



The Meaning of Community

Ann Boyles offers a perspective on the meaning of "community," its condition today, and what it will look like in the next millenium. This article appeared in the 1996-97 edition of The Bahá'í World, pp. 197-219.

It was Aristotle who first defined the word "community" as a group established by men having shared values. That initial definition has been refined and expanded through the years. We have come, for example, to recognize that people can belong to a number of different "communities" simultaneously--communities of place; cultural communities; communities of memory, in which people who may be strangers share "a morally significant history"; and psychological communities "of face-to-face personal interaction governed by sentiments of trust, co-operation, and altruism."¹

The world, we are repeatedly reminded, has contracted into a "global village." One effect of this

contraction is the bringing together of hitherto isolated peoples, allowing for the development of new patterns of civilization--but also creating new tensions. Thus, challenges now confront communities at local, national, and global levels. For example, new information technologies have created "networks" and "cybercommunities" in the world of the Internet that link individuals and organizations around the globe without regard for national boundaries; small communities around the planet are affected by urban migration or by degradation of the natural and built environment; the existence of national communities--nation states--is under threat from assaults by ethnic or tribal enclaves. Ironically, while the emergence of a global community wielding effective power is seen by many as a necessity in order to combat the ill effects of unfettered market economics, the whole idea that a real global community can ever come into existence is met with deep misgivings or complete skepticism by others. How, then, can we understand "community" at the end of the twentieth century--and what will its future be in the next millennium?

A number of significant challenges to community have arisen from developments in global information

technologies. While pundits ponder whether or not Internet users form any kind of viable community as they sit at their computers in farflung corners of the world, a deeper and more serious issue is the manner in which the entire structure of computer networks undermines more traditional kinds of community organization.

As Jessica Mathews points out in her essay "Power Shift," which appeared in a recent issue of *Foreign Affairs*, these new information technologies have challenged established societal hierarchies. They have empowered civil society, which in turn has allowed the world's peoples generally to be more involved than previously in issues that were once the sole province of states and to forge new links between democracy, human rights, and international security. Yet, the technologies themselves are not always used to achieve constructive ends. They have, for example, also promoted the spread of global organized crime, and they have enabled individuals to cross borders easily to subvert governments and, at times, create new societal divisions.

The future of the state, in her view, is therefore uncertain. Information technologies, she points out "disrupt hierarchies, spreading power among more people and groups." She continues,

In drastically lowering the costs of communication, consultation, and coordination, they favor decentralized networks over other modes of organization. In a network, individuals or groups link for joint action without building a physical or formal institutional presence. Networks have no person at the top and no center. Instead, they have multiple nodes where collections of individuals or groups interact for different purposes. Businesses, citizens organizations, ethnic groups, and crime cartels have all readily adopted the network model. Governments, on the other hand, are quintessential hierarchies, wedded to an organizational form incompatible with all that the new technologies make possible.²

The technologies, she concludes, weaken community by empowering individuals, and her article contains this dire prediction:

The prophets of an internetted world in which national identities gradually fade, proclaim its revolutionary nature and yet believe the changes will be wholly benign. They won't be. The shift from national to some other political allegiance, if it comes, will be an emotional, cultural, and political earthquake.³

Mathews raises important questions: What kind of community can be forged in an internetted world, where the structure of the technology promotes anarchy, with its emphasis on complete freedom of expression and lack of regard for authority? Does this spell the end of the nation-state and, if so, what other kind of political entity might arise in its stead? The challenges posed by the new information technologies may generate significant crises felt throughout the world, but such a development looms on the horizon.

There are, however, a number of current crises facing community. Loss of the sense of community based on "place" is a worldwide phenomenon. Millions of people all over the planet are being displaced from their homes. Some are refugees fleeing escalating political strife. Others are forced

from their homes by economic necessity, such as farmers from rural China who are migrating to cities in vast numbers, searching for factory work. Such movement destroys families, undermines the traditional sense of trust found in community, increases feelings of isolation and dislocation, and creates a host of social problems.

