

Apocalyptic Thinking and Process Thinking: A Bahá'í Contribution to Religious Thought

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The key feature of classical religious apocalyptic thinking is that affairs are static until they are suddenly moved from one state to another by God. Thus the change in affairs is sudden and immediate and it is supernaturally directed and actioned. Human beings are passive participants in this in that although the change usually affects them they play no part in bringing the change about. The Báb and Bahá'u'lláh initiated a change in this type of religious thinking. They initiated the idea that religious change is a process not a jump from one state to another and that it is to be brought about through human effort and not by a magical Divine intervention. In this paper, this change in religious thinking will be examined in relation to Bahá'í expectations of the peace, about which there was a great deal of apocalyptic thinking in the years prior to 2000. The main features that are a precondition or accompaniment of peace as described in the Bahá'í texts are listed and then the extent to which these have come to pass in the course of the twentieth century is considered. From this, a sequence of four stages for the fulfillment of these features is delineated. It is furthermore suggested that all of these features reached the third stage during the twentieth century. It is therefore for this reason that the Universal House of Justice was able at the close of the 20th century to confirm 'Abdu'l-Bahá's description of this century as the "Century of Light".

There are a number of ways in which the religion initiated by the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh produced a major change in structures of religious thought. One of these is the change from what I will for the purposes of this paper call apocalyptic thinking to process thinking.

In classical religious apocalyptic thinking, affairs are static until they are suddenly moved from one state to another by God. The key features of this then are that the change is sudden and immediate and it is supernaturally directed and actioned. Human beings are passive participants in this in that although the change usually affects them they play no part in bringing the change about. This type of thinking tends to see matters in black-and-white terms and favours the literal and physical interpretation of texts.

The Báb and Bahá'u'lláh initiated a change in this type of religious thinking. They initiated the idea that religious change is a process not a jump from one state to another and that it is to be brought about through human effort and not by a magical Divine intervention. This type of thinking favours the spiritual and metaphorical interpretation of texts and texts to see matters as a rainbow of colours or shades of grey—rather than black-and-white. Thus for example, the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh came to a world that was expecting, as a result of their reading of their scriptures, that the Promised One would arrive and within a short space of time defeat the forces of evil and establish justice throughout the world. After this would come the Day of Judgement or Day of Resurrection. All of these were events that would happen by Divine intervention suddenly and within a short space of time. Humans would for the most part, especially in relation to the events of the Day of Resurrection, be passive participants.

The Báb and Bahá'u'lláh spent much of their ministries and much of their writings with interpreting these religious expectations. They explained that these passages of scripture are metaphorical and spiritual descriptions, not intended to be taken literally. God does not work in this magical interventionist way. The scriptures of the past do write of a Day of God but they also write that a day of God is as one thousand years in human reckoning. The promised saviour will establish his sovereignty and will establish justice in the world but it will be a slow process taking one thousand years. Furthermore, it will be

the actions of human beings that will bring about this transformation. This may be described as a change from static, magical or apocalyptic thinking to process thinking.

However, this change in religious thinking is not just confined to interpretation of the prophecies of the past. It also applies to the vision that the Central Figures of the Bahá'í Faith present about the future direction of the world. While the interpretations of past prophecies have been comparatively easy for the Bahá'í community to accept and internalize, this application of the new way of thinking has been more difficult to adopt when projected forward to future events. In this paper, I want to examine this change of religious thinking by examining an example that demonstrates this.

The Bahá'í Teachings about Peace

One of the main features of the vision of a future society that Bahá'u'lláh brings is that there will be peace. This peace is envisaged as occurring in two stages: The Lesser Peace (which is how Shoghi Effendi translates both *ṣulḥ-i-aṣḡhar* and *ṣulḥ-i akbar*), a political peace brought about by the governments of the world and needing to be enforced; a Greater Peace or Most Great Peace (*ṣulḥ-i a'ẓam*), an enduring more deeply-rooted peace brought about by the widespread acceptance of the Bahá'í teachings. Although many Bahá'ís think of these two as successive events, first the Lesser Peace and then the Most Great Peace, it will appear from the evidence I cite in this paper that the authoritative Bahá'í texts see these two processes as intertwined and evolving together. Among the features and necessary pre-conditions for peace found in the writings of the Central Figures of the Bahá'í Faith it is sometimes not clear whether the feature refers to the Lesser Peace or the Most Great Peace, but since these are concurrently developing and inter-twined processes, the

difference need not concern us here. The following is a list of these features and pre-conditions:

