

# Identity, Discourse, and Policy: Reconstructing the Public Sphere

MATTHEW WEINBERG

## *Abstract*

It is through interchange that individuals and the communities they compose are able to define their identities and their long-term goals. In this sense, human life has a “fundamentally dialogical character.” New models of social transformation will emerge only from a change in consciousness about who we are, how we regard others who enter our ambit—no matter how near or distant—and how we collectively design the structures and processes of social life, whether local or global. Giving full consideration to the multiple dimensions of human experience in public discourse can give rise to new social meanings and expand policy dialogues beyond narrow conceptual boundaries.

## *Résumé*

C'est par un processus d'interactions que les communautés et les humains qui les composent sont en mesure de se définir une identité et des objectifs à long terme. On peut donc dire, en ce sens, que la vie humaine a un « caractère fondamentalement dialogique ». De nouveaux modèles de transformation sociale n'émergeront qu'à la suite d'un changement de perception concernant, d'une part, qui nous sommes et comment nous percevons les autres qui—aussi près ou aussi loin de nous qu'ils soient—entrent dans notre sphère, et, d'autre part, comment nous établissons collectivement les structures et les processus de la vie en société, au niveau de la localité, voire de la planète. Si le discours public tenait pleinement compte des multiples dimensions de l'expérience humaine, il pourrait s'ensuivre de nouvelles significations sociales et un recadrage des dialogues de politique au-delà des limitations conceptuelles étroites qui prévalent actuellement.

## *Resumen*

Es a través del intercambio que los individuos y las comunidades que ellos componen pueden definir sus identidades y sus metas a largo plazo. En este sentido, la vida humana tiene un “carácter fundamentalmente dialógico”. Nuevos modelos

de transformación social surgirán solo de un cambio en la conciencia acerca de quiénes somos, cómo consideramos a otros quienes entran en nuestro ámbito—sin importar cuán cerca o distante—y cómo diseñamos colectivamente las estructuras y procesos de la vida social, sean local o globales. Dándole completa consideración a las múltiples dimensiones de la experiencia humana en el discurso público puede dar origen a nuevos significados sociales y expandir diálogos de política más allá de estrechos límites conceptuales.

To effect social change requires transforming “habits of thought,” for in so many ways our minds are involved in constructing the world we find ourselves in.<sup>1</sup> Our perceptions and the concepts we hold determine the social reality we see and create. The very patterns of our thought—our suppositions, frameworks of understanding, and the questions we are moved to ask or not ask—influence how we interact with and shape this reality. Thus, our conceptions of who we are as human beings, the interactions and discourses that inform our thinking, and our experiences in applying ideas and ideals, all serve to define the parameters of social existence. In this respect, Bahá'u'lláh provides clear direction as to where our thoughts, and the actions flowing from these thoughts, should be focused: “Do not busy yourselves in your own concerns; let your thoughts be fixed upon that which will rehabilitate the fortunes of mankind and sanctify the hearts and souls of men” (*Gleanings* 93). It is this challenging mandate of the Bahá'í teachings that is examined here, particularly how a spiritual understanding of human identity and purpose gives rise to social processes and policies essential for humanity's collective progress.

As we now look at human society, its characteristics of complexity, interconnectedness, and immediacy are unprecedented. As the sheer intensity and velocity of change challenges our assumptions about the nature and structure of social reality, a set of vital questions confront us. These include: What is the source of our identity? Where should our attachments and loyalties lie? If our identity or identities so impel us, how—and with whom—should we come together? What is the nature of the bonds that bring us together? And how does such self-understanding give rise to the formation of individual and societal goals?

The organization and direction of human affairs are inextricably connected to the future evolution of our identity. For it is from our identity that intention, action, and social development flow. Identity determines how we see ourselves and conceive our position in the world, how others see us or classify us, and how we choose to engage with those around us. “Knowing who we are,” the sociologist Philip Selznick observes, “helps us to appreciate the reach as well as the limits of our attachments” (“Civility and Piety” 46).<sup>2</sup> Such attachments play a central role in shaping our “authentic selves” and in determining our attitudes toward those within and outside the circle of our social relationships. Acting on the commitments implied by these attachments serves to amplify the powers of individuals in effecting societal well-being and advancement. Notions of personal and collective identity can thus exert considerable influence over the norms and practices of a rapidly integrating global community.

As we have many associational linkages, identity comes in a variety of forms. At times we identify ourselves by our family, ethnicity, nationality, religion, mother tongue, race, gender, class, culture, or profession. At other times our locale, the enterprises and institutions we work for, our loyalty to sports teams, affinity for certain types of music and cuisine, attachment to particular causes, and educational affiliations provide definitional aspects to who we are. The sources of identification which animate and ground human beings are immensely diverse. In short, there are multiple demands of loyalty placed upon us, and consequently, our identities, as Nobel laureate Amartya Sen has noted, are “inescapably plural” (*Identity and Violence* xiii).

