



EYE TO THE AGES: A *Bahá'í*-INSPIRED PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY

by Harold Rosen

GLOBAL FAITH BOOK SERIES

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BOOKS PUBLISHED:

Studies in Bahá'í Philosophy: Selected Articles. GFBS Vol. 1, ed. with an Introduction by Mikhail Sergeev. Boston, MA: M•GRAPHICS, 2018, 294 pp., ISBN 978-1940220901

Peter Terry. *Proofs of the Existence of God.* GFBS Vol. 2, Boston, MA: M•GRAPHICS, 2019, 164 pp., ISBN 978-1950319053

Studies in Bahá'í Epistemology: Essays and Commentary. GFBS Vol. 3, ed. with an Introduction by Mikhail Sergeev. Boston, MA: M•GRAPHICS, 2021, 370 pp., ISBN 978-1950319626

Religion and Science in the Globalized World: GFBS Vol. 4, ed. with an Introduction by Mikhail Sergeev. Boston, MA: M•GRAPHICS, 2022, 356 pp., ISBN 978-1950319947



Center for Global Philosophy and Religion is a research organization that specializes in the study of philosophy and religion from a global perspective.



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HAROLD ROSEN

Eye to the Ages: A Bahá'í-Inspired Philosophy of History

(Global Faith Book Series. Vol. 5)

Editor: Mikhail Sergeev, *University of the Arts (Philadelphia)*

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ISBN 978-1-960533357

Library of Congress Control Number: 2024933015

The cover has been designed using assets from Freepik.com

Published by M•GRAPHICS | BOSTON, MA

📄 www.mgraphics-book.com

✉ mgraphics.books@gmail.com

Printed in the U.S.A.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

If there is any abiding and universal value in this work, it is due to the Light bestowed upon humanity by such figures as Moses, Buddha, Jesus, Muhammad and Bahá'u'lláh. They progressively revealed the Spirit that has transformed our world for the better. Perhaps I have reflected some rays of Their illumination. However, all weaknesses and distortions in this book are my own responsibility, and I look forward to the continuing process of learning and implementing a more adequate 'big picture'.

Without the loving and conscientious support of my dear wife, Wendy Rosen, and that of my dear parents, Mary and Larry Williams, I could not have finished this work. They offered many forms of assistance and encouragement for which I am eternally grateful. My dear sisters, Debi Madden and Cory Going, also cheered me on, deepening the family support which led to this book's completion.

Because this work grew out of courses on civilizations that I designed and taught, I thank all my students collectively; they appreciated, challenged and modified my material in various ways over the years. I am grateful to the administrators who sponsored my teaching in the Vancouver, Canada area, at Simon Fraser University Continuing Studies and University of British Columbia Continuing Studies, as well as the Wilmette Institute and various Elder College programs. My gratitude also extends to community centers, libraries, churches, and local Bahá'í assemblies that sponsored my courses.

I admire and benefit from the perspectives of several interpreters of the sweep of world history: Arnold Toynbee, Douglas Martin, Karen Armstrong, and the scholars of the Time-Life series, "Great Ages of Man". I learned a great deal from several religion scholars: Huston Smith, Mircea Eliade, John Bowker, Keith Crim, Hasan Balyuzi and Moojan Momen. I value the insights and

inspiration of my professional colleagues: Mikhail Sergeev, Jack McLean, Shahrokh Monjazeb, Mark Keedwell, Robert Stockman, John Hatcher, Anne Perry, William Collins, Ian Kluge, Linda and Dan Popov, John Kolstoe.

I declare my deep gratitude to my first Bahá'í teachers: Sandra Azizi, Manu Majzub, Minoo Greenall and Mehran Kiai. I am grateful to my long-time TCU friends and current colleagues in the Dialogue for Democracy forum for their support, insights and elevating conversations in the arena of public discourse: Ted Coonfield, Landon Shultz, Keith Miller, Tobin Quereau, Dixie Van Eynde, Carla Ficke, Don Mills, Linda Newman and Valerie Neal.

I have been blessed by the ongoing support of my Bahá'í friends: Brian and Ann Murdoch, Barbara Matthews, Sylvester Scott, John Sargent, Adel Bellemlih, Connie Waterman, Chohre Rassekh, and Norma Hoyle—my proofreader who offered countless hours of thoughtful scrutiny, serving as a much-needed sounding board.

I appreciate the support and service-orientation of my inter-faith friends: Ev and Joan Morris, Karl and Sonya McNeill, Connie Thompson, Don Strangway, Art Turnbull, Jeannie Martin, Katherine Murray, Neil McKenzie, Sherry Marceil and Cathy Merchant.

Finally, I feel indebted and grateful for the competent and caring assistance of the consultants and editors at the Global Faith Book Series and the Center for Global Philosophy and Religion.

NOTES ON APPROACH AND STYLE

Who is the ‘Eye to the Ages’? In a sense it is anyone viewing the sweep of history looking for purpose and direction. In another sense it is the Prophet for today, Bahá’u’lláh, offering humanity a universal vision of past, present and future. In yet another sense the Eye is anyone informed and inspired by divine guidance. All three of these meanings are carried throughout this study, attempting to provide an illuminating summary of humanity’s journey across the ages.

In this book, the terms ‘we’ and ‘our’ most often refer to all readers of this study of common patterns in world history. These terms sometimes refer to humanity as a whole, because our field is world religious development as a common heritage. ‘We’ and ‘our’ may also refer to people willing to entertain the hypothesis of progressive revelation—the idea that God or the realm of Ultimate Truth periodically discloses new guidance to humanity by means of revelatory Prophets understood as Divine Educators. This revelatory sequence, including humanity’s response, is a basic pattern of history and the central organizing principle of this work.

We capitalize terms such as ‘Founders’ and ‘Divine Educators’, along with related pronouns, because these historic religious figures are central to this study. They are the generators of civilizations, as well as the most transformative agents in world history. This language practice encourages mutual respect and assigns equal dignity and status to each of the Founders. It also helps clarify the intended meaning of the often-complex communication between God and humanity in the world’s religious literature. We also use italics for all scriptural quotations, other authoritative sources from faith traditions, and visionary passages from indigenous peoples.

