

# Toward a Framework for Action<sup>1</sup>

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## *Abstract*

For nearly four decades, the Association for Bahá'í Studies in North America has labored to promote Bahá'í scholarly activity through a range of efforts that include encouraging young believers in their study of the Revelation and their academic pursuits, fostering approaches to assist the friends in correlating the teachings with issues arising in contemporary thought, and providing a forum for Bahá'í academics to present their work and collaborate with one another. A letter dated 24 July 2013, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of Canada, set forth fresh insights to assist the Association in reflecting on its progress to date and its prospects for the future, centered around developing the "notion of an evolving conceptual framework." The following are some personal thoughts about the nature of such a framework and what some of its elements might be.

## *Résumé*

Pendant près de quarante ans, l'Association d'études bahá'íes en Amérique du Nord a cherché à promouvoir l'érudition bahá'íe par la tenue d'activités diverses

visant à encourager les jeunes croyants à s'engager dans l'étude de la Révélation et à réaliser des travaux académiques y faisant référence, à stimuler chez les amis leur capacité de mettre en corrélation les enseignements bahá'ís et le discours sur les enjeux contemporains, ainsi qu'à offrir aux universitaires bahá'ís une tribune pour y présenter leurs travaux et collaborer entre eux. Une lettre datée du 24 juillet 2013 écrite au nom de la Maison universelle de justice et adressée à l'Assemblée spirituelle nationale du Canada énonçait des idées nouvelles visant à aider l'Association à se pencher sur les progrès accomplis et sur ses perspectives d'avenir et mettait l'accent sur la « notion d'un cadre conceptuel évolutif ». L'auteur présente ici ses réflexions personnelles à ce sujet.

## *Resumen*

Por casi cuatro décadas, la Asociación de Estudios Bahá'ís en Norte America ha laborado para promover actividad escolar Bahá'í a través de un rango de esfuerzos que incluyen animar a creyentes jóvenes en su estudio de la Revelación y en sus intereses académicos, fomentando enfoques para asistir a los amigos en correlacionar las enseñanzas con temas que nacen del pensamiento contemporáneo, y proveyendo un foro para los académicos bahá'ís donde pueden presentar su trabajo y colaborar los unos con los otros. Una carta con fecha del 24 de julio de 2013, escrita de parte de la Casa Universal de Justicia para la Asamblea Espiritual Nacional de Canadá, expuso nuevas ideas para ayudar a la Asociación reflexionar sobre su progreso hasta la fecha y sus prospectos para el futuro, centrado alrededor del desarrollo de la "noción de un marco conceptual en evolución". Los siguientes puntos son algunos pensamientos personales sobre este tema.

1 This article is based on the plenary talk by the same title presented at the 38th Annual Conference of the Association for Bahá'í Studies, Toronto, Ontario, August 2014.

## THE CONCEPT OF A FRAMEWORK

At the start of his ministry, Shoghi Effendi focused the attention of the friends on the importance of building the administrative order. For some, at that time, the very notion that the Bahá'í Faith could be organized—instead of merely being a movement or a reflection of the spirit of the age—was a challenge. A few consciously resisted the administration, eventually falling away or opposing the Faith. However, even the generality of the faithful believers, who accepted without question Shoghi Effendi's guidance, naturally struggled at this early stage to understand and appropriately apply the teachings concerning the administration. Among the issues that challenged them were the relationships between the Assemblies and individuals, between the National and Local Assemblies, and between the National Assembly and the National Convention. The Bahá'í electoral process needed to be conceived, grasped, and translated into an effective pattern of action. Understanding the nature and method of Bahá'í consultation and the importance of upholding the decision of the Assembly, even when that decision was wrong, or at least when perceived by some to be wrong, presented additional challenges.

It can be inferred from guidance provided by Shoghi Effendi that on occasion, owing to a lack of understanding or experience, a member of an institution might have used his or her position to achieve personal aims

or impose personal perspectives, and community members sometimes ignored the Assembly's decision when it did not conform to their preferences. At other times, in response to particular issues that arose, the friends might have set aside the guidance provided in the Writings and simply taken sides and argued. Again and again, when these and similar challenges arose, Shoghi Effendi reminded the believers of the importance of their unity, which was grounded in their common love for Bahá'u'lláh, and indicated that the resolution of their problems rested on putting into practice the principles of the administration. A letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi states:

One of the main reasons why the Faith does not advance more rapidly is because the friends have not learned to live with, and work within the framework of the Administrative Order. Either they crystallize it into too set a form, or they rebel against what they feel to be a System, and do not give it sufficient support. Both of these extremes impede the progress of the Faith, and the efficiency of the believers. (qtd. in Hornby 185)

In order to overcome the dichotomy of reducing the administration to a rigid set of procedures or rejecting it outright, Shoghi Effendi introduced the concept of a framework.<sup>2</sup> This

<sup>2</sup> Shoghi Effendi used the word framework in relation to the administration both in terms of its meaning as the basic

concept is useful because the nature of Bahá'í efforts for administration are too big, too broad, and too organic to crystallize it into a fixed form, but the system is essential and cannot be set aside. The concept of a framework allows for evolution in understanding as the set of ideas within the framework, as well as how they are perceived, change over time based on experience and circumstances. Thus, what Shoghi Effendi originally said about Bahá'í administration was elaborated over the course of his ministry, and more has been added since the establishment of the Universal House of Justice. Some concepts and practices of the administration are permanent, some are temporary, and some are contextual. Even principles—which are unchanging—may be applied differently in different circumstances or at different times. In this sense, a framework should not be

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pattern of the institutions of the administrative order (for example, “the framework of His Administrative Order has been erected” [*World Order* 168]) and as the conceptual structure underlying the administrative system (for example, “One of the main reasons why the Faith does not advance more rapidly is because the friends have not learned to live with, and work within the framework of the Administrative Order,” which is “a system both living and dynamic” that requires “obedience to its principles and regulations” so as to “be able to direct their energies as a united force into the different channels of service that lie open to them” [*Light of Divine Guidance* 1:185–86]).

understood as a particular lens for the study of the Revelation, which is too vast to be restricted in this way; rather, it is a construct for being able to focus on learning how to translate the Bahá'í teachings into action in a particular area.

For example, the process of large-scale expansion of the Faith began during the Ten Year Crusade (1953–1963) in the final years of the life of Shoghi Effendi. However, for some forty years, the ability to sustain and extend the process on a systematic basis, maintaining the necessary balance between expansion and consolidation, remained elusive. To resolve this problem, the Universal House of Justice set forth the provisions of the Four Year Plan (1996–2000).<sup>3</sup> As these efforts

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3 “At Ridván 1996, the Bahá'ís of the world will embark on a global enterprise aimed at one major accomplishment: a significant advance in the process of entry by troops. This is to be achieved through marked progress in the activity and development of the individual believer, of the institutions, and of the local community. That an advance in this process depends on the progress of all three of these intimately connected participants is abundantly clear. The next four years must witness a dramatic upsurge in effective teaching activities undertaken at the initiative of the individual. Thousands upon thousands of believers will need to be aided to express the vitality of their faith through constancy in teaching the Cause and by supporting the plans of their institutions and the endeavors of their communities.

continued to evolve within the Five Year Plan (2001–2006), it was helpful to begin to conceive of a framework for action pertaining to the work of growth and community-building, which has gradually evolved in complexity through experience to guide the work of the series of Five Year Plans through the end of the first century of the Formative Age. As the Universal House of Justice explains:

Over the past four and a half years, as the believers throughout the world have striven to pursue the aim of advancing the process

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They should be helped to realize that their efforts will be sustained by the degree to which their inner life and private character ‘mirror forth in their manifold aspects the splendor of those eternal principles proclaimed by Bahá’u’lláh.’ An acceleration in the tempo of individual teaching must necessarily be complemented by a multiplication in the number of regional and local teaching projects. To this end the institutions should be assisted in increasing their ability to consult according to Bahá’í principles, to unify the friends in a common vision, and to use their talents in service to the Cause. Furthermore, those who enter the Faith must be integrated into vibrant local communities, characterized by tolerance and love and guided by a strong sense of purpose and collective will, environments in which the capacities of all components—men, women, youth and children—are developed and their powers multiplied in unified action” (Universal House of Justice, *Messages* 213:2).

of entry by troops, it has become increasingly clear that the close of the present Five Year Plan will mark a decisive moment in the unfoldment of the historical enterprise on which the community of the Greatest Name is embarked. The elements required for a concerted effort to infuse the diverse regions of the world with the spirit of Bahá’u’lláh’s Revelation have crystallized into a framework for action that now needs only to be exploited. (*Turning Point* 35:2)

There is no need here to provide an overview of the elements of this framework, which have been set out and elaborated in numerous messages of the House of Justice since 1996 and with which the community is generally familiar. However, another example can be found in the experience of Bahá’ís over some three decades in the field of social and economic development. In a paper published in 2012, the Office of Social and Economic Development writes:

Achieving progressively higher degrees of coherence both within and among the broad interconnected fields of endeavour in which the Bahá’í community is engaged is clearly a vital concern. It suggests that areas of activity are to be complementary, integrated, and mutually supportive. Further, it implies the existence of a common, overarching framework

that gives shape to activities and which evolves and becomes more elaborate as experience accumulates. The expression of the divers elements of the framework will not, of course, be uniform in all spheres of action. In relation to any given area of activity, some elements move to the fore, while others act only in the background . . . .

Among the elements most relevant to social action are statements that define the character of progress—that civilization has both a material and a spiritual dimension, that humanity is on the threshold of its collective maturity, that there are destructive and constructive forces operating in the world which serve to propel humanity along the path towards its full maturity, that the relationships necessary to sustain society must be recast in the light of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation, that the transformation required must occur simultaneously within human consciousness and the structure of social institutions. . . .

Other elements that speak to the nature of social action are derived from a particular perspective on the role of knowledge in the development of society. The complementarity of science and religion, the imperative of spiritual and material education, the influence of values inherent to technology on the organization of society, and the relevance of

appropriate technology to social progress are among the issues involved. Views related to the generation and application of knowledge have implications not only for the nature of development but also for the question of methodology. . . . [Y]et another set of elements of the framework [are] . . . those statements that analyze concepts such as individualism, power, authority, personal comfort, selfless service, work, and excellence.

