

Reframing Social Principles: Centering the Spiritual Core of the Bahá'í Faith in Modern Discourse

Behrooz Sabet

Indeed, the chief reason for the evils now rampant in society is a lack of spirituality. The materialistic civilization of our age has so much absorbed the energy and interest of mankind, that people in general no longer feel the necessity of raising themselves above the forces and conditions of their daily material existence. There is not sufficient demand for things that we should call spiritual to differentiate them from the needs and requirements of our physical existence. The universal crisis affecting mankind is, therefore, essentially spiritual in its causes. The spirit of the age, taken on the whole, is irreligious. Man's outlook upon life is too crude and materialistic to enable him to elevate himself into the higher realms of the spirit. [1]

Shoghi Effendi

Historically, particularly in the West, the social principles of the Bahá'í Faith—such as racial justice, economic justice, and gender equality—have played a central role in teaching and promoting the Faith. This approach has been effective and, at times, successful in engaging in social discourse. However, social principles that were once viewed as progressive have, over time, become widely accepted societal norms. As a result, there is a growing need to reiterate the importance of carefully framing these social teachings within the spiritual foundation of the Faith. Without this framework, social teachings may risk losing their deeper meaning and original source, as the core belief of the Bahá'í Faith is that spiritual renewal is the true catalyst for social change and the reconstruction of civilization.

Clearly, in the social sphere and in collaborative efforts with governments, institutions, and public policy initiatives, it is essential to present the Bahá'í perspective on specific social issues with clarity, precision, and a focused approach to ensure its relevance and transformative impact. However, in deeper discussions, when a broader perspective on the Bahá'í worldview is explored, it is more fitting to center the presentation of the Faith on its spiritual core, which embodies the true essence and meaning of Bahá'u'lláh's revelation.

When progressive social teachings are discussed without the spiritual context, they may lead to mere nodding approval, without inspiring the deeper curiosity needed to recognize the true mission of its founder. Even more significantly, the way these principles are conceptualized has, at times, led to their entanglement with ideologies that diverge from the original spiritual, moral, and religious context of the Bahá'í Faith. Furthermore, a Bahá'í discourse focused primarily on social issues could give the misleading impression that the Bahá'í Faith is merely a liberal social movement with religious orientation, rather than a comprehensive, multifaceted spiritual path with a global transformative vision aimed at creating profound changes in human conduct.

How Virtues Lose Meaning Without a Spiritual Core: The Case of Tolerance: A discourse can stray from its spiritual foundation and universal perspective through loosely connected ideas, shifting cultural trends, flawed ideologies, political doctrines, and even academic theories that start with noble principles but veer into misleading conclusions. When a discourse begins with a virtue—such as justice, freedom, or equality—it can serve as a powerful rhetorical anchor, giving the illusion of depth and legitimacy. Length and abstraction can make ideas seem sophisticated, even if they lack logical rigor or practical relevance. Many people

resonate with the initial virtue, assuming that because it started well, it must be valid throughout.

For example, tolerance exists both as a spiritual timeless virtue and as a social principle with policy implications. The difference between the two lies in their origin, purpose, depth, and application. Both forms of tolerance are essential but serve distinct functions. Spiritual tolerance nurtures the soul and fosters deep interpersonal harmony, while social policy tolerance ensures legal fairness and peaceful coexistence in diverse societies.

Tolerance as a spiritual timeless virtue is rooted in spirituality and moral philosophy, often linked to a divine or transcendent order. Found in religious and philosophical traditions, it encourages individuals to cultivate humility, patience, forgiveness, and respect for others' dignity.

Tolerance as a social principle with policy implications is rooted in political philosophy, law, and governance, primarily emerging from Enlightenment ideas about pluralism and civil rights. It is designed as a pragmatic approach to managing diverse societies with competing interests.

However, when social tolerance lacks a deeper spiritual or ethical foundation, it risks leading to moral relativism, political coercion, or unintended contradictions. If a discourse on tolerance is not contextualized within a comprehensive spiritual worldview, it can easily drift into incoherence or contradictions. It may evolve into the notion that all beliefs, behaviors, and opinions must be accepted equally, leading to moral relativism, where even harmful or irrational ideas are shielded from scrutiny under the guise of “tolerance.”

