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Elements of a Culture of Peace: A Bahá'í Perspective

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Abstract

The realization of universal peace is a central teaching of the Bahá'í Faith and permeates individual and collective Bahá'í practice. This article explores this teaching through the lens of culture as a constructive social process based on shared beliefs and values and their expression. It begins by outlining a Bahá'í concept of peace and then turns to the question of how Bahá'í teachings foster a culture of peace. It focuses on three elements central to a Bahá'í approach to a culture of peace, outlined as follows: (i) the beliefs people hold of themselves and the world, (ii) the importance of a sense of moral purpose as the basis of individual and collective commitment, and (iii) a framework for shared agency through individual action and community building, as illustrated by Bahá'í educational activities, participation in social discourses, and community development initiatives. The article explores each of these elements from the perspective of Bahá'í principles and practices, at the individual and collective level, in the light of the academic literature on cultures of peace, paradigm shift, and normative change, and then addresses the contribution of a Bahá'í perspective to understanding cultures of peace. It concludes with a reflection on the mode of operation of the Bahá'í community, the role of individuals, communities, institutions, and emerging cultural patterns, challenges presented by this vision of peacebuilding, and questions for future research on a Bahá'í approach to a culture of peace.

Keywords: Bahá'í; peace; culture of peace; social change; normative change; shared beliefs; moral purpose; shared commitments; shared agency; community building



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1. Introduction

The realization of universal peace as the next stage in the process of humanity's collective maturation is the primary aim of the Bahá'í Faith. For Bahá'ís, peace entails both an end to war and the creation of a condition of wholeness of self and society, a state of wellbeing for all the peoples of the world, experienced in individual and collective lives, reinforced and secured by appropriate governance. A Bahá'í concept of peace brings together teachings for the elevation of the human soul and its relationship with the Creator, on one hand, and on the other, principles to guide the relationships human beings have with each other and with the planet. Peace is personal and political, individual and institutional, spiritual and material, requiring transformation at every level of human experience and organization. It encompasses notions of inner and outer peace (e.g., [Groff and Smoker 1996](#)), positive and negative peace ([Galtung 1969](#)), peacemaking, peacebuilding, and peacelearning ([Reardon 2019](#)). Explicitly and implicitly, peace permeates individual and collective Bahá'í thought and practice.

As the central theme of the Bahá'í Faith, peace is directly addressed in authoritative primary texts (by Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Shoghi Effendi, and the Universal House

of Justice¹), as well as in formal contributions to the wider public discourse on peace, including statements by the Bahá'í International Community. There is also a growing body of secondary sources, including books and articles in the academic literature that discuss a Bahá'í approach to peace from various standpoints (e.g., [Danesh 1986](#); [Egerton 2015](#); [Mahmoudi and Khan 2020](#); [Stockman 2020](#); [Gil 2022](#); [Mahmoudi 2020, 2022](#); [Betts Razavi and Mahmoudi 2022](#)).

This article offers a consideration of the notion of peace in the Bahá'í Faith through the lens of culture, that is, with reference to social science constructs that address aspects of human collective life; specifically, it describes Bahá'í teachings as elements of a constructive social process that nurtures shared beliefs, commitments, and actions and give rise to peaceful communities and societies. It begins with a brief overview of a Bahá'í understanding of peace, to offer a sense of the centrality as well as the scope of the concept. It then focuses on three ideas derived from the academic study of culture to illustrate how Bahá'í teachings and practices serve to build a culture of peace—*shared beliefs* about human nature and humanity as a whole, *shared commitment* through a sense of moral purpose, and *shared agency* on the path to peace.

2. A Bahá'í Concept of Peace²

A Bahá'í concept of peace is inextricably linked to the understanding of both religion and human development. For Bahá'ís, religion is both eternal and progressive—all religions share an unchanging core that concerns human spirituality, but laws and practices necessarily change over time as divine educators bring teachings to guide human societies as they evolve. Thus, the notion of peace at this stage of human history is connected with the emergence of an age of global interconnectedness, international cooperation, the embrace of diversity, and collective responsibility for planetary wellbeing and the prosperity of humankind. Universal peace is the explicit goal of the Bahá'í Faith. Its Founder, Bahá'u'lláh, states that His object is “none other than the betterment of the world and the tranquility of its peoples” ([Bahá'u'lláh 1976](#), no. CXXXI), and that His aim is “to quench the flame of hate and enmity, that the horizon of the hearts of men may be illumined with the light of concord and attain real peace and tranquility” ([Bahá'u'lláh 2017](#), no. 32).

While Bahá'u'lláh calls for “the weapons of war throughout the world” to “be converted into instruments of reconstruction and that strife and conflict may be removed from the midst of men” ([Bahá'u'lláh 1978](#), no. 3), the removal of conflict is not the final measure of universal peace. From a Bahá'í perspective, the essential quality of universal peace is unity. Bahá'u'lláh clearly states that “the well-being of mankind, its peace and security, are unattainable unless and until its unity is firmly established” ([Bahá'u'lláh 1976](#), no. CXXXI). The Bahá'í writings describe the emergence of unity and the unfoldment of world peace in two stages. The first, the “Lesser Peace,” is a form of unity of nations involving international agreement for collective security and an end to war. It is described as a political unity, achieved through a secular process that requires an all-inclusive convocation of world leaders to resolve differences, devise and agree to measures for global unity, and direct attention to the use of resources to lay the foundations for peace. The second, the “Most Great Peace,” the result of a long-term society-building process and a fundamental transformation, is characterized by human flourishing in the context of the spiritualization of world civilization, in which “all the peoples of the world. . .reconcile their differences, and, with perfect unity and peace, abide beneath the shadow of the Tree of His care and loving-kindness” ([Bahá'u'lláh 1976](#), no. IV). This stage is connected to the spread of the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh and their influence on the life of society, the application of His laws and principles, and the emergence and operation of structures of governance designated in His writings, as the framework for world unity and universal peace in its fullest sense.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Bahá’u’lláh’s authorized successor and interpreter, describes the qualities of the aspired condition of peace by contrasting it with the all too familiar condition of war:

“...war is destruction while universal peace is construction; war is death while peace is life; war is rapacity and bloodthirstiness while peace is beneficence and humaneness; war is an appurtenance of the world of nature while peace is of the foundation of the religion of God; war is darkness upon darkness while peace is heavenly light; war is the destroyer of the edifice of mankind while peace is the everlasting life of the world of humanity; war is like a devouring wolf while peace is like the angels of heaven; war is the struggle for existence while peace is mutual aid and cooperation among the peoples of the world and the cause of the good pleasure of the True One in the heavenly realm.” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá 1919)

Peace, then, comes about as light overcomes darkness, a process that Bahá’ís believe is “not only possible but inevitable” (Universal House of Justice [1985] 1986) as humanity evolves both materially and spiritually. The conflicts and wars that have marked human history are not viewed as evidence of an insurmountable aggressive nature, but as signs of immaturity akin to the adolescent stage in the development of an individual. Two concurrent forces propel this historical process—on one hand, there is decay and disintegration of immature features of the social order, and on the other construction and integration stimulate the emergence of characteristics of maturity, culminating in the realization of the unity of humankind, the indispensable prerequisite for peace. Disintegration is evident, for example, in the decline of religion as a social force, in moral downfall and confusion, and the breakdown of political and economic structures. These forces “tend to sweep away barriers that block humanity’s progress, opening space for the process of integration to draw diverse groups together and disclosing new opportunities for cooperation and collaboration.” (Universal House of Justice 2013)

Shoghi Effendi, designated by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá as the Guardian, interpreter of Bahá’í texts and the head of the Bahá’í Faith, further elaborates this vision of global peace:

“The ages of its infancy and childhood are past, never again to return, while the Great Age, the consummation of all ages, which must signalize the coming of age of the entire human race, is yet to come. The convulsions of this transitional and most turbulent period in the annals of humanity are the essential prerequisites, and herald the inevitable approach, of that Age of Ages, “*the time of the end*,” in which the folly and tumult of strife that has, since the dawn of history, blackened the annals of mankind, will have been finally transmuted into the wisdom and the tranquility of an undisturbed, a universal, and lasting peace, in which the discord and separation of the children of men will have given way to the worldwide reconciliation, and the complete unification of the divers elements that constitute human society.” (Shoghi Effendi [1941] 1980)

In a message addressed to the peoples of the world, *The Promise of World Peace*, the Universal House of Justice further highlights the importance of understanding peace in this framework, as a source of hope and commitment to continued effort:

“A candid acknowledgement that prejudice, war and exploitation have been the expression of immature stages in a vast historical process and that the human race is today experiencing the unavoidable tumult which marks its collective coming of age is not a reason for despair but a prerequisite to undertaking the stupendous enterprise of building a peaceful world.” (Universal House of Justice [1985] 1986)

This enterprise lies at the heart of the Bahá'í Faith. It requires an orientation to peace at “the level of principle, as distinct from pure pragmatism” ([Universal House of Justice \[1985\] 1986](#)) and alignment with constructive processes of change and a clear focus on building unity, even as destructive forces play out and humanity continues to experience conflict and division.

