The Conversive Turn in Bahá'í Scripture: An Intersubjective Communications Model for Bridging Global Diversity

SUSAN BERRY BRILL DE RAMIREZ

Abstract

The Bahá'í writings offer extensive scriptural directives regarding the processes of conversive communications and their necessity for unifying a divided planet. Conversive communications manifest equality of participants, a spiritualized understanding through both mind and heart, and integrative consequences for individual and interpersonal coherence. The conversative aspect is an essentially collaborative, intersubjective, and relational, co-creative articulation that brings diverse persons and elements of the world together. The conversion aspect signifies the transformative capacity of language to transform persons and worlds through the unifying power of deep interpersonal connections. Bahá'í consultation is one form of conversive communications.

Résumé

Les écrits bahá'ís contiennent des directives scripturales détaillées au sujet des processus de communications conversives et du besoin de celles-ci pour unifier une planète en proie aux divisions. Les communications conversives témoignent de l'égalité entre les participants, d'une compréhension spiritualisée s'opérant à la fois dans l'esprit et dans le cœur, et des conséquences intégratives pour une cohésion individuelle et interpersonnelle. Le caractère conversatif des communications est une articulation cocréative foncièrement collaborative, intersubjective et relationnelle, qui rassemble des personnes et des éléments du monde. Le caractère conversionnel des communications signifie la capacité qu'a la langue de

transformer des individus et des mondes par le pouvoir unifiant de rapports inter-personnels profonds. À cet égard, l'approche bahá'íe de la consultation constitue une forme de communication conversive.

Resumen

Los escritos bahá'ís ofrecen directivas extensas en sus textos religiosos refer-ente a los procesos de comunicaciones conversivas y su necesidad para unificar un planeta dividido. Las comunicaciones conversivas expresan igualdad de los participantes, una comprensión espiritualizada tanto mental como de corazón y consecuencias integradoras para la coherencia individual e interpersonal. El aspecto conversador es una articulación co-creadora esencialmente colaborativa, supuesta a sujeción entre si y relacional, juntando personas y elementos diversos del mundo. El aspecto de conversión significa la capacidad transformadora del idioma para transformar personas y mundos mediante el poder unificador de conexiones profundas entre personas. El proceso consultivo bahá'í es una forma de comunicaciones conversivas.

Introduction

As the most contemporary of the world's religions, the guidance given in Bahá'í scripture is distinctively relevant to the complexities of today's emerging global community. While the spiritual verities that underlie the world's diverse religious faiths are strikingly similar, the specific laws and institutions established by each religion diverge insofar as the needs of their respective times and cultures require. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains, "Present exigencies demand new methods of solution; world problems are without precedent. . . . Ancient laws and archaic ethical systems will not meet the requirements of modern conditions." (*Promulgation of Universal Peace* 140). One area in which the development of the Bahá'í Faith diverges substantially from its religious predecessors regards its rhetorical orien-tation, presentation, and emphasis. Regardless of geography, century, or cultural tradition, all of the religions of the world, prior to the Bahá'í Faith, emerged within the context of vibrant oral traditions and a concomitant illiteracy (even where writing was extant but not yet widespread, as in the cases of Judaism, Christianity, and Zoroastrianism).

Originating in an increasingly literate and textually oriented world, whose respective oral traditions have been variously receding into distant memory, the Bahá'í Faith emphasizes the crucial role of sacred orality for the relational harmonics that bring persons together. The Bahá'í writings offer extensive scriptural directives and explanations regarding the processes of conversive communications and their necessity for a divided planet whose nations, regions, communities and families are sorely riven by discord, horrific violence, and socioeconomic deprivations. Briefly, what distinguishes conversive communications (conversative and conversional) from other forms of communications is the constitutive conjunction of (1) co-equal, intersubjective relationality (the equality of participants), (2) a deep epistemological use of mind and heart (spiritualized understanding), and (3) the integrative consequences of individual and interpersonal coherence (a resultant unity of persons or groups).

Whereas most communications modes involve the use of persons for linguistic and rhetorical ends of expression, information, argument, and persuasion (persons serving linguistic and logical ends), the opposite is true for conversive communications, where language and reason are the means towards larger ends of interpersonal and intergroup unity (language and reason serving as unifying means to real world cohesion). Bahá'u'lláh's tablets and prayers exemplify the power of conversive articulation for the integrating and unifying capacities that adhere in spite of and, more importantly, because of the rich diversity of humankind.[1] After a brief preliminary historical and religious review of the shifts from oral to textual cultures, the section "The Linguistic Turn to the Conversive" (36–41) provides a more developed explication of conversive communications, delineating and explaining fundamental differences between discursive and conversive communications, including etymological clarification.

To approach the conversive, it is necessary to begin with its gradually diminishing presence over the course of time and cultural shift. The transitions to increasing global literacy and the development of textually informed cultures, which albeit still do not reach the majority of the world's impoverished and undereducated masses, have brought tremendous benefits to the world in the arenas of the arts, science, technology, and communications. While global telecommunications and electronic networks span

the planet, facilitating international and regional connections previously impossible, one of the profound ironies of the turn to the text (whether written, video and film, other performative, or electronic) has been the almost universal turn away from the conversive. Contemporary discourse, whether in the public or private arenas, largely privileges the discursive utterance: the language and its denotative and connotative significance, the argument and its reasoning and validity, and the specific discursive content—all of which can be delivered orally, textually, or electronically. Even though it is the case that conversive communications are more the norm within traditionally oral cultures, it is crucial to note that the conversive can also be manifested in written and electronic form.[2] As mentioned above, the significant distinction lies in the inverse functioning of means and ends with discourse using persons as the means towards informational and argumentative ends versus conversive communications using language and reason (ratiocinative and empathic) as the means towards relationally unifying ends.[3] An overview of the historical evolution towards the text demonstrates the transitions from the inclusive wholeness of conversive orality to the increasing textual divides and hierarchies of cartographic imperial exclusion.[4]

The story of the great shift towards the Western, and now globalized, traditions of secular learning begins with the development of alphabetically based writing and the technological advances that furthered the widespread reliance on the printed word. While these innovations made possible tremendous societal progress as knowledge became more objective, objectified, and distanced from the knower, they also facilitated a radical break as learning gradually became more secularized and textualized into information that could be frozen in time (and on the page) and thereby easily categorized and defined and dissected as an object of study. There is a power and an immediacy to orality that is much more difficult to achieve through the mediation of the text (whether written or electronic). Of course, it is one thing to use writing for the record keeping of accounts and legislation; it is quite another to have personal engagements with the Word of God mediated by textual limits. Perhaps the most successful convergence of oral and written traditions can be found in the Hebrew people's capacity to maintain the vibrancy of sacred stories even

when preserved by textual means (Applbaum 3–12; Tannen, "Oral/Literate" 15). For example, the complexly metaphoric and richly connotative creation stories of the Hebrew people articulate a people's spiritual and creative origins, including their tribal geographies of belonging and ancestral homelands, their moral responsibilities to God and each other, and the consequences of disobedience. These stories are richly fleshed out in diverse ways when conversively brought to storytelling life, as in the Passover Seder; but when they are dissected and decontextualized from their tribal, cultural, regional, ancestral, and sacred origins, then the interpretive possibilities surrounding creative metaphors are attenuated into literal facticity, complex symbols are reduced to fixed archetypes, and rich storytelling traditions become lost behind the superficiality of the text (Goody, "Alternative Paths" 211–2). Alan Dundes explains this process in *Holy Writ as Oral Writ*, in which he notes that the processes of textualization permitted the realm of the sacred to become inscribed within the bounds of a secular analytic that defined it in logocentric terms as mythology (2). This can be seen more broadly in the Eurocentric readings of modernity that reduced sacred orality to the point of absence as origin, genesis, emergence stories were misinterpreted as little more than mythic fables.[5] As Talal Asad points out, "[T]he rereading of the scriptures through the grid of myth has not only separated the sacred from the secular, it has helped to constitute the secular as *the* epistemological domain" (43).

