

THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE

Day of the Covenant
26 November 2003

To the Followers of Bahá'u'lláh in the Cradle of the Faith

Dearly loved Friends,

It is now a little over 125 years since 'Abdu'l-Bahá addressed His open letter to the people of your country. Because of His vital role in a religious community that had been made the object of intense prejudice, the Author necessarily refrained from attaching His name to the document. His message, however, could not have been more clear. Speaking out of a profound love for a native land that He had not seen during the long years of exile since His childhood, the Master appealed in passionate language for its people to call to mind those days when Iran "was as the heart of the world", "the source and centre of sciences and arts, the wellspring of great inventions and discoveries, the rich mine of human virtues and perfections". The time had come, He insisted, when the heirs of so great a civilization could—and must—arise and reclaim their heritage.

What the letter prophetically laid out was the challenge of modernity. Today, that challenge has become the inescapable preoccupation of populations throughout the planet, not least the peoples of the Islamic world. The meaning of modernity and the features of that rising flood of cultural revolution were explicitly identified in the Master's message: constitutional and democratic government, the rule of law, universal education, the protection of human rights, economic development, religious tolerance, the promotion of useful sciences and technologies and programmes of public welfare. In praising the achievements of what He termed this "temporal and material apparatus of civilization", the Master made it clear that He was not proposing simply a credulous imitation of the West. On the contrary. In uncompromising language, He portrayed European society as drowning "in the sea of passion and desire", trapped in a materialistic perception of reality that could bring in its wake nothing but disillusionment:

Be just: can this nominal civilization, unsupported by a genuine civilization of character, bring about the peace and well-being of the people or win the good pleasure of God? Does it not, rather, connote the destruction of man's estate and pull down the pillars of happiness and peace?

Readers were urged to look below surface phenomena. As a lengthy exposition of historical processes would have burdened what was intended as an urgent appeal for reflection and action, 'Abdu'l-Bahá confined Himself to a few salient examples of the points He was making. Their common theme was the transformative power that has been responsible for all of humanity's development over the ages and that would later lend the published edition of the letter its familiar title *The Secret of Divine Civilization*. Whether in reviewing events of Persian history or touching on passages in the Holy Qur'án, the letter called on its readers to reflect deeply about the unique endowment that promotes the advancement of all human well-being:

Consider carefully: all these highly varied phenomena, these concepts, this knowledge, these technical procedures and philosophical systems, these sciences, arts, industries and inventions—all are emanations of the human mind. Whatever people has ventured deeper into this shoreless sea, has come to excel the rest. The happiness and pride of a nation consist in this, that it should shine out like the sun in the high heaven of knowledge.

The Secret of Divine Civilization is a celebration of the creative role played by the rational faculty—God's greatest gift to humankind—in the advancement of civilization. Among the fruits of the mind that He particularly singled out, the Master laid strong emphasis on scientific and technological development. His readers were encouraged to reflect on the benefits that would accrue to Persian society through taking appropriate advantage of whatever had been accomplished in this respect by peoples of other lands, whether in the West or elsewhere. It had been the free-ranging powers of the human intellect, He insisted, that had discovered and tested each of the benefits enjoyed by any people, and no legitimate argument could be advanced for imposing cultural or national barriers to the operations of this universal process. Its achievements represent the common possessions of the entire human race, their adoption by a nation or people neither diminishing the users nor reflecting on their native capacities.

At a much deeper level, the Master turned his readers' attention to the spiritual forces shaping and impelling the work of the mind. In one of the most penetrating passages of the letter, He challenged those fundamental errors about the nature of man and society that had already had ruinous consequences in other lands and that could, if not avoided, undermine the capacity of the Iranian people to assess their present situation objectively and seize the opportunities before them. "There are", 'Abdu'l-Bahá remarked, "some who imagine that an innate sense of human dignity will prevent man from committing evil actions and ensure his spiritual and material perfection." On the contrary, He pointed out, it is readily observable that human development depends on education. He then drew the implications of this law for the progress of society. All the evidence inescapably demonstrates that the principal influence in the gradual civilizing of human character, far from being a simple endowment of nature, has been the effect produced on the rational soul by the guidance of the successive Messengers of God. It has been through Their intervention, and through it alone, that the peoples of the world, of whatever nation or religion, have learned the values and ideals that have empowered them to put material resources and technological means at the service of human betterment. It is They who, in each age, have defined the meaning and requirements of modernity. It is They who have been the ultimate Educators of humankind:

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 honour, 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 valour 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.

