

Seven Candles of Unity and Broader Reflections on the Concept of Unity¹

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The Tablet of the Seven Candles of Unity is one of the writings of Abdu'l-Bahá. This Tablet was written in 1906 to Mrs. Jane Elizabeth Whyte, wife of Dr. Alexander Whyte, a prominent clergyman and Moderator of the General Assembly of the Free Church of Scotland. Despite her husband's prominent position within the traditional Scottish church, Mrs. Whyte herself possessed an inquiring spirit and an open and progressive outlook on spiritual matters. She was particularly interested in religious unity, world peace, and humanity's spiritual future. In the early twentieth century, through some of the first Western Bahá'ís, she became acquainted with the Bahá'í Faith and began corresponding with Abdu'l-Bahá. One of her fundamental questions was how, in a world filled with conflict and division, world peace and harmony among religions could be achieved.

This short and concise Tablet has particular significance in light of the historical circumstances in which it was written. When Abdu'l-Bahá wrote it in 1906, He was still living under confinement and restrictions in 'Akká by order of the Ottoman Sultan. At the same time, the world was entering a period of intensifying political and international rivalries and tensions—a process that, a few years later, culminated in the First World War.

Amid the turmoil and mounting tensions of that period, what is particularly significant in this Tablet is Abdu'l-Bahá's confidence in humanity's capacity to build a different future. He spoke of peace and the oneness of humankind at a time when the world was moving increasingly toward rivalry, division, and confrontation. Yet He did not regard this condition as humanity's inevitable destiny. Rather, He envisioned the possibility of a new stage of collective life in which relations among nations, religions, and human societies would be established on new foundations. The significance of this Tablet therefore extends beyond an answer to the questions

¹ This is an English translation of the revised Persian script prepared for presentation at the 36th Annual Conference of the Association of the Friends of Persian Culture in Chicago. This text was translated using an AI translation tool and reviewed/refined by the author.

of one individual; it may be viewed as outlining a horizon for the transformation of human society and its movement from longstanding patterns of conflict and separation toward an order based on unity, peace, and global solidarity.

In this Tablet, Abdu'l-Bahá uses the seven candles symbolically, each candle, when lit, bringing into realization one aspect of the organic process of the unity of humankind. The essential point is that these seven candles should not be understood as seven independent subjects or as seven completely separate stages. They are components of an organic, historical, and evolutionary process, and each can influence the development of the others.

Drawing on the authoritative Bahá'í texts and within the comprehensive framework of the Bahá'í worldview, I will discuss these seven dimensions and attempt to situate them within the broader movement of human society from separation and competition toward interdependence, cooperation, and a sense of belonging to a global community. At the conclusion, I will also offer several general observations that may help us understand some of the contemporary challenges facing the world and the path toward unity.

The First Candle: Unity in the Political Realm

This is the unity that must be established based on a global covenant among the governments of the world in order to eliminate the foundations of war and geopolitical conflict and bring about collective security, which was introduced in the Writings of Baha'u'llah Himself. He designated it as the Lesser Peace, a process by which nations of the world, through collective decisions, will establish mechanisms to resolve disputes and abolish war.²

The dynamics of the Baha'i perspective on collective security have been at the core of international relations since the early years of the twentieth century. Abdu'l-Bahá wrote two letters in 1919 and 1920 to the Executive Committee of the Central Organization for a Durable Peace in the Netherlands in which He explained the necessity and characteristics of an enduring peace. During His historic travels in the West, Abdu'l-Bahá presented the concepts of peace in

² *The sixth Glad-Tidings* is the establishment of the Lesser Peace, details of which have formerly been revealed from Our Most Exalted Pen. Great is the blessedness of him who upholdeth it and observeth whatsoever hath been ordained by God, the All-Knowing, the All-Wise.

visionary and seminal ways before religious, scientific, and academic gatherings and organizations, and warned of the dangers that were increasing in Europe. He referred to the political atmosphere of Europe, where everyone spoke of peace and reconciliation while the fire of hostility burned in their hearts. Treaties contained within themselves seeds of discord that would once again place the world in chains.

