The Pursuit of Social Justice

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The Pursuit of Social Justice

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Justice is a central principle of the Cause of Bahá’u’lláh. “The best beloved of all things in My sight is Justice,” Bahá’u’lláh wrote, “turn not away therefrom if thou desirest Me, and neglect it not that I may confide in thee.”1 “No light can compare with the light of justice. The establishment of order in the world and the tranquility of the nations depend upon it.”2 “Tread ye the path of justice, for this, verily, is the straight path.”3

How does the Bahá’í principle of justice relate to prevailing conceptions of social justice? And how do the society-building processes being advanced by the Bahá’í community relate to contemporary movements for social justice? This essay seeks to correlate Bahá’í approaches to social change with the approaches adopted by prevalent social and political movements working for social justice and to draw out emerging insights from Bahá’í endeavors in recent decades.

Conceptualizing social justice

Though the concept of justice traces back to the earliest recorded religious and philosophical texts, the concept of social justice emerged in the modern era. In contemporary discourses and in struggles for social justice, the concept is understood in many different ways. For instance, it is often understood in distributive terms, with a focus on how the basic structures of society distribute power, resources, and opportunities to different social groups. Alternatively, it is often understood in procedural terms, with a focus on how a society’s political and legal decision-making procedures can become more just. Other ways of conceptualizing social justice focus on how major historical injustices against entire populations can be repaired; how harmful stigmas and prejudices can be overcome; how environmental conditions can become more equitable for all social groups; and how other important concerns can be addressed. Given this diversity of valid but sometimes competing concerns, is

it possible to articulate an underlying aspiration that ultimately motivates all movements for social justice, or a common horizon toward which all such movements can ultimately orient themselves?

The Bahá'í teachings suggest this is possible. The central organizing principle of the Bahá'í Faith—the oneness of humanity—is often understood through the metaphor of the human body. According to this metaphor, diverse individuals and social groups can be likened to the members of an organically interdependent body whose internal diversity is a source of strength and vitality. Given this organic interdependence, the well-being of every individual and group depends on the well-being of the entire social body—even as the well-being of the entire body depends on the well-being of every individual and group. This, as the Universal House of Justice has stated, is the context within which Bahá'u'lláh's teachings on social justice must be understood.4

The Bahá'í teachings further suggest that human beings—as spiritual beings—have a two-fold moral purpose: to develop their latent spiritual and intellectual potentialities and to contribute to the well-being and development of the entire social body. Through service to humanity, the individual develops his or her latent potentialities. In turn, the relative condition of the body of humanity affects the individual's ability to cultivate intellectual and spiritual capacities. Individual and societal development are thus inseparably linked, each one acting upon the other; the two-fold moral purpose derives from this reciprocal relationship.5

In this light, social justice can be broadly understood as a set of ideal conditions within the social body that would enable every individual and group to develop their latent spiritual and intellectual potentialities. In keeping with the contemporary conceptions of social justice previously described, some of these conditions can be understood in distributive terms, some in procedural terms, some in reparative terms, some in environmental terms, and so forth. However, an underlying logic that brings coherence to all of these considerations might be stated as follows: Social justice is that set of conditions that enables every individual and social group to develop their latent potentialities and thereby contribute to the flourishing of the entire social body, from which their own flourishing ultimately derives.

Let us assume, for a moment, that this underlying conception is coherent with the particular concerns and aspirations of diverse movements for social justice and that it can orient us in the direction of a shared horizon toward which we can all seek to advance, regardless of the particular aspects of justice on which we are most immediately focused. Such an assumption still leaves open the question: How can we advance toward this end?

Pursuing social justice

There are undoubtedly many means by which social justice can be pursued. In this regard, it helps to envision a complex "ecology" of social change in which diverse movements occupy distinct niches and make contributions that can

be complementary. Surveying a few of the most salient features of this ecology of social change helps us understand the distinctive contributions the Bahá'í community is increasingly able to make.

Movements for social justice have sometimes taken the form of violent insurrections aimed at capturing the state on behalf of emancipatory aims. However, the Bahá'í Faith explicitly forbids engagement in politically motivated violence. And the track record of the Bahá'í community clearly attests to this commitment.