A few examples serve to illustrate how contemporary published work addressing peace and the Bahá'í Faith explores various aspects of these principles as well as their practical expression, from a range of perspectives. The idea of the oneness of humanity as a prerequisite for universal peace is, of course, a central theme in this literature. [Van den Hoonaard \(2005\)](#) explores how the Bahá'í Faith articulates and applies the principle of unity in diversity as a framework for understanding and fostering a form of pluralism that is distinct from secular models, based on a deeper conception of unity which moves beyond tolerance and co-existence to a celebration of difference as essential to collective flourishing. [Egerton \(2015\)](#), too, presents the Bahá'í approach to oneness as distinctive and identifies it as the spiritual, moral, and practical foundation of true peace, with implications for thinking, acting, and organizing human affairs; [Danesh \(1986\)](#) considers mindset, quality of relationships, orientation to power, freedom, and science and technology as aspects of the “unity paradigm” which subsequently shapes an integrative theory of peace education ([Danesh 2006](#)) and the Education for Peace integrative curriculum ([Danesh 2008](#)). [Betts Razavi and Mahmoudi \(2022\)](#) consider oneness as the basis of moral identity and an ethic of unity that combines justice and care which provide the foundation for personal and political peace. In relation to peace and the absence of conflict, [Stockman \(2020\)](#) turns to Bahá'í writings to consider violence and non-violence in the context of building a more mature global civilization, while [Karlberg \(2004\)](#) uses a Bahá'í perspective in a social science framework to interrogate notions of contest in contrast to mutualism as the basis of culture, and [Ferreira \(2022\)](#) traces the historical development of the peace concept and its relationship to the vision of peace provided in the Bahá'í writings. Adopting a broad approach, [Mahmoudi \(2020\)](#) describes the Bahá'í vision of peace as a holistic and transformative enterprise grounded in a renewed understanding of the role of religion in society, progressing through the combined effect of the disintegration of outdated structures and the construction of new forms of individual and collective life rooted in spiritual values and a unified vision for the future of humanity.

3. Through the Lens of Culture

The vision of peace described in the Bahá'í writings requires massive transformation at every level of society; it includes reform at the level of global governance to deter and arrest conflict but relies on the development of principles at the individual and community level that lay the foundation for collective wellbeing. “In essence,” writes the Universal House of Justice, “peace stems from an inner state supported by a spiritual or moral attitude, and it is chiefly in evoking this attitude that the possibility of enduring solutions can be found” ([Universal House of Justice \[1985\] 1986](#)) as part of a conscious process of personal and social transformation.

One way of understanding a Bahá'í concept of peace is therefore through the lens of culture, as the study of culture, too, invokes inner states and attitudes to the world finding expression in social forms. “Culture,” writes [Geertz \(1957\)](#), “is the fabric of meaning in terms of which human beings interpret their experience and guide their action” (p. 33). Whether national, ethnic, religious, or organizational, culture derives from shared “conceptions of persons, society, nature, and divinity” ([Jensen 2018](#), p. 110). Constructs about human beings and human relations reflect a set of values that serve as “internalized guides for individuals” and “promote group survival and prosperity” ([Schwartz 2012](#), p. 14). As an

overarching concept, culture is about process, not a ‘what’ but a ‘how’, that unfolds within a set of structures and potentially influences them (Haste and Abrahams 2008). As with many concepts in the social sciences, understanding of culture is evolving and increasingly complex as theoretical and methodological perspectives from various disciplines (including anthropology, sociology, psychology, political science, and economics, as well as history and the humanities and arts) merge and intersect in the context of globalization. Anheier (2020) identifies a number of issues as central to advancing an integrated interdisciplinary understanding of culture, including globalization (historical perspectives and contemporary analysis) and the domination of nation-state framing; definitions of culture (acknowledging the instrumentalization of ‘culture’ as a concept in divisive debates); values as systems operating at multiple levels in society; assumptions about identity in relation to collective memory, heritage, and globalization; relationships with the economy, the arts (and related cultural policy), and soft power.

These general issues have a bearing on the study of cultures of peace specifically, which has a distinct literature and range of approaches dedicated to understanding the nature of peace and how it can be built and sustained. In the broad context of peace and change, the idea of fostering a new culture is a means of constructive and enduring transformation, involving “lifeways, patterns of belief, values, behavior, and accompanying institutional arrangements that promote mutual caring and wellbeing as well as equality that includes appreciation of difference, stewardship, and equitable sharing of the earth’s resources among its members and with all human beings” (Boulding 2000, p. 1). The cultural approach to peace is a proactive society-building process advanced by many engaged in peacebuilding, and notably under the auspices of the United Nations through UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) as a long-term strategy “to use education, science and culture to create a world climate in which peace will be made more probable and war less likely” (Klineberg 1953, p. 188); UNESCO continues to promote and oversee the Programme of Action on a Culture of Peace through a range of initiatives (see, for example, International Commission on the Futures of Education 2021; UNESCO 2022). Peace studies literature, including peace education, education for sustainability, and moral development, has evolved concepts and approaches including inner and outer peace (e.g., Groff and Smoker 1996), positive and negative peace (Galtung 1969), peacemaking, peacebuilding, and peacelearning (Reardon 2019) and provides real-world evidence of and movement towards cultures of peace (e.g., Fry and Miklikowska 2012; Coleman et al. 2021; Gilligan 2023), concurrent and coherent with intergenerational value change connected to material development (e.g., Inglehart et al. 2015; Inglehart 2018).

The deep process of basic cultural change takes time (Inglehart et al. 2017). As described in the paradigm shift literature (Kuhn 1970) and its application to social change (Betts Razavi 2023), recognition of the inadequacy of a prevailing worldview or culture does not lead immediately to its rejection. Rather, there are stages of shift, including loss of faith in existing normative patterns and structures, gradual awareness of possible alternative beliefs and ways of understanding, and eventually a collective decision to adopt a new paradigm. Kuhn (1970) describes this final step as “a special sort of change involving a certain sort of reconstruction of group commitments” (p. 180). These group commitments form the basis of new behaviors that reflect principles—in a religious context, and in the Bahá’í writings specifically, these are spiritual and moral—which over time become normative. Mapping the paradigm shift framework to a cultural model implies recognizing the potential of human agency to transform social practices from within existing structures (Bakken and Bransford 2002). Such “structurally embedded agency” (Ortner 1996), which ultimately propels paradigm shift patterns, can be seen in explicit efforts to advance peace as an alternative to war and conflict, and also through attention to a range of specific so-

ciopolitical issues associated with justice, equity, care, and harmony, as critical components of a culture of peace.

