

Governance from a Bahá'í perspective

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It may seem odd that a biologist would devote much of his professional life to issues of governance, even more so when the roots of that interest are spiritual. However, for those who have some acquaintance with the Bahá'í Faith and the role principles of governance have in this religion as a foundation for achieving the unity of all humanity, this result is rather logical, and even coherent. For me, there has never been a separation between my professional life in science and in international governance, and my beliefs.

I was raised in a Bahá'í family, and when I was 15 I made my own choice to become a Bahá'í. My interest in nature also began very early, being raised on the California coast in the 1940s and 50s, with summer trips into Yosemite and the High Sierra mountains. Nature was another way of discovering the attributes of God reflected in all creation. In my studies in biology at Stanford University, I was drawn to ecology (before it was a popular subject) because it explored how unity in diversity, cooperation and altruism were expressed in nature, reflecting the Bahá'í principle of the harmony of science and religion. Understanding how nature organized and regulated its ecological communities might suggest how we humans could better organize and govern our own communities.

My Ph.D. research at the University of California at Santa Barbara looked at how biological systems were integrated from the ultrastructure of the cell to external environmental influences, and how information flow related to complex systems processes. The science of complex systems and its applications became an underlying theme of my work throughout my career (Dahl 2010). In 1966, I first presented my research at international scientific meetings in Japan and Germany, participated in discussions of marine conservation and protected areas, and visited and taught in Bahá'í communities in Japan, Taiwan and Korea. I also had my baptism in environmental problems when the Santa Barbara oil spill of 1969 covered my research material.

From a Bahá'í conference I attended at the age of 10, where I saw Bahá'ís parting for far off destinations, I developed a longing to be of service to developing countries. At university, I selected courses that I thought would be useful for living and working in remote parts of the world. In my postdoctoral research at the Smithsonian Institution in

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Washington, D.C., I chose to study the complex ecosystems of coral reefs, which already were under threat from human activities, requiring new kinds of environmental governance. My research allowed me to travel to many tropical developing countries and islands, diving on the coral reefs and visiting and encouraging local Bahá'í communities.

In 1969, the Governor of American Samoa came to the Smithsonian asking for a study of the territory's environmental problems, so I volunteered to prepare such a study as a way of learning how to become an environmental advisor to governments (Dahl 1970), and at the same time set up long-term environmental monitoring of the coral reefs there to document natural variability and human impacts (Dahl & Lamberts 1977). During the 5 years I was employed as a researcher at the Smithsonian, I travelled through the Caribbean and Pacific Islands and as far as the Red Sea, trying to understand how such a complex ecosystem as a coral reef worked, and how it might be protected and managed in the future.

In 1970, for the first Earth Day in Washington, D.C., I spoke to a high school on the environment and ethics. I also represented the Bahá'í International Community (BIC) at the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm in 1972, my first introduction to international governance. Already I could see weaknesses in the way governments approached international environmental problems, and the need for better scientific advice to decision-makers. I continue to assist the BIC in various ways, including drafting their first declaration on nature and the environment (Dahl 1988), and was part of their delegations to the Copenhagen Climate Change Conference (COP15) in 2009 and the Paris Climate Change Conference (COP21) in 2015.

While I loved basic science, I saw the great need for scientific advice to governments to conserve nature and solve their environmental problems. A Bahá'í in Samoa told me about their regional intergovernmental organization, the South Pacific Commission (now the Pacific Community), and in 1974 I left the Smithsonian and realized my dream to settle in a developing part of the world, on the Pacific island of New Caledonia, and become the Regional Ecological Adviser to 22 island countries and territories of the Pacific. Over the next 8 years, I organized and launched the Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP) which a few years later became a separate intergovernmental organization with its headquarters in Apia, Samoa. This was one small step towards the international governance foretold in the Bahá'í writings, through helping countries to see their common interest in working together. During that time, I developed close collaboration with the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and other intergovernmental organizations. My faith thus led me to a lifelong engagement in efforts to find solutions to the challenges of international governance.

As I confronted increasingly complex problems of governance in my professional work, I naturally turned to the Bahá'í teachings and the pattern of Bahá'í administration for inspiration, since they explicitly address many of the flaws in all present systems of governance, and suggest practical ways forward. Guidance from the Bahá'í World Centre, and declarations from the Bahá'í International Community at various United Nations (UN) events, provide deep insights into current problems and the need for solutions rooted in spiritual principles. The following sections summarize some of these insights.

