

Human Knowledge and the Advancement of Society

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Music is the one incorporeal entrance into the higher world of knowledge which comprehends mankind but which mankind cannot comprehend.

—Ludwig van Beethoven

Abstract

Human knowledge is the means toward realizing a global civilization as envisaged by Bahá'u'lláh. This paper examines the concept of knowledge and its treatment in the Bahá'í texts followed by an exploration of certain themes specified in the current Five Year Plan as brought forward and promulgated by the Universal House of Justice. These themes focus the worldwide Bahá'í community's consultation, reflection, and its efforts towards actions which exercise knowledge in constructing a better world. The paper also explores the individual's adoption of an unassuming learning mode in response to applying acquired spiritual and secular knowledge to the complex and enduring process of civilization building.

Résumé

La connaissance humaine est le moyen par lequel une civilisation mondiale, telle qu'envisagée par Bahá'u'lláh, pourra être réalisée. L'auteur examine le concept de la connaissance et ce qu'en disent les textes bahá'ís, puis il explore certains thèmes précisés dans le plan de cinq ans actuel établi et promulgué par la Maison Universelle de Justice. C'est sur ces thèmes que se concentrent la consultation, la réflexion et les efforts de la communauté mondiale baha'ie en vue d'actions qui constituent une application de la connaissance pour établir un monde meilleur. L'auteur examine également l'adoption par l'individu d'un mode d'apprentissage humble qui découle de l'application des connaissances spirituelles et séculières à la démarche continue et complexe visant l'établissement d'une civilisation nouvelle.

Resumen

El conocimiento humano es el medio para hacer realidad una civilización global así como es previsto por Bahá'u'lláh. Este ensayo examina el concepto del conocimiento y su trato en los textos Bahá'ís seguido por una exposición de ciertos temas especificados en el actual Plan de Cinco Años traído y promulgado por la Casa Universal de Justicia. Estos temas enfocan la consulta, reflexión de la comunidad mundial Bahá'í, y sus esfuerzos de acciones que utilizan el conocimiento para construir un mundo mejor. Este ensayo explora además la adopción del individuo de un modo de aprendizaje modesto en respuesta a aplicar el conocimiento espiritual y secular adquirido al complejo y duradero proceso de la construcción de una civilización.

In the mid-nineteenth century, with the advent of the Báb's Dispensation—which paved the way for the anticipated dawn of the Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh—a vast profusion of knowledge beyond measure was disclosed to humankind. The knowledge imparted by Bahá'u'lláh challenges and reorients existing perceptions of the material and spiritual aspects of life and demands from individuals and social institutions responses that are appropriate to humankind's age of maturity.

An outcome of the vision this knowledge has imparted to humanity is the inclusion of principles such as the organic unity of humankind in what Shoghi Effendi characterizes as the “highest stage in the stupendous evolution of man's collective life on this planet” (*World Order* 163). The Bahá'í Faith encourages an unfettered search for truth; it explains that the role of religion is to expound and articulate “the values unfolding progressively through Divine revelation”; it views science as the “instrumentality through which the human mind explores and is able to exert its influence ever more precisely over the phenomenal world,” and asserts that religion “defines goals that serve the evolutionary process,” that “science assists in their attainment,” and that religion and science jointly constitute the dual aspects of the ever-present goal of humankind—a “knowledge system impelling the advance of civilization” (*One Common Faith* 33).

Other knowledge that has been imparted to humankind by the birth of the Bahá'í Faith is the condemnation of all forms of superstition and prej-

udice. In 1912, in a public talk given during His travels across the United States, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá stated the following about the blight and burden perpetuated by all forms of prejudice: “Shall we remain steeped in our fanatichisms and cling to our prejudices? Is it fitting that we should still be bound and restricted by ancient fables and superstitions of the past...?” (*Promulgation* 369). Another example of the knowledge enunciated in this Revelation is the equality of women and men, a principle which was not a “Western construct but a universal spiritual truth—a statement about human nature—that was promulgated by Bahá’u’lláh nearly 150 years ago in His native Iran” (Letter to the Believers), a goal now considered obvious worldwide even though it is far from being realized.

