

# Power and the Bahá'í community

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Bahá'ís frequently claim that the Bahá'í teachings have the ability to create a new social order, a new way of organising human society such that individuals could develop themselves physically, mentally and spiritually to the utmost of their capability. When trying to explain what this new social order is, they present the list of social teachings that was enunciated by 'Abdu'l-Bahá during his journeys to the West a hundred years ago: the oneness of humanity, the equality of women and men, the need for harmony and balance between religion and science, the importance of education and so on. While these social teachings may have sounded new and exciting a century ago, that is no longer the case today. Even in the middle of the last century, in 1949, Shoghi Effendi was making this point:

The world has – at least the thinking world – caught up by now with all the great and universal principles enunciated by Bahá'u'lláh over 70 years ago, and so of course it does not sound “new” to them.<sup>1</sup>

Many other groups are now promoting these social teachings that 'Abdu'l-Bahá spoke about a century ago. The majority of thinking people accept them. The problem for humanity now is not accepting these teachings, but how to implement them. Most people have accepted the need for the eradication of poverty, for the equality of women and men, for the removal of racial and other prejudices, and so on, but despite the fact that this has been well accepted for many decades, there has been little success in implementing these aims: the gap between the rich and poor is not closing, women are still unable

to progress in society as easily as men, racism still exists in all areas of social life.

So the problem the world faces is not in the principles that would lead to a better society but in the application. In its 1985 statement, *The Promise of World Peace*, the Universal House of Justice offered up the Bahá'í community as a model for the world to examine:

The experience of the Bahá'í community may be seen as an example of this enlarging unity. It is a community of some three to four million people drawn from many nations, cultures, classes and creeds, engaged in a wide range of activities serving the spiritual, social and economic needs of the peoples of many lands. It is a single social organism, representative of the diversity of the human family, conducting its affairs through a system of commonly accepted consultative principles, and cherishing equally all the great outpourings of divine guidance in human history. Its existence is yet another convincing proof of the practicality of its Founder's vision of a united world, another evidence that humanity can live as one global society, equal to whatever challenges its coming of age may entail. If the Bahá'í experience can contribute in whatever measure to reinforcing hope in the unity of the human race, we are happy to offer it as a model for study.

In this passage, the Universal House of Justice is holding up the Bahá'í community as a model of a new society for study. So the question arises: in what way is the functioning of the Bahá'í community as a solution to the problems that society now faces? What aspects of Bahá'í community life are answers to these problems? What we need to do is to look at our present society and try to determine what are the root causes of the problems that it faces and then to see in what practical ways the functioning of the Bahá'í community tackles these problems. I am going to deal mainly with Western societies since these are the only ones about which I feel I can speak, but what I say may well be also true of other societies since the conditions I will be describing are by no means confined to the West and, in any case, the problems the West faces are gradually seeping out to other parts of the world.

There are of course many problems that the world is facing but I am going to focus on two partly inter-related problems: first the fact

that a large proportion of people in our societies feel that they are excluded because they have no power within society or that they are unable to participate fully in society because barriers exist that prevent this. They feel unable to develop fully on account of this and feel a sense of injustice and consequent resentment. The second problem is that the balance between individual freedom and central authority in society has not been satisfactorily resolved. While authoritarian regimes have been overthrown and democracy established in many parts of the world, many are now saying that the balance has shifted too far towards individualism and a lack of central authority, that the rampant freedom of the capitalist market has led to a danger of falling into a situation of the 'rule of the jungle', where the wealthiest and most powerful have free reign to do what they like. The same situation prevails within religions where fundamentalists and liberals are locked in conflict over the question of whether society should be subservient to the authority of traditional religious forms or whether religion should change and adapt to accommodate social realities.

## **Hierarchical, Hegemonic, Patriarchal Society**

Returning to the first of these two problems that society faces, the fact that a large number of people feel excluded from society to some extent, so pervasive is this that in fact, in most societies, the majority of people find that they face barriers of one sort or another. These may be barriers of gender, race, social class or even such things as the accent with which one speaks. But in all, it means that the majority of every society faces barriers to some degree, which mean that they are not treated equally, cannot advance in their occupation, cannot obtain the same services, cannot live in the same areas and cannot join in some activities in society. The barriers that are put up can be minor, such as just having to wait longer than others for the same service or they can be major such as finding that one's chosen occupation is barred to one.

Although there is lip service to equality in many Western societies, the reality that most people experience is one of constantly coming up against these barriers. Thus for example, in most Western nations, the principle of the equality between men and women has been acknowledged for almost a century and yet women say that they

experience what has been called a “glass ceiling” as they develop professionally and try to advance in their careers. They reach a point at which further progress seems to be denied them despite their having the qualifications for it. They see male colleagues with less experience and perhaps even fewer qualifications being promoted ahead of them.

