

Bahá'í

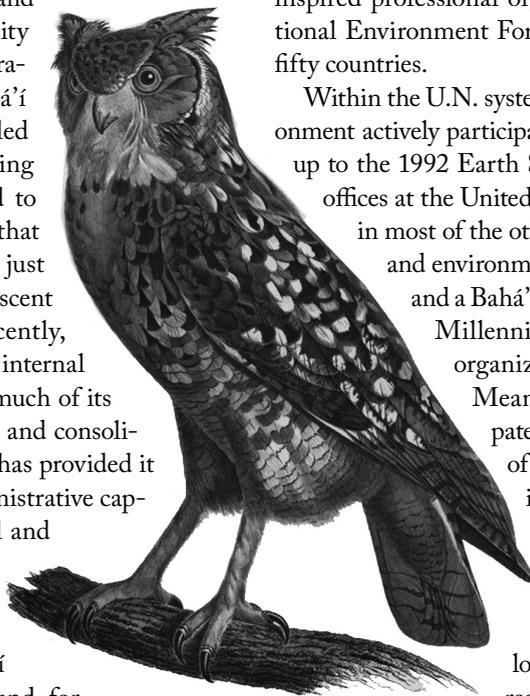
Founded in the nineteenth century, the Bahá'í Faith now has over 5 million members located throughout the world, representing a microcosm of humanity. Bahá'ís recognize nature as an expression of God's will, view science and religion as complementary approaches to truth, and strive to pursue processes of individual and community development that promote unity, interdependence, social justice, and ecological sustainability.

The Bahá'í Faith is an emerging world religion concerned with the spiritual, social, and ecological challenges facing humanity in an age of increasing global integration. The Persian founder of the Bahá'í Faith, Bahá'u'lláh (1817–1892), called for humanity to recognize a coming age of global interdependence and to implement principles and practices that could serve as the basis for a more just and sustainable world order. The nascent Bahá'í community has, until recently, been focused largely on processes of internal growth, which continue to occupy much of its attention. The worldwide expansion and consolidation of the community, however, has provided it with the human resources and administrative capacity to engage contemporary social and ecological problems in a direct and systematic manner, which it has begun to do.

For instance, in 1987 the Bahá'í Faith joined the World Wide Fund for Nature's Network on Conservation and Religion. Two years later a compilation of extracts from Bahá'í scriptures and other primary texts was published, entitled *Conservation of the Earth's Resources*. Study of this document

within the Bahá'í community inspired a multitude of ecological stewardship and sustainable development initiatives around the planet, including environmental education programs, conservation projects, tree-planting activities, sustainable-technology innovations, awareness-raising campaigns employing the arts, and advocacy work in various policy arenas. This document has also inspired a growing body of scholarship exploring the social and ecological dimensions of sustainability from a Bahá'í perspective, and it has prompted the formation of Bahá'í-inspired professional organizations such as the International Environment Forum, which has members in over fifty countries.

Within the U.N. system, the Bahá'í Office of the Environment actively participated in planning processes leading up to the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro. Bahá'í offices at the United Nations also played an active role in most of the other global U.N. summits on social and environmental issues throughout the 1990s, and a Bahá'í representative cochaired the U.N. Millennium Forum of nongovernmental organizations at the end of the decade. Meanwhile, in 1995 Bahá'ís participated in the founding of the Alliance of Religions and Conservation, and in 1998 they became founding members of the World Faiths and Development Dialogue. Membership in these organizations brought Bahá'ís into direct dialogue with other faith communities regarding the spiritual dimension of environment stewardship and sustainable development. This involvement has stimulated a range of grassroots actions within the Bahá'í community. One example is the emergence of Bahá'í-inspired “community



learning groups” among the indigenous Bribri and Cabecar peoples in Costa Rica, who are studying the relationship between moral leadership and environmental stewardship; initiating sustainable development projects such as school and family gardens, fish farms, and poultry raising; and collaborating with other local organizations to promote the conservation of natural resources.

