



## *Century of Light*

Keele Campus

The Impact and Legacy of 'Abdu'l-Bahá

*Second Afternoon Session (105 minutes)*  
*9 August 2015*

## 4. The Impact & Legacy of 'Abdu'l-Bahá

### The Impact & Legacy of 'Abdu'l-Bahá

Page 127-28: Using the familiar metaphor of "candles", 'Abdu'l-Bahá wrote to Mrs. Whyte:

O honoured lady!... Behold how its [unity's] 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. 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 realisation .

While it will be decades - or perhaps a great deal longer - before the vision contained in this remarkable document is fully realised, the essential features of what it promised are now established facts throughout the world.

### **Creative Pause**

As we have agreed that memorising is a valuable way to internalise important quotations and can help us in moments of quiet reflection, can we take a few moments now to begin to memorise either this quotation or another from the first session.

### **Whole Group Session (Slide Presentation)**

#### **Basic Background**

In addition to Bahá'u'lláh, the Founder of the Bahá'í Faith, there are two other key individuals and one key institution whose roles are of central importance to the unfolding story we are following right now.

The first is the son of Bahá'u'lláh, Whom His father designated as the Centre of His Covenant, the Mystery of God and the Perfect Exemplar. Some of the meaning of these terms will become clearer to those not familiar with them as the remainder of this sequence of workshops progresses. For now I will simply say that Bahá'ís believe God has made a Covenant with both His Followers and with humanity as a whole. The former is known as the Lesser Covenant, the latter as the Greater Covenant<sup>1</sup>. We will be coming back to an examination what those terms mean in more depth, but basically the role of 'Abdu'l-Bahá as Centre of the Covenant refers to how all Bahá'ís in His lifetime and beyond should see Him as the One to Whom His Father entrusted the protection of the unity of the Faith. We will be looking closely at 'Abdu'l-Bahá's role and its impact in the next two workshops.

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<sup>1</sup> This terminology dates from the time of the Báb as Shoghi Effendi makes clear in *God Passes By* (page 27): 'The Greater Covenant into which, as affirmed in His writings, God had, from time immemorial, entered, through the Prophets of all ages, with the whole of mankind, regarding the newborn Revelation, had already been fulfilled. It had now to be supplemented by a Lesser Covenant which He [ie the Báb] felt bound to make with the entire body of His followers concerning the One [ie Bahá'u'lláh] Whose advent He characterized as the fruit and ultimate purpose of His Dispensation. Such a Covenant had invariably been the feature of every previous religion.'

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Later we will focus on Shoghi Effendi, the grandson of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá who was designated the Guardian of the Cause of God on ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s passing. He was also authorised to be the translator and interpreter of the Writings.

Finally we will come to the Universal House of Justice. Elected in 1963 the House is the elected international governing body of the Bahá’í Faith. More on that later.

There are other writers who can shed some further light on this before we plunge into the details.

We are clearly living through a critical period. Paul Ray and Sherry Ruth Anderson write in *Cultural Creatives* (page 236): ‘[We are also facing] a breathtakingly dangerous tipping point for our civilisation and our planet. Our need to discover a way through is the most urgent, most central question of our time.’ They add (page 203) ‘In the consciousness movement, the people who can persevere for ten, twenty, and thirty years are the ones who can have a dramatic impact on the culture – because that is the true time horizon of effective action.’ The Universal House of Justice feels this will be the work of centuries (from a letter to Bahá’ís of Iran – 2 March 2013):

The rejection of deeply ingrained prejudices and a growing sense of world citizenship are among the signs of this heightened awareness. Yet, however promising the rise in collective consciousness may be, it should be seen as only the first step of a process that will take decades—nay, centuries—to unfold. For the principle of the oneness of humankind, as proclaimed by Bahá’u’lláh, asks not merely for cooperation among people and nations. It calls for a complete reconceptualization of the relationships that sustain society.

