

Danish Summer School 25-30 July 2022

## Preparing for public discourse

Five classes by Arthur Dahl

### Tuesday 26 July Environment

#### Preparing for public discourse

2010: “two interconnected, mutually reinforcing areas of activity: involvement in social action and participation in the prevalent discourses of society.”

(Universal House of Justice, Ridvan 2010)

2013, creation of the Office of Public Discourse at the Bahá'í World Centre

how we are to understand and analyze social issues so that our contributions to the conversations in which we take part are increasingly aligned with the teachings of the Faith.

... be increasingly involved in the life of society, knowing well that the enormous global transformation envisioned by Baha'u'llah will not come about through the endeavors of Baha'is alone.

(Ruhi Book 14: Participating in public discourse)

How do we go about understanding and analyzing issues of social import in light of the Baha'i teachings? How did I develop the perception I have of this or that issue? To what extent are my views on social issues influenced by informal conversations with friends, neighbors, and co-workers? Given that I am constantly exposed to a wide range of convincing arguments, often stemming from conflicting ideological perspectives, each aggressively propagated by the media, how do I go about separating truth from propaganda? What criteria do I use to distinguish between facts and opinion? How do I avoid presenting as the Baha'i view on a particular issue a set of ideas in vogue that are superficially akin to certain beliefs of the Faith?

(Ruhi Book 14: Participating in public discourse)

Truth and investigation of reality

Certitude in Baha'u'llah's revelation

avoiding extreme relativism and fanaticism

humility, our understanding far from complete

continually gain fresh insights into spiritual and social reality

pursue knowledge with others, towards unity of thought

make distinction between dogma, superstition and prejudice, and the truth

reality or truth is one

(Ruhi Book 14: Participating in public discourse)

#### The environmental crises

Overshooting planetary boundaries

Climate change, few years to turn the corner

The collapse of biodiversity: 80% of insects in Europe; 60% of vertebrates in the world, 1 million species

Land degradation, deforestation, water shortages

Plastic pollution, chemicals, urban air pollution

## World Scientists' Warning

The scientists call for immediate action to change course in six areas:

- (1) **energy**, eliminating fossil fuels and shifting to renewables;
- (2) **short-lived air pollutants**, slashing black carbon (soot), methane, and hydrofluorocarbons;
- (3) **nature**, restoring and permanently protecting Earth's ecosystems to store and accumulate carbon and restore biodiversity;
- (4) **food**, switching to mostly plant-based diets, reducing food waste, and improving cropping practices
- (5) **economy**, moving from indefinite GDP growth and overconsumption by the wealthy to ecological economics and a circular economy, in which prices reflect the full environmental costs of goods and services
- (6) **human population**, stabilizing and gradually reducing the population by providing voluntary family planning and supporting education and rights for all girls and young women.

All transformative climate action should focus on **social justice** for all by prioritizing basic human needs and reducing inequality.

Source (2021): <https://doi.org/10.1093/biosci/biab079>

## Our society of abundance

The most significant impact on the environment and sustainability comes from the wealthy and our society of abundance. Our materialistic consumption is not compensated by advances in technology. The only way we can avoid the climate and biodiversity catastrophes is through a significant reduction in our lifestyle and GDP in Western economies, with all the losses in employment and changes in our economic model that this implies. We must rethink our communities from the bottom up and simplify our ways of living.

(based on Thomas Wiedmann et al. (2020) *Scientists' Warning on Affluence*. *Nature Communications* 11:3107 <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41467-020-16941-y>)

On 8 October 2021, the UN Human Rights Council approved the Human Right to a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment

## Public discourse on environment

One of the pressing concerns of humanity today is how the resources of nature can be utilized in a way that safeguards the health of the environment, and there is a large community of people around the world who are giving attention to the many dimensions of this challenge. Some are, for instance, scientists investigating the causes of phenomena such as climate change or searching for means to curb pollution. Others are working to raise consciousness about the effects of the systems and processes of present-day society on the natural world. Still others are associated with endeavors aimed at establishing environmentally sound policies. In short, the question of environment is being addressed by a diversity of groups and in numerous ways. And all these efforts require engagement in ongoing interconnected conversations, of different degrees of formality, from the local to the international level. We can refer to the totality of what is being expressed about this concern of humanity – in books and articles, at summits and conferences, in the media, in classrooms and so on – as the discourse on the environment. Like any other significant discourse of society, it has a direction, and it is, to an extent that may vary, rigorous. It is public in the sense that it aspires to reach everyone who wishes to follow its unfoldment.

(Ruhi Book 14: Participating in public discourse)

## Norms & values for transformation

Against the backdrop of climate change, environmental degradation, and the crippling

extremes of wealth and poverty, the transformation from a culture of unfettered consumerism to a culture of sustainability has gained momentum.... ...it is a transformation that will require an earnest examination of our understanding of human nature and of the cultural frameworks driving institutions of government, business, education, and media around the world. Questions of what is natural and just will need to be critically re-examined. The issue of sustainable consumption and production... will need to be considered in the broader context of an ailing social order—one characterized by competition, violence, conflict and insecurity—of which it is a part.

(Bahá'í International Community, *Rethinking Prosperity: Forging Alternatives to a Culture of Consumerism*, 2010)

## **The Environment**

We cannot segregate the human heart from the environment outside us and say that once one of these is reformed everything will be improved. Man is organic with the world. His inner life moulds the environment and is itself also deeply affected by it. The one acts upon the other and every abiding change in the life of man is the result of these mutual reactions.

(Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, 17 February 1933)

Every man of discernment, while walking upon the earth, feeleth indeed abashed, inasmuch as he is fully aware that the thing which is the source of his prosperity, his wealth, his might, his exaltation, his advancement and power is, as ordained by God, the very earth which is trodden beneath the feet of all men. There can be no doubt that whoever is cognizant of this truth, is cleansed and sanctified from all pride, arrogance, and vainglory.

(Bahá'u'lláh, *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*, Wilmette, Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1988, p. 44)

Bahá'u'lláh loved the beauty and verdure of the country. One day He passed the remark: '*I have not gazed on verdure for nine years. The country is the world of the soul, the city is the world of bodies.*'

('Abdu'l-Bahá, in J. E. Esslemont, *Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era*. Chpt. 3, p. 35)

## **Nature and Spirituality**

All religions have teachings about ecology

### *Hinduism*

All actions take place in time by the interweaving of the forces of Nature; but the man lost in selfish delusion thinks that he himself is the actor.

But the man who knows the relation between the forces of Nature and actions, sees how some forces of Nature work on other forces of Nature, and becomes not their slave.

Those who are under the delusion of the forces of Nature bind themselves to the work of these forces. Let not the wise man who sees the All disturb the unwise who sees not the All.

(Bhagavad Gita 3:27-29)

### *Judaism*

But ask the animals, and they will teach you; the birds of the air, and they will tell you; ask the plants of the earth, and they will teach you; and the fish of sea will declare to you. Who among all these does not know that the hand of the Lord has done this? In his hand is the life of every living thing and the breath of every human being. (Job 12:7-10)

The earth lies polluted under its inhabitants; for they have transgressed laws, violated the statutes, broken the everlasting covenant. Therefore a curse devours the earth, and its

inhabitants suffer for their guilt; therefore the inhabitants of the earth dwindled, and few people are left. The wine dries up, the vine languishes, all the merry-hearted sigh. The mirth of the timbrels is stilled, the noise of the jubilant has ceased... (Isaiah 24:5-8)

### *Buddhism*

This is what should be done by those who are skilled in goodness, and who know the path of peace...

in gladness and in safety, may all beings be at ease. Whatever living beings there may be, whether they are weak or strong, omitting none, the great or the mighty, medium, short or small, the seen and the unseen, those living near and far away, those born to-be-born-- May all beings be at ease!...

Even as a mother protects with her life her child, her only child, so with a boundless heart should one cherish all living beings, radiating kindness over the entire world, spreading upward to the skies, and downward to the depths, outward and unbounded. (from Metta Sutta, "Loving-kindness")

### *Christianity*

He went up on the mountain by himself to pray. (Matthew 14:23)

And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan, and he was with the wild beasts, and the angels waited on him. (Mark 1:12-13)

...for "the earth and its fullness are the Lord's." (1 Corinthians 11:26)

The nations raged, but your wrath has come, and the time for the dead to be judged, and to recompense your servants, the prophets, and the holy ones and those who fear your name, the small and the great alike, and to destroy those who destroy the earth. (Rev 11:18)

### *Islam*

It is He who produceth gardens, with trellises and without, and dates, and tilth with produce of all kinds, and olives and pomegranates, similar (in kind) and different (in variety): eat of their fruit in their season, but render the dues that are proper on the day that the harvest is gathered. But waste not by excess: for God loveth not the wasters. (6:141 Al-An'am - Cattle)

And the earth We have spread out (like a carpet); set thereon mountains firm and immovable; and produced therein all kinds of things in due balance. (15:19 Al-Hijr - The Rocky Tract)

There is the type of man whose speech about this world's life may dazzle thee, and he calls God to witness about what is in his heart; yet is he the most contentious of enemies. When he turns his back, his aim everywhere is to spread mischief through the earth and destroy crops and cattle but God loveth not mischief. When it is said to him, "fear God," he is led by arrogance to (more) crime. Enough for him is Hell; - an evil bed indeed (to lie on)! And there is the type of man who gives his life to earn the pleasure of God; and God is full of kindness to (His) devotees.

(2:204-207 Al-Baqarah - The Cow)

### *Baha'i Faith*

Nature is God's Will and is its expression in and through the contingent world.

(Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 142)

When... thou dost contemplate the innermost essence of all things, and the individuality of each, thou wilt behold the signs of thy Lord's mercy in every created thing, and

see the spreading rays of His Names and Attributes throughout all the realm of being.... Then wilt thou observe that the universe is a scroll that discloseth His hidden secrets, which are preserved in the well-guarded Tablet. And not an atom of all the atoms in existence, not a creature from amongst the creatures but speaketh His praise and telleth of His attributes and names, revealeth the glory of His might and guideth to His oneness and His mercy....

*(Abdu'l-Bahá, Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, p. 41-42)*

And whensoever thou dost gaze upon creation all entire, and dost observe the very atoms thereof, thou wilt note that the rays of the Sun of Truth are shed upon all things and shining within them, and telling of that Day-Star's splendours, Its mysteries, and the spreading of Its lights. Look thou upon the trees, upon the blossoms and fruits, even upon the stones. Here too wilt thou behold the Sun's rays shed upon them, clearly visible within them, and manifested by them.

*(Abdu'l-Bahá, Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, p. 41-42)*

Briefly, it is not only their fellow human beings that the beloved of God must treat with mercy and compassion, rather must they show forth the utmost loving-kindness to every living creature.... The feelings are one and the same, whether ye inflict pain on man or on beast.

Train your children from their earliest days to be infinitely tender and loving to animals. If an animal be sick, let the children try to heal it, if it be hungry, let them feed it, if thirsty, let them quench its thirst, if weary, let them see that it rests.

*(Abdu'l-Bahá, Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, p. 158-159)*

### **Nature as an integrated system**

This nature is subjected to an absolute organization, to determined laws, to a complete order and to a finished design, from which it will never depart - to such a degree, indeed, that if you look carefully and with keen sight, from the smallest invisible atom up to such large bodies of the world of existence as the globe of the sun or the other great stars and luminous spheres, whether you regard their arrangement, their composition, their form or their movement, you will find that all are in the highest degree of organization....

*(Abdu'l-Bahá, Some Answered Questions, Chpt. 1, p. 3)*

The innumerable created things that are found in the world of existence - be they man, animal, plant, or mineral - must each be composed of elements. There is no doubt that the completeness seen in each and every thing arises, by divine creation, from the component elements, their appropriate combination, their proportionate measure, the manner of their composition, and the influence of other created things. For all beings are linked together like a chain; and mutual aid, assistance, and interaction are among their intrinsic properties and are the cause of their formation, development and growth.

*(Abdu'l-Bahá, Some Answered Questions, Chpt. 46, p. 205)*

Consider for instance how one group of created things constituteth the vegetable kingdom, and another the animal kingdom. Each of these two maketh use of certain elements in the air on which its own life dependeth, while each increaseth the quantity of such elements as are essential for the life of the other. In other words, the growth and development of the vegetable world is impossible without the existence of the animal kingdom, and the maintenance of animal life is inconceivable without the co-operation of the vegetable kingdom. Of like kind are the relationships that exist among all created things. Hence it was stated that co-operation and reciprocity are essential properties which are inherent in the unified system of the world of existence, and without which the entire creation would be reduced to nothingness.

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá, in *Compilation on Social and Economic Development*, p. 12)

In surveying the vast range of creation thou shalt perceive that the higher a kingdom of created things is on the arc of ascent, the more conspicuous are the signs and evidences of the truth that co-operation and reciprocity at the level of a higher order are greater than those that exist at the level of a lower order. For example, the evident signs of this fundamental reality are more discernible in the vegetable kingdom than in the mineral, and still more manifest in the animal world than in the vegetable.

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá, in *Compilation on Social and Economic Development*, p. 12)

### **Reestablishing an ecological balance**

The elements and lower organisms are synchronized in the great plan of life. Shall man, infinitely above them in degree, be antagonistic and a destroyer of that perfection?

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá, talk at Leland Stanford Junior University, Palo Alto, California, 8 October 1912. *Promulgation of Universal Peace*. Wilmette, Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1982. p. 350)

For the sustainable economic and social development of all countries, agriculture and the preservation of the ecological balance of the world are fundamental.

(adapted from *Universal House of Justice 1985*)

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.

(based on Bahá’í International Community, *Valuing Spirituality in Development*. 1998)

One of the most pressing problems of humanity in the current century is how a growing, rapidly developing, and not yet united global population can, in a just manner, live in harmony with the planet and its finite resources.... The limited availability and inequitable distribution of resources profoundly impact social relations within and between nations in many ways, even to the point of precipitating upheaval and war [and] devastating consequences for the environment. The question of the impact of climate change... is today a major aspect of this larger problem. The Revelation of Bahá’u’lláh directly and indirectly touches on a range of such concerns in a manner that speaks to a harmony between society and the natural world.

(Universal House of Justice, letter of 29 November 2017 [https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/the-universal-house-of-justice/messages/20171129\\_001](https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/the-universal-house-of-justice/messages/20171129_001))

### **Sustainability**

As trustees or stewards of the planet's resources and biodiversity, we must:

- ensure sustainability and equity of resource use into distant future
- consider the environmental consequences of development activities
- temper our actions with moderation and humility
- value nature in more than economic terms
- understand the natural world and its role in humanity's collective development both material and spiritual

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.

(based on Bahá’í International Community, *Valuing Spirituality in Development*. 1998)

## **Global Environmental Governance**

(examples)

### *Questions for discussion*

What are the most important environmental problems in your community?

Are you taking action to respond to climate change?

What is the state of local biodiversity?

Do you have problems of pollution?

How might you contribute to environmental discourse?

Have you changed your lifestyle to be more sustainable?

## **Wednesday 27 July**

### **- Social justice**

#### **Deeds, not words**

The wrong in the world continues to exist just because people talk only of their ideals, and do not strive to put them into practice. If actions took the place of words, the world's misery would very soon be changed into comfort.

A man who does great good, and talks not of it, is on the way to perfection.

The man who has accomplished a small good and magnifies it in his speech is worth very little.

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Paris Talks 1, The Duty of Kindness and Sympathy towards Strangers and Foreigners*, 16 October 1911)

Multiple social crises

Limits to Growth – Scenarios

Ethical challenges

Population problem?

Health threats

#### **The consumer culture**

- Materialism's gospel of human betterment produced today's consumer culture pursuing ephemeral goals

- For the small minority of people who can afford them, the benefits it offers are immediate, and the rationale unapologetic

- The breakdown of traditional morality has led to the triumph of animal impulse, as instinctive and blind as appetite

- Selfishness becomes a prized commercial resource; falsehood reinvents itself as public information; greed, lust, indolence, pride - even violence - acquire not merely broad acceptance but social and economic value

(based on Universal House of Justice, *One Common Faith*, 2005)

#### **Corruption**

The illegal economy from organized crime is now \$2 trillion/year, or twice all the world's defense budgets, including \$870 billion for international crime syndicates

Bribery \$1.5 tr; counterfeiting and piracy \$520bn; drug trade \$320bn; human trafficking \$44bn; traffic in endangered species \$20bn; identity theft \$1bn

Political corruption is everywhere; the vast majority of bribes go to people in rich countries

10% of all public health budgets are lost to corruption

Business participates to buy advantages, for efficiency, out of fear

This results in market failures, capital loss, ignored environmental regulations, failed resource management

### **Hopelessness**

Today the world is assailed by an array of destructive forces. Materialism, rooted in the West, has now spread to every corner of the planet, breeding, in the name of a strong global economy and human welfare, a culture of consumerism. It skilfully and ingeniously promotes a habit of consumption that seeks to satisfy the basest and most selfish desires, while encouraging the expenditure of wealth so as to prolong and exacerbate social conflict. One result is a deepening confusion on the part of young people everywhere, a sense of hopelessness in the ranks of those who would drive progress, and the emergence of a myriad social maladies.

(Universal House of Justice, To Baha'is in the Cradle of the Faith, 2 April 2010)

Refusal of social globalization

when climate change will cause mass migrations

- Reinforcing frontiers
- Rejection of immigrants
- Rise of xenophobia
- Fear of delocalizations
- Failure to deal with poor governance

Globalization should include the free movement of people as well as capital, goods and services

### **Multiple interacting crises**

Religion was intended to bring love and fellowship, but is used instead to fan hatred.

Now we are plunged into war as well.

All these express fundamental failures in ethics, values, morality and spirituality.

### **Questioning our assumptions**

- Are we really inherently aggressive and competitive in the struggle to win out over others?
- Is life a zero-sum game where winning means that someone else must be the loser?
- What about our gender stereotypes?
- Do we have identities based on racism, nationalism and religious bigotry rooted deeply in our subconscious?
- What have we inherited without questioning?

### **Constructing a just social order**

How... 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.

(Bahá'í International Community 2010, *Rethinking Prosperity: Forging Alternatives to a Culture of Consumerism*)

...the chief reason for the evils now rampant in society is a lack of spirituality. The materialistic civilization of our age has so much absorbed the energy and interest of mankind, that people in general no longer feel the necessity of raising themselves above



the forces and conditions of their daily material existence. There is not sufficient demand for things that we should call spiritual to differentiate them from the needs and requirements of our physical existence. The universal crisis affecting mankind is, therefore, essentially spiritual in its causes. The spirit of the age, taken on the whole, is irreligious. Man's outlook upon life is too crude and materialistic to enable him to elevate himself into the higher realms of the spirit.

(From a letter dated 8 December 1935 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer)

Loss of faith in the certainties of materialism and the progressive globalizing of human experience reinforce one another in the longing they inspire for understanding about the purpose of existence.

(Universal House of Justice, *One Common Faith*, p. 13)

...loss of faith in traditional religion has been an inevitable consequence of failure to discover in it the guidance required to live with modernity, successfully and with assurance.

