

Consultation: A Revolutionary Model of Democratic Governance

Wilmette Institute Web Talk
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Outline

- Fundamentals
- Principles of consultation
- Contrast to other processes
- Wilmette Institute course
- Summary

Revolutionary?

The world's equilibrium hath been upset through the vibrating influence of this most great, this new World Order. Mankind's ordered life hath been revolutionized through the agency of this unique, this wondrous System—the like of which mortal eyes have never witnessed.

-Bahá'u'lláh

Model?

For notwithstanding its inclination to democratic methods in the administration of its affairs, and regardless of the resemblance of some of its features to those of other systems, the Administrative Order is not to be viewed merely as an improvement on past and existing systems; it represents a departure both in origin and in concept.

- Universal House of Justice
Individual Rights & Freedoms in the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh
29 December 1988

Governance?

What motivates us is the knowledge that the supreme mission of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, the Bearer of that Order, is, as Shoghi Effendi pointed out, “none other but the achievement of this organic and spiritual unity of the whole body of nations,” indicating the “coming of age of the entire human race.”

- Universal House of Justice
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Not Just an Improvement

Democratic systems	Bahá'í administrative system
Accepts that human nature is self-centered, governance tries to manage the resulting competition	The human being is a "mine rich in gems of inestimable value," governance elicits and harnesses this
"Conceived in rebellion" and "inspired by protest" against oppressive orders, individualism & suspicion of authority	"Recognition of a mutuality of benefits," and a "spirit of cooperation."
Candidates attain office by self-promotion, spending on advertising, and corrupt power brokering	Complete freedom to choose, based on qualifications such as "selfless devotion, a well-trained mind..."
Legislators represent the interests of constituents. Are often bribed by some of them.	People serving on elected bodies guided by moral principles. Not a popularity contest.
The mass media entertains, sensationalizes, and propagandizes. Motivated by profit.	Publishes "high thoughts," directs public opinion to what is "worthy," uses "clear, comprehensive, and conclusive proofs."

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What is Consultation ?

- Spiritual conference
- Conducted in an attitude and atmosphere of love
- Whose purpose is the investigation of truth
- Very different from decision-making processes such as parliamentary debate

Individual qualities required “Prime requisites”

- Purity of motive
- Radiance of spirit
- Detachment from all else save God
- Attraction to His Divine Fragrances
- Humility and lowliness amongst His loved ones
- Patience and long-suffering in difficulties
- Servitude to His exalted Threshold

Collective qualities required “Essential conditions”

- Love, harmony, freedom from estrangement
- Prayer

Ground rules

- Carefully consider the views already advanced before expressing my own views
 - Accept worthy ideas and not hold willfully to my own
- Express freely my own thoughts and opinions
 - With devotion, courtesy, dignity, care, and moderation
 - Not as right but as a contribution to consensus
- Don't feel hurt if anyone disagrees with my opinion
- Don't belittle the contributions of others
- The shining spark of truth comes forth only after the clash of differing opinions

Decision-making steps

- Ensure the prime requisites and conditions
- Find out all the facts related to the issue
 - Can use the advice of experts
- Identify spiritual and ethical principles that are relevant to the situation
- Apply those principles to reach a decision
 - Consensus preferable
 - Majority vote can be taken
- Unanimously support the implementation of the decision
 - No minority opinion or post-decision censure

What if the decision is bad?

- Condemnation of the decision might make it unworkable
- Unanimity of support enables shortcomings to be discovered and decisions revisited without divisive “finger pointing” and defensiveness
- It’s not just about making the right decision, but about building a unified community

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A principled process

- The group reaches decisions by consciously applying spiritual and ethical principles to the issue at hand
- In contrast, decision-making processes in the political world are driven by expediency, or the seeking or maintaining of power and privilege. Even moral ends are invoked to justify corrupt methods.

