

One Common Faith

Bahá'í World Centre

A summary

2005

1. There is every reason for confidence that the period of history now opening will be far more receptive to efforts to spread Bahá'u'lláh's message than was the case in the century just ended. All the signs indicate that a sea change in human consciousness is under way.
2. Early in the twentieth century, a materialistic interpretation of reality had consolidated itself.
3. People's happiness would be the natural result of better health, better food, better education, better living conditions.
4. Throughout that part of the world where the vast majority of the earth's population live, facile announcements that "God is Dead" had passed largely unnoticed. The experience of the peoples of Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Pacific had long confirmed them in the view not only that human nature is deeply influenced by spiritual forces, but that its very identity is spiritual. ... Helpless to exercise any real influence over the shaping of their futures or even to preserve the moral well-being of their children, these populations were plunged into a crisis different from but in many ways even more devastating than the one gathering momentum in Europe and North America. Although retaining its central role in consciousness, faith appeared impotent to influence the course of events.
5. As the twentieth century approached its close, therefore, nothing seemed less likely than a sudden resurgence of religion as a subject of consuming global importance. Yet that is precisely what has now occurred in the form of a groundswell of anxiety and discontent, much of it still only dimly conscious of the sense of spiritual emptiness that is producing it. ... Perhaps the most insistent factor in producing the change is reluctant recognition that there is no credible replacement for religious belief as a force capable of generating self-discipline and restoring commitment to moral behaviour.
6. Beyond the attention that religion, as formally conceived, has begun to command is a widespread revival of spiritual search. Expressed most commonly as an urge to discover a personal identity that transcends the merely physical, the development encourages a multitude of pursuits, both positive and negative in character.

7. The phenomenon is the product of historical forces that steadily gather momentum.
8. The most obvious cause of these re-evaluations has been *the bankruptcy of the materialist enterprise* itself.

9. *Modernization*: economic well-being, the building of just and prosperous societies. The closing decades of the twentieth century, however, sagged under a mounting burden of evidence to the contrary: the breakdown of family life, soaring crime, dysfunctional educational systems, and a catalogue of other social pathologies.
10. *Social and economic development*: born in the wake of the chaos of the Second World War. The collective effort that began with such high hopes has seen the gap widen into an abyss.
11. *Consumer culture*: the triumph of animal impulse.
12. Clearly, materialism's error has lain not in the laudable effort to improve the conditions of life, but in the *narrowness of mind and unjustified self-confidence* that have defined its mission.

13. *Global integration*: a force of change undermining the misconceptions about reality. General access to information, producing a stimulus to reflection about reality and a questioning of all established authority.
14. The transformative impact on global consciousness that has resulted from *mass travel* on an international scale. Millions of *refugees* fleeing from persecution: the progressive integration of the world's races and cultures as the citizenry of a single global homeland.
15. The transformations announced in Bahá'u'lláh's message are resistlessly accomplishing themselves.
16. Loss of faith in the certainties of materialism and the progressive globalizing of human experience reinforce one another in the longing they inspire for understanding about the purpose of existence. It is this universal upheaval, Bahá'u'lláh explains, for which the scriptures of past religions employed the imagery of "*the Day of Resurrection*".

17. Throughout history, the primary agents of spiritual development have been the great religions. Viewed in perspective, *the major religions* emerge as the primary driving forces of the civilizing process.
18. Why, then, does this immensely rich heritage not serve as the central stage for today's reawakening of spiritual quest?
19. The problem is, of course, twofold. The rational soul does not merely occupy a private sphere, but is an active participant in a social order. Although the received truths of the great faiths remain valid, the daily experience of an individual in the twenty-first century is unimaginably removed from the one that he or she would have known in any of those ages when this guidance was revealed. Changes affecting every aspect of human life, have brought into being *a new world of daily choices* for both society and its members. Loss of faith in traditional religion has been an inevitable consequence of failure to

discover in it the guidance required to live with modernity, successfully and with assurance.

