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Many articles published in *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies* allude to the institutions and central figures of the Bahá'í Faith; as an aid for those unfamiliar with the Bahá'í Faith, we include here a succinct summary excerpted from http://www.bahai.org/beliefs/bahaullah-covenant/. The reader may also find it helpful to visit the official web site for the worldwide Bahá'í community (www.bahai.org) available in several languages. For article submission guidelines, please visit bahaistudies.ca/publications/submission-guidelines/.

About the Bahá'í Faith

The Bahá'í Faith, its followers believe, is "divine in origin, all-embracing in scope, broad in its outlook, scientific in its method, humanitarian in its principles and dynamic in the influence it exerts on the hearts and minds of men." The mission of the Bahá'í Faith is "to proclaim that religious truth is not absolute but relative, that Divine Revelation is continuous and progressive, that the Founders of all past religions, though different in the non-essential aspects of their teachings, "abide in the same Tabernacle, soar in the same heaven, are seated upon the same throne, utter the same speech and proclaim the same Faith" (Shoghi Effendi).

The Bahá'í Faith began with the mission entrusted by God to two Divine Messengers—the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh. Today, the distinctive unity of the Faith They founded stems from explicit instructions given by Bahá'u'lláh that have assured the continuity of guidance following His passing. This line of succession, referred to as the Covenant, went from Bahá'u'lláh to His Son 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and then from 'Abdu'l-Bahá to His grandson, Shoghi Effendi, and the Universal House of Justice, ordained by Bahá'u'lláh. A Bahá'í accepts the divine authority of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh and of these appointed successors.

The Báb (1819-1850) is the Herald of the Bahá'í Faith. In the middle of the 19th century, He announced that He was the bearer of a message destined to transform humanity's spiritual life. His mission was to prepare the way for the coming of a second Messenger from God, greater than Himself, who would usher in an age of peace and justice.

Bahá'u'lláh (1817-1892)—the "Glory of God"—is the Promised One foretold by the Báb and all of the Divine Messengers of the past. Bahá'u'lláh delivered a new Revelation from God to humanity. Thousands of verses, letters and books flowed from His pen. In His Writings, He outlined a framework for the development of a global civilization which takes into account both the spiritual and material dimensions of human life. For this, He endured 40 years of imprisonment, torture and exile.

In His will, Bahá'u'lláh appointed His oldest son, 'Abdu'l-Bahá (1844-1921), as the authorized interpreter of His teachings and Head of the Faith. Throughout the East and West, 'Abdu'l-Bahá became known as an ambassador of peace, an exemplary human being, and the leading exponent of a new Faith.

Appointed Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, His eldest grandson, Shoghi Effendi (1897-1957), spent 36 years systematically nurturing the development, deepening the understanding, and strengthening the unity of the Bahá'í community, as it increasingly grew to reflect the diversity of the entire human race.

The development of the Bahá'í Faith worldwide is today guided by the Universal House of Justice (established in 1963). In His book of laws, Bahá'u'lláh instructed the Universal House of Justice to exert a positive influence on the welfare of humankind, promote education, peace and global prosperity, and safeguard human honor and the position of religion.

THE JOURNAL OF BAHÁ'Í STUDIES

Contents

From the Editor's Desk

MICHAEL SABET

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 travailing 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
SHAHRIAR ERFANIAN

For Once

JOHN S. HATCHER

To be, but for one All Hallows Eve
Something other than ourselves,
Defying gravity and space,
Freed from every law of science
             and of God,
Mocking every trace
Of decorum and grace
That constrains our inmost longings.

Let's indulge in fantasy this one brief night.
Unveil our secret selves from shame,
Loose our inner demons to revel,
To un-disguise ourselves
For near ones and neighbors
To peer beneath our daily masks.

You might also like to read...

As a service to our readers, we are including the URLs to articles related to the subjects presented in this issue. These are articles that have been previously published in the *Journal* and are available for free on our website.

TOWARD A FRAMEWORK FOR ACTION
by *Paul Lample*
https://doi.org/10.31581/jbs-28.3.2(2018)

A letter dated 24 July 2013, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of Canada, set forth fresh insights to assist the Association in reflecting on its progress to date and its prospects for the future, centered around developing the "notion of an evolving conceptual framework." The article offers some personal thoughts about the nature of such a framework and what some of its elements might be.

NEW DIRECTIONS FOR ECONOMICS
by *Gregory Dahl*
https://doi.org/10.31581/jbs-28.1-2.3(2018)

Recent developments in both the Bahá'í community and the field of economics have opened up new vistas in the application of Bahá'í principles to economic questions, both in theory and in practice. The Bahá'í community has grown enough that the Universal House of Justice, in its 1 March 2017 message, has called on Bahá'ís to concern themselves increasingly with the inequalities in the world and to bring their personal lives and the actions of their Bahá'í communities more in line with the high moral standards and principles of compassion and service in the teachings of their Faith. At the same time, the economics profession is more open to new directions of thought and research following the financial crisis of 2007–08 and the subsequent global recession, which exposed the shortcomings of the macroeconomic models that the profession had spent the previous several decades constructing. Some of the fields that appear most fertile for the application of Bahá'í principles to current economic problems are reviewed in this article.

BECOMING HOSPITABLE AND UPLIFTING
HOLDING ENVIRONMENTS FOR
HUMANITY'S GRIEFS: DEPRESSION
AND THE BAHÁ'Í COMMUNITY
by *Elena Mustakova*
https://doi.org/10.31581/jbs-27.4.4(2017)

As Bahá'ís seek ways to bring Bahá'u'lláh's healing Message to a troubled, disillusioned, and anxious humanity, a question emerges. How can we become beacons of light and encouragement, shed distractions, and build hospitable, healing, and uplifting communities, able to embrace humanity's griefs and point the way forward? This paper focuses on what depression- and anxiety-related conditions can teach us about creating healing spiritual communities.

Wise Hands
SHAHRIAR ERFANIAN

Reflections on the Challenge of our Age

PAUL LAMPLE

Abstract

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. In the face of such challenges, the Bahá'í Faith seeks to unite humanity in the search for truth and the building of a just and peaceful world. The purpose of this paper is to explore how Bahá'ís expect to achieve these aims through the conscious and active transformation of the moral order—not by force or coercion but by example, persuasion, consensus, and cooperation.

Résumé

La désintégration de l'ancien ordre mondial se manifeste de plus en plus dans l'incapacité des êtres humains à résoudre leurs différends, comme le montrent les litiges persistants au sujet de la connaissance, de la politique, de la morale et de l'économie. Face à de tels défis, la foi bahá'íe cherche à unir l'humanité dans la recherche de la vérité et la construction d'un monde juste et pacifique. Le présent article vise à explorer comment les bahá'ís comptent y parvenir par une transformation consciente et active de l'ordre moral, non pas par la force et la contrainte, mais par l'exemple, la persuasion, le consensus et la coopération.

Resumen

La desintegración del viejo orden mundial es cada vez más evidente en la incapacidad de los seres humanos en poder resolver sus diferencias, que se manifiesta en disputas intratables sobre el conocimiento, la política, la moral y la economía. Frente a tales desafíos, la Fe Bahá'í busca unir a la humanidad en la búsqueda de la verdad y la construcción de un mundo justo y pacífico. El propósito de este ensayo es explorar como los Bahá'ís esperan lograr estos objetivos por medio de una transformación consciente y activa del orden moral, no por la fuerza o la coerción, sino por el ejemplo, la persuasión, el consenso y la cooperación.

INTRODUCTION

In 1925, a visitor to Palestine and the Middle East stopped for a time in Haifa and had a meeting with Shoghi Effendi. In a book recording her travels, she wrote of her response to that encounter:

> They are a lovable and fascinating people, the Bahais: idealists who have dreamed a dream of peace that passes all understanding, who seek to bring relief to restless unhappy human hearts, who, by cooperation, would replace competition, and blend all races, religions, nations and classes into one harmonious whole. A beautiful dream, too good, it is feared, to come true in our present state of imperfection and atavistic crudity, but a dream that it is pleasant to come into contact with, as I did for a couple of hours, on a blazing April afternoon. (Mills, qtd. in Redman 100)

This, of course, is not the only account of the Bahá'í Faith that sets it aside as a beautiful but unrealistic aspiration for humanity and sees Bahá'ís as having noble ideals but being unable to actually do anything to achieve them in a practical way. The challenge facing humanity is not simply a matter of stating how things ought to be, but of determining how that necessary transformation is to occur. Thus, the pressing question that arises is: How does such a small band of so-called idealists expect to be able to make their dream a reality?

As this astute observer noted, the problem is not that Bahá'í ideals are unworthy of attainment; rather, it is that the present state of human action is flawed and unable to bring such ideals into reality. The profound transformation required to achieve these high aims requires a process of change in thought and action that begins with that small band of "idealists" and increasingly embraces ever-larger numbers. The change encompasses not only what people do, but also who they are—the character of individuals and of culture. It is, fundamentally, a change in moral conception and practice, by individuals and by society as a whole.

Almost from the beginning of human existence, human beings asked themselves questions such as: What am I supposed to do? What ought human beings do? What kind of actions are right and what kind are wrong? What constitutes a good life and a good society? What do I owe to others? What is the nature of sound relationships among human beings and what form ought they take? The range of views in answer to such questions is wide. At one extreme, some view morality as the enactment of the immutable decrees of God as understood by human interpreters relying on a literal—or even ideological—perspective. At the other, some view moral language as expressing no more than preferences that vary from person to person and which amount to nothing more than statements about how one desires others to behave. Yet, even from the time of hunter-gatherer groups, the way people answered such questions had a profound impact, sometimes even determining whether a particular group flourished or ceased to exist.

The problem is particularly evident today when, as a result of the acceleration of the process of the disintegration of the old world order, people are increasing divided into different groups according to identity and moral purpose—different configurations of "us and them"—resulting in intractable differences with others. Increasingly, there is no shared conception of reality to resolve the differences among these groups. The outcome is a seemingly endless contest for power that results in a circle of high conflict and contention in discourse, social interaction, and political affairs.[1] It is as if the picture

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1	For an in-depth treatment of this subject, see Joshua Greene*, Moral Tribes: Emotion, Reason, and the Gap Between Us and Them*; Jonathan Haidt. *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion*; Michael Karlberg,

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. Overcoming such seemingly intractable differences is the most pressing challenge of our age. The purpose of this paper is to explore the Bahá'í perspective on the nature of how the world ought to be and how to bring about the necessary change in society in accordance with the "standard of true morality" provided by the Bahá'í teachings ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation* 66). The thoughts presented here are merely my personal perspective on this profound and weighty topic.

It is, of course, possible to simply examine in isolation Bahá'u'lláh's moral teachings. And it is possible to separately examine how the Bahá'í community is unfolding in its efforts to unite humanity. The purpose of this article, however, it to call to mind that these two things are inseparable—both as means and ends. "The purpose of justice is the appearance of unity among men," Bahá'u'lláh states. The unbreakable association between teaching and the moral order is explicated by Shoghi Effendi in *The Advent of Divine Justice*, written as Bahá'ís initiated their systematic execution of the Divine Plan. To understand the true nature of the work of the Bahá'í community, especially at this important moment of transition into a new series

of Plans[2] and as the forces of disintegration grow in intensity, it is essential to appreciate the ongoing promulgation of divine justice.

A Brief Overview of Moral Thought

How has humanity sought answers to questions of morality and moral order? It is impossible, of course, in this limited space to adequately survey the range and depth of thinking on the question of morality across human history. Yet, it is useful to get a sense of how humanity has attempted to address such questions over time to better understand the context and intent of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings pertaining to morality, which are properly understood as part of the unfolding story of human history, and which provide the means by which human individual and social development will attain their maturity.

Tens of thousands—or perhaps even over a hundred thousand—years ago, religion emerged among groups of people to inform human identity and behavior. In various forms, and at various times and places, religion fostered the social cohesion that helped humanity evolve to ever higher levels of social complexity and order. It created bonds that allowed people to see themselves as one and, through its teachings, it conveyed a narrative

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Beyond the Culture of Contest; and Amanda Ripley, *High Conflict: Why We Get Trapped and How We Get Out*.

2   Global plans for the expansion and consolidation of the Bahá'í Faith. The first plans were initiated by Shoghi Effendi and they now unfold under the direction of the Universal House of Justice.

concerning the nature of reality and the position and purpose of the human being within that reality. It provided a description of what is right and what is good, and how human beings should act, including how to act toward other human beings within and outside the religious community. In this manner, individuals were bound together in a shared pattern of life, a tradition, and a culture in which succeeding generations were raised and socialized.

The challenge for the moral guidance provided by religion is that, over time, human ideas begin to infiltrate the original teachings until they eventually overtake them. What was initially a center of unity and wellbeing can then become a vehicle for division and contention. Religion can even be reduced to an ideology, when certain beliefs or religious propositions are held to be the standard by which other human beings are judged and even persecuted as infidels, rather than maintaining a focus on improving morals and the common good.

Another contribution to moral thought, dating over thousands of years, is philosophy. The range of philosophical perspectives varies across cultures. Generally, philosophy uses reasoned argument to try to discern the nature of reality and the responsibilities of human beings across the range of the relationships they experience. Among the most prominent areas in moral philosophy, particularly in western or cosmopolitan thought, are utilitarianism, or consequentialism, which is concerned with ultimate

outcomes—such as the greatest happiness for the greatest number; deontology which is concerned with the nature of moral rules or obligations that determine what is right or wrong; and virtue ethics, which emphasizes virtue or character expressed, through wisdom, in pursuit of the good life in a particular cultural context. Through these and other approaches, philosophy has sought to provide a moral foundation for political order, social progress, or economic systems.

Philosophy, however, has also given rise to schools of thought that challenge or displace the concept of morality. Emotivism, for example, suggests that ethical and value judgments are mere expressions of feelings, while nihilism rejects moral principles in the belief that life is meaningless. The rise of reason sought to contain—if not root out—religion, especially that form of religion that drifted far from its original teachings, thus contributing to severing humanity's allegiance to religion and its effects on the moral order (Hare). Philosophy ranges across a spectrum of thought that gives rise to various forms of ideology, in which particular ideas are held as the highest value to which human action must conform (W. Hatcher 1–4, *World Order* 42). This can take such forms as individualism, which stresses the importance of the individual, libertarianism, where freedom is the highest value that sets the standard for moral considerations, or the evolutionary struggle for existence in the form of social Darwinism or eugenics. One characteristic of

philosophy is that discussion has no basis for final resolution (Heil 199–200; 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation* 21); thus, while philosophy over millennia has shed light on a range of issues pertaining to morality and the moral order, such investigations too often tend to be circular, with different arguments prevailing at different periods, rather than finding resolution and consensus on the basis of which moral progress can be consistently pursued.

Finally, in recent decades, various sciences have contributed significantly to moral thought, yielding a wide range of insights. For example, drawing from fields such as neuroscience, evolutionary biology, and cultural anthropology, moral psychology has sought to understand how the mind creates moral understanding and action. From this perspective, some see religion purely as a social phenomenon and understand it as a force for creating social cooperation that allowed some societies to overcome forces of self-interest to succeed in out-competing others in an evolutionary social contest. Virtues are simply evolutionary behaviors that contribute to cooperation, while vice is any developed behavior contributing to types of competition that undermine the viability of a particular form of social order (Lample). As another example, analysis of brain functioning in relation to moral reasoning and action reveals the automatic response of the brain's lower function, and a higher brain function that seems to be used after the initial response to morally justify the choices made; so-called "moral"

actions are then considered to be the responses ingrained by evolution and by personal experience, for which the rational mind provides justification after the fact. Some experiments have demonstrated how prejudice is ingrained at a deep and habitual level of response that operates before conscious governance of behavior is invoked. Other experiments have even indicated that certain decisions—moving a leg, for instance—are witnessed in bodily movement even before signals in brain activity, prompting some to doubt the existence of free will.

Religion, philosophy, and psychology all offer certain insights into the relationship between morality and identity. Yet, the current moral order is profoundly disordered. Rather than a standard to which an individual or group seeks to conform, morality becomes something that bends to conform to human desires or to the will of those wielding power. As various factions of humanity pursue their own aims at the expense of others, morality is distorted to rationalize and justify those actions, and large portions of humanity are reduced to mere objects that others manipulate.

The challenge is to raise a new moral order which can encompass all humanity and is suited to the age of the maturity of the human race—the expression of the oneness of humanity in the reordering of life on the planet. "The morals of humanity must undergo change," 'Abdu'l-Bahá affirms. "Just as the thoughts and hypotheses of past ages are fruitless today, likewise

dogmas and codes of human invention are obsolete and barren of product" (*Promulgation* 144).

Perhaps, as a starting point, the most useful conception of morality that can be drawn from these diverse perspectives concerns the nature of the relationships that place the human being in proper context with others and explains what is due to each—that is, what we owe to one another— thereby bringing about the empirical results of human flourishing—what is good, what is right, what is just—resulting in peace, unity, prosperity, a meaningful life, and the common good in the form of an ever-advancing civilization (see W. Hatcher, Scanlon, Wallace). Bahá'ís must seek to understand what Bahá'u'lláh has explained about such matters, learn how to translate this understanding into action, and share this perspective with others if the high ideals toward which they aim are to be achieved.

Bahá'u'lláh and the Standard of True Morality

An effort to understand Bahá'u'lláh's approach to morality and the moral life begins with some essential ideas drawn from His vast Revelation.

According to Bahá'u'lláh, every human being is endowed with a soul. This means that every person inherently possesses the power of the mind and consciousness. Every person is endowed with a heart—a capacity for love and other powerful and uplifting emotions. Every person is endowed

with a will—with volition and agency—the capacity to act on the basis of free choice in the world. Every person has the capacity to manifest all spiritual virtues—human expressions of the names and attributes of God. Freedom of conscience has been bestowed upon everyone. A human being, then, is more than a body, more than a mere animal seeking to satisfy its instinctive desires. The purpose of life in this world is to give full expression to these powers of the soul. Every person appears on the earth to express the potentialities of this endowment through the creative act of developing and utilizing these powers to live a meaningful, just, virtuous, and fulfilling life.

