

The Age of Universality

Graham Nicholson¹

Introduction

The argument advanced in this article is the view that humanity is entering upon an age of universality. The term 'universality' is not used in the sense of all the circumstances of humanity being universal in every respect; this is of course an impossibility given the great diversity of the human race in terms of culture, language, nationality, religion and belief, etc. And humanity is still divided into membership of different national institutional arrangements and forms of governance, although increasingly these are being transcended by cross-border connections, institutions and laws. The argument accepts that all humanity is one human species and hence are members of one race and are increasingly seen as such. But more than that, it argues that that one human race is now participating in a process that is entering upon a new age in which the many factors that go to make up that one race are experiencing ever increasing degrees of connections and commonalities. These connections and commonalities have now reached a stage such that the interdependence of that one race is becoming an established fact². Increasingly there is an emerging universality of factors applicable to all humanity despite the differences already mentioned. It is not uncommonly observed that the world of humanity is becoming a global village³. And that universality is

¹ Dr Graham Nicholson, retired lawyer, writer, Baha'i.

² "The world is, in truth, moving on towards its destiny. The interdependence of the peoples and nations of the earth, whatever the leaders of the divisive forces of the world may say or do, is already an accomplished fact." (Shoghi Effendi, *The Promised Day Has Come*, 122.)

"There is a coming together. The power of community is asserting itself. We are realising how fragile are our frontiers in the face of the world's new challenges. Today conflicts rarely stay within national boundaries. Today a tremor in one financial market is repeated in the markets of the world. Today confidence is global; either its presence or its absence....I have long believed this interdependence defines the new world we live in."- Tony Blair, Labour Party Conference speech, <<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2001/oct/02/labourconference.labour6>>

³ This term was coined by Marshall McLuhan in the 1960s to describe the world's increasing interconnection – Jakaria, *Age of Revolutions*, Allen Lane, (2024), 221.

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increasingly being reflected in a consciousness on the part of many people of the depth of these connections and commonalities. Despite a resurgence of national consciousness and some rise of opposition to globalization, which as Zakaria points out produces its discontents and the possibility of revolutions⁴, it is argued that the overall trend towards universality is now set in place.

This article has deliberately adopted the concept of historical "ages" as a means of endeavouring to describe the age into which, it is argued, humanity is now entering. It does this without any apology. The use of the "age" concept is a convenient way of identifying predominant trends and emphases in human history by focusing on particular descriptions of certain temporal "ages". This practice provides a focus on the primary attribute of each period of time that can be conveniently described as a particular "age", thereby assisting in the overall assessment of developments in human affairs. This applies even if the use of "ages" is in relation to what is sometimes described as humanity's "progress", in the course of the evolution of that history. Thus in the past we have what has been described as the prehistoric age, the age of ancient empires, the dark ages, the early and late middle ages, the age of the renaissance and reformation, the age of the enlightenment, the colonial age, the age of liberalism and capitalism and the "modern" or contemporary age. Sometimes the "age" may correspond with the peak development of some widespread philosophy or religion, such as the golden ages of Hellenism or of Islam. In other cases it may be linked to the peak development of particular "civilizations", such as the golden ages of ancient Egypt, Persia and Rome⁵. Again it may be linked to certain scientific and technological factors, such as the stone age, the bronze age, the iron age, the industrial age and the age of information technology. None of these are precise terms, but they provide an introduction to one or more of the most prominent features of each age in question. Each may be open to criticism in that it may be said to place too much emphasis on one major factor to the disadvantage of others of significance. But each has a value in identifying the major characteristic of the age in question.

⁴ Zakaria, Age of Revolutions, Allen Lane (2024).

⁵ This approach is described by Arnold J Toynbee, A Study of History, in 12 volumes, 1934-1961. It is a general approach that reflects much earlier notions of history, not in terms of any progressive linear developments, but rather in terms of continuous cycles of life.

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Allied to this descriptive use of different ages is the notion that human history is not just a lineal description of social, religious, political and other events involving the interaction of human beings, but that there is in addition some overall direction or "progress" in the unfoldment of that human history. This is a controversial matter⁶. The question is whether or not history follows a purely random course, responding to empirical cause and effect without any overall plan, direction or goal. An affirmative answer contains a view that can accept that history is capable of radical change and development by human choice and intervention. But human choice or intervention may be seen by some as just one of a number of random events that contribute to the unfoldment of that history. And human choice or intervention may be seen as having positive or negative effects, good or bad⁷. On this view, the social organization of humanity, or any section of that humanity, can rise and fall at any time.