When tolerance is interpreted as absolute acceptance, it paradoxically enables intolerance itself. Karl Popper's *paradox of tolerance* explains that unlimited tolerance ultimately leads to the rise of intolerance.

A drift occurs when tolerance is mistaken for intellectual passivity, treating all ideas as equally valid regardless of evidence or logic. This reduces tolerance to an excuse for anti-intellectualism rather than a principle of mutual respect. The discourse may further equate disagreement with intolerance, suppressing critical inquiry. Instead of advocating for peaceful coexistence, it may shift toward demanding positive affirmation of all beliefs and behaviors, erasing the crucial distinction between tolerating something and endorsing it.

Furthermore, the discussion can become detached from real-world complexities, fostering the illusion that tolerance alone can resolve all conflicts. This overlooks the reality that social issues involve competing values—such as justice, security, and the rule of law—which demand more than mere tolerance to address. Without a well-grounded framework, tolerance risks becoming an empty slogan, vulnerable to misuse and contradiction.

For a healthy civilization, tolerance must be grounded in both a spiritual foundation—rooted in compassion, love, sincerity, unity, and above all, a nonviolent culture of peace—and pragmatic social policies, legal frameworks, and institutional regulations that aim to prevent social conflict, foster political harmony, and ensure legal protection. This balance ensures that tolerance remains a force for justice and unity rather than an empty ideal or a tool for suppressing truth and reason.

Center and Periphery: In any discourse, it is essential to distinguish between the center and periphery of the subject. The concepts of center and periphery are fundamental in religious, philosophical, and scientific discussions, as they demonstrate how a central element serves as an organizing, supportive, or governing force while influencing and connecting to surrounding peripheral elements. This relationship is ubiquitous in nature, from the microcosmic structure of atoms—where the nucleus dictates the behavior of the electron cloud—to the vast expanse of the Solar System, where the Sun provides gravitational stability and energy, guiding the orbits of the planets in its periphery.

In religion, the center refers to the core spiritual teachings and beliefs that form the foundation of the faith. This includes divine principles, the nature of God or ultimate reality, the purpose of life, spiritual growth, the connection with the divine, and the like. The periphery, on the other hand, encompasses the broader social and cultural applications of these core teachings. It involves how religion addresses social issues, governs relationships between individuals, promotes justice and compassion, and engages with the wider world. In essence, the center focuses on spiritual truths and the relationship with the divine, while the periphery deals with how those truths are lived out in the world.

Similarly, in the Bahá'í context, the spiritual teachings of the Faith form the core, while its social vision resides in the periphery. In other words, the spiritual center precedes, and the social vision naturally emanates from it, with the inner essence flowing outward. This structure ensures that the social vision aligns closely with the intentions of Bahá'u'lláh. However, if this logical progression is not followed, or if the spiritual center is not prioritized or fails to play a central role in the discourse, the resulting social framework may fail to reflect the deeper spiritual

foundation and universal vision from which it originates. It may also fail to reveal the spiritual bedrock upon which Bahá'í civilization must be built.

Metaphysical Anxiety: The world is currently facing a crisis of faith, values, and meaning, with many seeking a deeper approach that recognizes spiritual voids as the root cause of numerous societal issues. As societies modernize, spiritual engagement has notably declined, leading to a profound sense of alienation and disconnection from both the divine and a sense of purpose in life. This spiritual void is manifesting in various ways, including societal fragmentation, moral and ethical challenges, and an increasing search for meaning in a world that often prioritizes material success over spiritual growth. In light of these changing times and emerging realities, there is a growing need to present the Bahá'í teachings not merely as principles for social reform but as a comprehensive framework for the spiritual revival of humanity. Thus, Bahá'í discourse will have a broader and more lasting impact if it addresses both the themes of spirituality and the condition of the world that results from its absence.