The endowment received by every person is identical in *nature*. This identical nature creates an equality of condition among human beings that must be respected. "Each sees in the other the Beauty of God reflected in the soul, and finding this point of similarity, they are attracted to one another in love," 'Abdu'l-Bahá states (*Paris Talks* 180). The reality of the human being, the soul, is not differentiated by those things on whose basis human beings tend to judge and divide themselves from one another, such as gender, race, or nationality; the soul, in its essence, is free of such characteristics. This common endowment is the basis for human honor—the rights and dignity owed to every person. Yet, this endowment is not identical in *measure*. "The portion of some," Bahá'u'lláh states, "might lie in the palm of a man's hand, the portion of others might fill a cup, and of others

even a gallon-measure." This natural difference is an expression of diversity, but offers no justification for discrimination. He states: "Let none, therefore, consider the largeness or smallness of the receptacle." Rather, "The whole duty of man in this Day is to attain that share of the flood of grace which God poureth forth for him" (*Gleanings* 5:4). The extent to which each person gives expression to these latent potentialities for their proper purpose is that which gives distinction to a human life—not those ephemeral measures assigned by human societies of fame, wealth, class, or calling. "How excellent, how honorable is man if he arises to fulfil his responsibilities;" 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains, "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" (*Secret* 4).

Bahá'u'lláh further indicates that human beings are social beings. A soul born into this world is immediately a part of a social order. The community, the society, is both the social environment that shapes and educates a human being, empowering that soul to give expression to its latent potentialities to live a good and meaningful life, and is, in its own right, an actor, a protagonist, manifesting itself, throughout history, in ever-larger, ever more complex forms of social organization. As a participant in the social order, human beings, under the guidance of the Manifestation of God, create and are created by social relationships. The nature of these social relationships, the

framework of what one human being owes to others, is born out of the shared endowment of the soul. One cannot justifiably claim for oneself the right to give full expression to one's own latent divine endowment without implicitly granting that right to all others to give expression to their own. Thus, the golden rule, to treat others as one wishes to be treated, is a moral exhortation found in every religion. Equality of condition requires justice, where each person receives what is due, which is the right to express these inherent capacities. In this way, every human being may be considered the trust of society. It is immoral and unjust that, in the pursuit of selfish benefit, an individual or a group deprive another individual or group of the possibilities of expressing these inherent human potentialities; any configuration of the social order that creates these unjust conditions would constitute a form of oppression. This is the "struggle for existence" decried by both Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá (qtd. in *Messages:1986-2001* 215.2, *Selections* 227:10).

For millennia, the social order has evolved—from clans, to tribes, to city states, to nations, and now, to the threshold of a unified world (Shoghi Effendi, *Promised Day* 192–93). At each stage of this development, religion has been a force for uniting humanity at ever-wider levels of social organization—a conclusion argued by historians and even by evolutionary biologists. This story of the unfoldment of civilization and the progress of the human race is captured by

Bahá'u'lláh's description of progressive revelation. In every age, the "object of every Revelation" He states, is "to effect a transformation in the whole character of mankind, a transformation that shall manifest itself both outwardly and inwardly, that shall affect both its inner life and external conditions" (*Kitab-i-Íqán* 240).

Thus, the description of what the inner and outer life ought to be in this age is set forth in Bahá'u'lláh's writings (*Tablets* 130). The determination of what that inner life ought to be is based on the true nature of the human being, as well as on the capacity for cultivating and expressing that nature to the extent possible based on the current stage of human social evolution. The determination of what that outer life ought to be pertains to overcoming the challenges that inhibit the advance of the most recent stage in humanity's organic social development. Such descriptions and exhortations in the Bahá'í Writings are not arbitrary—based on a kind of divine whim; Bahá'u'lláh does not ask for blind obedience or mere submission to divine command. Faith, for Bahá'ís, is conscious knowledge and action (Universal House of Justice, 22 October 1996). The Bahá'í teachings are based on the reality of human nature and social wellbeing, and their effective implementation is intended to create an empirically demonstrable improvement in the human condition. "The Laws of God are not imposition of will, or of power, or pleasure," 'Abdu'l-Bahá affirms, "but the resolutions of truth, reason and justice" (*Paris Talks* 154).

At each stage of social evolution up to this point, the social order created by human beings was founded on some conception of "us and them." While outwardly this divided human beings, it nevertheless served as an effective instrument for uniting them, gradually forging an ever-growing circle of those considered to share a common identity—an "us." Each dispensation expanded the circle of unity, the concept of "us," assisting humanity to achieve the next, larger, and more complex, stage of its social development. Yet, at the same time, this process of "othering" allowed for two standards of morality and justified differential treatment of those who were not considered the same as oneself or one's community—even to such extremes as oppression, slavery, or genocide. By ushering in the age of the maturity of the human race, Bahá'u'lláh has brought an end to any justification for otherness and has now made it possible to create a society that gives expression to the oneness of humanity. The essential reality of human nature—its oneness—is now to find expression in the social order ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks* 53). What 'Abdu'l-Bahá described as the "standard of true morality" (*Promulgation* 66), the obligations that rest upon every human being and every human society including the institutions that make social order possible, apply to all without exception. The question, now, is how to so order human affairs that the right of every person to manifest their divine endowment is not compromised but, rather, is cultivated in a just

society that safeguards the common good.

The twofold purpose of the Manifestation of God to transform the inner and outer life of humanity finds its complement in the twofold moral purpose of every individual soul to transform the self and to contribute to transforming society. In the first, a person gives expression to the inherent powers of the soul in an act of moral artistry that weaves the rich tapestry of a righteous, good, worthy, and meaningful life. In the second, a person acts as a citizen of the world, making choices in association with others that contribute, as many drops join to make a mighty river, to the formation of united, just, prosperous, and peaceful social spaces, leading ultimately to the attainment of the common good and an ever-advancing civilization.

It is through His teachings that Bahá'u'lláh provides the insight and guidance necessary for such a profound change in human affairs. His teachings redefine human relationships for a global civilization in the age of maturity of the human race. This includes the relationship of the individual with God and His Manifestation; of the individual toward his or her true self; of the individual and the family; of the individual toward others—indeed of the full range of relationships among individuals, groups, communities, and institutions within society, as well as between humanity and the physical environment. The growth and development of the Faith is a process of learning, individually and collectively,

about the formation of these new relationships at ever higher degrees of complexity, as they will, in the fullness of time, give rise to a new pattern of social organization for humanity.

To the extent that we bring ourselves into alignment with Bahá'u'lláh's moral teachings—that is, the more we are able to cultivate the set of proper relationships within ourselves and with others—the more effective we become in the pursuit of our twofold purpose. Think of an electromagnet. When the proper conditions of the core, the wire, and the power source exist, electricity can flow creating a magnetic force that affects the world around it. If these conditions do not exist—a non-metallic core or a high resistance wire—the power cannot appear, and the capacity to affect the surroundings does not become manifest.

The potential for change offered by Bahá'u'lláh's teachings presents humanity with a profound moral challenge: the end of evil. The nature of suffering is a mysterious and inherent aspect of the material world. Human life in the material world is a journey of the soul, and suffering is a part of that journey without which it would not be possible to know joy or make spiritual progress (J. Hatcher). However, the nature of evil in the world is different; it arises from willful human action that does harm to others. Therefore, it can be eliminated. "Every good thing is of God, and every evil thing is from yourselves," Bahá'u'lláh explains (*Gleanings* 77:1). He further states: "Indeed the actions of man himself breed a

profusion of satanic power. . . . A world in which naught can be perceived save strife, quarrels and corruption is bound to become the seat of the throne, the very metropolis, of Satan." Yet, "were men to abide by and observe the divine teachings, every trace of evil would be banished from the face of the earth" (*Tablets* 176–77).

Spirituality and Morality

The points raised above should not be misinterpreted. For a Bahá'í, there can be no reduction of religion to mere moral behavior. For a Bahá'í, the moral life is the Bahá'í life. This means that for a Bahá'í the starting point for attaining to the standard of true morality, the understanding of how life ought to be lived, how society ought to be organized, what we owe to one another— all this begins with a particular conviction that is the essence of religion: the personal experience of the recognition of the Manifestation of God in His Day and certitude in His reality. This is the first of the twin duties Bahá'u'lláh ordains for every human being in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas. As a result, the rational soul becomes a new creation, reborn and animated by the spirit of faith. The second corresponding duty, derived from and motivated by this inner conviction that unites the individual with God, is "to observe every ordinance of Him Who is the Desire of the world" (Kitáb-i-Aqdas ¶ 1). It is the inner spiritual conviction that gives rise to the motive force for moral action. These are the twin duties enjoined in the

Kitáb-i-Aqdas, and neither is acceptable without the other.

Thus, spirituality and morality are, from Bahá'u'lláh's perspective, inseparable. A spirituality without the fruits of moral action is illusion. Also, one cannot know true morality, much less live a truly moral life, without the association of the moral standard with something more than human preference. Morality is associated with that standard provided by the Manifestation of God, a standard that one recognizes and desires to uphold out of love of His Beauty.

"Think not that We have revealed unto you a mere code of laws," Bahá'u'lláh states in that Most Holy Book. "Nay, rather, We have unsealed the choice Wine with the fingers of might and power" (Kitáb-i-Aqdas ¶ 5). This choice wine is His Revelation. Through the Revelation, He explains who human beings are and what they are to do, individually and collectively, to live a good and meaningful life and contribute to the betterment of the world. "The first thing to do is to acquire a thirst for Spirituality," 'Abdu'l-Bahá is reported to have said, "then Live the Life! Live the Life! Live the Life!" (*Compilation* v. 1 no. 425). To "live the life," a letter written on behalf of the Guardian explains, is "to have our lives so saturated with the Divine teachings and the Bahá'í Spirit that people cannot fail to see a joy, a power, a love, a purity, a radiance, an efficiency in our character and work that will distinguish us. . . . Unless we can show this transformation in our lives, this new power,

this mutual love and harmony, then the Bahá'í teachings are but a name to us" (*Compilation* v. 2 no. 1271).

A statement attributed to 'Abdu'l-Bahá captures the distinction between the moral life and spiritual life that is the standard of true morality. "Moral life consists in the government of one's self," He is reported to have said. "Immortality is government of a human soul by the Divine Will" (qtd. in Grundy 5). A standard of morality established by human beings is fallible. It is always subject to debate and contention. Morality derived from human invention too easily drifts to the extremes, governed by ideological orthodoxy or mere personal desire. On one extreme, as previously mentioned, ideology of various kinds displaces the human being as the highest value, and human beings may be sacrificed on the altar of these beliefs. On the other, human beings are always tempted to define moral standards according to their personal desires, rather than control desire in pursuit of moral good. The product of these extremes is the victory of the struggle for existence—morality never rises above rationalization. The divine standard is the moral objective toward which human understanding and action turn to achieve their highest expression. Naturally, human understanding and action are partial and fallible, but they can advance over time.

The inner and outer moral transformation which leads to meaningful and fulfilling human life and to the betterment of the world is, at its heart, a change in relationships. This includes the relationship of the individual with God, with Bahá'u'lláh and His Covenant, with the self, with other people, with nature and the material world; as well as the many permutations of relationships among groups, society, institutions, and civilizations. These relationships are recast in light of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings and it is the obligation of Bahá'ís to learn to translate these teachings into action. As they learn to be more effective in their expression of these teachings, then, in the fullness of time, the institutions of society take the form of a New World Order, society transforms to become a spiritual civilization, and individuals become a new human race. "A race of men incomparable in character, shall be raised up," Bahá'u'lláh has promised, "which . . . will cast the sleeve of holiness over all that hath been created from water and clay" (qtd. in Shoghi Effendi, *Advent* 31). Holiness is the attainment of spiritual and moral excellence; to live a Bahá'í life is to endeavor to bring spiritual and moral excellence to the entire creation.

For Bahá'ís, then, spirituality is the conscious knowledge and action of responsible agents aimed at bringing into being just and proper relationships that organize humanity's inner and outer life. It is not confined to correct private thoughts about knowledge or virtue or Bahá'í theological concepts. Bahá'u'lláh did not come to make us mere mystic knowers as an end in itself; He unlocked mystic knowledge and revealed truths never before known

so we could translate these truths into reality and action to transform individuals and the social order. Spiritual quickening is not the end point of human aspiration, it is the beginning of a process that leads to the transformation of the physical and social world to make it the kingdom of God on earth. Being and doing are a coherent whole.

In *Some Answered Questions*, 'Abdu'l-Bahá discusses the relationship between faith and deeds. He explains that "the foundation of success and salvation is the recognition of God, and that good deeds, which are the fruit of faith, derive from this recognition." "When this recognition is not attained, man remains veiled from God and, as he is veiled, his good works fail to achieve their full and desired effect." Yet, this "does not mean that those who are veiled from God are all equal, whether they be doers of good or workers of iniquity. It means only that the foundation is the recognition of God and that good deeds derive from this knowledge. Nevertheless, it is certain that among those who are veiled from God there is a difference between the doer of good and the sinner and malefactor" (65.2–3). Thus, deeds ought to be good; actions ought to be moral. And when anchored in spiritual conviction, moral action becomes deeply rooted, properly directed, and more potent; it is light upon light.

Thus, for Bahá'ís, the association between recognition and obedience, between faith and deeds, between the inner and outer life, is clear. The conviction, or certitude, in the reality of the Manifestation of God must find its expression in the deeds that He ordains. It is unproductive to engage in any attempt to separate the two, or to consider the material and social teachings of Bahá'u'lláh as something apart from, or secondary in status to, the spiritual teachings of the Faith (*Tabernacle* 2.20). Rather, to speak of morality in relation to the Faith—to what human beings ought to do, to what we owe one another, and to how society should be organized—is to recognize its inseparability from spiritual reality. When Bahá'ís speak of social action, for example, it is never a reference to mere humanitarian deeds, but to the effort to adjust the arrangement of human affairs and work for the betterment of the world by translating Bahá'u'lláh's teachings into reality, leading ultimately to the attainment of spiritual civilization. To speak of the objectives of a particular Plan is not to become preoccupied with specific activities and procedures, but to carry forward the divine mandate for the spiritual illumination of the planet. All such thought and action directed to these ends is an expression of the inner spiritual conviction of faith in God and allegiance to Bahá'u'lláh that is translated into reflective, goal-directed, spiritually grounded action for the attainment of the Divine Purpose.

CONTOURS OF THE STANDARD
OF TRUE MORALITY FOUND IN
BAHÁ'U'LLÁH'S TEACHINGS

Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation is replete with guidance pertaining to the moral change necessary to reform humanity's inner and outer life. It includes not

only a body of virtues or a description of what the new moral standard ought to be as set forth in His laws and exhortations, as well as what the outcome should be in terms of the wellbeing of and new relationships among individuals, communities and institutions born from their relationship with God and His Manifestation, but also a consideration of how these moral aims are to be realized.

Because human conscience is free, a solution cannot be imposed. But humanity must gradually be persuaded and educated, by word and deed, to discover that Bahá'u'lláh's prescription provides the remedy for humanity's grave ills. Bahá'ís have to learn to put this standard into practice in their own lives, families, communities, and relationships with others—in ever-widening social spaces. It is not possible here to even begin to capture the full contours of Bahá'u'lláh's standard of true morality. A summary of a few key concepts, which would be part of a framework for moral action derived from the Teachings, must suffice.

The Independent Investigation of Reality

Bahá'u'lláh upholds freedom of conscience of every soul in its effort to achieve its moral purpose. "The first teaching of Bahá'u'lláh is the duty incumbent upon all to investigate reality," 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains. "What does it mean to investigate reality? It means that man must forget all hearsay and examine truth himself, for he does not know whether statements he hears are in accordance with reality or not. Wherever he finds truth or reality, he must hold to it, forsaking, discarding all else; for outside of reality there is naught but superstition and imagination" (*Promulgation* 62). Too often, prejudice and superstition are used to manipulate and divide human beings in pursuit of self-interest; a myriad social ills flow from blindly accepting and rationalizing the self-interested narrative of one human tribe versus another. In a world where individuals, groups, and institutions increasingly obscure the truth in an effort to triumph in various contests for power to control the thoughts and actions of others—the continuing struggle for existence—this fundamental principle of Bahá'u'lláh becomes increasingly important in resisting the forces of a disintegrating order and in contributing to the construction of a new one in its stead.

Love

Bahá'u'lláh explains that, "The beginning of religion is love for God and for His Chosen Ones, and its end is to manifest that love to His servants" (*Call* 3.8). Love is the power that can transform human hearts. "Let your hearts be filled with the great love of God, let it be felt by all;" 'Abdu'l-Bahá states, "for every man is a servant of God, and all are entitled to a share of the Divine Bounty. Especially to those whose thoughts are material and retrograde show the utmost love and patience, thereby winning them into

the unity of fellowship by the radiance of your kindness" (*Paris Talks* 27). He urged the believers to "strive with all their might until universal fellowship, close and warm, and unalloyed love, and spiritual relationships, will connect all the hearts in the world" (*Selections* 7:1). In its letter dated 22 July 2020 to the Bahá'ís of the United States, the House of Justice stressed the vital importance of love in creating the susceptibilities in human hearts for moral persuasion and change in the existing fragmented relationships among human beings.

JUSTICE

Justice, Bahá'u'lláh explains, "consisteth in rendering each his due" (*Tabernacle* 2.37). It is "the best beloved of all things" in God's sight (*Tablets* 36). It is a "powerful force," "the conqueror of the citadels of the hearts and souls of men, and the revealer of the secrets of the world of being, and the standard-bearer of love and bounty" (*Epistle* 32) and its purpose "is the appearance of unity among men" (*Tablets* 67). Bahá'u'lláh's conception of justice encompasses the highest aspirations of human thought over the centuries. Justice is a virtue, a spiritual attribute that is an integral part of human nature and that must be cultivated. It also pertains to principles, exhortations, and laws that, as they are universally adopted, will transform the relations among individuals, communities, and institutions. Further, justice is associated with those outcomes of the social order

which are conducive to human flourishing, happiness, wellbeing, and the common good. Justice—for all without exceptional accommodations for "us" and "them"—provides the standard to guide thought and action in making the necessary arrangements for the reconstruction of the social order for the age of human maturity.

