



Century of Light

Keele Campus

The Universal House of Justice

Fourth Afternoon Session (105 minutes)
11 August 2015

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The Universal House of Justice

Whole Group Session (Slide Presentation)

Essential Background

After the passing of the Guardian in 1957, nine Hands of the Cause selflessly steered the Faith towards the next key development in its unfolding destiny. They organised the process by which the Universal House of Justice would be elected, and then stepped back to allow that institution to lead the Bahá'í community exactly as 'Abdu'l-Bahá had envisaged in His Will & Testament, though sadly, given that Shoghi Effendi had appointed no successor, with no possibility of the continuance of the Guardianship.

Century of Light describes the moment when the Universal House of Justice came into being (page 81):

On 21 April 1963, the ballots of delegates from fifty-six National Spiritual Assemblies brought into existence the Universal House of Justice, the governing body of the Cause conceived by Bahá'u'lláh and assured by Him unequivocally of Divine guidance in the exercise of its functions . . .

They point towards the difficult decision Shoghi Effendi had had to make (pages 82-83):

. . . . it is clear that Shoghi Effendi early accepted the implications of the fact that the Universal House of Justice could not come into existence until a lengthy process of administrative development had created the supporting structure of National and Local Spiritual Assemblies it required.

It is important we begin to understand the full significance of this election and what it presaged (page 92):

The process leading to the election of the Universal House of Justice very likely constituted history's first global democratic election. Each of the successive elections since then has been carried out by an ever broader and more diverse body of the community's chosen delegates, a development that has now reached the point that it incontestably represents the will of a cross-section of the entire human race. There is nothing in existence that in any way resembles this achievement.

The House then had some significant decisions to make given that it did not have the authority to appoint new Hands of the Cause but their function needed to continue (pages 97-98):

. . . the House of Justice created, in June 1968, the Continental Boards of Counsellors. Empowered to extend into the future the functions of the Hands of the Cause for the protection and propagation of the Faith, the new institution assumed responsibility for guiding the work of the already existing Auxiliary Boards and joined National Assemblies in shouldering responsibilities for the advancement of the Faith. [In 1973 there was] another major development of the Administrative Order, the creation of the International Teaching Centre, the Body that would carry into the future certain of the responsibilities performed by the group of "Hands of the Cause Residing in the Holy Land", and from this point on coordinate the work of the Boards of Counsellors around the world.

A. The Period Since Then

There has been a twin impact in terms of the Faith (page 97):

During these crucial thirty- seven years the work proceeded rapidly forward along **two parallel tracks: the expansion and consolidation of the Bahá'í community itself** and, along with it, **a dramatic rise in the influence the Faith came to exercise in the life of society**. While the range of Bahá'í activities greatly

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diversified, most such efforts tended to contribute directly to one or other of the two main developments.

A sequence of seven plans of various durations followed (page 98-99) until ‘Twelve Month Plan that ended the century.’ The strands of activity in each plan built upon those of Shoghi Effendi and the Founders of the Faith: ‘the **training of Spiritual Assemblies**; the translation, production and distribution of **literature**; the encouragement of **universal participation** by the friends; attention to the **spiritual enrichment** of Bahá’í life; efforts toward the **involvement of the Bahá’í community in the life of society**; the **strengthening of Bahá’í family life**; and the **education of children and youth**.’

The opportunities created were beyond the capacity of any individual to manage (page 100): it became necessary to ‘launch Bahá’í communities on a wide range of **collective teaching and proclamation projects** recalling the heroic days of the dawn-breakers.’ **Teams of teachers** were created and the Faith reached ‘entire groups and even whole communities. The tens of thousands became **hundreds of thousands**.’

As a result ‘members of Spiritual Assemblies . . . had to adjust to expressions of belief on the part of **whole groups of people** to whom religious awareness and response were **normal features of daily life**.’

The **role of the youth was central** – not for the first time in the history of the Faith (ibid): ‘. . . one is reminded again and again that the great majority of the band of heroes who launched the Cause on its course in the middle years of the nineteenth century were all of them young people. **The Bab Himself declared His mission when He was twenty-five years old**, and Anís, who attained the imperishable glory of dying with his Lord, was only a youth. **Quddus responded to the Revelation at the age of twenty-two**. . . . **Tahirih was in her twenties** when she embraced the Bab's Cause.’

More challenges followed. **Mass enrolments exceeded the community's capacity to nurture those who had declared their faith** in Bahá'u'lláh. Also (page 101) ‘. . . Theological and administrative principles that might be of consuming interest to pioneers and teachers were seldom those that were central to the concern of new declarants from very different social and cultural backgrounds. Often, **differences of view** about even such elementary matters as the use of time or simple social conventions **created gaps of understanding** that made communication extremely difficult.