In a work like this, addressing complex religions and civilizations, summaries and selections are necessary. In presenting a relatively long quotation, ellipses or sets of three dots are often used, announcing the selection of a single theme, rather than including all

the themes of the full quotation. This practice is intended as a gift to the reader, bringing clear focus and brevity, and hopefully not distortion of the author's meaning. If errors result from this practice, it is sincerely hoped that future commentaries will correct them.

The terms 'Civilization' and 'Religion' in the singular and capitalized refer to world-wide or global phenomena that will be described. This broad usage is to be distinguished from references to particular civilizations such as the Persian and Hellenic, and to particular faith traditions such as the Buddhist, Christian and Islamic. This practice is parallel to the ordinary distinction between Science in general and various sciences in particular.

Given that the proposed dates for events and developments in the more ancient civilizations vary widely in many cases, we make no attempt to identify these years precisely. Rather, we choose a rounded off dating figure which lies between well-respected estimates. Where most of the well-established timelines and historical sources agree on a date, we state these identified years with more confidence.

We realize that some people do not find the term 'God' meaningful and may even regard it as oppressive or destructive. Indeed, much damage and harm have been perpetrated under this traditional banner, and it is commonly thought that science has no need of this belief. To move forward productively with this study, it may be helpful to 'suspend disbelief' when approaching religious phenomena or facing new spiritual perspectives. It may also help to translate the term 'God' as Ultimate Reality, the Source of our evolving universe—or whatever concept may remove obstacles to finding common ground in the building of a united and peaceful world.

Though the author is a Bahá'í, he offers only an individual understanding of the Bahá'í Faith, and in no sense should his interpretations of Bahá'í teachings be considered authoritative. And because he is more of a teacher and thinker than a scholar of primary sources, he has focused more on discernment of truth and value than on specific origins and sources of ideas and observations. Though he has made a conscientious attempt to give credit where credit is due, he may have forgotten some of the links in the development of his understanding, and he apologizes in advance for any failed referencing.

CHAPTER ONE

EYE TO PAST AGES: A BAHÁ'Í-INSPIRED APPROACH

A new Eye to the past, present and future has been offered to humanity. We can now see further in all directions and implement more of this universal vision than previously believed. A new Divine Educator appeared in the nineteenth century, and though humanity's rejection of His guidance led to the tragedies and atrocities of the twentieth century, our chastened eyes can become accustomed to His Light, and we can co-fashion an ever-advancing global civilization. Of course, this uniting of humanity in larger embrace will be very challenging. Birth brings two kinds of intense pain—a dying of the old order and an awkward struggling with the new.

Divine Eyes have been provided for humanity throughout our time on earth, and more will be provided in the future. History is humanity's portion of the developmental unfolding of the universe as a whole. Creative potentiality is packed into divine guidance, and several centuries of struggle are usually required before its formative power becomes clearly visible to observers of the world. Among the Eyes that have generated the main chapters in the book of humanity's unfolding are Moses, Krishna, Zoroaster, Buddha, Christ and Muhammad. To these generators of civilization, we must now add Bahá'u'lláh—who empowers humanity to attain moral-spiritual maturity and build a united world.

When accessing news, or reading about a certain time period and region, or engaging in a conversation about the times we live in and the state of our world—it is reasonable to reflect on the basic perspective being offered. Is the outlook hopeful, despairing, or somewhere in between? Does it focus on individual needs only, or are wider circles considered? Does it cast light on nation-

al context only, or is the global arena addressed? What beliefs are presupposed? What angles on humanity's experience through the ages are portrayed? Given complexities of communication technologies and changing demographics, we long for trustworthy views of the 'big picture'. We need to take into account world historical developments—not just our own national, ideological or spiritual background—but humanity's saga across the ages, with a loftier embrace of higher aspirations.

Can we 'see' the significance of history? Can we 'view' basic contours of past ages, discerning important stages and developments? If there is an Eye of higher understanding, it can assist the eye of ordinary human vision, providing a peak from which salient features of the past become more visible. Religious traditions teach that our perceptions are enhanced by higher spiritual realms. "As the Buddhists say, faith opens 'the eye of truth', also called 'the Eye of the Heart' or 'the Eye of the Soul'. Saint Augustine insisted that 'our whole business in this life is to restore to health the eye of the heart whereby God may be seen'. Persia's greatest Sufi poet, Rumi... speaks of 'the eye of the heart, which is seventy-fold and of which these two sensible eyes are only the gleaners'..." [1] The human eye is able to see both visible and invisible realms, perceiving the significance of the flow of events when aided by the Divine Spirit. Our day provides a special vantage for perceiving and implementing lessons of the ages. *"It is incumbent upon everyone, in this day, to perceive with the eye of God, and to hearken with His ear."* [2]

The Universal House of Justice, the central governing body of the Bahá'í Faith, advises that

the perspective of history (be) kept fully in view. The civilization of today, for all its material prowess, has been found wanting, and the verdict has been issued by the Supreme Pen: 'Know ye not that We have rolled up that which the people possessed, and have unfolded a new order in its place?' The establishment of Divine Civilization is... the primary mission of the Bahá'í Faith. It is to be built upon the most foundational qualities, ones for which the world stands in great need: unity, trustworthiness, mutual support, collaboration, fellow feeling, selflessness, commitment to truth,

a sense of responsibility, a thirst to learn, the love of an all-embracing heart. [3]

History, in this view, is not an optional pastime, but required to build civilization anew upon moral-spiritual grounding, amplified by the present Eye to the ages, Bahá'u'lláh.

PROGRESSIVE REVELATION

We are applying the hypothesis that renewed divine guidance, or progressive revelation, enables humanity to rebuild civilization on ever wider and deeper foundations. The higher we climb, the farther we see; and the farther we see, the more universal and unifying become our aspirations and actions. Bahá'u'lláh, the nineteenth century Prophet-Founder of the Bahá'í Faith, offers a new Eye to the ages, providing a deeper grasp of the grand pattern of history. *“Peerless is this Day, for it is as the eye to past ages and centuries, and as a light unto the darkness of the times.” [4]* *“I have seen... in the path of God what eye hath not seen nor ear heard.” [5]* Bahá'u'lláh offers universal principles and consultative institutions that have the power to generate an ever-advancing global civilization. From the heights of the Bahá'í revelation we view the drama of world history in the chapters before us, integrating many sources of historical information and insight, reviewing patterns of major civilizations, and assessing their implications for the world of today and tomorrow.