WISE AND MODERATE SPEECH

Bahá'u'lláh explains that, "Human utterance is an essence which aspireth to exert its influence and needeth moderation" (*Tablets* 143). In past ages, diversity of human thought was suppressed by obedience to authority, and later, when the expression of views was finally liberated, it often took the form of argumentation, extreme conflict, and contest for power that made it difficult for truth to prevail. In contrast, Bahá'u'lláh explains that, "It behoveth a prudent man of wisdom to speak with utmost leniency and forbearance so that the sweetness of his words may induce everyone to attain that which befitteth man's station." (*Tablets* 173). He outlined an approach to cooperative human utterance—consultation—which allows for a collective search for the truth of a matter to determine appropriate action according to circumstances. In this process of consultation, individuals offer opinions without passion or rancor, contention is forbidden, participants listen to the views of others and if they hear a better idea, they embrace it without stubbornly clinging to personal views. A spirit of cooperation and

respect prevails and, after consensus is formed, a conclusion is supported by all and tested in action to determine if it is effective. Reflection on action and further consultation leads to learning and refinement of understanding and practice. While this mode of discourse may appear at first glance to be utopian or naïve, Bahá'ís have established it as effective practice in diverse cultural settings worldwide.

Education and Spiritual Empowerment

Bahá'ís recognize that every people, every person, has the right to be a protagonist in the process of working for the betterment of the world. Development is not something one group carries out for another. According to the Bahá'í teachings, it is essential, then, that human beings receive an education so that the potentialities latent in every soul find their full and effective expression, and so that the generation and accumulation of knowledge can support the advancement of civilization. This education should be material, social, moral, and spiritual. "The primary, the most urgent requirement is the promotion of education," 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains. "It is inconceivable that any nation should achieve prosperity and success unless this paramount, this fundamental concern is carried forward" (*Secret* 109).

Tolerance and Righteousness

"The heaven of true understanding shineth resplendent with the light of two luminaries: tolerance and righteousness," Bahá'u'lláh states (*Tablets* 169–70). These are "two lights amidst the darkness of the world and two educators for the edification of mankind" (*Tablets* 36). Human beings are generally tolerant toward themselves and those like themselves, while being self-righteous toward others, easily finding fault with their perceived shortcomings, limitations, or beliefs. What is needed, if human relationships are to be well founded, is the reverse: tolerance toward others, while holding oneself or one's community to the obligation to do that which is right. Hypocrisy—the insistence upon moral standards or beliefs to which one's own behavior does not conform—is a formidable barrier to understanding and cooperation. "Be thou of the people of hell-fire," is Bahá'u'lláh's emphatic rebuke, "but be not a hypocrite" (*Compilation* no. 2050).

Avoiding the Imposition of Values

Human conscience is free—even to err—and must be persuaded and guided, not coerced. In becoming a Bahá'í, one freely accepts Bahá'u'lláh and commits to abide by His teachings. Bahá'ís do not abandon what Bahá'u'lláh has ordained or change it to accord with their own personal preferences, even if they struggle to live up to His standards. In the process of engaging others in the wider society in a search for truth, Bahá'ís seek out points of unity to work together for the common good. They do not judge others or impose on

them their values. 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains that the Bahá'í Cause, "cometh neither for strife nor war, nor for acts of mischief or of shame; it is neither for quarrelling with other Faiths, nor for conflicts with the nations. . . . Its victory is to submit and yield, and to be selfless is its everlasting glory." The aim is empowerment and cooperation with others, not condemnation or contention. He concludes: "Let all your striving be for this, to become the source of life and immortality, and peace and comfort and joy, to every human soul, whether one known to you or a stranger, one opposed to you or on your side" (*Selections* 206:11).

The Empirical Nature of Moral Progress

For Bahá'ís, Bahá'u'lláh's moral teachings are derived from an accurate perception of human nature and of social reality. Learning to properly understand and apply these teachings leads to evident constructive change in human lives and in social progress. "When the fruit of the tree appears and becomes ripe, then we know that the tree is perfect; if the tree bore no fruit it would be merely a useless growth, serving no purpose," 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains, "When a soul has in it the life of the spirit, then does it bring forth good fruit and become a Divine tree" (*Paris Talks* 98). The efficacy of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings is demonstrated in reality; learning through reflection on action creates improvement over time. The teachings address humanity where it is

at the start of the dispensation, and are formulated to transform its inner and outer life to achieve its full potential in a global spiritual civilization by the end of the dispensation.

The Covenant and Administration

In addition to His teachings that inform a framework for moral action, Bahá'u'lláh has endowed His Revelation with distinct elements to assist the believers and ensure their success in achieving their high aims and ideals. The most distinctive of these elements—the example of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and the Covenant—are particularly worthy of note at this time of the centenary of the passing of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, when the House of Justice has called for "profound reflection" on His life, and on "the strength of the Covenant of which He was the Centre" (25 November 2020).

"It is evident that the axis of the oneness of the world of humanity is the power of the Covenant and nothing else," 'Abdu'l-Bahá states. In this way, He indicates that the Covenant has a vital function not only for Bahá'ís, but for all humanity. For as He further explained, "Had the Covenant not come to pass, had it not been revealed from the Supreme Pen and had not the Book of the Covenant . . . illuminated the world, the forces of the Cause of God would have been utterly scattered. . ." (*Tablets* 49). Without the Covenant, the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh would not find their full expression, and the

oneness of humanity could not be fully realized.

Learning to translate Bahá'u'lláh's teachings into action takes place within the context of the arrangements He has revealed for the Covenant and Administration. In past dispensations, the absence of an explicit Covenant resulted, over time, in the views of individuals gradually obscuring, diluting, or even altogether supplanting the true meaning of the Divine Teachings. The teachings would become mixed with personal opinions that invariably led to discord and division. Therefore, Bahá'u'lláh established His Covenant, and ordained an administrative order to ensure that His Revelation remains unadulterated and that the community remains united throughout the many stages of its evolution as the believers strive to apply His teachings ever more effectively.

The administrative system ordained by Bahá'u'lláh is, Shoghi Effendi explained, the nucleus and pattern of a new world order. Over the course of the dispensation, Bahá'ís are learning how to transform the relationships among individuals, communities, and institutions in the many complex configurations of a mature society. The outcome, in the fullness of time, is a new human race, a new world order and a spiritual civilization.

After His passing, Bahá'u'lláh instructed the friends to turn to 'Abdu'l-Bahá. 'Abdu'l-Bahá subsequently perpetuated Bahá'u'lláh's Covenant through His Will and Testament. "Unto the Most Holy Book every one must turn and all that is not expressly recorded therein must be referred to the Universal House of Justice," He states. "That which this body, whether unanimously or by a majority doth carry, that is verily the Truth and the Purpose of God Himself" (*Will and Testament* 39–40). "In the Bahá'í Faith there are two authoritative centers appointed to which the believers must turn," the House of Justice further explains, "one center is the Book with its Interpreter, and the other is the Universal House of Justice guided by God to decide on whatever is not explicitly revealed in the Book" (*Messages:1963-1986* 75.15).

With the passing of Shoghi Effendi the authoritative interpretation of the Text came to an end. Nevertheless, the evident meaning of the Book, including the body of existing authorized interpretation, is available to guide the action of the believers. As the House of Justice states in its Constitution: "The provenance, the authority, the duties, the sphere of action of the Universal House of Justice all derive from the revealed Word of Bahá'u'lláh which, together with the interpretations and expositions of the Centre of the Covenant and of the Guardian of the Cause—who, after 'Abdu'l-Bahá, is the sole authority in the interpretation of Bahá'í Scripture—constitute the binding terms of reference of the Universal House of Justice and are its bedrock foundation. The authority of these Texts is absolute and immutable until such time as Almighty God shall reveal His new Manifestation to Whom

will belong all authority and power" (*Constitution* 4).

The Universal House of Justice is now, after the passing of Shoghi Effendi, the Head of the Faith to which all Bahá'ís turn. Its powers and duties, set forth in the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and Shoghi Effendi, are summarized in the Declaration of Trust that begins its Constitution. Among the functions of the House of Justice is the administration of the affairs of the Cause, the coordination of its activities, the promotion of its interests, the execution of its laws, and the defense of its institutions (*World Order* 148). Further, Shoghi Effendi explained, the House of Justice "is to lay more definitely the broad lines that must guide the future activities and administration of the Movement" (*Administration* 63). Acknowledging that certain practices of the community during his ministry were a temporary measure to be reconsidered by the House of Justice when it was finally established, the Guardian explained: "And when this Supreme Body will have been properly established, it will have to consider afresh the whole situation, and lay down the principle which shall direct, so long as it deems advisable, the affairs of the Cause" (*Administration* 41).

The House of Justice prescribes the proper action within the framework of the teachings according to the exigencies of the time: "Inasmuch as for each day there is a new problem and for every problem an expedient solution, such affairs should be referred to the Ministers of the House of Justice that

they may act according to the needs and requirements of the time," Bahá'u'lláh states (*Tablets* 27). This includes directing the evolution of the administrative order and designing the successive stages of the unfoldment of the Divine Plan (*Unfolding Destiny* 216). While possessing the exclusive right to legislate on matters not explicitly revealed in the Most Holy Book, in the absence of the Guardian, the House of Justice carries forward their common object "to insure the continuity of that divinely-appointed authority which flows from the Source of our Faith, to safeguard the unity of its followers and to maintain the integrity and flexibility of its teachings" (Shoghi Effendi, *World Order* 148). Further, as 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains, it deliberates "upon all problems which have caused difference, questions that are obscure and matters that are not expressly recorded in the Book. Whatsoever they decide has the same effect as the Text itself" (*Will and Testament* 40). "By this body all the difficult problems are to be resolved" (*Will and Testament* 29).

Thus, the Covenant provides the means necessary to ensure that the believers receive the reliable and binding guidance essential to make certain that Bahá'u'lláh's teachings are safeguarded and properly applied in order to achieve His purpose over the course of the dispensation. Because Bahá'u'lláh established this Covenant, and because He guarantees the protection of the House of Justice, the believers are assured that the guidance they receive is in keeping with Bahá'u'lláh's

intent. Yet, in no way is the Covenant an obstacle to freedom of thought and action. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states that “the moderate freedom which guarantees the welfare of the world of mankind and maintains and preserves the universal relationships, is found in its fullest power and extension in the teachings of Bahá’u’lláh” (*Selections* 227:27). Bahá’u’lláh does not ask that we follow Him blindly, but that we use the capacities God has bestowed on us—including the full power of the intellect—to understand and apply His teachings. Human minds differ and all ways of human knowing are limited, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains in various passages, and therefore people naturally have diverse opinions on a wide range of subjects. It is obvious, then, that in relation to any decision reached by an institution, some people will agree and some will disagree; this is the source of political or religious conflict. In the Faith, however, these differences are reconciled. The Covenant safeguards the exchange of diverse views in the search for truth and the building of a new world, while preventing the contention, conflict, heresy, and division—even hatred and warfare—that eventually befell religion in previous dispensations. The Covenant fosters and preserves sound relationships among individuals, communities, and institutions, ensuring the rights and responsibilities of each of these protagonists engaged in a conscious learning process to apply Bahá’u’lláh’s teachings for personal and social transformation in a worldwide network, from the grassroots to the international level.

With the Covenant at their heart, then, Bahá’u’lláh’s teachings function like the laws and procedures of a system of traffic management. The intention and outcome of such laws is not restriction but freedom: they preserve the ability to move freely and efficiently; without them, safety and movement are impossible. In the Bahá’í Faith, individuals are free to express their views, including criticisms, through designated means. Other believers listen without becoming overawed by new or possibly erroneous ideas, sharing in turn their own views in the search for truth. Where collective action is required, consultation provides the means to reach decisions that are embraced by all and tested through experience and further reflection. On all subjects that have caused difference, questions that are obscure, or matters that are not addressed in the Book, the authoritative decision rests with the Universal House of Justice. The Covenant is the axis of the oneness of humanity because it preserves the unity and integrity of the Faith itself and protects it from being disrupted as individuals, communities, and institutions learn to apply the teachings and build the sound and transformative relationships which will make the unity of the human race a reality.

The Example of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá

The second distinctive element offered by Bahá’u’lláh to the Bahá’í community to assist it to achieve its high aims

was His son, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the Centre of the Covenant after the passing of Bahá'u'lláh. He is the embodiment of every Bahá'í ideal, the perfect exemplar to whom Bahá'ís turn to understand what it means to live a life in accordance with Bahá'u'lláh's teachings. It is common for Bahá'ís to see in the stories of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's life the practical expression of various spiritual qualities which they should appreciate and strive to emulate; indeed, such vignettes are a cornerstone of the moral education of young Bahá'ís. Perhaps it is also possible, looking at His example in a slightly different way, to try to draw insight into how 'Abdu'l-Bahá acted as a moral agent to transform the relationships among human beings in the effort to create a just world.

First among these insights is 'Abdu'l-Bahá's intellectual example in remolding the moral foundations of society. In one of His Tablets pertaining to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Bahá'u'lláh states: "We pray God to illumine the world through Thy knowledge and wisdom" (qtd. in Shoghi Effendi, *World Order* 135). And so it was that 'Abdu'l-Bahá's *Will and Testament* perpetuated the Covenant and inaugurated the administrative order, thereby securing the axis of the oneness of humanity. His *Tablets of the Divine Plan* provided the charter for the expansion and consolidation of the Faith worldwide. In *The Secret of Divine Civilization*, He offered an understanding of the spiritual and moral foundations for the development of peoples and nations. And in the Tablet to the Hague, and

in His various talks as He travelled in the West, He demonstrated how to elevate the discourse among peoples on a host of subjects to look at problems from a perspective that assists humanity to overcome differences and search together for effective solutions. An example is His discussion of world peace, raising the issue beyond a mere end to war to a consideration of a range of relationships that must be adjusted if a peaceful world is to result—including the equality of women and men, the elimination of prejudices of all kinds, the end of religious strife, the need for universal education, and so on.

These seminal works, along with countless other Tablets, not only provide a foundation for all areas of endeavor of the Bahá'í world today, but also a rich illustration of how Bahá'ís can direct their own intellectual energies to address the wider society about the needs of the age. This example is increasingly important in an age in which individuals obscure the truth and seek to foster conflict and contention in pursuit of power and personal gain. "The principal reason for the decline and fall of peoples is ignorance," 'Abdu'l-Bahá warns. "Today the mass of the people are uninformed even as to ordinary affairs, how much less do they grasp the core of the important problems and complex needs of the time." "It is therefore urgent that beneficial articles and books be written, clearly and definitely establishing what the present-day requirements of the people are, and what will conduce to the happiness and advancement of

society," He adds. "The publication of high thoughts is the dynamic power in the arteries of life; it is the very soul of the world" (*Secret* 109).

Another example offered by 'Abdu'l-Bahá is His firm grasp of His identity. He was the servant of Bahá'u'lláh, and nothing could shake Him from the course set by adherence to this path. 'Abdu'l-Bahá's adamantine embrace of His identity made Him one with every human being and consecrated to His twofold purpose. He could not be swayed or tempted to compromise in the face of praise or blame. "I have set forth that which is conducive to human progress and shown you the humility of servitude," He said (*Promulgation* 460). And He called for us to follow in this path: "look at Me, follow Me, be as I am; take no thought for yourselves or your lives, whether ye eat or whether ye sleep, whether ye are comfortable, whether ye are well or ill, whether ye are with friends or foes, whether ye receive praise or blame" (qtd. in Balyuzi 73).

In the world today, differences of identity multiply in countless moral tribes that divide humanity into competing visions of truth and moral purpose. Each Bahá'í also hears the call of tribes, ethnicities, races, religions, nations, gender, political parties, ideologies, and so on. Shoghi Effendi explains that being a Bahá'í does not conflict with lesser loyalties, but calls for a wider loyalty, recognizing that "the advantage of the part is best to be reached by the advantage of the whole" (*World Order* 198). To be a Bahá'í does

not mean one's life is a perfect expression of the Bahá'í teachings, but it is a commitment to struggle and strive to practice them every day. And in the effort to live a Bahá'í life, one cannot compromise the requirements of the teachings for the sake of personal desires or in the face of praise or blame.

Still another essential example demonstrated by 'Abdu'l-Bahá was the nature of His discourse—His engagement with others. In a world divided by countless competing factions of us and them, in which language is used to create a greater divide and enflame a contest for power, 'Abdu'l-Bahá sought to use a language that would elevate discourse above points of contention, foster a common investigation of reality, unite people in the search for truth and the solutions to problems, and forge a common identity based on the oneness of humanity. Moral discourse persuades and empowers; it does not mislead or coerce. In a talk, Bahá'u'lláh extolled the manner in which 'Abdu'l-Bahá sought to engage others:

Whatever a person says, hollow and product of vain imaginings and parrot-like repetition of somebody else's views though it be, one ought to let it pass. One should not engage in disputation leading to and ending with obstinate refusal and hostility, because the other person would consider himself worsted and defeated. . . . One ought to say: right, admitted, but look at the matter in this other

way, and judge for yourself whether it is true or false; of course it should be said with courtesy, with kindliness, with consideration. . . . He will agree, because he comes to realize that the purpose has not been to engage in verbal battle and to gain mastery over him. He sees that the purpose has been to impart the word of truth. . . . His eyes and his ears are opened, his heart responds, his true nature unfolds. . . (qtd. in Balyuzi 27).

The meaning of these reported words of Bahá'u'lláh is captured in countless statements in the Bahá'í Writings. "Do not argue with anyone, and be wary of disputation," Abdu'l-Bahá states. "Speak out the truth. If your hearer accepteth, the aim is achieved. If he is obdurate, you should leave him to himself, and place your trust in God." "The friends of God should weave bonds of fellowship with others and show absolute love and affection towards them," He also explains. "These links have a deep influence on people and they will listen." And He further advises:

Follow thou the way of thy Lord, and say not that which the ears cannot bear to hear, for such speech is like luscious food given to small children. However palatable, rare and rich the food may be, it cannot be assimilated by the digestive organs of a suckling child. Therefore unto every one who hath a right, let his settled measure be given.

"Not everything that a man knoweth can be disclosed, nor can everything that he can disclose be regarded as timely, nor can every timely utterance be considered as suited to the capacity of those who hear it." Such is the consummate wisdom to be observed in thy pursuits. Be not oblivious thereof, if thou wishest to be a man of action under all conditions. First diagnose the disease and identify the malady, then prescribe the remedy, for such is the perfect method of the skillful physician (*Compilations* 300–301).

