

From the Editor's Desk

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A COLLABORATIVE EXPLORATION
OF THE HARMONY OF SCIENCE
AND RELIGION

In its “Ten Year Retrospective, 24 July 2023” (vol. 33, no. 1-2), the Association for Bahá’í Studies highlighted collaborative scholarship as an area of learning for ABS. In keeping with its goal to assist in the generation and dissemination of this learning, we are pleased to bring you the first of two issues of *The Journal of Bahá’í Studies* devoted to a single collaborative writing project.

The papers in these two issues are the fruit of a collaborative process dating back more than four years, in which a number of friends have studied, consulted, written, and reflected together on the theme of the harmony of science and religion.

This editorial provides an opportunity to share reflections on both this theme itself, and the process by which these papers came about. We turn first to the theme, a perennial topic of reflection and study for many Bahá’ís, and situate the three papers in this issue in the context of the broad discourse on the harmony of science and religion. Next, we will describe in some detail the experience of this group of collaborators, and insights that have emerged

from it, which are sure to be useful to readers who are themselves interested in collaborative scholarship.

We are pleased to feature Alea Morren’s “Inviting Grace” on the cover of this issue, and to present two poems—“A Reason to Remain” and “Morning with Cows”—by Kat Dunlop and two—“A Kind of Truth” and “Legacy: A Conversation”—by Tami Haaland.

THE HARMONY OF SCIENCE AND
RELIGION

The theme of the harmony of science and religion, a cornerstone principle of Bahá’í epistemology, can be stated simply, and yet invites ongoing exploration; like many foundational truths, we are asked to approach it with a marriage of faith and humility, with both certitude in its truth and awareness of the limitations of our understanding of it at any given time. It is a theme as broad in scope as it is profound, with implications for myriad research questions and as many methodological approaches, and inviting study from a great diversity of perspectives. A cohesive collaborative approach to this theme, then, will necessarily require focus.

One approach would be to bring a certain methodological approach or disciplinary perspective to a number of questions related to the theme. Another would involve identifying a central question, or a series of related questions, and then examining them from a diversity of perspectives. The papers in this issue and the next take this latter

approach. They center on the implications of this expansive theme for epistemology—the theory of knowledge—and ask how science and religion can help us discover the kind of discourse that can advance collective understanding. United by this shared focus, the papers represent a diversity of perspectives, like light sources illuminating an object of study from varying angles.

These authors' focus on epistemology is conceptually coherent with a Bahá'í understanding of science and religion as "systems of knowledge," characterized by the Universal House of Justice as "inseparable and reciprocal" (17 Jun. 2011), and "indispensable" to both the development of "the potentialities of consciousness" (Apr. 2002) and "the advancement of civilization" (17 Jun. 2011). Epistemology in this context, then, is not an abstract philosophical concern, but a highly pragmatic one. Indeed, for humanity to rise to the many challenges it now faces, an understanding of what it means for both science and religion to be systems of knowledge, and how to draw on them, is indispensable:

Social action, of whatever size and complexity, should strive to remain free of simplistic and distorted conceptions of science and religion. To this end, an imaginary duality between reason and faith—a duality that would confine reason to the realm of empirical evidence and logical argumentation and which would associate faith with superstition

and irrational thought—must be avoided. The process of development has to be rational and systematic—incorporating, for example, scientific capabilities of observing, of measuring, of rigorously testing ideas—and at the same time deeply aware of faith and spiritual convictions. (Office of Social and Economic Development 26 Nov. 2012)

The relevance of both science and religion, as systems of knowledge, to civilization-building is perhaps taken for granted by Bahá'ís themselves, though it would be foolhardy to claim that Bahá'í communities anywhere have adequately grasped its implications. For many other individuals and communities, however, this perspective may not seem at all intuitive. On the one hand, even many religious people today might question how religion, as it is commonly understood, can be meaningfully characterized as a valid system of knowledge. On the other hand, a growing number of groups seem to call science itself into question, either challenging the validity of scientific findings that do not fit with prior ideological views, or going so far as to question the scientific enterprise entire. Given such a reality, it is heartening to see the ongoing efforts of Bahá'ís and likeminded friends to advance in their capacity to express the ways in which both science and religion act as systems of knowledge, contribute to the advancement of civilization, and are in harmony with each other.