The challenges of governance today

Governance in a broad sense can encompass all those ways that society organises itself and takes decisions, including not only government itself, but also the rules, laws and

sometimes unwritten codes and sets of values by which people function collectively. It concerns more than the state, extending to corporate governance and that of civil society. It includes such dimensions as leadership, the administration of justice, rewards and punishments, and how conflicting interests are regulated. The mechanisms of governance enshrine many of the basic values of a society, and these are often derived originally from religion, so the two are intimately linked even if, in secular societies, the link is often denied.

Forms of governance have evolved from the family, tribe, city state and empire to the modern nation, and today, with the transformation of social interactions by the modern technologies of communications and transportation, the world is struggling to create forms of governance for a planet that has shrunk into a neighbourhood. Some challenges we face, such as climate change, biodiversity loss, the equitable management of natural resources within planetary boundaries, the spread of pollutants, and global health issues like pandemics and antibiotic resistance, can only be managed at the international level. The same is true for the global financial system, tax evasion, global crime, war and terrorism. Migration and wealth distribution are also emerging as planetary problems. The world population has grown to the point where failure to regulate these problems could bring the collapse of civilization and cost billions of lives, yet efforts to create mechanisms of governance capable of addressing these problems are strongly resisted because they threaten those who presently hold power.

We are stuck in the trap of the concept of national sovereignty, where each nation thinks first of itself and pursues its national interest on the world stage. Even international organisations like the UN have national sovereignty inscribed in their charters, and the most powerful nations regularly use this principle to subvert international efforts to prevent war and conflict when it is in their national interest as defined by their leaders. This global anarchy gives full play to the egotistical and power-hungry. It is reinforced by the bankruptcy of political systems at the national level, both because of flaws in the systems themselves, and because of a lack of ethics in the people working within the system. When government fails to deliver security, well-being, justice and equity to the people, pressures build for change and create civil unrest, opening the door to autocratic rulers, if not failed states. Even Western liberal democracy based on competition for power has become anachronistic, unjust, and unsustainable. It is based on materialistic assumptions that human nature is essentially selfish and competitive, and that people have conflicting interests to be settled through interest-group competition. By playing to the narrow interests of the majority within a state and disregarding the longer term global common interest, it increases income disparities, environmental destruction, public cynicism and disaffection (Karlberg 2007). It lacks vision and is subject to the short-term whims of an electorate easily manipulated by demagogues reinforced by the power of the media, when it is not short-circuited by lobbying by powerful interests, and the corruption of self-interest.

Corruption is perhaps the best indicator of governance failure. It is traditionally defined as the abuse of public office for private gain, including bribery, nepotism and misappropriation; extra-legal efforts by individuals or groups to gain influence over the actions of the bureaucracy; the collusion between parties in the public and private sectors for the benefit of the latter; and more generally influencing the shaping of policies and institutions in ways that benefit the contributing private parties at the expense of the broader public welfare (Lopez-Claros 2015). The corruption that is eating into the vitals of global society today is more than just the material corruption of bribery for personal gain. It is any undue preference given to personal or private gain at the expense of the public or collective interest, including the betrayal of a public trust or office in government, but also

the manipulation of a corporate responsibility for self-enrichment, the distortion of truth and denial of science to manipulate the public for ideological and political ends, and even the misuse of a religious responsibly to acquire power and wealth. Corruption is just one expression of the priority given to oneself over others, of egoism over altruism, of personal over collective benefit (Dahl 2016).

In addition, governments themselves have been sidelined by the growing power of the actors in the neoliberal economic system that have escaped from national regulation and taxation. Through this system, powerful multinational corporations and financial institutions now control the main levers of power and information at the global level, preventing any efforts to interfere with their projects of economic exploitation to maximize their profits. This both feeds and feeds on corruption, since the materialist value system is driven by greed, lust, indolence, pride and violence, and only pays lip service to higher ethical principles. Other organizations of civil society, from humanitarian and ideological movements to organized religions, also wield considerable power, and not always for the common good, as with organized crime and terrorism.

Morality and governance

The failures of governance have moral roots, and the solution must first be sought at that level (Dahl 2016). Institutions are tools rather than ends in themselves, and can be used for either good or bad purposes. They seldom have a built-in ethical framework. If the individuals within an institution have strong moral principles, they will use the institution to advance their values. If they hold self-centred materialist or Machiavellian values, they will manipulate the institution to build their power and wealth. Some governance mechanisms can enshrine basic values, declarations of rights and responsibilities, and mechanisms of checks and balances, but these can too easily be ignored or overruled by those who refuse to play by the rules.

