

ENGAGING IN THE DISCOURSES OF SOCIETY

Study materials prepared for the Association for Bahá'í Studies 2016 annual conference

And every branch of learning, conjoined with the love of God, is approved and worthy of praise; but bereft of His love, learning is barren -- indeed, it bringeth on madness. Every kind of knowledge, every science, is as a tree: if the fruit of it be the love of God, then is it a blessed tree, but if not, that tree is but dried-up wood, and shall only feed the fire.¹

~‘Abdu’l-Bahá

The Cause needs more Bahá'í scholars, people who not only are devoted to it and believe in it and are anxious to tell others about it, but also who have a deep grasp of the Teachings and their significance, and who can correlate its beliefs with the current thoughts and problems of the people of the world.²

~ Shoghi Effendi

A selection of paragraphs from the Universal House of Justice [45 min.]

one of three arenas of endeavor

At this stage in your development, the House of Justice encourages you to begin to examine the work of your community in terms of three broad areas of action, which, though distinct from one another, each with its own methods and instruments, must achieve a high degree of coherence between them, if they are to reinforce one another and lend substantial impetus to the movement of the Australian people towards the spiritually and materially prosperous civilization envisioned in the writings of the Faith. What will ensure this coherence is the process of systematic learning that characterizes them all.

The expansion and consolidation of the Bahá'í community itself can be regarded as one area of action, the approach, methods and instruments of which are now well understood. Social action can be considered another. . . .

Efforts to participate in the discourses of society constitute a third area of action in which the friends are engaged. Such participation can occur at all levels of society, from the local to the international, through various types of interactions—from informal discussions on Internet forums and attendance at seminars, to the dissemination of statements and contact with government officials. What 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. . . .³
(January 4, 2009)

- ❖ *What does it mean to say that these three arenas of action “must achieve a high degree of coherence between them”? How is such coherence achieved?*

discourse in many spaces, at all levels

Over the decades, the Bahá'í community has gained much experience in these two areas of endeavour. There are, of course, a great many Bahá'ís who are engaged as individuals in social action and public discourse through their occupations. A number of non-governmental organizations, inspired by the teachings of the Faith and operating at the regional and national levels, are working in the field of social and economic development for the betterment of their people. Agencies of National Spiritual Assemblies are contributing through various avenues to the promotion of ideas conducive to public welfare. At the international level, agencies such as the United Nations Office of the Bahá'í International Community are performing a similar function. To the extent necessary and desirable, the friends working at the grassroots of the community will draw on this experience and capacity as they strive to address the concerns of the society around them.

Effective social action serves to enrich participation in the discourses of society, just as the insights gained from engaging in certain discourses can help to clarify the concepts that shape social action. 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.⁴ (Ridván 2010)

Learning about the participation of Bahá'ís in the discourses of society will advance as more and more believers throughout the world contribute to this area of activity over the coming years. This will occur at a number of levels. A growing number of individual believers will bring insights based on the writings to conversations in a variety of social spaces in which they find themselves—some will be related to life in their localities while others will be connected to their professions. Bahá'í-inspired agencies will naturally contribute to discourses associated with aspects of social and economic development relevant to their work. Further, as programs of growth advance and the friends are drawn into the life of society around them, their efforts to overcome challenges facing their communities through the application of spiritual principles will invariably entail participation in discourses at the grassroots. That Bahá'í involvement in the discourses of society will grow organically at all levels, in line with the increasing capacity of the believers, is evident. Equally clear is the centrality of the role of the training institute to this process.⁵ (February 22, 2011)

- ❖ *Share a few specific examples of Bahá'í engagement in discourse in various spaces and levels*

contributing to civilization-building

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. “Is not the object of every Revelation”, He Himself proclaims, “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?” The work advancing in every corner of the globe today represents the latest stage of the ongoing Bahá'í endeavour to create the nucleus of the glorious civilization enshrined in His

teachings, the building of which is an enterprise of infinite complexity and scale, one that will demand centuries of exertion by humanity to bring to fruition. There are no shortcuts, no formulas. 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.