(Universal House of Justice, *One Common Faith*, p. 16)

A heart that has embraced love for the whole of humanity will certainly be pained when confronted by the suffering that so many endure because of disunity. But the friends of God cannot shut themselves off from the increasing turmoil of the society that surrounds them; they must guard themselves, too, from becoming enmeshed in its conflicts or falling into its adversarial methods. No matter how bleak conditions may appear at any given time, no matter how dismal the immediate prospects for bringing about unity, there is no cause for despair. The distressing state of the world can only spur us to redouble our commitment to constructive action. "These are not days of prosperity and triumph" cautions Bahá'u'lláh. "The whole of mankind is in the grip of manifold ills. Strive, therefore, to save its life through the wholesome medicine which the almighty hand of the unerring Physician hath prepared."

(Universal House of Justice, to the Baha'is of the World 18 January 2019

[https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/the-universal-house-of-justice/messages/20190118\\_001/](https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/the-universal-house-of-justice/messages/20190118_001/))

## **Baha'i perspectives on social justice**

### **Implications of the oneness of humankind**

- that the rational soul has no gender, race, ethnicity or class, a fact that renders intolerable all forms of prejudice, not the least of which are those that prevent women from fulfilling their potential and engaging in various fields of endeavour shoulder to shoulder with men;
- that the root cause of prejudice is ignorance, which can be erased through educational processes that make knowledge accessible to the entire human race, ensuring it does not become the property of a privileged few;
- that science and religion are two complementary systems of knowledge and practice by which human beings come to understand the world around them and through which civilization advances;
- that religion without science soon degenerates into superstition and fanaticism, while science without religion becomes the tool of crude materialism;
- that true prosperity, the fruit of a dynamic coherence between the material and spiritual requirements of life, will recede further and further out of reach as long as consumerism continues to act as opium to the human soul;
- that justice, as a faculty of the soul, enables the individual to distinguish truth from falsehood and guides the investigation of reality, so essential if superstitious beliefs and outworn traditions that impede unity are to be eliminated;

- that, when appropriately brought to bear on social issues, justice is the single most important instrument for the establishment of unity;
- that work performed in the spirit of service to one's fellow human beings is a form of prayer, a means of worshipping God.

(Universal House of Justice, *To the Baha'is of Iran*, 2 March 2013, para. 9)

### **Moderation**

Such a chaste and holy life... involves no less than the exercise of **moderation** in all that pertains to dress, language, amusements, and all artistic and literary avocations.... It calls for the abandonment of a frivolous conduct, with its excessive attachment to trivial and often misdirected pleasures.... It can tolerate no compromise with the theories, the standards, the habits, and the excesses of a decadent age.

(Shoghi Effendi. *The Advent of Divine Justice*, p. 30)

### **Redefining prosperity**

Man's merit lieth in service and virtue and not in the pageantry of wealth and riches. Take heed that your words be purged from idle fancies and worldly desires and your deeds be cleansed from craftiness and suspicion.

Dissipate not the wealth of your precious lives in the pursuit of evil and corrupt affection, nor let your endeavours be spent in promoting your personal interest. Be generous in your days of plenty, and be patient in the hour of loss.... Guard against idleness and sloth, and cling unto that which profiteth mankind, whether young or old, whether high or low.

(Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas*. 1978, p. 138)

### **Migrants/refugees**

Let not conventionality cause you to seem cold and unsympathetic when you meet strange people from other countries. Do not look at them as though you suspected them of being evildoers, thieves and boors. You think it necessary to be very careful, not to expose yourselves to the risk of making acquaintance with such, possibly, undesirable people.

I ask you not to think only of yourselves. Be kind to the strangers....

Help to make them feel at home; ...try to make their lives a little happier.

In this way, even if, sometimes, what you at first suspected should be true, still go out of your way to be kind to them—this kindness will help them to become better.

Let those who meet you know, without your proclaiming the fact, that you are indeed a Bahá'í.

Put into practice the Teaching of Bahá'u'lláh, that of kindness to all nations. Do not be content with showing friendship in words alone, let your heart burn with loving kindness for all who may cross your path.

(‘Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks 1, The Duty of Kindness and Sympathy towards Strangers and Foreigners*, 16 October 1911)

### **The true human nature**

A more accurate understanding of human nature would encompass qualities and attitudes such as trustworthiness, mutual support, commitment to truth, and a sense of responsibility, that are the building blocks of a stable social order. It would give rise to models which would avoid or ameliorate the ills of reductive materialism, ensuring that our pursuit of prosperity includes the many other facets of individual and collective well-being.

(Bahá'í International Community, *One Planet, One Habitation*, §21)

### **Restoring the influence of religion**

Unity is a condition of the human spirit. Education can support and enhance it, as can legislation, but they can do so only once it emerges and has established itself as a compelling force in social life. A global intelligensia, its prescription largely shaped by materialistic misconceptions of reality, clings tenaciously to the hope that imaginative social engineering, supported by political compromise, may indefinitely postpone the

potential disasters that few deny loom over humanity's future.... As unity is the remedy for the world's ills, its one certain source lies in the restoration of religion's influence in human affairs.

(Universal House of Justice, *One Common Faith*, p. 42-43 )

Bahá'u'lláh has not brought into existence a new religion to stand beside the present multiplicity of sectarian organizations. Rather has He **recast the whole conception of religion as the principal force impelling the development of consciousness**. As the human race in all its diversity is a single species, so the intervention by which God cultivates the qualities of mind and heart latent in that species is a **single process**.

(Universal House of Justice, *One Common Faith*, p. 23)

...until material achievements, physical accomplishments and human virtues are reinforced by **spiritual perfections**, luminous qualities and characteristics of mercy, no fruit or result shall issue therefrom, nor will the happiness of the world of humanity, which is the ultimate aim, be attained. For although, on the one hand, material achievements and the development of the physical world produce prosperity, which exquisitely manifests its intended aims, on the other hand dangers, severe calamities and violent afflictions are imminent.... Progress and barbarism go hand in hand, unless material civilization be confirmed by Divine Guidance... and be reinforced by spiritual conduct...

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, 225, p. 283-284)

### **Universal education**

The development of a global society calls for the cultivation of capacities far beyond anything the human race has so far been able to muster. The challenges ahead will require an enormous expansion in access to knowledge on the part of individuals and organizations alike. Universal education will be an indispensable contributor to this process of capacity building, but the effort will succeed only to the extent that both individuals and groups in every sector of society are able to acquire knowledge and to apply it to the shaping of human affairs.

(Bahá'í International Community. *Valuing Spirituality in Development*, 1998)

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 mankind. 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.

(Bahá'í International Community. *Valuing Spirituality in Development*, 1998)

### **New approaches to progress**

To redefine progress is not to dismiss any legitimate accomplishments of the past, but to expand the boundaries of achievements yet to come. From new approaches to ownership and usership, to new forms of urban organization, to new methods of agriculture, power generation, and transportation, the possibilities before humanity are vast. Seizing them will require a far fuller expression of the stores of human potential latent within every individual and the combined efforts of humanity as a whole. But the coming decades hold the

prospect of being an exceptionally rich and rewarding period of human history. Daunting as the unprecedented scale of transformation needed in numerous sectors of society might sometimes seem, it opens possibilities for a great flourishing of human creativity and initiative.

(Bahá'í International Community, *One Planet, One Habitation*, §22)

### **Ethical principles**

- Moral values state what is good and of primary importance to human civilization,
- often articulated as ideals
- define right from wrong
- Ethical principles are the operational expression of moral values
- provide guidance to decision-making and action
- A capability of moral reasoning starts from abstract general ethical principles to resolve conflicts that arise from moral dilemmas and ethical problems

(from Eloy Anello (2008) *A Framework for Good Governance in the Public Pharmaceutical Sector*. Working draft for field testing and revision, April 2008. World Health Organization. 45 p.

[www.who.int/entity/medicines/areas/policy/goodgovernance/GGMFramework2008-04-18.pdf](http://www.who.int/entity/medicines/areas/policy/goodgovernance/GGMFramework2008-04-18.pdf))

Both law and ethics are concerned with the application of justice

Law: institutions for enforcement, top-down regulation of society, punishment, use of force if necessary, costly

Ethics: individual attachment to the principle of justice and its application, bottom-up, self-motivated, reward more than punishment

The stronger the ethical framework and its application, the less need for law; more cost-effective; process-based solution

### **The forces of global integration**

How do we encourage the forces of integration?

We need ethics, values, goals and perspectives of a better future

A vision of a more just and equitable world

Able to motivate positive actions

Can an ethical, even spiritual, perspective help us to change our lifestyle and consumption patterns?

The UN 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals can give us a framework for discourse and action

We need institutions of global governance for global problems

### **UN 2030 Agenda**

- fundamental transformation is needed in society and the economy
- Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) define a paradigm shift for people and planet
- inclusive and people-centred, leaving no one behind
- integrate the economic, social and environmental dimensions
- in a spirit of solidarity, cooperation, mutual accountability
- with the participation of governments and all stakeholders

Young people will be the torch bearers... the first truly globalized, interconnected, and highly mobilized civil society, ready and able to serve as a participant, joint steward, and powerful engine of change and transformation.

(*The Road to Dignity by 2030: Ending Poverty, Transforming All Lives and Protecting the Planet*, Synthesis Report of the Secretary-General On the Post-2015 Agenda, released 4 December 2014)

It is "We the Peoples" who are embarking today on the road to 2030. Our journey will involve Governments as well as Parliaments, the UN system and other international

institutions, local authorities, indigenous peoples, civil society, business and the private sector, the scientific and academic community – and all people.... It is an Agenda of the people, by the people, and for the people – and this, we believe, will ensure its success.

(Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development)

## Sustainable Development Goals

### **A shift in perspective – values**

To alleviate a variety of problems born of the economic inequalities so prevalent in the world today, social and economic development will require, especially among the younger generations, a fundamental shift in perspective, one that changes the way in which certain essential concepts are viewed--the true purpose of life, the nature of progress, the meaning of true happiness and well-being, and the place that material pursuits should assume in one's individual and family life.

(Universal House of Justice, To Baha'is in the Cradle of the Faith, 2 April 2010)

Social justice will be attained only when every member of society enjoys a relative degree of material prosperity and gives due regard to the acquisition of spiritual qualities. The solution, then, to prevailing economic difficulties is to be sought as much in the application of spiritual principles as in the implementation of scientific methods and approaches.

(Universal House of Justice, To Baha'is in the Cradle of the Faith, 2 April 2010)

### **Focus on hope**

- focus on hope, a rare commodity today
- be positive, full of creative imagination
- draw on the fantastic potential hiding within all of us
- youth are the hope of the future
- today will only be a start
- tomorrow is already the future
- the more we build forward, the more that future will open up

### *Questions for discussion*

How can we read our local social reality?

Are there injustices that need to be addressed?

What would be everyone's rights and responsibilities?

Is your community welcoming to immigrants and refugees?

How can we build community solidarity?

Most fundamentally, what would be the underlying principles and values to guide this ever-evolving system?

## **Thursday 28 July**

### **Economic justice**

Detachment from consumerism

Principles for an alternative economy

### **Materialism**

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.... The day is approaching when its flame will devour the cities...

Bahá'u'lláh (1817-1892)

- The early twentieth century materialistic interpretation of reality became the dominant

world faith in the direction of society

- Humanity thought it had solved through rational experimentation and discourse all of the issues related to human governance and development
- Dogmatic materialism captured all significant centres of power and information at the global level, ensuring that no competing voices could challenge projects of world wide economic exploitation

(based on Universal House of Justice, *One Common Faith*, p. 3-4)

The time has come when those who preach the dogmas of **materialism**, whether of the east or of the west, whether of capitalism or socialism, must give account of the moral stewardship they have presumed to exercise. Where is the "new world" promised by these ideologies?... Why is the vast majority of the world's peoples sinking ever deeper into hunger and wretchedness when wealth on a scale undreamed of by the Pharaohs, the Caesars, or even the imperialist powers of the nineteenth century is at the disposal of the present arbiters of human affairs?

(Universal House of Justice (1985), *The Promise of World Peace*, I, p. 7)

- Materialism's gospel of human betterment produced today's consumer culture pursuing ephemeral goals
- For the small minority of people who can afford them, the benefits it offers are immediate, and the rationale unapologetic
- The breakdown of traditional morality has led to the triumph of animal impulse, as instinctive and blind as appetite
- Selfishness becomes a prized commercial resource; falsehood reinvents itself as public information; greed, lust, indolence, pride - even violence - acquire not merely broad acceptance but social and economic value

(based on Universal House of Justice, *One Common Faith*, 2005)

The economic life of humanity has recently embroiled so many people. Injustice is tolerated with indifference and disproportionate gain is regarded as the emblem of success.

UHJ Ridvan 2012

### Some spiritual principles

O people of Baha! It is incumbent upon each one of you to engage in some occupation - such as a craft, a trade or the like. We have exalted your engagement in such work to the rank of worship of the one true God.... Waste not your hours in idleness and sloth, but occupy yourselves with what will profit you and others.... The most despised of men in the sight of God are they who sit and beg. Hold ye fast unto the cord of means and place your trust in God, the Provider of all means.

(Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, para. 33, p. 30)

[The true seeker] should be content with little, and be freed from all inordinate desire.... He should succour the dispossessed, and never withhold his favour from the destitute.

(Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Iqán*, p. 193-194)

...eschew... dishonesty in one's transactions or the economic exploitation of others. There should be no contradiction between one's economic conduct and one's beliefs. By applying in one's life principles of fairness and equity, each person can uphold a standard far above the low threshold by which the world measures itself.

UHJ Ridvan 2012

Social justice will be attained only when every member of society enjoys a relative degree of material prosperity and gives due regard to the acquisition of spiritual qualities. The

solution, then, to prevailing economic difficulties is to be sought as much in the application of spiritual principles as in the implementation of scientific methods and approaches.

UHJ, 2 April 2010

Vigilance must be exercised in distinguishing "means" from "ends".

The acquisition of wealth is acceptable and praiseworthy to the extent that it serves as a means for achieving higher ends:

- providing people with basic necessities
- fostering social progress
- promoting the welfare of society
- contributing to the establishment of a world civilization.

To make the accumulation of wealth the central purpose of one's life is unworthy.

based on UHJ, 2 April 2010

...the end does not serve to justify the means. However constructive and noble the goal..., it must not be attained through improper means. Regrettably, a number of today's leaders--political, social, and religious--as well as some of the directors of financial markets, executives of multinational corporations, chiefs of commerce and industry, and ordinary people who succumb to social pressure and ignore the call of their conscience, act against this principle; they justify any means in order to achieve their goals.

UHJ, 2 April 2010

Wealth is praiseworthy in the highest degree, if it is acquired... in commerce, agriculture, crafts and industry, if the measures adopted... in generating wealth serve to enrich the generality of the people, and if the wealth thus obtained is expended for philanthropic purposes and the promotion of knowledge, for the establishment of schools and industry and the advancement of education, and in general for the welfare of society.

based on UHJ, 2 April 2010

...the acquisition of wealth should be governed by the requirements of justice.... An employer and employee, for example, are bound by the laws and conventions that regulate their work, and each is expected to carry out his or her responsibilities with honesty and integrity.

UHJ, 2 April 2010

...if the deeper implications of justice are to be realized, other preconditions to the legitimate acquisition of wealth must be taken into account, and prevailing norms reassessed in their light:

- the relationship between minimum wage and the cost of living, especially in light of the contribution workers make to a company's success and their entitlement to a fair share of the profits
- the wide margin, often unjustifiable, between the production costs of certain goods and the price at which they are sold
- the question of the generation of wealth through measures that enrich the generality of the people.

based on UHJ, 2 April 2010

...certain approaches to obtaining wealth--so many of which involve the exploitation of others, the monopolization and manipulation of markets, and the production of goods that promote violence and immorality--are unworthy and unacceptable.

UHJ, 2 April 2010

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.

(based on Bahá'í International Community, [\*Valuing Spirituality in Development\*](#), 1998)

Central to the task of reconceptualizing the organization of human affairs is arriving at a proper understanding of the role of economics. The failure to place economics into the broader context of humanity's social and spiritual existence has led to a corrosive materialism in the world's more economically advantaged regions, and persistent conditions of deprivation among the masses of the world's peoples. Economics should serve people's needs; societies should not be expected to reformulate themselves to fit economic models. The ultimate function of economic systems should be to equip the peoples and institutions of the world with the means to achieve the real purpose of development: that is, the cultivation of the limitless potentialities latent in human consciousness.

Society must develop new economic models shaped by insights that arise from a sympathetic understanding of shared experience, from viewing human beings in relation one to another, and from a recognition of the central role that family and community play in social and spiritual well-being. Within institutions and organizations, priorities must be reassessed. Resources must be directed away from those agencies and programs that are damaging to the individual, societies and the environment, and directed toward those most germane to furthering a dynamic, just and thriving social order. Such economic systems will be strongly altruistic and cooperative in nature; they will provide meaningful employment and will help to eradicate poverty in the world.

(Bahá'í International Community, [\*Valuing Spirituality in Development: Initial Considerations Regarding the Creation of Spiritually Based Indicators for Development\*](#). A concept paper written for the World Faiths and Development Dialogue, Lambeth Palace, London, 18-19 February 1998)

In an increasingly interconnected world, more light is being cast on the social conditions of every people, giving greater visibility to their circumstances. While there are developments that give hope, there is much that should weigh heavy on the conscience of the human race. Inequity, discrimination, and exploitation blight the life of humanity, seemingly immune to the treatments applied by political schemes of every hue. The economic impact of these afflictions has resulted in the prolonged suffering of so many, as well as in deep-seated, structural defects in society. No one... can remain unmoved by these consequences. "The world is in great turmoil," Baha'u'llah observes..., "and the minds of its people are in a state of utter confusion. We entreat the Almighty that He may graciously illuminate them with the glory of His Justice, and enable them to discover that which will be profitable unto them at all times and under all conditions."

The welfare of any segment of humanity is inextricably bound up with the welfare of the whole. Humanity's collective life suffers when any one group thinks of its own well-being in isolation from that of its neighbours' or pursues economic gain without regard for how the natural environment, which provides sustenance for all, is affected. A stubborn obstruction, then, stands in the way of meaningful social progress: time and again, avarice and self-interest prevail at the expense of the common good. Unconscionable quantities of wealth are being amassed, and the instability this creates is made worse by how income and opportunity are spread so unevenly both between nations and within nations. But it need not be so. However much such conditions are the outcome of history, they do not have to define the future, and even if current approaches to economic life satisfied humanity's stage of adolescence, they are certainly inadequate for its dawning age of maturity. There



is no justification for continuing to perpetuate structures, rules, and systems that manifestly fail to serve the interests of all peoples.... There is an inherent moral dimension to the generation, distribution, and utilization of wealth and resources. The stresses emerging out of the long-term process of transition from a divided world to a united one are being felt within international relations as much as in the deepening fractures that affect societies large and small. With prevailing modes of thought found to be badly wanting, the world is in desperate need of a shared ethic, a sure framework for addressing the crises that gather like storm clouds. The vision of Baha'u'llah challenges many of the assumptions that are allowed to shape contemporary discourse—for instance, that self-interest, far from needing to be restrained, drives prosperity, and that progress depends upon its expression through relentless competition. To view the worth of an individual chiefly in terms of how much one can accumulate and how many goods one can consume relative to others is wholly alien to Baha'i thought. But neither are the teachings in sympathy with sweeping dismissals of wealth as inherently distasteful or immoral, and asceticism is prohibited. Wealth must serve humanity. Its use must accord with spiritual principles; systems must be created in their light. And, in Baha'u'llah's memorable words, "No light can compare with the light of justice. The establishment of order in the world and the tranquillity of the nations depend upon it."