In a critical distinction from the past religions and various oral sacred traditions of the world, the Bahá'í Faith is the first to emerge within the condition of a prevailing global literacy. The complex history of the transitions to increasing literacy is inextricably interwoven with the trajectories of Manifest Destiny and global empire-building agendas. Even though the majority of the world's people during the nineteenth century were illiterate and the powers of empire explicitly worked to occlude the colonized and marginalized populations within their domains, an ironic consequence of the turn to the text is that one of the key tools of control was to encourage literacy, but in the languages of conquest. Shifts towards westernized education served the ideologies of empire building as colonized peoples were taught the diminishment and devaluation of their own cultures, traditions, histories, and beliefs.[6] Whereas the history of literacy among the Jewish

and Muslim populations was religiously driven, by the nineteenth century, the movements towards literacy were intertwined with the geopolitics of the time. Regardless of the specific historical channels that have produced their respective literate demographics, today most Jews and Christians and many Muslims are able to read their sacred texts, a sharp contrast from the situations of their predecessors, who had to rely on literate intermediaries who would orally transmit the guidance of scripture to the masses—the most educated often being members of the clergy. The various textual cultures of modernity, ranging from the early developments of writing and its performative forms (such as drama, poetry, and chant) to more recent media (video, electronic, and contemporary technological performance modes) present a categorically different demographic within which to have a religion of God originate and develop. This signifies new parameters of interpretive mediation that complicate direct conversive engagements with the Word for the majority of the world's inhabitants in ways that in the past challenged only the few.

Textual Turns to the Conversive Sacred

One religious effect of the change to an increasingly textually oriented world is that certain oral communication proclivities of the human experience with the divine, which traditionally have been familiar to people living within oral cultures, have become more foreign to participants of cultures that are more heavily mediated by the text. Over time, the understandings and practices of sacred song, chant, prayer, and meditation as intercessionary "conversations with God" have largely become lost and forgotten behind the layers of ritualized and textualized utterance that often becomes attenuated to little more than disengaged rote recitations.[7] The revelation of Bahá'u'lláh provides an extensive remedial primer that delineates conversive relationality to a modern audience increasingly distanced from its oral traditions. The orally informed methods of conversive communications (what French Caribbean theorist and writer Édouard Glissant terms "Poetics of Relation"), which are implicit in the scriptures and practices of the world's earlier faiths, are renewed and made explicit in the tablets and prayers of Bahá'í scripture. For an audience whose lives are

more textually mediated, Bahá'u'lláh articulates the Word of God in the form of the Book[8] while insuring the immediacy and power of the conversively revealed Word.

The rhetorical turn in Bahá'í scripture towards the conversive evidences a significance far beyond the more limited scope of its surface textuality, for the realm of the conversive is inherently relational with the text of the Book serving the larger spiritual ends of an interpersonal ingathering. This scriptural shift manifests, clarifies, and requires fundamental transformations in contemporary human communications that encompass the interwoven domains of linguistics, psychology, epistemology, and the practice of interpersonal human relations. Bahá'u'lláh makes it very clear that all the sacred traditions of the world throughout time have advocated deeply relational and transforming communications, but that, today, not only do the majority of people not communicate conversively, but that many have even forgotten how to do so, instead communicating in the more efficient, yet superficial, manner of discourse in which communications stay at the levels of ratiocinative thought, personal opinion, and emotional response. It is important to remember that the central distinction between discourse and converse is directional regarding means and ends: whether the persons are the means towards the ends of the argument, in the former, or the language and thought are the means towards the ends of interpersonal relationality (unity). In traditionally slower-paced oral cultures, it was easier for individuals to consider another's words at the deeper levels of reflection and concentration ("ponder this in thy heart," as Bahá'u'lláh writes in one of the Hidden Words). The global primacy of discourse and the text today is such that as Walter Ong asserts in *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, "We—readers of books such as this—are so literate that it is very difficult for us to conceive of an oral universe of communication or thought except as a variant of a literate universe" (2). Bahá'u'lláh makes it very clear that a turn to the conversive is crucial for the well-being of all of our lives today. In this way, empathically engaged communications can serve the larger ends of familial, community, regional, and global needs. Attention to conversive communications as articulated and advocated by Bahá'u'lláh is presented as requisite to the resolutions of the world's problems, both big and small.

The significance of this shift cannot be overstated, for Bahá'u'lláh states that human utterance is the most powerful means for human transformation. Abrogating the Islamic law of *jihad* for the Bahá'ís, Bahá'u'lláh states that now, true conversion to the Faith of God must focus on people's hearts, and that such a transformation cannot be achieved by means of force, but rather by means of the Word of God as communicated in relationally intersubjective and heartfelt human speech: "Arise for the triumph of My Cause, and, through the power of thine utterance subdue the hearts of men. . . . Indeed through the power of good words, the righteous have always succeeded in winning command over the meads of the hearts of men. Say, O ye loved ones! Do not forsake prudence. . . . and beware lest your hands or tongues cause harm unto anyone among mankind" (*Tablets* 84–85). In a post-9/11 world imploding under the burdens and legacies of empire building and regional and global colonizations, the importance of such guidance is patently clear.

Bahá'u'lláh proclaims that the central problem in the world today is the fact that humans have forgotten how to communicate conversively, with God and His Prophets, with each other, and with nonhuman members of creation (e.g., animals, plants, the Earth, stars).[9] As expressed in Bahá'í scripture, the most powerful and effective remedy for the world's problems is not to be found within the arenas of politics or economics, but rather within the realm of communications. In the Lawḥ-i-Maqsúd, Bahá'u'lláh delineates that solutions to the world's troubles require the knowledge and understanding that can only be reached through the specific conversive communications process of consultation: "The heaven of divine wisdom is illumined with the two luminaries of consultation and compassion. Take ye counsel together in all matters, inasmuch as consultation is the lamp of guidance which leadeth the way, and is the bestower of understanding" (*Tablets* 168). Within the framework of cultures in which most forms of communication are elicited and responded to fairly quickly at the levels of minds and passions, the much slower-paced and contemplative mode of conversive consultation, common among past cultures, is now distanced from our view and eludes our conceptual grasp. Bahá'u'lláh repeatedly urges his readers to "ponder" in conjunctive thought that involves both mind and heart, thereby avoiding the divides that result in the extremes

of unfeeling reason or uncontrolled emotion. This process that, for a literate world, Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá need to declare and reiterate and explain again and again was part of the fabric of everyday life in oral cultures.[10]

Bahá'í scripture advocates an interwoven process of deep thinking and reflective feeling—emphasizing that conversively informed thought and communications lead to spiritualized words and actions. Prior religious traditions mention this process of deep thinking, but it is not given the rhetorical and epistemological tutorial emphasis that it has in the Bahá'í writings. In one of the Psalms when King David speaks to God, he says, "[M]y heart standeth in awe of thy word" (119:161). The rightful place for thought is identified as a person's heart in Islam. One of the hadiths of Islam, as recorded in the Bukhari translation and initially related by Abu Huraira, affirms that "the Prophet said, 'Allah said, "I have prepared for My righteous slaves (such excellent things) as no eye has ever seen, nor an ear has ever heard nor a human heart can ever think of"'" (9.93.589). From the earlier Zoroastrian tradition in Persia, the Book of Common Prayer (known as the Khorda Avesta) of the Zend-Avesta contrasts the spiritualized knowledge that is informed by a faithful and enlightened heart versus the heart that is unenlightened and limited by one's passions: "The man without glory, led astray from the right way, grieves in his heart; the man without glory thinks thus in himself: . . . But I think thus in my heart" (105–6). In Christian scripture, the Gospel according to Matthew relates that Jesus criticized those whose hearts do not think good thoughts: "Jesus knowing their thoughts said, Wherefore think ye evil in your hearts?" (9:4). Delineating the epistemological emphasis the Báb placed on a person's heart, in his appropriately titled volume *Gate of the Heart*, Nader Saiedi affirms that the heart is "the supreme seat of spiritual truth, the abode of divine revelation" (102).

'Abdu'l-Bahá states explicitly that the "spirit" of communications (oral or written) is determined by the condition and focus of the speaker's heart: "Man's speech is the revealer of his heart. In whatever world the heart travels, man's conversation will revolve around that center. From his words you can understand in what world he is traveling" (qtd. in Hornby 339). Then referencing the Imám 'Ali of the Shi'ah Islamic tradition, 'Abdu'l-Bahá em-

phasizes that a person's articulated words are informed by and, thereby, reflect her or his spiritual condition: "For this reason His Holiness 'Ali says: 'Man is hidden behind his tongue. Out of the abundance of his heart does man speak'" (qtd. in Hornby 339).[11] Perhaps more important than any other prescription in the Bahá'í writings is Bahá'u'lláh's oft-repeated guidance for people's communications to become increasingly conversive and, accordingly, respiritualized. Bahá'u'lláh states that the lack of such spiritually informed communications has produced "men . . . whose words are the pride of the world, and whose deeds are the shame of the nations" (*Tablets* 61). He points to "expositions and discourses . . . [that] cause the spirits to be chilled" (*Tablets* 142). Bahá'u'lláh declares that by clinging to a superficial textuality, deep meaning is lost: "[B]y holding fast unto names, they deprive themselves of the inner reality," of "the ocean of inner meanings," and of the "spirit" with which "every word is endowed" (*Tablets* 58, 167, 172). Even more intriguing is Bahá'u'lláh's affirmation that "a kindly tongue . . . clotheth the words with meaning, it is the fountain of the light of wisdom and understanding" (*Epistle to the Son of the Wolf* 15). This concept of heartfelt significance will be clarified by investigations into the linguistic subtleties of conversive relationality.