But which identity or identities are most important? Can divergent identities be reconciled? And do these identities enhance or limit our understanding of and engagement with the world? Each of us on a daily basis, both consciously and unconsciously, draws upon, expresses, and mediates between our multiple senses of identity. And as our sphere of social interaction expands, we tend to subsume portions of how we define ourselves and seek to integrate into a wider domain of human experience. This often requires us to scrutinize and even resist particular interpretations of allegiance that may have a claim on us. We therefore tend to prioritize which

identities matter most to us. As the theorist Iris Marion Young stresses: "Individuals are agents: we constitute our own identities, and each person's identity is unique. . . . A person's identity is not some sum of her gender, racial, class and national affinities. She is only her identity, which she herself has made by the way that she deals with and acts in relation to others. . . ." (101–2). The matrix of our associations surely influences how we understand and interpret the world, but cannot fully account for how we think, act, or what values we hold. That a particular identity represents a wellspring of meaning to an individual need not diminish the significance of other attachments or eclipse our moral intuition or use of reason. Affirming affinity with a specific group as a component of one's personal identity should not limit how one views one's place in society or the possibilities of how one might live.

While it is undoubtedly simplistic to reduce human identity to specific contextual categories such as nationality or culture, such categories do provide a strong narrative contribution to an individual's sense of being. Social, cultural, and other narratives directly impact who we are. They provide context and structure for our lives, allowing us to link what we wish to become to a wider human inheritance, thereby providing a basis for meaningful collective life. Various narratives of identity serve as vehicles of unity, bringing coherence and direction to the disparate experiences of individuals.

But modernity has transformed identity in such a way that we must view ourselves as being not only in a condition of dependence or independence but also in a condition of interdependence. Our connections to others now transcend traditional bounds of culture, nation, and community. The unprecedented nature of these connections is radically reshaping human organization and the scale and impact of human exchange. Globalization, though, has been with us a long time; the movement of peoples, goods, and ideas is an inherent feature of human history and development. Virtually every culture is linked to others by a myriad ties.

Clearly, the perceptions that human beings hold of each other matter. In a world convulsed by contention and conflict, conceptions of identity that feed the forces of prejudice and mistrust must be closely examined.

Assertions that certain populations can be neatly partitioned into oppositional categories of affiliation deserve particular scrutiny.

“A tenable global ethics,” the philosopher Kwame Appiah observes, “has to temper a respect for difference with a respect for the freedom of actual human beings to make their own choices” (“Case for Contamination”). Existing mores, practices, and institutions can inform, validate, and even ennoble the human condition, but cannot or should not foreclose new moral or social directions for individuals and communities. Indeed, collective learning and adjustment are defining characteristics of social evolution. Because our perceptions and experiences change, our understanding of reality necessarily undergoes change. So too, then, do our identities change.

The prevalent stance that identity is solely about difference is untenable. Perceiving identity through the relativistic lens of separation or cultural preservation ignores compelling evidence of our common humanity and can only aggravate the forces of discord now so pervasive in the world. The only alternative to this path of fragmentation and disunity is to nurture affective relationships across lines of ethnicity, creed, territory, and color—relationships that can serve as the basis of a new social framework of universal solidarity and mutual respect. A one-dimensional understanding of human beings must be rejected.

As Amartya Sen underscores, “The hope of harmony in the contemporary world lies to a great extent in a clearer understanding of the pluralities of human identity, and in the appreciation that they cut across each other and work against a sharp separation along one single hardened line of impenetrable division” (*Identity and Violence* xiv). The resolution of the problems now engulfing the planet demands a more expansive sense of human identity. As articulated by Bahá’u’lláh more than a century ago: “The earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens” (*Gleanings* 250).

The crucial need of the present hour is to determine the conceptual and practical steps that will lay the foundations of an equitable and harmonious global order. Effectively addressing the crises now disrupting human affairs will require new models of social transformation that recognize the deep interrelationship between the material, ethical, and transcendent

dimensions of life. It is evident that such models can emerge only from a fundamental change in consciousness about who we are, how we regard others who enter our ambit—no matter how near or distant—and how we collectively design the structures and processes of social life, whether local or global.

From a Bahá'í perspective, a universal identity is a vital precursor to action that is universal in its effects—to the “emergence of a world community, the consciousness of world citizenship, the founding of a world civilization and culture” (Shoghi Effendi, *World Order* 163). In emphasizing our global identity, Bahá'u'lláh presents a conception of life that insists upon a redefinition of all human relationships—between individuals, between human society and the natural world, between the individual and the community, and between individual citizens and their governing institutions.

In the Bahá'í view, social origin, position, or rank are of no account in the sight of God. As Bahá'u'lláh avers, “man's glory lieth in his knowledge, his upright conduct, his praiseworthy character, his wisdom, and not in his nationality or rank” (*Tablets* 67).<sup>3</sup>

The “watchword” of the Bahá'í community is “unity in diversity” (Shoghi Effendi, *World Order* 41). More than creating a culture of tolerance, the notion of unity in diversity entails vanquishing corrosive divisions along lines of race, class, gender, nationality, and belief, and erecting a dynamic and cooperative social ethos that reflects the oneness of human nature. From this vantage point, our multiple senses of identity are not in tension with our common humanity, but are facets of that common humanity.