An example of this type of engagement is 'Abdu'l-Bahá's discussion of the extremes of wealth and poverty. Despite some progress in assisting the poorest of the poor, this problem has in many ways only intensified since 'Abdu'l-Bahá addressed it. According to some reports, one percent of humanity has twice the wealth of some ninety percent of the rest of humanity. About 2,800 people—the world's billionaires—have the same wealth as some sixty percent of the planet (Oxfam). The same extremes apply to differences among countries—some have enormous wealth while others are trapped in poverty and debt. This economic outcome is not the result of chance occurrence, or the inevitable expression of free markets and entrepreneurial merit. It is the result of human choice about the structure of society and human relationships and the imposition of power. A business or economic plan that intentionally profits its initiators

by exploiting employees, harming the wellbeing of society, or damaging the planet itself is inherently unjust. It does not have to be permitted. If we think and act differently, it is possible to attain a different result.

'Abdu'l-Bahá framed the conversation around the elimination of the extremes of wealth and poverty in a manner characterized by early Bahá'ís as a spiritual solution to the economic problem. Bahá'u'lláh makes it evident that human beings are not, in essence, economic beings. He is not, however, opposed to wealth. Spiritual progress, He indicates, is made possible by material means (*Compilation*s no. 1099). When spiritual maturity is attained, then wealth is needed (*Tablets* 35). Wealth should be properly acquired—through productive work—and properly expended—for human well-being. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá states:

> Wealth is praiseworthy in the highest degree, if it is acquired by an individual's own efforts and the grace of God, in commerce, agriculture, art and industry, and if it be expended for philanthropic purposes. . . . Wealth is most commendable, provided the entire population is wealthy. If, however, a few have inordinate riches while the rest are impoverished, and no fruit or benefit accrues from that wealth, then it is only a liability to its possessor. (*Secret* 24–25)

A just economic system would meet the minimum requirements of every human being, so that they are able to achieve their twofold purpose, while not causing harm to the earth, thereby creating a relationship of harmony between humanity and the physical world. This does not require equal outcomes. 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains that "absolute equality" is "untenable, for complete equality in wealth, power, commerce, agriculture, and industry would result in chaos and disorder, disrupt livelihoods, provoke universal discontent, and undermine the orderly conduct of the affairs of the community. For unjustified equality is also fraught with peril." At the same time, "the greatest oppression and injustice are to be found" when "wealth, power, commerce, and industry are concentrated in the hands of a few individuals, while all others toil under the burden of endless hardships and difficulties, are bereft of advantages and benefits, and remain deprived of comfort and peace. (*Some Answered Questions* 78.4–5).

Without calling for a particular type of economic system, 'Abdu'l-Bahá discussed the spiritual and moral characteristics of an economic order that respects humanity's equality of condition. Every person, to achieve their true purpose, requires basics such as food, a place to live, health care, retirement. In one economic approach such needs can be met by means of just pay and profit-sharing, for example, or through taxes and supplementary government programs, in another. 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains that "insofar as the mutual rights of the factory owners and the workers are concerned, laws must be

enacted that would enable the former to make reasonable profits and the latter to be provided with their present necessities and their future needs, so that if they become incapacitated, grow old, or die and leave behind small children, they or their children will not be overcome by dire poverty" (*Some Answered Questions* 78.8). Ultimately, He states, a satisfactory outcome is not the result of force (*Selections* 79:3), but of justice and moral persuasion (*Promulgation* 238–39). "It is therefore clearly established that the appropriation of excessive wealth by a few individuals, notwithstanding the needs of the masses, is unfair and unjust, and that, conversely, absolute equality would also disrupt the existence, welfare, comfort, peace, and orderly life of the human race. Such being the case, the best course is therefore to seek moderation" (*Some Answered Questions* 78.7).

This, of course, is but one example among many of how 'Abdu'l-Bahá lifted a heated debate above personal belief and self-interest to seek a moral basis for uniting people in the search for just solutions and attainment of the common good.

Shoghi Effendi's Moral Treatise

With these insights into the moral framework provided by Bahá'u'lláh's teachings, His Covenant, and the example of their translation into reality offered by the life of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, it is now possible to appreciate how Bahá'ís are working to transform their high ideals into practical action through an ever-wider engagement with peoples across the planet.

As the Bahá'ís of North America embarked upon the first Seven Year Plan, the first stage of the systematic execution of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Plan for the spiritual transformation of the planet, Shoghi Effendi shared with them a seminal letter, published as a book entitled *The Advent of Divine Justice*. Upon reading the title, one might anticipate that the purpose of such a message was to lay out the basis and procedures of Bahá'í administration and the functioning of Spiritual Assemblies, which are in the fulness of time to become Houses of Justice. Yet, in fact, the book may be understood to be the Guardian's moral treatise on the Bahá'í teachings (*Compilation* 106). For it is not through the mere establishment of a system of jurisprudence or of a set of administrative procedures that the divine justice promised by Bahá'u'lláh will appear in the world. Creating the necessary relationships that will move humanity from its current stage of development to its ultimate destiny is a process of moral change.

Among the most fundamental themes of *The Advent of Divine Justice* is the promulgation of the teaching work. With but brief reflection, it should come as no surprise that moral transformation begins with teaching the Faith, so that every soul will know his or her true reality and purpose: what it means to be a human being and how to transform one's inner and outer life. For Bahá'u'lláh, teaching the Faith is not simply a process of the spiritual

rebirth of individual souls; it is about restoring the collective life of humanity and reinvigorating its progress. "In this day," He stated, "We say: 'Come ye after Me, that We may make you to become the quickeners of mankind'" (qtd. in *Promised Day* 174).

In this important work, Shoghi Effendi analyzes for the Bahá'ís of North America the problems afflicting American society, singling out for special consideration three evil tendencies: political corruption, moral laxity, and ingrained racial prejudice. He points out that, just as Iran was chosen to be the cradle of the Faith because of its shortcomings, America was chosen to be the cradle of Bahá'u'lláh's world order because of its moral failings, not because of any inherent superiority. "It is by such means as this," he wrote, "that Bahá'u'lláh can best demonstrate to a heedless generation His almighty power to raise up from the very midst of a people, immersed in a sea of materialism, a prey to one of the most virulent and long-standing forms of racial prejudice, and notorious for its political corruption, lawlessness and laxity in moral standards, men and women who, as time goes by, will increasingly exemplify those essential virtues of self-renunciation, of moral rectitude, of chastity, of indiscriminating fellowship, of holy discipline, and of spiritual insight that will fit them for the preponderating share they will have in calling into being that World Order and that World Civilization of which their country, no less than the entire human race, stands in desperate need" (*Advent* 19–20).

Shoghi Effendi observed that Bahá'ís, as part of their society, are also afflicted by these evil tendencies. At the time he addressed it, he noted that the Bahá'í community was too small to have a marked effect on society as a whole, and that the believers should begin by focusing on themselves; but he anticipated that, as their number and capacity grew, the time would come when they could begin to also contribute to addressing these same problems in the society around them. Ultimately, he envisioned, their contribution to the elimination of these moral failings of their society would be a decisive one, when they would be "called upon to eradicate in their turn such evil tendencies from the lives and the hearts of the entire body of their fellow-citizens" (*Advent* 21).

The Advent of Divine Justice emphasizes in unambiguous language that the work of the Faith is fundamentally a moral project, in which the range of relationships discussed above are profoundly out of order and must be restored and revitalized to enable humanity to achieve its purpose. The love of God must be rekindled, the understanding of one's true self and twofold purpose awakened. The right of every human being to develop and exercise their God-given powers must be respected and safeguarded, the relationships among diverse groups of peoples must be harmonized, and the institutional arrangements of society must be made free of oppression and corruption through adherence to the teachings and principles that reflect and establish the

oneness of humanity. Different societies have different moral strengths, which represent a distinctive contribution to a shared global society, and each also has its moral ills, which must be overcome in the path of individual and social progress; the analysis that Shoghi Effendi carried out concerning the American Bahá'í community in *The Advent of Divine Justice* offers insight for the approach which every Bahá'í community faces in reading its particular social reality and enacting a constructive process of internal and social transformation.

In his argument, Shoghi Effendi describes for the American believers a "double crusade, first to regenerate the inward life of their own community, and next to assail the long-standing evils that have entrenched themselves in the life of their nation" (*Advent* 41). The double crusade restates for the community as a whole the twofold moral purpose of each human being, and it echoes Bahá'u'lláh's description of the purpose of the Manifestation to transform the inner and outer life of humanity. It involves the simultaneous effort of the American Bahá'í community to address the three spiritual prerequisites in its internal affairs, even as it sets out on its world embracing mission to diffuse the divine teachings.

In this double crusade, Shoghi Effendi directed the friends to apply the teachings to the best of their ability within all social spaces in which they participated. Rectitude of conduct, he explains, "must distinguish every phase of the life of the Bahá'í community" (*Advent* 2). It "must manifest itself, with ever-increasing potency, in every verdict which the elected representatives of the Bahá'í community, in whatever capacity they may find themselves, may be called upon to pronounce. It must be constantly reflected in the business dealings of all its members, in their domestic lives, in all manner of employment, and in any service they may, in the future, render their government or people" (*Advent* 26). "A chaste and holy life," he states, "must be made the controlling principle in the behavior and conduct of all Bahá'ís, both in their social relations with the members of their own community, and in their contact with the world at large." "It must be upheld, in all its integrity and implications, in every phase of the life of those who fill the ranks of that Faith, whether in their homes, their travels, their clubs, their societies, their entertainments, their schools, and their universities. It must be accorded special consideration in the conduct of the social activities of every Bahá'í summer school and any other occasions on which Bahá'í community life is organized and fostered" (*Advent* 29–30). Finally, freedom from racial prejudice "should be consistently demonstrated in every phase of their activity and life, whether in the Bahá'í community or outside it, in public or in private, formally as well as informally, individually as well as in their official capacity as organized groups, committees and Assemblies. It should be deliberately cultivated through the various and everyday opportunities, no

matter how insignificant, that present themselves, whether in their homes, their business offices, their schools and colleges, their social parties and recreation grounds, their Bahá'í meetings, conferences, conventions, summer schools and Assemblies" (*Advent* 36).

Since that time, Bahá'í communities have multiplied, expanding their numbers and their reach, including a much greater involvement in the life of society. This presents an even greater opportunity for the application of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings in larger and more diverse social settings. The Universal House of Justice has further expanded upon Shoghi Effendi's guidance, describing the necessary transformation of relationships within the myriad social spaces in which Bahá'ís participate up to the current day. Among its statements is this one written on its behalf to a Bahá'í in the United States in relation to race unity:

the Guardian is calling for the friends to address the question of race unity as a part of life in all of the social spaces in which they are engaged, and, similarly, the House of Justice is now saying that freedom from racial prejudice must be the watchword of Bahá'ís in the social spaces in which they are engaged for the activities of the Plan. In such intimate settings, people of diverse racial backgrounds encounter the Word of God, and in their efforts to translate the Teachings into practical action, are able to generate bonds of love, affection, and unity, and to learn what it means to establish a true interracial fellowship that is powerful enough to overcome the forces of racism that afflict them and their society. Currently, among the Bahá'ís of the United States, race unity is a dimension of the work of community building in scores of clusters, of social action in hundreds of efforts of various levels of complexity, and of involvement in the discourses of society by thousands of believers in various settings. The House of Justice is confident that these endeavors will become more systematic, more widespread, and more effective as the learning process already set in motion by your National Spiritual Assembly is persistently pursued by the believers in greater numbers. (6 August 2018)

As the Divine Plan continues to unfold, the scope of the social spaces in which Bahá'ís are engaged will continue to expand and multiply, offering greater possibilities for transforming the human relationships through the insights derived from Bahá'u'lláh's teachings, until, in the fullness of time, Bahá'ís will witness the achievement of their high aspirations for justice, unity, and peace among all peoples and nations.

The Bahá'í Community's Current Efforts

The current social order is the reflection of the world's moral choices. The

society we are trying to create in response to Bahá'u'lláh's wishes and in light of His teachings will be a moral achievement—it will be created by our thoughts, our discourse, our actions, and the sum of our relationships. By moral, again, in a Bahá'í context, is meant the kind of action grounded in spiritual conviction and obedience in response to divine love expressed in a twofold moral purpose. This effort is apparent in the current activities of Bahá'í communities worldwide in the context of the Divine Plan.

Every Bahá'í is striving to learn how to live a meaningful, good, coherent, and flourishing Bahá'í life, to create a work of moral artistry that is the story—in all of its many stages and chapters—of a life well-lived in accordance with Bahá'u'lláh's teachings. This Bahá'í life is propelled by the conviction of recognition of Bahá'u'lláh as the Manifestation of God for this age, leading to reflective action to create the proper relationships He has ordained.

Imagine, then, the process of waking up in the morning and beginning each day with the basic spiritual disciplines of prayer, meditation, reading the Writings, and bringing oneself to account, which strengthen the relationship of the individual with God, with Bahá'u'lláh and His Covenant, and with the self. Leaving the privacy of this chamber, one then goes into the world, to strengthen bonds with others—members of the family and of the community, in the neighborhood, at work, and in all the social spaces in which one participates—and thus

to "cast the sleeve of holiness over all that hath been created from water and clay."

The efforts of individuals along this path come together in the collective endeavor of the community, and in particular its efforts to strive to implement the activities of the current stage of the Divine Plan. The Plan describes for the community what must be done according to the current needs of humanity and the latest stage of organic development of the Faith. Individuals, communities, and institutions in every part of the world then read their own social reality and determine what they will do. The recent series of Plans has vastly expanded the capacity of the Bahá'í world. Whereas before, Bahá'í communities were generally small—the largest, with few exceptions, counting hundreds of members—currently, in the most advanced clusters the activities of the community now engage thousands, and a few even tens of thousands. All inhabitants of these clusters are welcome to participate in the activities of Bahá'í communities, whether they ultimately accept the Faith or not.

The spirit of this engagement is captured in one statement of Bahá'u'lláh about teaching the Faith: "The children of men are all brothers, and the prerequisites of brotherhood are manifold," He states. "Among them is that one should wish for one's brother that which one wisheth for oneself. Therefore, it behoveth him who is the recipient of an inward or outward gift or who partaketh of the bread of heaven to inform and invite his friends with

the utmost love and kindness. If they respond favorably, his object is attained; otherwise he should leave them to themselves without contending with them or uttering a word that would cause the least sadness" (*Tabernacle* 2.39). Even if a person does not embrace the Faith, he or she is still your brother or sister, still part of the family, and all must learn to work together for the wellbeing of all.

Quantitative change in a cluster is matched by qualitative change in relationships, as reflected in countless reports worldwide. We can currently witness, to an increasing degree, entire villages united as one, where love and trust grow to the point that problems among families largely disappear and Local Spiritual Assemblies assume a respected position of moral leadership. In more and more clusters, young women are given unprecedented opportunities for participation and education, and the influence of oppressive social systems is dissipated. The behavior of young people is transformed, they take their studies more seriously and lead the way in social action. Principals, chiefs, and other leaders of thought acknowledge the noteworthy change in relationships and the betterment of the community. Progress, from place to place, is uneven, but what has been learned flows to all parts of the Bahá'í world, connecting the grassroots, regions, nations, continents, and the international level. Systematic efforts for community building are coherent with, and encompass locally, systematic efforts for social and economic

development and involvement in the discourses of society. Every advance in this process is driven by learning how to translate what Bahá'u'lláh wrote into reality and action; thus, in all places, a nucleus of capable individuals—who can read their reality, study the relevant teachings, implement a plan of action, raise up more and more individuals with the capacity to participate in the process, and reflect upon and revise action as needed—facilitate transformation and progress.

In this common enterprise, gradually, the relationships among individuals, communities and institutions take on new form. In the system created by Bahá'u'lláh, these three protagonists are inseparably associated and their efforts complementary. In the wider society, the various forms of relationships among these three are too often characterized by contention and the contest for power. In the efforts initiated by the Bahá'í community to which all are invited to participate, each of the three sees its responsibility to support and empower the other two, even to the extent of sacrifice. The divisions of "us" and "them" give way to the expression of the oneness of humanity in diverse social settings. 'Abdu'l-Bahá observed: "According to the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh the family, being a human unit, must be educated according to the rules of sanctity. All the virtues must be taught the family. The integrity of the family bond must be constantly considered, and the rights of the individual members must not be transgressed. The rights of the son, the

father, the mother—none of them must be transgressed" (*Promulgation* 168). Just as a family advances when the pattern of rights and responsibilities is properly ordered and upheld, the same is true for the social order in general. Bahá'ís are now learning to apply the teachings within ever larger and more numerous social spaces.

The remedy to the division of humanity into contending moral tribes is moral persuasion, through distinctive words and deeds. If Bahá'ís succumb to merely parroting the discourse or mimicking the actions of contending factions in the contemporary spheres of knowledge, morals, politics, economics, and others, their efforts will be swept aside by the forces of disintegration, and they cannot hope to contribute to the change necessary for progress and human flourishing. The alternative is love and a discourse that unites and persuades, reshaping human association.

In environmental biology there is a concept called ecological succession that describes the emergence of a mature forest or its recovery after a devastating fire. The ecosystem is restored in distinct stages of relationships among soil, plants, and wildlife. So, for example, upon bare rock, microorganisms help soil form and rudimentary plant life takes root. As initial plants grow and die, organic matter is added. In this renewed substrate, grasses and then more complex and larger plants, and eventually shrubs and small trees can appear. More sophisticated plants support more advanced collections of insect and animal life. Each more complex stage of the ecosystem serves as a foundation for another, even more complex stage to appear until the mature forest emerges at a state of equilibrium.

