

The Bahá'í Faith, Environment and Sustainable Development

A compilation of Bahá'í texts



BAHÁ'ÍS OF THE UNITED STATES
OFFICE OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS

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This compilation represents an effort to collect, in one place, a selection of the passages in the Bahá'í sacred writings, in messages from the head of the Bahá'í Faith and from the Bahá'í International Community that bear on issues of the environment, climate change and sustainable development. It is not intended to be exhaustive or authoritative, and the headings under which the passages appear are arbitrary and have been included solely for ease of reference. It is hoped that this compilation will serve as a starting point for Bahá'ís to familiarize themselves with the guidance on the natural environment, bearing in mind that guidance on this vast subject is ever evolving, and thus requires ongoing study.

Relationship to the Natural Environment

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

(Bahá'u'lláh, Súriy-i-Haykal §152 (to Napoleon III), The Summons of the Lord of Hosts)

Take from this world only to the measure of your needs, and forego that which exceedeth them. Observe equity in all your judgements, and transgress not the bounds of justice, nor be of them that stray from its path.

(Bahá'u'lláh, Súriy-i-Mulúk §19, The Summons of the Lord of Hosts)

Every man of discernment, while walking upon the earth, feeleth indeed abashed, inasmuch as he is fully aware that the thing which is the source of his prosperity, his wealth, his might, his exaltation, his advancement and power is, as ordained by God, the very earth which is trodden beneath the feet of all men. There can be no doubt that whoever is cognizant of this truth, is cleansed and sanctified from all pride, arrogance, and vainglory....

(Bahá'u'lláh, Epistle to the Son of the Wolf)

Nature is God's Will and is its expression in and through the contingent world.

(Bahá'u'lláh, Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh)

This nature is subject to a sound organization, to inviolable laws, to a perfect order, and to a consummate design, from which it never departs. To such an extent is this true that were you to gaze with the eye of insight and discernment, you would observe all things - from the smallest invisible atom to the largest globes in the world of existence, such as the sun or the other great stars and luminous bodies - are most perfectly organized, be it with regard to their order, their composition, their outward form, or their motion, and that all are subject to one universal law from which they never depart.

('Abdu'l-Bahá, Some Answered Questions)

...to man God has given such wonderful power that he can guide, control and overcome nature.... What ignorance and stupidity it is to worship and adore nature, when God in His goodness has made us masters thereof.

('Abdu'l-Bahá, Paris Talks)

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.

(Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, February 17, 1933, Compilation on Social and Economic Development, p. 4)

The Environmental Crisis

Resource Use

One of the most pressing problems of humanity in the current century is how a growing, rapidly developing, and not yet united global population can, in a just manner, live in harmony with the planet and its finite resources. Certain biological realities present themselves when an organism negatively affects or exceeds the capacity of its ecosystem. The limited availability and inequitable distribution of resources profoundly impact social relations within and between nations in many ways, even to the point of precipitating upheaval and war. And particular arrangements of human affairs can have devastating consequences for the environment. The question of the impact of climate change, and to what extent it is man-made and its effects can be ameliorated, is today a major aspect of this larger problem. The Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh directly and indirectly touches on a range of such concerns in a manner that speaks to a harmony between society and the natural world. It is essential, therefore, that Bahá'ís contribute to thought and action regarding such matters.

(Universal House of Justice, November 29, 2017)

Human-driven Climate Change

Scientific inquiry into the question of human contributions to global warming has gradually unfolded over a century of investigation and, more recently, with intense scrutiny. While there will naturally be differences of view among individual scientists, there does exist at present a striking degree of agreement among experts in relevant fields about the cause and impact of climate change. Sound scientific results, obtained through the employment of sound scientific methods, produce knowledge that can be acted upon; ultimately, the outcomes of action must stand the test of further scientific inquiry and the objective facts of the physical world. In the spectrum of issues under discussion—which includes the extent of human contribution, projections of the possible future consequences, and alternatives for response—some aspects are, of course, less supported than others by scientific findings and hence subject to additional critical analysis.