The Bahá’í Faith was introduced to humanity as a global religion, as a religion which from its inception addressed the peoples of the West as well as the East and made clear that its teachings are intended for the entire world. For over 165 years this sea of knowledge full of new ideas—including a deep and ever-present vision of the spiritual dimension of life, of the moral and spiritual principles and laws pertaining to the operation of our daily life and the purpose underlying our creation—has been placed in the hands of humanity.

This knowledge was proclaimed by the Báb and Bahá’u’lláh to the kings and rulers of the world, and it has since been carried to virtually every corner of the world by its adherents as well as by its well-wishers. In fact, from the outset of the Bahá’í Revelation, the dispersion of the knowledge contained in the teachings of Bahá’u’lláh has been openly and enthusiastically shared with the generality of humankind, wherever circumstances permit, because this limitless knowledge belongs to all the peoples of the world.

Acquiring knowledge and, more importantly, appreciating its application through both individual and collective effort and actions, are at the very heart of Bahá’u’lláh’s Revelation. In the Bahá’í texts, the attainment of knowledge is linked to social progress and to the spiritual and material transformation of individuals and society.

Therefore, the attitude that one adopts toward knowledge is fundamental to the formation of social reality. How knowledge is understood and

how its meaning is applied and practiced are critical in shaping the kind of society and world civilization that the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh envision. At the center of this process of knowledge-seeking is the human mind and consciousness which is endowed with the capacity to carve and shape this insight into reality in the form of a new global civilization.

Among contemporary scholars there is growing concern about the pursuit of knowledge solely for the sake of a purely economic or political framework, for within this context the broader and deeper culturally edifying component of knowledge is lost—a component that includes such vital elements as the civilizing, enriching, enlightening, and transforming of culture.

A concomitant disassociation between the pursuit of knowledge and civic responsibility permeates current discourse. What should an educated person offer in service to his or her community? One scholar raises the question, “Is the man [or woman] of knowledge just a man [or woman] pursuing knowledge, maybe divine, maybe scientific, for its own sake? Or is he [or she] also connected with the life of the community?” (Eisenstadt 19).

Finally, what is the role of education in a rapidly changing globalizing world where different societies, cultures, or civilizations encounter one another in very close quarters and often under conditions that do not always produce tolerance and understanding? There is growing tension in society among the concepts of universalism (a society open to everyone), pluralism (a society composed of several autonomous but interdependent groups that either share power or continuously compete for power), and more stringent forms (totalitarian and non-tolerant). Thus, we might usefully ponder the role of knowledge and education in relation to preparing people to live effectively, successfully in a constantly changing world. Can the contestations and conflicts that abound in the world gradually fade away through sound methods of knowledge generation and application?

Therefore, let us examine human knowledge as the means toward the realization of a world civilization as envisaged by Bahá'u'lláh starting with a brief overview of the concept of knowledge and its treatment in the Bahá'í texts, followed by a searching reflection of certain themes in the

current Divine Plan as brought forward and promulgated by the Universal House of Justice. In particular, let us discuss three themes from two of the recent letters of the Universal House of Justice: the Ridván 2010 letter and the 28 December 2010 letter addressed “To the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors.” These themes, including knowledge, a culture of learning, and openness to the wider society, focus the worldwide Bahá’í community’s consultation and efforts on actions relevant to the exercise of knowledge in the construction of a global civilization. In examining the contents of these letters, we can discern the establishment of the importance of a humble response by the individual—a learning mode—in applying the acquired spiritual and secular knowledge to the complex and enduring process of civilization-building.

An important outcome of acquiring knowledge, learning, and understanding relates to the influence of this process on the refinement of the human capacity to grasp the essence of social problems in an effort to uncover their potential solutions through actions. A cursory examination of the concept of knowledge and its treatment in the Bahá’í texts reveals its singular function in the social order described by Bahá’u’lláh as “a veritable treasure for man, and a source of glory, of bounty, of joy, of exaltation” (*Epistle* 27) for humankind. What emerges from a brief examination of some selected passages from Bahá’u’lláh and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is the fact that true and authentic knowledge is far more than accumulation of information and that the concept of manipulating knowledge to attain status or power, or for personal gain, is incompatible with it.

