

Association for Bahá'í Studies Fiftieth Anniversary Retrospective: *Executive Summary*

INTRODUCTION

In January 1976, eighty people gathered at Cedar Glen in Bolton, Ontario, for the first annual conference of the Canadian Association for Studies on the Bahá'í Faith. The Association had been called into being the previous year by the National Spiritual Assembly of Canada in response to a specific goal assigned by the Universal House of Justice to the Canadian community at the inception of the Five Year Plan: to cultivate opportunities for formal presentations, courses, and lectureships on the Bahá'í Faith in Canadian universities and institutions of higher learning. While the founding membership was small and the institutional infrastructure minimal, it was clear from the outset that Bahá'í thought had much to contribute to the intellectual life of the age, and that the time had come to pursue that contribution more systematically and in earnest.

Over fifty years later, this retrospective offers an occasion to reflect on what

those five decades have built and set in motion. It traces the arc from that small gathering in Bolton, Ontario, through the decades of institutional growth and intellectual development that followed, to the capacities the Association is now working to cultivate, guided at each turn by the Universal House of Justice. It also builds on the Ten Year Retrospective published in the *Journal of Bahá'í Studies* in 2023, carrying that account forward and situating current developments within the full arc of the Association's history. Two companion essays in this special issue develop some of the recent developments in greater depth: the first, "Approach to Learning," examines the conceptual framework and dispositions that have come to guide the Association's work since 2013; the second, "Learning in Action: Insights from Collaborative Initiatives," draws on the experience of special interest groups and other collaborative initiatives to illustrate how that learning is taking shape across diverse fields.

What animates this account is a conviction, shared by those who have served and participated in the Association throughout its history, that the work of Bahá'í scholarship—pursued with rigor, humility, and love, in the company of others, consciously oriented toward addressing the needs of a humanity in transition—is not peripheral to the life of the Faith but integral to the release of its society-building power in ever-greater measures. The pages that follow are written in awareness of that heritage and in gratitude for all those who contributed to it.

FOUNDING AND EARLY GROWTH, 1975–1979

The impulse to found the Association came directly from the Universal House of Justice in 1974. The National Spiritual Assembly of Canada responded by establishing the Canadian Association for Studies on the Bahá'í Faith in 1975, with Hossain Danesh as founding Chair and Douglas Martin as Secretary. The founding Executive Committee also included William Hatcher, Glen Eyford, Elizabeth Larin, Michael Rochester, and Don Rogers. René Steiner and Jane Nishi Goldstone joined the committee in 1977.

The annual conference served as the Association's primary vehicle from the start, growing from eighty participants at Cedar Glen in 1976 to 200 at the fourth conference in Toronto in 1979, drawing early collaborators such as David Smith, Abdu'l-Missagh Ghadirian, and Jane Faily, who would continue to serve and speak at Association conferences over the following decades. The *Bahá'í Studies* monograph series launched in 1976, with early volumes—including William Hatcher's *The Science of Religion* and John Hatcher's *The Metaphorical Nature of Physical Reality*. William Hatcher also presented at annual conferences and lectured on science and religion and related subjects at several Canadian universities, including Mount Allison and the University of Moncton. Ghadirian, too, contributed to the series, and Peter Morgan became its editor beginning with Volume VI

in 1979. With such contributions, the series demonstrated its capacity to reach outside the Association's own circle. Hossain Danesh's volume on the violence-free society, published in 1979 as a Special United Nations Year of the Child edition with a combined print run of 20,000, was an early sign that the Association's publications could speak to audiences well beyond the academy. The Association further launched a companion quarterly, *Bahá'í Notebook/Cahier Bahá'í*, designed to complement the monograph series with shorter articles, literary pieces, poetry, and music in both English and French.

In a letter dated 19 March 1979, the House of Justice commended the Association's publications as one of the very favorable outcomes of the Five-Year Plan, and, at the inception of the Seven-Year Plan, set a further goal of expanding opportunities for teaching in Canadian institutions. This was a clear signal that, with each successive Plan, the Association would be drawn ever more deliberately into the Faith's global institutional strategy.

GROWTH AND CONSOLIDATION, 1980–1990

The early 1980s brought significant institutional growth. The Hasan Balyuzi Memorial Lecture was inaugurated in 1980. Amatu'l-Bahá Rúhíyyih Khánum, Hand of the Cause of God, attended the Sixth Annual Conference in 1981, where she concluded the gathering and opened the International

Bahá'í Conference on Marriage and the Family that followed. That same year, following a recommendation by the National Spiritual Assembly of Canada and with the approval of the Universal House of Justice, the Association was renamed the Association for Bahá'í Studies, its mandate extended to cover all of North America—a development the House of Justice described as having international ramifications.