(Universal House of Justice, November 29, 2017)

Limits to Growth

A challenge of similar nature faces economic thinking as a result of the environmental crisis. The fallacies in theories based on the belief that there is no limit to nature's capacity to fulfil any demand made on it by human beings have now been coldly exposed. A culture which attaches absolute value to expansion, to acquisition, and to the satisfaction of people's wants is being compelled to recognise that such goals are not, by themselves, realistic guides to policy. Inadequate, too, are approaches to economic issues whose decision-making tools cannot deal with the fact that most of the major challenges are global rather than particular in scope.

(The Prosperity of Humankind, Bahá'í International Community, Office of Public Information, Haifa, 1995)

Consumerism

Consumer culture, today's inheritor by default of materialism's gospel of human betterment, is unembarrassed by the ephemeral nature of the goals that inspire it. For the small minority of people who can afford them, the benefits it offers are immediate, and the rationale unapologetic. Emboldened by the breakdown of traditional morality, the advance of the new creed is essentially no more than the triumph of animal impulse, as instinctive and blind as appetite, released at long last from the restraints of supernatural sanctions. Its most obvious casualty has been language. Tendencies once universally

castigated as moral failings mutate into necessities of social progress. Selfishness becomes a prized commercial resource; falsehood reinvents itself as public information; perversions of various kinds unabashedly claim the status of civil rights. Under appropriate euphemisms, greed, lust, indolence, pride - even violence - acquire not merely broad acceptance but social and economic value. Ironically, as words have been drained of meaning, so have the very material comforts and acquisitions for which truth has been casually sacrificed.

(Universal House of Justice, One Common Faith, p. 10)

Spiritual and Principled Responses to the Environmental Crisis

It is our conviction that any call to global action for environment and development must be rooted in universally accepted values and principles. Similarly, the search for solutions to the world's grave environmental and developmental problems must go beyond technical-utilitarian proposals and address the underlying causes of the crisis. Genuine solutions, in the Bahá'í view, will require a globally accepted vision for the future, based on unity and willing cooperation among the nations, races, creeds, and classes of the human family. Commitment to a higher moral standard, equality between the sexes, and the development of consultative skills for the effective functioning of groups at all levels of society will be essential.

(Statement by the Bahá'í International Community to the Preparatory Committee of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), 1991)

The Role of Religion and Unity

Unity is essential if diverse peoples are to work toward a common future. The Earth Charter might well identify those aspects of unity which are prerequisites for the achievement of sustainable development. In the Bahá'í view, *"The well-being of mankind, its peace and security, are unattainable unless and until its unity is firmly established."*

(Statement by the Bahá'í International Community to the Preparatory Committee of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), 1991)

Religion therefore offers a vital source of commitment to new and potentially challenging patterns of daily life. It is notable that religious leaders and faith-based organizations have been increasingly active on environmental and justice issues as they relate to climate change. But religious conviction does not automatically translate into service to the common good. It is entirely possible, for example, to have a congregation of well-intentioned adherents whose actions do little to contribute to the betterment of society. Clearly there is much to learn about how noble ideals become expressed in committed, sustained action. In this sense, religious communities can be understood as communities of practice in which spiritual teachings are translated into social reality. Within them, a process of capacity building that enables people of all backgrounds to participate in the transformation of society can be set in motion. How this unfolds in different contexts and cultures promises to be an area of rich exploration for all working on sustainability issues.

Identifying the spiritual principles at the root of ecological challenges can also be key in formulating effective action. Principles— that humanity constitutes but a single people, for example, or that justice demands universal participation in the work of sustainable development – reflect the rich complexity of human nature. Just as importantly, they help foster the will and the aspiration needed to facilitate the

implementation of pragmatic measures. Identifying the principles underlying given issues and formulating action in light of their imperatives is therefore a methodology that all can benefit from and contribute to – those in traditionally religious roles, but also leaders of government, the corporate sector, civil society, and others involved in the formulation of public policy.