The idea of ‘an ever-advancing global civilization’ may be difficult to embrace, given such realities as clashing ideologies, terrorism, poverty, unsustainable development and environmental abuse. But the central theme of the Bahá'í Faith is world unity with respect for diversity—an achievable condition which will empower humanity to creatively resolve our most pressing problems. The idea of ‘progressive revelation’ is also very difficult for many to accept, given their disillusionment with religion as a whole, or their attachment to a particular tradition. But we examine some philosophical and theological grounds for viewing world history as a drama of providential guidance, humanity’s response, and our gradual advancement. We will show that religious visions have inspired and generated civilizations, but our human moral-spiritual weakness has also brought the decline and fall of all previous civilizations.

From this perspective, today's world appears to be near the end of the formerly great civilizations—whether Tribal, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist, Chinese, Christian or Islamic. Today's world can be described as undergoing a Great Transition from competing regional civilizations to an emerging global civilization, destined to achieve great heights of excellence that we can scarcely imagine. *“The tabernacle of unity will be upraised on the heights of the world, and the banners of the universality of humankind will be unfurled on the peaks of the earth.”* [6] *“The greatness of the kingdoms under the whole of heaven shall be given to the people of the saints of the Most High; their kingdom shall be an everlasting kingdom, and all dominions shall serve and obey them.”* [7] *“And I saw that the sacred hoop of my people was one of many hoops that made one circle, wide as daylight and starlight, and in the center grew one mighty flowering tree to shelter all the children of one mother and one father.”* [8]

SEEING AND INTERPRETING THE PAST

‘Eyesight’ and ‘seeing’ are the primary metaphors of this chapter and this work as a whole. Our aim is to view the sweep of our earthly journey through the ages with wisdom and discernment, aided significantly by the Eye of Bahá’í Writings, as well as the mirrors and telescopes of historians, social theorists, philosophers and scholars of comparative religion. Teilhard de Chardin, the famous paleontologist, evolutionary thinker and theologian, described seeing in cosmic perspective.

“Seeing. We might say that the whole of life lies in that verb—if not ultimately, at least essentially. Fuller being is closer union... union increases only through an increase in consciousness, that is to say in vision. And that, doubtless, is why the history of the living world can be summarized as the elaboration of ever more perfect eyes within a cosmos in which there is always more to be seen... To see or to perish is the very condition laid upon everything that makes up the universe, by reason of the mysterious gift of existence. And this, in superior measure, is man’s condition... Man is unable to see him-

self entirely unrelated to mankind, neither is he able to see mankind unrelated to life, nor life unrelated to the universe... The time has come to realize that an interpretation of the universe... remains unsatisfying unless it covers the interior as well as the exterior of things; mind as well as matter." [9]

The evolution of awareness and vision is alluded to eloquently here. Our existence is a 'gift', and our ability to see 'in superior measure' enables us to expand outward to humanity and the cosmos, as well as inward to the realms of mind and spirit. Seeing the coherence of the whole in evolving measure is our human responsibility, and an essential aspect of our purpose.

How has humanity viewed and interpreted our own past? There seem to be at least six basic approaches to explaining world history, sometimes combined in various ways. In **ethnological** approaches, societies are viewed as progressing through similar stages—from hunting-gathering, to horticultural-pastoral, and then to hierarchical-civilizational—and mental developments are said to play a key role, as in inventions, discoveries and ever-larger organizations. In **sociological** approaches, societies are seen as developing when their structures and functions differentiate in integrated ways that yield a kind of progress or development—often explained as due to 'social selection' or a natural complexity-making process. In **geopolitical** approaches, regional power relationships are emphasized, along with ideological and economic factors, while civic and military leaders are given key places in historical interpretation. In **materialist** approaches—whether leaning to capitalist or communist values—the basic physical needs for food, shelter, clothing, safety, community solidarity and expression, as well as visible symbols of worth and power are interpreted as true measures of prosperity and driving forces of history. In **environmental-technological** approaches, societies are said to rise, survive and fall according to their discovery and management of natural resources, and the extent to which their technical means remain ecologically appropriate. And in **spiritual-progressive** approaches, societies are said to progress by making creative responses to new and higher moral-spiritual vision; here

too, sequential stages of growth and complexity are posited, along with decline due to decay of moral-spiritual leadership; but there is faith that new moral-spiritual guidance is progressively offered by Prophets or Enlightened Ones.

We take a spiritual-progressive approach, offering an early contribution to a Bahá'í-inspired philosophy of history—a genre that is likely to provide ever-improving versions in the future. There are two basic kinds of philosophies of history: an analytic or critical account of what historians say; and a synthetic or speculative account of history itself. Our study attempts the latter. Within the synthetic approach, some seek explanations of specific episodes and developments; others seek to explain the wider or universal context, attempting a synoptic vision that discerns meaning and significance. This effort emphasizes the latter. Within the synthetic-synoptic approach, views vary widely as to cultural perspective, accounts of human nature, socio-political ideals, metaphysical and epistemological assumptions, as well as religious beliefs. This work, though modest in length, attempts a multicultural, multifaith and integrative approach, offering teleological and spiritual-ideational interpretations, overarching patterns and grand narratives, without ignoring the naturalist views of the social sciences. We are concerned with macro-history or the big picture, rather than with micro-history or a localized and period-centered focus. However, we will not ignore representative turning-points, while lifting up cultural highlights and telling evidence of decline, death and renewal.

Do the millennia reveal an overall purpose and direction? Perhaps the grand narratives and providential theories of the past should not be completely discarded, for they may cast light on our present world. Are the patterns they claim true enough for us to envision our likely future? What lessons might we draw from the sweep of humanity's story? Is any new source of illumination available today by which we may steer a more productive course? *"This Day a door is open wider than heaven and earth... This is the Day which past ages and centuries can never rival."* [10] *"This is the Day in which God's most excellent favors have been poured out upon men..."* [11] Our own times provide a special vantage point, offering us effective means to a positive future. "Consciousness of the presence of God and the divinity of man is a critical foundation for the

eternal evolution and progress of humanity... Historical consciousness allows us to clearly see that existence is about the consistent unfoldment of the eternal plan of God.” [12] These are some of the exciting themes to be explored in the pages before us.