Social justice is also pursued through conventional mechanisms of the state, such as electoral politics. In this regard, the Bahá'í teachings forbid participation in processes that are inherently conflictual and divisive. Therefore, Bahá'is do not avail themselves of partisan political mechanisms, beyond voting in democratic elections when this does not require a partisan affiliation. Bahá'ís do, however, appeal for justice through appropriate legal channels. Sometimes this occurs through mechanisms for public input on state policies, through established judiciary processes, or through mechanisms within the nascent system of international human rights law. Also, in states that safeguard freedom of speech and freedom of the press, as well as on the global stage, Bahá'ís sometimes pursue awareness-raising campaigns using traditional mass media or, more recently, social media in efforts to shine a public spotlight on injustice. However, only a small portion of the Bahá'í community is engaged in any of the aforementioned processes. The primary response of the Bahá'í community to injustice and persecution lies beyond such processes.

Beyond the conventional responses to injustice mentioned above, social movement scholars often focus on forms of contentious politics ranging from protests, civil disobedience, and general strikes, to property destruction and even terrorism.6 Such strategies are intended to change state policies by applying external forms of moral, political, or economic pressure through legal or illegal forms of collective action. In the literature on contentious politics, increasing attention is being paid to strategies of nonviolent resistance. Empirical studies have demonstrated that such strategies tend to be more efficacious than their violent counterparts.7 Their efficacy appears to derive, in part, from the fact that it is easier to mobilize a larger percentage of the population in a nonviolent movement than a violent insurrection, due to both practical and moral constraints on ways in which most people can or will engage. The relative efficacy of nonviolent strategies also appears to derive from the fact that they attract broader public sympathies in support of a cause, including the sympathies of some state actors and other influential elites.

Of course, nonviolence, as a moral or spiritual principle, dates back millennia through Jainism, Buddhism, Christianity, and other religious movements. However, in the modern era, organized, large-scale, nonviolent social and political movements began to emerge in the nineteenth century—around the same time the Bahá'í Faith originated. By the early twentieth century,

nonviolent movement strategies were being systematically refined and popularized by Mahatma Gandhi in South Africa and India. They were subsequently adapted in many other twentieth-century struggles—such as the United States civil rights movement of the 1960s. Since then, a burgeoning and sophisticated literature on nonviolent theory and practice has emerged, giving rise to a proliferation of centers for training in nonviolent collective action. These sites are becoming increasingly influential in processes of social movement learning around the globe.

Nonviolent tactics such as civil disobedience, though historically effective in achieving some aims, can undermine the broader rule of law. The Bahá'í teachings emphasize that the rule of law is essential to social progress. Therefore, in response to patently unjust laws, the Bahá'í community uses other means—legal means—to advocate for reform.

The contemporary language of "resistance" is also foreign to the Bahá'í writings and to Bahá'í discourse. Rather, the Bahá'í teachings suggest that historical progress toward peace, justice, and shared human prosperity is driven primarily by increases in the human capacity to apply spiritual principles—or foundational normative truths about human existence—to the construction of ever-more mature social forms. Such constructive efforts are active, not reactive. Indeed, such efforts often encounter resistance from those seeking to preserve the status quo. In this regard, the Bahá'í community is not simply reacting to, or resisting, the myriad injustices of the present-day social order. Rather, the community comprises diverse peoples who are attracted to the vision of a new world order articulated by Bahá'u'lláh, and who are inspired to become protagonists in the processes that will be needed to translate this vision into reality.

The Bahá'í community is thus focused on constructing an entirely new social order—a new civilization—through organized processes of learning, training, and capacity building. Such processes address, simultaneously, the transformation of both individuals and social structures, through the mobilization of ever-expanding circles of protagonists. Bahá'ís increasingly refer to these efforts in terms of society building.8

In this connection, the Gandhian concept of a constructive program provides some insight.9 This concept arose from Gandhi's recognition that the means and ends of social change need to be coherent.10 This is because the means we adopt in the pursuit of social change prefigure the ends we achieve.11 Thus, nonviolent ends cannot be achieved through violent means. As Gandhi gained experience applying this principle, and as his thinking matured, he recognized the importance of actively constructing a new social order that could displace or supplant the prevailing social order. This is what he meant by a constructive program, which he came to see as the fullest expression of the principle of coherence between means and ends.

