

Learning and the Evolution of the Bahá'í Community

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“It is incumbent upon every man of insight and understanding,” Bahá'u'lláh states, “to strive to translate that which hath been written into reality and action.”¹ To be a Bahá'í, to “live the life,” means to comprehend the Word of God and act on it, individually and collectively. It is to make the reality of one's personal life and the pattern of society at large reflect the teachings. Bahá'u'lláh Himself affirms that “the object of every Revelation” is to “effect a transformation in the whole character of mankind, a transformation that shall manifest itself both outwardly and inwardly, that shall affect both its inner life and external conditions.” Otherwise, He observes, “the futility of God's universal Manifestations would be apparent.”²

Collectively, we receive the gift of the Word of God, and through its application we are to raise the Kingdom of God on earth; that is, we are to gradually contribute to the building of a new social order that is shaped by the truths of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh. This statement appears simple, yet implicit in it is a challenge to reflect deeply about how we are to understand and behave. Achieving Bahá'u'lláh's intended purpose for the human race requires new morals, new ways of generating knowledge, new ways of communicating, new ways of acting, and new institutions. How do we Bahá'ís, with our diverse, sometimes conflicting, understandings of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings, collaborate to bring about the society that reflects His will? The answer will have to be found in learning, over time, to better understand the text and translate it into efficacious action consistent with its divine intent.

To expand the Faith, to build Bahá'í communities, to apply the teachings to address social concerns, to educate youth or children, to engage in scholarly study and research or to work in any other area for the progress of the Cause or the advancement of civilization provides opportunities for achieving a balance of study and action in which questions are raised, problems defined, and solutions attempted. By engaging in an ongoing conversation about how to understand the teachings and, simultaneously, an ongoing reflection on action about how to translate these teachings into reality, the Bahá'í world gradually learns how to contribute to the emergence of a civilization that reflects the oneness of humanity. For, on the one hand, the teachings do not provide a recipe for the creation of a new world order, while on the other, there are certain principles, procedures, methods, and processes found in the Revelation must be properly implemented. There is not “one way” to do things, but, at the same time, we cannot indiscriminately support all activities and all methods. There has to be a capacity for determining how one approach

or idea is superior to another so knowledge can advance. A statement written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi gives some insight into this process:

There are practically no technical teachings on economics in the Cause, such as banking, the price system, and others. The Cause is not an economic system, nor can its Founders be considered as having been technical economists. The contribution of the Faith to this subject is essentially indirect, as it consists in the application of spiritual principles to our present-day economic system. Bahá'u'lláh has given us a few basic principles which should guide future Bahá'í economists in establishing such institutions which will adjust the economic relationships of the world.³

What is true of this aspect of the Faith is true for the aims of the Revelation as a whole. Generation after generation of believers will strive to translate the teachings into a new social reality. Through various means of participation in the life of society, Bahá'ís help to contribute to the generation and application of knowledge essential for the advance of civilization. 'Abdu'l-Bahá describes the gradual process of social change in *The Secret of Divine Civilization*:

The world of politics is like the world of man; he is seed at first, and then passes by degrees to the condition of embryo and fetus, acquiring a bone structure, being clothed with flesh, taking on his own special form, until at last he reaches the plane where he can befittingly fulfill the words: “the most excellent of Makers.” Just as this is a requirement of creation and is based on the universal Wisdom, the political world in the same way cannot instantaneously evolve from the nadir of defectiveness to the zenith of rightness and perfection. Rather, qualified individuals must strive by day and by night, using all those means which will conduce to progress, until the government and the people develop along every line from day to day and even from moment to moment.⁴

Learning—consultation, action, and reflection on action in light of divine guidance—over the course of our lives and over the course of the dispensation is the means by which we find our way forward toward Bahá'u'lláh's intended purpose for humanity. To speak of the need for learning is an acknowledgement that we are not perfect, we make mistakes, and we must learn to do things better over time. It is an appreciation that human knowledge is limited, and we must continually strive for a better understanding of the meaning and implications of the Revelation. It is also an acknowledgement that the Faith is organic, our responsibilities will evolve and capacities will develop over time, and we will act at ever higher levels of complexity and achieve greater results in the future. Without learning, our thoughts and actions are trapped in an endless circularity. The challenge is to grasp this learning process and use it to support systematic action—to learn how to learn.

For decades, the Bahá'í world struggled with the problem of sustaining large-scale expansion. In the Four Year Plan, the Universal House of Justice focused attention on

consciously cultivating a capacity for learning about growth, and by the year 2000, observed that it had taken root.

The culture of the Bahá'í community experienced a change. This change is noticeable in the expanded capability, the methodical pattern of functioning and the consequent depth of confidence of the three constituent participants in the Plan—the individual, the institutions and the local community. That is so because the friends concerned themselves more consistently with deepening their knowledge of the divine Teachings and learned much—and this more systematically than before—about how to apply them to promulgating the Cause, to managing their individual and collective activities, and to working with their neighbors. In a word, they entered into a learning mode from which purposeful action was pursued.⁵

The culture of learning that is emerging is characterized by dialogue rather than debate, by constructive experience at the grassroots level rather than elaborate planning from the top, by systematization rather than freneticism, by reflective refinement rather than derogatory criticism. It has proven effective in resolving long standing challenges that paralyzed the progress of the community. This paper will examine the learning process that is driving growth and will explore its implications for other areas of concern to the further development of the Bahá'í world.

Learning and the Growth of the Community

At the start of his ministry, Shoghi Effendi recognized that one of his major areas of responsibility would be to guide the believers to execute, in a more systematic manner, the Divine Plan whose provisions for the worldwide propagation of the Faith were outlined in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Tablets to the Bahá'ís in North America. Initially, however, the means for prosecuting this Plan collectively was absent, and therefore, "It was held in abeyance for well-nigh twenty years while the fabric of an indispensable Administrative Order, designed as a divinely appointed agency for the operation of that Plan, was being constructed."⁶ This first stage in the development of the administration involved a learning process that included education of the believers and the refinement of various procedures and practices pertaining to Local and National Spiritual Assemblies, National Conventions, elections, and the like. Once the prerequisite institutional capacity was in place, Shoghi Effendi called upon national communities to adopt formal teaching plans. "The new hour has struck in [the] history of our beloved Cause," he proclaimed in 1935, "calling for nation-wide, systematic, sustained efforts in [the] teaching field."⁷

An attitude of learning was evident in the earliest efforts to formulate effective approaches to teaching. For example, Shoghi Effendi described meetings to promote world unity as "an experiment to test the efficacy of the indirect method of teaching."⁸ At one point he called for a "highly salutary and spiritually beneficent experiment of encouraging a more active participation by these newly won supporters of the Faith in

Latin America” to be “developed, systematized and placed on a sure and unassailable foundation.”⁹ Over time, certain approaches—such as firesides¹⁰ and pioneering—“proved by experience to be the most effective way”¹¹ and became mainstays of propagation.

Institutions and methods evolved through experience under the direction of the Guardian. Because of the careful education and loving guidance over the course of his ministry, the Bahá’í world was able to launch the first global Plan in 1953, the Ten Year Crusade, which linked the efforts of the twelve existing National Assemblies. As a result of their accumulated experience and capacity, the Bahá’ís were able to accomplish more in that single decade than was achieved in the previous century. More than a hundred countries and territories were opened to the Faith in the first year of that Plan. By the end of the decade, more than forty new National Assemblies were established, thousands of Local Assemblies were formed, and tens of thousands of new believers were enlisted in all parts of the world.