The ideology of difference so ubiquitous in contemporary discourse militates against the possibility of social progress. It provides no basis whereby communities defined by specific backgrounds, customs, or creeds can bridge their divergent perspectives and resolve social tensions. The value of variety and difference cannot be minimized, but neither can the necessity for coexistence, order, and mutual effort.

To foster a global identity, to affirm that we are members of one human family, is a deceptively simple but powerful idea. While traditional loyal-

ties and identities must be appreciated, they are inadequate for addressing the predicament of modernity, and consequently, a higher loyalty, one that speaks to the common destiny of all the earth's inhabitants, is necessary. Self-determination, whether at the personal or group level, must now be understood as participation in the construction of a broader collectivity. Participation of this kind by a diverse array of cultures and peoples offers the promise of enriching the entire fabric of civilized life.

An inherent aspect of such a universal identity is recognition of the spiritual reality that animates our inner selves. To be sure, a global identity grounded in awareness of our common humanness marks a great step forward from where humanity has been, but a strictly secular or material formulation of global identity is unlikely to provide a sufficient motivational basis for overcoming historic prejudices and engendering universal moral action. Establishing a global milieu of peace, prosperity, and justice is, in the final analysis, a matter of the heart; it involves a change in basic attitudes and values that can only come from recognizing the normative and spiritual nature of the challenges before us. This is especially so given that the vast majority of the world's peoples do not view themselves simply as material beings concerned with material needs and circumstances, but rather as beings endowed with spiritual sensibility and an innate dignity.

The recognition, then, of our common spiritual nature is what ultimately informs personal and shared social meaning, and therefore our social arrangements. It provides the basis for empathetic relationships and cooperation as well as principled action. For enkindled souls, spiritually inspired behavior flows not from externally imposed duties and rights but from the spontaneous love that each member of the community has for one another. From perceiving that we are all sheltered under the love of the same Divine Reality comes both humility and the means for true social cohesion.

Our different senses of identity consequently become fully realized through the development of our spiritual identity; they each provide a means for achieving our basic existential purpose—the discovery and refinement of the spiritual capacities latent within us. Through the concrete

expression of such capacities—compassion, trustworthiness, fairness, courage, forbearance, and willingness to sacrifice for the common weal—we define a path of spiritual growth. This is the path of transcendence—a way of being and doing in which individual identity is tied to something greater than the self.

Human beings are social beings. The self cannot evolve outside of human relationships. Indeed, the self develops principally through endeavors that are participatory in nature. Virtues such as generosity, loyalty, mercy, and civility cannot be manifested in isolation from others. The Bahá'í teachings affirm that the principal agent of moral choice is the autonomous person. But this autonomy is exercised within a broader social context, as well as an all-encompassing spiritual reality that informs the nature of that social context. The Bahá'í teachings thus offer a social conception of human identity in which the inner aspirations of the self are aligned with the goals of a just and creative global polity. In this way, the Bahá'í community is able to balance individual prerogative and development with the needs of the whole, thus reconciling “the right” with the “good.”<sup>4</sup>

Realizing a common understanding of human purpose and action, especially in a complex world of pluralistic identities and rapidly shifting cultural and moral boundaries, depends on the recognition and expression of a spiritual conception of life. For the emergence of progressive modes of living requires both an internal and external reordering—a reordering of human preferences, priorities, and modes of social organization. By redefining identity in terms of the totality of human experience, the Bahá'í teachings anticipate the moral reconstruction of all human practices. When an evolving global society draws upon the spiritual mainspring of human identity and purpose, truly constructive avenues of social change can be pursued. “Among the results of the manifestation of spiritual forces,” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá confirms, “will be that the human world will adapt itself to a new social form . . . and human equality will be universally established” (*Promulgation* 132).

It is still regrettably the case that the identity of certain individuals or groups results from a shared experience of oppression—from being the victims of systematic discrimination or injustice. In addressing this



dimension of human identity, Bahá'u'lláh speaks forcefully and repeatedly about the rights and dignity of all human beings, and the indispensability of creating mechanisms of social justice, but He also explains that spiritual oppression is the most serious of all: "What 'oppression' is more grievous than that a soul seeking the truth . . . should know not where to go for it and from whom to seek it?" (*Kitáb-i-Íqán* 31). From this standpoint, it is in the displacement of a transcendent understanding of life by an ascendant materialism that we find the source of the disaffection, anomie, and uncertainty that so pervades modern existence. All forms of oppression ultimately find their genesis in the denial of our essential spiritual identity. As Bahá'u'lláh earnestly counsels us: "Deny not My servant should he ask anything from thee, for his face is My face; be then abashed before Me" (Hidden Words, Arabic no. 30).