Finally, at the heart of the conceptual framework for social action lie elements that describe beliefs about fundamental issues of existence, such as the nature of the human being, the purpose of life, the oneness of humanity, and the equality of men and women. While for Bahá'ís these touch on immutable convictions, they are not static—the way in which they are understood and find expression in various contexts evolves over time. (“Social Action” 3–4)

It is evident, from these examples, that the idea of a “framework” has nothing to do with a narrow imposition of methods or formulaic procedures, but is intended to provide an evolving, shared understanding of beliefs, concepts, methods, practices, vision and approaches relevant to advancing work in the particular arena of endeavor at hand. The Universal House of Justice addresses this concept of a framework in relation to the

work of the Association for Bahá'í Studies and calls for a continuing clarification of its elements in its letter of July 24, 2013, to the National Assembly of Canada:

Every believer has the opportunity to examine the forces operating in society and introduce relevant aspects of the teachings within the discourses prevalent in whatever social space he or she is present. It is, perhaps, as a means to enhance the abilities of the friends to explore such opportunities in relation to their scholarly interests that the endeavours of the Association for Bahá'í Studies can be conceived. Through the specialized settings it creates, the Association can promote learning among a wide range of believers across a wide range of disciplines. Central to the effort to advance the work of expansion and consolidation, social action, and the involvement in the discourses of society is the notion of an evolving conceptual framework, a matrix that organizes thought and gives shape to activities and which becomes more elaborate as experience accumulates. It would be fruitful if the elements of this framework most relevant to the work of the Associations for Bahá'í Studies can be consciously and progressively clarified. (letter dated 24 July 2013)

This is not to say, of course, that it is necessary to restart such considerations about the work of the Association from the beginning. Just as the framework pertaining to the work of expansion and consolidation drew upon insights and experience that predated the Four Year Plan, there is a significant legacy pertaining to Bahá'í scholarly activity and the work of the Association from the 1970s until now. Many thoughtful books, articles, and presentations have been prepared by believers intensely concerned with the intellectual life of the community over the course of these decades, and many of them are immediately relevant to such considerations. And it is not the purpose of this discussion to provide an extensive exploration of such issues but rather simply to touch upon a few concepts specifically mentioned in the letter from the House of Justice that contribute to clarifying relevant aspects of a framework that can help shape the efforts of the Association in fostering the intellectual life of the Bahá'í community. Furthermore, the ideas offered here are the personal opinions of one individual.

#### LEARNING AND THE VITAL CONTRIBUTION OF LEARNED INDIVIDUALS

Before examining at some length a few concepts that come to the fore when considering progress in the intellectual life of the community, two important points must be mentioned first. Because they are addressed at some

length elsewhere, only a brief mention is made here.<sup>4</sup>

First, as in the other areas of endeavor in which the Bahá'í community is engaged, learning—an ongoing process involving study, consultation, action, and reflection—is a critical component of a framework for action pertaining to the work of the Association for Bahá'í Studies in order to gradually but systematically grow in the ability to cultivate the intellectual life of the community and the capacity of succeeding generations of young believers to participate in this process. “Perhaps the most important” of the elements of a framework most relevant to the work of the Associations for Bahá'í Studies “is learning in action,” the House of Justice explains. In this way, “the friends participate in an ongoing process of action, reflection, study, and consultation in order to address obstacles and share successes, re-examine and revise strategies and methods, and systematize and improve efforts over time” (letter dated 24 July 2013).

Much scholarly work is, of course, an individual enterprise. But even in such instances, the aim is not the mere expression of personal opinions. There is also an explicitly collective dimension to such endeavor, in which individuals collaborate in the exchange of views for the investigation of reality, the search for truth,

and the generation of knowledge. Therefore, it is useful to consider the extent to which this work, involving potentially a wide range of methods and approaches, can be systematized among groups of individuals or within the Association itself. The Universal House of Justice raises a number of possibilities as starting points for inquiry:

As unity of thought around essential concepts emerges, the Association may find it useful to explore fresh approaches with some simple steps that can grow in complexity. Gradually, those aspects of the conceptual framework pertaining to intellectual inquiry in diverse fields will become clearer and grow richer. For example, a number of small seminars could be held to assist individuals from certain professions or academic disciplines to examine some aspect of the discourse of their field. Specific topics could be selected, and a group of participants with experience could share articles, prepare papers, and consult on contemporary perspectives and related Bahá'í concepts. Special interest groups, such as philosophy or religious studies, could have gatherings to intensify their efforts. Periodic communications or follow-up meetings could be arranged to increase the effectiveness of the participation of these groups of individuals in aspects of the discourse in their

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4 See Paul Lample, *Revelation and Social Reality: Learning How to Translate What Is Written into Reality and Action*, chapter 4.

chosen fields. Focus could also be directed toward those areas in the academic literature pertaining to the Faith that are ignored or dealt with in a misleading or problematic manner. In addition, existing activities, such as the hosting of a large conference, may be reimagined. Of course, continued exertions must be directed toward preparing and disseminating articles, periodicals, and books. (letter dated 24 July 2013)

Second, the Bahá'í Writings are quite explicit in describing the importance of the mind, the acquisition of knowledge, and the contribution that learned individuals, with expertise in diverse fields of human endeavor, will need to make toward achieving the aims of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation. 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains:

There are certain pillars which have been established as the unshakeable supports of the Faith of God. 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. (*Selections* 126)

Shoghi Effendi urges the friends "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" (qtd. in *Compilation* 348). He envisioned that the friends in fields of human inquiry, such as economics and education, would have to learn over time to translate the teachings into constructive action for the betterment of the world.<sup>5</sup> Contributions can be made in all disciplines of human endeavor, including, but not limited to, the Faith as an object of study, whether through rigorous examination of the Texts or through closely associated disciplines such as translation, history, philosophy, theology, or Middle Eastern studies. These contributions will include, of course, rigorous and thoughtful scholarship of a high standard in an academic sense, although such efforts, owing to a degree of specialization and skill, will not involve all. In general, however, Shoghi Effendi sets forth a wide definition for such scholarly endeavor, emphasizing the sense in which Bahá'ís are engaged with the world:

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<sup>5</sup> See "Economics" in *The Light of Guidance*, p. 626 and "Education" in *Compilation of Compilations*, vol. 1, p. 35. A letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi dated 29 November 1938 states: "as we all know that the powers released by the Manifestation of Bahá'u'lláh in this day are destined in the course of time to reveal themselves through the instrumentality of His followers, and in every conceivable field of human endeavour."



The Cause needs more Bahá'í scholars, people who not only are devoted to it and believe in it and are anxious to tell others about it, but also who have a deep grasp of the Teachings and their significance, and who can correlate its beliefs with the current thoughts and problems of the people of the world.

The Cause has the remedy for all the world's ills. The reason why more people don't accept it is because the Bahá'ís are not always capable of presenting it to them in a way that meets the immediate needs of their minds. (qtd. in *Compilation* 431)

To this conception, a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice adds:

At this early stage in the development of the Faith, it would not be useful to propound a highly restrictive definition of the term "Bahá'í scholarship". In a letter written on behalf of the House of Justice to one of the Associations for Bahá'í Studies recently, it is stated that:

The House of Justice advises you not to attempt to define too narrowly the form that Bahá'í scholarship should take, or the approach that scholars should adopt. Rather should you strive to develop within your Association respect for a wide range of approaches and endeavors. No doubt there

will be some Bahá'ís who will wish to work in isolation, while others will desire consultation and collaboration with those having similar interests. Your aim should be to promote an atmosphere of mutual respect and tolerance within which will be included scholars whose principal interest is in theological issues as well as those scholars whose interests lie in relating the insights provided by the Bahá'í teachings to contemporary thought in the arts and sciences.

A similar diversity should characterize the endeavors pursued by Bahá'í scholars, accommodating their interests and skills as well as the needs of the Faith. The course of world events, the development of new trends of thought and the extension of the teaching work all tend to highlight attractive and beneficial areas to which Bahá'í scholars might well direct their attention. Likewise, the expansion of the activities of the Bahá'í International Community in its relationship with United Nations agencies and other international bodies creates attractive opportunities for scholars to make a direct and highly valued contribution to the enhancement of the prestige of the Faith and to its proclamation within an influential and receptive stratum of society. As the Bahá'í community continues to emerge inexorably from obscurity, it will be confronted by enemies, from both within and

without, whose aim will be to malign and misrepresent its principles, so that its admirers might be disillusioned and the faith of its adherents might be shaken; Bahá'í scholars have a vital role to play in the defence of the Faith through their contribution to anticipatory measures and their response to defamatory accusations levelled against the Faith.

Thus, there should be room within the scope of Bahá'í scholarship to accommodate not only those who are interested in theological issues and in the historical origins of the Faith, but also those who are interested in relating the Bahá'í teachings to their field of academic or professional interest, as well as those believers who may lack formal academic qualifications but who have, through their perceptive study of the teachings, acquired insights which are of interest to others. (letter dated 19 October 1993)

#### THE NATURE OF THE QUEST FOR KNOWLEDGE

“One of the critical aspects of a conceptual framework that will require careful attention in the years ahead,” the House of Justice indicated with regard to the work of the Association, “is the generation and application of knowledge” (letter dated 24 July 2013). The human capacity to know—including both powers and limitations—as well as the importance and means

for investigating reality, are matters examined in some detail in the Bahá'í Writings. If thoughtful Bahá'ís are to carry out adequately their responsibility to translate what has been written by Bahá'u'lláh into practical and effective action to achieve His purpose, there must be a way to achieve unity of thought within the community on many issues so that the friends are not pulled in contradictory directions by claims from the diverse fields of human endeavor about what is true or what must be done.

The idiosyncracies of human thought and the understanding of reality are explored by journalist Will Storr in his book *The Unpersuadables: Conversations with the Enemies of Science*, which contains interviews with individuals who are immersed in worldviews that appear to stand in sharp contrast to scientific truth. Storr observes the tendency of human beings to construct a particular view of reality and then cling tenaciously to that view despite evidence to the contrary.

I consider—as everyone surely does—that my opinions are the correct ones. And yet, I have never met anyone whose *every single thought* I agree with. When you take these two positions together, they become a way of saying, ‘Nobody is as right about as many things as me.’ And that cannot be true. Because to accept that would be to confer upon myself a God-like status. It would mean that I possess a superpower: a clarity of

thought that is unique among humans. Okay, fine. So I accept that I am wrong about things—I *must* be wrong about them. A lot of them. But when I look back over my shoulder and I double-check what I think about religion and politics and science and all the rest of it . . . well, I know I am right about that . . . and that . . . and that and that and—it is usually at this point that I start to feel strange. I know that I am not right about everything, and yet I am simultaneously convinced that I am. . . . And I think it is true to say that it is not just me—that is, we all secretly believe we are right about everything and, by extension, we are all wrong. . . .