Shoghi Effendi explained that the growth of the Faith would involve three stages, beginning with a “steady flow” of fresh recruits that would be followed by entry by troops and, eventually, mass conversion.¹² Signs of the start of the second stage, marked by the entry of large numbers of new believers, were already evident in some countries in Africa and in Indonesia during the lifetime of the Guardian.¹³ Starting in the late 1950s, and accelerating over the next three decades, campaigns of rapid enrollment unfolded whereby hundreds, thousands, and even tens of thousands entered the Faith quickly in country after country. Membership in several countries surpassed 100,000 believers, while in India, the number of believers surpassed two million.¹⁴ Despite the success in obtaining new enrollments, however, no national community was able to achieve the appropriate balance between expansion and consolidation necessary to sustain the process of entry by troops.

In 1996, Bahá’í communities were, for the most part, small and inwardly directed. In some countries this was the result of the lack of effective teaching, and, in others, the lack of success in deepening the new believers who were enlisted in successive waves of teaching activity. The December 26, 1995 message of the Universal House of Justice that introduced the Four Year Plan “focused the Bahá’í world on a path of intense learning about the sustained, rapid growth of the Faith.” It drew on previous experience, but could only describe “in general terms the nature of the work that would have to be undertaken in meeting the challenges ahead.”¹⁵ By 2006, after a decade of learning, the House of Justice was able to describe a new pattern of action involving a coherent integration of activities for expansion, consolidation, and spiritual upliftment that were mutually reinforcing and which could be readily replicated in other areas. “The elements required for a concerted effort to infuse the diverse regions of the world with the spirit of Bahá’u’lláh’s Revelation,” it stated, “have crystallized into a framework for action that now needs only to be exploited.”¹⁶ “The way forward is clear, and at Ridván 2006 we

will call upon the believers to steel their resolve and to proceed with the full force of their energies on the course that has been so decidedly set.”¹⁷ The problem of sustaining large-scale expansion that stymied the Bahá’í world for almost four decades found a resolution in less than ten years.

The achievements of the Four Year Plan were attributed by the Universal House of Justice to a change in the culture of the Bahá’í community that resulted from a new capacity for learning. Learning drove progress across the entire decade, from the first efforts to establish training institutes at Ridván 1996 to the emergence of intensive programs of growth in certain clusters by Ridván 2006. What was the nature of this learning process? What were some of the specific lessons learned?

At the start of each Plan, and at Ridván and other strategic points during the decade, the Universal House of Justice provided guidance to the Bahá’í world based on its current level of development, summarizing what had been learned and accomplished, and outlining new directions and challenges. The Counsellors gathered several times in the Holy Land to receive guidance on the Plans and to consult on its various aspects. They returned to participate with National Assemblies in consultations on how to implement the guidance. The believers at the cluster level, accompanied by the Counsellors and their Auxiliary Board members, engaged in action to be carried out in a learning mode. As the institute process was established in a cluster, the believers involved acquired the habit of gathering periodically in reflection meetings to study the guidance from the Bahá’í World Centre, consult on the progress of their area, share experiences, analyze the strengths and weaknesses of their efforts, and try to discover more effective approaches. A steady stream of questions flowed to the Bahá’í World Centre, to which the Universal House of Justice would respond with clarifications or additional elucidation. The flow of guidance to all parts of the world resulted in the blossoming of new activity and in a flow of experience and insights from communities around the globe back to the Bahá’í World Centre. As more effective patterns of action emerged, the means for the analysis and diffusion of learned lessons became more structured through the dissemination of various documents prepared by the International Teaching Centre.

Learning about growth did not result in a simple formula for action. Rather, sacrifice and perseverance, critical thought, and constant valuation and revising of methods were required. In clusters where progress may have been stalled by one or more vexing challenges, it was often difficult to appreciate the accelerating movement of advanced clusters that was unmistakable from a global perspective. And invariably, obstacles would arise whenever the friends in a cluster advanced into new, uncharted areas of endeavor. Within a cluster, it was the daily struggle of individuals to grasp the Plan and act on it that drove progress. This was true not only of new believers, but also of long-time members of the community who were used to seeing others carry the responsibility for the work of teaching and deepening.

By the end of the decade, a strong network was established throughout the Bahá'í world as learning emerged in a particular cluster and then flowed to the World Centre and back to nations, regions, and clusters in all parts of the world. While it is impossible to summarize all the lessons learned in the decade from 1996 to 2006, the following examples illustrate how various elements emerged and were combined to shape an integrated pattern of action that has proven its effectiveness in diverse settings worldwide.

- At the start of the Four Year Plan, the House of Justice observed that institutes “must offer courses both at a central location and in the villages and towns so that an appreciable number of believers can enter its programs.”¹⁸ No specific approach was described, however, for offering the courses at a distance. By 1998, as a result of the experience in one area, a practical approach was discovered involving the establishment of study circles, groups of some “six to ten believers in the towns and villages throughout the country, who will go through a series of basic courses together with a tutor.”¹⁹ Because of their proven effectiveness, study circles soon became a feature of institutes worldwide.
- In 2001, the House of Justice made reference to stages of community building and observed that “among the initial goals for every community should be the establishment of study circles, children’s classes, and devotional meetings, open to all the inhabitants of the locality.”²⁰ One year later, as a result of the experience gained by implementing these activities, the House of Justice observed an evolution in these activities that went far beyond what was originally envisioned:

Where a training institute is well established and constantly functioning, three core activities—study circles, devotional meetings, and children’s classes—have multiplied with relative ease. Indeed, the increasing participation of seekers in these activities, at the invitation of their Bahá'í friends, has lent a new dimension to their purposes, consequently effecting new enrollments. Here, surely, is a direction of great promise for the teaching work. These core activities, which at the outset were devised principally to benefit the believers themselves, are naturally becoming portals for entry by troops. By combining study circles, devotional meetings and children’s classes within the framework of clusters, a model of coherence in lines of action has been put in place and is already producing welcome results. Worldwide application of this model, we feel confident, holds immense possibilities for the progress of the Cause in the years ahead.²¹

- The experience with some twenty-five area growth programs in the Twelve Month Plan contributed directly to the specification of propitious conditions for the establishment of intensive programs of growth presented in the Five Year Plan. Yet in 2001, it was not possible to describe the specific nature of an intensive program of growth, but only to clarify some desirable conditions and outline general principles.

“Success will depend on the manner in which lines of action are integrated and on the attitude of learning that is adopted,” the House of Justice wrote. “At the core of the program must lie a sound and steady process of expansion, matched by an equally strong process of human resource development,” it further explained. “A range of teaching efforts needs to be carried out, involving both activities undertaken by the individual and campaigns promoted by the institutions.”²²

By the midpoint of the Plan, the features of the intensive program of growth emerged from experience and, by its end, they could be clearly defined. “Conforming well to the vision we presented five years ago,” the House of Justice explained, such a program “consists of cycles of activity, in general of three months’ duration each, which proceed according to distinct phases of expansion, consolidation, reflection and planning.”²³ “The expansion phase,” the House of Justice added, “often a period of two weeks, demands the highest level of intensity. Its objective is to widen the circle of those interested in the Faith, to find receptive souls and to teach them.”²⁴ Further, it became clear that institute courses should proceed uninterrupted from cycle to cycle because “When human resources increase in a manner proportionate to the rise in the overall Bahá’í population from cycle to cycle, it is possible not only to sustain but to accelerate growth.”²⁵ While, in 2001, it was not possible to describe an intensive program of growth, by the start of the new Plan in 2006 they were well understood and a goal was established to multiply their number to more than 1,500 worldwide.