Events in today's world are often disturbing and perplexing. They can make us long for a clearer sense of the big picture and brighter vision of the way forward. In this study we look at the big picture in time, rather than space. What has been the basic shape and landscape of recorded history? Civilizations, including our own, may be more comprehensible when viewed as organisms with a birthing process, dynamics of growth and maintenance, eventually struggling with decline and death. What roles do religions play in the rise, fall, and progressive renewal of civilizations? Can we discern what time it is now for our world family as a whole? Are we drifting toward un-resolvable chaos and disaster, or are we evolving toward greater global unity? *“Every eye, in this Day, should seek what will best promote the Cause of God.”* [13] We will survey the panorama of world history, and dare to glimpse into the future. Our search will be for the most significant developments in the unfolding of major civilizations, seeking instructive patterns and deeper understanding. *“Only when the lamp of search, of earnest striving... is kindled within the seeker's heart... will the darkness of error be dispelled... and the lights of knowledge and certitude envelop his being... he will find himself endowed with a new eye, a new ear, a new heart, and a new mind.”* [14]

Bahá'u'lláh asked His son to compose a short treatise on the spiritual forces underlying the rise, fall and progressive renewal of civilization—the very theme of our present study. ‘Abdu'l-Bahá began his treatise with an exhilarating emphasis on the power of the human mind as an expression of the Universal Mind, the first creation of God.

Praise and thanksgiving be unto Providence that out of all the realities in existence He has chosen the reality of man and honored it with intellect and wisdom, the two most luminous lights in either world. Through the agency of this great endowment, He has in every epoch cast on the mirror of creation new and wonderful configurations. If we look

objectively upon the world of being, it will become apparent that from age to age, the temple of existence has continually been embellished with a fresh grace, and distinguished with an ever-varying splendor, deriving from wisdom and the power of thought... Witness to it is the Holy Tradition, 'Before all else, God created the mind.' From the dawn of creation, it was made to be revealed in the temple of man... Consider carefully: all these highly varied phenomena, these concepts, this knowledge, these technical procedures and philosophical systems, these sciences, arts, industries and inventions—all are emanations from the human mind. [15]

Through our minds, which are 'divine endowments' that were long ago 'revealed in the temple of man', we can 'embellish existence' with 'wonderful configurations' of 'ever-varying splendor', and we can do this 'from age to age' owing to our 'intellect and wisdom'. All the 'highly varied phenomena' of civilization are 'emanations of the human mind.' Since so much has been given to us, much is also expected of us in the building of a new and global civilization, under the guidance of a new revelation.

We are exploring the past, the present day world, and the near future—using some tools of philosophy, history, social theory, comparative religion, as well as the Bahá'í revelation. What are the implications of civilizations having a lifespan, like other living organisms? Could it be that humanity's large collectivities—our societies and cultures—develop through stages of birth, growth, maintenance, decline and death-renewal? If so, what are the hinges between these stages—those dramatic turning-points showing us that times have indeed changed? Can we justifiably depict today's world as a two-century transition from about 1900 to about 2100, during which a global civilization emerges? *"A new life is, in this age, stirring within the peoples of the earth; yet none hath discovered its cause or perceived its motive."* [16] In our closing chapters, we will take forays into possible hinges of the future—thresholds of struggle and maturation toward a dynamic peace.

Observing the world religions, especially with current global issues and tensions in the background, can be confusing, bewildering

ing, if not completely overwhelming—leading us to the threshold of despair. In our present effort, however, we have been assisted by patterns discernible in the stories and teachings of the Founders of faith. In light of these patterns, it appears that knowable forces have operated in religious history, and among these forces is that mysterious process called ‘revelation’. Revelation is viewed as the unveiling or disclosure of guidance from a transcendent source, and is usually recorded as scriptures and holy writings. This extensive body of guidance is believed to contain the Law, the Word and the Truth as adapted to the human capacities of the time. Revelation is understood as containing both ‘true stories’ (factual-historical material) as well as ‘stories of truth’ (symbolic-figurative material). By means of revelation and scripture, humanity has been offered spiritual understanding and moral guidance that would not have been available otherwise. Divine Educators have not only generated major religions, but also, by renewing virtues and establishing new guidance, They actually generated new civilizations. They provided the Eye by which humanity, limited by developmental capacities of the historical period, could see and strive for lofty heights of cultural attainment. *“O son of man!... if thine eyes be turned toward justice, choose thou for thy neighbor that which thou choosest for thyself.”* [17]

SCOPE AND KEY TERMS

In this study we step back and consider the role of religion in history broadly conceived. What kind of influence and impact has religion had in the past? How have civilizations fared vis-à-vis the emergence and institutions of religion? If religions and civilizations have life spans, how are their stages best described and understood? What kind of religion and civilization are emerging today, and how do we fit into this big picture? What prospects does the future hold, given the current state of our religious world? Of course, we cannot answer all of these questions in a definitive or complete way, but perhaps with the Eye of providential history, we can see religion’s formative role in history more clearly, and thereby inspire a sense of hope and contribution, strengthen our identification with the whole of humanity across the ages, and spell out

some of the implications of this study for what may soon unfold for humanity. *“God has given us eyes, that we may look about us at the world, and lay hold of whatsoever will further civilization and the arts of living... (W)e, distinguished above all other forms of life for perceptiveness and reason, should labour at all times and along all lines... until all mankind are safely gathered into the impregnable stronghold of knowledge.”* [18]

We are offering a providential interpretation of world history—less a sociology or psychology of religion than a moral-spiritual appraisal of humanity’s journey through time, attempting to see further through the Eye of the most recent divine revelation. Ours is not an exercise in global political science, nor an analysis of trends, but a Bahá’í-inspired philosophy of history that employs well-established timelines and noteworthy theories of religion and societal development. We are not emphasizing economic, technological, geopolitical or environmental factors, but are trying to show that moral, spiritual and intellectual forces—both positive and negative—have been and continue to be the most potent influences shaping the development of our world. We are exploring key dynamics in the evolving relationship between religion and civilization understood in their broadest sense.

