Rethinking Religion and Politics in a Plural World

The Bahá'í International Community and the United Nations

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Preface

The ideas that gave rise to this book began to percolate in my mind in 2001. That summer, as part of my master's degree in education and international development, I completed an internship at the Bahá'í International Community's (BIC's) United Nations Office. The opportunity came about partly by accident. My husband had secured an internship at the United Nations Security Council, and I needed to find an internship in New York City related to my studies. Over the course of the summer, my interests began to shift away from education policy and toward the role of non-governmental organizations (NGOs)—specifically, religious ones—in international affairs. It was the summer before 9/11, the question of religion in international affairs was still under the radar, and the idea that religion was increasingly irrelevant to the forward march of modernity was largely accepted. But in my internship I observed a different reality, which sparked many questions: Why were so many religious and faith-based NGOs active and formally affiliated with the United Nations? Were there hidden proselytization agendas? Were their contributions valued or even taken seriously? Were they effective? In the years following 9/11, the question of religion and politics accelerated to the top of the research agenda.

In 2004, I began work as principal researcher for the BIC's United Nations Office in New York. For the next eleven years, I had a front-row seat to the multifaceted engagement of religious NGOs (RNGOs) with all matters on the UN agenda: human rights, social and sustainable development, poverty eradication, gender equality, peace and security, and UN reform, among others. During this time, I couldn't help but reflect on the distinct elements of the Bahá'í community's approach to interaction in the political arena. In the burgeoning studies of religion and politics, no one was describing the approach I witnessed at the BIC: a developmental view of history and religion; an understanding of modernity as a stage in humanity's advancement toward greater degrees of social unity; an avoidance of partisanship; an emphasis on the coherence between the means and ends of social transformation; and a keen attentiveness to principled processes of deliberation and decision-making and their place in the global and democratic institutional architecture of the worldwide Bahá'í community. This was religion in politics, but not in the familiar sense of "religion," nor the familiar

sense of "politics." This was something different, something calibrated to a new understanding of human progress and human flourishing and intensely relevant to the pressing social, political, and economic questions of our time.

Twenty years after that first internship, we are seeing the world in a different light, chastened by the experience of a pandemic that has laid bare the frailties and the deep injustices embedded in our social order. We continue to struggle with gross inequality, social marginalization, protracted armed conflict, and the impotence of leaders at all levels to mend the fractures in the structures of society. Yet the heightened consciousness of these frailties has also ushered in a greater desire, an openness, a readiness to rethink established ways of being, doing, and organizing ourselves as a global community, as nations, as communities, and as neighbors. A spirit of refashioning and rethinking is palpable as the unquestionable reality of our interconnectedness comes to light. It is in this spirit—the search for new conditions of possibility, new conceptions of religion, and new modes of pursuing social change—that the inquiry in this book unfolds.

1

Ideas, Religion, and Social Change

In 1884, delegates from twenty-five countries met in Washington, DC, to approve a single "world time" organized around twenty-four time zones encompassing the globe. It was a remarkable achievement; only eighty years prior, every region, every city was setting its own time based on the position of the sun. Over the course of the next several decades, all countries would calibrate their clocks according to Greenwich Mean Time. A quiet revolution had unified the world around a common measure of time.

We, too, live in a time of revolutions, some quiet, some pronounced; dramatic and widespread shifts in thought and behavior arising from ideas that enter the public consciousness and alter the way in which we view and experience our human and social existence. Many such ideas arise not from the centers of power but from the periphery and gradually proliferate among the generality of people, altering thought and practice in fundamental ways. We might think of the printing press, women's suffrage, abolitionism, the internet, to name a few. The COVID-19 pandemic set the stage for further revolutions in thought and practice. In a world struggling with gross inequality and social marginalization, and the inability of leaders to mend the schisms and the wounds afflicting humanity, the pandemic has laid bare the frailties of our social order. Yet this heightened consciousness has also prompted a greater desire, an openness, a readiness to rethink established ways of relating to one another as human beings, as communities, and as nations.