Even where people still maintain their homes, there are challenges to the sense of place. A case in point is America, where planners are in revolt against the manner in which the built environment of communities has been shaped in the latter part of the twentieth century. A movement widely known by the name "new urbanism" protests against the "fantastic, awesome, stupefying ugliness" of "the gruesome, tragic suburban boulevards of commerce" so common in American towns and cities, contending that "this ugliness is the surface expression of deeper problems" and contributes substantially to the widely expressed sense of "loss of community" felt throughout the society.⁴

The new urbanists posit that going back to the planning and design principles that shaped the traditional neighborhoods of America is a way of

recapturing this lost sense of place and community, of reversing a pattern of development they see as "economically catastrophic, an environmental calamity, socially devastating, and spiritually degrading." Discarding the zoning laws that segregate various activities, they seek to create neighborhoods (or hamlets or villages) of manageable size which, when clustered together, become towns and cities. Each neighborhood is constructed on a "human scale"; it contains both residential and commercial property and provides housing for people of different levels of income. The proposal is not fantastic. Many traditional European towns, for example, have preserved this element of "human design." But to make such a change, citizens everywhere must take an active role in decisions regarding the environment in which they live:

Human settlements are like living organisms. They must grow, and they will change. But we can decide on the nature of that growth--on the quality and the character of it--and where it ought to go. We don't have to scatter the building blocks of our civic life all over the countryside, destroying our towns and ruining farmland.... It is within our power to create places that are worthy of our affection.⁵

Such loss of "community of place" can also bring loss of communities of memory and communities governed by trust. In the late nineteenth century Ferdinand Tönnies theorized that in the development of systems of culture, communities invariably move from a period of *Gemeinschaft*, where shared experience and likeness are most important, toward a period of *Gesellschaft*, where individuals exist in isolation from each other, there is a strong sense of competition, relationships are contractual, and monetary values prevail. Such a progression has been noted by others as well. In this century, Pitirim A. Sorokin, for example, saw societies moving through ideational, idealistic, and sensate stages, away from spiritual truth and values towards self-indulgence and material values. But is such a progression inevitable?

If we again take the case of America and look at it in Tönnies' terms, we see that the society is in a period of *Gesellschaft*. William Leach, in his insightful 1993 volume *Land of Desire*, analyses the forces that have shaped modern America as "a distinct culture, unconnected to traditional family or community values, to religion in any conventional sense, or to political democracy.... The cardinal

features of this culture were acquisition and consumption as the means of achieving happiness; the cult of the new; the democratization of desire; and money value as the predominant measure of all value in society."⁶ As this culture grew, Leach writes, "Increasingly, the worth of everything--even beauty, friendship, religion, the moral life--was being determined by what it could bring in the market."⁷

Leach characterizes the dominant mode of interaction in twentieth century life as an amoral "brokering style," the features of which are "repressing one's own convictions and withholding judgment in the interest of forging profitable relationships." Contending that it "occupies a preeminence in today's political and moral economy," he writes, "Brokers are now busy in nearly every sphere of activity, and they have helped inject into American culture a new amoralism essentially indifferent to virtue and hospitable to the ongoing inflation of desire."⁸ Because America, with the collapse of communism, is now the world's undisputed single superpower, its role as the leading exponent of Western capitalist values--which have

been exported throughout the entire world--is crucial.

Indeed, some writers have gone so far as to characterize the current devotion to those values as a worldwide "religious" phenomenon. David Loy writes:

...our present economic system should also be understood as our religion, because it has come to fulfill a religious function for us. The discipline of economics is less a science than the theology of that religion, and its god, the Market, has become a vicious circle of ever-increasing production and consumption by pretending to offer a secular salvation. The collapse of communism--best understood as a capitalist "heresy"--makes it more apparent that the market is becoming the first truly world religion, binding all corners of the globe more and more tightly into a worldview and set of values whose religious role we overlook only because we insist on seeing them as "secular."⁹

George Soros shares this view, stating, "What used to be a medium of exchange has usurped the place of fundamental values.... The cult of success has

replaced a belief in principles. Society has lost its anchor."¹⁰ Concluding that "there is something wrong with making the survival of the fittest a guiding principle of civilized society," he proposes an "open society" as the antidote to the havoc that laissez-faire capitalism and market values are wreaking in democratic society, where the guiding principles of "nonmarket values" are eclipsed by the influence of market values. Current confidence that "the unhampered pursuit of self-interest will bring about an eventual international equilibrium" is, in his view, "misplaced." An "open society" would promote institutions that allow people to live together in peace, in spite of their different views, interests, and beliefs concerning what is true. He concludes, however, that there is currently no willingness to establish the means to preserve a global open society.