The constructive program constitutes the internal work an oppressed population must do to build a more just order. Gandhi contrasted this constructive work

with contentious forms of nonviolent action. He saw the latter as externally focused tactics intended to resist, disrupt, or dismantle specific elements of the oppressive order; he came to view these as secondary. The primary work of nonviolent social change, he came to believe, was the constructive program.12

Gandhi also recognized that confrontational forms of nonviolent action tend to unleash passions that can easily devolve into cycles of conflict and violence. And he understood that without an adequate constructive program, a movement dependent on confrontation and conflict can throw off old forms of violence and oppression only to leave a vacuum in which new forms of violence and oppression will emerge. However, Gandhi's peers within the Indian independence movement downplayed the importance of this aspect of Gandhi's thought and practice. Likewise, as Gandhi's nonviolent methods were adapted around the world, little attention was paid to the radical implications of his thinking about constructive programs, until quite recently.13

Constructive agency

The Bahá'í teachings suggest that the most effective way for Bahá'ís to contribute to social transformation is through organized expressions of constructive agency. Thus, the community as a whole is focused on consciously, intentionally, and systematically building a new social order amidst the violence and oppression of the prevailing order. However, this commitment to purely constructive means does not entail criticism of others who employ more contentious means in the pursuit of justice. Rather, Bahá'ís have faith that their purely constructive efforts will, over time, make a vital contribution to the transformation of society alongside other movements struggling for justice in their own ways—many of which are helping to sweep away obstacles to social progress and thereby clearing the ground for processes of social reconstruction.

The Bahá'í community has learned to understand its constructive work in terms of three broad, overlapping spheres of activity. First, Bahá'ís are focused on the expansion and consolidation of new forms of community life. Through this work, they seek to create new social norms, new institutional structures, and new cultural patterns on an ever-expanding scale across the planet. Second, as these community-building processes advance, so does the capacity to engage in diverse forms of outward-oriented social action. Such action aims to build capacities within a population to address its own social and economic needs and aspirations in constructive ways. Third, as both of the preceding capacities develop, so does the capacity to participate in the discourses of society. Bahá'ís thus seek to contribute to the evolution of thought and the advancement of knowledge in all fields bearing on human progress. In this regard, Bahá'ís hope to play their part in helping to lay the epistemic foundations of a more peaceful, just, and mutually prosperous social order.14

Through these three spheres of constructive activity, Bahá'ís actively seek to address the root causes of injustice and oppression. In this regard,

Bahá'ís do not directly confront oppressive power structures. Instead, they adopt an expanded conception of power that opens new possibilities for pursuing social justice.15 Contemporary conceptions of power tend to focus on its competitive, conflictual, and oppressive expressions. This narrow focus obscures unifying and mutualistic powers of the human spirit that can be marshaled by individuals, institutions, and entire communities for the purposes of constructing a more peaceful and just social order.

The Bahá'í teachings suggest that these unifying and mutualistic powers act as forces of attraction capable of drawing in ever-expanding numbers of people who want to participate in the construction of a new social order. This is based on an understanding that the present-day order, which embodies so many conflictual and oppressive expressions of power, is already in crisis and cannot be sustained because of its internal contradictions and dysfunctions. Accordingly, Bahá'ís have faith that as growing numbers of people recognize the inadequacies and injustices of the extant social order, they will be attracted to participate in efforts to construct a more peaceful and just order.

As the experience of the Bahá'í community in some parts of the world demonstrates, transformative constructive efforts of the kind described above require resilience, because such efforts will encounter repression in some contexts. As Bahá'í efforts advance in specific places, it can become clear to those who are privileged by the oppressive dynamics of the inherited social order that there would be no place for such ill-gotten privilege in the more just social order Bahá'ís and others are laboring to construct. Remarkably, in some cases, the hearts and minds of privileged individuals have been attracted to the Bahá'í Cause, and they have thrown in their lot with this society-building program. Others, however, have attempted to repress this constructive movement to maintain their privileges. The resilience of Bahá'í communities in the face of such repression—which has already been experienced in a number of countries—offers early evidence of the human capacity to continually advance a transformative constructive movement, even in the face of violent repression.16

Consider, for instance, the Bahá'í community's long-standing commitment to the advancement of women, and to the equality of women and men, in the context of deeply patriarchal forces that are still at play in many parts of the world. In such contexts, Bahá'ís have been among the first to reject the forced veiling of women, to declare the full equality of women and men, and to begin translating this principle into practice in every arena of family and community life by prioritizing the education of girls, fostering professional and administrative capacities in women, and empowering women to become protagonists of social change within their societies. Not surprisingly, this unwavering commitment to the equality of women and men has been used, in some countries, as a pretext for ongoing calumnies and assaults against Bahá'ís. Nonetheless, Bahá'ís continue, to this day, wherever they reside, to engage in constructive efforts to foster the advancement of women—while responding

to their oppressors with dignity and compassion.