The Bahá'í orientation to peace at the level of spiritual principle and moral attitude as humanity moves from adolescence to maturity certainly entails a conscious paradigm shift in the normative framework that defines people's identities, experiences and aspirations, as individuals, institutions, and communities as a deep process that takes time, and as such can be characterized as cultural. Indeed, in recent years, the Universal House of Justice has explicitly referenced the idea of culture to describe Bahá'í engagement with peacebuilding:

"Today, the spiritual duty and moral responsibility of every conscientious soul is to serve the cause of the peace and unity of the world. In this important undertaking, every member of the human family has a share. In purifying the heart and cleansing its mirror from prejudice on the one hand, and in creating the social conditions for peace and unity on the other, every individual has agency and the capacity to play a part. All souls are able to promote the culture of peace and unity in their interactions with friend and stranger alike." ([Universal House of Justice 2024b](#), para. 5)

So, what are the elements of a culture of peace from a Bahá'í perspective, in principle and in practice? The Bahá'í writings explicitly address the mindsets, commitments, and actions necessary for peace at the individual and collective levels. For example, Bahá'u'lláh writes of peace at the level of thought, a sign of drawing close to God, a condition of the soul that is connected to its attitude to both itself and humanity as a whole:

"In this glorious Day whatsoever can purge you from defilement and ensure your peace and tranquillity, that indeed is the straight Path, the Path that leadeth unto Me. To be purged from defilement is to be cleansed of that which is injurious to man and detracteth from his high station—among which is to take undue pleasure in one's own words and deeds, however worthy they may be. True peace and tranquillity will only be realized when every soul will have become the well-wisher of all mankind." ([Bahá'u'lláh 2006](#), p. 6)

In the wake of the First World War, 'Abdu'l-Bahá elaborates on the development of this world-embracing mindset, describing a process of expanding individual consciousness in ever-widening circles of community, and ultimately global society:

"Every imperfect soul is self-centered and thinketh only of his own good. But as his thoughts expand a little he will begin to think of the welfare and comfort of his family. If his ideas still more widen, his concern will be the felicity of his fellow citizens; and if still they widen, he will be thinking of the glory of his land and of his race. But when ideas and views reach the utmost degree of expansion and attain the stage of perfection, then will he be interested in the exaltation of humankind. He will then be the well-wisher of all men and the seeker of the weal and prosperity of all lands." ('[Abdu'l-Bahá 2014a](#), no. 34)

Further, 'Abdu'l-Bahá advances a collective, arguably cultural, concept of "unity of conscience" as essential to universal peace "so that the foundation of this matter may become secure, its establishment firm and its edifice strong" ('[Abdu'l-Bahá 1919](#), para. 4). He offers the Bahá'í community as an example of an emerging culture of peace, in which the motivation and desire to work for peace is not merely intellectual, rather its collective commitment "is a matter of religious belief and one of the eternal foundations of the Faith of God." "That is why," he continues, "we strive with all our might and, forsaking our own advantage, rest, and comfort, forgo the pursuit of our own affairs; devote ourselves to the mighty cause of peace" ('[Abdu'l-Bahá 1920](#), para. 6).

In the midst of the Second World War, alongside the decline of a world order “crashing in oppression, bloodshed, and ruin,” Shoghi Effendi describes the emergence of a new society, “an Order, divine and redemptive” that “opens up vistas of a justice, a unity, a peace, a culture, such as no age has ever seen” (Shoghi Effendi [1941] 1980, p. 17).

This culture, as referred to by Shoghi Effendi, is rooted in the extensive body of the Bahá'í Faith's spiritual and social teachings, a foundation of beliefs about human reality, social reality, and humanity's developmental path, which find expression in values and principles that provide a constructive framework for personal behavior and collective action. These teachings form a single coherent system, interconnected, mutually dependent, and indispensable to the comprehensive vision of unity, human development, and flourishing described in the Bahá'í writings. In that sense, *all* Bahá'í teachings are relevant to building a culture of peace across individual, community, and institutional dimensions. With that in mind, for the purpose of this article, three concepts derived from a social change framework are used to describe Bahá'í teachings as elements of culture: first, shared beliefs or assumptions about human nature and the oneness of humanity; second, group commitments through a shared sense of spiritual and moral purpose; and third, shared agency through a set of individual and community practices.

4. Shared Beliefs: Human Nature and the Oneness of Humanity

As noted previously, insofar as the Bahá'í Faith advances peace as a central objective, all its teachings are connected with this aim, so the notion of shared belief as a component of a culture of peace applies to any and all of its specific principles. This section focuses on two ontological concepts that can be considered the foundation of shared beliefs in the context of a cultural framework: first, that human beings are essentially spiritual in nature, and second, that humanity is one.

With respect to human nature, Bahá'u'lláh writes:

“O Son of Spirit! Noble have I created thee, yet thou hast abased thyself. Rise then unto that for which thou wast created.” (Bahá'u'lláh [1932] 2003, Arabic no. 22)

Bahá'ís believe that human beings are singled out “from among all created things” by a “pure, gem-like reality” (Bahá'u'lláh 1976, no. XXXIV), invested with the unique capacity of knowing God and “reflecting the greatness of His glory” (XXXIV). At the same time, the Bahá'í writings acknowledge a lower nature associated with the physical world:

“Every good habit and every noble quality belongs to the higher nature, while imperfections and harmful actions come from the lower nature.” (‘Abdu'l-Bahá 2011, no. 18)

Through the gifts of “mind, perception, memory, abstraction and the powers of the senses” the human being can respond to the call of the Divine Educators, rise to the higher, noble nature and become “the manifestation of divine virtues, a radiant light in the world of creation, a source of life and the agency of constructiveness” (‘Abdu'l-Bahá 2012, p. 498).

This understanding of human nature shapes not only individual self-perceptions but also attitudes to others. Bahá'u'lláh writes:

“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. . .” (Bahá'u'lláh [1932] 2003, Arabic No. 68)

In terms of building a culture of peace, belief in essential human nobility as a reflection of the divine stands in contrast to assumptions of innate human aggression and selfishness (e.g., Lorenz 1966; Dawkins 1976; Wilson 1978), often derived from natural selection

theory and advanced as a biological essentialist basis for the inevitability of conflict in some form as a feature of human society. This difference has a key implication for the orientation to peace. In general, the metaphysical view of human nature and the emphasis on spirituality—focusing on beliefs that link human reality with a Creator, divinity, or universal life-enhancing force—offers a hopeful and unifying basis for understanding peace (Timpson 2010), increasingly resonant with secular literature indicating that natural selection equally supports a cooperative view of human nature (e.g., Bregman 2020). Also, as Gentry (2016) argues, the spiritual dimension of religious faith frees believers from the constraint of social norms that may impede peace, breeds discipline, and allows creative solutions conducive to peace to flourish.

For Bahá'ís, the assumption that human beings are not only capable of but inclined to peacefulness engenders conviction in the inherent capacity for peace, that it is in the nature of every human being to develop spiritual qualities including love, justice, compassion, and forgiveness, that foster peace. Though it takes conscious effort to rise to this higher nature, this is the essence which defines, distinguishes, and endures. From a Bahá'í perspective, every human being has the capacity to build peace and also believes that every other human being possesses the ability and inclination to do the same. Human nobility thus binds all human beings together. All are the same at the level of the spirit; although physical characteristics create the appearance of difference, these are not differences in substance, worth, or rank, a conviction that gives rise to relational norms about upright conduct and shared expectations about cooperation, reciprocity, service, and the common good.

This understanding of human nature in terms of spiritual capacity aligns with various approaches in academic research, including ethics and moral psychology, suggesting new possibilities for enriching understanding of the human condition. For example, joining Levinas' (1969) framing of human nature and ethics as inherently relational with a Bahá'í perspective prompts consideration of a spiritual ontology in which the human being both reflects and recognizes in others a divine "Other". Another example is Monroe's (1996) empirical work on moral exemplars which concludes that altruism stems from a deeply internalized sense of common human identity, rather than a form of moral reasoning; a Bahá'í concept of human nature suggests a spiritual foundation for these findings, drawing attention to the relevance of metaphysical dimensions in moral psychology enquiry more widely.