The evolution of the relationships among individuals, communities, and institutions in the Faith can be understood as following this same pattern. The Báb, for example, raised up a community and organized it in such a way that its primary purpose would be the recognition of Bahá'u'lláh. During the ministry of Bahá'u'lláh, the Bahá'í community was increasingly organized in such a manner as to make it distinct from the Bábí community and ultimately prepare it to turn to 'Abdu'l-Bahá after Bahá'u'lláh's passing. The worldwide community was then organized around the person of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, consolidating its understanding of the Covenant, and extending its process of expansion and consolidation along the path He set out. During the time of Shoghi Effendi, the community evolved once more, and added new features, from the beginning of the Formative Age and the inauguration of the administrative order, to the 1950s with the start of its international institutional arrangements. The same process of successive stages in the evolution of the ecosystem of relationships within the Faith continues under the direction of the House of Justice. The past twenty-five years forged a pattern of arrangements that accelerated a global process of learning to advance the process of entry by troops;

the decades ahead must further shape the relationships once more for an even more profound capacity to give expression to Bahá'u'lláh's teachings.

The work in community building, social action, and involvement in the discourses of society represents a continuing intellectual challenge to the Bahá'í world to which all of the friends have an opportunity to contribute, following in the footsteps of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. It consists in the generation and application of knowledge. Clusters have to reach new frontiers; material and social progress has to be advanced in villages and neighborhoods among all peoples by establishing projects and organizations dedicated to social and economic development; and insights from Bahá'u'lláh's teachings have to be introduced by individuals and institutions into the discourses of all the social spaces in which they participate. "O people of Baha!" Bahá'u'lláh exhorts, "The source of crafts, sciences and arts is the power of reflection. Make ye every effort that out of this ideal mine there may gleam forth such pearls of wisdom and utterance as will promote the well-being and harmony of all the kindreds of the earth" (*Tablets* 72).

Through the increased capacity cultivated by learning and the development of human resources, progress in the Bahá'í world accelerates exponentially. During the Ten Year Crusade—coming, as it did, at the climax of the learning process cultivated by Shoghi Effendi—more was accomplished in ten years than in the previous hundred. In the recent series of Plans, more was accomplished in the last five years than in the previous two decades. The pressing needs of humanity cry out for an even greater acceleration in the spiritual enterprise in which the Bahá'ís are engaged in the decades that lie ahead.

CONCLUSION

All peoples and nations are protagonists of the process of building the social world. All contribute to an ever-advancing civilization. This contribution—be it constructive or destructive—depends upon their understanding, their values, and their actions. The teachings of Bahá'u'lláh have been revealed to foster a constructive change in the inner and outer life of humanity. But a remedy must be applied. The purpose of the Bahá'í community is to understand and apply Bahá'u'lláh's teachings, and to do so in a manner that demonstrates their efficacy and persuades others through word and deed to also adopt this remedy to transform the relationships among human beings, leading to the creation of a just, unified, prosperous, and peaceful world. To do this, Bahá'ís, in keeping with their twofold moral purpose, are engaged in a process of learning how to apply Bahá'u'lláh's teachings in their own personal lives and in the ever wider circle of social spaces in which they participate, collaborating with all those in the wider society who are interested in the common enterprise of the betterment of the world.

There are no shortcuts, no formulas to achieve this end. It is not about

imposing values on people. It is not about attempting to acquire power to compel the conscience or to force human beings to adopt particular policies or practices. It is about learning to translate the teachings into action and to assist others to do the same. It is about cultivating just patterns of association among individuals, communities, and institutions. It is about love—love that eliminates divisions of "us and them" to create the oneness of humanity and to bind people together in the search for truth and the resolution of humanity's ills. It is for Bahá'ís to serve as a leaven—a pervading influence—by striving, little by little and day by day, to do what is right and by engaging with all peoples who seek to transcend differences and work together for the common good. It is to strive to be the protagonists of a change in the relationships among human beings, the co-creators of a new spiritual and moral order in the world of humanity. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá explained in one of His talks:

> You belong to the world of purity, and are not content to live the life of the animal, spending your days eating, drinking, and sleeping. . . . Your thoughts and ambitions are set to acquire human perfection. You live to do good and to bring happiness to others. . . .
>
> The Heavenly Father gave the priceless gift of intelligence to man so that he might become a spiritual light, piercing the darkness of materiality, and bringing

goodness and truth into the world. If ye will follow earnestly the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh, ye shall indeed become the light of the world, the soul for the body of the world, the comfort and help for humanity, and the source of salvation for the whole universe. (*Paris Talks* 36:10)

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Beyond Welfare: A Preliminary Bahá'í Normative Framework for Economic Rights and Responsibilities[1]

VARGHA BOLODO-TAEFI

Abstract

Invoking a broad catalog of applicable Bahá'í principles, this paper presents the conceptual and theoretical underpinnings of a Bahá'í approach to economic growth and disparity and then maps these concepts onto an applied framework of economic rights and responsibilities. The framework that emerges thus both conceptualizes the underlying virtues that govern economic prosperity in a Bahá'í model and shows how these principles might lead to normative prescriptions for economic rights and responsibilities. The paper concludes that the Bahá'í principles dealing with economic prosperity expand the theory and practice of economic justice and give rise to individual and institutional rights and responsibilities that go beyond the imperatives of conventional models of welfare.

Résumé

S'appuyant sur un large éventail de principes bahá'ís pertinents, l'auteur présente les

fondements conceptuels et théoriques d'une approche bahá'íe de la croissance et des disparités économiques, puis transpose ces concepts dans un cadre applicable de droits et de responsabilités économiques. Le cadre qui en résulte permet à la fois de conceptualiser les vertus sous-jacentes qui régissent la prospérité économique dans un modèle bahá'í et de montrer comment ces principes peuvent mener à l'établissement de prescriptions normatives en matière de droits et de responsabilités économiques. L'auteur conclut que les principes bahá'ís relatifs à la prospérité économique élargissent la théorie et la pratique de la justice économique et donnent lieu à des droits et responsabilités individuels et institutionnels qui vont au-delà des impératifs des modèles conventionnels en matière de bien-être.

Resumen

Refiriéndose a un amplio catálogo de principios Bahá'í aplicables, este artículo presenta los fundamentos conceptuales y teóricos de un enfoque bahá'í del crecimiento económico y la desigualdad y luego mapea estos conceptos en un marco conceptual práctico de derechos y responsabilidades económicas. El marco que emerge así conceptualiza las virtudes subyacentes que gobiernan la prosperidad económica en un modelo bahá'í y muestra como estos principios pueden conducir a propuestas normativas de derechos y responsabilidades económicas. El artículo concluye que los principios bahá'í que tratan con la prosperidad económica amplían la teoría y la práctica de la justicia económica y dan lugar a derechos y responsabilidades individuales e institucionales que van más allá de los imperativos de los modelos convencionales de bienestar.

INTRODUCTION:
BAHÁ'Í ECONOMICS

In a world in which economic interde-
pendence is an inescapable reality, the
concentration and over-accumulation
of wealth have been the cause of exces-
sive disparity between rich and poor.
This unequal distribution of wealth
keeps the world in a state of social and
economic instability. The world's po-
litical and religious leaders, as well as
its philosophers and scholars, have not
found a solution to this acute disorder,
which, if left unchecked, could cause
strikes, wars, and much destruction
('Abdu'l-Bahá, qtd. in *Star of the West*
82–84), and threaten the democratic
order (Piketty 571).

While Bahá'ís generally recognize
the importance of applying the prac-
tical tools of economic policy—an
essentially technical matter—in ad-
dressing problems of this kind, they
do not believe that humanity can find
relief from its economic maladies
through such means alone. The Uni-
versal House of Justice asserts that
insofar as "there is an inherent moral
dimension to the generation, distri-
bution, and utilization of wealth and
resources" (1 Mar. 2017), the solution
to the excessive wealth disparity "calls
for the combined application of spiri-
tual, moral and practical approaches"
(*Promise of World Peace*). The Bahá'í
Faith thus introduces spiritual princi-
ples and establishes mechanisms and
institutions that bring oneness, justice,
detachment, generosity, and prosperity
to bear on the economy. It provides a

framework for guiding the establish-
ment of the future economic order.
Central to that framework is the belief
that a transformation of the virtues
of individuals and of the patterns of
thought and behavior that give those
virtues collective expression in society
together help reconceptualize the rela-
tionships between the individual, soci-
ety, and institutions—understood to be
the protagonists of the economy.

To this end, this paper first examines
the underlying virtues that govern the
process of translating the Bahá'í laws,
principles, and teachings into a future
Bahá'í economic system. It then identi-
fies universal concepts of practical im-
port that constitute a Bahá'í normative
framework for economic rights and
responsibilities and guide the Bahá'í
approach to economic prosperity. It
invites a popular endorsement of these
norms as the prerequisite for the emer-
gence of a shared ethic which would
ultimately herald the advent of a new
economic order.

As will be shown, standard eco-
nomic models view welfare as the
satisfaction of preferences and the
maximization of utility and profit.
Likewise, conventional conceptions
of justice, within which the theories
of welfare are traditionally developed,
limit the scope of justice to the protec-
tion and satisfaction of rights. These
views do not encompass the entirety
of the Bahá'í vision of prosperity. The
Bahá'í writings present a framework
of standards within which questions
of economic justice can be consid-
ered. By including non-rights-based

measures, as well as the principle of generosity, this framework broadens both the domain within which economic justice must be applied, and the range of implications of economic justice. The framework, similarly, expands the definition of welfare and widens the base of ensuing constitutional guarantees. It reconceptualizes wealth, prosperity, and economic activity in a manner that not only satisfies the requirements of justice but is also supported by concepts, principles, obligations, values, norms, practices, and individual imperatives that go beyond justice. This paper concludes that the individual and institutional rights and responsibilities prescribed by the Bahá'í framework for economic prosperity go beyond the imperatives of the conventional models of welfare.

The following propositions should not be seen as an attempt to encompass the breadth and depth of the Bahá'í teachings within a narrow framework that is the product of a limited understanding of current realities and requirements. They should rather be viewed as an effort to bring these teachings—the full application and implications of which only future generations will appraise—one step closer to a practical reality. As the collective understanding of the Bahá'í teachings as well as the needs and realities of the global economy evolve, so should the frameworks that conceptualize prosperity and prescribe the outcome of economic activity and public policy.

OVERVIEW

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá introduced the elements of a solution to the twofold question of economic progress and the extremes of wealth and poverty. Their rationale for this global solution was not growing globalization, increasing economic interdependence, or strengthening international civil society; it was, rather, Their belief in the oneness of humankind, of which these are manifestations. Their teachings stressed that each member of the human race is born into the world as a trust of the whole, and that this trusteeship constitutes the moral foundation of economic rights and responsibilities (Bahá'í International Community).

The foundations of the Bahá'í economic teachings are laid in the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh. In the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, the Mother Book of the Bahá'í Faith, for instance, Bahá'u'lláh introduces provisions that establish the spiritual foundation of economic progress and prosperity, train progressive communities that engage in social and economic development, and address the development of the economy through several principles and laws. These include the law of inheritance (¶¶ 20–26) with provisions for investment in trade and business to secure the future of children, profit-sharing as remuneration for wealth management services (¶ 27), and settlement of debts (¶ 28); engagement in some occupation, such as a craft, trade, or the like, and exalting

such work to the rank of worship (¶ 33); prohibition of idleness and mendicancy (¶¶ 33, 147); transiency of the material world and detachment from one's possessions (¶ 40); use of charitable endowments (¶ 42); obligatory education for children with provisions for the role of local institutions (¶ 48); fines (¶ 52); inherent oneness of mankind and trusteeship (¶ 58); abolishing slavery (¶ 72); fixing one's gaze on the eternal life of the spirit and detachment from this world (¶ 79); obedience to the government (¶ 95); Ḥuqúqu'lláh (the Right of God) (¶ 97); writing of a will (¶ 109); confirming material means for progress (¶ 113); the imperative of balancing liberty and protection (¶ 124); and payment of Zakát (tithes) to purify means of sustenance (¶ 146). Elsewhere, Bahá'u'lláh addresses the acquisition of wealth through crafts or professions (*Tablets* 35); trustworthiness as the basis of wealth and prosperity (37); provision of rewards due to people (38); moderation in all matters and the evil of excess (69); the need for a treaty to abolish war so people may be relieved from the burden of exorbitant expenditures (89); a children's education fund (90); the importance of charity and benevolence (94); and the permissibility of charging interest on lending (133). The Bahá'í teachings also institute a "progressive income tax, a high death duty and consultation in industry between capital and labour" (Shoghi Effendi 64).

The Bahá'í writings do not outline the elements of a detailed economic system. They, however, promote spiritual principles that call for a reorganization of human society in which economic relationships are readjusted and the role of various professions in the generation, distribution, and utilization of wealth are re-evaluated accordingly.[2] These Bahá'í principles include collaboration and mutual support rooted in the belief that one cannot attend to all of one's needs alone; equality in human rights notwithstanding natural distinctions among the people; and sharing and sacrifice—not equality—in individual relationships. This reorganization, readjustment, and re-evaluation begins with a renewed view of wealth and prosperity.

WEALTH

The Bahá'í view of wealth and economic activity stands in sharp contrast to dominant theories of human conduct, such as assumptions that portray human beings as self-interested agents seeking to maximize their utility and profit and "striving to claim an ever-greater share of the world's material resources" (Universal House of Justice, 1 Mar. 2017). This, however, does not suggest that wealth is denounced as intrinsically objectionable or immoral (1 Mar. 2017) or that poverty is commended and cherished ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Secret* 29). On the contrary, all are commanded to engage in a profession or trade. Wealth is commendable and

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2   In this light, the Bahá'í Writings laud the contribution that craftsmen (Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets* 38), teachers (39, 51–52), and farmers (90) make to the economy and to society's prosperity.

praiseworthy, 'Abdu'l-Bahá states, "if it is acquired by an individual's own efforts and the grace of God, in commerce, agriculture, art and industry," "if it is dedicated to the welfare of society" and "for philanthropic purposes," and "provided the entire population is wealthy" (*Secret* 29).

PROSPERITY

There is similarly a marked divergence between the Bahá'í view of prosperity and prevailing assumptions that seek happiness in consumption, acquisition, and possession, that neglect our collective future responsibilities, that fuel self-interest and personal entitlement, and that lead to indifference to the suffering experienced by others (Universal House of Justice, 1 Mar. 2017). In addressing the ever-widening gap between rich and poor, such materialistic views usually invite materialistic methods and solutions that emphasize technical manipulation rather than moral and spiritual transformation.

The Bahá'í vision of prosperity poses a challenge to two extreme assumptions that shape contemporary discourse. On the one hand, it introduces purity of motive and action—not self-interest—as the foundation of prosperity; it asserts that collaboration—not competition—drives performance and true progress; and it views the individual's worth in terms of service and virtue—not accumulation of wealth and consumption (Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets* 138). On the other hand, it prohibits asceticism and does not dismiss

wealth as "inherently distasteful or immoral" (Universal House of Justice, 1 Mar. 2017). Similarly, it neither advocates that all the poor should become rich, nor does it propose that the rich and the poor should have an equal amount of wealth. It rather suggests that through a universal application of spiritual, moral, and practical remedies, poverty will decrease and no one will remain deprived of basic necessities and a comfortable life, access to which is considered a human right in the Bahá'í teaching (*Paris Talks* nos. 40, 46). However, since ability, capacity, intelligence, and power are the causes of natural distinction and vary among the people, they will not be equal in talent, learning, and skill. A natural distinction in stations—distinction based on merit, not distinction that leads to unwarranted disparity—leads to a natural emergence of ranks and positions in society. Ranks, positions, or degrees that allow for individual mobility and do not perpetuate a stagnant system of hierarchy are essential to organization and order in the world of creation. Likening the world of humanity to a great army, 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains that generals, captains, under-officers, and soldiers, each with their own appointed duties, are necessary for its proper functioning. Just as an army cannot be composed of only generals, or of soldiers without anyone in authority, order and organization of the economy also necessitate the existence of ranks and degrees (*Paris Talks* no. 46; Shoghi Effendi, qtd. in *Lights of Guidance* nos. 1865, 1867).

The Bahá'í teachings stress that the extremes of wealth and poverty must be abolished, that all must be equal before the law, and that all must enjoy equal opportunities for economic progress. Nevertheless, owing to the intrinsic differences in intelligence, wisdom, and capacity, even people of the same age with equal stations at birth who are subject to the same opportunities in education, nutrition, environment, and care, manifest different degrees of capability, advancement, and material progress ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation* no. 37) and occupy various ranks and positions on the social and economic ladder. The Bahá'í teachings do not seek to break down these differences in rank and position or equalize property and the conditions of life in society ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks* no. 46). They preserve the natural distinctions in social and economic station, which is conducive to the protection of order and organization in society, but emphasize that in the ranks and positions that emerge, all must be able to live in the greatest happiness ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation* no. 60). The natural differences in intelligence and capacity, moreover, must not disadvantage some people. As will be shown, vast differences in capacity, and consequently the ability to produce and contribute to the economy, shall be adjusted through a taxation that is proportionate to capacity and production (no. 77).

The Bahá'í teachings on economic activity and collective prosperity can be considered from the standpoint of the insights they provide into two interrelated global economic questions: economic progress and economic disparity. The economic teachings of the Bahá'í Faith do not merely concern the equalization of the means of livelihood. Notwithstanding the emphasis they place on the alleviation of poverty, the Bahá'í writings are replete with teachings that highlight key themes in economic growth, such as order, efficiency, human capital, productivity, and sustainability. They stress that not only must extreme poverty and wealth be eradicated, but the society and the individual, rich and poor, must also be able to progress economically. As will be discussed in the section "A Normative Framework," through a combination of individual and institutional rights and responsibilities, some Bahá'í principles offer a path towards abolishing the extremes of wealth and poverty and achieving comfort and wellbeing for everyone, while others advance a vision for the orderly organization of the economy with degrees and ranks—not equality—to facilitate economic growth.

The following sections first offer a brief survey of key themes and principles found in prevalent theories of justice and welfare, and then conceptualize standards and virtues that underlie the Bahá'í approach to economic prosperity. To do the latter, it is necessary to construct a framework for thinking about underlying virtues. These can be thought of as the constitutional principles, emanating from the reality of the human soul, that any specific economic law, regulation, or practice must

conform with. They are the conceptual abstractions that describe, always apply to, and guide, every economic activity, irrespective of its type, sector, and location, the specific context and circumstances, or the economic actors involved. It is also useful to provide another framework for organizing norms: secondary, context-dependent, action-guiding principles that prescribe and act as standards of economic behavior, and that may apply individually or together to an economic activity, depending on the type, sector, location, context, circumstances, and the economic protagonists involved. The first group of principles forms the conceptual framework; the second group constitutes the normative framework. Each norm in the latter can be traced back to one or more underlying virtues in the former. Similarly, depending on the circumstances, each underlying virtue can give rise to one or more norms, including norms that appear to directly oppose each other. For example, as will be illustrated, the rights-based virtue that underlies justice, termed "render each his due," may necessitate equality in one scenario, but inequality in another.