One of the most prominent aspects of this development, directly referred to by Shoghi Effendi, was the establishment of the League of Nations. In 1920, the League of Nations came into being as a result of the Paris Peace Conference, and by 1923, more than 50 countries had joined it. The League succeeded to some extent in contributing to the postwar stabilization and reconstruction of Europe. But, as we know, it was ultimately unable to achieve its principal objectives, and its system of collective security largely collapsed toward the end of the 1930s. Germany, Italy, and Japan withdrew from it, while the United States Senate refused to ratify the Treaty of Versailles, and consequently the United States never joined the League. President Wilson, one of the principal architects of the League, suffered a severe stroke in 1919 and died several years later, in 1924.

During the Cold War, in retrospect, the League of Nations was regarded as the failure of an immature and impractical project devised by an individual whose approach to political realities was considered idealistic. However, with the intensification of global conflict during the Cold War, the acceleration of economic and political interdependence among nations, and the expansion of international communications, the need for a mechanism in global relations became increasingly evident. Concerned individuals in government, academia, the media, and global think tanks began to revise their views, and instead of seeing the League of Nations simply as a failure, they considered it an experience that, in the gradual development and progressive course of world events, would necessarily find its fuller expression in more mature and comprehensive international institutions.

From Abdu'l-Bahá's perspective, political unity points toward the emergence of a new order in international relations that must ultimately find expression in the structures and relationships of a global society. This order views the relationship between each country and the world community from two complementary perspectives.

From the first perspective, peace and collective security are connected with the broader strategies of the international system, global cooperation, and sustainable development, and require the emergence of a global consensus concerning the shared responsibility of nations for maintaining peace and security. Within this framework, all nations bear responsibility for the problems of the world and must seek solutions to common problems through cooperation and global consultation. Force and domination should not be instruments of supremacy or means for resolving disputes. Rather, nations should establish the foundations of global peace and security through reason, justice, and cooperation.

From the second perspective, however, Abdu'l-Bahá directs attention toward the internal transformation of nations. Collective security cannot be sustainable unless every nation, while participating in the global order, also attends to its own cultural, social, and political maturation. Every society, with a sense of responsibility and a spirit of peace, and by drawing upon the resources of civilization, must free itself from backwardness, illiteracy, reactionary behaviors, and obscurantism. Rather than remaining trapped in the past, it must advance along the path of progress and development and draw upon science, knowledge, and beneficial achievements from the treasury of global civilization.

From this perspective, political unity results from the interaction of two complementary movements: the formation of a just and cooperative order at the global level, and the cultural, social, and political growth and maturation of the nations that constitute that order.

The reality and necessity of a global system cannot be denied, nor can it remain concealed beneath the dust and shadow of past prejudices. Recognition of social reality is like the rising of the sun: first it illuminates the summit of the mountain, then its light descends along the slopes, and finally spreads across the plains and deserts. In this process, some come to recognize the truth sooner and others later, but human delay in recognizing reality cannot prevent its eventual manifestation. It is impossible at the outset to envision a new civilization in all its fullness and perfection. It is like a figure in the desert enveloped in a haze of light and heat: the closer we approach it—that is, the more we free ourselves from the domination of prejudice and dogmatic beliefs—the more clearly its characteristics become.

The Second Candle: Unity of Thought in World Understanding

We know that the power of thought and the ability to reason are distinctive human capacities that distinguish human beings from the animal world. Through the power of thought, human beings have been able to discover the realities of things, attain knowledge, develop technology, and establish the foundations of civilization. Thought and reflection are essential means of seeking truth and attaining knowledge and understanding.

Unity in diversity is a well-established premise. Hence, unity of thought does not mean making all opinions identical. Rather, we emphasize the necessity and diversity of opinions while maintaining that there must be a common framework and foundation for attaining truth and collective agreement. Abdu'l-Bahá regards unity of thought and opinion as essential to the unity of humankind and world peace. In effect, He links epistemology—the question of how we arrive at knowledge and truth—with political philosophy. The question, then, is how we can achieve unity and agreement in thought while preserving diversity of opinion in collective decision-making and exercise of power. Is this possible? Are there models that can guide human conduct in political and social discourse?