In the Bahá'í writings, belief in human nobility is reinforced by belief in the oneness of humanity. Oneness is an explicitly global concept that embraces humankind as an organic unit, consisted of diverse individuals, groups, and nations created to live in harmony and reflect the "beauty, efficiency and perfection of the whole" ('Abdu'l-Bahá 1919, para. 41). The belief in oneness as a reflection of collective human maturity is critical to a Bahá'í culture of peace because it sets up the context and scope for the expression of noble qualities and a focus on unity, as a principle and a practice, as the foundation of peace. Bahá'u'lláh writes:

"O ye men of wisdom among nations! Shut your eyes to estrangement, then fix your gaze upon unity. Cleave tenaciously unto that which will lead to the well-being and tranquility of all mankind. This span of earth is but one homeland and one habitation." (Bahá'u'lláh 1978, p. 67)

He goes on to draw a connection with human nobility and oneness as a source of identity:

"It behooveth you to abandon vainglory which causeth alienation and to set your hearts on whatever will ensure harmony. . . man's glory lieth in his knowledge, his upright conduct, his praiseworthy character, his wisdom, and not in his nationality or rank." (pp. 67–68)

The oneness of humanity provides a framework for navigating individual, community, and institutional questions; with an expanded vision of wholeness, notions of self, society, and wellbeing are shifted and moral uprightness is guided by building and preserving unity. For example, the Universal House of Justice invokes the oneness of humanity as a guiding principle in relation to the question of identity, a theme that has captured popular attention, driven division and ideological polarization leading to conflict and violence, defined social justice movements, and influenced political trends in many parts of the world:

“Humanity is gripped by a crisis of identity, as various peoples and groups struggle to define themselves, their place in the world, and how they should act. Without a vision of shared identity and common purpose, they fall into competing ideologies and power struggles. Seemingly countless permutations of “us” and “them” define group identities ever more narrowly and in contrast to one another. Over time, this splintering into divergent interest groups has weakened the cohesion of society itself. Rival conceptions about the primacy of a particular people are peddled to the exclusion of the truth that humanity is on a common journey in which all are protagonists. Consider how radically different such a fragmented conception of human identity is from the one that follows from a recognition of the oneness of humanity.” (Universal House of Justice 2019, para. 7)

Embracing oneness, then, also entails the acknowledgement and rejection of residual patterns of thought and action from earlier adolescent stages of the collective movement towards patterns that reflect the age of maturity. In many of His expositions of the core principles of the Faith in the context of peace, before introducing the concept of oneness, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá shares the Bahá’í teaching regarding the independent investigation of reality, that is, the requirement of every individual to reach his or her own conclusion about truth, in order to move away from unquestioned traditions and superstitions that bind human beings to old patterns of thinking and living and stand in the way of peace (see, for example, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá 1919, 2012). Bahá’í social teachings draw attention to such patterns as injustices that pose barriers to the realization of the oneness of humanity and must be overcome as a prerequisite for universal peace, in particular the “abandonment of prejudice—prejudice of every kind—race, class, color, creed, nation, sex, degree of material civilization, everything which enables people to consider themselves superior to others” (Universal House of Justice [1985] 1986).

From the perspective of culture, independent belief in the oneness of humanity is critical not only for the conviction in the inevitability of peace it represents, but in the challenge it poses to a hierarchy of relational assumptions which shape everyday thought and interaction, structure, design, expectation, and possibility, thereby forming a foundation for deep normative change. In this respect, Bahá’í belief is distinctive; there is a spectrum of attitudes to a global construct of humanity in relation to peace, varying according to concepts of peace, justice, economics, and governance (e.g., Doyle 2000) and context (Bar-Tal 2002), including existing or potential threats of interpersonal or intergroup violence (Harris 2002), and—as alluded to by the Universal House of Justice (2019) in the extract above—views of globalization that contest the benefits of “unity” with criticisms focused on “identity” (see Palmer 2024). Some argue that conflict is a necessary part of social relations (e.g., Mac Ginty 2024), inevitable and potentially beneficial when managed non-violently, and that a vision of a unified world defined by cooperation and reciprocity is an unrealistic utopia. Few, if any, however, discount the material reality of increasing global interdependence and its relevance for approaches to peacebuilding, whether as a stressor (Doyle 2000) or—as in Bahá’í belief—a prompt for movement away from conflict and competition (Karlberg 2004) and towards cooperative relational norms in a culture

of peace. In general, the Bahá'í perspective counters tendencies towards dichotomization in the discourse on globalization and advances a more integrated conception of human individual and collective realities; belief in oneness and sense of belonging to humanity as a whole coexist with subordinate identities. As interdisciplinary attention to these questions broadens, there is increasing interest in more integrated and complex thinking about such themes, including a reframing of questions of theory and practice to interrogate how human beings make meaning in a global society, reduce exclusionary reactions, and build and maintain various simultaneously shared identities (Gelfand et al. 2011), an emerging discourse that resonates with Bahá'í concepts and involvement in peace education (Betts Razavi and Mahmoudi 2023).

5. Shared Commitments: Spiritual and Moral Purpose

Closely related to shared beliefs, a second level of culture is found in the form of group commitments to “a set of moral principles that guide decisions about the issues that come up in the course of daily life” (Arnett 2024, p. 207), that is, an intention to give time and attention to translating beliefs into behavior (see, for example, Ajzen 2020) and to sharing intentions with others in collaborative action (Tomasello 2011).

As in many religions, in a Bahá'í framework, commitments are channeled through teachings about the spiritual and moral purpose of life and reflected culturally through related ethics. Purpose is clearly articulated in Bahá'í texts and is directly connected with the two beliefs described in the previous section. Bahá'u'lláh writes that every human being is created, “to know his Creator” (Bahá'u'lláh 1976, no. XXIX) and “to carry forward and ever-advancing civilization” (Bahá'u'lláh 1976, no. CIX), twin spiritual imperatives mandated as the reason for human existence, described by the Universal House of Justice as “a twofold moral purpose, to develop...inherent potentialities and to contribute to the transformation of society” (Universal House of Justice 2010, para. 19). Thus, one aspect of purpose relates to the notion of nobility and the other to oneness, one to inner life and a sense of “being” and the other to “doing” through contribution to the progress of society, which in a Bahá'í vision is explicitly world-embracing.

The two aspects of moral purpose are inseparable in theory and in practice, both requiring individual effort in the context of the social and the natural world, whilst also acknowledging that as these efforts are made, new realities are created:

“We cannot segregate the human heart from the environment outside us and say that once one of these is reformed everything will be improved. Man is organic with the world. His inner life moulds the environment and is itself also deeply affected by it. The one acts upon the other and every abiding change in the life of man is the result of these mutual reactions.” (Shoghi Effendi, cited by the Universal House of Justice 2012)

Personal moral development occurs through the expression of noble qualities such as fairness, kindness, compassion, forgiveness, and patience in interactions with others and prosocial action toward the common good, which provide the foundation for the transformation of communities and ultimately societies that further reinforce spiritual, material, and intellectual dimensions of individual and collective improvement.

That morality and culture are understood to co-modulate in this way (see Jensen 2018) is in itself an important element of a Bahá'í culture of peace. A Bahá'í conception of the moral self reflects a unique combination of the ethics of autonomy, community, and divinity as developed in cultural literatures (Shweder et al. 1997; Jensen 2018). In keeping with the ethic of divinity, a Bahá'í notion of moral identity is primarily spiritual, as striving to align with spiritual standards set out in sacred texts is central to moral uprightness. However, Bahá'í writings also uphold the ethic of autonomy in the emphasis on free will,

at the same time making moral uprightness impossible without reference to membership of a community defined as the whole of humanity. Thus, in a Bahá'í conception, all three—autonomy, community, and divinity—are joined, refined, and expanded in what might be described as an ethic of unity (Betts Razavi and Mahmoudi 2022), which provides a moral basis for commitment to peace: it is a sacred charge.

