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Nurturing Inherent Nobility: Insights on Human Dignity from a Bahá'í Perspective

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Abstract: The Bahá'í Faith is an important case for a discussion on dignity, religion and human rights. Beyond the notions of dignity enshrined in its basic teachings, a core concern of the Bahá'í community is how to build dignity into the pattern of social relations of an emerging global civilization. The oneness of humanity is the core principle around which all Bahá'í teachings revolve, and within this principle is enshrined not only the inherent, God-given nobility and dignity of every individual but also the responsibility of creating new patterns of social relations, forms of community, processes of education, and structures of institutional authority that consciously strive to create a global polity that protects and affirms the dignity of all humans, in all of their diversity. In this paper, we examine the foundations of human dignity in the Bahá'í Faith in four parts. First, we explore the use of the term "dignity" in Bahá'í sacred texts and its relationship to the concepts of "nobility" and "rights". Second, we examine how Bahá'ís seek to put into practice their conception of dignity through a democratic system of global governance, grounded in processes of consultative deliberation, referred to as the Bahá'í Administrative Order. Third, we highlight how the Bahá'í community is seeking to cultivate conditions of dignity in its current educational endeavours, which seeks to contribute to the betterment of local communities throughout the world. Fourth, we explore the ongoing and centuries-long persecution of the Bahá'ís in Iran to understand the implications of dignity in responding to oppression.



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1. Introduction

The Punta del Este Declaration commemorating the 70th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is a welcome reminder that the conception and application of human rights remains fraught with challenges in our highly pluralized world. The discourse on human rights has largely been centered on legal norms, democratic governance and civil society, founded upon liberal values that sit uncomfortably in many parts of the non-Western world (Benhabib 2007; Ingram 2008; Kingsbury and Avonius 2008). In practice, transnational efforts to advance human rights have also become dependent on flows of economic and political resources between the West and the global South, entrenched in the inequalities and power struggles that characterize the post-war world order (Hafner-Burton 2008; Kennedy 2002). For the purpose of safeguarding the well-being of humanity, then, expanding the discourse on human rights to include conceptions of dignity needs to be more than semantic: it requires a clarification of the relationships, structures and practices that should govern society, not just at the level of institutions, but also at the level of individuals and communities (Selznick 1994).

Scholars from various disciplines have shed light on diverse conceptions of dignity over the past two decades (Düwell et al. 2014). What is clear from the existing body of

literature is that “human dignity” is not a neutral term and takes on particular meanings within different interpretive frames. However, even sophisticated conceptions of dignity are limited in their ability to contribute to our present challenge of realizing collective human flourishing unless they are explicitly linked to a conception of humanity as an interdependent, organic body (Karlberg 2020). As Karlberg observes, “the maturation of practices leading to human dignity lies, ultimately, in the reframing of human consciousness” to view humanity through this integrated social body frame. This reframing, he argues, is nothing short of an “evolutionary imperative” (2020, p. 45).

Religious perspectives play a significant role in contributing to this discourse. Bahá’ís conceive religion, in part, as a system of knowledge and practice that, among other things, seeks to make sense of what it means to be human, and to cultivate communities and collectivities that will become conducive environments for nurturing humaneness. Just as scientific communities generate knowledge according to particular processes and methods (Kuhn 1996; Lakatos 1978), religion, too, can be considered a source of knowledge that operates according to its own dynamics and processes. As Farid-Arbab (2016) asks: “How does religion, we need to ask, deal with the knowledge it acquires—from both the reading of what it considers revealed truth and the articulation of what it learns in its day to day practice—about individual and collective human flourishing on earth?” (p. 170).

It is from this vantage point that this chapter seeks to contribute insights on human dignity from the perspective of the Bahá’í Faith. The Bahá’í Faith is an important case for a discussion on dignity, religion and human rights: beyond the notions of dignity enshrined in its basic teachings, a core concern of the Bahá’í community is how to build dignity into the pattern of social relations of an emerging global civilization, from individual behavior to community life at the grassroots, and into the governance of institutions at the local, national and world levels.

As noted by the philosopher K. Anthony Appiah, all humans, regardless of their culture, education, religion or ideology, have a deep sense of dignity: a sense of the moral obligation to treat others and be treated with respect (Appiah 2001, quoted in Mahmoudi 2020, p. 20). Religions and philosophical systems can articulate ontological foundations, including normative principles, that enable us to translate these sentiments into ethical discourses, social and legal norms, and institutions of government. While the way these ontological foundations are conceptualized may differ from one culture or religion to another, they all tend to include normative principle such as “the golden rule” (Bushrui 2020).