The Linguistic Turn to the Conversive

To approach the conversive turn advocated in Bahá'í scripture, it is necessary to delineate the subtle, yet categoric, differences between conversive and discursive communications. The importance of this nominal change cannot be overstated, for as Wittgenstein reminds us, "A new word is like a fresh seed sewn on the ground of the discussion" (*Culture and Value* 2e). As already noted, the realm of the conversive reflects the dual aspects of conversation and conversion. The conversative aspect is an essentially collaborative, intersubjective, and relational co-creative articulation that brings diverse persons and elements of the world together. The conversion aspect signifies the transformative capacity of language to transform persons (human and nonhuman) and worlds through the unifying power of deep interpersonal connections: what John Attinasi and Paul Friedrich refer to as "life-changing" or "conversion conversations" (43). Attinasi and

Friedrich note the importance of the conversive for scholars where such relationally based and mutually transforming "conversion conversations" push us beyond "the limits of conventional social science and suggest new standards and goals" (43, 49) for scholarship that transcends "the relentless dominance of textuality in the scholarly mind" (Ong, *Orality* 10). Whereas scholars have tended to focus on the divide between orality and literacy (Ong, *Orality and Literacy*), *parole* and *langue* (de Saussure), and speech and writing (Derrida), an analysis of the etymology and processes of conversive and discursive communications delineates foundational differences that prove to be more significant than the more superficial dissimilarities of orality and textuality.

Webster's unabridged dictionary explains the Latinate etymology of the word "discourse" as "a running to and fro" (745). This word can be divided into its prefix *dis-* and its root *currere* to run. The dictionary defines *dis-* as follows: "A prefix denoting: 1. *Separation* or *parting from*, . . . 2. *Reversal, undoing, negation*, or *depriving*" (*Webster's* 740, italics in original). The first definition of the prefix is the one that refers to its predominant usage in discourse; however, as we shall see, the second meaning's sense of negation also bears interesting and profound implications that apply—notably the extent to which discourse invariably impedes, and possibly even negates, the collaborative process of interpersonal communications. The concept and practice of discourse presume a separation that is bridged by language and logic. Regarding the dialogic form of discourse, Anton L. Becker points out that "a dialogic stance . . . [involves] negotiating a ground between us" (239): the interstices that Bruce Mannheim and Dennis Tedlock refer to as "the economics of verbal exchange" (4, 8) and that Mikhail Bakhtin describes as the linguistic "borderline between oneself and the other" (293).

At the underlying grammatical levels of its language game (using the Wittgensteinian sense of language use with its attendant rules of play), discourse occurs when there is reasoned communication that proceeds in a logical and necessarily consecutive sequence. Of course, in its dysfunctional and discordant forms, the logic and language are disjunctive and productive of interpersonal alienation and disunity. In its functional forms, discourse is reasoned, logical, and formulated with emphasis placed on the sense or signification that is discursively conveyed through language,

whether in oral or written form. The participating individuals (the discoursers) are relevant as the transmitters and receivers of the presented argument, but it is the argument that takes precedence in this ostensibly objective mode of communication. The words, the text of the arguments, the rhetorical presentation, and the logical thinking take primacy over the speaking or writing subjects and listening or reading audience whose discursive significance is primarily as vehicles for the ends of the articulation. This being said, it is important to point out that the logical sense of discourse is not purely bounded by strict ratiocinative limits of deductive argumentation.

Discourse can take many different forms, ranging from the more conflictual and confrontational (which further distances the discoursers from each other) to a more collegial expression of views (which, even so, maintains the positional divides). Whether delivered in either monologic or dialogic forms, the difference here lies primarily in the number of persons participating in the discourse, one in the case of a monologue or two or more in the case of a dialogue. Regardless of the number of participants, in any form of discourse, at the center of the communication lies the interstitial text, words, argument, logic. The primary roles for the participants consist in the thinking and transmitting of that which is being uttered (orally, textually, or electronically). It is crucial to reiterate that even though discourse can take on a dialogic form with multiple persons, largely peripheral to the notion and practice of discourse is the relevance of the relationship between the participants (Ong, *Interfaces* 53–81). The multiple voices of dialogic discourse provide the opportunity for diverse subjects to present their views while at the same time positionally asserting their subjectivities and positions at the expense of their respective listeners' relegation to an objective status (even though the positions of sender and receiver may shift back and forth over the course of the dialogue). In other words, the person in the subjective position or role of speaker displaces the "others" to the grammatical positions of passive listening objects. Once another speaks, in dialogue, the prior speaker is displaced from speaking subject to listening object position. Regardless of any speaker's subjectivity in discourse, persons are subservient to the language and logic which hold primacy at the expense of interpersonal relations.

As Bakhtin clearly states, dialogism is an inherently positional and op-
positional process: "one point of view opposed to another, one evaluation
opposed to another, one accent opposed to another" (314). Discourse de-
centers, minimizes, and in some cases actually causes to disappear alto-
gether the participating persons behind their constructed roles as discur-
sive instruments. Becker and Ong point out that such privileging of the
logos invariably marginalizes the speaking/writing subject and audience,
resulting in an essentially "autonomous" and "voiceless" discourse (Becker
249; Ong, *Orality* 78–81). While the multiplicity and possible heteroglos-
sia[12] (diverse tongues) of dialogic communication may give the appearance
of a conversation or conversive relationship, it is crucial to recognize that,
in many cases, this is the appearance, not the reality, of an intersubjective
conversivity.

Conversive communications give primacy to the developing intersubjec-
tive relationship that is being developed or strengthened among its mutu-
ally co-creative participants: here language and reason are subservient to
relational ends. The linguistic manifestations of hierarchized power differ-
entials evidenced in the various discursive modes of communications are
absent within conversively informed communications where, conversely,
we find a centering relationality that is co-creative and mutually empower-
ing of all involved. This is evident in the word's very constructions (e.g.,
conversive, conversant, conversation, converse, and conversion) where the
prefix "con-" signifies "*with, together*" and the Latin *vertere* has the sense of
"to turn, to change, to translate" (*Webster's* 555, 2834). The word comes
from the Latin *conversatio* which has the senses of "frequent abode in a
place, intercourse, manner of life": intercourse as opposed to discourse
(*Webster's* 582). As Deborah Tannen points out, "In narration and conver-
sation, the particular enables listeners (or readers) to provide a subjective-
ly real understanding"—their co-creative "participation in sense-making"
("Waiting" 215), what Angela Hildyard and David R. Olson recognize as
a "'speaker's meaning' . . . preserved in the mind of the listener" (20), what
Claude Lévi-Strauss has described as "a kind of continuous reconstruction
taking place in the mind of the listener" (49), and what Karl Kroeber refers
to, within a storytelling framework, as "a social transaction in which the
audience 'participates' as actively as the teller" (8). As R. P. McDermott

and Henry Tylbor affirm, "Collusion is necessary for any conversation" (219).

In conversive communications, words and moments of silence both facilitate deeply resonating interpersonal connections and understanding that are personally and interpersonally transforming, thereby contributing to lived unity in the world. The realm of the conversive is that of coming together, of ingathering, of changing through relationship, of interpersonal transformations. "Changing with" is like a dance in which each person maintains her or his individuality, subjectivity, and value while interacting intersubjectively and co-creatively with fellow person(s)—a coming together in "unity in diversity" (Shoghi Effendi, *World Order* 41). Whereas discourse is a means of division, separation, distinction, and differentiation followed by a ratiocinative and logocentric bridging of distances which, more often than not, serves to perpetuate and/or accentuate the divides, conversive processes recognize and affirm the diversity and subjectivities that are manifested throughout creation as diverse persons (human and nonhuman) enter into relationships that interweave the fabric of creation in continually unfolding worlds and lives. In this fashion, the more deeply rooted connective links that are otherwise obscured behind the more superficial veils of difference and appearance are, in turn, affirmed and strengthened—hence the fact that conversive knowledge emerges within the framework of the relationship between the knower and that which she or he is learning.