Though the Bahá’í World Centre emphasised that **expansion**, the bringing in of newly declared Bahá’ís, and **consolidation**, their deepening in the Faith, were ‘**twin processes** that must go hand in hand,’ the ‘hoped for results did not readily materialise’ and ‘a **measure of discouragement frequently set in**.’ Enrolment slowed ‘tempting some Bahá’í institutions and communities to turn back to more familiar activities and more accessible publics.’

The main impact of the setbacks was to clarify that (page 102) ‘the high expectations of the early years were in some respects quite unrealistic.’ It became obvious that ‘the easy successes of the initial teaching activities . . . did not, by themselves, build a Bahá’í community life that could meet the needs of its new members and be self-generating.’

(End of Presentation: any questions?)

Key Questions

Pioneers and new believers faced questions previous experience offered few answers (ibid: my bullet pointing).

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- How were Local Spiritual Assemblies to be established - and once established, how were they to function - in areas where large numbers of new believers had joined the Cause overnight, simply on the strength of their spiritual apprehension of its truth?
- How, in societies dominated by men since the dawn of time, were women to be accorded an equal voice?
- How was the education of large numbers of children to be systematically addressed in cultural situations where poverty and illiteracy prevailed?
- What priorities should guide Bahá'í moral teaching, and how could these objectives best be related to prevailing indigenous conventions?
- How could a vibrant community life be cultivated that would stimulate the spiritual growth of its members?
- What priorities, too, should be set with respect to the production of Bahá'í literature, particularly given the sudden explosion that had taken place in the number of languages represented in the community?
- How could the integrity of the Bahá'í institution of the Nineteen Day Feast be maintained, while opening this vital activity to the enriching influence of diverse cultures?
- And, in all areas of concern, how were the necessary resources to be recruited, funded, and coordinated?

1. How many of these questions do we feel relate to our own situation?

2. Do we have answers? If so, what are they? If not, what might those answers be?

Page 102: The pressure of these urgent and interlocking challenges launched the Bahá'í world on **a learning process** that has proved to be as important as the expansion itself. It is safe to say that during these years **there was virtually no type of teaching activity**, no combination of expansion, consolidation and proclamation, no administrative option, no effort at cultural adaptation **that was not being energetically tried in some part of the Bahá'í world.**

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.

All group members needs to keep their own record of the main points for using in the role play at the end of the group consultation. The notes should be easy to use in a conversation. Both groups will use the same material.

B. The Integration of Social Action

Page 103: The fact that the Bahá'í message was now penetrating the lives not merely of small groups of individuals but of whole communities also had the effect of reviving a vital feature of an earlier stage in the advancement of the Cause. For the first time in decades, the **Faith found itself once more in a situation where teaching and consolidation were inseparably bound up with social and economic development.**

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An Office of Social and Economic Development was created at the World Centre in October 1983, and 'Bahá'í communities throughout the world were called on to begin incorporating such efforts into their regular programmes of work.'

Page 104: The temptation was great, given the magnitude of the resources being invested by governments and foundations, and the confidence with which this effort was pursued, **merely to borrow methods current at the moment or to adapt Bahá'í efforts to prevailing theories**. As the work evolved, however, Bahá'í institutions began turning their attention to the goal of **devising development paradigms** that could assimilate what they were observing in the larger society to the Faith's unique conception of human potentialities.

The successive Plans yielded the greatest harvest in **India**. By 1985 the growth of the Faith there had reached a level a more sharply focused attention was needed 'than the National Spiritual Assembly alone could provide. Thus was born the **new institution of the Regional Bahá'í Council**, setting in motion the process of administrative decentralisation that has since proven so effective in many other lands.'

In addition (page 105) '**India's House of Worship** has become the foremost visitors' attraction on the subcontinent, welcoming an average of over ten thousand visitors every day, . . . [which] has given new meaning to the description by 'Abdu'l-Bahá of Bahá'í Temples as "**silent teachers**" of the Faith.'

Its reputation was now such that the National Spiritual Assembly of Indian was able to host, 'in collaboration with the Bahá'í International Community's newly created Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity, **a symposium on the subject of "Religion, Science and Development"**. More than one hundred of the most influential development organisations in the country participated.

Malaysia began to follow suit. Then Bahá'í communities in **Africa** (page 106) achieved remarkable **spiritual victories**, having 'survived war, terror, political oppression and extreme privations.'

In 1992 (page 107) '**the Bahá'í world celebrated its second Holy Year, this one marking the centenary of the ascension of Bahá'u'lláh and the promulgation of His Covenant**. Truly remarkable was 'the ethnic, cultural and national diversity of the 27,000 believers who gathered at the Javits Convention Centre in New York City' together with together with the thousands present at nine auxiliary conferences across the world.'

