

## Scientific and Spiritual Dimensions of Climate Change

### Unit 9 - Reasons for Hope

#### Part 2

### Hope in a World of Turmoil - a Bahá'í Perspective

*This reading is written from a Bahá'í perspective using the specific language appropriate in a Bahá'í context, while the reading in Unit 9 "The Role of Religious Communities" reflects the spirit of public discourse and may be more suitable for groups from other faiths.*

#### **Section 1: What do the Bahá'í teachings say about the current global crisis?**

As we now know, the prospects for the future are dire. Is humanity doomed?

The Bahá'í teachings interpret the "end of times" and the apocalypse as having spiritual and not physical significance. There doesn't seem to be any indication in the Bahá'í Writings that human civilization will not survive and prosper. To the contrary, Bahá'u'lláh said that the Bahá'í era alone will last about 500,000 years. When talking about humanity, Shoghi Effendi, the Guardian of the Baha'i Faith, said:

*Its present state, indeed even its immediate future, is dark, distressingly dark. Its distant future, however, is radiant, gloriously radiant—so radiant that no eye can visualize it.<sup>1</sup>*

Shoghi Effendi elaborated on humanity's plight in a letter written in 1936:

*Much suffering will still be required ere the contending nations, creeds, classes and races of mankind are fused in the crucible of universal affliction, and are forged by the fires of a fierce ordeal into one organic commonwealth, one vast, unified, and harmoniously functioning system. Adversities unimaginably appalling, undreamed of crises and upheavals, war, famine, and pestilence, might well combine to engrave in the soul of an unheeding generation those truths and principles which it has disdained to recognize and follow. A paralysis more painful than any it has yet experienced must creep over and further afflict the fabric of a broken society ere it can be rebuilt and regenerated.<sup>2</sup>*

Today, the paralysis and apathy are painfully apparent to everyone aware of the reality of the state of the world. Climate change would certainly qualify as an "undreamed of crisis". In fact, it becomes increasingly clear that other social and environmental crises will converge with the impacts of climate change to a "most

great crisis". The UK Chief Scientist warned already in 2009 that the world faces a 'perfect storm' of problems in 2030 as food, energy and water shortages interact with climate change to produce public unrest, cross-border conflicts and mass migrations.<sup>3</sup>

It seems that the Bahá'í teachings are promising a glorious distant future, but severe crises in the present and near future. 'Abdu'l-Bahá said:

*Chaos and confusion are daily increasing in the world. They will attain such intensity as to render the frame of mankind unable to bear them. Then will men be awakened and become aware that religion is the impregnable stronghold and the manifest light of the world, and its laws, exhortations and teachings the source of life on earth.*<sup>4</sup>

Bahá'u'lláh wrote quite explicitly about this:

*The world is in travail and its agitation waxeth day by day. Its face is turned towards waywardness and unbelief. Such shall be its plight that to disclose it now would not be meet and seemly. Its perversity will long continue. And when the appointed hour is come, there shall suddenly appear that which shall cause the limbs of mankind to quake. Then and only then will the Divine Standard be unfurled and the Nightingale of Paradise warble its melody.*<sup>5</sup>

In the quotation cited further above, 'Abdu'l-Bahá said that the intensity of the crisis ahead will cause humanity to become aware that "religion is the impregnable stronghold and the manifest light of the world, and its laws, exhortations and teachings the source of life on earth." The words of Bahá'u'lláh above confirm that these severe tests will be the prerequisite for the unfurling of the "Divine Standard" and the warbling of the melody of "the Nightingale of Paradise", symbolic language for the implementation of Divine revelation.

Humanity is in an "adolescent phase" of development in which it takes and does whatever it pleases, for example extracting resources without moderation and being wasteful with them, and polluting without considering the consequences etc. Humanity may not grow up and change until it is confronted by tests which provide a rude awakening that opens people's eyes.