Morality starts with the nature and purpose of human beings. We are born with an animal nature and the potential for much more, a potential that is realized through education. That education needs to have material, intellectual and ethical/moral/spiritual dimensions. Without the right education, our ego and selfish desires dominate, and our life is driven by self-interest and physical passions. In the absence of any higher purpose, it is perfectly natural to be selfish and aggressive, and for many, "you can't change human nature". Corruption is an expression of this, as are war, crime, dictatorships and the many other ways that self-interest is expressed in today's world. Every civilization in which these forces of disintegration become dominant has eventually collapsed.

Self-centredness in all its forms has become the ideology for self-justification behind the conservative movements of today, whether in the neoliberal economy that drives the concentration of wealth and power, political ideologies of total individual freedom that reject any constraints or regulations in the common interest, national sovereignty that leans to isolationism and self-protection behind strong borders, xenophobia that places one ethnicity or culture above all others, multinational corporations for which the right to profits overrides all other interests, and even criminal syndicates for which illegal activities are the fastest route to money and power. These ideologies forget that Adam Smith's invisible hand of self-interest was balanced by an individual sense of moral responsibility, and declare that the larger good will somehow "naturally" emerge or trickle down from all these selfish drives, while in practice they only serve to entrench the rich and powerful.

The irony is that human beings have the capacity for much more, as the history of the rise

of civilizations has repeatedly demonstrated. Education is what allows culture, science, innovation and social cohesion to develop. It cultivates all the potentials available in each individual, whether the physical capacity for athletic performance or feats of endurance, the intellectual capacity for rational thought, scientific investigation and cultural creation, the emotional capacity for altruism, empathy, solidarity and cooperation, or the spiritual capacity for love, humility, forgiveness, volition, generosity, and self-effacement into a higher collective entity. All of these dimensions of education are complementary and mutually reinforcing, and neglecting any of them can lead to undesirable outcomes (Dahl 2016).

Fundamental to all of this is the shared morality on which any society must be built, with values that contribute to social cohesion, that favour unity in diversity and leaving no one behind. Education transmits those values and ensures the sustainability of the society. Today, those values are receding. The Bahá'í international governing body, the Universal House of Justice, has so well described "the multiplying ills of a disordered society. Over the last year, it has become clearer still that, in different nations in different ways, the social consensus around ideals that have traditionally united and bound together a people is increasingly worn and spent. It can no longer offer a reliable defence against a variety of self-serving, intolerant, and toxic ideologies that feed upon discontent and resentment. With a conflicted world appearing every day less sure of itself, the proponents of these destructive doctrines grow bold and brazen. We recall the unequivocal verdict from the Supreme Pen [Bahá'u'lláh]: "They hasten forward to Hell Fire, and mistake it for light." Well-meaning leaders of nations and people of goodwill are left struggling to repair the fractures evident in society and powerless to prevent their spread. The effects of all this are not only to be seen in outright conflict or a collapse in order. In the distrust that pits neighbour against neighbour and severs family ties, in the antagonism of so much of what passes for social discourse, in the casualness with which appeals to ignoble human motivations are used to win power and pile up riches - in all these lie unmistakable signs that the moral force which sustains society has become gravely depleted." (UHJ. 2015, §2)

Many people today, particularly among intellectuals, the young, and those from cultures that retain a sense of collective purpose, still hold to these values and despair at the destructive forces swirling around them, but the faltering or failure of many of the more progressive movements of the left shows that an intellectual attachment to human rights, solidarity, concern for the excluded and marginalized, and redistribution of wealth is not sufficient. Movements of the left are just as divided by ego, ambition and the struggle for power as those on the right.

What is missing is a higher level of spiritual education and transformation in each individual. Human potential comes to fruition when it is cultivated in a spirit of selfless service, without pride, with no desire to be seen as superior to anyone else, ready to accompany others in their own acts of service and thus to become part of an organically-evolving learning community. It is this dimension of education that is largely absent today in societies around the world. It is spiritual education that empowers every individual to refine their character and to contribute to an ever-advancing civilization. It is at this level that effective responsibility and accountability can be built into the institutions of society (Dahl 2015b).

Bahá'í concepts of governance

For Bahá'ís, our material civilization needs to be balanced by a divine civilization based on

spiritual principles, acknowledging our higher human purpose and fostering our spiritual evolution. The material side of life is there to give us the means to develop the infinite potential inherent in human consciousness.

Governance should therefore promote unity and justice. With our intensifying global interdependence, the aim today should be governance that reflects and fosters the organic unity of humanity. Our well-being will be achieved through integration and coordination, while appreciating our diversity, not uniformity. “Within human societies, diversity is a source of inspiration, creativity, productivity, resilience, innovation, and adaptation” (ISGP 2012). Justice should be the guiding principle, so that every individual has the opportunity to develop their full potential. Governance should acknowledge that every human being is a trust of the whole, and we have a collective trusteeship for the whole human race (ISGP 2012). In the terms of the UN 2030 Agenda, this means leaving no one behind.

