

*The Unity Principle:  
Ideas of Social Concord and Discord in the Bahá'í Faith (1)*

by

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**Ideas of Social Concord and Discord in the Bahá'í Faith**

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The issue of social concord--and by implication, discord--is central to understanding the Bahá'í Faith. The Bahá'í Faith's founder, Bahá'u'lláh (1817-92), stated that the purpose of religion is "to establish unity and concord amongst the peoples of the world" (2). His son and successor `Abdu'l-Bahá (1844-1921), added that the purpose of Bahá'u'lláh's life and the reason he endured enormous hardships--for Bahá'u'lláh was severely persecuted for his teachings--was to ensure that "the oneness of humankind become a reality, strife and warfare cease and peace and tranquillity be realized by all" (3).

Concord and discord, for Bahá'ís, are defined in relation to the Bahá'í concept of unity, which Shoghi Effendi (1897-1957), `Abdu'l-Bahá's successor, describes as the "watchword" and "hallmark" of Bahá'í beliefs (4). Like the Christian notion of love, the Bahá'í notion of unity is complex and multifaceted. Its development in the Bahá'í writings (the writings of Bahá'u'lláh, `Abdu'l-Bahá, and Shoghi Effendi) synchronized with the development of the Bahá'í community itself, first in the nineteenth-century Islamic Middle East, then in the context of twentieth-century European and American culture when Bahá'í communities developed there as well, and finally (since the 1940s) in the context of sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, and South Asia, where the majority of the world's Bahá'ís now reside. As a result, it is very difficult to separate the idealized scriptural concept of

unity from the ongoing efforts to create unity in the Bahá'í community and overcome Bahá'í community crises.

The implications of the term *unity* are best seen when one considers how concord and discord are defined in the Bahá'í authoritative texts. Discord violates unity and thus helps clarify its boundaries, whereas concord is a synonym for unity (5). The Bahá'í authoritative texts also contain many principles and recommend many avenues of action that reinforce and strengthen unity or provide paths for its achievement. Hence a study of the Bahá'í notion of unity is a study of the central principle underlying the Bahá'í teachings. Unity is the backbone, to which the other teachings serve as lesser bones, muscles, and nerves making up the body of Bahá'í teachings.

### **Unity in the Spiritual Realm**

To understand the Bahá'í concept of human unity one must set it in the context of various spiritual unities. The first is the unity of God, a teaching basic to Judaism and Islam and, in modified form (because of the doctrine of the trinity), Christianity. The Bahá'í authoritative texts speak of two aspects of God: the attributes of God (such as patience, compassion, love, unity, justice, and kindliness), which humans can understand and discuss, and the divine essence, which transcends the attributes, is beyond human understanding, and is ultimately unknowable (6). In the attributes one finds the personal dimension of God; in the unknowable essence, the impersonal dimension, similar in some ways to the Hindu notion of brahman.

The Bahá'í scriptures make a sharp division between creator and creation. The two

are related in that creation reflects the attributes of God and thus serves as a mirror for understanding the divine; nevertheless it is separate from God. Human beings possess the potential to reflect all the divine attributes--other earthly creatures reflect a few, but not all; therefore humanity is at the spiritual apex of earthly life (7). Because all human beings potentially reflect all the divine attributes one can speak of the spiritual oneness of humanity, a oneness in creation that is a metaphor for the unity of God.

The Bahá'í scriptures describe two primary ways humanity learns about God. One is human reason; Bahá'u'lláh states that God's greatest gift to humanity is the "gift of understanding" (8). Turned toward creation, the gift of understanding teaches humans about God's attributes; systematized as philosophy, it weeds out contradictory concepts and refines our language for speaking about God.

The second (though to Bahá'ís, the more important) way to know God is via divine revelation. The Bahá'í authoritative texts note that through inspiration all humans have some access to this gift, but that only to a few rare individuals has the door of revelation been opened fully; they are termed *Manifestations of God*. The Bahá'í authoritative texts identify Abraham, Moses, Jesus, Muhammad, Krishna, Buddha, Zoroaster, the Báb (Bahá'u'lláh's forerunner) and Bahá'u'lláh as Manifestations, as well as several ancient and little-known Middle Eastern figures. Manifestations of God are founders and renewers of religion. The Bahá'í authoritative texts add that they are sinless, always speak God's will, and have a different spiritual rank than ordinary human beings. Because they all come from the same source, one can speak of the unity of the Manifestations; because they are channels of divine revelation, one can speak of the unity of revelation; and because they

found successive forms of religion, one can speak of the unity of religion (9).

### **Unity of Religion: Implications**

The Bahá'í concept of the unity of religion has important implications for its view of human history and the concord and discord that history contains. Rather than viewing history as the story of human sinfulness, as traditional Christian salvation history does, the Bahá'í notion of history stresses gradual progress as the twin processes of reasoning and revelation bring to humanity greater scientific, cultural, moral, and spiritual understanding. Successive societies represent better approximations of concord and unity. War, social strife, immorality, and corruption, common in society today as yesterday, represent the failure of human beings to understand and apply divine revelation to solve their problems.

The Bahá'í authoritative texts speak of an eternal covenant, a promise by God to guide and educate humanity through Manifestations. This covenant faced unique challenges with the rise of the modern age, for the potential and the needs of modernity are qualitatively different than those of past ages. Technological developments--particularly the invention of the telegraph, telephone, railroad, steamship, jet aircraft, and atomic power--have brought the world together, shrunk it to a neighborhood, mixed its peoples, mingled its cultures, created unparalleled opportunities for global cooperation, and made unprecedented destruction possible. Bahá'u'lláh claimed his revelation to be God's answer to modernity's unprecedented needs. The corpus of his writings far exceeds the scriptures of most previous religions in length (10). Unlike previous Manifestations, he wrote down

his revelation in order to avoid the problem of its accurate transmission to posterity. To prevent misinterpretation, Bahá'u'lláh delineated a system to coordinate his religion, resolve differences of interpretation, and maintain its unity. He said that the Bahá'í organizational system (the *administrative order*) was part of God's covenant with humanity, and therefore could not fail the Bahá'ís. The implications of these claims for concepts of concord and discord within the Bahá'í community will be considered later in this essay.