This same experience of facing barriers to progress is also experienced by people from racial and ethnic minorities, from the lower social classes and by many other groups. In fact the only people who do not experience this and who therefore obtain the full benefits of society are, in Western societies, educated white males from the upper strata of society. It is usually these people who are in positions where they are analysing their society in an authoritative manner and initiating change. Thus the social structure is hierarchical and highly competitive. That which is given the highest value in such societies are power, authority, control, victory, ownership, courage, strength. The main interactions are power struggles and competition. The ends justify the means. Results are expressed in terms of victory or defeat. There are only rewards for the winners in such a society, none for the runners-ups. It is epitomised by tradition, institutions, civilisation, law, and control over the natural world. Those who have power and wealth are valued, considered important, are consulted about major decisions and are listened to when they protest. Those who have no power or wealth are not valued, not considered important, are not consulted on major decisions and not listened to when they protest. As a result of having their ideas disparaged and discounted as they grow up, they often cease to have ideas of their own and merely repeat what the newspapers and political demagogues tell them is true. Decisions in such societies are made by just one man or a small group of men and are then handed down to be carried out. The social structures in these societies are pyramidal with one or a few people at the top and increasing numbers as one goes down. This is what is meant by a hierarchical society.

The fundamental problem underlying this situation is the fact that we live in societies that are patriarchal or hegemonic. The word patriarchy means ‘rule by men’ and implies a domination of society by men. The majority of positions of power and authority whether this be in government, business, professional or even in recreational and informal groups and societies are held by men. The concept of a patriarchal society goes, however, beyond just the fact of the gender

of those in authority. For example Britain went through a period of almost two decades when there was a female sovereign and female Prime Minister, but this did not change the fact that Britain was a patriarchal society. If a woman wants to reach the higher echelons of society, she must masculinize herself, become competitive and aggressive, become more male than the men. There is considerable evidence that girls are inherently less competitive and more cooperative than boys. Therefore in any society where power is the highest value and there are no other constraints, girls/women will usually be dominated by boys/men. In modern Western societies where almost all positions of power are awarded on the basis of competitiveness (either in the form of outright competition for the post or through interviews where competitiveness is given the highest value), the inevitable result is that men dominate most positions of power in the society. This is the patriarchal society.<sup>2</sup>

One might think that the sorts of totalitarian regimes that existed in Europe in the inter-war years of the twentieth century or which exist today in many parts of the world are the only remaining hierarchical societies and that democratic Western societies are not hierarchical but there is just as much of a hidden hierarchy in Western societies as in any totalitarian state. The relatively small number of people at the top of the hierarchy in Western states control the political process, the newspapers and other media, the education system, the justice system and all other important areas of life. Through this control, they also control the discourse of society. It is their opinions that are heard on the television, read in the newspapers and put into the textbooks studied at schools and universities; theirs is the only discourse that gets publicity and is thus regarded as the norm for the society; they have a hegemony over the norms, values and discourses of society. The voices of those lower down the hierarchy are ignored, considered unimportant and marginal; their experiences of social barriers and prejudice are regarded as the "rumblings of social malcontents". This is the hegemonic society.

Thus our modern societies, no matter where we live in the world, are hierarchical, patriarchal hegemonic societies. In the West, there may not be tanks in the streets enforcing the hierarchy, but all such societies depend upon force to maintain the pyramid of power. In the West, this compulsion is maintained through the law and the police force. This situation is not one that is easy to change. Those with

authority and power control the communications media and education. They therefore are in a position to impose their worldview on others. Women and other groups low down the hierarchy have one of two alternatives in this situation. They can accept the system and continue to hold a lower place in society. If they wish to try to beat the system can only do so by competing with those already in power.

Power is thus corrosive and subversive. Even in a democratic process, the attempt to gain power is itself corrosive. If a group wants to bring about social justice and a more egalitarian society, it has to gain power in order to bring this about. It thinks that if it gains power, it will control the state and then it can use the state to achieve its goals of social justice and a more egalitarian society. It forms a political party and starts to campaign to gain votes. But in this process, it is being diverted from its goal of achieving social justice and a more egalitarian society and its goal is now achieving power. Everything becomes subordinated to this goal. Achieving power now becomes the main goal of the group and other goals such as social justice become secondary. What happens in practice is that once the party is successful and has achieved power, the hierarchy remains the same B remaining in power has the highest priority. To this priority the lower goals such as social justice and a more egalitarian society are readily sacrificed. The people who voted for the party feel betrayed as they see the party chasing after those who wield influence and have social power and failing to implement anything that benefits them.<sup>3</sup>

Thus the values of the patriarchal, hierarchical hegemonic society are subversive; they subvert those that try to defeat them. This has been what successive revolutions from the 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards have found. The French Revolution and the various Communist Revolutions that have occurred have all been in the name of creating a more egalitarian society, where power is no longer the highest value. Those that led these revolutions were however forced to seize power and in doing so found their initial values subverted. The result was a society that was just as hierarchical as before, but with merely a different set of people in power.<sup>4</sup>

All groups that are low in the social hierarchy, whether women, racial and ethnic minorities or people of lower social class or status face much the same sorts of barriers and problems. Indeed if one considers that half of society is women and then adds in the various

ethnic and class groups who are also dominated by the white upper and middle class males who are at the top of the social hierarchy, one can see that in Western societies where we are all supposed to be equal, it is only a small percentage who have full access to the benefits and opportunities and the majority are a good deal less “equal” than them.