Another illustration of the Faith's constructive work can be seen in Bahá'í efforts to develop a more just and inclusive system of democratic governance. The Bahá'í community has no clergy. Rather, it organizes its affairs through democratically elected assemblies at local, national, and international levels. Yet its unique electoral system is entirely free of nominations, partisanship, competition, money, and self-interest.17 All adults are eligible to vote and, on the local and national levels, all adults are eligible to be voted for. Within this system, individuals who are thereby elected have a responsibility to serve in positions they never sought, and such service is characterized by personal sacrifice rather than the accrual of power and privilege. This system thus constitutes a radically new form of democratic governance, elements of which the United Nations has brought to the attention of aspiring democracies as they construct their own electoral systems for the first time.18 Within this system, women and men serve side by side on elected councils even in countries where it is dangerous to do so. Likewise, blacks and whites served side by side under Jim Crow segregation in the U.S. and apartheid in South Africa, despite the dangers that entailed. In cultures with caste systems, members of the highest and lowest castes also serve side by side on these councils. Not surprisingly, this inclusive system, which stands in striking contrast to many prevailing systems of governance, has been repressed in some parts of the world. Indeed, some Bahá'ís who have been elected to positions of service within this system have subsequently been arrested, tortured, and executed by government authorities. Yet the global project of constructing a more just and responsible model of governance continues undeterred and, in the course of the past century, Bahá'ís have established elected assemblies in more than 6,000 localities and 190 countries worldwide.19

By persevering with a principled and constructive approach in the pursuit of social justice—and showing resilience in the face of violent repression—Bahá'ís are demonstrating the potential of a purely non-adversarial model of transformative social change. Moreover, when they encounter direct repression, Bahá'ís do not let their oppressors establish the terms of the encounter. They refuse to play the role of victim; refuse to be dehumanized; and refuse to forfeit their sense of constructive agency.

In Iran, where the Bahá'í community has faced—and continues to face—systematic, state-sponsored persecution, that community has adopted a posture of constructive resilience under conditions of sustained, severe repression.20 The Bahá'í response to oppression has been, as described by the Universal House of Justice, "neither to succumb in resignation nor to take on the characteristics of the oppressor." The House of Justice continued, "The victim of oppression can transcend it through an inner strength that shields the soul from bitterness and hatred and which sustains consistent, principled action."21

In relation to the society-building endeavors of the Bahá'í community, it should also be noted that Bahá'ís do not seek to impose their beliefs or

practices on others. They believe the patterns of community life they are constructing, along with the administrative structures that support those patterns, will only be viable if they are embraced through a supremely voluntary process. In this regard, Bahá'ís reject all forms of force, coercion, compulsion, pressure, or proselytization as means of social change. Rather, their strategy is consistently one of construction and attraction: Construct a viable alternative to prevailing social norms and structures and, to the extent it proves itself more just and inclusive, it will steadily attract more and more people.22 When Bahá'ís encounter repression in this process, they adopt a posture of resilience while laboring on with their constructive efforts.

It should further be noted that the Bahá'í community is in it for the long game. Many social and political movements today have specific objectives they hope to achieve in a matter of years, or perhaps decades. The Bahá'í community — "another kind of movement"23 — adopts a much longer time frame, measured in centuries. Of course, Bahá'u'lláh exhorted his followers to "Be anxiously concerned with the needs of the age ye live in, and center your deliberations on its exigencies and requirements."24

Pedagogy of social transformation

Any effort to correlate the Bahá'í approach to social change with the approaches adopted by prevalent social and political movements would be incomplete without examining the central role that education and training plays within many movements for change. In this regard, the growing body of literature about nonviolent collective action is paying increased attention to the pedagogy of social change. Briefly examining a few of the most salient insights from this literature will, again, help illuminate the approach of the Bahá'í community.

One of the earliest documented social justice movements to develop an explicit pedagogy of social change was the Scandinavian folk school movement, which initially emerged in mid-nineteenth-century Denmark. Leaders of these folk schools recognized the inherent dignity of the working poor along with their capacity to become protagonists of social change. To release this capacity, they sought to establish a grassroots network of folk schools oriented to the needs and struggles of common people. These schools employed participatory and collaborative methods to tap into the tacit wisdom that exists within communities. Attention was paid to both the spiritual and intellectual dimensions of empowerment, the legitimization of folk culture, building community solidarity, and fostering collective social action. By the early twentieth century, a network of folk schools had taken root in rural areas and small towns throughout Scandinavia, initially among peasant farmers and later among industrial workers. In Sweden, this movement gave rise to study circles—a participatory pedagogy in which common folk come together to study, analyze their local conditions, and develop plans for social action. The collective agency fostered by folk schools and study circles across Scandinavia played a significant role in movements that had, by the late twentieth century,

brought about some of the most equitable societies on earth.