While all humans have an innate sense of dignity, and all cultures possess norms of mutual respect, these feelings and norms are often clouded by forms of prejudice that arise from in-group and out-group distinctions based on sex, race, ethnicity, class, caste, tribe, religion, and so forth. The “oneness of humanity”, in contrast, is the core principle around which all Bahá’í teachings revolve (Penn and Nguyen 2020). Thus, the Bahá’í Faith sees its mission as creating new patterns of social relations, forms of community, processes of education, and structures of institutional authority that consciously strive to overcome these prejudices and create a global polity that is founded on the inherent, God-given nobility, dignity and oneness of all human beings. Only through the realization of the oneness of humanity can the dignity of all humans, in all of their diversity, be protected and affirmed. Bahá’ís strive to explore the application of these principles within their own communities in different cultural and social contexts, in their relationships with other communities and social actors, and in their relationships with the state (Palmer 2018; Palmer and Tavangar 2021; Palmer and McCormick 2022).

2. Background on the Bahá’í Faith

The Bahá’í community saw its beginnings in Persia in the mid-1800s, in response to the teachings of Bahá’u’lláh (1817–1892). Bahá’u’lláh’s title translates from Arabic as the “Glory of God” and his followers are known as Bahá’ís, derived from the root word “Bahá’

or glory. After his passing, leadership was assumed by his son ‘Abdu’l-Bahá (1844–1921) (Brookshaw and Fazel 2012).

Over his lifetime, Bahá’u’lláh revealed hundreds of tablets and dozens of volumes, among which the *Kitáb-i-Íqán* (*Book of Certitude*) and *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* (*Most Holy Book*) are the core sources of religious doctrine and law, respectively (Kourosch 2018). For Bahá’ís, the entirety of Bahá’u’lláh’s revelation, along with ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s writings and the guidance of his grandson Shoghi Effendi Rabbani (1897–1957), and, since 1963, the Universal House of Justice, constitute the body of authoritative texts that serve as guidance for individual and collective life.

According to Bahá’u’lláh’s teachings, religion is a single, ever-unfolding process of revelation, which recurs periodically over the course of human history, separated by the span of centuries. This ceaseless process is understood in relation to the purpose of humanity’s creation, which is to “carry forward an ever-advancing civilization”, one that is both materially and spiritually prosperous. The Creator, an Unknowable Essence referred to by many terms, including God, reveals Himself iteratively to humanity through emissaries, in accordance with humanity’s evolving capacity to comprehend. Bahá’u’lláh likens humanity to a single body that has gone through infancy, childhood, and adolescence, and now stands at the cusp of maturity. Bahá’u’lláh declares himself the most recent emissary from God, whose teachings will guide humanity into this period of collective maturity.

The pivot around which all of Bahá’u’lláh’s teachings revolve is the principle of the oneness of humanity—a central principle that reconciles unity with diversity. This conception of oneness is derived from ontological reality and is not bound by time and space. Consequently, social identity constructs such as gender, ethnicity, culture or religion have no bearing on the common essence that binds all humanity as subjects of one Creator. When this essential oneness is recognized, diverse social identities become a source of beauty and celebration, and uniformity is rejected. Bahá’ís believe that this principle will usher in humanity’s next stage of collective life on earth, one that will realize a vision of Earth as “one country and mankind its citizens” (Bahá’u’lláh 1880–1881) and usher in new social institutions, cultural practices and new systems of administration and governance.

By the mid-20th century, the Bahá’í Faith had spread to every country across the globe, from tribal communities to urban territories (Smith 1987; Warburg 2006; Palmer 2013; Wan and Palmer 2019; Jaya Gopan 2019; Horton 2013) and Bahá’í institutions began to be established at the local, national and international levels. This rapid expansion was motivated by Bahá’u’lláh’s teaching that the realization of a new civilization founded upon oneness necessitated the participation of all peoples, and that

“The well-being of mankind, its peace and security, are unattainable unless and until its unity is firmly established”. (Bahá’u’lláh 1853–1892a)

In the sections to follow, we examine the foundations of human dignity in the Bahá’í Faith in four parts. First, we explore the use of the term “dignity” in Bahá’í sacred texts and its relationship to the concepts of “nobility” and “rights”. Second, we examine how Bahá’ís seek to put into practice their conception of dignity through a democratic system of global governance, grounded in processes of consultative deliberation, referred to as the Bahá’í Administrative Order. Third, we highlight how the Bahá’í community is seeking to cultivate conditions of dignity in its current educational endeavors, which seeks to contribute to the betterment of local communities throughout the world. Fourth, we explore the ongoing and centuries-long persecution of the Bahá’ís in Iran to understand the implications of dignity in responding to oppression.