SELECTED PASSAGES FROM BAHÁ’U’LLÁH’S WRITINGS

Knowledge is as wings to man’s life, and a ladder for his ascent. Its acquisition is incumbent upon everyone. (*Epistle* 26)

In truth, knowledge is a veritable treasure for man, and a source of glory, of bounty, of joy, of exaltation, of cheer and gladness unto him. Happy the man that cleaveth unto it. (*Epistle* 27)

Forget your own selves, and turn your eyes towards your neighbour.
Bend your energies to whatever may foster the education of men.
(*Gleanings* 9)

Bend your minds and wills to the education of the peoples and kindreds of the earth, that haply the dissensions that divide it may, through the power of the Most Great Name, be blotted out from its face, and all mankind become the upholders of one Order, and the inhabitants of one City. (*Gleanings* 333–34)

SELECTED PASSAGES FROM 'ABDU'L-BAHÁ'S WRITINGS

To promote knowledge is... an inescapable duty imposed on every one. (*Selections* 126).

[H]uman knowledge is of two kinds. One is the knowledge of things perceptible to the senses—that is to say, things which the eye, or ear, or smell, or taste, or touch can perceive, which are called objective or sensible.... The other kind of human knowledge is intellectual—that is to say, it is a reality of the intellect; it has no outward form and no place and is not perceptible to the senses. For example, the power of intellect is not sensible; none of the inner qualities of man is a sensible thing; on the contrary, they are intellectual realities. So love is a mental reality and not sensible; for this reality the ear does not hear, the eye does not see, the smell does not perceive, the taste does not discern, the touch does not feel. (*Some Answered Questions* 83)

There are certain pillars which have been established as the unshakable 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. (*Selections* 126)

Ye must strive with heart and soul that ye may become renowned in character and knowledge. (*Selections* 117)

THE BAHÁ'Í CONCEPT OF KNOWLEDGE
AND THE APPROACH TO RELIGIOUS TRUTHS

The knowledge, spiritual and material, that Bahá'u'lláh has imparted to humankind is intended to be applied in every aspect of social existence. In this process both the individual and society are to be transformed through the revitalizing influence of the teachings and principles revealed by Bahá'u'lláh.

In 1991, the following elucidation was given in a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice:

Bahá'ís believe that the Teachings and Order of Bahá'u'lláh are the solution to the current problems of mankind, they abstain completely from ever attempting to put them into effect through political action. Only if people voluntarily accept them and submit themselves freely to this Order will it be implemented in the world. Bahá'ís should never attempt to impose their belief on anyone. Bahá'u'lláh has given certain teachings which Bahá'ís believe to be true; they offer these teachings to the rest of mankind." (*Messages* 203–5)

In this context, Bahá'u'lláh teaches that the truths found in religion are revealed by God to humanity through His Manifestations or Prophets. The truths of religion may thus be discovered by human beings, but their ultimate source is God, Whose essential reality is veiled and hidden from human understanding. Bahá'u'lláh has explained this phenomenon, asserting that "there can be no direct" interaction "to bind God with His creation" (*Gleanings* 60). 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains that "Religion...is the necessary connection which emanates from the reality of things; and as the supreme Manifestations of God are aware of the mysteries of beings, therefore, They understand this essential connection, and by this knowl-

edge establish the Law of God" (*Some Answered Questions* 159).

The human mind draws knowledge from religious truths, from the spiritual teachings revealed by the Manifestations of God. But here the notion of human capacity plays an important role in relation to the teachings of the Manifestation of God. Bahá'u'lláh has written, "The Revelation of which I am the bearer is adapted to humanity's spiritual receptiveness and capacity... Whatever I manifest is nothing more or less than the measure of Divine glory which God has bidden me reveal" (*World Order* 60).