The Universal House of Justice explained that there are two processes taking place in our world today:

*[We] see in the revolutionary changes taking place in every sphere of life the interaction of two fundamental processes. One is destructive in nature, while the other is integrative; both serve to carry humanity, each in its own way, along the path leading towards its full maturity. The operation of the former is everywhere apparent—in the vicissitudes that have afflicted time-honoured institutions, in the impotence of leaders at all levels to mend the fractures appearing in the structure of society, in the dismantling of social norms that have long held in check unseemly passions, and in the despondency and indifference exhibited not only by individuals but*

*also by entire societies that have lost any vital sense of purpose. Though devastating in their effects, the forces of disintegration tend to sweep away barriers that block humanity's progress, opening space for the process of integration to draw diverse groups together and disclosing new opportunities for cooperation and collaboration.... [The] forces associated with the process of integration... will continue to gain in strength, no matter how bleak the immediate horizons. Human affairs will be utterly reorganized, and an era of universal peace inaugurated.<sup>6</sup>*

In another letter, the Universal House of Justice elaborates more on the process of integration:

*Penetrating, indeed, is Shoghi Effendi's depiction of the process of disintegration accelerating in the world. Equally striking is the accuracy with which he analyzed the forces associated with the process of integration. He spoke of a "gradual diffusion of the spirit of world solidarity which is spontaneously arising out of the welter of a disorganized society" as an indirect manifestation of Bahá'u'lláh's conception of the principle of the oneness of humankind. This spirit of solidarity has continued to spread over the decades, and today its effect is apparent in a range of developments, from the rejection of deeply ingrained racial prejudices to the dawning consciousness of world citizenship, from heightened environmental awareness to collaborative efforts in the promotion of public health, from the concern for human rights to the systematic pursuit of universal education, from the establishment of interfaith activities to the efflorescence of hundreds of thousands of local, national and international organizations engaged in some form of social action.<sup>7</sup>*

Shoghi Effendi shed light on the underlying purpose of this world-wide crisis:

*The crisis that exists in the world is... serving a great purpose. It is broadening the outlook of man, teaching him to think internationally, forcing him to take into consideration the welfare of his neighbours if he wishes to improve his own condition...<sup>8</sup>*

The good news is that, as the Divine Physician for our age, Bahá'u'lláh revealed the remedy to this unprecedented crisis in human history. Let us contemplate His reassuring words:

*These are not days of prosperity and triumph. The whole of mankind is in the grip of manifold ills. Strive, therefore, to save its life through the wholesome medicine which the almighty hand of the unerring Physician hath prepared.<sup>9</sup>*

*That which is conducive to the regeneration of the world and the salvation of the peoples and kindreds of the earth hath been sent down from the heaven of the utterance of Him Who is the Desire of the world.<sup>10</sup>*

*Each one of the ordinances We have revealed is a mighty stronghold for the preservation of the world of being.<sup>11</sup>*

## **Section 2: The Challenge for the Bahá'í Community**

In his book “Down to the Wire – Confronting Climate Collapse”, David Orr deplores the fact that “we are entering the opening years of difficult times with no adequate political framework or philosophy. We need whole new institutions, new ways of doing business, and new ways of governing”.<sup>12</sup>

But there *is* an alternative. The world order of Bahá'u'lláh provides a design for new institutions and new ways of governing as well as for new patterns of living. The world-wide Bahá'í community functions within the framework of an administrative order that could be considered a template for a future world order. Bahá'ís are in the process of learning to implement its various components. The distinguishing features of this new world order are its spiritual foundation: the consultative process and participatory method of decision-making, the emphasis on using reason and science as well as religion as complementary knowledge systems in our quest for truth, the vision of humankind as one family with the implication of considering the “well-being of all of humankind” in our actions and policy-making, the absence of individuals wielding power, and the absence of the power of money.