Clearly, our search for self-definition and recognition is intimately tied up with the struggle for social justice. Establishing patterns of reciprocal recognition, of genuine respect and concern for "the other," is an expression of our true identity as spiritual actors. Social integration and harmony is critically dependent on such mutual recognition. As the theorist Axel Honneth suggests, only to the degree to which we actively care about the development of the potentialities of others can our shared goals be realized. And this requires cultivation of what Honneth terms "communicative freedom," or what we might describe as participatory equality—the opportunity for all members of society to meaningfully interact and contribute to public discourse and thereby to the building of a definite vision of the common good.<sup>5</sup>

So in a very real sense, the formation and evolution of our identities occurs through dialogue and association with others. Human life, the philosopher Charles Taylor notes, has a "fundamentally dialogical character" (33). It is through interchange that individuals and the communities they compose are able to give tangible definition to their identities and their long-term goals. Human beings are "learning, creating, communicating" beings, and therefore participatory mechanisms that allow this essential "communicative" nature to be fully expressed must characterize all institutional practices and social arrangements.

Constructive dialogue, or what Bahá'u'lláh describes as “consultation,” is at the very heart of social order. He indicates that consultation is the “bestower of understanding” and that “In all things it is necessary to consult,” for “no welfare and no well-being can be attained except through consultation” (in *Consultation* 93). ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states: “The principle of consultation is one of the most fundamental elements of the divine edifice. Even in their ordinary affairs the individual members of society should consult.” (in *Consultation* 97). But He adds: “[T]rue consultation is spiritual conference in the attitude and atmosphere of love” (*Promulgation* 72).

If individuals and communities are to become the principal actors in promoting their physical, spiritual, and social well-being, they must develop the capacity to consult and act in a harmonious manner. Further, advancing toward conditions of greater justice must involve a process of collective reasoning that assesses the actual states of persons and communities, especially their ability to realize opportunities for choice and action.<sup>6</sup> Consultation, therefore—and this is critically important—can lead to the creation of new social meanings and innovative social forms that reflect what is reasonable and fair for communities to achieve. But any such process of collective deliberation and decision making, the Bahá'í writings insist, must be devoid of adversarial posturing and must be dispassionate and fully participatory in spirit. It is through discourse which is inclusive and unifying that the religious impulse finds expression in the modern age.

Obviously, there can never be an absolutely objective or static understanding of what constitutes concepts such as social equity, human security, power, “the common good,” democracy, or community. There is an evolutionary aspect to social development—a dynamic process of learning, dialogue, and praxis in which social challenges and solutions are constantly redefined and reassessed. There are always multiple understandings of particular social questions and these diverse perspectives each typically contain some measure of validity. By building a broader framework of analysis that encompasses not only material and technical variables but the normative and spiritual dimensions of various social issues, new insights can emerge that enrich dialogues previously locked into narrow

conceptual boundaries. A unifying sense of identity can obviously play an important role in facilitating and sustaining such a consultative path.

In many ways, the struggle to understand our identity is tied up with the question of meaning in modern life. Increasingly, calls are being made for rooting meaning and identity in community, but when the community is religiously, morally, and culturally pluralistic in character it is challenging for diverse voices to find common ground. It is here where the Bahá'í concepts of unity in diversity and nonadversarial dialogue and decision making can offer a potent alternative vision of social advancement. Engaging in a cooperative search for truth will no doubt lead to the discovery and implementation of shared perspectives and values. Such open moral dialogue within and among diverse communities can lead to a process of action, reflection, and refinement resulting in genuine social learning and progress.<sup>7</sup>

Meaning emerges from an independent search for truth and a chosen freedom grounded in social experience and social participation—a participation that leads to the enlargement of the self. Participation “creates new identities and new solidarities” (Selznick, *The Moral Commonwealth* 524). In Bahá'í communities around the globe, patterns of fellowship, knowledge building, and collaboration among diverse peoples are giving rise to a new human culture. Bahá'ís have found that encouraging new modalities of association, participation, and dialogue is key to promoting social development and effective local governance that is democratic in spirit and method. Hence, Bahá'u'lláh's statement that fellowship and sincere association “are conducive to the maintenance of order in the world and to the regeneration of nations” (*Tablets* 36).

Yet, as even a cursory review of contemporary affairs makes painfully clear, social discourse around the world is all too often characterized by disunity, contention, manipulation, and power seeking. How, then, can the arena of human interchange known as the “public sphere” be reconceived and reconstructed? The notion of the “public sphere” is a complex concept in philosophy and social theory. For our purposes here, it can be understood as the many social spaces of discourse and deliberation where the diverse voices of society identify mutual interests, reach common

judgments, and influence action in light of those judgments.<sup>8</sup> It can also be described as the “realm of social life in which public opinion” is “formed.”<sup>9</sup> In this sense, the public sphere is where society attempts to articulate ideas and goals related to the common good. The public sphere gives expression to the values and aspirations of individuals and families (the private sphere) and thereby affects the assumptions and policies of public institutions.

Not surprisingly, many thinkers have assailed the “patterns of social exclusion and inequality in dominant public spheres,” which have accentuated social divisions and led to the fragmentation of public dialogue.<sup>10</sup> Others contend that discourse in the public sphere is impoverished and indeed distorted by the avoidance and exclusion of religious and spiritual perspectives.<sup>11</sup> The constrained vocabulary and categories of secular discourse fail to adequately convey the full implications of our normative convictions, premises, and commitments (Smith 39). Drawing upon religious insights and imagination can admittedly complicate public dialogue, but it can also serve to vitalize and deepen public deliberation. Any plausible vision of social betterment must give reference to those universal spiritual postulates that animate and guide human initiative. To ignore the very self-understanding that individuals and communities have regarding their essential identity and purpose is untenable and nonempirical. It severely limits the horizons of human flourishing available to us. We need a critical theory of society but not one in which the interpretative schema is primarily materialistic in character.