It is in this spirit that the inquiry in this book unfolds: it traces the experience of a community whose ideas about social order and the mechanisms of social change refashion familiar notions of politics as well as religion. The book focuses its attention on the Bahá'í International Community (BIC), an international non-governmental organization (NGO), which represents the worldwide community of some 5 million Bahá'ís across 180 nations,

in global fora—most notably, the United Nations. As a smaller religious community, Bahá'ís do not exert the kind of influence that is associated with "key players" in the international arena, such as powerful lobby groups that wield significant material resources and mobilize communities in protests and advocacy to achieve political aims. However, the Bahá'í example offers a particularly fruitful, unique test case for an approach to social change that goes beyond the divisive, antagonistic modes that typically characterize political processes to lay the foundations for new patterns of relationships among individuals, communities, and governing institutions—patterns that are keenly attuned to the needs of an evolving global community. Such an approach has given rise to a new polity, a new vision of political life, and a new logic of engagement animated by the reality of the profound interdependence of all peoples and nations.

On another level, this book is about the power of ideas to effect social change. I do not try to argue simply that ideas are powerful catalysts for driving change; this we know. We live in a world shaped by ideas that were once radical and dangerous and now widely accepted, such as universal suffrage, universal education, racial and gender equality, the system of nation-states, etc. As Victor Hugo once remarked: "An invasion of armies can be resisted; an invasion of ideas cannot."[1]

Specifically, I examine ideas that emerge from within a religious tradition and shape the interactions of a religious community with society as a whole. Perhaps we are not used to thinking of religions in terms of "ideas"; more commonly, we think of them in terms of "beliefs," laws, and social and cultural practices. But ideas matter. If we consider the history of religious thought dating back to Abraham, Moses, Zoroaster, Krishna, Buddha, Jesus, and Mohammad, one cannot but be struck by the deep influence of the teachings and ideas introduced by these figures on the development of human civilization. German sociologist Max Weber was among the first to posit a connection between Christian ideals and new patterns of behavior. In his famous treatise *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1930), Weber draws a connection between the ethics of ascetic Protestantism and the emergence of the capitalist spirit in the West. Specifically, he notes that Calvinist attitudes toward profit, wealth, and the dedicated pursuit of a craft or profession (seen as a "calling") are endowed with moral and spiritual significance.

Furthermore, the discipline of political theology has shed light on the relationship between ideas in religious teachings and engagement in public

life, as exemplified in liberation theology, Catholic social teaching,[2] and more recently, feminist theology.[3] Political scientists Judith Goldstein and Robert Keohane have argued that ideas have the broadest impact when they take the form of worldviews, which, the authors note, can be rooted in religion as much as in scientific rationality. Of course, we can also point to organizations claiming to speak from a religious standpoint that have resorted to violent means to challenge dominant regimes (e.g., ISIS, Al-Qaeda, the Lord's Resistance Army, Buddhist groups in Myanmar and Sri Lanka, Hindu nationalist groups in India, among others).[4] Sadly, there is no lack of organizations, past or present, religious or secular, that have legitimized violence on philosophical grounds.

There are many different kinds of religious organizations. I focus specifically on a category of organizations known as "religious NGOs" or RNGOs. Broadly speaking, RNGOs are nonprofit voluntary organizations whose identity and mission are consciously shaped by the teachings of a religious or spiritual tradition, such as World Vision International, the Lutheran World Federation, Tzu Chi Foundation, Soka Gakkai International, Muslim Aid, American Jewish World Service, and many others. RNGOs have exercised their influence in the international arenas of policy-making and humanitarian aid and have demonstrated their impressive capacity to mobilize human and financial resources, as well as the ability to reach remote areas and populations. In this way, they have, over the years, become indispensable partners in development, relief, and peacemaking efforts.

But the way in which the teachings and ideas of these respective traditions are translated into action by RNGOs remains largely unknown. For example: How do the tenets of a religious/spiritual tradition shape an RNGO's view of the world and its understanding of the role it is to play in it? How do they influence the manner in which the RNGO diagnoses the world's social ills? How do the teachings shape the methods employed by the organization? What is the organization's understanding of foundational concepts such as peace, justice, progress, and human flourishing? To ask these questions is not to essentialize the aforementioned ideas and discount other influences on organizational behavior (e.g., finances, human resources, external sociocultural factors, etc.). Rather, it is a step toward examining more deeply the intellectual, conceptual, and epistemological dimensions of religious agency in the modern world.

Why Are These Questions Important, and Why Now?

