

From the Editor's Desk

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WALKING THE MYSTIC PATH WITH PRACTICAL FEET

With the arrival of the centenary of the passing of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, people around the world have taken a moment to pause and reflect on a life that, from one perspective, appears timeless. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s station is eternal: Center of the Covenant of Bahá’u’lláh, Interpreter of His Word, Perfect Exemplar of His teachings. His example speaks to humanity at all times and in all circumstances; a bright moon that never sets, reflecting to us His Father’s imperishable light.

Having paused and reflected, we find ourselves once more in the stream of daily life, with work at hand. Some of this work is the community-building that those who have responded to Bahá’u’lláh’s call pursue under the guidance of the Universal House of Justice. Some of the work is the civilization-building enterprise in which every person has a part to play. We are carried on the currents of history, striving to guide our craft along its predestined course, steering away from the rocks and shoals that loom up ever and anon. But no matter how important and overwhelming—or how small and mundane—our share in the work may at any time seem, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s

example serves, as One who walks the mystic path with practical feet.

The contributions in this issue of the *Journal of Bahá’í Studies* speak directly to this question of civilizational advancement through time. Based on his keynote address at the 2021 Conference of the Association for Bahá’í Studies, Paul Lample’s “Reflections on the Challenge of our Age” helps place the moral trajectory of humankind in historical context, showing that the moral questions vexing humanity today may present new aspects, but they are not new at their core. Their stakes, however, are undeniably higher in this age of humanity’s impending maturity, and the urgency of developing a system adequate to answer them, and to build consensus around them, is greater than ever before. Lample’s article shows how the moral teachings of Bahá’u’lláh, which give shape to a Bahá’í approach to morality in the context of all of our relationships, are inextricable from the program He has set out for the advancement of civilization. In reviewing some of the core elements of this moral approach, he invites us to reflect on how we can convey this coherence between the standard of morality and the goal of civilizational advancement to an ever-widening swathe of humanity. It is a timely invitation, at this moment when we recall ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s contributions to discourse and social action. Indeed, Lample notes that among the gifts “offered by Bahá’u’lláh to the Bahá’í community to assist it to achieve its high aims was His son,

‘Abdu’l-Bahá.” In His life, the work of advancing civilization was the organic outgrowth of unswerving adherence to Bahá’u’lláh’s moral order, which itself was the inextricable companion to spiritual conviction. There could be no distinction between being and doing. It is this perfect coherence that makes His example timeless; it is also what enabled Him to make contributions so perfectly attuned to the needs of His own place and time.

One facet of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s example to us is His way of contributing to discourse. As an instance of this, Lample gives an overview of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s discussion of the extremes of wealth and poverty. This matter receives an expanded treatment in the second article in this issue, Dr. Vargha Bolodo-Taefi’s “Beyond Welfare: A Preliminary Bahá’í Normative Framework for Economic Rights and Responsibilities.” Bolodo-Taefi considers the particular contribution that Bahá’í teachings can make to our collective endeavor to move towards a more just economic system. Before asking how to construct a just economic order, we must first be able to articulate what such an order looks like—or, if even this is premature and must be determined through experience, to consider by what criteria we might evaluate an order, to ask whether it is just. Bolodo-Taefi contributes to this foundational work by mapping out a constellation of principles that shed light on the requirements of a just economic system, many of which emerge directly from ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s own contributions to

the discourses of society in His day. By showing how these principles, taken as a whole, point toward certain rights and responsibilities of economic actors and expand conventional conceptions of the meaning of economic welfare, this work exemplifies how the Bahá’í teachings provide a continual source of insight in our efforts to contribute to the advancement of civilization.

In “The Need for an Integrative Conceptual Framework for Addressing Mental Health Challenges during the COVID-19 Pandemic,” Dr. Bayan Jalalizadeh addresses a matter at the intersection of ongoing civilizational advance and the pressing needs of the moment, using the coronavirus pandemic as a lens to explore the strengths and weaknesses of our collective approach to mental health. By considering how the pandemic-illuminated shortcomings of the current framework for addressing mental health have their roots in certain conceptual assumptions, he helps us appreciate both the bounty of living in an age where we understand that the thoughts and emotions of a human being are integral to health, and the need to overcome the individualistic and fragmented paradigms through which this area of human knowledge, like so many others, is too often approached.

These three articles, each in its own way, emphasize the progressive, incremental, and humble attitude that humanity is called on to adopt in its efforts to use the Revelation as a light, guiding the way on the path to civilizational advance.

A common, and often implicit, feature of all Bahá'í efforts to contribute to an ever-advancing civilization is a conception of history as progressive. The centenary of the passing of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and of the beginning of the Formative Age of the Bahá'í dispensation, provides an opportunity to reflect on how the progress of the Faith itself—which is organically connected to the building of a new world order—can be understood within this conception of history.

