

INTRODUCTION

Human beings have always longed for a sense of purpose. We have ever been in search of the meaning of existence. We have always wanted to love and to be loved. We have always dreamed of peace. This is no less true today than in ancient times.

The twentieth century was born at a time when the forces of modernism were swiftly gaining momentum. Scientific, political, and cultural advances of that day contributed to an overwhelming sense that humanity was entering a new era. With these discoveries came not only hope for dramatic and uninterrupted progress, but also new philosophies, at the center of which stood man himself. Humanity was now, according to emerging thought, unloosed from the shackles of past traditions and dogmas, free to discover truth, and firmly in control of its destiny. In the conviction that happiness and prosperity were at long last within the reach of every individual, the pioneers of that age, especially in Europe and America, poised themselves to spread the benefits of enlightened civilization across the earth.

The present perspective, however, shows that the Modern Age has been a mixed blessing. In spite of humanity's many marvelous achievements, the fundamental goal of a peaceful and just society still seems to lie beyond our reach. Although conditions have certainly improved for many people, the vast majority of the world still languishes in desperate poverty while a few enjoy luxuries such as the Caesars could not have imagined. The very advances that have transformed the planet into a "global village" have also exacerbated age-old tensions between nations, religions, and ethnic groups and have provided the means for rivals to deal with each other on a scale so vast and by means so brutal as could scarcely have been imagined in a previous age. To these tensions can be added a steadily rising environmental destruction whose ultimate consequences, if the trend is not reversed, are dreadful to contemplate.

The ironies of modern life are present also in the nations that have gained the most. In the United States, for example, the top strata of society enjoy a standard of living and a level of personal freedom unparalleled in history. Yet a large pro-

portion of the country's citizens seem perpetually excluded from this prosperity. There is hardly a household that has not been touched by the crimes and abuses that abound in that society, and the prevalence of mental and emotional disorders demonstrates that material well-being alone is no guarantor of happiness.

As we enter the new millennium, an increasing number of thoughtful people are realizing that the Modern Age might just as aptly be labeled the Age of Frustration. History has shown that the moral aspects of civilization do not automatically progress hand-in-hand with the material ones. More and more thinkers admit that science does not, after all, address inner spiritual needs. It has been learned that even the most advanced and progressive political systems can go only so far in ensuring justice—in other words, that morality cannot be legislated. And education, for all its value, does not equal wisdom if it does not include the moral dimension. Moreover, we are presented with a chaos of choices in the form of countless religions, creeds, political movements, and other belief systems, each laying claim to solutions to the issues of human happiness. In many respects we seem no closer than we ever were to the ideal of universal human prosperity.

Yet it is clear that the world needs a common ethical center. Humanity must have a frame of reference that ministers to practical and spiritual needs and that balances individual freedom with social responsibility. There must be a unifying moral force that provides the collective will necessary to address, once and for all, the problems that threaten not only our well-being but also our very existence.

Not long ago it was generally assumed among Western leaders of thought that religion was destined to die out as society advanced. For them religion was a relic of an ignorant and superstitious age, neither compatible with scientific reality nor in keeping with the needs of the times. In addition, there were and still are abundant examples of the destructive influence of religion carried to extremes. The idea of religion is now being reexamined. It has become increasingly acknowledged that, religious fanaticism notwithstanding, religion is a powerful force for good. Many have observed that most religions have certain essential aspects in common. All cultivate a sense of the transcendent, offer meaning and value to human life, and uphold an essentially universal set of moral and ethical values.

Yet no particular creed seems capable, in and of itself, of reconciling the vast diversity of humanity into the kind of moral system of which the world is now in dire need. The world needs a universal spiritual vision, with practical effects, that can provide both the continuity and the adaptability required for an age of transition.