While these examples provide some insight into the progress made, a number of problems also arose. Mistakes are an inseparable aspect of learning. In the effort to establish a culture of learning, it is difficult to escape the pull of old patterns of behavior. Effective methods to translate the guidance into action often had to be patiently refined over years through perseverance and sacrifice, constant revision and reflection. Challenges emerged not only from the difficulty of the task, but also by the challenges individuals face in acquiring new capabilities.

Some countries struggled for years to have their institute become fully operational and to integrate training with systematic growth. The initial implementation of the sequence of courses and the translation of new skills into action was often wooden and awkward. Out of a desire to apply the guidance “correctly,” there was a tendency in isolated cases to go to extremes. For example, either the institute was to provide all of the educational needs of a country through a wide range of classes, or all other activity was to be stopped so that all could take institute courses. Either everyone was to become a tutor, or a restrictive process for tutor recognition was imposed. Occasionally, individuals who taught children’s classes for years were told they could no longer teach them unless they studied an institute course on child education. Among some of the specific problems that arose were the following:

- Study circles, initially intended as a means to provide institute courses to individuals in their communities proved to be attractive to those who were not Bahá'ís but were interested in studying the teachings. As many of these individuals accepted the Faith, often after studying one or two books, it was realized that study circles could be tools of teaching as well as training. Some mistakenly concluded, however, that Bahá'ís were being told to abandon firesides or other teaching methods and replace them by study circles. To a query on this matter a letter written on behalf of the House of Justice responded:

To call upon the Bahá'í world to focus its energies on a certain set of activities at a particular stage in the unfoldment of the Divine Plan does not in any way diminish the importance of other endeavors. . . . While it is highly desirable to include seekers in study circles wherever possible, the individual believer retains the inescapable duty to teach the Faith on his or her own initiative.²⁶

- Another point of confusion arose when some understood that the new Four Year Plan obliged everyone to participate in institute courses. Individuals who expressed this concern received the following clarification:

It is natural that any given educational program would not appeal to everyone, and clearly participating in the courses of an institute is not a requirement to be fulfilled by all believers. In no way, then, should those who do not wish to take part feel that they are disobeying the directives of the Universal House of Justice. It does ask, however, that everyone, even those not involved, support the institute process and not impede its steady progress.²⁷

- Early in the Five Year Plan, the International Teaching Centre observed that when a sizable number of individuals in a cluster completed the sequence of institute courses, there was a corresponding increase in core activities and a revitalization of the teaching work. In certain clusters, however, the friends, eager to reach these numbers rapidly, left out key elements of the courses, especially those involving the practice of new skills essential to the overall scheme of the process. Concerns arose when growth did not “magically” appear. Guidance to the increasing number of clusters that were determined to move ahead soon incorporated this lesson, as conveyed in the following statement by the International Teaching Centre:

In some areas, the eagerness of the believers and institutions to achieve certain targets in the institute process has led them to eliminate portions of the courses, particularly the practice components, which are an essential aspect of training. If the friends are never able to apply the skills they are learning, they will not become effective in carrying out the tasks of expansion and consolidation. It has become clear that to move quickly through the training does not mean reducing the number of hours spent on a course; it means completing the same course and its practices in their entirety, but in a shorter period of time—perhaps days instead of weeks or weeks instead of months. A balanced approach is needed that avoids the potential pitfalls of rapid training

that fails to cultivate skills and multiply activities, or endless training to achieve capacities that would be developed more fully through practical experience.²⁸

In order to understand these challenges, it is useful to reflect upon the learning process. Researchers Hubert and Stuart Dreyfus have suggested that individuals pass through five distinct stages from novice to expert when acquiring skills. This holds true whether the skill is technical, such as building a house, or intellectual, such as analyzing a text.²⁹ Each stage represents a distinct set of behaviors that are distinguishable in qualitative and recognizable ways from the other levels of performance. Without endorsing this theory, it may be useful to consider the characteristics of these stages and how an individual passes from one stage to the next in order to obtain a better understanding of the relationship between learning and experience.

At the novice stage an effort is initially made to present the student with a collection of specific elements, including facts, rules, procedures, and circumstances in which the skill is applied. Consider the example of learning how to drive a car with a manual transmission. The novice is given a number of facts, rules, and behaviors: a description of the pattern of shifting the gears to various levels; an explanation of when to shift gears as the engine reaches a particular level of performance; a demonstration of how to move the hands and feet to coordinate the interaction of the gear shift and clutch. In the first attempts to shift gears in a car, the novice consciously juggles the various aspects of the information learned while trying to coordinate different movements. It is not uncommon for the car to lurch violently or stall. Again and again the novice repeats the pattern, evaluating a performance based on whether the facts and rules are appropriately recalled and applied. At first, there is simply too much new information to remember and process for a satisfactory result to be achieved. Performance is awkward and mechanical. But with each experience, there is a better understanding of the information and rules presented, and the driver passes through the stages of learning by discriminating and getting the “feel” for effective action. Concepts initially ignored or misunderstood become clear. After continual practice and accumulation of experience, knowledge, and action become integrated into a coordinated pattern without the need to remember context-independent facts and rules. At an expert level, the driver seamlessly integrates shifting gears into other aspects of driving practice, and can even simultaneously juggle other tasks like eating or talking on a cell phone.

Learning skills for advancing the process of entry by troops in various countries appear to have followed similar stages. Understandably, when new capabilities and new practices are being acquired, mistakes will be made and performance will begin poorly. Attempts to follow so much new guidance without error sometimes leads to strict rules and rigid applications, and the process is somewhat mechanical. However, through perseverance and growing experience, understanding and effectiveness gradually appear. Over time, individuals and institutions become active participants in their own learning.

In country after country, the institute has become a center of learning about how the process of entry by troops can unfold in the region it serves.

The examples of learning about growth in the decade from 1996 to 2006 indicate that the process is well established. Yet, potential achievements and additional challenges remain for the current and future Plans. In the second year of the Five Year Plan from 2006–2011, for example, great strides were made in the expansion of the Faith through and increase in direct teaching among reception populations, the use of resource persons, and the dissemination of learning from cluster to cluster. A new pattern of action emerged that could begin simply even in the least developed clusters and unfold organically, allowing these areas to achieve in months what had previously taken years in other places. These achievements in turn produced new questions and challenges, such as how to ensure the balance between expansion and consolidation in clusters with very rapid enrollments, determining when and where a door-to-door approach to teaching is appropriate, and learning about the next stages of community development in clusters with large numbers of new believers.

Coherence and a Greater Involvement with Society

After the passing of the Guardian the unfoldment of the Divine Plan continued with a series of global plans conducted under the auspices of the Universal House of Justice. Each plan has built on the objectives and achievements of the previous ones, demanding increasing maturity and new levels of capacity for complex action. Each brought into focus specific elements related to growth and development. For example, the Nine Year Plan (1964–73) included the objectives of vast expansion and universal participation. The Five Year Plan (1974–79) maintained these goals and added an emphasis on the strengthening of assemblies and community life. The Seven Year Plan (1979–86) added the focus on a greater involvement in the life of society, including projects for social and economic development. In the Six Year Plan (1986–92), the responsibility for creating national plans devolved onto the National Spiritual Assemblies and the Counselors, while the Three Year Plan (1993–96) introduced a triple theme—enhancing the vitality of the faith of individual believers, developing human resources, and fostering the proper functioning of institutions.