What immediately comes to mind is the manner in which unity and agreement are achieved in scientific thought and research. In scientific inquiry, particularly empirical research, agreement is much easier to achieve than in religious, social, and political discussions. There are several reasons for this. First, science faces change as a recognized principle of its progress. If a scientific theory claims to answer every question and presents itself as the final and most perfected form of knowledge, it violates one of the most fundamental principles of the scientific method and will immediately be disregarded by the scientific community. The foundation of scientific and logical knowledge is that human understanding expands, becomes more comprehensive, and continually changes. A partial truth develops into a greater truth, and this process unfolds within the dynamic relationship between human beings and their surrounding environment, which itself is in a state of continuous change and movement.

Scientists therefore recognize, at every stage in the development of scientific thought, that prevailing knowledge and the criteria by which truth is understood are relative and will

eventually give way to further understandings through subsequent thought and research. Second, because scientific research is based on observation, objective experience, and tangible realities, it facilitates agreement by reducing the role of purely subjective interpretations. Facts are represented through quantitative measures—numbers, calculations, statistics, graphs, symbols, tables, and laboratory experiments—thereby limiting the space for bargaining, disagreement, and the imposition of personal opinions. Although empirical research has theoretical limitations, it presents its findings clearly, explicitly, and tangibly to the observer, listener, and reader. It therefore limits the influence of prejudice in scientific understanding and makes it more difficult to rely on rhetorical devices or the interpretive ambiguities that can arise in hermeneutics, exegesis, and social theory.

The application of scientific models to the achievement of unity of opinion itself requires more serious study. We know that the harmony of science and religion—in effect, the unity of scientific and religious thought—is one of the fundamental teachings of the Bahá'í Faith and should lead toward a unity of knowledge. Here, however, a distinction must be made between material phenomena and social phenomena. Material and natural phenomena, such as those studied in physics, chemistry, and biology, can readily be examined through empirical scientific methods. Social phenomena, however, involve values and subjective considerations, and therefore cannot be investigated in precisely the same manner as sensory phenomena in the natural sciences. Social research does not deal with phenomena that can easily be placed in a laboratory and manipulated. In social matters, we confront a complex network of human relationships and values about which agreement is not easily achieved.

In the natural sciences, scientists working with empirical and observable information can conduct experiments, publish their findings, and obtain relatively immediate agreement and validation from the scientific community and their colleagues. In social questions, however, achieving such agreement requires broader criteria. Yet the weaknesses and limitations of empirical methods in addressing social problems do not mean that social questions cannot be studied systematically and scientifically.

The scientific method based on observation and experimentation must therefore be coordinated with two additional criteria if we are to move closer to unity of thought in sociocultural matters. These two criteria are discursive democracy in the public sphere and ethical and spiritual values.

At the first stage, scientific methods are used in social research to collect and analyze data, identify major themes and patterns, and interpret and report findings. At the next stage, these findings are introduced into a broader consultative space of generative discourse. In this space, scientific findings are considered together with new ideas, perspectives, and conceptual frameworks, while also taking into account the broader historical and social context, with the aim of developing a deeper and more shared understanding of social reality.

Through this interaction, differing perspectives can generate new insights and gradually contribute to a shared understanding that is broader than any single viewpoint. The objective at this stage is not merely to arrive at a decision, but to develop a new discourse and framework for understanding social reality, one capable of encompassing, in addition to empirical evidence, the totality of historical experience and the interpretive and hermeneutical dimensions of human life. Through hermeneutic interpretation, rich religious and philosophical texts, including Baha'i writings that offer universal principles relevant to the modern pursuit of unity, can serve as important textual references.

At the final stage comes the need for spiritual sentiments that result in the awakening of conscience for genuine moral values and behaviors. Spiritual sentiment acts like a powerful magnet, helping transcend consultation and the search for truth driven by selfish motives and prejudice, transforming the clash of opinions from conflict and contention into a means of generating a spark of truth. Thus, consultation rests from below upon the foundations of scientific method and is refined and rectified from above by ethical and spiritual standards.