At the most fundamental level, this calls for redefining and reconceptualizing power and authority, beyond self-interested and competitive expressions of power to unifying, cooperative, and mutualistic expressions of power. Bahá'ís propose an alternative concept of power and authority, that is democratic without competition and collective rather than individual. Elections to Bahá'í administrative institutions of nine members at the local, national and international levels are held without nominations, campaigning or partisanship, and those elected have an obligation to serve. Authority is exercised by the body through consultative decision-making in a search for truth with reference to spiritual principle. The local and national bodies are presently called Spiritual Assemblies, while the international governing body is the Universal House of Justice.

The members of these institutions are responsible to their own conscience and to God, rather than to those who elected them. There are no individual leaders, avoiding all the problems associated with the corrupting influence of individual power. The aim is loving empowerment, participation and accompaniment of those being administered. Bahá'ís see their system as an embryonic model to be adopted voluntarily when the world sees its advantages, acknowledging that it is not simply institutions and procedures, but that it depends on the requisite values, norms and commitments (ISGP 2012). While developing a system in which unity is the fundamental principle, Bahá'ís abstain from partisan politics, and are loyal to the government wherever they reside.

New models of collective decision making, generally referred to as consultation, are the foundation of this system. This is not disputation and debate driven by ego, ideology, or interest-group competition. Bahá'í consultation seeks out a diversity of views in a search for the truth, in humble detachment and a spirit of service to the community, referring always to spiritual principles including justice and collective trusteeship. Bahá'í institutions are responsive to feedback from the community, while being shielded from manipulation by special interests. This system of consultation requires patience, maturity, and an attitude of humble learning (ISGP 2012).

While decision-making power and authority is exercised collectively and not by individual leaders, the Bahá'ís have a parallel set of institutions composed of individuals appointed to encourage and inspire the community, with specific functions of propagation and protection but with no responsibility for decision-making, who assist in the implementation of the plans adopted by the administrative institutions. Those with continental or international responsibilities receive the title of Counsellor, and are appointed for 5 year terms by the Universal House of Justice, while those working at the national and local levels are members of Auxiliary Boards named by the Counsellors. The result is a wise separation of

individual charismatic leadership and power.

Given the importance of diversity and subsidiarity in governance in a world of many nations, cultures, environments and economic situations, Bahá'ís operate a system of multilevel governance with Local and National Spiritual Assemblies in almost every country and the Universal House of Justice at the Bahá'í World Centre in Haifa, Israel. Each level has considerable autonomy, but decisions can always be appealed to the level above, and guidance and encouragement flow down from the upper levels.

Ultimately, the Bahá'í vision is of a world federal system with executive, legislative and judicial functions and mechanisms for collective security and the equitable distribution of the world's resources. What form this will take still needs to be worked out. There are no simple formulas and no singular models, so new approaches to governance must evolve in a learning mode, with decisions tested against reality and revised or refined. Change is only possible as consciousness is raised among the masses of humanity, so progress will be gradual. Reflective learning requires unity, as in the Bahá'í spirit of consultation, and this is presently sabotaged by the culture of opposition and protest that is reacting to the dysfunction, corruption, and injustice in the present system (ISGP 2012).

What can be done now is to start building the capacities for effective governance, which depend on the values, qualities, and capabilities of individuals along with the development of institutions. We can educate for altruism and cooperation, and provide moral, intellectual and spiritual education from an early age. We require virtues such as trustworthiness, honesty, integrity, selflessness and humility. In addition, we should develop capacities for self-expression, listening, drawing out the diverse views of marginalized groups, considering new perspectives, appreciating diversity, systematic inquiry, and elevating a discourse to the relevant moral and spiritual principles and being guided by them. Education for good governance can also include the practical aspects: how to elect leaders with the right qualities, how to accompany others in service, having a work ethic of service, showing openness and inclusiveness, patience, flexibility, and resilience, and building mutual trust and respect free from backbiting (ISGP 2012).

Applying Bahá'í principles in the real world

The Bahá'í vision of our personal responsibility to refine our character and our social responsibility to contribute to an ever-advancing world civilization has always motivated me to seek opportunities for service. Rich possibilities open up when scientific knowledge is combined with the second great knowledge system that is religion. It is an exciting challenge to take a spiritual principle and explore how it may shed new light on a difficult problem and suggest possible solutions.

