RELIGION, SPIRITUAL PRINCIPLES, AND CIVIL SOCIETY

DAVID A. PALMER

The public sphere of collective global discourse is emerging within social spaces that are often referred to as "civil society." This sphere usually is understood as one that is rooted in the people; that enjoys some degree of autonomy from direct state control, from market forces, and from particularistic interest groups; and that contains a great diversity of groups, associations, networks, and movements that self-organize, act to improve or transform social conditions, and participate in public discourses.

Civil society is generally considered to be a good thing. A vibrant civil society is seen to be a desirable goal; it is actively pursued and promoted by international foundations, government policies, development organizations, UN agencies, and academic institutions. "Global civil society" has become institutionalized in many international forums, UN conferences, and transnational alliances on specific issues. Why this nearly universal legitimation of civil society? Civil society seems to be conceptualized as the arena within which a host of positive values are spontaneously manifested in the popular realm. These values include solidarity, participation, volunteerism, altruism, generosity, and justice. Civil society thus becomes a realm of freedom, where people take voluntary initiatives, self-organize at the grassroots to address social dilemmas, participate in public affairs, and sacrifice their narrow interests for the common good. It is considered to have the dynamism and flexibility to solve social problems without the cost and inefficient bureaucracy of the state, and it can draw on moral and cultural resources to counterbalance the harsh realities of the market in meeting social needs. Indeed, current discourses on civil society tend to

stress its complementarity to the state and the market, compensating for the limitations of both: as an arena for the expression of popular voices and interests in the face of state authority; as an aggregate of flexible actors who, being close to the grassroots, are more capable of providing social services than inefficient bureaucracies; and as a space of altruism and philanthropy, making up for the cold rationality of market efficiency.[1]

The Bahá'í teachings and the community's pattern of social engagement generally predispose Bahá'ís to support and identify with those elements of civil society that promote the enhancement of human dignity and reinforce unity and solidarity within and among communities. Indeed, civil society organizations and movements have been at the forefront of advancing some of the social teachings that were promulgated by Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá as part of the core principles and mission of the Bahá'í faith over a century ago—lessons on establishing peace, unity, and justice among the peoples of the world; overcoming racism and prejudice of all kinds; building equality between men and women; reducing economic inequality; promoting universal education; and establishing world citizenship. From the early twentieth century onward, Bahá'ís have been active in movements for women's rights and racial equality. Following the spread of the Bahá'í Faith to countries outside the Middle East and North Atlantic regions in the second half of the twentieth century, Bahá'í communities in regions such as South America and India began initiatives in literacy, health, agricultural technology, and grassroots education. The Universal House of Justice, in a message to the Bahá'ís of the world on October 20, 1983, stated that the growth and expansion of the Bahá'í community had reached the point where processes of social and economic development "must be incorporated into its regular pursuits"; shortly afterward, an Office of Social and Economic Development was established at the Bahá'í World Centre to promote these efforts and to collect, consolidate, and disseminate learning.[2] In the course of these endeavours, many Bahá'ís, typically in an individual capacity, worked for or established their own non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and some projects evolved into sustained Bahá'í-inspired development organizations that fostered long-term interactions and collaborations with other organizations and institutions of civil society. In its 1985 statement "The Promise of World Peace," the Universal House of Justice remarks that the rise of humanitarian organizations and "the spread of women's and youth movements calling for an end to war" and of "widening networks of ordinary people"—all of which may be seen as components of civil society—are a sign of the constructive processes that lay the foundations of the universal peace "for which from age to age the sacred scriptures of mankind have constantly

held the promise."[3]

While the Bahá'í community is organized under the authority of a single institutional structure whose governing bodies are elected at the local, national, and international levels, its affairs are decentralized to the greatest extent possible. There is no clergy. Consultation on community affairs is a core aspect of religious practice. Individual initiative is encouraged, and universal participation in the expansion, consolidation, and administration of the community is a fundamental goal and principle. Over the past few decades, the Universal House of Justice, in a series of global plans, has encouraged Bahá'ís around the world to learn how to apply and develop these approaches through a focus on community building that extends to all members of a neighbourhood, village, or social space regardless of religious affiliation. As they gain experience in this process, Bahá'ís undertake social actions of increasing duration, scale, and complexity for the purpose of improving the spiritual, social, and material conditions of life, and they endeavour to contribute to the prevalent discourses of society. The Bahá'í International Community (BIC) was one of the first NGOs to be given consultative status at the United Nations in 1947; as discussed in Julia Berger's contribution to this volume, the BIC has become one of the most active participants in the UN's consultations with civil society organizations, and it was the BIC's representative to the UN who was elected to represent global civil society at the UN's Millennium Summit in 2000.

The Bahá'í Faith, from its core teachings to its organizational structure and from its historical experience to its contemporary modes of social engagement, clearly has deep affinities with civil society as a space for the expression of its values and teachings. It is strongly committed to fostering people's capacity to associate at the grassroots. Its purpose is to develop a new social order that will emancipate humans from all forms of oppression, and it hopes to bring its teachings and experience to bear on the deliberations of the public sphere. While the Bahá'í Faith defines itself as a religion based on divine revelation with its specific articles of faith, laws, and practices, it considers its social principles to be equally important to and inseparable from its teachings on individual spiritual life and ethics. Thus it does not recognize itself in the conventional framing of religion in modern secular societies as restricted to the private domain of individual subjectivity, whose social expression should be limited to congregational gatherings of people sharing the same faith. However, since the Bahá'í teachings forbid involvement in partisan politics and any attempt to seize the levers of political power, the social engagement of Bahá'ís does not take the form adopted by some modern religious movements that have challenged the privatization of religion by reasserting the role of religion in the

political realm.[4] Instead, civil society is the preferred space within which Bahá'ís tend to collectively engage with other social actors at the national and the global level. Given the great diversity of forms of organization, discourse, and action that can be found within civil society, the application of Bahá'í principles to social engagement has become an important area of inquiry among Bahá'í practitioners and institutions. Through reflection and consultations informed by both experience in the field and research on the relevant Bahá'í writings and teachings, an increasingly coherent body of knowledge has begun to emerge that not only helps guide Bahá'ís in their own involvement in civil society, but also can contribute to broader debates and discussions on the role of religion in civil society.

In this chapter, I hope to bring some insights from this body of knowledge into dialogue with the academic discourse on civil society, which is derived from several disciplinary and theoretical traditions, primarily in sociology, political science, and development studies. It is but a preliminary outline of a set of problems and lines of inquiry that have been the subject of discussions and consultations among Bahá'ís for many years but that may also be of interest to the broader community of researchers and practitioners who approach civil society from either secular or religious perspectives.

I begin by considering current normative conceptualizations and social configurations of civil society, discussing its associational, deliberative, symbolic, and emancipatory dimensions and the possibilities and limitations thereof. I define civil society as social spaces for the voluntary and expansive expression of values of human solidarity and explain why religion occupies an ambiguous position in relation to such spaces. Religion is a key source of values and commitment to human solidarity in individual and community life; at the same time, many forms of prevalent religious discourse and action ignore or even undermine the values of solidarity that underpin civil society. I propose that this dilemma can be overcome through the application of "spiritual principles"—principles of ethics and modes of action derived from certain ontological assumptions about the spiritual dimension of human nature and about the nature of an ideal society. While spiritual principles do not eliminate the distinction between religion and civil society, they provide a language and lines of inquiry that can be applied within both religious and secular spaces. I explore the implications for civil society actors of explicitly reflecting on the foundations of their action as based on spiritual principles such as the oneness of humanity, justice, and participation in the generation and application of knowledge and of operationalizing these principles in all aspects of the deliberations and actions of civil society networks and organizations. But

religion, as well, needs to question its role and build its capacity to become a social vehicle for nurturing, upholding, and applying spiritual principles. To the extent to which both religion and civil society are able to operate according to these principles, they will be able to expand the social space of voluntary and expansive solidarity.

