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“Mutual exchanges of Asian civilizations and a community of shared future for mankind”

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Future generations will look back and identify a period during which, out of the histories of numerous peoples and societies—each rich and proud in its own right—a story of humanity in its entirety began to become discernible. We stand at the threshold of that transition today. Where past ages looked to the future through the lens of the family, the tribe, the city-state, or the sovereign nation, today we are not only able, but impelled to take into account a shared future for all. This is the reality of the present moment, and ours is the opportunity and the responsibility to choose how that future will be built and what values and priorities will characterize it.

The Baha’i International Community welcomes this exploration. It also sees China as a fitting convener of the Asian Civilization Dialogue Conference and the present inquiry. The Chinese people, who are to exert such a preponderating influence on the destiny of humanity, are highly praised in the Baha’i holy writings. To them, one of the early leaders of the Baha’i Faith referred as "truth-seeking" and "prompted with ideal motives". From among them, he declared, can be raised "such divine personages that each one of them may become the bright candle of the world of humanity." Qualities such as these will be indispensable in unlocking the phenomenal constructive capacities found in the numerous populations across the Asian continent.

A civilization befitting a humanity which, having passed through earlier stages of social evolution, is coming of age will not emerge through the efforts of a select group of nations alone. Rather, it is a challenge must be faced by humanity in its entirety, drawing on the contributions of all and providing for the progress of all. And that growing body of active protagonists in the betterment of society will, to a great degree, be Asian in heritage. This continent has long been home to the majority of the human race and was the cradle of many of humanity’s first complex civilizations. How its 4.5 billion inhabitants—some 60% of the world’s population—understand themselves, their world, and their purpose in life is therefore of critical importance to the future of humanity.

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Asia’s record of economic development over the past century is notable indeed. Sizable segments of its overall population were freed from the limitations of subsistence agriculture, and its countries generated several of the longest periods of sustained economic growth in modern history. Such developments bolstered well-being in a number of areas. To take just one

example, within the context of the United Nations' Millennium Development Goals, some 470 million individuals in China were lifted out of extreme poverty between 1990 and 2005, thereby contributing a significant share toward the overarching goal of reducing extreme poverty around the world by half.

Yet welcome as these steps were, the Asian development experience reinforces one central truth as emphatically as the Western one does: that material advancement alone, unmoored from spiritual and moral foundations, is not only unsustainable, but ultimately illusory. It can be seen that even the most technologically advanced and economically dominant countries of world today, whether of the East or the West, are being assailed by destructive social forces such as materialism, self-interest, and prejudice. These, in turn, are giving rise to a multitude of social ills, ranging from poverty and crime to corruption and hypocrisy, from deterioration of the natural world to disintegration of the social fabric, from conflict and hostility to alienation and indifference. Realities such as these—and the toll they take on the great masses of humanity—can be seen in country after country around the world; they need no further elaboration here.

Over a hundred years ago, Baha'u'llah, the Founder of the Baha'i Faith wrote that, "if allowed to overleap the bounds of moderation" the civilization "so often vaunted by the learned exponents of arts and sciences" would "bring great evil upon men." He further warned that, "If carried to excess, civilization will prove as prolific a source of evil as it had been of goodness when kept within the restraints of moderation."

What becomes apparent is that movement toward a flourishing global future must take into account the full range of human existence. "Progress" today is often defined in relation to the historical experience of a small set of countries whose developmental path was conceived in largely materialistic terms. Those efforts refined a set of instrumentalities—industrialization, automation, sustained technological innovation, to name a few—the benefits which are not to be discounted. Yet human lives cannot be considered well lived absent considerations of meaning and purpose, relationship and connection, character and calling, devotion and dedication.

The notion of prosperity similarly needs to be re-examined. Material means are clearly vital to the advancement of civilization, and all people should have sufficient and equitable access to them. But prosperity cannot be accurately understood as the mere accumulation of personal wealth. Such an individualistic conception—bereft as it is of the guidance of transcendent values and noble aspirations—inevitably places undue weight on indulging desires and tends to cultivate a love of luxury. To contribute to the advancement of a full and integrated civilization, material means need to be used for far higher purposes: to foster unity, to uplift and edify the life of society, and to facilitate access to knowledge for all people, to name but a few.