1. The need for a world assembly of leaders and governments that would confer for the purpose of establishing peace. (GWB 249), (ESW30–31), (SDC, 64–5) This would be a feature of the Lesser Peace.
2. The establishment by the world's leaders of arrangements about collective security—an agreement made that if any government later violate any one of the provisions of these treaties, “*all the governments on earth should arise to reduce it to utter submission.*” (GWB 249; ESW 31; SDC 65). This would be a feature of the Lesser Peace.
3. The establishment of the World Commonwealth, Shoghi Effendi says that this ‘momentous and historic step’ will involve the ‘reconstruction of mankind, as the result of the universal recognition of its oneness and wholeness’ (PDC 122).
4. Another key feature of peace described by Shoghi Effendi, is that of ‘some form of a world superstate’ that must needs be ‘be evolved’ (WOB. 40), although this would appear to be more of a feature of the Most Great Peace than of the Lesser Peace.
5. The general features of this world commonwealth and world superstate should include:
 - + “This commonwealth must, as far as we can visualize it, consist of a world legislature, whose members will, as the trustees of the whole of mankind, ultimately control the entire resources of all the component nations, and will enact such laws as shall be required to regulate the life, satisfy the needs and adjust the relationships of all races and peoples.

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- ✦ A world executive, backed by an international Force, will carry out the decisions arrived at, and apply the laws enacted by, this world legislature, and will safeguard the organic unity of the whole commonwealth.
 - ✦ A world tribunal will adjudicate and deliver its compulsory and final verdict in all and any disputes that may arise between the various elements constituting this universal system.
 - ✦ A mechanism of world intercommunication will be devised, embracing the whole planet, freed from national hindrances and restrictions, and functioning with marvellous swiftness and perfect regularity.
 - ✦ A world metropolis will act as the nerve center of a world civilization, the focus towards which the unifying forces of life will converge and from which its energizing influences will radiate.
 - ✦ A world language will either be invented or chosen from among the existing languages and will be taught in the schools of all the federated nations as an auxiliary to their mother tongue.
 - ✦ A world script, a world literature, a uniform and universal system of currency, of weights and measures, will simplify and facilitate intercourse and understanding among the nations and races of mankind.”(WOB 203–4)
6. Among the characteristics of the world society in which this super-state will operate as described by Shoghi Effendi as being:
- ✦ ‘all economic barriers will have been permanently demolished’
 - ✦ ‘the interdependence of Capital and Labour definitely recognized’

- ✦ 'the clamour of religious fanaticism and strife will have been forever stilled'
- ✦ 'the flame of racial animosity will have been finally extinguished'
- ✦ a single code of international law—the product of the considered judgment of the world's federated representatives—shall have as its sanction the instant and coercive intervention of the combined forces of the federated units'
- ✦ 'the fury of a capricious and militant nationalism will have been transmuted into an abiding consciousness of world citizenship' (WOB 41)

7. The presence of peace should allow nations to disarm and reinvest their expenditure on armaments into constructive developmental activities. This principle was first stated by Bahá'u'lláh (TB 165)

To this list should also be added the Seven Candles of Unity that 'Abdu'l-Bahá lists and links to peace:

Hence the unity of all mankind can in this day be achieved. Verily this is none other but one of the wonders of this wondrous age, this glorious century. Of this past ages have been deprived, for this century—the century of light—hath been endowed with unique and unprecedented glory, power and illumination. Hence the miraculous unfolding of a fresh marvel every day. Eventually it will be seen how bright its candles will burn in the assemblage of man.

Behold how its light is now dawning upon the world's darkened horizon.

- ✦ *The first candle is unity in the political realm, the early glimmerings of which can now be discerned.*

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- *The second candle is unity of thought in world undertakings, the consummation of which will ere long be witnessed.*
- *The third candle is unity in freedom which will surely come to pass.*
- *The fourth candle is unity in religion which is the corner-stone of the foundation itself, and which, by the power of God, will be revealed in all its splendour.*
- *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.*
- *The sixth candle is unity of races, making of all that dwell on earth peoples and kindreds of one race.*
- *The seventh candle is unity of language, i.e., the choice of a universal tongue in which all peoples will be instructed and converse.*

Each and every one of these will inevitably come to pass, inasmuch as the power of the Kingdom of God will aid and assist in their realization. (SWAB 32)

In all, from these passages, a list of about 25 points related to the coming of peace can be drawn up.