Four Dimensions of Civil Society

Academic and public discourse on civil society is rich and complex, with many different understandings of what civil society is. Without providing a lengthy review of these debates, we can see that different authors have focused on four different dimensions, types, or functions of civil society, which can be described respectively as the "associational," the "deliberative," the "symbolic," and the "emancipatory."[5]

The Associational Dimension

The "associational" fabric of civil society, first described by Alexis de Tocqueville, is based on voluntary associations—flourishing, lively groups that are spontaneously organized among the people; this is the soil and the social space in which people learn to self-organize, to work together with civility, and to cooperate across different associations.[6] Associational activity is the very baseline of what civil society is—people interact and create clubs, organizations, churches, parent-teacher associations, sports clubs, history societies, environmental groups, support groups, and so on. As long as there is a diversity of lively non-governmental, voluntary associations, the thought goes, civil society flourishes and social capital can grow. And inversely, as lamented by Robert D. Putnam, if people do not participate in such associations, there will be a declining social capital and civil society.[7]

There seems to be an assumption that popular self-organization is always in the direction of social progress and solidarity. Although much contemporary discourse tends to idealize or even romanticize the popular or "democratic" nature of civil society associations and NGOs, the reality is that they are not accountable to anyone but themselves and their funders.[8] Many voluntary groups are violent, racist, extremist, or intolerant.[9] What if, in some societies, much of the associational self-organizing is in the service of xenophobia, fanaticism, violence, or the suppression of women or minority groups? Such "anti-civil" organizations have, in recent decades, increased their influence in places as varied as the United States, Western Europe, the Islamic world, and East Asia.[10] Clearly, the significance of civil society must reside in more than the empirical fact of people's capacity to form associations. What, then, are the values that these associations should embody?

The Deliberative Dimension

The "deliberative" concept of civil society, which can be linked to Jürgen Habermas's public sphere, focuses on the social spaces and discursive practices within which public discourse, common norms, values, and ideals are debated and elaborated.[11] Within certain social spaces, through their rational conversations on issues of mutual concern, people are drawn out of their private and particularistic interests, converse and engage with each other with civility, and accept people of different opinions and backgrounds into the conversation. They develop an inclusive language and norms of communication and debate on and elaborate common ideals and moral values based on the inherent dignity of each participant and the equal application of justice to all. The discourses emerging from this deliberative sphere influence other political, legal, and social institutions, which gradually embody and reinforce those values. Deliberative civil society operates at the level of discourse and of the rules of discourse, which is to say that it takes shape as a discourse on values, the practice of those values, and their institutional reinforcement.

The Symbolic Dimension

Michael Karlberg discusses the concept of the public sphere in chapter 3, so I will not further elaborate here on the deliberative dimension of civil society. I will instead turn to Jeffrey Alexander's proposal of the "civil sphere" as a more empirically grounded and realistic alternative to the abstract rationalism and universalism of Habermas's vision. Alexander's conceptualization focuses on the symbolic structures and dynamics of civil society. It points to the historical processes of cultural change by which, within a given society, the symbolic codes that define the boundaries of the sphere of social solidarity are contested and expanded, until, to varying degrees, civic values become normative for other spheres of society such as the family, the state, and the economy.

Alexander asserts that "societies are not governed by power alone and are not fueled only by the pursuit of self-interest. Feelings for others matter, and they are structured by the boundaries of solidarity."[12] He defines civil society as this sphere of solidarity "in which a certain kind of universalizing community comes to be culturally defined and to some degree institutionally enforced."[13] Associations, the law, and the media give institutional structure to sustain and protect the civil sphere, which also depends on the practice of civility, criticism, and mutual respect. A central component of the dynamics of the civil sphere is the historically contingent expansion and contraction of the "boundaries of solidarity" through binary codes that define civic virtues and anti-civic vices and incorporate or stigmatize

populations based on their purported capacity to express them. Thus, in the United States, the civil sphere was initially restricted to white, property-owning, Christian men who upheld values of universalistic solidarity but excluded much of the human race on the grounds that they lacked the civil qualities of rationality, autonomy, self-control, altruism, trustworthiness, and so on. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the boundaries of solidarity were expanded to include categories such as women, black people, and Jews, to the extent that there was a shift in the meanings and boundaries of the binary codes, and these populations were accepted within the civil sphere as being equally capable of embodying civic qualities. Essential to the success of these cultural transformations was that movements for the rights of these populations were able to translate their particular grievances into the language of universal civic values and thus to appeal to the broader society's feelings of solidarity. Thus, while exclusionary cultural binary codes create boundaries around the civil sphere, those boundaries are susceptible to be challenged and expanded by invoking the values of solidarity that underpin it.

Another key set of boundaries distinguishes the civil sphere from what Alexander calls the "noncivil" spheres of the state—the economy, religion, the family, and the local community. These spheres are "fundamental to the quality of life and to the vitality of a plural order, and their independence must be nurtured and protected," but they have their distinctive cultural codes and institutions and embody sectoral rather than societal interests, particularistic rather than universal values, and/or coercive hierarchies rather than voluntary, horizontal solidarity.[14] The civil sphere is thus a space that is independent of these other spheres but that is always in productive tension with them. Noncivil spheres can bring what Alexander calls "positive inputs," but also "negative intrusions," into the civil sphere. Thus, the market economy, for example, has undermined essentializing social hierarchies and divisions by seeing all humans as individuals equally capable of engaging in production, consumption, and exchange and by instilling habits of work, fairness, and autonomy that are conducive to civil relations. On the other hand, the market economy generates economic inequalities, class divisions, and an ideology of self-centred accumulation that are destructive to the civil sphere. It is precisely from the standpoint of the civil sphere and its values of solidarity that these phenomena are seen as problems and that a critical discourse emerges that calls on governments and corporations to restrict the unfettered intrusion of economic criteria into all domains of social life. The civil sphere also expands the reach of its values of solidarity into noncivil spheres, such as, for example, when civil associations, movements, and discourses devoted to women's liberation

succeeded in institutionalizing norms of gender equality in the political and economic spheres and even, to varying degrees, in the spheres of the family and religion.[15]

Grounded in the often agonistic transformation of culture in the direction of a utopian solidarity, the civil sphere concept raises many questions. Since the civil sphere is based on culturally coded binary oppositions between populations identified as civil and anticivil, is it possible to have a civil sphere that does not define itself in opposition to some cultural other? And while the trajectory for Western societies has been, over the past few centuries, a bumpy and tortuous process of expanding the boundaries of the civil sphere to become more inclusive, is there not the possibility, increasingly evident today, of those boundaries shrinking back toward self-enclosed, antagonistic communities, each of which sees itself as more civil than the others? And even the expansion of the civil sphere, in Alexander's account, is a process of incorporating groups into a set of values and an understanding of solidarity that have very specific roots in Euro-American history and its institutions of liberal democracy. How feasible can this be in the emergence of a truly global civil sphere, which would necessitate the social instantiation, on a worldwide scale, of the values of solidarity that are needed to bind a progressively interconnected world? Is it necessary or even possible for the whole world to make a detour through Western liberalism in order to build a global sphere of solidarity?