These ethical and spiritual standards, however, must ultimately find expression in the character and conduct of those engaged in consultation. One of their most important consequences is therefore the cultivation of a character based on humility, proper conduct, and attention to a higher realm, so that differences of opinion do not turn into confrontation among individuals and groups. Human beings can disagree profoundly about important matters without regarding one

another as enemies or as members of an opposing camp. The principle of human oneness teaches us first to recognize one another's shared humanity and dignity, and then freely to discuss and critique our beliefs and differences. Within such a framework, one may strongly disagree with an idea without denying the human worth and dignity of the person who holds it.

Abdu'l-Bahá, in His Second Tablet to The Hague, wrote something about the achievement of world peace that can be applied to this argument as well. He emphasized that knowledge and intellectual recognition alone are not sufficient; a deeper power is required to translate an ideal from the realm of thought into social reality. He wrote:

“Today the benefits of universal peace are recognized amongst the people, and likewise the harmful effects of war are clear and manifest to all. But in this matter, knowledge alone is far from sufficient: A power of implementation is needed to establish it throughout the world. Ye should therefore consider how the compelling power of conscience can be awakened, so that this lofty ideal may be translated from the realm of thought into that of reality. For it is clear and evident that the execution of this mighty endeavour is impossible through ordinary human feelings but requireth the powerful sentiments of the heart to transform its potential into reality.”

The Third Candle: Unity in Freedom

In the Bahá'í Faith, moral philosophy and the concept of freedom are closely intertwined. Freedom of the human will is one of the essential conditions of genuine moral choice and responsibility. Because human beings possess the capacity to choose, they can distinguish between good and evil and consciously direct their actions toward values associated with human perfection. From this perspective, unity of freedom implies a shared recognition of the moral principles and values that enable freedom to contribute to both individual and collective development. In an emerging world civilization, these values increasingly acquire a global dimension. Respect for human rights, for example, does not belong to any particular nation or race but represents a universal principle. Freedom also entails liberation from those prejudices and attachments that separate human beings from one another and undermine the oneness of humankind.

Unity and freedom must therefore exist in a dynamic balance. Human beings need not make identical choices; what must be shared is an acceptance of the conditions that make free choice possible for everyone. Indeed, one of the most important signs of the maturity of civilization is its ability to establish a balance between freedom and discipline. Freedom without discipline and responsibility can lead to self-centeredness and social fragmentation, just as discipline without freedom can lead to coercion and the suppression of individuality. Civilization flourishes when it can create an order that neither sacrifices freedom for social cohesion nor, in the name of freedom, ignores the necessity of responsibility, order, and belonging to society. Freedom should not be interpreted as license; rather, freedom finds its fuller expression when joined with moral responsibility.

In an emerging global order, all human beings should have the freedom and opportunity to develop and express their potential capacities and perfections. Political and economic institutions should therefore be regarded as instruments for the development and manifestation of human capacities, rather than systems to which human beings become subordinate or victims of political and economic ideologies. From this perspective, the emergence of a global order may be understood as a further historical expression of humanity's capacity for conscious and responsible freedom. This inherent capacity for choice, together with reason, knowledge, and moral development, has enabled humanity progressively to master the forces of nature, develop science and technology, bring social institutions into greater conformity with principles of justice and equality, abolish slavery in many societies, expand freedom of belief and conscience, and, at this stage of social evolution, increasingly lay the foundations of a global civilization.

The Fourth Candle: Unity in Religion

This means recognizing the common spiritual foundations that constitute the basis of all divine religions. The unity of religions means bringing to an end the wars and conflicts that for centuries have set the followers of different religions against one another. It means removing the barriers that obstruct understanding and fellowship among religions. And finally, it means agreement that theological and religious differences retain their validity so long as they do not become instruments of repression, violence, and sectarianism. Where religion becomes a cause of alienation, its absence becomes preferable to its presence.

The unity of religions does not mean ignoring different theological or doctrinal interpretations. Religions and denominations hold different views concerning God, revelation, the station of the Prophet, salvation, the afterlife, and many other subjects. These differences can be discussed, investigated, and criticized. Differences in subsidiary matters should not lead to denial of the common essence of all religions.