A community of shared future for humankind, it becomes clear, requires deep coherence between the material and the spiritual. It requires that both dimensions of human existence advance harmoniously together, in individual lives as well as society as a whole. In this regard,

Baha'u'llah's eldest son and appointed successor stated that while "material civilization is one of the means for the progress of the world of mankind," until it is "combined with Divine civilization, the desired result, which is the felicity of mankind, will not be attained." He continued:

Material civilization is like a lamp-glass. Divine civilization is the lamp itself and the glass without the light is dark. Material civilization is like the body. No matter how infinitely graceful, elegant and beautiful it may be, it is dead. Divine civilization is like the spirit, and the body gets its life from the spirit, otherwise it becomes a corpse. It has thus been made evident that the world of mankind is in need of the breaths of the Holy Spirit. Without the spirit the world of mankind is lifeless, and without this light the world of mankind is in utter darkness.

Material civilization has advanced far in certain regions of the world and technological wonders abound. Yet all too often, members of those very societies suffer grievous maladies of the spirit: fear, suspicion, resentment, hopelessness. Continued progress toward a flourishing common future will therefore require labor and learning about the material and the spiritual dimensions of progress.

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The peoples of Asia are far from unaware of the transcendent aspects of human reality. Many possess a profound sense of spirituality, reflected in the practices of their daily lives, no less than the quality of their relationships with one another, with nature, and with their social institutions. They have a keen understanding of the need for coherence between the material and the spiritual. And they are disturbed by the effects of gross materialism on their societies in recent years.

This receptivity to the promptings of the spirit should come as no surprise. After all, the sun of religious truth has long risen in the East, and from there spread its life-giving rays around the globe. The Abrahamic faiths all arose from the fertile fields of Asia, as did the Chinese systems of Confucianism and Taoism. Hinduism and Buddhism guide thought and practice across the continent and beyond, as do Sikhism and Shinto. And the Baha'i Faith itself, as well as the ancient religion of Zoroastrianism, arose from Persia, in the heart of Asia, each of which made its distinct contributions to humanity's understanding of its relationship with the Divine.

But what is meant by "spirituality"? A word of caution is needed here, as it is easy to view the concept in a superficial way, to approach it as little more than a tool for maximising satisfaction or a veneer of activities or rituals designed to soothe the anxieties roused by a materialistic life. But true spirituality, faithful to the example of those transcendent Figures who gave the world its great belief systems, reaches to the very roots of human existence. It permeates action and channels individual and collective efforts for the betterment of society. It cultivates thirst for knowledge, elevates work to the station of worship, and promotes empathy. It provides for the

control of selfish impulses and emphasises oneness and interconnectedness. It fosters generosity and humility and nurtures appreciation for diversity and attraction to beauty.

Far from an inquiry into the esoteric and the obscure, then, spirituality in this sense functions as a source of insight into the heights to which human well-beings can rise and the means by which foundations for lasting progress can be laid in both human hearts and social systems. “It is incumbent upon every man of insight and understanding,” Baha’u’llah declared, “to strive to translate that which hath been written into reality and action.” Spiritual principles, no matter how lofty and commendable, are nothing but ideas until they are put into practice through human agency. “The essence of faith,” Baha’u’llah states, “is fewness of words and abundance of deeds.”

In this light, the abiding sense of faith characteristic of so many Asian cultures is intimately connected to a process of applying spiritual principles to the life of society, for the betterment of all. This is an eminently practical process. It is carried out not in the abstract, but rather in light of the unique circumstances of any given population, and the aspirations, perspectives, talents, and resources of its members. It is also a process that calls for a long-term commitment to learning in action. How, to take one example, is the spiritual principle of the equality of women and men given concrete expression in thousands of neighborhoods and villages around the world today? How does a population gradually build a society that reflects its realities and imperatives at all levels and in all facets of life? How would rising consciousness of this fundamental equality shape norms and expectations around employment and the workplace? Around issues of voice and political representation? Around the structure and functioning of the family unit?

These are questions that Baha’is everywhere are striving to learn about with like-minded collaborators. They are also the kinds of questions—applied to a range of spiritual principles, such as the oneness of the human family or the harmony of science and religion—that Baha’is believe will have to be taken up by every people and society, if a prospering global civilization is to advance through successive stages of its collective development.