The absence of clergy in the Bahá'í Faith means that it is the responsibility of every individual to make this moral commitment independently, and this too is an important aspect of a Bahá'í culture of peace. The power of the human mind and the exercise of rational capacity are strongly emphasized in the Bahá'í teachings, illustrated by exhortations to every individual to seek knowledge and understanding through both science and religion, to engage in an occupation to contribute to the development of both material and spiritual civilization, to develop individual talents and skills, and to participate in processes of decision-making and problem-solving through consultation. As an expression of collective maturity, peace relies on individual maturity in ownership of spiritual perception, moral discernment, and life choices; peace is ultimately a spiritual condition. In this connection, in His second communication to the Executive Committee of the Central Organization for a Durable Peace³, 'Abdu'l-Bahá comments:

“Today the benefits of universal peace are recognized amongst the people, and likewise the harmful effects of war are clear and manifest to all. But in this matter, knowledge alone is far from sufficient: A power of implementation is needed to establish it throughout the world. Ye should therefore consider how the compelling power of conscience can be awakened, so that this lofty ideal may be translated from the realm of thought into that of reality. For it is clear and evident that the execution of this mighty endeavor is impossible through ordinary human feelings but requireth the powerful sentiments of the heart to transform its potential into reality.” ('Abdu'l-Bahá 1920, para. 6)

He further asserts that “the power of implementation in this great endeavor is the penetrating influence of the Word of God and the confirmations of the Holy Spirit” ('Abdu'l-Bahá 1920, para. 8). For Bahá'ís, then, the pursuit of peace through the twofold moral purpose is guided by an understanding that the Word of God is transformative, “endowed with such potency as can instill new life into every human frame” (Bahá'u'lláh 1976, no. LXXCIV), with a “generative power which in every age has provided the means for refining human character and reordering human affairs” (Universal House of Justice 2022).

In this respect, a Bahá'í approach to moral purpose is very similar to other religions (and clearly distinguished from materialist philosophies) explicitly linking the expression of faith and moral uprightness to a source of spirituality (Gentry 2016). Practices that involve connection with the Word of God, both private and communal, are therefore integral to its culture of peace. These include daily private prayer, meditation and reading of scripture, prayer gatherings and other spaces for community worship and service, and educational activities that center study of the Bahá'í writings (described in more detail in the next section). A commitment to moral purpose is fostered around the sacred texts in various ways, most obviously through the themes they address, which relate to the whole human being through the life of the soul, the mind, and the body as well as to human relations and the life of society. Engagement with the Word of God is an act of seeking meaning that in itself has moral worth, bringing together intellect, affect, and action with a sense of purpose (Noddings 2012), a bonding that further contributes to a culture of peace. In addition, focus on the Word of God is a method that reinforces the twofold purpose, encouraging individuals to turn to the writings independently for illumination and also as a source of shared understanding, to build unity of thought, responsibility, and commitment to applying Bahá'í principles of peace to the needs of their society.

Although the particular form is distinctive and there is variable attention to the moral aspect, the idea that a sense of purpose is central to a culture of peace is not unique to the Bahá'í Faith, rather there is in the literature an implicit morality in commitment to peace as a noble goal that benefits the human world. For example, Montessori ([1949] 2015) describes the need for humanity to take control and give direction to its own progress, to develop individual spiritual life and organize humanity for peace; in her seminal text on peace education Noddings (2012) considers the moral worth of concerns that give meaning to human lives and elsewhere further discusses the moral instinct for peacemaking (Noddings 2010). Thus, it is not surprising that the relatively small body of empirical work interrogating the relationship between moral purpose and peace (see Betts Razavi and Mahmoudi, forthcoming), supports the role of a sense of purpose, especially when prosocial, as conducive to peace and peacebuilding. In a review of the literature, Damon et al. (2003) conclude that “purpose plays a positive role in self-development as well as a generative one for the person’s contributions to society” and posit that “acquiring noble purposes discourages the acquisition of ignoble ones” (p. 126). More recently, Quinn (2012) finds that other-oriented sense of purpose and prosocial behavior relate to beliefs about the possibility for change and growth in the world, and in pursuing its culture of peace agenda the United Nations Development Programme continues to emphasize “a shared sense of purpose” as “the foundation for building peace” (UNDP 2024).

6. Shared Agency: Building Community

The final element of culture extends beliefs and commitments into the realm of behavior through the idea of shared agency—the intentional collaborative and collective capacity of individuals, groups, and institutions to act together toward common goals (see, for example, Bakken and Bransford 2002; Tomasello 2019). From a Bahá'í perspective, agency is a critical aspect of a culture of peace. Peace is not a vague aspiration, neither is it passive. It is a practical task that requires the exercise of capabilities that comprise both internal and external factors—the development of individual capacity and readiness to act coupled with conditions and opportunities to take those actions (Nussbaum 2011) to transform and create new normative patterns (Bakken and Bransford 2002).

For Bahá'ís, a culture of peace involves individuals, institutions, and communities working together in reciprocal and mutually supportive ways to build unity in spaces at all levels of society, integrating spiritual and material development for both personal and collective transformation, with the ultimate aim of contributing to the progress and wellbeing of all humanity. It is a culture of grassroots ownership, “an approach founded on faith in the ability of a population to become the protagonists of their own development” (Universal House of Justice 2021). It involves the practice of Bahá'í consultation, a distinctive approach to truth-seeking, decision-making, and problem-solving that prioritizes unity and collective wellbeing (Kolstoe 1985; Ripley 2022), described by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá as “spiritual conference and not the mere voicing of personal views” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá 2012, p. 99) in which each participant “endeavors to arrive at unity and truth” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá 2012, p. 100). The emphasis on unity encourages universal (though not uniform) participation (Betts Razavi and Mahmoudi 2023), and links individual and collective agency in a way that runs through all aspects of community life and culture.

Shared agency begins at the individual level, through common patterns of conduct that promote peace, including personal prayer, meditation, and the study of sacred writings, the expression of spiritual qualities such as kindness, patience, and courage in interpersonal interactions, and more complex acts of service across the range of relationships that define human lives. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá describes this type of agency in His first communication to the Executive Committee of the Central Organization for a Durable Peace:

“Be ye loving fathers to the orphan, and a refuge to the helpless, and a treasury for the poor, and a cure for the ailing. Be ye the helpers of every victim of oppression, the patrons of the disadvantaged. Think ye at all times of rendering some service to every member of the human race. Pay ye no heed to aversion and rejection, to disdain, hostility, injustice: act ye in the opposite way. Be ye sincerely kind, not in appearance only. Let each one of God’s loved ones center his attention on this: to be the Lord’s mercy to man; to be the Lord’s grace. Let him do some good to every person whose path he crosseth, and be of some benefit to him. Let him improve the character of each and all, and reorient the minds of men. In this way, the light of divine guidance will shine forth, and the blessings of God will cradle all mankind: for love is light, no matter in what abode it dwelleth; and hate is darkness, no matter where it may make its nest.” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá 1919, para. 51)

Such actions are within the scope of every individual, can be nurtured and encouraged in the home, among families and friends, and gradually permeate a community and society more widely with a peaceful character. But for Bahá’ís, a culture of peace is also significantly shaped by activities identified and coordinated by the institutions of the Faith to build communities reflecting the principles associated with unity and peace. Institutions at every level—local, national, and international—play a vital role in providing unity and direction for shared agency through a series of plans. To orient the collective mind toward peacebuilding attitudes and action, at present Bahá’ís are directed to three strands of engagement with society as follows: (i) sharing Bahá’í prayers and writings through devotional gatherings and “offering educational programmes for children, junior youth, and youth and adults—for empowering the friends in large numbers and enabling them to enhance their capabilities for service” (Universal House of Justice 2023, para. 55); (ii) engaging “in projects of social action, through which, in a myriad ways, issues related to peace, justice, and unity can be practically addressed” (Universal House of Justice 2024b, para. 7); and (iii) “making constructive contributions to the discourses of society. . . in an effort to bring insights emerging from the study of the Revelation and from the community’s own experience to bear on the problems facing the world” (para. 7).

These three strands, outlined and guided by Bahá’í institutions at the international level and pursued in Bahá’í communities all over the world, create a clear framework for shared agency. For many, a starting point is the simple act of coming together to turn to God in prayer. “Thousands upon thousands” writes the Universal House of Justice “. . . carry out acts of collective worship in diverse settings, uniting with others in prayer, awakening spiritual susceptibilities, and shaping a pattern of life distinguished for its devotional character” (Universal House of Justice 2008). The communal nature of this activity contributes directly to a culture of peace as “the spiritual growth generated by individual devotions is reinforced by loving association among the friends in every locality, by worship as a community and by service to the Faith and to one’s fellow human beings” (Universal House of Justice 1999, para. 7).