By Religion we refer to a relationship, a connection and interaction between divine and human realms. Religion is humanity’s response to divine guidance and to the highest ethical ideals known at any given time and place. God or the ultimate realm initiates a process of social transformation through Prophets, Messengers or Saviors who reveal a Message, and then portions of humanity observe, ignore, reject or distort such guidance. Direction and purpose is revealed to a group of people who are called to implement and share their new teaching. Religion, then, is the educator of humanity and the generator of civilization. Civilization in this study is understood as a social and cultural structure built upon such universal virtues as kindness, compassion, service, truthfulness, justice, wisdom, peace and unity. Both religion and civilization begin as a morally lofty process that, over time, develops through stages of growth, maintenance, decline and death-renewal.

By ‘providential history’ we refer to a worldview which integrates divine guidance, as well as humanity’s response, and the con-

sequences of our response for better and for worse. Providential history offers an interpretation of world-changing events that takes into account the transformative impact of revelatory guidance and divine power, as well as humanity's moral-spiritual decisions and their results. Such an approach is teleological or purpose-oriented, and assumes that major happenings and transitions are divinely influenced. This perspective affirms that there is in operation a multifaceted divine plan shaping the overall landscape and sequential flow of history. There is a transcendent goal—never fully comprehended—toward which the peoples of the earth have been and are now being guided. Such a view does not eliminate human freedom and responsibility, but rather, places these values in a lofty, challenging and illuminating context.

Bahá'í Writings, through passages such as the following, invite a providential view of the emergence and development of civilizations.

Consider history. What has brought unity to nations, morality to peoples and benefits to mankind? If we reflect upon it, we will find that establishing the divine religions has been the greatest means toward accomplishing the oneness of humanity... The divine religions are collective centers in which diverse standpoints may meet, agree and unify. They accomplish oneness of native lands, races and policies. For instance, Christ united various nations, brought peace to warring peoples and established the oneness of humankind. The conquering Greeks and Romans, the prejudiced Egyptians and Assyrians were all in a condition of strife, enmity and war, but Christ gathered these varied peoples together and removed the foundations of discord—not through racial, patriotic or political power, but through divine power. This was not otherwise possible. [19]

We will attempt to show that similar unifications were brought about through the Founders of civilizations—including Moses, Krishna, Zoroaster, Buddha, Christ, Muhammad and Bahá'u'lláh.

SPIRITUAL RECEPTIVITY AND GLIMPSES OF CIVILIZATION

To attain a true and mature historical perspective, it is necessary to be spiritually receptive. This is the overall theme of the Ruhi Institute's Book 9, "Gaining an Historical Perspective". Using Bahá'í Writings it delves into the spiritual requisites for understanding and implementing the Eternal Covenant in its present form, grasping humanity's gradual passage to maturity, how we can avoid the partisanship and materialism of contemporary society, and contribute to the sacred enterprise of community building in ever wider circles.

There is good evidence that when humanity heeds the divine wisdom offered by Revealers, noble civilizations have been built. High degrees of unity and peace were attained, prosperity was developed, social services were provided, beauty was fashioned, and learning and exploration were encouraged. The study of world history can be heartening and inspiring when we recall periods of our high collective achievement. For example, visualize the architectural, legal and scientific wonders of ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia and Central America, inspired by High Gods... ancient Israel under David and Solomon, inspired by the Most High... ancient Zoroastrian Persia ruled by Cyrus and Darius, inspired by the Lord of Wisdom... ancient Greece led by Solon and Pericles, inspired by spiritual philosophers... Buddhist India under Asoka, inspired by the Dharma, the Path of Truth... classical India under the Gupta emperors, inspired by both Krishna and Buddha... the Byzantine Empire initiated by Justinian and Theodora, inspired by Christ and the Spirit of Wisdom... China during the Tang Dynasty, inspired by the Lord of Heaven and the Dharma Realm... the Holy Roman Empire of Charlemagne, inspired by Christian visions of Father, Son and Spirit... Islamic Spain during the reign of Abdur Rahman III, inspired by Allah... and Islamic India administered by Akbar, inspired by diverse Books and communities of God.

Such flowering eras provide exciting glimpses of humanity's potential being actualized, our promise being fulfilled, our basic dignity and creativity being expressed—at least for a time, to a degree, and in a certain cultural setting. Belief and commitment to the vision of a unified, just, prosperous and creative world can be

strengthened by a universal, providential view of history. The excellent and exalted attainments of such periods can be sources of pride and inspiration for our whole world family, if we identify with the whole story and progress of humanity. And these heights will surely be attained again, and even surpassed. However, humanity's faith and vision are currently obscured by seemingly irreconcilable differences between religious, cultural and ideological groupings. Yet we can collectively discover that conflicts in religious teachings and clashes between civilizations are products of human egocentricity, misinterpretation and corruption—not of religion itself as a civilizing power, because the essence of divine guidance and wisdom is universal and progressive. The original teachings of all religions call us to be virtuous: loving, kind and trustworthy... responsible, cooperative and tolerant... wise, peaceful and just... generous, reverent and creative. So, when we sink into crippling conflict, this is not due to contrary guidance from the Founders of Faith, but rather, from our own morally bad choices, our faulty spiritual education, our egocentricities and institutional corruption. But humanity can, and will, make better choices: this is the hope and faith underlying this study.

The Eye of a new revelation can help us see humanity's history as one continuous inter-related saga of reactions to Revelatory Light. Our collective story shows patterns of ignoring, rejecting, embracing and distorting the divine guidance offered to us at discernible intervals. When small portions of our world family accepted and implemented divine guidance, they grew into creative world-shaping civilizations. But as our moral-spiritual resolve wavered and diminished, we lost our culture-building momentum and turned downward toward more purely materialistic and militaristic concerns, succumbing to processes of decline, corruption and decay. However, divine compassion brought ever-higher guidance in proportion to our developmental capacities—yielding an overall sequence of intermittent progress and advance. This is the essential scheme of progressive revelation, the basic outline of providential history.