Beyond theological differences, the unity of religions requires rejection of all forms of violence, coercion, and imposition of belief for the propagation or defense of a religion. Likewise, deep faith in a religious tradition need not be accompanied by insistence upon the exclusivity of truth or the final and absolute character of its teachings in such a way that the path to dialogue and recognition of truth in other traditions is closed. The unity of religions does not require abandoning belief; rather, it requires abandoning exclusivism and transforming doctrinal differences from sources of hostility into opportunities for dialogue and mutual understanding.

Within religious discourse, two modes of thought and belief have created major challenges for understanding and coexistence among religions. The first is belief in the finality of a religion—that divine revelation has reached its conclusion within that religion, that all knowledge of the first and the last has been revealed, and that the door through which truth and divine guidance may be conveyed by a new Prophet has been closed. The second is religious exclusivism, which regards one's own religion as comprehensive and complete and as the sole path to salvation for its believers.

These two interconnected beliefs have, throughout history, severely limited—and at times made seemingly impossible—the path toward dialogue and recognition of the fundamental unity of religions. Although interreligious understanding has gained greater acceptance in the modern world, many attempts at convergence have remained at a superficial level because the doctrinal foundations of religious teachings continue to rest upon finality and exclusivism.

Here, the Bahá'í concept of progressive and continuous revelation assumes particular importance. From this perspective, the great religions are not separate and antithetical but successive expressions of a single process of divine guidance, appearing in accordance with humanity's capacities and needs during different periods of history. Such a perspective, on the

one hand, challenges finality because it does not regard divine revelation as a completed process; on the other hand, it moderates exclusivism because it does not confine divine truth and guidance to one religion or one historical period. Thus, differences among religions can be understood not necessarily as evidence of their conflict, but within the continuity and evolution of a historical process of divine guidance—a perspective that provides a deeper foundation for religious unity and interreligious dialogue.

The concept of progressive revelation also establishes a natural relationship between religious unity and freedom. If truth and divine guidance are not confined to a single period or religious tradition, then the search for truth must itself be a free and conscious process. Freedom of conscience therefore enables every individual to seek truth according to his or her own understanding and conscience while at the same time recognizing truth and value within other religious traditions.

Unity, however, goes beyond tolerance. Tolerance may mean merely enduring the other, whereas unity requires respect, dialogue, and cooperation, recognition of shared spiritual and moral foundations and the consciousness of the fundamental unity of religion. Followers of different religions can move beyond exclusivism without abandoning their religious identities and beliefs and can cooperate in addressing the common problems of society and advancing civilization.

The politicization of religion and its transformation into an ideological instrument for acquiring power and domination are also among the most important obstacles to religious unity. Abdu'l-Bahá, both in His writings and in His leadership of the Bahá'í community, devoted great effort to protecting it from political entanglement in both theory and practice. The danger of such politicization is precisely that it can reverse the proper function of religion. He emphasized that when religion creates love, understanding, and connection among human beings, it becomes a constructive force in civilization. But when it becomes an instrument of hatred and hostility, it departs from its spiritual purpose. Hence, if religion becomes a cause of enmity and discord, its absence is preferable to its presence.

From a Bahá'í perspective, the fundamental cause of division and discord is the spiritual decline of civilization, which itself results from the extinguishing of the lamps of religion. It must

immediately be clarified, however, that the extinguishing of the lamps of religion does not mean the disappearance of religious traditions, customs, rituals, clergy, or religious organizations. Rather, it refers to the eclipse of the light of God, when divine revelation, as the spiritual and unifying force of civilization, is disregarded or loses its influence in human life. When this spiritual vitality is diminished, religious institutions, customs, and rituals can become ceremonies emptied of their deeper meaning, while material motives and political ambitions increasingly overshadow the spiritual purpose and mission of religion.

In such a condition, when God is removed from His place in the human heart, human beings begin to construct idols and devise false gods. Human beings are by nature oriented toward an origin and an ultimate end. Therefore, if God as the origin, goal, and ultimate destination of humanity's journey is removed, human beings create other ends for themselves and begin to worship them, thereby creating still more constraints for themselves. They create an idol, then destroy it, only to replace it with another.

But ideological idols such as materialism, moral relativism, or nihilism are more dangerous than natural or physical idols. Whenever the spirituality of religion disappears, the conditions are created for the cultivation of intellectual idols. In such circumstances, the soulless body of religion itself becomes another idol and forms alliances with the other idols.