Some other commentators may view this matter in a different light and claim there is an overall progression to be discerned in human affairs over time from age to age, citing the primitive beginnings of the human race and its gradual rise through progressive stages of civil organization – tribe, city-state, nation, etc. This progression clearly may not have been uniform; it may have had its "ups" and "downs", its own cycles. It might be likened metaphorically to climbing a series of mountain ranges interspersed by deep valleys, but with an overall increase in height as the journey progresses. There is seen to be, on this view, a general

⁶ The idea of human progress is examined in Sidney Pollard, *The Idea of Progress: History and Society*, (London, C A Watts, 1968); Ronald Wright, *A Short History of Progress*, (Melbourne, Text Publishing, 2004). Wright argues that only by understanding the patterns of repeated human behavior in its continuing cycles can humanity learn to change its ways and with luck and wisdom avoid the repeat of disastrous outcomes that have characterised past cycles. Some writers are strongly against the idea of human progress towards global integration in recent centuries, for example. Alain Touraine in his comments in *One World*, <<https://courier.unesco.org/en/articles/one-world>>.

⁷ The idea of progress took somewhat of a battering in the 20th century, when belief in the wonders of scientific materialism was hit by the mass brutalities of two World Wars and numerous other hideous conflicts. This might suggest that humanity has in fact reversed its "progress" in this century. But viewed from another perspective, such brutalities have indicated the shortcomings of a world divided, and in themselves provide further strong grounds for a shift to universality. The risk of further such global conflict cannot be dismissed as humanity deals with the demands of its increasingly global nature. In fact such severe trials may well yet provide the impetus for a more unified global approach.

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upward or positive form of human development, a generally purposeful direction towards ever greater universality with mostly beneficial effects for humanity as a whole. In this present age, that may be seen as culminating in a global age, an age of universality taken to its limit. It is this idea that this article examines.

This latter approach may sometimes be described as a teleological or providential approach to human history, one in which there is seen as being an overall plan or design leading to a specific human end of a positive nature, whether as a secular or a religious concept. The secular approach can be illustrated by the communistic theory in Marxian writings, or perhaps in the perceived end goal of modern liberal democracy found in the writings of Fukuyama⁸. The religious approach can be illustrated by the eschatology to be found in the literature of all the great religions, in which humanity is seen as moving towards a golden age, the Kingdom of God on earth or something similar to that concept.

There is an alternative historical approach to the linear view of human history. This alternative proclaims the relevance and merit of a cyclical approach to human history through what may be said to be the inevitable rise and fall of particular civilizations, religions, etc. History may be seen as moving in certain cycles, with commonly repeated elements of rise, efflorescence and decline. This cyclical view does not necessarily exclude the view that each successive cycle has its own particular characteristics and even overall development. But there are also commonly repeated elements to that history. This leads to the question whether, as part of any such cycles, humanity is "progressing" forwards in any sense, or heading towards some specific cyclical goal, whether positive or negative.

In the current debate over such issues as the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, great power confrontation, terrorism, global warming and over-population, there is speculation as to whether the human race as a species is in danger of becoming extinct due to certain destructive human choices or practices. If human beings are just another animal, another class of mammals, then longer term global history indicates that there is a distinct possibility of any animal species evolving and becoming extinct according to environmental and other

⁸ Francis Fukuyama, The End of History and the Last Man (New York, Free Press, 1992).

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factors⁹. If added to this is the factor of certain bad human choices that have been made, then some may see room for pessimism into the future, a possible end to the human cycle. The question is - are we as a human race now in a cycle that is heading towards the greatest of all declines and falls; that is, that of the total extinction of the race? Some commentators may now seriously question the viable future existence of the human race on a planet that is afflicted by so many complex and deep-seated "illnesses".

If, on the other hand, the human species is in a special category or is unique in any manner of ways, in particular in that species' capacity to adapt to changed circumstances (beyond that of most animals) and in their profound intellectual, conceptual, imaginative, creative, moral, spiritual and other abilities, then arguably there is a future that will see a continued development of that human species into new, much more unified and harmonious society with much more unified political, religious and other structures well into the future¹⁰. This continued development could even be seen in the indications that humanity is moving towards a new, major universal cycle, a new global age.