(Universal House of Justice, To the Baha'is of the World, 1 March 2017)

Consideration of... the reorganization of human society... inevitably gives rise to questions of economics.... The aim is to learn about how to participate in the material affairs of society in a way that is consistent with the divine precepts and how, in practical terms, collective prosperity can be advanced through justice and generosity, collaboration and mutual assistance.

Every choice [an individual] makes—as employee or employer, producer or consumer, borrower or lender, benefactor or beneficiary—leaves a trace, and the moral duty to lead a coherent life demands that one's economic decisions be in accordance with lofty ideals, that the purity of one's aims be matched by the purity of one's actions to fulfil those aims.... Not content with whatever values prevail in the existing order that surrounds them, the friends everywhere should consider the application of the teachings to their lives and, using the opportunities their circumstances offer them, make their own individual and collective contributions to economic justice and social progress wherever they reside. Such efforts will add to a growing storehouse of knowledge in this regard.

A foundational concept to explore in this context is the spiritual reality of man.... [T]he nobility inherent to every human being... is a fundamental tenet... upon which hope for the future of humankind is built. Economic life is an arena for the expression of honesty, integrity, trustworthiness, generosity, and other qualities of the spirit. The individual is not merely a self-interested economic unit, striving to claim an ever-greater share of the world's material resources. "Man's merit lieth in service and virtue", Baha'u'llah avers, "and not in the pageantry of wealth and riches." And further: "Dissipate not the wealth of your precious lives in the pursuit of evil and corrupt affection, nor let your endeavours be spent in promoting your personal interest." By consecrating oneself to the service of others, one finds meaning and purpose in life and contributes to the upliftment of society itself....

"And the honour and distinction of the individual consist in this, that he among all the world's multitudes should become a source of social good. Is any larger bounty conceivable than this, that an individual, looking within himself, should find that... he has become the cause of peace and well-being, of happiness and advantage to his fellow men? No, ...there is no greater bliss, no more complete delight." ('Abdu'l-Baha)

Viewed in this light, many seemingly ordinary economic activities gain new significance because of their potential to add to human welfare and prosperity. "Every person must have an occupation, a trade or a craft, so that he may carry other people's burdens, and

not himself be a burden to others." ('Abdu'l-Baha) The poor are urged by Baha'u'llah to "exert themselves and strive to earn the means of livelihood", while they who are possessed of riches "must have the utmost regard for the poor". "Wealth", 'Abdu'l-Baha has affirmed, "is praiseworthy in the highest degree, if it is acquired by an individual's own efforts and the grace of God, in commerce, agriculture, art and industry, and if it be expended for philanthropic purposes." At the same time, the Hidden Words [of Baha'u'llah] is replete with warnings of its perilous allure, that wealth is a "mighty barrier" between the believer and the proper Object of his adoration. No wonder, then, that Baha'u'llah extols the station of the wealthy one who is not hindered by riches from attaining the eternal kingdom; the splendour of such a soul "shall illuminate the dwellers of heaven even as the sun enlightens the people of the earth!" Abdu'l-Baha declares that " if a judicious and resourceful individual should initiate measures which would universally enrich the masses of the people, there could be no undertaking greater than this, and it would rank in the sight of God as the supreme achievement". For wealth is most commendable "provided the entire population is wealthy." At all times, contentment and moderation, benevolence and fellow feeling, sacrifice and reliance on the Almighty are qualities that befit the God-fearing soul.

(Universal House of Justice, *To the Baha'is of the World*, 1 March 2017)

The forces of materialism promote a quite contrary line of thinking: that happiness comes from constant acquisition, that the more one has the better, that worry for the environment is for another day. These seductive messages fuel an increasingly entrenched sense of personal entitlement, which uses the language of justice and rights to disguise self-interest. Indifference to the hardship experienced by others becomes commonplace while entertainment and distracting amusements are voraciously consumed. The enervating influence of materialism seeps into every culture, and [everyone] recognizes that, unless they strive to remain conscious of its effects, they may to one degree or another unwittingly adopt its ways of seeing the world. Parents must be acutely aware that, even when very young, children absorb the norms of their surroundings. The junior youth spiritual empowerment programme encourages thoughtful discernment at an age when the call of materialism grows more insistent. With the approach of adulthood comes a responsibility, shared by one's generation, not to allow worldly pursuits to blind one's eyes to injustice and privation. Over time, the[se] qualities and attitudes... help individuals to see past the illusions that, at every stage of life, the world uses to pull attention away from service and towards the self... rais[ing] consciousness of the need to manage one's material affairs in keeping with the divine teachings.

(Universal House of Justice, *To the Baha'is of the World*, 1 March 2017)

### **A just salary for ministers**

Overstep not the bounds of moderation, and deal justly with them that serve thee. Bestow upon them according to their needs, and not to the extent that will enable them to lay up riches for themselves, to deck their persons, to embellish their homes, to acquire the things that are of no benefit to them, and to be numbered with the extravagant. Deal with them with undeviating justice, so that none among them may either suffer want, or be pampered with luxuries. This is but manifest justice.

(Bahá'u'lláh [to the Sultan of Turkey], *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, CXIV, pp. 235-236)

### **Voluntary sharing**

... the Teachings of Bahá'u'lláh advocate voluntary sharing, and this is a greater thing than the equalization of wealth. For equalization must be imposed from without, while sharing is a matter of free choice.

Man reacheth perfection through good deeds, voluntarily performed, not through good deeds the doing of which was forced upon him. And sharing is a personally chosen

righteous act: that is, the rich should extend assistance to the poor, they should expend their substance for the poor, but of their own free will, and not because the poor have gained this end by force. For the harvest of force is turmoil and the ruin of the social order. On the other hand voluntary sharing, the freely-chosen expending of one's substance, leadeth to society's comfort and peace. It lighteth up the world; it bestoweth honour upon humankind.

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, 79, p. 115)

And among the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh is voluntary sharing of one's property with others among mankind. This voluntary sharing is greater than equality, and consists in this, that man should not prefer himself to others, but rather should sacrifice his life and property for others. But this should not be introduced by coercion so that it becomes a law and man is compelled to follow it. Nay, rather, man should voluntarily and of his own choice sacrifice his property and life for others, and spend willingly for the poor, just as is done in Persia among the Bahá'ís.

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, 227, p. 302)

### **Guaranteed minimum income**

The fundamental basis of the community is agriculture, tillage of the soil. All must be producers. Each person in the community whose income is equal to his individual producing capacity shall be exempt from taxation. But if his income is greater than his needs he must pay a tax until an adjustment is effected. ...if his necessities exceed his production he shall receive an amount sufficient to equalize or adjust. Therefore taxation will be proportionate to capacity and production and there will be no poor in the community.

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Foundations of World Unity*, p. 37)

### **Capital and labour**

The question of socialization is very important. It will not be solved by strikes for wages. All the governments of the world must be united and organize an assembly the members of which should be elected from the parliaments and the nobles of the nations. These must plan with utmost wisdom and power so that neither the capitalists suffer from enormous losses nor the laborers become needy. In the utmost moderation they should make the law; then announce to the public that the rights of the working people are to be strongly preserved. Also the rights of the capitalists are to be protected. When such a general plan is adopted by the will of both sides, should a strike occur, all the governments of the world collectively should resist it. Otherwise the labor problem will lead to much destruction, especially in Europe. Terrible things will take place.

...the owners of properties, mines and factories should share their incomes with their employees and give a fairly certain percentage of their products to their workingmen in order that the employees may receive, beside their wages, some of the general income of the factory so that the employee may strive with his soul in the work.

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Foundations of World Unity*, p. 43-44)

### *Questions for discussion*

What economic problems worry people the most?

Are people aware of the dangers of consumerism?

Are there some ethical businesses trying to do the right thing?

Are there efforts to build a sustainable local economy?

How can you introduce spiritual principles into discourse on the economy?

## **Friday 29 July**

### **Peace and Global governance**

#### **The governance problem**

National sovereignty: war is the final recourse to impose one state's will on others  
International anarchy, no rule of law  
Struggle for power and world domination  
Push back against multilateralism  
Warfare increasingly dangerous to the survival of the human race  
Multinational corporations out of control  
World filled with ego, corruption and aggression  
Rise of reckless political leaders and autocrats

#### **The promised crises are here**

The pandemic with its dead and social chaos  
Climate and biodiversity catastrophes  
The coming financial crisis – insurmountable debts  
Famine already spreading  
Now we have war as well

#### **General failure in governance**

In general one can say that modern democracies have been established as the outcome of attempts to limit the power of absolute monarchy, of dictatorships, or of certain dominant classes. This may have come about gradually through the centuries, or tumultuously by a series of revolutions. Thus, even when democratic constitutions and structures have been established, there remains a suspicion of authority as such, and a tension between the degree of freedom accorded to individual citizens and the imposition of sufficient public discipline to protect the weak against the selfish pursuits of the strong among the citizenry.

(Universal House of Justice, to an individual, 18 July 2000)

The operation of transparency, accountability, freedom of the press and critical dialogue is thus imbued with a spirit of partisanship that easily descends into the merciless invasion of personal privacy, the dissemination of calumny, the exaggeration of mistrust, and the misuse of the news media at the hands of vested interests. The reaction of those who attempt to protect themselves against such distortions of the system produces secretiveness, concealment of uncomfortable facts, and reciprocal misuse of the media—in all, a perpetuation of disharmony in the social fabric.