Another commentator, William Greider, in his book *One World, Ready or Not: The Manic Logic of Global Capitalism*, also contends that the widespread adoption of market economics does not and will not bring social and political stability, which have often been touted as long-term benefits. In fact, he says, the spread of market economics

destroys the fabric of traditional societies and provides ideal conditions for contending political forces to fight each other for control.

In a response to Greider's book in *The Atlantic Monthly*, Lester Thurow concurs, saying, "Capitalism is myopic and cannot make the long-term social investments in education, infrastructure, and research and development that it needs for its own future survival. It needs government help to make those investments, but its own ideology won't allow it either to recognize the need for those investments or to request government help. That is the ideological paradox of our time."¹¹

According to Greider, we stand at a watershed in history: "A revolutionary principle is embedded in the global economic system, awaiting broader recognition: Human dignity is indivisible. Across the distances of culture and nations, across vast gulfs of wealth and poverty, even the least among us are entitled to dignity, and no justification exists for brutalizing them in the pursuit of commerce."¹² He continues, "any prospect of developing a common global social consciousness will inevitably force people to reexamine themselves first and come to

terms with their own national contradictions and hypocrisies. And just as Americans cannot claim a higher morality while benefiting from inhumane exploitation, neither can developing countries pretend to become modern `one world' producers and expect exemption from the world's social values."¹³

While there is, as yet, no set of social values generally accepted by the world, attempts have recently been made to introduce an internationally accepted "Charter of Human Responsibilities." This document would "provide a broader ethical context to the principles inherent within the Universal Declaration of Human Rights" to "accentuate those positive obligations each individual should assume in the service to humanity and the rest of creation."¹⁴ The charter has not yet gained wide acceptance, but its formulation is a hopeful sign.

Values are also a main concern of Philip Selznick, a communitarian philosopher who contends not only that social justice must be the foundation of community but that it is the responsibility of both individuals and the collective. Thus, the communitarian concept of community is a "unity of

unities"--a sort of "federal" unity that preserves the integrity of the parts by emphasizing individual moral autonomy as well as the moral bonds of civility, which are seen to be interdependence and reciprocity.¹⁵ The concept of "stewardship" in governance further binds social power to moral ideals.¹⁶ It is a concept that looks outward rather than inward--or, as Selznick puts it, moves towards "the `we' of humanity."¹⁷ In this concept of community the balance of particularism and universalism is regarded as crucial, respecting diversity "without allowing its claims to override those of basic humanity and justice."¹⁸

It is not surprising that movements such as the communitarians have arisen to revisit the roots of Western society and to reexamine the values underpinning its culture. Their response to "the weakening of institutions, the blurred line between liberty and license, the widespread preference for short-run gains," is to prescribe "more extensive responsibility in every aspect of personal experience and social life" as the antidote.¹⁹

Two other communitarians have offered some valuable insights into a community-friendly,

sustainable system of economics. In their book *For the Common Good*, Herman E. Daly and John B. Cobb, Jr., make a distinction between two different paradigms of economic behavior: chrematistics and oikonomia. Chrematistics, they say, "can be defined as the branch of political economy relating to the manipulation of property and wealth so as to maximize short-term monetary exchange value to the owner"--a model that conforms to Leach's, Soros' and Greider's view of capitalism, as epitomized by the American system. In contrast, oikonomia "is the management of the household so as to increase its use value to all members of the household over the long run." They continue, "If we expand the scope of household to include the larger community of the land, of shared values, resources, biomes, institutions, language, and history, then we have a good definition of `economics for community.'"²⁰

The concept of oikonomia seems quite close to Selznick's "stewardship." Cobb and Daly's assertion that "True economics concerns itself with the long-term welfare of the whole community"²¹ posits a conception of humans as something quite different from mere consumers--and of community as something much different from a mere marketplace.