### **Unity of Humanity**

The unities discussed so far--unity of God, revelation, religion, and humanity--are unities that exist in a theological realm. The unity of humanity is a recognition of the common potential of human beings to reflect the divine attributes; a restatement, in Bahá'í scripture, of the biblical notion that humanity was created in God's image (Genesis 1:26). To this definition of human unity can be added a genetic definition repeatedly stated in the Bahá'í authoritative texts: that all human beings come from the same stock (11) and are members of the same species. Such a concept also may be found in the Bible, which states all humans are descended from Adam and Eve, ancestors (literally or metaphorically, depending on one's perspective) of all humanity.

But the Bahá'í concept of unity goes beyond theological assertions, for unity is also seen as an ongoing process with various levels or stages. The idealized form of unity is expressed in the metaphor that the Bahá'ís should be "one soul in many bodies" (12). This form of spiritual unity is rarely achieved in practice. `Abdu'l-Bahá describes it in these words:

Another unity is the spiritual unity which emanates from the breaths of the Holy Spirit. . . . Human unity or solidarity may be likened to the body, whereas unity from the breaths of the Holy Spirit is the spirit animating the body. This is a perfect unity. It creates such a condition in mankind that each one will make sacrifices for the other, and the utmost desire will be to forfeit life and all that pertains to it in behalf of another's good. This is the unity which existed among the disciples of Jesus Christ and bound together the Prophets and holy Souls of the past. It is the unity which through the influence of the divine spirit is permeating the Bahá'ís so that each offers his life for the other and strives with all sincerity to attain his good pleasure (13).

Spiritual unity is a goal behind many efforts of Bahá'ís. It is one reason why almost every Bahá'í event starts with prayers, for the prayers help establish a spiritual atmosphere and invoke a spiritual dynamic that allows the gathering to achieve its true purpose (14). The creation of spiritual unity is a principal purpose of the *nineteen-day feast*, the monthly Bahá'í community gathering for worship, consultation, and socializing (15). `Abdu'l-Bahá composed a prayer to use at the start of meetings of *spiritual assemblies* (local or national Bahá'í coordinating councils) that asks that "our thoughts, our views, our feelings may become as one reality, manifesting the spirit of union throughout the world" (16); a prayer designed to foster spiritual unity. Spiritual unity is also a goal of Bahá'í conventions where Bahá'í spiritual assemblies are elected. Bahá'í prayer books often contain a section titled "meetings" filled with prayers that seek, in their poetic language and the divine power they invoke, to create spiritual unity. The individual reading of these prayers in public is one of

the few public rituals in the Bahá'í Faith (17).

A pragmatic and active metaphor for unity is Bahá'u'lláh's exhortation "be ye as the fingers of one hand, the members of one body" (18). A hand cannot function without coordination of its fingers, nor can a body survive without the complementary efforts of its organs. Spiritual unity, however, need not be achieved for unity in action to be possible; while spiritual unity is the ideal, a lower level of unity is adequate to work together and may be a stage in the path to creating spiritual unity. Efforts to work together are emphasized and highly praised in the Bahá'í authoritative texts, which state "verily, God loveth those who are working in His path in groups, for they are a solid foundation." (19)

There are many possible levels of working together, from mere talking, to setting common goals, to assisting one another. The Bahá'í authoritative texts appear to view all such efforts as various levels or stages of unity. Unity itself is seen as an ongoing process that starts with people sitting together and ends with a mystical or spiritual communion.

### **Consultation as a Mechanism for Creating Unity**

The Bahá'í authoritative texts contain a mechanism for fostering unity termed *consultation*. The concept (*shúrá* in Arabic) is Qur'anic (42:38), but Bahá'u'lláh emphasized it ("in all things it is necessary to consult") (20), and `Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi elaborated on it. Consultation is a process based on the expression of virtues: "the prime requisites for them that take counsel together are purity of motive, radiance of spirit, detachment from all else save God, attraction to His Divine Fragrances, humility and lowliness amongst His loved ones, patience and long-suffering in difficulties and servitude



to His exalted Threshold" (21). Some of them--such as purity of motive, detachment, and humility--have obvious value in a decision-making context. Others, such as servitude to God, are relevant when one remembers that the ultimate purpose of consultation is to create spiritual unity, not just a practical level of unity. For this reason Bahá'ís will pray before they begin consulting, or stop to pray if the atmosphere in the room has become unfavorable to proper consultation. Bahá'ís will also interrupt their consultation to research relevant principles in the Bahá'í authoritative texts, to insure that their decisions are guided by the Bahá'í teachings.

Consultation cannot succeed without "absolute freedom" to express one's opinions. It must be based on respect for and trust in the participants. Although "no occasion for ill-feeling and discord" should arise, and one should "on no account feel hurt," disagreement is not prohibited; indeed, "the shining spark of truth cometh forth only after the clash of differing opinions" (22). Consultation thus calls on individuals to express themselves freely and frankly, and to offer differing views without giving or taking offense, a combination that requires great maturity and tact. Consultation also includes detachment from one's views, so that once one offers an idea in consultation it belongs to the group and is not an extension of oneself.

Since consultation is a process for arriving at truth that involves human beings, it often may be imperfect and opposing views may not be reconciled: "if, after discussion, a decision be carried unanimously, well and good; but if, the Lord forbid, differences of opinion should arise, a majority of voices must prevail" (23). Thus, unlike the Quakers, the Bahá'ís do not require unanimity for decision making. Once a decision has been reached,

however, the Bahá'í authoritative texts emphasize that all should support the decision, whether they previously had agreed with it or not:

If they agree on a subject, even though it be wrong, it is better than to disagree and be in the right, for this difference will abolish the divine foundation. Though one of the parties may be in the right and they disagree that will be the cause of a thousand wrongs, but if they agree and both parties be in the wrong, as it is in unity the truth will be revealed and the wrong made right. (24)

Without unity one might never be able to determine whether a decision was wrong, because disunity might sabotage efforts to implement a right decision and cause an effort to fail that otherwise might have succeeded. The paramount importance of unity over being right is underscored in the Bahá'í scriptures as follows: "if two souls quarrel and contend about a question of the Divine questions, differing and disputing, *both are wrong*" (italics in the original) (25).

