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## BAHÁ'Í

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Religion and ecology may seem to be two distinct domains of human experience: one with many centuries of diverse traditions and practice; the other an emerging scientific perspective on complex environmental systems and humanity's often problematic relationship with the natural world. For Bahá'ís, they are in fact complementary and closely interrelated, and have converged in recent years. The science of ecology offers a systems perspective on the relations between human society and the planetary ecosystem, including interrelated economic, social, and environmental dimensions. The concern today is sustainable development—that is, how to make the transition from a consumer society plundering the earth's resources, and political and economic institutions driven by self-interest, to a just and sustainable world civilization respecting planetary boundaries and restoring the natural productivity of the Earth and its ecosystems.

Unlike many religious traditions with centuries of practice behind them, the Bahá'í Faith, dating only from the middle of the nineteenth century, has both scriptural texts that are more explicit on environmental questions, and a body of teachings and authoritative guidance that evolves to respond to current situations. Bahá'u'lláh (1817–1892), the prophet-founder of the Bahá'í Faith, designated an authorized interpreter after his passing, 'Abdu'l-Bahá (1844–1921), and provided for an elected international council, the Universal House of Justice, to legislate on matters not specified in scripture. There is thus a continuing flow of new guidance on many matters, including the environment and sustainability, most recently in messages from the Universal House of Justice and the statements of the Bahá'í International Community (BIC) at the United Nations. Our understanding of that guidance is limited and constantly evolving, often related to the many social and cultural backgrounds of the diverse Bahá'í communities around the world, so our “interpretive debate” is in challenging our inherited assumptions and being open to new meanings. As a learning community, we are still often trapped in old ways of thinking and old frames of reference, and struggle to understand the full implications of the spiritual principles we have received. This is a time of rapid change, both in the world and in our own communities.

Since environmental problems are the result of human behavior, the response needs to be as much based on spiritual and ethical principles as scientific knowledge. This discussion of Bahá'í and ecology is placed in this larger framework.

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### Cross-disciplinary perspectives

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)*

One fundamental element of Bahá'í belief is that science and religion are two complementary knowledge systems. This inevitably leads Bahá'ís to be active in current debates about the role of religion in modern society, including in providing the ethical foundations and spiritual motivation to address many contemporary environmental challenges. Science provides the knowledge of planetary ecology and the threats represented by climate change, biodiversity loss, degradation of natural resources, and widespread pollution, as well as the necessary solutions at a technical level. However, these are only symptoms of the dysfunctions in human society, including a widespread loss of spiritual purpose and its replacement by a short-term vision and materialistic orientation. The Bahá'í teachings explicitly address the need to provide spiritual foundations for an emerging world civilization, with moderation in material civilization and an emphasis on individual lives of service (see Karlberg 2014).

One of the strengths of spiritual principles is that they provide a framework and points of reference for human behavior and social organization at a fundamental level, and thus address many problems of human society simultaneously, including those of ecology and environmental management. Principles like justice, equity and the oneness of humankind lead naturally to cross-disciplinary perspectives.

For example, climate change is an important symptom of the ecological imbalances created by an economy founded on the temporary cheap energy subsidy provided by fossil fuels, containing ancient solar energy stored in earlier geological epochs but now being exhausted in a matter of decades while threatening the well-being of future generations. From a Bahá'í perspective, we should be developing all available sources of energy on the surface of the planet to meet our energy needs on a sustainable basis. It is unjust that a wealthy minority should privilege itself while imposing the risks and costs of climate change on the poor and on future generations (BIC 2008). The Bahá'í teachings call for the elimination of extremes of wealth and poverty, and this has been an important theme for recent Bahá'í International Community (BIC) interventions at the United Nations (BIC 2010, 2011, 2012).

Recent scientific opinion is that global warming of 4°C—likely in this century if a rapid transition is not made to renewable energy sources—could wipe out half of all the species on the planet and reverse millions of years of evolution. Any future civilization would need to be founded on the renewable resources of agriculture, forestry, and fisheries. The Bahá'í writings call for a federated world government able to manage the natural resources of the planet and to distribute the benefits equitably. They give high priority to agriculture and farmers, with arrangements to support the income of farmers in bad years. Sea level rise, droughts, and other natural disasters resulting from climate change risk the permanent displacement of hundreds of millions of people. Not only will their human rights be violated, but the situation will precipitate migration crises around the world. Since most human rights violations today are against immigrants, this requires proactive educational efforts in the receiving communities, and a new international legal framework for environmentally displaced persons. The Bahá'í-inspired International Environment Forum (IEF) has raised this topic in UN forums. Religion should be part of the response, since all religions have principles about honoring guests, welcoming strangers, and assisting those in distress. Bahá'ís worldwide are engaged in learning

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how to create unified communities from diverse backgrounds. These are precisely the tools that will be needed to deal constructively with the massive mixing of the world population in the years ahead.