The purpose of this article is to examine this very question; that is, whether we are moving into a new cycle or age of universality. This the article seeks to do by looking at some existing trend and circumstances, leaving the reader to draw his or her own conclusions. It is not the purpose of this article to enter upon the debate as to the chances of the future survival of the human race, or otherwise to speculate in detail on what that future may be other than in a universal sense. And for the purposes of this article, it is not necessary to discuss this controversial issue of whether the human species is in some special category in relation to other animals. Nor does it necessarily have to answer the question whether human history is essentially lineal or cyclical in nature. This is because the question whether humanity is entering upon a new age characterized by its universality is a question

⁹ The history of now extinct hominids other than homo sapiens is illustrative in this respect.

¹⁰ The concept of progress may have a basis in evolutionary theory. Thus Richard Leakey stated_ "*It appears that the evolutionary process promotes its own progress: learning about the environment (which demands a certain intelligence) means living in a stable social milieu (which demands at least an equal and possibly a greater intelligence); as social intelligence increases, so too will the ability to learn; this in turn encourages an even longer social apprenticeship; and longer group living leads to more social intelligence*" (Origins, 1977)

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that can be answered whether or not human history is properly to be characterized as linear or cyclical. If the lineal approach is the case, then it is still possible to conclude that overall we as humans are "progressing" in linear time towards a new universal aspect of human history. If the cyclical approach is the case, then it is still possible to conclude that humanity is in the process of entering upon a new cycle and age characterized by its universality, while otherwise building upon past cycles. If you like, it is an argument that envisages a "spiral" view of human history, like a series of lesser ages contained within each of fewer but major ages, which overall are seen as "spiraling" upwards¹¹.

Universality

Let it be assumed for the moment that we are moving into a new major age of universality. The word "universality" by itself it is a very general word, capable of carrying diverse meanings. It denotes some kind of general application – a "universal" application. In its Latin derivation it means "of or belonging to all". In the present context, it is used in relation to the whole human race, but not in the sense of the history of that race as having universal characteristics through history. Rather, it is used in the sense that the age in which humanity may now be entering may be appropriately characterized as one in which humanity as a whole increasingly acts, and is perceived to be acting, in the broadest of terms, as one unit socially, politically, nationally, racially, etc., rather than as a race (or many races) primarily characterized by many separate, competing divisions, prejudices, interests, hatreds and antagonisms. Of course, these divisions, etc., remain and will continue well into this new age. But the argument is that increasingly humanity is moving away from those divisions, and is seeking more for common planetary interests, unities and harmonies, if for no higher reason than a form of enlightened self interest¹².

¹¹ Reminiscent of the "hybrid" or "mixed" system described by P Sorokin in Social and Cultural Dynamics: A Study of Change in Major Systems of Art, Truth, Ethics, Law and Social Relationships.

¹² Alternatively the development of global unity may be seen as part of a Divine plan.

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Nor is universality in the sense presently used a mere matter of tolerance of differences, a universality based merely on an acceptance of "otherness". Rather, there is a growing recognition that, despite various differences between people that persist, perceived or factually based, and particularly between the different self-identifying groups that make up the planetary community, there are commonalities among all of them which, in this new age, are seen as being much more important than those differences. It is a universality of shared racial origins¹³, capacities, organization and interests in a global context.

It is not simply an argument about what is now commonly called "globalisation"¹⁴. Rather, it is an argument that goes to the very nature of human relationships and shared interests across the planet and the future of those relationships and interests. It involves a dramatic attitudinal change as much as an actual change in individual and collective human action and practice. There is a question of human consciousness involved, a paradigm shift in human attitudes and thought. All conceptions of workable societies are said to be based on a shared inner consciousness¹⁵. A community the main feature of which is its universality requires a shared consciousness of that universality. But of course it takes time for any change of major proportions in consciousness to develop. It is an evolving thing. In the case of the argued change to that of universality, that change may already be happening under a large number of complex global circumstances and pressures, some of which are discussed below. It is a change that may be gradually altering perceptions of a single human race which by inheritance is divided upon many lines: nationality, citizenship, race, colour, culture, religion, language, ethnicity, etc.

And it is a change that appears to be increasingly manifesting itself and becoming more deeply embedded as those complex pressures increase and the need for global responses becomes more evident. In fact it can be argued that it is an overall change that, due to interdependence, is now unstoppable, barring some

¹³ The scientific evidence now points strongly to the view that all humans share a common inheritance under the "out.of Africa" theory.

¹⁴ This is in itself a term of uncertain meaning and application. It is now usually seen as being something more than economic globalization and the global economy. The concept of globalization can be seen as a subset of universality.

¹⁵ Philip Arnott, *Eunomia*, (OUP, 1990).