A Basic Categorical Framework

Here are some potential categories or thematic areas that enhance and clarify our value position on the core spiritual foundation. These areas serve as frameworks for understanding how spiritual principles provide insights into the true meaning and ultimate purpose of the Bahá'í social teachings. By exploring these themes, we can better articulate the connection between the spiritual foundation and the transformative vision of the Bahá'í Faith.

1. The Spiritual Foundations of the Bahá'í Faith

• ***Bahá'u'lláh's Claim and Vision:*** A candid discussion of Bahá'u'lláh's role as the promised figure in all religious dispensations, including His unique position in the history of religious revelation and His vision for a united global society.

• ***The True Meaning of Religion:*** Exploration of the Bahá'í perspective on religion, which is seen not as a mere set of rituals or beliefs, but as a dynamic, transformative force guiding human progress toward unity, justice, and peace.

- ***The Role of Religion in Individual and Collective Transformation:*** A comprehensive look at how religion serves not only as a source of personal guidance but also as a dynamic force capable of transforming society and establishing the essential foundation for civilization.
- ***The Chaos That Arises When the Light of Religion is Extinguished:*** An exploration of the consequences when spiritual principles are abandoned or disregarded, resulting in societal instability, moral decay, and the fragmentation of human relationships.
- ***The Importance of Placing God at the Center of Our Worldviews:*** An emphasis on the central role of God in shaping individual and collective perspectives, fostering a worldview where divine guidance informs every aspect of life, from ethics to social structures.
- ***The Interplay of Individual Transformation, Civilization, and Family Life:*** Emphasizing that human nature is inherently spiritual, the Bahá'í teachings affirm that the purpose and meaning of life are primarily defined by spiritual progress, with material life serving as a vehicle for actualizing this potential. This realization is reflected in ethical behavior, love, and

service to others. The spiritual foundation of human existence teaches that individual transformation begins with personal growth and extends outward in a reciprocal process that fosters collective advancement. Within this process, the family serves as the most fundamental environment for self-development, forming the foundation upon which social institutions are built and shaping the course of civilization. The rise and fall of civilizations are intrinsically linked to the spiritual vitality of family life, which has historically functioned as the organizing principle of human society. While civilizations evolve in response to changing circumstances, the essential components of family life remain constant, as prescribed in religious dispensations. Within this framework, the emphasis on the Bahá'í Faith's spiritual teachings on marriage and family should demonstrate how these essential components are preserved while simultaneously advancing a social ethos rooted in equality and justice.

- ***The Spiritual Foundation: A Compelling Force for Unity and Peace:*** The ultimate goal of cultivating unity in the world and establishing a culture of peace is fundamentally a spiritual process that brings about transformative change in human character. A spiritual process is central to changing human behavior toward others and fostering the recognition of humanity as one. This spiritual awakening must carry “the compelling power of conscience” for the ideals of unity and peace to take root. As ‘Abdu’l-Bahá clearly states, “it is clear and evident that the execution of this mighty endeavour is impossible through ordinary human feelings but requireth the powerful sentiments of the heart to transform its potential into reality.” He further emphasizes, “The power of conscience is therefore needed, and spiritual sentiments are required, that souls may feel compelled to evince a goodly character. It is our firm belief that the power

of implementation in this great endeavour is the penetrating influence of the Word of God and the confirmations of the Holy Spirit.”[\[2\]](#)

- ***The Transitory Nature of Life and the Immortality of the Soul:*** Discussing the Bahá’í view of life’s temporal nature, the concept of the soul, and the belief in its immortality, underlining the continuity of spiritual growth beyond physical existence. A significant and perhaps unparalleled feature in religious history found in the Bahá’í sacred writings is the strong emphasis on the transitory nature of material life and the immortality of the soul. From guiding personal conduct to defining the meaning of life, from encouraging rectitude of character to advising leaders on principles of governance, and from ethical admonitions to reflections on the nature of reality, both Bahá’u’lláh and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá consistently return to this theme. What makes this emphasis unique is that, while the Bahá’í teachings envision a practical and progressive civilization, they firmly root it in the constant awareness that material existence is fleeting and ephemeral—merely a means for the soul’s eternal journey.