The Emancipatory Dimension

The fourth, "emancipatory" dimension of civil society is highly relevant to these questions. The incorporation of groups into the civil sphere represents not only the expansion of the sphere of solidarity, but also liberation from political, social, and cultural oppression. The emancipatory vision of civil society is derived from several distinct intellectual traditions, which have different historical points of origin but share a focus on how civil society organizations can counter and even overturn structures of political hegemony and oppression. One strand, associated with the Marxist tradition and critical thinkers such as Antonio Gramsci, sees contemporary civil society as an adjunct to capitalism but also argues that it provides the soil out of which countervailing spaces can grow.[16] Another strand, exemplified by Adam Michnik, draws on the example of the collapse of communist totalitarianism in Eastern Europe in order to show how civil society activity can prepare people's consciousness and lay the foundations for the end of authoritarianism and the establishment of liberal democracy.[17]

Growing appreciation of the emancipatory function of civil society generates many of the expectations that people place on civil society; they

hope that the advancement of civil society can help create different types of social spaces in which people can be freed from structures of oppression. This emancipatory vision of civil society is especially salient in social and political discourses outside of the North Atlantic countries and highlights the specific historical origin and spread of civil society as a conceptual and institutional construct. For in North America and Western Europe, civil society has emerged in parallel with modern social and political institutions, has long been part of the socio-political mainstream, and is now a fully institutionalized and legitimate component of the liberal-democratic order. From the West, models of civil society have spread to other regions, where they exist in tension with more traditional forms of associational life and public discourse and, often, with non-liberal political regimes. Since the 1990s, transnational flows have led to the emergence of a "global civil society" that is closely associated with the institutional infrastructures of international organizations such as the UN, as well as global meetings and forums, but that also remains largely Western centred. Funding tends to flow from the West outward, and the international NGOs that often act as intermediaries and brokers between global civil society, Western funders, and local groups and populations also tend to be Western based.

Thus, the emancipatory promise of civil society needs to be considered within the historical and geopolitical location of global and national civil societies. Indeed, although Western civil society organizations may promote counter-hegemonic discourses, advocate for the emancipation of specific populations, and engage in actions and social movements related to specific issues, they tend to take the Western liberal order for granted, are rather generally content (or resigned) to operate within its framework, and often consider their mission to be the defense or strengthening of that very order. However, in other countries, civil society may be highly contentious because its discourses may challenge the entire political order of a country. In these contexts, civil society organizations appear to provide the dynamic organizational infrastructure of transformative social movements.

Whether consciously or not, analyses of the emancipatory potential of civil society organizations still tend to present Western liberal democracies as the normative standard for emancipation. It is true that many civil society organizations, in the West and elsewhere, might strongly object to such a statement. Some simply work for human betterment, while others are highly critical of the Western social order. But the fact is that since the collapse of the socialist ideals that sustained many groups and movements until around the 1980s, the vast majority of civil society organizations and discourses have no vision of a progression beyond Western liberal democ-

racy. Notwithstanding the cultural idealization of protest, subversion, and postcolonial critiques of the West in some quarters of civil society and intellectual discourse, the default position of civil society discourse is to erect the Western social, political, and economic system as the standard and ideal of emancipation toward which all societies should strive.[18]

The Western-centred emancipatory vision of civil society is problematic on two counts. First, it falsely assumes that Western liberal democracies represent the "end of history," the goal toward which all societies aspire. Second, it ignores that the freedom of Western liberal democracies is but a component of a global economic and geopolitical order, that it is structurally inseparable from the oppression of other regions, and that the West uses the economic, political, and cultural tools of soft power to sustain a global hegemony that is increasingly challenged by other powers.[19] Indeed, since the 1990s, Western governments and foundations have made use of civil society organizations as geopolitical tools, both in the provision of development aid and in the promotion of political reform.[20] Many groups that have benefited from such funding or participated in such projects are aware of the dangers of being instrumentalized; they have taken measures to protect their independence and are often highly critical of the governments that fund them. Nonetheless, it is important to recognize the role that partisan geopolitical and ideological forces play in shaping of civil society. The acknowledgment of these dynamics has led the legitimacy and the emancipatory potential of civil society to be questioned in many circles.[21]

We can better appreciate these complex facets of the contemporary discourse on civil society by understanding how this discourse arose in the 1980s and 90s, in the context of the decline of the traditional left-wing political project and of third world liberation movements, and the rise of global neoliberalism since the end of the Cold War. Under the "Washington consensus" of a strong neoliberal ideology and policies aiming to shrink the state and to expand the reach of the market, civil society came to be seen as an arena that could be opened up in parallel with the market, with charities and NGOs taking up functions of grassroots organization and social service provision that had previously been provided by the state, left-wing political parties, trade unions, and churches.[22] Some scholars have thus written about the role of NGOs and civil society as actors of "neoliberal governance."[23] With the breakdown of Marxist ideology, social organizations needed a new grounding. Revolution was no longer the order of the day; the path that was now open to them was to professionalize and to survive on grants from private foundations or international aid agencies. Both the left and the right converged in their support for civil society

under the new consensus: because the state was seen as incapable of solving problems and, in many countries, was drastically pared down under structural adjustment programs imposed by the International Monetary Fund, society could be left to self-organize under the market and civil society.[24] At the same time, the associational fabric of civil society could generate social mobilization to keep governments in check or even topple authoritarian regimes. The growth of civil society was thus envisioned as an important condition for the establishment of liberal democracy.

The contemporary normative discourse of civil society is thus closely tied with the expansion of capitalism and Western-style democracy.[25] Civil society has been mythologized in counter-hegemonic discourses as stirring the seeds of anti-authoritarian movements and "colour revolutions" in Eastern Europe, Iran, Russia, the Middle East, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and elsewhere, with the promise of ushering in pro-Western democratic regimes or Western-style electoral systems.[26] For precisely this reason, civil society organizations have been fiercely fought by anti-Western forces that have become increasingly adept at deploying their own strategies of popular organization and mobilization against them; the end result, as seen in Russia, China, and the Arab world, has often been a renewed and more assertive authoritarianism, fractured societies, or total social disintegration.[27] Civil society in its current structural configuration is thus being instrumentalized in a set of broader ideological struggles and geopolitical conflicts that undermine its legitimacy and regenerative force.

Civil society organizations operating in non-Western settings thus find themselves in a difficult position. Groups that see themselves as critical or even opposed to Western powers and interests often have little choice but to receive much-needed support from foundations and governments that have no interest in transforming the Western socio-political order and may be actively committed to entrenching it.[28] As a result, regardless of how they use such resources, these groups often end up, whether directly or indirectly, consciously or not, being perceived as serving a Western geopolitical agenda. The emancipatory function of civil society is therefore undercut by its association with Western hegemony, which leads authoritarian regimes to strive to prevent the growth of an independent civil society, in the Western liberal understanding of the term.