### **Consultation and Bahá'í Organization**

The consultation process is crucial to the framework of Bahá'í organization. Bahá'u'lláh forbade his religion to have a clergy, thereby abolishing a specialized leadership class to which lay believers turn for advice and guidance. Instead he said each local grouping of Bahá'ís should select nine or more members to administer local affairs through consultation. Under `Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi this system became regularized and routinized. A local community of Bahá'ís elects nine adults every April 21 to serve on its local spiritual assembly or governing body. Nationally, Bahá'ís are divided

into electoral units, and each unit elects one or more delegates annually; the delegates gather annually to elect a nine-member national spiritual assembly (26). Every five years all of the national spiritual assemblies gather at the Bahá'í world center in Haifa, Israel, to elect the nine-member international Bahá'í governing council, the Universal House of Justice. All of these bodies function and make decisions through the consultation process. Furthermore, many local Bahá'í communities appoint committees--very large Bahá'í communities might have hundreds--that involve the rank and file in collective decision making. The administrative component of the nineteen-day feast--the portion that follows worship--involves consultation of the local Bahá'í community with its local spiritual assembly about matters of common concern.

In addition the Bahá'í Faith has specially appointed consultants whose primary purpose is to foster consultation and education in the Bahá'í community. The Universal House of Justice appoints Counselors at the international and continental levels whose main purpose is to meet with individual Bahá'ís or with local or national spiritual assemblies to encourage and educate them, give them suggestions, provide them with the latest information, and help them make decisions. The Counselors appoint Auxiliary Board members who carry out similar duties in regions of continents, and the Auxiliary Board members appoint assistants whose area might be several Bahá'í communities, one community, or even a specialized group in an area (such as youth, or Spanish speakers). The consequence of all these committees, group projects, and consultants is the creation of a culture of consultation in the Bahá'í community.

## Unity and Partisanship

A distinctive aspect of the Bahá'í concept of unity is the rejection of partisanship. Partisanship implies unity based on a lesser loyalty--an idea or ideology, a political party or faction, or a national, ethnic, or racial identity--rather than on service to humanity and adherence to divine revelation. Partisanship is unity with strings attached, for it exalts loyalty to one group over others. Partisanship is a roadblock to the spiritual unity that is the ultimate goal of Bahá'í social processes.

Creating a community without partisanship is a challenge few groups have attempted. One approach would be to convert only people of a single ethnic or social background, but the Bahá'í emphasis on the oneness of humanity demands an outreach to all strata of society. Defining narrow bounds of orthodoxy would be another approach, but the Bahá'í principle of independent investigation of truth encourages Bahá'ís to arrive at their own understandings of truth and limits efforts to suppress varying opinions. Consultation as a process that produces group consensus on many matters helps to reduce partisanship but cannot prevent it.

Instead, the Bahá'í Faith has tackled partisanship at one of the key points where it is expressed in systems of organization: the election process. The Bahá'í authoritative texts explicitly forbid nominations, campaigning, or even discussion of individuals by name before an election. A typical Bahá'í election begins with the gathering of the voters together (those unable to attend may vote by absentee ballot). Bahá'í prayers are then read, often followed by passages in the Bahá'í authoritative texts that stress the qualities or virtues one should consider when deciding privately who one will vote for. A frequently

read passage by Shoghi Effendi advises:

It is incumbent upon the chosen delegates [the voters] to consider without the least trace of passion and prejudice, and irrespective of any material consideration, the names of only those who can best combine the necessary qualities of unquestioned loyalty, of selfless devotion, of a well-trained mind, of recognized ability and mature experience. (27)

After such passages are read, absolute silence falls over the room. Each voter prays silently, meditates about the various choices that come to mind, and votes. Generally, all adult Bahá'ís in the jurisdiction are considered eligible to be voted for; a voting list is usually provided to each person or is available for examination. The ballots are then collected and counted by appointed tellers (28). Since only a plurality, rather than a majority (fifty percent plus one) is needed, one round of voting is adequate for a Bahá'í election unless a tie needs to be broken (29).

The Bahá'í authoritative texts give two reasons for avoiding the practice of nomination (and campaigning, which it implies). The first is that it is "in fundamental disaccord with the spirit which should animate and direct all elections held by Bahá'ís" because it "leads to the formation of parties" and produces "corruption and partisanship" (30). The second is that it kills "in the believer the spirit of initiative and of self-development," prevents "the development in every believer of the spirit of responsibility," and limits the possibility of "maintaining fully his freedom in the elections" (31). The Bahá'í Faith thus protects the individual's right to vote his or her conscience in an election and views the process of nominating as a fundamental infringement of that right.

Inevitably, it must be asked whether Bahá'í elections in practice actually follow the principles. Sociological research is necessary to answer that question in detail, but anecdotal experience suggests that nominations, at least in North America, are very rarely attempted (32), and that a powerful aversion to the mentioning of names in connection with Bahá'í elections precludes overt electioneering. Individuals attempting in obvious ways to influence an election would face the high probability that their efforts would be reported to Bahá'í institutions; the bigger the effort, the greater the likelihood of exposure. The consequence of exposure could be invalidation of an election, thereby rendering counterproductive any effort to influence the voting.

Because Bahá'í elections involve a prayerful process that occurs without any mentioning of names or campaigning, there is also no discussion of "issues." In such an environment, no opportunities to express partisanship exist. Those elected, not having made any promises to the voters, are considered free from the need to represent a constituency and are considered responsible to God for their decisions, further weakening any sense of partisanship.

The consultation process itself serves as another obstacle to partisanship, because of the important principle of nonadvocacy of one's ideas and recommendations. According to this principle, once one mentions an idea in a decision making situation, the idea then belongs to the group; one can clarify it or elaborate on it, but cannot advocate it, indeed, one is free to speak against it.