Challenging Oppositional Conceptions of Religion and Modernity

Since the Enlightenment, religion has largely been defined in opposition to modernity: Friedrich Nietzsche's declaration that "God is dead" helped usher in the victory of scientific rationality over religious revelation.[5] The idea that the influence of religion would wane as the march of modernity advanced held sway over the social sciences until the 1960s.[6] Yet by the close of the twentieth century, one of the leading proponents of secularization theory recanted, observing that "[t]he world today, with some exceptions, … is as furiously religious as it ever was" and that the entire body of literature loosely labeled "secularization theory" was "essentially mistaken."[7] The pendulum had swung in the opposite direction, it seemed: religiously motivated activists, revolutionaries, social movements, and factions were mobilizing and asserting their place domestically and on the world stage.[8] This is "God's century," declared scholars[9]; in less than fifty years, religion had moved from a position of irrelevance to one of the "most influential factors in world affairs."[10] How, then, should we account for the role of religion in the present day?

This book adds to the efforts to examine the role of religion in the modern world by looking at religious agency from an internal, *emic* perspective. Complementary to the work that focuses on describing historical processes (e.g., the axial age,[11] multiple modernities,[12] narrative frameworks[13]), I seek to understand how a religious organization translates the ideas and teachings of its tradition to its actions in the international arena. In doing so, I challenge the construction of religion *in opposition to* modernity in order to explore its role as an active participant in the definition thereof.

Beyond the Focus on Religion and Violence

As one scholar points out, until recently, "the treatment of religion generally retained the old secular fixation with religiously based conflict or religiously inspired violence."[14] After the attacks of September 11, 2001, growing concerns about fundamentalism and radicalization directed research funding and attention to religious organizations to better understand the relationship between religious ideology and violence. However, this preoccupation with religiously motivated violence (which itself may be a misnomer, as political and

personal interests play a defining role) has resulted in a partial and distorted view of religion in the international arena. Studies have associated organizations' deep rootedness in and adherence to a faith tradition with militant and violent actions.[15] This approach has reinforced a belief in the "irrationality" of religious actors, the notion that greater identification with a religious tradition leads to socially deviant and undesirable behavior, and the idea that religion has no place in broader discourse about the organization of human affairs and the social order.

At the same time, religious organizations pursuing social change in constructive, creative, effective, and law-abiding ways have received little attention. Isn't it possible that religious organizations can abide by the law and, at the same time, challenge the vision, rationality, and structures of power embedded in present-day society? Can organizations be revolutionary and law-abiding at the same time? And if so, how? In this book, I posit that by interrogating an RNGO's internal structures of thought, we can begin to examine how religious ideas combine to constitute a distinct logic—one that offers a new vantage point and lens for examining the present social order and the dynamics and relationships within it.

Beyond the Focus on Service Provision and Advocacy

Previous research about religious and faith-based organizations has conceptualized their roles along two lines: first, in terms of the provision of material and social services and, second, in terms of social justice advocacy. It is true that a large proportion of religious civil society organizations attend to the needs of underserved and vulnerable populations[16] and advocate for social justice in various domains. It is also true that many religious organizations have been able to provide financial and organizational resources, reach remote populations, and mobilize their congregations to support growing social movements.[17] Yet an exclusive focus on the service- and advocacy-oriented work obscures an important dimension of RNGO contributions—namely, their efforts "to confront and alter values that drive [contemporary society], and to shift power dynamics in contemporary politics."[18] Others concur that religion represents "a deep source for contesting development orthodoxy and providing alternatives" but note that this facet is poorly conceptualized and often ignored.[19] Do we see RNGOs simply as attending to those marginalized by the current world order, or do we also recognize their role in building the world anew?

Enlarging the Moral Imagination

It is too easy to forget that the philosophical foundations shaping our global order—our understanding of power, relationships between nations, individual responsibility, security, etc.—were not handed down to us but were created and constructed by people. It is these conceptual foundations that continue, often imperceptibly, to germinate and give rise to patterns of thinking and practice that appear very "normal" to us. It is difficult to picture another form of democracy, public education, or a market economy. Yet in the collective efforts to forge a more just social order, we must consider the intellectual contributions that arise outside of the prevailing order and not assume that all civil society actors wish to adopt the intellectual program of the Western liberal-democratic order. Scholars of international affairs have begun to explore "alternative understandings that can expand the meanings of power, institutions and ideas" in the context of world politics[20]; others describe a steady "transformation of the normative structure of international society" beyond its European origins[21] and examine new forms of rationality that "draw on both secular and religious imaginaries."[22] By studying the structures of thought of RNGOs, new forms of rationality are able to come to light, correcting the often-held assumptions about their proselytizing motives or the absence of critique or ideas regarding the structure and intellectual foundations of the present-day social order.