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unexpected global disaster of monumental proportions that thrusts humanity backwards in an irrecoverable manner. It is a change that thrusts itself upon, and competes with, those inherited human perceptions and actions of a more divisive or prejudiced nature. There is no doubt that these past perceptions and actions will continue to influence the evolution of this current age and impede the growth of a paradigm of universality. But these influences, although still strong, and which may in some cases even be exhibiting an increasingly vocal influence, appear to becoming more defensive and outspoken in nature. Arguably they may well reach a "tipping point" in influence and may well gradually diminish over time as the factors of universality expand, thereby not affecting the proper characterization of the evolving age as one distinguished by its primary feature of universality.

Some might argue that the idea of universality is not new. In fact, if one looks back to the great empires of old, they may be said to have incorporated elements of universality that transcended particular races, ethnicities, etc. But what is unique about the present age is that it can be seen as a movement towards universality on a comprehensive global scale, such that many people are beginning to identify with the planet as a whole and its best interests as a single, fragile unit, inhabited by one human species. It is "spaceship earth". Increasingly, solutions to its many problems are being sought on a planetary basis. And remarkably, the sophisticated scientific and technical tools for dealing with these many problems of the planet have only emerged in comparatively recent times, creating the opportunity for co-operative global solutions if the will can be found and old divisions and prejudices submerged. This is not to diminish or render insignificant the opposite forces at work of division, separation and disunity in the world. Obviously these forces are still very strong. In recorded history there has never been a situation like this before with such countervailing forces developing towards increasing global interdependence, not on this global scale.

This view of an age in which humanity faces a common future as one entity on one small planetary homeland is becoming expressed in the literature. It may not be seen by all as being inevitable, and it is not necessarily a view of constant linear progress and development; rather it may have its ups and downs given the frailty of the human condition and the inadequacies of human reason. But it may be viewed,

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both in perspective and in fact, as a form of overall human progress through history despite the reversals and irregularities, and involving decisions and actions that overall have tended to assist in the ultimate goal of establishing unity among humanity, particularly in more recent times. The motivations behind it may be various, including the quest for a more united, peaceful and just world. Thus the following quote attributed to Leakey states:

*"..the human race occupies one world. We share the same planet...From the perspective of pre-history, one can also add that we are one species, and that every human being in every part of the globe shares a common heritage with each other. This, I believe, is a powerful motivation for reconsidering the blatant inequities in the world before such imbalances drive us all to oblivion."*¹⁶

Langness has written:

*"I am a passenger on the Spaceship Earth," wrote Buckminster Fuller. "The new electronic interdependence recreates the world in the image of a global village," says Marshall McLuhan. These and other forward-looking thinkers, following the lead of Baha'u'llah's 19th Century teachings on collective human development, have all perceived the emerging need for world unity."*¹⁷

Townshend wrote:

"History... is in its length and breadth one and single. It is one in its structure. It is one in its movement. From the beginning of time the whole human race has been subject to one law of development; and it has advanced age after age in accordance with one and the same principle and by the application of one and the same method. Its whole movement has one source and one cause, and is directed towards one goal. The unification of the world, instead of being an afterthought,

¹⁶ The source and authenticity of this quote is being investigated.

¹⁷ D Langness, The Progressive Baha'i Concept of Human History, < <https://bahaiteachings.org/progressive-bahai-concept-of-human-history/>>.

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*or of needing an improvised miracle for its completion, is the normal conclusion of a process that has been going on since the race began."*¹⁸

Lennon sang:

*"Imagine all the people living life in peace. You may say I'm a dreamer, but I'm not the only one. I hope someday you'll join us, and the world will live as one."*¹⁹

This in turn raises profound moral and spiritual issues. The compatibility of old codes and beliefs with the perceptions and directions of a new age of universality, and with all that entails, is now open to question and to challenge. New moral codes and beliefs may be emerging that tend to put the planet and its combined inhabitants first, before the inherited codes and beliefs based on past divisions and prejudices. More and more people may be recognizing that the many great issues and concerns now facing humanity do not end at national borders. There is a growing acceptance that cross border, more peaceful, cooperative global solutions are increasingly required if they are to be effective and lasting²⁰. At the same time, the dangers of confrontation arising based on a more divisive approach to world affairs in opposition to principles of universality are not difficult to see.

One consequence is that many older religions have increasingly come under challenge, especially where they proclaim some form of uniqueness or exclusive access to truth. Fanaticism flourishes in response, as a defence to the developing demands of universality among other factors. And more virulent forms of nationalism are emerging in response, some connected to a particular religion. It is action and reaction. The more that universality progresses, the more the violence of the reaction is likely to be²¹. In fact, at a more fundamental level, much of the

¹⁸ The Epic of Humanity, George Townshend, Bahá'í World, Volume VI (1934-1936)

¹⁹ John Lennon in the song "Imagine" (1971).