Yet 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 Bahá'u'lláh's conception 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. It should be clear to everyone that the capacity created in the Bahá'í community over successive global Plans renders it increasingly able to lend assistance in the manifold and diverse dimensions of civilization building, opening to it new frontiers of learning.⁶ (Ridván 2010)

❖ *What is needed to make progress toward building the civilization envisioned in the Revelation?*

seeing through the framework

They are called upon to become increasingly involved in the life of society, benefiting from its educational programmes, excelling in its trades and professions, learning to employ well its tools, and applying themselves to the advancement of its arts and sciences. At the same time, they are never to lose sight of the aim of the Faith to effect a transformation of society, remoulding its institutions and processes, on a scale never before witnessed. To this end, they must remain acutely aware of the inadequacies of current modes of thinking and doing—this, without feeling the least degree of superiority, without assuming an air of secrecy or aloofness, and without adopting an unnecessarily critical stance towards society.⁷ (December 28, 2010)

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. Though endeavours in these two areas of activity may well effect an increase in the size of the Bahá'í community, they are not undertaken for this purpose. Sincerity in this respect is an imperative. Moreover, care should be exercised to avoid overstating the Bahá'í experience or drawing undue attention to fledgling efforts, such as the junior youth spiritual empowerment programme, which are best left to mature at their own pace. 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.⁸ (Ridván 2010)

The purpose of participation in the discourses of society is not to persuade others to accept a Bahá'í position or to engage in direct teaching. Nor should it be understood as a public relations activity or academic exercise. Rather, those involved adopt a posture of learning and engage in genuine conversations in which they can offer insights drawn from the writings and from their experience in applying them, as a contribution to the advancement of a given discourse.⁹ (February 22, 2011)

- ❖ *What qualities, attitudes and approaches should characterize a Bahá'í who seeks to engage in discourse in order to contribute to the betterment of society?*

Guidance from the Universal House of Justice on the role of the Association for Bahá'í Studies [60 min.]

The Universal House of Justice has recently completed a series of consultations on the intellectual life of the Bahá'í community and its greater involvement in the life of society. . . .

...
The House of Justice has observed that Bahá'ís will increasingly become involved in the discourses of society within clusters where the process of growth rises in intensity and at the national level, on topics selected by the National Assembly. At the same time, it noted that there are “a great many Bahá'ís who are engaged as individuals in social action and public discourse through their occupations”. Every believer has the opportunity to examine the forces operating in society and introduce relevant aspects of the teachings within the discourses prevalent in whatever social space he or she is present. It is, perhaps, as a means to enhance the abilities of the friends to explore such opportunities in relation to their scholarly interests that the endeavours of the Association for Bahá'í Studies can be conceived. Through the specialized settings it creates, the Association can promote learning among a wide range of believers across a wide range of disciplines.

- ❖ *What is a role of ABS in relation to discourse identified by the House of Justice?*

Central to the effort to advance the work of expansion and consolidation, social action, and the involvement in the discourses of society is the notion of an evolving conceptual framework, a matrix that organizes thought and gives shape to activities and which becomes more elaborate as experience accumulates. It would be fruitful if the elements of this framework most relevant to the work of the Associations for Bahá'í Studies can be consciously and progressively clarified. In this respect, it may be useful to give consideration to insights that have contributed to the community's progress: the relationship between study and action, the need for focus, which is not to be confused with uniformity, the challenge of fostering the capacity of individuals and accompanying others in service, the dynamics of organic development, the institutional arrangements necessary to sustain ever more complex patterns of activity, the coherence required among all areas of endeavour, and sound relations among individuals, the community, and the institutions. Perhaps the most important of these is learning in action; the friends participate in an ongoing process of action, reflection, study, and consultation in order to address obstacles and share successes, re-examine and revise strategies and methods, and systematize and improve efforts over time.

- ❖ *How do insights from the expansion and consolidation work relate to discourse? What could “learning in action” look like in the context of academic and professional discourse?*

One of the critical aspects of a conceptual framework that will require careful attention in the years ahead is the generation and application of knowledge, a topic that those gathered at the conference of the Association for Bahá'í Studies will explore in August. At the heart of most disciplines of human knowledge is a degree of consensus about methodology—an understanding of methods and how to use them appropriately to systematically investigate reality to achieve

reliable results and sound conclusions. Bahá'ís who are involved in various disciplines—economics, education, history, social science, philosophy, and many others—are obviously conversant and fully engaged with the methods employed in their fields. It is they who have the responsibility to earnestly strive to reflect on the implications that the truths found in the Revelation may hold for their work. The principle of the harmony of science and religion, faithfully upheld, will ensure that religious belief does not succumb to superstition and that scientific findings are not appropriated by materialism. The friends who seek to excel in scholarly activity will, of course, strive to live up to the high expectations set forth by Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Whatever the extent of their achievements, they are an integral part of the community; they are not exempt from obligations placed upon any believer and, at the same time, deserve the community's understanding, forbearance, support, and respect.