3. Dignity and Human Nature in Bahá’í Ontology

From a Bahá’í perspective, safeguarding human dignity is inseparable from efforts to build a world civilization founded upon the principle of the oneness of humanity:

Addressing mankind, [Bahá’u’lláh] says, “Ye are all leaves of one tree and the fruits of one branch.” By this it is meant that the world of humanity is like a tree, the nations or peoples are the different limbs or branches of that tree, and

the individual human creatures are as the fruits and blossoms thereof. In this way Bahá'u'lláh expressed the oneness of humankind, whereas in all religious teachings of the past the human world has been represented as divided into two parts: one known as the people of the Book of God, or the pure tree, and the other the people of infidelity and error, or the evil tree. The former were considered as belonging to the faithful, and the others to the hosts of the irreligious and infidel—one part of humanity the recipients of divine mercy, and the other the object of the wrath of their Creator. Bahá'u'lláh removed this by proclaiming the oneness of the world of humanity, and this principle is specialized in His teachings, . . . all are recipients of the bounty and bestowals of God. (['Abdu'l-Bahá 1912a](#))

To understand the place of dignity in relation to human rights in the Bahá'í teachings, we suggest beginning by exploring the relationship between the terms “nobility”, “dignity” and “rights” as they appear in the writings of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá. In these texts, we find that dignity is a corollary of nobility, an expression of the divine essence of humanity. Bahá'í writings on nobility address the ontological reality of the human being, while statements on dignity address how to nurture or respect this innate nobility. The term “rights” is used by Bahá'u'lláh in a more restricted sense when admonishing rulers to “safeguard the rights of the downtrodden” and to establish equal rights for all ([Bahá'u'lláh 1853–1892b](#); ['Abdu'l-Bahá 1912b](#)).

The concept of dignity is perhaps best expressed through the core notion of the intrinsic nobility of the human being. In *Hidden Words*, the scripture containing the essence of the Bahá'í teachings on spirituality and ethics, the voice of the Creator states:

Noble have I created thee, yet thou hast abased thyself. Rise then unto that for which thou wast created. ([Bahá'u'lláh 1858a](#))

'Abdu'l-Bahá, in his public talks to Western audiences, expounded thusly on the concept of human nobility:

Every good habit, every noble quality belongs to man's spiritual nature, whereas all his imperfections and sinful actions are born of his material nature. (['Abdu'l-Bahá 1912c](#))

“According to the words of the Old Testament God has said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness”. This indicates that man is of the image and likeness of God—that is to say, the perfections of God, the divine virtues, are reflected or revealed in the human reality. Just as the light and effulgence of the sun when cast upon a polished mirror are reflected fully, gloriously, so, likewise, the qualities and attributes of Divinity are radiated from the depths of a pure human heart. This is evidence that man is the most noble of God's creatures.” (['Abdu'l-Bahá 1912d](#))

These statements on human nobility reflect the understanding of human nature in Bahá'í ontology. The Bahá'í teachings affirm that a human being's core identity is the soul. From conception, the material body serves as a vessel for the development of one's spiritual nature. Whereas the material nature eventually experiences death, the higher nature, or the soul, is not bound by this physical condition and will continue to develop. [Bahá'u'lláh \(1853–1892c\)](#) states:

[T]he human soul is, in its essence, one of the signs of God, a mystery among His mysteries. It is one of the mighty signs of the Almighty, the harbinger that proclaimeth the reality of all the worlds of God. Within it lieth concealed that which the world is now utterly incapable of apprehending.

In this light, to reduce human identity to social and material indicators, such as genetics, wealth, status, gender, race, nationality, ethnic or outward religious identity, represents a failure to honor the dignity that inheres in our intrinsic nobility or spiritual nature, which transcends all material and social differences. From a Bahá'í perspective, these diverse social identities are mere outward phenomena, and are referred to as a “mirage” (['Abdu'l-Bahá 1978](#)). Spiritual nobility shines through all of these distinctions.