(Universal House of Justice, to an individual, 18 July 2000)

#### **Nations cling to national sovereignty**

Even at the UN, national sovereignty is jealously protected, yet global problems require a global response. Governments do not realize that true national self-interest today is best reflected in global solidarity and a willingness to make short-term sacrifices in the common interest

#### **Progress in the oneness of humanity**

This [global] perspective must now evolve to reflect the essential connectedness and common fate of humanity that for too long has struggled against a worldview that emphasized sovereignty, ascendancy and competition. Efforts to reconceptualize sovereignty, from an absolute right to a responsibility, signal that a shift in consciousness towards greater degrees of global solidarity is already underway. To be sure, the solution

to climate change exceeds the capacities and resources of any one nation and requires the full cooperation of all nations, each according to their means.

(Bahá'í International Community, [Seizing the Opportunity: Redefining the challenge of climate change](#), 2008)

The principle of the oneness of humankind... seeks to move beyond utilitarian notions of cooperation to anchor the aspirations of individuals, communities and nations to those of the progress of humanity. In practical terms, it affirms that individual and national interests are best served in tandem with the progress of the whole. As children, women, men, religious and scientific communities as well as governments and international institutions converge on this reality, we will do more than achieve a collective response to the climate change crisis. We will usher in a new paradigm by means of which we can understand our purpose and responsibilities in an interconnected world; a new standard by which to evaluate human progress; and a mode of governance faithful to the ties that bind us as members of one human race.

(Bahá'í International Community, [Seizing the Opportunity: Redefining the challenge of climate change](#), 2008)

### **War and peace**

Our joy at seeing the community of the Greatest Name go from strength to strength is tempered by our deep sorrow at seeing the persistence of conditions and conflicts in the world that create misery and desperate suffering—in particular, at observing the recrudescence of destructive forces that have disordered international affairs while visiting horrors upon populations. We know well and are reassured that, as Bahá'í communities have repeatedly demonstrated in many different contexts, the followers of Bahá'u'lláh are committed to offering relief and support to those around them, no matter how straitened their own circumstances.

(Universal House of Justice, Ridvan 2022)

But until humanity as a whole undertakes to establish its affairs on foundations of justice and truth, it is, alas, fated to stagger from one crisis to another. We pray that, if the recent outbreak of war in Europe is to yield any lessons for the future, it will serve as an urgent reminder of the course that the world must take if it is to attain genuine and enduring peace. The principles enunciated by Bahá'u'lláh to the monarchs and presidents of His time, and the weighty responsibilities with which He charged rulers past and present, are perhaps even more pertinent and imperative today than when they were first recorded by His Pen.

(Universal House of Justice, Ridvan 2022)

For Bahá'ís, the inexorable advance of the Major Plan of God—bringing with it ordeals and upheavals, but ultimately impelling humanity towards justice, peace, and unity—is the context within which the Minor Plan of God, with which the believers are chiefly occupied, unfolds. The dysfunctional state of present-day society makes the need for the release of the society-building power of the Faith abundantly clear and pressing. We cannot but expect that, for now, convulsions and disturbances will continue to afflict the world; you will no doubt appreciate, then, why every earnest supplication we offer for all God's children to be relieved from bewilderment and bitter hardship is coupled with an equally heartfelt prayer for the success of the much-needed service you are rendering for the Cause of the Prince of Peace.

(Universal House of Justice, Ridvan 2022)

### **The problems are global, but governance is still national**

- Legislation: social definition of ethical limits
- Taxation: wealth redistribution for common services and social security
- International frameworks largely non-binding (labour, health, transport, intellectual

property)

- No global mechanism for economic management (IMF, G8, G20, etc.)
- No mechanism for global wealth redistribution
- No international legislation providing common standards or a level playing field for business

## **Our Common Agenda**

Report of the Secretary-General 10 September 2021, acknowledges the need for global governance reform

First, now is the time to re-embrace **global solidarity** and find new ways to work together for the common good. ...it must include urgent and bold steps to address the triple crisis of climate disruption, biodiversity loss and pollution destroying our planet.

Second, now is the time to renew the **social contract** between Governments and their people and within societies, so as to rebuild trust and embrace a comprehensive vision of human rights. People need to see results reflected in their daily lives. This must include the active and equal participation of women and girls, without whom no meaningful social contract is possible. It should also include updated governance arrangements to deliver better public goods....

Third, now is the time to end the “infodemic” plaguing our world by defending a common, empirically backed consensus around **facts, science and knowledge**. The “war on science” must end. All policy and budget decisions should be backed by science and expertise....

Fourth, now is the time to correct a glaring blind spot in how we **measure economic prosperity and progress**. When profits come at the expense of people and our planet, we are left with an incomplete picture of the true cost of economic growth. As currently measured, gross domestic product (GDP) fails to capture the human and environmental destruction of some business activities. I call for new measures to complement GDP, so that people can gain a full understanding of the impacts of business activities and how we can and must do better to support people and our planet.

Fifth, now is the time to think for the **long term**, to deliver more for young people and succeeding generations and to be better prepared for the challenges ahead.... We also need to be better prepared to prevent and respond to major global risks.

## **Trust and trustworthiness**

- States must trust that decisions are really taken in the common interest
- People must trust that their human rights will be protected
- Everyone able to develop their full potential to contribute to society
- Governments must be trustworthy
- Everything founded on justice for all
- Sacrifices should be shared equitably
- No one should be left behind

## **The tortuous pathway to peace**

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. Rival conceptions about the primacy of a particular people are peddled to the exclusion of the truth that humanity is on a common journey in which all are protagonists.

Consider how radically different such a fragmented conception of human identity is from the one that follows from a recognition of the oneness of humanity. In this perspective, the diversity that characterizes the human family, far from contradicting its oneness, endows it with richness. Unity, in its Bahá'í expression, contains the essential concept of diversity, distinguishing it from uniformity. It is through love for all people, and by subordinating lesser loyalties to the best interests of humankind, that the unity of the world can be realized and the infinite expressions of human diversity find their highest fulfilment.

Today, many of the dominant currents in societies everywhere are pushing people apart, not drawing them together. Even as global poverty of the most extreme form has decreased, political and economic systems have enabled the enrichment of small coteries with grossly exorbitant wealth—a condition that fuels fundamental instability in world affairs. The interactions of the individual citizen, governing institutions, and society as a whole are often fraught, as those arguing for the primacy of one or the other show more and more intransigence in their thinking. Religious fundamentalism is warping the character of communities, even nations. The failings of so many organizations and institutions of society have understandably led to a decline in public trust, but this has been systematically exploited by vested interests seeking to undermine the credibility of all sources of knowledge.

Certain shared ethical principles, which seemed to be in the ascendant at the start of this century, are eroded, threatening the prevailing consensus about right and wrong that, in various arenas, had succeeded in holding humanity's basest tendencies in check. And the will to engage in international collective action, which twenty years ago represented a powerful strain of thinking among world leaders, has been cowed, assailed by resurgent forces of racism, nationalism, and factionalism.

Thus do the forces of disintegration regroup and gain ground. So be it. The unification of humanity is unstoppable by any human force; the promises made by the prophets of old and by the Author of the Cause of God Himself testify to this truth. Yet the course humanity takes to achieve its destiny may very well be tortuous. The tumult raised by the contending peoples of the earth threatens to drown out the voices of those noble-minded souls in every society who call for an end to conflict and struggle. As long as that call goes unheeded, there is no reason to doubt that the world's current state of disorder and confusion will worsen—possibly with catastrophic consequences—until a chastened humanity sees fit to take another significant step, perhaps this time decisive, towards enduring peace.

(Universal House of Justice, *To the Bahá'ís of the World*, 18 January 2019

[https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/the-universal-house-of-justice/messages/20190118\\_001/](https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/the-universal-house-of-justice/messages/20190118_001/))

### **Global governance**

Our world is increasingly globalized and interconnected, but there is no effective mechanism for governance, law and collaboration at the scale of global challenges and catastrophic risks, whether economic, social or environmental, as called for in the World Order of Baha'u'llah.

How can we contribute to the discourse on global governance?

### **Discourses related to peace**

The friends are also developing their capacity for engaging those around them, regardless of creed, culture, class, or ethnicity, in conversations about how to bring about spiritual and material well-being through systematic application of the divine teachings. One gratifying result of this growing capacity is the community's increased ability to make meaningful contributions to various important discourses prevalent in society; in certain countries, leaders and thinkers striving to address the challenges confronting their societies increasingly show appreciation for the perspectives offered by Bahá'ís. These contributions articulate insights derived from Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation, draw on the experience being generated by the believers around the world, and aim to elevate the discussion above the acrimony and contention that so often prevent discourses of society from progressing.

(Universal House of Justice, *To the Bahá'ís of the World*, 18 January 2019)

Further, the ideas and lines of reasoning advanced by Bahá'ís are reinforced by their practice of consultation. Sensitized as they are to the importance of harmony and the fruitlessness of conflict, the followers of Bahá'u'lláh seek to cultivate those conditions that are most conducive to the emergence of unity in any setting. We are heartened to see the believers expanding their efforts to participate in the discourses of society—especially those friends who, in their professional capacity, are able to contribute to discourses directly related to peace.

