

The Failure of Modernism and the Emergence of a New World Order from the Chaos of Knowledge to Bahá'í 'Iláh's Vision of the Future of Humanity

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Introduction

There are many ways of approaching the Vision of Bahá'í 'Iláh for the future of humanity. Many ways, for this is an all-encompassing Revelation for the establishment of a new order within a global vision of the eternal advancement of civilization. As one order is slowly crumbling from under us and around us, another order is emerging. A greater and eternal design for the advancement of humanity periodically and organically goes through periods of adjustments, of growth and renewal where decay and regeneration, death and rebirth meet in an intense and harrowing struggle which, infallibly opens the way to a level of unity, harmony and civilization superior to the one characterizing the previous era.

Three quotes from Bahá'í 'Iláh which deal, on the one hand with the progressive disintegration of the present world order, and on the other, with the emergence of a new world order and of a new consciousness of the forces at work in the world at present, set the stage for this titanic struggle which humanity is presently experiencing:

1. *How long will humanity persist in its waywardness? How long will injustice continue? How long is chaos and confusion to reign amongst men? How long will discord agitate the face of society? ...The winds of despair are, alas, blowing from every direction, and the strife that divideth and afflicteth the human race is daily increasing. The signs of impending convulsions and chaos can now be discerned, inasmuch as the prevailing order appeareth to be lamentably defective.*

(Cleanings CX 216)

2. *This is the Day in which God's most excellent favours have been poured out upon men, the Day in which His most mighty grace hath been infused into all created things. It is incumbent upon all the peoples of the world to reconcile their differences, and with perfect unity and peace, abide beneath the shadow of the Tree of His care and loving-kindness... Soon will the present-day order be rolled up and a new one spread out in its stead.*

(Cleanings IV 6-7)

3. *We desire but the good of the world and the happiness of the nations... That all nations should become one in faith and all men as brothers; that the bonds of affection and unity between the sons of men should be strengthened; that diversity of religion should cease, and differences of race be annulled... what harm is there in this? ...Yet so it shall be; these fruitless strifes, these ruinous wars shall pass away, and the "Most Great Peace" shall come...*

(Bahá'í 'Iláh in Edward G. Browne, A Traveller's Narrative 39-40)

The study of the evolution of humanity, of the rise, decline and fall of civilizations teaches us that there exists a constant paradigm whereby an old order is replaced by a new order through a period of chaos and that often, devastating hardships, tremendous convulsions are required before the new order can finally take place.

This difficult passage from one order to another through chaos and violence is exemplified in the Ancient Greek myth of Dionysos whose symbolic function was to allow the passage from one state to another through catharsis. Such a myth, seen as a systemic element of foundation within a society dominated by the symbol, reflects passages within that very civilization.

Central to this passage from one order to another is how society as a whole relates to knowledge. The search for knowledge, the acquisition of knowledge, and its development, characterize the human being and are central to human activity. However, knowledge can lead either to progress, maturation, and betterment of humanity if used within an ethical and spiritual framework, or to fanaticism, the degradation of society, its breakdown, the misuse of science and technology, if developed and used improperly.

In The Promise of World Peace, the Universal House of Justice calls to account "*those who preach the dogmas of materialism, whether of the east or the west, whether of capitalism or socialism*" for "*materialistic ideals have... failed to satisfy the needs of mankind.*" What were these man-made ideologies if not new ways of approaching knowledge? However, they were only based on a material vision of humanity, on a material vision of existence, on a vision of the human being and of life devoid of any spirit.

What the vision of Bahá'í'Iláh brings to the world is the possibility of reconciliation between the material or physical reality and the spiritual reality, a vision whose keyword and call order is UNITY. Central to our approach of knowledge under the protective shadow of the Revelation of Bahá'í'Iláh is the unity of our physical and spiritual experiences.

Following the three steps outlined by the three quotes of Bahá'í'Iláh cited at the beginning of this presentation, I will first broadly retrace the development of Western thinking which led to these man-made ideologies which have been imposed on the entire world and which have or are now in the process of disintegrating.

I will then underline the two interrelated patterns of evolution, at the same time concurrent and diverging which manifest the fall of one order and the birth of another while creating unspeakable chaos. To a very large extent, the generality of society is not yet aware of this process. It can only observe, with increasing angst, despair and hopelessness, the signs of that decay as well as the near paralysis of an ever increasing number of its fundamental structures, whether economic, social, cultural, or spiritual.

Finally, I will attempt to outline Bahá'í'Iláh's vision of humanity's coming of age, a time when the knowledge of God through His Manifestation will have given humanity a new understanding of its purpose and responsibilities, of the relationship between physical and spiritual realities and, therefore, a new understanding of the purpose of our physical reality, of our life on this planet, of the purpose of the divine laws, and of the need for obedience to these laws as a means to achieve freedom, justice, and unity in the ever advancing progress of human civilization.

PART I From the Metaphysical to the Material

While the beginning of Western thinking was dominated by a metaphysical analysis of reality, our modern world has all but eliminated metaphysical explanations of reality, to rely solely on a physical or scientific approach.

Many thinkers of our time have analyzed this phenomenon. Most have seen it as a welcome liberation of humanity from superstitions and witchcraft. Few have understood its second aspect: a progressive dichotomy between the physical and spiritual realities, a progressive estrangement of the human being from its spiritual dimension.