A truth-seeking process

- Goal is ascertain facts, identify the issues, clarify relevant principles, and find the best solution
- In contrast, decision-making processes in the political world are driven by ideological bias or trying to "win the argument"

A service-oriented process

- Opinions offered to help the group find a solution; goal is to serve the human family
- In contrast, decision-making processes in the political world are often power-seeking or serve the few

Based on genuine communication

- Both frank expression of views and listening and learning
- In contrast, participants in debates or exchanges often talk past each other, each with certainty of being in the right; at best, it's persuasion rather than learning

Tends to synthesize the insights of the participants

- Takes advantage of different points of view to gain better insight than any individual could achieve alone
- In contrast, without the spirit of consultation, different points of view can lead to paralyzing conflict

Inclusive

- Everyone is listened to and valued as a contributor
- In contrast, elitism or prejudice in many processes causes some participants opinions to be discounted or given less weight

"Not infrequently, nay oftentimes, the most lowly, untutored, and inexperienced among the friends will, by the sheer inspiring force of selfless and ardent devotion, contribute a distinct and memorable share to a highly involved discussion in any given Assembly."

-Bahá'í writings

Unity a priority, not a side effect

- The harmony and cohesiveness of the group is a priority, going into the process, during the process, and in supporting the decision afterward
- Contrast this to the blame game and character assassination in politics

Congressional process

- Mixed goals and motives
 - The benefit of humanity (extremely rare)
 - The benefit of country (rare)
 - The benefit of state/district
 - The benefit of a special interest or group of constituents
 - Good publicity (or avoidance of bad publicity)
 - Political gain for a party
 - Perpetuation of wealth/power

Congressional process (cont)

- Methods
 - Debate
 - Demagoguery and propaganda
 - Reward and retaliation
 - Bargaining and compromise
 - Intrigue and deception
 - Obstruction of process
 - Buying access
 - Partisan ploys

Contrast to parliamentary debate

“In France I was present at a session of the senate, but the experience was not impressive. Parliamentary procedure should have for its object the attainment of the light of truth upon questions presented and not furnish a battleground for opposition and self-opinion. Antagonism and contradiction are unfortunate and always destructive to truth. In the parliamentary meeting mentioned, altercation and useless quibbling were frequent; the result, mostly confusion and turmoil; even in one instance a physical encounter took place between two members. It was not consultation but comedy.”

-Abdu'l-Bahá

A warning to the Bahá'í community

“Beware, beware lest the foul odour of the parties and peoples of foreign lands in the West, and their pernicious methods, such as intrigues, party politics and propaganda — practices which are abhorrent even in name — should ever reach the Bahá'í community, exert any influence whatsoever upon the friends, and thus bring all spirituality to naught. The friends should, through their devotion, love, loyalty and altruism, abolish these evil practices, not imitate them.”

- Shoghi Effendi, 1923

Consultation vs Compromise

- **Compromise**
 - Each participant seeks to gain outcomes
 - The outcomes are known ahead of time
 - The participant might bargain, trading off some outcomes to get others
- **Consultation**
 - Each participant seeks to serve the community
 - The outcomes are not known ahead of time
 - The group applies ethical/spiritual principles
 - The goal of the process is to discover the best outcomes

Consultation vs Debate

- Debate
 - Each side seeks to win the argument
 - Each side presents evidence for its position
 - Each side suppresses or ignores evidence that does not support its position
- Consultation
 - Each participant expresses views as a contribution to a truth-seeking process
 - Everyone considers all evidence
 - Participant's mind can be changed
 - Finding the truth, not winning an argument

Consultation vs Consensus-Building

- Consensus-Building
 - Unanimity is the goal
 - Risk of paralysis when unanimity is not obtained
 - Risk of abandoning core values in favor of a watered-down outcome to which nobody objects
- Consultation
 - Finding the truth is the goal
 - Unanimity is a good thing, but is the result of a good process
 - Core values are not abandoned
 - Majority vote can be used as a last resort

Consultation is one Aspect of "Incubating" a New Culture

“Present-day conceptions of what is natural and appropriate in relationships – among human beings themselves, between human beings and nature, between the individual and society, and between the members of society and its institutions – reflect levels of understanding arrived at by the human race during earlier and less mature stages in its development. If humanity is indeed coming of age, if all the inhabitants of the planet constitute a single people, if justice is to be the ruling principle of social organization – then existing conceptions that were born out of ignorance of these emerging realities have to be recast.”