I have watched as these personal battles have manifested in the wider world. The decade of terrorism we have just lived through had its roots, of course, in mismatched beliefs that are both political and religious. Those same years saw what has the appearance of an increasing suspicion of science. The white-coated priests of the laboratory, to whom we have granted custody of the truth for so long, are seemingly being treated with growing levels of doubt. We don't trust the MMR jab, we don't trust climate data, we don't trust genetically modified wheat or 'conventional' medicine or supermarket-bought beef. One response has been the cultural rise of the radicalized

rationalists: celebrity atheists who have written bestselling books and sponsored anti-God advertising on the sides of London buses; groups of self-declared 'Skeptics' who toured sold-out concert venues like rock stars, defining themselves in opposition to the kind of anti-scientific thinking that they declared dangerous. Every one of these people, convinced they are right. None of them convincing the other. (7–8)<sup>6</sup>

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6 The problem and limitations of the human capacity to know and describe reality is, of course, a central concern of philosophy, especially contemporary discussions on the philosophy of mind. For example, in *The View from Nowhere*, the philosopher Thomas Nagel explores the question of knowledge and concludes that human beings cannot fully resolve the tension between objective and subjective understanding. He observes: "First, we are finite beings, and even if each of us possesses a large dormant capacity for objective self-transcendence, our knowledge of the world will always be fragmentary, however much we extend it. Second, since the objective self, though it can escape the human perspective, is still as short-lived as we are, we must assume that its best efforts will soon be superseded. Third, the understanding of the world of which we are intrinsically capable—leaving aside limitations of time and technology—is also likely limited. . . . [R]eality probably extends beyond what we can conceive of. Finally, the development of richer and more powerful objective hypotheses does

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Storr finds that the tendency to hold to a fixed view—considering oneself to be right and others wrong—is not only a characteristic of those maintaining unscientific or irrational views, but also of those who claim to be the champions of rationality. As he notes, such inflexible attitudes are becoming prevalent in the discourse within contemporary society. In the United States, as but one example, there is a hardening of viewpoints evident in areas such as media and politics, resulting in polarization and dismissiveness that make it almost impossible to carry out a constructive dialogue on concerns vital to social order and well-being—that is, the attempt to understand reality in the face of differing views in order to find consensus in a search for solutions to humanity's problems. Increasingly in today's world, civility has diminished. Arrogance is mistaken for leadership. Self-righteousness supplants righteousness. Hypocrisy abounds. And there is insistence on the correctness of one's views even when they fly in the face of objective evidence. Indeed, in some quarters there is a systematic effort to undermine science, diminish education, or exercise power to bend the perception of reality to serve a particular agenda. "Every one of these people, convinced they are right," as Storr states. "None of them convincing the other" (8).

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nothing to rule out the known and unknown skeptical possibilities which are the other aspect of any realist view" (86).

It should come as no surprise to Bahá'ís that the disintegration of the old world order described so vividly by Shoghi Effendi consists, to a large extent, in an inability of humanity to find agreement about the way things are and about what should be done. "Though the world is encompassed with misery and distress, yet no man hath paused to reflect what the cause or source of that may be," Bahá'u'lláh states. "No two men can be found who may be said to be outwardly and inwardly united. The evidences of discord and malice are apparent everywhere, though all were made for harmony and union" (*Gleanings* 112:1). The question, then, becomes how are we to resist such forces and not fall prey to the all too human tendency to insist that one's personal understanding is correct and take sides and fight it out? And how can we avoid absorbing from the wider society tendencies and habits that stand in marked contrast to the principles and methods identified in the Bahá'í teachings for the search for truth, the investigation of reality, the attainment of unity of thought and action, and the constructive resolution of the ills of humanity?

As Bahá'ís, we study the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh—whether at a basic or perhaps at a profound and systematic level—and we strive to understand His teachings and His purpose for humanity. In coming to grips with the nature of the limitations of the human mind, however, we would have to conclude that there must be some difference between what we personally understand

and what Bahá'u'lláh intends—even if at the moment we do not see what that difference might be. And although we strive to understand more, some gap will always remain; the entire dispensation will be the collective effort of the believers and humanity in general to understand more accurately and more deeply what Bahá'u'lláh said and to translate it ever more effectively into action. Humility is necessary, then, to acknowledge this fundamental gap when sharing personal understanding about the meaning of the teachings and the admonishments and safeguards set forth by Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and Shoghi Effendi that preserve their integrity and prevent any individual from imposing personal interpretations upon the community.

For example, as a result of what individual believers personally understand Bahá'u'lláh's teachings to mean, a community may move beyond disagreement and diversity of views to fall into disunity and contention. As noted above, Shoghi Effendi observed the tendency of the friends either to crystallize the administration into a set form or else to rebel against it and fail to give it sufficient support. Some years ago, tensions arose among some concerning the categorization of believers as liberals or fundamentalists, despite the Guardian's explicit prohibition about the use of such destructive terms. More recently, difficulties arose in some localities about aspects of the prosecution of the Divine Plan. These, and other such examples, commonly emerge from a sense that our

own understanding of the teachings are correct and thus, those of others are wrong. Yet the Writings are filled with advice and admonitions that remind us of the limitations of the mind and the attitudes that must prevail in the search for truth.

The Great Being saith: Human utterance is an essence which aspireth to exert its influence and needeth moderation. As to its influence, this is conditional upon refinement which in turn is dependent upon hearts which are detached and pure. As to its moderation, this hath to be combined with tact and wisdom as prescribed in the Holy Scriptures and Tablets. (Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets* 198)

Every word is endowed with a spirit, therefore the speaker or expounder should carefully deliver his words at the appropriate time and place, for the impression which each word maketh is clearly evident and perceptible. The Great Being saith: One word may be likened unto fire, another unto light, and the influence which both exert is manifest in the world. Therefore an enlightened man of wisdom should primarily speak with words as mild as milk, that the children of men may be nurtured and edified thereby and may attain the ultimate goal of human existence which is the station of true understanding and nobility. (Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets* 172–73)

And as a fundamental aspect of the process of consultation 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains:

They must then proceed with the utmost devotion, courtesy, dignity, care and moderation to express their views. They must in every matter search out the truth and not insist upon their own opinion, for stubbornness and persistence in one's views will lead ultimately to discord and wrangling and the truth will remain hidden. (*Selections* 88)<sup>7</sup>

To assist mature human beings in their collective investigation of reality and search for truth, Bahá'u'lláh not only extolled the methods of scientific inquiry, but emphasized the method of consultation. Of course, many problems or interesting questions

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7 'Abdu'l-Bahá similarly comments: "Consequently, it has become evident that the four criteria or standards of judgment by which the human mind reaches its conclusions are faulty and inaccurate" (*Promulgation* 255). Furthermore, He writes: "In accordance with the divine teachings in this glorious dispensation we should not belittle anyone and call him ignorant, saying: 'You know not, but I know'. Rather, we should look upon others with respect, and when attempting to explain and demonstrate, we should speak as if we are investigating the truth, saying: 'Here these things are before us. Let us investigate to determine where and in what form the truth can be found'" (*Selections* 30).

in various fields of inquiry do not readily lead to conclusions, but it must be remembered that consultation, as described by Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá, does not pertain merely to the decision-making processes of a Local Assembly. "Take ye counsel together in all matters," Bahá'u'lláh states, "inasmuch as consultation is the lamp of guidance which leadeth the way, and is the bestower of understanding" (*Tablets* 168). He adds, "Consultation bestoweth greater awareness and transmuteth conjecture into certitude. It is a shining light which, in a dark world, leadeth the way and guideth. For everything there is and will continue to be a station of perfection and maturity. The maturity of the gift of understanding is made manifest through consultation" (qtd. in *Compilation* 1:93). Consultation establishes a free exchange of differing views in a common search for truth, setting aside destructive, but regrettably all too common, worldly practices such as distorting or belittling the opinion of others, stubbornly insisting upon personal views and ad hominem attacks—all of which lead to discord and wrangling and cause the truth to remain hidden.

For Bahá'ís, the quest for knowledge is not something that begins and ends in words. Knowledge and action are intimately entwined. There is no knowledge of God without deeds faithful to the prescriptions of His Revelation. Ideas, even those that touch upon the abstract or the metaphysical, have implications for human behavior. "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," Bahá'u'lláh states. "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" (*Tablets* 175). "Knowledge is not enough," 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains in one of His talks, "we must also work and study to bring to maturity the fruit of knowledge" (*Abdu'l-Bahá in London* 39). Thus, thought must be tested in action and both revised in light of outcomes until an efficacious result is achieved.

The quest for knowledge, and the assessment of its implications for action, may in some cases involve investigation into a particular question over many years or even generations; yet systematic progress can be made through a process of learning centered on consultation, including reflection on action. Such consultation is an instrument with broad implications whose value for the collective search for understanding is as yet largely unexplored. The problem of human understanding and the importance of discursive methods has not escaped the notice of contemporary philosophers; the conversive mode of investigation for the Bahá'í community has been touched upon by a number of Bahá'í writers and is at the heart of the process that drives the progress of stages of the Divine Plan.

All these points, of course, do not mean that in the search for truth, there is no place for critical thought, powerful arguments, or the initial clash of differing opinions, which is an inherent part of the consultative process. Indeed, on many issues, whether conceptual or practical, there is room for a range of personal views that never have to be reconciled with those of others. Individuals do not have to agree about everything. On those subjects where truth or collective action is the aim, however, contention, interminable wrangling, or immovable insistence on one's personal views are formidable and debilitating obstacles.

#### SHARING PERSONAL OPINIONS

Another point that is fundamental to a conceptual framework and that informs the intellectual life of the Bahá'í community is that there is a wide scope for individuals to hold and express personal views. 'Abdu'l-Bahá states: "When freedom of conscience, liberty of thought and right of speech prevail—that is to say, when every man according to his own idealization may give expression to his beliefs—development and growth are inevitable" (*Promulgation* 197). "He does not ask us to follow Him blindly," a letter written on behalf of the Guardian states; "as He says in one of His Tablets, God has endowed man with a mind to operate as a torchlight and guide him to the truth" (qtd. in Hornby 552). And as a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice explains:

The interpretations of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and the Guardian are divinely-guided statements of what the Word of God means and as such these interpretations are binding on the friends. However, the existence of authoritative interpretations in no way precludes the individual from engaging in his own study of the teachings and thereby arriving at his own interpretation or understanding. Indeed, Bahá'u'lláh invites the believers to "immerse" themselves in the "ocean" of His "words", that they "may unravel its secrets, and discover all the pearls of wisdom that lie hid in its depths." (letter dated 9 March 1987)

Given the limitations of the human mind, it is obvious that such expressions of personal views invariably include ideas that are partially, and sometimes perhaps even largely, incorrect. This awareness is fundamental to the relationships of individuals, the community, and the institutions as we engage in the investigation of reality and the generation and application of knowledge as guided by the Revelation and with the aim of the transformation of society. As discussed above, every individual will naturally feel that his or her ideas about the Faith are correct—and he or she may share them with personal conviction and with the strongest possible supporting arguments. Yet this conviction should be accompanied by an appreciation—by the presenter and by the recipients

of the remarks—that such views are not authoritative and may be wrong. Among the concepts set forth in the Bahá'í teachings are that individual opinions should not be suppressed, that such personal views should not be imposed on the community or presented as if they are authoritative, and that individuals should not fight with each other over questions pertaining to the meaning or application of the Text. These concepts are not contradictory but are part of a single integrated process.