Through this entire period, new capacities emerged and were developed. It became increasingly evident, however, that communities struggled to integrate these activities into a coherent pattern of action that could contribute to systematic progress. Some communities, despite their formation through successful teaching campaigns, were never consolidated. Others saw the emergence of sound assemblies and regular activities, yet these were too often pursued in a fragmented manner as a result of limited human resources. A burst of growth of more than one million believers over a period of two years during the Six Year Plan placed this problem into clear perspective. At that time, the House of Justice stated,

Since change, ever more rapid change, is a constant characteristic of life at this time, and since our growth, size and external relations demand much of us, our community must be ready to adapt. In a sense this means that the community must become more adept at accommodating a wide range of actions without losing concentration on the primary objectives of teaching, namely, expansion and consolidation. A unity in diversity of actions is called for, a condition in which different individuals will concentrate on different activities, appreciating the salutary effect of the aggregate on the growth and development of the Faith, because each person cannot do everything and all persons cannot do the same thing. This understanding is important to the maturity which, by the many demands being made upon it, the community is being forced to attain.³⁰

By 2006, after focused attention and a decade of learning, a coherent and sustainable pattern of growth finally emerged. It combined teaching—direct and indirect, individual and collective—with the ability to develop human resources among the new and veteran believers and foster a pattern of community life open to the wider society. The House of Justice observed the impact not only on the quantitative growth of the community, but also on its qualitative development:

On several occasions we have made reference to the coherence that is brought to the process of growth through the establishment of study circles, devotional meetings and children’s classes. The steady multiplication of core activities, propelled by the training institute, creates a sustainable pattern of expansion and consolidation that is at once structured and organic. As seekers join these activities and declare their faith, individual and collective teaching endeavors gather momentum. Through the effort made to ensure that a percentage of the new believers enroll in the institute courses, the pool of human resources required to carry out the work of the Faith swells. When strenuously pursued in a cluster, all of this activity eventually brings about conditions favorable for launching an intensive program of growth.

What a close examination of clusters at this threshold confirms is that the coherence thus achieved extends to various aspects of community life. The study and application of the teachings become a pervasive habit, and the spirit of communal worship generated by devotional meetings begins to permeate the community’s collective endeavors. A graceful integration of the arts into diverse activities enhances the surge of energy that mobilizes the believers. Classes for the spiritual education of children and junior youth serve to strengthen the roots of the Faith in the local population. Even an act of service as simple as visiting the home of a new believer, whether in a village in the Pacific Islands or in a vast metropolitan area like London, reinforces ties of fellowship that bind the members of the community together. Conceived as a means for exposing believers to the fundamentals of the Faith, “home visits” are giving rise to an array of deepening efforts, both individual and collective, in which the friends are delving into the Writings and exploring their implications for their lives.³¹

Looking into the future, the continuing progress of the Faith in the clusters will depend upon learning how to further develop Bahá'í community life, to strengthen Local Spiritual Assemblies, and to address the needs of a growing body of believers and the wider community. The coherence evident in the diverse teaching activities must extend to include Bahá'í efforts to contribute to the advancement of civilization. As the House of Justice stated in its 2008 Ridván message,

As you continue to labour in your clusters, you will be drawn further and further into the life of the society around you and will be challenged to extend the process of systematic learning in which you are engaged to encompass a growing range of human endeavours. In the approaches you take, the methods you adopt, and the instruments you employ, you will need to achieve the same degree of coherence that characterizes the pattern of growth presently under way.³²

The community's capacity for learning, systematization, and integration in a coherent pattern of action that was so carefully cultivated in the area of its growth must, therefore, gradually be extended to participation in activities for social transformation that is the purpose of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation. Given the magnitude of the change ahead and the scope of human suffering today, the current efforts of the Bahá'í community are but a mere drop. For a period of time, Bahá'í influence on the social order will obviously be limited. Yet, at least three areas of activity can be immediately identified. Bahá'ís contribute through their work and professions to the generation and application of knowledge in various disciplines. We contribute to the social and economic development of our communities by carrying out specific projects that benefit the general population in their immediate surroundings. And we also participate in humanity's collective discourse, encouraging action according to insights provided by Bahá'í teachings. Over time, as the Faith grows in size, capacity and experience, its direct role in promoting human welfare will no doubt become increasingly significant.

Engaging in Diverse Fields of Human Endeavor

Bahá'ís are called to engage in all fields of endeavor that are of benefit to humanity. In referring to the arts, crafts and sciences, Bahá'u'lláh states: "Knowledge is as wings to man's life and a ladder for his ascent. Its acquisition is incumbent upon everyone."³³ "Let the loved ones of God," 'Abdu'l-Bahá urges, "whether young or old, whether male or female, each according to his capabilities, bestir themselves and spare no efforts to acquire the various current branches of knowledge, both spiritual and secular, and of the arts."³⁴ And in another passage He states: "Make every effort to acquire the advanced knowledge of the day, and strain every nerve to carry forward the divine civilization. . . . Included must be promotion of the arts, the discovery of new wonders, the expansion of trade, and the development of industry."³⁵ Shoghi Effendi assigned to Local Assemblies the responsibility to encourage the believers "to make detailed inquiry into the various

branches of contemporary learning—arts and sciences alike—and to concentrate their attention on serving the general interests of the people.”³⁶

The obligation to acquire and apply knowledge to serve humanity and contribute to an ever-advancing civilization applies to all believers without exception. Those with particular capacity for achievement in various disciplines of human knowledge are called to a higher level of action. As a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice explains:

As the Bahá’í community grows it will acquire experts in numerous fields—both by Bahá’ís becoming experts and by experts becoming Bahá’ís. As these experts bring their knowledge and skill to the service of the community and, even more, as they transform their various disciplines by bringing to bear upon them the light of the Divine Teachings, problem after problem now disrupting society will be answered. . . .

In time great Bahá’í institutions of learning, great international and national projects for the betterment of human life will be inaugurated and flourish.³⁷

Bahá’í Involvement in Social and Economic Development

Social and economic development is an aspect of the consolidation of Bahá’í communities. For more than a century after the birth of the Faith, the number of believers was too small and communities too weak for Bahá’ís to be systematically engaged in development activities anywhere outside of Iran. In its message of October 20, 1983, the House of Justice explained that “the community of the Greatest Name has grown to the stage at which the processes of [social and economic] development must be incorporated into its regular pursuits.” Action was particularly “compelled by the expansion of the Faith in Third World countries where the vast majority of its adherents reside.”³⁸

After the first quarter century of systematic development activity, there are several thousand social and economic development activities conducted by Bahá’ís in more than one hundred countries. They span such diverse domains as agriculture, education, microenterprise, governance, environment, vocational training, technology, rural development, literacy, health, race unity, children’s rights, youth empowerment, and the advancement of women. The vast majority of these are fairly simple activities of limited duration in which Bahá’ís in villages and towns around the world are beginning to address the challenges facing their localities. Over 550 are sustained projects, many with permanent administrative structures, while some 50 organizations have evolved to the point where they have relatively complex programmatic structures and significant spheres of influence.³⁹ A global process of learning is already underway, guided by the Office of Social and Economic Development at the Bahá’í World Centre. Focus is centered on building institutional capacity to enable the people of a region to become the protagonists of their own progress, and consolidating the experience of these institutions and disseminating it effectively to other communities. The systematization of experience

currently involves a few areas such as junior youth empowerment, primary health education, community banking, and primary and secondary education. Despite promising indications from various parts of the world, the potential to be derived from the integration of teaching and development activities is as yet unrealized.