For Bahá’ís, a central focus in the creation of a peaceful society is raising capacity for service through education. “Bend your energies,” writes Bahá’u’lláh, “to whatever may foster the education of men” (Bahá’u’lláh 1976, no. V). Character training, “the education of the souls to rehabilitate the fortunes of mankind, to ensure spiritual progress, to promote universal peace” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá 2014b, p. 193) is regarded as the “primary accomplishment of humankind” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá n.d., para. 1). Over time, Bahá’í educational efforts have become more systematic through the development of worldwide grassroots programs for children, adolescents, and adults, based on the curriculum and materials of the Ruhi Institute.⁴ These programs foster moral and spiritual development together with seeking knowledge, advancing understanding, and gaining practical skills, and

contribute directly to a culture of peace through participatory study of content from Bahá'í writings, focusing on individual and collective learning and service to others, and raising capacity to build united communities. Educational activities often determine the rhythm of community life and act as micro-environments (see [Betts Razavi and Mahmoudi 2022](#)) within which cultural characteristics are developed and internalized. Together with devotional gatherings, children's classes, junior youth groups, and study circles for youth and adults constitute the "core activities" (e.g., [Universal House of Justice 2005](#)) of Bahá'í community life.

A few features of these programs are worth mentioning specifically in relation to agency and culture. Importantly, these activities are not intended only for members of the Bahá'í community, rather they are open to everyone and seen as a tool for building community based on spiritual reality. They are conducted in small groups in a participatory format with a focus on putting into practice the principles and concepts covered in the materials, in forms appropriate to each stage of the educational process. In children's classes, the emphasis is on learning to show spiritual qualities among immediate family and friends, in the home and at school; for junior youth, the frame expands to the wider community through collective acts of service, and for older youth and adults to a range of community-building activities of varying complexity. The practice component is important both as a feature of the educational method to deepen understanding and as an expression of shared agency towards social transformation and a basis for raising up "practitioners of peace" ([Universal House of Justice 2024a](#), para. 3).

In addition, through participation in these activities, individuals are also trained to deliver them—as teachers of children's classes, animators of junior youth spiritual empowerment groups, or tutors of study circles for youth and adults. By equipping an expanding pool of people to help others contribute to building community, the educational process steadily raises consciousness, capacity, and scope for agency among a growing number of participants studying, taking action, and reflecting together to learn with the aim of enhancing their communities. And throughout, from childhood to adulthood, this process further reinforces the shared beliefs and commitments that underlie a culture of peace.

Building capacity through education naturally opens a channel for shared agency in the form of initiatives to improve social and economic conditions. Social action is thus explicitly outward-looking. Bahá'ís are encouraged to "enter into collaboration, as their resources permit, with an increasing number of movements, organizations, groups and individuals, establishing partnerships that strive to transform society and further the cause of unity, promote human welfare, and contribute to world solidarity", to strictly avoid regarding "any joint undertaking as an occasion to impose religious convictions," rather to "readily offer to their collaborators the lessons they have learned through their own experience, just as they are happy to incorporate into their community-building efforts insights gained through such association" ([Universal House of Justice 2013](#), para. 16).

Projects of social action range from "informal efforts of limited duration undertaken by small groups of individuals, projects that have become more sustained over time" to "programs with a higher level of complexity and sophistication implemented by Bahá'í-inspired development organizations" ([Bahá'í International Development Organization 2023](#), p. 15) in response to the particular needs of communities and societies. Key areas of action include "education, agriculture, the environment, arts and media, health, the local economy, the advancement of women, and humanitarian relief" (p. 33). Types of projects include literacy programs, community schools and other educational activities, health clinics, environmental sustainability work, and economic empowerment through skills training and cooperative enterprises rooted in spiritual principles, as well as initiatives

promoting equality, advancing the equal participation of women and men in all aspects of community life, and overcoming prejudice of all kinds as a barrier to unity and collective progress. Grassroots social action of this kind makes a significant contribution to a culture that is conscious of human need and potential and supports flourishing in all its dimensions.

Finally, shared agency in a Bahá'í culture of peace also has a place “in the world of ideas” as Bahá'ís are called to develop “intellectual rigor and clarity of thought to match their commitment to spiritual and material progress in the world of deeds” ([Universal House of Justice 2021](#), para. 27) through engagement with prevalent discourses in society to provide a perspective based on Bahá'í teachings. Contribution to discourse occurs in multiple formats and contexts. At the grassroots level, the Universal House of Justice explains:

“...involvement in public discourse can range from an act as simple as introducing Bahá'í ideas into everyday conversation to more formal activities such as the preparation of articles and attendance at gatherings, dedicated to themes of social concern—climate change and the environment, governance and human rights, to mention a few. It entails, as well, meaningful interactions with civic groups and local organizations in villages and neighbourhoods.” ([Universal House of Justice 2010](#), para. 30)

At the same time, this contribution extends beyond the local level, to include “engaging in conversations in a widening range of spaces at the international and national levels, working shoulder to shoulder with like-minded organizations and individuals, seeking, where possible, to stimulate consultative processes and draw out underlying principles around which agreement and mutual understanding can be built” ([Universal House of Justice 2017](#), para. 11). Thus again, participation in public discourses, whether directly about peace or related themes, channels collective agency to reinforce a unity-centered culture of peace.

The development of behaviors and shared patterns of action is an integral part of any cultural approach to peace though there is, of course, a diversity of emphasis on the form of individual and collective expression. While the framework of local community-building activities described here is distinct to the Bahá'í Faith, much of the peace literature resonates with a Bahá'í perspective, particularly in relation to proactive strategies. Cultural approaches to individual and collective action for peace are reflected in descriptions of “outer peace” as a set of processes in the social and natural environment ([Harris 2004](#)), and “positive peace” as a state that goes beyond the absence of aggression ([Standish et al. 2021](#)). For example, [Mac Ginty \(2024\)](#) describes the notion and practice of “everyday peace” in terms of interpersonal interactions embodying qualities such as forgiveness, mercy, and compassion, and their extension into prosocial grassroots action that disrupts conflict and builds peace in small groups below the level of civil society organizations, [Chowdhury \(2014\)](#) emphasizes empowerment to express fundamental principles through both individual and societal level actions as the basis of sustainable peace, and [Haessly \(2022\)](#) notes the need to “recognize the multitude of personal, professional, and political activities that can be named as peacemaking activities that have the potential to address global challenges” (pp. 1122–23). Social action perspectives on peace include more directed forms of agency at the community level, “building on the resources for peace building that already exist, combined with a focus on creating meeting spaces for local peace and justice groups of all ages, and for intergenerational interaction” as well as “community mobilization for action on international issues” ([Boulding 2001](#), p. 569). Peace education efforts also adopt a community approach to social change ([Kester 2012](#)), strategically proactive and preventive rather than reactive ([Harris 2019](#)), oriented to the long-term transformation of individuals, groups, and eventually societies. Finally, at the level of coordination, an institution-led approach to shared agency is inherent in the very founding

of UNESCO and its ongoing culture of peace program of action (e.g., [Mayor and Adams 2000](#); [UNESCO 2022](#)).

In terms of reactive forms of agency, there is a range of approaches to the role of active nonviolence and civil disobedience in a culture of peace, including symbolic nonviolent protest to raise awareness (e.g., picketing, vigils), nonviolent noncooperation (e.g., strikes, boycotts), and nonviolent interventions (e.g., sit-ins), which involve a combination and more directly obstruct functioning ([Mayton 2001](#)). In many cases, these forms of collective action are seen as important—if not defining—features of principled and effective responses to injustice and structural violence (see, for example, [Lal 2019](#)). None of these forms, however, are found in a Bahá'í approach to shared agency in a culture of peace. Rather, Bahá'ís “are required by the teachings of their Faith to refrain from involvement in partisan political activity and civil disorder” ([Universal House of Justice 1986](#), para 7). The House of Justice writes that “given the adversary principle that characterizes our political traditions throughout the world” (para 7), moral challenge has “become intertwined with partisan political concerns” and “social protest originating in moral outrage has assumed the character of political action” (para 6). Instead, Bahá'ís are directed to respond to oppression and injustice with “constructive resilience,” “to build, to strengthen, to refine the tissues of society wherever they might find themselves,” to respond to “the inhumanity of their enemies with patience, calm, resignation, and contentment, choosing to meet deception with truthfulness and cruelty with good will towards all” ([Universal House of Justice 2007](#), para 5). Indeed, these qualities define the persecuted Bahá'í community in Iran, both historically and today. Constructive resilience offers a new perspective to understanding individual and collective agency; beyond nonviolence, this view of agency involves outward-looking active engagement not merely to preserve or protect the rights of a particular group under oppression, but to create new possibilities to address barriers to peace and contribute to progress for society as a whole.