A further fact that makes it difficult to achieve any change is that in patriarchal societies, it is very difficult to even gain an acknowledgement of the fact that a problem exists. It is men from the dominant group who control the communications media and the education system; it they who are the journalists, the newspaper editors, the social analysts, the professors of social sciences and these men experience no barriers and therefore see no problem. The rhetoric coming from these leaders of society is that their societies are fair and democratic with equal opportunities for all. These individuals at the top of the hierarchy have not experienced life in the lower levels of the hierarchy, they have not come across any social barriers or obstacles in their careers or faced prejudice and injustice. They therefore can truthfully say that “ours is an open society; people get to the top through merit alone” – and therefore there is no need for any change.

## **The Bahá'í Answer to the Hierarchical, Hegemonic, Patriarchal Society**

It can be seen that because of its unseen barriers and subversive nature, it is not a very easy matter to contemplate changing such a society. The question then arises as to whether the Bahá'í Faith has any answers to this difficult situation. Since the Bahá'í Faith aims for equality between men and women and to bring into being a more egalitarian society, how does the Bahá'í Faith seek to resolve this problem? It can be seen from the above that a very radical change is needed and furthermore it must be a change that does not inherently find itself subverted.

Firstly of course, a set of values is needed that does not place power and wealth at the highest level; but this is perhaps the easiest part of the process. Most religions offer a set of values that emphasise the importance of values such as love, service, humility etc. and indeed most religions teach that wealth can be a barrier to spiritual progress. The Bahá'í Faith has similar teachings. There are a

large number of quotations from the Bahá'í scriptures asserting the equality of all human beings, for example, and others that assert the equality of men and women.

Even in the earliest stages of its history, the Bábí and Bahá'í Faiths have been engaged in overturning the power structures that formed the foundations of society. When the Báb praised a simple sifter of wheat for having discerned the truth and recognized him before all of the learned class of Isfahan, when the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh asserted that understanding religious truth did not depend on the years of book learning that the Islamic learned classes engaged upon at their religious colleges but rather on purity and spiritual discernment that could be cultivated by anyone, they were in effect laying an axe to the foundations of the hegemonic social structure that prized the book learning of the religious class and gave them authority and privileges on account of that.

In a letter written on 14 March 1927 to the Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Istanbul, the Guardian's Secretary explained, on his behalf, the principle in the Cause of action by majority vote. He pointed out how, in the past, it was certain individuals who "accounted themselves as superior in knowledge and elevated in position" who caused division, and that it was those "who pretended to be the most distinguished of all" who "always proved themselves to be the source of contention." "But praise be to God," he continued, "that the Pen of Glory has done away with the unyielding and dictatorial views of the learned and the wise, dismissed the assertions of individuals as an authoritative criterion, even though they were recognized as the most accomplished and learned among men and ordained that all matters be referred to authorized centres and specified Assemblies. Even so, no Assembly has been invested with the absolute authority to deal with such general matters as affect the interests of nations. Nay rather, He has brought all the assemblies together under the shadow of one House of Justice, one divinely appointed Centre, so that there would be only one Centre and all the rest integrated into a single body, revolving around one expressly designated Pivot, thus making them all proof against schism and division."<sup>5</sup>

'Abdu'l-Bahá carried this process forward defining some of the words associated with the hegemonic push towards competitiveness in such a way as to subvert their meanings. Thus for example,

regarding the word “victory”, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá writes that for the Bahá’í Cause: “*its victory is to submit and yield*” [SWAB 256] and he quotes Bahá’u’lláh as stating: “*Therefore, today, ‘victory’ neither hath been, nor will be opposition to anyone, nor strife with any person; but rather what is well-pleasing—this is, that the cities of men’s hearts, which are under the dominion of the hosts of selfishness and lust, should be subdued by the sword of the Word of Wisdom, and of Exhortation.*”<sup>6</sup> Similarly, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá subverts the concept of competition from its usual role in a masculine society, that of gaining power, and instead promotes it as an approach in the arena of service: “*Vie ye with each other in the service of God and of His Cause. This is indeed what profiteth you in this world, and in that which is to come*” [qtd in ADJ 83]. The goal of personal ambition and the source of greatest glory do not belong, in ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s estimation, to the person who seizes power but to the person who excels in service to “*human uplift and betterment*” [PUP 353] and to “*the cause of the Most Great Peace*” [PUP 123].

It is all very well to have egalitarian values and to subvert the foundations of the hegemonic society, but the question remains of what you put in its place. Many individuals and groups have had these principles but have not been able to transform them into practice because of the subversive nature of power. What is needed is to have some way to get these values prevalent in society without having them subverted. How does one set up a community that is more egalitarian? The Bahá’í community in fact provides a model for just such a social system.

First, the Bahá’í community does not contend for power. Those who have wanted to change society have always thought that the way to do this is to seize control of the state and that it would then be possible to use the power of the state to change society. They have therefore either taken the revolutionary road to power (as in the French Revolution and the various communist revolutions) or they have tried the democratic route, as with various democratic socialist parties. Apart from the pitfall of the subversion of their egalitarian values which has been discussed above and which they all suffered, what they have failed to appreciate is that the power of the state is largely illusory. The state is but one element in a nexus of actors and by itself, it has only a limited ability to make changes. It cannot by itself

change the social structure, for example, since it is the social structure that is supporting the state and to try to change it risks destabilizing the state itself. The Bahá'í community eschews the route to power as a means of effecting a change in society. It refrains from all involvement in partisan politics, recognising that any such involvement risks subverting its values and ultimately frustrating its goals.

