



Social Action and Public Discourse

Bahá'u'lláh counselled His followers: *"Be anxiously concerned with the needs of the age ye live in, and centre your deliberations on its exigencies and requirements."*

As such, Bahá'ís throughout the world—both individually and collectively—strive to become involved in the life of society, working shoulder to shoulder with diverse groups to contribute to the advancement of material and spiritual civilization.

Social action describes a spectrum of activities, often undertaken at the grassroots, the purpose of which is to contribute to the material and social wellbeing of the wider community.

Closely related are the efforts of Bahá'ís to contribute to the public welfare at the level of thought through participation in the discourses of society. Among individual members of the Bahá'í community this typically entails sharing ideas inspired by the Bahá'í teachings in a variety of social spaces. National Spiritual Assemblies coordinate Bahá'í efforts to contribute to discussions focussed on various aspects of social progress, while on the international stage, the Bahá'í International Community is present in a range of global networks concerned with issues such as the equality of men and women and sustainable development.

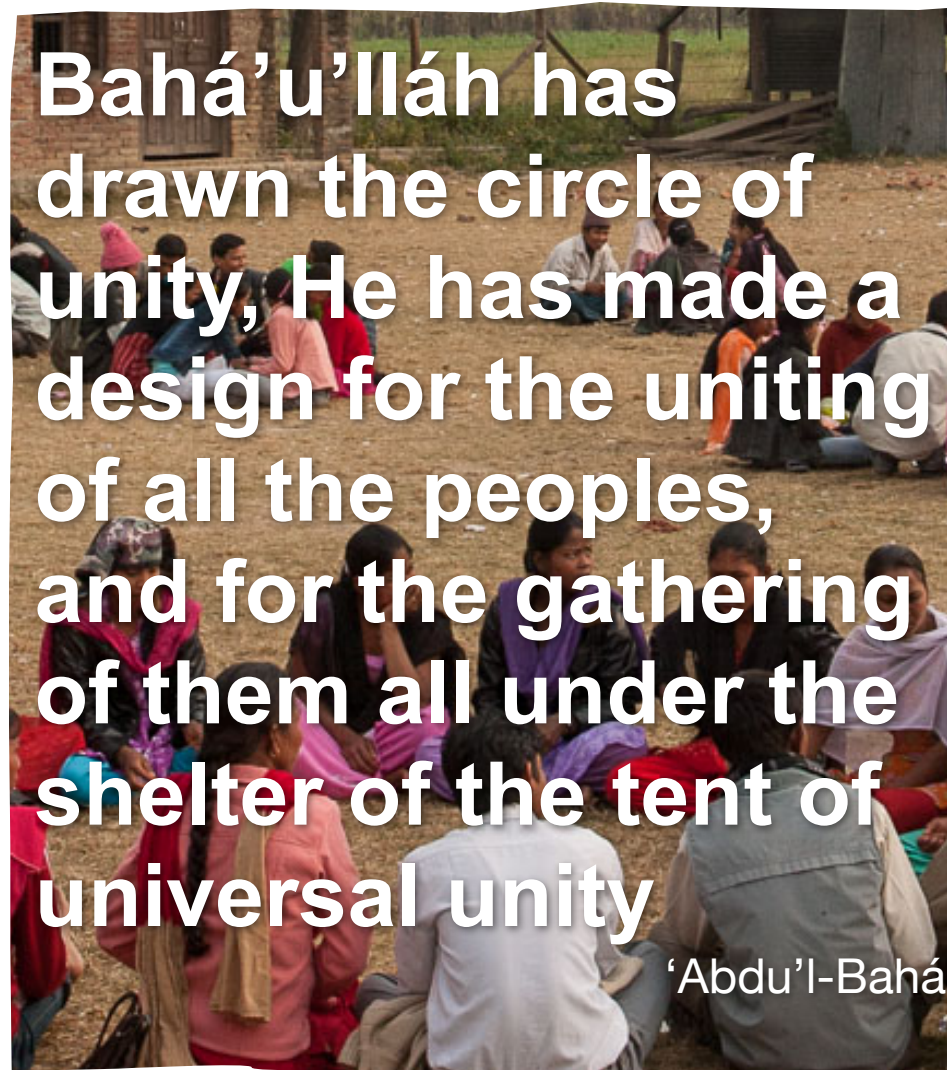
At whatever level it occurs, the purpose of Bahá'í participation in discourses is not to persuade others to accept a Bahá'í position on this or that subject. Nor is effort in this area of endeavor pursued as a public relations activity or an academic exercise. Rather, Bahá'ís strive to adopt a posture of learning and engage in genuine conversation. As such, they do not set out to offer any specific solutions to the problems that face humanity such as climate change, women's health, food production and poverty alleviation. Yet Bahá'ís in a range of settings around the world are eager to share what they are learning in their efforts to apply Bahá'u'lláh's teachings towards the advancement of civilization and to learn with and from other like-minded individuals and groups.