For example, during the ministry of Bahá'u'lláh, two perspectives emerged about His station. Some saw Him to be the Supreme Manifestation of God, while others went further as a result of their understanding of certain passages from the Writings. When pressed on the matter, Bahá'u'lláh—no doubt in appreciation of the limitations of human capacity to understand completely such profound metaphysical truths—explained that so long as individuals were sincere, both views were right, but if they argued, both were wrong (Taherzadeh 303).<sup>8</sup> As 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains:

In brief, O ye believers of God!  
The text of the Divine Book is

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<sup>8</sup> Over time, of course, the station of Bahá'u'lláh became further clarified through His own Writings and the authoritative interpretations of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi. Yet even with such additional perspective, the limitations of the human mind and the space for personal understanding remain.



this: If two souls quarrel and contend about a question of the Divine questions, differing and disputing, both are wrong. The wisdom of this incontrovertible law of God is this: That between two souls from amongst the believers of God, no contention and dispute might arise; that they may speak with each other with infinite amity and love. (*Tablets* 52)

The Guardian states that “regarding such interpretations (of verses from the Scriptures) no one has the right to impose his view or opinion and require his listeners to believe in his particular interpretation of the sacred and prophetic writings. I have no objection to your interpretations and inferences so long as they are represented as your own personal observations and reflections” (*Unfolding* 423). And the Universal House of Justice writes:

Independent investigation of truth recognizes that no human being can have a full and correct understanding of the revelation of God; it places upon each individual the duty to strive for an ever greater understanding of the Teachings of Bahá’u’lláh, to apply them to the whole of his life; it is the mainspring of mature consultation, by which all the affairs of the community are conducted; it leads men to discover the secrets of the universe and promote the sciences. As you point out, this will produce great

diversity of views on a wide variety of subjects, and this is excellent. What it cannot and must not do is to produce “sects” in relation to the Teachings of the Faith; the Covenant provides the centre of guidance which is to prevent such a degeneration. (letter dated 20 October 1977)

In order to allow for a rich, frank, and possibly quite diverse exchange of personal views, certain terms should be understood and carefully used, avoiding dichotomies that are often misleading and unproductive. Consider, for example, the question of criticism. As Bahá’ís, we are discouraged from criticizing one another, and in this regard Shoghi Effendi mentions ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s “contempt for and impatience of criticism” (*Advent* 4). “Vicious criticism is indeed a calamity,” a letter written on his behalf states. “But its root is lack of faith in the system of Bahá’u’lláh, i.e., the Administrative Order—and lack of obedience to Him—for He has forbidden it!” (qtd. in Hornby 104). ‘Abdu’l-Bahá also explains: “It is again not permitted that any one of the honored members object to or censure, whether in or out of the meeting, any decision arrived at previously, though that decision be not right, for such criticism would prevent any decision from being enforced” (qtd. in *Compilation* 1:95). Such a use of the term is different, of course, from the legitimate criticisms that every believer is entitled to convey directly to the Local or National Assembly about the

affairs of the Cause, or even about the actions of one of its members<sup>9</sup>; there are well-defined channels for such criticism so that it may result in constructive change rather than disruption of the community or even schism of the type that affected previous dispensations. “If we disapprove of their decisions,” a letter written on behalf of the Guardian states, “we must be careful to avoid discussing such matters with other believers who have no authority to put them right” (qtd. in *Compilation* 2:112). It is vital, however, that all such concerns pertaining to the issue of criticism should be distinguished from the critical thought that is necessary in the search for understanding, lest such important and essential inquiry be inadvertently suppressed. Indeed, the House of Justice explains that destructive personal criticism and critical thought are not the same thing (*Messages* 60:31).

A similar example concerns the use of the term “dissent,” especially in a culture infused with the conceptions of Western political thought. On a particular topic, a believer may at times express a “dissenting” perspective—that

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9 “The Bahá'ís are fully entitled to address criticisms to their assemblies; they can freely air their views about policies or individual members of elected bodies to the assembly, local or national, but then they must whole-heartedly accept the advice or decision of the assembly, according to the principles already laid down for such matters in Bahá'í administration” (Shoghi Effendi qtd. in *Compilation* 2:112–13).

is, a view that differs from the majority view or from the way an idea is traditionally understood. Such ideas are welcome and indeed essential in the search for truth; a different perspective on an issue, even if it ultimately proves to be in error, may well contribute to obtaining a more profound grasp of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings. Yet expressing a new idea is quite different than fomenting discord or dissension by contending with the authoritative Texts, attempting to impose one's personal views on the thought and action of the community, or insisting on the correctness of one's personal interpretations even when contradicted by a passage in the Writings or by a decision of the Universal House of Justice. For it is the House of Justice that is “to safeguard the unity of its followers and to maintain the integrity and flexibility of its teachings” (Shoghi Effendi, *World Order* 148) and to “deliberate upon all problems which have caused difference, questions that are obscure and matters that are not expressly recorded in the Book” (‘Abdu'l-Bahá, *Will and Testament* 19).<sup>10</sup> At the same time, dissidence directed toward the authority of the Text itself or the provisions of the Covenant is a fundamental contradiction for anyone who professes to be a Bahá'í.<sup>11</sup>

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10 And He concludes: “Whatsoever they decide has the same effect as the Text itself” (‘Abdu'l-Bahá, *Will and Testament* 19).

11 “Such assertions emphasize a crucial point; it is this: in terms of the covenant, dissidence is a moral and intellectual

As learned believers explore the meaning of the Revelation, correlate its concepts and principles with contemporary thought, and consider its implications for action in various fields in light of scientific understanding, their exchange of views and presentation of perspectives are guided by a host of statements in the Writings. For example, Bahá'u'lláh explains:

Whatever is written should not transgress the bounds of tact and wisdom, and in the words used there should lie hid the property of milk, so that the children of the world may be nurtured therewith, and attain maturity. We have said in the past that one word hath the influence of

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contradiction of the main objective animating the Bahá'í community, namely, the establishment of the unity of mankind" (Universal House of Justice, *Messages* 60:36). And Bahá'u'lláh states: "O ye that dwell on earth! The religion of God is for love and unity; make it not the cause of enmity or dissension. In the eyes of men of insight and the beholders of the Most Sublime Vision, whatsoever are the effective means for safeguarding and promoting the happiness and welfare of the children of men have already been revealed by the Pen of Glory. But the foolish ones of the earth, being nurtured in evil passions and desires, have remained heedless of the consummate wisdom of Him Who is, in truth, the All-Wise, while their words and deeds are prompted by idle fancies and vain imaginings" (*Tablets* 222).

spring and causeth hearts to become fresh and verdant, while another is like unto blight which causeth the blossoms and flowers to wither. God grant that authors among the friends will write in such a way as would be acceptable to fair-minded souls, and not lead to cavilling by the people. (qtd. in Universal House of Justice, letter dated 20 June 1997)

Further, 'Abdu'l-Bahá observes that unity is essential in the the search for truth. He states: "The fact that we imagine ourselves to be right and everybody else wrong is the greatest of all obstacles in the path towards unity, and unity is necessary if we would reach truth, for truth is one" (*Paris Talks* 136). In a talk He explains:

The purpose is to emphasize the statement that consultation must have for its object the investigation of truth. He who expresses an opinion should not voice it as correct and right but set it forth as a contribution to the consensus of opinion, for the light of reality becomes apparent when two opinions coincide. A spark is produced when flint and steel come together. Man should weigh his opinions with the utmost serenity, calmness and composure. Before expressing his own views he should carefully consider the views already advanced by others. If he finds that a previously expressed opinion is more true and

worthy, he should accept it immediately and not willfully hold to an opinion of his own. By this excellent method he endeavors to arrive at unity and truth. Opposition and division are deplorable. (*Promulgation* 72–73)

The sensitivity and wisdom required when presenting new and challenging ideas are particularly important when the topic concerns the meaning of the Revelation or the action of the community. For the community is not an inert object unaffected by study conducted by detached and objective observers. Rather, the errors, misperceptions, and biases of a commentator are introduced into the discourse of the community. The contentious insistence on a particular personal viewpoint, rather than a wise presentation offered as a contribution to the search for truth, can lead to disunity and confusion as the friends respond in various ways to new ideas.<sup>12</sup>

Ultimately, in the Bahá'í community, unity is the highest value, since unity is essential for seeking and finding truth. Without unity, truth remains hidden, for truth is either obscured by continual argumentation or, even if a truth is discovered, lack of unity prevents translating new understandings into practical and effective action. It is for such a reason, where collective action is necessary, that Bahá'ís are advised to support the decision of an

Assembly, even though it might be wrong, because this will be the most efficient means to reveal the error and allow it to be corrected. “Though one of the parties may be in the right and they disagree, that will be the cause of a thousand wrongs,” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states, “but if they agree and both parties are in the wrong, as it is in unity the truth will be revealed and the wrong made right” (qtd. in *Compilation* 1:96).

As Bahá'ís, we are trying to learn how, in the age of maturity of the human race, the relationships among individuals, communities, and institutions should be manifested in order to support the search for truth and right action. These protagonists are all part of one organic whole—not discordant and competing elements more reflective of the adolescent stage of social development. Individuals study the Revelation, as well as diverse fields of human knowledge, and, guarded by a humility born of a recognition of the limitations of human understanding and a firm grounding in the Covenant, share their perspectives and contribute to the progress of the Faith and the advancement of society. The community as a whole should welcome and appreciate the contributions of learned individuals and provide an environment that supports their efforts. While, on occasion, the unwisdom of the friends<sup>13</sup> may become manifest

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<sup>12</sup> See Lample, *Revelation and Social Reality*, pp. 152–54.

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<sup>13</sup> See the Universal House of Justice, *Messages of the Universal House of Justice: 1986–2001*, 60:46.

in insistence on the correctness of personal interpretations, in fruitless argumentation, or even in the conscious fomenting of discord, the members of the community should strive to become sensitive to identifying such errors and immune to its harmful influence. Institutions should be tolerant of new ideas, but ultimately they must protect the space for learning from the machinations of insincere individuals, as well as ensure the unity of the community. Over the years, the Universal House of Justice has described various features of the relationship among individuals, communities, and institutions that safeguard the search for knowledge.