The sociological results of rejecting nomination, advocacy, and constituency, and the general stand against partisanship in the Bahá'í authoritative texts have not been

studied systematically. Personal experience suggests, however, that if one were to poll a random sample of Bahá'ís, 99% would have no idea whether they were "liberal" or "conservative" in terms of Bahá'í doctrine; indeed, they would have no idea what "liberal" or "conservative" meant. The Bahá'í community is singularly lacking in its use of such labels as liberal, conservative, traditional, or orthodox. Ethnic minorities are welcomed into the Bahá'í community and valued, are even favored when there is a tie vote in a Bahá'í election between a minority and a non-minority, but are not represented by advocacy groups within the Bahá'í community or its administration.

The ban on partisanship and advocacy also means that the norms of Bahá'í community discourse reject demonstrations, sit-ins, use of media pressure, public advancement of views or positions in opposition to institutional policies, and other liberal democratic practices shaped by freedom of speech. The Bahá'í community strives to create institutions that are responsive to genuine needs and concerns without resort to pressure tactics and to create an atmosphere of consultation in which frankness, tactfulness, trustworthiness, tolerance, and fairness abound. In short, it seeks to create a community in which freedom of speech is a normative value, but extremes of speech are unnecessary. The only way that such an approach to discourse will work--and partisanship be avoided--is to create over the long term a community culture in which virtues are understood, valued, and expressed, and spiritual unity remains the overriding goal.

### **Dealing with Incipient Partisanship within the Bahá'í Community**

The Bahá'í community has not yet attained its high ideals of discourse. Like other

social systems, it experiences impulses toward dissatisfaction, dissent, and occasionally opposition or even rebellion. At such moments the distinction between concord and discord are defined in practice; boundaries on community discourse and membership are set.

If an individual feels that an injustice has been committed in the Bahá'í community or that a member of a Bahá'í institution is corrupt, the Bahá'í authoritative texts state that the individual has a sacred duty to express his or her concern. Several options exist. One may consult with a Counselor or Auxiliary Board member, who is able to take one's concerns to a Bahá'í institution. Or one may report one's concern to a local or national spiritual assembly. Finally, one may write the Universal House of Justice about the matter. One may appeal a decision to the next higher level of institution; decisions by local spiritual assemblies are appealed to the national spiritual assembly, and decisions by the latter are appealed to the Universal House of Justice. Since the Universal House of Justice is the highest institution in the system, one cannot appeal its decisions, just as Americans cannot appeal decisions made by the United States Supreme Court.

### **Infallibility, Covenant, and Dissent**

The Bahá'í authoritative texts make a claim about the Universal House of Justice that the supreme court cannot make: that it is guaranteed divine guidance. The Bahá'í texts state that the members of the Universal House of Justice are ordinary human beings and are not infallible but that a majority is divinely guaranteed to decide that which is right (33). Bahá'ís take the claim of guaranteed divine guidance seriously; a 1976 survey of 239



active Ontario Bahá'ís showed that 77% believed the House of Justice was infallible, 16% weren't sure or didn't answer, and 7% did not believe the claim (34). Such numbers reflect a significant level of trust in Bahá'í administrative institutions in general, and the fact that the Universal House of Justice's actions have, to date, confirmed most Bahá'ís' belief in its trustworthiness and reliability.

The Bahá'í authoritative texts treat the divine guidance of the Universal House of Justice as part of God's covenant with humanity: that, through Bahá'u'lláh, God has given humanity a system of governance that, ultimately, cannot fail. In secular terms, the covenant is equivalent to a national constitution, which defines the division of authority, responsibility, and rights in a nation. The Bahá'í covenant prominently features the Bahá'í administrative institutions and requires obedience to its supreme body. Bahá'ís often state that the claim to divine protection is made straightforwardly in Bahá'í scripture, whereas other religions' claims to infallible guidance usually arose after the creation of their scriptures and are not found in the words of their founders.

When a Bahá'í disagrees with a decision of the Universal House of Justice, it represents more than a dilemma of conscience; because of the House's guarantee of divine guidance, it is also a dilemma of faith. Of course, since no individual is guaranteed access to truth or to all the relevant information, it is reasonable for the individual to assume in most cases that the dilemma arises out of one's own faulty reasoning, rather than from an error by the House of Justice. But situations arise when a Bahá'í may become convinced that the Universal House of Justice has made an error in a sphere where the Bahá'í scriptures state it cannot. If a Bahá'í reaches this conclusion the most logical reaction

would be to reevaluate his or her membership in the Bahá'í Faith and possibly to withdraw from it, on the grounds that Bahá'u'lláh's claim to a divine revelation has been disproved.

Occasionally Bahá'ís react to a disagreement with the Universal House of Justice by attempting to change its decision or lobbying against the decision. Such effort may result in the creation of partisanship, a violation of Bahá'í principle, requiring a response by Bahá'í institutions. The most common response--after consultation has been attempted--is to sanction the individual in some way. Bahá'ís have various privileges of membership--the right to vote, to be voted for, to donate money to the Bahá'í Faith, to serve on Bahá'í institutions and their committees, and to attend the nineteen-day feast--that can be suspended temporarily or indefinitely (35). Such rights are restored once the cause for their suspension is resolved.

### **Covenant Breaking**

In very rare cases, dissidence may go beyond lobbying against a decision or institution. Sometimes a Bahá'í may decide to oppose the Bahá'í administrative system and advocate its replacement, usually because a higher source of guidance--perhaps conscience, but more often a claim to personal divine revelation or inspiration--is invoked. Such a situation may require the Bahá'í institutions to expel the individual from the Bahá'í community.

When a person persists in contacting Bahá'ís in order to undermine their loyalty to Bahá'í institutions and persuade them to reject the institutions, the Universal House of Justice may declare the person a covenant breaker: a Bahá'í who has violated the terms of

and is opposed to Bahá'u'lláh's covenant (36). From the perspective of Bahá'í theology, such a position is self-contradictory, for a person cannot simultaneously claim to be a follower of Bahá'u'lláh and reject a central aspect of his teachings. History has shown that persons who take such a position are usually motivated by a personal desire for power or by an ideosyncratic insistence that their understanding of Bahá'í scripture is right. Often they are not interested in dialogue; rather, they use consultation as an opportunity to pull Bahá'ís away from their institutions. As a result, Bahá'ís are instructed to avoid all contact with covenant breakers (37).

