



Dialogues between Faith Values and ESD Values - The Bahá'í Faith

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The Bahá'í writings make direct and explicit reference to the concepts behind sustainable development. For example, Bahá'u'lláh, the Prophet-founder of the Bahá'í Faith, warned that "The civilization, so often vaunted by the learned exponents of arts and sciences, will, if allowed to overleap the bounds of moderation, bring great evil upon men.... 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." With reference to individual consumption, He said "Take from this world only to the measure of your needs, and forego that which exceeded them." Building an ever-advancing world civilization respecting the ecological balance of the planet is fulfilling the Divine purpose for the human race.

Bahá'í Scriptures describe nature as a reflection of the sacred. They teach that nature should be valued and respected, but not worshipped; rather, it should serve humanity's efforts to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization. However, in light of the interdependence of all parts of nature, and the importance of evolution and diversity "to the beauty, efficiency and perfection of the whole," every effort should be made to preserve as much as possible the earth's bio-diversity and natural order.

As trustees, or stewards, of the planet's vast resources and biological diversity, humanity must learn to make use of the earth's natural resources, both renewable and non-renewable, in a manner that ensures sustainability and equity into the distant reaches of time. This attitude of stewardship will require full consideration of the potential environmental consequences of all development activities. It will compel humanity to temper its actions with moderation and humility, realizing that the true value of nature cannot be expressed in economic terms. It will also require a deep understanding of the natural world and its role in humanity's collective development - both material and spiritual. Therefore, sustainable environmental management must come to be seen not as a discretionary commitment mankind can weigh against other competing interests, but rather as a fundamental responsibility that must be shouldered - a pre-requisite for spiritual development as well as the individual's physical survival.

Bahá'ís believe that the crucial need facing humanity is to find a unifying vision of the nature and purpose of human life. An understanding of humanity's relationship to the natural environment is an integral part of this vision.

The question of human nature has an important place, as it prompts us to reexamine, at the deepest levels, who we are and what our purpose is in life. The human experience is essentially spiritual in nature: it is rooted in the inner reality - or what some call the 'soul' - that we all share in common. The culture of consumerism, however, has tended to reduce human beings to competitive, insatiable consumers of goods and to objects of manipulation by the market. Commonly held views have assumed the existence of an intractable conflict between what people really want (i.e., to consume more) and what humanity needs (i.e., equitable access to resources). How, then, can we resolve the paralyzing contradiction that, on the one hand, we desire a world of peace and prosperity, while, on the other, much of economic and psychological theory depicts human beings as slaves to self-interest? The faculties needed to construct a more just and sustainable social order—moderation, justice, love, reason, sacrifice and service to the common good—have too often been dismissed as naïve ideals. Yet, it is these, and related, qualities that must be harnessed to overcome the traits of ego, greed, apathy and violence, which are often rewarded by the market and political forces driving current patterns of unsustainable consumption and production.

This preoccupation with the production and accumulation of material objects and comforts (as sources of meaning, happiness and social acceptance) has consolidated itself in the structures of power and information to the exclusion of competing voices and paradigms. The unfettered cultivation of needs and wants has led to a system fully dependent on excessive consumption for a privileged few, while reinforcing exclusion, poverty and inequality, for the majority. Each successive global crisis—be it climate, energy, food, water, disease, financial collapse—has revealed new dimensions of the exploitation and oppression inherent in the current patterns of consumption and production.

It is now increasingly acknowledged that such conditions as the marginalization of girls and women, poor governance, ethnic and religious antipathy, environmental degradation and unemployment constitute formidable obstacles to the progress and development of communities. These evidence a deeper crisis—one rooted in the values and attitudes that shape relationships at all levels of society. Viewed from this perspective, poverty can be described as the absence of those ethical, social and material resources needed to develop the moral, intellectual and social capacities of individuals, communities and institutions. Moral reasoning, group decision-making and freedom from racism, for example, are all essential tools for poverty alleviation. Such capacities must shape individual thinking as well as institutional arrangements and policy-making. To be clear, the goal at hand is not only to remove the ills of poverty but to engage the masses of humanity in the construction of a just global order.

Justice is the one power that can translate the dawning consciousness of humanity's oneness into a collective will through which the necessary structures of global community life can be confidently erected. An age that sees the people of the world increasingly gaining access to information of every kind and to a diversity of ideas will find justice asserting itself as the ruling principle of successful social organization. The shift towards a more just, peaceful and sustainable society will require attention to a harmonious dynamic between the material and non-material (or moral) dimensions. The latter, in particular, will be essential for laying the foundation for just and peaceful human relations; these include the generation of knowledge, the cultivation of trust and trustworthiness, eradication of racism and violence, promotion of art, beauty, science, and the capacity for collaboration and the peaceful resolution of conflicts.

Teaching and communicating about sustainable development

Bahá'ís all over the world are engaged in a coherent framework of action that promotes the spiritual development of the individual and channels the collective energies of its members towards service to humanity. These activities promote the systematic study of the Bahá'í Writings in small groups in order to build capacity for service. They respond to the inmost longing of every heart to commune with its Maker by carrying out acts of collective worship in diverse settings, uniting with others in prayer, awakening spiritual susceptibilities, and shaping a pattern of life distinguished for its devotional character. They provide for the needs of the children of the world and offer them lessons that develop their spiritual faculties and lay the foundations of a noble and upright character. They also assist junior youth to navigate through a crucial stage of their lives and to become empowered to direct their energies toward the advancement of civilization. As Bahá'ís and their friends gain experience with these initiatives, an increasing number are able to express their faith through a rising tide of endeavours that address the needs of humanity, in areas such as climate change and environmental stewardship, in both their spiritual and material dimensions.