1. Schaefer

In The Imperishable Dominion (George Ronald, Oxford, 1983), Udo Schaefer writes:

Our modern world has its roots in that Copernican revolution in thought which banished resort to authoritative sources of the past... and replaced it by a mode of investigating nature which is grounded in experiment and rational theory and is independent of earlier precedents. The modern world operates according to Galileo's maxim: Measure everything that is measurable and make measurable everything that is immeasurable.' This new attitude of mind, implying as it does a liberation from prejudice and preconceived ideas and at the same time a commitment to methodological discipline and absolute objectivity, was felt to be the ideal for man in his newly-attained state of independence and maturity. The onward march of science signalled the retreat of religion. This led to the secularization of the world and the development of a secular concept of man...

(*Schaefer, 1983, 2*)

2. Nash

In The Phoenix and the Ashes (George Ronald, Oxford, 1984), Geoffrey Nash develops, as does Udo Schaefer, a Bahá'í view of history, or a religious view of history rather than a secular one, and asserts:

With the passing of the medieval-Christian world-picture, Renaissance philosophers began to conceive of man as the measure of his own world... The natural sciences became such a preoccupation that the way of looking at the natural world spread to the domain of man himself.

(*Nash, 1984, 79*)

Such assertions could be suspect and seen as a way of justifying certain Bahá'í principles such as Progressive Revelation. However, non-Bahá'í thinkers have arrived at similar conclusions albeit for vastly different reasons and with a totally different objective in mind.

3. Kristeva

In the third chapter of her book *Semiotiké*, “Le texte clos”, translated in English under the title “The Bounded Text” and appearing in the collection of her texts (from *Semiotiké* and *Polylogue*) entitled *Desire in Language - A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (Columbia University Press, New York, 1980), Kristeva evokes something which took place between the XIIIth and XVth centuries:

The second half of the Middle Ages... was a period of transition for European Culture: thought based on the sign replaced that based on the symbol.

(Kristeva, 1980, 38)

According to Kristeva, such a transition had three characteristics or, evolved along three stages:

i Stage 1

A semiotics of the symbol characterized European society until around the thirteenth century, as clearly manifested in this period's literature and painting. It is, as such, a semiotic practice of cosmogony; these elements (symbols) refer back to one (or several) unrepresentable and unknowable universal transcendence(s); univocal connections link these transcendences to the units evoking them; the symbol does not “resemble” the object it symbolizes; the two spaces (symbolized-symbolizer) are separate and do not communicate.

ii Stage 2

*From the thirteenth to the fifteenth century, the symbol was both challenged and weakened, but it did not completely disappear. Rather, during this period, its passage (its assimilation) into the sign was assured. The transcendental unity supporting the symbol - its otherworldly casing, its transmitting focus was put into question. Thus, until the end of the fifteenth century, theatrical representations of Christ's life were based on both the canonical and apocryphal Gospels of the Golden Legend (see the *Mysteries* dated c. 1400 published by Achille Jubinal in 1837 and based on the manuscript at the Library of Sainte-Geneviève). Beginning in the fifteenth century, the theatre as well as art in general was invaded by scenes devoted to Christ's public life (as in the *Cathedral of Evreux*). The transcendental foundation evoked by the symbol seemed to capsize. This heralds a new signifying relation between two elements, both located on the side of the “real” and “concrete.” In the thirteenth-century art, for example, the prophets were contrasted with the apostles; whereas in the fifteenth century, the four great evangelists were no longer set against the four prophets, but against the four fathers of the Latin Church (Saint Augustine, Saint Jerome, Saint Ambrose, and Gregory the Great as on the altar of Notre Dame of Avioth). Great architectural and literary compositions were no longer possible; the miniature replaced the cathedral and the fifteenth century became the century of the miniaturists. The serenity of the symbol was replaced by the strained ambivalence of the sign's connection, which lays claim to resemblance and identification of the elements it holds together, while first postulating their radical difference.*

iii. Stage 3

By the Renaissance the difference between the sign and the symbol has become apparent and can be seen:

Vertically as well as horizontally: within its vertical function, the sign refers back to entities both of lesser scope and more concretized than those of the symbol. They are reified universals which become objects in the strongest sense of the word. Put into a relationship within the structure of sign, the entity (phenomenon) under consideration is, at the same time, transcendentalized and elevated to the level of theological unity. The semiotic practice of the sign thus assimilates the metaphysics of the symbol and projects it onto the 'immediately perceptible.' The 'immediately perceptible,' valorized in this way, is then transformed into an objectivity—the reigning law of discourse in the civilization of the sign.

(Kristeva, 1980, 38-40)

What Julia Kristeva is outlining here is the secularization of Western Culture which, from an architectural point of view, will be marked by a shift from the sacred to the temporal, from the cathedrals (already in the Gothic style, a decadence or a baroquism compared to the romanesque period) to the Chateaux and to secular architecture such as Versailles imitated throughout Europe. In sacred architecture, the only renewal (in other words regaining a symbolic dimension, an architecture spiritually inspired) lies in Bahá'í architecture particularly in the Houses of Worship of North America and India. Otherwise, all Christian and even Moslem religious architecture have been either imitations or adaptations. (See, for example, the cathedral of Montreal or the huge cathedral recently built in Ivory Coast which imitates St. Peters of Rome, or the recently completed Episcopalian cathedral of Washington which is a magnificent example of English Gothic.)

4. Durand

In L'imagination symbolique the French philosopher Gilbert Durand considers that this transition from the symbol to the sign which marks the passage of culture and society into secularization, took place in the IXth century.