Historically, the strategy of requiring Bahá'ís to sever contact with covenant breakers has been effective in maintaining the unity of the Bahá'í community. Covenant breakers have usually offered a negative message rather than a set of positive teachings. Consequently their recruitment of followers has usually focussed on the Bahá'í community; they draw few members from outside the Bahá'í community, especially at first. If contact with the Bahá'í community is cut, the group is deprived of its principal source of new members. As a result, the Bahá'í world in 1997 consists of a unified "mainstream" community of five to six million members worldwide and about half a dozen "splinter" Bahá'í groups which together have one or two thousand adherents.

History has also shown that splinter groups usually last thirty to fifty years before lapsing into inactivity and gradually disappearing (38). The splinter groups are usually dependent on the mainstream for purchase of Bahá'í scripture and often are influenced by intellectual trends in the mainstream community (39).

The unity of the Bahá'í world is highlighted by a comparison to other religions. All

major world religions, with the possible exception of Judaism, are divided into sects, usually numbering in the hundreds. Some sects are thousands of years old. Christianity has more than 22,000 sects (40). Mormonism--a movement of similar size to the Bahá'í Faith, established within a decade of the latter's founding--has one large denomination with up to eight million members, a reorganized branch that is a century and a half old and has several hundred thousand members, and several dozen smaller sects, some of considerable age, with a few hundred to a few thousand adherents.

To many it will seem ironic that, to maintain its unity, the Bahá'í Faith has a mechanism to expel or shun members. But no community or society can exist without establishing boundaries defining unacceptable individual behavior--otherwise chaos or injustice would ensue--and boundaries cannot be maintained without specifying consequences for their transgression. Most religious groups have found it necessary to discipline clergy for violations of ethical norms; in the past most denominations in the United States disciplined members as well.

### **The Bahá'í Faith and Secular Partisan Politics**

The Bahá'í approach to unity has major implications for its approach toward the governance of secular society. The modern democratic nation state is founded on the assumption that powers must be divided: different powers are given to different branches, which exist to keep each other in check; often, within branches groups compete for dominance, thereby keeping each other in check. Although the founding fathers of America warned against the "mischiefs of faction" a multiparty electoral system is now

considered an essential component of a modern democracy (41).

The Bahá'í rejection of partisanship is also a rejection of the notion that disunity must be used to control ambition and greed. Indeed, the Bahá'í system turns the equation around; it views partisanship as a common cause of ambition and greed and seeks to control them through consultation and creation of a virtue-centered community. The Bahá'í administrative system does not have separate legislative, executive, and judicial branches; instead, all three types of authority devolve on individual consultative bodies (the local and national spiritual assemblies and the Universal House of Justice), and a separate branch of advisors (the Counselors, Auxiliary Board members, and assistants) has consultative but no legislative, executive, or judicial responsibilities.

The Bahá'í authoritative texts appear to support the value of secular government possessing branches; for example, Bahá'u'lláh praised the British governing system as possessing both a sovereign and a legislature, and Shoghi Effendi referred to the future world government as possessing an executive, a legislature, and a "tribunal" (a judicial function) (42). The Bahá'í authoritative texts apparently envisage the branches as potentially complementary rather than competitive.

Political parties, however, are not compatible with the Bahá'í approach to unity. Bahá'ís are forbidden to join all political parties on the grounds that they exist to promote themselves at the expense of other political factions and that their platforms usually contradict one Bahá'í principle or another. Bahá'ís and Bahá'í organizations are also forbidden to become involved in partisan politics or to make campaign contributions. Historically, Bahá'ís who join a political party in spite of their religion's ban on such

membership have had their Bahá'í community membership rights suspended.

The Bahá'í ban on partisan politics, on campaigning for office, and on contributing funds to political campaigns makes it virtually impossible for Bahá'ís to hold an elected position in the United States. There have been a few exceptions; Bahá'ís have served on school boards where one need not declare a party affiliation or campaign, and in one case a Bahá'í was elected mayor in a small town--in spite of his refusal to join a party or campaign for office--because he was well known and had an excellent reputation. Since the selection of judges is often political, it is difficult for Bahá'ís to be chosen (43). While Bahá'ís are encouraged to serve their country as civil servants, Bahá'ís are required to decline political appointments such as cabinet positions and ambassadorships because of their highly partisan nature.

Bahá'í institutions have gradually gained experience in dealing with governments in ways that avoid partisanship. In the United States, the National Spiritual Assembly has sought bipartisan support for legislation on selected issues related to fundamental Bahá'í principles, mostly concerning human rights. The effort to protect the Bahá'í community in Iran from persecution by asking governments to pressure Iran's government to improve its treatment of the Bahá'ís has proceeded very carefully; but as a result, every resolution condemning the persecution of Iran's Bahá'ís that the United States Congress has passed since 1982 has had bipartisan sponsorship and support. Subsequently, the United States National Spiritual Assembly has worked with other national organizations to achieve bipartisan support in Congress for ratification of United Nations human rights treaties designed to establish international standards against genocide and torture, and to abolish

discrimination of minorities, women, and children. As long as partisanship remains a prominent feature in secular governance, it appears that Bahá'ís will restrict their involvement in the political system.

### **Civil Obedience, Civil Disobedience, and Social Change**

The Bahá'í insistence on the principle of unity also determines the ways Bahá'ís can work for social change. Unity cannot exist in a society without the rule of law; hence the Bahá'í authoritative texts require Bahá'ís to respect and obey the governments and laws under which they live. Their obedience even extends to disbanding Bahá'í institutions voluntarily and suspending Bahá'í community activities if they are banned by the government (44).