Bahá'ís believe that progress in the development field depends on and is driven by stirrings at the grass roots of society. Different communities will likely devise different approaches and solutions in response to similar needs. It is for each community to determine its goals and priorities in keeping with its capacity and resources, requiring innovation and a variety of approaches to the environment appropriate to the rhythm of life in the community.

The Bahá'í International Community has long participated in United Nations activities and the international dialogue on social justice, development, environment and sustainability. In addition, many Baha'i-inspired social and economic

development projects and organizations such as the International Environment Forum (IEF, <http://iefworld.org>), and the European Bahá'í Business Forum (<http://www.ebbf.org>) have directly addressed education for sustainable development in their work.

The Bahá'í International Community and the IEF were active contributors to the Earth Charter drafting process, and have supported the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development with conferences, events and materials, so there is a natural integration with these processes. The IEF is part of the Partnership for Education and research about Responsible Living (PERL), as it was in the preceding Consumer Citizenship Network. Bahá'ís initiated the project on Values-based indicators of Education for Sustainable Development in which the Earth Charter Initiative was a partner, and which has produced tools (www.wevalue.org) useful for many ESD activities.

Individual Bahá'ís, Bahá'í communities and Bahá'í-inspired organizations have long been significant contributors to ESD efforts, with an exchange of tools in both directions. Educational materials and examples developed within Bahá'í communities are actively shared through sources such as the IEF web site including, for example, an interfaith study course on climate change. The Wilmette Institute of the U.S. Bahá'í Community offers on-line courses including one on sustainable development. Local community-based education and empowerment activities are open to everyone. Baha'is participate in inter-faith collaboration, internationally, for example, with the Alliance of Religions and Conservation (ARC), and nationally through bodies such as the US Partnership for DESD, Interfaith Power and Light, Faith and the Common Good, etc. Such collaboration on ESD will certainly grow in the years ahead.

In order to progress beyond a world community driven by a largely economic and utilitarian calculus,

to one of shared responsibility for the prosperity of all nations, the principle of the oneness of humanity must take root in the conscience of the individual. In this way, we come to recognize the broader human agenda – which subsumes those of climate change, poverty eradication, gender equality, development, and the like – and seeks to use both human and natural resources in a way that facilitates the progress and well-being of all people.

If education is to effect the profound changes in the minds of people and in the structures of society needed to shift towards sustainability, the nature of the educational processes will need to be rethought. As a starting point, the programme of education must be based on a clear vision of the kind of society that we wish to live in, and the kind of individuals that will bring this about. It needs to help learners reflect on the purpose of life and help them to step out of their cultural realities to develop alternative visions and approaches to the problems at hand, and to understand the manifold consequences of their behaviours and to adjust these accordingly.

Education must be lifelong. It should help people to develop the knowledge, values, attitudes and skills necessary to earn a livelihood and to contribute confidently and constructively to shaping communities that reflect principles of justice, equity and unity. It should also help the individual develop a sense of place and community, grounded in the local, but embracing the whole world. Successful education will cultivate virtue as the foundation for personal and collective well-being, and will nurture in individuals a deep sense of service and an active commitment to the welfare of their families, their communities, their countries, indeed, all humankind. It will encourage self-reflection and thinking in terms of historical process, and it will promote inspirational learning through such means as music, the arts, poetry, meditation and interaction with the natural environment.

Making the transition to a sustainable world

The transition to a sustainable world is the fundamental aim and purpose of the Bahá'í Faith. We try in our own small way to learn what this means in practice, by applying the principles mentioned above, and to set an example for others. Where we have some success, we hope to catalyze wider change. We also participate actively in the dialogues of society on these issues, as our principles and ideas can have an impact far beyond our own community.

We believe that progress at the technical and policy levels now needs to be accompanied by public dialogue—among rural and urban dwellers; among the materially poor and the affluent; among men, women and young persons alike—on the ethical foundations of the necessary systemic change. A sustainable social order is distinguished, among other things, by an ethic of reciprocity and balance at all levels of human organization, expressing unity in diversity. Within such an order, the concept of justice is embodied in the recognition that the interests of the individual and of the wider community are inextricably linked. The pursuit of justice within the frame of unity in diversity provides a guide for collective deliberation and decision-making and offers a means by which unified thought and action can be achieved.

Ultimately, the transformation required to shift towards a sustainable world will entail no less than an organic change in the structure of society itself so as to reflect fully the interdependence of the entire social body - as well as the interconnectedness with the natural world that sustains it. Among these changes are: the consciousness of world citizenship; the eventual federation of all nations through an integrated system of governance with capacity for global decision-making; the establishment of structures which recognize humanity's common ownership of the earth's resources; the establishment of full equality

between men and women; the elimination of all forms of prejudice; the establishment of a universal currency and other integrating mechanisms that promote global economic justice; the adoption of an international auxiliary language to facilitate mutual understanding; and the redirection of massive military expenditures towards constructive social ends.

The pathway to sustainability will be one of empowerment, collaboration and continual processes of questioning, learning and action in all regions of the world. It will be shaped by the experiences of women, men, children, the rich, the poor, the governors and the governed as each one is enabled to play their rightful role in the construction of a new society. As the sweeping tides of consumerism, unfettered consumption, extreme poverty and marginalization recede, they will reveal the human capacities for justice, reciprocity and happiness.