Climate change is also becoming a significant force for improvements in world governance, compelling nations to rise above national sovereignty in their common interest, just as Bahá'u'lláh called on them to do more than a century ago. While adjustments to the world economy must be made at the global level, the effects of climate change will be different in each local environment, where the Bahá'í approach to development by empowerment and capacity-building at the grassroots level will help each neighborhood and community to find its own local solutions relevant to its situation. Excessive consumption is a major driver of climate change, and the Bahá'í teachings strongly support simpler material lifestyles and a civilization focused on social and spiritual values, and those intangible things like knowledge, science, art, and culture that do not face limits to growth. Recent Bahá'í guidance has been highly critical of the consumer society, and emphasized redefining prosperity in other than material terms (Universal House of Justice [UHJ] 2005; BIC 2010).

Take from this world only to the measure of your needs, and forego that which exceedeth them.

*(Bahá'u'lláh)*

Ecology and religion intersect most intimately in our attitude towards nature. Modern urban society has largely forgotten about nature. We have conveniently replaced nature with “the environment,” largely of our own making and outside of us, which we can ignore as an externality in our preoccupation with economic growth. Yet 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 biodiversity and natural order (BIC 1998). There are Bahá'í warnings about the threat to nature, and that humanity should not be antagonistic to and a destroyer of the perfection in nature. Humanity has ignored that warning from a hundred years ago. Climate change, biodiversity loss, deforestation, soil degradation, over-fishing, and ocean acidification are seriously reducing the natural capacity of the planet. Nature, in its undisturbed form, will soon be a thing of the past. To make the transition to sustainability, we need a new emphasis on sustainable agriculture and renewable resources, and on preserving the ecological balance of the world.

The country is the world of the soul, the city is the world of bodies.

*(Bahá'u'lláh)*

The Bahá'í appreciation for nature goes far beyond its utilitarian value, to see it as a significant source of knowledge at the spiritual level. Many religious scriptures include exhortations about respect for nature, moderation in its use, and a prohibition on waste. Nature has spiritual significance, with the qualities of the divine being reflected in it. Contemplating nature is therefore a path to spiritual understanding. The greatness, grandeur, beauty, power, and wonders of nature can invoke in us a sense of humility. This is very healthy in our struggle with our ego, and can help to draw us out of ourselves. For those who are open to it, nature can produce a deep resonance with our spirit or soul. The great spiritual teachers (e.g. Moses,

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Buddha, Jesus, Mohammed, Bahá'u'lláh) retreated into the wilderness to prepare for their mission. Many people seek mystical experiences in nature, or find their deeper self or direction in life through being in nature. For Bahá'ís, contact with nature is an important part of education.

### Integrated approach

Regard ye the world as a man's body, which is afflicted with divers ailments, and the recovery of which dependeth upon the harmonizing of all its component elements.

*(Bahá'u'lláh)*

There is a recent recognition that one of the structural problems in present-day society is its increased specialization, reflected in government ministries, academic disciplines, international agencies, and many other components of society. The call today is to “break down the silos.” Systems science, emerging in part from ecology, is providing tools for a more integrated approach to today's problems (Dahl 1996; Capra and Luisi 2014).

From a Bahá'í perspective, the problems of ecology and the environment cannot be separated from all the other problems facing the world today, and require a holistic integrated approach, both scientific and spiritual. Part of the integration needs to be in multiple levels of governance. The critical need is to acknowledge the oneness of all humanity in its diversity, and for all the nations of the world to understand and follow the admonitions of Bahá'u'lláh to whole-heartedly work together in looking after the best interests of humankind. The unity of nations is essential in the search for ways to meet the many environmental problems besetting our planet. The challenge of climate change, among others, is forcing states to recognize that only global environmental governance can address problems at a planetary scale.

The emergence of the Anthropocene, the epoch where human beings have become the major transformers of the Earth's surface, highlights the challenge, as it becomes apparent that our destruction of nature and our impact on global processes like the climate mean that our societal responsibilities now extend to the management and restoration of the whole planetary system. Our governance systems and values are totally inadequate to the challenge, and Baha'is see the rapid implementation of Bahá'u'lláh's solutions as the remedy that the world requires.