Building institutions of governance

My Pacific experience was just the beginning of a professional career building institutions of international governance. After 11 years in New Caledonia, I moved with my French wife and family to France near Geneva to help to develop the relationship between the Bahá'í International Community and the United Nations, and in 1989 I joined UNEP in Nairobi, Kenya, as Deputy Director of the Oceans and Coastal Areas programme, building Regional Seas programmes of states for environmental management of their common sea area, as I had done in the Pacific. To make this work, I learned to find those issues on which all the governments could see that it was in their interest to work together.

Secretariats have an important role in making institutions effective. At the time of the Rio Earth Summit in 1992, UNEP moved me to Geneva, Switzerland, to take responsibility for coordinating the UN System-wide Earthwatch across more than 50 parts of the UN system, also serving as task manager to the Commission on Sustainable Development for Agenda 21 chapter 40 on information for decision-making. This involved many dimensions of science in support of decision-making, such as developing indicators of sustainable development, coordinating the strategies for global observing among the space agencies and international research programmes, and contributing to international reports on the state of the environment. As I was a one-person office with a half-time secretary, the different agencies saw that I was not trying to build an empire, but only to help them all to work better together, and I received good cooperation.

Even after my retirement from UNEP in 2002, I continued to assist them with reviewing state-of-environment reporting (Dahl 2008a), teaching environmental diplomacy to mid-career diplomats (Dahl 2008b), helping to design and write Global Environment Outlook reports, integrating the Sustainable Development Goals into their work programme (Dahl 2015a), and facilitating national workshops. When UNEP's major groups and stakeholders set up an Advisory Expert Group on International Environmental Governance, with experts from all the major groups from women and youth to business, labour and indigenous peoples, I was asked to co-coordinate it since, as one member put it, "only a Bahá'í could build consensus among such disparate perspectives". The Bahá'í approach to decision-making through consultation provides good training in reflecting as a group on ethical principles and seeking out the truth through multiple perspectives. I would collect everyone's inputs and prepare a balanced synthesis where everyone could see that their views were considered and valued, while adding an ethical dimension wherever it seemed to be missing.

Most recently, my efforts have addressed reforming the whole system of global governance, including preparing proposals with two Bahá'í colleagues for the reform of the UN system, which won the New Shape Prize in 2018 and led to a book "*Global Governance and the Emergence of Global Institutions for the 21st Century*" (Lopez-Claros, Dahl and Groff 2020), and the creation of a Global Governance Forum and a Climate Governance Commission. For the latter, another Bahá'í professor and I prepared proposals for a Global Environment Agency (Karlsson-Vinkhuyzen and Dahl 2021) that became a source for the UN High Level Advisory Board on Effective Multilateralism.

Importance of values in redefining development

At the conceptual level, there is much in the Bahá'í teachings about balancing the material and the spiritual in development, and the need for moderation in material civilization. It was obvious to me that much needed to be changed in the dominant economic development paradigm.

Already in the Pacific, I had seen the importance of indigenous knowledge and values as distinct from the Western materialist perspective, and built this into the institutions I was designing. As I travelled in the region, it was my immediate integration into the local Bahá'í communities that enabled me to learn their unique island cultures and to bring my science to bear on their environmental problems with respect and sensitivity for their values and heritage. My appreciation of unity in diversity led me to research traditional knowledge of the environment (Dahl 1985a), and to develop training materials that combined modern science and indigenous knowledge, and that made the science accessible to everyone (Dahl 1985b). For example, the tradition of placing a taboo (prohibition) on fishing for

certain species or in certain areas has now been restored in locally managed conservation areas in the region. The countries I worked with appreciated my sensitivity to their cultures and values. They were confident that I had their best interests in mind, and encouraged my work. When a big UN-funded regional project was being planned, they asked me to chair the advisory process "to protect them from the UN system" which did not understand the realities of small island states.

One of the best ways to support an institution-building process is to draft the texts that can redefine development and provide the basis for cooperation. I learned this in the Pacific, where I oversaw the preparation of the declaration and action plan for the Pacific Regional Environment Programme, and even prepared all the opening speeches for the organizational conference. In 1991, UNEP loaned me to the secretariat of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (the 1992 Rio Earth Summit), where I was responsible for the final drafting of Agenda 21 chapter 17 on oceans, coastal areas and small island states, and could lay out a plan for cooperation among island developing states (Dahl 2017). Often my work in the UN required preparing strategies and action plans for agency and government consideration, and I could emphasize the constructive and unifying elements necessary including ethical principles.