They argue that seeing people only as beings "bent on optimizing utility or satisfaction through procuring unlimited commodities,"²² which is the view underlying current economic theory, leads to "policies that weaken existing patterns of social relationships."²³ They advocate, instead, that "economics should be refounded on the basis of a new concept of Homo economicus as person-in-community,"²⁴ recognizing that

the well-being of a community as a whole is constitutive of each person's welfare...because each human being is constituted by relationships to others, and this pattern of relationships is at least as important as the possession of commodities. These relationships cannot be exchanged in a market. They can, nevertheless, be affected by the market, and when the market grows out of the control of a community, the effects are almost always destructive. Hence this model of person-in-community calls not only for provision of goods and services to individuals, but also for an economic order that supports the pattern of personal relationships that make up the community.²⁵

Daly and Cobb argue strongly for a conscious movement towards the adoption of social behavior and values that will enhance "the common good" and build the foundations of a community that will protect the environment and promote ways of living that provide for a sustainable future. Such an approach addresses some of the key challenges facing community.

At the broadest level of discussion, many contemporary thinkers, such as Daly and Cobb, see the global nature of environmental crises and the interconnectedness of national economies, for example, as leading inexorably towards the establishment of a global community of some sort. Others, however, see the whole idea as an utter impossibility. Some of the most provocative pieces to appear in print on this topic during the past several years have been authored by Samuel P. Huntington, whose essay "The Clash of Civilizations?" in *Foreign Affairs* sparked a firestorm of debate on his thesis that the emergence of a global civilization is a utopian fantasy. Huntington later expanded his position to a full-length book, notably dropping the question mark at

the end of the title to read *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*.

The phrase "world community" "has become the euphemistic collective noun (replacing 'the Free World') to give global legitimacy to actions reflecting the interests of the United States and other Western powers,"²⁶ he contends. The West, whose system of liberal democracy has recently been touted as the pinnacle of social evolution and achievement, is not, in his view, a universal civilization. "What is universalism to the West is imperialism to the rest," he states.²⁷

While Huntington focuses on "civilization," which he defines as "the highest cultural grouping of people and the broadest level of cultural identity people have short of that which distinguishes humans from other species," the elements he sees as shaping civilizations are quite similar to those generally accepted as characteristics of community: "common objective elements, such as language, history, religion, customs, institutions" and "the subjective self-identification of people."²⁸

He is extremely skeptical that any kind of unified global civilization can ever develop. At the individual level, he asserts that there must always be "the civilizational `us' and the extracivilizational `them'" because we fear and distrust people who are different; we experience difficulty in communicating with them; and we are unfamiliar with what motivates them, how they conduct social relationships, and so on.²⁹ In opposition to Daly and Cobb, he states that "it is human to hate"; "for self-definition and motivation people need enemies: competition in business, rivals in achievement, opponents in politics. They naturally distrust and see as threats those who are different and have the capability to harm them."³⁰ This rivalry extends to the sphere of religion. As Huntington says, "Whatever universalist goals they may have, religions give people identity by positing a basic distinction between believers and nonbelievers, between a superior in-group and a different and inferior out-group."³¹ Further, "if a universal civilization is emerging," he asserts, "there should be signs of a universal language and a universal religion developing." He concludes, "Nothing of the sort is occurring."³²

Andrew Bard Schmookler, while also identifying "intersocietal anarchy" as "the overarching context of civilized life," is somewhat more optimistic than Huntington about the development of a united global civilization. "As long as the human cultural system was fragmented into a multiplicity of separate units," he asserts, "the problem of power remained insoluble."³³ He contends that now "an escape from this fragmented system is beginning to emerge," although dangers still remain:

For the first time, the world is becoming a single interdependent system in which all the world's peoples are in contact. Meanwhile, the age-old struggle for power goes on and may annihilate us before we can create an order that controls power. But the centuries ahead give us the opportunity to place all human action within a structure that for the first time makes truly free human choice possible. Even so, it is far from clear how to get from here to there, or even what kind of world order "there" should be.³⁴

Malaysia's deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim advances one possible path for humanity to tread. In his forthcoming book *The Asian Renaissance*, he

criticizes Huntington's approach as "nothing more than Orientalism in a new garb," a view he characterizes as "false and dangerous":

It is false because it implies an inherent impermeability of cultures, an inability to absorb each other's characteristics, and presupposes the existence of a "Great Wall" separating the civilizations of the world. It is dangerous because it generates paranoia and breeds animosity and suspicion and may, therefore, become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Thus, the question is not whether civilizations will clash, but whether civilizations ought to clash.³⁵