There is a fluidity to conversive communications that elides the positionality of discourse. Since each participant is a co-equal and co-creative subject throughout conversively informed engagements, each person's subjective status as an active participant is affirmed both in one's own speech and actions and, more importantly, in the speech and behaviors of the fellow participants. Hierarchies of power and binary divides are the stuff of discourse. Conversive communication is definitionally relational and intersubjective. As Iranian Bahá'í novelist and scholar Bahíyyih Nakhjávaní tells us, "There is a language lying all about us that we have not learned to read. There is a syntax of the spirit that we hunger for. But, accustomed to the narrow roads of grey assumption and the fierce possessive drive for resolution, it is hard for us, this desperate generation, to turn aside from

the highway . . . and consider what we've missed. . . . The road, its teeth clenched in grammatical assertion, has forgotten what it chased" (6–7). The parameters of the conversive yield integral change in individuals and relationships that result from the deeply intersubjective, communicative intercourse demonstrated linguistically in spiritualized, empathic, and experiential relationship.

CONVERSIVE TRANSFORMATIONS

Verbal and/or experiential communications that are conversive can provide important means towards intersubjective knowing and interpersonal transformations or conversions (Anderson 211–34). The therapeutic qualities of interpersonal communications have been widely accepted across cultures and times. In classical Greece, Aristotle noted the cathartic healing effects of group storytelling and drama. Indigenous communities worldwide have long observed healing ceremonies dependent on specific verbal articulations (e.g., consultative gatherings with elders, chants, songs, prayers, recitations, storytelling). Additionally, the methodology of conversation has been at the center of psychological and psychiatric therapeutic process for over a century with a variety of theoretical and methodological approaches, each of which manifest varying degrees of conversivity and discursivity (largely determined by theoretical approach and practitioner skill). Recently, scholarship has begun to consider explicitly the potentially transformative effects that conversations and oral storytelling offer in persons' lives, even in everyday interactions. As Harlene Anderson explains in *Conversation, Language, and Possibilities: A Postmodern Approach to Therapy*, "One of the most important features of life is conversation. We are in continuous conversation with each other and with ourselves. Through conversation we form and reform our life experiences and events; we create and recreate our meanings and understandings; and we construct and reconstruct our realities and our selves" (xvii).

 In their essay "Maps and Meaning in Life and Healing," consultant clinical psychologist Peter Harper and play therapist Mary Gray affirm that within more orally informed cultures, personal healing and change invariably occurred within relationally conversive settings, especially noting the

"therapeutic" power of the storytelling event: "The creation and telling of stories has been used universally by cultures, communities and individuals to provide hope, meaning, purpose and understanding in life" (42, 51–61). Echoing Anderson's emphasis on the concrete transformative capacities of conversation, Kedar Nath Dwivedi and Damian Gardner affirm that this is true in "the stories that we have about ourselves" which they claim "are constitutive or shaping of our lives" (32). Folklorist Karl Kroeber goes even further, suggesting that conversive communication in the form of "storytelling is perhaps humanity's primary tool for *changing* reality" (13).

The central role that conversive communication has played in people's lives and communities throughout time is perhaps most poignantly demonstrated in its telling absences. Harper and Gray emphasize the psychic and social loss that accrues due to the lack of conversive relations and storytelling in persons', families', and communities' collective lives. With the "increasingly individualistic orientation [of] twentieth-century Western society . . . [and the] significant decline in the oral tradition, . . . successive generations appear to have developed an increasingly egocentric focus" (42). Play therapist Sonia Compton points to the transformative healing in children that comes from told stories, noting that storytelling permits the listener to engage with the story at the deeper level of "the unconscious mind, therefore giving the opportunity for unconscious thinking and behavior to come into the conscious mind . . . [often with] resolutions to conflicts and different coping strategies" (169–70). This is the transformative knowing that combines mind (the conscious level of linguistic and reasoned thought) and heart (the unconscious level of insight and inspiration).

Insofar as religious communications are concerned, at the heart of all of the world's religions and sacred oral traditions is the emphasis on persons' and communities' spiritual transformations as elicited through the power of the Word of God—which Bahá'u'lláh affirms as "the supreme animating power for the advancement of the world and the exaltation of its peoples" (*Tablets* 86). Bahá'u'lláh qualifies this process later on in this same tablet, stating that the transforming capacity of scripture requires the individual to come into a conversive relationship with the sacred so that one's heart can be transformed by that Word: "The Word of God may be likened unto

a sapling, whose roots have been implanted in the hearts of men. It is incumbent upon you to foster its growth through the living waters of wisdom, of sanctified and holy words, so that its root may become firmly fixed and its branches may spread out as high as the heavens and beyond" (94). Here and elsewhere, Bahá'u'lláh emphatically affirms the centrality of conversively transformative communications, stating that the growth of the Word of God in the world is contingent upon humans' increasingly sanctified words and wisdom that reflect the successful implantation of that Word in their hearts. This process is underscored further in Bahá'u'lláh's categoric avowal of its role in spiritually informed interpersonal communications: "They who are the beloved of God, in whatever place they gather and whomsoever they may meet, must evince, in their attitude towards God, and in the manner of their celebration of His praise and glory, such humility and submissiveness that every atom of the dust beneath their feet may attest the depth of their devotion. The conversation carried by these holy souls should be informed with such power that these same atoms of dust will be thrilled by its influence" (*Gleanings* 7). The transformative power of conversive communications lies less in the specificity of its words, reasoning, and facts, and more in the articulative relationship that one enters into through the engagement of "holy souls." This is not to say that spoken and heard words are unimportant. They are indeed a crucial part of effective communications, but in conversive communications, there is the deeper relational element of the sacred that makes those words enlightening, ennobling, and deeply transforming. In its most powerful form, conversive communications are evidenced in the revelatory Word of God as presented by the founders of the world's religions and the prophets of the world's oral sacred traditions.

A core teaching of the Bahá'í Faith is the principle of progressive revelation that posits that God has always made His Word available to all people since the beginning of time and that every human person has always had the opportunity to come into relationship with the sacred. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains, "As you have observed, at the time of the appearance of each Manifestation of God [e.g., Moses, Buddha, Zoroaster, Jesus Christ, Muhammad, Bahá'u'lláh] extraordinary progress has occurred in the world of minds, thoughts and spirits" (*Some Answered Questions* 163).

Such transformations of human lives and cultures, Bahá'u'lláh makes clear, are dependent upon the crucial power of sacred communications between people and the divine, and also spiritualized and loving communications among persons—a fact that Bahá'u'lláh states has been the case throughout human existence. In His tablet Lawḥ-i-Maqṣúd, Bahá'u'lláh conveys that "Moreover He [God] hath in every age and cycle, in conformity with His transcendent wisdom, sent forth a divine Messenger to revive the dispirited and despondent souls with the living waters of His utterance" (*Tablets* 161).

Even beyond people's individual engagements with religious scripture, Bahá'u'lláh calls for a broad application of conversive communications and conversive ways of knowing. He laments the global crises that come from people's incapacity to orient their thought processes through God's Word: "The world is in great turmoil, and the minds of its people are in a state of utter confusion" (*Tablets* 94). Bahá'u'lláh states over and over again that human understanding must be deepened, that wisdom is desperately needed to guide the world's peoples. A conversive response engages with scripture, human expression, and the natural world at the deeper levels of heart and spirit, considering what has been heard, read, or otherwise experienced in contemplative and meditative ways that open the person to empathic and spiritualized understanding. Key to this process are moments and periods of silence during which external inputs (what is read, seen, experienced) and internal thoughts and feeling are given deep consideration at the level of heart. The person's receptivity to the higher susceptibilities opens in such deepened prayer and meditation, enabling the understanding that comes from inspiration and insight. Many indigenous writers and thinkers have affirmed that this part of the process is inherently relational as persons' hearts come together through love and affection (Tapahonso; Silko 54–57). Reflecting on the Bahá'í teachings, John E. Esslemont writes, "Heart alone can communicate to heart the state of the knower" (89).