20. A second barrier to a re-emergence of inherited systems of belief as the answer to humanity's spiritual yearnings is the effects already mentioned of global integration. Throughout the planet, people raised in a given religious frame of reference find themselves abruptly thrown into close association with others whose beliefs and practices appear at first glance irreconcilably different from their own. If people whose beliefs appear to be fundamentally different from one's own nevertheless live moral lives that deserve admiration, *what is it that makes one's own faith superior* to theirs? Alternatively, if all of the great religions share certain basic values in common, do not sectarian attachments run the risk of merely reinforcing unwanted barriers between an individual and his neighbours?
21. Religion cannot refashion its system of belief in a manner to derive legitimacy from the authoritative words of its Founder, it likewise cannot adequately answer the multitude of questions posed by social and intellectual evolution. Attempts to force a reversal of some kind can lead only to still greater disenchantment with religion itself and ... sectarian conflict.

22. In order to respond adequately to the spiritual needs of their neighbours, Bahá'ís will have to gain an in-depth understanding of the issues involved.
23. There are many conceptions of what is intended by "*religion*". What all such differing conceptions have in common is the extent to which a phenomenon that is acknowledged to completely transcend human reach has nevertheless gradually been imprisoned within conceptual limits - whether organizational, theological, experiential or ritualistic - of human invention.
24. The teachings of Bahá'u'lláh cut through this tangle of inconsistent views and, in doing so, reformulate many truths which, whether explicitly or implicitly, have lain at the heart of all Divine revelation. "...*God*, the unknowable Essence, the divine Being, is immensely exalted beyond every human attribute" ... "hath caused those luminous Gems of Holiness to appear out of the realm of the spirit, in the noble form of the human temple."
25. To presume to judge among the *Messengers of God*, exalting one above the other, would be to give in to the delusion that the Eternal and All-Embracing is subject to the vagaries of human preference. What is meant by "*knowledge of God*", Bahá'u'lláh explains, is knowledge of the Manifestations Who reveal His will and attributes.
26. Religion, thus conceived, awakens the soul to potentialities that are otherwise unimaginable. Because the soul is immortal, its awakening to its true nature empowers it, not only in this world but even more directly in those worlds that lie beyond, to serve the evolutionary process.
27. *Belief* is thus a necessary and inextinguishable urge.

28. Because the purpose of the *successive revelations of God* is the awakening of humankind to its capacities and responsibilities as the trustee of creation, the process is not simply repetitive, but progressive.
29. In no sense can Bahá'ís profess to have grasped at this early hour more than a minute portion of the truths inherent in the revelation on which their Faith is based. Apart from encouraging humility, this fact should serve also as a constant reminder that Bahá'u'lláh has not brought into existence a new religion to stand beside the present multiplicity of sectarian organizations. As the human race in all its diversity is a single species, so the intervention by which God cultivates the qualities of mind and heart latent in that species is *a single process*.
30. The recurring proof of the existence of God, therefore, is that from time immemorial He has repeatedly manifested Himself.

31. The objection most commonly raised against the foregoing conception of religion is the assertion that the *differences* among the revealed faiths are so fundamental that to present them as stages or aspects of one unified system of truth does violence to the facts. ... Such an objection offers Bahá'ís an invitation to set the principles reviewed here more explicitly in the evolutionary context provided in Bahá'u'lláh's writings.
32. In the case of *religious customs governing personal life*, it is helpful to view the subject against the background of comparable features of material life. It is most unlikely that diversity in hygiene, dress, medicine, diet, transportation, warfare, construction or economic activity, however striking, would any longer be seriously advanced in support of a theory that humanity does not in fact constitute one people, single and unique.
33. "These principles and laws, these firmly-established and mighty systems", Bahá'u'lláh asserts, "have proceeded from one Source, and are the rays of one Light. That they differ one from another is to be attributed to the *varying requirements of the ages* in which they were promulgated."
34. To argue, therefore, that differences of regulations, observances and other practices constitute any significant objection to the idea of revealed religion's essential oneness is to miss the purpose that these prescriptions served. More seriously, it misses the *fundamental distinction between the eternal and the transitory features of religion's function*.
35. The concept of progressive revelation places the ultimate emphasis on *recognition of the revelation of God at its appearance*. The failure of the generality of humankind in this respect has, time and again, condemned entire populations to a ritualistic repetition of ordinances and practices long after these latter have fulfilled their purpose and now merely stultify moral advance.
36. More detrimental still to religious understanding has been theological presumption. A persistent feature of religion's sectarian past has been *the dominant role played by clergy*.

