of people seeking spiritual transformation will have uneven results. No community or society can exist without establishing boundaries defining unacceptable individual behaviour—otherwise chaos or injustice would ensue—and boundaries cannot be maintained without specifying consequences for their transgression. Most religious groups have found it necessary to discipline clergy for violations of ethical norms; many denominations in the United States discipline members as well.

### **The Bahá'í faith and secular partisan politics**

The Bahá'í approach to unity has major implications for its approach toward the governance of secular society (see the chapter on governance). The modern democratic nation state is

founded on the assumption that powers must be divided: different powers are given to different branches, which exist to keep each other in check; often, within branches, groups compete for dominance, thereby keeping each other in check. The Bahá'í rejection of partisanship is also a rejection of the notion that disunity must be used to control ambition and greed. Indeed, the Bahá'í system turns the equation around; it views partisanship as a common cause of ambition and greed and seeks to control them through consultation, elimination of campaigning, and creation of a virtue-centred community. Political parties are not compatible with the Bahá'í approach to unity. Consequently, Bahá'ís are forbidden to join political parties on the grounds that they exist to promote themselves at the expense of other political factions and that their platforms usually contradict one Bahá'í principle or another. Bahá'ís and Bahá'í organizations are also forbidden to become involved in partisan politics, to campaign for candidates or parties, or to make campaign contributions.

Many individual Bahá'ís have channelled their efforts to serve humanity into nonpartisan avenues, and both national and international Bahá'í institutions have gained experience in working with governments in ways that avoid partisanship. For example, every resolution condemning the persecution of Iran's Bahá'ís that the United States Congress has passed since 1982 has had bipartisan sponsorship and support. Subsequently, the United States National Spiritual Assembly has worked with other national organizations to achieve bipartisan support in Congress for ratification of United Nations human rights treaties designed to establish international standards against genocide and torture and to abolish discrimination against minorities, women, and children.

### **Constructive action for social change**

The Bahá'í insistence on the principle of unity also determines the ways Bahá'ís can work for social change. Unity cannot exist in a society without the rule of law; hence, the Bahá'í authoritative texts require Bahá'ís to respect and obey the governments and laws under which they live. Their obedience even extends to disbanding Bahá'í institutions voluntarily and suspending Bahá'í community activities if they are banned by the government. The exception is any government law requiring Bahá'ís to renounce or deny their religion, for such a law moves beyond the sphere of personal action and into the sphere of personal faith, over which the individual and the government have no control.

Bahá'ís can participate in efforts to bring about change in wider society as long as they do not break the law. The techniques of nonviolent civil disobedience—that is, those that break the law—as effective as they have been to bring about significant changes in social structure, are themselves possible only because changes in society over the last few hundred years have created conditions (a free press, democracy, public opinion) that make them effective. Nonviolent civil disobedience thus reflects a new level of maturation of human society. But because it perpetuates disunity to bring about social reform, its ultimate efficacy is limited. Instead, Bahá'ís support social change through a variety of constructive means, such as personal example, participation in legal marches and rallies to educate the public, and involvement in public discourse about social issues where Bahá'í teachings are relevant (see the chapter on 'Constructive Agency'). The primary way Bahá'ís seek to bring about lasting social change is through their core activities, especially home devotional meetings and classes for children, junior youth (aged 11–14), youth, and adults. The purposes of this spiritual and educational process is to teach and reinforce virtues, establish the habit of consultation, create an understanding of the implications of oneness and unity, and empower people to work together to change their lives and their neighbourhoods (see the chapter on 'Culture of Learning').

## Conclusion

As Shoghi Effendi notes, the Bahá'í principle of the oneness of humanity 'is no mere outburst of ignorant emotionalism or an expression of vague and pious hope' (*World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, 43). Rather, it is an ethical imperative with an elaborate set of implications. It rejects splitting human beings into unequal divisions based on race, gender, education, class, or citizenship. It implies access to education for all. It implies that all must have a voice in the deliberations of society. It offers a mechanism—consultation—and the requisite values to bring about a consultative society.

Unity as a principle does not imply that humans are naturally united or that efforts to undermine unity will not exist or can be ignored. Instead, it implies the need for mechanisms to build and maintain unity. Elections that protect the right of the individual to vote his or her conscience and that prevent the creation of partisanship are central mechanisms for creating unity; indeed, for Bahá'ís they are a sacred mechanism. Because unity in wider society is a goal, Bahá'í involvement in partisan politics is forbidden.

In order to protect humanity from egotism and the disunity it can create, Bahá'u'lláh created a Covenant whereby some of the authority given to Him by God has been delegated to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Shoghi Effendi, and the Universal House of Justice. So clear and unambiguous is this chain of authority that efforts to thwart it have been few and historically have been spectacularly unsuccessful. 'Abdu'l-Bahá once noted that 'the pivot of the oneness of mankind is nothing else but the power of the Covenant' (in Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, 238). It is the power of the Covenant, Bahá'ís believe, that will guarantee their unity. Bahá'ís are actively involved in efforts to educate people about oneness and its ethical imperatives and thereby make possible a unified civilization embracing all of humanity.

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