In this section, I have reviewed four different conceptions of civil society that can be identified in the academic literature. This overview has undoubtedly oversimplified the great diversity of views on the roles, dimensions, and structures of civil society. For the present purposes, and drawing on insights from the conceptualizations I have discussed above, I will define civil society as referring to *social spaces for the voluntary and*

expansive expression of values of human solidarity. Because it is made up of social spaces, civil society is structured by norms and institutions that define human interactions. The solidarity expressed in these spaces is voluntary—a manifestation of freely chosen bonds and aspirations—rather than imposed by tradition, regulation, or ideology. It is expansive, in the sense that while such spaces may be composed of very specific groups of people, the boundaries of such groups are not seen as essential but as temporary conditions in a collective aspiration for an ever-widening solidarity. The spaces of civil society are made up of people working together and enacting solidarity in and between groups and associations. In these spaces, participants learn to transcend particularistic interests in the course of mutual deliberations on the common good, and the values of solidarity are articulated, defended, and translated into societal, cultural, economic, and political realms. From this perspective, many of the shortcomings and limitations that have been pointed out in the discourse on civil society can be linked to a common problem, which is the tearing apart of the values of solidarity that underpin civil society, whether caused by associations whose values, ideals, or practices are damaging to an expansive solidarity; divisive forms of public discourse; exclusionary cultural codes; or co-optation by political forces or geopolitical interests.

The Role of Religion

What is the role of religion in civil society thus defined as spaces of solidarity? Its position is ambiguous and fraught with potential tensions. On the one hand, religion is a key source of the values associated with universal solidarity. It enjoins us to transcend our self-centred ego and to expand our sphere of concern to include all humans, all sentient beings, or even the entire cosmos. Religion does not content itself with ideas on universal love and compassion but attempts to express, embody, and disseminate these values through living communities. Creating expansive spaces of solidarity, one might argue, is of the very essence of religion. Religion is undoubtedly the origin of many of the core values of civil society.[29]

On the other hand, the transcendental source and authority at the root of the world religions, which generates intense bonds of solidarity expressed through a common faith, religious identity, ritual practices, and communal life, is also what separates religion from a complete identification with civil society. The solidarity of civil society is one of horizontal immanence, of free association among people and groups who may not share any common transcendental referent, while religious solidarity derives from a common connection and alignment to a transcendental divinity or spiritual reality. This faith automatically implies the possi-

bility of its absence—of people who are, by definition, not bound by the same ties of solidarity. Civil society, on the other hand, calls on solidarity between religious and non-religious people, or between people of different religious communities.

Thus the problem: religion is an indispensable contributor of values and communities of solidarity, but it is also potentially one of the greatest obstacles to the nurturing of spaces of ever-expansive solidarity. Throughout history and around the world, religious communities have constituted the first and most widespread forms of self-governing groups that have been based on values of solidarity, which they have striven to embody in forms of collective life. And today, in many places, local religious communities such as congregations, parishes, temples, and mosques contribute in large measure to the associational and cultural dimensions of civil society by providing a strong fabric of grassroots community life.[30] They have also been the founders of the earliest charities, philanthropic organizations, and volunteer movements, as well as many movements for social and civil rights and some of the largest social service organizations and international NGOs.[31]

However, other aspects of religious culture can be obstacles to expanding spaces of solidarity. The traditional forms and habits of many religious groups are often based on patriarchal or authoritarian forms of leadership that are contrary to civic values, while the traditional scope of religious activity may divert people away from reaching out to broader spheres of solidarity around issues of common social concern. Religion too often remains associated with the oppression of women and the sanctification of ethnic, cultural, and national prejudice, all of which are severely damaging to civil society. Additionally, sectarianism and overemphasis on divisive religious identities often undermine the ability of many religious communities to build social solidarity, as does the tendency for many local religious organizations to be influenced by political forces and ideologies.[32]

In response to these limitations, some have sought to advance an individualistic spirituality that strongly rejects any hint of the divisive aspects of organized religion. But this new brand of spirituality has proven itself almost entirely unable to resist co-optation by the forces of the market and thus has given way to a "spiritual marketplace" of books, seminars, courses, and experiences that are consumed by people in pursuit of personal spiritual gratification and that cannot sustain community. While such a commodified, individualistic spirituality does tend to promote ideals of harmony, it is limited in its capacity to create meaningful and sustainable solidarity in social practice.

Another form of religious engagement with civil society is through

faith-based charities, philanthropies, NGOs, and social service agencies. These efforts and contributions still form the bedrock of civil society in many places. Nevertheless, like many other civil society organizations, they often end up being co-opted by the state and transformed into purveyors of social services on its behalf. Worse, they may become unwitting palliatives that, by alleviating the worst forms of suffering, simply reinforce the oppressive structures of the dominant political and economic system.

Religiously inspired socio-political movements, which have arisen especially in many Christian, Muslim, and Hindu nations, can be seen as a final form of religious social engagement. These movements saw their origins in attempts to draw on religious teachings in order to challenge existing structures of social and political oppression and to propose utopian formulations of social solidarity. Yet as recent history shows, such movements are liable to end up becoming ensnared in political contests for power and thus made to be the servants of partisan and geopolitical dynamics that completely undermine any potential these movements may have initially possessed to reinforce social solidarity.

There is, to be sure, much to be learned from the various approaches to faith-based engagement mentioned above, ranging from individual spiritual growth to local community building, from agencies dedicated to serving the common good to movements aiming to generate a profound social transformation. But it is clear that even as there is a growing recognition of the potential role of religion in strengthening civil society, there is much to be questioned as well. Religion and civil society in the modern era are thus characterized by a dialectical tension and mutual intrusions. Religion contributes values, resources, and networks to civil society, but civil society pushes back against the influence of religiously sanctioned patriarchy, sectarianism, extremism, and prejudice—not only on the broader society, but even, with varying degrees of success, within religious communities themselves. For example, many churches have become tolerant of other religions, mindful of social justice and the rights of women, and find inspiration within scripture and theology for these moves toward a more all-encompassing solidarity. These changes and reforms have taken place at least partly in response to criticism and new norms of solidarity emanating from a secular civil sphere. As such, the dialectical relationship between religion and civil society has, to a great degree, been a productive one. But is it possible to move beyond these tensions and find a solid common ground and line of communication between religious and civil values of solidarity? In the next section, I argue that this common ground can be located by questioning prevalent assumptions about human nature, by exploring the spiritual dimension of human nature and its expression

through solidarity-building values and initiatives in civil society, and by identifying and applying the spiritual principles that can guide public discourse and social action to build solidarity.

The Spiritual Foundations of Civil Society

From a Bahá'í perspective, any reflection on social action—e.g., its motivation, its methods, its purpose, and its effectiveness—must begin with an understanding of human nature. What is the ontological foundation of social action and its ideal of solidarity? What implicit assumptions do civil society actors make about human nature and aspirations? Such beliefs and ontological premises are rarely the subject of explicit discourse in civil society, but to avoid such a critical reflection may result in civil society actors being unconsciously governed by implicit assumptions or ideologies that are at odds with their own deepest aspirations for solidarity, or it may ultimately reinforce the very oppressive social structures that civil society organizations are trying to change or alleviate.

Questioning Prevailing Assumptions on Human Nature

Prevalent understandings of human nature fail to account for both the ultimate values of civil society and for the behavioural motivation of many civil society actors. Clearly, there is something that motivates people to commit their time and money to philanthropic aims, to volunteering, to mutual help, and to activism. The large and growing range and scale of civil society activity and organization and the persistence of civil society actors in the face of challenges, restrictions, and lack of resources are a testament to the power of the values of solidarity, participation, altruism, generosity, and justice—a power that the Universal House of Justice says is "not a finite entity that is to be 'seized' and 'jealously guarded' " but rather a "limitless capacity to transform" that can be "released," "encouraged," or "enabled" because it springs forth from the deepest roots of human nature.[33]

Many social theories and public policy frameworks employ a concept of human nature that assumes that human beings are self-interested and competitive and that all human behaviour can be explained in reference to an unquenchable thirst to satisfy material needs. Although such assumptions and theories can account for much human behaviour in the realms of politics and commerce, they fail to adequately account for the higher capacities, powers, and inclinations that are so conspicuously on display in the realm of civil society.