After retirement, the consultancies continued. With the World Economic Forum, I explored the competitive edge in environmental responsibility in business (Dahl 2004). The World Bank asked for my help in conceptualising a new development index based on the progress of individual human beings rather than economic statistics, with some of the background published (Dahl 2014). Starting from basic ethical principles, I defined the many dimensions of human well-being including physical growth and health, security and safety, education, work, financial security, justice and fairness, human rights and freedoms, a place in the community, and cultural and spiritual identity, and suggested possible indicators. The World Bank also gave me consultancies to consider national legislation that discriminates on the basis of race, ethnicity, religion or sexual orientation, and to explore the moral dimension of corruption (Dahl 2016).

Some years ago, I helped to organize and lead a research project on values-based indicators for education for sustainable development. With Bahá'í researchers and others, we wanted to find ways to measure the unmeasurable, the values that would motivate more ethical and sustainable behaviour. With funding from the European Union and the collaboration of two universities and four non-governmental organizations, we developed techniques to help organizations crystallise their values and make them more visible, and to measure how they were expressed in their educational programmes. The results have been used by the Earth Charter Initiative, the Red Cross youth programmes, and have been adapted in toolkits on values-based learning for secondary schools (Dahl et al. 2014). We discovered that organizations were not always aware of values that were important to them, and they became more explicitly values-oriented with the tools and indicators we were able to develop.

More recent work has been on the UN 2030 Agenda and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which in their ambition reflect many of the values that Bahá'ís share. The pledge to "leave no one behind" is close to the Bahá'í concept that every human being is a trust of the whole. The elimination of poverty, raising the standard of health, universal education, gender equality, stewardship for the environment, and reducing inequalities, have always been for Bahá'ís necessary aspects of the unity of the human race and pillars of an emerging world civilization based on justice. I contributed to the development of the SDGs, and have advised UNEP, the World Bank, and other organizations on their

implementation.

Throughout all this period, I have given many public talks on environmental themes from a Bahá'í perspective, written over a hundred papers on Bahá'í approaches or with reference to Bahá'í principles (in addition to 150 professional papers and presentations, <http://yabaha.net/dahl/biblio.htm>), taught in university courses, presented at scientific meetings and conferences, contributed to scholarly publications, and published books including "*Unless and Until: a Bahá'í Focus on the Environment*" (Dahl 1990), "*The Eco Principle: Ecology and Economics in Symbiosis*" (Dahl 1996), and "*In Pursuit of Hope: A Guide for the Seeker*" (Dahl 2019), that combines science and spiritual perspectives to give hope to young people and to equip them to face the challenges ahead as we make the transition to a more sustainable and spiritual society.

Encouraging collaboration

There was so much interest among Bahá'í communities around the world in environment and sustainability that I could not keep up with the demand. With other Bahá'í environmentalists, we organized from 1996 the International Environment Forum (IEF) as a Bahá'í-inspired professional organization on environment and sustainability, now with over 500 members in 85 countries. The IEF works to bring spiritual values into science and international governance (<https://iefworld.org>). It was accredited by the UN in the science and technology major group, and has contributed events to the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg in 2002, Rio+20 in 2012, and the Paris Climate Change Conference (COP21) in 2015, among others. Its role is recognized by the International Science Council (ISC), and some of its proposals have been singled out for special attention. At COP21, one issue it explored was how to hold governments accountable for their decisions. Its 2016 conference at Nur University in Santa Cruz, Bolivia, was on implementing the Sustainable Development Goals at the community and individual levels.

I also served for many years on the Governing Board of another Bahá'í-inspired organization, ebbf - Ethical Business Building the Future (<http://ebbf.org>), which works to bring ethics and values into business and organizations and has sustainability as one of its core values (Dahl 2002).

There is no Bahá'í concept of retirement, so I shall continue to try to be of service to all of humanity, bringing Bahá'í principles to bear on issues of governance and sustainability as long as God wills to give me the strength and lucidity to do so.

Ways Ahead

Recent events show that the processes of disintegration are accelerating as outworn systems of governance fail to respond to the challenges the world is facing. This requires equally strong efforts to build constructive forces for integration, educating people to new values, and innovating in new approaches to the economy, social organisation and governance in a spirit of humble learning. Even the United Nations, despite all its accomplishments, is trapped in the paradigm of national sovereignty and unable to bring the peace to the world that was its principal motivation. I am working with others to explore what would be needed to renew the mechanisms of world governance to address the reality of a globalising world hitting planetary environmental boundaries and struggling to manage a global economy. The Bahá'í principles provide a useful guide to this type of

reflection, especially for the processes that will be needed to explore innovations in governance as we go forward.