‘*He was in the world, and the world was made by Him.*’
 (John 1.10) *The promised Manifestation of God appears;*

a community of believers forms around this focal center of spiritual life and authority; a new system of values begins to reorder both consciousness and behavior; a restructuring of laws and of the administration of social affairs takes place. Slowly, but irresistibly, a new civilization emerges, one that so fulfils the ideals and so engages the capacities of millions of human beings that it does indeed constitute a new world, a world far more real to those who 'live, move, and have their being' in it than the earthly foundation on which it rests. Throughout the centuries that follow, society continues to depend for its cohesion and self-confidence primarily on the spiritual impulse that gave it birth. [20]

Here we have a concise summary of the formative pattern that enables us to learn effectively from humanity's past. Progressive revelation can unlock the mystery of the rise, fall and renewal of civilizations. The Founders' and Revealers' teachings enable us to discern where tragic mistakes were made, to celebrate virtuous achievement, to embrace the latest divine guidance, and then co-establish a glorious future. We explore this hope-giving pattern in the exciting journey ahead of us.

WORKING HYPOTHESES ON WORLD HISTORY

We now make explicit our main hypotheses on the primary forces shaping world history. Religions are generated by Revealers, and civilizations are built upon the divinely renewed virtues. Civilizations, and the religions which generate them, have lifespans within which they develop, decline and are renewed. These lifespans of civilizations and religions can be described as a sequence of five stages—birth, growth, maintenance, decline and death-renewal. Religions are civilizing forces in their growth stages, and they are corrupting forces in their decline stages. Religions in their creative functioning help align human capacities with divine guidance, shaping selves and societies with moral-spiritual vision. They reinforce spiritual, social and material virtues so as to generate widespread prosperity—thus fulfilling divine expectation and promise. Religions in their destructive functioning misuse spiritual symbolism and in-

stitutional power to maintain the social privileges of entrenched hierarchies. They reinforce superstitious, doctrinal, and dogmatic beliefs, obstructing new learning, and controlling the multitudes through religious fear, rather than inspiring them with hope.

Parallel descriptions can be made of civilizations. In their creative phases, civilizations are strong and fruitful structures inspired by the moral-spiritual teachings of their Founders of Faith. They represent an enormously impressive inter-institutional achievement—family life and education, commerce and governance, art and culture, science and technology, philosophy and spirituality; all of these domains prosper as civilizations implement universal virtues. But in their destructive phases, civilizations become defined by leadership for whom vices replace virtues. There is a dimming of moral-spiritual vision, corruption obstructs service, and lethargy replaces invention and creativity. Walls replace bridges in foreign relations, and we can observe militarism and materialism become dominant values. The people lose faith in their leaders as well as their religion. Cultural values become increasingly shallow and this-worldly, and decreasingly altruistic. But as the death of religious civilization approaches, revelatory guidance is offered anew to humanity, and progress in all fields gradually becomes visible.

History cannot be interpreted justly without placing humanity in the context of ultimate reality. “Behind the desire of the historian to know and to record history integrally, to capture the whole sweep of evolving, organized life on the planet, lies the quest for eternity... From the atomic moments of particular civilizations, the historian broadens his vision to survey patterns, to observe the ‘rise and fall’, a metaphorical phrase itself dependent on the metaphysical notions of causality, space and time... Providential history especially has an inescapable metaphysical component. In the abstract sense, as there is only one religion, the religion of humanity, there is only one history, the history of the human race on the planet earth... The historian must... seek the total picture, the meaning of the whole so as to make sense of humanity’s ordered life... If they do not succeed in capturing the *meaning* in the pattern of events they interpret and the *telos* of history, they have not really succeeded, for history is the manifestation of the human spirit in the concrete act and can never be devoid of a higher significance. He who does not learn from the

lessons of history, learns history not at all. Without a sense of the metaphysical, history remains deprived of a deeper meaning and it cannot afford to be so deprived.” [21]

BAHÁ'Í FAITH: A BRIEF INTRODUCTION

The Bahá'í Faith is a new global religion originating in 1844 in Iran, and its founder was Bahá'u'lláh (a title meaning ‘Glory of God’), whose followers believe is the Promised One of all ages. *“Behold, he is coming on clouds, and every eye will see him.”* [22] Bahá'u'lláh is viewed as a ‘Divine Manifestation’ whose predecessors include Muhammad, Jesus, Buddha, Krishna, Zoroaster and Moses. A central theme of the Bahá'í Faith is ‘world unity’, especially the unity of humanity and of religion, leading to establishing an ever-advancing global civilization. A central belief is that all major religions are divine in origin, each religion fulfilling the promises of the preceding one, with new revelations to come in the future. God is understood as the Creator and Source of all reality, the generator of all major religions through Manifestations, but the Divine Nature Itself is unknowable in any final sense.

Principle teachings of the Bahá'í Faith include the independent investigation of truth, the complementary nature of science and religion, overcoming all forms of prejudice, racial and gender equality, universal education, selecting a universal auxiliary language that all people can learn and share, eliminating the extremes of poverty and wealth, attaining spiritual solutions to economic problems, and establishing a consultative world government as a means to peace, justice and prosperity for all. Central practices include daily prayer, study of the Writings, and work that benefits society as whole. Its holy places include Mount Carmel in Haifa, Israel (world center), and Akka, Israel (site of the Shrine of Bahá'u'lláh). The highest authority is the Universal House of Justice, a nine-member body elected democratically every five years. The highest concentrations of the world's eight million Bahá'ís are in Iran, India, Africa and South America, and there are about 300,000 in North America. All of the writings of the Báb (the ‘Gate’ and ‘Forerunner’), Bahá'u'lláh (the ‘Founder’), and ‘Abdu'l-Bahá (the ‘Exemplar and Center of the Covenant’) are considered revelatory. However, all authentic

scriptures from the world's major religions are viewed as divine guidance. Bahá'u'lláh (1817–1892) is seen as the latest (but not final) Prophet or Manifestation of God in a never-ending series of Divine Educators sent to humanity. He was a Persian nobleman originally named Mirza Husayn-Ali. He supported the Báb's cause for 19 years, attracted many followers with eloquence, wisdom and good deeds, thereby threatening religious and civil authorities. He was exiled four times: to Baghdad (Iraq), to Constantinople and Adrianople (Turkey), and to Akka (Palestine). He was imprisoned or under house arrest his whole life from age 27 onward. He taught that, despite all the humanly caused divisions and doctrinal distortions: God is one, humanity is one, and religion is one. He claimed that all religions point to a Promised Day for humanity, and the time of collective spiritual fulfillment has now been initiated. The 'old world order' of sovereign and contentious nations will break down and come to an end, and humanity will begin to co-fashion a 'new world order' with fresh divine guidance. *"The world's equilibrium hath been upset through the vibrating influence of this most great, this new World Order. Mankind's ordered life hath been revolutionized through the agency of this unique, this wondrous System—the like of which mortal eyes have never witnessed."* [23]