The Case for Studying the Bahá'í International Community

This book analyzes the influence of ideas on RNGO engagement in the international arena through a focused analysis of the BIC's United Nations Office seventy-year engagement with the United Nations. The Bahá'í Faith was founded in Persia (now Iran) in the mid-nineteenth century by Mírzá Husayn-'Ali, known as Bahá'u'lláh.[23] The teachings of this young Faith focus on the promotion of unity and justice in the context of an emerging and interdependent global community. The fundamental oneness of all human beings is the cornerstone of all Bahá'í teachings, which chart a course for the expression of this interdependence in all processes, relationships, and institutions that sustain society. The Bahá'í Faith is an independent religion, with communities established in over 100,000 localities around the world, numbering over 5 million adherents;[24] and today it is recognized as the second most widespread religion in the world.[25]

What makes the BIC such a compelling example to study? First, the sacred texts of the Bahá'í Faith address extensively, among other things, the institutional, legal, social, intellectual, and spiritual requisites of the emerging, increasingly interdependent, global community. Bahá'u'lláh spoke of a new "World Order" fully sixty years before Woodrow Wilson would use this expression in his "Fourteen Points."[26] In that sense, the Bahá'í Faith is qualitatively different than "ancient" faiths, as it addresses directly and explicitly the exigencies of the modern order. "Be anxiously concerned with the needs of the age ye live in," state the writings of the Bahá'í Faith, "and center your deliberations on its exigencies and requirements."[27] Furthermore, the development of the Bahá'í community in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries parallels the rise of nation-states and the modern political order.

Today, the BIC is an active and well-respected NGO at the United Nations and among its NGO peers, as attested to by independent reports as well as its history of being elected to leadership positions on numerous prominent NGO committees[28]; it has emerged as one of the leading voices in the areas of human rights, gender equality, and social development. A rich record for study emerges from its now seventy-five-year relationship with the United Nations.[29] The BIC is among very few RNGOs to represent the entire membership of a single religious community to the United Nations.[30]

Scholarship about the Bahá'í Faith has, over the years, shifted from a focus on the tenets and history of the Bahá'í Faith (often situated in the field of Middle Eastern studies)[31] to one that correlates the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith to a range of social issues and engages a wide variety of discourses. A number of scholars, both Bahá'ís and those in the larger community, have continued to shed new light on Bahá'í scriptures,[32] the history and practices of various Bahá'í communities,[33] and the persecution of the community in Iran.[34] Scholars have increasingly explored the application of Bahá'í principles to questions such as gender equality,[35] education,[36] governance, and peace.[37] As well, other publications have brought Bahá'í thought and practice into conversation with contemporary scholarship on religion and modernity.[38]

Another reason for the timeliness and urgency of this study is the need to advance scholarship beyond its comfort zone of Christian NGOs and organizations. While these comprise the majority of humanitarian, development, and advocacy NGOs worldwide, a continued focus on Christian organizations to the exclusion of other faiths continues the practice of transposing a normatively Christian understanding of religion onto the study of other faiths, whose theological and conceptual frameworks may be distorted, or rendered

invisible, by such an analysis. As Richard King reminds us, one of the central tasks of scholars of religions outside of Christianity is to "[untangle] some of the Christian presuppositions that have framed the discussion so far."[39] Unlike the older world religions, the Bahá'í Faith engages directly with the category of "religion." In the Bahá'í writings, religion is described as a continually unfolding process that operates throughout the history of human civilization (and its present). "Bahá'u'lláh has not brought into existence a new religion to stand beside the present multiplicity of sectarian organizations," states a Bahá'í text; rather, "He has recast the whole conception of religion as the principal force impelling the development of consciousness."[40] Throughout this book, the Bahá'í conception of religion and its role in reshaping familiar understandings of social order and social change are explored in the context of the BIC's engagement in the international arena.