#### INDIVIDUAL INTERPRETATION AND THE MEANING OF THE TEXT

The doctrines of the Faith and truths pertaining to spiritual reality are set forth in the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh and the writings of the authoritative interpreters of the teachings, 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi. Access to such knowledge, however, must come through the imperfect yet wondrous instrument of the human intellect, the "supreme emblem of God" that "stands first in the order of creation and first in rank, taking precedence over all created things" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Secret* 1). For Bahá'ís, it is a cardinal principle that individual conscience must not be coerced; each person is enjoined to study the Revelation, understand its meaning, obey its ordinances, and translate it

into action. At the same time, it must be recognized that the human mind is limited and prone to error, and thus the ultimate safeguard of the individual and the community is firmness in the Covenant and adherence to the principles of the administration. In this way, the integrity of the teachings and the unity in action of the community are preserved. What may seem to be the necessity of upholding ostensibly contradictory values—the freedom to seek truth and obedience to authority—is in fact just another example of the spirit of a true Bahá'í "to reconcile," in the words of Shoghi Effendi, "the principles of mercy and justice, of freedom and submission, of the sanctity of the right of the individual and of self-surrender, of vigilance, discretion, and prudence on the one hand, and fellowship, candor, and courage on the other" (*Bahá'í Administration* 64). The individual believer, the Bahá'í community, and its institutions are thus bound in a common effort to strive to understand and act on the teachings while knowing with certainty that there must be, to some extent, a gap between personal understanding and Bahá'u'lláh's intent. As the Universal House of Justice explains:

A clear distinction is made in our Faith between authoritative interpretation and the interpretation or understanding that each individual arrives at for himself from his study of its teachings. While the former is confined to the Guardian, the

latter, according to the guidance given to us by the Guardian himself, should by no means be suppressed. In fact such individual interpretation is considered the fruit of man's rational power and conducive to a better understanding of the teachings, provided that no disputes or arguments arise among the friends and the individual himself understands and makes it clear that his views are merely his own. Individual interpretations continually change as one grows in comprehension of the teachings. As Shoghi Effendi wrote: "To deepen in the Cause means to read the writings of Bahá'u'lláh and the Master so thoroughly as to be able to give it to others in its pure form. There are many who have some superficial idea of what the Cause stands for. They, therefore, present it together with all sorts of ideas that are their own. As the Cause is still in its early days we must be most careful lest we fall into this error and injure the Movement we so much adore. There is no limit to the study of the Cause. The more we read the Writings, the more truths we can find in Them, the more we will see that our previous notions were erroneous." So, although individual insights can be enlightening and helpful, they can also be misleading. The friends must therefore learn to listen to the views of others without being over-awed or allowing their faith

to be shaken, and to express their own views without pressing them on their fellow Bahá'ís. (*Messages* 35:13)

A question previously arose as to whether, as with the clergy in past dispensations, the authoritative interpretations of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi, as well as the guidance of the Universal House of Justice, would unduly narrow the scope for personal investigation and understanding. The Universal House of Justice responds:

You express the fear that the authority conferred upon 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the Guardian and the Universal House of Justice could lead to a progressive reduction in the "available scope for personal interpretation," and that "the actual writings of the Manifestation will have less and less import," and you instance what has happened in previous Dispensations. The House of Justice suggests that, in thinking about this, you contemplate the way the Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh has actually worked and you will be able to see how very different its processes are from those of, say, the development of the law in Rabbinical Judaism or the functioning of the Papacy in Christianity. The practice in the past in these two religions, and also to a great extent in Islam, has been to assume that the Revelation given by the Founder was the final,

perfect revelation of God's Will to mankind, and all subsequent elucidation and legislation has been interpretative in the sense that it aimed at applying this basic Revelation to the new problems and situations that have arisen. The Bahá'í premises are quite different. Although the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh is accepted as the Word of God and His Law as the Law of God, it is understood from the outset that Revelation is progressive, and that the Law, although the Will of God for this Age, will undoubtedly be changed by the next Manifestation of God. Secondly, only the written text of the Revelation is regarded as authoritative. There is no Oral Law as in Judaism, no Tradition of the Church as in Christianity, no Hadith as in Islám. Thirdly, a clear distinction is drawn between Interpretation and Legislation. Authoritative interpretation is the exclusive prerogative of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and the Guardian, while infallible legislation is the function of the Universal House of Justice.

If you study the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and of the Guardian, you will see how tremendously they differ from the interpretations of the Rabbis and the Church. They are not a progressive fossilization of the Revelation, they are for the most part expositions which throw a clear light upon passages which may

have been considered obscure, they point up the intimate interrelationship between various teachings, they expound the implications of scriptural allusions, and they educate the Bahá'ís in the tremendous significances of the Words of Bahá'u'lláh. Rather than in any way supplanting the Words of the Manifestation, they lead us back to them time and again.

There is also an important distinction made in the Faith between authoritative interpretation, as described above, and the interpretation which every believer is fully entitled to voice. Believers are free, indeed are encouraged, to study the Writings for themselves and to express their understanding of them. Such personal interpretations can be most illuminating, but all Bahá'ís, including the one expressing the view, however learned he may be, should realize that it is only a personal view and can never be upheld as a standard for others to accept, nor should disputes ever be permitted to arise over differences in such opinions.

The legislation enacted by the Universal House of Justice is different from interpretation. Authoritative interpretation, as uttered by 'Abdu'l-Bahá and the Guardian, is a divinely guided statement of what the Word of God means. The divinely inspired legislation of the Universal House of Justice does not

attempt to say what the revealed Word means—it states what must be done in cases where the revealed Text or its authoritative interpretation is not explicit. It is, therefore, on quite a different level from the Sacred Text, and the Universal House of Justice is empowered to abrogate or amend its own legislation whenever it judges the conditions make this desirable. Moreover, the attitude to legislation is different in the Bahá'í Faith. The human tendency in past Dispensations has been to want every question answered and to arrive at a binding decision affecting every small detail of belief or practice. The tendency in the Bahá'í Dispensation, from the time of Bahá'u'lláh Himself, has been to clarify the governing principles, to make binding pronouncements on details which are considered essential, but to leave a wide area to the conscience of the individual. The same tendency appears also in administrative matters. (letter dated 3 January 1982)

In a sport, such as soccer, there is a framework of defined parameters that establish its nature and set its rules. The elements of the framework are not intended to restrict the participants arbitrarily; rather, they create the arena for productive action—the skill and artistry of the game.

Without such a framework, there is no fruitful result, only chaos. The Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh and its body of authoritative interpretation, along with the guidance of the House of Justice that will direct the community's course over centuries, are not intended to shackle, but to liberate the human mind, and prepare and focus the community so that it may explore the oceans of spiritual and material reality and make progress along a course leading to the shaping of a new world order and a new civilization.

Thus, at any given time, there may be a range of ideas about a given aspect of reality in light of the Bahá'í teachings. Some of these perspectives, after further investigation, may not hold up and can be discarded, resulting in a clear consensus about the truth of a matter. In other instances, there may still remain a range of different perspectives that have some degree of justification and further understanding that requires additional experience and the elaboration of thought. Comfort with ambiguity is required in such instances, with space for different individuals to think differently, rather than contention or insistence upon the truth of a particular perspective on matters that cannot, or need not, be resolved at a given moment in time. Such an approach safeguards freedom of thought, as well as the unity of action on which the progress of the community depends.



IMPLICATIONS OF THE PRINCIPLE  
OF THE HARMONY OF SCIENCE  
AND RELIGION

The final concept to be mentioned here, as another element of the framework governing engagement in Bahá'í scholarly activity, is the principle of the harmony of science and religion, of reason and faith. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, as noted above, describes religion and science as "two wings upon which man's intelligence can soar into the heights, with which the human soul can progress" (*Paris Talks* 143). He adds, "Should a man try to fly with the wing of religion alone he would quickly fall into the quagmire of superstition, whilst on the other hand, with the wing of science alone he would also make no progress, but fall into the despairing slough of materialism" (*Paris Talks* 143). Thus, in some manner, true religion acts to ensure true science; true science acts to ensure true religion; and these two, in harmony, are the means for human progress. But what is this appropriate interaction? How is it to be defined? How is it realized?

Even a cursory survey of the forces at work in the world brings to light the many challenges arising from a failure to find harmony between the two. In the prejudice, fanaticism, and violence sweeping the globe in the guise of religion; in the assaying of the truth of scientific findings in the balance of religious beliefs; in the stubborn perpetuation of irrational

religious doctrines and practices; in the postmodern devaluation of scientific method and knowledge; in the commercial subjugation of science; in the lens of materialistic philosophy that systematically distorts scientific assumptions and findings; in the contest for power—political and otherwise—that exploits both science and religion; in the false dichotomy at the heart of debates between superstition and materialism posing as religion and science; and in other such permutations can be found the many strategies and distortions that prevent humanity at this time from appreciating the harmony of science and religion upon which depends the quest for truth, morality, justice, and the advancement of civilization.

At this stage in the development of the Bahá'í community, we can expect to see a range of diverse personal views about the principle of the harmony of science and religion, and the conception of some believers will reflect widely held social conventions or the perspectives derived from the various disciplines of human thought.

Of course, 'Abdu'l-Bahá's statements about these principles would be accepted by all. Yet knowledgeable Bahá'ís with scientific training, for example, acutely aware of and sensitive to the excesses of religious fundamentalism in attempting to impose itself upon the minds of individuals, may lean toward the concept that science and religion are largely separate spheres—"non-overlapping magisteria" (Gould).

At the same time, other devoted believers immersed in a profound study of the Writings may be convinced, by an understanding of certain passages, that ultimately it is science that will evolve in the future to conform to, or be subsumed under, the truths of Revelation. A range of views by others may fall within these extremes. Rather than creating contentious debates by insisting on the correctness of one's personal interpretation about the meaning of the principle or its application in a particular instance, however, what is necessary—as in so many other areas of inquiry—is for the friends to consult, act together, and thereby advance within an evolving framework that will allow for unity of thought to emerge through experience over time.

Those engaged in Bahá'í scholarly activity, then, may well conduct their inquiries from any point along a spectrum of approaches representing very different views about the relationship of science and religion—for example, from the natural sciences, from the social sciences, from history, from philosophy, from secular religious studies, from theology, or from the study of the Sacred Texts within the community.

It thus falls to these friends to weigh the value of the methods within these various approaches, assessing their strengths and limitations. As “Bahá'ís who are involved in various disciplines—economics, education, history, social science, philosophy, and many others—are obviously conversant and fully engaged with the

methods employed in their fields,” the Universal House of Justice explains, “[i]t is they who have the responsibility to earnestly strive to reflect on the implications that the truths found in the Revelation may hold for their work” (letter dated 24 July 2013). In such a process, a tendency toward false dichotomies and extreme perspectives that stand in contradiction to the principle of the harmony of science and religion may be avoided because the desired methods are not a reduction to creationism or scholasticism or to contending theological schools; neither is it scientism, nor secular religious studies, nor philosophical materialism.

Science, in its method, restricts the scope of its investigations to increase the reliability of its findings; however, contrary to the understanding of many, religion is not faith in the unbelievable or irrational. Philosophy may well serve to interpret scientific findings, but philosophical conclusions cannot be conflated with scientific truth. Careful attention should be given by Bahá'ís engaged in various fields to the assumptions pertaining to the relationship between science and religion that govern them, and while these assumptions cannot be summarily dismissed by the friends who participate in these spheres, neither can Bahá'ís ignore the truths articulated in the authoritative Bahá'í Texts. In brief, an effort must be made to deal with or reconcile all points of contradiction.