Second, in the Bahá'í community power does not rest with individuals. There are no priests or any other religious professionals with any special power or authority by virtue of their position. Authority rests with institutions acting as institutions. It is true of course that individuals are elected onto these institutions but these individuals hold no power or authority in their own right. Even the chairman of a National Spiritual Assembly, the national governing body of the Bahá'ís in an area, has no individual authority. A member of the National Spiritual Assembly is still subject to the authority of the local governing board, the Local Spiritual Assembly, in the area where he or she lives. All authority rests with the institutions making decisions as a body. There are individual appointments made to positions such as the Boards of Counsellors and the Auxiliary Board, but these appointees play only an exhortatory and advisory role. They hold no authority or power.

Third, decisions are made in the Bahá'í community through consultation. The Bahá'í process of consultation is one which encourages all those taking part to participate. This helps to draw out members of minority groups and races as well as lower social classes who do not feel confident enough to speak in group settings. The Bahá'í ideal of consultation provides a safe and encouraging environment for such people to express their views. Indeed, just as men are better at competition, women are inherently better in the co-operative environment produced by the consultation process. In such an environment, they therefore feel comfortable in putting forward their views (which is not the case in a highly competitive environment) and they are able to play a major role in Bahá'í community life.

There are also other provisions in Bahá'í community life which are aimed at encouraging minorities. The Bahá'í Faith has been spread through planned action. In these plans, a deliberate effort has been made to bring into the community every type of minority living in a

particular area. This has been assisted by having, as part of these same plans, Bahá'í literature translated into as many languages as possible. Another example is the fact that, in Bahá'í elections, if there is a tied vote, then if one of those tied is from a minority, that person is automatically declared the winner of the tie.

## **A Practical Path to a Different Society**

It is however, in the last two decades that the Bahá'í community has produced a practical path forward that all, whether Bahá'í or not, can follow in creating a more egalitarian society. Since about 1996, the Bahá'í community has been engaged in a programme of action that works to mitigate and counter many of the worst features of the hierarchical society. The central feature of this programme is a course of participatory learning designed to develop the human resources within a community. The course encourages people, especially those at the base of the power pyramid who have been used to having their ideas disparaged and discounted and have ceased to think for themselves, to start to think, to develop ideas, and, in the protected consultative environment of the course, to start to have the confidence to express those ideas. Furthermore, the course focuses on the spiritual aspects of the human being, encouraging the growth of a spirit of selflessness and service. As a result, people are encouraged to engage in acts of service. They are initially trained to do such service as organising children's moral education classes, junior youth empowerment programmes, devotional meetings, home visits and accompanying others in their path of service. These acts of service then enable participants to have ideas about the needs of the community and how to address these. Thus participants in the courses are trained not only to develop their own ideas and have the confidence to express them but also, through acts of service, they begin to see the reality around them and to have thoughts about how to address the problems of their community.

All of this is then brought to the cluster reflection meetings where those attending reflect on what has occurred previously and with input from Bahá'í administrative bodies and from ideas arising from their own study groups and service projects, they consult upon the needs of the area and how these can be addressed realistically with the resources available. These study courses and reflection meetings are

not confined to Bahá'ís. Anyone interested can engage with this process, can take part in the study courses, can carry out the acts of service and can participate in the reflection meetings. In this way, the power to change their own community is devolved down in a meaningful way to the members of that community.

If we were to create in this way more egalitarian societies, this would not just solve the problem that large numbers of people feel alienated and unjustly treated by the structures of the hierarchical society, it would help towards resolving other social problems as well. To reduce the competitiveness and aggressiveness associated with the patriarchal, hegemonic society would also be a major step towards world peace since this competitiveness and aggressiveness also feeds across from a society's internal affairs into its external foreign affairs and results in undue aggressiveness and lack of co-operation at the international level. A higher value being placed on co-operation within our societies would result in a higher level of co-operation in global affairs and in resolving global problems. The greater involvement of women in social affairs would in itself also be conducive to world peace according to the Bahá'í teachings.

The competitiveness of the business world is a major contributor to pollution and environmental degradation. The competitiveness that the patriarchal society demands results in an inexorable pressure to reduce costs often with the result of increased pollution. If local environmental regulations prevent this pollution then modern business instead of accepting this as a price worth paying moves its factories to elsewhere in the world where the environmental regulations are not so strict. Unfortunately although the environmental regulations are local in their effects, the pollution caused by these companies respects no borders and is world-wide in its effects. A society that is not so driven by the urge to be competitive would also be inherently less polluting.

Thus to produce more egalitarian less hierarchical societies would help in the resolution of many of the problems that the world faces from the alienation and sense of injustice that breeds civil unrest, vandalism and violence to global problems such as war and environmental pollution.