As alluded to above, these authors

have further refined their focus by investigating the social dimension of the generation of knowledge. Both science and religion, far from operating solely by the mechanical application of certain processes, can each be understood as a field in which knowledge is generated by an epistemic community—a group of people working collaboratively to advance their knowledge of reality. The coherence and functionality of such a community depends intimately on its discursive capacity: the extent to which its various members can communicate in a way that advances their individual and collective investigation of reality. A key variable in this respect is diversity. The authors all express the conviction, bolstered by their study of both the Bahá'í writings and philosophy of science, that greater diversity in an epistemic community, far from leading to a deadlock of incommensurable views and irreducible arguments, is a bounty, providing the opportunity for greater objectivity and sounder progress.

But the discursive capacity to harness diversity in this way is not a given. In Todd Smith's "Becoming Attuned to Reality: Presuppositions and the Power of Learning in Action," the question of what it might mean to achieve objectivity within an epistemic community is at the forefront. Given the diversity of presuppositions and perspectives that participants in such a community bring to the collective search for greater understanding of reality, it is vital for the group to identify attitudes and practices by which this diversity can become conducive to the desired "attunement."

Smith argues that the "learning mode" of action, reflection, consultation and study with which the Bahá'í community is becoming increasingly familiar is capable of achieving this, because it encourages participants to attend to a number of interplays—dynamic relationships that help to identify and remove ineffectual presuppositions and generate new and useful insights. These interplays, six of which (including that between science and religion themselves) are explored in the paper, can all be considered facets of "the fundamental dynamic between unity and diversity, which is understood to lie at the core of the learning process" (Smith). As a rigorous exploration of the epistemology of the learning mode, this contribution is sure to enrich the reader's understanding of this central element of the Bahá'í community's approach to social change.

Smith's philosophical exploration of the dynamics by which diversity can be harnessed to the investigation of reality is complemented by Whitney White Kazemipour's investigation, which uses the tools of social science. In "Even as the Waves of One Sea: Bahá'í Consultation's Implicit Cultural Support for the Clash of Differing Opinions" White Kazemipour takes for her object of study the Bahá'í concept of consultation, and uses an anthropological lens to consider how the "clash of differing opinions"—the diversity—that is the *sina qua non* of productive consultation can be fostered, protected, and honoured without impairing unity. The paper engages with the meaning of unity in diversity at a foundational level:

what does it mean to be united when we do not see eye to eye? In her analysis of a prayer revealed by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá for opening the meeting of a Spiritual Assembly, which she considers through the anthropological concept of a rite of passage, White Kazemipour lucidly and forcefully demonstrates the power of language to shape our attitudes and dispositions along the lines necessary for this unity in diversity to be possible. Her insights into this prayer are well worth studying for anyone involved in Bahá’í consultation, particularly in an institutional setting.

Where Smith and White Kazemipour’s papers begin with practices of a religious community—the learning mode of the Bahá’í community and consultation—and explore the nature of the discursive activity at their core, the third paper brings in a thoughtful analysis of the core enterprise of knowledge generation in science. In “Revelation as Scientific in its Method: Science, Diversity, Consultation, and Learning in Action,” Stephen Friberg begins with the intriguing claim made by Shoghi Effendi that the Bahá’í Faith is “scientific in its method.” Asking how we might understand this striking statement, Friberg unpacks its implications by first assessing what makes a method scientific, and then exploring where the elements of such a method can be found in Bahá’í practice. By avoiding a reductionist understanding that would reduce science to one single method, and thoughtfully considering instead how a series of interrelated attitudes and practices help give shape to

the concept of science, Friberg is able to draw parallels with Bahá’í community practice that can help individuals, groups and institutions see the processes they are involved with in a new light. As such, and in common with the other papers in this issue, Friberg’s work is both rigorously academic and eminently practical.