²⁰ This may be increasingly recognized, for example, in the debate on climate change, where it is becoming obvious to many that solely state based solutions are not going to achieve the desired global results.

²¹ Thus Dahl states "*The conflicts between these integrative forces on the one hand, and the resistance of traditional concepts and institutions on the other are growing fiercer*" – One World One People, Baha'i Publishing, (2007), 51. It is not correct, it is argued, to ascribe the increase in fanatical violence and terrorism in recent times

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conflict in the world can be seen as a form of resistance or reaction to the various manifestations of universality in the world, variously expressed, and the increasing pressures that that is placing on outmoded privileges, practices, ideas and beliefs. Just one example of an idea under pressure is the idea that some sections of the global community, through the concept of absolute national sovereignty, are entitled to maintain great particular rights, wealth and privilege even though other sections, perhaps the majority, remain in a position of less advantage. Already such a notion of absolute national sovereignty is under challenge. National isolation cannot, it is humbly suggested, in a technologically connected world, in the longer term survive the move towards universality. This analysis of the nature of contemporary conflict as being a defensive response to a growing universality is not widely recognized by many modern thinkers. And these tensions are likely to increase in the immediate future until the move to universality is much more widely accepted and accommodated. There may even be a tendency towards an increase in the levels of confrontation and conflict, a tendency that is likely to continue for some time, in response to the growing recognition of the demands of universality, even if that reaction may eventually be terminal.

And it is likely that of all matters giving rise to such confrontation, religious and related matters of belief will be the last bastion of resistance. People tend to cling to their religious beliefs more strongly than anything else, even if those beliefs are out of tune with the needs of the time and with rational belief. As a consequence, while the pinnacle of universality would be marked by an eventual acceptance of the universality of morals²² and of religion²³ within a united planetary society, there is likely to be acute resistance to that acceptance. This would most likely be

to just East-West competitive issues, or to Christian-Muslim religious divisions, or to a lack of democracy, demands of individual freedom, economic inequality or other such causes. It is arguably and fundamentally a prejudiced reaction to the increasing forces of universality in an emerging age of universality – an age that must be characterized by the demand for global justice, unity and other universal values.

²² See the Global Ethic that emerged from the World Parliament of Religions in 1993. See [A Global Ethic](https://parliamentofreligions.org/globalethic/#:~:text=The%20Global%20Ethic%20is%20a,religious%2C%20spiritual%2C%20and%20cultural%20traditions), (Continuum, New York, 1993), <<https://parliamentofreligions.org/globalethic/#:~:text=The%20Global%20Ethic%20is%20a,religious%2C%20spiritual%2C%20and%20cultural%20traditions>>

²³ In one sense, universality of religion and belief is already partly achieved by the various human rights guarantees of freedom of religion and belief, in the sense that all are protected in terms of universal human rights law. But there is another sense in which religion may be universal, in the belief that all the great religions originally stemmed from the same Divine source through selected individuals as part of the universal human quest for transcendence.

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the last aspect of universality to be achieved. It is clearly a long way off. It is discussed further below.

This article mounts its arguments by reference to some significant contemporary human circumstances. From this it extrapolates into the future. It is argued that, on the evidence available, we are already heading into the early stages of a new age characterized by its universality, and that many of the essential features of this universality are already developing or even already in place on the planet. It argues that the trend towards increasing degrees of universality in human affairs is already occurring. Subject to various strong forces in opposition, it is by and large argued that this trend that is headed in that one direction, with rapidly evolving, exponential features. It is therefore not just an exercise in futurology – it is an issue that is already facing the human race. It is for the reader to judge whether he or she agrees and to draw whatever conclusions he or she wishes. This is a most important matter for consideration, as it clearly impacts, and will continue to impact, upon every human being. There will certainly be important ramifications that will need to be considered and changes made by each person, as well as by society collectively, by way of adjustment and accommodation. These changes, it is argued, are likely to be profound, and will increasingly impact upon our own comprehension and perception of the nature of global society in which we are living. This may well in turn further reinforce and accelerate the trend towards universalism and the collective nature of that global society.

Science, Communications and Technology

There is no need to greatly expand upon the enormous advances in recent times in science, communications, transport and technology. These ground breaking changes in a little over one century have revolutionized the nature of the global society and brought humanity much closer together.