The Centre for Bahá'í Studies in Ottawa began operating in 1982, providing the Association with a physical home under the enduring stewardship of Executive Secretary Christine Zerbinis, whose administrative leadership spanned nearly two decades. From this strengthened base, the Association extended its reach into the wider academic world through the First Symposium on the Relationship of the Bahá'í Faith and Islam at McGill University in 1984 and the Bahá'í-Marxist Dialogue at Louhelen in 1986. The Eleventh Annual Conference at the University of Western Ontario in 1986 drew 2,000 participants—the largest in the Association's history so far—centered on the theme of “Creating a New World Order” in the wake of the Universal House of Justice's statement “The Promise of World Peace,” with Hand of the Cause Amatu'l-Bahá Rúhíyyih Khánum and Hand of the Cause Dr. 'Alí-Muḥammad Varqá among the speakers.

Then came what many would regard as the most consequential institutional development of the period. The *Journal of Bahá'í Studies* launched in 1988 as a

peer-reviewed, interdisciplinary quarterly published trilingually in English, French, and Spanish, giving Bahá'í scholarship a permanent, academically credible home. The House of Justice later expressed appreciation that the Editorial Board had ensured that not only the content of the *Journal* but also its editorial style appropriately reflected the principles of the Faith, observing that this care had greatly contributed to securing for the publication the widespread and well-merited admiration it enjoyed in the Bahá'í world. By 1990, membership stood at over 2,300, and nineteen international affiliates were operating across five continents.

SUSTAINED ENGAGEMENT AND STRUCTURAL CHANGE, 1991–1999

In a letter dated 25 December 1990, the House of Justice explicitly linked the Association's scholarly work to the community-building and outreach efforts of the broader Bahá'í community. The conferences of the 1990s addressed large structural questions, culminating in the three-year “Anarchy into Order” series (1994–1996), which tackled global governance in Cambridge, San Francisco, and Edmonton. The decade also brought structural challenges: membership declined from a peak of 2,409 in 1989 to 1,754 by 1999, and most regional committees had ceased to function by mid-decade.

Yet the broader picture pointed to an organization of substantial reach—twenty-seven international affiliates worldwide, a journal indexed

in multiple academic databases, and publications that demonstrated the Association's capacity to contribute to urgent public conversations, notably Richard W. Thomas' *Racial Unity: An Imperative for Social Progress*, published the same year as the Fifteenth Annual Conference in Atlanta on "Models of Racial Unity" and later revised and republished in 1993. The decade closed with the publication of June Manning Thomas' *Planning Progress: Lessons from Shoghi Effendi* in 1999, a book that was republished twenty-five years later with a new preface, a testament to its enduring relevance.

FOUR STANDOUT THEMES, 1975–1999

Looking back on the founding period, four themes stand out that would continue to shape the Association's development in the years ahead and remain relevant today.

The first is the pattern of guidance from the Universal House of Justice, which constituted the Association's identity. At the outset of each successive Plan, and at many other moments in between, the House of Justice either initiated, confirmed, or expanded the Association's mandate—from the 1979 commendation of its publications as a favorable outcome of the Five Year Plan, to the 1984 description of its North American expansion as having international ramifications, to the 1996 recognition of the *Journal's* editorial standards as contributing to its well-merited admiration. The

Association's work was consistently affirmed as integral to the unfoldment of the Faith's mission.

The second is the significance of the institutional transformation initiated in 1981, when the Association expanded from a Canadian body to a North American and then an internationally connected organization. This shift in scale, accountability, and ambition shaped everything that followed. By 1999, its implications were visible in twenty-seven international affiliates, a trilingual *Journal* indexed in multiple academic databases, and a continental conference program that had drawn participants from across North America and beyond.