We have reviewed briefly here the argument of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's great message because of the remarkable extent to which contemporary events vindicate its diagnosis and prescriptions. The insights it contains illumine both the situation in which the Iranian people currently find themselves and the related implications for you who are the followers of Bahá'u'lláh in that country. The message was a summons—to the country's leaders and the population alike—to free themselves from blind submission to dogma and to accept the need for fundamental changes in behaviour and attitude, most particularly a willingness to subordinate personal and group interests to the crying needs of society as a whole.

As you well know, the Master's appeal was ignored. Locked in the grip of an antiquated Qájár autocracy restrained only by its incompetence, Persia drifted ever deeper into stagnation. Venal politicians competed with one another for a share of the diminishing wealth of a country driven to the verge of bankruptcy. Worse still, a population that had once produced some of the greatest minds in the history of civilization—Cyrus, Darius, Rumi, Hafiz, Avicenna, Rhazes and countless others—had become the prey of a clerical caste, as ignorant as it was corrupt, whose petty privileges could be maintained only by arousing in the helpless masses an unreasoning fear of anything progressive.

Little wonder then that, taking advantage of the chaos that followed in the wake of the first world war, an ambitious army officer was able to seize power and establish a personal dictatorship. To him—as to his son after him—deliverance from Persia's ills was assumed to lie in a systematic programme of "Westernization". Schools, public works, a trained bureaucracy and a well-equipped military served the needs of the new national government. Foreign investment was encouraged as a means of developing the country's impressive national resources. Women were freed from the worst of the restrictions that had prevented their development and were given opportunities for education and useful careers. Although the Majlis remained little more than a facade, hope rose that, in time, it might emerge as a genuine institution of democratic government.

What emerged, instead, through the single-minded exploitation of Iran's petroleum resources, was wealth on an almost unimaginable scale. In the absence of anything resembling a system of social justice, the chief effect was to vastly enrich a privileged and self-serving minority, while leaving the mass of the population little better off than they had been before. Treasured cultural symbols and the heroic episodes of a glorious past were resurrected merely to decorate the monumental vulgarity of a society whose moral foundations were built on the shifting sands of ambition and appetite. Protest, even the mildest and most reasonable, was smothered by a secret police unconstrained by any constitutional oversight.

In 1979 the Iranian people threw off this despotism and swept its counterfeit claims to modernity into history's dustbin. Their revolution was the achievement of the combined forces of many groups, but its driving force was the ideals of Islám. In place of wanton self-indulgence, people were promised lives of dignity and decency. Gross inequities of class and wealth would be overcome by the spirit of brotherhood enjoined by God. The natural resources with which providence has endowed so fortunate a land were declared to be the patrimony of the entire Iranian people, to be used to provide universal employment and education. A new "Islamic Constitution" ostensibly enshrined solemn guarantees of equality before the law for all citizens of the republic. Government would endeavour conscientiously to combine spiritual values with the principles of democratic choice.

How do such promises relate to the experience being described 25 years later by the great majority of Iran's population? From all sides today one hears cries of protest against endemic corruption, political manipulation, the mistreatment of women, a shameless violation of human rights and the suppression of thought. What is the effect on public consciousness, one must further ask, of appeals to the authority of the Holy Qur'án to justify policies that lead to such conditions?