Role of Religion

This leads to the great absent in efforts to address the crises in today's world: religion. Traditionally it has been religion that has provided the multitudes with basic moral and ethical values. Religion has taught about good and evil, saints and sinners, the good values that build society, versus the greed, lust, indolence, pride, and violence that are valued in today's market society. Yet today, even in societies that claim to be religious, those ethical values are largely lacking, or are given lip service while the great majority pursue self-centred materialistic objectives. Where religion has been replaced by a secular ideology, the results are no better, and fear may be used to enforce common values rather than the positive internal motivation that religion can provide.

Interestingly, a recent study of civilisation-building by an avowed atheist has identified religion as the main explanation for the rise of complex large-scale civilizations (Turchin 2016). The same researcher warned of the impending collapse of our own civilization because of the increasing concentration of wealth, loss of social cohesion and abandonment of the young (Turchin 2010).

However, religion in most of its expressions today is not up to the task. In its statement to the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg in 2002, the Bahá'í International Community provided a detailed analysis of the challenge facing religions with respect to international efforts at the United Nations to address world problems. It highlighted "both the constructive role that religion can play in creating a peaceful and prosperous global order, and the destructive impact that religious fanaticism can have on the stability and progress of the world," and referred to the UN failure "to address religious bigotry as a major obstacle to peace and well-being."

"It is becoming increasingly clear that passage to the culminating stage in the millennia long process of the organization of the planet as one home for the entire human family cannot be accomplished in a spiritual vacuum. Religion, the Bahá'í Scriptures aver, 'is the source of illumination, the cause of development and the animating impulse of all human advancement' and 'has been the basis of all civilization and progress in the history of mankind.' It is the source of meaning and hope for the vast majority of the planet's inhabitants, and it has a limitless power to inspire sacrifice, change and long-term commitment in its followers. It is, therefore, inconceivable that a peaceful and prosperous global society - a society which nourishes a spectacular diversity of cultures and nations - can be established and sustained without directly and substantively involving the world's great religions in its design and support.

"At the same time, it cannot be denied that the power of religion has also been perverted to turn neighbor against neighbor. The Bahá'í Scriptures state that 'religion must be the source of fellowship, the cause of unity and the nearness of God to man. If it rouses hatred and strife, it is evident that absence of religion is preferable and an irreligious man is better than one who professes it.' So long as religious animosities are allowed to destabilize the world, it will be impossible to foster a global pattern of sustainable development....

"Given the record of religious fanaticism, it is understandable that the United Nations has been hesitant to invite religion into its negotiations. However, the UN can no longer afford to ignore the immeasurable good that religions have done and continue to do in the world,

or the salubrious, far-reaching contributions that they can make to the establishment of a peaceful, prosperous and sustainable global order. Indeed, the United Nations will only succeed in establishing such a global order to the extent that it taps into the power and vision of religion. To do so will require accepting religion not merely as a vehicle for the delivery and execution of development initiatives, but as an active partner in the conceptualization, design, implementation and evaluation of global policies and programs. The historically justified wall separating the United Nations and religions must fall to the imperatives of a world struggling toward unity and justice.

“The real onus, however, is on the religions themselves. Religious followers and, more important, religious leaders must show that they are worthy partners in the great mission of building a sustainable world civilization. To do so will require that religious leaders work conscientiously and untiringly to exorcise religious bigotry and superstition from within their faith traditions. It will necessitate that they embrace freedom of conscience for all people, including their own followers, and renounce claims to religious exclusivity and finality.

“...until the religions of the world renounce fanaticism and work whole-heartedly to eliminate it from within their own ranks, peace and prosperity will prove chimerical. Indeed, the responsibility for the plight of humanity rests, in large part, with the world's religious leaders. It is they who must raise their voices to end the hatred, exclusivity, oppression of conscience, violations of human rights, denial of equality, opposition to science, and glorification of materialism, violence and terrorism, which are perpetrated in the name of religious truth. Moreover, it is the followers of all religions who must transform their own lives and take up the mantle of sacrifice for and service to the well-being of others, and thus contribute to the realization of the long-promised reign of peace and justice on earth” (BIC 2002).

There are a few steps in that direction, such as the encyclical of Pope Francis (2015), but most of the world is still not listening, especially among those who have long since rejected religion as having any relevance to the modern world.

In its message to leaders of religion, the Universal House of Justice referred explicitly to corruption within religions. “Among the many temptations the world offers, the test that has, not surprisingly, preoccupied religious leaders is that of exercising power in matters of belief. No one who has dedicated long years to earnest meditation and study of the scriptures of one or another of the great religions requires any further reminder of the oft-repeated axiom regarding the potentiality of power to corrupt and to do so increasingly as such power grows. The unheralded inner victories won in this respect by unnumbered clerics all down the ages have no doubt been one of the chief sources of organized religion's creative strength and must rank as one of its highest distinctions. To the same degree, surrender to the lure of worldly power and advantage, on the part of other religious leaders, has cultivated a fertile breeding ground for cynicism, corruption and despair among all who observe it. The implications for the ability of religious leadership to fulfil its social responsibility at this point in history need no elaboration.