In other parts of the Western world, in the decades leading into the Great Depression, a wider movement toward emancipatory forms of popular education could be discerned. Among its influential centers was the Antigonish movement in the Canadian maritime province of Nova Scotia. Against a backdrop of impoverished farming and fishing communities, a group of liberal Catholic priests and educators began fostering processes of critical consciousness raising and training focused on the development of economic cooperatives, credit unions, microfinance, and other forms of rural community self-empowerment. Drawing inspiration from Scandinavian folk schools and study circles, as well as from British workers' educational associations and other educational movements of the time, the Antigonish movement fostered study groups that met in homes to analyze the social forces impoverishing participants, identify cooperative forms of local empowerment, and translate those into collective action. In the following decades, the Antigonish movement spread throughout the Canadian maritime provinces before exerting influence across North American and ultimately attracting visitors from around the world who came to learn from its accomplishments.

By the mid twentieth century, centers of training in the United States, such as the Highlander Folk School in rural Appalachia, along with the citizenship schools and freedom schools to which it helped give rise across the U.S. South, were training generations of activists through participatory, culturally relevant, action-oriented pedagogy in the service of overcoming rural poverty, racism, and other social injustices. In roughly the same period, popular education movements were developing across Latin America, inspired in part by the influential work of Paulo Freire. And they were simultaneously developing throughout other parts of the world, based on an understanding that the purpose of popular education is to support marginalized communities in efforts to change unjust social arrangements. Such movements rested on the assumption that all communities are sources of collective insights derived from their experiences. Emancipatory education should foster participation, dialogue, and critical thinking in ways that encourage people to draw out these insights, analyze the forces that keep them oppressed, and develop creative approaches to social change.

Though the preceding sketch traces only a few of the most well-documented threads running through a much more complex global tapestry of movements for emancipatory education and training, these threads illustrate variations on one of the most salient themes in the pedagogy of social change: a focus on raising consciousness through participatory processes that lead to collective social action.

But the pedagogy of social change includes another significant theme that must be noted. This is the training of protagonists to engage in disciplined forms of social action within a shared framework. For instance, Gandhi envisioned campaigns of nonviolent social change as the equivalent of military campaigns that required training. The focus of his training was the development of

virtue, perseverance, firmness in the truth, disciplined nonviolence, and a willingness to sacrifice for a just cause. These ideas were subsequently adapted to, and expanded within, many other nonviolence struggles for social justice, including the U.S. civil rights movement.

The global diffusion of consciousness-raising methods and training techniques illustrates some of the ways that social movements have long been learning from each other about the pedagogy of social change. In this regard, Gandhi envisioned nonviolent social change as a nascent science that would steadily develop across the twentieth century and beyond; and he described his own contributions to this process as "experiments with truth."25 Thus, over the course of the past century, social movements have been increasingly engaged in the generation, application, and diffusion of knowledge about social change. This has been occurring both within and across diverse movements, and it has given rise to an increasingly rich body of literature on social movement learning.26

To date, however, systematic learning about movement pedagogy has tended to focus on the pedagogy of contentious resistance. Less attention has been paid to the pedagogy of transformative constructive programs. One illuminating exception to this is Jessica Gordon Nembhard's history of African-American cooperative thought and practice.27 In the early twentieth century, inspired in part by the Antigonish movement (which also embodied a constructive program pedagogy), African Americans began forming study circles to systematize the expansion of economic cooperatives as a means of overcoming economic marginalization across the U.S. As Nembhard documents, nearly every black cooperative of this era started with a study circle of some kind. Through this decentralized, participatory, and mutually empowering pedagogy, consciousness increased about the significance of cooperative enterprises, understanding deepened about the principles and philosophy of such enterprises, and practical skills developed to organize and run such enterprises. The relationships, mutual trust, and solidarity that cooperative enterprises depend upon were also fostered by those study circles.

Nembhard's work brings into focus the central role pedagogy can play in constructive movements for social change, and it serves as an invitation to further advance this important area of learning. In this context, the Bahá'í community has much to contribute. Since the passing of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, which ushered in the formative age of the Bahá'í Faith, Shoghi Effendi and the Universal House of Justice have successively guided the Bahá'í community by adopting a learning mode that has continuously distilled new knowledge from accumulating experience.28 By the dawn of the twenty-first century, a conscious and systematic culture of learning was taking root across the entire global Bahá'í community, as a central element of its evolving framework for action. Though this culture of learning has been written about in detail elsewhere,29 a few of its salient features will illuminate the discussion at hand.