For Durand, the single most important characteristic of Western culture is its ever-increasing tendency towards iconoclasm. Durand considers that the symbol is a representation which allows a secret meaning to be revealed, it is in other words, the "epiphany of a mystery." And he subscribes to Paul Ricoeur's definition that any authentic symbol is three-dimensional: cosmic, ontic and poetic. According to Durand, symbolic knowledge (which he equates to indirect thinking, the figurative presence of a transcendental dimension and epiphanic understanding) is the antithesis of the knowledge acquisition process which has characterized Western culture for the past ten centuries. Durand opposes symbolic thinking to scientific thinking at three distinct levels:

to indirect thinking	is opposed direct thinking, the concept
to the epiphany of transcendence	is opposed the dogma of the churches

to the epiphanic understanding of reality is opposed science and its reasoning process

For Durand, the apex of iconoclasm begins with the theories of Descartes and attains its culminating point first with XVIIIth century so-called enlightenment and XIXth century positivism.

5. From St. Augustine's City of God to Thomas Aquinas' Summa theologiae

Prior to the IXth century, Western thinking is dominated by platonism, whether Greco-Latin or North-African (School of Alexandria). It is St. Augustine's vision of the City of God, his cosmic plan, which dominates the theory of existence, the theory of knowledge and the vision of world history. Life in all its aspects is dominated by the transforming power of grace, the consciousness that the transforming power of the spirit is at work in the universe. Platonism implies symbolism since it is a philosophy of transcendence.

After the IXth century, scholasticism dominates Western thinking. It is first based on the Neoplatonist works of John Scotus Erigena, then on the efforts of Anselm of Canterbury to render the Christian Faith intelligible.

While the West was employing a predominantly logical Aristotelianism and was engaged in a vast controversy on the topic of universals, it is the works of Islamic philosophers, such as Avicenna and Averroës, and of Jewish philosophers, such as Ibn-Garbid and Moses Maimonides, which will truly open the works of Aristotle to the Western Christian world. However, in the process, Western thinking will not recognize the transcendental dimension of Islamic thinking, focusing instead purely on its philosophical dimension, and selectively on a theory of knowledge acquisition which best conformed to its view of the world in the Middle Ages.

Thus, around the XIIIth century, Western culture is dominated by Aristotelianism as seen by Averroës, who puts forward the consideration that faith and reason may not be complimentary, and later by Thomas Aquinas, who definitely separated philosophy and theology in his Summa Theologiae. By the Renaissance, the separation between transcendental or symbolic knowledge and rational knowledge was completed.

From this point on, the distance between these two forms of knowledge, once united, will but increase to the point of becoming totally foreign to one another, of being seen as antithetic, utterly contradictory, diametrically and irremediably opposed.

6. Towards XIXth century Materialism

From the XIIIth century onward, knowledge adopts the Thomistic view of nature, of humanity, of society and of the civil state. Knowledge, whether in its abstract forms or in its realizations such as art, does not attempt to convey meaning but rather, to copy nature. With Descartes, the philosophy of the sign (i.e. direct thinking) triumphs over the symbol (i.e. indirect thinking). Imagination and intuition, rather than being considered as an

integral part of the knowledge acquisition or discovery processes, are rejected as leading to error. Descartes' method of analysis is in essence, reductionist since it attempts to reduce God to analytical geometry.

It is from Descartes' reasoning that Spinoza elaborates the reductive concept of the man-God which, in his Court traité - De Dieu, de l'homme et de la santé de son âme (Chapter1 "Que Dieu est") is contrary to (if not in conflict with) the transcendental concept of an unknown and unknowable God with which the Bahá'í Writings are re-acquainting us. In Les Principes de la philosophie de Descartes démontés selon la méthode géométrique and in Les Pensées méaphysiques, Spinoza further elaborates on this secularization of God.

By the so-called Age of Enlightenment, such methods of analysis, such approaches to knowledge will lead directly to the pantheistic vision of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and to the theories of Voltaire and others. In the words of Udo Schaefer:

The atheism of modern times reached its first zenith with the Age of Enlightenment in eighteenth-century France. In the works of the rationalists d'Holbach, Helvétius, Diderot and Voltaire, Reason assumed the throne which Revelation till then had occupied.

(Schaefer, 1983, 3)

From the Age of Enlightenment, there is only one short step to Auguste Comte's positivism and Karl Marx's materialism. Whether it is Freudian psychoanalysis, social anthropology, mechanistic linguistics, the semiology of Hjelmslev and later Greimas or Bakhtine, Western thinking is dominated by a semiology of the sign rooted in materialism.

Indeed, by the latter part of the XIXth century and the first half of the XXth century, transcendence will have been totally removed from Western thinking. The very last remnants of a transcendental dimension will undergo a phenomenon which Girard calls "fonctionnalisation" (functionalization), even "fonctionnarisation" (neologism which basically means submissiveness to literal state or clerical dogmas). Symbolic thinking, in the giving way to secular concepts allowed for its submission and subsequent annihilation in clerical doctrine, in the sclerosis of religious dogmas and syntax.

It is at this very point that "literal thinking threatens the spirit" (Girard), where imagination and symbolic inspiration are rejected, for symbolic inspiration insures in every individual that the link with the mystery of transcendence can be established. In other words, literal thinking has to be established as the enforcement of ecclesiastical power be it that of the pharisees, of the priests or of the mullahs. Imagination and symbolic inspiration are therefore seen as a sacrilege, as an attack against dogmas, as a threat to ecclesiastical authority when it is on the contrary the very expression of the human spirit, the inherent right of the human being for the individual investigation of the truth.

We live now in the age of literal thinking whether it is in its most extreme religious forms as can be seen in the fundamentalistic tendencies of any of the past religious systems controlled by zealots or in the field of art and literature where, in the Western world, particularly the novel, and more precisely, the romance novel, has

obliterated poetry, and in the world as a whole—where the mass media, television in particular, is used, for the time being, as an instrument to convey literal thinking.