For example, the concept of *homo economicus* is based on a strong ontological claim about human nature—that the essence of human beings is to maximize self-interest. While this theory was developed to describe mar-

ket behaviour, it has acquired an increasingly hegemonic and normative status in a growing number of disciplines and social domains.[34] A central assumption in economic theory has become an ideology that, through the institutions of education, politics, the economy, and the media, shapes people's subjective sense of self-identity as being driven by self-interest. But is it possible to build solidarity on the basis of this understanding of human nature? What is demonstrated by the record of the past several decades, during which the assumptions of *homo economicus* have increasingly been applied beyond the market to guide decisions, policies, and planning in government, civil society, and even sometimes religion? To what extent have civil society organizations, their funders, their members, and the policymakers who regulate their activities, consciously or unwittingly structured civil society along the assumptions of *homo economicus*?

Similar questions arise in response to the equally widespread assumption that society is instituted entirely by competitive relations of power and that the only means of overcoming oppression is to engage in adversarial struggle.[35] Is it possible to build sustainable peace and solidarity, universal participation, and grassroots empowerment if all the actors of society are engaged in a perpetual struggle for domination? Embracing adversarial movements of protest and political struggle undermines civil society's emancipatory promise in what Michael Karlberg has called "the paradox of protest."[36] When civil society generates protest movements in the name of emancipation, they often trigger backlashes and counter-movements supporting powerful interests. The result is either a deepening of social divisions or a strengthened determination and capacity of vested interests to perpetuate their power. Or, if the social movement is successful, the "victors" occupying positions of power may end up either replicating the oppressive structures against which they had originally fought or creating new ones.[37]

The Spiritual Dimension of Human Nature

A sustainable and transformative solidarity must be grounded in an understanding of human nature that is at once critical, realistic, empowering, and ontologically consistent. From a Bahá'í perspective, although human nature cannot be boiled down to a simplistic formula, the range of potential human motivation and behaviour can be understood through a dual understanding of the self as including both a lower, more material and self-interested dimension and a higher spiritual dimension that is motivated by a sense of oneness with and love for all humanity, for all creation, and for the source of creation.[38] To put the point in other terms, as a product of biological evolution, the human body is driven by instincts to survival and

self-preservation; when the powers of the mind are subordinated to these instincts, the self-centred and self-interested ego becomes the driving force of human motivation. Yet humans also have a spiritual essence that provides us with an innate desire and potential to strive for transcendence; to expand the sphere of concern beyond the self to the family, to the community, and ultimately to all of humanity and even all beings; and to express spiritual capacities such as self-sacrifice, generosity, compassion, detachment, justice, the exercise of free will, and the earnest search for truth. When the powers of the human mind strive to express a higher spiritual potential, true transformation becomes a realistic possibility.

In Bahá'í discourse, the term "spiritual" is used to describe a reality that underlies and transcends the material world; reflects divine perfection; operates according to laws and principles that can, to a certain extent, be apprehended by human reason; and is the ultimate source and goal of human consciousness and aspiration. Attraction to and alignment with spiritual reality is manifested by humans in the form of virtuous qualities and ethical behaviours such as care and compassion for fellow beings, both human and non-human, and striving for unity and solidarity. Although great variations in intensity and expression appear throughout history and around the world, the attraction to spiritual reality and perfection is a universal quality of human nature.

According to this conception of human nature, which is, in various formulations, shared by all religious traditions and present in the deepest beliefs of most of humanity, a lower and a higher nature exist in all humans in latent form, and it is through the combined effects of social conditioning, education, and individual effort that they can be either strengthened or suppressed. Personal prayer and meditation is only one, albeit essential, aspect of spiritual growth and training. Spiritual development must also be pursued through the practice of social engagement. Indeed, the Bahá'í writings explicitly posit a twofold moral purpose for human life—a striving for both personal and collective transformation, each of which is a necessary condition for the other. Seen from this perspective, the social space of civil society acquires deep significance. For engagement in civil society provides an ideal space in which human beings can express their essential spiritual nature and develop its infinite latent potentials.

To be sure, human motivations are complex, and the self-centered ego raises its head in all endeavours. Civil society actors are often, to lesser or greater extents, motivated by personal ambitions or the desire for worldly gain. They often also operate according to principles of competitive power struggle. Real-world civil society organizations, movements, and discourses usually combine spiritual and material (including economic and

political) values and mix self-interested and altruistic motivations. But, undoubtedly, much of the power driving civil society's yearning for solidarity reflects the spiritual desires to transcend the ego, to seek a higher purpose and meaning, and to follow the inner urges to do something for the good of humanity and to build a better society. From this perspective, the stirrings of solidarity, compassion, and desire for justice that are at the origin of the founding of many civil society groups and movements are expressions of the spiritual promptings of the soul. Most of the time, however, these spiritual motivations remain implicit or inchoate. Accordingly, lacking consciousness and coherence, such motivations can easily fall prey to the self-centered promptings of the ego or to the many powerful ideologies and social forces that aggressively promote our lower nature.

Although most civil society actors do not explicitly define their values and principles as "spiritual," it is important to acquire a conscious awareness of the spiritual foundations of solidarity. For if the discourse and practice of social solidarity lack a coherent foundation, they may become vulnerable to the intrusion of other hegemonic discourses that are based on contradictory and spiritually impoverishing assumptions. Such hegemonic discourses shape self-understanding, actions, structures, and policies in much of contemporary civil society. These include discourses and practices of entrepreneurship, professionalism, management, enterprise, and client relations that are derived from the world of business. Perhaps more controversially, from a Bahá'í perspective, they also include the discourses and tactics of adversarial struggle—advocacy, protest, occupation, and political campaigning. As I argued above, social action inspired by and striving for solidarity, participation, and emancipation cannot be premised on assumptions of self-interested humans craving unlimited accumulation of wealth and participating in contests of power.

Spiritual Principles

The concept of "spiritual principles" provides us with a useful lens through which to think about the contexts in which the spiritual yearning for solidarity can be properly developed and expressed. Bahá'í discourse often discusses the oneness of humankind, justice, the equality of men and women, and environmental stewardship, among others, as "spiritual principles."[39] What makes these widely accepted principles specifically *spiritual*? The term "spiritual principles" refers in this discourse to a certain set of normative concepts that are expressions of a deeper spiritual reality; as such, they link ontological foundations and practical action. The concept of spiritual principles ties motivation, goals, and action to an ontological foundation that is understood as spiritual. First, it describes an aspect of spiritual real-

ity. Second, it refers to the consciousness of this reality within us, which causes a deep yearning of our soul. Third, it describes an outer social state in which this inner consciousness finds its expression; it thus refers to the motivation and imperative to translate consciousness into social reality. Fourth, it guides our action in the realization of the inner yearning toward its outer expression.