However, this “nobility” is not a condition of spiritual superiority or hierarchy between humans. On the contrary, the essence of nobility is humility, and through the recognition of the nobility of all humans, to develop the capacity for oneness:

O Children of Men! Know ye not why We created you all from the same dust? That no one should exalt himself over the other. Ponder at all times in your hearts how ye were created. Since We have created you all from one same substance it is incumbent on you to be even as one soul, to walk with the same feet, eat with the same mouth and dwell in the same land, that from your inmost being, by your deeds and actions, the signs of oneness and the essence of detachment may be made manifest. (Bahá'u'lláh 1858b)

Practices taught by Bahá'u'lláh, which, among others, include prayer, meditation, reflection, fasting, and living a service-oriented life, aim to cultivate in people these qualities of nobility.

Some Bahá'í laws specifically address the protection of dignity. Forbidding the consumption of alcohol and recreational drugs is a means of eliminating habits that frequently lead to the loss of dignity in individual and group behavior. It is in this spirit that Bahá'u'lláh (1853–1892d) warns against the excesses of personal freedom:

Liberty causeth man to overstep the bounds of propriety, and to infringe on the dignity of his station. It debaseth him to the level of extreme depravity and wickedness.

However, just as undignified behavior is to be avoided, so is magnifying the indignities committed by others. Backbiting is forbidden, and condemning the sins of others is not the preferred means of addressing moral weaknesses or failures:

“It is not Our wish to address thee words of condemnation, out of regard for the dignity We conferred upon thee in this mortal life. We, verily, have chosen courtesy, and made it the true mark of such as are nigh unto Him”. (Bahá'u'lláh 1868)

One of the implications of the conception of innate nobility thus far explored is that it cannot take place in a social vacuum. The Bahá'í writings state that individual spiritual growth cannot be separated from efforts to “be a source of social good” and improve the conditions of society ('Abdu'l-Bahá 1875a). The relationship between the individual and society is seen as organic and mutually constituting.

In this light, Bahá'u'lláh (1853–1892e) states:

“All men have been created to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization . . . Those virtues that befit his dignity are forbearance, mercy, compassion and loving-kindness towards all the peoples and kindreds of the earth”.

His writings liken collective human society unto an individual growing from infancy to adulthood, guided by the process of progressive revelation. His revelation, he claims, signals the imminent collective maturity of humankind, when new emergent capacities will be made manifest:

Man must now become imbued with new virtues and powers, new moral standards, new capacities . . . The gifts and blessings of the period of youth, although timely and sufficient during the adolescence of mankind, are now incapable of meeting the requirements of its maturity. (Rabbani 1936)

At this period of maturity, the dignity of every individual is held in such high esteem that Bahá'u'lláh (1873) forbids individuals from symbolically debasing themselves before another person through acts such as prostrating before or kissing the hands of prominent figures, and everyone has to cultivate the capacity to call themselves to account each day. No individual may claim to have greater access to ontological reality, i.e., religious truth. It is upon this basis that Bahá'u'lláh also abolishes the function of priests and clergy, and instead places the responsibility for seeking truth on every individual. Children born within Bahá'í families are also free to choose their own religion, and by the age of 15, which is considered the age of maturity, they must assume ultimate responsibility for their

own spiritual path. Freedom of conscience is, thus, a fundamental principle that informs Bahá'í practices.

The relationship between justice and dignity is also revealed in Bahá'u'lláh's teachings on the equality of women and men:

Divine Justice demands that the rights of both sexes should be equally respected since neither is superior to the other in the eyes of Heaven. Dignity before God depends, not on sex, but on purity and luminosity of heart. Human virtues belong equally to all! ('Abdu'l-Bahá 1912e)

In this light, it is only under conditions of justice that the dignity of every person can be safeguarded, and this is a prerequisite for realizing the unity of humankind:

When perfect justice reigns in every country of the Eastern and Western World, then will the earth become a place of beauty. The dignity and equality of every servant of God will be acknowledged; the ideal of the solidarity of the human race, the true brotherhood of man, will be realized; and the glorious light of the Sun of Truth will illumine the souls of all men. ('Abdu'l-Bahá 1912f)

4. Cultivating Dignity in an Institutional Context: The Bahá'í Administrative Order

The organizational structure and collective practices of the Bahá'í community can give us insight into how dignity can be cultivated at the level of institutions and communities.

