

Overcoming Corruption and Safeguarding Integrity in Public Institutions: A Baha'i Perspective

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As humanity emerges from a century of upheaval and startling change its need for moral and spiritual renewal becomes ever more apparent. That the twentieth century was a century of both darkness and light-revealing the capacity for human depravity as well as human achievement-underlies the confusion that pervades our times. A deepening moral disorientation threatens social institutions and the fundamental bonds that define human relations. In the Baha'i view, the displacement of a transcendent understanding of life by an ascendant materialism is responsible for the skepticism, alienation and anomie that characterize contemporary existence.

Over a century ago, Bahá'u'lláh, Founder of the Baha'i Faith, warned against the inevitable spiritual and moral aridity that would emerge from the marginalization of religion. *"In truth,"* He wrote, *"religion is a radiant light and an impregnable stronghold for the protection and welfare of the peoples of the world ... Should the lamp of religion be obscured, chaos and confusion will ensue, and the lights of fairness and justice, of tranquillity and peace cease to shine."*¹

Social advancement, we know, arises from the ideals and shared beliefs that weld society together. Meaningful social change results as much from the development of qualities and attitudes that foster constructive patterns of human interaction as from the acquisition of technical capacities. True prosperity-a well-being founded on peace, cooperation, altruism, dignity, rectitude of conduct and justice-flows from the light of spiritual awareness and virtue as well as from material discovery and progress.

To distinguish the vital characteristics of religion from the distortions that falsely pose in its name is challenging. Yet, religion is an indispensable source of knowledge and motivation-a wellspring of values, insights, and energy without which social cohesion and collective action are difficult if not impossible to achieve. Through the teachings and moral guidance of religion, great segments of humanity have learned to discipline their baser propensities and to develop qualities that conduce to social order and cultural advancement. Such qualities as trustworthiness, compassion, forbearance, fidelity, generosity, humility, courage, and willingness to sacrifice for the common good have constituted the invisible yet essential foundations of progressive community life. Religion provides the bricks and mortar of society-the ethical precepts and vision that unite people into communities and that give tangible direction and meaning to individual and collective existence.

Clearly, the set of capacities necessary for building up the social, economic, and moral fabric of society depends upon the resources of both mind and spirit. The civilizing virtues of honesty, duty and loyalty so central to human progress are cultivated by the language of the heart and the voice of conscience. Legal imperatives and penalties, while essential, are limited in their efficacy. To draw upon the spiritual roots of motivation that lie at the heart of human identity and purpose is to tap the one impulse that can ensure genuine social transformation. From the Baha'i perspective, then, the emergence of public institutions that engender public trust and that are devoid of corruption is intimately bound up with a process of moral and spiritual development. As Bahá'u'lláh confirms: *"So long as one's nature yieldeth unto evil passions, crime and transgression will prevail."*²

Baha'is see the entire enterprise of civilization as a spiritual process involving the progressive awakening of humanity's moral and creative capacities. The creation of a "corruption-free" public milieu consequently depends on the building up of moral capacity within individuals, communities and social institutions.

How is it possible to build moral capacity? What are the practical strategies societies can adopt that will raise up from within their populations positive social actors who choose to lead lives of service and probity? Education is an indispensable tool. The fact that the world community is pluralist in character should not deter governments and international agencies from giving serious attention to the question of moral development. The growing collaboration among religious communities, non-governmental organizations and public institutions in addressing major social challenges provides evidence of the possibility for effective action.

The Baha'i community has undertaken a number of initiatives, although modest in scope, in the area of ethical leadership and moral education. These programs draw upon both scientific and religious resources in cultivating the concepts, values, attitudes, and skills necessary for creating an ethos of rectitude and integrity. The formulation of pedagogical approaches and methods that systematically promote moral development has been a particular focus of Baha'i efforts. Núr University, the second largest private institution of higher learning in Bolivia, integrates academic knowledge with both practical experience and ethical training, giving particular emphasis to community service, social justice, and a respect for human diversity. Núr was founded, in large part, to help develop leaders who understand the linkage between individual and social transformation. Its educational philosophy is based on concepts and principles drawn from the Baha'i teachings. Núr's moral leadership program teaches participants that they have the obligation to search for, adopt and live by moral precepts. Leadership is shown to be a responsibility that is exercised by all members of society and requires the development of specific moral capabilities. Underpinning such capabilities is a commitment to pursue and apply truth in all areas of human endeavor. This program has reached some 400 rural communities in Bolivia and more than a dozen Latin American countries.