For example, the oneness of humankind, taken as a spiritual principle, describes the idea that it is (1) a reflection of divine reality; (2) an inner spiritual consciousness of and yearning for oneness and unity among all people; (3) a social ideal that manifests our inner aspiration for oneness; and (4) a guiding principle, according to which any effort to build more peace and oneness must itself follow the requirements and realities of the principle of oneness—the ends do not justify the means. The principle of the oneness of humankind thus sets a standard that both protects the spiritual integrity of actors who seek to be guided by its light while also providing a clear and useful orientation for various forms of social action.

Spiritual principles shape our consciousness, our inner motivations, our social goals, and our efforts to pursue actions that help us express our motivations and realize our goals. Furthermore, they are mutually reinforcing and inseparable from each other, as, for example, the equality of men and women is inseparable from the broader principles of justice and the oneness of humankind.

Applying Spiritual Principles
According to the Bahá'í writings, contemporary religion should strive to contribute to the emergence of a socially and politically integrated global civilization by systematically infusing spiritual values and principles into all dimensions of social life. Civil society can be seen as a space in which humans' individual and collective capacity to channel the powers of their spiritual nature toward the realization of the social ideals of justice, solidarity, and oneness can be developed and explored in relation to various populations, issues, and discourses. And then as this capacity develops and grows, it can be used to guide deepening engagement in other spheres, such as the realms of economy and governance.

This is not to say that spiritual values and principles cannot simultaneously and immediately be infused into these other spheres. Indeed, although I have emphasized the spiritual foundations of civil society in the above discussion, it is important to mention that the Bahá'í writings equally insist on the need to establish spiritual foundations for the economy and governance, which is to say for the production and distribution of material resources and for the administration of order and justice in soci-

ety. Many individuals and organizations working in the fields of business and public administration, including Bahá'ís and others, strive to apply spiritual principles in their respective realms. However, in the current configuration of the world, norms and ideologies of material acquisition and power struggle have established a powerful hegemony over the practices of economics and government. Yet in the sphere of civil society, insofar as it is based on values of solidarity that can resist such hegemony, there is more space for experimentation with and learning about establishing social relations based on spiritual principles.

Taking this perspective, let us now reconsider the operation of civil society in its associational, deliberative, cultural, and emancipatory functions. At the associational level, we can see how face-to-face social interaction in the context of working together for the common purpose of bettering the community can provide a training ground for the development of spiritual qualities and the building of solidarity at a local level, outside the matrix of the family. Of particular importance here are informal groups that are rarely considered in much of the contemporary discourse on civil society. Indeed, it is often in the absence of formal organization and procedures and in response to specific problems or needs that most initiatives of solidarity and cooperation arise, and it is in such informal, local spaces that interpersonal trust and resilience in the face of obstacles, among other spiritual qualities, are exercised and trained. Although such initiatives are rarely noticed and are always very small in scale, their importance cannot be overemphasized.

It is therefore important to think at greater length about how these small-scale associational dynamics can be fostered and enabled to mature. How, we might ask, can such spaces become venues for learning and empowerment? How can the kinds of small acts of service that address concrete needs be understood in a broader vision of building solidarity through individual and social transformation? How can institutions and communities provide nurturing spaces and support for these kinds of local initiatives without imposing ready-made packages from above? How can these initiatives and acts of service contribute to the strengthening of our higher nature? How can capacities such as self-sacrifice, detachment, consultation, and mutual accompaniment be nurtured? How can learning processes characterized by consultation, action, and reflection be integrated into such small-scale grassroots initiatives?

Moving to the formal organizations of civil society, the main issue is the extent to which they provide a structure for the systematic nurturing and application of spiritual qualities. Numerous challenges exist in this regard. In their eagerness to do more or to become bigger, civil society organi-

zations are inevitably tempted to act according to forms of instrumental rationality that treat human beings—whether the populations being served, the members of the organization, or its staff and volunteers—as mere instruments to attain institutional outcomes. Furthermore, funding agencies, governments, and regulatory bodies, as well as the general sociopolitical environment, often pressure civil society organizations to adopt structures, procedures, and objectives that may not align with a spiritual understanding of human nature and purpose. Finally, while civil society organizations are usually established to address a specific social need or problem, the spiritual principle of the oneness of humanity places the resolution of specific problems in the context of the general progress of humanity. Actions taken to address a particular problem or to aid a specific population are entry points for service to humanity as a whole. Civil society organizations, however, face the challenges of retaining this broader perspective and of avoiding the tendencies to become, at best, entrenched special interest organizations committed to a single issue or community and, at worse, groups concerned primarily with their own self-perpetuation.

In order to address such issues, we must consider questions concerning how civil society organizations can evolve from small-scale groups and initiatives into formal organizations while retaining their role as spaces for the development of spiritual qualities and capacities in situations of increasing organizational complexity. How can civil society groups remain true to spiritual principles while engaging constructively with government agencies, funding bodies and foundations, and other civil society organizations? How can the expansion of the scope and complexity of their activities be tied to a growing capacity to connect specific issues or populations to broader processes of constructive social transformation, thus aiming for the betterment of humanity taken as a whole? And how can civil society organizations become vehicles and repositories of collective learning in which all of their action is undertaken with a posture of learning, seeking to involve all participants in the process of knowledge generation through consultation, action, and reflection?

Such types of questions form the basis of a research program that should not be limited to professional researchers, but rather should be driven by civil society practitioners as they reflect on their own experiential learning. This brings us to the second, deliberative dimension of civil society. Developing spiritual virtues and qualities can contribute to enhancing the deliberative capacity of groups and populations, and learning to deliberate for the common good is an important arena for training spiritual qualities. Here I will limit myself to mentioning the importance of nurturing

this capacity at the grassroots level. Public discourse should not be seen as restricted to the public spaces for elites at the international, national, or regional levels, but rather as a process that also involves general humanity, as friends, family, neighbours, and community members engage in meaningful conversations about issues of common concern and about the material, social, intellectual, and spiritual progress of their communities. In this context, it is important to consider how civil society groups can strengthen the quality and frequency of deliberation within both their organizations and the broader community. How can such deliberative processes be conducted in a mode of learning and sincere consultation, rather than as the representation and defense of competing interests? How can they contribute to the generation and application of knowledge regarding material, social, and spiritual reality at the grassroots level? And how can this process connect with public discourse at wider levels and even on a global scale?

Nurturing the spiritual qualities that strengthen people's capacity to build solidarity through associative and deliberative activity as outlined above implies a process of cultural transformation—which brings me to the third, cultural dimension of civil society. A civil sphere based on spiritual principles would be one that does not define itself in opposition to "uncivil" outside groups. Spiritual principles, as defined in this essay, help to identify what types of motivations and actions are appropriate to building solidarity and which ones are not. In that sense, spiritual principles help draw limits that define what fits into the sphere of solidarity and what does not. But such principles and limits are not identities that can be ascribed to specific individuals and groups; they are guidelines for reflection and action. They replace binary cultural codes. Being rooted in transcendence, they are the property of no single person or group; in fact, they have never been realized fully anywhere. They belong to no culture or nation; they can only guide and inspire; their latent and partial expression can be found in any culture. In this context, we would need to consider how to nurture the capacity, within individuals and groups, to define and strengthen solidarity on the basis of spiritual principles. How can people learn to identify, appreciate, and release their spiritual consciousness, and the deep roots of solidarity that are present in their culture, without developing a parochial sense that their group has a higher level of civility or spirituality than others?