At Ridván 2010, the Universal House of Justice's message explained that 'all social action seeks to apply the teachings and principles of the Faith **to improve some aspect of the social or economic life of a population, however modestly**.' The Office of Social and Economic Statement (OSED – page 2) amplifies on this:

Most central to this vision was the question of **capacity building**. That activities should **start on a modest scale** and only grow in complexity in keeping with available human resources was a concept that gradually came to influence development thought and practice.

They continue (page 4):

Bahá'í activity in the field of social and economic development seeks to promote the well-being of people **of all walks of life**, whatever their beliefs or background. . . . Its purpose is **neither to proclaim the Cause nor to serve as a vehicle for conversion**.

Page 5: To seek coherence between the spiritual and the material does not imply that the material goals of development are to be trivialised. It does require, however, **the rejection of approaches to development which define it as the transfer to**

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all societies of the ideological convictions, the social structures, the economic practices, the models of governance—in the final analysis, the very patterns of life—**prevalent in certain highly industrialized regions of the world.** When the material and spiritual dimensions of the life of a community are kept in mind and due attention is given to both scientific and spiritual knowledge, **the tendency to reduce development to the mere consumption of goods and services and the naive use of technological packages is avoided.**

Page 6: Every member of the human family has not only the right to benefit from a materially and spiritually prosperous civilization but also **an obligation to contribute towards its construction.** Social action should operate, then, on the principle of **universal participation.**

The ‘scope and complexity’ (page 9) of such activity must be **‘commensurate with the human resources available** in a community to carry it forward.’

Page 13: when an effort is **participatory**, in the sense that it seeks to involve the people themselves in the generation and application of knowledge, as all forge together a path of progress, **dualities such as “outsider-insider” and “knowledgeable-ignorant” quickly disappear.**

C. Capacity Building

Pages 108-09: One of the great strengths of the masses of humankind from among whom the newly enrolled believers came lies in an openness of heart that has the potentiality to generate lasting social transformation. **The greatest handicap of these same populations has so far been a passivity learned through generations of exposure to outside influences** which, no matter how great their material advantages, have pursued agendas that were often related only tangentially - if at all - to the realities of the needs and daily lives of indigenous peoples.

As a result, ‘the lessons that had been learned during earlier Plans now placed the emphasis on **developing the capacities of believers** - wherever they might be - so that all could arise as **confident protagonists** of the Faith's mission.’ The means to achieve this had been developed from the 1970s in **Colombia**, ‘against a background of violence and lawlessness that was deranging the life of the surrounding society.’ A **‘systematic and sustained programme of education in the Writings’** had been devised and was ‘soon adopted in neighbouring countries.’

By the time the Four Year Plan ended (pages 109-110) ‘over one hundred thousand believers were involved world-wide in the programmes of the more than three hundred permanent training institutes.’ The process was moved on a stage further ‘by creating networks of “study circles” which utilise the talents of believers to replicate the work of the institute at a local level.’

1. The word ‘modest’ effectively occurs twice in the quoted passages about social action. Why do we think that is?
2. How does the idea of ‘capacity building’ translate into this context?
3. How easy is it for us to step outside the assumptions we have acquired in our ‘industrialised’ (note OSED does not say ‘developed’) society? Why is it so necessary that we do so?
4. Much of the work within the Bahá’í community has been aimed at breaking the prevalent pattern of passivity and involving an ever-greater proportion of people in its activities. Why do we think this can be so difficult to achieve? What are the influences that militate against this attempt? What are the benefits of breaking this pattern in however small a way?

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Group Report Back: this is to be done as an exercise in role play. As far as time permits, one member of each group takes it in turns to explain to a member of the other group what they have learnt and needs to field whatever questions and comments come their way. This should involve those, if any, whom time did not permit to do this earlier. The exact method for this will be determined on the day when we know the exact group sizes.

D. Not Just the Bahá'ís

Page 110: The prosecution of the Divine Plan entails no less than **the involvement of the entire body of humankind** in the work of its own spiritual, social and intellectual development.

Various threads intertwine here.

1. Involvement in the UN

Pages 115-16: The birth of the United Nations opened to the Faith a far broader and more effective forum for its efforts toward exerting a spiritual influence on the life of society. [In 1948] the eight National Spiritual Assemblies then in existence secured from the responsible United Nations body accreditation for "The Bahá'í International Community" as an international non-governmental organisation.

In 1980 (page 117), 'the attempt by the Shi'ih clergy of Iran to exterminate the Cause in the land of its birth' catapulted the Bahá'í relationship with the wider world to a new level.'

The Bahá'í response was unusual (page 119):

The persecuted community neither attacked its oppressors, nor sought political advantage from the crisis. Nor did its Bahá'í defenders in other lands call for the dismantling of the Iranian constitution, much less for revenge. All demanded only justice - the recognition of the rights guaranteed by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, endorsed by the community of nations, ratified by the Iranian government, and many of them embodied even in clauses of the Islamic constitution.