Public discourse must seek to be “more open to alternative possibilities” of framing social challenges, and more morally engaged, even with the likely outcome of disagreement, because it is only in this way that social understanding can evolve (Smith 213). Truly productive or “conscientious” discursive engagement depends on fidelity to what actually grounds human belief and action (Smith 225). Ultimately, it is only through reconceiving identity—reflecting about our obligations to the multiple communities to which we are bound—that substantive and creative social directions will unfold. Reflection about our obligations to the many communities in which we are embedded, to our family, our inner selves and to God,

gives further definition to who we are and what our aims should be.<sup>12</sup> To not reconceive identity in this way would be to fail to draw on the very roots of human motivation that can ensure transformation of individual and collective behavior. This observation is underscored, for example, by recent work exploring how moral revolutions, such as the end of Atlantic slavery and the abandonment of Chinese footbinding, emerged as a result of changed public perceptions about notions of human dignity and honor.<sup>13</sup>

For Bahá'ís, it is through recognition of our shared identity as noble human agents that inequities and distortions in the public sphere will eventually be overcome. Understanding that all human beings possess a primary spiritual identity, and thus an underlying moral equality and worth, serves to overcome any perceived categories of difference or distinction and opens the way for meaningful forms of cooperative action. With belief in the fundamental oneness of human relationships, Bahá'ís work to transcend the tendency of fragmented discourses in which some groups seek ascendancy over others; instead, Bahá'ís strive to expand the consciousness and capacity of communities to address their complex needs and aspirations. In this approach, the idea of power in the public sphere is radically reconceptualized from being a means of achieving advantage or domination to being an instrument of conciliation, service, truth, and unity.

Bahá'ís seek to be agents of social transformation. The issue at stake is the type of transformation needed and how to bring it about. Both means and ends are important. The goal of a just and unified society cannot be attained through unjust and divisive means. Bahá'ís reject everything associated with the prevailing culture of adversarialism and base material motivation. But this does not imply that the Bahá'í community is disengaged from vital matters of the day.

The grassroots or core activities now being pursued by Bahá'ís in all parts of the world are inherently vehicles of personal and communal change that inevitably lead to meaningful social endeavor and participation in public discourse. In many places, they already have. Social action is the fruit of spiritual awakening and knowledge generation. Implicit in any type of social action is a process of understanding and defining issues,

roles, values, and relationships—a process that is a key aspect of the new culture taking root in the Bahá'í community. In particular, the framing of issues—whether internal or external—is grounded in spiritual perception and spiritual principle. In the Bahá'í experience, the empowerment of individuals and groups flows from spiritual awareness expressed in tangible forms of service. Bahá'ís are building patterns of social learning and fellowship in which meaning, understanding, and action are conjoined. This process of building community is occurring in a variety of ways and at different levels.

Participation in the prevalent discourses of society is an area in which individuals, groups, and institutions of the Faith work within their respective spheres of influence to effect positive change in prevailing patterns of thought, communication, and practice. In a letter to a National Spiritual Assembly, the Universal House of Justice explains that “[w]hat is important is for Bahá'ís to be present in the many social spaces in which thinking and policies evolve on any one of a number of issues—on governance, the environment, climate change, the equality of men and women, human rights, to mention a few—so that they can, as occasions permit, offer generously, unconditionally and with utmost humility the teachings of the Faith and their experience in applying them as a contribution to the betterment of society.”<sup>14</sup>

The Bahá'í community's contributions to public discourse are as much about the mode of its interactions with others as about the ideas it shares. While it is confident in bringing insights from Bahá'u'llah's teachings to the public sphere, and in sharing its modest experience in applying these teachings to the challenges of daily life, it also recognizes that what it directly learns from the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh is complemented by what it learns from the broader effects of the Revelation—from the advances in knowledge across all areas of human undertaking. And so Bahá'í participation in the discourses of society can be viewed as a process of mutual learning with partners, one that entails a posture of collaboration, sincerity, humility, openness, and flexibility. The goal is not to present answers or persuade others to accept a Bahá'í position, but to enrich the conceptual terrain associated with a given discourse. Previous experi-

ence has shown that the most effective Bahá'í contributions to major discourses have entailed reconciling various viewpoints, raising questions that stimulate new avenues of inquiry, and offering ways of creatively reframing issues.<sup>15</sup>

Every public discourse has a potential policy dimension. In a broad sense, public policy is about the nexus between individual interest and the public interest; it is about collective intention, purpose, and effort—about societies and communities developing strategies for realizing common ideals and goals, defining and addressing problems, managing key social relationships, and formulating structures and processes that channel individual capacity and harness collective resources.