A rich and deepening consciousness of the oneness of humankind is the only way that the obstacles inherent in dichotomies like rich/poor, north/south, developed/developing can be overcome. Designations of this kind are not without basis, for some countries *do* have more financial resources than others. But while such realities are not to be denied, neither should they be allowed to paralyze constructive action. Rather, they should be incorporated into the perspective that an integrated, sustainable and prosperous world will not be built by “us” working together with “them”, but by all of us working on behalf of everyone.

(Bahá'í International Community, Shared Vision, Shared Volition: Choosing Our Global Future Together, 2015, pp. 6-8)

Economic Life

The welfare of any segment of humanity is inextricably bound up with the welfare of the whole. Humanity's collective life suffers when any one group thinks of its own well-being in isolation from that of its neighbours' or pursues economic gain without regard for how the natural environment, which provides sustenance for all, is affected. A stubborn obstruction, then, stands in the way of meaningful social progress: time and again, avarice and self-interest prevail at the expense of the common good. Unconscionable quantities of wealth are being amassed, and the instability this creates is made worse by how income and opportunity are spread so unevenly both between nations and within nations. But it need not be so. However much such conditions are the outcome of history, they do not have to define the future, and even if current approaches to economic life satisfied humanity's stage of adolescence, they are certainly inadequate for its dawning age of maturity. There is no justification for continuing to perpetuate structures, rules, and systems that manifestly fail to serve the interests of all peoples.... There is an inherent moral dimension to the generation, distribution, and utilization of wealth and resources.

(Universal House of Justice, March 1, 2017)

Society must develop new economic models shaped by insights that arise from a sympathetic understanding of shared experience, from viewing human beings in relation one to another, and from a recognition of the central role that family and community play in social and spiritual well-being. Within institutions and organizations, priorities must be reassessed. Resources must be directed away from those agencies and programs that are damaging to the individual, societies and the environment, and directed toward those most germane to furthering a dynamic, just and thriving social order. Such economic systems will be strongly altruistic and cooperative in nature; they will provide meaningful employment and will help to eradicate poverty in the world.

(Bahá'í International Community, Valuing Spirituality in Development: Initial Considerations Regarding the Creation of Spiritually Based Indicators for Development. A concept paper written for the World Faiths and Development Dialogue, Lambeth Palace, London, February 18-19, 1998)

Consultation and Moderation

In those parts of the world where discussions surrounding anthropogenic climate change have indeed fallen prey to an almost intractable divide, Bahá'ís must be sensitive to the danger of this divisive partisan approach taking root in the community. This may well mean that some individuals or agencies have to consider to what extent their views about action required on climate change reflect a posture that is too extreme, whether in exaggerating the problem or minimizing it. Concepts and principles associated with Bahá'í consultation inform how the friends should interact among themselves and how they participate in social discourses and social action. Consultation provides a means by which common understanding can be reached and a collective course of action defined. It involves a free, respectful, dignified, and fair-minded effort on the part of a group of people to exchange views, seek truth, and attempt to reach consensus. An initial difference of opinion is the starting point for examining an issue in order to reach greater understanding and consensus; it should not become a cause of rancor, aversion, or estrangement. By acting in unity, a conclusion about a particular course of action may be tested and revised as necessary through a process of learning. Otherwise, as 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains, "stubbornness and persistence in one's views will lead ultimately to discord and wrangling and the truth will remain hidden."

(Universal House of Justice, November 29, 2017)

Consultation must replace confrontation and domination in order to gain the cooperation of the family of nations in devising and implementing measures that will preserve the earth's ecological balance.