While individual statements of the BIC may address specific matters, such as climate change, sustainable consumption, globalization and transition, economic reform, gender, human rights, UN reform, prosperity, and well-being, they are all part of the Bahá'í cross-disciplinary perspective, and they come back to underlying principles of the spiritual nature and purpose of human life. They combine individual refinement of character and fulfillment, and the advancement of civilization, unity of humanity, and a new world order.

Spiritual perspectives that harmonize with that which is immanent in human nature can induce an attitude, a dynamic, a will, an aspiration, which can facilitate the discovery and implementation of practical measures. For example, at the UN Social Summit in Copenhagen in 1995, the Bahá'í International Community offered an extensive discussion of “The Prosperity of Humankind” integrating its economic, social, and environmental dimensions (BIC 1995). They returned to this theme for the debate on sustainable consumption and production at the UN Commission on Sustainable Development in 2010 with a statement on “Rethinking Prosperity: Forging Alternatives to a Culture of Consumerism” (BIC 2010).

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### **Economic reform**

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.

*(Bahá'u'lláh)*

The Bahá'í teachings have much to contribute to the discussion of economic reform, at least in principle if not in the technical details. Since the ecological challenges we now face are largely the result of an economic system founded in a materialistic interpretation of reality that has become the dominant faith in much of the world, this is highly relevant to both religion and ecology. The Bahá'í critique describes a consumer culture unembarrassed by the ephemeral nature of the goals that inspire it. For the small minority of people who can afford them, the benefits it offers are immediate, and the rationale unapologetic. Emboldened by the breakdown of traditional morality, the advance of the new creed is essentially no more than the triumph of animal impulse, as instinctive and blind as appetite, released from the restraints of religious sanctions. Selfishness becomes a prized commercial resource; falsehood reinvents itself as public information; greed, lust, indolence, pride—even violence—acquire not merely broad acceptance but also social and economic value (UHJ 2005). Endlessly rising levels of consumption are cast as indicators of progress and prosperity. This preoccupation with the accumulation of material objects and comforts (as sources of meaning, happiness, and social acceptance) has consolidated itself in the structures of power and information to the exclusion of competing voices and paradigms. The unfettered cultivation of needs and wants has led to a system fully dependent on excessive consumption for a privileged few, while reinforcing exclusion, poverty, and inequality for the majority. Each successive global crisis—be it climate, energy, food, water, disease, or financial collapse—has revealed new dimensions of the exploitation and oppression inherent in the current economic system. The narrowly materialistic worldview underpinning much of modern economic thinking has contributed to the degradation of human conduct, the disruption of families and communities, the corruption of public institutions, and the exploitation and marginalization of large segments of the population—women and girls in particular (BIC 2010).

The shift towards a more just, peaceful, and sustainable society will require attention to a harmonious dynamic between the material and non-material (or moral) dimensions of consumption and production. Bahá'ís call for a new economic model that furthers a dynamic, just, and thriving social order, will be strongly altruistic and cooperative in nature, provides meaningful employment, and will help to eradicate poverty in the world (BIC 1998). In the lead-up to the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20) in 2012, it was clear that the UN had devoted much attention to the elimination of poverty, but little had been said about the elimination of extremes of wealth at a time when the gap between those extremes was widening, so a statement was prepared exploring this issue (BIC 2011) and it was one of the themes of the Bahá'í contributions in Rio, including both its statement (BIC 2012) and a side event organized at the conference centre.

### **Action at the community and individual levels**

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

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of these mutual reactions.

*(Bahá'í Writings)*

The Bahá'í focus is not only at the global level of economic systems and governance. Bahá'ís believe that progress in the development field depends on and is driven by initiatives at the grassroots of society rather than from an imposition of externally developed plans and programs. Different communities will often devise different approaches and solutions in response to similar needs. It is for each community to determine its goals and priorities in keeping with its capacity and resources. This encourages innovation and a variety of approaches to the environment appropriate to the rhythm of life in each community (BIC 2009b).