To avoid such conflict, he asserts that if we reflect on "higher ideals,"

we will discover that there is less difference between East and West than is often made out to be....The challenge at hand is to conceive a common vision of the future which goes beyond our current concerns and preoccupations, advancing toward the creation of a global community, dominated neither by the East nor the West, but dedicated to the ideals of both.³⁶

He advocates a "civilizational dialogue," undertaken with the goal of achieving a "global convivencia--a harmonious and enriching experience of living together among people of diverse religions and cultures."³⁷

The uncertain hope expressed by Schmookler, the pessimism of Huntington, the fundamental structural changes described by Mathews, the ills outlined by Leach, Greider, Soros, and others, and the prescriptions advanced by Daly, Cobb, Selznick, and Ibrahim all provide differing perspectives on the strenuous debate currently taking place around the subject of community. Where the world will go from here remains uncertain. Various individuals and organizations have attempted to address the ills of society, which are generally perceived to be worldwide in scope, but, as Soros comments rather bitterly, no will exists to establish institutions and mechanisms that would effectively govern a global community. And certainly there is no wide agreement about what exactly the fundamental values of such a community should be.

It is clear from the number and variety of problems confronting humanity at this stage in its history that

community development must be pursued at all levels, from the local to the global. Religion is one powerful means to address these problems, since it has traditionally been concerned with two broad questions: the purpose of existence and the nature of the community. In fact, the word "religion" itself is derived from *religio*, meaning "to bind together."

Members of the world's youngest independent religion, the Bahá'í Faith, who now number some five million souls from more than 2,000 tribes, races, and ethnic groups, have forged a united, dynamic community that is flourishing at the local, national, and global levels. The vision that unites this diverse group comes from Bahá'u'lláh, the Founder of the Bahá'í Faith. He taught that all people worship one God, Who has guided the development of humanity through successive Messengers Who have founded the world's major religions. The human race, Bahá'u'lláh said, now stands at the threshold of maturity, and the time has come for the uniting of all peoples into a peaceful and integrated global society. His prescriptions for humanity all lead toward that end.

Bahá'ís are, therefore, deeply concerned with the process of community building. To help them advance in their understanding of this issue, the Universal House of Justice, the Faith's international governing council, has offered a definition of "community," which it characterizes as "more than the sum of its membership":

it is a comprehensive unit of civilization composed of individuals, families and institutions that are originators and encouragers of systems, agencies and organizations working together with a common purpose for the welfare of people both within and beyond its own borders; it is a composition of diverse, interacting participants that are achieving unity in an unremitting quest for spiritual and social progress.^{[38](#)}

Because spiritual values have the power to simultaneously unite peoples and transform political order into a moral community, the Bahá'í Faith has tremendous capacities to promulgate the model of a healthy, dynamic community. Indeed, Shoghi Effendi, the Guardian of the Faith, writing about the Bahá'ís, once referred to "the society-building power which their Faith possesses."^{[39](#)}

The principle that has enabled the Bahá'í Faith to achieve an unprecedented level of unity as a world community and yet preserve local communities' and individuals' unique identities is that of "unity in diversity," about which Shoghi Effendi offers this commentary:

The Faith of Bahá'u'lláh has assimilated, by virtue of its creative, its regulative and ennobling energies, the varied races, nationalities, creeds and classes that have sought its shadow, and have pledged unswerving fealty to its cause. It has changed the hearts of its adherents, burned away their prejudices, stilled their passions, exalted their conceptions, ennobled their motives, coordinated their efforts, and transformed their outlook. While preserving their patriotism and safeguarding their lesser loyalties, it has made them lovers of mankind, and the determined upholders of its best and truest interests. While maintaining intact their belief in the Divine origin of their respective religions, it has enabled them to visualize the underlying purpose of these religions, to discover their merits, to recognize their sequence, their interdependence, their wholeness and unity, and to acknowledge the bond that vitally links them to itself. This universal, this transcending love

which the followers of the Bahá'í Faith feel for their fellow-men, of whatever race, creed, class or nation, is neither mysterious nor can it be said to have been artificially stimulated. It is both spontaneous and genuine. They whose hearts are warmed by the energizing influence of God's creative love cherish His creatures for His sake, and recognize in every human face a sign of His reflected glory.⁴⁰

This sense of spiritual unity that provides the basis of community structure pervades all aspects of Bahá'í community life. As one writer puts it,

...the meaning of Community is a meaning which can only be gradually unfolded as our experience in living the ideals of Community grows and evolves. Beyond our sense of friendship and fellowship and social interaction there is the reality of spiritual unity....