As a religion without priests or clergy, the Bahá'í community is administered through a unique global institutional system. In his writings, Bahá'u'lláh outlines a global system of democratic governance, grounded in processes of consultative deliberation, referred to as the Bahá'í Administrative Order. This aspect of the Bahá'í Faith is especially relevant as it sheds practical insight into how to build a global institution founded upon the spiritual nobility of every individual that seeks to cultivate environments conducive to dignity (Palmer and Tavangar 2021).

A foundational element of the Bahá'í Administrative Order is the Nineteen Day Feast, held every 19 days in accordance with the Bahá'í calendar. This gathering serves as a devotional, administrative and consultative platform for the Bahá'í community at the local level. It is described as "a vital medium for maintaining close and continued contact between the believers themselves, and also between them and the body of their elected representatives in the local community" (Universal House of Justice 1989).

During the feast, any individual, regardless of age, is free to raise matters for discussion. 'Abdu'l-Bahá describes the purpose of this gathering:

"This Feast is a bringer of joy. It is the groundwork of agreement and unity. It is the key to affection and fellowship. It diffuseth the oneness of mankind . . . ", "The object is concord, that through this fellowship hearts may become perfectly united, and reciprocity and mutual helpfulness be established. Because the members of the world of humanity are unable to exist without being banded together, cooperation and mutual helpfulness is the basis of human society. Without the realization of these two great principles no great movement is pressed forward". (Research Department of the Universal House of Justice 1991)

Thus, the feast serves as a regular, localized platform for every individual to strive to put into practice values and principles conducive to dignity and unity.

Feasts are organized by the Local Spiritual Assembly, which is responsible for guiding the affairs of the community at the local level. It is formed of nine adults, elected annually by all enrolled Bahá'ís above the age of 18 in a given locality. Election is conducted through anonymous ballots after prayerful reflection by the individual voter. All Bahá'ís over the age of 21 residing in the locality are eligible; there are no nominations, and any kind of campaigning is forbidden. In the event that a tie occurs between two individuals, the person who represents a minority group is given priority. At the national level, the same process applies in the annual election of the National Spiritual Assembly, elected by delegates from every locality. Every five years, the members of all the National Assemblies in the world

elect the nine members of the Universal House of Justice, the highest governing body of the Bahá'í Faith. The House of Justice is tasked with realizing Bahá'u'lláh's vision of world unity, founded upon justice and dignity. Its constitution states:

“The fundamental purpose animating the Faith of God and His Religion,” declares Bahá'u'lláh, “is to safeguard the interests and promote the unity of the human race, and to foster the spirit of love and fellowship amongst men . . . Whatsoever is raised on this foundation, the changes and chances of the world can never impair its strength, nor will the revolution of countless centuries undermine its structure”. (Universal House of Justice 1963)

These elected institutions are supported by the Institution of Counsellors, consisting of individuals appointed by the Universal House of Justice who hold no legislative, judicial or executive authority. Their role is to foster a culture of learning, encourage action, and to offer counsel.

All levels of the Bahá'ís Administrative Order operate according to a clearly outlined process of consultation:

The first condition is absolute love and harmony amongst the members of the assembly. They must be wholly free from estrangement and must manifest in themselves the Unity of God . . . The second condition: They must when coming together turn their faces to the Kingdom on High and ask aid from the Realm of Glory. They must then proceed with the utmost devotion, courtesy, dignity, care and moderation to express their views. They must in every matter search out the truth and not insist upon their own opinion, for stubbornness and persistence in one's views will lead ultimately to discord and wrangling and the truth will remain hidden. ('Abdu'l-Bahá 1978)

The efficacy of this global, deliberative institutional structure ultimately depends on every individual member striving to manifest his or her own nobility and behave in a manner conducive to dignity. This requires active humility, open-heartedness and an ongoing attitude of learning.

A distinguishing feature of this structure is that although its jurisdiction is limited to those who freely and willingly accept its authority, i.e., those who voluntarily declare their faith in Bahá'u'lláh, the scope of its responsibility is the well-being of the entire human race. This scope is directly informed by a belief in the spiritual nobility of every person, regardless of their religious identity (Palmer and Tavangar 2021).