THE COLLABORATIVE PROCESS

As ever more groups are coming together in the activities of the Association for Bahá’í Studies to learn how to collaboratively take steps towards contributing to the discourses of society, projects such as the current issue represent not only substantive contributions in their own right, but opportunities to reflect on learning generated in this area of endeavour. In that spirit, what follows is a distillation of some of that learning, gleaned from the participants themselves. The discussion is organized around elements of the particular capability being fostered by this group—that of engaging in collaborative scholarship.

ENGAGING WITH A DISCOURSE

As noted above, engaging with a topic as vast as the harmony of science and religion requires focus. In the case of this group, focus was provided by a central question that crystallized through collective study and consultation: What can religion, and specifically the Bahá’í Faith, offer science? Arriving at and pursuing this question required the

participants to develop their capacity, shared by Bahá'ís around the world working in this area, including those in ABS reading groups, to read an existing discourse and find within it points of resonance with our emerging understanding of the Bahá'í Revelation. Practically speaking, this involved moving fluidly between Bahá'í writings and guidance, existing scholarship on the harmony of science and religion from a Bahá'í perspective,¹ and texts in philosophy of science. A close study of Helen Longino's *Science as Social Knowledge* proved particularly fruitful, as it revealed a key point of correlation between the discourse on science and the Bahá'í religious approach to investigating reality: the role of diversity as not a barrier to unity, but fundamental to it—a source of richness from both an aesthetic and epistemological perspective. This correlation led to an initial hypothesis, that the Bahá'í concept

of consultation might illuminate the social process at the heart of the scientific enterprise.

QUALITIES AND ATTITUDES

While a process of engagement with discourse can be described in the manner above, in terms of what was studied, what trails of ideas were followed, and what insights resulted, the experience of this group can also be conveyed in terms of the intellectual and spiritual qualities they relied on and refined, the postures and attitudes those qualities informed, and the habits and practical actions through which those postures and attitudes were expressed and developed. Together, these elements help illuminate the inextricable relationship between “being” and “doing,” at the heart of all Bahá'í action in the world, including collaborative scholarship (Universal House of Justice, 28 Dec. 2010).

The spiritual quality at the genesis of this project was love. While this may not be the term that first comes to mind for researchers describing their work, in the sense used by this group love is surely at the heart of much of human investigation of reality. These authors shared a love for their area of common interest—the capacity of science and religion to investigate reality. This love was expressed as deep curiosity and a desire to understand which, as a shared commitment, naturally contributed to the deepening of friendship and love between the participants themselves.

Friendship, in turn, contributed to the mutual trust vital to collaborative

1 Specific works studied included Paul Lample's “In Pursuit of Harmony between Science and Religion” (*The Journal of Bahá'í Studies* vol. 26 no. 4, 2016, pp. 23–57) and “Toward a Framework for Action” (*The Journal of Bahá'í Studies* vol. 28 no. 3, 2018, pp. 1–43) Farzam Arbab's “An Inquiry into the Harmony of Science and Religion” (in *Religion and Public Discourse in an Age of Transition: Reflections on Bahá'í Practice and Thought*, ed. Geoffrey Cameron and Benjamin Schewel, Association for Bahá'í Studies and Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2018, pp. 131–62), and Todd Smith's “Science and Religion in Dynamic Interplay” (*The Journal of Bahá'í Studies* vol. 29 no. 4, 2019, pp. 11–44).

scholarship. The group's reflections on their process over time reveal a fascinating relationship between trust and the interplay of unity and diversity. On the one hand, trust rested on the participants' shared commitment to advancing knowledge on a topic of mutual interest, as described in the previous section. On the other hand, it was also built by their attitude of welcoming diversity of perspective. Moving from a shared hypothesis to written product required identifying a mode of collaboration that would work for this group; the decision to write distinct papers, joined and given impetus by the ongoing collective process of study, reflection and consultation, came naturally. As they consulted together on what they were studying, the participants gained a sharper sense of what approach or topic was close to each person's heart. And their trust grew that each person's contribution was being enriched by the diversity of the others' perspectives. This trust permitted honest feedback to be warmly received in the spirit in which it was given, and allowed participants to share tentative understandings, unresolved puzzles, and points where they were "stuck."