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Iran's crisis of civilization will be resolved neither by blind imitation of an obviously defective Western culture nor by retreat into medieval ignorance. The answer to the dilemma was enunciated on the very threshold of the crisis, in the clearest and most compelling language, by a distinguished Son of Iran Who is today honoured in every continent of the world, but sadly not in the land of His birth. Persia's poetic genius captures the irony: "I searched the wide world over for my Beloved, while my Beloved was waiting for me in my own home." The world's appreciation of Bahá'u'lláh came perhaps most explicitly into focus on 29 May 1992, the centenary of His death, when the Brazilian Chamber of Deputies met in solemn session to pay tribute to Him, to His teachings and to the services rendered to humanity by the community He founded. On that occasion, the Speaker of the Chamber and spokespersons from every party rose, successively, to express their profound admiration of One who was described in their addresses as the Author of "the most colossal religious work written by the pen of a single Man", a message that "reaches out to humanity as a whole, without petty differences of nationality, race, limits or belief".

What has been the response in His native land to a Figure whose influence has brought such honour to the name of Iran? From the middle years of the 19th century when He arose to champion the Cause of God, and despite the reputation His philanthropy and intellectual gifts had won, Bahá'u'lláh was made the object of a virulent campaign of persecution. In recognizing His mission, your forefathers had the imperishable glory of sharing in His sufferings. Throughout the ensuing decades, you who have remained faithful to His Cause, who have sacrificed for it and promoted its civilizing message to the most remote regions of the planet have known your own portion of abuse, bereavement and humiliation—each Bahá'í family in Iran.

One of the most appalling afflictions, in terms of its tragic consequences, has been the slander of Bahá'u'lláh's Cause perpetrated by that privileged caste to whom Persia's masses had been taught to look for guidance in spiritual matters. For over 150 years, every medium of public information—pulpit, press, radio, television and even scholarly publication—has been perverted to create an image of the Bahá'í community and its beliefs that is grossly false and whose sole aim is to arouse popular contempt and antagonism. No calumny has been too vile; no lie too outrageous. At no point during those long years were you, the victims of this vilification, given an opportunity, however slight, to defend yourselves and to provide the facts that would have exposed such calculated poisoning of the public mind.

One example will stand for all the rest. Of the countless accomplishments of the Cause, particularly striking has been the success of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings in inculcating, in one generation of believers after another, the highest standards of personal morality. No argument is needed here to defend this assertion. The reputation for integrity that the Bahá'í community has won worldwide—among publics, governments and international agencies alike—speaks for itself. Thousands of your fellow citizens have also had good cause to appreciate its character at first hand. And yet, driven by ungovernable malice, your self-appointed enemies in Iran have

not hesitated to bring against you charges of every form of human depravity, charges which—when recounted in free societies where the Faith is well known—have merely exposed the degeneracy of the minds capable of concocting them.

Parallel with this campaign of moral defamation has been a strategy devised to intimidate all those who, aware of the truth of the matter, were moved to come to your assistance. Having associated you in popular opinion with attitudes and behaviour that are a danger to society, your oppressors then accuse anyone who appeals on your behalf of also being a Bahá'í and therefore lacking in credibility. The extremes to which this systematic corruption of public life extends can be seen in the willingness of those behind the scheme to represent even long-standing opponents of the Cause as being its secret supporters. Have they not gone so far as to claim that a discredited prime minister—whose father had been expelled from the Bahá'í community precisely because of his partisan political involvement, who was himself insistent to his last breath on his Islamic identity and who was the cause of great difficulties for the Bahá'í community—was in fact a clandestine member of the Faith?

Nor have your oppressors been content with slander. For a century and a half you have suffered repeated violence. Most recently, since the 1979 revolution, you have seen some of the noblest men and women whom Bahá'u'lláh has raised up imprisoned on charges too outlandish to warrant comment, subjected to monstrous tortures and murdered after farcical trials, their property plundered by their persecutors and by the hoodlums who serve and protect them. Your elected Spiritual Assemblies, long the most advanced examples of democratic decision-making bodies in the country, were arbitrarily dissolved, many of their members kidnapped and slain. How many the children who have been orphaned. How many the youth who have seen their educational plans and hopes of earning a livelihood brutally extinguished. How many the aged left homeless, the pensions for which they had worked a lifetime confiscated by fatvás issued by men unworthy of respect. How many the parents who have been forced to bury the mutilated bodies of their sons and daughters in whatever barren wastelands were allocated to them for the purpose. What indeed of the flower-bordered Bahá'í cemeteries, tenderly cared for over the years, that have been maliciously bulldozed, the precious remains of countless loved ones shovelled onto heaps of rubble?