The Bahá'í Faith offers just such a vision. It provides the answer to the hopes and expectations of countless philosophers, teachers, and religious leaders of the past and the present. It demonstrates that the promises in the sacred scriptures of

the great religions of the world—promises of a day when justice and righteousness would be firmly established—are true and are now being fulfilled. It reaffirms that humanity has a destiny, that there is a God Who cares about us and has provided a way to achieve universal peace and salvation.

The history and teachings of the Bahá'í Faith center around the inspiring person of its Founder, Bahá'u'lláh. The traits of character that He displayed throughout the course of a long and turbulent life, His voluminous and comprehensive body of written works, and the impact that He has already had in the world qualify Him for a place in the firmament of history's greatest religious luminaries.

Bahá'u'lláh, Whose name in Arabic means "The Glory of God," claimed to be none other than the Promised One foretold in the sacred scriptures of all of the world's great religions. Bahá'u'lláh's spiritual and ethical teachings embrace all aspects of the human condition and offer the means to achieve the age-old dream of world peace.

Bahá'u'lláh taught that all humanity are the children of a loving God, Who has guided our spiritual and social evolution in progressive stages until the present era, which is destined to witness the unification of the world, universal justice, and the permanent establishment of peace. This is the age when God's promise of peace, as foretold in the scriptures of the world's great religions, will be fulfilled.

Bahá'u'lláh taught that each human being is endowed with an immortal soul. The purpose of this physical life is to develop the spiritual qualities necessary for the life hereafter. Yet this does not mean that we are to disdain this world. On the contrary, the means to spiritual life is through loving service to all of humanity as well as through cultivation of personal faith and virtues.

The teachings of Bahá'u'lláh affirm the eternal truths taught by all of the great religions of the past. His teachings uphold the validity and divine inspiration of the great Prophets and Messengers such as Moses, Jesus, and Muḥammad, all of Whom were sent by God for the purpose of guiding humanity. Bahá'u'lláh has given principles that address the needs of the present age. Among them is the oneness of humanity, a principle that, in and of itself, has vast moral and social implications. This principle of the oneness of humanity implies the equality of men and women as well as the equality of all races.

The harmony of science and religion is another essential teaching of Bahá'u'lláh, as is the principle of independent investigation of truth. Among others are the need for the elimination of all forms of prejudice, the elimination of the extremes of wealth and poverty, and the principle of compulsory education for all.

Yet another teaching of Bahá'u'lláh is that the time has come to establish a system of world order. Bahá'u'lláh designed a new system of governance, based upon the principles described above, that addresses the material and spiritual needs

of humanity. This system is the nucleus and pattern for a new world civilization that will emerge in the fullness of time and will mark the establishment of God's Kingdom on earth.

At its heart, the Bahá'í Faith addresses the innermost longings of the human spirit. It proclaims God's continued presence in human affairs and the joyous news that the prophecies of ancient days are to be fulfilled. It tells of God's infinite and abiding love for each one of us, His assurance that divine justice will indeed reign, and His open call to a purposeful life in this world and eternal happiness in the world to come.

Today the Bahá'í Faith counts millions of followers in virtually every nation and territory on earth, firmly establishing it as a great new world religion. The achievements of this united global community, comprising the whole diversity of the human race, already portend the realization of mankind's ancient hopes for world peace and universal happiness.

This volume focuses on several essential themes. First and foremost, it chronicles the life of Bahá'u'lláh and other central figures in the history of the religion so that the reader may better appreciate their extraordinary lives and their historical context. Interspersed with this history are sections dealing with basic Bahá'í beliefs and teachings. Other chapters deal with the specific relationship of the Bahá'í Faith to Christianity, the rise and spread of the Bahá'í Faith throughout the world, the Bahá'í vision for world peace, and what being a Bahá'í means for the individual. The aim here is simply to offer an overview that can serve as a starting point for further study.

This is the story of the Bahá'í Faith. It is unique in the annals of religious history for the circumstances of its birth, the dramatic episodes that accompanied its rise and development, and the world-embracing character of its vision. The story begins in what might seem an unlikely time and place.