Contributing to Humanity's Collective Discourse

A third aspect of the contributions Bahá'ís make to the civilization-building process is through participation in humanity's collective discourse on the challenges and opportunities facing the world. This occurs at all levels of society, but more particularly through efforts to reach leaders of thought. Such participation includes individual Bahá'ís who contribute as experts in their fields, or through their involvement in governmental or nongovernmental organization, as well as Bahá'í-inspired initiatives. It also involves the direct contributions of Bahá'í institutions, especially through the Bahá'í International Community at the United Nations.

For example, as the number of Bahá'í social and economic development organizations and their body of experience has increased, the Bahá'í world has been able to expand its involvement in the global discourse on development. One channel has been the publications of individual Bahá'ís who are experts in related fields. The Universal House of Justice notes that “As the friends gain experience in social and economic development, and as they advance in their studies of various branches of learning or in their professional fields, individuals arise in every continent who have expertise in some aspect of development work.”⁴⁰ Another channel is the establishment of the Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity at the Bahá'í World Centre. As its first initiative, the Institute launched a program to promote a discourse on science, religion, and development. The activities of the program began in India with a colloquium held in New Delhi in November 2000 that brought together more than a hundred representatives of nongovernmental organizations from all regions of the country. The warm reception by individuals and agencies in India to this gathering has prompted steps to promote similar efforts in Africa and Latin America. Yet another way in which Bahá'ís attempt to contribute to humanity's discourse for the betterment of the world is through external affairs activities, in interaction with governments, nongovernmental organization, and leaders of thought, particularly in such areas as human rights, the status of women, global prosperity, and moral development. This involves participation in various events and the preparation of publications on diverse issues.

In the same way that much has been achieved through the learning that created a coherent pattern of activities for expansion and consolidation, so too, will the capacity of the Bahá'í community to fulfill its purpose be more fully realized when we learn to integrate the teaching work with a range of activities pertaining to a greater involvement in the life of society. Up to this point, our involvement in social action, external affairs and scholarly and professional activities have been pursued in a parallel fashion to the

teaching work. As these are increasingly integrated, they will have an impact on Bahá'í identity as well as providing a clearer perspective on the Faith to the wider society. Drawing from the insights provided by the teachings and reinforced by the growing experiences of Bahá'ís working in a range of endeavors, institutions and individuals will engage others and increasingly contribute to the collective search for constructive solutions to human problems that marks the advancement of civilization.

The Nature of Bahá'í Intellectual Activity

With an appreciation of the challenge of learning to translate the Bahá'í teachings into action to create a new social order, and with an understanding of the need to strengthen and gradually integrate diverse lines of action including community growth and development, administration, social action and social and economic development, and external affairs, the potential contribution of learned Bahá'ís becomes evident. It is essential for individuals with knowledge and capacity to contribute to all of these areas. And, of course, every believer has the obligation to teach the Faith. Scholarly activity, whether Bahá'í studies particularly or the participation of Bahá'ís in any field of human endeavor, may legitimately be seen, in this context, as another line of action that is progressing as part of the Divine Plan parallel to the main focus of its current stage. In time, based on the demands of growth and progress, it will be increasingly be integrated with these other areas.

In the past, when some questioned whether Bahá'í activities for social and economic development contributed directly to the teaching work, the House of Justice explained: “Social and economic development is an important area of activity in and of itself. Its justification should not be sought in its ability to produce enrollments; it complements teaching and also contributes to it.”⁴¹ In the same way, Bahá'í scholarly activity is valid in its own right; it does not have to be reduced to particular tasks directly associated with advancing the process of entry by troops in the Five Year Plan in order to justify its important contribution. Thus, works of apologetics, exploration of a range of topics in Bahá'í studies, or correlation of insights from the teachings with the concerns of various disciplines are part of the ongoing work of learned Bahá'ís beyond any potential contribution to the current Plan, to social action, to administration, or to external affairs.

Bahá'u'lláh and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, as well as the Guardian and the Universal House of Justice, leave no room for doubt regarding the essential value of Bahá'í intellectual activity. No romantic notions, no appeal to mystical insight, nor any apposite principles associated with obedience, unity, or spirituality can call into question the attainments of the mind and the vital role of the truly learned in this dispensation.

“The man of consummate learning and the sage endowed with penetrating wisdom are the two eyes to the body of mankind,”⁴² Bahá'u'lláh states. “There are certain pillars which have been established as the unshakeable supports of the Faith of God,” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains. “The mightiest of these is learning and the use of the mind, the expansion

of consciousness, and insight into the realities of the universe and the hidden mysteries of Almighty God. To promote knowledge is thus an inescapable duty imposed on every one of the friends of God.”⁴³

Shoghi Effendi urges the Bahá’ís “to accord honor, veneration and respect to—and endorse the efforts of—exponents of the arts and sciences, and to esteem and revere those who are possessed of extensive knowledge and scholarly erudition.”⁴⁴ And the Universal House of Justice observes that Bahá’ís have been “encouraged from the time of the Faith’s inception to pursue knowledge in all its forms and to excel in such attainments”⁴⁵ and it “regards Bahá’í scholarship as of great potential importance for the development and consolidation of the Bahá’í community as it emerges from obscurity.”⁴⁶

Such emphatic and repeated authoritative statements should be sufficient to ensure that the body of the believers and the national and local institutions do not succumb to a reactionary anti-intellectualism or superstitious spiritualism that have corrupted religious practice in past dispensations. Nor should the sincere efforts of those who labor in scholarly disciplines—and who as human beings will inevitably err—be confused with the actions of a handful of “unwise or malicious”⁴⁷ individuals, who, immovably attached to their own views, attempt to impose them on the community.

Guarded by humility, by a deep and thoughtful appreciation of the mutable and limited nature of their views, and by the obligation to be firm in the Covenant and preserve unity, those who engage in Bahá’í scholarly activity explore new perspectives, examine aspects of the community’s understanding and practices, and propose promising avenues for a fuller expression of the potentialities latent in Bahá’u’lláh’s Revelation. As participants in all fields of human endeavor, they bring insights from sciences and the Bahá’í teachings to bear upon various questions, thereby contributing to the evolution of thought and action that leads to social transformation and well-being. When attitude and method are sound, errors and false starts are nothing more than natural occurrences in the process of the investigation of reality. A variety of metaphors help clarify the role of a learned Bahá’í in contributing to the progress of the Bahá’í community.

The learned Bahá’í is not a “gatekeeper” or “priest.” While the effective work of trained, knowledgeable, and insightful individuals shed light on the context and meaning of the writings in many ways, the community of believers is not dependent upon a body of specialists in order to understand the meaning of the text. The Word of God is accessible to all believers, according to their capacity. The experience of the community derived from practice, the growing understanding of the implications and meaning of the text over time, and above all, the guidance of the Universal House of Justice contribute to shaping both the believers’ understanding as well as the perspective and direction of scholarly activity.

The learned Bahá’í is not an “anthropologist” of the Bahá’í community. The purpose of Bahá’í scholarship is not merely to explain the community at a moment in history and present the resulting picture as its reality. Bahá’ís recognize that, at any point, the

community is far from that which Bahá'u'lláh has envisioned. It is “less Bahá'í” now than what it will become in future.

The learned Bahá'í is not an “archeologist.” The “true” meaning of the Faith is not lost somewhere in the past, to be recaptured by excavating layers of erroneous interpretation and practice. Such an approach is especially problematic if it is used to justify a search for the meaning of the Faith in Bahá'u'lláh's writings alone, while ignoring the role of the authoritative institutions He established to guide His Faith.