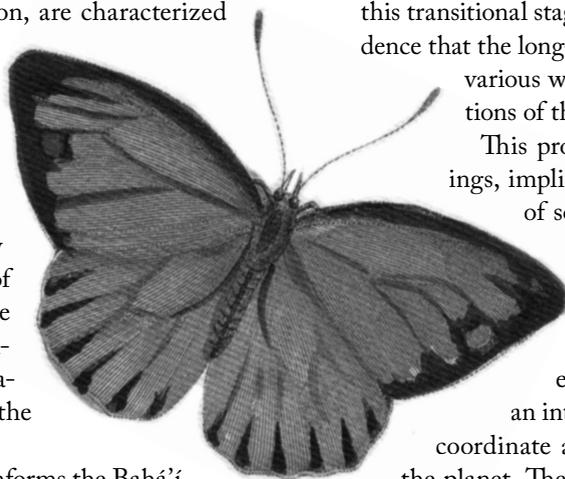
Vision of Nature and Society

Underlying these examples of engagement is a sense of spiritual purpose derived from the Bahá'í teachings on nature and society. The Bahá'í Faith is founded on a belief in one unknowable Divine Essence—God. Bahá'u'lláh taught that although humans cannot comprehend God, the natural world is a reflection of God's attributes and an expression of God's will. Bahá'ís are thus urged to revere, contemplate, and unravel the mysteries of nature by drawing on the complementary methods and insights of both science and religion.

In this context, the Bahá'í teachings explain that while the universe is characterized by a great diversity of forms, it is nonetheless an organically integrated whole that is governed by relations of interconnection, mutuality, and balance. Likewise, humanity is understood as an organic whole that should be governed by these same characteristics. Religion, according to Bahá'u'lláh, is the one force capable of unifying humanity in this manner.

The Bahá'í teachings also liken human society to the human body, whose cells and organs, while diverse in form and function, are characterized by reciprocity and interdependence. Within the human body, the health and well-being of each part is inseparable from the health and well-being of the whole. Similarly, in the body of humanity, the interests of all individuals and groups are interdependent, and the well-being of the part is inseparable from the well-being of the whole.

This organic worldview informs the Bahá'í vision of nature and society. According to this worldview, unity and reciprocity are requisites of a just and sustainable social order. Bahá'ís thus believe that as long as human societies remain in states of conflict and competition, divided and indifferent to their organic interdependence, it will be impossible to address increasingly complex social and ecological problems in an effective and sustainable manner.



Evolutionary Perspective

According to the Bahá'í teachings, humanity has arrived at a critical historical juncture. Humanity's social evolution has led to unprecedented levels of interdependence and has dramatically increased our impact upon the ecological systems that sustain us. Yet inherited patterns of belief and behavior prevent humanity from addressing the challenges that we are now facing. As these inherited cultural codes prove maladaptive under contemporary conditions, Bahá'ís believe that the social and ecological crises facing us will continue to deepen and proliferate.

Bahá'ís hold that at this critical juncture in human history the question facing humanity is whether we will embrace our organic unity and interdependence as a species and self-consciously adapt to the new conditions of our existence, or whether we will cling to inherited patterns of belief and behavior and learn the lessons of interdependence the hard way, through the deepening social and ecological consequences of a failure to adapt. The goal of the Bahá'í community is, therefore, to effect those changes in human culture and consciousness that will hasten the construction of a more just and sustainable social order.

Likening human society again to an individual body, the Bahá'í writings teach that we have passed through the stages of our collective infancy and childhood and have now reached the turbulent transitional period of our collective adolescence, in which we are approaching our full physical capacity but our actions are not yet tempered by the wisdom and judgment that comes with maturity. Although this transitional stage will be difficult, Bahá'ís have confidence that the long-awaited age of maturity, alluded to in various ways by all of the major religious traditions of the past, will eventually be realized.

This process, according to the Bahá'í teachings, implies an organic change in the structure of society that will reflect the underlying principle, or truth, of the oneness of humanity. This principle entails the emergence of a consciousness of world citizenship, along with the eventual federation of all nations into an integrated system of governance that can coordinate and harmonize human affairs across the planet. The principle of oneness also entails: the establishment of the full equality of men and women in all arenas of human affairs; the elimination of all forms of prejudice and discrimination based on race, religion, or nationality; the establishment of a universal currency and other integrating mechanisms that promote global economic justice and shared prosperity; the adoption of an international auxiliary language that facilitates communication and mutual understanding; the demilitarization of



the world and the redirection of massive military expenditures toward constructive social ends; and the emergence of an ethic of sustainable development that promotes the conservation and stewardship of the Earth's resources, along with the just and equitable distribution of the benefits that derive from them.