Bahá'ís reject nonviolent civil disobedience as a mechanism for bringing about change in wider society, for it relies on violation of laws and the creation of a partisan atmosphere. Instead, Bahá'ís support social change through education, personal example, use of legitimate legal means (such as legal marches and obtaining press coverage) and initiatives that may represent unusual ways of obeying laws (45). The techniques of nonviolent civil disobedience, as effective as they have been to bring about significant changes in social structure, are themselves possible only because changes in society over the last few hundred years have created conditions (a free press, democracy, public opinion) that make them effective. Bahá'ís argue that society should be developed through innovative nonviolent civil *obedience* and that disobedience and partisanship must be replaced by better mechanisms to bring about social change.

Rather than compromising their principle of unity and attempting to improve society through involvement in civil disobedience or partisan politics, the Bahá'ís have sought to follow what they consider to be a higher standard of behavior, based on prayer and virtues and expressed in acts of charity and innovative efforts to improve society. One factor limiting the effectiveness of the Bahá'í example has been the small size of the community worldwide--about 100,000 in 1900, 400,000 in 1963, and over 5 million in 1997. Hence the impact of the Bahá'í community on humanity remains to be demonstrated.

### **Conclusion**

To understand the Bahá'í perspective on concord and discord, one must understand the Bahá'í concept of unity. Unity above all else is a process that has as its goal the creation of a state of mystic unity. Spiritually, the goal is sought through prayer and virtuous action; practically, the principles of consultation exist to channel discussion toward agreement and collaboration. Ultimately, the mechanism for guaranteeing Bahá'í unity is its administrative order, a system central to Bahá'u'lláh's covenant with his followers.

The Bahá'í concept of unity is distinguished from other notions of unity by its rejection of the legitimacy of partisanship. To prevent partisanship, Bahá'í elections are conducted without nominations, campaigning, or mention of names; voting is seen as an expression of the complete and unbridged freedom of the individual to vote for any Bahá'í whom prayer and personal contemplation leads one to choose. In rare cases when the mechanisms preventing partisanship fail, Bahá'í institutions have the authority to sanction dissidents, expel schismatics from the Bahá'í community, and even to forbid



Bahá'ís from associating with them.

In the sphere of secular government, the Bahá'í rejection of partisanship leads to an avoidance of partisan politics and a ban on Bahá'ís joining political parties. The Bahá'í notion of unity also requires Bahá'ís to reject civil disobedience and work toward social change in ways that are innovative but legal. Bahá'ís seek to demonstrate the potential of their teachings to transform human society through spreading their religion, strengthening their administrative institutions, establishing charitable organizations, and collaborating with outside organizations whose missions are compatible with Bahá'í principles. Bahá'ís hope that by demonstrating their concept of unity through the creation of a dynamic, diverse, and virtuous community they can attract humanity to the Bahá'í teachings and transform civilization.

## Notes

1. The author would like to thank Jeffery Huffines, Gayle Morrison, and Lynne Yancy for reading the manuscript and offering suggestions for its improvement.

2. Bahá'u'lláh, Tablet of Isbráqát, in *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh Revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, p. 129. Bahá'u'lláh was born as MírzáH usayn-`Alí in Iran to an aristocratic family. In 1844 he accepted the religion of Siyyid `Alí-Muhammad, who assumed the title of the Báb (Arabic for "the gate") and who founded a new religion in May 1844. For claiming a divine revelation after Muhammad, the Báb was put to death in 1850. His followers, called Bábís, were severely persecuted, thousands being killed, often with great cruelty. Bahá'u'lláh gradually was recognized as the leader of the Bábí community and in 1863 declared Himself the divine messenger whom the Báb had promised would soon appear. Bahá'u'lláh was exiled from Iran and eventually imprisoned in Akka, northern Palestine, then a penal city of the Ottoman Empire. After a few years his imprisonment was changed to a lifetime of house arrest. During the years of exile and imprisonment, Bahá'u'lláh wrote thousands of letters, some of book length, defining his claim and his teachings. They are viewed by the Bahá'ís as divine revelation and the core of the Bahá'í scripture. [Note: this note should be located on the bottom of the first page. If you are using endnotes, could this be made an asterisk note instead?]

3. `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Bahá'í World Faith*, p. 230. `Abdu'l-Bahá was Bahá'u'lláh's oldest son.

Born in Tehran with the given name `Abbás (`Abdu'l-Bahá is a title meaning "servant of Bahá'u'lláh" that he took in the 1890s), he traveled into exile with Bahá'u'lláh and, once he was old enough, served as Bahá'u'lláh's personal secretary. Bahá'u'lláh appointed `Abdu'l-Bahá as his successor in his will, which was made public after Bahá'u'lláh's death on May 29, 1892. `Abdu'l-Bahá led the Bahá'í community with great skill for thirty years; among the achievements of his ministry was the expansion of the Bahá'í Faith in Europe and North America. `Abdu'l-Bahá stated that he was not a divine messenger, but Bahá'ís understand statements in Bahá'u'lláh's writings to give `Abdu'l-Bahá a unique station above ordinary human beings, though lower than the station of a divine messenger. `Abdu'l-Bahá's writings, though not divine revelation, are considered binding on Bahá'ís and are part of Bahá'í scripture. [Note: this note should also be located on the bottom of the page. If you are using endnotes, could this be made an asterisk note instead?]

4. Shoghi Effendi, *Messages to America*, p. 28; Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 202. Shoghi Effendi Rabbani (1897-1957) was the oldest grandson of `Abdu'l-Bahá. In his will and testament, made public after `Abdu'l-Bahá's death on November 26, 1921, `Abdu'l-Bahá named Shoghi Effendi his successor. Shoghi Effendi is not regarded a divine messenger or as having the spiritual stature of `Abdu'l-Bahá. The will and testament gave Shoghi Effendi the title of Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith and stated that Bahá'ís must turn to him and accept his authority. Shoghi Effendi wrote extensively in Arabic, Persian, and English and translated many writings of Bahá'u'lláh and `Abdu'l-Bahá into English. On Shoghi Effendi's death in 1957 the Bahá'í Faith was temporarily coordinated by a council of

eminent Bahá'ís until the Universal House of Justice, the nine-member international coordinating body that Bahá'u'lláh, `Abdu'l-Bahá, and Shoghi Effendi all discussed and defined, was elected. The Universal House of Justice was first elected in 1963 and is subsequently elected every five years; it is the permanent head of the Bahá'í religion. [Note: this note should also be located on the bottom of the page. If you are using endnotes, could this be made an asterisk note instead?]