The third is the creative tension between serving a broad Bahá'í membership and functioning as a vehicle for rigorous scholarly engagement, compounded by the question of how best to engage the mainstream academic world in a climate largely shaped by materialistic assumptions. The Marxist-Bahá'í Dialogue of 1986, the Princeton conference of 1987, and the Islam-Bahá'í Symposium of 1984 each tested that engagement directly, as did the launch of the *Journal*. The 1999 compilation, *Issues Related to the Study of the Bahá'í Faith*, containing letters of the Universal House of Justice, affirmed that truth in scholarly fields cannot be found if the evidence of Revelation is systematically excluded, while clarifying that the terms "Bahá'í scholarship" and "Bahá'í scholars" should not be used in an exclusive sense that would demarcate

those admitted into this category from those denied entrance to it. Learning to act on this conviction in active collaboration with academics from the wider society, with full attentiveness to the framework of the Covenant, remained central to the work of the Association.

The fourth standout theme is the relationship between scholarship and the Covenant. The Association faced a challenge in the 1990s owing to the emergence of a campaign, conducted largely through internet discussion groups, by certain individuals who sought to secure interpretive authority on the basis of their academic training, and so alter the essential character of the Faith. In response, the House of Justice addressed such fundamental questions as the relationship between scholarly freedom and institutional authority, conscience and its formation, and the proper methods for expressing disagreement, while the Association's leadership engaged deeply with these questions in close consultation with the Continental Board of Counsellors. The same 1999 compilation, *Issues Related to the Study of the Bahá'í Faith*, observed that no segment of humanity was so well equipped as the Bahá'í community to take a leading role in developing scholarly paradigms capable of engaging spiritual, moral, and cultural realities, describing this as a priceless opportunity of service and achievement.

CONSOLIDATION AND FURTHER QUESTIONS, 2000–2013

The years between 1999 and 2013 were devoted largely to consolidating the Association's understanding of its role and purpose. One constant throughout was a deliberate reconceptualization of Bahá'í Studies, as the Association worked to broaden and redefine its meaning, applying a distinctively Bahá'í perspective to constructively critique the assumptions underlying academic approaches and methodologies—a reminder that the Association was not only for academics, that Bahá'í scholarship is not simply the same as the academic study of the Faith, and that scholarship can and should take many diverse forms. The annual conference remained the Association's most visible activity, regularly drawing over a thousand participants and attracting distinguished contributors from within and beyond the Bahá'í community. The Campus Associations for Bahá'í Studies, which at their peak extended to some forty-eight institutions across every Canadian province, continued to cultivate a Bahá'í scholarly presence on campuses through conferences, speaker tours, and study circles. Over three decades, they built a body of activity that laid important foundations for the campus engagement that would follow. Publishing milestones included the 2000 publication of Nader Saiedi's *Logos and Civilization* and the 2008 co-publishing partnership with Wilfrid Laurier University Press for Saiedi's *Gate of the Heart*.

A letter dated 24 April 2008, written on behalf of the House of Justice, gave the Association a clear and authoritative answer to those who were uncertain whether rigorous scholarship had a place in a community increasingly focused on the core activities of the Plans. It stated that far from being a distraction from the worldwide effort to advance the growth of the Faith, Bahá'í scholarly activity was a powerful reinforcement of that endeavor. Growing awareness of the coherence among community building, engaging in discourse, and social action made it increasingly apparent that participating in academic and professional discourses was exactly the kind of work the Association existed to foster. The emergence of the Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity and its seminars for university students and recent graduates from around 2007–08 was a parallel and significant development; ISGP graduates were beginning to flow into Association spaces, bringing a grounding in the conceptual framework that would prove invaluable going forward.

It was in this spirit that the National Spiritual Assembly of Canada sought the guidance of the House of Justice on how the Association could advance participation in the academic and professional discourses to which the friends' fields and vocations gave them access. On 24 July 2013, the reply arrived. It would play a vital role in deepening, focusing, and giving fresh impetus to what had been building across the preceding decades.

WORKING WITHIN THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK, 2013–2026

The letter of 24 July 2013 acknowledged the Association's contribution over nearly four decades and reflected on the most productive avenues of endeavor going forward. The House of Justice suggested that the Association's endeavors could be conceived as a means to enhance the friends' abilities to explore opportunities related to their scholarly interests, promoting learning among a wide range of believers across disciplines through the specialized settings it creates. It offered concrete suggestions about seminars, special interest groups, and the reimagining of existing activities, situated the Association's work within the conceptual framework giving shape to the activities of expansion and consolidation, social action, and participation in the discourses of society, and closed with a vision of rising generations entering diverse social spaces and fields of human endeavor, to which arena the Association could offer an important contribution.