As Paul Lample explains in *Revelation & Social Reality* (page 109), Bahá’ís share this perspective and recognise that Bahá’ís alone can never bring about such changes. To say that the process of building a new civilisation is a conscious one does not imply that the outcome depends exclusively on the believers’ initiatives. . . . emphasis on the contributions Bahá’ís are to make to the civilisation-building process is not intended to diminish the significance of efforts being exerted by others. He also states (page 6): ‘Human beings are not passive observers of reality and our personal reality, our thought, is not simply imposed upon us. In a very specific way we may consider ourselves – collectively – as co-creators of reality, for through the power of the human mind and our interactions, the world undergoes continued transformation.’

And the time scale, as well as the engagement of all humanity, is very clear (page 48): ‘Generation after generation of believers will strive to translate the teachings into a new social reality. . . . . . [I]t is not a project in which Bahá’ís engage apart from the rest of humanity.’

Ray and Anderson make a key point (page 246): ‘Cultural Creatives may be leading the way with responses directed towards healing and integration rather than battle. For these responses to contribute to the creation of a new culture, grassroots activism and social movements will have to evolve into new institutions. . . . [W]hile new social movements are transitory, institutions can turn the energies of these movements into everyday action.’

*(End of Presentation: any questions?)*

For now we return to the role of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and begin with the core concept of unity or oneness.

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### Group Work

For each group discussion the group should choose a facilitator. It would be best to change the facilitator for each piece of group work over the series of workshops but the group will remain the same. During the consultation, the facilitator's role is to keep track of the time, to ensure that:

1. everyone contributes something,
2. no one keeps repeating the same point, and
3. no one makes excessively long contributions.

The group also needs to agree who will keep a record of the main points for reporting back to everyone at the end of the group consultation. The aim should be to make the report back no longer than five minutes.

### Group One Task

#### A. Unity

Page 7: ['Abdu'l-Bahá] came to [this moment in history] resolved to proclaim to responsive and heedless alike the establishment on earth of that promised reign of **universal peace and justice** that had sustained human hope throughout the centuries. Its foundation, He declared, would be **the unification, in this "century of light", of the world's people:**

. . . . 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.

Page 9:

My meaning is that **the beloved of the Lord must regard every ill-wisher as a well-wisher....** That is, **they must associate with a foe as befiteth a friend, and deal with an oppressor as beseemeth a kind companion.** They should not gaze upon the faults and transgressions of their foes, nor pay heed to their enmity, inequity or oppression.

. . . . He hath brought the whole creation under the purview of His gracious utterance, and hath **enjoined upon us to show forth love and affection, wisdom and compassion, faithfulness and unity towards all, without any discrimination.**

Page 18: [Of those who responded to 'Abdu'l-Bahá's call] Their response arose from **a level of consciousness that recognized, even if sometimes only dimly, the desperate need of the human race for spiritual enlightenment.** To remain steadfast in their commitment to this insight required of these early believers on whose sacrifice of self much of the foundation of the present-day Bahá'í communities both in the West and many other lands were laid - that **they resist not only family and social pressures,** but also **the easy rationalisations of the world-view in which they had been raised** and to which everything around them insistently exposed them.

1. Bahá'ís have been dismissed as hopelessly Utopian. Part of the reason for this lies in the perception that the ideals of, on the one hand, learning to evince the degree of love 'Abdu'l-Bahá describes, and, on the other, of establishing *universal* peace and justice, are permanently beyond humanity's reach. What do we feel about that?
2. What can we learn from the experiences of the early believers that might give us some hope, especially as the Universal House of Justice describes this as the work of centuries?

Page 20: The gift of God to this enlightened age is **the knowledge of the oneness of mankind** and of **the fundamental oneness of religion.** War shall cease

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between nations, and **by the will of God the Most Great Peace shall come**; the world will be seen as a new world, and all men will live as brothers.