Because of the secularization of our world, because of the disappearance of the transcendental dimension or its assimilation in dogmas, the world has lost its sense of orientation the same way that an individual devoid of a code of ethics rooted in a spiritual dimension, drops to the level of the animal. Because of literal thinking, our world is in upheaval and we only need to go back to the many depictions of the present state of our world made by Shoghi Effendi to realize that in fact, we live on the brink of annihilation and that it is only our lack of foresight, our lack of understanding as well as our tendency, as Pascal would have said, to become “distracted”, which allow us to survive:

A tempest, unprecedented in its violence, unpredictable in its course, catastrophic in its immediate effects, unimaginably glorious in its ultimate consequences, is at present sweeping the face of the earth. Its driving power is remorselessly gaining in range and momentum. Its cleansing force, however much undetected, is increasing with every passing day. Humanity, gripped in the clutches of its devastating power, is smitten by the evidence of its restless fury. It can neither perceive its origin, nor probe its significance, nor discern its outcome. Bewildered, agonized and helpless, it watches this great and mighty wind of God invading the remotest and fairest regions of the earth, rocking its foundations, deranging its equilibrium, sundering its nations, disrupting the homes of its peoples, washing its cities, driving into exile its kings, pulling down its bulwarks, uprooting its institutions, dimming its light, and harrowing the souls of its inhabitants.

(Shoghi Effendi, The Promised Day is Come, 1980, 3)

Such a depiction could indeed lead us to believe that all is lost, that humanity is doomed and, in total oblivion, is moving towards the precipice where it will forever disappear.

However, existing or impending signs speak of the resilience of humanity, of the power of the spirit, of hope. While humanity is not yet aware that the forces at work in the world are those of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, numerous phenomena, attempts, realizations and projects attest to His power.

PART II From the Chaos of Knowledge Arises a Central Transcendental Concept for Salvation— Unity

1. Duality: A sign of our times

We live in an era of profound contradictions. Two opposite forces are in travail in the world as we speak. One is a force of fragmentation and destruction, and is the most obvious. The other is a principle of regeneration and it is not as evident because its manifestations, while numerous, appear unrelated. More specifically, in its frantic panic and in its disunity, humanity has so far been unable to fathom the one single principle, the one single source which is at the origin of these manifestations. Furthermore, many of these manifestations contain within them the two opposing principles of creation and destruction.

The duality which marks our time is both the expression of a chaos of knowledge and of a rebirth. As in the myth of Dionysos, as one order dies creating great convulsions, a new superior order arises amidst more convulsions and establishes itself on the ruins of the previous one. Thus, ambiguity is the order of the day: dualism as well as the androgynous figure tend to dominate many aspects of our cultural expression from fashion to literary creation.

2. Signs of a paradigm shift

a) Reassessing the knowledge acquisition process

The relationship of our society to knowledge is central to the understanding of this phenomenon. One of the fundamental principles which dominates our relationship to knowledge, one which can be found in literature, architecture, philosophy, or politics, is post-modernism.

For Jean-François Lyotard, post-modernism is the central functional concept of our times, a concept which emerges from the present chaos of knowledge. Post-modernism is a reaction against the belief that science as well as various systems whether scientific, ideological, political, etc., created on a scientific or pseudo-scientific basis, can bring all the answers. In short, it is a post-industrialist reaction, a reaction against capitalism and communism, against the information revolution, consumerism, the media, society, etc. It is also a reaction against linguistics, semiotics and all the disciplines of thought that attempt to have some scientific or systemic dimension.

It is also a reaction against modernism which is characterized by a constant need for closure, for systems that always work as closed systems (in literature, as demonstrated by Kristeva and others, the principle of closure is exemplified by the novel born in the late Middle Ages during the period of transition between the semiotic of the symbol and the semiotic of the sign).

It is therefore a reaction against totalitarianism whether intellectual or political because any form of totalitarianism requires closure to survive (politically, the Soviet Union only survived through closure and North Korea is at present one of the most blatant examples of this phenomenon).

It is finally a reaction to the absurdity of our lives dominated by the nuclear threat, wars, the pursuit of wealth and power, etc.

The main characteristics of post-modernism is its duality, again, specific to our times. It is on the one hand, what is generally referred to as "deconstructionism"; in other words, an explosion, a pulverization, a destruction of the old knowledge base. It is also a developmental concept which leads to reconstruction. For Umberto Eco (Postscript to the Name of the Rose), post-modernism is a spiritual category, a way of operating, an attitude. Eco considers that modernism has reached its ultimate limit and is condemned to repeating itself, to only producing a metalanguage on its past creations (elaborating endlessly on its achievements, imitating rather than creating). Post-modernism consists then of recognizing that the past cannot be destroyed (which the 1950s and

the 1960s attempted to do) but must, on the contrary, be revisited. While deconstructionist post-modernism leads to cultural and conceptual suicide, Eco's post-modernism leads to the creation of new archetypes, of new literary and artistic modes.

b) Reassessing the relationship between science and religion

While some particularly reactionary thinking can lead to the outright rejection of all scientific explanations and is often accompanied by regressive literalism, the questioning of the god-like scientific method is not only a specificity of post-modern philosophers, it is also a trend which an ever larger number of scientists are embracing. Among others, the Re-Vision project is a dialogue among several world renowned scientists working on the holographic imprint of the brain (for a definition see Wilber's, The Holographic Paradigm, New Science Library, Shambala, Boston and London, 1985, 2): Karl Pribram of Stanford University, Fritz of Capra, Renee Weber, Carl Bohm. This dialogue is:

[...] *perhaps the first serious and sustained look at the interface of "real science" (e.g. physics and physiology) and "real religion" (e.g. mysticism and transcendence).* (Wilber, 1985, 1)