The Bahá'í culture of learning gave rise to, and is in turn being fostered

by, a network of training institutes that began emerging in the 1990s. In short, as systematic learning became a central focus of the community as a whole, a system was needed to facilitate the generation, application, and diffusion of knowledge within the community. Training institutes emerged as a key component of this system.

The training institutes of the Bahá'í community are based on the following premises and principles, among others. The movement of a population along a path of social and spiritual development is an organic process that begins with the transformation of hearts and minds. This process must soon manifest itself in the transformation of social structures and relationships. Systematic approaches to education and capacity building are needed to support this. The concept of a "path of service" provides a valuable way to organize these processes. Diverse individuals within a population will move along paths of service at different rates. The advancement of a population must be propelled by unifying and constructive forces generated from within the population itself. And ongoing processes of study, action, reflection, and consultation that are open to all—that are participatory, coordinated, systematic, and free from the trappings of ego—are needed to generate knowledge on all of these fronts.

Based on these premises and principles, Bahá'í training institutes are proving increasingly capable of raising ever-expanding circles of protagonists to advance the society building processes of the Cause. There are now over three hundred national and regional training institutes of this kind established around the world, reaching tens of thousands of localities and millions of participants, through a decentralized and culturally adaptive approach. Each of these training institutes, in proportion to its developing capacities, is simultaneously contributing to and drawing on a systematic global learning process.

All such training institutes foster creative, grassroots initiative within a shared framework for service. In the literature on nonviolent social change, training processes of this kind have been referred to as frontloading, because, at the outset, they impart "the DNA" of a given movement's framework in ways that enable diverse protagonists to adapt the framework to local conditions while maintaining the unity, coherence, and integrity of the framework across the movement.30 Of course, the DNA of Bahá'í training institutes is different from programs that train protagonists of contentious social action. Among other things, Bahá'í training institutes center on studying the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh and exploring its implications for individual and collective transformation.

For Bahá'ís, and for growing numbers of like-minded people who participate in these training institutes, studying the Word of God provides the motivating power and the organizing principles for collective action. One form of this action is initiating devotional gatherings that bring people together across all lines of difference; foster and sustain sacrificial commitments to the betterment of the world; and provide spaces for meaningful conversations about

the exigencies of the age and the means for addressing them. Another form of action is initiating classes for the education of children that, during a child's formative age, lay the moral and intellectual foundations that can undergird a life committed to social transformation. Still another form of action is animating groups of adolescent youth within a program of spiritual and intellectual empowerment—groups of peers that, during another crucial formative age, learn to read their social reality in light of their emerging sense of justice, organize their first initiatives of social action, and thereby develop their budding capacities to become protagonists of change. Initiating study circles for older youth and adults is yet one more form of action, with the purpose of training participants to advance a wide range of society building processes —from the local community-building initiatives mentioned immediately above, to forms of social action addressing wider societal concerns, to participating in prevalent societal discourses about the betterment of the human condition.

Across all of these areas of endeavor, training institutes seek to foster the grassroots emergence of artistic expressions that awaken hearts, inspire insight and understanding, and motivate people to action. Finally, training institutes also foster the qualities, skills, and knowledge needed to construct, participate in, and refine radically new structures of democratic governance, alluded to earlier in this essay, that are capable of guiding the constructive agency of an ever-expanding community at the local, national, and global levels. This work of institution building can be understood as both a laboratory for learning about the requisites of just governance and an evolving model from which all who are concerned with just governance might draw new insights.

Invitation to collective learning and dialog

As this essay has emphasized throughout, the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh is not merely a social or political movement. The Bahá'í Faith is a world-embracing religion whose adherents constitute an ever-expanding cross-section of humanity focused on the application of spiritual principles in the construction of a new civilization befitting the age of humanity's collective maturity. Nonetheless, in many respects, the Bahá'í community can also be understood as a global movement focused on radical social change in the original sense of the word radical: addressing the root causes of the many injustices facing humanity.