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Upcoming Wilmette Institute Course:

Applying Bahá'í Principles to
Discourses on Governance in the
United States

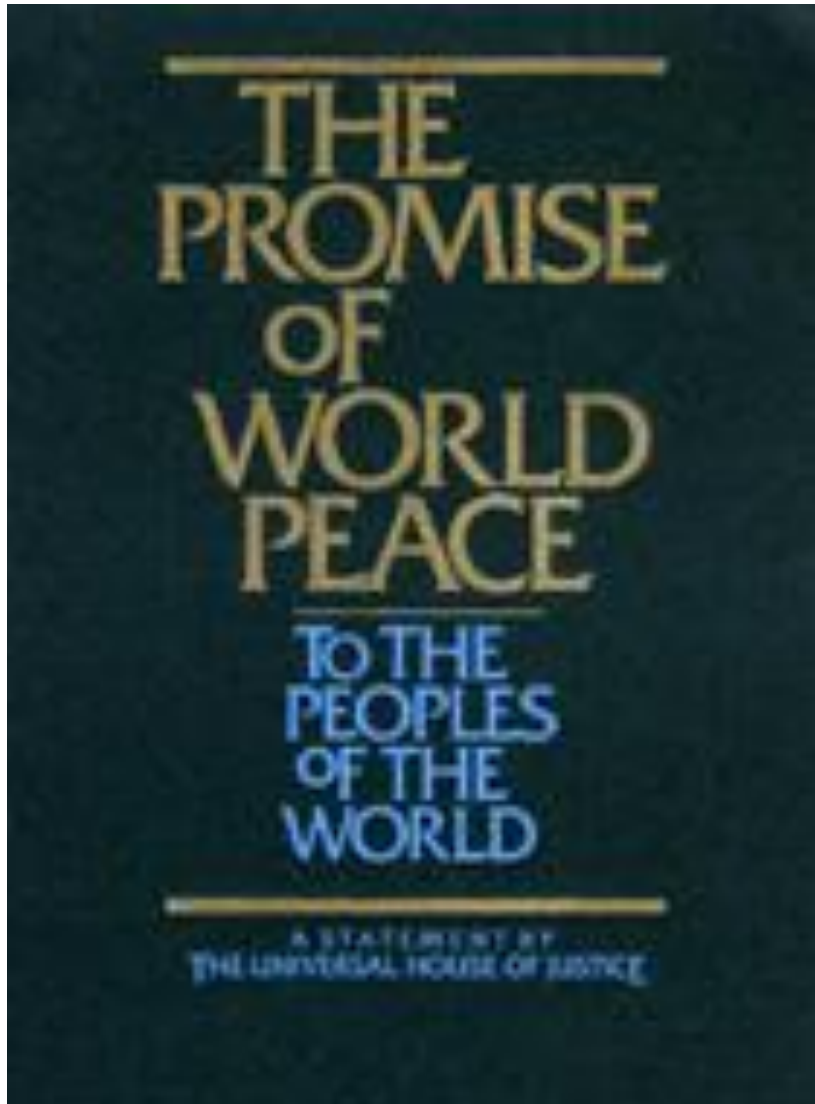
Feb 22 – Apr 16, 2016

From the Universal House of Justice

- "Two interconnected, mutually reinforcing areas of activity: involvement in social action and participation in the *prevalent discourses* of society"
- "Apply the teachings and principles of the Faith to improve some aspect of the social or economic life of a population."
- "Public discourse can range from...introducing Bahá'í ideas into everyday conversation to...preparation of articles [on] climate change and the environment, *governance* and human rights."