Ken Wilber, editor of The Holographic Paradigm summarizes the project's preoccupation in these terms:

[...] *rather suddenly, in the 1970s, were some very respected, very sober, very skilled researchers—physicists, biologists, physiologists, neurosurgeons—and these scientists were not talking with religion, they were simply talking religion, and more extraordinarily, they were doing so in an attempt to explain the hard data of science itself. The very facts of science, they were saying, the actual data (from physics to physiology) seemed to make sense only if we assume some sort of implicit or unifying or transcendental ground underlying the explicit data... for various sophisticated reasons, these researchers and theoreticians from the "hard sciences" were saying that, without the assumption of this transcendental, spaceless, and timeless ground, the data themselves, the very results of their laboratory experiments, admitted to no cogent explanation. Moreover—and here was the shock—his transcendental ground whose very existence seemed necessitated by experimental-scientific data, seemed to be identical, at least in description, to the timeless and spaceless ground of being, (or Godhead") so universally described by the world's great mystics and sages* (Wilber, 1985, 1-2).

In that prevalent atmosphere where traditionally established patterns of knowledge acquisition are put in question, many scientists and thinkers find themselves engaged in the exercise of attempting to identify processes and structures, of making sense of seemingly random signs, even of artificially introducing a measure of order in the prevalent chaos which is often perceived as intellectually unacceptable. However, while many can and do provide accurate descriptions of the present state of civilization, few present any pertinent answers to the problems facing humanity. Quite to the contrary, most analyses, even if they go at all beyond platitudes and pious wishes, underline the difficulty which most present-day thinkers have in adequately answering the growing concerns of human society.

c) Reassessing patterns of growth and evolution

In an article published in the Journal of Bahá'í Studies ("The Evolution of Reality", Volume 3, Number 1, 1990-1991, p. 20-30), the general systems scientist Georges Land develops a pattern of growth based on the idea that "in the universe is a series of states of progression from one level to another in which everything is connected at higher levels" (Land, 1990-1991, 20). Land distinguishes three phases in the evolution of humanity. The first stage of this pattern is one of exploration and invention of the pattern, and corresponds roughly to the period of the evolution of humanity ranging from 15,000 B.C. to 6,000 B.C. The second phase of growth, where humanity improves and matures, goes from 6,000 B.C. to the present time, and is marked by an evolution of human society from the Nomadic Groups to the birth of International Organizations through the tribe, city-state, nations, empires and alliances. Humanity, according to Land, is now engaged in a dual process. As the third phase of this process, the integrating phase, takes shape, it is also going through a process of decaying. At the same time as this third phase starts, a new first phase begins, one that reinvents the future:

Here the organism incorporates the old system but now begins to explore a much broader environment and starts to organize a new pattern in this much broader environment. It is very hard to identify that new first phase... It is crazy. It has no pattern; it is trial and error. When a pattern is found, the organism moves to a higher level of organization, usually by one order of magnitude that is at least ten times more complex and begins another second phase at the crossing point (Land, 1990-1991,23).

These dual processes outlined by Land, as they collide and intermingle, lead to incredible upheavals. These upheavals, themselves marked by duality, are at the basis of the present-day reassessment of modernism.

d) Reassessing modernism

While the reaction against modernism can lead to such phenomena as religious fanaticism and religious fundamentalism based on literalism (in other words, a literal interpretation of religious Writings), one can also witness the rise of a significant, albeit frequently haphazard, reflection on the ways to negotiate the transition out of modernism towards a new order as yet largely undefined.

If Arnold Toynbee was largely alone a few decades ago in his assessment of the changes affecting our contemporary society, analyses of this perceived transition now are more common. I shall only cite a few.

In The Inner Limits of Mankind - Heretical Reflections on Today's Values, Culture and Politics (Pergamon Press, Oxford, 1978), Ervin Laszlo, member of the Club of Rome and Rector of the Vienna Academy for the Study of the Future, outlines the personal, cultural, and political limitations affecting humanity at this time and suggests ways of overcoming such limitations based on progress, justice, and mutually beneficial cooperation among nations.

In Design for Destiny - Managing the Coming Bifurcation (Harper and Rowe, New York, 1989), Ervin Laszlo further emphasizes the limitations of our age, the faltering of modern beliefs and systems, the upcoming

bifurcation which humanity needs to negotiate skillfully to avoid disintegration and the need for holistic solutions to its problems.

The 1981 volume which the most eminent French sociologist, Edgar Morin, devotes to Pour sortir du XX^e siècle (Seuil, Points, Paris, 1981) stresses the need for humanity to understand its own nature, underlines the present ideological and cultural disarray of most societies, and suggests the need for a paradigm shift from the present emphasis on the individual to a new emphasis on humanity.

Another renowned French sociologist (Alain Touraine) has recently released a voluminous book entitled Critique de la Modernité (Librairie Arthème Fayard, Paris, 1992) in which he stresses the crisis of modernism as the illusory triumph of reason and prescribes a reconstruction of modernism based on a revisiting of history from the Renaissance where the unity of the sacred and of reason was broken, leaving the human subject in an increasingly profound spiritual and cultural vacuum.

Finally, the French political scientist Jean-François Revel, in a somber study entitled Comment les démocraties finissent (Grasset Fasquelle, Paris, 1983) analyzes democracies as an accident of history, sorts of parentheses in a Western Civilization itself destined to collapse, to leave room only for new forms of totalitarianism.