The Fifth Candle: Unity of Nations

This means that human beings, beyond national borders, should regard themselves as inhabitants of one planet and members of one human community. This principle is in fact an expression of the principle of the oneness of humankind. Its purpose is not to eliminate national identities. The language, culture, history, traditions, and distinctive characteristics of every nation are part of the richness of human civilization. The problem arises when national identity turns into extreme nationalism, claims of superiority, or hostility toward other nations.

The movement toward global unity therefore does not require the negation of national identity; rather, it requires an expansion of the circle of human identity and belonging. Just as belonging to a family does not prevent one from belonging to a community and nation, belonging to a nation should not prevent one from feeling a sense of belonging to humanity as a whole. A

person can be Iranian, French, Indian, or a member of any other nation while at the same time regarding himself or herself as a member of the human community. Global identity does not necessarily replace other identities; rather, it places them within a broader framework.

The unity of nations therefore means harmonizing national identities within a broader global identity. Within such a perspective, nations preserve their cultures and distinctive characteristics while recognizing that their enduring interests cannot be separated from the destiny of the human community as a whole.

The Sixth Candle: Unity of Races

The sixth candle, the unity of races and peoples, is directly related to the fundamental principle of the oneness of humankind.

The unity of races and peoples rests upon the principle that no racial, ethnic, cultural, or ancestral difference can constitute a basis for determining the value, dignity, or rights of human beings. Physical, ethnic, and racial differences cannot serve as grounds for regarding some human beings as superior and others as less valuable. All human beings are members of one human family. Ethnic and cultural diversity is not an obstacle to unity; rather, it can become a source of the richness and beauty of human civilization. The unity of races and peoples therefore goes beyond an exclusive emphasis on identity politics: while recognizing the importance of addressing the particular experiences and injustices faced by different groups, it seeks to place these identities within the broader framework of a shared human identity. The central issue in the unity of races and peoples is therefore the elimination of prejudice, discrimination, and claims of superiority. The oneness of humankind moves beyond an ethical ideal and becomes a social reality when it is reflected in human relationships and embodied in the institutions and structures of society.

The Seventh Candle: Unity of Language

Finally, the seventh candle is the unity of language, according to which, in addition to the mother tongue, an international language should be selected through the free will of nations and on the basis of consultation, and taught in schools throughout the world in order to facilitate conversation and mutual communication at the global level. The purpose is not to replace mother

tongues or eliminate national cultures. Different languages will continue to carry the history, memory, culture, and identity of societies. An international language would simply provide a common means of communication among them.

A common language is not merely a linguistic matter; it also has epistemological dimensions and is closely related to questions of thought and consciousness, because language provides a medium for the formation of concepts and for human understanding of the world. At a deeper philosophical level, this function of language recalls the concept of *Logos*, with its ancient association of word, meaning, and reason. Through language, human beings transform experience into meaning, develop and communicate thought, enter into dialogue with others, and participate in the development of human consciousness and social life. From this perspective, a common language can help create the conditions for the emergence of a global discourse conducive to mutual understanding and unity.

In a world in which problems themselves have become global, the existence of a common space for dialogue becomes increasingly important. Peace, the environment, migration, economics, health, science, and technology are not issues that can be considered solely within the framework of a single country. Such issues require a global and unifying discourse. A common language can form part of the cultural infrastructure of such a discourse and enable nations to consult directly with one another about the common concerns of humanity. In this way, a common language expands communication; communication increases mutual understanding; mutual understanding makes global discourse and consultation possible; and shared discourse strengthens the foundations of global awareness and cooperation.

Summary and a Broader Reflection on the Concept of Unity

This has been a summary of the Seven Candles of Unity referred to by Abdu'l-Bahá in His Tablet and cited by Shoghi Effendi in his discussion of the objectives of the new world order. Yet these seven dimensions should not be understood as separate or independent objectives. Rather, taken together, they reveal a broader vision of humanity's movement toward unity.

The integrated and unified Bahá'í worldview invites us to regard these seven dimensions as different aspects of a living and evolving whole and to recognize the reciprocal relationships among them. They are manifestations and reflections of an overarching process rooted in the principle of the oneness of humankind, whose aim is to harmonize cultural, religious, national, and racial diversity within a balanced unity and an evolving global civilization.