5. The Bahá'í authoritative texts include the writings of Bahá'u'lláh, `Abdu'l-Bahá, Shoghi Effendi, and the Universal House of Justice. The Bahá'í scriptures are defined for the purpose of this essay as the writings of Bahá'u'lláh and `Abdu'l-Bahá. The writings of the Universal House of Justice, like papal encyclicals for Catholics, are authoritative but not scriptural. The writings of Shoghi Effendi occupy an intermediate station between those of the House of Justice and `Abdu'l-Bahá; they are authoritative and binding, but not sacred.

6. The best summary of the Bahá'í concept of God can be found in Juan R. Cole, "The Concept of Manifestation in the Bahá'í Writings," *Bahá'í Studies*, vol. 9, pp. 1-38. Because the Bahá'í Faith arose in an Islamic milieu, its scriptures are in dialogue with, and build on, many concepts in Islamic theology, philosophy, and mysticism.

7. Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, selection XC, p. 177.

8. Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, selection XCV, p. 194.

9. This essay is not the place to discuss the philosophical and theological problems that are created by the notion of the unity of religion, such as the profound differences among religions. The Bahá'í Faith deals with them primarily in three ways: (1) by emphasizing that over time many of the original teachings of the Manifestations have been lost (a claim that historical-critical scholarship often bears out); (2) by noting that the religions as practiced today are a mixture of divine teachings and human reinterpretation, and human reinterpretation often distorted the original purpose and meaning of the revelations; and (3) by reinterpreting and reappropriating the scriptures of earlier religions metaphorically and symbolically.

10. Bahá'u'lláh's writings consist of over 15,000 documents, mostly letters, but some works of book length. The writings of `Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi are even larger, at 27,000 and 17,500 documents respectively (Bahá'í World Centre, *The Seven Year Plan, 1979-1986: Statistical Report, Ridván 1983* p. 22).

11. `Abdu'l-Bahá, in *Bahá'í Prayers*, p. 101.

12. `Abdu'l-Bahá, quoted in Shoghi Effendi, *The Lights of Divine Guidance*, vol. 2, p. 50.

13. `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, pp. 191-92.

14. When Bahá'ís pray they almost always use written prayers revealed by Bahá'u'lláh and `Abdu'l-Bahá, not prayers composed by themselves or by other Bahá'ís. In this way Bahá'í prayer is an act of reconnection to God's revelation.

15. Bahá'ís do not normally conduct worship on a weekly basis, as do mosques, churches, and synagogues. The nineteen-day feast occurs once every Bahá'í month (which last nineteen days, there being nineteen Bahá'í months in a solar year). It was initiated by Bahá'u'lláh, developed by `Abdu'l-Bahá (who made it a Bahá'í community event every Bahá'í month involving worship and social portions), and refined by Shoghi Effendi (who added the portion for consultation on community business).

16. `Abdu'l-Bahá, in *Bahá'í Prayers*, p. 138.

17. The Bahá'í obligatory prayer is a daily ritual, preceded by ritual washing and, in one of the three prayers that may be chosen, involving ritual postures and gestures. It is normally performed in private and alone. The Bahá'í Faith has no public ritual equivalent to Catholic mass or Islamic Friday prayer. Bahá'í prayers are not said in unison, unless they are sung. Only one congregational prayer exists in the Bahá'í Faith, the obligatory prayer for the dead; one individual recites it on behalf of the audience. Any individual can be chosen to read a Bahá'í prayer in public; the Bahá'í Faith has no clergy.

18. Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, paragraph 58.

19. `Abdu'l-Bahá, quoting an unknown source, in *Bahá'í World Faith*, p. 401.
20. Bahá'u'lláh, in *Consultation: A Compilation*, p. 3.
21. `Abdu'l-Bahá, in *Consultation: A Compilation*, p. 5.
22. `Abdu'l-Bahá, in *Consultation: A Compilation*, p. 5.
23. `Abdu'l-Bahá, in *Consultation: A Compilation*, p. 5.
24. `Abdu'l-Bahá, in *Consultation: A Compilation*, p. 7.
25. `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Tablets of the Divine Plan*, p. 53. Presumably "question of the Divine questions" refers to a doctrinal or theological matter; the translation (from the original Persian) is not clear.
26. As of April 1997, there are 175 national spiritual assemblies worldwide.
27. Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá'í Administration*, p. 88.
28. For the quinennial election of the Universal House of Justice in Haifa, Israel, the

members of the national spiritual assemblies often dress in ethnic costumes, even if it be a loincloth. When each national spiritual assembly's name is called the members process forward with great dignity to deposit their ballots. Such an occasion becomes an opportunity to demonstrate the oneness of humanity as expressed in the worldwide Bahá'í community. It should be noted that the Bahá'í scriptures do not specify such practices in connection with elections and they could change. The point being made is that elections are often the most elaborate and significant ritual that exists in a Bahá'í community. A comparison to the Christian eucharist--where the body of Christ becomes present in the community--is not inappropriate.

29. The only exception is in the election of officers on a spiritual assembly, which requires a majority (five votes, since all Bahá'í governing bodies have nine members). The election of officers may require many rounds before someone garners five votes, consequently the assembly members may decide to have the tellers announce which members received which number of votes. But even in officer elections, nominations are forbidden. If a tie vote occurs in any Bahá'í election and one of the persons tied for the post is a minority, the tie is broken in favor of the minority and a second round of voting is unnecessary.

30. Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, in *The Lights of Divine Guidance*, vol. 2, pp. 67-68.

31. Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, in *The Lights of Divine Guidance*, vol. 2, pp.



67-68.

32. The author, in 24 years as a Bahá'í, has never heard of anyone attempting to influence a Bahá'í election and only once has heard an allusion to who someone was planning to vote for.