Public policy is by its very nature a subject of considerable interest to Bahá'ís, but it is also a realm of activity where Bahá'í institutions and individual Bahá'ís have carefully modulated the extent of their involvement. And for good reason. Public policy of whatever form is often suffused with political calculation, factionalism, or partisan political ideology. This obviously is something that Bahá'ís avoid because of the clearly enunciated Bahá'í principle of nonparticipation in political matters, a principle that safeguards the integrity and unity of the Bahá'í community.<sup>16</sup>

The Universal House of Justice indicates, though, that “involvement in social discourse and action will at times require that Bahá'ís become associated with the development of public policy. In this regard, the term ‘policy,’ like the term ‘politics,’ has a broad meaning. While refraining from discussion of policies pertaining to political relations between nations or partisan political affairs within a country, Bahá'ís will no doubt contribute to the formulation and implementation of policies that address certain social concerns.”<sup>17</sup>

It can be said that Bahá'ís engage in discourse on public affairs at the level of principle. But depending on circumstance, this can be a delicate balancing act and consequently requires institutional guidance to sort out challenges associated with particular policy dialogues. Any social issue can be viewed through a partisan lens or perspective. Even basic terminology previously understood in neutral ways can suddenly take on specific partisan meanings, and likely would not be used by Bahá'ís in certain contexts.

It is important to recognize the evolutionary nature of the principle of noninvolvement in political affairs. There has been a gradual shift in the nature and intensity of the interactions between Bahá'í institutions—particularly National Spiritual Assemblies—and governments. The situation of the Bahá'ís in Iran has been a central catalyst in bringing about this shift. As the Bahá'í community expands and as its principles and methods for addressing the many ills of today's world receive wider attention, it will no doubt be called upon to help develop solutions to pressing social challenges. Its direct engagement with government decision makers, non-governmental organizations, and leaders of thought from the cluster to the international level will only intensify. The Universal House of Justice alludes to the evolving conditions facing the Bahá'í community: "With the passage of time, practices in the political realm will definitely undergo the profound changes anticipated in the Bahá'í writings. As a consequence, what we understand now of the policy of non-involvement in politics will also undergo a change. . . ."18

Policy is intimately bound up with politics and Bahá'ís should be comfortable with this reality. Broadly speaking, politics is concerned with the art of governance and the organization of human affairs. Policy analysis and policy making can be understood as the systematic expression of political will and exchange. Policy is all about ideas and how ideas are explored, debated, and actualized in political communities. As one policy scholar has observed, "What communities decide about when they make policy is meaning, not matter" (Stone 379). The development of shared meanings about social reality simultaneously provides the conceptual and volitional basis for collective action. The manner in which issues are defined and possible solutions assessed is socially and politically constructed. Policy making, then, can be understood as an ongoing process of dialogue in which categories of thought and action are assessed from diverse perspectives and in light of concrete experience. In this constant process of interchange, underlying disagreements about common ideals and goals are reformulated or resolved.

If public policy is defined as a process which involves the assessment, the evaluation, and ultimately the adjustment of conditions affecting the



general welfare of society, then there is no conflict with Bahá'í teachings. Bahá'u'lláh affirms: "The progress of the world, the development of nations, the tranquillity of peoples, and the peace of all who dwell on earth are among the principles and ordinances of God" (*Tablets* 129–30). That the "the object of every Revelation" is "to effect a transformation in the whole character of mankind, a transformation that shall manifest itself both outwardly and inwardly, that shall affect both its inner life and external conditions" (Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitab-i-Iqan* 240) speaks to a fundamental congruence between the policy enterprise and the activities of the Bahá'í community.

The central objective of any public policy is to bring about systemic transformation, and in many cases this means behavioral transformation—including changing the nature of relationships between various social actors, the way society treats its most vulnerable members, the way it uses natural or financial resources, the underlying assumptions it makes concerning the value of various avenues of human endeavor, or the manner in which it plans to meet the needs of future generations. So we have a basic convergence, as both the Bahá'í Revelation and public policy are concerned with social transformation. As Bahá'u'lláh says, "every matter related to state affairs which ye raise for discussion falls under the shadow of one of the words sent down from the heaven of His glorious and exalted utterance." (*Tablets* 151).

Clearly, a spirit of inquiry and knowledge generation must guide the Bahá'í community's efforts to contribute to policy discourse. Promoting a process of inquiry and learning among relevant policy actors can lead to more comprehensive understandings of social problems while simultaneously building bridges of cooperation among these actors. In limited ways, this has been the experience of the Bahá'í International Community and various National Assemblies in relation to certain discourses such as human rights, social development, and environmental preservation. Policy questions inevitably involve ambiguities or uncertainties which can only be addressed by expanding or altering existing viewpoints. Collaborative efforts to generate new knowledge can work to change dispositions and point to possible policy solutions (Linblom 6). Such an approach can also

serve to constructively inform public opinion, an expression of public education given great emphasis by 'Abdu'l-Bahá.<sup>19</sup>

In any given social or political context, it is necessary to understand the various frames of reference that inform and shape the different perspectives of key policy actors. At the most basic level, policy decision makers draw on particular views of human nature, appropriate social relationships, how problems are caused and should be solved, what problems fall into the private or public domains, what constitutes social betterment, or what types of social improvement are possible in light of human nature, and when cooperative or government action is required. Ideology, values, religious world views, social history, various social and physical indicators,<sup>20</sup> ostensible empirical information from other societies, scientific data, and the force of public opinion all contribute to the construction of interpretative lenses through which potential policy paths are formulated, decided, and evaluated. Bahá'ís consequently need to be systematic in mapping out how particular policy issues are understood and framed across the entire spectrum of policy stakeholders—civil society, industry, government, academia and the general public, whether at the local, national, or international levels. Once efforts are taken in this direction, it becomes possible to discern how Bahá'í principles and concepts can help clarify the essential issues underlying major policy questions and how to begin to identify practical measures in light of those principles.