As the world-wide Bahá'í community is developing these features and implements them – including with their expression in environmentally responsible actions - our globally united, but diverse community will radiate the spiritual truth of the revelation of Bahá'u'lláh and become a worthy model for a future world order.

The Bahá'í teachings guide us all toward a very lofty goal. It may be helpful to bear in mind that Bahá'ís are just ordinary human beings and not more endowed than their fellow humans. We are still at an embryonic stage both in our individual and community development. We are part of a young growing spiritual global community and at the same time part of a decaying old world order. Again, we can find guidance in the words of Shoghi Effendi:

*In such a process of purgation, when all humanity is in the throes of dire suffering, the Bahá'ís should not hope to remain unaffected. Should we consider the beam that is in our own eye, we would immediately find that these sufferings are also meant for ourselves, who claimed to have attained. Such world crisis is necessary to awaken us to the importance of our duty and the carrying on of our task...*<sup>13</sup>

As the young Bahá'í community is maturing, it will embrace environmentally sustainable and socially just practices on a larger scale, applying principles of moderation in material civilization. This will contribute to not only its own spiritual integrity, but also to creating a new spiritual global civilization and world order. Much effort will need to go into environmental education of the Bahá'í community and local neighborhoods to raise the awareness of the direct relationship of spiritual beliefs to everyday actions such as eating, shopping, using energy, cleaning, transportation, housing, building, etc. as well as to our social responsibility as world citizens to work for a just transition to sustainability.

### Section 3: The Hopeful Vision of a New Spiritual World Order

Many people who write realistically about climate change, try to end their article, book, or presentation on a positive note by speaking about hope. The intention is excellent because if there is no hope, why should we work for change? However, their hope is generally not based on more than the word itself which does not give us any reassurance in the face of the impending climate chaos. But the vision of Bahá'u'lláh's spiritual world order with all its teachings answers the problem of how to approach the climate crisis. This vision can fill us with faith and assurance that humankind will not just survive, but thrive, and create a just and environmentally sustainable world community. All of us have a small part to play in that great plan of God.

The Bahá'í Writings can give us real hope:

*I truly am God, there is none other God but Me. I am He Who, from everlasting, hath been the Source of all sovereignty and power, He Who shall continue, throughout eternity, to exercise His kingship **and to extend His protection unto all created things**. My proof is the greatness of My might and My sovereignty that **embraceth the whole of creation**...*

*Wherefore, be thankful to God, for having strengthened thee to aid His Cause, for having made the flowers of knowledge and understanding to spring forth in the garden of thine heart. Thus hath His grace encompassed thee, **and encompassed the whole of creation**. Beware, **lest thou allow anything whatsoever to grieve thee**. Rid thyself of all attachment to the vain allusions of men, and cast behind thy back the idle and subtle disputations of them that are veiled from God. Proclaim, then, that which the Most Great Spirit will inspire thee to utter in the service of the Cause of thy Lord, that thou mayest stir up the souls of all men and incline their hearts unto this most blessed and all-glorious Court....*

*That which beseemeth you is the love of God, and the love of Him Who is the Manifestation of His Essence, and the observance of whatsoever He chooseth to prescribe unto you, did ye but know it.<sup>14</sup>*

And when confronted with the severe crises coming upon us, we can be reassured by these words of 'Abdu'l-Bahá:

*I say unto you that anyone who will rise up in the Cause of God at this time shall be filled with the spirit of God, and that He will send His hosts from heaven to help you, and that nothing shall be impossible to you if you have faith. And now I give you a commandment which shall be for a Covenant between you and me: that ye have faith; that your faith be steadfast as a rock that no storms can move, that nothing can disturb, and that it endure through all things even to the end; even should ye hear that your Lord has been crucified, be not shaken in your faith; for I am with you always, whether living or dead; I am with you to the end. As ye have faith so shall your powers and blessings be. This is the standard -- this is the standard -- this is the standard.<sup>15</sup>*