(Italics added)

My Own Involvement in Discourse Since 1985



Resolution passed unanimously by the City Council of Cambridge, Massachusetts on June 2, 1986:

WHEREAS: Peace and mutual understanding are the most compelling needs in this world of increasingly interdependent nations; and

WHEREAS: The achievement of peace is frequently assumed to be incompatible with human nature, and this assumption leads to despair and a general paralysis of will; and

WHEREAS: This paralysis can only be overcome by educating people, and encouraging their involvement with a wide spectrum of social and interpersonal issues which are the foundations of peace; and

WHEREAS: The Bahá'í world community has been in the forefront of such issues for over a century, contributing to social and economic development, to the emancipation of women, and to the elimination of prejudice; and

WHEREAS: The experience of the Bahá'í world community at the grass roots level can inspire hope that international peace is possible as well as provide an example of how to lay its foundations; and

WHEREAS: In this International Year of Peace, the City of Cambridge reaffirms its commitment to world peace; therefore, be it

RESOLVED: That *The Promise of World Peace*, a letter to the peoples of the world by the Universal House of Justice, the governing Council of the Bahá'ís of the world, is a valuable resource for all citizens who yearn for peace, and that study of this document is enthusiastically encouraged.

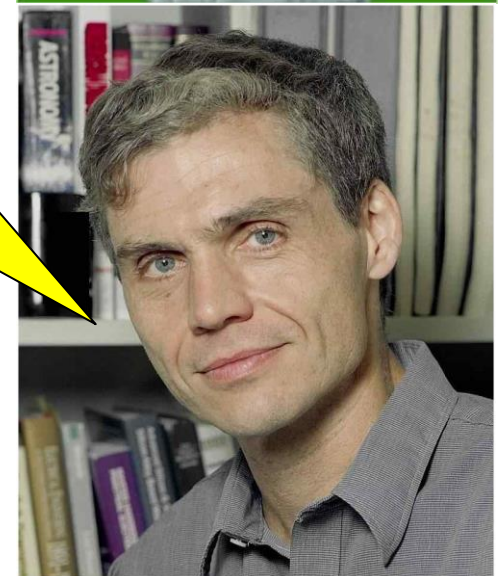
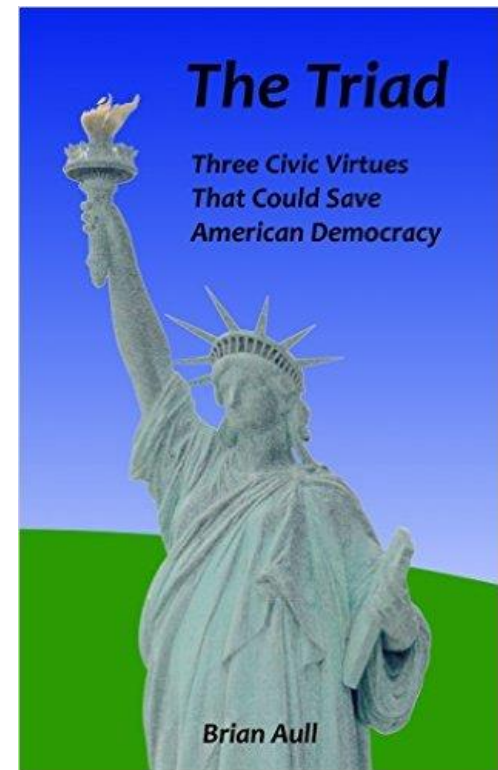
One of the signs of the breakdown of society in all parts of the world is the **erosion of trust and collaboration** between the individual and the institutions of governance. In many nations the electoral process has become discredited because of endemic **corruption**. Contributing to the widening distrust of so vital a process are the influence on the outcome from **vested interests** having access to lavish funds, the restrictions on freedom of choice inherent in the **party system**, and the distortion in public perception of the candidates by the **bias expressed in the media**.