(Universal House of Justice, *To the Bahá'ís of the World*, 18 January 2019)

### **A Baha'i vision of ways forward: World Order**

The unity of the human race, as envisaged by Bahá'u'lláh, implies the establishment of a world commonwealth in which all nations, races, creeds and classes are closely and permanently united, and in which the autonomy of its state members and the personal freedom and initiative of the individuals that compose them are definitely and completely safeguarded. This commonwealth must, as far as we can visualize it, consist of a world legislature, whose members will, as the trustees of the whole of mankind, ultimately control the entire resources of all the component nations, and will enact such laws as shall be required to regulate the life, satisfy the needs and adjust the relationships of all races and peoples. A world executive, backed by an international Force, will carry out the decisions arrived at, and apply the laws enacted by, this world legislature, and will safeguard the organic unity of the whole commonwealth. A world tribunal will adjudicate and deliver its compulsory and final verdict in all and any disputes that may arise between the various elements constituting this universal system. A mechanism of world intercommunication will be devised, embracing the whole planet, freed from national hindrances and restrictions, and functioning with marvellous swiftness and perfect regularity. A world metropolis will act as the nerve center of a world civilization, the focus towards which the unifying forces of life will converge and from which its energizing influences will radiate. A world language will either be invented or chosen from among the existing languages and will be taught in the schools of all the federated nations as an auxiliary to their mother tongue. A world script, a world literature, a uniform and universal system of currency, of weights and measures, will simplify and facilitate intercourse and understanding among the nations and races of mankind. In such a world society, science and religion, the two most potent forces in human life, will be reconciled, will cooperate, and will harmoniously develop. The press will, under such a system, while giving full scope to the expression of the diversified views and convictions of mankind, cease to be mischievously manipulated by vested interests, whether private or public, and will be liberated from the influence of contending governments and peoples. The economic resources of the world will be organized, its sources of raw materials will be tapped and fully utilized, its markets will be coordinated and developed, and the distribution of its products will be equitably regulated. National rivalries, hatreds, and intrigues will cease, and racial animosity and prejudice will be replaced by racial amity, understanding and cooperation. The causes of religious strife



will be permanently removed, economic barriers and restrictions will be completely abolished, and the inordinate distinction between classes will be obliterated. Destitution on the one hand, and gross accumulation of ownership on the other, will disappear. The enormous energy dissipated and wasted on war, whether economic or political, will be consecrated to such ends as will extend the range of human inventions and technical development, to increase the productivity of mankind, to the extermination of disease, to the extension of scientific research, to the raising of the standard of physical health, to the sharpening and refinement of the human brain, to the exploitation of the unused and unsuspected resources of the planet, to the prolongation of human life, and to the furtherance of any other agency that can stimulate the intellectual, the moral, and spiritual life of the entire human race.

A world federal system, ruling the whole earth and exercising unchallengeable authority over its unimaginably vast resources, blending and embodying the ideals of both the East and the West, liberated from the curse of war and its miseries, and bent on the exploitation of all the available sources of energy on the surface of the planet, a system in which Force is made the servant of Justice, whose life is sustained by its universal recognition of one God and by its allegiance to one common Revelation - such is the goal towards which humanity, impelled by the unifying forces of life, is moving.

(Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 203-204)

### **The promise of world peace**

Beloved friends: The devoted efforts that you and your like-minded collaborators are making to build communities founded on spiritual principles, to apply those principles for the betterment of your societies, and to offer the insights arising—these are the surest ways you can hasten the fulfilment of the promise of world peace.

(Universal House of Justice, *To the Bahá'ís of the World*, 18 January 2019)

## **Global Governance and the Emergence of Global Institutions for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

### *Questions for discussion*

Is there community participation in local decision-making?

Are there local groups concerned about the United Nations and global governance?

How can concern about the war in Europe open doors for meaningful conversations?

Do you see opportunities for discourses related to peace?

Can a yearning for peace lead to constructive local action?

## **Saturday 30 July**

### **Enabling discourse in local communities**

#### **Reaching the wider community**

A clear sign that the society-building power of the Cause is being released in a cluster is that efforts are being made by a growing band of its inhabitants, inspired by the teachings of the Faith, to help improve the spiritual character and social conditions of the wider community to which they belong. The contribution made by Bahá'ís is distinguished by its focus on building capacity for service; it is an approach founded on faith in the ability of a population to become the protagonists of their own development.

(Universal House of Justice, 30 December 2021, § 16)

...within clusters, expansion and consolidation, social action, and contributing to prevalent discourses are dimensions of a single, unified, outward-looking endeavour carried out at the grassroots of society.

(Universal House of Justice, 30 December 2021, § 17)

### **Public discourse in the 9-year plan**

Closely connected with the capacity for engaging in social action is a capacity for contributing to the discourses of society. At heart, this is simply a capacity for participating in a conversation about a matter that affects people's lives and offering a perspective grounded in Bahá'í principles and Bahá'í experience. Viewed in this way, it is a skill which many Bahá'ís have the opportunity to practise almost daily, for instance in their studies or occupations, and which is cultivated through involvement in institute courses; in its more formal expression, it is central to the work of the Bahá'í International Community and national Offices of External Affairs.

(Universal House of Justice, 30 December 2021, §19)

However, in relation to the release of the society-building power of the Faith at the grassroots, it is a capacity that comes into greater demand as closer association with a population, brought about through the work of expansion and consolidation, leads to increased consciousness of an area's prevailing social problems, as well as of the aspirations of its people to overcome them. As the number of those participating in community-building activities rises, so does the need for the Bahá'í community to offer, as a unified body, its considered perspective on obstacles to social progress and on issues that weigh on the minds and spirits of those with whom it interacts....

(Universal House of Justice, 30 December 2021, §19)

Over time, efforts to contribute to societal discourses become more systematic, and Bahá'ís become adept at helping those around them to engage constructively in a discourse and find consensus. Opportunities are sought out to share the perspectives of the Faith with community leaders and figures in authority, and spaces are created in which representatives of various groups and interests can be assisted to reach a common point of view through consultation....

(Universal House of Justice, 30 December 2021, §19)

We wish to stress that, historically and now, social action and efforts to participate in the prevalent discourses of society have emerged not only in the context of growth, but also as a result of individual Bahá'ís striving to contribute to society's progress in ways available to them. As a personal response to Bahá'u'lláh's summons to work for the betterment of the world, believers have variously chosen to adopt certain vocations and have sought out opportunities to support the activities of like-minded groups and organizations.

(Universal House of Justice, 30 December 2021, §20)

Projects, both large and small, have been started in order to respond to a range of social issues. Numerous Bahá'í-inspired organizations have been established by groups of individuals to work for many different objectives, and specialist entities have been founded to give attention to a particular discourse.... We rejoice to see these diverse, harmonious expressions of faith by the devoted followers of the Blessed Beauty, in response to the tribulations of a perplexed and sorely agitated world.

(Universal House of Justice, 30 December 2021, §20)

As the contribution being made by the Faith to the progress of society in different parts of the world gains greater visibility, the Bahá'í community will increasingly be called upon to explicate the principles it advocates, and to demonstrate their applicability to the issues facing humanity. The more the intellectual life of a community blossoms and thrives, the greater its capacity to answer this call. It will be up to the followers of Bahá'u'lláh to provide, in the world of ideas, the intellectual rigour and clarity of thought to match their commitment to spiritual and material progress in the world of deeds.

(Universal House of Justice, 30 December 2021, §27)

### **Local public discourse**

Passivity is bred by the forces of society today. A desire to be entertained is nurtured from childhood, with increasing efficiency, cultivating generations willing to be led by whoever proves skilful at appealing to superficial emotions. Even in many educational systems students are treated as though they were receptacles designed to receive information. ...the Bahá'í world has succeeded in developing a culture which promotes a way of thinking, studying, and acting, in which all consider themselves as treading a common path of service....

(Universal House of Justice, Ridvan 2010, §10)

Learning as a mode of operation requires that all assume a posture of humility, a condition in which one becomes forgetful of self, placing complete trust in God, reliant on His all-sustaining power and confident in His unfailing assistance....

(Universal House of Justice, Ridvan 2010, §20)

Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation is vast. It calls for profound change not only at the level of the individual but also in the structure of society.... Only as effort is made to draw on insights from His Revelation, to tap into the accumulating knowledge of the human race, to apply His teachings intelligently to the life of humanity, and to consult on the questions that arise will the necessary learning occur and capacity be developed.

(Universal House of Justice, Ridvan 2010, §25)

...every human being and every group of individuals, irrespective of whether they are counted among His followers, can take inspiration from His teachings, benefiting from whatever gems of wisdom and knowledge will aid them in addressing the challenges they face. Indeed, the civilization that beckons humanity will not be attained through the efforts of the Bahá'í community alone. Numerous groups and organizations, animated by the spirit of world solidarity that is an indirect manifestation of... the principle of the oneness of humankind, will contribute to the civilization destined to emerge out of the welter and chaos of present-day society.

(Universal House of Justice, Ridvan 2010, §26)

At the level of the cluster, involvement in public discourse can range from an act as simple as introducing Bahá'í ideas into everyday conversation to more formal activities such as the preparation of articles and attendance at gatherings, dedicated to themes of social concern—climate change and the environment, governance and human rights, to mention a few. It entails, as well, meaningful interactions with civic groups and local organizations in villages and neighbourhoods.

(Universal House of Justice, Ridvan 2010, §30)

In this connection, we feel compelled to raise a warning: It will be important for all to recognize that the value of engaging in social action and public discourse is not to be judged by the ability to bring enrolments.... Sincerity in this respect is an imperative.... The watchword in all cases is humility. While conveying enthusiasm about their beliefs, the friends should guard against projecting an air of triumphalism, hardly appropriate among themselves, much less in other circumstances.

(Universal House of Justice, Ridvan 2010, §31)

### **Forces of disintegration and integration**

[We] see in the revolutionary changes taking place in every sphere of life the interaction of two fundamental processes. One is destructive in nature, while the other is integrative; both serve to carry humanity, each in its own way, along the path leading towards its full

maturity. The operation of the former is everywhere apparent—in the vicissitudes that have afflicted time-honoured institutions, in the impotence of leaders at all levels to mend the fractures appearing in the structure of society, in the dismantling of social norms that have long held in check unseemly passions, and in the despondency and indifference exhibited not only by individuals but also by entire societies that have lost any vital sense of purpose.