Thus, we need to recognize our condition at this stage in the development of the Faith. Human minds

are limited. In science, advancement is made because there is a truth referent greater than the conclusions of the human mind alone—the testing of ideas against the brute facts of nature through the scientific method. The reliability of science is based on the extent to which it can be grounded on these brute facts, rather than on personal impression. So too, for Bahá'ís, the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh provides a truth referent against which human conceptions must be weighed. In principle, the individual Bahá'í bends to the truth of this Revelation—the Revelation is not interpreted according to the wishes of the individual. So the teachings, and their authoritative interpretations, are statements of truth that cannot be altered. Of course, in the pursuit of truth there is latitude in personal understanding, but this freedom is intended to serve the purpose of finding the truth—and truth is one.

Reason alone is subject to certain limitations. In this respect, a difference can be observed between consultation and learning within an evolving framework and the circularity that can overtake continuous debate and argumentation about personal views. In his book *The Philosophy of Mind*, John Heil describes a tension within the discipline of philosophy that tends toward cycles of thought rather than toward a systematic progress in capturing insights and refining understanding over time:

In philosophy there is a tendency to take doctrines with which we

disagree and dismiss them out of hand. But a view can be wrong, even mostly wrong, without being altogether wrong. When you consider the historical development of theories in the philosophy of mind, you can see that the same difficulties cycle into focus again and again. One generation addresses the qualitative aspects of mentality, the next focuses on its scientific understanding, its successor takes up the problem of mental content. The cycle then starts over, each generation recovering what had been largely invisible to its immediate predecessor. (199–200)

Another example of a potential challenge in the encounter between reason and religion may be found within the discipline of theology when emphasis shifts from the implications of the meaning of the teachings for the unity of the community and the betterment of society to concern with the Faith primarily as the object of study. While there are naturally many aspects of the Revelation that address theological concepts that must be constructively examined, the discipline of theology and the practice of theologians or 'ulamá is grounded in assumptions and approaches of previous dispensations that have no part in the Bahá'í dispensation and that, indeed, have even been proscribed by Bahá'u'lláh.

In the book *Doctrine and Power*, theologian Carlos Galvao-Sobrinho

examines how in the fourth century of Christianity, doctrinal disagreements on theological issues, which previously were resolved through a search for consensus, evolved to become a means by which bishops exerted power:

Persistent confrontation, combined with a determination to undermine fellow prelates, replaced the former striving for consensus. . . . Challenged by their rivals and driven by a new certainty that they possessed the truth, church leaders embarked on a disruptive quest to prove their orthodoxy and to discredit their opponents. . . . with unprecedented zeal and passion, they set out to convince other Christians that their views represented the truth about God and the orthodox teachings of the church. (6)

As a result of this change, the essence of theological effort shifted from a search for truth to the imposition of power. Theologians and ecclesiastics insisted upon the correctness of their own views, and by this means they accrued power and influence. At the same time, they used what power and influence they had to ensure the acceptance of their views. The history of Christianity was thereby stained by these struggles, which resulted in endless bloodshed and countless divisions.

Consequently, we can appreciate why any inquiry into the value of the discipline of theology or its methods for Bahá'í thought must be weighed

against its limitations and the distinctive characteristics and injunctions of the Revelation. Ultimately, it is learned Bahá'ís in any field who, having studied in a profound manner both the Writings and their disciplines, are responsible for carefully considering such issues, shedding light on the value of methods, and serving as the first line of defense against extremes that lead either to imposing naïve personal religious beliefs on science or to placing an exaggerated value on certain interpretations of scientific method while imposing the materialistic interpretations of such findings in an unscientific manner on the evolution of the Bahá'í community.

Attaining this capacity requires a true understanding of a discipline, its strengths and limitations, and not simply insisting to the Bahá'í community that a particular point is true based on an appeal to authority from a particular field of inquiry. It is the responsibility of "Bahá'í scholars, people who not only are devoted to [the Faith] and believe in it and are anxious to tell others about it," those "who have a deep grasp of the Teachings and their significance, and who can correlate its beliefs with the current thoughts and problems of the people of the world" (Shoghi Effendi qtd. in *Compilation* 2:226) to acknowledge the range of legitimate debate within a discipline, help the community understand the range of its assets and liabilities as an instrument in the investigation of truth, and correlate and resolve the apparent points of conflict between

the perspectives of that field and the current understanding of the Bahá'í teachings.

The scope of the challenge may vary across different disciplines. In the natural sciences, there may be little overlap between the knowledge systems of science and religion, while across the social sciences and humanities the area of overlap grows more extensive. Education as a field, for example, can only advance so far without an appreciation of the spiritual reality of a human being. The study of religion, and particularly the study of the Bahá'í Faith in the context of the discipline of religious studies, whether from a secular or theological perspective, is subject to significant distortion by assumptions and methods that stand in sharp contrast to the Bahá'í teachings. Indeed, this sharp distinction begins at the outset with Bahá'u'lláh's definition of religion itself. Every learned believer has the opportunity to experience the joy and challenge of tackling such difficult problems that can contribute to the progress of the Faith and advancement of human knowledge.

AN EXAMPLE OF HOW DIFFERING  
OPINIONS MAY GIVE WAY IN THE  
SEARCH FOR TRUTH

As individuals, communities, and institutions gradually learn how to harmonize their efforts in the investigation of reality, truth will emerge over time in greater depth and abundance. In some instances associated with metaphysical questions, a diversity of

opinion may continue to prevail, owing to the limitations of the human mind to grasp such truths, even when they are discussed at some length by Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Again, such diversity is to be expected, and although Bahá'ís may hold different opinions on such issues, there is no reason that this diversity itself should lead to discord, so long as individuals do not insist upon the correctness of their own views or try to impose their opinions on others.

For many other questions, however, just as in science, truth—or at least ever more robust insights into the nature of reality—will emerge over time. At first, many different views on a given topic may be held simultaneously by different Bahá'ís. Then, over time, as sound arguments are set forth that draw upon science and an analysis of the teachings and as knowledgeable believers consult on the evidence, some perspectives will eventually be demonstrated to be weaker or somehow defective, while others will prove to be stronger and more robust, until issues are clarified and the truth—the strength of a particular perspective—is revealed. On some subjects, this process may happen fairly quickly, while other questions may require generations to resolve.

The subject of evolution may provide a useful illustration of this process. In His talks and writings, 'Abdu'l-Bahá touches upon the theory of evolution, a subject in the field of biology that, beyond science, has had profound social and philosophical

implications for humanity since Darwin presented his findings in the mid 1800s. A range of personal interpretations about the meaning of what 'Abdu'l-Bahá said have been set forth by Bahá'ís over the years. And while it is not our purpose here to examine the Bahá'í perspective on evolution in depth, a general overview of these personal interpretations sheds light on the process of understanding the Bahá'í teachings by illustrating how diverse and sometimes conflicting opinions may be resolved over time in the search for truth.

At least four general perspectives have been set forth by individuals on 'Abdu'l-Bahá's statements about evolution. A traditional and somewhat widely held perspective, dating, perhaps, from Dr. John Esselmont's description of the topic in *Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era*, suggests that, from the beginning of the appearance of life on earth, there has been a separation between the line of organisms that led to animals and the line that led to human beings. Drawing upon quotations from 'Abdu'l-Bahá, such as "from the beginning of his existence man has been a distinct species" (*Some Answered Questions* 47:10), it is concluded that there has never been a common biological ancestor between animals and humans.

A second perspective is similar to the first, but in emphasizing that this conclusion about human biological distinctiveness stands in sharp contrast to the findings of evolutionary science that humanity

shares the biological history of animals and is most closely related to apes, this view concludes that 'Abdu'l-Bahá is in error about the scientific basis of evolution and His statements in this context should be set aside. Still another distinct perspective proposes that 'Abdu'l-Bahá's statements are essentially in harmony with the contemporary findings of science. A fourth suggests that 'Abdu'l-Bahá's argument is not so much about the scientific basis of evolution, but rather, using the language common to the debates on evolution at that time in the Middle East, it is intended to make certain points about the social and philosophical principles of the new theory.

In the case of these four perspectives on evolution, the first, a kind of "parallel" evolution of animal and human, is incompatible with science. Advances in DNA analysis make it possible to determine the genetic similarities between humans and other species and impossible to imagine how such similarities could come about by any means other than biological kinship. 'Abdu'l-Bahá's strong admonition to weigh religious beliefs in the light of science would seem to require that any concept of parallel evolution should be set aside by Bahá'ís as an error in the individual interpretation of the meaning of His statements and thereby avoid the appearance of clinging to a theory of some kind of "creationism"—the antiscientific opinion articulated by adherents of some religious demoninations.

Of course, it is possible to make the argument that what ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says is true in a given case and that a contemporary scientific understanding is wrong and will be revised in the future. For example, in *Some Answered Questions*, He explains that the Sacred Texts may indeed state truths not understood by science (7:14).

Yet despite this, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá does not state that the truth of scientific views should be weighed in the light of religious Texts. If Bahá’ís were to take this position continually when science and the interpretation of scripture conflict, they would be rightly regarded as unscientific, and they would undermine the principle of the harmony of science and religion as set forth by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. As scientific understanding advances, however, certain wisdom hidden in the Text may come to light. If one imagines that science changes in the future as a result of shedding certain of its materialistic philosophical assumptions, this change will be the result of advancement within science rather than scientists being compelled to accept the dictates of religious beliefs.

The second perspective on statements in the Writings about evolution, although upholding scientific findings, also appears to have some problems in that it insists there is only one way to interpret what ‘Abdu’l-Bahá said and that this interpretation stands in contradiction to science. Yet it is ‘Abdu’l-Bahá Himself Who said that science and religion agree. It therefore seems reasonable to conclude that,

generally, any personal interpretation of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s statements that contradicts scientific understanding could be set aside as erroneous—or at least called into question—and an alternative interpretation sought.

Given the limitations of human understanding, one obviously cannot insist one’s personal interpretation of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s statements is exactly what He actually intended. Personal interpretation can be wrong. Further, this second perspective is illogical in presuming that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá would insist on an incorrect understanding of scientific aspects of evolution, while at the same time urging—based on the principle of the harmony of science and religion—that believers not accept religious views that contradict science and reason. Stated another way, why would ‘Abdu’l-Bahá contradict the very principles He expounds? In seeking to understand the statements about evolution in the Bahá’í Writings, therefore, Bahá’ís should expect the principle of the harmony of science and religion to be upheld and not succumb to either superstition or materialism.