The emancipatory dimension of civil society—the search for justice motivated by solidarity with the weak and the oppressed—then, can find expression through the release of the powers of the human spirit, rather than through power struggles. The Bahá'í writings present justice as,

among other things, a capacity and expression of the human soul. In this context, justice, as a spiritual principle, leads the heart to feel pain and anger at the sight of the unjust suffering of our fellow human beings, motivates us to act to overcome injustice, provides us with a moral compass that helps us exercise independent and critical judgment about social conditions, and gives us a standard to guide our efforts to build just social relations.[40]

Undoubtedly, many of the actions, initiatives, organizations, and movements of civil society are motivated by such promptings of justice. But after they have become large and highly institutionalized and have grown too close to positions of worldly power, even organizations and movements that actively strive to realize social justice can end up reproducing the very structures of domination that they had originally set out to transform. Indeed, one might even say that the more successful a civil society organization is, the more temptations it faces to betray its founding ideals.[41]

From a spiritual perspective, the root of such conflicts can be found in the attempt of many organizations to pursue the promptings of the soul to seek justice within a framework that explicitly denies the spiritual dimension of human life. Thus, it is important to ask how civil society can become a space within which people's spiritual yearning for justice can be strengthened and trained.

A first step in this direction would be to deepen our understanding of the spiritual and material dimensions of both justice and injustice. Otherwise, the initial stirrings of the soul may be easily manipulated by propaganda, vested interests, or popular fads and ultimately lead to disillusionment, cynicism, and apathy.

There are many forms of oppression in the world—the oppression of women by men, of the poor by the rich, and of one race, nation, ethnic group, or religion by another, to name but a few. All these forms of oppression have a common foundation in the habit of dividing humanity into opposing groups in order to justify the elevation of one group over another. At its core, then, injustice involves the violation of human unity and solidarity. By extension, true justice and emancipation entail the realization in thought, action, and social structure of the oneness of humanity. Some common expressions of oneness are the equality of men and women, the reduction of economic disparities, and the harmony between racial, ethnic, and religious communities.

Many attempts to overcome injustice fall short of this realization by framing their efforts as struggles against specific populations, groups, organizations, or institutions that are identified as being the causes of oppression. As a result, they end up reproducing the structural root of

injustice, which is the tearing apart of the oneness of humanity. To be sure, material conditions of inequality that generate and reinforce divisions need to be changed. But we cannot effectively promote oneness in material conditions by using ideologies and methods that are predicated on division and struggle between groups. Reproducing the same structural divisions by inverting them, or by generating new divisions, thus fails to contribute to the important goal of establishing lasting justice.

Another key dimension of injustice is ignorance. When people are unaware of the social forces that shape their reality, they are deprived of the capacity to reflect effectively and to transform and improve it. The concentration of knowledge and the means for its generation and application in the hands of a small class of specialists in wealthy nations is therefore one of the most fundamental and pervasive forms of oppression in the world. For universal participation in the creation and use of knowledge is an essential condition for the emancipation of humanity. And such knowledge cannot only be material, as nothing is a greater form of oppression than keeping people ignorant of their spiritual nature. Ideologies that aggressively teach children and adults that they are little more than animals, pleasure-seeking hedonists, or selfish players in a ruthless contest of power and influence therefore deprive humans of the capacity to think and act in any meaningful way, to know themselves, and to improve the human condition. An essential component of social justice is thus to create the conditions for universal participation in the generation and application of material and spiritual knowledge at the grassroots level.

Reconceptualizing Religion

If we are to conceive of civil society as an expression of the spiritual nature of humanity and envision it as a space to channel the powers of spiritual reality into social solidarity, then civil society organizations and actors might wish to better understand spiritual reality and to learn how to operate according to its principles. This would seem to suggest the need to turn to the wisdom and knowledge provided by religion. But if religion is seen by its own adherents and by society at large as consisting primarily of subjective belief, forms of personal and collective worship, and rules of personal behaviour, then it becomes difficult to contribute meaningfully to a broader discourse on spiritual principles and their potential application outside of closed religious communities.

In order to overcome this discursive chasm, a new understanding of religion will be required. Over the past decades, within their communities and in their interactions with civil society actors, Bahá'ís have been working to develop such a new vision of religion, which could provide appropri-

ate and effective knowledge, concepts, and experience for the benefit of the broader society. Although Bahá'ís would not claim to be able to provide simple solutions to the issues presented above, they have gradually developed a principled conceptual framework that guides their endeavours.

In this context, religion can be considered as an evolving system of discourse, knowledge, and practice that is concerned with understanding spiritual reality, applying its principles, and releasing its powers for the dual purpose of individual and collective transformation. This vision of religion is admittedly partial, and it does not deny the central role of faith, worship, laws, and community. But it helps us appreciate the continuity through history of humanity's many efforts to understand spiritual reality and to apply these insights to human life and society. It also enables us to see how religion must be dynamic and embrace change in its ongoing effort to understand the spiritual dimension of reality and to communicate effectively and apply its insights and ideas in the constantly changing domains of social reality.

Still, many questions must be asked about how religion, so conceived, can be protected from the many intrusive dynamics that have been considered and explored above. What attitudes, understandings, and capacities can individuals acquire from their personal relationship with their Creator that help them become better servants of humanity? What forms of religious life and institutional organization are most conducive to nurturing the qualities of unity, justice, and solidarity that religion seeks to bring to the world? What types of social service and action are most conducive to the welfare and solidarity of humankind? How can profound processes of structural transformation be set in motion and sustained? How can religious communities see themselves as catalysts and vehicles for such processes?

An inquiry into the social expression of our spiritual nature, as well as into the identification and application of spiritual principles, is just as important in the exploration of these questions pertaining to religion as it is to the challenges facing civil society. Such a discourse is one that can be applied equally within the spheres of religion and civil society. In either sphere, it prompts a critical reflexivity on widely held assumptions and practices and leads to a rethinking of the nature and purposes of both religion and civil society. As a common language, it can facilitate communication and mutual learning, and it makes possible a conceptual and practical coherence for actors who operate simultaneously in both spheres.

There is, of course, a certain tension between this discourse on spiritual principles and prevalent modes of thought in both the religious and the secular domains. In the secular sphere of civil society, it may appear to

be a religious intervention to the extent that it assumes the existence of a transcendent spiritual reality and the spirituality of human nature. But the ideals of solidarity, justice, and peace, here considered to be expressions of a spiritual reality, are widely shared in the secular realm. It is thus possible for religious and non-religious actors to consult together on the means of achieving these ideals, and to search for principles to motivate and guide action. In the religious domain, a discourse on spiritual principles may appear as a secular intervention to the extent that it focuses on a rational exploration of social structures and realities that are often seen, even by religious people, as marginal or irrelevant to spiritual life and salvation. But both traditional religious discourses and those on spiritual principles derive from the search for knowledge of the divine reality and the means to align our lives to it. It is thus possible to engage in productive dialogues on how the accumulated religious wisdom of humanity can be understood, re-examined, and extended into new domains of social life. Ultimately, from a Bahá'í perspective, all these tensions are caused by false dichotomies that are produced by the limitations of our languages and modes of thinking. It is thus important, if a discourse on spiritual principles is to be productive and inclusive of people of different backgrounds, to allow for a certain degree of ambiguity—avoiding, for instance, hair-splitting metaphysical discussions of spiritual reality on the one hand, and excessively precise programs of social reform on the other. This is not to deny the academic value of such elaborations in other contexts. But the purpose of a discourse on spiritual principles is to guide consultation, analysis, and planning in the context of action and reflection on action, providing direction and flexibility in a complex and rapidly changing social reality.