The Prophets of God provide this measure of religious truths and spiritual teachings according to humanity's capacity and spiritual openness to grasp such truths and teachings. Thus, human limitation is the determining factor as to the degree to which truths and spiritual teachings are revealed by God. It is heartening and reassuring "to know"—in the veiled currents and problematic anxieties of the times in which we live—that the knowledge which Bahá'u'lláh has imparted to humanity for this age is the framework for the construction of a global civilization.

The challenge that scholars and all members of the Bahá'í community face is to find creative ways to introduce Bahá'í perspectives about major issues into public discourse. In doing so, the importance of imparting a greater awareness about the essentially spiritual nature of human beings is paramount. This discourse should be purposeful and focused on the long-term goal envisaged by Bahá'u'lláh of achieving a world civilization built on "a dynamic coherence between the material and spiritual requirements of life" as enunciated in the Bahá'í teachings (Letter to the Bahá'ís).

Yet, in terms of attitudes toward knowledge, it is helpful to adopt an unassuming posture as one studies the Bahá'í teachings and explores what a global civilization might look like. We have no precedence for such a civilization. Indeed, the whole development of human knowledge and understanding has led us here, to humanity's greatest undertaking as it strives to attain maturity. This effort makes the whole enterprise a highly complex work in progress, and at the same time it propels humankind to new and exciting frontiers.

The unique nature and long-range vision of this undertaking is explicated in a letter dated 13 May 1996 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice:

Essentially, the Bahá'í community is "pioneering" a new approach to the organization of society and the individual person's relationship to it, one that is based on a spiritual conception of reality. This effort follows two parallel tracks. On the one hand, we do all we can as Bahá'ís to acquaint those around us, including the organizations of society, with the principles and concepts revealed by Bahá'u'lláh, in the hope that this guidance may be put to practical use in the life of humanity. On the other, we are slowly building a global community which demonstrates, beyond argument, that humanity, in all its diversity, can learn to live and work as a single people in a global homeland....

We are, as you say, only a minority. But this has always been the case at any great turning-point in history. It is the Revelation of God that makes this minority a creative force in history and that brings to each of its active members the deepest sense of fulfilment that human life affords. (*Messages* 536)

We now come to the next section of this paper, which examines a few of the themes as brought forth in the recent letters from the Universal House of Justice about the current Divine Plan in which the worldwide Bahá'í community is engaged and whose aim, over the centuries, is the development of a world civilization.

INSIGHTS DERIVED FROM LETTERS OF THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE

When speaking about constructing a world civilization, the Universal House of Justice has portrayed in detail the current Divine Plan in which the worldwide Bahá'í community is engaged. In these documents, the House of Justice makes it clear that such an undertaking requires a level of capacity-building greater than any endeavor humanity has ever attained before. In order to reach such heights of individual and collective capaci-

ty-building, humankind must achieve a colossal expansion of knowledge. It is this large development of human capacity that calls to mind Shoghi Effendi's use of the phrase "entry by troops," which, to a certain extent, is a seminal goal of the current plan engaging the Bahá'í world. This Plan thus calls for universal participation—everyone has a part to play.

The Universal House of Justice explains, "Access to knowledge is the right of every human being, and participation in its generation, application and diffusion a responsibility that all must shoulder in the great enterprise of building a prosperous world civilization—each individual according to his or her talents and abilities" (Letter to the Bahá'ís). The approach is one of drawing insight and inspiration from the knowledge gleaned and the application of the laws and teachings of the Bahá'í Faith in active service to the betterment of society. Engaging in this process over time brings about an ever-growing and deeper-acquired understanding of the revealed works of Bahá'u'lláh that explicate His vision and outline some of the basic features of His New World Order. From the acquisition of knowledge, our capacity-building is enhanced, understanding of more complex meaning is unraveled, and human consciousness is expanded, all of which lead to the advancement of social conditions.

Therefore, much more learning is required. Solid secular and religious education is needed and must be employed in an endeavor to uplift the human condition. In such a context, we draw on each other's diverse capacities in a spirit of cooperation and unity. Shoghi Effendi repeatedly stated that the Bahá'ís should be "well equipped" (*Compilation of Compilations*, Vol. I, 220), and that they should have their "intellectual as well as spiritual side equally developed" (*Compilation of Compilations*, Vol. II, 418).