The most visible new line of action adopted in response was the development of special interest groups—specialized settings designed to assist individuals from particular professions or academic disciplines in examining aspects of discourse within their fields. At the time, these were referred to as working groups, with the term special interest groups being later re-adopted, in keeping with the language of the 2013 letter itself. Through

experimentation across the 2014, 2015, and 2016 conferences, this model took shape, with eight groups active by the 2016 conference in Montréal and approximately 250 individuals participating in pre-conference sessions. The same conviction animating this expansion—that participation in the intellectual life of the Bahá'í community should be open to all who wish to engage—led in September 2016 to the Executive Committee's decision to discontinue formal membership, reconceiving the Association from a body defined by dues payment to a community of participants defined by engagement. Carrying this work forward has depended throughout on a reliable administrative infrastructure, including the work of staff members such as Parvin Rowhani and Nilufar Gordon, who have each selflessly devoted many years to supporting the Executive Committee and the Association's expanding range of activities.

As the practical work of responding to the 2013 guidance unfolded, four authors made important contributions that helped shed further light on what it means for Bahá'ís to engage seriously, humbly, and effectively with the academic and professional life of society. Drawing on the conceptual framework in complementary ways, Haleh Arbab, Paul Lample, Farzam Arbab, and Shahriar Razavi each examined questions central to the Association's developing work—among them the relationship between mastery of a field and the light of the Revelation, the nature of an evolving conceptual framework,

the intellectual vocation of the Bahá'í community, and the principles and approaches that bear on participation in public discourse. These four essays are listed in the Works Cited below.

LEARNING ABOUT LEARNING

In the years since 2013, drawing on the counsel of members of the Universal House of Justice as well as the regular guidance of the Counsellors and the National Spiritual Assemblies of Canada and the United States, the Association has progressively clarified its mandate: to foster the intellectual life of the community by helping to build the capacity of the friends to contribute to the prevalent discourses of society in their academic fields and in their professions, in a manner that enriches the capacity of the Bahá'í community to discharge its mission.

Central to this work has been the concerted effort to understand and apply the elements of the conceptual framework highlighted in the July 2013 message—the relationship between study and action, focus, capacity building and accompaniment, organic growth, institutional arrangements, coherence among endeavors, sound relations among individuals and institutions, and learning in action. These elements have come to serve as a lens through which the Association examines everything it is striving to achieve.

At the heart of the framework are foundational principles—the oneness of humanity, the nobility of every person, the interdependence of all created

things, and a consciousness of history that situates every act of scholarship within a larger story of humanity's collective journey toward maturity. Running through these is a set of related dispositions central to the kind of inquiry Association spaces are working to cultivate: humility and detachment, the capacity to correlate insights, consultation in dynamic interplay with independent investigation, and a resolute orientation toward transcending difference and harmonizing perspectives, all animated by divine love. In its 30 December 2021 message, the Universal House of Justice has given vivid expression to the kind of participants these conditions are working to form. They are enkindled souls committed to the prosperity of all, championing rationality and science, viewing everyone as a potential partner to collaborate with, patient and perseverant, pledged to long-term endeavor.

The Association has also identified six objects of learning that now organize its work: how to multiply and develop the settings and processes in which participants can collaborate and generate collective insights; how to enable growing numbers of diverse participants to assist each other to contribute to relevant discourses; how to develop an outward-looking culture actively cultivating a collective learning process with the wider society; how to help young adults view participating in professional and academic discourses as a core dimension of their service; how to assist a growing number of authors to publish work contributing to

the intellectual life of the community; and how to draw on the arts as a means of disseminating knowledge and consolidating understanding. Running through all six is the aspiration to coherence: the understanding that the Association's different spaces and activities, while retaining a measure of autonomy appropriate to a voluntary scholarly association, are also part of an ecosystem of activity in which the whole generates understanding that no single space could achieve on its own. Reading groups cultivate the habits of mind and collaborative relationships that deepen seminar conversations; seminars generate insights that find expression in writing groups and conference presentations; publications extend the reach of this learning into the wider scholarly world; young adult seminars complement ISGP processes while cultivating the intellectual capacities of a rising generation; outward-looking initiatives connect all of this to the broader currents of academic and professional life; and the arts enrich the epistemological foundations on which the entire enterprise rests. Among the publications that have extended this learning into the wider scholarly world is the 2018 volume *Religion and Public Discourse in an Age of Transition*, edited by Geoffrey Cameron and Benjamin Schewel and published with Wilfrid Laurier University Press, a milestone in collaborative Bahá'í scholarship whose writing process directly inspired the *Journal's* subsequent experiments in collective inquiry.