We must consider that new ideas and challenges to established modes of thinking and behaving tend to emerge not from the mainstream of a debate, but rather from the periphery—from groups of individuals who challenge prevailing patterns of thought and behavior and, perhaps most powerfully, establish alternative patterns for society to consider. One such alternative pattern, and one crucial to this discussion, is the orientation of the Bahá'í community toward the practice of politics. The centrality attached to the principle of the oneness of humankind in the Bahá'í writings extends to and shapes its view of politics. I use the term "politics" in a broad sense to denote processes and activities that encompass decision-making about the social order and the deliberation on issues facing society.[41] Efforts to contribute to the betterment of society must eventually navigate this terrain in some measure. Bahá'ís, however, draw a distinction between partisan political activity—activity characterized by association with, promotion of, or opposition to the interests of a particular group or political party—and unifying actions aimed at bringing about a social good. Partisan activity is traditionally concerned with the "retention or acquisition of power, in which all participants in the political arena are classified as either allies or opponents."[42] Grounded in the teaching of the oneness of humankind, the Bahá'í writings set forth a system of governance and decision-making that eschews partisan methods of any kind, methods that embody contests for power, however subtle (as will be discussed in detail in Chapter 3). The Bahá'í writings state: "If religion becomes a cause of dislike, hatred and division, it were better to be without it, and to withdraw from such a religion would be a truly religious act …. Any religion which is not a cause of love and unity is no religion."[43]

These specific parameters of engagement in political affairs are highly practical in nature as they preserve the unity of a growing, far-flung Bahá'í community, spread across different countries and under the authority of clashing governments. In a world slowly advancing toward unity, Bahá'ís abstain from involvement in processes or systems that divide them into groups based on ideology (such as political parties) or social class (caste systems, for instance), as these maintain structures and ways of thinking that place individuals into oppositional and divisive relationships. On a practical level, this means that Bahá'ís cannot identify as members of a political party or run for political office, though they can vote. Adherence to this principle is not meant as a criticism of those employing such methods but rather an acknowledgment of the limitations of such methods in trying to bring about greater unity. On the face of it, this may suggest an incompatibility between Bahá'í teachings and engagement with the United Nations, which is, after all, a political entity. Yet this is not the case. In the context of the United Nations, this directive means that Bahá'ís cannot align with initiatives that support any one political platform or viewpoint. By analyzing the expression of several foundational elements of Bahá'í thought throughout seventy-five years of history at the United Nations, this book examines the emergence of a distinctive pattern of interactions in the political arena. Furthermore, the prohibition against engaging in partisan political processes does not prevent collaborating in other ways with those who use traditional political approaches to achieve noble ends. In fact, it implies working with broad and diverse arrays of partners (across on all "sides of the aisle"), where efforts can be combined to achieve constructive social change.

From the Vantage Point of the United Nations

The United Nations provides an important vantage point for the study of religious organizations in international affairs. Indeed, the presence of religious actors at the United Nations is more prominent today than at any other time and encompasses normative, institutional, operational, and discursive dimensions. Institutionally, intergovernmental and governmental delegations such as the Permanent Mission of the Organization for Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and the Permanent Observer Mission of the Holy See play a major representative role. The OIC is the largest intergovernmental organization with a mission to the United Nations, consisting of fifty-seven member states, while the Holy See represents the voice and experience of the worldwide Catholic community.[44] In

addition, a number of UN member states have official religions that shape their foreign policy and perspectives on issues under consideration by the United Nations. Normatively, religion is addressed in the UN human rights framework as a non-derogable right[45] to freedom of religion or belief. In a less direct but widely acknowledged manner, both the Charter of the United Nations and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights are normatively rooted in values emanating from the world's religious traditions.[46] Of the over 5,000 NGOs that formally cooperate with the United Nations (through their "consultative status"[47]), approximately 10 to 15 percent have a religious affiliation and self-identify as "religious" or "spiritual."[48] Over the last fifteen years, various UN agencies have formalized their collaboration with a growing number of RNGOs and faith-based organizations, recognizing the value of their skills and resources (human, social, and financial) in achieving development and humanitarian goals.[49] As the UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women notes:

> Faith-based[50] organizations are … among the most powerful agents of social change. The language of faith reaches to the deepest roots of human motivation. In addition, faith-based organizations and institutions are among the largest, most stable, and well-resourced social networks. Many of these networks transcend political, ethnic, and socio-economic boundaries…[51]

While only a decade ago, the question of religion and religious actors may have seemed out of place in the presumed secular domain of the United Nations, it is today—as outlined above—a well-established facet of its intellectual and operational environment.