Alongside long-standing forms of in-person nonviolent action, the emergence of global social media has introduced new approaches, including “expressive” forms that some researchers argue have integrated protest culture into popular culture ([Fahlenbrach et al. 2016](#)). While the notion of protest remains intertwined with dissent even in social media, in practice, communicative agency may also be exercised (proactively or as a reaction to social and political conditions) in the mode of consciousness-raising and unity-building. In this form, it finds a place in a Bahá'í culture of peace as illustrated by the #OurStoryIsOne campaign initiated by the Bahá'í International Community, which aims “to demonstrate that despite the Iranian government’s efforts to sow discord and hate between groups, that our story is a shared one” ([Bahá'í International Community 2023](#)). That said, media-led social movements differ from other forms of shared agency, associated with more fluid collective identities and weak ties ([Cammaerts 2021](#)); how such efforts connect with and complement shared agency and ownership at the grassroots is a question that merits continued attention in the context of building a meaningful culture of peace.

7. A Bahá'í Contribution to Understanding of Cultures of Peace

While the principal aim of this article is to demonstrate how Bahá'í principles and practice can be understood as elements of a culture of peace, it is clear from this analysis that there is considerable resonance between the Bahá'í writings and concepts in the culture of peace literature; throughout the article, connections have been drawn between the elements of a Bahá'í perspective and contemporary research on cultures of peace, often illustrating alignment and significant intersection with this body of work. So, we may also ask, what does a Bahá'í perspective contribute to the broad conversation about cultures of peace? As noted in the introduction, the cultural approach to peace is based on an understanding

that sustainable peace requires more than a cessation of violence (negative peace) and proposes that normative change in beliefs, values, attitudes, behaviors, and ways of life is necessary to eliminate the root causes of conflict and create peaceful societies conducive to individual and collective flourishing (positive peace). A Bahá'í conception of universal peace is similarly holistic and encompasses the notions of negative and positive peace as described by [Galtung \(1969\)](#), constructs which have significantly shaped approaches in peace research generally and the proactive stance of culture of peace studies and peace education particularly. Within the holistic framework, there is no shortage of questions and issues that could be considered in the light of a Bahá'í approach. This section highlights three examples of how a Bahá'í perspective contributes to contemporary understanding of cultures of peace: (i) augmentation of the local-global culture framework outlined by [Smoker and Groff \(1996\)](#) with a spiritual and social evolutionary perspective and a practical framework; (ii) elaboration of [Reardon's \(2019\)](#) notion of “peacelearning” at the individual and collective level and a wholeness-based foundation of education for peace; and (iii) engaging [Gilligan's \(2023\)](#) notion of “a human voice” with a Bahá'í approach to collective maturity, spiritual identity and moral purpose.

[Smoker and Groff \(1996\)](#) describe an evolution of perspectives on cultures of peace from single to multifactorial definitions, from negative to positive conceptions, and from outer peace only to both inner and outer peace. They note that there are “various interpretations of the culture of peace concept ranging from a narrow view that stresses the creation of cultural conditions that make war between states impossible, to a broad view that requires the transformation of every culture to a state that makes holistic inner-outer peace achievable” (p. 12). The collective maturation process described in Bahá'í writings, in terms of the spiritual and social evolution from the Lesser to the Most Great Peace (e.g., [Shoghi Effendi \[1936\] 1991](#)) offers an interpretative framework for the observed patterns. Further, the writings explain the basis of the underlying social and cultural transformation as the expansion of human consciousness and widening of the ontological frame (‘[Abdu'l-Bahá 2014a](#), no. 34). Smoker and Groff further suggest that “in our globally interdependent world, [these] positive visions of peace. . . need to be based on a synthesis of some of the best ideas from different cultures around the world on what, ideally, peace could and should look like” (p. 31). In this respect, the Bahá'í writings provide a systemic model of the connection between the parts and the whole. For example, [Bahá'u'lláh \(2002\)](#) writes, “Regard ye the world as a man's body, which is afflicted with divers ailments, and the recovery of which dependeth upon the harmonizing of all of its component elements” (pp. 79–80). Moreover, a Bahá'í approach to worldwide community-building as described in the messages of the Universal House of Justice (e.g., [Universal House of Justice 2010, 2021](#)) opens a path for understanding how in practice such a global-local culture can be created, through the application of universal principles in diverse settings around the world.

[Reardon \(2019\)](#) advances the construct of “peacelearning” as “the sum of reflections on all learning experiences—intellectual, social and political, ethical, aesthetic, emotional even physical” leading “us toward human wholeness” and drawing “us into efforts to restore wholeness to the world” (254) as central to peacebuilding processes. This concept clearly echoes the ontological perspectives of human nature and the oneness of humanity as the basis of peace in the Bahá'í writings. From a Bahá'í perspective, an additional spiritual dimension is essential to individual human wholeness, wholeness in the world, and to the learning process, as [Bahá'u'lláh \(1976, CXXII\)](#) states: “Regard man as a mine rich in gems of inestimable value. Education can, alone, cause it to reveal its treasures, and enable mankind to benefit therefrom. If any man were to meditate on that which the Scriptures, sent down from the heaven of God's holy Will, have revealed, he would readily recognize that their purpose is that all men shall be regarded as one soul. . .” And elsewhere: “Set

before thine eyes God's unerring Balance and, as one standing in His Presence, weigh in that Balance thine actions every day, every moment of thy life" (Bahá'u'lláh 1976, CXIV). The notion of peacelearning as a component of a culture of peace is thus elaborated through a recognition of both the oneness of humanity and a spiritual source of authority which focuses and regulates individual and collective learning and educational processes.

The example of Gilligan's (2023) formulation that "the voice of care ethics is a human voice" illustrates another way Bahá'í writings can contribute to understanding a culture of peace: by providing an integrated framework that interfaces with concepts from adjacent disciplines to enrich the peacebuilding discourse. Gilligan (2023) discusses the cultural separation of mind and heart in ethics, a pattern that emerges during adolescence in both girls and boys in patriarchal society, and the consequent masking and dissociation of the "human voice" from social reality. She proposes that this dissociation not only compromises individual development and wellbeing but interferes with the capacity to see, challenge, and fight injustice. In the context of understanding gender and ethics, she urges a shift away from seeing difference to seeing humanity and argues that the true threat to human wellbeing is not the loss of subordinate identities rather the failure to realize our humanness. Though Gilligan's work is not situated in peace culture research, there is significant scope for dialogue with peace-related concepts from a Bahá'í perspective. Interestingly, she describes a turning point during adolescence in individuals, which in a Bahá'í view applies also to the collective process of maturation on the path to peace as humanity emerges from the tumult of adolescence and "must now become imbued with new virtues and powers, new moralities, new capacities" ('Abdu'l-Bahá 2012, p. 618). Since the features of maturity are necessary for peace, from a Bahá'í perspective strengthening the capacity of the mature "human voice"—and the capacity to hear it—are part of the mindset and practice of peace. The Bahá'í writings further engage the "human voice" in the characterization of the human soul as sexless and the shared moral and spiritual imperative for every human being to develop the qualities that cultivate peace. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá (2012, p. 528) explains, "In the estimation of God there is no gender. The one whose deeds are more worthy, whose sayings are better, whose accomplishments are more useful is nearest and dearest in the estimation of God, be that one male or female."