❖ *What is a responsibility of Bahá'ís who are involved in various disciplines?*

As unity of thought around essential concepts emerges, the Association may find it useful to explore fresh approaches with some simple steps that can grow in complexity. Gradually, those aspects of the conceptual framework pertaining to intellectual inquiry in diverse fields will become clearer and grow richer. For example, a number of small seminars could be held to assist individuals from certain professions or academic disciplines to examine some aspect of the discourse of their field. Specific topics could be selected, and a group of participants with experience could share articles, prepare papers, and consult on contemporary perspectives and related Bahá'í concepts. Special interest groups, such as philosophy or religious studies, could have gatherings to intensify their efforts. Periodic communications or follow up meetings could be arranged to increase the effectiveness of the participation of these groups of individuals in aspects of the discourse in their chosen fields. Focus could also be directed toward those areas in the academic literature pertaining to the Faith that are ignored or dealt with in a misleading or problematic manner. In addition, existing activities, such as the hosting of a large conference, may be reimagined. Of course, continued exertions must be directed toward preparing and disseminating articles, periodicals, and books.

❖ *Describe what some simple steps along this path could look like among your colleagues.*

One additional point will be central to these reflections. The training institute is pivotal in the development of the capacity of veteran and new believers for active involvement in the work of expansion and consolidation. Beyond this, the institute provides the structure for an educational process with three distinct stages that will increasingly serve cohorts of individuals from age six into adulthood. In the experience offered by the institute, participants are not merely presented with information, but through study of the courses and involvement in the community-building activities in which their lessons find practical expression, they acquire knowledge, skills, and spiritual insights that enable them to effectively foster personal and social change. Yet, whatever the scope of its curriculum and no matter how fundamental it is to the progress of the community, involvement in the institute is only a part of a lifetime of inquiry in which these friends will be engaged—one that will include exploration of the Revelation as well as various disciplines of knowledge. The upcoming youth conferences, which will draw tens of thousands of young people, are representative of swelling numbers who, shaped by the institute process at the dawning of their maturity, will set their footsteps firmly in the path of learning and action that will extend throughout their academic studies and beyond. The House of Justice looks to rising generations of

Bahá'ís to wholeheartedly address a wide range of intellectual challenges, overcome all pitfalls and obstacles, and render service for the betterment of the world. In the decades ahead, then, a host of believers will enter diverse social spaces and fields of human endeavour. To this arena, pregnant with possibilities, the Association for Bahá'í Studies can offer an important contribution.¹⁰ (July 24, 2013)

- ❖ *How is participation in the institute process related to building capacity to engage in academic and professional discourse?*

Among these [notable developments in the work of ABS] are the initiatives to create mechanisms for individuals from similar disciplines to interact at the annual conference and to encourage them to attempt to explore thought in their field or profession in light of the Teachings. The House of Justice feels that this aspect holds greater promise than has thus far been realized and, accordingly, should be the focus of further exploration. One of the aims would be to foster a wider participation and to encourage and inspire many to attempt to correlate ideas within their fields with Bahá'í thought. Such participation would necessarily represent a range, from those who are already seriously engaged, to those for whom such endeavours will be relatively new. Opportunities can also be contemplated beyond the annual conference for interested individuals to meet, to reflect together, to explore related themes, and for some to present their conclusions more formally, whether arrived at through individual or collaborative effort. In this context, the guidance contained in the 24 July letter regarding special interest groups holds particular significance.¹¹ (September 7, 2015)

- ❖ *What are the aims of creating mechanisms for individuals from similar disciplines to interact?*

Closing discussion: [15 min]

Share brief examples of participating in a discourse related to your discipline or profession. In what spaces? How did you apply a Bahá'í framework to your efforts? What did you learn from that experience?

¹ *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, section 154.

² From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, dated October 21, 1943 (reprinted in the compilation *Scholarship*, para. 13).

³ From a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Australia, dated January 4, 2009, regarding the Yerrinbool Bahá'í Centre of Learning.

⁴ Ridván 2010 message from the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the world.

⁵ From a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States, dated February 22, 2011.

⁶ Ridván 2010 message from the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the world.

⁷ From the Universal House of Justice to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors, December 28, 2010.

⁸ Ridván 2010 message from the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the world.

⁹ From a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States, dated February 22, 2011.

¹⁰ From a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Canada, dated July 24, 2013, regarding the Association for Bahá'í Studies.

¹¹ From a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Canada, dated September 7, 2015, regarding the Association for Bahá'í Studies.