Thus Stanwood Cobb wrote:

"We do not need to rehearse here all the amazing ways in which humanity has progressed since the Century of Enlightenment -- the discoveries of science and their application to human living; the great enlargement of man's knowledge and conceptual power; the broadening of his horizons; the narrowing of the planet

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until all are near neighbors; and the promise of technology to bless and fructify the earth."²⁴

Thus the development of science, communication, transport and technology can be seen as critical elements in the progress of humanity towards universality.

Frederick Seitz commented by reference to Darwin that this was part of a gradual development of civilization within human society over a long time:

*"Darwin recognized that thus far the civilization of mankind has passed through four successive stages of evolution, namely, those based on the use of fire, the development of agriculture, the development of urban life and the use of basic science for technological advancement."*²⁵

The very fact that humanity can now readily and instantaneously communicate, exchange views and trade or otherwise associate with the rest of humanity, and can also potentially travel in a fairly brief time to almost any part of the planet, must be considered factors in the coming together of humanity. The degree of interaction between the different sections of humanity has now increased exponentially, extending to all aspects of human activity. It extends well beyond the more limited concept of economic globalization. The ancient idea of "*love thy neighbour*", which previously had in practice a limited geographical application, can now be seen to extend to all humanity, facilitated by scientific and related progress.

Of course some commentators have not been all positive about these developments, in that they have identified the dangers in them to humanity. The ultimate danger is that the scientific development of weapons of mass destruction might be used to terrible effect and cause the survivors of humanity to revert to a more backward form of existence, thus substantially putting back the progress of humanity. This possibility cannot be brushed aside. The present state of the very divided world of so called sovereign states, many equipped with such weapons, does bring much cause for concern. It has not so far occurred en masse apart from the use of such weapons against Japan at the end of World War 2. It seems that for any positive progress towards a new and much more united global order, a binding

²⁴ Baha'i World, Volume 12, p. 873.

²⁵ The Science Matrix: The Journey, Travails, Triumphs (1992, 2012), 86.

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form of global disarmament, extending to a total ban on all such weapons, as well as an effective system of collective security, must be critical elements.

This is not to minimize the obstacles to a more unified global community. The forces of separation and prejudice in the world community are obviously very strong and of long historical derivation. The forces of advanced science, communications, transport and technology, largely neutral, may not be sufficient to achieve the advance of universality by themselves. It seems that other factors must contribute to this advance, not the least of which is the further development of a global consciousness among the masses, accompanied by advances such as in education, in advances in commerce and industry, in the development of world law and in global institutional arrangements. There is also the prospect that any future major global conflict causing devastation as a result of the employment of the very destructive weapons developed by science and technology could provide the tipping point that forces the leaders of the world to enter into new, more united and peaceful global arrangements²⁶. Sufficient to point out the uniqueness of the present period of history, among which are the huge rise of science and the other forms of knowledge and application in recent times that are available to assist the forces tending towards every greater universality if those forces are properly and responsibly applied.

Religion and Belief

There are of course other factors than science and the other factors already just mentioned that need to be addressed in dealing with this issue of universality. Prominent among them are matters of religion and belief. These are particularly relevant, with a capacity to bring both unity or disunity. Many would assert that religions have been a major factor in the past divisions and confrontations in human society and, far from being factors contributing to universality, they may actually be seen as major factors in opposition to universality. But equally it can

²⁶ The two modern global institutional arrangements, the League of Nations and the United Nations, both arose out of global conflict.

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be argued that the purpose of true religion, properly interpreted and applied, is to generally bring humans together in accordance with Divine virtues. The fact that this does not always occur can be ascribed to the deficiencies of the human condition and arguably not to true religion itself.

It simply cannot be denied that the way some religions are practiced is a primary contributing factor in the cause of some contemporary conflicts in the world. To this extent at least, it is a factor against the trend towards universality. But this is certainly not a new feature in conflicts over millennia. What is perhaps quite new, at least since the first World Parliament of Religions was held in 1893 in Chicago, is the growth of the interfaith movement, now finding expression quite widely in the world. This has brought many different religions and religionists together in dialogue and in the interchange of views. And many religious leaders, including the Pope, now express more tolerant views of other religions and denominations and participate in some joint meetings and exchanges. This has not generally led to the abandonment of exclusivist creeds and beliefs²⁷, but it is a form of progress that perhaps reflects the wider trend towards universality already mentioned. And it is supported by the rise of universal human rights internationally and in many countries, including the freedom of religion and belief and respect for the beliefs of others.