## Individualism and Authority

A second area that is causing a deal of turmoil for many because it is a problem that has not been successfully resolved in any society is the balance between individuality and authority in society and the associated problem of how to maintain a balance between centralised national or international authority and local initiative and independence. The balance between these has not been successfully achieved in any society. In those societies that have swung too far towards individuality, the cult of the individual threatens the cohesion and moral order of society. Using the pretext of personal freedom, some individuals are subjecting others to virtual slavery (driving the poor into financial debt that makes them virtual slaves of the owners of their debts), sexual abuse, and the physical and sexual abuse of children. The opposite extreme is that of the sort of collectivism seen in communist societies, where the individual is suppressed completely, supposedly for the benefit of the community. Neither extreme allows either full human development or human prosperity. Of course, all human beings are individuals and must be given the freedom to develop their talents and potential, but to allow that freedom to go to excess, where human beings are given the freedom to sink to the level of animal behaviour and to oppress others stunts human development and causes society to fall apart in corruption and moral decadence. Similarly excessive centralized control stifles human initiative and leads to loss of morale and enthusiasm for projects because people do not feel involved in the decisions that affect their lives.

These two extremes of excessive individualism and excessive control can be seen operating in many situations in the world. Broadly speaking, the United States of America leans towards the extreme of individualism and rights to liberty in all areas. In practice, this means that those with money and power use this liberty to control the communications media and the political process to their advantage and in order to impose their aims on society. Thus paradoxically, in precisely those societies where the most freedom is given to the individual, the result is that the individual is most manipulated by commercial and other interests. Western Europe has, on the other hand, moved towards centralized control and many aspects of daily life are regulated by the centralized authority of the

European Union. The result is that people feel remote from the decision-making process and therefore feel increasingly justified in rebelling against it or ignoring it. There are of course many areas of the world where centralized authoritarian political regimes go much further than Europe and these regimes suppress individual initiative even more and result in a loss of morale and initiative in their populations.

These extremes are not confined to political structures however. Matters such as international aid have swung across the pendulum from a strict centralised control of methods and means of deploying international aid – often leading to inappropriate aid being given because the people at the centre do not know what is appropriate – to a much more relaxed system with decisions being made locally – often resulting in corruption and dissipation of effort. In religions in particular this tension can be seen as one of the most prominent features of religious life in the past century. In almost every religious group there is some degree of conflict between those who hold to a strict central doctrinal and organisational authority in the religion (often associated with religious fundamentalism) and those who want to free the individual believers to think freely about religious ideas and to experience the religion in ways that suit each individual (often described as religious liberalism).

In the Bahá'í Faith there are several aspects to achieving the right balance between individual liberty and centralized authority. While Bahá'u'lláh on the one hand applauds democracy and commends Queen Victoria for having “*entrusted the reins of counsel into the hands of the representatives of the people*” [PB 34],<sup>7</sup> he also, on the other hand, condemns the excess of liberty that leads to libertarianism and states that it will “*exercise a pernicious influence upon men*” [GWB 216]. Shoghi Effendi summarises this by stating that “The Bahá'í conception of social life... neither suppresses the individual nor does it exalt him to the point of making him an anti-social creature, a menace to society. As in everything, it follows the ‘golden mean’” [UD 435-436].

As in the case of achieving a more egalitarian society, there are many groups and movements other than the Bahá'ís who agree with Shoghi Effendi's view that the ideal is to achieve this ‘golden mean’. However in practice, we find that societies and groups either gravitate towards one extreme or the other or else they swing like a

pendulum between the two extremes. It appears that no society or large group has succeeded in finding a way of remaining at the 'golden mean'. It is in the practicalities of how to achieve this state that they have failed.

Once again, the Bahá'í community provides a model of how to achieve this balance. This is achieved in the Bahá'í community through an innovative separation between power and authority. In most societies, organisation and groups, it is taken for granted that those in authority should also be given the power to enforce their authority. Thus mechanisms of enforcement are enacted to compel those who are members of that society or group to follow the directives of those that are in authority. These may be laws for a society or codes of discipline in organisations or rules in the case of groups. Those who are in authority are given the power to sanction whoever fails to follow their directives.

In the Bahá'í community, however, there is an attempt to separate authority and power to some extent. We have noted above that individuals have neither authority nor power in the Bahá'í community. The elected institutions of the Bahá'í community have the authority to direct the affairs of the community, but their obligation is to try to achieve their objectives through winning the support of the individual Bahá'ís. Shoghi Effendi addressing primarily the members of the elected Bahá'í institutions states:

Let us also bear in mind that the keynote of the Cause of God is not dictatorial authority but humble fellowship, not arbitrary power, but the spirit of frank and loving consultation. Nothing short of the spirit of a true Bahá'í can hope to reconcile the principles of mercy and justice, of freedom and submission, of the sanctity of the right of the individual and of self-surrender, of vigilance, discretion and prudence on the one hand, and fellowship, candor, and courage on the other. [BA 63-64]

The elected Bahá'í institutions have, in effect, very little power to enforce their authority in many areas when compared with the central authorities of other religions. They have no doctrinal authority; no authority to determine correct doctrine or to create new doctrine or theological teachings, nor to interpret the texts of the scripture. Thus they hold no power in many areas over which religious leadership has

traditionally held both power and authority. They have the authority to direct the Bahá'í community by laying out plans of action for the Bahá'ís, but they have no sanctions or other means of compelling the Bahá'ís to carry out these plans. If any Bahá'í, for example, wants to completely ignore the present Five Year Plan of the Universal House of Justice, they are free to do so without any fear of sanctions against them. The general situation is summed up in the words of the Universal House of Justice thus:

Authority and direction flow from the Assemblies, whereas the power to accomplish the tasks resides primarily in the entire body of the believers.<sup>8</sup>

The power that the elected institutions have over the believers can only be exercised in extreme situations and is thus rarely encountered by the average Bahá'í. This power involves Bahá'ís who actions go outside certain limits. These include for example administrative sanctions against Bahá'ís who bring the Bahá'í Faith into disrepute, perhaps by their disregard for the moral code of society (however what Bahá'ís do privately is not usually a cause of action by the Bahá'í institutions). More severe sanctions are taken towards those who seek to create division and sectarianism in the Bahá'í community (however holding differing opinions is not sanctionable, it is only when an individual attempts to create a sect or grouping around such an opinion that sanctions may be applied). The overwhelming majority of Bahá'ís will not however experience this.

If Bahá'ís have such freedom of thought and freedom to disregard the exhortations of their institutions, what is it then that preserves the unity of the Bahá'í community (for if the Bahá'í Faith is to achieve its stated goal of uniting humanity, it is obvious that it itself must remain united). The principal mechanism whereby the individual is granted freedom of thought in the Bahá'í Faith and yet unity is maintained is that of the Covenant. In the Bahá'í Faith, there is no doctrine or creed about the nature of God or the nature of Bahá'u'lláh to which the individual is obliged to assent. Bahá'ís are free to read the scriptures for themselves and to come to their understanding of theological matters. The only limit on Bahá'ís is that they cannot claim that their understanding of theological matters is authoritative or binding on any other Bahá'í (and thereby attempt to set up a cabal or sectarian grouping). Only the interpretations of

'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi are authoritative. Since both 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi are deceased, their writings have effectively become part of the scripture or authoritative text. There is no longer any living authoritative interpretation in the Bahá'í Faith. What preserves the unity of the Bahá'í community in the face of this ideological individualism is the concept of the Covenant – that all Bahá'ís pledge themselves to obeying the instructions of the Focal Centre of the Covenant, which since 1963 has been the Universal House of Justice. Since the Universal House of Justice is not a body that creates doctrine or dogma but rather a body that directs the affairs of the Bahá'í community, obedience to the instructions of the Focal Centre of the Covenant does not limit the individual's freedom to think whatever they wish about theological matters, but only their freedom to act in ways that would set up sects and cliques around such individual interpretation.

Another aspect of the balance between centralized authority and local democracy in the Bahá'í community is the fact that the authority and powers of the local governing councils of the Bahá'í community have been laid down in authoritative Bahá'í texts. The local governing councils have inherent rights over matters that are purely confined to their locality, an authority that cannot be removed by the decision of the national body. Thus one cannot have the situation that has occurred in many countries where the local governing authorities have had their rights stripped away by the desire of the national government to centralize and control all aspects of the nation's life.

In all aspects of Bahá'í community life, the emphasis is on decentralization – handing down to the local level everything that can appropriately be administered at the local level. “It [the world-wide Law of Bahá'u'lláh) repudiates excessive centralization on one hand, and disclaims all attempts at uniformity on the other. Its watchword is unity in diversity” [WOB 42]. But to offset problems that may arise from such decentralization – where local prejudices may discriminate against some individuals or groups, individual Bahá'ís are given substantial powers to appeal the decisions of their local body to the national and even, if necessary, to the international level.

In the pre-modern period, individuals, except for the elite in society were given a script at birth which they were expected to

follow and which severely limited their choices in all aspects of their lives. This script however, as long as they followed, gave them a socially-recognised identity, a guaranteed place in society and made them feel included in the workings of their community. The individualism of contemporary society means that people are free to tear up the script that they are given at birth and write their own script in terms of their individual choices. This individualism, however, leaves most individuals with no assigned or recognized social interactions that can make them feel part of a community, an anomie resulting in no social structure to which a person can relate. Throughout most of human history it has been religion that formed the glue binding individuals to their communities. Having cast religion aside, most individuals in the twentieth century experimented with various social and political ideologies, such as communism, nationalism and racism, which tried to take the place of religion in linking the individual into a community. All of ideologies failed with disastrous consequences for the societies that tried to adopt them. What the Bahá'í Faith offers is a modern religion, free of the superstition and irrationality that marks much of traditional religion, and offering a pathway for the individual to link into a community united in constructive action and service; giving that individual interpersonal links that can give that person a feeling of belonging and interconnectedness.

## The Maturity of Humanity

I would like to suggest that these two aspects of the social dynamics of the Bahá'í community which we have discussed, the removal of hierarchies of power and the achievement of a balance between society and the individual, can be thought of as related to the statement that has been made by Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi: that humanity is just entering its collective stage of maturity.