The approach I have outlined is, to be sure, not one that will appeal to everyone. For some religious groups, the only form of solidarity that matters is the one that derives from their own religious identity and community. For some civil society actors, struggle is the only realistic path to a future solidarity. And for part of this latter population, the only legitimate form of public discourse is one that excludes any reference to spiritual ideals. All these perspectives need to be respected within the big tent of civil society, and their constructive contributions need to be honoured. At the same time, the experience of the Bahá'í community, in its own work and in its collaborations with actors from other religious traditions and from civil society, demonstrates that another path is possible.

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The aim of this chapter has been to argue that the values of solidarity that define civil society are ultimately expressions of our spiritual nature—the

part of us that yearns for oneness with all beings, that cannot bear to see others suffering pain or injustice, and that is willing to give generously, to reach out, and to work hand in hand with others. It prompts us to join with others to build the better community or the better world of which all people dream—a vision that leads us to act for the transformation of society and for the emancipation of its peoples and that motivates us to engage in public discourses in order to deliberate on the content of our collective dreams and the means of achieving them.

But if these spiritual foundations are not adequately channeled and nurtured, both civil society and religion become vulnerable to forces that are destructive to the core values of solidarity. Indeed, the empirical reality of civil society is far from a pure expression of such noble sentiments and ideals. But it is these ideals of solidarity, emanating from the soul, that are the ultimate source of the power that makes civil society distinct from other spheres such as the market and partisan politics, with their logics of material accumulation and domination. The question for both religion and civil society, then, is how those spiritual values and capacities can be better understood, how their dynamics can be apprehended, how they can be nurtured in individuals, how they can be applied in the field of social action, and how they can be systematically and sustainably fostered through appropriate educational and institutional arrangements. Guided by spiritual principles, religion and civil society can work hand in hand to expand and consolidate the domain of human solidarity.

Notes

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2, 2010, http://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/marlies-glasius/dissecting-global-civil-society-values-actors-organisational-forms; and Rebecca Todd Peters, *In Search of the Good Life: The Ethics of Globalization* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 156.

2   Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the World, October 20, 1983, http://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/the-universal-house-of-justice/messages/#d=19831020_001&f=f1.

3   Universal House of Justice, "The Promise of World Peace" (Haifa, Israel: Bahá'í World Centre, 1985).

4   On religious re-engagment in political life, see José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

5   This categorization is loosely inspired by Jeffrey Alexander's review of theories of civil society in *The Civil Sphere* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

6   Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

7   Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).

8   See, for example, Chandhoke, "The Limits of Global Civil Society"; Jens Steffek and Kristina Hahn, "Transnational NGOs and Legitimacy, Accountability, Representation," in *Evaluating Transnational NGOs: Legitimacy, Accountability, Representation*, ed. Jens Steffek and Kristina Hahn (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 1–25.

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10 Jan Aart Scholte, "Global Civil Society: Changing the World?" (May 1999), http://www.sites.google.com/a/usnayar.com/www2/GlobalCivilSociety-ChangingtheWorldJ.pdf.

11 Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989).

12 Alexander, *The Civil Sphere*, 3.

13 Ibid., 31.

14 Ibid., 7.

15 Ibid., 205–09.

16 See Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci* (New York: International Publishers, 1971); Alexander, *The Civil Sphere*; and Joseph A. Buttigieg, "Gramsci on Civil Society," *Boundary 2* 22, no. 3 (1995): 1–32.

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Interview with Erica Blair (John Keane)," in *Letters from Freedom: Post-War Realities and Perspectives* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998), 96–113.

18 See Alexander, *The Civil Sphere* and Chandhoke, "The Limits of Global Society," 52.

19 See Joseph S. Nye, "Soft Power," *Foreign Policy* 80 (1990): 153–71; Nye, "What China and Russia Don't Get About Soft Power," *ForeignPolicy.com*, last modified April 29, 2013, http://foreignpolicy.com/2013/04/29/what-china-and-russia-dont-get-about-soft-power/?wp_login_redirect=0; and Jie Chen, *Transnational Civil Society in China: Intrusion and Impact* (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2012).

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22 Chandhoke, "The Limits of Global Civil Society," 43.

23 See Mitchell Dean, *Governing Societies* (New York: McGraw Hill Open University Press, 2007) and Lidia Lo Sciavo, "Governance, Civil Society, Governmentality. The 'Foucauldian Moment' in the Globalization Debate: Theoretical Perspectives," *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 4, no. 13 (November 2014): 181–97.

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25 Stephen Hopgood, "Reading the Small Print in Global Civil Society: The Inexorable Hegemony of the Liberal Self," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 29, no. 1 (2000): 1–25.

26 See Armine Ishkanian, "Democracy Promotion and Civil Society," in *Global Civil Society 2007–08*, ed. Marlies Glasius, Mary Kaldor, and Helmut Anheier (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2008), 58–85.

27 See the forthcoming volume edited by Gzegorz Ekiert, Elizabeth Perry and Yan Xiaojun based on a series of conferences at Harvard University and the University of Hong Kong on "Mobilized Contention: The State-Protest Movement Nexus."

28 See David Chandler, "Building Global Civil Society 'From Below?' " *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 33, no. 2 (2004): 313–39; Chandhoke, "The Limits of Global Civil Society," 45; Frances Pinter, "Funding Global Civil Society Organizations," in *Global Civil Society 2001*, ed. Helmut Anheier, Marlies Glasius, and Mary Kaldor (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2001), 195–217.

29 See Robert Wuthnow, "Can Religion Revitalize Civil Society? An Institutional Perspective," in *Religion as Social Capital: Producing the Common Good*, ed. Corwin E. Smidt (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2003), 191–210.

30 Corwin E. Smidt, ed., *Religion as Social Capital: Producing the Common Good* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2003).

31 See World Economic Forum, "The Future Role of Civil Society," *World Scenario Series* (2013): 13–14, available online at http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_FutureRoleCivilSociety_Report_2013.pdf.

32 See Abdullahi An-Na'im, "Religion and Global Civil Society: Inherent Incompatibility or Synergy and Interdependence?" in *Global Civil Society 2002*, ed. Marlies Glasius, Mary Kaldor, and Helmut Anheier (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2002), 55–73.

33 Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of Iran, March 2, 2013, http://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/the-universal-house-of-justice/messages/#d=20130302_001&f=f1.

34 Daniel Cohen, *Homo Economicus: The (Lost) Prophet of Modern Times* (London: Polity Press, 2014).

35 On the sociological theory of Pierre Bourdieu, see, for example, Roger Friedland, "The Endless Fields of Pierre Bourdieu," *Organization* 16, no. 6 (2009): 1–31.

36 Michael Robert Karlberg, *Beyond the Culture of Contest: From Adversarialism to Mutualism in an Age of Interdependence* (Oxford, UK: George Ronald, 2004).

37 Ibid.

38 'Abdu'l-Bahá, "The Two Natures in Man," in *Paris Talks* (London: UK Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1972), 60.

39 See, for example, Farzam Arbab, "Promoting a Discourse on Science, Religion and Development," in *The Lab, the Temple, and the Market: Reflections at the Intersection of Science, Religion and Development*, ed. Sharon Harper (Ottawa, ON: Kumarian Press, 2000), 177–205.

40 Arbab, "Promoting a Discourse on Science, Religion and Development," 200–01; William S. Hatcher, *Love, Power, and Justice* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 2002).

41 Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 133.

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