Within the normative Bahá'í framework for realizing human dignity, the relationships between the individual, institutions and community are seen as interconnected and mutualistic, founded upon an organic conception of a humanity maturing towards oneness. Individual dignity is safeguarded by a system of administration that requires the participation of every willing individual in service to the collective. Zero-sum notions of power that seek to impose or control are seen as incompatible with this system (Karlberg 2004).

5. The Implications of Dignity in Education and Community Building

The ideals discussed in relation to cultivating dignity explored in the previous sections require systems for education and capacity building, so that an ever-expanding Bahá'í community can be continually advancing towards these ideals.

Beginning in 1996, the Universal House of Justice began to guide the Bahá'í community towards establishing small-group community building as the primary means to consolidate the growth that was experienced. This process began with the introduction of the “institute process”, an educational system that takes the form of small-group study circles that invites participants to reflect on the interconnected nature of individual and social transformation and to put them into practice at the grassroots level through concrete acts of service in one's community (Palmer 2013). Through this process of learning by doing, insights are distilled and refined from application in various settings, and then incorporated into further course materials. The entire institute process is anchored around a process of study, consultation,

action and reflection, informed by Bahá'u'lláh's (1880–1881) statement: "Regard man as a mine rich in gems of inestimable value. Education alone can cause it to reveal its treasures and enable mankind to benefit therefrom". 'Abdu'l-Bahá (1875b) stressed that our innate nobility requires education for it to be fully manifest:

There are some who imagine that an innate sense of human dignity will prevent man from committing evil actions and ensure his spiritual and material perfection. That is, that an individual who is characterized with natural intelligence, high resolve, and a driving zeal, will, without any consideration for the severe punishments consequent on evil acts, or for the great rewards of righteousness, instinctively refrain from inflicting harm on his fellow men and will hunger and thirst to do good. And yet, if we ponder the lessons of history, it will become evident that this very sense of honor and dignity is itself one of the bounties deriving from the instructions of the Prophets of God. We also observe in infants the signs of aggression and lawlessness, and that if a child is deprived of a teacher's instructions, his undesirable qualities increase from one moment to the next. It is, therefore, clear that the emergence of this natural sense of human dignity and honor is the result of education.

The Bahá'í educational process, including children's classes, junior youth groups, study circles for youth and adults, and specialized training in different fields of service, is based on nurturing the nobility and dignity of all participants, both in terms of content and methods (Ali and Palmer 2023).

The first course of the institute process introduces the concept of the soul and, consequently, the importance of living a life oriented around service to others. These insights are then practically applied through acts of service such as organizing a devotional gathering. As the courses advance, participants develop the capacity to organize classes for children, and become facilitators of empowerment programs for young teenagers. Participants also develop the skills and attitudes required to facilitate their own study circles.

The institute process can be viewed as a self-replicating educational system founded upon becoming conscious of our inherent spiritual nobility, exemplifying it in our words and deeds, and accompanying others in the same process. A distinguishing feature of this system of education is that the boundaries of community become blurred. The institute process is not exclusive to Bahá'ís; it is open to anyone who is interested, including those who follow other religions and those who are non-religious. Its approach is to invite a growing number of people to walk together on a path of service (Universal House of Justice 2017). Individuals who are not regularly engaged in this process may also be invited to attend occasional events such as a neighborhood celebration organized by children or a cleanup project organized by youth living in a locality. Thus, the discourse on community-building within the context of the institute process seeks to collapse distinctions between religious community and geographic community, ultimately extending the sense of community to encompass all of humanity. This approach is grounded in the belief that the realization of the oneness of humanity requires universal participation.

As participation in the institute process has come to encompass a greater segment of humanity, efforts oriented around social action have also evolved to incorporate new insights generated from collective learning about the implications of spiritual nobility and processes that honor dignity. Early Bahá'í social action projects were largely similar to conventional development approaches, seeking to assist a population in need by providing a service or expertise in a field. However, the consolidation of insights from two decades of learning-by-doing facilitated by cycles of study, consultation, action and reflection resulted in a shift to establishing "a process that seeks to raise capacity within a population to take charge of its own spiritual, social and intellectual development . . . Social change is not a project that one group of people carries out for the benefit of another" (Universal House of Justice 2010). Underlying this approach is avoiding forms of charity, aid and development that can strip individuals and populations of their dignity by making them into dependent recipients of aid. Social action efforts are now oriented at the grassroots or neighborhood,

conducted at various levels of complexity but all focused on participation and generating learning over time. The shift in this approach has resulted in a manifold increase in the number of social action projects being undertaken across the world ([Universal House of Justice 2021](#)).