*No sooner had mankind attained the stage of maturity, than the Word revealed to men's eyes the latent energies with which it had been endowed – energies which manifested themselves in the plenitude of their glory when the Ancient Beauty appeared, in the year sixty, in the person of 'Alí-Muhammad, the Báb. [Bahá'u'lláh: GWB 77-78]*

*Similarly, there are periods and stages in the life of the aggregate world of humanity, which at one time was passing through its degree of childhood, at another its time of youth but now has entered its long presaged period of maturity, the evidences of which are everywhere visible and apparent. Therefore, the requirements and conditions of former periods have changed and merged into exigencies which distinctly characterize the present age of the world of mankind ... The gifts and graces of the period of youth, although timely and sufficient during the adolescence of the world of mankind, are now incapable of meeting the requirements of its maturity. The playthings of childhood and infancy no longer satisfy or interest the adult mind. [Abdu'l-Bahá: PUP 438-439]*

Such is the stage to which an evolving humanity is collectively approaching. The Revelation entrusted by the Almighty Ordainer to Bahá'u'lláh, His followers firmly believe, has been endowed with such potentialities as are commensurate with the maturity of the human race – the crowning and most momentous stage in its evolution from infancy to manhood. [Shoghi Effendi: WOB 165]

If one considers this metaphor, then it can be seen that what we have been discussing in this paper fits this metaphor well. When one is dealing with children, one imposes a hierarchy of power over them and instructs them as what they should do and not do. One has both power and authority over them. In the same way, in accordance with the Bahá'í model of progressive revelation, the religions that came during the collective infancy of humanity encouraged and resulted in hierarchical forms of society where people who had power and learning dominated those who did not. As a child grows into adolescence and eventually to maturity, the wise parents will gradually reduce the orders and instructions given to the child and increasingly allow the child to take responsibility for itself. They hand the power that they exerted over the individual as a child over to that individual once he or she reaches adolescence and maturity. This flattening of hierarchies and handing over power to mature responsible individuals can be seen as the appropriate response as humanity reaches its collective maturity. The Bahá'í teachings maintain that this is now the stage in the evolution of humanity's

social life where this collective maturity is occurring and a new social order is needed to accommodate this change.

## Conclusion

One objection that can be raised is that while these considerations may be true of the Bahá'í community, can they be applied to society as a whole. Can one, for example, really run a society in which the local or national administrative authorities do not have power? Of course, one has to say immediately that where extremes of human behaviour are concerned – criminal activity, for example – then the authorities must also have the power to arrest, try and punish such individuals. But the Bahá'í administrative institutions have those powers to deal with such extreme individuals also, as mentioned above. However, in the lives of ordinary people going about their everyday activities, the Bahá'í teachings would point towards a greater reliance on the maturity and sense of responsibility of individuals to be given the power to regulate their own affairs. This would involve the handing over by national government to local authorities of a greater degree of the responsibility for the conduct of all local matters such as education, health and policing. But it would in turn mean a far greater involvement, through genuine consultative processes, of the individual citizens in the running of their local communities. Individual citizens would in turn have to take the responsibility of educating themselves in local issues so that they are not manipulated by single-issue pressure groups or vested commercial and financial interests.

This approach has wide-ranging implications in many aspects of social life beyond just that of the political system. In relationship to employment practices, this approach would also mean the rolling back of the present trend towards ever greater management control of workers in both the public and private sector, allowing people to do their jobs without incessantly seeking to control the way they do their jobs and setting targets and requiring paper-work which both consumes time and distorts activity.

Of course such rolling back of the power of both individuals and institutions cannot occur without a corresponding advance in the sense of responsibility and the maturity of individuals so that the

vacuum created is adequately filled. This requires individuals who are mature enough to participate in social activity in a constructive and balanced manner. It requires an uprightness of conduct and a commitment to social involvement by all of the individuals in a society well in excess of what is the current norm. This in turn requires spiritual resources in the individual which is, of course, a subject that is too large to go into in this paper.

The whole process can envisaged as a disempowerment of the hierarchy of power and an empowerment of individuals to take over many of the essential social functions at present being carried out, in an unsatisfactory and unjust manner, by the power hierarchy. There will undoubtedly be a continuing need for an authority structure to coordinate more complex social functions at the local level and also those activities that are better managed at a regional and national level. Such institutions, which will of course be elected bodies, will also need to have powers of last resort in matters of criminality and social deviance. But the principle of de-centralization means that these wider social functions and powers will be kept to a minimum. At present, most activities that affect the lives of ordinary Bahá'ís are consulted upon and decided at the local level at reflection meetings by the people involved themselves. It seems likely then that in government also most activities that affect the lives of ordinary people will be consulted upon, agreed and carried out by the people involved themselves. The present Bahá'í administrative order provides a model for the functioning of such a social structure.

It is, however, worth pointing out that the Bahá'í community as a whole, after several decades of concentrating upon the geographical expansion of the Bahá'í Faith is now engaged, in the latest Five-Year Plans upon activities which are designed to create precisely the sort of human resources that would be needed for the successful application of such a model of community and society: training programmes to help individuals to take part in consultative decision-making. This is moreover, not just a training programme for Bahá'ís; rather it is thrown open to all to both participate in the training and participate in the programmes of social action that emerge from the training. The stated aim of the present plans in the Bahá'í community is to move from the type of community characterised by the passivity

of the congregation to one where the brunt of the activity and responsibilities are borne by the membership as a whole.