"It is with such thoughts in mind that Bahá'ís enter into collaboration, as their resources permit, with an increasing number of movements, organizations, groups and individuals, establishing partnerships that strive to transform society and further the cause of unity, promote human welfare, and contribute to world solidarity."

The Universal House of Justice

A fundamental principle of the Bahá'í Faith

Advancement of Civilization



Bahá'u'lláh has drawn the circle of unity, He has made a design for the uniting of all the peoples, and for the gathering of them all under the shelter of the tent of universal unity

‘Abdu’l-Bahá

Since the inception of the Bahá'í Faith in the Nineteenth Century, a growing number of people have found in the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh a compelling vision of a better world. Many have drawn insights from these teachings—for example, on the oneness of humanity, on the equality of women and men, on the elimination of prejudice, on the harmony of science and religion—and have sought to apply Bahá'í principles to their lives and work. Others have gone further and have decided to join the Bahá'í community and participate in its efforts to contribute directly to the realization of Bahá'u'lláh's stupendous vision for humanity's coming of age.



Responding to the Call

A pivotal concept in the Bahá'í teachings is that the refinement of one's inner character and service to humanity are inseparable facets of life. Shoghi Effendi, in a letter written on his behalf, states:

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.

In light of this, Bahá'ís have come to appreciate the operation of a two-fold purpose that is fundamental to their lives: to attend to their own spiritual and intellectual growth and to contribute to the transformation of society.

This two-fold purpose helps to shape the endeavours of Bahá'ís in all areas. Thus, for example, they are not only expected to pray and reflect daily in their personal lives, but also to make efforts to infuse their surroundings with a devotional spirit; they are asked, not only to deepen their own knowledge of the Faith, but also to share with others Bahá'u'lláh's teachings; they are not only admonished to learn to resist the dictates of the ego in their own lives, and also to strive, with courage and humility, to reverse the tendencies of a culture that glorifies self-gratification and erodes the foundations of solidarity.

The dynamics of walking a spiritual path is a theme that Bahá'ís, both individually and collectively, are constantly exploring in their activities and consultations. Certain aspects are clear: that simply focusing on oneself proves counter-productive; that the path is to be walked in the company of others—each giving and receiving love, assistance and encouragement; that the tendency to allow self-righteousness to take hold needs to be conscientiously resisted; and that humility is a requisite of progress.

No soul walking this spiritual path may make a claim to perfection. Yet, the kind of relativism that condemns adherence to clearly stated ideals and principles finds no place. Each Bahá'í is asked to make daily effort to progressively reflect in his or her conduct the standards described by Bahá'u'lláh, no matter how difficult to attain they may seem.



A Pattern of Community Life

Building the global civilization envisaged by Bahá'u'lláh cannot be accomplished through the scattered efforts of individuals, no matter how devoted and well-meaning they may be. A community, unified in thought and action, has to come into being, grow, and move from strength to strength.

Each Bahá'í sees him or herself at once as a member of a local, national, and global community of adherents. Every effort is made to ensure that, at each of these levels, communities remain vibrant and open to all people; great care is taken to avoid the pitfalls of exclusivity. 'Abdu'l-Bahá counsels us: *"See ye no strangers; rather see all men as friends, for love and unity come hard when ye fix your gaze on otherness. ... For each of the creatures is a sign of God, and it was by the grace of the Lord and His power that each did step into the world; therefore they are not strangers, but in the family; not aliens, but friends, and to be treated as such."*

The Bahá'í community came into existence gradually—from the handful who first heard the message of The Báb, to the enthusiastic band of followers of Bahá'u'lláh in cities and villages throughout nineteenth century Persia, to a global community of millions today, with members in more than 100,000 localities in virtually every country and territory around the world.

This worldwide community is characterized by a pattern of community life that aims to put into practice the teachings of the Faith to advance society. Prayer is integral to Bahá'í life, and Bahá'ís turn their hearts in prayer to God repeatedly throughout the day—imploping His assistance, supplicating Him on behalf of loved ones, offering praise and gratitude, and seeking divine confirmations and guidance. Bahá'ís also gather with others in devotional gatherings to pray together. The Bahá'í community at every level is highly sensitised to the need to respond to the spiritual aspirations of the young, and older youth are typically anxious to take responsibility for the development of those around them younger than themselves. Educational activities for children, then, are often among the first to multiply in a community. Alongside these children's classes, groups for youth between the ages of 11 to 14 that aim to foster their capacities for service and spiritual development in an entirely non-religious context, act as catalysts to other community building activities.