This long-term and process-oriented approach towards understanding the nuances of dignity sheds light on the significance of sustained and systematic learning. Dignity is not a predefined state; rather, the nuances of its implications emerge as greater populations participate in seeking to realize it, guided by a common framework.

6. The Implications of Dignity in Responding to Oppression

A litmus test to the conception of dignity thus far explored is its implications in the face of oppression. What is a dignified response to oppression? To explore this question, we examine the life of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, and the 150-year-long and ongoing persecution of the Bahá’ís in Iran. Under conditions where the state strips away one’s basic rights and freedoms, the Bahá’í response to oppression is also manifested in a manner befitting dignity. This was exemplified by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá as he endured 56 years of exile and imprisonment at the hands of the Persian and Ottoman Empires from 1852 to 1908. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is an important resource for exploring the implications of dignity due to the unique station that he was given by Bahá’u’lláh as the perfect exemplar of his teachings. As such, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s words and deeds continue to be an inspirational resource in reflecting on the implications of being “created noble”.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá became a prisoner at the age of nine when his whole family was exiled, and remained a prisoner until the age of 64. During these decades, he dedicated his time and efforts towards being an ongoing source of comfort and solace towards his family, his fellow exiles, and towards the poor and the needy wherever he resided. In spite of the harsh conditions of imprisonment and exile, which resulted in the illness and death of many, including members of his own family, his service-oriented life never ceased. In spite of his status, his counsel came to be sought after by governors and community leaders where he resided. Freedom, he notes, “is not a matter of place. It is a condition. I was thankful for the prison and the lack of liberty was very pleasing to me, for those days were passed in the path of service under the utmost difficulties and trials, bearing fruits and results . . . Unless one accepts dire vicissitudes he will not attain . . . When one is released from the prison of self, that is indeed freedom, for self is the greater prison. When this release takes place, one can never be imprisoned” ([‘Abdu’l-Bahá \[1911\] 1982](#), pp. 120–22).

He adds that this condition of freedom can only come to one who accepts life with “radiant acquiescence”. As ‘Abdu’l-Bahá exemplified, this is not a passive state but an act of agency that seeks to establish conditions conducive to the dignity of others, regardless of setting and circumstance. Following his release in 1908 at the age of 64, he organized extensive agricultural operations which prevented famine among the residents of Haifa, Palestine, during World War I. Between 1910 and 1913, he traveled throughout Europe and America, promoting ideals of the oneness of humanity. He met with leading feminists and social justice activists and encouraged their efforts, and he consciously—and lovingly—defied unjust norms of race, class and gender. Numerous accounts document his inclusion of black Americans in seats of honor in white-dominant social settings, of the poor, homeless and working class in upper-class settings, and of women in male-dominant settings ([Honnold 1982](#)).

‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s example suggests that one of the implications of dignity in responding to oppression is a conscious and ongoing cultivation of an inner self that defies external ascriptions of identity or social conditions. This inner self is always active, and never passive; it is not limited by place, culture or language. This cannot be separated from an awareness of systems of oppression everywhere, and a refusal of complicity in the oppression of others. The dismantling of systems of oppression, his actions suggest, can begin by seeing all humanity as noble beings, regardless of race, gender, religion, wealth, or any other socially ascribed identity.

However, how might systems of oppression be made more visible? In his talks addressing racial justice during his travels in America, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá suggests that conditions conducive to the realization of justice can only be established when the experiences and perspectives of the oppressed are taken fully into account (Smith 2019). Thus, oppression anywhere is oppression everywhere, and the denial of the fundamental nobility of one person is a harm to the cultivation of conditions conducive to the dignity of all, and, consequently, a barrier to justice. Within the relational framework of the oneness of humanity, the oppressor and the oppressed are not fixed states: all of humanity is harmed by systems of oppression that deny the nobility of any individual.