37. Over time, theology succeeded in constructing in the heart of each one of the great faiths an *authority* parallel with, and even inimical in spirit to, the revealed teachings on which the tradition was based.
38. In effect, each new stage in the progressively unfolding revelation of spiritual truth was *frozen in time* and in an array of literalistic images and interpretations, many of them borrowed from cultures which were themselves morally exhausted.

39. Freed from the thickets with which theology has hedged religious understanding about, the mind is able to explore familiar scriptural passages through the eyes of Bahá'u'lláh. The most striking observation that results from taking advantage of this perspective is the *unity of purpose and principle running throughout religious scriptures*.
40. Humanity-focal point, inheritor and trustee of the world-exists to know its Creator and to serve His purpose. Inseparable from the *spirit of reverence* itself is its *expression in service* to the Divine purpose for humankind.
41. There is equal agreement in these texts that the soul's ability to attain to an understanding of its Creator's purpose is the product not merely of its own effort, but of *interventions of the Divine that open the way*.
42. The *succession of revelations* of the Divine also appears as an implicit-and usually explicit-feature of all the major faiths.
43. What emerges is a recognition of the essential *oneness of religion*.
44. It is, therefore, an inadequate recognition of the unique station of Moses, Buddha, Zoroaster, Jesus, Muhammad-or of the succession of Avatars who inspired the Hindu scriptures-to depict their work as the founding of distinct religions. Rather are they appreciated when acknowledged as the *spiritual Educators of history*. In loving them humanity has progressively learned what it means to love God.

45. Confusion about the role of religion in cultivating moral consciousness is equally apparent in popular understanding of its contribution to the shaping of society. Perhaps the most obvious example is the *inferior social status* most sacred texts assign to *women*. ... It needs little insight to appreciate that clinging to primitive norms in the present day would defeat the very purpose of religion's patient cultivation of moral sense.
46. Comparable considerations have pertained in *relations between societies*. The long and arduous preparation of the Hebrew people for the mission required of them is an illustration of the complexity and stubborn character of the moral challenges involved. A somewhat comparable issue arose in the struggle of the newborn community founded by Muhammad to survive attempts by pagan Arab tribes to extinguish it-and in the barbaric cruelty and relentless spirit of vendetta animating the attackers.

47. Among the most contentious of such issues in understanding society's evolution towards spiritual maturity has been that of *crime and punishment*. While different in detail and degree, the penalties prescribed by most sacred texts for acts of violence against either the commonweal or the rights of other individuals tended to be harsh. In the perspective of history, however, one may reasonably ask what practical alternatives existed. The whole of civilization has since been the beneficiary, and it would be less than honest not to acknowledge the fact.
48. Mendicancy, slavery, autocracy, conquest, ethnic prejudices and other *undesirable features of social interaction* have gone unchallenged-or been explicitly indulged-as religion sought to achieve reformations of behaviour that were considered more immediately essential at given stages in the advance of civilization.
49. The issue is not the past, but the implications for the present. Problems arise where followers of one of the world's faiths prove unable to distinguish between its eternal and transitory features, and attempt to impose on society rules of behaviour that have long since accomplished their purpose. Bahá'u'lláh points out. "Be anxiously concerned with *the needs of the age ye live in*, and centre your deliberations on its exigencies and requirements."

50. The exigencies of the new age of human experience to which Bahá'u'lláh summoned the political and religious rulers of the nineteenth century world have now been largely adopted, at least as ideals, by their successors and by progressive minds everywhere.
51. What is lacking is the *power of moral conviction* that can implement these principles, a power whose only demonstrably reliable source throughout history has been religious faith.
52. Through His revelation, the principles required for the collective coming of age of the human race have been invested with the one power capable of penetrating to the roots of human motivation and of altering behaviour. Through *spiritual empowerment* brought by Bahá'u'lláh's revelation the Divine standards can be appreciated, not as isolated principles and laws, but as facets of a single, all-embracing vision of humanity's future, revolutionary in purpose, intoxicating in the possibilities it opens.
53. Integral to these teachings are principles that address the administration of humanity's collective affairs. The governments of the world are called upon to convene an international consultative body as the foundation, in the words of the Guardian, of "*a world federal system*" empowered to safeguard the autonomy and territory of its state members, resolve national and regional disputes and coordinate programmes of global development for the good of the entire human race. Significantly, Bahá'u'lláh attributes to this system, once established, the right to suppress by force acts of aggression by one state against another.
54. The power through which these goals will be progressively realized is that of *unity*. Few will disagree that the universal disease sapping the health of the body of humankind is

that of disunity. ...the achievement of genuine unity of mind and heart among peoples whose experiences are deeply at variance is thought to be entirely beyond the capacity of society's existing institutions.