Bahá'u'lláh taught that world unity will be attained, yet diversity of culture and belief will be respected. He taught that a dynamic peace will eventually prevail. All prejudices will be overcome, extremes of poverty and wealth will be eliminated, political parties will disappear, as all social and economic problems will be resolved consultatively. Arms will be greatly reduced, and an auxiliary language will be selected for international discourse. Earth's resources will be discovered, conserved and shared equitably. A commonwealth of nations and a just, federal system of global governance will be established. The earth will come to mirror heaven ever more perfectly as humanity matures. A few of Bahá'u'lláh's memorable and universal teachings include:

All men have been created to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization. [24]

Let your vision be world-embracing, rather than confined to your own self. [25]

The tabernacle of unity hath been raised; regard ye not one another as strangers. Ye are the fruits of one tree, and the leaves of one branch. [26]

Consort with the followers of all religions in a spirit of friendliness and fellowship. [27]

So powerful is the light of unity that it can illuminate the whole earth. [28]

Be worthy of the trust of thy neighbor, and look upon him with a bright and friendly face. Be a treasure to the poor, an admonisher of the rich, an answerer of the cry of the needy, a preserver of the sanctity of thy pledge... Be as a lamp unto them that walk in darkness, a joy to the sorrowful, a sea for the thirsty, a haven for the distressed, an upholder and defender of the victim of oppression... a luminary above the horizon of virtue, a dew to the soil of the human heart, an ark upon the ocean of knowledge... a shining light in the firmament of thy generation, a fruit upon the tree of humility. [29]

BAHÁ'Í SOURCES AND COMPLEMENTARITIES

There is an abundance of guidance in Bahá'í Writings on the lessons of history, and we attempt to apply this illuminating material. [30] Tahirih, a female disciple of the Báb, wrote a poetic-theological account of progressive revelation in the Adamic Cycle, entitled “Adam’s Wish”. It uses the Ark as a symbol of historically recurring covenantal bonds through Prophets, exploring the gradualism of divine education, leading to the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh. About a third of the passages in “Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh” provide a framework for interpreting world history—revealing themes such as the Promised One and the Promised Day, fulfillment of prophecy, progressive revelation, the rise and decline of religious civilizations, responsibilities and failures of rulers, as well as world-embracing injunctions. Bahá'u'lláh’s “The Book of Certitude” shows history-shaping patterns of religious and civic leaders misinterpreting scripture, persecuting followers of new revelations, and corrupting the basic moral-spiritual principles of their own religious heritage. The common Source of all

revelations suggests that religions can and will ultimately unite as a common global heritage.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s “Some Answered Questions” illustrates the great historic roles of the Founders of Faith, Their station and transformative capacity, universal cycles in world history, the seasons of religious dispensations, as well as the dynamics of human evolution across millennia. His “The Secret of Divine Civilization” emphasizes the power and responsibility of societal leaders to renew civilization with the Light of revelation, fostering wider learning of both physical sciences and universal virtues. His “Paris Talks” and “The Promulgation of Universal Peace” also cast Light on themes such as Prophets as turning-points in history, revelation as the directive force of human advancement, material and spiritual progress, and the need for global governance to attain peace, justice and prosperity.

Shoghi Effendi’s “The World Order of Bahá’u’lláh” expounds on themes such as humanity’s birth-pangs and death-pangs, the transition from the Old to the New World Order, the collapse of religious civilizations, moral downfalls of societies, the goal of world unity and the coming world commonwealth. His “The Promised Day is Come” offers an historically grounded apocalyptic account of the twentieth century, the consequence of the ‘great powers’ ignoring or rejecting the nineteenth century guidance of Bahá’u’lláh, as well as a detailed account of future developments for humanity, including the Lesser and Greater Peace, and the inevitability of an ever-advancing global civilization.

The Universal House of Justice also offers authoritative guidance on historic developments in works such as “The Promise of World Peace”, “Century of Light” and “One Common Faith”, emphasizing our human capacity and responsibility for resolving global challenges and ideological diversity through recognizing progressive revelation and embracing the complementary nature of science and religion.

There is also a complementary growing body of Bahá’í-inspired writing [31], such as the previously mentioned Ruhi Institute Book 9, “Gaining an Historical Perspective”, John Hatcher’s “The Face of God Among Us: How the Creator Educates Humanity” and Mikhail Sergeev’s “Theory of Religious Cycles: Tradition,

Modernity and the Bahá'í Faith". These books address the impact of progressive revelation in world history. We comment on the latter in Chapter 2, showing its complementarity with our present study, offering a stage theory of religions and civilizations.

JOURNEY OF HOPE AND PROSPECTUS FOR EXPLORATION

I have great hope for humanity's progress and a strong desire to contribute to global understanding and cooperation. This grew from my lifelong fascination with unity-in-diversity—the challenge of discovering common ground and interdependence across religious, cultural and national boundaries, and then building upon this discovery to help make a more just, peaceful and creative world. This book's global emphasis was influenced by work and travel in the United States, Canada, Mexico, England, Greece, Israel, India, China, Japan, Korea and Turkey. This book also grew from my study of human sciences, and a twenty-five year Unitarian Universalist ministry, including extensive interfaith activity and exploring world religions, their respective Founders and scriptures. It reflects my experience as a community interfaith educator, grateful to many and varied students. Finally, it reflects my becoming a declarant of the Bahá'í Faith, with its call to investigate truth independently, and its all-embracing vision of humanity's past, present and future.

While teaching world religions in classroom settings, it is my policy neither to hide nor promote my own beliefs—striving to set up a safe atmosphere for learning, dialogue and commitment to a more unified world. I am a lover of wisdom and an advocate of lifelong learning and service. I believe that openness on one's beliefs and assumptions in teaching-learning environments, together with respectful interest in others' beliefs, result in more fruitful sharing and more objective views of topics at hand.