Dimensions of Change

In order to effect these changes, the Bahá'í Faith addresses itself to both individual and institutional dimensions of change. At the level of the individual, Bahá'ís engage in a number of spiritual disciplines, such as daily prayer and meditation, along with an annual period of fasting, as they strive to transcend the pull of their baser instincts and struggle to develop qualities of the spirit such as selflessness, moderation, purity of motive, and devotion to the common good—all of which they see not only as individual spiritual imperatives but as prerequisites for a just and sustainable collective future. To these ends, the Bahá'í community is also developing systematic approaches to the moral education of children, the spiritual and intellectual empowerment of adolescents, and the training of older youth and adults with skills and capacities for community service—as demonstrated by the Ruhi Institute, which has developed training materials and educational processes that are being used by tens of thousands of Bahá'ís and others around the world. In addition, Bahá'ís emphasize the education of individuals in the arts and sciences, which are recognized as powerful forces for social transformation and advancement. Examples of such an emphasis can be seen in Bahá'í-inspired projects such as the Mongolian Development Center in Ulaanbaatar, the Barli Development Institute for Rural Women in India, the Uganda Program of Literacy for Transformation, or the Foundation for the Application and Teaching of the Sciences in Colombia.

Difficult as these processes of individual education and development may be, Bahá'ís see them as necessary but insufficient conditions for the establishment of a more just and sustainable social order. Responsible and effective institutional forms are also needed. Toward this end, the Bahá'í community is constructing (at local, national, and international levels), institutional structures and practices it believes are suited to the age of maturity that humanity is entering.

For instance, the Bahá'í community, which has no clergy, employs a participatory system of governance with

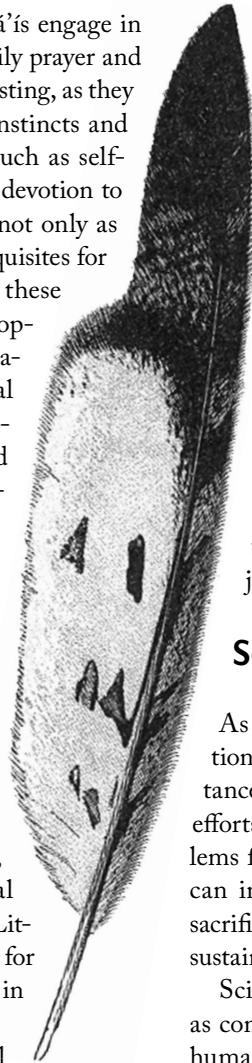
a unique electoral process that, while democratic in spirit, is entirely nonpartisan and noncompetitive. All adult community members are eligible for election, and every member has the reciprocal duty to serve if elected. Nominations, campaigning, and all forms of solicitation are prohibited. Voters are to be guided only by their own consciences as they exercise real freedom of choice in voting for those they believe best embody qualities such as trustworthiness, integrity, recognized ability, mature experience, and selfless service to others. Through a plurality count, the nine individuals that receive the most votes are called to serve as members of the governing assembly—even though they did not seek to be elected.

These assemblies, in turn, are guided by consultative principles that are intended to encourage decision making as a unifying rather than divisive process. These electoral and decision-making methods are used to govern the affairs of the Bahá'í community at the local, national, and international levels. With a current membership of over 5 million people drawn from over two thousand ethnic backgrounds and residing in every nation, these methods of governance are currently being learned and practiced in over ten thousand distinct communities around the globe. Based on decades of accumulated experience with these methods, Bahá'ís offer their administrative system as a model that others can learn from in their search for more just and sustainable institutional forms.

Science and Religion

As Bahá'ís focus on processes of individual and institutional transformation, they also emphasize the importance of applying scientific knowledge and methods in efforts to solve the mounting social and ecological problems facing humanity. But Bahá'ís believe only religion can inspire the vision, motivation, commitment, self-sacrifice, and unified action required to construct a just and sustainable social order that encompasses the planet.

Science and religion are thus understood by Bahá'ís as complementary systems of knowledge that can guide human development and channel humanity's intellectual and moral powers within processes of social evolution. According to this view, the methods of science have allowed humanity to construct a coherent understanding of the laws and processes governing physical reality. The insights of religion have, in turn, illuminated the deepest questions of human purpose and existence, clarified those shared values and essential principles that promote human well-being, and given constructive direction to individual and collective endeavors—including the enlightened application of scientific knowledge.



In this context, Bahá'ís interpret the purely materialistic interpretations of reality that are often advanced in the name of science as obstacles to dealing with the pressing challenges facing humanity. At the same time, they interpret the fanatical and divisive claims that are often advanced in the name of religion as equally problematic obstacles. According to the Bahá'í teachings, religion in its pure form is a single, universal, and transhistorical phenomenon that reflects humanity's ongoing response to expressions of a Divine will and purpose. Religious truth, Bahá'u'lláh taught, is revealed progressively over time according to the changing needs and capacities of ever-evolving human societies. At this stage in history, Bahá'ís believe, the purpose of religion is to renew and affirm the eternal spiritual truths that have been articulated within all past religious dispensations, while focusing humanity on the essential task of learning how to live together in a just and sustainable way, as an interdependent global community.