2. Justice.

The word 'justice' occurs a number of times in *Century of Light*. It is 'the best beloved of all things' in the sight of God, Bahá'u'lláh writes. It entails seeing with our own eyes and not relying on the eyes of others. To get a clearer sense of how the Bahá'í community sees this principle operating at the highest level of the wider society it is perhaps worth pausing to look at a statement that has been twice presented to the UN before we continue with the issue of the human rights of the Bahá'ís in Iran.

In terms of both the individual and the legal system the Bahá'í position is as follows (from *Turning Point* – pages 10-11 – and from *Prosperity of Humankind* – pages 6-8):

In any system of governance, a strong judicial function is necessary to moderate the powers of the other branches and to enunciate, promulgate, protect and deliver justice. The drive to create just societies has been among the fundamental forces in history and without doubt no lasting world civilization can be founded unless it is firmly grounded in the principle of justice.

Justice is the one power that can translate the dawning consciousness of humanity's oneness into a collective will through which the necessary structures of global community life can be confidently erected. An age that sees the people of the world increasingly gaining access to information of every kind and to a diversity of ideas will find justice asserting itself as the ruling principle of successful social organization.

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At the **individual** level, justice is that faculty of the human soul that enables each person to distinguish truth from falsehood. In the sight of God, Bahá'u'lláh avers, justice is “the best beloved of all things” since it permits each individual to see with his own eyes rather than the eyes of others, to know through his own knowledge rather than the knowledge of his neighbour or his group.

At the **group** level, a concern for justice is the indispensable compass in collective decision-making, because it is the only means by which unity of thought and action can be achieved. Far from encouraging the punitive spirit that has often masqueraded under its name in past ages, justice is the practical expression of awareness that, in the achievement of human progress, the interests of the individual and those of society are inextricably linked. To the extent that justice becomes a guiding concern of human interaction, a consultative climate is encouraged that permits options to be examined dispassionately and appropriate courses of action selected. In such a climate the perennial tendencies toward manipulation and partisanship are far less likely to deflect the decision-making process.

Such a conception of justice will be gradually reinforced by the realization that in an interdependent world, the interests of the individual and society are inextricably intertwined. In this context, justice is a thread that must be woven into the consideration of every interaction, whether in the family, the neighbourhood, or at the global level.

3. Persecution of the Bahá'ís in Iran

While progress was slow and complete reversal of the persecution was not achieved (page 121), ‘In time, the United Nations Human Rights Commission, however slow and relatively cumbersome its operations may appear to some outside observers, succeeded in **compelling the Iranian regime to bring the worst of the persecution to a halt. . .**’

As a result of the persecution the Bahá'í community (ibid) has learnt ‘**how to use the United Nations' human rights system** in the manner intended by that system's creators, **without having recourse to involvement in political partisanship of any kind, much less violence.**’

4. Promoting Peace

In 1985 (page 122), as the Iranian crisis was unfolding, the Universal House of Justice issued through National Spiritual Assemblies the statement *The Promise of World Peace*, addressed to the generality of humankind. In ‘unprovocative but uncompromising terms’ the document expressed ‘**Bahá'í confidence in the advent of international peace as the next stage in the evolution of society.**’

5. The Bahá'í International Community

The Bahá'í International Community (pages 122-23) ‘became, in only a few short years, one of the most influential of the non-governmental organisations . . . Because it is, and is seen to be, entirely non-partisan, it has increasingly been trusted as a mediating voice in complex, and often stressful, discussions in international circles on major issues of social progress. This reputation has been strengthened by appreciation of the fact that the Community refrains, on principle, from taking advantage of such trust to press partisan agendas of its own.’

6. Publications

Page 140: This process [of spiritual empowerment] was immeasurably strengthened in 1992 through the long-awaited publication of a fully-annotated translation into English

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of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, a repository of Divine guidance for the age of humanity's collective maturity.

7. The Unity of the Bahá'í Spiritual and Administrative Centres

Page 142: In contrast to the circumstances of other world religions, the spiritual and administrative centres of the Cause are inseparably bound together in this same spot on earth, its guiding institutions centred on the Shrine of its martyred Prophet. For many visitors, even the harmony that has been achieved in the variegated flowers, trees and shrubs of the surrounding gardens seems to proclaim the ideal of unity in diversity that they find attractive in the Faith's teachings.

Final Questions (hopefully 30 minutes!)

It is clear that on the world's stage the Bahá'í community has achieved increasing prominence over the years, first through the travels of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, then through the campaigns launched by Shoghi Effendi, later by our involvement at the UN and finally by increasingly effective programmes of expansion, consolidation and social action.

1. Where does that leave us now – whether as members of the Bahá'í community or of the wider society?
2. What are our respective roles?
3. How do we play our different parts in the context of what we have learnt about the world right now?