The learned Bahá'í is not an “artist” who is free to shape the teachings according to some criteria of personal choice or creativity. The teachings of Bahá'u'lláh have an intended meaning and an intended aim. Unity—even unity in diversity—emerges by seeking out and conforming to this meaning. One cannot select, rearrange, or craft from the teachings, according to subjective standards, a particular narrative or design. If such an approach were pursued, the Faith would become nothing more than an individual or cultural adornment.

The learned Bahá'í is not an “impartial observer.” The resolution of important questions requires more than the application of methods of the natural sciences. It is not possible to stand apart from the community to study it without influencing it or being influenced by it.

Perhaps the learned Bahá'í is more like the “scout” who helps to guide an expedition on a journey into unexplored territory. This is someone who participates actively in the journey, but whose specialized knowledge, skills, and experience informs various aspects of the struggle to make progress: constructive perspectives into the past, present, and future; insight and technical capacity for ongoing study of the text; problem posing and problem solving; the defining of culture and intercultural relations. On this journey, the learned individual/scout does not have authority, and, while making a vital contribution, like any other participant is fallible and learns over time.

Moving Beyond Perceived Tensions Between Science and Religion

As Bahá'ís strive to contribute to the advancement of civilization, they draw upon the insights provided by the study of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings as well as study of the diverse disciplines of human knowledge. For Bahá'ís, science and religion are not in conflict. Nor are they simply incommensurate, exploring in different ways different domains that are mutually exclusive. The Bahá'í teachings offer an approach to reality that encompasses a scientific worldview but is more comprehensive, addressing a wider range of questions that are essential to human progress.⁴⁸ The efforts of learned Bahá'ís to find an appropriate engagement between religion and science, however, can never be reduced to scholasticism or scientism.

Insights from religion cannot be thrust arbitrarily into the discourse of a particular discipline. It would be unacceptable and completely unconvincing to a scientist, for example, if a quotation from 'Abdu'l-Bahá were used in an attempt to overturn scientific

understanding of biological evolution while justifying nonscientific concepts such as intelligent design which are, in fact, theological or philosophical in nature. Whatever the source of inspiration, a hypothesis must be tested according to the scientific methods and standards, producing change that can be articulated and justified within the domain of science.

So too, insights from various disciplines cannot be arbitrarily imposed on the understanding and practice of the Bahá'í community. A particular tool of scholarly inquiry, for example, such as historical criticism,⁴⁹ may be very useful in shedding light on aspects of the teachings. Yet, the scope of the validity of such tools is a topic of discussion even within academia. While they may have value to Bahá'ís engaged in scholarly study of the Faith, they cannot be blindly accepted as instruments that yield “scientific truth” and used to justify propositions that overturn explicit Bahá'í concepts presented in the authoritative texts.⁵⁰ The assumptions and methods of various fields are subject to debate, investigation, evaluation, and continual refinement in ways that are inherent to scientific and rational inquiry.

Therefore, even though science and religion are not fundamentally in conflict, tensions or ambiguity may sometimes arise for individual Bahá'ís between their involvement in study and action as believers, and their engagement in a professional discipline, particularly scientific or scholarly inquiry. How are such tensions resolved?

In the book *Our Practices, Our Selves: Or, What it Means to be Human*, Todd May introduces the concept of a “practice,” which he describes as “a regularity (or regularities) of behavior, usually goal-directed, that is socially normatively governed.”⁵¹ According to May, practices constitute a large part of what it means to be a human being. Examples of practices include using credit cards, raising children, engaging in a profession, or participating in politics. Communities and even cultures can be understood as practices, such as scientists, church-goers, or members of the legal profession. In these cases, shared participation in a community says something meaningful about the participant’s personal identity.

May explains that “To be committed to a practice . . . is to be committed to enough of the claims, findings, and theories of that practice—and particularly its ‘central’ claims, findings, theories, and so on—as to be reasonably seen as being committed to it.”⁵² Thus, each practice has its own body of knowledge, its own criteria for justification, and its own methods of investigating reality and discovering truth. Different practices may interact and, through the exchange of ideas, influence one another; but change occurs as a result of a practice affirming new conclusions based on its own criteria. An individual is usually a member of more than one community of practice, and therefore, is able to contribute to change within a particular practice by introducing new insights from others. Different practices are, however, not relativistic groupings free to occupy distinct realms each with their “own” truth, since insights are ultimately checked against reality and must, over time, yield to it. An individual is confronted, therefore, by the tensions that

come from the competing truth claims and standards found within the various practices that are embraced.

Bahá'ís participate in a wide range of practices besides membership in the Bahá'í community. This is natural. In so doing, we bring insights from Bahá'u'lláh's teachings to those practices and influence them—within the range of the internally accepted standards of that practice. And we can gain insights from these practices and bring them into the Bahá'í community—to the degree that they are acceptable within the range of internal standards of the Bahá'í teachings.

Perhaps any perceived tension in Bahá'í efforts to introduce principles and insights from the teachings into the various disciplines of human knowledge may be alleviated by explicitly acknowledging that believers are engaged in more than one community of practice. Bahá'í scholarship, as described by the Central Figures of the Faith and the Universal House of Justice, is an internal function of the Bahá'í community of practice; it is not the academic study of the Bahá'í Faith. It is open to all believers according to their capacity, not just Bahá'í academics. It serves the purposes of the Faith. It has its standards of rationality and justification, and its own growing body of knowledge. These are derived from the Bahá'í writings as well as from validated elements drawn from the wide range of other practices in which Bahá'ís engage, including the natural sciences, the social sciences, and the humanities. An academic who is a Bahá'í can, of course, participate in this internal scholarly activity and simultaneously be a member of an academic community of practice.

Disciplines such as economics, philosophy, history or religious studies give rise to their own communities of practice. They have their own bodies of knowledge, standards, and methods with which they explore reality and come to understandings that guide judgment and action. Bahá'ís who are participants in such academic communities of practice are correct to point out that they are obliged to conform to the accepted range of methods, criteria, and truths. Otherwise, they would never be taken seriously and their arguments would have no influence. There is also a need to acknowledge, however, that academic practices do evolve and that Bahá'ís can contribute to that evolution. Within any academic field there is inevitably a range of voices, theories, and approaches, some of which are closer to Bahá'í teachings than others; Bahá'í students and practitioners within a discipline can seek out and build upon compatible approaches. Yet, change within a practice—even revolutionary change—takes place according to its own standards and web of belief, not because ideas are imposed from the outside.

How is it possible to work within two practices that sometimes have divergent assumptions or standards—in particular, the practice of a religion and the practice of the academic study of religion that cannot take into account metaphysical influences? What is a Bahá'í to do? Moojan Momen, in the article “Methodology in Bahá'í Studies,” reviews a range of options, including an “interior scholarship” that would take place within the Bahá'í community alone using a “faith-based, revelation-centered

methodology,” and an “external scholarship,” an involvement with the academic world that may require suspending the Bahá’í viewpoint on reality or focusing on areas that are more compatible with Bahá’í principles. He concludes with his own preference: “writing material that satisfies both the academic community and the believing community.”⁵³ Writing in such a manner that is acceptable to the standards of reasonable individuals within both practices seems to resolve the dilemma in most cases.