Future Prospects

The overarching purpose of the Bahá'í Faith is to effect the spiritual unification of the human family and establish a just and sustainable world order. To skeptics, this

transformative project appears to be an expression of naïve idealism. To Bahá'ís, it appears to be the only realistic way forward at this critical juncture in history.

At this early stage in the development of the Bahá'í community, however, most Bahá'ís admit that they are still struggling to successfully apply many of their own teachings. In this regard, individual Bahá'ís vary significantly in their grasp of these teachings and in their commitments of time and energy to the work of the community. They also struggle to transcend cultural habits and inherited patterns of thought that often pull against or undermine their ideals. Bahá'í efforts to adopt more sustainable lifestyles—like the efforts of other people—are often compromised by limited understandings of the issues, or by the powerful pull of consumer culture, or by the unsustainable structures of contemporary society within which they currently live. Yet as the Bahá'í community grows, matures over time, and pursues its long-term project of spiritual and social transformation, the internal discourse of the community is increasingly focused on issues of sustainability; mechanisms are being established to deepen the community's grasp of, and commitment to, the principles and practices of sustainability.

In keeping with the spirit of openness, experimentation, and systematic learning that characterizes



THE BAHÁ'Í APPROACH TO SUSTAINABILITY

Today the Bahá'í Faith promotes the oneness of humanity, equality of the sexes, international justice, and world peace—all components in the striving toward sustainable life. The Persian founder of the faith, Bahá'u'lláh (1817–1892), urged humanity to put into practice such principles in light of a coming age of global interdependence; the following excerpt comes from one of thousands of scriptural “tablets” he wrote emphasizing nonliteral interpretations of the Bible and the Quran—this one a slim book of laws.

Verily, the Word of God is the Cause which hath preceded the contingent world—a world which is adorned with the splendours of the Ancient of Days,

yet is being renewed and regenerated at all times. Immeasurably exalted is the God of Wisdom Who hath raised this sublime structure . . . Say: Nature in its essence is the embodiment of My Name, the Maker, the Creator. Its manifestations are diversified by varying causes, and in this diversity there are signs for men of discernment. Nature is God's Will and is its expression in and through the contingent world. It is a dispensation of Providence ordained by the Ordainer, the All-Wise.

Source: Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, by Bahá'u'lláh (1892). Haifa, Israel: Bahá'í World Centre, 141–142.

the worldwide Bahá'í community, Bahá'ís offer their ongoing experience as a vast social experiment that is open for others to study. The long-term outcomes of this experiment, however, are still too distant to assess in an empirical manner. But the initial experience and accomplishments of the Bahá'í community raise thought-provoking questions about whether, or how, humanity might eventually adapt to conditions of heightened global interdependence.

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BERKSHIRE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF SUSTAINABILITY: THE SPIRIT OF SUSTAINABILITY

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For the past half century, religious leaders, scholars, and activists have begun to acknowledge that religious traditions and practices have developed within the context of a wider planetary or natural community. This area of reflection is variously known as “religion and ecology,” or “religion and nature”, or “religion and the environment.” In *The Spirit of Sustainability*, religion and other scholars assess the key ways in which religious ideas, beliefs, and practices have both promoted sustainability and served as roadblocks. Coverage ranges from religious vegetarianism to understandings of the Earth as Gaia, from the Lynn White Thesis to the field of “science and religion.” The volume offers readers a wide variety of ways to look at “the spirit of sustainability.” At the end of each entry readers will find suggestions for further study.

The Spirit of Sustainability maps out the “values” territory of sustainability, helping readers understand the moral worlds, axial concepts, social practices, and major topics related to sustainability. Through a collaboration with the Forum on Religion and Ecology (FORE), an established network of leading scholars examine key concepts for understanding and implementing the values and practices of sustainability. Coverage ranges widely, from the promise and problems of global and indigenous religions to major theories in philosophy and environmental ethics, and then to professional practices and social movements. As a whole, the volume describes the various goals of sustainability—ecological integrity, economic health, human dignity, fairness to the future, social justice—as well as interpretive frameworks for reasoning through their combined challenge.

In the 10-volume Berkshire Encyclopedia of Sustainability experts around the world provide authoritative coverage of the growing body of knowledge about ways to restore the planet. Focused on solutions, this interdisciplinary print and online publication draws from the natural, physical, and social sciences. The result is a unified, organized, and peer-reviewed resource on sustainability that connects academic research to real world challenges and provides a balanced, trustworthy perspective on the global environmental challenges in the 21st century.