POSTURES, HABITS AND PRACTICES

The way in which these qualities of love and trust informed, and were in turn strengthened by, the postures, habits and practices of the group, is illustrated by the group's first experience with sharing writing. Having blocked out topics to write on, the

group began by drafting abstracts for proposed papers and sharing them with each other. Drawing on the experience each had gained from participation in the global plans of the Universal House of Justice, the group approached their foray into collaborative writing in a learning mode, allowing them to refine their process as time went on. The abstracts provided an initial opportunity for learning how to do certain crucial things: how to consult with each other on individual pieces, how to accompany each other by identifying specific components of a given piece that one or more individuals might have insight into or experience with, and what the "transformative criticism" that Longino highlights as central to the scientific endeavour might look like through a consultative lens. Each abstract was given focused attention, being the topic of consultation at two or three of the group's weekly meetings. As the authors presented their work and received consultative feedback, some of the initially chosen topics shifted fluidly over time with writing and re-writing. As one member of the group reflected: "There was a lot of encouragement, and a lot of cross-fertilization of ideas. Longino talks about the importance of diversity, and we were excited to learn how to be united while not needing to be the same—while writing about what touched our hearts."

The postures highlighted by this account are those of accompaniment—with each participant serving as accompanier and accompanied at different junctures, switching roles organically

as particular questions or problems arose—and consultation itself. Indeed, the group was deliberate about applying the very insights they were gaining into Bahá'í consultation through their study and writing to the consultative dynamics of their group.

The culture of consultation within the group also allowed them to identify what they were learning about the practical requisites of collaborative writing. The simple step of starting each meeting with a prayer was found to lead to a different quality of collective engagement, and facilitate the group's desired orientation away from the ego-driven kind of criticism that can take hold in academic settings. A rotating schedule of presentations effectively maintained momentum, while taking turns in the role of chair allowed each participant to gain capacity in this important function. The group quickly learned that effective note-taking was key to ensuring that the insights of consultation could be captured and integrated into the emerging writing, and not lost. Patience with the process went hand in hand with this systematization; indeed, the systematization allowed patience to flourish with the confidence that progress was continuing. Some of the most practical insights were arrived at in a completely organic way; group members shared that they came to realize, through experience, the great power of humour to help even deep criticism be received, understood, and welcomed.

A final posture of the group worth highlighting was that of being outward oriented. This orientation was shaped

by early study of texts on the nature of contribution to discourse itself (including Book 14 of the Ruhi Institute, *Participating in Public Discourse*). At later stages of their work, the group convened two seminars to invite feedback on their drafts from invited guests representing a wide diversity of academic disciplines. These periodic opportunities to consult more widely were important for the group to ensure that they were benefitting from a diversity of perspectives, and to uncover elements of their collective thinking that they might be taking for granted. And, of course, seminars of this kind can have a range of benefits beyond the production of papers: they help to build a community of scholars that is learning to think together about the harmony of science and religion and gaining greater capacity to discuss this principle in language that is meaningful for colleagues of all backgrounds. The authors intend to acknowledge the contributions of this wider circle of collaborators in the next issue.

It is hoped that these comments may serve as a further contribution to the arc of learning about collaborative scholarship in the Association and the *Journal*, continuing to build on insights shared in the collaborative issue on Constructive Resilience² and in Jordan van Rijn's "Learning to Sift: Reflections on Ten Years of Engaging with the Economics Discourse."³ It is

2 *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies* vol. 30, no. 3, 2020.

3 *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies* vol. 33, no. 1-2, 2023, pp. 37–69.

the further hope of the Association for Bahá'í Studies that many more collaborative initiatives will produce writing, for publication in the *Journal* or elsewhere, and that the learning they share will further contribute to this important area of growth for Bahá'í scholarship.