Bahá'í expectations of the Lesser Peace

It is clear that many Bahá'ís, locked into the older static pattern of religious thought were expecting the Lesser Peace to arrive through a miraculous Divine intervention. From as early as the start of the twentieth century, Bahá'ís were speculating as to the date that it would arrive. One of the first to set a date for the arrival of peace

was Ibrahim Kheiralla, who interpreting a prophecy in Daniel, concluded that peace would come in 1917. Although Kheiralla was discredited and expelled from the Bahá'í community, his idea about the "time of the end" and the dawn of peace occurring in 1917 lived on in the Bahá'í community and was referred to by other Bahá'ís.¹ Even after this date passed, however, the expectation of a sudden advent of world peace continued. The Second World War obviously made some think that this was the calamity that should precede the advent of peace. Some focused on the year 1957, because of their understanding of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's words regarding a prophecy in the Bible, others looked to 1963 as the fulfilment of that same prophecy. The centenary of the proclamation of Bahá'u'lláh to the kings and leaders of the world excited attention because the Universal House of Justice, in referring to this wrote that "the hundred years' respite" has ended and "the struggle between the forces of darkness—man's lower nature—and the rising sun of the Divine teachings which draw him on to his true station, intensifies day by day." (The Universal House of Justice, Messages 1963 to 1986, p. 113). The centenary of the passing of Bahá'u'lláh in 1992 was another occasion when expectations heightened. Up to the year 2000, it was not unusual to find Bahá'ís stating that the Lesser Peace would come by the year 2000.² Evidence of the continuing speculation among Bahá'ís regarding this matter can be found in the need that the Universal House of Justice felt to issue letters trying to play down these expectations among Bahá'ís.³ The significant aspect of these predictions was that those Bahá'ís who were most involved in these speculations usually expected peace to arrive out of thin air, with no human effort required. They were, thus, caught up in what I have named above as an apocalyptic mode of thought.

This mode of apocalyptic thought existed despite the fact that the authoritative Bahá'í texts say something different. What is clear from texts that we have from 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi is

that the coming of the Lesser Peace and the Most Great Peace is a slow evolving process:

Gradually whatsoever is latent in the innermost of this Holy Cycle shall appear and be made manifest, for now is but the beginning of its growth and the dayspring of the revelation of its Signs. Ere the close of this Century and of this Age, it shall be made clear and manifest how wondrous was that Springtide and how heavenly was that Gift! (BA 15–16)

The kingdom of peace, salvation, uprightness, and reconciliation is founded in the invisible world, and it will by degrees become manifest and apparent through the power of the Word of God! (BWF 409)

To the general character, the implications and features of this world commonwealth, destined to emerge, sooner or later, out of the carnage, agony, and havoc of this great world convulsion, I have already referred in my previous communications. Suffice it to say that this consummation will, by its very nature, be a gradual process.... (PDC 122–3)

Peace as a Process

I now propose to show how process thinking has been applied by the Bahá'í leaders to these 25 points related to the coming of peace. When at the end of World War I, Woodrow Wilson drew up his 14 points to be the guiding principles for an enduring peace and established the League of Nations, 'Abdu'l-Bahá is reported by Shoghi Effendi to have declared that these achievements signalled the "*Dawn of the Most Great Peace*". (CF 36). This points to the fact that the developments towards the Lesser Peace and the Most Great Peace are intertwined and occurring together not successively.

Similarly, Shoghi Effendi, writing in 1936, hailed a decision by the League of Nations in October 1935 to sanction Italy for an act of aggression towards Ethiopia as “one of the most distinctive milestones on the long and arduous road that must lead it to its goal, the stage at which the oneness of the whole body of nations will be made the ruling principle of international life.” (WOB 193).

This quotation establishes an important point of principle in this way of thinking about world events. Even though that particular action of the League of Nations was unsuccessful, the important point for Shoghi Effendi was that the principle had been established—for him this was an important step—it would only be a matter of time before the principle would be universally enforced. In other words that things progress by a number of steps: that first a principle is established in one particular case then gradually it becomes more universally acknowledged.