This aspiration to coherence is itself strengthened by the Association's deepening relationship with the training institute. The Association has been learning how participating in the institute constructively affects its work, and how the prior engagement of young people in the community-building process and ISGP seminars enhances the quality of their participation in Association spaces. Between April and November 2025, multi-seminar gatherings were organized at decentralized locations across North America, bringing together some 160 participants, predominantly youth and young adults, exploring themes related to technology and society, mental health, evolution and consciousness, and economics—the latest manifestation of a campus engagement tradition that extends back to the Association's founding mandate. This experience has already yielded valuable points of learning: the importance of framing such seminars as exploratory rather than prescriptive, the effectiveness of personal invitations over general announcements in attracting participants, and the considerable value of allowing extended time and iterative consultation for ideas to mature.

Two questions now stand at the forefront of consultation with senior institutions: how Association activities can best complement and strengthen the pattern of community action taking shape across North America as the processes by which young people contribute to the world of ideas grow in complexity and become more closely

interwoven with their other arenas of service, and what processes of review would be appropriate for the seminar materials being developed by special interest groups as such offerings multiply at the local level.

Large conferences both reflect and reinforce this emphasis on participation and coherence, serving as the visible point of convergence where the various threads of the Association's work are brought together, reflected upon, and catalyzed for next steps. Their evolution over the past five decades has been considerable, shifting gradually from a model that enabled more passive attendance to working conferences in which participants actively engage in processes relevant to their academic and professional interests. The 2020 virtual conference drew over 3,000 registrants—roughly double the in-person attendance—and introduced programming formats including share-out presentations from reading groups, poster sessions, and roundtables that proved durable well beyond the pandemic. Thematic seminars, growing from nine in 2023 to nineteen in 2025 and spanning themes from artificial intelligence and technology to Indigenous and African ways of knowing, from nutrition and health equity to evolution and consciousness, have created a heightened level of focus and engagement that animates the rest of each conference. The 49th Annual Conference in Calgary in 2025 hosted approximately 2,000 participants—the largest gathering since 1986—with Chief Troy Bossman Knowlton of the

Blackfoot Ancestral Territory opening the proceedings, and 307 individuals participating in pre-conference thematic seminars.

IN CLOSING

Fifty years is a significant threshold, and this retrospective is offered in part as an act of institutional gratitude—for the guidance that called the Association into being and sustained it through five decades of searching and building, for the loving, continuous encouragement and support of the Counsellors and of the National Spiritual Assemblies of both Canada and the United States, for the visionary souls who gave the Association its initial impetus and direction, for the generosity of donors whose support has helped to make its work possible over the years, and for the many dedicated collaborators and participants over the decades. Together, these have given its work its meaning and enduring momentum. The vision that has been progressively articulated—of an approach to scholarship that integrates the spiritual and the material dimensions of life, advances through consultation rather than contention, draws on the complementary contributions of science and religion, and serves the transformation of civilization rather than the prestige of the few—is slowly crystallizing in the collaborative spaces, the written scholarship, and the capacity building of a growing community of inquiry.

Part of what sustains this community is the historical consciousness at

the heart of all Bahá'í activity: the dual conviction that humanity is on a collective journey toward oneness whose destination is assured, and that every act of serious, humble, and loving scholarship undertaken in the company of others is a vital contribution to that journey. As early as 1977, the House of Justice gave its vision of where such evolution leads: “As the Bahá'í community grows it will acquire experts in numerous fields—both by Bahá'ís becoming experts and by experts becoming Bahá'ís. As these experts bring their knowledge and skill to the service of the community and, even more, as they transform their various disciplines by bringing to bear upon them the light of the Divine Teachings, problem after problem now disrupting society will be answered.” That vision, articulated nearly half a century ago, powerfully describes what the Association continues to pursue with an ever-widening circle of participants learning alongside one another.

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The 1st annual conference of the Association for Bahá'í Studies, 1976, Bolton, Ontario

Standing: Jane Faily and John S. Hatcher.

Seated, left to right: Glen Eyford, Hossain Danesh, Don Rogers



Plenary audience at the 49th annual conference of the Association for Bahá'í Studies, 2025, Calgary, Alberta

On the stage, from left to right: Bradley Wilson, Haleh Arbab, Gustavo Correa, and Michael Karlberg