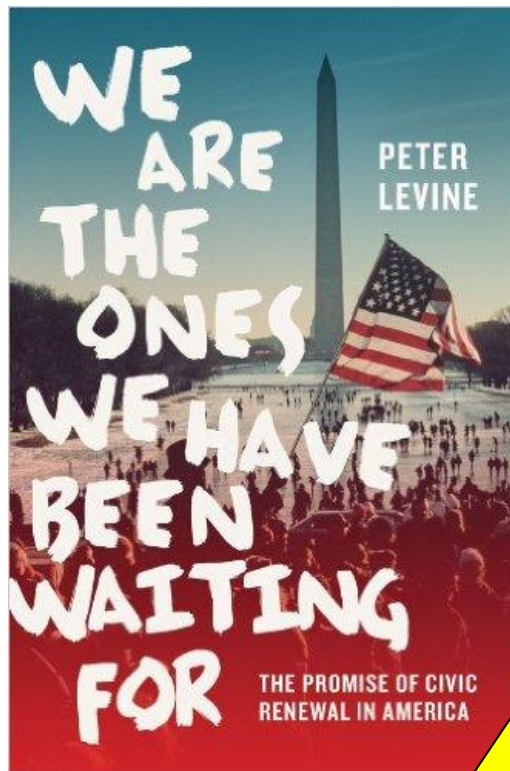
- Universal House of Justice (2007)

The Triad: Three Civic Virtues That Could Save American Democracy

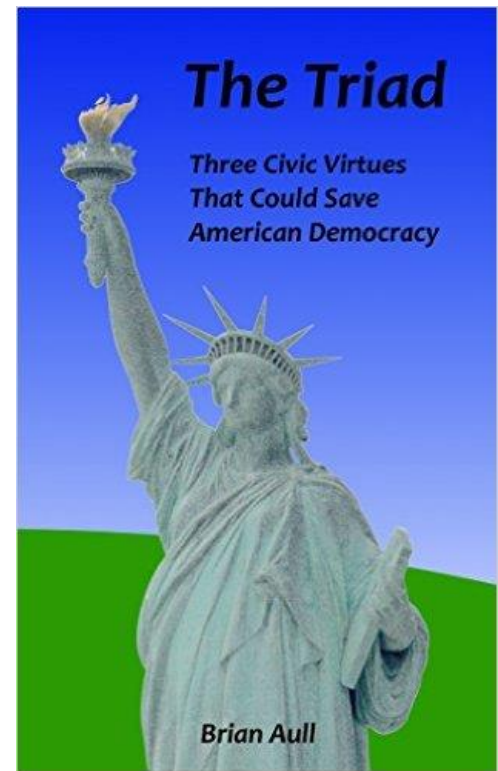
- Inspired by Bahá'í principles
- Addresses dysfunctional state of public life in the United States
- Not about politics, rather about virtues the lack of which makes politics fail

Service
Learning
Community-building

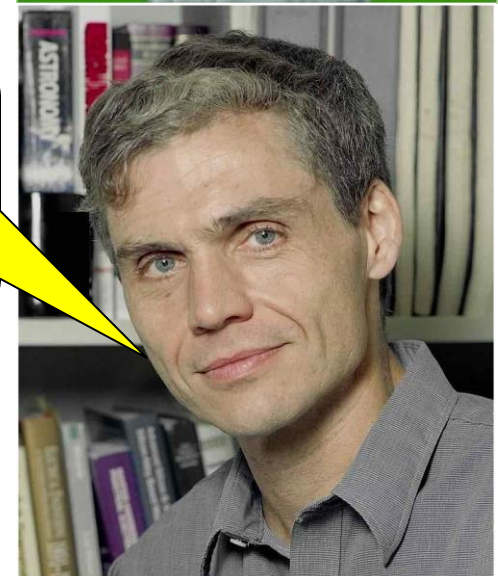




Deliberation
Collaborative work
Civic relationships



Service
Learning
Community-building



Summary

- The Bahá'í Faith offers a model of human governance rooted in lives of spiritual awareness and ethical virtue
- Consultation is a decision-making process for the maturity of human society
- Distinguished by the spirit of the process, not just the mechanics
- We should learn to present this intelligently and enticingly to activists and leaders of thought