It would not be unreasonable to conclude, then, that the first two perspectives are questionable and should be set aside, while the truth may be sought in a more rigorous examination of the arguments pertaining to the latter two. This is not, of course, an exhaustive analysis of Bahá’í views on evolution, but hopefully it serves as a useful illustration of how various conflicting opinions may be resolved

over time in the search for truth. Sound conclusions should correlate simultaneously with the findings of science, reason, and the meaning of the Sacred Text. By proceeding in such a manner, individuals freely set out diverse personal opinions, but over time, on most questions, clarity, insight, and unity of thought emerge.

#### A POTENTIAL PITFALL

The points provided above are a few initial concepts associated with the collective search for truth drawn from the teachings that are an essential part of a conceptual framework that guides action to advance the intellectual life of the Bahá'í community. Many more could be added. But it is necessary, at this time, to include one additional consideration pertaining to a potential pitfall that can obstruct the search for truth and, in its most extreme and virulent form, is a threat to the very existence of the Faith, whose central principle is unity.

As previously mentioned, in the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh, while the freedom of conscience of the individual is upheld, as is the freedom to express personal understanding, the views of an individual have no authority. Individuals or groups of individuals, no matter how learned, no matter the field of expertise, cannot insist upon the correctness of a personal interpretation of the Writings, impose such a view on others, or insist such a view is a guide to the action of individual believers or the community.

Rather, on matters pertaining to the Faith and its teachings, all are bound by the provisions of the Covenant. It is by this means that Bahá'u'lláh has resolved the question of religious truth and practice, quenching the fire of contention and sectarianism that dimmed the light of religion in previous dispensations.

Human beings differ. Their views differ. Their interests differ. History demonstrates the wide range of strategies employed to resolve or live with such differences, from blind obedience to unrestricted freedom, from brutal manifestations of power to tolerance and reasoned discourse. Bahá'u'lláh, responding to human reality and historical circumstances, sets forth the basis for the protection of the prerogatives and the harmony of relations among Bahá'í individuals, institutions, and the community within the framework of His administrative order. As a letter written on behalf of the House of Justice states:

Upon becoming a Bahá'í, one accepts certain fundamental beliefs; but invariably one's knowledge of the Teachings is limited and often mixed with personal ideas. Shoghi Effendi explains that "an exact and thorough comprehension of so vast a system, so sublime a revelation, so sacred a trust, is for obvious reasons beyond the reach and ken of our finite minds." Over time, through study, prayerful reflection, and an effort to live a Bahá'í life, immature ideas yield



to a more profound understanding of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation. Service to the Cause plays a particular role in the process, for the meaning of the Text is clarified as one translates insights into effective action. As a matter of principle, individual understanding or interpretation should not be suppressed, but valued for whatever contribution it can make to the discourse of the Bahá'í community. Nor should it, through dogmatic insistence of the individual, be allowed to bring about disputes and arguments among the friends; personal opinion must always be distinguished from the explicit Text and its authoritative interpretation by 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi and from the elucidations of the Universal House of Justice on "problems which have caused difference, questions that are obscure and matters that are not expressly recorded in the Book." (letter dated 14 November 2005)<sup>14</sup>

The problem described here is not a matter of Covenant-breaking in the sense of challenging the authority as Center of the Cause or claiming to have equal authority, as witnessed at the time of the passing of Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, or Shoghi Effendi. Rather, it centers on the question of what

Bahá'u'lláh's Writings mean and what must be done in order to achieve His intended purpose for humanity. The problem is the insistence that a particular view of an individual about the meaning of the Bahá'í teachings is correct and that, as a result, the Bahá'í community must accept this individual's interpretation and its implications for Bahá'í practice—or at least, that the community should be open to endless dissent and disputation about such matters, while ignoring the consultative methods established by Bahá'u'lláh for resolving disagreements.

Such a posture, especially on issues central to the Covenant and the practice of the Faith, strikes at the heart of the authority invested in the twin institutions of the Administrative Order of Bahá'u'lláh—the Guardianship and the Universal House of Justice—whose common fundamental objective is to “insure the continuity of that divinely-appointed authority which flows from the Source of our Faith, to safeguard the unity of its followers and to maintain the integrity and flexibility of its teachings” in acting to “administer its affairs, coordinate its activities, promote its interests, execute its laws and defend its subsidiary institutions” (Shoghi Effendi, *World Order* 148).

The intellectual life of the community is vulnerable to this pitfall when there is excessive insistence by an individual or a group of individuals on the correctness of their personal understanding. Again, it is quite natural for an individual to believe that his or her

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14 For an overview of Bahá'í hermeneutics and practice, see Paul Lample, *Revelation and Social Reality*, especially chapter 2.

personal understanding of the teachings is in precise conformity with the meaning intended by Bahá'u'lláh. It is also obvious that this cannot always be true. Humility is required, as well as an attitude of learning, in order to work in harmony with other believers under the direction of the institutions to achieve Bahá'u'lláh's intended will and purpose. This condition includes the freedom to share one's views with others. However, for an individual to become so convinced of the truth of a personal interpretation, or even of what he or she concludes to be a limitation of Bahá'u'lláh's thought or of the interpretations of 'Abdu'l-Bahá or Shoghi Effendi, and then for this same individual to attempt continually to bend the community to this personal understanding, is to strike at the unity of the community and to subvert the search for truth and the endeavor to translate the teachings into effective action. This attitude or action is very different from setting forth a point of view with sound arguments without insisting it is correct and without challenging an authoritative statement in the Writings or a decision of the House of Justice. It is, instead, an attempt to impose a change in the Bahá'í community in direct opposition to the safeguards Bahá'u'lláh put in place to maintain the unity of His Cause and preserve the integrity of His teachings. While, owing to the provisions of the Covenant, such improper efforts will ultimately fail, they can in the short term foment discord and confusion, create division, obstruct

progress, distort the understanding of the wider society about the Bahá'í teachings, and extinguish the light of faith in some misled souls.

In response to one such assault on the intellectual life of the community some years ago, the Universal House of Justice observed that there was a "campaign of internal opposition" (*Messages* 296:2), which, "while purporting to accept the legitimacy of the Guardianship and the Universal House of Justice as twin successors of Bahá'u'lláh and the Center of His Covenant," attempted "to cast doubt on the nature and scope of the authority conferred on them in the Writings" (*Messages* 296:5). The individuals involved "sought to use the language, the occasions and the credibility of scholarly activity to lend a counterfeit authority to a private enterprise which was essentially ideological in nature and self-motivated in origin" (letter dated 8 February 1998). The House of Justice stated that "Even if their original aims were idealistic in nature—no matter how ill-informed and erroneous in concept—they had evolved in practice into an assault on the Covenant which Bahá'u'lláh has created as a stronghold within which His Cause would evolve as He intends" (letter dated 8 February 1998). In asserting and attempting to win sympathy for their views, this group of individuals complained that a fundamentalist religious authority was attempting to suppress intellectual freedom; yet what actually occurred was an effort to create and impose a form

of ecclesiastical authority to usurp the authority Bahá'u'lláh placed in an elected body. As the House of Justice explained at the time, “by diminishing the station of Bahá'u'lláh—a disservice done to previous Manifestations by people similarly inclined—by casting doubt on the authority conferred on ‘Abdu'l-Bahá, the Guardian and the Universal House of Justice, and by calling into question the integrity of Bahá'í administrative processes, they would be able to persuade a number of unwary followers that the Bahá'í Faith is in fact not a Divine Revelation but a kind of socio-political system being manipulated by ambitious individuals” (letter dated 8 February 1998). The scheme insisted “that even the nature of religion itself can be adequately understood only through the use of an academic methodology designed to ignore the truths that make religion what it is” (*Messages* 296:6). In the absence of a Guardian, they claimed to possess “quasi-doctrinal authority, parallel to and essentially independent of the local House of Justice, which would permit various interests to insinuate themselves into the direction of the life processes of the Cause” (*Messages* 296:7).<sup>15</sup> The problem that

aroused the concern of the House of Justice was “the systematic corruption of Bahá'í discourse in certain of the Internet discussion groups, a design which became increasingly apparent to many of the Bahá'í participants and whose first victim, if it were to succeed, would be Bahá'í scholarship itself” (letter dated 8 February 1998).

In establishing the basis of His religion, Bahá'u'lláh seized power from ecclesiastics, ended priesthood, and abrogated powers exercised by the learned in the Islamic dispensation. While extolling the truly learned, He redefined their obligations and guarded against their excesses through the instrument of His Covenant.<sup>16</sup> These

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confirmation of the Holy Spirit, because it is in the safekeeping and under the shelter and protection of the Ancient Beauty, and obedience to its decisions is a bounden and essential duty and an absolute obligation, and there is no escape for anyone” (qtd. in *Compilation of Compilations* 1:323).

16 “In a letter written on 14 March 1927 to the Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Istanbul, the Guardian's Secretary explained, on his behalf, the principle in the Cause of action by majority vote. He pointed out how, in the past, it was certain individuals who ‘accounted themselves as superior in knowledge and elevated in position’ who caused division, and that it was those ‘who pretended to be the most distinguished of all’ who ‘always proved themselves to be the source of contention.’ ‘But praise be to God,’ he continued, ‘that the Pen of Glory has done away with the unyielding dictatorial views of the learned

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15 Such vain and idle imaginings turn on its head the authoritative guidance of ‘Abdu'l-Bahá: “Let it not be imagined that the House of Justice will take any decision according to its own concepts and opinions. God forbid! The Supreme House of Justice will take decisions and establish laws through the inspiration and

actions, which reflect the maturity of the human race that the provisions of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation seek to foster, in no way diminishes the vital importance of learning and scholarship, but frames, reinforces, protects, and canalizes such essential powers and contributions. In this way, Bahá'u'lláh upholds freedom of conscience and expression while safeguarding the development of the Faith and preserving the integrity of the teachings. The personal interpretation of individuals is both respected and bound within the constraints of wisdom. In this dispensation, there will be no St. Paul who recasts the thought of the Manifestation, no Arius whose actions sever the bonds of union among the believers.<sup>17</sup> "The friends who seek

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and the wise, dismissed the assertions of individuals as an authoritative criterion, even though they were recognized as the most accomplished and learned among men and ordained that all matters be referred to authorized centres and specified assemblies. Even so, no assembly has been invested with the absolute authority to deal with such general matters as affect the interests of nations. Nay rather, He has brought all the assemblies together under the shadow of one House of Justice, one divinely-appointed Centre, so that there would be only one Centre and all the rest integrated into a single body, revolving around one expressly-designated Pivot, thus making them all proof against schism and division" (Universal House of Justice, *Messages* 111:12).