Those perpetrating these atrocities are eager to raise a hue and cry—as indeed they have every right to do—if the least offence is given in another land to a location associated with the sacred name of Islám. But what of the Bahá'í Shrines and other Holy Places in Iran? What of the priceless House of the Blessed Báb in Shíráz, centre of pilgrimage for the entire Bahá'í world, destroyed by a municipal wrecking crew acting under the direction of 'ulamá, its sacred precincts paved over as an ultimate desecration? Speaking of persons so base as to commit acts of this evil, Bahá'u'lláh has declared, “God is wholly quit of them, and likewise are We.”

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No one would contend that you are alone in the ordeals you are enduring. The victims of injustice today number in countless millions. Each year, the agendas of the human rights organizations are overwhelmed by appeals from spokespersons for oppressed minorities of every type—religious, ethnic, social and national. In the words of Bahá'u'lláh, “Justice is in this day bewailing its plight, and Equity groaneth beneath the yoke of oppression.” What has more alarmed perceptive observers of such situations than even the physical and material anguish caused is the spiritual damage done to the victims. Deliberate oppression aims at dehumanizing those whom it subjugates and at de-legitimizing them as members of society, entitled to neither rights nor consideration. Where such conditions persist over any length of

time, many of those affected lose confidence in their own perception of themselves. Inexorably, they become drained of that spirit of initiative that is integral to human nature and are reduced to the level of objects to be dealt with as their rulers decide. Indeed, some who are exposed to sustained oppression can become so conditioned to a culture of brutalization that they, in their turn, are ready to commit violence against others, should the opportunity offer itself.

What is it then, the world is beginning to ask, that has preserved you from spiritual corrosion of this nature? Where have you found the resources to free your hearts from resentment and to act with magnanimity toward those who have taken part in your mistreatment? How is it that, after a century and more of unremitting persecution—and the calculated attempt at genocide of these past 25 years—you still retain both a confident mastery of your moral purpose and an abiding love for the land in which you have suffered so greatly? The incomparable words of Bahá'u'lláh supply the answer:

Every fire is seen to be extinguishable except for the fire of the Love of God that is manifest and ablaze in the hearts. Every mighty tree will be uprooted by tempestuous winds except for the trees of the Divine orchard, and every lamp is quenched except for the lamp of the Cause of God, which shineth in the heart of the world. Winds will add to its brightness, and it will never be extinguished.

This is the answer that history will give to those who enquire of your secret. Your lives are the fruit of that Divine orchard, the handiwork of the Creative Word to which you have surrendered your hearts. “O well-beloved ones! The tabernacle of unity hath been raised; regard ye not one another as strangers. Ye are the fruits of one tree and the leaves of one branch.” “...love is light, no matter in what abode it dwelleth; and hate is darkness, no matter where it may make its nest.” “Were man to appreciate the greatness of his station and the loftiness of his destiny he would manifest naught save goodly character, pure deeds, and a seemly and praiseworthy conduct.” “In this day, all must cling to whatever is the cause of the betterment of the world and the promotion of knowledge amongst its peoples.” “...the tongue is for mentioning what is good, defile it not with unseemly talk.” “Women and men have been and will always be equal in the sight of God.” “One speck of chastity is greater than a hundred thousand years of worship and a sea of knowledge.” “We have enjoined upon all to engage in crafts and trades and have accounted it as an act of worship.” “Trustworthiness is the greatest of doors leading to the tranquility and security of the people of the world.” “Knowledge is the cause of exaltation and advancement. It enableth man to pass beyond the world of dust to the realms above and leadeth him out of darkness into light. It is the redeemer and the bestower of life. It conferreth the living waters of immortality and imparteth heavenly food.”

All of you have, from childhood, been familiar with the exhortation of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá that so marvellously sums up these ideals: “To be a Bahá’í is to be the embodiment of all human perfections.”