A problem arises, however, when demands of the two practices cannot be reconciled. Todd May suggests three possible outcomes. First, it is possible to live with ambiguity, anticipating resolution at a future time. Ambiguity is inherent in scientific inquiry; to find it in the engagement between science and religion is, therefore, unsurprising. Reality is one, but our practices, being fallible, involve insights into reality that evolve to become more robust. This is true also of our practice of the Faith, since “practice” in this respect is concerned with the capacity of the believers to understand and act on Bahá’u’lláh’s teachings, not with Bahá’u’lláh’s capacity or the nature of His Revelation. An entire lifetime may pass—perhaps many lifetimes—before certain questions can be resolved. A second possible outcome is that the understandings from one practice help to shape the other in a manner that eliminates an apparent contradiction. Again, reciprocity is required, in that either practice can influence the other—not by imposing outside standards but by introducing influence or new insights that provoke change from within. If insights from science or other disciplines cause a change in the Bahá’í community, this is a change in the perception of the believers that draws them closer to Bahá’u’lláh’s intended meaning and purpose. A final possibility is that an individual, unable to reconcile the two practices and unwilling to tolerate ambiguity, will reject and withdraw from one of the practices. In various statements, the Universal House of Justice has acknowledged all three of these alternatives.⁵⁴

It is not reasonable to assume, however, that an individual who is committed to the investigation of reality and the search for truth and who is involved in both practices, would participate in one while ignoring what has been accepted as true within the other. This is just another face of extreme relativism.⁵⁵ It implies living within separate, contradictory worlds, fully embracing each on its own terms without regard for the conflicts and inconsistencies such a life engenders. Far more reasonable, albeit more difficult at times, is to acknowledge the possibility of conclusions that could be reached within religious worldviews, identify discrepancies, and use them as starting points for gaining deeper insights into reality. Thus a Bahá’í historian, for example, may not be able to introduce into the discipline the argument that divine forces influence events; this concept can be set aside while other forces are being examined. Yet a believer’s assumptions, arguments, and conclusions cannot be identical with those that result from an entirely materialistic worldview, a view that implicitly demands that all historians be materialists while hiding such demand in its apparently innocent requirement that the scholar totally ignore his or her faith when engaged in rational inquiry.

When an individual sees participation in formal processes of the generation and application of knowledge in two or more communities of practice as complementary, the contribution to both acquires special value. The practice of the Bahá'í community is still in an early formative stage. Bahá'í scholarly activity is part of Bahá'í practice and therefore adheres to its methods and standards, including for example its own hermeneutical principles. While it is true that the Revelation does not change, our understanding of the Revelation does change, and therefore the application of the knowledge, methods, and standards of Bahá'í practice evolve throughout the dispensation. Learned Bahá'ís who are members of other communities of practice—historians, sociologists, lawyers, biologists, political scientists, anthropologists, philosophers, educators and so on—can draw upon the insights gained in their fields and propose ideas and methods that are valuable in understanding the teachings and in translating them into action. Those in accord with the Bahá'í community's understanding of the inviolable tenets of the Faith will, in one way or another, be adopted. The progress thus achieved creates more capacity in the Bahá'í community to undertake scholarly activity. This in turn makes it possible for an increasing number of individuals to participate meaningfully in the many fields of human activity and contribute to the generation of knowledge indispensable for the advancement of civilization.

The scholarly activity carried out within the Bahá'í community of practice requires consciousness of the difference between studying the Faith as an object, and collaborating in the movement toward its aims and purpose within the framework of the Covenant. Bahá'ís endowed with intellectual capacity direct their energies toward the transformative aims of the Faith. The teachings of God are intended for the masses of humanity; the goal is a new race of human beings and a world order that reflects the oneness of humanity. The learned followers of Bahá'u'lláh stand with the peoples of the world and are protagonists serving the forces of change toward justice and unity.

Bahá'í scholarly activity is vital to the progress of the Faith and its engagement with the wider society. The fruits, however, will only be abundantly realized as the culture of learning that is beginning to emerge in the fields of teaching and development also takes root in such efforts. Any tensions that obstruct such pursuits have to give way to a community of inquirers using sound hermeneutical principles; involved in consultation, action, and reflection; conscious of their role and influence as an integral part of the Bahá'í community and in the other practices in which they participate; imbued with qualities, attitudes, and behaviors shaped by the teachings; and operating in harmony with the teachings of the Faith and the guidance of the Universal House of Justice. This culture of learning will be characterized by error and achievement and by periods of ambiguity or of consensus punctuated by valuable new insights. In a culture of learning, Bahá'í academic specialists will find personal fulfillment in their chosen discipline and will contribute their share to the progress of the Cause and of society. The possessor of knowledge has great promise, but also great responsibility. Bahá'u'lláh states:

Know thou that he is truly learned who hath acknowledged My Revelation, and drunk from the Ocean of My knowledge, and soared in the atmosphere of My love, and cast away all else besides Me, and taken firm hold on that which hath been sent down from the Kingdom of My wondrous utterance. He, verily, is even as an eye unto mankind, and as the spirit of life unto the body of all creation. Glorified be the All-Merciful Who hath enlightened him, and caused him to arise and serve His great and mighty Cause.⁵⁶

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1. Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh Revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, comp. Research Dept. of the Universal House of Justice, trans. Habib Taherzadeh et. al (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1988), p. 166.
 2. Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Íqán*, Shoghi Effendi, trans. (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1974), p. 241.
 3. On behalf of Shoghi Effendi, in Helen Hornby, comp., *Lights of Guidance: A Bahá'í Reference File*, (New Delhi: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1996), p. 551. A very similar statement is made about Bahá'í education in a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, in *Centers of Bahá'í Learning*, no. 92.)
 4. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Secret of Divine Civilization* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1990), pp. 107–8.
 5. The Universal House of Justice, *Turning Point: Selected Messages of the Universal House of Justice and Supplementary Materials, 1996–2006* (West Palm Beach: Palabra Publications, 2006), p. 125.
 6. Shoghi Effendi, *Citadel of Faith: Messages to America, 1947–1957* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1965), p. 32.
 7. Shoghi Effendi, *Messages to America: Selected Letters and Cablegrams Addressed to the Bahá'ís of North America, 1932–1946* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Committee, 1947), pp. 5–6.
 8. Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1991), p. 9.
 9. Shoghi Effendi, *Citadel of Faith*, p. 76.
 10. “. . . it has been found over the entire world that the most effective method of teaching the Faith is the fireside meeting in the home. . . . This method is far more effective than advertising in newspapers, public lectures etc. The Guardian is encouraging the believers over the world, including those on the home fronts, to engage in this method of teaching.” (On behalf of Shoghi Effendi, in *Lights of Guidance*, p. 248.)
 11. “Those believers who have the means, and also the capacity to teach, should be encouraged, no matter how great the sacrifice involved, to settle in these virgin territories, until such time as a local assembly has been constituted, or at least a group of firm believers formed that can safely and gradually evolve into a firmly-organized and properly-functioning local assembly. This policy of teaching by settlement which the Guardian has also advised and indeed urged the American believers to adopt has been proved by experience to be the most effective way of establishing the Faith in new territories, and he therefore confidently recommends it for adoption by your Assembly.” On behalf of Shoghi Effendi, *Dawn of a New Day* (New Delhi: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, n.d.), p 76.
 12. Shoghi Effendi, *Citadel of Faith*, p. 116.
 13. Shoghi Effendi, *Messages to the Bahá'í World 1950–1957* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1958), p. 113. See also *ibid.*, p. 48.
 14. Bahá'í World Centre, *The Six Year Plan 1986–1992: Summary of Achievements* (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1993), p. 20.
 15. The Universal House of Justice, *Turning Point*, p. 195.
 16. *Ibid.*, p. 195.
 17. *Ibid.*, p. 196
 18. *Ibid.*, p. 8.