It would be misleading to regard unity in the political realm as a stage disconnected from unity in freedom or unity among religions. Nor should political unity be understood as beginning and ending at a particular point, only to be followed by unity of thought and opinion, which in turn is completed and gives way to another form of unity. Such a linear and sequential interpretation fails to capture the interdependent nature of these different dimensions of unity and is incompatible with an organic and evolutionary understanding of the transformation of human society in the light of progressive and continuous divine revelation.

The concept of world unity should be understood as a living and vital phenomenon in which all its forms and manifestations are simultaneously present in potential, each of these capacities gradually becoming manifest as the process grows and develops. It is like an embryo in which, from the beginning, all the physical, intellectual, emotional, and moral capacities and perfections are potentially present. These capacities gradually reveal their effects. At one stage, physical growth may be more visibly apparent, but we know that intelligence, reason, and the power of speech are developing at the same time, and physical growth in fact creates the conditions for the emergence of other mental capacities. Conversely, the manifestation of intellectual capacities does not mean that physical development has ended. We therefore consider physical, emotional, intellectual, and moral development together within the totality of the individual's stages of growth and evolution rather than as disconnected and separate phases. By analogy, the different manifestations of unity are interconnected dimensions of an evolutionary process through which human unity progressively expands in scope and deepens in character and substance.

Another point to note is that the seven dimensions of unity address two broad forms of transformation: those intended to create the material foundations for world unity, and those intended to create its spiritual foundations. Unity, like any other social phenomenon, has both a subjective dimension, that is, it exists as an idea, a value, and a form of consciousness, and an

objective and material dimension, meaning that it finds tangible expression in the political, economic, and social institutions of the world. It is analogous to thought, which cannot find expression without a body, or electricity, which cannot have an external manifestation without a conductive medium. Seen in this light, an organic and fluid understanding of the relationships among these seven forms of unity is essential, since their spiritual and material dimensions are necessarily interconnected. Such an understanding reflects a Bahá'í mode of thought that approaches the problems of the world not as separate and mechanical segments, but as interconnected realities whose relationships possess vital and organic dimensions.

Unity as a Historical Process

If we compare the world today only with the ultimate ideal of unity, we may see nothing but wars, prejudices, rivalries, and failures and conclude that the movement toward unity has failed. But if we view human society within the framework of a historical process, the question changes. The question is no longer simply, “Has unity been achieved or not?” Rather, we must ask: At what stage of this process does human society currently stand? What forces are moving it toward unity? What forces are resisting it? And what might be the next step in this transformation?

In social processes, progress is not always linear. There may be periods of crisis or regression. The failure of a policy or institution does not necessarily mean the failure of the overall direction. The experience of the League of Nations is an example of this. An institution may fail to achieve its ultimate objective yet generate experience that can later be used in constructing more mature institutions. Unity should therefore also be regarded as a learning process. Human society learns from its experiences, reforms its institutions, and gradually develops more appropriate ways of living together.

The unity of humankind may be understood as part of humanity's historical trajectory and collective destiny. Throughout history, the boundaries of cooperation and collective identity have gradually expanded: from the family and tribe to the city and nation, and in the modern era toward a civilization that is becoming increasingly interconnected on a global scale. Today, advances in science, communications, transportation, trade, and international cooperation have made human societies more interdependent than ever before.

At the same time, there is a growing view that the international order that emerged after the Second World War is undergoing a profound transformation. This order, shaped to a considerable extent by Western powers, particularly the United States, developed through the Cold War period and expanded significantly following the collapse of the Soviet Union. It was associated with the expansion of international trade, the development of human-rights norms, and the creation of institutions intended to strengthen international cooperation and collective security. Despite all its shortcomings and contradictions, this system represented an important stage in the development of an international order based upon expanding cooperation among nations, creating multilateral institutions, establishing shared rules and norms, developing global trade, and strengthening principles such as human rights and collective security. From a broader historical perspective, it can therefore be regarded as an important step toward the greater organization of human society at the global level.

