Divisiveness

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Divisiveness has reached new heights. Whether the public debate is about climate change, gun violence, immigration, or other vital issues, polarization has become inevitable. A complex issue is first depicted as having only two sides. People then choose one of the two opposing sides – sometimes with little or no understanding of the intricacies of the issue – and become combative. They promote their side's arguments and suppress the other side's views.

Yet "humanity would be best and most effectively served by setting aside partisan disputation, pursuing united action that is informed by the best available scientific evidence and grounded in spiritual principles, and thoughtfully revising action in the light of experience," the Baha'i writings say. "The incessant focus on generating and magnifying points of difference rather than building upon points of agreement leads to exaggeration that fuels anger and confusion, thereby diminishing the will and capacity to act on matters of vital concern."

Regarding the role of "scientific evidence" in our debates and actions, these writings say that "sciences of today are bridges to reality," that "religion must be in conformity with science and reason," and that "sound scientific results, obtained through the employment of sound scientific methods, produce knowledge that can be acted upon; ultimately, the outcomes of action must stand the test of further scientific inquiry and the objective facts of the physical world."

According to these writings, complex issues "cannot be reduced to simple propositions or simplistic policy prescriptions. Even when there is agreement on some underlying facts, there may be a diversity of views about what to do in response to those facts, and the problem is compounded when uncertainty exists or when basic facts are contested for partisan reasons."

Therefore, the Baha'i writings emphasize the importance of consultation: "Consultation provides a means by which common understanding can be reached and a collective course of action defined. It involves a free, respectful, dignified, and fair-minded effort on the part of a group of people to exchange views, seek truth, and attempt to reach consensus. An initial difference of opinion is the starting point for examining an issue in order to reach greater understanding and consensus; it should not become a cause of rancor, aversion, or estrangement. By acting in unity, a conclusion about a particular course of action may be tested and revised as necessary through a process of learning (i.e. on the basis of experience and new findings over time.) Otherwise, 'stubbornness and persistence in one's views will lead ultimately to discord and wrangling, and the truth will remain hidden.'"

These writings also highlight the importance of moderation. But by moderation is not meant "mere compromise, the dilution of truth, or a hypocritical or utopian consensus." Instead, "moderation in deliberation and action stands in contrast to the arbitrary imposition of views through power or insistence upon ideological aims, both of which obstruct the search for truth and sow the seeds of continuing injustice. A moderate perspective is a practical and principled standpoint from which one can recognize and adopt valid and insightful ideas whatever their source, without prejudice."

Moderation also applies to our manner of speech during deliberations: "Human utterance is an essence which aspireth to exert its influence and needeth moderation. … One word is like unto springtime causing the tender saplings of the rose-garden of knowledge to become verdant and flourishing, while another word is even as a deadly poison. It behoveth a prudent man of wisdom to speak with utmost leniency and forbearance so that the sweetness of his words may induce everyone to attain that which befitteth man's station."

By basing our public debates and actions on scientific evidence and spiritual principles, we can effectively address the countless problems afflicting our society and the planet.