Shoghi Effendi also emphasized the need for the acquisition of all kinds of knowledge, saying: "If the Bahá'ís want to be really effective in teaching the Cause they need to be much better informed and able to discuss intelligently, intellectually, the present condition of the world and its problems. We need Bahá'í scholars, not only people far, far more deeply aware of what our teachings really are, but also well-read and well-educated people, capable of correlating our teachings to the current thoughts of

the leaders of society" (*Compilation of Compilations*, Vol. I, 230).

There is another dimension to this enterprise which involves the importance of striking a balance between spiritual and secular education and knowledge in the development of a global civilization. Shoghi Effendi makes this concept of balance very clear in his statement that not until true religion is combined with true ethics can moral progress become a possibility "and not a mere ideal." He explains that "true religion" is religion devoid of self-opinionated, man-made dogmatism. He further explains: "Divorced from true religion, morals lose their effectiveness and cease to guide and control man's individual and social life.... Not until these two are rightly combined and brought into full action can there be any hope for the future of the race" (*Compilation of Compilations*, Vol. II, 427).

The correlation of spiritual and secular knowledge and its application to social issues require that we draw from the wealth of knowledge that is being generated in all the fields of endeavor and invite those of good heart and like mind to participate with us in such a critical process of social, cultural and moral advancement. To be involved in the wholesome life of society means that we should celebrate, not run away or isolate ourselves from, what society offers in relation to sound ideas—methods and views that are helpful and essential to understanding the human condition.

Connected to this vast effort to learn about secular knowledge is a similar process requiring in-depth study of the major works of Bahá'u'lláh, the Báb, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and Shoghi Effendi in particular. Among Shoghi Effendi's most salient commentaries are *The Advent of Divine Justice*, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, *The Promised Day is Come*, *Bahá'í Administration*, and *Citadel of Faith*. It is in the writings of Shoghi Effendi that current and future events are described. A clear sense of purpose for what is required of the Bahá'í community is given, and the features and principles of the Administrative Order are meticulously laid out. In addition, the vision for the future world civilization is set forth, and profound wisdom, insight and encouragement are offered. This knowledge is fundamental in understanding the present and the future. Without a deep penetration into these writings, the strategic thinking and abundant effort required to move

humanity forward over the next centuries cannot be realized.

In-depth study of the writings of Shoghi Effendi prepares us to understand the events that are transpiring in the contemporary world. For example, his framework of the operation of two processes (integration and disintegration) enables us to make sense out of the present as well as the future. Shoghi Effendi described this two-fold process at work in present day society as consisting, on the one hand, of a “disruptive” and “disintegrating” process that is “tear[ing] down with increasing violence, the antiquated barriers that seek to block humanity’s progress towards its destined goal.” And on the other hand, he portrays a process attributed to the unfoldment and construction of the Bahá’í System, a unifying force that is “essentially an integrating process...associated with the nascent Faith of Bahá’u’lláh.” Of the destructive forces that characterize the other, Shoghi Effendi points out that “these should be identified with a civilization that has refused to answer to the expectation of a new age, and is consequently falling into chaos and decline” (*World Order* 170).

The Universal House of Justice describes this process as follows: “[I]f the Administrative Order is to serve as a pattern for future society, then the community within which it is developing must not only acquire capacity to address increasingly complex material and spiritual requirements but also become larger and larger in size” (Letter to the Conference).