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To speak of a shared future for humanity is to acknowledge the many pragmatic ties that increasingly link the lives of the people of the world. But beyond this, to speak of a shared global future is to acknowledge that the human family is one. For Baha’is, the oneness of humanity is the defining feature of the current stage of social evolution. “Ye are the fruits of one tree and the leaves of one branch,” wrote Baha’u’llah in the 19th century. In an age of intense political division and rivalry, He declared “the Earth is but one country and mankind its citizens.”

The premise that humanity constitutes a single people finds wide acceptance at the level of principle. Indeed, people around the world—particularly the young—increasingly cry out for societies that are more unified, just, and civil. Through the operation of forces ranging from the

economic to the environmental, diverse populations are mixing on unprecedented scales and the world grows more interconnected and interdependent by the day. Yet many of the dominant currents in societies everywhere are pushing people apart, not pulling them together. As the Universal House of Justice, the world governing body of the Baha'i Faith, recently wrote:

Humanity is gripped by a crisis of identity, as various peoples and groups struggle to define themselves, their place in the world, and how they should act. Without a vision of shared identity and common purpose, they fall into competing ideologies and power struggles. Seemingly countless permutations of "us" and "them" define group identities ever more narrowly and in contrast to one another. Over time, this splintering into divergent interest groups has weakened the cohesion of society itself.

These challenges demonstrate that movement toward a truly shared future will require unity of thought, action, and purpose to be expanded at every level. Governments will need to foster a sense of shared identity and common purpose among their citizens, and unequivocally renounce the practice of stoking racial, religious, ethnic, or other tensions for political gain. Communities will need to foster a culture of universal participation in the affairs and decisions of society, and take measures to actively include populations that were excluded in the past. And individuals, honestly searching the depths of their own heart and conscience, will need to continually expand the bounds of friendship and bring to bear the moral courage necessary to dismantle prejudice and bigotry in every form they may take.

It should be noted here that the diversity of the human family, far from contradicting its oneness, endows it with richness. From this perspective, unity contains within it the essential concept of diversity. Indeed, this is what distinguishes it from uniformity. Equally crucial is a robust and authentic orientation towards justice. For without that unbending commitment to justice, calls to unity can all too easily become another guise for oppression and tyranny.

Central to an appreciation for diversity is recognition of the particular talents and capacities that distinguish every culture and society. There has long been a tacit assumption that human advancement is a project that some carry out on behalf of others, whether based on geographic location, financial affluence, or countless other lines of demarcation. Historically, such attitudes have stemmed from ignorance and limitations of experience, but also from prejudice and arrogance. These assumptions of superiority, and their justifications, are an artifact of humanity's period of childhood and must now give way to more mature understandings. Just as every member of the human family has the right to benefit from a materially and spiritually prospering civilization, every individual, group, and nation has meaningful contributions to make toward its construction.

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Asia will exercise increasing influence in the coming years, in arenas ranging from the demographic and economic to the cultural and political. Indeed, some have suggested that we

stand today at the threshold of an “Asian Century”. Yet if the region is to avoid merely replicating the path taken by others in the past—including missteps and excesses—thought must be given as to how its growing capacity for action will be used, and toward what ends. What are the unique contributions that each people has to make to the construction of a better world? What are the distinct endowments each has to offer to a spiritually and materially prospering global civilization?

Just as importantly, how are the efforts of countless peoples and groups to be integrated into a coherent global thrust forward? Collaboration will of course be vital on all sides. But for the Baha’i Faith, a religion that was born in the East but saw much of its early development unfolding in the West, mutuality and unity of purpose between Orient and Occident has particular importance. Only as the strengths of each are not only developed, but blended—each becoming something more and greater than what they would be alone—does the prospect of a just global order that unifies the nations with the assent of humanity take on reality and possibility. Toward that end, may these words from the Baha’i holy writings inspire and guide all people of good will in their labors to build a common vision for the future of humankind:

The East and the West must unite to give to each other what is lacking. This union will bring about a true civilization, where the spiritual is expressed and carried out in the material. Receiving thus the one from the other, the greatest harmony will prevail, all people will be united, a state of great perfection will be attained...