In general terms, then, a Bahá'í view contributes both focus and breadth to the understanding of cultures of peace, invoking the spiritual dimension and providing a model of progression from the structural form of the Lesser Peace, to the deeper cultural transformation of global civilization (with further structural implications) of the Most Great Peace, asserting that this holistic peace is possible through human effort as active processes of purposeful learning effect a transformation of human social reality. It invites a re-examination of the assumptions underlying peace as a complex but attainable goal and urges a shift to a unity-based paradigm. It suggests that a comprehensive developmental vision of peace that spans the short term and the long term is important to the process of normative change, as is a systematic and clear form of global grassroots response to the challenges facing humanity through community-building. And, critically, it offers conviction that human beings are not only capable of but inclined to create cultures of peace and will ultimately succeed in achieving universal peace.

In the final analysis, culture is a lived social reality, and in this respect the Bahá'í contribution to understanding cultures of peace is unique. Beyond engaging in dialogue at the level of concept, the worldwide Bahá'í community is a case study of a culture of peace in the making, in which the shared beliefs, commitments, and forms of agency described here come together in a real-life community of practice. Indeed, in *The Promise of World Peace*, the Universal House of Justice explicitly offers the Bahá'í community as a model for study to "contribute in whatever measure to reinforcing hope in the unity of the human

race” ([Universal House of Justice \[1985\] 1986](#)), reiterated in its 2019 message on the theme of peace as it acknowledges that Bahá’ís have been “patiently refining that model and working with others around them to build up and broaden a system of social organization” based on the Bahá’í teachings and “learning how to nurture communities that embody [the] prerequisites of peace” ([Universal House of Justice 2019](#)).

8. Conclusions

Consideration of the teachings of the Bahá’í Faith through a cultural lens illustrates how the elements of belief, commitment, and agency interact to create new ways of looking at the world, to clarify moral purpose, and prompt collective action coherent with the ultimate vision of universal peace articulated by Bahá’u’lláh. As individuals, communities, and institutions commit themselves to working towards unity as the prerequisite for peace by developing personal potential and attention to the common good, this orientation begins to influence the nature of collective life, which over time generates normative change.

For Bahá’ís, this process of cultural change is already apparent in “a mode of operation characterized by action, reflection, consultation and study—study which involves not only constant reference to the writings of the Faith but also the scientific analysis of patterns unfolding” ([Universal House of Justice 2013](#), para. 10). In this mode, the interplay of individuals, institutions, and communities distinctively shapes and maintains the cultural norms of a holistic and unity-centered approach to peace. “Institutions,” writes the Universal House of Justice, “appreciating the need for coordinated action channeled toward fruitful ends, aim not to control but to nurture and guide the individual, who, in turn, willingly receives guidance, not in blind obedience, but with faith founded on conscious knowledge” (para. 12). In this purpose-driven culture, the actions, decisions, and communications of the institutions provide a framework for empowerment and highlight the importance of the long-term vision in everyday reality ([Durand and Ioannou 2023](#)). “The community, meanwhile, takes on the challenge of sustaining an environment where the powers of individuals, who wish to exercise self-expression responsibly in accordance with the common weal and the plans of institutions, multiply in unified action” ([Universal House of Justice 2013](#), para. 12).

While specific forms of shared agency vary across time and place to meet the needs of diverse populations, and do not always or fully include the approaches endorsed by popular culture or social justice activism, the beliefs and commitments that drive individual and collective action and form the bedrock of culture are clearly embedded in Bahá’í texts. That said, from a Bahá’í perspective, to be a practitioner of peace within a Bahá’í framework does not depend on adherence to the Faith as a matter of religious belief; agency is open to all. A shared intention, desire, or aspiration for a better life can engage a person of any background or faith in building a culture of peace. Indeed, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states that “the scope of universal peace must be such that all the communities and religions may find their highest wish realized in it” (‘[Abdu’l-Bahá 1919](#), para. 25). The power and the possibility to aspire, commit, and act are not connected to any subordinate identity but rather to the essential quality of human nobility. That the approach itself begins to sound very much like the goal of universal peace it seeks to promote speaks to the importance of the coherence of means and ends in a culture of peace framework; to move towards a vision of peace defined by wholeness and flourishing depends on processes that embody the same characteristics, processes that include, connect, and elevate.

Of course, this endeavor is not without challenges for individuals, communities, and institutions. For example, it demands critical attention to longstanding assumptions and existing cultural practices set by past traditions, in the light of the Bahá’í writings, to preserve diversity while still building unity. Similarly, it involves developing a form of

response to issues of social justice that does not unwittingly contribute to divisiveness, neither retreats into passivity, rather focuses energy constructively on unity and the path to peace. As an outward-looking enterprise, another current challenge is to articulate Bahá'í concepts to a wider audience and to consciously participate in contemporary conversations about social and cultural change and peace from various academic perspectives, again without engaging in potentially divisive debate. There is undoubtedly much to be gained from correlation of Bahá'í concepts and practices with existing bodies of work on peace and normative change to address specific themes and questions, yet there remains a need to describe the Bahá'í Faith and its teachings in general terms as a foundation for such engagement.

This challenge is also one of the limitations of this article—it articulates the breadth of a Bahá'í perspective of a culture of peace with reference to contemporary work but does not pursue in depth particular aspects of each of the elements that could stimulate further discussion within and across relevant disciplines. Acknowledging this limitation, it is helpful to note some of the questions that could not be addressed here and would benefit from attention in future work on cultures of peace. Among the many that have come up in the course of preparing this article are: How does a Bahá'í approach to human nature relate to theories of culture and the psychology of identity? (see [Appiah 2019](#)); What does a Bahá'í perspective of grassroots ownership add to understanding about peace and the distribution of power in a global society? (see [Blattman 2022](#)); How does the idea of ever widening spheres of consciousness relate to theories of altruism and identification with all humanity? (see [Monroe 1996](#); [McFarland et al. 2012](#)); What is the role of the arts in fostering cultures of peace and how does a Bahá'í approach both learn from and contribute to existing research? (see [Anheier 2020](#)).

While many steps and many questions remain on the path to peace—and this, too, is acknowledged as part of the dynamic character of a Bahá'í approach—for Bahá'ís, to create a culture of peace individual and collective lives must always actively and consistently defend and uphold the nobility of the human spirit and the oneness of humanity. In a Bahá'í framework, the triad of shared beliefs, commitments, and agency shapes a culture of peace in a paradigm that moves beyond dichotomies to reconcile notions of the self and others, of the local and the global, of humility and courage, of spiritual and material progress, to an expansive view of unity compelling “the carrying out of our common task for the peace and regeneration of the world” ([Shoghi Effendi \[1928\] 1968](#), p. 51) as humanity advances towards the stage of maturity, wellbeing, and prosperity.

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Notes

- ¹ Bahá'u'lláh is the Founder of the Bahá'í Faith. He designated His son, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, as His successor and authorized interpreter of His teachings. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá appointed His grandson, Shoghi Effendi, as the Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith. The Universal House of Justice, an institution described in the writings of Bahá'u'lláh, is the elected international governing body of the Bahá'í Faith.
- ² A comprehensive treatment of the topic of peace from a Bahá'í perspective is beyond the scope of this article. Rather, this section briefly describes a Bahá'í vision of peace distilled from a selection of Bahá'í primary texts that elaborate these ideas, and an illustration of how the topic is addressed in contemporary academic publications on the Bahá'í Faith and peace, in order to

- provide context for the exploration of a Bahá'í approach to fostering a culture of peace. For a more detailed presentation of Bahá'í teachings related to peace from a secondary source, see Mahmoudi (2020, 2022).
- 3 The Central Organization for a Durable Peace was formed in 1915, involving representatives from ten nations. Its focus was the prevention of future war. It effectively ceased to operate after the Treaty of Versailles, overtaken by the League of Nations (see Mahmoudi and Khan 2020).
 - 4 The Ruhi Institute is an educational institution based in Columbia, dedicated to spiritual, social, and cultural development based on a framework derived from the application of Bahá'í principles to the analysis of social conditions (see <https://www.ruhi.org/en/>, accessed on 27 July 2025).

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