Shoghi Effendi’s writings also describe the Lesser Peace and the Most Great Peace as stages through which humanity will evolve as it moves toward the future Bahá’í Commonwealth. He describes the current stage as “a gradual process,” explaining that “as Bahá’u’lláh has Himself anticipated,” this stage will “lead at first to the establishment of that Lesser Peace which the nations of the earth, as yet unconscious of His Revelation and yet unwittingly enforcing the general principles which He has enunciated, will themselves establish” (*Promised Day* 201). He then explains that with the establishment of the Lesser Peace, a “momentous and historic step, involving the reconstruction of mankind, as the result of the universal recognition of its oneness and wholeness, will bring in its wake the spiritualization of the masses, consequent to the recognition of the character, and the acknowledgement of the claims, of the Faith of

Bahá'u'lláh—the essential condition to that ultimate fusion of all races, creeds, classes and nations which must signalize the emergence of His New World Order” (*Promised Day* 201–2). These and a myriad other examples of Shoghi Effendi’s understanding of the processes at work, and the end result that these forces will ultimately yield, point to the vital necessity for the study of his writings. A profound understanding of his writings provides the indispensable means by which today’s generation is enabled to build the strong foundation upon which every future generation will continue its contribution to the structure of a civilization that is gradually emerging.

THE CONCEPT OF LEARNING
AS DISCUSSED BY THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE

The Bahá’í approach to growth involves support for a culture of learning. The Bahá’í writings tell us that the most effective way to learn is by experience, by reflection, and by action. The Universal House of Justice writes that “it is only through continued action, reflection and consultation on their part that they will learn to read their own reality, see their own possibilities, make use of their own resources, and respond to the exigencies of large-scale expansion” (Letter to the Bahá’ís).

Within the psychological literature on human knowledge, some have observed that at the “knowledge level,” which consists of information that is acquired from the environment and innate principles of induction and problem solving, all learning is a matter of experience. Cognitive psychology expert John R. Anderson states that “[t]he basic view of human behaviour is one of a problem solver who has a set of operators for solving problems and a set of methods for applying these operators. Such a system has to start out with a way of extracting operators from experience” (347).

Neuroethicist Paolo Costa in attempting to answer questions such as, “What is a person?” and, “What is the Self?” has made a most interesting statement about the process of human reflection, an observation which is relevant to this process of action, reflection and consultation. He writes,

“[R]eflection is essentially problem-oriented, driven by the need to straighten out the conflicts that have disrupted the ordinary course of our lives” and, for that reason it cannot “stand back from experience as a whole.” But this is not all, the author then observes that “the reflective stance consists of actualizing a potentiality that is implicit in every acting being and finds its most peculiar expression in humans. We could call it the urge to self-reliance or self-determination. This must be meant in a very minimal sense, namely that it is up to the self to live its own life. Nobody can live it in its stead” (124).

A culture of learning implies willingness on the part of every individual, according to her or his capacity, to participate in a systematic endeavor or working together in service to the well-being of the community. Yet within this focus is the development of the understanding and creation of that important aspect of Bahá'í culture that informs us how individuals and Bahá'í institutions operate within society—a society aspiring to reach a level of maturity that is paramount to its success. In such a context, learning implies flexibility in thinking and in attitude. It calls for an openness of heart and mind toward new ideas, actions, and views. This environment for learning calls for the avoidance of behavior that is oppressive to others, wherein power on the part of one individual or group is used to deny access to knowledge and learning on the part of others. It also calls for the avoidance of false dichotomies and rigid, uncompromising thought. Instead, it encourages “exercise in raising consciousness” and cautions against the “awakening of the insistent self” (Letter to the Conference). It employs the necessity for consultation, not manipulation. It empowers the reality of each person through encouragement, positive planning, and systematic action. This overall approach, writes the Universal House of Justice, is seen as a “striking contrast to the spiritually bankrupt and moribund ways of an old social order that so often seeks to harness human energy through domination, through greed, through guilt, or through manipulation” (Letter to the Bahá'ís).

Learning requires understanding of those matters that may be subject to change and of those that cannot be altered. Many areas are open to change, but others fall under spiritual laws and principles that cannot be

compromised. For example, world unity is an unchanging principle. The elimination of all forms of prejudice is an unchanging principle. The harmony between science and religion is an unchanging principle. But others concepts are subject to change under the constant guidance of the Universal House of Justice. This distinction helps us understand why a culture of learning is a never-ending and life-long process.