A few of the developments in my process of becoming a Bahá'í may cast useful light on the methodology and rationale of this study. In the summer of 1996, I made an interfaith pilgrimage to Oxford and Seoul, meeting many enthusiasts for global cooperation and participating in their devotions. It was soon after this that I began to take a new approach to major faith traditions. Before

this time, I had adopted what might be called an ‘anthropological’ perspective on teachings of other faiths—trying to understand them from a safe distance, and not anticipating being changed in any significant way such exposure. But then, the world’s scriptures, including Bahá’í Writings, began to speak to me—personally and spiritually. I became a more open-minded and open-hearted seeker of ‘higher truth’. I began to hear the same ‘voice’ behind all scriptures—as if the same story were being revealed and a common body of guidance were being offered to humanity as a whole.

Another key turning-point was gaining insight about the giant puzzle of history’s civilizations. I had long been fascinated by the concept of civilization, broadly conceived as a lofty mountain-range of human achievement. How have these mighty structures arisen? Were there significant patterns in their development? Why did they fall? How do they arise anew? What role does religion play in this earth-changing sequence? Is a new civilization arising today out of the ashes of two devastating wars involving both the Western and Eastern hemispheres? I was thinking of civilization in general as the highest collective attainment of a sizeable portion of humanity, bringing certain images to mind—religiously inspired architecture... a just legal system underlying a wise and humane government... creative development and opportunity for all levels of society... effective social services... widely shared prosperity marked by fair commerce and trade... dignity and moderation in all quarters... kind and trustworthy people in all walks of life... schools and universities... flourishing arts and sciences... beautiful gardens and parks... respect and care for the earth... spiritual reverence and philosophical reflection. Through search and study, I adopted a Bahá’í view of history.

Hope is a universal need, and an essential theme of religion. “Most religions contain teachings that anticipate a time, beyond the present era of suffering and injustice, when human history will be consummated by a decisive act of God.” [32] Hope is also an assumption of evolutionary understanding, a given of developmental theory, and a discernible reality despite the atrocities of humanity’s past—the troubled and even tragic character of human existence up until this Day of Maturation. Hope is a lesson of history when interpreted with divine guidance, showing that glorious realities lie

ahead for humanity. I cherish the hope that one day, a progressive account of all major religions and civilizations will be bound in one volume and taught to all people. This work is a humble and preliminary contribution to the arduous process of bringing forward that Day of global religious education. *“The newly born Babe of that Day excels the wisest and most venerable men of this time, and the lowliest and most unlearned of that period shall surpass in understanding the most erudite and accomplished divines of this age.”* [33]

We have introduced the challenge of discovering and developing insights of the most recent Eye to the Ages—the Bahá’í revelation. We described the project of fashioning a new providential philosophy of history, while offering preliminary assumptions and hypotheses, defining key terms, and introducing a few aspects of the Bahá’í Faith and how it enhanced the author’s quest for unity-in-diversity. In Chapter 2 we take a closer look at the broad phenomena of Religion and Civilization, including their developmental relationship, along with a five-stage theory suggesting that these two sets of protagonists and antagonists on the stage of history undergo processes of birth, growth, maintenance, decline and death-renewal.

In Chapter 3 we evaluate some significant views of history that arose within traditional tribal societies, Indian and Asian civilizations, as well as Islamic civilization. In Chapter 4 we evaluate some comparable philosophies of history that arose within Jewish, Greek-Roman and Christian traditions. In Chapter 5 we extend our survey of historical interpretations Europe from the early seventeenth century forward. In Chapter 6 we fashion a glimpse of prehistory and some early emerging civilizations, focusing on spiritual development. In Chapter 7 we take a broader view of our Abrahamic heritage than is typical among Westerners. In Chapter 8 we employ a five-stage theory—assisted by the Eye of providential guidance, while considering humanity’s moral-spiritual choices for better and worse—describing the rise, fall and progressive renewal of eight major civilizations.

Our concluding chapters reflect anew on our world today, and how it may be co-fashioned. We employ the Eye to interpret the nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first centuries as a Great Transition in world history, and to reflect on the more distant fu-

ture of humanity. We show that humanity's ability to appreciate and grasp global history, and to adopt a developmental or evolutionary perspective including all people, is a relatively recent attainment.

One of the distinguishing features of modernity has been the universal awakening of historical consciousness. An outcome of this revolutionary change in perspective that greatly enhances the teaching of Bahá'u'lláh's message is the ability of people, given the chance, to recognize that the whole body of humanity's sacred texts places the drama of salvation itself squarely in the context of history. Beneath the surface language of symbol and metaphor, religion, as the scriptures reveal it, operates not through the arbitrary dictates of magic but as a process of fulfillment unfolding in a physical world created by God for that purpose. [34]

Chapters 9 and 10 examine humanity's transition from sovereign nations to world loyalty, evaluating consequences of decline in major religious civilizations and the rise of several short-lived ideologies, which attempted to fill the spiritual void. Major processes of disruption and disintegration are identified, and the birth of the Bahá'í Faith is described. Chapters 11 and 12 summarize positive global developments and some new social, cultural and spiritual activities, including the Bahá'í Faith, demonstrating key aspects of the emerging and divinely ordained global civilization. And Chapters 13 and 14 explore implications of humanity's earlier revelatory visions, as well as prophecies of the most recent divine revelation, as they bear on humanity's near and more distant future.

We aspire to discover and shape high thoughts, thereby contributing to the building of true world community. *"The publication of high thoughts is the dynamic power in the arteries of life; it is the very soul of the world. Thoughts are a boundless sea, and the effects and varying conditions of existence are as the separate forms and individual limits of the waves; not until the sea boils up will the waves rise and scatter their pearls of knowledge on the shore of life."* [35] Perhaps the 'sea boiling up' referred to here is the appearance of new divine guidance in our world. In any case, we experiment with the light it offers, viewing anew humanity's journey through time.

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What is the meaning of history? Can we discern its significant stages and developments? Does our past reveal an overall purpose and direction? What light do grand theories and religious visions cast on today's world? Do the patterns enable us to envision humanity's likely future?

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ISBN 978-1-960533-35-7