2. Methodological Foundations for Understanding and Conveying the Core Spiritual Basis of the Bahá’í Faith

- ***Science and Religion: Pillars of a Spiritually Grounded Civilization***

The harmony between science and religion as pillars of a true civilization enriches the core spiritual foundation of the Bahá’í Faith, providing a framework for understanding and addressing the material and spiritual dimensions of human existence. Within the teachings of the Faith, the integration of these two complementary forces is essential to fostering a

civilization that reflects divine principles while advancing human progress. By bridging the empirical insights of science with the moral and ethical guidance of religion, the Bahá'í perspective transcends the fragmentation often seen in society, offering a balanced approach to life that nurtures both the soul and the world. This synthesis not only facilitates material and technological progress but also strengthens the spiritual foundation required to navigate the complexities of contemporary challenges.

Central to this vision is a deeper understanding of spiritual renewal as a transcendent force that reorients humanity toward higher principles, aligning with the Faith's emphasis on unity, justice, and compassion. The integration of science and religion is not merely an intellectual exercise but a transformative process that enriches the Faith's social teachings, offering a new paradigm for understanding the purpose and potential of human existence. As humanity faces global challenges, the Bahá'í teachings emphasize the necessity of a civilization rooted in both scientific innovation and spiritual clarity. This integration of material and spiritual dimensions strengthens the core spiritual foundation of the Baha'i Faith, inspiring a vision of a world where progress is measured not only by technological advancement but by the moral and spiritual development of society, ensuring the well-being and unity of all peoples.

- ***The Influence of the Bahá'í Worldview on Emerging Normative Thought and Practical Life***

A discussion of the harmony between science and religion can be approached on multiple levels. At the general level, it involves examining their historical relationship and identifying the factors that have led to periods of both divergence and convergence. A deeper level requires

engaging with the philosophical foundations of materialism and reductionism in human knowledge—leading to frameworks that reveal the necessity of a more integrative approach between the material and spiritual dimensions of civilization. Most importantly, this discourse should illuminate how the Bahá'í worldview is increasingly reflected in emerging normative values across religious, philosophical, and social thought. That is to say, it brings to light how the Bahá'í disposition, grounded in its intrinsic spiritual principles, has subtly permeated and influenced the constructive ethos of our time.[\[3\]](#)

- ***Balancing Continuity and Change: Harmonizing Timeless Principles and Social Teachings***

Addressing the dynamic tension between upholding timeless spiritual principles and adapting to the evolving needs of society, this discussion illustrates how the foundation of Bahá'í belief is built upon the interplay between continuity and change.

Continuity refers to the enduring aspects of religious teachings, which define all religions as integral components of the tree of life and as "the changeless Faith of God, eternal in the past and eternal in the future." Change, on the other hand, reflects the evolving social conditions of humanity, allowing for further growth and development. In every dispensation, as new spiritual regeneration unfolds, humanity requires a favorable social environment to nurture, reinforce, and sustain the process of spiritual growth.

Thus, social teachings are not isolated or stand-alone principles but rather instruments designed to cultivate conditions that foster ever-deeper spiritual

development. Continuity provides order and stability, while change allows for the emergence of new possibilities. Therefore, while social change is both essential and inevitable, it finds its true meaning only within the framework of the spiritual core that upholds and binds the changeless Faith of God.

In this turbulent era of change and upheaval, one of the key challenges facing the Bahá'í community is to demonstrate, both conceptually and practically, how the vitality of Bahá'u'lláh's Faith harmonizes the dual aspects of continuity and change. Indeed, this challenge lies at the heart of ongoing Bahá'í discourse. The Bahá'í community will increasingly be called upon to show how continuity can be upheld without succumbing to reactionary or outdated interpretations of the past, while also distinguishing itself from radical forces of disbelief that seek to redefine human nature, infuse social order with a sacrilegious character, and distort the very essence of human progress and happiness with hollow theories and unfounded claims.