OPENNESS TO THE WIDER SOCIETY
AS ELUCIDATED BY THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE

The Universal House of Justice states: "Indeed, the civilization that beckons humanity will not be attained through the efforts of the Bahá'í community alone. Numerous groups and organizations, animated by the spirit of world solidarity that is an indirect manifestation of Bahá'u'lláh's conception of the principle of the oneness of humankind, will contribute to the civilization destined to emerge out of the welter and chaos of present-day society" (Letter to the Bahá'ís).

The knowledge and learning that is being generated in the wider society is essential in constructing a world civilization. The challenge is to be able to distinguish useful and quality knowledge from thoughts or concepts that are frivolous, groundless, and even harmful. In relation to this distinction, it is helpful to recall 'Abdu'l-Bahá's guidance that "[i]t is impossible for religion to be contrary to science, even though some intellects are too weak or too immature to understand truth... religion and science [are] to be the measure... of our understanding" (*Paris Talks* 145). Of course, there is also good and bad science, and we all must be ever watchful as we develop our capacity to distinguish the difference between the two.

Not enough can be said about the importance of the creation of a confident community that is comfortable and at ease with the wider society and the many advantageous elements that such a community has to offer to all aspects of human learning. The Universal House of Justice urges Bahá'ís "to become increasingly involved in the life of society, benefiting from its educational programmes, excelling in its trades and professions, learning

to employ well its tools, and applying themselves to the advancement of its arts and sciences" (Letter to the Conference).

Social action and discourses with society, two elements discussed in the messages of the Universal House of Justice, will gradually evolve as knowledge, learning, and involvement in the wider society become commonplace in the life of the individual and the community.

CONCLUSION

Never before in human history has there been an opportunity such as the one available to all today, wherein every individual is able to fully participate in the dissemination of spiritual and secular knowledge toward the establishment of a global civilization. Having explored and reviewed the place of knowledge in civilization-building, we can better realize the potential for a sea change in transforming habits of thought in every aspect of human existence. This observation brings to mind what cognitive neurobiologist Paul M. Churchland has said about the process of moral learning. He describes moral learning as taking time—in his words, "large amounts of time" (154). He then observes that "[t]he very real problems posed by moral and political diversity are simply the price that humanity pays for growing up" (169).

Another insight that has been offered by neuroethicists Adriana Gini and James Giordano is in relation to human knowledge and the evolutionary neuroscience of the human brain. They point out that "humans show a trend toward not merely surviving, but flourishing" and then proceed to explain that "human history is punctuated by our attempts to break the bonds of biological restrictions, and 'be more than we are'" (343).

For this reason we need more knowledge, a far greater expansion of learning both spiritual and secular. Here 'Abdu'l-Bahá raises the level of human consciousness regarding the potential for our civilizing influence to improve our social environment when He states:

How long shall we drift on the wings of passion and vain desire;
how long shall we spend our days like barbarians in the depths of
ignorance and abomination? God has given us eyes, that we may look

about us at the world, and lay hold of whatsoever will further civilization and the arts of living. He has given us ears, that we may hear and profit by the wisdom of scholars and philosophers and arise to promote and practice it. Senses and faculties have been bestowed upon us, to be devoted to the service of the general good; so that we, distinguished above all other forms of life for perceptiveness and reason, should labor at all times and along all lines, whether the occasion be great or small, ordinary or extraordinary, until all mankind are safely gathered into the impregnable stronghold of knowledge. We should continually be establishing new bases for human happiness and creating and promoting new instrumentalities toward this end. How excellent, how honorable is man if he arises to fulfil his responsibilities; how wretched and contemptible, if he shuts his eyes to the welfare of society and wastes his precious life in pursuing his own selfish interests and personal advantages. Supreme happiness is man's, and he beholds the signs of God in the world and in the human soul, if he urges on the steed of high endeavor in the arena of civilization and justice." (*Secret 3–4*)

The station of knowledge and the generating impulse that knowledge conveys must needs be acknowledged and extended. Application of knowledge in resolving the multifaceted challenges facing humanity is a long-term endeavor. Together we are to cooperate and assist each other in this venture. Through systematic, sustained, and coherent action on the part of individuals, communities, and institutions, humankind will steadily progress throughout the future decades as a global civilization unfolds.

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