Shoghi Effendi also called the Formative Age of the Faith, “the Transitional, the Iron Age which is to witness the crystallization and shaping of the creative energies released by [Bahá'u'lláh's] Revelation” (*God Passes By* xiv).

The concept of the Iron Age evokes the Ages of Man found in ancient Greek thought. Centuries before the Greeks began a systematic study of history, the poet Hesiod outlined this myth-infused theory of historical change, moved perhaps by the abiding human need to explain the persistent burden of suffering in the world. Hesiod, too, believed that his was the Iron Age—an age defined by violence, toil, misery, and the lapse of morals. Operating within a conception of history as regressing from a more ordered and peaceful past into an ever more chaotic future, Hesiod held that the Golden Age—the age when humans had dwelt with the gods—was long past, never to return. Now was the age of Iron—a base metal, unlovely but hard, that it might endure.

This gloomy appraisal resonates with how some see humanity's present predicament, as noted by Lample:

The disintegration of the old world order is increasingly evident in the inability of human beings to resolve their differences, as manifested in intractable disputes about knowledge, politics, morals, and economics. [...] It is as if the picture of humanity has become a shattered mosaic, with no hope of finding a way to put the pieces back together in the form of just social relationships.

Hesiod's view of history has some resonance too with religious narratives that look back to a time before humanity's fall. While these visions may look forward to the coming of the kingdom of God on earth, this kingdom is often understood to be divine not only in its design but in its making, descending fully formed from heaven.

Today, of course, some read history through an even bleaker lens than Hesiod's. We have not fallen, because there are no gods; history is directionless, and so is humanity. Even the faint comfort of the Ages of Man—the comfort of knowing that humanity abides in an ordered universe—is gone. The virtue of iron—its enduring hardness—is denied us; things fall apart.

In this vein, some may conclude that the vision of a harmonious social order held out in the Bahá'í Writings is something that never was and never can be, because conflict—with all

the suffering it entails—is too deeply rooted in human nature to ever be removed. Indeed, Lample notes that, at a glance, the aspirations of the Bahá'í Faith can seem naïve. But the challenges facing humanity in economics, in mental health, in climate change—to mention only those treated in this issue—demand change, progress. What is naïve is to imagine that, absent real and transformative change, we will survive. In the face of suffering and a disordered social reality, we must neither surrender hope for a better world, nor wait until such a world descends, fully formed, the product of direct divine intervention.

In Shoghi Effendi's usage, and through the progressive narrative of history that he helps us to discern in the Bahá'í teachings, the Iron Age remains a time of toil. But we do not toil merely to stave off the encroaching chaos of an increasingly entropic universe. Humanity must share the constructive, painstaking, work of building, brick by brick, the foundations of the golden age to come. The iron of this age must be molded into something new. It is Bahá'u'lláh Who will

forge, with the hammer of His Will, and through the fire of tribulation, upon the anvil of this trawailing age, and in the particular shape His mind has envisioned, these scattered and mutually destructive fragments into which a perverse world has fallen, into one single unit, solid and indivisible, able to execute His design for the

children of men. (Shoghi Effendi, *The Promised Day is Come* 124)

As we follow in the example of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, ours is the privilege to lend our hands, however feeble, to the wielding of the hammer.

We hope that each of the articles in this issue will provide inspiration, speaking as they do to this constructive process.

The poems featured in this issue are by two retired professors of English—Charles H. Lynch and John S. Hatcher—who share a great sense of humor and a profound admiration for Robert Hayden. Dr. Lynch's poetry has been published and awarded over the years and we are sure that our readers will enjoy this first introduction to his art. While most readers might know Dr. Hatcher for his widely published works on Bahá'í themes, he is also an accomplished poet and the author of the book *From the Auroral Darkness: The Life and Poetry of Robert Hayden*, published by George Ronald.

The evocative photographs by Shahriar Erfanian punctuate this issue and invite us to look up, look down, and look forward. On the cover, we are delighted to feature Jacqueline Claire's evanescent "Midnight Prayer." Peacocks, always a symbol of immortal life, have graced the Bahá'í gardens in the Holy Land since the time of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Beautiful and proud as it appears, He explained one day to a group of Western pilgrims, if the peacock looks at its ugly feet, it becomes despondent and its tail droops; "So you

must keep your faces and hearts turned to God always, never look upon your unworthiness” (qtd. in Pauline Hannen, “Pilgrimage in February, Letter on 4 March, Account of meetings with ‘Abdu’l-Bahá”).



Dive
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