“With every day that passes, danger grows that the rising fires of religious prejudice will ignite a worldwide conflagration the consequences of which are unthinkable. Such a danger civil government, unaided, cannot overcome. Nor should we delude ourselves that appeals for mutual tolerance can alone hope to extinguish animosities that claim to possess Divine sanction. The crisis calls on religious leadership for a break with the past as decisive as those that opened the way for society to address equally corrosive prejudices of race, gender and nation. Whatever justification exists for exercising influence

in matters of conscience lies in serving the well-being of humankind. At this greatest turning point in the history of civilization, the demands of such service could not be more clear. 'The well-being of mankind, its peace and security, are unattainable', Bahá'u'lláh urges, 'unless and until its unity is firmly established' " (UHJ 2002).

Interfaith dialogue

One fruitful area for progress is in interfaith dialogue, and I have been involved for close to fifty years. At the Stockholm Conference in 1972, the Bahá'í International Community was one of the few organizations officially accredited to the conference, and I spoke of the need for governments to include collaboration with non-governmental organizations like religions that could address ethical dimensions of the environment. In 1995, I was the expert from the UN at the Summit on Religion and Conservation at Windsor Castle to present the issues to the assembled leaders from the major religions, including the Bahá'ís. When the Ecumenical Patriarch of the Orthodox Church organized a Symposium on Religion, Science and the Environment in the Black Sea in 1998 on a ship visiting every country of the region, I was a rapporteur and drafted the final declaration of the Symposium, since the organisers said I combined the perspectives of science, religion and the UN in one person. When Pax Christi in France organized a series of colloquia on ecology, ethics and spiritualities, I contributed a Bahá'í perspective to each colloquium (Dahl 1995, 1997a, 1997b, 1998, 1999, 2001), and was later asked by the French Catholic church to serve on a committee to draft a declaration on the environment for French bishops. Such opportunities have continued, and the environment and climate change are issues around which many faith traditions can find common moral ground.

As with the intergovernmental work, interfaith dialogue works best when it identifies the principles and issues that all religions have in common. Where there is a collective will to address challenges like social justice and sustainability, faith-based groups working together can have a wide reach and impact. Of course, the participants have to be open-minded and able to recognize spiritual truth wherever it is found; if they cling to the idea that they have the right way and everyone else is wrong, progress is not possible. Since Bahá'ís believe that all the major religions have come from the same source and reflect the same ultimate spiritual truth adapted to the time and place where they first appeared, interfaith dialogue comes easily.

Spiritual renewal from the bottom up

It should be clear from all that has been said above that the world is not going to find instant solutions to the challenges of global governance. Even at the national level, the social consensus on which governments have operated up to now is failing. Conflicting ideologies, fundamentalist, populist and xenophobic movements are growing, fanning the flames of disunity and conflict. The downward spiral of states that are morally and financially bankrupt, fragmented and considered failed states seems set to continue. The materialistic faith that dominated the 20th century, whether communist or capitalist, carries within it the seeds of its own destruction. The old dysfunctional systems must give way to allow new forms of governance and society to emerge from the ashes. Crisis and renewal is a natural mechanism for change, as evidenced by the wars that led to the League of Nations and the United Nations. It is hard to predict how traumatic the coming transition to an effective global system will be.

The only logical response is to work for spiritual renewal from the bottom up. The kind of education that will foster innovations in governance has been described above. The

Bahá'ís will continue to work on their alternative system to be able to offer it as a possible model when the world is ready to listen. The best protection against future crises will be a strong sense of solidarity at the community level. If a community or neighbourhood has developed children's classes to teach basic virtues and moral values, accompanies its junior youth in adopting their own framework of values and discovering the satisfaction of acts of service to the community, and holds devotional meetings and study circles on spiritual themes to help people find shared spiritual perspectives in all their diversity, it will have the capacity to consult together about any challenges it may face and to find local solutions and ways forward. An organic process of governance at the grassroots will empower people for change to everyone's benefit. Without this spiritual foundation, the strong will grab what they can, and anarchy will reign.

The only solution to the multiple challenges threatening us today is to reinforce the spiritual foundations of society, and to help every willing individual to begin the process of internal change, and each community to launch itself on a collective process of responsabilization and transformation. Only in this way can we rebuild, from the bottom up, solid ethical foundations for the world society that must ultimately emerge from this age of frustration and transition.

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