(Statement by the Bahá'í International Community to the Preparatory Committee of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), 1991)

Also relevant to such participation is greater appreciation and application of Bahá'u'lláh's insights on moderation. "In all matters moderation is desirable," He states. "If a thing is carried to excess, it will prove a source of evil." This call for moderation includes in particular the manner of speech if a just conclusion is to be achieved. "Human utterance is an essence which aspireth to exert its influence and needeth moderation," Bahá'u'lláh writes. "One word is like unto springtime causing the tender saplings of the rose-garden of knowledge to become verdant and flourishing, while another word is even as a deadly poison," He explains. "It behoveth a prudent man of wisdom to speak with utmost leniency and forbearance so that the sweetness of his words may induce everyone to attain that which befitteth man's station." By moderation, Bahá'u'lláh is in no way referring to mere compromise, the dilution of truth, or a hypocritical or utopian consensus. The moderation He calls for demands an end to destructive excesses that have plagued humanity and fomented ceaseless contention and turmoil. Moderation in deliberation and action stands in contrast to the arbitrary imposition of views through power or insistence upon ideological aims, both of which obstruct the search for truth and sow the seeds of continuing injustice. A moderate perspective is a practical and principled standpoint from which one can recognize and adopt valid and insightful ideas whatever their source, without prejudice. "Whoso cleaveth to justice, can, under no circumstances, transgress the limits of moderation," Bahá'u'lláh states. "He discerneth the truth in all things, through the guidance of Him Who is the All-Seeing."

(Universal House of Justice, November 29, 2017)

Whoso cleaveth to justice, can, under no circumstances, transgress the limits of moderation. He discerneth the truth in all things, through the guidance of Him Who is the All-Seeing. The civilization, so often vaunted by the learned exponents of arts and sciences, will, if allowed to overleap the bounds of moderation, bring great evil upon men. Thus warneth you He Who is the All-Knowing. If carried to excess, civilization will prove as prolific a source of evil as it had been of goodness when kept within the restraints of moderation. Meditate on this, O people, and be not of them that wander distraught in the wilderness of error. The day is approaching when its flame will devour the cities, when the Tongue of Grandeur will proclaim: "The Kingdom is God's, the Almighty, the All-Praised!"

(Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh)

Implications for Governance

The unity of the human race, as envisaged by Bahá'u'lláh, implies the establishment of a world commonwealth in which all nations, races, creeds and classes are closely and permanently united, and in which the autonomy of its state members and the personal freedom and initiative of the individuals that compose them are definitely and completely safeguarded. This commonwealth must, as far as we can visualize it, consist of a world legislature, whose members will, as the trustees of the whole of mankind, ultimately control the entire resources of all the component nations, and will enact such laws as shall be required to regulate the life, satisfy the needs and adjust the relationships of all races and peoples. A world executive, backed by an international Force, will carry out the decisions arrived at, and apply the laws enacted by, this world legislature, and will safeguard the organic unity of the whole commonwealth. A world tribunal will adjudicate and deliver its compulsory and final verdict in all and any disputes that may arise between the various elements constituting this universal system. A mechanism of world intercommunication will be devised, embracing the whole planet, freed from national hindrances and restrictions, and functioning with marvelous swiftness and perfect regularity. A world metropolis will act as the nerve center of a world civilization, the focus towards which the unifying forces of life will converge and from which its energizing influences will radiate. A world language will either be invented or chosen from among the existing languages and will be taught in the schools of all the federated nations as an auxiliary to their mother tongue. A world script, a world literature, a uniform and universal system of currency, of weights and measures, will simplify and facilitate intercourse and understanding among the nations and races of mankind. In such a world society, science and religion, the two most potent forces in human life, will be reconciled, will cooperate, and will harmoniously develop. The press will, under such a system, while giving full scope to the expression of the diversified views and convictions of mankind, cease to be mischievously manipulated by vested interests, whether private or public, and will be liberated from the influence of contending governments and peoples. The economic resources of the world will be organized, its sources of raw materials will be tapped and fully utilized, its markets will be coordinated and developed, and the distribution of its products will be equitably regulated.