...unity is the essence of the Bahá'í Faith, because it is the principle of spiritual unity applied at a social level, a spiritual unity which has never before been realized in any community, a spiritual unity which flows from the communion of the individual soul

with God and from the vision of God revealed in the soul of every other believer in that Community.⁴¹

True civilization does not arise from material progress, but rather is founded on the transcendent values that hold society together. Bahá'ís believe that the theories and practices that promote self-indulgence and disrupt the connections among individuals must be directly challenged. Service to humanity and a commitment to a deeper level of engagement with each other and the problems of society are key motivating forces behind the Bahá'í community. As Bahá'u'lláh has written:

That one indeed is a man who, today, dedicateth himself to the service of the entire human race.... Blessed and happy is he that ariseth to promote the best interests of the peoples and kindreds of the earth.... It is not for him to pride himself who loveth his own country, but rather for him who loveth the whole world. The earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens.⁴²

Such service is the hallmark of true religion. In the words of `Abdu'l-Bahá, son of Bahá'u'lláh:

Universal benefits derive from the grace of the Divine religions, for they lead their true followers to sincerity of intent, to high purpose, to purity and spotless honor, to surpassing kindness and compassion, to the keeping of their covenants when they have covenanted, to concern for the rights of others, to liberality, to justice in every aspect of life, to humanity and philanthropy, to valor and to unflagging efforts in the service of mankind. It is religion, to sum up, which produces all human virtues, and it is these virtues which are the bright candles of civilization.⁴³

To support the spiritual unity and desire to serve humanity that form the basis of community in Bahá'u'lláh's teachings, a structure to guard that unity and to promote acts of service is also explicitly laid out in the Faith's sacred writings. As the eminent Bahá'í writer Horace Holley comments:

Faith alone, no matter how wholehearted and sincere, affords no basis on which the organic unity of a religious fellowship can endure...

The Bahá'í teaching has this vital distinction, that it extends from the realm of conscience and faith to the

realm of social action. It confirms the substance of faith not merely as a source of individual development but as a definitely ordered relationship to the community.⁴⁴

He goes on to discuss the nature of the authority to which Bahá'ís commit themselves:

Sovereignty, in the Bahá'í community, is attributed to the Divine prophet, and the elected representatives of the believers in their administrative function look to the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh for their guidance, having faith that the application of His universal principles is the source of order throughout the community. Every Bahá'í administrative body feels itself a trustee, and in this capacity stands above the plane of dissension and is free of that pressure exerted by factional groups.⁴⁵

Here one finds an application of the concept of "stewardship," as mentioned by Selznick. Indeed, as Holley says, the Local Spiritual Assembly, the council that is elected annually, "represents the collective conscience of the community with respect to Bahá'í activities."⁴⁶ In short,

Spiritual Assemblies, local and national, combine an executive, a legislative and a judicial function, all within the limits set by the Bahá'í teachings.... They are primarily responsible for the maintenance of unity within the Bahá'í community and for the release of its collective power in service to the Cause.⁴⁷

The administrative model conceived by Bahá'u'lláh promotes a concept of leadership embodying trustworthiness, wisdom, and willingness to sacrifice for the common good, and whose highest expression is service to the community. It also fosters collective decision making and collective action through a process called "consultation." Conducted in a spirit of unity, its purpose is to search out the truth. Those engaged in the process are enjoined to express their views with "all freedom," but at the same time "with the utmost devotion, courtesy, dignity, care, and moderation."⁴⁸ In this way, participants can avoid antagonism and conflict, and all can freely express their views without fear of displeasing or alienating anyone. Here, one sees how the "right" of freedom of speech is balanced by the "responsibility" of moderate expression. Indeed, Bahá'u'lláh states that "Human utterance is an essence which aspireth to

exert its influence and needeth moderation." Its influence, He says, "is conditional upon refinement which in turn is dependent upon hearts which are detached and pure," and its moderation should be "combined with tact and wisdom."⁴⁹