CONVERSIVE RELATIONS ACROSS WORLDS—PRAYER AND MEDITATION

Within all frameworks of the sacred (whether the more formal institutionalized religions or oral sacred traditions), there is the profound sense

that conversive communications are possible across worlds, as a human person comes into relationship with those beyond this world. Upon being asked whether "a departed soul [can] converse with someone still on earth," 'Abdu'l-Bahá affirms that interactively conversive communications occur across worlds, but that their form is different from conversations expressed orally or textually in human language: "A conversation can be held, but not as our conversation. There is no doubt that the forces of the higher worlds interplay with the forces of this plane. The heart of man is open to inspiration; this is spiritual communication. As in a dream one talks with a friend while the mouth is silent, so is it in the conversation of the spirit" (*Paris Talks* 178). Bahá'u'lláh urges his followers and all who peruse his Tablets to enter into their own relationships with the divine—the most powerful means of doing this being prayer, which 'Abdu'l-Bahá defines as "conversation with God" (qtd. in Esslemont 88). Bahá'u'lláh further points out that the founders of the world's religions conversed with God: "Thus in moments in which these Essences of Being were deep immersed beneath the oceans of ancient and everlasting holiness, or when they soared to the loftiest summits of Divine mysteries, they claimed their utterances to be the Voice of Divinity, the Call of God Himself" (*Gleanings* 54).[13]

Such sacred communications are not reserved only for mystics and the prophets of God, for all sacred traditions specify the importance of prayer, song, chant, meditation, or other forms of sacred conversive communications for their adherents. In prayer, the supplicant speaks to the divine and, during moments of silence, perhaps hears a response. In meditation upon scripture, the reverse communications process occurs, for during the reading, chanting, singing, or other recitation of scripture, one listens to the Word of God, while the silent moments are when the individual conversively responds to the divine. Also, during those deep moments of reflection, contemplation, and meditation, the individual's heart opens to the influx of the Holy Spirit and the love of the divine. John E. Esslemont explained this process using 'Abdu'l-Bahá's words to the early followers of the Bahá'í Faith in the West:

> In order that God may make known His Mind and Will to men, He must speak to them in a language which they can understand, and this

He does by the mouths of His Holy Prophets. While these Prophets are alive in the body They speak with men face to face and convey to them the Message of God, and after Their death Their message continues to reach men's minds through Their recorded sayings and writings. But this is not the only way in which God can commune with and inspire those whose hearts are seeking after truth, wherever they are, and whatever their native race or tongue. . . . 'Abdu'l-Bahá speaks much of this spiritual language. He says, for instance:—

"We should speak in the language of heaven—in the language of the spirit—for there is a language of the spirit and heart. It is as different from our language as our own language is different from that of the animals, who express themselves only by cries and sounds.

"It is the language of the spirit which speaks to God. When, in prayer, we are freed from all outward things and turn to God, then it is as if in our hearts we hear the voice of God. Without words we speak, we communicate, we converse with God and hear the answer." (Esslemont 88–89)

The deep receptivity of successful spiritualized communications requires that persons engage their hearts and spirits in addition to their minds and senses in the conversive processes as interactive speakers and listeners. Regardless of whether conversive communications are manifested orally, textually, or electronically, such communications are definitionally relational and intersubjective and reliant upon the practice of silence for mutual contemplation and response.

In 1993, a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual Bahá'í spoke to the contemporary challenges to and requirements for deep interactions with scripture: "But, in addition to needing the proper spirit, it requires concentration and meditation to unravel the meanings which lie enshrined in the Revealed Word. Nowadays, however, the lives of most people are busy and crowded with distractions, so it requires great discipline to devote the time, attention and care necessary to study the Teachings in the way they deserve. Deepening is like a skill or art which must be acquired through effort." To assist such efforts, Bahá'í scripture embeds such time and silences in the very texts of Bahá'u'lláh's

tablets and prayers. In many of the original Arabic and Persian texts, there are line breaks (similar to poetic formats) that invite the reader as a conversive listener-reader to pause, consider, and respond.[14] These line breaks represent the emphatic, empathic, and meaningful pauses that are heard in an oral presentation—demonstrating the speech and silence of a speaker engaged in a conversation.[15]

Especially in light of the religious strife that today is so endemic globally, it is important to underscore the fact that evidence of conversive communications across worlds is exemplified in the diverse religious and sacred traditions of the world. As Zulkiple Abd. Ghani affirms about Islamic teaching and belief, "human communication does not only function horizontally with fellow beings, but also vertically with God" (39). This is the very conversive process that Bahá'u'lláh explicitly asserts is lacking in the world today and which is desperately needed to re-spiritualize people's lives, thoughts, and actions. In his tablet Kalímát-i-Firdawsíyyih, Bahá'u'lláh cites the nineteenth century Iranian philosopher Hájí Mullá Hádí Sabzivárí: "Alas! Attentive ears are lacking, otherwise the whisperings of the Sinaic Bush could be heard from every tree" (qtd. in *Tablets* 61). Within the textual cultures of much of the world today, often those prayerful vertical communications become formalized and textualized into monologues or dialogic litanies which are categorically different acts from that of conversively informed prayer, meditation, and knowledge. In light of the increasing pace of many people's lives today, what once were the deep, slow, and considered conversive prayers of an earlier era have, all too often, turned into monologic recitations without time even being taken at the end for reflection and response.

In the study materials devised by the Ruhi Institute for Bahá'í study circles, Book 1, *Reflections on the Life of the Spirit*, laments that "Unfortunately, humanity is steadily losing its understanding of how to pray, substituting empty and meaningless rituals for indispensable inner conditions. Therefore, the study groups should consult a great deal on the sections of the unit which refer to the attitudes of heart and mind that help one enter the state of prayer, and to the conditions that should be created in one's surroundings at the time of prayer" (3). Bahá'u'lláh's explicit instructions regarding the conversive process of prayer provide the needed tutorial for

followers of all religious and sacred traditions whose prayers and medita-
tions have become increasingly formalized and textualized.

The Ruhi methodology and program, developed by Bahá'ís in Columbia,
consists of a structured program of study circles that assist individuals in
learning how to engage conversively with the Word of God in prayer and
meditation and, also, how to apply those lessons in communication with
one's fellow persons in the world. The passages from scripture included
in the first Ruhi workbook focus on speech (prayerful, truthful, loving)
and deeds ("pure and goodly," unifying, and contributory to the peace and
"betterment of the world"). As a primer for learning conversive speech
and listening, abbreviated scriptural passages are used so that study circle
participants can practice the effective application of deepening silence. One
short selection and its use demonstrate this program in which conversive
communications are taught and practiced: "When a thought of war comes,
oppose it by a stronger thought of peace. A thought of hatred must be
destroyed by a more powerful thought of love" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*
29; *Reflections* 14).[16] A conversive engagement might have a person read or
hear the beginning clause, "When a thought of war comes," and during the
brief comma pause, a conversive reading or listening would elicit a brief
silent response. Perhaps it might be a heartfelt consideration of the seem-
ingly ever-present thoughts and actions of war today or the daily news me-
dia reports or perhaps a momentary reflection of one's own all too many
thoughts, discussions, debates, and arguments regarding war.

After the momentary consideration of pervasive "thoughts of war,"
'Abdu'l-Bahá says that we must "oppose" any thought of war "by a stronger
thought of peace." At the longer period pause, the listener-reader might
consider the idea that "thoughts of peace" can be strong and potentially
stronger than thoughts of war. Perhaps the listener-reader might feel the
very strength of peace in his or her breast, perhaps the unifying power
of prayer and visions of persons coming together in unity. 'Abdu'l-Bahá
continues, bringing his words about war down to the level of every in-
dividual person, saying that "A thought of hatred must be destroyed by
a more powerful thought of love." Not solely the arena of international
governmental and military concern, the elimination of war is offered to
each of his listener-readers as an integrally personal responsibility. Hatred

leads to war; peace comes from love. The pause at the end of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's sentence regarding the capacity of "powerful thoughts of love" to "destroy" thoughts of hatred invites each listener-reader to consider where in his or her own life hateful, angry, and otherwise unloving thoughts occur and which must needs be "destroyed by a more powerful thought of love." As demonstrated in these two paragraphs, conversive interactions require a spiritually (or, at the very least, an empathically) strategic use of time and silence whether this is during the silent moments of prayer when the supplicant listens for reply or during periods of meditation upon scriptural passages with silence reflective of the individual's deeply felt responses to the Word of God. For prayer and meditation to literally become such "conversations with God," exertion of time is essential, as Shoghi Effendi makes explicit in his reminder, "For conversation is after all a slow process" (*Compilation of Compilations* 270).

Epistemology and Conversive Ways of Knowing

The post-Platonic and post-Cartesian West has focused the study of epistemology and human ways of knowing predominantly in the capacities of the individual person and individual mind as articulated in Descartes' famous dictum *"Je pense dois je suis"* ("I think therefore I am"). Bahá'u'lláh categorically affirms the importance of the individual and the human mind, revealing the following in His tablet Kalímát-i-Firdawsíyyih: "the greatest gift and the most wondrous blessing hath ever been and will continue to be Wisdom"—here signifying the deep conversive knowledge that comes from the conjunctive processes of mind, heart, spirit, and experience (*Tablets* 66). In one of his Paris talks, 'Abdu'l-Bahá offers a parallel assertion, stating that "God's greatest gift to man is that of intellect, or understanding" (41). Emphasizing the highest respect that the Bahá'í teachings give to knowledge and understanding, in a tablet addressed to the early Bahá'í Mírzá Maqsúd (Lawh-i-Maqsúd), Bahá'u'lláh declares, "The man of consummate learning and the sage endowed with penetrating wisdom are the two eyes to the body of mankind. God willing, the earth shall never be deprived of these two greatest gifts" (*Tablets* 171). It is crucial to note that the Bahá'í affirmation of the importance of mind in no wise gives primacy

nor centrality to this means of knowing. While the valuation of mind is un-
questioned, there are two areas in which Bahá'í scriptural guidance seeks
to redirect contemporary thinking and knowledge production and our
understandings of those processes: one is the primacy given to deepened
thought; the second is the recognition and appreciation of the relational
function of conversive knowledge creation.