(Universal House of Justice, *To the Baha'is of Iran*, 2 March 2013 para. 4)

Though devastating in their effects, the forces of disintegration tend to sweep away barriers that block humanity's progress, opening space for the process of integration to draw diverse groups together and disclosing new opportunities for cooperation and collaboration.... [The] forces associated with the process of integration... will continue to gain in strength, no matter how bleak the immediate horizons. Human affairs will be utterly reorganized, and an era of universal peace inaugurated.

(Universal House of Justice, *To the Baha'is of Iran*, 2 March 2013 para. 4)

### **Starting in local communities**

The community, a building block of the global arena, can provide a space where alternative, inclusive, and cooperative ways of life can find expression, where men wholeheartedly come to see women as equal partners, and all are empowered to develop leadership abilities.... Through moral educational programs, attitudes of unity and fellowship are instilled from a young age so that participants come to view each other as valued allies working for the well-being of their communities. Central to this process is the concept of capacity-building — of enhancing the ability of participants to better understand the material, social, and spiritual realities of their societies and to devise next steps as they collectively chart their own path of progress, deriving fulfilment through service.

(Bahá'í International Community, *The Heart of Resilience: The Climate Crisis as a Catalyst for a Culture of Equality*, 2022)

Toward this end, spaces have organically emerged for individuals to reflect together on their challenges, identify constructive responses, and explore deeper questions related to the meaning of life. These spaces can serve as arenas where hope in times of difficulty finds expression, and bonds of solidarity can strengthen. The... capacities, attitudes, and qualities characterizing a community can reinforce its resilience in the face of extreme events or ongoing environmental burdens.

(Bahá'í International Community, *The Heart of Resilience: The Climate Crisis as a Catalyst for a Culture of Equality*, 2022)

### **Education**

...if [education and institutional capacity building] are 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 program 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 behaviors and to adjust these accordingly.

(Bahá'í International Community, *Rethinking Prosperity: Forging Alternatives to a Culture of Consumerism*, 2010)

Schools themselves must become participants in the social transformation processes. The curriculum cannot simply aim to impart relevant knowledge and skills; rather it should aim to develop the vast potential inherent in the human being. Individuals must be assisted to channel this potential towards the betterment of their communities and the advancement of

society as a whole. The level of consciousness and the deep spirit of service and collaboration required to transform individual behaviors and institutional forces in the direction of sustainability will require a transformation of educational processes commensurate with the task at hand.

(Bahá'í International Community, *Rethinking Prosperity: Forging Alternatives to a Culture of Consumerism*, 2010)

### **Voluntary simplicity**

Take from this world only to the measure of your needs, and forego that which exceedeth them. Observe equity in all your judgements, and transgress not the bounds of justice, nor be of them that stray from its path.

(Bahá'u'lláh, Súriy-i-Mulúk §19, in *The Summons of the Lord of Hosts*, p. 193. Haifa, Bahá'í World Centre, 2002)

### **Diversity**

In increasingly diverse communities, how do we go from prejudice and withdrawal to open integration and unity?

### **The role of youth**

The key to resolving these social ills rests in the hands of a youthful generation convinced of the nobility of human beings; eagerly seeking a deeper understanding of the true purpose of existence; able to distinguish between divine religion and mere superstition; clear in the view of science and religion as two independent yet complementary systems of knowledge that propel human progress; conscious of and drawn to the beauty and power of unity in diversity; secure in the knowledge that real glory is to be found in service to one's country and to the peoples of the world; and mindful that the acquisition of wealth is praiseworthy only insofar as it is attained through just means and expended for benevolent purposes, for the promotion of knowledge and toward the common good. Thus must our youth prepare themselves to shoulder the tremendous responsibilities that await them. And thus will they prove immune to the atmosphere of greed that surrounds them and press forward unwavering in the pursuit of their exalted goals.

(Universal House of Justice, *To Baha'is in the Cradle of the Faith*, 2 April 2010)

### **Meaningful work**

The provision of meaningful work represents an essential component of poverty alleviation efforts. The meaningful engagement of young people becomes even more important as urban populations swell and, with them, the increase of slums, rising crime rates, use of drugs, unemployment, breakdown of family structures and social isolation.... Lack of meaningful employment only feeds their hopelessness and frustration. Yet it is not only the quantity but also the quality and meaning of work that needs to be reconsidered. Whether tilling the soil or selling goods, one's work should not be reduced to a means for acquiring more goods or as an expendable cost of production. One's work is the means of developing one's craft, of refining one's character, and contributing to the welfare and progress of society.

(Bahá'í International Community, *Eradicating Poverty: Moving Forward As One*, 2008)

### **Facing community challenges**

- to help previously antagonistic groups find unity through pursuit of a common goal;
- to learn to put aside inherited customs and attitudes that belong to humanity's period of adolescence, and to overcome prejudices of all kinds;
- to guard against any tendency to view matters with cynicism or an eye for faults, and instead sustain an eager and constructive outlook;
- to put the equality of women and men into practice;

- to cast off inertia and apathy through the exercise of individual initiative;
- to put one's support of plans for collective action before feelings of personal preference;
- to harness the power of modern technologies without succumbing to their potentially enervating effects;
- to prize the sweetness of teaching the Faith and the joy of serving humankind above worldly interests;
- to reject the opiate of consumerism;
- to turn away from materialist ideologies and the worldviews they aggressively promote, and fix one's gaze upon the bright beacon that is the laws and principles of God.

(Universal House of Justice, 30 December 2021, §36)

### **Questions for the process of learning**

- how to bring people of different backgrounds together in an environment which, devoid of the constant threat of conflict and distinguished by its devotional character, encourages them to put aside the divisive ways of a partisan mindset, fosters higher degrees of unity of thought and action, and elicits wholehearted participation;
- how to administer the affairs of a community in which there is no ruling class with priestly functions that can lay claim to distinction or privilege;
- how to enable contingents of men and women to break free from the confines of passivity and the chains of oppression in order to engage in activities conducive to their spiritual, social and intellectual development;
- how to help youth navigate through a crucial stage of their lives and become empowered to direct their energies towards the advancement of civilization;
- how to create dynamics within the family unit that lead to material and spiritual prosperity without instilling in the rising generations feelings of estrangement towards an illusory "other" or nurturing any instinct to exploit those relegated to this category;
- how to make it possible for decision making to benefit from a diversity of perspectives through a consultative process which, understood as the collective investigation of reality, promotes detachment from personal views, gives due importance to valid empirical information, does not raise mere opinion to the status of fact or define truth as the compromise between opposing interest groups.

(Universal House of Justice, To the Baha'is of Iran, 2 March 2013, para. 10)

### **Ethical foundations of change**

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.... 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.

(Bahá'í International Community, *Rethinking Prosperity: Forging Alternatives to a Culture of Consumerism*, 2010)

...the pathway to sustainability will be one of empowerment, collaboration and continual processes of questioning, learning and action in all regions of the world.... As the sweeping tides of consumerism, unfettered consumption, extreme poverty and marginalization recede, they will reveal the human capacities for justice, reciprocity and happiness.

(Bahá'í International Community, 2010, *Rethinking Prosperity: Forging Alternatives to a Culture of Consumerism*.)

### **Establishing Divine Civilization**

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, in the words of the Guardian, “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.

(Universal House of Justice, 30 December 2021, §39)

### **A vision of the future**

A flourishing global civilization in harmony with the natural environment is a vision toward which growing numbers are laboring. The world that beckons is one of integration and balance, beauty, and maturity. It is a world with a redefined sense of progress, filled with communities and individuals working together with the support of institutions toward the realization of their highest aspirations. It is a world increasingly relieved of the destructive moral compromises — social, economic, and environmental — that have so often been asserted as necessary to progress.

(Bahá’í International Community, *One Planet, One Habitation*, §42-44)

Movement toward this vision has begun; its momentum is gathering. Lofty ambitions have been articulated and action is being called for on scales unseen. Yet the pace of transformation has not, so far, risen to the demands of the moment. The range of options available to make the adjustments necessary will only narrow if action is deferred to the future. Will humanity act on the truth that its own destiny and that of the planet are irrevocably intertwined? Or will still greater calamities be required to move it to action? The gulf between intention and action is one of the central challenges facing humanity today. This gap can be bridged; individuals, communities, and nations are contributing their share toward this goal every day.

(Bahá’í International Community, *One Planet, One Habitation*, §42-44)

Yet for action to rise to the scales required, far stronger consensus and collective will among the nations is needed around the values demanded by the current stage of humanity’s development. It also calls for much greater resolve in putting those values into practice, recommitting to that which is beneficial to the common good and discarding whatever stands in the way of answering the moral and practical call of the present hour. This is a high endeavor indeed, and its benefits a priceless legacy that must be left to the generations to come. Let us join together in rising to its demands.

(Bahá’í International Community, *One Planet, One Habitation*, §42-44)

### **Building communities on spiritual principles**

The efforts of the friends to build communities, to engage in social action, and to contribute to the prevalent discourses of society have cohered into one global enterprise, bound together by a common framework for action, focused on helping humanity to establish its affairs on a foundation of spiritual principles.

(Universal House of Justice, Ridvan 2022)

#### *Questions for discussion*

How do we create unity in diversity?

Do we see immediate opportunities for public discourse?

What are the qualities we need?

How do we stay detached from the consumer society?

What does the information revolution mean for community life and organization?

Are there groups or individuals in our community being left behind?  
How do we bring the spiritual dimension into our community activities?