Writing in 1941, and despite being in the midst of World War II, Shoghi Effendi commented on yet further progress along the path towards peace:

The world is, in truth, moving on towards its destiny. The interdependence of the peoples and nations of the earth, whatever the leaders of the divisive forces of the world may say or do, is already an accomplished fact. Its unity in the economic sphere is now understood and recognized. (PDC 200)

This points to another principle that: that there may be what appear to be major reverses at the hands of the “leaders of the divisive forces of the world” but that such reverses are only temporary and may even be necessary steps in the long-term evolving process described in the Bahá'í texts. This fact is more clearly enunciated in the following quotation:

Whatever the present status of the League or the outcome of its historic verdict, whatever the trials and reverses which, in the immediate future, it may have to face and sustain, the fact must be recognized that so important a decision marks one of the most distinctive milestones on the long and arduous road that must lead it to its goal, the stage at which the oneness of the whole body of nations will be made the ruling principle of international life. (WOB 193)

Features of the Processes leading to Peace

We can now look at the various features that are necessary preconditions or accompaniments of the process towards peace and see how far the process leading to this progressed during the twentieth century.

A. The first element of the Lesser Peace that we can look at is the need for a world assembly of leaders and governments that would confer for the purpose of establishing peace. (Bahá'u'lláh GWB 249; 'Abdu'l-Bahá, SDC 64–5)

Now it is clear that the convocation called for by Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá has not occurred but it is equally clear that the establishment of the League of Nations, the United Nations and particularly the round of major summits that occurred in the last decade of the twentieth century, bringing together world leaders to discuss such subjects as sustainable development, the position of women, the environment and particularly the Millennium Summit that brought the world leaders together to review the past and look forward to the future—these are all important advances towards that process.

B. Among the items that the Bahá'í writings state that the world's leaders need to agree about are arrangements about collective security—an agreement made that if any government later violate any

one of the provisions of these treaties, "*all the governments on earth should arise to reduce it to utter submission.*" (SDC 65)

Such arrangements have existed in theory ever since the establishment of the League of Nations. Indeed when in October 1935, the League decided to impose sanctions on Italy over its invasion of Ethiopia, Shoghi Effendi acclaimed this:

For the first time in the history of humanity the system of collective security, foreshadowed by Bahá'u'lláh and explained by 'Abdu'lBahá, has been seriously envisaged, discussed and tested. For the first time in history it has been officially recognized and publicly stated that for this system of collective security to be effectively established strength and elasticity are both essential strength involving the use of an adequate force to ensure the efficacy of the proposed system, and elasticity to enable the machinery that has been devised to meet the legitimate needs and aspirations of its aggrieved upholders. For the first time in human history tentative efforts have been exerted by the nations of the world to assume collective responsibility, and to supplement their verbal pledges by actual preparation for collective action. And again, for the first time in history, a movement of public opinion has manifested itself in support of the verdict which the leaders and representatives of nations have pronounced, and for securing collective action in pursuance of such a decision. (WOB 191192.)

Again the principle was invoked in the United Nations when communist forces invaded Korea just after the second World War. After that however, the world appeared to forget about it until 1992 when Iraq invaded Kuwait and the Gulf War was launched again invoking and re-awakening the awareness of this principle. Now of course the energetic response of the USA was not pure altruism and a sense of

global responsibility on the part of the USA and was much more concerned with protecting its sources of oil, but nevertheless an important principle has been established. The Universal House of Justice in message of Ridván 1991, referred to the importance of this event in the process: "The forces which united the remedial reactions of so many nations to the sudden crisis in this region demonstrated beyond any doubt the necessity of the principle of collective security prescribed by Bahá'u'lláh more than a century ago as a means of resolving conflict. While the international arrangement envisioned by Him for the full application of this principle is far from having been adopted by the rulers of mankind, a long step towards the behaviour outlined for the nations by the Lord of the Age has thus been taken."

The agreement by Indonesia to pull back from its occupation of East Timor in 1999 is another example of this principle gradually coming to the fore.

C. Regarding the establishment of the World Commonwealth, Shoghi Effendi says that this 'momentous and historic step' will involve the 'reconstruction of mankind, as the result of the universal recognition of its oneness and wholeness' (PDC 122). And the Universal House of Justice has stated that "Acceptance of the oneness of mankind is the first fundamental prerequisite for reorganization and administration of the world as one country, the home of humankind. Universal acceptance of this spiritual principle is essential to any successful attempt to establish world peace." (PWP 10)

At first glance, it would appear that the world is a long way away from acknowledging this principle. But if we consider more closely, we can see that enormous strides have been made in this direction during the twentieth century. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide, the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights all mark

major steps forward from the situation earlier in the twentieth century when large parts of the human race were considered inferior and not deserving of any rights by other parts. All these steps have been taken in the last fifty years or so.