55. As unity is the remedy for the world's ills, its one certain source lies in the *restoration of religion's influence* in human affairs.
56. Central to Bahá'u'lláh's mission, therefore, has been *the creation of a global community* that would reflect the oneness of humankind. The Bahá'í community comprises several million people representative of virtually every ethnic, cultural, social and religious background on earth, administering their collective affairs without the intervention of a clergy, through democratically elected institutions.
57. The phenomenon may represent the operation of *spiritual influences* capable of eliciting extraordinary feats of sacrifice and understanding from ordinary people of every background.
58. One will search in vain for another association of human beings in history - political, religious, or social - that has successfully survived the perennial blight of schism and faction.

59. The problem of *evil*: a spiritual disease.
60. If the appalling suffering endured by the earth's peoples during the twentieth century has left a lesson, it lies in the fact that the *systemic disunity* ... could throw open the door in this age to demonic behaviour more bestial than anything the mind had dreamed possible.
61. If evil has a name, it is surely the deliberate violation of the hard-won covenants of peace and reconciliation by which people of goodwill seek to escape the past and to build together a new future. Fulfilment ultimately lies in the soul's submission to God.
62. Failure to meet the challenge of such submission has manifested itself with especially devastating consequences throughout the centuries in [*covenant-breaking*].
63. Today, with the immense opportunities and horrific dangers that physical unification of the planet has brought with it, *commitment to the requirements of unity* becomes the touchstone of all professions of devotion to the will of God or, for that matter, to the well-being of humankind.

64. Everything in its history has equipped the Bahá'í Cause to address the challenge facing it. An onlooker need not accept its claims to Divine origin in order to appreciate what is being accomplished.

65. The rest of humanity has every right to expect that a body of people genuinely committed to the vision of unity embodied in the writings of Bahá'u'lláh will be an increasingly vigorous contributor to programmes of social betterment that depend for their success precisely on the force of unity. *Responding to the expectation* will require the Bahá'í community to grow at an ever-accelerating pace...
66. The *culture of systematic growth* taking root in the Bahá'í community would seem, therefore, by far the most effective response the friends can make to the challenge. The nature of the core activities of the current Plan-children's classes, devotional meetings and study circles-permits growing numbers of persons who do not yet regard themselves as Bahá'ís to feel free to participate in the process.
67. The parallel efforts of promoting the betterment of society and of teaching the Bahá'í Faith are reciprocal features of one coherent global programme.
68. Bahá'u'lláh: "Verily I say, this is the Day in which mankind can behold the Face, and hear the Voice, of the Promised One."

69. One of the distinguishing features of modernity has been the *universal awakening of historical consciousness*. Religion operates as a process of fulfilment unfolding in a physical world created by God for that purpose.
70. In this respect, the texts speak with one voice: religion's goal is humanity's attainment of *the age of "ingathering"*...
71. The declared purpose of history's series of prophetic revelations, therefore, has been not only to guide the individual seeker on the path of personal salvation, but to prepare the whole of the human family for *the great eschatological Event* lying ahead, through which the life of the world will itself be entirely transformed. The revelation of Bahá'u'lláh is neither preparatory nor prophetic. It is that Event.
72. Jesus' analogies speak of a potentiality of the human species that has been nurtured and trained by God since the dawn of time as the purpose and leading edge of the creative process. The ongoing work of *patient cultivation* is the task that Bahá'u'lláh has entrusted to the Bahá'ís.
73. The process bears within itself the assurance of its fulfilment. For those with eyes to see, *the new creation is today everywhere emerging*, in the same way that a seedling becomes in time a fruit-bearing tree or a child reaches adulthood. ... "That which the Lord hath ordained as the sovereign remedy and mightiest instrument for the healing of all the world is the union of all its peoples in one universal Cause, *one common Faith*."