To fully understand the relationship between man’s progress towards peace and the role of the Bahá’ís compared to the role of all humanity, it will help to provide some background. In the compilation on *Peace* (pages 38-39) we read in the words of the Universal House of Justice: ‘As to the Lesser Peace, Shoghi Effendi has explained that this will initially be a **political unity** arrived at by decision of the governments of various nations; it will **not be established by direct action of the Bahá’í community**. This does not mean, however, that the Bahá’ís are standing aside and waiting for the Lesser Peace to come before they do something about the peace of mankind. Indeed, by **promoting the principles of the Faith**, which are indispensable to the maintenance of peace, and **by fashioning the instruments of the Bahá’í Administrative Order**, which we are told by the beloved Guardian is the pattern for future society, the Bahá’ís are constantly engaged in **laying the groundwork for a permanent peace**, the Most Great Peace being their ultimate goal.’

1. How would a wider acceptance of the concept of the oneness of humanity be conducive to peace?
2. In the light of this, what are Bahá’ís meant to be doing and why?
3. What might people in the wider world be working at and why?

### Group Two Task

#### B. The Full Implications

Page 21: {Shoghi Effendi unpacks these as follows – my bullet points:]

- The independent search after truth, unfettered by superstition or tradition;
- the oneness of the entire human race, the pivotal principle and fundamental doctrine of the Faith;
- the basic unity of all religions;
- the condemnation of all forms of prejudice, whether religious, racial, class or national;
- the harmony which must exist between religion and science;
- the equality of men and women, the two wings on which the bird of human kind is able to soar;
- the introduction of compulsory education;
- the adoption of a universal auxiliary language;
- the abolition of the extremes of wealth and poverty;
- the institution of a world tribunal for the adjudication of disputes between nations;
- the exaltation of work, performed in the spirit of service, to the rank of worship;
- the glorification of justice as the ruling principle in human society, and of religion as a bulwark for the protection of all peoples and nations; and
- the establishment of a permanent and universal peace as the supreme goal of all mankind

these stand out as the essential elements of that Divine polity which He proclaimed to leaders of public thought as well as to the masses at large in the course of these missionary journeys.

The Guardian (page 50), addressing the friends in the West in 1931, ‘opened for them a brilliant vista’:

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The principle of the Oneness of Mankind - the pivot round which all the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh revolve - is no mere outburst of ignorant emotionalism or an expression of vague and pious hope. Its appeal is **not to be merely identified with a reawakening of the spirit of brotherhood and good-will among men**, nor does it aim solely at the fostering of harmonious cooperation among individual peoples and nations. Its implications are deeper, its claims greater than any which the Prophets of old were allowed to advance. Its message is applicable not only to the individual, but **concerns itself primarily with the nature of those essential relationships that must bind all the states and nations as members of one human family**.... It implies an organic change in the structure of present-day society, a change such as the world has not experienced.... It calls for no less than the **reconstruction and the demilitarisation of the whole civilised world** - a world organically unified in all the essential aspects of its life, its **political machinery**, its **spiritual aspiration**, its **trade and finance**, its **script and language**, and yet **infinite in the diversity** of the national characteristics of its federated units.

. . . . using as illustration the same 'organic metaphor in which Bahá'u'lláh, and subsequently 'Abdu'l-Bahá, had captured the millennia-long process' that has brought us to this point (ibid):

The long ages of infancy and childhood, through which the human race had to pass, have receded into the background. **Humanity is now experiencing the commotions invariably associated with the most turbulent stage of its evolution, the stage of adolescence**, when the impetuosity of youth and its vehemence reach their climax, and must gradually be superseded by the calmness, the wisdom, and the maturity that characterize the stage of manhood.

1. There is a huge amount of detail here. Basically though, in what ways do the above passages help us understand what the Bahá'í Faith means when it uses the word 'unity' or speaks of 'oneness.'
2. How would the 'political machinery' and 'trade and finance' be changed do we think?
2. What might it feel like to live in a world reconstituted in this way?

***Report Back:** One member of each group explains their conclusions and what they have learnt. Their group members can join in to field whatever questions and comments come their way.*

#### **Group Work (if this was carried over)**

This was intended to come after an examination of the impact of war and hopefully a chance to detect the flickering of various candles beginning to combat the darkness.