A number of scholars have begun to examine the manner in which ideas rooted in religious traditions guide and motivate religious actors at the UN. Joseph Rossi, for example, identifies particular theological constructs that shaped Catholic engagement at the United Nations between 1946 and 1972; among them sovereignty of God, right conscience, human dignity, and the essential unity of the human race.[52] Similarly, in his 1965 address to the General Assembly, Pope Paul VI notes that "peace is not built merely by means of politics and a balance of power and interests. It is built with the mind, with ideas … the edifice of modern civilization has to be built on spiritual principles, for they are the only ones capable not only of supporting it, but of shedding light on it and inspiring it."[53] A more recent study of Christian NGOs at the United Nations, by Karsten Lehmann, asserts that "religiously affiliated actors cannot be properly analyzed without focusing upon the subjectively meaningful behavior of

individuals."[54] The study attends to the manner in which the respective traditions of two RNGOs shaped their reading of international relations, their conceptions of human rights, the determination of organizational roles, and responsibilities vis-à-vis the social issues at hand, and the manner in which engagement with the United Nations was framed. Both Rossi's and Lehmann's studies highlight the dynamic relationship between theological reflection and the kind of strategies, approaches, and positions adopted by the RNGOs in question.

The Organizational Substrate: A New Analytical Tool

The central concern of this book is the identification and study of a distinct character of political activity as carried out by the BIC in its interactions with the United Nations. The inquiry draws inspiration from Robert Byrd's landmark study of Quaker engagement in foreign policy from 1647 to 1945 that seeks to identify a "body of cohesive principles which form the central structure" of the Quaker movement and which "give direction and moving power to it."[55] Examining Quaker efforts in the areas of abolishing slavery, promoting freedom of religion, as well as peacemaking and peacebuilding, Byrd delineates what he refers to as "the invisible skeleton" that consistently shaped the character of Quaker work for social justice over a period of three centuries.[56]

In the spirit of unearthing the hidden conceptual and epistemological frames shaping action, I introduce the concept of the *organizational substrate*. In order to grasp the nature and qualities of the political activity of the BIC, it is necessary to go beyond the external sociocultural determinants of behavior to explore the structures of organizational thought *from the inside*. This enables a better understanding of the manner in which the particular organization views the world and its role in it; as such, we begin to understand the entity not only as a political and social actor but *also* as a religious actor; not only as a consumer of political philosophies and structures of the liberal Western order but also as a creative agent of alternative formulations of progress and social order, a partner in the co-creation of the modern world.

If we understand religious traditions as organic, living phenomena, we must select (or develop) analytical tools that are attuned to these characteristics. As such, the *substrate* is a construct intentionally drawn from the fields of biology and chemistry, which themselves focus on organic phenomena. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the term "substrate" refers to a foundational form—something that "underlies or forms the basis of another."[57] In biology, a

substrate is a "surface or material on which any particular organism occurs or grows";[58] in chemistry, it is the "substance which a particular agent or reagent acts on … bringing about a specific transformation."[59] Political theorist William Connolly highlights the utility of concepts drawn from biology for the study of phenomena in the political sphere. He argues that "bio-cultural connections should become more central to political inquiry," as this approach "appreciates the creative element in evolution" and may contribute to forms of "cultural interpretation that are even less reductionist in character."[60]

The creative and evolutionary element highlighted by Connolly is central to the analysis in this book, which attends to the generative (as opposed to deterministic) nature of the substrate as well as to the evolution of both the Bahá'í community and the United Nations between 1945 and 2020. The study identifies three elements of the organizational substrate of the BIC and examines their role in shaping the BIC's engagement with the United Nations. What emerges from the analysis is a distinctive kind of "politics" that challenges familiar notions of oppositional processes aimed at bringing about social change. The three elements are: (a) a developmental view of history, (b) the oneness of humankind, and (c) the Bahá'í system of governance (the "Administrative Order"). The elements of an organizational substrate not only bring to light the often hidden and unacknowledged factors shaping an organization's behavior, but it also enables us to consider the "conditions of possibility" (to borrow from Michel Foucault[61]) for new patterns and means of pursuing social change. Chapter 3 elaborates on this new analytical tool and its application in the study of the BIC.