Through its Just Governance Program, Núr is providing training to public officials, government technical staff, and members of community-based organizations. It seeks to promote good governance by exploring the different dimensions of moral leadership, strengthening administrative and decision-making capacities in the public sector, and by promoting dialogue concerning the future development of Bolivian society. Many regional government departments and local municipalities have taken part in the program. A related initiative involves some 5,000 public high school students in promoting youth leadership. The program works to limit youth involvement in crime, violence, and alcohol and drug consumption by preparing young people for active community service. Núr has also worked to train school teachers as community development agents. To date, more than 2000 teachers from Bolivia, Argentina, and Ecuador have participated in the program, which has received much positive feedback from its participants. One student wrote:

The study of this course has helped me, above all, to understand the importance of guiding my life according to principles. I now try to serve those in need without expecting recognition, to forgive those who may have offended me without holding grudges and to share with others what I have learned, and thereby contribute to my own happiness and theirs.

The "Justice in Education" project being carried out by the Human Plenitude Program in Brazil is another Baha'i effort that focuses on promoting ethical leadership in government. The Brazilian Ministry of Education, in collaboration with the National Association of Judges and Prosecutors, has approved a training program developed by Human Plenitude staff that targets approximately 6,000 legal professionals who are working directly with youth and junior youth who have become involved in Brazil's court system. The initial module of this training initiative is comprised of materials that address ethics and values relating to the protection of children and youth.

Under the auspices of the Royaumont Process of the European Union, the Baha'i International Community has undertaken a multiyear moral education initiative aimed at promoting ethnic harmony and social cohesion in several countries in Southeastern Europe. Through the adaptation of "The Happy Hippo Show," a unique drama-based interactive television and radio program designed to explore moral and ethical issues, the Baha'i International Community has conducted training seminars for educators, media representatives, journalists and non-governmental organizations. The program has become quite popular with both the public and government officials in providing examples on how to approach life problems by finding positive solutions. Developing constructive

ways of overcoming intergroup conflict and prejudice have been a principal theme of the initiative. The success of training seminars in Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Macedonia, Croatia, Hungary, Romania and Slovenia has led to several follow-up projects. Radio and television programs in Croatia and Bulgaria, as well as primary education curricula in Romania are now using the techniques of the show to demonstrate how morality is central to the question of social stability and prosperity. Recently, the UN Administrator and Special Representative to the Secretary-General for Kosovo expressed the wish that a Happy Hippo Show project be started in Kosovo. The Happy Hippo format has also been adapted for use in values education programs in Finland, Italy, Russia, Sweden, Moldova, Norway, and Malaysia.

In collaboration with the International Labour Organization (ILO), the European Baha'i Business Forum, a voluntary association of Baha'i business professionals, recently produced a joint working paper entitled "Socially Responsible Enterprise Restructuring." The report has served as a basis for several training sessions organized by the ILO and has been disseminated to governments, employers associations and workers' organizations throughout the world. The European Baha'i Business Forum has also conducted a series of seminars on business ethics in eastern Europe and has formed an educational partnership with AIESEC, one of the largest organizations of business students in the world.

As a practical step in contributing to a dialogue about development and social transformation that explicitly takes account of spiritual values and perspectives, some 100 influential development organizations, international and government agencies, religious representatives, and academics recently gathered in New Delhi to participate in a colloquium on the theme of Science, Religion and Development. The primary goal of the event was to explore how a unified interaction between scientific methods and religious insights can promote the building of human capacity, particularly in the areas of governance, education, technology and economic activity. The event was organized by the Baha'i community of India and the Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity, a research agency of the Baha'i International Community. At the global level, Baha'is have also been involved in the very constructive World Faiths Development Dialogue between the World Bank and major religions.

Although it strictly abstains from involvement in partisan politics, the Baha'i community does seek to contribute to public discourse about what it considers to be fundamental issues of principle. Over the past few years, for example, the Baha'i community, through its 180 elected national governing councils, has sought to encourage governments around the globe to adopt comprehensive programs of human rights education. In some cases, Baha'i national councils have made specific recommendations for promoting human rights curricula in schools and, in others, have tried to create awareness on the part of government officials about the crucial role of human rights education in fostering a culture of justice in their societies. Once such a culture begins to evolve, practical issues such as training in the administration and enforcement of justice, equitable distribution of community resources, and the upliftment of persons and groups historically excluded from the benefits and opportunities offered by society can be effectively addressed.