Based on more than a century and a half of experience, the Bahá'í community has much to contribute to the evolving global conversation on the pursuit of social justice. But it also has much to learn. As the preceding discussion suggests, the evolving philosophy and practice of nonviolent social change can offer, to Bahá'ís, fresh insights into the distinctive nature of Bahá'í collective action, along with a perspective on how the Bahá'í approach relates to other approaches—or how it fits into a wider ecology of social change. Furthermore, as a community that is dedicated to the generation, application, and diffusion of knowledge about social transformation, the

Bahá'í community is not learning in a vacuum. Bahá'ís are learning alongside, and in dialog with, others from the wider society. Bahá'ís are also encouraged to study and draw insights from every relevant field of knowledge. The challenge for Bahá'ís is learning how to do this in ways that are coherent with the evolving conceptual framework that guides the work of the Bahá'í community.

As Bahá'ís advance on this path of learning, they will increasingly develop the capacity to articulate the Bahá'í approach to social justice in conversation with activists from other movements to foster mutual understanding, contribute to processes of mutual learning, and leverage complementarity among diverse efforts. The purpose of this essay is to invite all who are walking this path, and all who are walking similar paths, to contribute to this expanding discourse on the ends and means of social justice.

Notes:

Bahá'u'lláh. Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh, www.bahai.org/r/961412317

Bahá'u'lláh. Epistle to the Son of the Wolf, www.bahai.org/r/463236506

Bahá'u'lláh. The Summons of the Lord of Hosts, www.bahai.org/r/660153975

"The issue of social justice is, as you know, central to the Bahá'í Revelation. In addressing the elected representatives of the world's people, Bahá'u'lláh sets out the context that must frame any effort to understand His Teachings on the subject: 'Regard the world as the human body which, though at its creation whole and perfect, hath been afflicted… with grave disorders and maladies.'… Central to such passages is the principle that not only are humanity's talents and capacities shared by all its members, but its problems and afflictions likewise ultimately affect all. Whether in sickness or health, the human family constitutes a single species, and the condition of any part of it cannot be intelligently considered in isolation from this systemic oneness." Universal House of Justice. From a letter to an individual dated 27 November 2001.

Thus the Bahá'í Writings explain that "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." On behalf of Shoghi Effendi. Letter to an individual believer dated 17 February 1933.

See, for example, Charles Tilly, Contentious Performances (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

Refer, for example, to the discussion of this concept in Mark Engler and Paul Engler, This is an Uprising: How Nonviolent Revolt is Shaping the Twenty-First Century (New York: Nation Books, 2017).

Erica Chenowith and Maria Stephan, Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic

Logic of Nonviolent Conflict (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

The Bahá'í concept of society building has been elaborated in a letter from the Universal House of Justice to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors dated 30 December 2021.

Mohandas Gandhi. Constructive Program: Its Meaning and Place (Ahmedabad, India: Navajivan Publishing House, 1945).

"They say 'means are after all means'. I would say 'means are after all everything'. As the means so the end… There is no wall of separation between means and end… Realization of the goal is in exact proportion to that of the means." Mohandas Gandhi, "An Appeal to the Nation, 17-7-1924," in The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi (New Delhi: GandhiServe Foundation, 1999), 28, 310. Likewise, the Universal House of Justice wrote, "Bahá'ís are to bear in mind the principle, enshrined in their teachings, that means should be consistent with ends; noble goals cannot be achieved through unworthy means. Specifically, it is not possible to build enduring unity through endeavours that require contention or assume that an inherent conflict of interests underlies all human interactions, however subtly." Letter to the Bahá'ís of Iran, 2 March 2013.

For a discussion of the concept of prefiguration in theories of social change, refer to Carl Boggs, "Revolutionary Process, Political Strategy, and the Dilemma of Power," Theory & Society 4, no. 3 (1977). The relation of this to the Gandhian concept of constructive programs is explored in Karuna Mantena, "Gandhi and the Means-Ends Question in Politics," Occasional Papers of the School of Social Science, no. 46 (Princeton, NJ: Institute for Advanced Study, 2012).

"Outward agitation," Gandhi wrote, "cannot be given the first place. It is of subsidiary importance and it depends for its success entirely on the success of that which is internal, viz. constructive work." Mohandas Gandhi. "My Notes (30-8-1925)" in The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi (New Delhi, Publications Division Government of India, 1999, 98 volumes), 362–363. Gandhi thus came to view social "agitation" as merely "an aid to constructive effort" (1945: iii). Moreover, he argued that "civil disobedience is not absolutely necessary… if the cooperation of the whole nation is secured in the constructive programme" (1945: 21).

Renewed interest in this aspect of Gandhian thought, and its relevance to contemporary social change, is illustrated in Mantena, "Gandhi and the Means-Ends Question in Politics"; Majken Jul Sorensen, "Constructive Resistance: Conceptualising and Mapping the Terrain," Journal of Resistance Studies 2 (2016); Sean Chabot and Stellan Vinthagen, "Decolonizing Civil Resistance," Mobilization an International Quarterly 20, no. 4 (2015).