Bahá'ís all over the world are engaged in action that promotes the spiritual development of individuals and channels their collective energies towards service to humanity, including environmental responsibility. Thousands of Bahá'ís, embracing the diversity of the entire human family, are engaged in certain core activities. These activities promote the systematic study of the Bahá'í Writings in small groups in order to build capacity for service. They respond to the innermost longing of every heart to commune with its Maker by carrying out acts of collective worship in diverse settings, uniting with others in prayer, awakening spiritual susceptibilities, and shaping a pattern of life distinguished for its devotional character. They strive to provide for the needs of children and youth, and offer them lessons that develop their spiritual faculties and lay the foundations of a noble and upright character. As Bahá'ís and their friends gain experience with these initiatives, an increasing number are able to express their faith through endeavors that address the needs of humanity in both their spiritual and material dimensions (BIC 2009b). It is natural that, as these processes mature, they will lead to consultation, action, and reflection on topics like environmental responsibility and climate change, and this is already happening in many places.

Individual Bahá'ís have been active on environmental issues for many decades, with the encouragement of Bahá'í institutions, starting with Richard St. Barbe Baker, active in reforestation and forest conservation from the 1920s to 1960s (Baker 1970), who in the early 1930s worked with all the religions in the Holy Land to begin the reforestation of Palestine. William Willoya and Vinson Brown, wrote *Warriors of the Rainbow* (Willoya and Brown 1962) collecting Native American visions of world peace and environmental harmony, which helped to inspire the founders of Greenpeace (Brown and May 1989, 12–13). Bahá'ís have published books and articles on environmental and sustainability themes, including Bahá'í perspectives on environment (Dahl 1990, 1991; Bell and Seow 1994), environmental stewardship (Karlberg 1994), ecology and economy (Dahl 1996), and the transition to sustainability (Hanley 2014; Karlberg 2014). The official record of the Bahá'í community, *The Bahá'í World*, has included essays on spirituality and ecology (White 1993) and on climate change (Dahl 2007). Dimity Podger has specifically looked at the relationship between sustainability and spirituality, using as a case study the American Bahá'í Community (Podger 2009).

Bahá'í-inspired professional organizations, such as the IEF for environment and sustainability and Ethical Business Building the Future (ebbf), encourage research and organizes conferences to advance thinking on sustainability based on ethics and values. The IEF was accredited by the United Nations to the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg in 2002, and Rio+20 in 2012, as part of the science and technology major group, and contributes substantively to international debates at the interface between science and values. It has even developed an interfaith course on climate change now being used around the world.

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## Research

Bahá'ís in academic and research positions often draw inspiration from the Bahá'í teachings in their choice of research areas and in the solutions they explore, including in the environmental field.

One obvious area of interest is alternative forms of governance, where the Bahá'í experience is particularly relevant. For example, Professor Michael Karlberg has studied the culture of contest so prevalent in modern society, the relative advantages of cooperation over competition, and a new environmental stewardship (Karlberg 1994, 2004, 2009). Professor Sylvia Karlsson-Vinkhuyzen has researched environmental governance, the functioning of international institutions for environment, and moral leadership (Karlsson 2007; Karlsson-Vinkhuyzen 2012; Karlsson-Vinkhuyzen et al. 2012; Vinkhuyzen and Karlsson-Vinkhuyzen 2014). Arthur Dahl has worked extensively on indicators of ecology and sustainability, including an ethical dimension inspired by Bahá'í values (Dahl 2012c, 2013, 2014a, 2014b).

Another emerging research area where Bahá'ís are active is the role of values in addressing the knowledge-action gap between environmental knowledge and responsible behavior, and making values-based education more visible and measurable. Research by Podger and others on educating for sustainability has demonstrated that inconsistency between knowledge and action reflects a conflict between morality and expediency, requiring a whole-person approach to education addressing the mind, heart, and will, and a spiritually oriented approach to service-learning (Podger et al. 2010). A research project funded by the European Union on values-based indicators of education for sustainable development was able to demonstrate that values and related behavior change could be measured in the activities of a variety of civil society organizations, both secular and faith based (Burford et al. 2013; Harder et al. 2014), and the approach is now being extended to a number of contexts including higher education (Dahl 2014b) and secondary schools through the Partnership for Education and Research about Responsible Living, which is coordinated by a Bahá'í.

Bahá'í-inspired organizations and individuals have long explored alternatives to the traditional top-down forms of development assistance and their harmonization with ecological requirements. If there is a higher human purpose that is essentially spiritual, then a focus only on material well-being is an inadequate approach to development. Research and practice have shown that education and empowerment allow local communities to find their own approaches to a more just and sustainable society, while addressing environmental concerns in ways that fit with the rhythm of life in their communities. This also means redefining the indicators used to assess sustainable development (Dahl 2014a) and exploring broader measures of human well-being.

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)*

We conclude with a quote from the Bahá'í International Community that summarizes the Bahá'í vision of the unity of religion and ecology:

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

(BIC 1998)

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