Ultimately, Baha'is believe, the emergence of a peaceful and just social order animated by moral principle is contingent upon a fundamental redefinition of all human relationships—among individuals themselves, between human society and the natural world, between the individual and the community, and between individual citizens and their governing institutions. In particular, outmoded notions of power and authority need to be recast. A basic reconceptualization of social reality is thus envisioned, a reality that in spirit and practice reflects the principle of the oneness of humankind. To accept that "the body of humankind is one and indivisible" is to recognize that every human being is "born into the world as a trust of the whole."³

Governance is referred to in the Baha'i writings as an expression of trusteeship, as the administering of a trust. Bahá'u'lláh speaks of the governors and administrators of society as "*trustees*" or the "*trusted ones*" of God. He also warns leaders that the vulnerable and the poor "*are the trust of God in your midst*."⁴ The concept of trusteeship implies, in some sense, a covenant between those who are in positions of authority and the members of the social polity that they are obligated to protect and serve. Consequently, trustworthiness is a vital characteristic of governance; it is the source of true

accountability. Bahá'u'lláh describes trustworthiness as the *"greatest portal leading unto the tranquillity and security of the people,"* and *"the supreme instrument for the prosperity of the world."*⁵ *"All the domains of power,"* He avers, *"are illumined by its light."*⁶

While governance is often equated with government, it in fact involves much more. Governance occurs at all levels and encompasses the ways that formal government, non-governmental groups, community organizations and the private sector manage resources and affairs. Three factors that largely determine the efficacy of any system of governance are the quality of leadership, the characteristics of the governed, and the nature of the structures and processes employed to exercise authority and meet human needs.

In this regard, the Baha'i community offers its own administrative system as a model for study. Baha'is attach great importance to cooperative decision-making and assign organizational responsibility for community affairs to freely elected governing councils at the local, national, and international levels. This hierarchy devolves decision-making to the lowest practicable level-thereby instituting a unique vehicle for grassroots participation in governance-while at the same time providing a level of coordination and authority that makes possible collaboration on a global scale. A unique feature of the Baha'i electoral process is the maximum freedom of choice given to the electorate through the prohibition of nominations, candidature and solicitation. Election to Baha'i administrative bodies is based not on personal ambition but rather on recognized ability, mature experience, and a commitment to service. Because the Baha'i system does not allow the imposition of the arbitrary will or leadership of individuals, it cannot be used as a pathway to power. Decision-making authority rests with corporate bodies. All members of the Baha'i community, no matter what position they may temporarily occupy in the administrative structure, are expected to regard themselves as involved in a learning process, as they strive to understand and implement the laws and principles of their Faith. Significantly, in many parts of the world, the first exercises in democratic activity have occurred within the Baha'i community.

The capacity of any institution to effect and manage change, and to respond creatively to challenges that lie before it, entails the development of a number of critical skills. These include the ability to maintain a clear perception of social reality and of the forces operating in it; to properly assess the resources of the community; to consult freely and harmoniously as a body and with one's constituency; to realize that every decision has both a material and spiritual dimension; to arrive at decisions in a manner that preserves and promotes institutional unity; to win the confidence, respect and genuine support of those affected by these decisions; to effectively use the energies and diverse talents of the members of the community it serves; to integrate the diversity of initiatives of individuals and groups into one forward movement that benefits all; to uphold standards of fairness and equity; and to implement decisions with an openness and flexibility that avoid all traces of dictatorial behavior. This constellation of skills must obviously draw on both intellectual and moral resources.

In the Baha'i writings, those individuals who are engaged in government service are exhorted to *"approach their duties with entire detachment, integrity and independence of spirit, and with complete consecration and sanctity of purpose."*⁷ Their personal fulfillment comes not from material reward but from *"the devising of methods to insure the progress of the people,"* from experiencing the *"delights of dispensing justice,"* and drinking from *"the springs of a clear conscience and a sincere intent."*⁸ In the end, the *"happiness and greatness, the rank and station, the pleasure and peace"* of the public servant does not consist in *"his personal wealth, but rather in his excellent character, his high resolve, the breadth of his learning, and his ability to solve difficult problems."*⁹

The challenge of overcoming corruption in public life is multidimensional in nature. The adoption of administrative procedures and legal safeguards, however important such measures may be, will not bring about enduring changes in individual and institutional behavior. For governance, in essence, is a moral and spiritual practice whose compass is found within the human heart. Thus, only as the inner lives of human beings are transformed will the vision of a "genuine civilization of character" be realized.¹⁰

Notes

1. Bahá'u'lláh, Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh Revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas (Wilmette: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1978), p. 125.
2. Ibid., p. 70.
3. The Prosperity of Humankind, a statement of the Baha'i International Community, 1995.
4. Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh (Wilmette: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1983), p. 251.
5. Bahá'u'lláh, Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh, pp. 37-38.
6. Ibid., p. 37.
7. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, cited in Trustworthiness: A Cardinal Baha'i Virtue, Compiled by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice, January 1987.
8. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, The Secret of Divine Civilization (Wilmette: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1970), p. 19, 21.
9. Ibid., pp. 23-24.
10. Ibid., p. 62