33. Bahá'u'lláh states of the House of Justice that "God will verily inspire them with whatsoever He willeth" (*Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh Revealed After the Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, p. 68) and requires everyone to obey it (*Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh Revealed After the Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, p. 27). In `Abdu'l-Bahá's Will and Testament, p. 14, `Abdu'l-Bahá states the Universal House of Justice is "the source of all good and freed from all error"; in *Some Answered Questions* p. 172, he says the House has "conferred infallibility." The Bahá'í scriptures make a distinction between the infallibility conferred on a Manifestation of God, which includes the power to receive divine revelation, and other types of infallibility. Both Bahá'u'lláh (*Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh Revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, p. 108) and `Abdu'l-Bahá (*Some Answered Questions*, p. 108) state that infallibility is conferred on many "holy souls," which indicates that the Persian and Arabic words translated as "infallibility" have a wider range of meaning than the English equivalent.

The infallibility of the Universal House of Justice is confined only to the areas of protection of the Bahá'í Faith and legislation on matters about which the writings of Bahá'u'lláh, `Abdu'l-Bahá, and Shoghi Effendi are silent and does not include receipt of revelation (Universal House of Justice, *Wellspring of Guidance*, pp. 81-91). Otherwise the

nature of the Universal House of Justice's infallibility is not elaborated on, and the Universal House of Justice itself has offered little additional clarification. Possible interpretations of the Bahá'í concept of infallibility range from the highly mystical to the pragmatic (that "infallible" means the House of Justice is the final arbiter of questions and problems in the Bahá'í Faith, that it is somehow protected by God, and that it must be obeyed).

34. David Smith, "The Bahá'í Community and Group Identity," paper presented at the Canadian Association for Studies on the Bahá'í Faith, 1976. It should be noted that Bahá'ís completed the survey at nineteen-day feasts, which are not usually attended by less active Bahá'ís, hence the survey reflects the attitudes of more active Bahá'ís.

35. Only Bahá'ís in good administrative standing can make monetary contributions to the Bahá'í Faith; non-Bahá'ís and Bahá'ís under sanctions cannot.

36. Note that persons who oppose the Bahá'í Faith but who never have claimed to be Bahá'ís or who have resigned their membership are not considered covenant breakers.

37. The term sometimes used in Bahá'í scriptures is to shun covenant breakers. The scriptures also make it clear that the purpose of shunning is to protect the Bahá'í from the covenant breaker's plans to set up an alternative form of the Bahá'í Faith and not to punish or deprive the person of opportunities to earn a livelihood. Violence against covenant

breakers is forbidden. Business relationships with them are not forbidden (letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, October 29, 1974, in *Lights of Guidance*, p. 186). There is no restriction on Bahá'ís associating with non-Bahá'ís who attack the Bahá'í Faith in print, for they are not attempting to create an alternative Bahá'í community.

38. For example, Ibrahim Kheiralla (1849-1929), the founder of the American Bahá'í community, broke from the Bahá'í Faith in 1900 when his request for a permanent position of authority over the American Bahá'í community was rejected by `Abdu'l-Bahá. The alternative Bahá'í group that he founded had largely dissipated by 1910, when he himself became uninterested in it. After a brief renaissance under new leadership in the late 1930s, it declined again, and disappeared entirely by about 1950. Ahmad Sohrab's New History Society, founded about 1930 as an alternative medium for expressing Bahá'í teachings, and which frequently published against the Bahá'í community, has become a nonprofit organization to promote intercultural exchange and understanding, is no longer a religious organization, and has no interest in the Bahá'í Faith. The orthodox Bahá'í Faith, founded about 1960 by Charles Mason Remey, has spawned three or four separate Bahá'í sects, together totalling perhaps a thousand members, most of which have become fascinated by esotericism and apocalyptic interpretations of biblical prophecy. One group has set several dates for nuclear armageddon.

39. For example, the *Behai Quarterly* was published by a group of "Behais" in Kenosha, Wisconsin, in the late 1930s. The periodical often published lengthy extracts from the

writings of Bahá'u'lláh reprinted from official Bahá'í publications without copyright permission. Its discussion of the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith focused on the same list of social principles that the mainstream Bahá'ís emphasized, usually phrased identically to the lists common in mainstream Bahá'í publications of the day. Ironically, the list of social principles used by the Behais--which was quite different from the teachings emphasized in the American Bahá'í community thirty years earlier, when their group was founded--was largely derived from the talks given by `Abdu'l-Bahá when he visited the United States and Canada in 1912, even though the Behais rejected `Abdu'l-Bahá's authority and accused Him of corrupting Bahá'u'lláh's teachings.

40. David B. Barrett, *The World Christian Encyclopedia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 14.

41. *The Federalist Papers* by Alexander Hamilton, James Madison and John Jay, p. 43.

42. Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh Revealed After the Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, p. 93; Shoghi Effendi, *World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 203.

43. There are notable exceptions here as well; a Bahá'í currently serves as a judge at the level of federal courts immediately below the supreme court, even though she has never had a political party affiliation.

44. The Bahá'ís of Iran disbanded all their administrative institutions when the government banned them in 1983. But Bahá'ís do not obey any government law requiring them to renounce or deny their religion, for such a law moves beyond the sphere of personal action and into the sphere of personal conscience. Historically, nearly all Bahá'ís given the choice between denial of their faith and execution have chosen the latter. Since 1979, over two hundred Bahá'ís in Iran have been executed for their faith. Bahá'ís might also refuse to obey other orders--such as an order to commit mass murder--on the basis of personal conscience.

45. To give a few examples: when an African country passed a law forbidding blacks to enter through the front doors of houses, some Bahá'ís boarded up their front doors and asked everyone to enter through the back door. When an African country passed a law forbidding nonprofit and religious organizations to have governing boards that were racially mixed, all the white Bahá'ís resigned from the local spiritual assemblies, which henceforth had only blacks as members. When a city in Iran ordered the heads of about 100 Bahá'í households to report to the police station, the women went, arguing that the Bahá'í principle of equality of the sexes meant that either the man or the woman could be the head. The police station, unprepared to arrest a hundred women, let them go.

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