#### **Group One Task**

#### **C. Unity and the UN**

*Century of Light* explains how even the darkness itself contains hints of potential light (pages 70-71): 'At a relatively early point in the second world war, the Guardian set that conflict in a perspective for Bahá'ís that was very different from the one generally prevailing. The war should be regarded, he said, "as the direct continuation" of the conflagration ignited in 1914. It would come to be seen as the **"essential pre-requisite to world unification"**. The entry into the war by the **United States**, whose president had initiated the project of a system of international order, but which had itself rejected this visionary initiative, would lead that nation, Shoghi Effendi predicted, to "assume through adversity **its preponderating share of responsibility to lay down, once for all, broad, worldwide, unassailable foundations of that discredited yet immortal System.**"

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The dimly discerned positives relate to the key concept we will be exploring more fully later (page 71): 'If the change could not yet be described as an emerging conviction about **the oneness of humankind**, no objective observer could mistake the fact that **barriers blocking such a realisation**, which had survived all the assaults against them earlier in the century, **were at last giving way**. . . . The years immediately following 1945 witnessed advances in framing a new social order that went far beyond the brightest hopes of earlier decades.' The clearest example of this, they explain, (pages 71-72) is found when, 'Meeting in San Francisco in April 1945 - in the state where 'Abdu'l-Bahá had prophetically declared, "May the first flag of international peace be upraised in this state" - delegates of fifty nations adopted the Charter of the United Nations Organisation, the name proposed for it by President Franklin D. Roosevelt. . . .'

This led onto (pages 72-73) 'the United Nations' adoption of the **Universal Declaration of Human Rights**. The moral commitment it represented was institutionalized in the subsequent establishment of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights. In due course, the Bahá'í community itself would have good cause to appreciate, at first-hand, the system's importance as **a shield protecting minorities from the abuses of the past**.'

And even the shibboleth of national sovereignty had taken a hit (page 73): '[Concerning the trial of Nazi leaders] Although the integrity of the proceedings was gravely marred by the participation of judges appointed by a Soviet dictatorship whose own crimes matched or exceeded those of the defendants' regime, the act set an historic precedent. It demonstrated, for the first time, that **the fetish of "national sovereignty" has recognizable and enforceable limits**.'

Most of what is said immediately above is straightforward history. There are two questions we might want to deal with briefly.

1. Do we wish briefly to explore the nature of such prejudices as have caused great suffering not only to the Bahá'ís in Iran but to many other minorities elsewhere?
2. Why does *Century of Light* describe 'national sovereignty' as a 'fetish'? (*Fetish* means an obsession or idol in this context.)

#### D. Green Shoots

Page 74: Beyond all the continuing educational disadvantages, the economic inequities, and the obstructions created by political and diplomatic manoeuvring - beyond all these practical but historically transient limitations - **a new authority was at work in human affairs to which all might reasonably hope somehow to appeal**. . . . [Once subject peoples were now being represented.]

. . . . As time passed, growing numbers of outstanding figures in every walk of life would escape the familiar limits of racial, cultural or religious identity. In every continent of the globe, names like Anne Frank, Martin Luther King Jr., [Paolo Freire](#), [Ravi Shankar](#), [Gabriel Garcia Marques](#), [Kiri Te Kanawa](#), [Andrei Sakharov](#), Mother Teresa and [Zhang Yimou](#) became sources of inspiration and encouragement to great numbers of their fellow citizens. . . . The world-wide outpouring of affection and rejoicing that was to greet the release from prison of Nelson Mandela and his subsequent election as president of his country would reflect a sense among peoples of every race and nation that these historic events represented victories of the human family itself.

*Question.* Apart from the most famous ones in the list, ie Martin Luther King, Mother Teresa, Anne Frank and Nelson Mandela, do we know why the others are mentioned? What does this suggest about the possibility of a sea-change in world affairs?