The very language sometimes used in policy discourse can severely limit policy framing and programmatic action. As an illustration, consider the problem of “corruption.” In the main, the policy challenge of addressing corruption in public life has been reduced to procedural improvements and efforts at promoting public transparency concerning the use of funds for social projects, but an educational component, addressing the question of moral leadership or moral development, is rarely mentioned in corruption policy discourse. A Bahá'í approach to corruption would no doubt be very different. Bahá'ís might not even describe the issue or goal as anticorruption policy, but rather as fostering moral development as a precursor to moral governance. The emphasis would not solely be on procedural and regulatory approaches but on how to awaken

the moral consciousness of individuals and harness the voluntary and cooperative forces of communities.<sup>21</sup> That the concepts of “capacity building” and “participation” dominate international development discourse—but actually reflect very narrow and materialistic notions of individual and collective empowerment—is another example. Bahá’í International Community statements have attempted to address the issue of terminology in development discourse by offering a more expansive understanding of “poverty” as encompassing social, ethical, and spiritual resources as well as material resources, and even defining the overall objective of development policy as comprehensive “prosperity” rather than only “poverty alleviation.”<sup>22</sup>

The sometimes contentious nature of policy making often yields less than optimal solutions and precludes innovation. Bahá’u’llah’s exhortation to follow the path of moderation is particularly relevant. Solutions to problems should be truly balanced, equitable, and proportionate. Moderation, though, does not mean compromise. Achieving consensus is important but not by sacrificing or compromising basic principles in doing so. “Second-best” solutions are usually not adequate. Mutuality of purpose among policy stakeholders and an exceptional standard of fairness in meeting the needs of different elements of society must always be the goal.

Finally, a major contribution that Bahá’ís can make in the policy arena is to demonstrate how the complementary knowledge systems of science and religion can together raise the capacity of individuals and communities to advance well-being.<sup>23</sup> The set of capacities necessary for building up the social, cultural, economic, technical, and moral fabric of society depends upon the resources of both mind and spirit. By themselves, rational or scientific methodologies will not tell us which concepts or norms best advance a specific social objective or competence. For this reason, the knowledge we bring to bear in our discourses must be multidimensional, encompassing not only techniques, methodologies, concepts, theories, and models but also values, ideals, qualities, attributes, intuition, and spiritual perception. Drawing on both science and religion allows us to satisfy these diverse knowledge requirements, and to identify new

moral standards and avenues of learning in addressing emerging contexts of social dilemmas. It also helps us avoid reductionistic approaches and to see how various social problems are interrelated. This is not about religiosity of any particular kind, but understanding how rational and spiritual capacities substantively interact in fashioning our social world. It is about accessing sources of knowledge that provide insight into the primary motivational forces of human experience and how those forces can be mobilized to advance the processes of civilization. The Bahá'í premise that religion is a system of knowledge is certainly challenging, but moves public discussions about religion away from vague notions of spirituality, misplaced conceptions of salvation, or dogmatic doctrine, and instead brings focus to how the powers of the human spirit, in conjunction with the methods of science, can be channeled in original and productive ways. Conceiving religion in this manner can serve to underscore the validity of spiritual perspectives and aspirations in shaping the social order.<sup>24</sup>

Reconstructing the public sphere is no easy task. Achieving a unity that liberates, that is creative, that is characterized by its embrace and harmonization of diversity, is the work of generations. Ultimately, of course, it is the power of example, and specifically the development of concrete models of amity and equity, that will extend the bounds of intersubjective affirmation regarding the relevance of a spiritual conception of life. For those who doubt or reject that an objective spiritual dimension informs our social reality, Bahá'ís can only offer these words of exhortation from a Prisoner: "Should one fail to attain unto the recognition of Him Who is the Eternal Truth, let him at least conduct himself with reason and justice" (Bahá'u'lláh, *Summons* 168).

The Bahá'í concept of an inhering human diversity leading to higher forms of unity suggests that we can and must move beyond a liberal construction of pluralism that is unable to provide an overarching vision of human development. But rather than engaging in a quixotic quest to overcome the innumerable evils at work in society or right the "countless wrongs afflicting a desperate age," Bahá'ís are devoting their whole energy to building the world anew.<sup>25</sup> As we have seen, recognizing the essential spiritual character of our identity is a defining feature of this project.

Further, at this moment in our social evolution, the appropriate locus for action is the globe in its entirety, where all members of the human family are joined together in a common enterprise of promoting justice and social integration.