We also have the guidance of the Universal House of Justice on what we should focus on:

*... the believers should understand that a catastrophic breakdown of human society as a result of mankind's ignoring His Message has been clearly foretold by Bahá'u'lláh, and that we are, indeed, in the midst of such a breakdown. The main concern of the Bahá'ís should be, not how to preserve themselves physically, but how to seize the opportunities that these conditions present to convey the healing teachings of the Faith to their fellow-citizens.*

*The rising level of concern at this time may well be one of the keys that will assist the friends to open the eyes of the peoples of Europe to the true nature of their predicament and to win their allegiance to the Cause of God.<sup>16</sup>*

*Bahá'ís must be careful not to be swept up in a spiral of fear and darkness engendered by prevailing conditions but, rather, devote their energies to building up a new world and promoting an environment of serenity and courage. An avenue for thoughtful believers who, as well-wishers of humanity, desire to offer a different perspective on the changes affecting their societies is through participation in relevant discourses in the various social spaces in which they are involved. Of course, in so doing, it is important that the friends steer away from becoming entangled in the political dimensions of any particular issue and instead strive to uplift people's vision by calling attention to the root causes of the issues at hand and the principles of the Faith that address them. In sharing insights from the Bahá'í teachings, the friends can indeed become a beacon of hope so that those who are experiencing the inevitable breakdown of the lamentably defective old world order can at the same time gain understanding and draw inspiration from the teachings for the building of a new world order.<sup>17</sup>*

The Divine plan is revealed. Guidance by the Writings and the Universal House of Justice is provided. The call to action was raised by Bahá'u'lláh Himself and repeated by the Universal House of Justice. How can we hesitate?

## REFERENCES

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- <sup>1</sup> Shoghi Effendi, *The Promised Day Is Come*, p. 116
- <sup>2</sup> Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 193
- <sup>3</sup> Sample, Ian. 2009. World faces 'perfect storm' of problems by 2030, chief scientist to warn. guardian.co.uk, 18 March 2009.  
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/science/2009/mar/18/perfect-storm-john-beddington-energy-food-climate>
- <sup>4</sup> *Peace*, Compiled by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice, Bahá'í World Centre, August 1985
- <sup>5</sup> *Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah*, LXI
- <sup>6</sup> Universal House of Justice, To the Baha'is of Iran, 2 March 2013 para. 4
- <sup>7</sup> Ridván 2006 – To the Bahá'ís of the World, [www.bahai.org/r/231809720](http://www.bahai.org/r/231809720)
- <sup>8</sup> From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, February 3, 1932, #436: [https://bahai.works/Lights\\_of\\_Guidance/Calamities\\_and\\_Crisis](https://bahai.works/Lights_of_Guidance/Calamities_and_Crisis)
- <sup>9</sup> *Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah*, XXXIV, p. 80
- <sup>10</sup> KITÁB-I-'AHD (Book of the Covenant), p. 223 <http://reference.bahai.org/en/t/b/TB/tb-16.html#pg223>
- <sup>11</sup> Ninth Leaf of Kalimat-i-Firdawsiiyih (Words of Paradise), Tablets of Baha'u'llah, p. 69
- <sup>12</sup> *“Down to the Wire – Confronting Climate Collapse”*, David Orr, p. 55
- <sup>13</sup> From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer in reply to a letter dated October 14, 1931: Bahá'í News, No. 58, January 1932, p. 1
- <sup>14</sup> *Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah* CXXXIX, p. 302 - 305
- <sup>15</sup> 'Abdu'l-Baha, *Baha'i Scriptures*, p. 503
- <sup>16</sup> From a communication dated 20 February 1984 written by the Universal House of Justice to the International Teaching Centre, In INTERNATIONAL TEACHING CENTRE WORLD CENTRE OF THE BAHÁ'Í FAITH, 1 July 1984
- <sup>17</sup> Universal House of Justice, 3 December 2020, letter to an individual