Of course the Bahá'í community is only at the very beginning of this process. At present, the Bahá'í community still largely reflects the wider society. Most Bahá'í communities are still run by a handful of individuals. But during the twentieth century, great strides were taken in transferring power and authority from individuals to institutions, followed by a process of devolving power and authority from central institutions to local institutions. The final part of this process – developing the capabilities of the generality of the community so that power can be handed on to them and they will take up this responsibility – is the aims of the current series of Five-Year Plans.

Lastly, I think all of this also has great implications for the way in which Bahá'ís present themselves. Bahá'ís have been used to presenting the Bahá'í Faith as having the answers to all of society's ills. This can seem arrogant to some and naive to others. It would seem preferable and closer to reality to present the Bahá'í community as one that has a mechanism through which all, whether Bahá'ís or merely interested individuals, can gather, consult and create together plans of social action designed to solve problems of society.

In the West, the Bahá'ís are facing a situation where there is a new religious scene that is affecting them very negatively. The main feature of this scene is the fact that, while an interest in spiritual matters is undoubtedly increasing, the type of religiosity that is on the increase is not assisting the Bahá'í Faith. There are two main areas in which religion is on the rise:

1. Ultra-traditionalist religion – in almost all parts of the world, the traditional religion of each area is seeing a resurgence of what is usually called fundamentalism. The uncertainties and bewildering choices open to people in modern life together with the accompanying decline in morals and standards as people take advantage of the freedoms given to them by modern society has caused a reaction whereby people are turning back to the certainties and what they perceive to have been the higher moral standards of traditional religion. Such people want to turn the clock back two or three hundred years and return to a world where traditional religion and its accompanying traditional values and morals were the centre of

society. Clearly the Bahá'í Faith, representing as it does in every part of the world a new religion that is in competition with the traditional religion, is not going to find favour with such religiosity. (Of course the Bahá'í Faith does itself have very high moral and ethical standards and does agree with traditional religion in many areas and this is certainly an avenue that can be explored in presenting the Bahá'í Faith to people from such a background.)

2. New Age religiosity – people are increasingly rejecting formal affiliation with any organised and established religion in favour of a highly-individualised pick-and-mix type of religiosity. They take ideas from every type of religion, (often from Eastern religions: chakras, reincarnation, astrology, etc.) and dabble in various types of religious practice (such as meditation or repetitive chanting), ending up with a medley of ideas and practices that is to their liking. Such people will often attend Bahá'í meetings, express their admiration for some Bahá'í ideas, but they will refrain from actually joining the Bahá'í community, either because they firmly believe in some idea, such as reincarnation, that is rejected in the Bahá'í teachings or because they just do not feel comfortable joining an organised religious group. Perhaps a deeper underlying reason that many such people do not join the Bahá'í community is that the Bahá'ís do not offer the sort of quick-fix spirituality that is the claim made by many groups. To join the Bahá'í community involves oneself in commitment and a long hard spiritual struggle and such a prospect may not be enticing for such people. Also the Bahá'í community does not offer the sort of immediate experiential religion offered by many successful religious groups.

The result of all this is that the Bahá'í Faith is not benefiting from the resurgence of interest in things spiritual that has been occurring. It is neither a traditional religion to be able to benefit from the rise in fundamentalism, while people who are engaged in the New Age movement may express appreciation of its teachings and may adopt them into their personal spirituality, they are not likely to want to make the commitments that becoming a Bahá'í entails.

Therefore in relation to the question of the presentation of the Bahá'í Faith, what the above analysis is intended to demonstrate is that the Bahá'í community is addressing and has developed ways of tackling some of the major problems that beset human society.

Therefore it may be that in the present climate of pick-and-mix religiosity, of people not being willing to commit themselves to organised religion, it may be more productive to try to bring to people's attention the nature of the sort of society that the Bahá'í Faith is seeking to bring about and the steps the Bahá'í community is taking to bring this about – to show that this sort of society can deal with the social problems that we face and to demonstrate that this sort of society can resolve some of the tensions in modern society. The implication of this presentation of the Bahá'í Faith is of course that if one wishes to tackle these problems, the most effective way to do so would be to become part of a process that has a pattern of social dynamics with at least a potential for solving some of these problems, whether that be as a fully committed member of the Bahá'í Faith or as someone who merely wishes to participate in the processes, plans and activities being carried out.

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## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Shoghi Effendi, in "The Importance of Deepening," *Compilation of Compilations*, p. 230
- <sup>2</sup> See analysis of this in Marilyn French, *Beyond Power*, London: Abacus, 1985.
- <sup>3</sup> See the analysis of this in John Holloway, *Change The World Without Taking Power. The Meaning of Revolution Today*, London: Pluto Press 2002, pp. 13-18
- <sup>4</sup> George Orwell's *Animal Farm* brilliantly describes this process.
- <sup>5</sup> Translated from the Persian. The Universal House of Justice, *Messages 1963 to 1986*, pp. 216-7
- <sup>6</sup> Bahá'u'lláh quoted by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in *A Traveller's Narrative*, trans. E.G. Browne, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1891, vol. 2, p. 114
- <sup>7</sup> cf. *Kitab-i-Aqdas* vs. 123-4
- <sup>8</sup> From a letter of the Universal House of Justice to Continental Boards of Counsellors and National Spiritual Assemblies, October 1, 1969, in *The Continental Boards of Counsellors*, Wilmette, 1981, pp. 37-38