The Conceptual Framework

Welfare

To appreciate the significance of the conceptual framework of principles governing the Bahá'í model of economic prosperity, it is helpful to first briefly review mainstream economic understandings of human welfare. Hausman et al. differentiate between substantive and formal theories of welfare. Substantive theories of welfare state *what* things are intrinsically good for people; formal theories of welfare specify *how* we can identify the things that are intrinsically good for people, but they do not state what those things are. Normative economists tend to focus on formal theories of welfare and leave the substantive question of what things are good for people up to people themselves. Mainstream economists, who are committed to utility theory in explaining human choices, consider preference satisfaction to be the fundamental measure of welfare. They postulate, as an axiomatic foundation of their theory, that individuals are exclusively self-interested agents who seek to maximize their utility and profit and whose preference is based on what is better for them. In standard economic models, then, welfare is the satisfaction of preferences. There are several problems with this concept of welfare, which pose a challenge to both formal and substantive theories of welfare. To name a few: people do care about more than their own welfare, defined as the satisfaction of preferences; they may prefer something that is bad for them because they do not always know what is beneficial or detrimental to them; people have different values as well as different beliefs about their values, and, insofar as people's preferences emanate from their beliefs, their preferences can change or conflict with each other (Hausman et al. ch. 8).

John Rawls, who also considers welfare to be the satisfaction of rational preferences, suggests that because people are partly responsible for their own welfare, social policy should focus on that aspect of welfare for which society is responsible. He, therefore, espouses an index of primary social goods, like income, to measure welfare (*A Theory of Justice* ch. 2.15). Amartya Sen proposes a capabilities approach to welfare. He suggests that social policy should focus on people's capabilities—abilities like literacy—rather than on what they make of their capabilities, which is determined by individual choice, or on resources, such as Rawls's primary social goods (ch. 3). In what can be seen as a substantive theory of welfare, Martha Nussbaum proposes a specific list of central human functional capabilities, such as life, bodily health and integrity, emotions, and play, which, she argues, have survived cross-cultural scrutiny and can, therefore, serve as the basis for welfare guarantees (78–80).

These views of welfare do not encompass the entirety of the Bahá'í vision of prosperity. Unlike most standard normative theories of welfare, the Bahá'í approach to economic prosperity addresses both substantive and formal questions of welfare. It prescribes, as will be demonstrated in the following sections, how things that are intrinsically good for people should be identified; it also provides a list of what should constitute welfare.

The substantive elements of welfare that are found in the Bahá'í teachings, unlike those in the above-mentioned theories, do not emanate from the people's beliefs and preferences, but from God's all-encompassing knowledge of His creatures, of the purpose of their existence, and, therefore, of what is intrinsically good for them (INBA 71:59; Bahá'u'lláh, *Prayers* 151, 182, 195–196; the Báb, *Selections* 201). The Bahá'í writings expand the definition of welfare to include not only wealth, but also access to knowledge, education, art, industry, training, power, and commerce ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Secret* 29; *Some Answered Questions* no. 78). Consequently, the enforceable obligations that arise from the right of every individual to welfare—that serve as the moral basis of constitutional guarantees—likewise include access to knowledge, education, art, industry, training, power, and commerce. It is in this light that the Bahá'í writings advocate the obligatory education of all children and mandate the community to provide the means for the education of a child if the parents are unable to do so ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections* no. 227). This helps break the cycle of poverty as receiving education and skills increases one's opportunities and chances of getting out of the poverty trap.

JUSTICE

In order to conceptualize the Bahá'í approach to economic prosperity, it is now important, for several reasons, to briefly examine some conceptions of justice and its development in the Bahá'í writings. When poverty is allowed to reach

a condition of starvation, it is a clear sign that somewhere we can find injustice ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks* no. 46). But when, in addition to sporadic and isolated cases of starvation, poverty causes misery, demoralization, and degradation among the masses, this is a clear indicator of a systemic injustice. In the distribution of economic output, justice is the guiding standard. Besides, formal conceptions of welfare are traditionally developed within theories of justice. In standard theories of welfare as a social policy, the first virtue of social institutions is justice (Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* 3). Classical theories maintain that justice is to "render each his due"—a definition found in the Institutes of Justinian, a codification of the Roman Law from the sixth century AD. Libertarians view justice as respecting one's rights. Utilitarians espouse utility-maximizing principles that facilitate cooperation and resolve conflicts. Contractualists define what is due to each person through principles such as mutual advantage, impartiality, and reciprocity, to include equal liberty and equal opportunity (Hausman et al. ch. 12). Nevertheless, all these conventional theories of justice offer a rights-based definition of justice, in that they limit the scope of justice to the protection and satisfaction of rights that derive from human nature and that are owed equally to everyone, regardless of their merits. It will be shown that in the Bahá'í writings, justice is developed within a framework of standards that go beyond the protection of equal rights, to include non-rights-based

considerations for one's merits or measures set by God—capacity, wisdom, intelligence, knowledge, talents, abilities, and skills—as well as generosity and sacrifice.

In the Bahá'í view, the essence and the source of justice are embodied in the ordinances prescribed by the Manifestations of God (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* no. 88). To observe justice, therefore, is to carry out the laws of God and, as will be explored further, the fear of God[3] invokes the moral obligation to guarantee the unconditional authority of justice (*Gleanings* no. 88; 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Secret* 45). This imperative stems from the Bahá'í belief that regards humanity "as a single individual, and one's own self as a member of that corporeal form," and that considers the suffering of one as the suffering of all (*Secret* 46). The proper functioning of the body politic, then, depends on justice ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* no. 77). This primacy of justice has two

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3   In the Bahá'í teachings, fear of God refers to the fear that by not living according to God's will, one deprives oneself of His love. This "dread of Divine displeasure" (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* no. 44) does not emanate from His cruelty, but from His justice (Shoghi Effendi, qtd. in "Bahá'í Education" no. 143), as failure to fulfil one's obligations may be met with God's justice. The fear of God that motivates one to act in accordance with His will is likened to a child's fear of "the righteous anger and chastisement of a parent" (Shoghi Effendi, qtd. in "Bahá'í Education" no. 133). For more information, see Taherzadeh 94–96.

significant implications for its intrinsic link with welfare: Firstly, in the Bahá'í view, justice means "to have no regard for one's own personal benefits and selfish advantages" and, therefore, to "consider the welfare of the community as one's own" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Secret* 45–46). This represents a clear departure from the standard concept of welfare as satisfaction of preferences. Secondly, justice applies unconditionally and universally in all social and economic relationships. David Hume argues that in true welfare, there is no reason to appeal to justice because resources are so abundant that partition of goods serves no purpose (16). That is to say, the requirements of justice apply only when distributing insufficient resources. In the Bahá'í view of economy, however, justice is a prerequisite for welfare. No social relation or economic activity could be perceived in which justice need not be a governing principle. While the applicability of justice is independent of the context, its mode of application may vary in different scenarios. It is in the application of this immutable belief to the question of economic disparity that the Bahá'í writings assert that the appropriation of excessive wealth by a few individuals is in itself unfair and unjust, regardless of the needs of the masses ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* no. 78). Abolishing extreme wealth is, therefore, as important as, but not dependent upon, the distribution of resources or the state of the economy.

In order to show that the Bahá'í approach to economic progress and disparity expands the scope for the application of economic justice, it is useful to explore three standards that underlie the consideration of economic justice in the Bahá'í writings and delineate the scope of its application and implications. Together, these three standards constitute the conceptual framework that can generate normative prescriptions for economic rights and responsibilities.

RENDER EACH HIS DUE

In numerous instances, but only as a starting point, both Bahá'u'lláh (INBA 47:42; *Tablets* 167) and 'Abdu'l-Bahá (*Selections* no. 153; INBA 88:121) maintain that justice is to render each his due. Although They adopt this classical definition of justice as a vehicle for the delivery of Their teachings, it is important to note that They invest it with a new meaning. According to this definition, justice has to do with how individual people are treated and just treatment is something due to each person, which suggests that justice is a matter of claims that can be rightfully made—that justice can be demanded. At a rudimentary level, it is in light of this rights-based approach that the Bahá'í teachings stipulate that "every human being has the right to live; they have a right to rest, and to a certain amount of well-being" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks* 40:19). This standard guarantees access to basic necessities of life for all individuals. As a corollary to this definition of justice, the right of each individual to a certain amount of

well-being becomes an obligation that should be enforceable.

Set Measures

The Bahá'í writings, however, uniquely complement this rights-based perspective with, and make it subject to, a second standard of justice: "set measures" (Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets* 167). What is due to each person is not always one's right, as previously qualified; it is also what one *deserves*. Therefore, the allocation of resources, benefits, or outputs is adjusted commensurate with one's capacity, intelligence, wisdom, knowledge, talents, abilities, and skills, and to reflect the realities of time and place, in order to preserve the natural order and balance in society and acknowledge the natural distinctions and ranks among the people. As mentioned previously, far from perpetuating a stagnant system of hierarchy, distinction based on merit requires the existence of degrees and ranks in society but does not permanently tie individuals to their ranks; rather, it allows for mobility and individual progress. Shoghi Effendi stresses that "social inequality is the inevitable outcome of the natural inequality of men" and that "human beings are different in ability and should, therefore, be different in their social and economic standing" (qtd. in *Lights of Guidance* no. 1865). Consequently, while access to basic necessities of life is each individual's right, greater measures are set for some who, owing to their circumstances, capacities, resources, and contributions, deserve a greater share of the output. This standard of justice guarantees economic progress and an orderly organization of the economy. An implication of this measures-based or merits-based standard is that what is due to each individual could become an enforceable obligation and serve as a moral basis of constitutional guarantees (Nussbaum 74).

In the Bahá'í approach to economic prosperity, the scope for justice, as an underlying virtue, is expanded to not only incorporate the standard rights-based notion of justice, but also include a measures-based concept of justice. Beyond this, the Bahá'í approach to prosperity integrates within its conceptual framework yet another important underlying virtue that serves to readjust the relationships that constitute economic activity: generosity.

Generosity

Time and again a rights-based definition of justice in the Bahá'í teachings is immediately followed—and offset—by a statement urging everyone to desire for others only that which one desires for oneself ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks* no. 49) and to "strive to provide for the comfort of all" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation* no. 102). The Bahá'í approach to addressing economic progress and disparity goes beyond a traditional theory of justice to include generosity and sacrifice. According to this standard, generous treatment is something due to each person and expected of each person. This signifies that no claim

needs to be made for what is due to oneself—that what is due need not be demanded[4]—and that one may be given a share of the output not according to one's desert—that one may receive undeservingly. Introducing generosity as a purpose of economic activity, 'Abdu'l-Bahá instructs every person to "have an occupation, a trade or a craft, so that he may carry other people's burdens, and not himself be a burden to others" (qtd. in Universal House of Justice, 1 Mar. 2017). This standard, therefore, facilitates the flow of wealth and contributes to economic prosperity. As will be explored further, a corollary to this standard is that as a moral basis of religious law it may justify special obligations of humanity in response to which people could be expected to do more than justice requires them to.

A superimposition of these three standards into one conceptual framework, as a layered spectrum that represents and emanates from the collective manifestation of the nobility and dignity of humankind, expands the conception of economic justice and, consequently, the scope for its application and implications, within which the theories of welfare are traditionally developed. The interplay between these three standards effloresces into a system of dynamic structure and methodical fluidity that is characterized by a certain unity in diversity. This conceptual framework for addressing economic progress and disparity gives rise to a normative framework that would prescribe a Bahá'í model of economic rights and responsibilities. If the individual and institutional rights and responsibilities that the Bahá'í framework for economic prosperity prescribes embody these underlying virtues and satisfy the expanded scope for economic justice, they deliver outcomes that go beyond the imperatives of the conventional models of welfare.

A NORMATIVE FRAMEWORK

FROM REVOLUTION TO ORGANIC EVOLUTION

Whether as individuals or communities, Bahá'ís throughout the world are putting into practice the elements of Bahá'u'lláh's vision for the spiritual and material prosperity of humankind. In particular, they bring the Bahá'í laws, principles, and teachings on economic life to bear on the condition of society. They believe that it is through the gradual transformation of individuals and communities, not merely the formulation of workable theories, that the world can tackle the issues of economic progress and disparity.

It is useful to describe the Bahá'í approach to social change by exploring Danesh and Musta's discussion of social forms, social norms, and social meanings. Social forms are institutions and organizations that structure and order the life of society, as well as the tools they use for the exercise of their

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4   The interaction between generosity and the concept of enforceable obligations, mentioned under "Render each his due" and "Set measures," will be discussed later.

functions, such as laws and policies. Social forms, therefore, are the most directly observable influencers of social action through which public power is organized and exercised. Social norms, conversely, are behavioral expectations that prescribe the established and accepted behavior. Bahá'ís do not pursue social change in wider society through revolution, which seeks to change social forms. While they may contribute to the discourse and action regarding the progress of social forms and the advancement of social norms, this tends not to be their primary focus. Changing social forms requires the exercise of social power and often causes social conflict; changing social norms usually places the focus on those who do not comply with the new norms and can thus be divisive. Bahá'ís, rather, see their contribution to social change as a process of organic evolution: With a focus on change at the level of social meanings—shared mental associations constructed to reinforce sets of behaviors, understandings, or outcomes—representing an epistemic vision of social change, they seek to increase awareness, understanding, and consciousness that reinforce the realities of unity, justice, and generosity. New social meanings, in turn, encourage behaviors that reflect these realities. This acts as a social force that shapes social norms and facilitates the evolution of new social forms. With the long-term commitment to constructing new social meanings, new patterns that reflect the underlying virtues of the Bahá'í economics emerge and a context is created

in which the movement of economic actors toward evolving social norms and social forms takes place in a more organic manner (11–16).

Another significant distinction between the Bahá'í framework for addressing economic justice and most prevalent theories, like that of John Rawls, thus emerges: The solutions offered in standard theories of economic justice rely heavily on social policy and distributive systems, but do not expect the individual participants in the economy to do much, particularly in their moral and spiritual life. On the contrary, in order to realize its ideals and economic teachings, the Bahá'í approach relies concomitantly on laws, social structures, and institutional distributive systems, as well as on individuals, who are expected not only to embody the high ideals enshrined in the Bahá'í teachings, but also to bring them to bear on the condition of life in society.

At the current stage in the process of translating the Bahá'í laws, principles, and teachings into a future Bahá'í economic system, universal elements of a normative framework are becoming distinguishable—concepts of practical import, oriented to effecting an action; action-guiding concepts that prescribe, rather than conceptual abstractions that describe. Milestones of a possible roadmap, ambitious yet within reach, could be anticipated: A popular endorsement of these norms would enable the emergence of shared ethics—those aspirational values and behaviors that allow a population to define the outcomes of its economy. In order to achieve these

outcomes, economic policies could then be pursued. These policies would, in turn, prescribe behavior and inform the application of such laws, principles, and teachings that form the basis of the Bahá'í approach to addressing economic progress and disparity. A wide application could give rise to the advent of an economic order, a reorganization of affairs, encompassing institutions, structures, relationships, and practices that would, in turn, define social indicators, as well as inequality and poverty measurements, such as metrics for a just income distribution. To this end, it is hoped that a formulation of normative objectives would ultimately inform the utilization of practical tools.

DISCOURSE

Positive economics engages empirical and theoretical discourse and questions of facts, whereas normative economics engages ethical and political discourse and questions of fairness. The discourse on economic progress and disparity is dominated by reference to analysis and empirical evidence. On the other hand, authoritative voices that elevate ideological assumptions— that economic growth leads to poverty alleviation, for instance—to the rank of common sense command the economic discourse and evade the consequences of unsubstantiated assertions. Here it is hoped that a formulation of norms that apply to different settings and realities would engage thoughts, beliefs, emotions, and actions that constitute much of the ethical and political discourse

and contribute to better organization and planning, evaluation of outcomes and courses of action, prioritization of goals, and application of solutions to actual prevailing conditions.

The Bahá'í teachings on economic activity do not cover the whole field of theoretical and applied economics (Shoghi Effendi, qtd. in *Lights of Guidance* no. 1862); neither do they contain any technical teachings on specific questions of economics, such as monetary measures, income distribution, relationship between labor and capital, ownership, control and distribution of capital, means of production, trusts and monopolies, banking, and price system (nos. 1862, 1867, 1868). They mainly concern the spirit that has to permeate economic relations (no. 1864). They make economic value judgements and provide guiding principles for effecting necessary readjustments in the economy. The Bahá'í approach to the question of economic progress and disparity specifies a two-fold outcome: safeguarding basic necessities of life and a certain amount of well-being for all individuals on the one hand and an orderly organization of the economy with degrees and ranks, not equality, in the distribution of wealth on the other. Insofar as economic conditions are driven by different ideologies, models, and sectors, different technical solutions apply when tackling economic progress and disparity in each case. The Bahá'í approach, however, addresses principles, as will follow, that apply to all economic systems one way or another.

Equality

It is only from the perspective of procedural justice that the Bahá'í writings stress equality: "equal opportunity of the means of existence" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks* 40:19), "equal standard of human rights" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation* no. 63), and equality before the law—that "the law must reign, and not the individual" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks* 40:21). They assert that "all men are equal before God" (*Paris Talks* 40:10) and that "all men must be treated equally" because "this is inherent in the very nature of humanity" (*'Abdu'l-Bahá in London* 29).

As a distributive norm, however, equality requires that costs and rewards be shared equally regardless of input. The Bahá'í writings reject this principle, suggesting that equality in distribution is untenable as it "would result in chaos and disorder, disrupt livelihoods, provoke universal discontent, and undermine the orderly conduct of the affairs of the community" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 78:5).