For indeed, as the old man-made ideologies collapse, far from being replaced by a new and gentler order, they seem to give way to new more violent forms of nationalism and new forms of totalitarianism.

e) Reassessing Governance

The same duality mentioned earlier dominates the human governance. As barbarian ethnic war rages in the former Yugoslavia, as the former Asian Republics of the Soviet Union seem on the brink of eruption, as Africa falls into a seemingly bottomless pit of anarchy, violence and suffering, new circles of unity are being established between nations and across entire continents, and the role of international Organizations, as imperfect as they may be, has never been so great.

While the role of the United Nations is the most visible of all international bodies, numerous other organizations, as outlined in The Promise of World Peace represent steps towards unity. One of these organizations is the Club of Rome, which has, for the past twenty years, provided the world with its assessment of the state of the planet and proposed remedies based on a holistic vision.

Nevertheless, as worthwhile as these various attempts may be, they appear fundamentally flawed as they lack the one element which not only would transcend them but give them coherence and focus and, more essentially, would unite them.

3. The Unity Paradigm

In his 1986 book, Unity: The Creative Foundation of Peace (Bahá'í Studies Publications, Ottawa: Fitzhenry & Whiteside, Toronto), H. Damesh outlines the components of this new paradigm. For H. Damesh, at the basis of unity is a realization that "the most important realities known to mankind are based on the principle of oneness, and includes the reality of the oneness of mankind, of religion, and of God." (p. 32) He then defines each of these three realities:

1. *Humanity is viewed as one organic body composed of individuals who, according to their unique characteristics and qualities, form the diversified yet harmonious cells and organs. (32)*
2. *The second reality relating to the concept of oneness also calls for a change in our mind-set and is related to conscience, thoughts and ideas. It is a popular belief that the ideologies emanating from different religious, political and philosophical sources are irreconcilable. However, in the same manner that all scientific truths are one, all spiritual truths are also one, and the diversity of ideologies is due to the limitations of understanding and the differences of perspective. (34)*
3. *The third reality which demands a fundamental change in our mind-set is the concept of the oneness of God. Every human being believes in a God, a God of science or religion, of nationalism or tribalism, of capitalism or socialism, of peace or war, of gratification or self-denial....For attainment of humanity's oneness however, these gods have to be discarded and in their place must come the understanding and realization that the oneness of God, the God of mercy, of love, of enlightenment, and of creativity, is at the very core of all other onenesses and is the object of every human being's deepest yearning. (35)*

We can already see clearly how this simple concept of oneness described here in its most essential facets, illuminates all the reassessments or approaches outlined earlier and provides them with a much needed focus and coherence.

These three principles of oneness form the basis of the Bahá'í Revelation and are at the heart of the vision which its founder, Bahá' u'lláh, developed more than a century ago, for the future of humanity. Bahá' u'lláh considers that the principle of oneness is not an option, a choice to make, but a reality. It is therefore presented by Bahá' u'lláh as a law, a spiritual law which, in Bahá'í theology ought to be considered as binding as any natural law such as the principle of gravity:

...through Him the light of unity hath shone forth above the horizon of the world, and the law of oneness hath been revealed amidst the nations (Epistle to the Son of the Wolf 2).

Thus, the fundamental purpose animating the Faith of God and His Religion is to safeguard the interests and promote the unity of the human race (Gleanings, 215).

In Bahá' u'lláh's vision, unity is the next stage in humanity's evolution and pursuit of knowledge, the attainment of a higher plane of understanding.

PART III From Knowledge to Unity: Bahá'í'lláh's Vision of
Humanity's Coming of Age

1. From the Valley of Knowledge to the Valley of Unity

Despite promising signs outlined before, humanity is still submerged, buried in the chaos of its delusions. Rather than being a potent source of unity, knowledge, as well as its pursuit and exploration, are, on the contrary, a source of strife.

Bahá' u'lláh asserts that, for knowledge to be a source of unity, it ought to be focused on a single common point from which all understanding flows:

Know thou that he is truly learned who hath acknowledged My Revelation, and drunk from the Ocean of My knowledge, and soared in the atmosphere of My love, and cast away all besides Me, and taken firm hold on that which has been sent down from the Kingdom of My wondrous utterance. He, verily, is even as an eye unto mankind, and as the spirit of life unto the body of all creation (Epistle to the Son of the Wolf, 83).

In the Seven Valleys, Bahá' u'lláh uses the metaphor of a journey through a succession of valleys to symbolize the progress or maturation of a human being. Thus, by setting his eyes on the Revelation of God for this age (Bahá' u'lláh), by drinking from the Ocean of His knowledge which, ontologically, is presented as the source of all knowledge, indeed of absolute knowledge, the human being will:

... enter the Valley of Knowledge and come out of doubt into certitude, and turn from the darkness of illusion to the guiding light of the fear of God. His inner eyes will open and he will privily converse with his Beloved; he will set ajar the gate of truth and piety, and shut the doors of vain imaginings (Seven Valleys, 11).

Knowledge of God through His Revelation and through His Manifestation, however, is not enough. Bahá' u'lláh emphasizes that, upon learning of the Revelation, the responsibility of all human beings is to foster the advancement of civilization and to dispense one's knowledge for the greatest good of the peoples of the world:

Now is the moment in which to cleanse thyself with the waters of detachment that have flowed out from the supreme Pen, and to ponder, wholly for the sake of God, those things which, time and again, have been sent down or manifested, and then to strive, as much as lieth in thee, to quench, through the power of wisdom and the force of thy utterance, the fire of enmity and hatred which smoldereth in the hearts of the peoples of the world. The Divine Messengers have been sent down, and their books were revealed, for the purpose of promoting the knowledge of God, and of furthering unity and fellowship amongst men (Epistle to the Son of the Wolf, 12).

Even more explicitly, Bahá' u'lláh states in Cleanings:

“ .. it is incumbent upon every man of insight and understanding to strive to translate that which hath been written into reality and action... That one indeed is a man who, today, dedicateth himself to the service of the entire human race (Cleanings, 250).