Bahá'u'lláh provides us with a potent new moral grammar that allows us to appreciate and nurture human diversity while expanding our horizons beyond the parochial to a solidarity encompassing the boundaries of the planet itself. He offers a vision of a comprehensive good that recognizes and values the particular while promoting an integrating framework of global learning and cooperation. His summons to unity articulates an entirely new ethics and way of life—one that flows from a spiritual understanding of human history, purpose, and development.

This spiritually based conception of social life goes beyond notions of mutual advantage and prudence associated with the idea of the social contract. While the principle of self-interested, rational exchange implied by the social contract indisputably represents an advance over coercion as a basis for social existence, there surely exists a step beyond rational exchange. Bahá'u'lláh instead offers a covenant of universal fellowship, a spiritually empowered ethic of deep and abiding commitment, as the basis for collective life. As a result of this covenant of oneness, in the deprivation and suffering of others we see ourselves. Such a frame of reference opens the door to critical reflection and true social renewal. In the words of 'Abdu'l-Bahá: "Let all be set free from the multiple identities that were born of passion and desire, and in the oneness of their love for God find a new way of life" (*Selections* 76).

#### NOTES

1. Universal House of Justice, 28 December 2010, To the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors.

2. Also see Selznick, *The Moral Commonwealth* 388–89.

3. It should be noted, however, that the Bahá'í teachings recognize the need for authority and rank for the purpose of ensuring functionality in the pursuit of community goals. In this regard, all decision-making authority in the Bahá'í

administrative system rests not with individuals but elected corporate bodies. A distinction is thus made between the moral and spiritual equality of all human beings and the differentiation that may exist in how individuals serve society.

4. In the vocabulary of moral philosophy, “the good” refers to a vision of happiness, human well-being, or a specific way of life. Thus, many conceptions of “the good” are possible. “The right” refers to types of principled or just action—binding duties, codes, and standards that regulate and guide how individuals pursue their particular notions of the good. Modern liberal thought, going back to Immanuel Kant, places emphasis on the right over the good. Communitarians have critiqued this view, arguing that it has led to the exaggerated individualism of Western society.

5. See Honneth 15, 18, 47, 68.

6. See Nussbaum 18 and 20, and Sen, *The Idea of Justice* 242–43.

7. The evolving international human rights discourse is one significant example of such cross-cultural moral exchange.

8. It is helpful to note that in the sense used here, “discourse” refers to the collective processes of social interchange and discussion relating to a particular subject area—for example, the international human rights discourse. More generally it can allude to a framework of concepts, shared understandings, and practices through which particular aspects of social reality are interpreted and constructed.

9. See Asen.

10. See Fraser and Honneth.

11. See West; and Sandel 268.

12. The recognition and exercise of such duties provide the very framework for actualizing human rights. A complementary relationship thus exists between duties and rights. That individuals have specific entitlements or needs informs us of particular duties that attach to other individuals or the broader society. Bahá'u'lláh speaks of both duties and rights in shaping social reality.

13. See Appiah, *The Honor Code*.

14. Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, 4 January 2009, to a National Spiritual Assembly.

15. Sometimes simply sharing Bahá'í principles of consultation has been a notable contribution to a policy dialogue. The Bahá'í community's moral leader-

ship—its commitment to integrity, fairness, the search for truth, serving the common interest, and to articulating a spiritual conception of social reality—also characterizes its participation in public discourse.

16. Shoghi Effendi emphasizes that the standard of rectitude expected of the followers of Bahá'u'lláh must include “non-acceptance of political posts, non-identification with political parties, non-participation in political controversies, and non-membership in political organizations. . . .” (*Advent of Divine Justice* 26).

17. Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, 23 December 2008, to an individual.

18. Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, 23 June 1987, to an individual.

19. “Public opinion must be directed toward whatever is worthy of this day, and this is impossible except through the use of adequate arguments and the adducing of clear, comprehensive and conclusive proofs” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Secret* 110).

20. Indicators often drive policy decision making. However, indicators can often be misleading if they are measuring variables of secondary importance. For example, education statistics compiled by UN agencies and national governments typically measure the percentage of students of a population enrolled in schools, teacher-to-student ratios or the number of new educational facilities built. Rarely, if ever, do educational indicators attempt to address the question of educational quality, for example, the content of educational curricula.

21. As the Bahá'í International Community underscores: “The adoption of administrative procedures and legal safeguards, however important such measures may be, will not bring about enduring changes in individual and institutional behavior. For governance, in essence, is a moral and spiritual practice whose compass is found within the human heart” (“Overcoming Corruption”).

22. See, for example, Bahá'í International Community, “A New Framework.”

23. The Universal House of Justice states that “faith in God and confidence in social progress are in every sense reconcilable; that science and religion are the two inseparable, reciprocal systems of knowledge impelling the advancement of civilization.” (Letter to the Bahá'ís in Iran, 26 November 2003).

24. And this, in fact, has been the experience with the discourse on science, religion, and development that has been promoted by the Institute for Studies in

Global Prosperity over the past several years. See [www.globalprosperity.org/lines-of-action/science-religion-and-development](http://www.globalprosperity.org/lines-of-action/science-religion-and-development).

25. Universal House of Justice, 24 May 2001.

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