Because the Bahá'í community--just a century and a half old--is only "at the very beginning of the process of community building," the House of Justice also provides, in its Ridvan 1996 letter, guidance regarding the elements necessary for healthy community growth. To facilitate the healthy growth of communities that can engage in an "unremitting quest for spiritual and social progress," the House of Justice emphasizes that they must promote patterns of behavior "by which the collective expression of the virtues of the individual members and the functioning of the Spiritual Assembly are manifest in the unity and fellowship of the community and the dynamism of its activity and growth." These patterns include the integration and inclusion of all the adults, youth, and children in "spiritual, social, educational and administrative activities," as well as "local plans of teaching and development." Another distinctive pattern of behavior is seen in the "collective will and sense of

purpose" to establish and maintain Bahá'í administrative institutions, particularly evident in the annual election of Spiritual Assemblies in communities around the world. A final pattern involves "the practice of collective worship of God" through regular devotional meetings, seen as "essential to the spiritual life of the community."

And indeed, the spirit of unity underlying their communities and the structures that govern them are not only for Bahá'ís, who believe that through time a unified global community will be forged, whether "reached only after unimaginable horrors precipitated by humanity's stubborn clinging to old patterns of behavior" or "embraced now by an act of consultative will."⁵⁰ As Shoghi Effendi wrote,

Unification of the whole of mankind is the hall-mark of the stage which human society is now approaching. Unity of family, of tribe, of city-state, and nation have been successively attempted and fully established. World unity is the goal towards which a harassed humanity is striving. Nation-building has come to an end. The anarchy inherent in state sovereignty is moving towards a climax. A world, growing to maturity, must abandon this

fetish, recognize the oneness and wholeness of human relationships, and establish once for all the machinery that can best incarnate this fundamental principle of its life.⁵¹

Shoghi Effendi describes the global society promised in the Bahá'í sacred writings as follows:

A world community in which all economic barriers will have been permanently demolished and the interdependence of Capital and Labor definitely recognized; in which the clamor of religious fanaticism and strife will have been forever stilled; in which the flame of racial animosity will have been finally extinguished; in which a single code of international law--the product of the considered judgment of the world's federated representatives--shall have as its sanction the instant and coercive intervention of the combined forces of the federated units; and finally a world community in which the fury of a capricious and militant nationalism will have been transmuted into an abiding consciousness of world citizenship--such indeed, appears, in its broadest outline, the Order anticipated by Bahá'u'lláh, an Order that shall come to be regarded as the fairest fruit of a slowly maturing age.⁵²

In the Bahá'í view, such a development is not a utopian vision; it is the next and highest step in the development of "an ever-advancing civilization," "the furthestmost limits in the organization of human society."⁵³

A response to Huntington's objection that there can be no global civilization because no universal religion or language is emerging is found within the Bahá'í Faith. First, it is a universal religion. As Bahá'u'lláh wrote over one hundred years ago,

There can be no doubt whatever that the peoples of the world, of whatever race or religion, derive their inspiration from one heavenly Source, and are the subjects of one God. The difference between the ordinances under which they abide should be attributed to the varying requirements and exigencies of the age in which they were revealed. All of them, except a few which are the outcome of human perversity, were ordained of God, and are a reflection of His Will and Purpose.⁵⁴

Further, He states,

Verily I say, this is the Day in which mankind can behold the Face, and hear the Voice, of the Promised

One.... Great indeed is this Day! The allusions made to it in all the sacred Scriptures as the Day of God attest its greatness. The soul of every Prophet of God, of every Divine Messenger, hath thirsted for this wondrous Day. All the divers kindreds of the earth have, likewise, yearned to attain it.⁵⁵

With regard to the choice or development of a single language, Bahá'u'lláh says in His book of laws:

O members of parliaments throughout the world! Select ye a single language for the use of all on earth, and adopt ye likewise a common script.... This will be the cause of unity, could ye but comprehend it, and the greatest instrument for promoting harmony and civilization, would that ye might understand!⁵⁶