D. A third feature of the peace described by Shoghi Effendi, is that of 'some form of a world superstate' that must needs be 'be evolved' (WOB 40). Our first reaction may be to think that we are a long way away from such a world government. But Shoghi Effendi says that this is something that will evolve and not something that will suddenly appear and if we have this long-term evolutionary vision of Shoghi Effendi and we look around us, we can see much evidence of its evolving presence in our midst. At the United Nations, a report on global Governance was commissioned and there has been talk of convening a summit to consider this report.

The first step towards the creation of a true world government is, Shoghi Effendi says, 'the inevitable curtailment of unfettered national sovereignty'. Those features of sovereignty which will need to be curtailed are:

- ♦ 'every claim to make war,
- ♦ certain rights to impose taxation and
- ♦ all rights to maintain armaments, except for the purposes of maintaining internal order within their respective dominions'. (WOB 40)

Now we do not see much evidence of this happening in the world at large, but if we look at what is happening within the European Union, then we see a group of nations which throughout the twentieth century went to war twice with each other in a major way—and they have agreed to curtail their unfettered national sovereignty, they have agreed to limit certain rights to impose taxation, and they are in the process of co-ordinating their foreign policies which would inevitably

lead to a curtailment of their right to make war and therefore logically also of their right to maintain independent armies.

So on a smaller scale, the very conditions that Shoghi Effendi sets are being put into effect—the principle of putting limits on unfettered national sovereignty are being accepted. And it should be born in mind that until fifty years ago this principle was considered sacrosanct and unassailable.

Furthermore, we have seen an international example of the refusal of the world's governments to allow the principle of unfettered national sovereignty to over-ride concerns about human rights abuses in the example of what happened in Kosovo in 1999. The world refused to allow a national government to do whatever it liked within its own internationally-recognized borders. More recently, this has happened again in the case of Libya in 2011.

E. Let us look at the accessories that Shoghi Effendi said would have to exist alongside this “world super-state”:

Such a state will have to include within its orbit

- ♦ an international executive adequate to enforce supreme and unchallengeable authority on every recalcitrant member of the commonwealth;
- ♦ a world parliament whose members shall be elected by the people in their respective countries and whose election shall be confirmed by their respective governments;

and a supreme tribunal whose judgement will have a binding effect even in such cases where the parties concerned did not voluntarily agree to submit their case to its consideration. (WOB 40–41)

Elsewhere he says that this world super-state will be 'backed by an International force' (WOB 203)

Again all of these things may on the one hand be considered to be very remote from the present situation of the world. But, if we look with a long-term evolutionary vision, we can see the seeds of them already present.

We have an international executive in the office of the secretary-general of the United Nations. It does not yet have the power "to enforce supreme and unchallengeable authority on every recalcitrant member" of the United Nations but at least it exists. In the case of the European Union, we even have the beginnings of a supra-national executive with limited powers to enforce itself upon its member states. We also have "a world parliament" in the United Nations General Assembly. It is not yet one "whose members shall be elected by the people in their respective countries," but the European Parliament is. Again, an International Court of Justice exists based in the Hague. It does not yet have the right to intervene in cases where either part has not agreed to submit to its jurisdiction, but other supra-national courts, such as the European Court of Human Rights, do have this right. The establishment of the International Criminal Court was a further major step in the movement towards having a world legal system that over-rides national sovereignty. And with respect to an international force that will back up the world super-state, we can again see the seeds of this in the various United Nations forces that are operating in different parts of the world.

Other elements in this statement of Shoghi Effendi include:

- ✦ A mechanism of world intercommunication will be devised, embracing the whole planet, freed from national hindrances and restrictions, and functioning with marvellous swiftness and perfect regularity.