Roshan Danesh and Lex Musta, "Some Reflections on Bahá'í Approaches to Social Change," in Dimensions of Bahá'í Law, ed. Roshan Danesh (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing, 2019).

For a discussion of this theme, see Michael Karlberg, Constructing Social Reality: An Inquiry into the Normative Foundations of Social Change (Ottawa: Association for Bahá'í Studies, 2020).

For an in-depth discussion of this theme, see Michael Karlberg, "Constructive Resilience: The Bahá'í Response to Oppression," Peace & Change 35, no. 2 (2010), 222-257.

For a more detailed discussion of the Bahá'í electoral system, in comparison with electoral models in most Western liberal democracies, refer to Michael Karlberg, "Western Liberal Democracy as New World Order?," in The Bahá'í World: 2005-2006 (2007).

United Nations Institute for Namibia, Comparative Electoral Systems & Political Consequences: Options for Namibia (Lusaka, Zambia: United Nations, 1989).

Bahá'í World Centre, Department of Statistics, 2021.

The concept of constructive resilience has been elaborated in numerous letters by the Universal House of Justice. See, for instance, to the Bahá'í students deprived of access to higher education in Iran dated 9 September 2007; to the Believers in the Cradle of the Faith dated 5 March 2009; to the Bahá'ís of Iran dated 23 June 2009; to the Believers in the Cradle of the Faith dated 21 March 2010; to the Believers in the Cradle of the Faith dated 21 March 2011; to the Believers in the Cradle of the Faith dated 14 May 2011; to the devoted believers of Bahá'u'lláh in the sacred land of Iran dated 1 March 2012; to the Bahá'ís of Iran dated 2 March 2013; to the followers of Bahá'u'lláh in Iran dated 27 August 2013; to the Bahá'ís of the World dated Ridván 2015; and to an individual Bahá'í in the United States dated 4 February 2018.

Universal House of Justice. Letter to the Bahá'ís of Iran dated 23 June 2009. Available at www.bahai.org/r/283815649

For a more extensive elaboration of this theme, refer to Michael Karlberg, Beyond the Culture of Contest: From Adversarialism to Mutualism in an Age of Interdependence (Oxford: George Ronald, 2004).

'Abdu'l-Bahá. Promulgation of Universal Peace, www.bahai.org/r/804094876

Bahá'u'lláh. Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'llah, www.bahai.org/r/096510150
So Bahá'ís are not indifferent to the conditions surrounding them in the moment and are encouraged to ameliorate those conditions to the extent they are able, through myriad forms of social action, commensurate with the developing capacities of the Bahá'í community. They strive to do this in ways that do not unduly divert them from the deeper long-term work that is ultimately needed to address the root causes of social injustice. In this regard, the time frame a movement operates in has significant implications for the means it adopts. Within a wider ecology of social change, some movements need to be attentive to the long game and adopt means that are suited to that time horizon.

Mohandas Gandhi. The Story of My Experiments with Truth (Washington, DC: Public Affairs Press, 1948).

Refer, for instance, to Casas-Cortés, Maria Isabel, Michal Osterweil, and Dana Powell, “Blurring Boundaries: Recognizing Knowledge-Practices in the Study of Social Movements,” Anthropological Quarterly, vol. 8, no. 1 (2008), 17-58; and Laurence Cox, “Movements Making Knowledge: A New Wave of Inspiration for Sociology?” Sociology, vol. 48, no. 5 (2014), 954-971. See also the activist journals Reflections on a Revolution, and Interface: A Journal for and about Social Movements, which directly support social movement learning; and Sean Chabot, The Transnational Roots of the Civil Rights Movement: African American Explorations of the Gandhian Repertoire (New York: Lexington Books, 2012).

Jessica Gordon Nembhard. Collective Courage: A History of African American Cooperative Economic Thought and Practice (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2014).

For an overview of this process, see Paul Lample. Revelation and Social Reality (West Palm Beach, FL: Palabra Publications, 2009).

Refer, for instance, to Michael Karlberg & Todd Smith, “A Culture of Learning” in The World of the Bahá’í Faith, ed. Robert Stockman (New York: Routledge, 2022).

Refer, for example, to the discussion of this concept in Mark Engler and Paul Engler, This is an Uprising: How Nonviolent Revolt is Shaping the Twenty-First Century (New York: Nation Books, 2017).

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