

A Challenge for Visionary Leaders

By Arthur Lyon Dahl

We live today in uncertain times. The processes of globalisation, impelled by rapid advances in science and technology, are producing stresses and strains in our cultures, institutions, and economic and social systems. These systems, which we have inherited from earlier generations, evolved to meet the needs of a society very different from our own. Governments, the private sector, civil society, and even our value systems are challenged by the need to adapt to unprecedented pressures and rapidly changing conditions. There is a lack of vision and a loss of direction. Old systems are failing, but what should we put in their place? The youth are disoriented. Politicians promise but fail to deliver to a disillusioned electorate. Scientists warn of un-sustainability in our demand for resources and our pressures on environmental services. Bureaucratic inefficiency, corruption, organized crime, terrorism, genocide and the slide of failed states into anarchy have become commonplace as the materially successful give up hard-won freedoms for increased security.

To understand what is happening, we need to put these problems in the larger perspective of the evolution of human society. Civilizations rise and fall as humanity slowly advances in a cyclical progression towards higher levels of social organization and cooperation. Historically, this progression has been linked to the development of the major religious traditions and advances in spiritual values. Today, the physical unity of human society at the planetary scale is forcing an often-painful transition towards a more economically, socially and environmentally united world. Our rapid and perhaps excessive development of material civilization is exploiting our natural resources unsustainably and degrading our environment, threatening our future welfare. While some blindly place their confidence in the "invisible hand of self-interest" and the assumption that there is a technological fix for every problem, many commentators believe that only a new balance of the material, social and spiritual dimensions of society can permit a transition towards sustainability. However this will require a fundamental transformation of human society as we know it.

Governments have been exploring the way ahead through several decades of international conferences, including the Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment (1972), the Rio Earth Summit (1992), the Johannesburg World Summit on Sustainable Development (2002), and many others. Civil society has organized its alternative social summits. However for all it has proven much easier to adopt declarations and action plans than to implement them.

While some groupings of corporate leaders have made useful advances, the private sector in general has been too competitive to create its own joint global vision of a more desirable future. How can economic efficiency, profit and wealth creation be combined with corporate social and environmental responsibility? With the growing power and responsibility of business in a globalising world, business leadership will be essential to effective economic and social transformation, in partnership with governments and civil society. Only visionary business leaders will be able to relate the practical realities of everyday business operations to a new framework of values able to lead us out of the present impasse.

The European Baha'i Business Forum (EBBF) aims to inspire people with some of these values.

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