3. Challenge and Symptom of Spiritual Voids

The concept of a spiritual void is more than the mere decline of organized religion; it reflects a profound sense of alienation and emptiness that permeates the heart of human society. This void emerges when the true meaning and spiritual nature of life are ignored or dismissed, leaving individuals and communities adrift in a loss of purpose and direction. Deprived of its transcendent significance, life becomes fragmented, and the immense challenges facing humanity appear insurmountable without a profound spiritual renewal. Such a renewal must reach the innermost depths of human awareness and moral integrity, rekindling a profound sense of interconnectedness, purpose, and responsibility.

When this spiritual void permeates social behaviors, it manifests as moral decline, breaking down the bonds that hold communities together and diminishing the capacity for authentic relationships. Alienation becomes pervasive, separating individuals not only from one another but also from their inner selves and the divine source of meaning. In the absence of spiritual values, society succumbs to materialism and self-interest, intensifying disconnection and diminishing collective well-being.

In particular, several dimensions of the spiritual void merit further exploration:

- ***Addressing the Global Ethical Crisis***

- ***The Ethical and Moral Vacuum in the World***

- Today:*** Identifying the current lack of strong ethical and moral guidance in many aspects of life and exploring how the Bahá'í Faith provides a framework to address this gap, emphasizing virtue, justice, and responsibility.

- ***The Need for Divine Standards:*** Arguing that human civilization requires divine standards to restore balance and guide ethical behavior, offering the Bahá'í teachings as a model for moral decision-making in the modern world.

- ***The Influence of Materialism***

Analyzing materialism not only as a desire for material possessions but as the underlying force shaping contemporary culture and values, revealing its pervasive influence that has effectively made it the spirit of the age. The Bahá'í teachings, offering a modern conception of religion while emphasizing its essential unity with the spiritual foundation of religions of the past, possess a unique explanatory power to address the pervasive

influence of unchecked materialism. That is to say, first, when materialism becomes hegemonic, it can extend its rule over the totality of thoughts and behaviors, dominating human priorities and overshadowing spiritual and moral dimensions. Second, the Bahá'í teachings provide a counterbalance by emphasizing spiritual growth and the well-being of humanity as foundational to a balanced and harmonious civilization, where the synthesis of material and spiritual progress fosters true prosperity, justice, and unity.

- ***The Crisis of Alienation and Human Identity***

Examining the widespread sense of alienation where individuals feel disconnected from their true selves, struggling to find meaning in a seemingly indifferent or chaotic world. This crisis is characterized by a loss of identity and purpose, leading to feelings of isolation and disorientation. Exploring how Bahá'í principles of spiritual purpose aim to reorient the foundations of civilization and revitalize culture with a new spiritual vision, offering a broader transcendent perspective that guides individuals to reconnect with their true selves and find direction in life.

Summary

While referencing social principles is important, especially in social forums and international settings, these discussions need to remain firmly rooted in the Bahá'í Faith's spiritual and moral framework. Highlighting modern social reform ideas is valuable, and engaging in dialogue with them is essential. However, the Bahá'í Faith's unique contribution to the discourse on social reforms draws from the eternal wisdom of the past, recognizing the spiritual truths that have guided humanity throughout history, ensuring that social reform is rooted in enduring

principles rather than fleeting trends. Moreover, the conversation should emphasize that, amidst the current chaos and confusion in the world, a spiritual rebirth is unfolding — one that aims to address not only the superficial symptoms of societal disarray but also the deeper spiritual void at the core of many global crises.

[\[1\]](#) The Universal House of Justice, Department of the Secretariat, 12 June 1984

<https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/search#q=Indeed%2C%20the%20chief%20reason%20for%20the%20evils%20now%20rampant%20in%20society%20is%20a%20lack%20of%20spirituality>.

[2] Second Tablet to The Hague, <https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/abdul-baha/tablets-hague-abdul-baha/>

[3] Please see:

https://www.academia.edu/114616434/Religion_Science_and_Reason_The_Dynamic_Relationships

https://www.academia.edu/112484469/Elements_of_a_Teaching_Learning_Framework_for_An_Integrative_Approach_to_Knowledge_and_Social_Discourse_A_Bahai_Perspective

https://www.academia.edu/107925541/Bahai_Epistemology_from_the_Perspective_of_Abdul_Baha