   Throughout Bahá'í scripture, Bahá'u'lláh articulates that the processes
of knowledge and understanding are neither bounded by nor rooted in the
domain of ratiocinative intellection—instead the sacred is reoriented to its
centripetal center with reason, words, and logic displaced from any sense
of logocentric primacy and relocated as tools of knowing. The dangers of
such logocentrism for scholarship is made explicit in the Lawḥ-i-Maqṣud,
where Bahá'u'lláh writes, "Such academic pursuits as begin and end in
words alone have never been and will never be of any worth" (*Tablets* 169).
Bahá'u'lláh calls his followers and the world to an epistemological model in
which the seat of knowing is the heart (not the mind); the process of know-
ing is fundamentally relational (not individualistic); all knowledge that is
meaningful is rooted in the sacred (not secular)[17]; the primary method of
knowing utilizes reason in conjunction with love and inspiration; the mode
of scholarship is conversive (not discursive); and the ends of learning are
"the knowledge of the Ancient of Days," the spiritual growth of the know-
er, and real world benefits to human (and nonhuman) prosperity and the
advancement of civilizations (*Gleanings* 263, 215).

   Specifically regarding the domain of scriptural interpretation, Bahá'u'lláh
writes, "The understanding of His words and the comprehension of the
utterances of the Birds of Heaven are in no wise dependent upon human
learning. They depend solely upon purity of heart, chastity of soul, and
freedom of spirit" (*Kitáb-i-Íqán* 211). He even goes further, noting that
knowledge per se (not just knowledge of religious or spiritual matters) is
housed in the heart and that such knowledge comes from God: "Knowl-
edge is a light which God sheddeth into the heart of whomsoever He wil-
leth" (*Kitáb-i-Íqán* 184). Indeed, Saiedi, as noted above, references the Báb's
Commentary on the Verse of Light II (Tafsír-i-'Ayiy-i-Núr) in which the
Báb distinguishes the revelatory and epistemological roles of heart, spirit,
soul and body, noting the distinctive capacity of heart as the seat of rev-

elation, inspiration, and knowing (102–4). It is this deepening stage that moves the knowing process into a communications model where knowing is an intersubjective process in contradistinction to the more objective and objectifying ratiocinative methods of secular study. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá pithily asserted almost a century ago, "Knowledge is love" (qtd. in *The Ocean of My Words* 20).

It is here that the Bahá'í turn to the conversive is its most revolutionary, for Bahá'u'lláh teaches that the process of deep knowing is a fundamentally relational process between the knower, fellow/sister knowers, the divine, and whatever it is that one seeks to know. The Bahá'í emphasis on the importance of consultation and conversive deep knowing clarifies that understanding is an essentially communicative act that needs to be understood in relational, empathic, and spiritual terms with applied consequences that benefit the world. This is akin to what Anderson confirms regarding conversive communication: "conversation . . . [with] its transformational nature . . . is the most important vehicle for the construction of meaning" (108, 109). Intersubjective communications and relationships that are explicitly or implicitly grounded in the sacred may be the primary distinction between conversive ways of knowing and a more discursive epistemology: the former reflecting a process in which one knows something by being in relation to it, by being a part of its reality and world, and by bringing it into one's own world; the latter consisting of knowledge (or information) that comes from being outside and separated from the object that one observes and analyzes. These are the processes that Dennis Tedlock differentiates as "the participating eye and the objectifying eye" (*Spoken Word* 15).

Scholars in a number of diverse fields (philosophy, psychology, literary theory, anthropology, and indigenous studies, among others) have begun to interrogate the long held Platonic bias in favor of ratiocinative reason. Karen J. Warren critiques the tendency towards "an exaggerated emphasis on reason and rationality, and the attendant 'hyperseparation' of reason from emotion," explaining that "research in emotional intelligence . . . shows that the rationalist philosophical tradition that separates reason from emotion, elevates reason to a higher status than emotion, and predicates ethics, ethical knowledge, and ethical action on dictates of reason unencumbered by emotion is mistaken" (50, 111). Daniel Goleman points out

that the conjunction of mind and heart "turns the old understanding of the tension between reason and feeling on its head. . . . The old paradigm held an ideal of reason freed of the pull of emotion. The new paradigm urges us to harmonize head and heart" (28–29).

Opening up new directions in the study of care ethics, Nel Noddings advocates the shift in human understanding and interaction that combines mind and heart: "At times we must suspend [rational-objective thinking] in favor of subjective thinking and reflection, allowing time and space for seeing and feeling" (26). Feminist philosophers have continued this critique, arguing the androcentrism of the primacy of the mind and the dangers of cold science that Mary Shelley warned us of in her novel *Frankenstein*: "The enlarged sense of objectivity that took hold in the nineteenth century, embracing not only freedom from theoretical bias but also a complete elimination of the personal and of the emotional" led to the problematic application of "the methodological and epistemological criteria of the physical sciences" towards other arenas of understanding in a mimesis that was, at best, strictly limited by its ratiocinative boundaries and, at worse, altogether spurious in its reasoning and conclusions (Daston 58; Code 31).

Bahá'u'lláh states that this process of sacred conversive communications is especially important for artists and scholars: "The source of crafts, sciences and arts is the power of reflection. Make ye every effort that out of this ideal mine there may gleam forth such pearls of wisdom and utterance as will promote the well-being and harmony of all the kindreds of the earth" (*Tablets* 72). Louis J. Bourgeois, the architect who designed the Bahá'í House of Worship near Chicago, confirms the Bahá'í teachings on spiritual inspiration, stating that "musicians, artists, poets receive their inspiration from another realm" (qtd. in Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* 351). Goody refers to this as "spiritual knowledge . . . that comes from beyond the human universe, directly from spiritual agencies" ("Alternative Paths" 204, 208). In an earlier era or within more conversively attuned cultures, such statements would have been understood as emblematic of the knowledge of prophets, poets, and wise elders, but now within the constraints of our more fast paced and increasingly superficial textual cultures, the very process of conversive relations and their role in the well-being of persons, families, communities, and the world as a whole need to be affirmed,

explained, modeled, and advanced. Communications methods that would have been much more familiar and, often, implicit common knowledge for religious adherents of those earlier dispensations emergent within oral traditions are foreign to those epistemologies bounded by ratiocinative logic.

Bahá'í Consultation

Beyond the personal and communal applications of conversive communications within the sacred practices of prayer and meditation, Bahá'u'lláh specifies, explains, and advocates a particular form of conversive communications for group deliberations. As delineated in the Bahá'í teachings, consultation is a spiritualized means of collaborative communications that is designed to produce distinctively strong solutions[18] for situations and problems. As demonstrated in the process of brainstorming, multiple ideas are generated. As evidenced in dialogue, multiple voices are heard. As intended in committee, project team, and task force meetings, individuals work together towards specific organization ends. However, what the process of Bahá'í consultation can offer each of these communications processes is that it is neither limited by logically ratiocinative, op/positionally heteroglossic, nor discursively logocentric bounds. Rigorous informational inquiry and logical reasoning are presumed, but Bahá'í consultation goes further, being defined in terms of its egalitarian and respectful intersubjectivity that establishes a sense of community and collaboration and which values the diversity of its viewpoints, a prayerful openness of heart and mind that enables the consideration of diverse possibilities, and deep empathic thought that combines the use of mind and heart.

Centered in the guiding force of the sacred, Bahá'í consultation unites all participants as coequal participants (like the points of a circle). Individuals are to speak from their hearts with thoughtfully considered ideas that they offer to the group. Personal subjectivity, egocentric positioning, and dialogic opposition are absent in this process, for each lets go of his or her ideas once they are articulated for the group's deliberations. As 'Abdul-Bahá explained in a talk given in 1912 in Chicago, a diversity of views is to be welcomed, but "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" (*Promulgation* 72). What is intended is a clash of diverse ideas, not a clash of persons; once shared with others, an idea is no longer one's own, but a given part of the group's consultative process. Each person's articulated offering is presented as a gift to the others who, when not speaking, are to receive that gift graciously by listening deeply, utilizing periods of silent meditation to engage the offered ideas both thoughtfully and empathically: "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" (*Promulgation* 72). In contrast to argument, debate, or even dialogue, the Bahá'í concept of consultation requires a spiritualized sharing of ideas in which each articulation is received as a gift, with respect and appreciative consideration ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Bahá'í World Faith* 406–7).