Through the Lens of Seventy-Five Years of History

The case study of the BIC is presented through a historical lens: it is not a snapshot but rather an unfolding. As such, it is not an exhaustive account of the history of the organization's relationship with the United Nations (this would require several volumes to recount) but a study of the manner in which certain foundational elements of the Bahá'í Faith combine to give rise to a qualitatively different form of political activity.

There are of course many ways to tell this story and, with each approach, to reveal different facets of religious agency and engagement. One could, for example, organize the analysis according to various themes (for instance, engagement with civil society, capacity building) or issue areas (such as

human rights or gender equality), and these too would yield useful insights. The rationale behind the historical approach is the desire to situate the BIC's engagement in the historical processes to which it is inextricably linked—the growth and development of civil society, the wider Bahá'í community, and the United Nations itself. Over the course of the seventy-five years covered by this volume, beginning in 1945 and concluding in 2020, we see the emergence of a new voice in international affairs—that of international civil society, through the work and organizing of thousands of NGOs spanning every issue, ideology, and constituency. We see the first seven decades of the first truly universal institution for deliberation among nation-states as it grows from 51 to 193 members. And we see the emergence of the BIC from obscurity—from an almost entirely unknown community in 1945—to an NGO elected to leadership positions of many of the largest NGO committees at the United Nations. As Byrd points out in his study of Quaker engagement in foreign policy, "The efficacy of this long-view approach is that the insights from each period are informed by the longer historical trajectory of engagement."[62]

To carry out the research, I drew on archival materials from the National Bahá'í Archives of the United States (Wilmette, Illinois), the archives of the BIC's United Nations Office (New York), the Dag Hammarskjöld Library (United Nations Headquarters, New York), the archives of the Bahá'í Office of Public Affairs (Washington, DC), as well as personal archives of past and present representatives of the BIC. Other sources include published primary sources such as Bahá'í sacred texts (print and online); online sources such as the official website of the BIC (www.bic.org), the official website of the worldwide Bahá'í community (www.Bahá'í.org), the BIC's YouTube channel, and the UN website. I also conducted open-ended interviews with past and present representatives of BIC, BIC delegates to various UN Commissions, as well as BIC staff.

How the Story Unfolds

In Chapter 2, I examine the history of the Bahá'í community, dating back to its origins in mid-nineteenth-century Persia in order to set the stage for its engagement with the structures of the emerging international order—the League of Nations and, subsequently, the United Nations. The chapter outlines the emergence of the Bahá'í community and its introduction of a novel concept of religion—a concept that stresses the progressive, evolutionary, unfolding nature of religious truth throughout human civilization; that religious revelation is

not absolute but relative—that it is conveyed according to the exigences and capacity of humanity at varying times throughout history and will continue in this manner. Next the chapter traces the Bahá'í community's first encounter with the rulers and monarchs of the nineteenth-century world through letters written by Bahá'u'lláh exhorting them to adhere to the "highest principles in human and international relations,"[63] to eradicate corruption from their midst, to disarm, and to come together in a commonwealth of nations. Furthermore, it charts the community's efforts to support the world's nascent steps toward international peace and to begin to erect the structures of the social and governing order outlined in the Bahá'í writings, offering a model for a federated system of social organization capable of embodying the rich cultural and intellectual diversity of the world's people as well as building consensus and fostering unity at all levels of social organization.

Next, in Chapter 3, I introduce the concept of the organizational substrate and highlight the need to examine the BIC from the inside in order to identify and analyze the structures of thought that shape its behaviors in the international arena, thus shedding light on the organization as not only a political but also a religious actor. I stress the importance of attentiveness to the particularities of a given religious tradition, noting that too often Christian frameworks and templates have been used to study other religious traditions. This tendency has muted and rendered invisible some of the distinctive elements of these traditions, which are necessary to obtain a richer understanding of both the human experience of religion and also the broader question of the agency of religious actors in the modern world. The use of the term "substrate" underlines the organic, generative nature of its elements and highlights the evolution of the manner in which religious ideas are applied in response to various historical periods and exigencies. The three elements of the substrate are explored in detail: the developmental view of history, the oneness of humanity, and the Bahá'í Administrative Order.