The liberal tradition has played an important historical role in advancing individual freedom, democracy, rationalism, human rights, and social progress. But it should not be regarded as the final stage of humanity's political and ethical evolution. Its fundamental premises have not been sufficient to address deeper questions about human nature, materialism, social polarization, identity conflicts, and the need for a shared ethical and spiritual framework.

At the same time, the liberal order faces challenges from religious fundamentalism and other radical ideologies that reject some of the essential principles of modern civilization, including freedom, tolerance, rationality, and peaceful coexistence. When such movements seek the exclusive imposition of their beliefs and reject fundamental civilizational achievements, they challenge not only the liberal order but also the foundations of peaceful life and social cooperation.

As the world becomes increasingly interdependent, the liberal order faces another challenge: how can principles that developed primarily within the framework of the nation-state be reconciled with the needs of an increasingly interdependent global society? This tension between principles and institutions rooted primarily in the nation-state and the growing requirements of global interdependence provides an important context for understanding the present strains within the international order.

Seen in this light, the divisions and tensions we observe today should not necessarily be regarded as signs of the collapse of the international order or of the futility of efforts to achieve collective security. More than anything, these developments reveal the limitations of institutions and arrangements created in response to the historical circumstances of an earlier period. The emergence of new global challenges, shifts in economic and political power, and increasing tension between national interests and global interdependence have made the weaknesses of existing international structures more apparent than before.

For this reason, increasing questioning and criticism of the existing global order should not necessarily be regarded as a negative phenomenon. In some respects, it may constitute a necessary corrective. Institutions created under particular historical circumstances may gradually become inflexible, bureaucratic, or insufficiently responsive to changing realities. Questions concerning national sovereignty, the unequal distribution of costs and benefits, institutional effectiveness and accountability, and the proper balance between national interests and international responsibilities are therefore serious questions worthy of consideration. Such criticism can help us distinguish between the principles of international cooperation and the particular structures that have thus far been used to implement those principles.

From this perspective, contemporary turmoil may even contribute to a constructive process of change. Questioning the existing order does not necessarily mean rejecting international cooperation or collective security. On the contrary, it can provide an opportunity to reconsider how these ideals should be realized under new historical circumstances. The challenge is neither to preserve the post-Second World War system unchanged nor to abandon the ideal of global cooperation. Rather, the task is to build upon its achievements while correcting its deficiencies. The emergence of a more mature global order is likely to require finding a better balance between legitimate national interests and the growing reality of global interdependence.

This point is important because historical systems do not disappear overnight and give way to entirely new systems that emerge from nothing. Historical transitions take place through processes of continuity, crisis, criticism, adaptation, and transformation. What persists through

such transitions, however, is not limited to institutions and structures; certain underlying aspirations may also endure and find new forms of expression. International systems are not merely products of competition for power and political interests. At their best, these systems have also reflected human aspirations, particularly the pursuit of peace, security, cooperation, and a more stable world.

Unity: From an Ideal Vision to Social Reality

Unity can be viewed from two complementary perspectives: unity as an ideal vision and unity as a historical and social process. The ideal vision presents an image of a society based on justice, cooperation, mutual respect, and a sense of belonging to a shared human community, while the process consists of the gradual movement from existing reality—with all its contradictions and limitations—toward this desired condition.

Having a vision is necessary because it establishes the direction of movement. Vision alone, however, is insufficient; it must be translated into intermediate goals, policies, institutions, and practical actions. The articulation of the vision and its translation into practical reality must therefore proceed simultaneously and in interaction with one another.

This perspective requires distinguishing between the ultimate objective and the stages through which it is achieved, as well as between principle and method. Principles establish the general direction, but the methods and policies through which principles are realized change and evolve. An institution or policy may not be perfect, yet it may constitute a necessary stage in the process of transformation. The movement toward unity is therefore not a linear process free of crises, but a gradual, learning process that advances through experience, evaluation, and reconsideration.

Such an approach avoids two extremes: abstract idealism, which sees the destination but ignores the path required to reach it, and realism without vision, which becomes trapped within the limitations of the existing order and short-term interests. The art of moving toward unity lies in connecting vision with action: knowing where we wish to go, understanding where we presently stand, and identifying the next step. We must preserve the principles while remaining flexible in the methods through which they are realized.