17 Attitudes toward theology should not give rise to dichotomous thought.

to excel in scholarly activity will, of course, strive to live up to the high expectations set forth by Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá," the Universal House of Justice states. "Whatever the extent of their achievements, they are an integral part of the community; they are

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Firmness in the Covenant is not the polar opposite of the freedom to express personal views; both are aspects of a harmonious body of thought set forth by 'Abdu'l-Bahá. They are points of spiritual guidance intended to lift us, guard us, and propel us, not clubs to use to beat each other. In this respect, the unity of the individual, the community, and the institutions again arises. The prerogatives and obligations, the aspirations and expectations, of each are not in opposition, but must find harmonious expression along the common part of their organic development according to the will and purpose of Bahá'u'lláh as expressed in His Teachings and by His authoritative interpreters. "The ocean of the Covenant shall send forth a wave and shall disperse and throw out these foams. Consider thou, at the time of Christ and after Him, how many childish attempts were made by different persons! What claims they have advanced and what a multitude have they gathered around themselves! Even Arius attracted to himself a million and a half followers and strove and endeavoured to sow the seeds of sedition in the Cause of Christ. But eventually the sea of Christ surged and cast out all the gathering froth and nothing was left behind save everlasting malediction." ('Abdu'l-Bahá qtd. in *Star of the West* 10:5:96).

not exempt from obligations placed upon any believer and, at the same time, deserve the community's understanding, forbearance, support, and respect" (letter dated 24 July 2013).

"Whatever comes within the sphere of human comprehension must be limited and finite," 'Abdu'l-Bahá affirms (*Promulgation* 72–73). In the Bahá'í Faith, no individual or group of scholars can say what the Bahá'í teachings really mean or how Bahá'ís ought to behave, and certainly no person could ever claim authority on the basis of their academic credentials or their "learned" opinions to challenge the actions or the elucidations of the House of Justice. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá emphatically affirms:

Today this process of deduction is the right of the body of the House of Justice, and the deductions and conclusions of individual learned men have no authority, unless they are endorsed by the House of Justice. The difference is precisely this, that from the conclusions and endorsement of the body of the House of Justice whose members are elected by and known to the worldwide Bahá'í community, no differences will arise; whereas the conclusions of individual divines and scholars would definitely lead to differences, and result in schism, division, and dispersion. The oneness of the Word would be destroyed, the unity of the Faith would disappear, and the edifice of the Faith

of God would be shaken. (qtd. in Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas* 8)

In the course of history, human beings have learned the rules of logic and reasoned argument. If someone systematically violates these principles, there is no need for contention, for it is recognized by all that the argument is inferior and unsound, and others ignore it. In the Bahá'í electoral process, there is no electioneering, and an individual who acts in such an obvious manner to attract attention will not receive the votes of the electors who find such behavior to be unacceptable for qualification for membership in a Bahá'í institution. In a similar manner, the principles governing the action of learned individuals in contributing to the search for truth, the progress of the Cause, and the betterment of the world, have been clearly set forth by Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá and must be increasingly understood and internalized by the community. "Now some of the mischief-makers, with many stratagems, are seeking leadership, and in order to reach this position they instill doubts among the friends that they may cause differences, and that these differences may result in their drawing a party to themselves," 'Abdu'l-Bahá states. "But the friends of God must be awake and must know that the scattering of these doubts hath as its motive personal desires and the achievement of leadership. Do not disrupt Bahá'í unity, and know that this unity cannot be maintained save through faith in the Covenant of God" (*Selections* 214).

Although in some extreme cases, it may be necessary for the institutions to act, the generality of the believers should grow in understanding and wisdom to be impervious to such machinations.<sup>18</sup> Truth and right action emerge in the course of sincere individuals making efforts, and sometimes making mistakes. They cannot emerge from a misplaced desire to prevent all mistakes. What is more important, perhaps, is to discern the intent associated with the appearance of mistakes and the effort exerted by an individual to adhere to Bahá'í principles associated with collective action.

If the desire is to assist the progress of the Faith, if there is an effort to uphold the principles of consultation and of the administration, then unity is maintained, the decisions of the institutions—and particularly the guidance of the House of Justice to resolve difficult problems—will be

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18 “[T]he believers need to be deepened in their knowledge and appreciation of the Covenants of both Bahá'u'lláh and ‘Abdu'l-Bahá. This is the stronghold of the Faith of every Bahá'í, and that which enables him to withstand every test and the attacks of the enemies outside the Faith, and the far more dangerous, insidious, lukewarm people inside the Faith who have no real attachment to the Covenant, and consequently uphold the intellectual aspect of the teachings while at the same time undermining the spiritual foundation upon which the whole Cause of God rests” (letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, qtd. in *Light of Divine Guidance* 2:86).

respected, and mistakes will gradually be resolved. However, if there is an intent to impose personal views about the meaning of the Text on the understanding of the community, create contention, spread calumny, or acquire power to direct the community's affairs along the path of one's choosing, then such intention or action strikes a blow at the very process of the search for truth and sound collective action for the progress of the community. “Mere intellectual understanding of the teachings is not enough,” a letter written on behalf of the Guardian explains. “Deep spirituality is essential, and the foundation of true spirituality is steadfastness in the Covenant” (qtd. in Hornby 85).

When, in the 1890s, despite the best efforts of ‘Abdu'l-Bahá, news of the machinations of Muhammad Ali began to circulate to the believers outside the Holy Land, creating doubts and confusion, one of the learned Bahá'ís wrote to Him seeking clarification about what was happening and guidance about what should be the proper attitude and conduct of the sincere friends. In a long and moving Tablet, ‘Abdu'l-Bahá pours out His personal anguish and His resolute guidance for the safeguarding of the Faith of God. He advises the friends of their attitudes toward others and of their need to guard themselves:

Conduct yourself with the utmost gentleness, affection, friendliness, well-wishing and compassion. . . . Pray for all and implore God for

everyone's welfare. Mention every person with perfect courtesy. Do not anger anyone and treat all with kindness. . . . Like this servant, behave with the greatest forbearance and patience, and be accustomed to the holy fragrances.

However, do not be deceived by anyone, and do not lend ears to the flattery of some. Quickly discern the doubts of the doubtful. Be perspicacious. Do not be misled. Do not be attracted to the praise of the waverers. Fix your gaze on the Light of God and be the manifestation of "Beware the discernment of the believer, for he sees with the Light of God" (provisional translation).

'Abdu'l-Bahá also explains that the steadfastness of the believers in the face of such obvious errors—that is, their immunity to such machinations—would be the ultimate remedy for and safeguard against attempts to disrupt the Cause. He writes:

But you inquired about the remedy for this situation. As long as some have hope that through machinations and false rumors this upwelling of the life of the Covenant could be diverted from its natural channel and this effulgent star may be shifted from its heavenly orbit to another course, never shall these seditions end nor will these dark clouds be dissipated off the horizon of God's Cause.

But if the friends should truly rise as is incumbent on them in accordance with the Covenant and Testament, and manifest steadfastness and influence, then others will despair of changing and perverting the Centre of the Covenant, and will give up their provocations and deliberations. Gradually the radiant horizon of the Lord's Cause will be cleansed and sanctified of these dense clouds and the true friends and the sincere supporters, like your kind self, will be cheered and inspired. (provisional translation)

It is evident, from the Bahá'í teachings, that religion is to be the cause of the upliftment, the empowerment, and the liberation of the individual. Human conscience is free. And through true religion, the individual's capacities are cultivated to serve the Faith, to raise and nurture a family, to build community, to engage in occupations and in activities to address social and economic needs, and to participate in the wide range of human discourse directed toward the advancement of civilization. But to do this, religion must be safeguarded from fruitless theological debates that have divided it in the past and from the efforts of those who, because of pride or the desire for leadership, attempt to use religion for their own purposes. It was to preserve His Faith from these ills that Bahá'u'lláh instituted His Covenant. The freedom of the individual—indeed, the freedom of all individuals that emerges

from the application of the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh—depends on steadfastness and the internalization of the implications of the Covenant so as to become inoculated against the kind of behavior that would subvert it. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá states:

O loved ones of God! Give a hearing ear to my counsel and refrain from stirring up sedition. If you ever detect the odor of dissention from any soul, even though to outward seeming he be a prominent person or an accomplished scholar, you should know of a certainty that he is an anti-christ among men, an opponent of the religion of the glorious Lord, an adversary of the Almighty, a destroyer of the divine edifice, a violator of His Covenant and Testament, an outcast from the threshold of the All-Merciful. Indeed a man of experience and discernment is even as a brilliant light, is a moving impulse for the felicity and well being of the dwellers of both this petty world and of the Great Beyond. Prompted by faith and invested with the power of the Covenant he strives for the highest good of humanity and for the peace and security of mankind. (*Risaliy-i-Siyasiyyih*, provisional translation)

#### CONCLUSION

These are merely a few thoughts on the elements of a framework for action

pertaining to the scholarly or intellectual work of the Cause. Much of value, of course, has already been written over several decades. The message of 24 July 2013, written on behalf of the House of Justice to the National Assembly of Canada, makes it clear that the task at hand is not about starting over, but of taking stock and renewing and revitalizing effort. As noted, the nature of the framework that governs Bahá'í endeavors is evolving, and through study, consultation, experience, and reflection, the framework for action becomes richer and better defined over time.

The challenge is not unlike the effort for learning about growth and community-building in the last two decades. At the start of the Five Year Plan in 2001, for example, it was impossible to define an intensive program of growth, but only to point to some principles and prerequisites. By the end of that Plan in 2006, some 100 clusters achieved a certain level of activity that allowed the friends to extend a similar productive pattern of activity to 1,500 clusters worldwide. This progress then allowed for a further refinement of understanding in 2010, and a further advance in the efforts so that now work has begun in more than 5,000 clusters and at least 200 clusters have reached a level where hundreds of active workers have learned to engage thousands of participants in a pattern of Bahá'í community life that is vibrant, meaningful, and growing.

Among the questions that require



further consideration are: What are the elements of the framework for action for scholarly endeavor? How is it possible to strengthen the capacity of individuals to engage in a process of drawing relevant insights from the teachings and applying them in some manner to the concerns of their fields of interest? What structures can be created to accompany them, and what spaces can be created to assist them in reflecting on their efforts and learning to improve them over time? As the House of Justice writes:

It is timely, then, to reflect upon the many years of experience of the Association, the coherence of its undertakings with the major areas of action in which Bahá'ís are engaged, and the possibilities for the most productive avenues of endeavour in the future. . . . Every believer has the opportunity to examine the forces operating in society and introduce relevant aspects of the teachings within the discourses prevalent in whatever social space he or she is present. It is, perhaps, as a means to enhance the abilities of the friends to explore such opportunities in relation to their scholarly interests that the endeavours of the Association for Bahá'í Studies can be conceived. Through the specialized settings it creates, the Association can promote learning among a wide range of believers across a wide range of disciplines. (letter dated 24 July 2013)

The task, then, before the Association for Bahá'í Studies and the Bahá'í community worldwide is to learn to contribute to bringing these concepts to bear in a pattern of action that becomes increasingly more expansive and effective over time.

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