In brief, the responsibility of the ones who have accepted the claim made by Bahá' u' lláh, is to foster unity for:

after passing through the Valley of Knowledge, which is the last plane of limitation, the wayfarer cometh to the Valley of Unity and drinketh from the cup of the Absolute, and gazeth on the Manifestations of Oneness (Seven Valleys, 17).

However, warns 'Abdu'l-Bahá, son of Bahá' u' lláh and appointed by Him as the sole interpreter of His Writings, one should recall the verse of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas (19) “ ... who so is deprived thereof, hath gone astray, though he be the author of every righteous deed” as interpreted in Some Answered Questions:

This blessed verse means that the foundation of success and salvation is the knowledge of God, and that the knowledge of God are the good actions which are the fruits of faith. If man has not this knowledge, he will be separated from God, and when this separation exists, good actions have not complete effect... the foundation is to know God, and the good actions result from this knowledge... good actions alone, with ut the knowledge of God, cannot be the cause of eternal salvation, everlasting success, and prosperity, and entrance into the Kingdom of God (Some Answered Questions, 238).

From these various quotations from the Writings of Bahá' u' lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá, one can see that fundamental to an understanding of the process which will first allow humanity to redefine the nature of knowledge and its relationship to it, and, second, allow it to move to a new plane of existence marked by unity, is a revisiting of the relationship between the material and the spiritual realms.

2. The Unity of the Physical and Spiritual Realities

We have already seen that our world is submerged in its materialism to the point of no longer being capable of apprehending, or even measuring spiritual realities. From the Paulinian doctrine of the physical resurrection of Jesus as the cornerstone of Christian doctrine to the increasingly literal interpretation of the Holy Writings of all of the world religions from Hinduism to Islam, which lead to an exponential increase in fanaticism and violence, materialism has invaded every corner, every aspect, of our world and of our daily life.

The Writings of Bahá' u' lláh on the other hand, purport to a reassessment of the physical and spiritual realities and an understanding of the purpose of physical reality (see John Hatcher, The Purpose of Physical Reality, Bahá'í Publishing Trust, Wilmette, 1987).

Bahá' u' lláh explains that, in order to comprehend the purpose of physical reality, one needs first to understand the nature of the human being “upon [whose] reality... He has focused the radiance of all His names and

attributes, and made it a mirror of His own self" (Gleanings, 65), for the human being is a "gem-like reality" (Gleanings, 77), "a mine rich in gems of inestimable value" (Gleanings, 260).

Human beings, however, are also physical creatures, but in the kingdom of creation, they are "the perfect one, the foremost individual in the world, who is the sum of spiritual and apparent perfections, and who is like the sun among the beings" (Some Answered Questions, 178). "Though man has powers and outer senses in common with the animal, yet an extraordinary power exists in him of which the animal is bereft" (Some Answered Questions, 186).

To summarize, "Man is in the highest degree of materiality, and at the beginning of spirituality - that is to say, he is the end of imperfection and the beginning of perfection" (Some Answered Questions, 235).

In the Promulgation of Universal Peace, comparing this point of passage, of transformation, where physical and spiritual realities are held in balance and complement one another, 'Abdu'l-Bahá compares the human being at this stage of transformation with the infant as it is about to be born to this plane of existence and states:

In the human plane and kingdom man is captive of nature and ignorant of the divine world until born of the breaths of the Holy Spirit out of physical conditions of limitation and deprivation. Then he beholds the reality of the spiritual realm and Kingdom, realizes the narrow restrictions of the mere human world of existence and becomes conscious of the unlimited and infinite glories of the world of God. Therefore, no matter how man may advance upon the physical and intellectual plane, he is ever in need of the boundless virtues of Divinity, the protection of the Holy Spirit and the face of God" (Promulgation of Universal Peace, 289).

In another of his works, 'Abdu'l-Bahá underlines that one of the signs of humanity's spiritual nature as reflecting the attributes of God, is understanding the functions of the intellect:

[The] intelligence of man is the intermediary between his body and his spirit. When man allows the spirit through his soul, to enlighten his understanding, then does he contain all Creation; because man, being the culmination of all that went before and thus superior to all previous evolutions, contain all the lower world within himself. Illumined by the spirit through the instrumentality of the soul, man's radiant intelligence makes him the crowning-point of Creation. But on the other hand, when man does not open his mind and heart to the blessing of the spirit, but turns his soul towards the material side, towards the bodily part of his nature, then he is fallen from his high place and he becomes inferior to the inhabitants of the lower kingdom" (Paris Talks, 96-97).

Intellect, or understanding, is therefore "God's greatest gift to man" (Paris Talks, 41), "understanding is the power by which man acquires his knowledge" (Paris Talks, 41). Being a function of the spirit, knowledge becomes articulated through will, or volition, and action. It is this "inextricable relationship between belief and action" as John Hatcher puts it (The Purpose of Physical Reality, 33) which allows a better understanding of the role and purpose of the laws in the Bahá'í Revelation.

3. Knowledge, faith and obedience - The purpose of the laws

At this point, one must go back to the principle enunciated earlier, that recognition of the Manifestation, contrary to prevalent Christian and particularly Christian fundamentalist doctrines, is not sufficient. In his commentary of Boethius' The Consolation of Philosophy, John Hatcher writes:

For the Bahá'í, recognizing the Manifestations and appreciating the absolutely essential nature of their sacrifices for the sake of our salvation and enlightenment is likewise essential, but it is not sufficient. Hand in hand with recognizing the Prophets and acknowledging their exalted station and exemplary life must go exacting obedience to the laws and ordinances that they reveal for our guidance. Our physical lives, therefore, are not simply reflections of belief or embellishments of faith. They are in this life the primary ingredients of and requisites for faith (The Purpose of Physical Reality, 36).

