

Bahai Collective Decision-Making

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An interesting and thought provoking piece, who would have thought? Well worth the read.

The war on terror is the dominant geo-political narrative of our time. It frames the world into “us against them.” It easily permits religion or ethnicity to be used as a distinguishing mark of one’s enemy (or, in some distorted fashion, religious belief impels the violent act itself). Dividing the world this way, us versus them, each perceiving the other as both enemy and an inferior, shreds the tapestry of the conversable and habitable cosmopolitan world. It tears apart the ideal of the oneness of humanity. It canalizes immense aggressive human energy into channels of violence towards the feared other. It closes the door on learning and critical self-reflection.

When we separate ourselves from the other, or divide the world into friends and enemies, conversation—from smallest to highest levels of talk—is stopped dead in its tracks. All learning shudders to a grinding halt, like a train forced to stop for an emergency. The “fatally speechless clash of worlds” (Philosopher Jurgen Habermas’s phrase) is already present malevolently in the world.

It awaits us at the extreme end of mute acts of violence that speak for themselves. The negation of speech or communicative action through violence shreds the world into little tattered pieces. Terrorism is a communicative pathology. But mumbled speech or unwillingness to try very hard to be conversable are also part of the problem we face in our world of too much sorrow and violence.

It is time to question the “culture of contest” and its political instruments, various “cultures of protest.” We need a new imaginary for social change. This is the urgent call of Michael Karlberg, a well-known Baha’i scholar, who has written a jewel of a book, *Beyond the Culture of Contest* (2004). Karlberg argues compellingly that the Baha’i organic world view prescribes unity and coordination in the face of increasingly complex social challenges. Baha’is assert that more mature methods of collective decision-making are now imperative. The massive interdependent problems facing humanity cannot be addressed without a “magnitude of cooperation and coordination at all levels that far surpasses anything in humanity’s collective experience” (p. 138).

Karlberg articulates the Baha’i model: they “advocate an inclusive model of collective decision-making that involves all segments of society in conceptualizing, designing, implementing and evaluating the policies and programmes that affect them” (ibid.). Additionally, “Baha’is believe that such a model must also transcend the adversarial posturing and partisanship, and the patterns of negotiation and compromise, that have become virtually synonymous with democratic decision-making in this age” (p. 139).

Baha’is overturn the tables in the temples of democracy. They assert that debate, adversarialism and propaganda are “fundamentally harmful to its purpose: that is, arriving at a consensus [regarding]...the wisest choice of action among the options open at any given moment” (ibid.). Thus, Baha’is advocate a “non-adversarial model of collective decision-making that they refer to simply as consultation—a model which they believe is ‘central to the task of reconceptualising the system of

human relations” (ibid.).

Through a collective learning process, Baha’is have also found this non-adversarial model to be adaptable to any culture. While the method certainly governs Baha’i affairs at the local, national and international levels, it is also used in Baha’i-initiated social and economic development projects as well as day-to-day decision-making in Baha’i families. In fact, Baha’is are even applying their ideas of consultation to the operation of the press within the Baha’i community.

What have Baha’is learned and discovered about consultation (or deliberation) in their world-wide community?

Fundamentally, Karlberg states, “Consultation seeks to build consensus in a manner that unites various constituencies instead of dividing them” (p. 140). Karlberg observes pointedly that participants in consultation must commit themselves to various consultative principles that encourage participants to transcend the struggle for power that is so common in traditional decision-making systems. Let us set out eight principles adopted by Baha’is.

1/ Baha’is regard human diversity as an asset in decision-making processes. This means that participants in consultation will seek to be informed by soliciting and considering the perspectives, concerns, interests and expertise in all segments of the community. Essential to this deliberative process is the active soliciting of traditionally excluded views. One result of this openness to the excluded other is that the consultative process engenders trust among various segments of the community. Without this, it is difficult to translate collective decisions into collective actions.

2/ The second Baha’i axiom is seldom explored in scholarly literature on the communicative virtues. Participants, Karlberg notes, must be detached from their personal views. In Baha’i consultation, then, participants must strive to transcend their respective points of view. One source for the capacity and will to do this lies in Baha’i spiritual practices of detachment and focussing of energy on God, the All-encompassing One. Karlberg points out that this practice of “detachment” reflects an epistemology with very practical implications. “In this regard, Baha’is accept that human comprehension is finite and limited relative to the infinite complexity of the world around us and that human beings therefore cannot perceive or know reality directly, comprehensively, in its raw form or essence” (p. 141).

Thus, because of our varied experiences and education, Baha’is accept that access to truth is not absolute. Indeed, many of Baha’u’llah’s prayers speak of human limitations to find adequate language to speak to the Holy One. Spiritual practices, one might say, underlie the necessary attribute of detachment. So a participant can offer his or her view, knowing well that it does not capture the whole truth.