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- ✦ A world metropolis will act as the nerve center of a world civilization, the focus towards which the unifying forces of life will converge and from which its energizing influences will radiate.
- ✦ A world language will either be invented or chosen from among the existing languages and will be taught in the schools of all the federated nations as an auxiliary to their mother tongue.
- ✦ A world script, a world literature, a uniform and universal system of currency, of weights and measures, will simplify and facilitate intercourse and understanding among the nations and races of mankind.” (WOB 203–4)

The first of these can be said to have been achieved with the advent of the internet, which occurred during the last decade of the twentieth century. There are no signs of the second occurring at the world level although on a continental level, Brussels and Strasbourg are competing to become the “nerve centre” of the European Union. The development of a world language is identical to ‘Abdu’l-Baha’s seventh candle and is discussed below. There have been a few developments in the fourth point above with the kilogram and kilometre being increasingly the world system of weights and measures, while a European currency has emerged in the course of the twentieth century.

F. We can also examine some of the characteristics of the world society in which this super-state will operate, as they have been described by Shoghi Effendi:

- ✦ ‘all economic barriers will have been permanently demolished’
- ✦ ‘the interdependence of Capital and Labour definitely recognized’
- ✦ ‘the clamour of religious fanaticism and strife will have been forever stilled’

- ✦ 'the flame of racial animosity will have been finally extinguished'
- ✦ a single code of international law—the product of the considered judgment of the world's federated representatives—shall have as its sanction the instant and coercive intervention of the combined forces of the federated units'
- ✦ 'the fury of a capricious and militant nationalism will have been transmuted into an abiding consciousness of world citizenship' (WOB 41)

We can see that gradually all of these elements are falling into place: economic barriers are collapsing—we already have a globalized economy (the main area which is not yet globalized is that of the protectionist policies of the United States and Europe towards their agriculture and heavy industries); the interdependence of Capital and Labour are largely already recognized; the clamour of religious fanaticism and strife cannot be said to be stilled but at least they are widely recognized as undesirable; a single code of international law cannot yet be said to have been put into place, but there is a growing body of international law which is acknowledged as binding by the nations of the world.

G. The presence of the Lesser Peace should allow nations to disarm and reinvest their expenditure on armaments into constructive developmental activities

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, there has been considerable talk of a "peace dividend". Numerous US and other military bases around the world have been closed down and military expenditure was cut back. Again I know that there has been a reversal of this process in the last few years but again the principle has been established, the idea implanted and eventually it will lead to fruition.

H. With regard to 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Seven Candles of Unity, a number of significant advances have been made:

1. Unity in the Political Realm

It is not immediately obvious what 'Abdu'l-Bahá means by this until we look at some other quotations. 'Abdu'l-Bahá in *Promulgation of Universal Peace* talks of “national unity where various peoples live under one form of government such as French, German, British, etc.; and political unity, which conserves the civil rights of parties or factions of the same government.” (PUP 191) Thus this level of unity may imply the achievement of a situation where the various racial, political and social groupings within a country feel that they are being treated justly and therefore able to unite politically. We will consider this candle again when we come to the 5th candle.

2. Unity in World Undertakings

The Universal House of Justice in its letter to the Bahá'ís introducing the document *The Prosperity of Humankind* in 1995, sees the recent round of United Nations conferences as ‘capstones to the myriad activities taking place in different parts of the world involving a wide range of non-governmental organizations and networks in an urgent search for values, ideas and practical measures that can advance prospects for the peaceful development of all peoples’ and it considers that in these conferences and activities can be discerned ‘the gathering momentum of an emerging unity of thought in world undertakings, the realization of which our sacred scriptures describe as one of the lights of unity that will illumine the path to peace’. Shoghi Effendi has also commented on this second candle that it might also involve the development of a universal culture. (CC2, no. 1628, 195)

3. Unity in Freedom.

During the twentieth century, we saw a number of important developments. At the time that 'Abdu'l-Bahá was writing, most of the world was either under colonial control or under despotic and

authoritarian governments. There could be no real unity when such inequalities and lack of freedom exist. The twentieth century saw the emergences of new states out of colonial control. Similarly, the twentieth century saw many other nations emerging from centuries of authoritarian monarchical structures into freer democratic ones. Not all of the peoples of the world can yet be said to be free but it is a process that is well under way.

Other aspects of this unity in freedom are of course freeing of women from centuries of oppression under male-dominated societies, the freeing of the working and agricultural classes from the oppression of the ruling classes and feudal social structures, and the freeing of ethnic minorities and castes from subservience to the upper echelons of society.