Bahá'í Ulláh expresses the twin duties of all of His followers in these terms:

The first duty prescribed by God for His servants is the recognition of Him Who is the Dayspring of His Revelation and the Fountain of His laws, Who representeth the Godhead in both the Kingdom of His Cause and the world of creation. Whoso achieveth this duty hath attained unto all good; and whoso is deprived thereof, hath gone astray, though he be the author of every righteous deed. It behoveth everyone who reacheth this most sublime station, this summit of transcendent glory, to observe every ordinance of Him Who is the Desire of the world. These twin duties are inseparable. Neither is acceptable without the other. Thus hath it been decreed by Him Who is the Source of Divine inspiration (Synopsis and Codification of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, 11; Kitáb-i-Aqdas, 19).

In the Bahá'í perspective, these laws bridge the spiritual and physical realities:

My commandments are the lamps of My loving providence among My servants, and the keys of My mercy for My creatures (Synopsis and Codification of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, 11-12).

They are “the highest means for the maintenance of order in the world and the security of its peoples” (Synopsis and Codification of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, 11). “From [His] laws the sweet smelling savour of [His] garment can be smelled, and by their aid the standards of Victory will be planted upon the highest peaks.” (Synopsis and Codification of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, 12).

As Udo Schaefer stresses (quoting ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in the process):

The laws of God are not the expression of a divine arbitrary to suppress and overpower human nature. They “are not imposition of will, or power, or pleasure, but the resolutions of truth, reason and justice (The Imperishable Dominion, 189; quote from Paris Talks, 154).

Expanding on this latest concept, 'Abdu'l-Bahá puts forward the idea that the highest expression of human freedom is obedience to the laws of God. For since these laws are revealed through the Manifestation and are therefore spiritual in origin, they liberate humanity of its bondage and limitations:

It is certain that man's highest distinction is to be lowly before and obedient to his God; that is, his greatest glory, his most exalted rank and honour, depend upon the close observance of the Divine commands and prohibitions (Secret of Divine Civilization, 71).

In the Bahá'í perspective, true freedom has, therefore, nothing to do with what our present society generally considers to be freedom. As explicated by H. Danesh:

True freedom requires the victory of man over his natural instincts and animal-like tendencies, a victory which requires self-knowledge and motivation and desire for the attainment of whatever is conducive to the exaltation and progress of man. When man lives according to "natural" and instinctual demands, his main concern becomes the struggle for existence which, according to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, is the source of all difficulties and problems in human life and relationships (Unity: The Creative Foundation of Peace, 64-65).

Finally, divine laws have one more purpose: The establishment of justice in human society:

The essence of justice and the source thereof are both embodied in the ordinances prescribed by Him who is the Manifestation of the Self of God amongst Men (Gleanings, 175).

The essence of all that We have revealed for thee is Justice, is for man to free himself from idle fancy and imitation, discern with the eyes of oneness His glorious handiwork, and look into all things with a searching eye (Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh, 57).

In the Bahá'í perspective, it is evident that justice is the essential prerequisite for unity and the abolition of prejudices, the eradication of extremes of wealth and poverty, principles of justice essential for the establishment of unity.

Conclusion: Humanity's Coming of Age

In The Promised Day is Come and in The Unfolding of World Civilization, Shoghi Effendi, Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith from 1921 to 1967, gives a vision of what the renewed knowledge-base brought in by the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh would provide for humanity:

One of the great events, " 'Abdu'l-Bahá has, in His Some Answered Questions affirmed, "which is to occur in the Day of the manifestation of that Incomparable Branch [Bahá'u'lláh] is the hoisting of the Standard of God among all nations. By this is meant that all nations and kindreds will be gathered together under the shadow of this Divine Banner, which is no other than the Lordly Branch itself, and will

become a single nation. Religions and sectarian antagonism, the hostility of races and peoples, and differences among nations, will be eliminated. All men will adhere to one religion, will have one common faith, will be blended into one race, and become a single people. All will dwell in one common fatherland, which is the planet itself.

This is the stage which the world is now approaching, the stage of world unity, which, as 'Abdu'l-Bahá assures us, will, in this century, be securely established. "The Tongue of Grandeur," Bahá'u'lláh Himself affirms, "hath...in the Day of His Manifestation proclaimed: 'It is not his to boast who loveth his country, but it is his who loveth the world.'"

"Through the power," He adds, "released by these exalted words He hath lent a fresh impulse, and set a new direction, to the birds of men's hearts, and hath obliterated every trace of restriction and limitation from God's Holy Book."

(The Promised Day is Come, 121)

The Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, whose supreme mission is none other but the achievement of this organic and spiritual unity of the whole body of nations, should, if we be faithful to its implications, be regarded as signaling through its advent the coming of age of the entire human race. It should be viewed not merely as yet another spiritual revival in the ever-changing fortunes of mankind, not only as a further stage in a chain of progressive Revelations, nor even as the culmination of one of a series of recurrent prophetic cycles, but rather as marking the last and highest stage in the stupendous evolution of man's collective life on this planet. The emergence of a world community, the consciousness of world citizenship, the founding of a world civilization and culture—all of which must synchronize with the initial stages in the unfolding of the Golden Age of the Bahá'í Era—should, by their very nature, be regarded, as far as this planetary life is concerned, as the furthestmost limits in the organization of human society, though man, as an individual, will, nay must indeed as a result of such a consummation, continue indefinitely to progress and develop.

(The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh, 163)