The writer argues in this context that there is a need to look to the fundamental nature of religion as Divinely revealed and not to the failings of humans. All the great religions teach the need for love and compassion and other virtues, even if not always practiced. These are universal principles. To assist in this approach, the writer now seeks to draw in particular upon the views expressed in the sacred literature of the Baha'i Faith as one example of universalist teachings, asserting as they do the unity and oneness of all humanity and of religion and the potential expression of those principles in a united global order.

A Spiritual Approach

²⁷ Perhaps contributed to by clerical self interest.

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The particular religion of which the author is a member, the Baha'i Faith, has a more spiritual approach to the argument in this article on the advance of an age of universality in the world, an approach which is arguably quite unique and which makes it worthy of consideration in this context.

The teachings of the Founders of this Faith are marked by a theology of progressive development in both material and spiritual terms extending over human history. The teachings incorporate a global spiritual approach to the major issues facing humanity and postulate united global solutions. In a particular sense they are essentially universalist in nature and direction, in that they apply to all humanity under the one supreme Deity of all and are directed at the progressive emergence of a truly global spiritual civilization as a reflection of the Divine realm. Abdu'l-Baha himself used the concept of universality in connection with his elucidation of the Faith, stating "*For universality is of God and all limitations earthly*"²⁸. Thus the processes at work in the world are seen as having a spiritual base reflecting the Divine Will for all humanity, and evolving over the ages through the agency of human beings having a degree of free will and of spiritual, moral and intellectual capacity, and guided by the Founders of the great religions. The teachings contemplate that, despite all the trials and difficulties encountered over the ages, there is an overall trend in human affairs towards greater global unity. It is a trend that is only seen as being linear in nature in the sense of there being an overall form of human development or progress through many ups and downs. It is essentially and historically cyclical in approach, moving through expanding societal cycles in association with the founding of the various great religions. The emphasis in this latest Baha'i cycle, which can be described as a universalist cycle applying to all humanity, is on the inculcation of a consciousness of the oneness of all humanity under the one supreme Deity of all. And the goal of the unity of the whole human race is seen in terms of a unity in diversity rather than a form of uniformity. It seeks and contemplates a goal of global unity including at institutional levels, as part of a new, united, more peaceful and just world order.

²⁸ Baha'i World Faith, Baha'i Publishing Trust, 445.

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It might be thought that the Faith may have some connection to the philosophy of Hegel as the progenitor of progressivism as a philosophy of history through a dialectical process moving toward higher unity²⁹. Hegel believed in the moral progress of humanity but his views were not expressed in metaphysical terms and were more political in nature and direction. The approach of the Faith is essentially spiritual in origin and causation rather than being secular in nature and is non political. The progressive development contemplated in the Faith is seen as being a part of a Divine plan for the wellbeing of all humanity, the culmination of which is eventually the evolution of a truly global civilization, a united spiritual 'Kingdom' on earth. Dahl wrote:

"The concept of an evolutionary progression over time is fundamental to the Bahá'í perspective. For example, all the major religions are seen as steps in a progressive revelation of Divine Will, with each renewing the fundamental spiritual truths of all religion, while bringing social teachings adapted to the needs of its particular time and place. The teachings of Bahá'u'lláh are seen as the most recent step in this progression, providing guidance to resolve the particular challenges of today and to lay the spiritual foundations for a coming world civilization....."

In the Bahá'í view, just as nature is marked by many cyclical phenomena, such as seasons and life cycles, so has society seen the rise and fall of many past civilizations, accompanying the gradually increasing scales of social organization and unity from the family to the nation. Today, we are experiencing the difficult transition from a world of sovereign nation states to a unified world society. Our suffering is like the birth-pangs of a new civilization.....

We are, in a sense, in the final stages of the turbulent adolescence of the human race, on the verge of our collective adulthood and maturity. As the institutions of a divided world collapse, and the material philosophies that have dominated our century demonstrate their failure to bring happiness and well-being to the majority of humanity, Bahá'ís see it as essential to lay new moral and spiritual foundations for the civilization that will inevitably be born out of this period of turmoil, and that will guarantee a better life of justice and peace for future generations.