While all the elements necessary for the establishing of a global society are present in the Bahá'í sacred writings, the forging of a world community will, in the words of Shoghi Effendi, be a "gradual process." The first step towards it will be the establishment of what Bahá'ís call "the Lesser Peace," a political union reached by the nations of the world:

This momentous and historic step, involving the reconstruction of mankind, as the result of the universal recognition of its oneness and wholeness, will bring in its wake the spiritualization of the masses, consequently to the recognition of the character, and the acknowledgment of the claims, of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh--the essential condition to that ultimate fusion of all races, creeds, classes, and nations which must signalize the emergence of His New World Order.⁵⁷

"Then," Shoghi Effendi continues, "will the coming of age of the entire human race be proclaimed and celebrated by all the peoples and nations of the earth." The "Most Great Peace" will be established with the universal recognition of the message of unity brought by Bahá'u'lláh, following which "a world civilization [will] be born, flourish, and perpetuate itself, a civilization with a fullness of life such as the world has never seen nor can as yet conceive."⁵⁸

The establishment of a world civilization, promoting an unimaginable "fullness of life," is assured. With confidence in the eventual achievement of this aim,

Bahá'ís face the uncertainty of the transition period in which we are now living.

While others are not so confident, even the more pessimistic express some vague hope that a peaceful world community will somehow arrive. At the end of his book *The Ends of the Earth: A Journey at the Dawn of the 21st Century*, Robert Kaplan asks a crucial question: "As a species, we can imagine justice and harmony. But how can justice and harmony be possible for much of humanity, given the evidence of history, plus the inflammatory potential of a fourfold increase in population since the nineteenth century, with antennas rising from mudhuts to allow the poor to see how the rich live?"⁵⁹ Kaplan has no answer to this question, but he closes his book with a quotation from the poem "Addressed to Haydon" by the visionary English poet John Keats:

And other spirits...are standing apart
Upon the forehead of the age to come;
These, these will give the world another heart,
And other pulses. Hear ye not the hum
Of mighty workings?--
Listen awhile ye nations, and be dumb.

Bahá'u'lláh delivered His message to humanity short years after Keats penned these lines. "The world's equilibrium," He stated, "hath been upset by the vibrating influence of this most great, this new World Order. Mankind's ordered life hath been revolutionized through the agency of this unique, this wondrous System--the like of which mortal eyes have never witnessed."⁶⁰ Bahá'u'lláh called the peoples of the world together in unity; He delineated the structure of a community that can function unitedly on the local, national, and global levels to promote justice and build a peaceful world. When considering the challenges facing communities at the end of the twentieth century, thinking people would do well to study the model that has brought together, in some 153 years, more than five million people from extremely diverse backgrounds and has enabled them to establish a single, united global community that both nourishes the individual and safeguards the good of the whole. These are indeed, in Keats' words, "mighty workings": here is a model that can benefit all the inhabitants of the planet.

At the [Habitat II conference in Istanbul](#) , in June 1996, the Bahá'í International Community shared its vision of communities of the future--a vision that

addresses many of the challenges facing us at the end of this turbulent century:

Communities that thrive and prosper in the new millennium will do so because they acknowledge the spiritual dimension of human nature and make the moral, emotional, and intellectual development of the individual a central priority. They will guarantee freedom of religion and encourage the establishment of places of worship. Their centers of learning will seek to cultivate the limitless potentialities latent in human consciousness and will pursue as a major goal the participation of all peoples in generating and applying knowledge. Remembering at all times that the interests of the individual and of society are inseparable, these communities will promote respect for both rights and responsibilities, will foster the equality and partnership of women and men, and will protect and nurture families. They will promote beauty, natural, and man-made, and incorporate into their design principles of environmental preservation and rehabilitation. Guided by the concept of unity in diversity, they will support widespread participation in the affairs of society, and will increasingly turn to leaders who are motivated by the desire to serve. In these communities the fruits of science and

technology will benefit the whole society, and work will be available for all.

Communities such as these will prove to be the pillars of a world civilization--a civilization which will be the logical culmination of humanity's community-building efforts over vast stretches of time and geography. Bahá'u'lláh's statement that all people are "born to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization," implies that every person has both the right and the responsibility to contribute to this historic and far-reaching, collective enterprise whose goal is nothing less than the peace, prosperity, and unity of the entire human family.⁶¹

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