One indicator of the efficacy of the “radiant acquiescence” exemplified by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is his funeral, which was held just one day after his death in Palestine in 1921. Observers and newspapers noted that some ten thousand people from all walks of life attended, including the wealthiest and the poorest, government officials and clergy, Persians, Kurds, Armenians, Europeans, Americans, Jews, Catholics, Orthodox Christians, Anglicans, Muslims, Druzes and Bahá’ís. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s grandson later wrote: “So united were they [the mourners] in their acclamation of him, as the wise educator and reconciler of the human race in this perplexed and sorrowful age, that there seemed to be nothing left for the Bahá’ís to say” (Blomfield and Rabbani 1922, pp. 11–12).

‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s individual example of responding to oppression—grounded in an inner nobility and manifested in an active cultivation of conditions conducive to the dignity of all—marks the blueprint of the collective response of the Bahá’í community in Iran throughout over 150 years of discrimination and oppression, from 1848 until today (Karlberg 2010; BIC 2005; Kazemzadeh 2000; Momen 2005). Addressing the Bahá’ís in Iran, the *Universal House of Justice* (2009) writes:

The proper response to oppression is neither to succumb in resignation nor to take on the characteristics of the oppressor. The victim of oppression can transcend it through an inner strength that shields the soul from bitterness and hatred and which sustains consistent, principled action.

Examining the situation of the Iranian Bahá’ís, Karlberg (2010, p. 242) notes, “For the most part, the Bahá’ís of Iran have never let their oppressors establish the terms of the encounter. They have generally refused to play the role of victim; refused to be dehumanized; refused to forfeit their sense of constructive agency; and refused to compromise their principles or forsake their beliefs.” This response, described as “constructive resilience”, is guided by a number of principles, summarized as:

the principle of meeting hatred and persecution with love and kindness; the principle that we can gain strength through adversity and hardship, and that we can attain higher spiritual values and goals by sacrificing lower material comforts and needs; the principle of cultivating spiritual qualities and virtues within oneself and relying on the power of personal example in order to attract and reform the hearts of others; and the principle of active service to humanity to improve the conditions of all people without regard to distinctions based on religious belief or other categories of identity. (Karlberg 2010, p. 236)

7. Concluding Remarks

From a Bahá’í perspective, the concept of human dignity is foundational to, and complementary with, the discourse on human rights, in which the Bahá’í community has been engaged for over seven decades (Mahmoudi and Penn 2020; Tahririh-Danesh 2001).

Bahá’í contributions to the United Nations date back to 1947 when the Bahá’í representative office at the UN, known as the Bahá’í International Community (BIC), offered a statement to the Human Rights Commission for its preparatory work on the drafting of the UN Declaration of Human Rights. The document, entitled “A Bahá’í Declaration of Human Obligations and Rights”, states:

Human rights can be established in terms of social status when members of the community realize that the gift of life and conscious being obligates them to meet responsibilities owed to God, to society and to self. Mutual recognition by members of the community of the truth that their lives emanate from one and the same universal Source enables them to maintain ordered relationships in a common social body. (BIC 1947)

This overarching theme continues to guide the work of the BIC. Over its 70-year history, the BIC has released scores of documents and statements advocating for processes of social change at all levels that are rooted in the recognition of humanity's nobility and dignity. The BIC is among the most prominent civil society organizations at the UN to advocate for gender equality, and its other areas of focus include education, human rights, development and community building (Berger 2021). These diverse areas of engagement are grounded in education about, and the implications of, human nobility.

While rights and obligations between states and citizens are essential in the Bahá'í teachings, they only cover one aspect of the relationships that constitute society and the polity. The Bahá'í teachings on nobility and dignity are not only the foundation of human rights, but they are also the foundation of all social relationships. This God-given dignity is understood neither as a status conferred by a hierarchical command structure, nor as the outcome of a struggle against such a command structure. Rather, it is manifested

“in terms of the intrinsic value or worth of every human being as a member of an interdependent community—or social body. The social body frame suggests that this intrinsic value is realized as individuals develop those latent capacities upon which the well-being of the entire body depends”. (Karlberg 2020, pp. 41–42)

The Bahá'í perspective suggests that respecting and nurturing the dignity of all people is the right and responsibility not only of the state in relation to citizens, but of all persons in their relationships with each other: acting with dignity and respecting and nurturing the dignity of others is the duty of all individuals. The goal of communities is to nurture a culture in which each person's dignity is valued, and the goal of institutions is to protect the dignity of all persons and to create the conditions for enhancing the dignity of all members of society.

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