A world federal system, ruling the whole earth and exercising unchallengeable authority over its unimaginably vast resources, blending and embodying the ideals of both the East and the West, liberated from the curse of war and its miseries, and bent on the exploitation of all the available sources of energy on the surface of the planet, a system in which Force is made the servant of Justice, whose life is sustained by its universal recognition of one God and by its allegiance to one common Revelation - such is the goal towards which humanity, impelled by the unifying forces of life, is moving.

(Shoghi Effendi, The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh)

A response to climate change will require profound changes at the level of the individual, the community and the nations of the world. These will no doubt be informed by continuing progress in the arenas of science, technology, economics and policy. To complement the processes of change already underway, we consider the concrete ways in which the principle of the oneness of humanity could be operationalized at the above-mentioned levels and could serve to build momentum, support and intellectual capacity for more integrated and just approaches to the solution of the challenge before us.¹

(Bahá'í International Community, Seizing the Opportunity: Redefining the challenge of climate change, 2008)

¹ Omitted here for the sake of brevity this statement goes on to explain the importance of: engaging children and youth at the individual level; advancing gender equality and encouraging dialogue between science and religion; building foundations for cooperative action at the national and international levels.

Environmental Stewardship

As trustees, or stewards, of the planet's vast resources and biological diversity, humanity must learn to make use of the earth's natural resources, both renewable and non-renewable, in a manner that ensures sustainability and equity into the distant reaches of time. This attitude of stewardship will require full consideration of the potential environmental consequences of all development activities. It will compel humanity to temper its actions with moderation and humility, realizing that the true value of nature cannot be expressed in economic terms. It will also require a deep understanding of the natural world and its role in humanity's collective development both material and spiritual.

Therefore, sustainable environmental management must come to be seen not as a discretionary commitment mankind can weigh against other competing interests, but rather as a fundamental responsibility that must be shouldered a pre-requisite for spiritual development as well as the individual's physical survival.

(Bahá'í International Community, Valuing Spirituality in Development: Initial Considerations Regarding the Creation of Spiritually Based Indicators for Development. A concept paper written for the World Faiths and Development Dialogue, Lambeth Palace, London, February 18-19, 1998)

A more balanced attitude toward the environment must therefore address human conditions as consciously as it does natural ones. It must be embodied in social norms and patterns of action characterized by justice and equity. On this foundation can be built an evolving vision of our common future together. And that vision, in turn, stands as a powerful mechanism for mobilizing action around the world and coordinating numerous efforts into mutually-reinforcing lines of action.

(Bahá'í International Community, Shared Vision, Shared Volition: Choosing Our Global Future Together, 2015, p. 4)

Scientific Findings and Bahá'í Institutions

We received with appreciation your most recent letter of April 12, 2019, the latest in a series of messages, including those of December 20, 2018 and March 26, 2019, email letters that were responded to on our behalf by our Office of Public Affairs in communications dated February 15 and April 1, 2019, respectively.

In reviewing your April 12 message, we note your reiteration of several points, including your assertion that Bahá'ís are being pressured to accept scientific conclusions by the National Spiritual Assembly.... Moreover, you state that the National Assembly is not in a position to act upon scientific conclusions because the Bahá'í Faith is a religion and, therefore, is not qualified to draw scientific conclusions. You also point out, once again, that the science of climate change has too wide a range of scientifically supportable positions to make it possible to act upon any one of them. It is correct, obviously, that the Faith is a religion and its institutions do not act as bodies performing scientific investigations. You are asked to consider again, however, the following excerpt from the April 1 letter from our Office of Public Affairs, which cites a letter of November 29, 2017 from the Universal House of Justice addressed to you and two other individuals:

There is a remarkable degree of consensus among scientific experts in the area of climate change. We earlier alluded to the findings in Volume I of the U.S. National Climate Assessment released on November 3, 2017. Many other reports of qualified experts come to similar conclusions. Noting this, in the 29 November 2017 letter of the House of Justice, it states: “[T]here does exist at present a striking degree of agreement among experts in relevant fields about the cause and impact of climate change.” This has implications for

action. Indeed, if the Bahá'í principle of the agreement between science and religion is to mean anything, then Bahá'í institutions should be free to act upon such consensus. "Sound scientific results, obtained through the employment of sound scientific methods, produce knowledge that can be acted upon. ..." (Ibid.) While there may be legitimate debate about the severity of the long-term impacts of a warming climate and exactly how rapidly those impacts will appear with the current levels of human-driven pollution, the most and least severe projections of qualified experts are both grave. Hence, the lack of greater precision does not negate, or even significantly qualify, the responsibility, among those who feel so driven, to act in what can be considered the best interests of current and future generations.

The House of Justice makes it clear that sound scientific results can be acted upon. And, given the degree of consensus that exists, it is reasonable for the National Assembly to act upon it.... By doing so, the National Assembly is not stating that the scientific results it is acting upon are infallible. It is, however, suggesting that there is enough consensus within the scientific community to act upon the knowledge that has been produced. Indeed, this brings us to an important aspect of the principle of the agreement between science and religion. As you undoubtedly know, the Bahá'í writings state that religious beliefs that contradict science are superstition. However, the Bahá'í teachings go well beyond this concept of non-contradiction. In *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, for example, Shoghi Effendi states that "science and religion, the two most potent forces in human life, will be reconciled, will cooperate, and will harmoniously develop." His choice of these words, especially "cooperate," strongly suggests that science informs decisions made by the Faith and that the Faith influences the use of scientific knowledge. Further, as noted above, the Supreme Body indicates that "sound scientific results, obtained through the employment of sound scientific methods, produce knowledge that can be acted upon." Thus, without this ability to act upon scientific knowledge, the Bahá'í principle of the harmony of science and religion becomes, to a large degree, devoid of meaning. Of course, scientific knowledge is never absolute. A judgment has to be made that qualified experts, employing peer-reviewed methods of research, have arrived at sound results. Given the overwhelming consensus in reports from top national and global scientific bodies, it would, frankly, be unreasonable for us to draw a conclusion that human-induced global warming is not occurring—or that there is uncertainty as to whether it is occurring—and poses no threat to human life on this planet.

We understand that you have cited particular sources that have drawn opposite conclusions. It is your prerogative to maintain a belief that these sources are correct. However, to assert that there is not an unusual degree of scientific consensus among qualified scientists on the reality of human-induced global warming is, in our view, inaccurate. Further, to assert that reliance on such consensus is inappropriate when minority opinions still exist removes from Bahá'í institutions the necessary latitude to make judgments about what is in the best interests of society. As the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh unfolds over the course of the coming decades and centuries and Bahá'í institutions are accorded increasing responsibilities, it would be unthinkable that they could not make judgments as to when a sufficient scientific consensus has been reached to inform their decisions.

(Excerpts from a letter dated July 23, 2019 from the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States to an individual believer)

References and Additional Resources

Wilmette Institute courses on [Climate Change](#) and [Sustainable Development](#).

[Yale Forum on Religion and Ecology](#)

[International Environment Forum](#)

[March 1, 2017 message of the Universal House of Justice](#)

[November 29, 2017 message of the Universal House of Justice](#)

[*Bahá'í International Community, Shared Vision, Shared Volition: Choosing Our Global Future Together*](#)

[*Shoghi Effendi, The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*](#)

[*Bahá'í International Community, Valuing Spirituality in Development: Initial Considerations Regarding the Creation of Spiritually Based Indicators for Development.*](#)

[*Universal House of Justice, One Common Faith*](#)

[*Bahá'í International Community, The Prosperity of Humankind*](#)

[*Bahá'í International Community, Seizing the Opportunity: Redefining the challenge of climate change, 2008*](#)

[*Statement by the Bahá'í International Community to the Preparatory Committee of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development \(UNCED\), 1991*](#)