Need

The need principle suggests that regardless of input, economic output must be first allocated to those in greatest need. According to the Bahá'í teachings, the output of economic activity must be distributed first to those whose income cannot meet their expenses, as well as to the invalid, the orphan, and the poor ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation* no. 102). For this purpose, the amount of one's need is defined as the difference between one's actual income and expenses, adjusted to provide, in advance, for a loss of income due to unemployment or incapacity (*Promulgation* no. 102; *Some Answered Questions* no. 78). 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains that "the arrangements of the circumstances of the people must be such that poverty shall disappear" (*Paris Talks* no. 46) and that laws and regulations must be passed that guarantee the essential needs of the poor (*Some Answered Questions* no. 78). In this sense, the need norm can be considered a deontic norm in that it creates enforceable obligations. While according to the Bahá'í teachings this norm applies to all, regardless of their employment status, 'Abdu'l-Bahá states, specifically concerning workers, that their remuneration must adequately meet their daily needs, but also include additional wages or a share in the revenues of their place of work to ensure their comfort and wellbeing in times of unemployment or incapacity (*Some Answered Questions* no. 78). Just as the rich enjoy the ease and luxuries of life, the poor must also have a comfortable life, with the basic amount of comfort determined by one's needs. In other words, all the expenses of those who may not be able to generate income, such as the orphan or the invalid, and the necessary expenses of the poor, whose means do not meet their ends, must be defrayed ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation* no. 102). The poor must have a pleasant home

and be provided with sustenance and comforts commensurate with their needs (*Promulgation* nos. 42, 63). This principle should guide the efforts to safeguard basic necessities of life for all and to abolish extremes of poverty.

SUFFICIENCY

The sufficiency norm stipulates that regardless of input, each person should have enough. What constitutes sufficiency and how much is "enough" may vary in different scenarios. For example, while on one dimension merely fulfilling all of one's needs could be deemed enough, on another scale gaining certain capabilities or utilizing certain skills may be considered enough. When available resources are too few to bring everyone up to the sufficiency threshold, one may propose maximizing the number of people who achieve sufficiency, whereas another may advocate a thin spread of resources to minimize the total shortfall suffered by all (Miller). In the Bahá'í approach to eradicating economic disparity, the sufficiency norm safeguards a wellbeing floor—access to the basic necessities of life ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks* nos. 40, 46). As noted in the previous section, the Bahá'í teachings assert that every human being should be able to live and rest, and must be provided enough food, clothing, and other sufficient means of existence (*Paris Talks* nos. 40, 46). They, however, introduce other provisions, such as education (Bahá'u'lláh, Kitáb-i-Aqdas ¶ 48) and training ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Secret* 29;

Some Answered Questions no. 78), as necessary for economic progress. Sufficiency, therefore, is the action-guiding principle that would prescribe requirements of welfare in order to lift the poor out of poverty ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation* no. 42) and set them up for progress in a society, commensurate with its socio-economic realities and necessities.

EQUITY

The equity principle requires that the input shall determine the outcome. In other words, this principle prescribes that whoever contributes more should get an ampler share of the reward. The Bahá'í writings do not introduce this norm to abolish the extremes of wealth and poverty and to safeguard basic necessities of life for all individuals. They, rather, highlight the equity principle to address economic progress—that equity should guide an orderly organization of the economy such that degrees and ranks remain and wealth is distributed commensurate with each individual's contribution. They clarify that contribution to the economy is not purely monetary and includes management, toil, and labor, among others. The equity principle is specifically endorsed for labor relations and employee remuneration. This indicates, for example, that between two workers who are employed to do the same job, all other things being equal, the one who works harder must be remunerated more. The Bahá'í writings also argue that since the business owner provides the capital

and management and the workers provide toil and labor, the workers must be given an equitable share in the profits of the business in addition to their daily wage ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* no. 78).

Desert

The desert norm entails a distribution of costs and rewards based on what one deserves. According to the Bahá'í writings, the appropriate quantity of means that is due to each individual may go beyond one's rights, or even one's contribution, to reflect a standard of "set measures" (Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets* 167; Shoghi Effendi, qtd. in *Lights of Guidance* no. 1865). In other words, one's share of wealth must be adjusted to correspond with what one deserves—that is, commensurate with one's capacity, knowledge, talents, abilities, and skills, in order to preserve the natural order, balance, and ranks. This may suggest, for instance, that between two workers who are employed to do the same job, other things equal, the one with more knowledge in that field deserves to be remunerated more. As discussed previously, in classes of people with various degrees of intelligence, capacity, and resources there is order but no equality: "Social inequality is the inevitable outcome of the natural inequality of men. Human beings are different in ability and should, therefore, be different in their social and economic standing" (Shoghi Effendi, qtd. in *Lights of Guidance* no. 1865). Therefore, "wages should be unequal, simply because

men are unequal in their ability, and hence should receive wages that would correspond to their varying capacities and resources" (no. 1867). Like equity, the desert principle mainly functions as a guide to maintaining an orderly organization and stimulating economic progress, rather than directly tackling the extremes of wealth and poverty.

Responsibility

The responsibility norm requires those who have more to share their wealth with those who have less. The Bahá'í writings instruct the rich to protect the poor as the trust of God (Bahá'u'lláh, Persian Hidden Words no. 54). This trusteeship constitutes the moral foundation of the economic responsibility of the rich towards the poor. 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains that "the wealthy should offer up each year a portion of their wealth for the sustenance of the poor and the assistance of the needy" (*Some Answered Questions* 78:12). This requirement is prescribed as a religious injunction that is binding upon all. The responsibility norm can also be considered a deontic norm insofar as it creates special obligations.

It should be noted that, in many cases, more than one norm would apply when addressing economic progress or disparity even in specific locations and settings or in situations that concern individuals. A norm that can most suitably guide a specific question of economic activity will often need to be supplemented by other principles to prescribe the distribution of resources,

primarily in situations in which resources are insufficient to fulfil everyone's needs, lift everyone out of poverty, or bring everyone up to a sufficiency threshold.

Justice takes a comparative form when the rights of others also need to be considered in order to determine what is due to each individual. It takes a non-comparative form when the consideration of one's circumstances is sufficient to determine what is due to that person. While the Bahá'í teachings stress that "the arrangements of the circumstances of the people must be such that poverty shall disappear" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks* 46:2), they also emphasize that everyone should share in comfort and well-being, as far as possible, according to one's rank and position (*Paris Talks* no. 46). Rank and position are, by nature, relative factors in considering the distribution of costs and gains. One's rank and position, therefore, impact distributive outcomes only in interaction with the ranks and positions of other individuals. Unsurprisingly then the sufficiency norm may prescribe outcomes that would embody comparative justice, while the need, equity, and desert norms may guide actions that would characterize non-comparative justice.

Novelty of the Bahá'í approach to Addressing Economic Progress And Disparity

The Bahá'í approach to addressing economic progress and disparity exemplifies, reunites, and integrates within its framework some of the wholesome and noble elements that can be found in recognized models of welfare and perspectives of justice and normative ethics.

Conservatism

The elements of the Bahá'í approach are generally conservative, in a philosophical sense. The Bahá'í Faith stresses comfort and wellbeing for the individual and order and organization for society through preservation of social order, government intervention, and taxation.[5] For instance, concerning the imperative for the orderly organization of the economy, 'Abdu'l-Bahá states that "the law of order must always obtain in the world of humanity" and that "degrees are absolutely necessary to ensure an orderly organization" (*Paris Talks* 46:5,6). Similarly, challenging the extremes of liberty and autonomy, He asserts that were people to be left to their own devices, they would become like a horde of brutes and beasts of the field, that they would become ferocious, wild, and bloodthirsty, and be consumed in the fire of rebellion ("Risáliy-i-Síyásíyyih" 3).

Classical Liberalism

Nevertheless, the Bahá'í approach also integrates classical liberal principles of utilitarianism, as a normative

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5   In Risáliy-i-Síyásíyyih, 'Abdu'l-Bahá stresses that people must pay their taxes in a spirit of gratitude and contentment.

theory, by emphasizing the greatest happiness principle as an intuitive, action-guiding criterion. In a formulation of the overarching goal of economic readjustment, 'Abdu'l-Bahá stipulates that "the readjustment of the economic laws for the livelihood of man must be effected in order that all humanity may live in the greatest happiness according to their respective degrees" (*Promulgation* no. 60). In another utilitarian critique of economic relations and intuitive application of justice, He asserts that "the factory owners reap a fortune every day, but the wage the poor workers are paid cannot even meet their daily needs: This is most unfair, and assuredly no just man can accept it" (*Some Answered Questions* 78:5). He further questions "How can one see one's fellow men hungry, destitute, and deprived, and yet live in peace and comfort in one's splendid mansion? How can one see others in the greatest need and yet take delight in one's fortune?" (78:12).

Consequentialism

Similar to the above descriptions that emphasize morality of the outcome of economic activity, other Bahá'í teachings can also be said to highlight the consequentialist perspective of normative ethics. They censure dishonesty, corruption, and commoditizing truth in generating wealth (Universal House of Justice, 28 Dec. 2010). They denounce egoism and self-interest, underline altruism, and describe a purpose of economic activity as selflessly delivering the masses out of poverty ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Secret* 120; Universal House of Justice, 1 Mar. 2017). Highlighting altruism, 'Abdu'l-Bahá states that "souls who are detached from all save God, for the love of His Beauty have mercy on the poor and expend their substance on the destitute—nay more, with the utmost joy and pleasure bestow their whole wealth, or a part thereof, upon the poor. In other words, in their love for their fellow men they are self-sacrificial, preferring the interests and comfort of the generality of the people to those of a particular group" (Nakhjavani 93). He, likewise, asserts that "man should voluntarily and of his own choice sacrifice his property and life for others, and spend willingly for the poor" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections* 227:19). Finally, statements by 'Abdu'l-Bahá that commend and praise wealth "if it is dedicated to the welfare of society" and "provided the entire population is wealthy" (*Secret* 29) paint a welfarist picture of the Bahá'í approach.

Virtue Ethics and Deontology

Numerous passages in the Bahá'í writings stress the importance of one's purity of intention while others emphasize one's purity of action in economic activity. The former, focusing on the character of the individual, can be seen as highlighting virtue ethics while the latter, focusing on the status of the action and considering one's rights and responsibilities, can be viewed as aligning with deontology. Corresponding to

the first perspective, Bahá'u'lláh urges His followers to strive that their "deeds may be cleansed from the dust of self and hypocrisy and find favor at the court of glory; for ere long the assayers of mankind shall, in the holy presence of the Adored One, accept naught but absolute virtue and deeds of stainless purity" (Persian Hidden Words no. 69). Featuring the second perspective, 'Abdu'l-Bahá writes:

> The highest righteousness of all is for blessed souls to take hold of the hands of the helpless and deliver them out of their ignorance and abasement and poverty, and with pure motives, and only for the sake of God, to arise and energetically devote themselves to the service of the masses, forgetting their own worldly advantage and working only to serve the general good. (*Secret* 120)

To further elaborate on this deontological basis of the Bahá'í approach to tackling the problem of economic progress and disparity, it can be argued that the Bahá'í belief that access to basic necessities of life is an absolute, natural right of the individual accords with Locke's Natural Rights Theory (¶¶ 27–39). Additionally, as we stated earlier, Bahá'í beliefs such as the inherent oneness of humankind, collaboration and mutual support, and equality in human rights, as well as sharing and sacrifice, underlie the aforementioned normative effects. A suggestion that these underlying beliefs can be popularly endorsed

and universally adopted, if people were unbiased, overlaps with a contractualist perspective of deontology.

PRAGMATIC ETHICS

A comparison of the Bahá'í approach with pragmatic ethics is also enlightening. Ethical pragmatists promote social reform and maintain that morality evolves socially over time (Dewey 324, ch. 7; Mill, *On Liberty* ch. 3). Bahá'u'lláh asserts that "all men have been created to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization" (*Gleanings* no. 109). Bahá'ís view economic progress, individual and collective maturity, generation, dissemination, and application of knowledge, and moral development as processes of organic evolution—not revolution and reform. Bahá'ís throughout the world, under the guidance of the Universal House of Justice, follow a pattern of active inquiry—action, reflection, consultation, and study—to translate the Bahá'í teachings into reality and bring them to bear on the condition of life in urban neighborhoods as well as in rural settings. They learn about the principles of economic justice and advance these norms through action and reflection.

While the Bahá'í approach to addressing economic progress and disparity embodies numerous elements found in these established models of welfare and perspectives of justice and normative ethics, it cannot be said to have been modelled after any one of them. Instead, the Bahá'í approach reconciles conservative and liberal perspectives

on the economy. It emphasizes that maximizing the opportunity of the individual in order to realize his or her full potential and government protection of the vulnerable must be the objective of the economy—a view of the economy now shared by both conservatives and liberals as the line between the two camps is increasingly fading. It embodies and reconciles elements of individual and utilitarian justice in that it is concerned with how each person is treated, yet it looks to the overall consequences aggregated across people to guide policies and judge actions. It neither adopts the Capitalist theories nor does it agree with the Marxists and Communists in relation to individual ownership (Shoghi Effendi, qtd. in *Lights of Guidance* no. 1862). It sanctions private ownership, but calls for a complete re-examination of its application. It enshrines equality to deliver justice in procedure but inequality to safeguard justice in distribution. It assimilates comparative and non-comparative perspectives of justice in that, depending on the setting, it considers the individual's own circumstances and the rights of others to both meet the basic necessities of the poor and facilitate the overall economic progress of society. It cannot readily be classified, however, either as comparative or non-comparative. It calls for social and economic inequalities to be arranged to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged (Rawls, *Political Liberalism* 283) when it stresses that "the arrangements of the circumstances of the people must be such that poverty shall disappear"

('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks* no. 46). It can be considered a systemic approach in that it aims to provide outcomes that raise the worst off person to the highest possible level while delivering neither a fixed amount of the basic necessities of life nor one that hinges on what is distributed to others.

In the scope of distributive justice, various theories place the responsibility for the distribution of wealth on the institutions of society. While recognizing this, inasmuch as the Bahá'í teachings regard humankind as one indivisible whole, they also hold humankind responsible as a collective agent for the distributive outcomes it allows to occur. From an international distributive justice perspective within the Bahá'í approach to economic prosperity, therefore, collective identity necessitates individual responsibility.

Conclusion

A Shared Ethic

Addressing the economic maladies of our time, the Universal House of Justice states that "the world is in desperate need of a shared ethic, a sure framework for addressing the crises" (1 Mar. 2017). One of the root causes of the problem of economic progress and disparity is the subjective morality of the rich and the poor, of different ideologies, models, and sectors. Each group holds a different opinion as to whether a solution to our economic ills is appropriate, right, ethical, moral, and therefore desirable. The world needs

to attain a greater degree of objectivity. Poverty is a global problem and it requires a global solution. A global approach from subjective morality towards objective fairness, therefore, could begin with an agreement on normative standards.

The Bahá'í Faith can offer unique insights into the solution to the global problem of economic progress and disparity. Bahá'ís throughout the world are engaging their peers in conversations about, and learning to act in accordance with, such spiritual verities as the spiritual reality of humankind and its inherent oneness, collective trusteeship, the inherent nobility of every human being, and the capacity of the soul to manifest all the names and attributes of God. In parallel, within a broader framework for contributing to the progress and transformation of society, Bahá'ís are embarking on projects and activities for social action and engaging in genuine conversations in which they offer insights from the Bahá'í writings and their experience in applying them, in order to contribute to the evolution of thought and the betterment of society (Universal House of Justice, 4 Jan. 2009; 22 Feb. 2011; 20 Oct. 2014; 27 Apr. 2017).

These initiatives are gradually improving the condition of life in society and producing a new universal attitude and a new set of values in individuals. Values are people's abstract concepts of what is important to them. Norms are action-guiding standards and expectations that enforce values. If values can be thought of as ends, norms

are means of achieving these ends. The Bahá'í writings are a source of normative value which is independent of the subjective morality of various economic actors. The world needs to seriously consider whether it can popularly endorse these underlying principles and ethical precepts, or the normative effects they create. Doing so will unite us to collectively aspire for mutual values and behaviors and allow public policies to align with these values. If popularly endorsed, these norms would strengthen economic order and cohesion and promote economic activity that is socially and globally valued. As we strive to build our economies and alleviate poverty, as we examine solutions to better address our economic ills, searching consultation—not only among leaders, but also with those whom they represent, serve, and lead—becomes of paramount importance.

BEYOND WELFARE

'Abdu'l-Bahá states that Bahá'u'lláh has revealed principles and regulations that ensure the welfare of the world (*Promulgation* no. 63). The elements of the Bahá'í approach to addressing economic progress and disparity discussed thus far—namely equal opportunity, equitable distribution of wealth, public responsibility towards those who are unable to meet the basic necessities of life, people's right to what they have not worked to earn for themselves, and the imperative to protect the interest of those who are unable to

protect themselves—clearly provide a blueprint for welfare governance.

Bahá'u'lláh ordains that those who are possessed of riches "must have the utmost regard for the poor" (*Gleanings* 100:3). Nevertheless, He also urges the poor to "exert themselves and strive to earn the means of livelihood" (100:4). 'Abdu'l-Bahá even goes further to assert: "Every person must have an occupation, a trade or a craft, so that he may carry other people's burdens, and not himself be a burden to others" (qtd. in *Compilation* 3).

Acknowledging that legal obligation is an effective instrument for the security and protection of man and that moral obligation deters him from and guards him against unworthy and unseemly conduct, the Bahá'í writings introduce the fear of God as the true source of moral obligation (Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets* 63, 93; *Epistle* 26, 74, 135; 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *A Traveller's Narrative* 72). In this sense, morality can have a special binding force on behavior, in that moral action is motivated by moral obligation and that without other obligations at play, moral obligation alone impels us towards good and deters us from evil (Foot; Korsgaard). Without the fear of God, legal obligation prevents people only outwardly from unseemly conduct, while moral obligation—or conscience (Mill, *Utilitarianism* ch. 3)—cannot alone motivate moral behavior as not everyone possesses it (Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets* 63). Against this background, the Bahá'í teachings cultivate the righteousness that the fear of God inspires in individuals and establish institutions that embody a combination of legal and moral obligations in society in tackling the problems of economic progress and disparity.