3/ The third axiom follows from the second. Diverse perspectives are complementary rather than oppositional. Baha’is understand that, once offered, a viewpoint becomes a collective resource, contributing to the combining of intelligence. Reality is complex and multi-faceted, and thus requires everybody’s viewpoint. What do you see that I do not? However simple this may sound, Baha’is think that is not so simple. Egos cling to ideas as private property; but our ideas ought to emanate from a sincere desire to serve.

This spiritual attitude of service is the opposite of constituency-building or strategic action to gain dominance in world affairs, business or politics. Thus, Baha’is recognize that consultation is “no easy skill to learn” (p. 141). It is not, but Baha’is have discovered, too, that effective decision-making leads to the maturation of individual participants as well as whole communities. It is, then, a

“learning process and they believe that the skills and attitudes developed through consultation are as important as the specific decisions arrived at” (ibid.).

4/ Another closely related principle of Baha’i consultation is that of exercising care and moderation in one’s manner of expression. “Freedom of speech” requires discipline and subtlety. Speech is a powerful phenomenon. Left to run wild, fueled with intense emotion (sometimes animosity), style, tact, wisdom and timeliness may get lost, with the result that trust is breached and persons are humiliated. “Efforts at such discipline,” Baha’is believe, “will give birth to etiquette of expression worthy of the approaching maturity of the human race” (p. 142). Thus, freedom of expression need not be interpreted as a licence for extreme and divisive speech.

Ridicule, insult, threats and other offensive demeaning and conflict-inducing modes of expression which have become the norm for much of what passes as public communications today have no place in Baha’i consultation. “Rather, Baha’is recognize that mutual insight and understanding, which are prerequisites of meaningful collective decision-making, emerge most readily in an atmosphere of courtesy, respect, care and moderation. Baha’is assert that only in such an atmosphere can participants confidently apply the above principle” (p. 142).

5/ Karlberg observes astutely that one might assume that this consultative process may induce communication that is artificially polite with differences simply papered over. On the contrary, he states that Baha’is find and facilitate modes of expression that allow conflicting perceptions and interests to be critically examined in an atmosphere of tolerance and a spirit of mutual commitment within which problems become soluble challenges. Karlberg informs us that Baha’is know well that human emotions cannot be ignored in the consultative process.

“Therefore, while Baha’is do not advocate a consultative process that is cold and emotionless, they do strive to avoid the adversarial clash of emotions that typically generates conflict and alienation” (p. 143). Flying in the face of public political discourse in most countries, Baha’is are opposed to dismissing any person or group as coarse, uneducated or irrational (a “basket of deplorables”). Thus, within an atmosphere of collective learning, Baha’is are encouraged to not take it upon themselves to monitor or censure others.

6/ A further fundamental principle for Baha’i consultation is the elevation of consultation to the level of principle rather than considered consultation as a pragmatic process. Baha’is insist, rightly so, that consultation must proceed only if the principles are agreed-upon beforehand. “Only discourse at the level of principle,” they assert, “has the power to invoke a moral commitment, which will, in turn, make possible the discovery of enduring solutions to the many challenges confronting a rapidly integrating human society” (p. 144). Karlberg states that underlying all principles (including equality of men and women and reducing the gap between rich and poor) is the more general principle of justice. Thus, the principle of justice serves Baha’is as an indispensable compass in collective-decision-making. Justice is a thread that must be woven into every interaction, whether in the family, the neighbourhood, or at the global level.

7/ Within this overarching commitment to justice, Baha’is employ “spiritual principles” (i.e. moral or ethical principles) as “mutually agreed-upon criteria that guide their efforts to formulate, compare and evaluate potential decisions” (p. 145). Baha’is believe that this approach manoeuvres it out of the quagmire of competing interest claims and into the court of ethical or spiritual principle—where the broader goals of social justice are more likely to prevail.

8/ Guided in this way by deliberate, conscious and systematic attention to ethical principle, Baha’is strive towards consensus in consultation but settle for a majority vote when consensus cannot be

reached. Baha'is then strive to proceed in a unified manner, setting aside personal views. There is no "minority report." This commitment to unity ensures that if a decision or a project fails, the problem lies in the idea itself, and not in lack of support from the community or the obstinate actions of opponents.

Thus, earlier decisions can be reconsidered. "In this sense," Karlberg states, "the ongoing monitoring, evaluation and refinement or abandonment of previous decisions is understood as an extension of the consultative process" (p. 146). But partisan or sectarian opposition makes it more difficult to evaluate whether the problem was the decision itself or with the fact that its implementation was sabotaged. "In this regard, Baha'is believe that consultation is undermined by the 'culture of protest' that is another widely prevailing feature of contemporary society" (ibid.).

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Jungle Drum Prose/Poetry. <http://jungledrum.lingama.net/news/story-2973.html>