

## Participation in the prevalent discourses of society

### Book 14.1 – The Nature of our Contributions

#### A guide for Summer School tutors

#### Section 1

This section has no question or quotation but tutors can consider asking participants the following questions so everyone advances together:

- What are the sequence of ideas in these two paragraphs?
- What are the main points in each paragraph?

The tutor can help identify those two points and explain them if need be:

- ❖ Paragraph 1: that the main theme of this unit is how we are to understand and analyse social issues so that our contributions to the conversations in which we take part **are increasingly aligned with the teachings of the Faith**
  - Participants can spend a few minutes discussing what this means/the implications of this
  - Tutors can encourage the friends to think about coherence—we don't think and speak like Baha'is only when we are around other Baha'is; we think and speak like a Baha'i everywhere
- ❖ Paragraph 2: what is at stake is the extension of a capacity we have been developing ever since we first set out on the path of service—the capacity to enter into uplifting and meaningful conversation
  - Participants can be asked about the implications of this, which could include the point made in paragraph 19 of the 30 December 2021 message (Nine Year Plan) that this is a skill we can practice daily
  - Tutors may point out that this is not an arena for elites or experts but is an extension of a capacity *everyone* is building
- ❖ Paragraph 2: the purpose of Book 14 is to enable us to increase this 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**
  - Participants may discuss the difference (if any) between participation in public discourse and impactful meaningful conversations that affect a positive change in culture, practice or policy (also very important)
- ❖ Paragraph 2: what do we mean by a “set of structured conversations”?
  - Tutors can encourage consultation on what this might look like so we can identify opportunities
  - A related question is how to have structure but allow the conversation to be organic

Paragraph 2 mentions Books 12 and 13 and tutors may encourage participants to take up study of those two books if they like

## Section 2

This section requires more time than Section 1. There is often high engagement with paragraph 2 but participants have benefitted from the tutor's help with paragraph 1.

Tutors may:

- Ask: what is the sequence of ideas in paragraph 1?
  - The tutor can even break this down sentence by sentence
- It has been helpful to point out how there are both individual and collective dimensions to participation in discourse
- Tutors could ask what does 'exigencies' mean? What are some examples of the exigencies and requirements of our age on which we must centre our deliberations?
- Tutors could ask why we work with other people as we are drawn further into the life of society
  - The Baha'i community cannot bring about the required transformation alone
  - It is an indirect expression of the oneness of humanity in that we see others as equal contributors with capacity to work together (moves away from an 'us and them' mentality) and seek out universal participation very consciously and purposefully
- Tutors could ask why involvement in social action and participation in public discourse is indispensable at this stage in the community's development?
  - At its most basic level, social action is about addressing the social and economic problems that are preventing a community or society's progress; participation in discourse is about addressing the faulty ideas that have given rise to those social problems. The areas are interconnected (Ridvan 2010) because when you are doing one it is very natural to do the other
  - So, when the world is falling apart around us, we need to get better at social action and participation in the discourses of society so we can bring forward the spiritual solutions to these problems and the teachings that will help society advance
  - Some may even recall deliver Baha'u'llah's writings that we are the "lump that must leaven the peoples of the world" and the implications of that statement
  - Our contribution restores hope and optimism to a discourse

Paragraph 2 and the exercise describe a discourse and ask participants to identify discourses in society. It is helpful to guide the participants towards the major discourses in society.

Some points for tutors to be aware of include:

- It is helpful to understand, but not get too caught up on, what is a *theme* and what is a *discourse*. For example, climate change may be a theme in the discourse on the environment or it could be its own standalone discourse. It is helpful to be aware of these nuances but avoid overthinking or compartmentalising, which could lead to unnecessary fragmentation
- Some discourses in society play out in our fields as well. For example, the discourse on gender equality plays out in the legal profession as the under-representation of women in senior roles
- Some discourses are unique to a field and do not really exist in broader society. For example, the role of a school in social transformation (education), the role of a teacher in strengthening community life (education), the role of law in society (law) or what makes a good doctor (medicine)

- Some discourses are unique to an institution or organisation. For example, in some companies there may be a discourse on corporate social responsibility
- The discourse on the role of technology in society permeates every aspect of life – the use of technology in our private lives (family and community life) but also in our fields (arena of work and study)

### Section 3

This section sets out the levels at which we participate in discourse and asks participants to identify social spaces in which they find themselves.

- The tutor could ask participants to identify the levels at which we participate in discourse from the quotation
- The tutor could ask how is the centrality of the institute to this process clear?
  - It will help if the tutor is clear on the pedagogy of the training institute. For example, that it builds capacity for service by applying the Word of God to our reality; it does this by removing the ego; it fuses theory and practice as capacity is built in action and not just through study; everyone can participate and is not just for elites
  - We should also see ourselves as building capacity to participate in discourse
- When doing the exercise on identifying spaces, the tutor can help the participants **think broadly**. For example:
  - Spaces can be physical (in person) or virtual (webinars)
  - Spaces can be formal (conferences, seminars) or informal (coffee or lunch)
  - Participants can attend spaces created by others or spaces they create themselves. For example, participants can organise a roundtable or small discussion space in their home on a particular theme and invite colleagues or families/neighbours to together to consult (and learn how to introduce the teachings), or they could create opportunities to connect with colleagues over lunch or coffee where relevant conversations can take place
  - Spaces can be located at our workplaces, communities, universities or other institutions
  - Spaces can also include book launches, writers' festivals, ideas festivals, art gallery openings, talks at libraries, museums, certain film festivals, etc.

For greater engagement with the last quotation of Section 3, the tutor can ask the participants to identify the forces operating in society and how that affects their field.

If the participants are struggling to identify forces, the tutor could give examples like materialism, consumerism, secularism, individualism, liberalism, sectarianism, capitalism or racism, and help the friends discuss how one or more of these forces plays out in their neighbourhood, community, field of work or study and the ways that force limits progress

Sometimes the discussion on negative forces can be disillusioning and it's helpful to end on a hopeful/positive note. One way tutors can do this is to remind the friends of the power of the Revelation of Baha'u'llah and it contains the remedy that will help us overcome these forces and the way they oppress us or limit progress.