The spirit of resourcefulness and practicality you are displaying also brings great comfort to the anguished hearts of your fellow believers in other lands. When your children were expelled from schools because of their Faith, you created classrooms in your homes. Graduates of the institution you founded to meet the needs of university students, who are similarly denied education, are today distinguishing themselves in prestigious universities in other countries where their credentials have been gladly accepted. God willing, the day is not far distant when opportunities for the development of their capacities will be opened for the thousands of other

Bahá'í youth still cruelly deprived. The sacrificial pooling of modest incomes is proving not only sufficient to ensure that members of the community are not left in want, but to produce funds for general activities. Under the most arduous conditions, a vibrant community life continues, with the far greater intensity that testing alone can produce.

For over a century this spirit has borne fruit both in Iran and throughout the entire world. There is today no region of the planet where the capacities of Iranian Bahá'ís have not lent a mighty impetus to the expansion of the teaching work and the establishment and consolidation of the Faith's institutions. Nor has the impact been limited to the spiritual life of the Faith. It would be difficult to think of any profession, any field of science or the arts, where Iranian Bahá'ís—particularly youth—are not powerfully manifesting the ideal of excellence so often reiterated by 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Such qualities do not burst forth in a people overnight, nor are they the product of mere human will. In the lives and work of Persian pioneers around the world today can be seen the fruit of the culture of learning and self-discipline in which they and their parents were lovingly raised in the land of their birth.

To every fair-minded observer, you are the living proof that faith in God and confidence in social progress are in every sense reconcilable; that science and religion are the two inseparable, reciprocal systems of knowledge impelling the advancement of civilization. Already, you begin to see this realization dawning in the eyes of many Muslims of your acquaintance. These friends and neighbours, who can truly lay claim to being “a people summoning unto goodness”, have watched with outrage as those whom they know to be innocent of any crime have been slandered and attacked without recourse to legal protection. They are sensitive—perhaps even more than you are yourselves—to the spirit of courage and decency that you have displayed throughout these ordeals. And they are also awakening to the real character of those whose abuse of you defiles the honour of Islám, in whose name such crimes are perpetrated. If you are not yet physically free, you are at last beginning to win acceptance as a respected and valued part of the Iranian people. Ahead lies the day when your fellow citizens will have recognized and come to treasure the contribution you are destined to make to Iran's recovery of her rightful place among the nations of the world.

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Ruling elites can make no more serious error than to imagine that the power they have managed to arrogate to themselves provides an enduring bulwark against the relentless tides of historical change. Today, in Iran as everywhere throughout the world, these tides roll in with insistent urgency and tumultuous force. They are not merely at the door of the house, but rise up irresistibly through its floors. They cannot be diverted. They will not be denied.

This is the real reason why Bahá'u'lláh was so desperately opposed by clergy and rulers who recognized in Him—correctly if only dimly—the Voice of a coming society of justice and enlightenment, in which they themselves would have no place. Nor should you have any doubt that it is this same fear that animates the successive waves of persecution you have long endured. Those who investigate the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh with sincerity readily appreciate that the Bahá'í community is a creative minority that is the embodiment of its Founder's vision of the future and of His indomitable Will to achieve it. Through your love, your sacrifices, your services and your very lives, you have proven to be the true promoters of the progress of your dear homeland of which 'Abdu'l-Bahá has written:

The horizon of Persia hath been illumined with the light of the heavenly Orb. Erelong will the Daystar of the supernal realm shine so brightly as to raise that land even unto the ethereal heights and to cause it to shed its radiance over the whole earth. The imperishable glory of bygone generations shall once more be manifest in such wise as to dazzle and bewilder the eyes....

Iran shall become a focal centre of divine splendours. Her darksome soil will become luminous and her land will shine resplendent. Although now wanting in name and fame, she will become renowned throughout the world; although now deprived, she will attain her highest hopes and aspirations; although now destitute and despondent, she will obtain abundant grace, achieve distinction and find abiding honour.

Each time we visit the Holy Shrines you are in the forefront of our hearts and prayers. Your long night will end, and you will have the joy of witnessing with your own eyes the mighty structure your sacrifices have raised.

*The Universal House
of Justice*