²⁹ G.W.F. Hegel (1770–1831)

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There is also in the Bahá'í teachings a clear vision of the future society that is already taking embryonic form even as the old order collapses. "Unification of the whole of mankind is the hall-mark of the stage which human society is now approaching. Unity of family, of tribe, of city-state, and nation have been successively attempted and fully established. World unity is the goal towards which a harassed humanity is striving. Nation-building has come to an end. The anarchy inherent in state sovereignty is moving towards a climax. A world, growing to maturity, must abandon this fetish, recognize the oneness and wholeness of human relationships, and establish once for all the machinery that can best incarnate this fundamental principle of its life." To achieve this, a series of evolutionary steps are envisaged, from the relatively rapid agreement on a political peace between nations, through the gradual spiritualization of societies around the world, to the achievement of a world commonwealth and the flowering in centuries to come of a rich and diverse world civilization in a golden age, before the continuing development of new potentials and the inevitable loss of momentum and deterioration in any human system require another process of spiritual renewal."³⁰

Abdu'l-Baha, the eldest son of the Founder of the Faith, wrote of the Baha'i cycle being the latest in a series of historic human cycles:

"In cycles gone by, though harmony was established, yet, owing to the absence of means, the unity of all mankind could not have been achieved. Continents remained widely divided, nay even among the peoples of one and the same continent association and interchange of thought were well-nigh impossible. Consequently intercourse, understanding and unity amongst all the peoples and kindreds of the earth were unattainable. In this day, however, means of communication have multiplied, and the five continents of the earth have virtually merged into one.... In like manner all the members of the human family, whether peoples or governments, cities or villages, have become increasingly interdependent. For none is self-sufficiency any longer possible, inasmuch as political ties unite all peoples and nations, and the bonds of trade and industry, of

³⁰ Dahl, The Baha'i Faith - A Future-Oriented Religion, *Future Generations Journal*, No. 22, Issue 1, p. 15-17 (1997)

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*agriculture and education, are being strengthened every day. Hence the unity of all mankind can in this day be achieved."*³¹

The Guardian of the Faith, Shoghi Effendi, wrote of a universal fermentation that is driving humanity through a combined process of global integration and disintegration towards unity:

"As we view the world around us, we are compelled to observe the manifold evidences of that universal fermentation which, in every continent of the globe and in every department of human life, be it religious, social, economic or political, is purging and reshaping humanity in anticipation of the Day when the wholeness of the human race will have been recognized and its unity established. A twofold process, however, can be distinguished, each tending, in its own way and with an accelerated momentum, to bring to a climax the forces that are transforming the face of our planet. The first is essentially an integrating process, while the second is fundamentally disruptive. The former, as it steadily evolves, unfolds a System which may well serve as a pattern for that world polity towards which a strangely-disordered world is continually advancing; while the latter, as its disintegrating influence deepens, tends to tear down, with increasing violence, the antiquated barriers that seek to block humanity's progress towards its destined goal. The constructive process stands associated with the nascent Faith of Bahá'u'lláh, and is the harbinger of the New World Order that Faith must ere long establish. The destructive forces that characterize the other should be identified with a civilization that has refused to answer to the expectation of a new age, and is consequently falling into chaos and decline.

*A titanic, a spiritual struggle, unparalleled in its magnitude yet unspeakably glorious in its ultimate consequences, is being waged as a result of these opposing tendencies, in this age of transition through which the organized community of the followers of Bahá'u'lláh and mankind as a whole are passing."*³²

The comments of the Founder/Prophet Baha'u'llah to Professor E G Browne of Cambridge University in 1890 are apposite and explain the exigencies of the present human condition and the remedy:

³¹ Shoghi Effendi, The Promised Day is Come, 120.

³² Shoghi Effendi, The World Order of Baha'u'llah, 169.

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"Thou has come to see a prisoner and an exile. We desire but the good of the world and the happiness of the nations; yet they deem us a stirrer-up of strife and sedition worthy of bondage and banishment. 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. Do not you in Europe need this also?

Is not this that which Christ foretold? Yet do we see your kings and rulers lavishing their treasures more freely on means of the destruction of the human race than on that which would conduce to the happiness of mankind. These strifes and this bloodshed and discord must cease, and all men be as one kindred and one family. Let not a man glory in this, that he loves his country; let him rather glory in this, that he loves his kind."³³

Conclusions

The argument is thus advanced that humanity is in the process of entering a new planetary age that can be characterised as an age of universality. The process is seen as an ongoing, evolutionary process, with links in human history operating in successive cycles, and one which is now evolving in contemporary terms, but which is subject to opposition, and still has a considerable way to go to reach its fulfillment. It is one in which all humanity are the participants, either as facilitators or by way of resistance. On one view it is essentially a process that reflects the Divine Will for the unity and oneness of all humanity in a new, united, peaceful and just global order based on spiritual principles. It is seen by some religionists as a process that is inevitable in its eventual outcome and essential for the future wellbeing of humanity.

³³ Baha'i World, Volume 4, 412.