The next four chapters examine the expression of the substrate throughout four distinct historical periods of the BIC–UN relationship, beginning in 1945 and ending in 2020. Chapter 4 opens with the creation of the United Nations and the BIC's early engagement as an "observer NGO;" it closes in 1970 when the BIC is granted the coveted "consultative status" with the United Nations. The chapter focuses on conceptions of history and time, and their implications for RNGO engagement in international affairs. The Bahá'í conception of history as a developmental and teleological process, unfolding over millennia and advancing toward the formation of a global community of nations, casts the United Nations

in a new light. The chapter explores how such a view of history leads to an evolutionary understanding of the United Nations, its challenges, its promise, and its greater role in the advancement of human society as a whole. We begin to see the emergence of a new kind of agency—the RNGO not as a passive recipient of knowledge about the international order, but one that generates a distinct view of international relations, the processes shaping relationships between member states, the forces leading to integration and disintegration, and the protagonists in the unfolding order.

Turning to a dramatic period in the BIC–UN relationship (1970–86), Chapter 5 unfolds as the existence of the Bahá'í community in Iran is threatened by a government-backed campaign of violent persecution aimed at exterminating the community from its midst. In this period, the elements of the substrate give rise to a principled response to one of the most severe cases of religious persecution in the world at this time. In addressing the growing threats, the BIC is challenged to respond in a manner that "doesn't take [on] the characteristics of the oppressor" but that maintains a principled, nonpartisan, as well as swift and globally coordinated course of action to protect the beleaguered community in Iran. This highlights the Bahá'í approach to relating to secular government authorities, the building of capacity for global action, as well as the evolution of institutions and processes that consolidate the growing Bahá'í community into a coherent global order. Furthermore, the chapter explores the Bahá'í community's involvement in the UN Decade for Women (1976–85) and reveals the particular role of the Universal House of Justice and the Administrative Order in increasing the community's ability to contribute to the advancement of gender equality locally and on the world stage.

Spanning the period between 1986 and 2008, Chapter 6 introduces the distinct construct of peace pursued by the BIC. What emerges from this period is an understanding of peace in terms of processes that advance humanity's capacity for collective action and that are guided by a consciousness of the interdependence and oneness of humankind. The intimate relationship between unity and peace provides a new lens for reading society, primarily in terms of its capacity for social cohesion and collaboration on a global scale. The chapter discusses particular constructs that shape the BIC's understanding of and approach toward the pursuit of peace: unity in diversity, relationship between justice and unity, peace as process, different kinds of peace ("Lesser Peace" and the "Most Great Peace"), conceptions of time, and ends—means coherence. Furthermore, the chapter reviews the BIC's deep engagement in setting the stage for major UN conferences during this period (environment, social development,

gender equality) as well as the BIC's epistemic and intellectual contributions to UN debates on issues of global and social concern.

Chapter 7 explores the operation of the substrate during the fourth and final period examined in this book, from 2008 to 2020. It uncovers a new orientation toward the BIC's engagement in the international arena, as introduced by the global governing body of the Bahá'í Faith—namely, "participation in the discourses of society." This shift embodies an approach toward social change that focuses on transformation at the level of thought, attitudes, and mental habits that constrain and shape the moral and social imagination. As the BIC asserts, "Attitudes, thoughts, and conceptions of fundamental issues need to be reshaped as a truly global community emerges and develops in its understanding of the nature of human flourishing as well as the social and material conditions required for such flourishing."[64] Such an orientation situates the BIC as a contributor to deliberative processes that shape the evolution of thought, practice, and policy-making. Furthermore, it highlights the collective dimension of the generation of insights and knowledge and the advancement of thought. The analysis reveals broader implications for the role of civil society in international affairs, conceptions of religion, the reconciliation of unity and difference, and the role of knowledge in advancing human flourishing.

Bringing together insights from the exploration of the BIC's seventy-five-year engagement with the United Nations, the final chapter probes the central questions of the book: How can we study the structures of thought that shape the engagement of RNGOs in the international arena in order to better understand religious agency in the world today? How do the BIC's structures of thought shape its encounter with the United Nations as it navigates different historical circumstances and opportunities? What insights can we glean about the changing role of religion in the modern world? While the volume focuses on the experience of the BIC, the questions raised and insights generated are not limited to the Bahá'í community. The book addresses itself to broader debates about the category of religion, pushing beyond Christian normativity in the study of civil society in international affairs, the unfoldment of civil society's relationship with the United Nations, the counter-rationality of religious organizations, and, ultimately, the complex, changing role of religion in the modern world.