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### Group Two Task

#### E. The Cold War & beyond

After the second world war we moved into a period termed the 'Cold War.' *Century of Light* summarises the situation (page 87): 'Hardly had hostilities ended than the ideological divisions between Marxism and liberal democracy burst out into attempts to secure dominance between the respective blocs of nations they inspired. The phenomenon of "Cold War", in which **the struggle for advantage stopped just short of military conflict**, emerged as the prevailing political paradigm of the next several decades.

This tense stand off was in response to the atom bomb's threat of '**mutually assured destruction**' (page 88): 'For Bahá'ís, the prospect could only bring vividly to mind the sombre warning uttered by Bahá'u'lláh decades earlier: "Strange and astonishing things exist in the earth but they are hidden from the minds and the understanding of men. These things are capable of changing the whole atmosphere of the earth and their contamination would prove lethal."' **The Soviet Union sought to capitalise on the injustices of colonialism** in what was termed the 'Third World' while '**the response of the West** - wherever development aid failed to retain the loyalties of recipient populations - **was to resort to the encouragement and arming of a wide variety of authoritarian regimes.**'

Even after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union, materialism continued effectively unchallenged (pages 89-90): 'impulses to devise and promote any formal materialistic belief system disappeared. Nor would any useful purpose have been served by such efforts, as materialism was soon facing no significant challenge in most parts of the world. **Religion, where not simply driven back into fanaticism and unthinking rejection of progress, became progressively reduced to a kind of personal preference, a predilection, a pursuit designed to satisfy spiritual and emotional needs of the individual.** The sense of historical mission that had defined the major Faiths learned to content itself with providing religious endorsement for campaigns of social change carried on by secular movements. The academic world, once the scene of great exploits of the mind and spirit, settled into **the role of a kind of scholastic industry** preoccupied with tending its machinery of dissertations, symposia, publication credits and grants.'

1. How can we explain how religion in certain places at certain times slides into fanaticism?
2. At the same time, elsewhere, it becomes a consumer fad. How does that happen, do we think?

Whether as world-view or simple appetite, **materialism's effect is to leach out of human motivation - and even interest - the spiritual impulses** that distinguish the rational soul. "For **self-love**," 'Abdu'l-Bahá has said, "**is kneaded into the very clay of man**, and it is not possible that, without any hope of a substantial reward, he should neglect his own present material good." In the absence of conviction about the spiritual nature of reality and the fulfilment it alone offers, it is not surprising to find at the very heart of the current crisis of civilisation **a cult of individualism** that increasingly admits of no restraint and that elevates acquisition and personal advancement to the status of major cultural values. The resulting **atomisation of society** has marked a new stage in the process of disintegration about which the writings of Shoghi Effendi speak so urgently.

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. . . . However important the application of legal, sociological or technological expertise to such issues undoubtedly is, it would be unrealistic to imagine that efforts of this kind will produce any significant recovery **without a fundamental change of moral consciousness and behaviour.**

Page 91-92: . . . **the unification of humankind under a system of governance** that can release the full potentialities latent in human nature, and **allow their expression in programmes for the benefit of all**, is clearly the next stage in the evolution of civilisation. The **physical unification of the planet** in our time and **the awakening aspirations of the mass of its inhabitants** have at last produced the conditions that permit achievement of the ideal, although in a manner far different from that imagined by imperial dreamers of the past. . . .

. . . . That yet greater suffering and disillusionment will be required to impel humanity to this great leap forward appears, alas, equally clear. Its establishment will require **national governments and other centres of power to surrender to international determination**, unconditionally and irreversibly, the full measure of overriding authority implicit in the word "government".

The quotations immediately above pinpoint precisely the opposing forces of integration and disintegration.

1. In what way could ‘the spiritual impulses that distinguish the rational soul’ lead to ‘a fundamental change of moral consciousness and behaviour’ that would reverse the ‘atomisation of society’?
2. How would such a transformation assist humanity to relinquish its attachment to the nation state and allow ‘national governments and other centres of power to surrender’ their authority ‘to international determination’? The current debate over the European Union helps give us a sense of what might be involved.

***Report Back:** One member of each group explains their conclusions and what they have learnt. Their group members can join in to field whatever questions and comments come their way.*