Crucial to the consultative process is communication that is informed by the sacred, infused with a conversive depth, and aimed towards real world benefits: "Moreover words and utterances should be both impressive and penetrating. However, no word will be infused with these two qualities unless it be uttered wholly for the sake of God and with due regard unto the exigencies of the occasion and the people" (*Tablets* 172). Bahá'u'lláh reiterates this theme in the Lawḥ-i-Siyyid-i-Mihdíy-i-Dahají, emphasizing that "Utterance must needs possess penetrating power" (*Tablets* 198). Individuals are to speak from their hearts with language and thoughts informed by both mind and heart; listeners, too, are to be active listeners, listening deeply, empathically, wisely. The guidance of prayer and scripture is interwoven in the consultative process to continually reorient the deliberations through their sacred center: "spiritual conference and not the mere voicing of personal views is intended" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation* 72). 'Abdul-Bahá makes it very clear that what is most important for Bahá'í consultation is to achieve a sense of harmony and unity among those who consult together. The extent to which they can come together in community is the extent to which the deliberations will be successful: "Therefore true consultation is spiritual conference in the attitude and atmosphere of

love. Members must love each other in the spirit of fellowship in order that good results may be forthcoming. Love and fellowship are the foundation" (*Promulgation* 72–73).

This is not a new communications process for humankind; aspects of consultation, as advocated and described by Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdul-Bahá, have been evidenced throughout time by the various peoples of the world. As this essay notes, the sacred scriptures of the diverse religions of the world have prescribed communications processes that place the sacred at the center of human interactions whether verbal or behavioral. Many of the indigenous peoples and tribes and national parliaments and senates still practice vestiges of this time honored practice of the consultative gathering, albeit the predominantly divisive and combative discourse that infuses so much of governmental, community, and business meetings these days is seemingly all-pervasive. What makes the Bahá'í mandated practice of consultation fundamentally new are its conjunctive emphasis on communal unity that preserves its integral diversity, its broader orientation that imbues an ecosystemic world mindedness as definitially interwoven with the well-being of its smaller units (e.g., regions, nations, organizations, institutions, families, and persons), the rhetorical changes evidenced in the societal conditions of a textualized planet, and the concomitant necessity for the consultative process to be not only explicitly advocated but expressly delineated and explained.

Today, in an age defined in terms of the widespread electronic dissemination of information combined with powerful attempts to mediate and control its access,[19] the Bahá'í writings provide extensive and repeated guidance regarding the principles and practice of consultation, noting its importance for all meetings (regardless of constitutive level or size) in which resolutions and remedies are sought. Indeed, in documents submitted as a nongovernmental organization represented at the United Nations, the Bahá'í International Community has emphasized consultation as a crucial tool towards addressing the range of problems befalling the world, including the global issues of disarmament, racism, women's rights, minority rights, education, religious tolerance, poverty, conservation, health care, economic and social justice, development, sustainable communities, spirituality, and peace.[20] Whereas various forms of consultation have been commonly known

and used throughout the world and across time (although often delimited in terms of gender, age, or status), Bahá'u'lláh makes it very clear that such communications are not to be limited according to any preconceived bias or prejudice regarding individual persons or groups. Each person who is impacted by a decision needs to have some reasonable means of contributing to the consultation, either through representatives or directly. In light of the twenty-first century's socioeconomic "violence of absolute destitution" which Glissant notes "is spreading with such lightning speed over half the planet" (145), changes at all levels of human existence are desperately needed. Bahá'u'lláh states that this will require a fundamental transformation in human perceptions, understandings, interactions, and expression—all of which are to be reoriented by a turn to the conversive and its inherently relational and transformative protocol.

Conclusion

Insofar as human understanding and perception are concerned, Bahá'í scripture advocates a progressive yet ancient heuristic that is fundamentally rooted in interpersonal communications that are intersubjective and conversive and whose explicit purpose is the strengthening of "the bonds of affection and unity between the sons of men" (Bahá'u'lláh, qtd. in Esslemont 39). Throughout the Bahá'í writings, we are reminded that language is an essential means for the coming together of peoples (in families, villages, tribes, nations, regions, and now planetary community), but such communications are encouraged to take the form of conversive relations centered in thoughtful, heartfelt, spiritualized interpersonal interactions. Recent scholarship confirms the vital role played by such communications. As Anderson affirms, "Conversation is more than simply talking. In its fullest sense it can be thought of as the very essence of our existence" (111).

Even though the religions of the world are largely text-based in their religious scriptures, the Bahá'í writings and the other sacred scriptures manifest the very process in their literary structures which evince conversive signs for reader engagement. Literary strategies that are conversively crafted give these texts their co-creative capacities: for example, voice shifts to an inclusive first person plural "we" or to a second person direct address,

interactive interrogatives, line and text breaks that simulate oral silence for response, episodic and associational structures with meaningfulness requisite upon listener-reader effort. In fact, the distinctions between the written and the oral, the discursive and the conversive have always been more of a continuum with elements of the one often interwoven with the other. As Goody asserts, "The interface between the oral and the written is always a complex matter" (*Power* 12). Referencing the sacred scriptures of both western and eastern religious traditions, Goody further notes that "there is a constant dialectic between written and oral activities" (*Interface* xiv). In the religious dispensation of Islam, the Prophet Muhammad called on his followers to read;[21] today Bahá'u'lláh calls on the people of the world to chant, sing, recite, speak and pray out loud, "Say! . . ."[22] For a world increasingly structured within and mediated by its textual bounds, Bahá'u'lláh offers us extensive guidance for transforming our prayers and meditations into "conversations with God" and our everyday interpersonal communications into spiritualized and deeply transforming interactions (qtd. in Esslemont 88).

Coming into global community is now far from a luxury or choice but a crucial necessity for the well-being of all. Conversive communications, as delineated in the Bahá'í writings, offer integrative means for interweaving the torn fabric of a planet whose peoples suffer under the centuries' old weight of empire building divides. The historical legacies of conquest and distrust have disempowered and disenfranchised the many through colonialist alterities of indigeneity, economic hierarchies of power, geographic demographies of diaspora, and the unequal accessibility to information technology, traditional communication networks and the production of knowledge. The connective and restorative powers of the conversive have been part of sacred and religious traditions throughout time with conversive communications at their sacred oral centers. Bahá'u'lláh articulates this process for our contemporary discursive and textual worlds, calling on us all to remember conversive relations in our individual, familial, tribal, regional, and global communications. Intersubjective relations across worlds, the transforming power of conversive utterance, diverse ways of knowing, reason, mindfulness, silence, contemplation, heartfelt thought, inspiration, understanding, listening and responding, conversation with

God, love, unity, empathy, community, and ever-advancing human civilizations and cultures—all this is what conversive communication is about and what it has been throughout the history of human existence (both in its presence and in its all too palpable absences). Commenting specifically on its implications for anthropology and other social science methodology, Attinasi and Mannheim state that such "life-changing dialogue [which] makes us go beyond the conventional parameters, paradigms, and perimeters of social science, could lead us to valuable truths about human interrelations" (51). Insofar as attention to conversive relations provides the language and lens for new directions in scriptural analysis and engagement, the conversive turn in Bahá'í scripture guides our way beyond the discursive oral/textual divide and towards conversive investigations and conversive communications: communications that are intersubjective, personally transforming, rooted within the sacred, and constitutive of the globally restorative and integrally unifying directions for an evolving and diverse world civilization.

Notes

1. For an earlier introduction to conversive communications—specifically as it relates to Bahá'í scholarship, please see my prior essay "Conversive Relationality in Bahá'í Scholarship: Centering the Sacred and Decentering the Self." *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies* 7.2 (1995): 1–28.

2. Much written literature demonstrates conversive literary forms, especially in the more oral genres of poetry and drama. For a more complete analysis of conversive literary structures, see my 1998 volume *Contemporary American Indian Literatures and the Oral Tradition* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1999). Also, Native writer Leslie Marmon Silko's remarkable collection *Storyteller* includes many oral stories presented on paper in ways that exemplify aspects of the stories' conversive orality. This can also be seen in Simon J. Ortiz's volume *A Good Journey* in which he, too, expressly strove to convey in his writing the conversive orality of his Acoma Pueblo people.

3. Regardless of its mode of delivery, the conversive can be understood through the geometric heuristic of a circle where centripetal relations are manifested in the inclusive integrity of the whole and the egalitarian nature of the equivalent, yet

differentiable points on the circle; in contrast, discursive relations can be visualized geometrically in the endpoints that define a line segment by their distance, primacy, and op/positionality. The center of the circle defines the extent of the circle's inclusive range: where that center is fixed in the sacred, the circle is wholly inclusive of creation.