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19. Ibid., p. 333.
 20. Ibid., pp. 146.
 21. Ibid., p. 172.
 22. Ibid., p. 146.
 23. Ibid., pp. 203–4.
 24. Ibid., p. 204.
 25. Ibid., p. 206.
 26. On behalf of the Universal House of Justice, message dated February 17, 2004.
 27. The Universal House of Justice, *Turning Point*, p. 260.
 28. The International Teaching Centre, message to all Continental Counselors, November 28, 2004.
 29. Hubert and Stuart Dreyfus, in Bent Flyvbjerg, *Making Social Science Matter: Why Social Inquiry Fails and How It Can Succeed*, trans. Steven Sampson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp.10–20.
 30. The Universal House of Justice, *A Wider Horizon: Selected Messages of the Universal House of Justice 1983–1992*, comp. Paul Lample (West Palm Beach: Palabra Publications, 1992), pp. 79–80.
 31. The Universal House of Justice, *Turning Point*, p. 199.
 32. The Universal House of Justice, Ridván letter 2008.
 33. Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas: The Most Holy Book* (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1992), p. 39.
 34. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, in “Bahá'í Education,” *The Compilation of Compilations*, vol. 1 (Maryborough, Victoria: Bahá'í Publications Australia, 1991), p. 253.
 35. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, in “The Arts,” *ibid.*, p. 6.
 36. Shoghi Effendi, in “Scholarship,” *The Compilation of Compilations*, vol. 2 (Maryborough, Victoria: Bahá'í Publications Australia, 1991), p. 34.
 37. On behalf of the Universal House of Justice, *Messages from the Universal House of Justice 1963–1986: The Third Epoch of the Formative Age*, Geoffrey W. Marks, comp. (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1996), p. 225.
 38. The Universal House of Justice, *Messages 1963–1986*, p. 602.
 39. Examples of these projects at all levels of complexity can be found in *For the Betterment of the World*, in the *Bahá'í World* volumes, in *One Country* newsletter and Web site <http://www.onecountry.org> and at the Bahá'í World Web Site, <http://www.bahai.org>.
 40. The Universal House of Justice, *Readings on Bahá'í Social and Economic Development* (West Palm Beach: Palabra Publications, 2000), p. 92.
 41. The Universal House of Justice, memorandum to the Office of Social and Economic Development, April 27, 1998.
 42. Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 171.
 43. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, comp. Research Dept. of the Universal House of Justice, trans. Marzieh Gail et. al (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1997), p. 97.
 44. Shoghi Effendi, *Compilation of Compilations*, vol. 3 (Ingleside, NSW: Bahá'í Publications Australia, 2001), p. 236.
 45. On behalf of the Universal House of Justice, *Issues Related to the Study of the Bahá'í Faith* (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1992), p. 35.
 46. On behalf of the Universal House of Justice, in “Scholarship,” *The Compilation of Compilations*, vol. 3, p. 241.
 47. On behalf of the Universal House of Justice, *Issues Related to the Study of the Bahá'í Faith*, p. 25.
 48. For a further consideration of the relationship between science and religion from a Bahá'í perspective, see Farzam Arbab, “Promoting a Discourse on Science, Religion, and Development,” in Sharon M. P.

Harper, ed., *The Lab, The Temple, and the Market: Reflections at the Intersections of Science, Religion, and Development* (Ottawa: International Research Development Centre, 2000), pp. 149–51.

49. See for example John S. Hatcher, “The Validity and Value of an Historical-Critical Approach to the Revealed Works of Bahá’u’lláh,” in Moojan Momen, ed., *Scripture and Revelation*, Bahá’í Studies Volume 3 (Oxford: George Ronald, 1997).
50. In this context, it is crucial for Bahá’ís who commit themselves to the study and mastery of any field to keep in mind that a fundamental characteristic of any discipline is that it provides a particular perspective on reality—it does not describe reality itself. The level of abstraction incorporated in a discipline often becomes forgotten by those experts who are totally immersed within it. This can lead to strange errors when trying to apply the lessons from the discipline back into the real world or when engaging the insights of other disciplines. For a more detailed exploration of this problem, see the discussion of “the fallacy of misplaced concreteness” in *For the Common Good: Redirecting the Economy toward Community, the Environment, and a Sustainable Future* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), by Herman Daly and John and Clifford Cobb, which explores the abstractions made in the field of economics, and how the field has rigidly structured the thinking of economists and their approaches to the problems of the world, often blinding them to obvious truths.
51. Todd May, *Our Practices, Our Selves: Or, What it Means to be Human* (University Park, Penn.: Penn State Press, 2001), p. 8. See chapter 6 for a more detailed exploration of May’s concept of “practices.”
52. *ibid.*, pp. 100–1.
53. Moojan Momen, “Methodology in Bahá’í Studies,” in *Bahá’í Studies Review* 10 (2001/2002), p. 80.
54. “In past dispensations many errors arose because the believers in God’s Revelation were overanxious to encompass the Divine Message within the framework of their limited understanding, to define doctrines where definition was beyond their power, to explain mysteries which only the wisdom and experience of a later age would make comprehensible, to argue that something was true because it appeared desirable and necessary. Such compromises with essential truth, such intellectual pride, we must scrupulously avoid.” (The Universal House of Justice, *Messages 1963–1986*, p. 87)
“With regard to the harmony of science and religion, the Writings of the Central Figures and the commentaries of the Guardian make abundantly clear that the task of humanity, including the Bahá’í community that serves as the “leaven” within it, is to create a global civilization which embodies both the spiritual and material dimensions of existence. The nature and scope of such a civilization are still beyond anything the present generation can conceive. The prosecution of this vast enterprise will depend on a progressive interaction between the truths and principles of religion and the discoveries and insights of scientific inquiry. This entails living with ambiguities as a natural and inescapable feature of the process of exploring reality.” (On behalf of the Universal House of Justice, letter to an individual, June 19, 1995.)
“Bahá’u’lláh has given certain teachings which Bahá’ís believe to be true; they offer these teachings to the rest of mankind. Whosoever accepts them is a Bahá’í, but everyone is free to reject them. No one is ever compelled to become a Bahá’í, nor is anyone compelled to remain a Bahá’í. If one has accepted the Bahá’í Faith and later concludes that one has made a mistake, one is free to withdraw, and no stigma is attached to such an action. In all such things Bahá’ís uphold Bahá’u’lláh’s principle of independent investigation of truth. (The Universal House of Justice, letter to an individual, May 1, 1991.)
55. A relativistic approach to practices is rejected. (See Todd May, *Our Practices, Our Selves*, pp. 125–35). Searle’s argument about truth and correspondence to reality is also relevant. (John R. Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality* [New York: Free Press, 1997], pp. 149–76.) Searle affirms that “all true statements about the world can be consistently affirmed together.” Thus, he rejects the perspective of conceptual relativism that we can describe the world in different ways that may contradict one another, and yet each of these perspectives is “true” in themselves. This position assumes that the same statement could be true of the world in one conceptual system but false in another. A standard example proposes the different representations of Aristotelian physics vs. Newtonian physics or the Mercator projection of the earth’s surface vs. a standard globe. On the Mercator projection, Greenland is larger than Brazil, while on the globe, Greenland is a smaller area than Brazil. This difference is not a result of incommensurate realities, Searle explains, but results from the fact that some models or

representations are mistaken or distort reality more than others. While we are “always confronted with the problems of vagueness, indeterminacy, family resemblance, open texture, contextual dependency, the incommensurability of theories, ambiguity, the idealization involved in theory construction, alternative interpretations, the underdetermination of theory by evidence, and all the rest of it,” nevertheless, “these are features of our systems of representation, not of the representation-independent reality.” Once statements from different representational systems are reconciled with one another, if they cannot be consistently affirmed together, they cannot all be true.

56. Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp. 207–8.