

Participating in Public Discourse

Book 14

Unit 1

The Nature of Our Contributions

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SECTION 1

In this, the fourteenth book of the main sequence, we will focus on the opportunities open to us to participate in the prevalent discourses of society. We will begin by discussing what such participation entails and then turn our attention to the main theme of the unit—how we are to understand and analyze social issues so that our contributions to the conversations in which we take part are increasingly aligned with the teachings of the Faith. In trying to address this question, we will refer now and again to earlier books in the sequence, reminding ourselves of what we have considered in the past and examining further certain elements of Bahá'í belief. Participation in public discourse per se will be the subject of discussion in the next two units.

What is at stake in this book, you should realize from the start, is the extension of a capacity you have been developing ever since you first set out on the path of service: the capacity to enter into uplifting and meaningful conversation with others. Upon the completion of Book 1, you were encouraged to undertake an act of service that would build on your efforts to share a few prayers with friends and neighbors, and you may still be hosting the regular devotional gathering that resulted. Subsequent books called upon you to broaden your capacity to engage in spiritually heightened conversation in different contexts—during visits to homes to explore certain themes, on occasions that present themselves in day-to-day life to introduce spiritual principles into a discussion, and in interactions with parents interested in learning more about ideas studied by their youngsters in the educational programs offered by the institute. Book 12 helped you to make a significant step forward by asking you to facilitate and promote a conversation among groups of families on issues related to raising children and on the challenges faced by young people in achieving coherence between the material and spiritual dimensions of their lives. And, in Book 13, you saw how such conversations and similar ones at the grassroots provide the means for concepts from the writings found in the institute materials to influence collective consciousness. The purpose of Book 14 is to enable you to increase your capacity even further, to take part in a very special kind of deliberation as opportunities permit: in sets of structured conversations in which numerous people participate in a variety of social spaces. It is to these that we refer as “discourses of society” or “public discourse”. In the next section, we will explore the meaning of these terms.

SECTION 2

Let us review a few fundamental ideas that inform our individual and collective efforts to engage in public discourse. To contribute to the well-being and progress of society is paramount among the duties enjoined by Bahá'u'lláh on every one of His followers. “Be anxiously concerned with the needs of the age ye live in,” He states, “and center your deliberations on its exigencies and requirements.” In accordance with this command, the Bahá'í community, as it grows in strength, seeks to be increasingly involved in the life of society, knowing well that the enormous global transformation envisioned by Bahá'u'lláh will not come about through the endeavors of Bahá'ís alone. All the peoples of the earth are being summoned to take part in the great historical processes leading to the rise of a new civilization, and the scope of our collaboration with those concerned with the betterment of the world must expand as we work towards this goal. While such collaboration will assume diverse forms over time, our involvement in social action and participation in public discourse are, at this point in the community's development, indispensable. The former was the subject of the previous book in the sequence and the latter is the object of our exploration here.

The word “discourse” frequently appears in everyday speech. To clarify how it will be employed in the three units of this book, let us consider an example. One of the pressing concerns of humanity today is how the resources of nature can be utilized in a way that safeguards the health of the environment, and there is a large community of people around the world who are giving attention to the many dimensions of this challenge. Some are, for instance, scientists investigating the causes of phenomena such as climate change or searching for means to curb pollution. Others are working to raise consciousness about the effects of the systems and processes of present-day society on the natural world. Still others are associated with endeavors aimed at establishing environmentally sound policies. In short, the question of the environment is being addressed by a diversity of groups and in numerous ways. And all these efforts require engagement in ongoing interconnected conversations, of different degrees of formality, from the local to the international level. We can refer to the totality of what is being expressed about this concern of humanity—in books and articles, at summits and conferences, in the media, in classrooms and so on—as the discourse on the environment. Like any other significant discourse of society, it has a direction, and it is, to an extent that may vary, rigorous. It is public in the sense that it aspires to reach everyone who wishes to follow its unfoldment.

With this example in mind, try to identify a few discourses prevalent in your society.

SECTION 3

With this very general idea of what we mean by the phrase “discourses of society”, let us try to gain a first basic understanding of how it is that we participate in them. This participation, the Universal House of Justice tells us, occurs at different levels:

“Learning about the participation of Bahá’ís in the discourses of society will advance as more and more believers throughout the world contribute to this area of activity over the coming years. This will occur at a number of levels. A growing number of individual believers will bring insights based on the writings to conversations in a variety of social spaces in which they find themselves—some will be related to life in their localities while others will be connected to their professions. Bahá’í-inspired agencies will naturally contribute to discourses associated with aspects of social and economic development relevant to their work. Further, as programs of growth advance and the friends are drawn into the life of society around them, their efforts to overcome challenges facing their communities through the application of spiritual principles will invariably entail participation in discourses at the grassroots. That Bahá’í involvement in the discourses of society will grow organically at all levels, in

line with the increasing capacity of the believers, is evident. Equally clear is the centrality of the role of the training institute to this process.”¹

As indicated above, for most of us, our contributions to the discourses of society begin as we learn to bring insights gleaned from the writings to conversations in the many social spaces in which we find ourselves. Some of these will be related to our occupation. In every area of work—whether in education or agriculture, in architecture or law, in journalism or medicine, in business or technology—there are, for example, professional associations that serve as such a space. Within these, members come together to discuss questions relevant to their fields through various means, including conferences and forums, publications and reports, seminars and colloquia.

Similarly, universities offer their students a variety of spaces for the exchange of ideas on topics central to human affairs. Clubs, academic societies, and faculty-student associations will most commonly act as such a space, but sometimes the classroom, itself, serves this purpose.

Aside from those related to our occupation, we will witness more and more spaces opening up to us as we become increasingly involved in the life of our village or neighborhood. Many will form part of what we call “civil society”. These include parent-teacher associations, local community groups, faith-based associations, youth and family associations, and various nongovernmental organizations, each of which may hold internal meetings and public gatherings, prepare newsletters and journals, as a way of furthering the conversation on matters of concern to them.

You may wish to think about some of the social spaces in which you currently find yourself. Can you list a few and give examples of issues discussed in these spaces?

In considering the contributions we can each make to public discourse, irrespective of the circumstances, we should keep in mind the following guidance of the Universal House of Justice:

“Every believer has the opportunity to examine the forces operating in society and introduce relevant aspects of the teachings within the discourses prevalent in whatever social space he or she is present.”²

Our participation in the discourses of society also extends into spaces that become available to the community as a whole—for instance, our presence as a community in the interfaith dialogue or in collaborative efforts with civic groups and organizations. Bahá’í institutions clearly play a role in guiding this process as it evolves. Then there are spaces in which the institutions themselves become formally involved and may ask one or another of us to represent the Faith on occasion. The dynamics of such participation, as mentioned earlier, will be examined in the second and third units of this book.