4. Although the larger divides of empire-building agendas as manifested in geographic conquest demonstrate the exclusionary directionality of communications, analogous divides are evident in the hierarchies of race, class, gender, age, continent, hemisphere, etc. Cartographic lines divide geographies; discursive lines divide people linguistically, informationally, epistemologically, educationally, economically, medically, and relationally.

5. Indeed, Bahá'u'lláh affirms the validity of sacred oral traditions regardless of their absence of religious scripture or other written documentation: "And now regarding thy question, 'How is it that no records are to be found concerning the Prophets that have preceded Adam, the Father of Mankind, or of the kings that lived in the days of those Prophets?' Know thou that the absence of any reference to them is no proof that they did not actually exist. That no records concerning them are now available, should be attributed to their extreme remoteness, as well as to the vast changes which the earth hath undergone since their time" (*Gleanings* 172).

6. For extensive documentation of "the relationship between the institutionalization of English . . . and the exercise of colonial power, between the processes of curricular selection and the impulse to dominate and control," see Gauri Viswanathan's powerful volume *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study in British Rule* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989).

7. French Caribbean theorist and writer Édouard Glissant laments the divisiveness of the contemporary world where the bonds of relationship are shifting and tenuous, noting those ties of earlier eras that are insufficient to bring people together in equal and harmonious relations. He advocates a "Poetics of Relation, in which each and every identity is extended through a relationship with the Other" so that no one remains as a distanced, marginalized, or devalued "other" (11). Looking back at the classic stories of antiquity, "the great founding books of communities, the Old Testament, the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, the *Chanson de Geste*, the Icelandic *Sagas*, the *Aeneid*, or the African epics," Glissant says that these "collective books concerning the sacred and the notion of history" for their respective

cultures and times exemplify what is needed today—namely "a similar dialectics of rerouting . . . a modern form of the sacred . . . a Poetics of Relation" (15, 16).

8. Here, the term "Book" refers to the sacred scripture as a whole, to the Word of God as manifested in writing. The Book of God here is used more broadly than the denotation of one specific text of Revelation such as the Bible or the Qur'án. Whereas the revelation of the Bahá'í Faith is in written form, the sacred scripture of the Bahá'í Faith encompasses a vast number of sacred Books, Tablets, Letters, and Laws.

9. For developed discussions of the intersubjective relationality that is possible in interspecies communications, see James R. Holmes' essay "The Status of Persons or Who Was that Masked Metaphor" (*Advances in Descriptive Psychology* 6 [1991]: 15–35) and my volume *American Indian Literatures and the Oral Tradition.* Descriptive psychologist Holmes points out that "paradigmatically, a person is an individual whose history is a history of deliberate action. . . . Up to the present time, we have recognized as persons only those individuals who have the embodiment of homo sapiens, namely human beings. There is however, nothing about the concept of a person that requires persons to be human beings" (29–30). Noting indigenous traditions regarding human and nonhuman relationality, Rodney Frey writes that among the Crow Indian people, "natural phenomena are animated with volition, addressed with kinship terms. . . . The human, natural, and spiritual worlds are intimately linked, interdependent each with the other" (131). Laguna Pueblo writer Leslie Marmon Silko confirms this in her own tribe's beliefs and experience: "A rock has being or spirit, although we may not understand it. The spirit may differ from the spirit we know in animals or plants or in ourselves. In the end we all originate from the depths of the earth. Perhaps this is how all beings share in the spirit of the Creator." ("Landscape" 84).

10. Whereas the conversive process has been part of all cultures, its manifestations have varied as cultures become more or less diverse, more or less secular, more or less literate. As the geographies of communication broaden to encompass the global village, the method of the conversive can no longer depend upon commonalities such as tradition, language, religion, ethnicity, culture, or gender. The challenges of integrative communications are therefore that much more challenging and that much more needed.

11. From a recently translated passage from the Báb's Tafsír-i-Ḥadíth-i-Man 'Arafa Nafsah faqad 'Arafa Rabbah, the relationship between a person's tongue and

heart is given great weight: "for verily utterance is a manifestation of the reality of the one who uttereth, and a mirror that reflecteth that which is in his heart" (qtd. in Saiedi 63).

12. The term "heteroglossia" refers to those communications where there is a diversity of voices or tongues. Used primarily in the fields of cultural studies in the humanities and social sciences, the term emphasizes the diversity of groups and persons as manifested in speech, writing, and other forms of articulation.

13. In Saiedi's volume on the writings of the Báb, he provides a very helpful presentation of the "modes of revelation" as delineated by the Báb. The sacred conversations between God and His Prophets are evident in the two modes of "divine verses (*áyát*)" where God speaks directly to His Emissaries and, thereby, to humankind and, conversely, the "prayers and supplications (*munáját, ad'íyih*)" where the Báb speaks to the divine (Saiedi 40–45).

14. Within the realm of Native American literatures, Leslie Marmon Silko's collection *Storyteller* and Dennis Tedlock's volume *The Spoken Word and the Work of Interpretation* provide valuable models for the effective textual layout of such orally informed texts; also Brill de Ramírez (1999).

15. The textual mediation of orally informed religious texts can be an impediment for readers' conversive engagements with scripture when the words are laid out in a prose paragraph format without sufficient punctuation, line breaks, page breaks, and font changes needed to convey the conversivity of the original.

16. The larger context in which this passage occurs can be seen in a larger portion of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's talk, which includes the following:

> The highest of created beings fighting to obtain the lowest form of matter, earth! Land belongs not to one people, but to all people. This earth is not man's home, but his tomb. It is for their tombs these men are fighting. . . .

> But war is made for the satisfaction of men's ambition; for the sake of worldly gain to the few, terrible misery is brought to numberless homes, breaking the hearts of hundreds of men and women! How many widows mourn their husbands, how many stories of savage cruelty do we hear! How many little orphaned children are crying for their dead fathers, how many women are weeping for their slain sons! There is nothing so heart-breaking and terrible as an outburst of human savagery!

> I charge you all that each one of you concentrate all the thoughts of your heart on love and unity. When a thought of war comes, oppose it by a stronger

thought of peace. A thought of hatred must be destroyed by a more powerful thought of love. . . . Do not think the peace of the world an ideal impossible to attain! Nothing is impossible to the Divine Benevolence of God. If you desire with all your heart, friendship with every race on earth, your thought, spiritual and positive, will spread; it will become the desire of others, growing stronger and stronger, until it reaches the minds of all men. (*Paris Talks* 28–30)

17. Knowledge that is accordingly rooted in the sacred is not limited to the domain of religious study. Spiritualized knowledge can be directed in temporal directions as in the case of ethically informed scientific study or towards explicitly religious ends in interpersonally transformative interpretations of scripture. Also, the study of religion can take a strictly ratiocinative approach that is largely (or even wholly) uninformed by the sacred depths of spiritualized intersubjective relations. The orientation of knowledge production (whether explicitly secular or religious) is a categorically different determination from the extent to which that study is informed in more or less spiritual or worldly degrees. Insofar as science is concerned, in no wise is the Bahá'í mandate for spiritualized knowledge a derogation of scientific study, rather it is a call for its spiritualized reorientation.

18. The concept of *strong solutions* here conveys the sense of particularly effective and efficacious solutions that arise from the conversive process of consultative deliberations. While not necessarily the ideal solutions, *strong solutions* are rooted in the exigencies of the situation and offer distinctively empathic options that take into account the larger consequents (e.g., all who are necessarily or potentially affected, including both the human and the larger environmental effects, as well as current and future outcomes). The strength of *strong solutions* lies in their narrow and broad, short-term and long-term benefits to persons, communities and the world as a whole.

19. See Rampton and Sheldon for a critical exposé of the excesses in the control and bias of knowledge production as evidenced in twentieth and early twenty-first century news media.

20. Written documents submitted to the United Nations in which the process of Bahá'í consultation is presented can be accessed electronically at <http://www.bic.org/statements-and-reports>.

21. "In the name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful. / 1. Proclaim! (or Read!) in the name of thy Lord and Cherisher, Who created — / 2. Created man,

out of a (mere) clot of congealed blood: / 3. Proclaim! And thy Lord is Most Bountiful — / 4. He Who taught (the use of) the Pen — / 5. Taught man that which he knew not" (*Holy Qur'án* 96).

22. "Intone, O My servant, the verses of God that have been received by thee, as intoned by them who have drawn nigh unto Him, that the sweetness of thy melody may kindle thine own soul, and attract the hearts of all men" (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* 295).

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