4. Unity in Religion.

Arguably, this is the area of these seven candles of unity in which humanity has achieved the least progress. The Universal House of Justice has acknowledged this in its letter to the world's religious leaders issued in 2002, calling upon them to take a lead in this sphere. There was however, in 1992, a revival of the Parliament of the World's Religions and there have been a number of other initiatives such as the World Conference on Religions and Peace (since 1970) and the Summit on Religions and Conservation (1993).

5. Unity of Nations.

The achievement of the unity of nations is what 'Abdu'l-Bahá stated would be achieved in the course of the twentieth century—not the Lesser Peace as many have thought.

In relation to the decision of the League of Nations to impose sanction on Italy in 1935, referred to above, Shoghi Effendi asserted that “the fact must be recognized that so important a decision marks one of the most distinctive milestones on the long and arduous road that

must lead it to its goal, the stage at which the oneness of the whole body of nations will be made the ruling principle of international life.” (WOB 193.)

Since then we have seen the United Nations emerge with much stronger powers than the League of Nations had and several bodies coming together forming regional unities of nations. All of these are steps along this pathway. However, the union of nations seems to point to something more than just political union which is the first candle. Shoghi Effendi was asked by Marion Hoffman about the difference between the first (which was unity in the political realm) and the fifth candle, and he replied:

With reference to your question concerning ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s reference to “*unity in the political realm*”: this unity should be clearly distinguished from the “*unity of nations*”. The first is a unity which politically independent and sovereign states achieve among themselves; while the second is one which is brought about between nations, the difference between a state and a nation being that the former, as you know, is a political entity without necessarily being homogeneous in race, whereas the second implies national as well as political homogeneity. (CC no. 1623 194)

Thus it would appear that unity in the political realm is one that is achieved at the governmental level while unity of nations is a unity that is achieved by the peoples of the nations of the world. Thus ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is here pointing to a deeper underlying consciousness of the oneness of humanity. This consciousness can be discerned to be slowly emerging. We saw it for example in the response that ordinary people made to the famine in the Sudan and to disasters elsewhere. People are increasingly gaining a consciousness of themselves as members of a single human family and the feeling that what happens

to people on the other side of the world is happening to members of their family.

6. Unity of Races

At the beginning of the twentieth century, there was, among the European nations, a general acceptance of the idea that the white races were superior to the other races. Racist ideologies were widely accepted and very fashionable. The last part of the twentieth century saw the discrediting of these racist ideas and the relegation of racism to an intellectual back-water. Politically, racism survives in many parts of the world but is under increasing pressure even in these parts.

7. Unity of Language

This is a principle which was enunciated by Bahá'u'lláh (TB 22) and also mentioned in the lists of Shoghi Effendi (see above). The concept was widely discussed during the twentieth century and Esperanto was widely advocated for this purpose. Again while on the surface, not much progress has been made in this area, in fact, the last few decades have seen the establishment of English as the international language in the areas of business and finance, science and the academic world, and in youth culture.

The Calamity

With regard to apocalyptic thought in the Bahá'í community, it is also necessary to deal with the points made by those who object to these arguments against apocalyptic thinking and point to the fact that far from speaking of the future as a process, Bahá'u'lláh has clearly stated that a calamity will precede the coming of peace and that this will occur suddenly, apocalyptically:

And when the appointed hour is come, there shall suddenly (baghtatan) appear that which shall cause the limbs of mankind

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to quake. Then, and only then, will the Divine Standard be unfurled, and the Nightingale of Paradise warble its melody.
(GWB 118–9)

Such a quotation strengthens the conviction of many Bahá'ís that there will be some apocalyptic event—a calamity followed by the advent of peace. If we read the letters of the Universal House of Justice, however, we find that this institution has indicated that we have already passed through the calamity.

The calamity is a feature of the Age of Transition and, as long ago as October 1967, we find the Universal House of Justice indicating that the calamity had begun:

As humanity enters the dark heart of this age of transition our course is clear. (MUHJ63 114)

For the next few years, there are indications that humanity continued to be in this dark heart; see the following example from June 1983:

The dark horizon faced by a world which has failed to recognize the Promised One, the Source of its salvation, acutely affects the outlook of the younger generations. (WH 158)

And even more clearly in a letter from February 1984, the fact that humanity is in the midst of the calamity is stated:

...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.⁴

Then in its Riḍván message of 1988, the Universal indicated that we were through the worst part of this calamity and able to see the silver lining at the end of the cloud:

A silver lining to the dark picture which has overshadowed most of this century now brightens the horizon. (WH 54)

Although even two years later in Riḍván 1990, the Universal House of Justice was warning that reverses could still occur, nevertheless, their language was such as to indicate that the worst was over:

Hopeful as are the signs, we cannot forget that the dark passage of the Age of Transition has not been fully traversed; it is as yet long, slippery and tortuous.⁵

Thus it appears that the Universal House of Justice thinks that the calamity was a process that has been going on for several decades and the worst of which is now behind us—although there is still a possibility for reverses. Thus this “suddenly” of Bahá’u’lláh would appear to be similar to the Divine “Day” and consists of an extended period of time and this calamity is seen in Bahá’í terms as a process and not an apocalyptic event.

Summary

In summary, this process way of thinking in relation to the progress made towards peace reveals the following features:

A. The Bahá’í Faith holds that God does not usually intervene in the world in dramatic miraculous ways (or only rarely) forcing His will upon humanity, rather He works by slowly evolving processes over long periods of time, inviting human beings to participate in these processes.

B. With regard to the establishment of the features of the vision of the Bahá'í Faith for the future of humanity, this process can be said to consist of a number of stages:

1. The enunciation of a principle in the writings of the Central Figures of the Bahá'í Faith.
2. The independent enunciation of the principle by a government or inter-governmental body and its insertion into international treaties or declarations.
3. The partial implementation of the principle, thus establishing it as a reality on the international stage. This may involve an unsuccessful attempt to implement the principle (as in the case of the response to Italy's invasion of Ethiopia or the United Nations as an implementation of a World Commonwealth) or an implementation that is geographically circumscribed and does not yet involve all nations (as in the steps towards the creation of a super-state within the European Union).
4. The general and full implementation of the principle such that it becomes regarded as the norm in world politics.

Only a few of the features of peace, as delineated in the authoritative Bahá'í texts can be said to have achieved stage 4 (for example the Internet can be said to be the fulfilment of the need for a "mechanism of world intercommunication will be devised, embracing the whole planet, freed from national hindrances and restrictions, and functioning with marvellous swiftness and perfect regularity"). Most of the features of peace delineated in the text above did however reach stage 3 during the course of the twentieth century.

C. The process of the implementation of these features is not smooth and there may be set-backs on the way.

Seen in this light, one can recognize all of the features of peace delineated in the authoritative Bahá'í texts achieved up to the third stage in the process of implementation during the course of the twentieth century. Some even reached stage 4. Thus it can be said that if the Lesser Peace and the Most Great Peace are seen as processes rather than apocalyptic events, then the prerequisites and accompanying features of these two categories of peace developed greatly and were securely established by the end of the twentieth century. It is therefore for this reason that the Universal House of Justice was able at the close of the twentieth century to confirm 'Abdu'l-Bahá's description of this century as the "*Century of Light*".

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NOTES

- 1 For Kheiralla's interpretation, see Browne, *Material for the Study of the Bábí Religion* 139; Kheiralla, *Behá'U'lláh* 480. This date was arrived at by taking Daniel 12:12 which refers to 1335 days and converting it to the relevant year of the Islamic calendar. For later Baha'is promulgating this idea, see for example, Nathan Ward FitzGerald, *The New Revelation* 192, quoting a newspaper report of what Baha'is had told a newspaper reporter in about 1902–4. Smith cites an article by a non-Bahá'í who attended the Bahá'í Convention in 1917 and found that the “war proved the leading topic of discussion” and that the Bahá'ís were confident that the war would end within a year and “the foundations of Peace laid”. P. Smith, “The American Bahá'í Community,” p. 159, citing Eric Dime, “Is the Millennium upon us?” *Forum* 58 (1917) 167–80
- 2 See reports collected by David Piff, *Bahá'í Lore* 365–7
- 3 The Universal House of Justice, *Messages 1963 to 1986*, p. 281 and letters written in July 1974, April 1976, December 1981, and February 1984, cited in International Teaching Centre, 1 July 1984, Concerns about Retributive Calamity
- 4 From a communication dated 20 February 1984 written by the Universal House of Justice to the International Teaching Centre and cited in International Teaching Centre, 1 July 1984, Concerns about Retributive Calamity.
- 5 The Universal House of Justice, *Riḍván* 147, 1990.