Therefore, in an even clearer departure from the established models of welfare, the Bahá'í writings institute a two-tiered approach to facilitating the distribution of wealth by introducing strong obligations and special obligations.

Strong obligations are duties prescribed by and enforceable under a law. 'Abdu'l-Bahá stresses that such special laws and regulations must be enacted that "will moderate the excessive fortunes of the few and meet the basic needs of the myriad millions of the poor" (*Some Answered Questions* 78:4). This provision would create a non-voluntary duty, legislatively mandatory for all, to be executed by the government, through "readjustment of the economic laws" (*Promulgation* no. 60), based on the need, sufficiency, and responsibility norms. It would seek to abolish the extremes of wealth and poverty (*Paris Talks* no. 46), achieve "a degree of moderation" (*Some Answered Questions* 78:4), and secure the comforts and privileges of life for everyone (*Promulgation* no. 44) according to their respective degrees and ranks (no. 60). For example, a distribution of economic output based on the natural differences in ranks, positions, or degrees could be readjusted through a taxation proportionate to capacity and production: If one's need is equal to one's producing capacity, one shall be exempt from taxes. If one's income

is greater than one's needs, one must pay taxes commensurate with the surplus. And if one's income falls short of one's necessities, one shall receive an amount that is sufficient to cover the shortfall (*Promulgation* no. 77).

Special obligations are typically obligations owed to those with whom one has a special relationship, such as family members. Likening members of the human race to parts of a human body politic, as well as to branches, leaves, blossoms and fruits of a tree, 'Abdu'l-Bahá states that the entire human race is one "human family" (*Promulgation* no. 6). By normalizing the oneness of humankind and, therefore, universalizing special obligations, the Bahá'í teachings emphasize that each individual owes special obligations to other members of the human race. It is against this backdrop that the Bahá'í writings emphasize "voluntary sharing of one's property with others" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections* 227:19). They require the wealthy to "offer up each year a portion of their wealth for the sustenance of the poor and the assistance of the needy" (*Some Answered Questions* 78:12). This provision goes beyond the extrinsic imperative for abolishing the extremes of wealth and poverty to deliver an intrinsic voluntary responsibility, to be observed as a matter of free choice, guided by the need and responsibility norms (*Selections* no. 79). While religiously binding upon all, this obligation is not legislatively compulsory and will not be enforced (*Some Answered Questions* no. 78; *Selections* nos. 79, 227; Nakhjavani 93). For over

a century, Bahá'ís have been accruing knowledge and experience in practicing this provision (*Selections* no. 227).

The Bahá'í approach to addressing our economic maladies, therefore, raises the standard of justice, but exceeds it to include generosity and sacrifice. It is sometimes justifiable to require people to do more than justice demands them to do. There may exist enforceable obligations of humanity. The imperative for collective trusteeship renders the duties of humanity a natural responsibility of every individual. The Bahá'í writings transform the hearts and minds to act righteously in economic activities and declare the active participation of individuals indispensable to addressing economic growth and disparity. They reconceptualize wealth, prosperity, and economic activity in a manner that is not only delineated by the requirements of justice but also supported by concepts, principles, obligations, values, norms, practices, and individual imperatives that go beyond justice.

The prevalent models of welfare are developed within the traditional theories of justice. The underlying principles of the Bahá'í approach to economic progress and disparity expand the scope for the application and implications of economic justice. If they embody these principles and satisfy the expanded consideration for economic justice, the individual and institutional rights and responsibilities that the Bahá'í framework for economic prosperity prescribes go beyond the imperatives of the conventional models of welfare.

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Oklahoma City
SHAHRIAR ERFANIAN

Attestaments

CHARLES H. LYNCH

for Robert Hayden*

at Cathedral Church of St. John The Divine   The Poets' Corner bay
    his stone plaque ensconced among ascendant neighbors:
    Hawthorne contiguous above
    stage left, Poe
    Emily Elizabeth Dickinson skirting right
    Twain smack-dab below

tan panda   coffee mugger   confiding, gentle man
birth claim: Asa Bundy Sheffey (of Paradise Valley, Detroit)
alas, alien alias (Robert Hayden) among Earth works' trustees

oiled, crimpy hair   button-down   striped bow tie
suspendered paunch   stiff, uncreased blue jeans
sloped shoulders serape-draped in Hotel Chelsea drafts

gladly treats me, delving doctoral candidate
clasps menu three inches from face
squints, lenses flat loupes
steers chopsticks' snaps after wanton soup noodles

Bob's keen hear holds elders natchal talk
mimics folksy quotes   whimsy about thin dime times

per his poems (and tendered mine), precise interpretive advice:
scrub blurry words   prism cinematically in rhythm
limn worn masks to marquee character

rueful grimace   behind gender's seductively flimsy scrims
    hint taboo in parables of guilt, temptation, regret
forehead clutch   blanching   confesses quandary

weighs career tact facts   sallies into reputations
   Black-tracked by Caucasian persuasion's poetry cliques
frown   smirk   splays palm on table to stress a point

prickly about dim versifiers spot-lit—and critics' canon fodder
catches himself   stokes briar pipe   purses lips
then, anecdotal poke fun   jowly owl's guttural guggle

what I liked about him most? . . . candid, jovial, funkily avuncular
(and, eighteen years later, gate ajar to my Declaration):
laud Baha'u'llah   Baha'i unifier   supreme Peace Teacher

with pensword honing deft anger with love,
   chronicled Afrogenic caravansary
   incised coal flow to furnace "lessons of our blood"

until that wintry Michigan Monday his great heart closed

*Robert Hayden (1913-1980) was an American poet, essayist, educator and Bahá'í. He was the first African-American to serve as Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress, a role today known as Poet Laureate of the United States.

The Need for an Integrative Conceptual Framework for Addressing Mental Health Challenges During the COVID-19 Pandemic

BAYAN JALALIZADEH

Abstract

The burden of mental illness[1] across the globe, already significant, has grown dramatically since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. This is, in part, due to limitations in the current conceptual frameworks for understanding mental illness and resulting methods of practice. This paper provides an overview of the state of mental health and illness in the world, summarizes the prevailing frameworks and practices, and introduces a potential framework which could guide a response to the mental health challenges of the pandemic.

Résumé

Le fardeau des maladies mentales dans le monde, déjà important, s'est considérablement accru depuis le début de la pandémie de COVID-19. Ce phénomène est attribuable, en partie, aux limites des cadres conceptuels actuels permettant de comprendre la maladie mentale ainsi qu'aux méthodes de pratique qui en découlent. Cet article donne un aperçu de l'état de la santé et de la maladie mentale dans le monde, résume les cadres et les pratiques qui ont cours et présente un cadre qui pourrait permettre de répondre aux défis de santé mentale découlant de la pandémie.

Resumen

La carga de las enfermedades mentales en todo el mundo, que ya es significativa, ha aumentado drásticamente desde el inicio de la pandemia del COVID-19. Este aumento se debe, en parte, a limitaciones de los marcos conceptuales actuales para comprender las enfermedades mentales y los métodos de práctica resultantes. Este artículo proporciona una descripción general del estado de la salud y la enfermedad mental en el mundo, resume los marcos y prácticas predominantes e introduce un marco potencial que podría orientar una respuesta a los desafíos de salud mental de la pandemia.

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1   A note on terminology: Literature on mental health and illness uses a wide and ever-changing vocabulary to describe the topic. For simplicity, this paper will use the terms "mental health condition," "mental illness," and "psychiatric illness" interchangeably. This paper also refers to "depressive disorders," which includes a set of particular diagnoses and symptoms: major depressive disorder, persistent depressive disorder, and disruptive mood dysregulation disorder, among a few others. "Anxiety disorders" refers to specific diagnoses as well: generalized anxiety disorder, social anxiety disorder, specific phobias, and OCD, among a few others.

Estimates of the prevalence and impact of mental illnesses across the world were already concerning prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Around twenty percent of the world's children and adolescents lived with a mental health condition needing treatment (GBD). Depressive disorders had a global twelve-month prevalence estimated at 3.72 percent, with 4.25 percent in high-income countries (HICs) and 3.43 percent in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs); anxiety disorders had a twelve-month prevalence of 4.03 percent, with 5.23 percent in HICs and 3.65 percent in LMICs; and substance use disorders, a twelve-month prevalence of 2.34 percent, with 3.92 percent in HICs and 1.59 percent in LMICs (GBD). These illnesses are devastating in their effects: those with severe mental health conditions die, on average, an entire ten to twenty years earlier than the general population (GBD). These illnesses can prevent afflicted individuals from participating fully in community life, or even in their own. And where the common paths of bodily illnesses often end in organ failure, many mental health conditions can lead to the most tragic of end results, suicide. Still a taboo topic among many cultures, the specter of suicide is ever-present in virtually every locality. It is currently the second-leading cause of death in young people aged fifteen to twenty-nine (GBD), and it takes the lives of nearly 800,000 people per year, which equates to one person taking their own life every forty seconds (GBD).

Without proper longitudinal studies using consistent measurement methods, we cannot know whether the emerging epidemiological data throughout the course of the COVID-19 pandemic represent a transient occurrence or a long-term pattern; nevertheless, the results thus far are even more concerning than the statistics prior to the pandemic. Recent meta-analyses found that the pooled global prevalence of depression is currently twenty-five percent—a seven-fold increase from the pre-pandemic rate—and found similarly heightened rates of anxiety (Bueno-Notivol et al.). It appears that these increases in prevalence are generalized global trends and not simply due to outlier countries. For example, prevalence of depressive symptoms and disorders in China is twenty-eight percent, and prevalence of anxiety symptoms and disorders is twenty-five percent (Ren et al. 4–6). Ethiopia, the United Kingdom, Iran, and Italy, among other countries, have likewise reported a massive increase in individuals exhibiting depressive and anxiety symptoms (Ambaw et al. 4–6; Bitew; Pierce et al. 887; Jahanshahi; Sani et al.). Even if individuals only experience a partial set of the clinical symptoms that characterize a depressive or anxiety disorder, which are sometimes referred to as subthreshold disorders, evidence shows that they still feel a substantial decrement in health status (Ayuso-Mateos et al. 367–70). Statistics like these are not completely unexpected. In fact, multiple studies have revealed that when epidemics of infectious disease strike,

a strong correlation is seen with rising rates of mental health consequences (Shultz et al.; Yip et al. 88–90).

With such alarming statistics arriving daily, it is necessary to ask: What factors have caused such an increase in the rates of mental health conditions during the COVID-19 pandemic, and do we have an appropriate framework to address these factors?

The scientific community has been working for decades to determine the numerous, interconnected variables impacting rates of mental illness. Each condition involves its own specific risk factors and protective factors. Among such factors are genetic predisposition, age, sociodemographic factors, early and recent life experiences, and physical health status (Michael et al. 140–41; Kessler et al. 379–81; Hettema et al. 1569–73; Blanco et al. 758–59; Dobson and Dozois; Rowland and Marwaha 259–62). While an exhaustive analysis of all the contributing factors would be too lengthy a discussion for the scope of this paper, the emerging literature reveals that in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the following psychological factors prominently increase the risk of mental illness: chronic stress; the increasing reality of social isolation; and the loss of hope, replaced with uncertainty and fear (Gabrielli and Lund; Xiong et al. 57–60; Hwang 1217–20; Satici et al.; Serafini et al.). For instance, while small, contained amounts of stress can be a positive motivator for action in the short-term, persistently high levels of stress over time (chronic stress), or excessively high levels of stress in a short time, can actually lead to loss of brain mass in several areas and over-activation of hormone pathways, increasing the risk of developing behavioral disturbances and depressive disorders such as major depressive disorder and persistent depressive disorder (Brodal 369; McEwen 175; Sarahian et al.; Reynaud 41–42; Fenster 542). Likewise, loneliness, when prolonged, can increase the risk of developing depressive and substance use disorders and attempting suicide (Cacioppo et al., "Loneliness" 5; Cacioppo et al., "Toward" 17). During the pandemic and subsequent lockdowns, many have felt the toll of these experiences.

Once we understand some of the factors precipitating our current mental health crises, and in order to find effective solutions, it would be helpful to look at the current frameworks for understanding and treating mental illness. This paper aims to review the existing mental health framework and propose the consideration of a modified framework, guided by the Bahá'í Writings, which draws on previously developed Bahá'í-inspired frameworks to highlight the need to move toward a spiritually informed understanding of mental illnesses that can adequately address all the factors that play a role in their development. As discussed in more detail below, this modified framework would add two important dimensions to the current model. First, it considers the spiritual reality of the individual as an essential dimension, which can help to provide solutions for

spiritual and existential problems such as the finding of meaning in suffering, among other challenges which the prevailing model does not fully address. Second, it considers the realities of the community and institutions—not just individuals—which can serve to alleviate or exacerbate mental illnesses.

CURRENT FRAMEWORKS AND LIMITATIONS

The observation and study of mental illnesses in modern science have varied origins, from ideas about "hysteria" among women to beliefs of supernatural possession or characterological failings (Wallace IV and Gach 199–220, 353–78, 590–620; Freedheim and Weiner 337–56; Tasca et al. 111–17). The field of human psychology has advanced remarkably in the past century, allowing us to conceptualize unconscious patterns of thought (ego psychology), perceptions of interpersonal dynamics (object relations theory), and the meeting of deep-rooted human needs (attachment theory) as roadmaps of human behavior, to name just a few contributions (Wallace IV and Gach 520–30, 631–55, 658–70). In parallel, research of anatomical structures and physiological processes has helped clinicians to diagnose and treat disorders in mood, addiction, psychosomatic syndromes, and many other conditions. This conception that mental illnesses are brain illnesses is known as the "medical model" of disease (Griesinger 1–4; Liang 22–24). In recent years, these psychological and biomedical approaches have been combined to conceive of a model called the "biopsychosocial formulation" of mental illness (Engel). In this framework, scholars see human thought and behavior as emergent from an interaction between genetic, anatomic, and physiologic qualities (biological); phenomena aligned with psychodynamic and cognitive-behavioral theories (psychological); and environmental situations and events which make up one's human experience (social). The biopsychosocial model operates as a framework for mental health practitioners to conceptualize the interrelated issues within a patient and address them in an individualized manner. As a result, treatment of illnesses using this framework can include changing lifestyle factors, administering appropriate medicines, providing targeted psychotherapy, modifying interpersonal relationships, and building immediate networks of support (Engel 108–21; Borrell-Carrió et al. 578–81; Schotte et al. 319–21).

Regarding the delivery of mental healthcare, multiple models exist. From a macro-perspective, organizations and governments can implement population-based interventions to reduce the chances of developing an illness, such as enacting public policies or conducting educational campaigns for mental wellness. In primary care offices, clinicians intermittently screen for early signs of developing mental health conditions; for example, pediatricians and family physicians might provide a questionnaire to their patients screening for symptoms of depression (Wissow

et al. 1134–35). When conditions are not caught at an early stage in this manner and subsequently worsen—which occurs in a majority of cases—patients will present to a mental health provider for specialized treatment (Bijl and Ravelli 603–06; Olfson et al.). These providers are academically trained healthcare professionals such as psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers, and licensed family therapists; the training involved typically produces knowledgeable providers but is also rigorous, expensive, and time-consuming (Kakuma et al. 1655–59; Magen and Banazak 198–200; Zisook et al.; Boggs and Douce 674–78).

Multiple studies have strengthened the credibility of the biopsychosocial model, for instance by showing how physical phenomena directly impact our psychological states, and how our psychological states impact our physical wellbeing (e.g., Kong et al.; Pennebaker and Skelton 526–8). Using the biopsychosocial formulation and the medical model of illness, modern psychiatric practice has benefited millions of individuals across the globe and helped to destigmatize populations who were previously at great risk of morbidity and mortality (Saxena 496–7; Singla et al.). Systems of care delivery and practice, too, have been effective in treating problems at differing levels of severity, especially in treating individual cases (Singla et al.). These frameworks for conceptualization and practice, therefore, have significant strengths.

Yet, with the surges in mental health challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic and the lack of ability to meet these needs, it is important to examine where the current frameworks fall short as well. The following points highlight a few limitations demonstrated by these frameworks. First, the frameworks cannot address some of the major psychological factors affecting individuals during the course of the pandemic, including existential questions such as the creation of meaning and purpose in suffering. Second, these frameworks examine strengths and vulnerabilities primarily within individuals and are unable to recognize challenges or suggest solutions on scales involving entire communities or populations which the pandemic has affected. Third, as an extension of the second example, while these frameworks and care systems are often useful tools when prevalence is low, they are essentially focused on the diagnosis and treatment of individuals and are not equipped to meet population-level challenges when the need expands. The following sections discuss these limitations in further detail.

The Loss of Hope

The COVID-19 pandemic is, in our time, a global event of tremendous scale akin to infectious outbreaks and disasters of the distant past. As such, it shares some characteristics with large-scale natural disasters or humanitarian crises in which many individuals suffer suddenly and simultaneously.

In the psychological literature, trauma is described as occurring when

individuals experience disturbing and uncontrollable events that typically involve fear for safety or security and which often challenge their view of the world as a just, safe, and predictable place; examples of traumatic events include sexual violence, assault, natural disasters, war, or sudden accidents (American Psychological Association). Of course, a global event such as the COVID-19 pandemic has no singular perpetrator such as in the case of many individualized traumatic events, and the scars left by the pandemic may be vastly different than for survivors of rape or physical assault. Still, the pandemic shares a number of psychological elements with trauma which cannot be ignored: the inability to feasibly escape the prompting situation; feelings of helplessness and loss of power and control; sudden removal of safety; and the perceived betrayal of an established social compact in which individuals are able to protect each other from harm (Herman 51). A global inability to contain the infection, coupled with the sudden decline and death of millions of individuals, have left countless souls with the very emotions of helplessness, loss of control, vulnerability, and betrayal that can characterize trauma. In addition, as articulated in "hopelessness theory" and demonstrated experimentally, when individuals have little control over negative events which they perceive to be long-lasting, unchangeable, and global, they are at higher risk of developing hopelessness (Seligman 407–11; Abramson 359–64). Hopelessness is

a well-demonstrated risk factor for suicide, a symptom of major depressive disorder, and a factor leading to ineffective coping strategies such as increased substance use and greater consumption of electronic media (Ribeiro et al. 281–85; Case and Deaton 133–47; Abramson 360–04). We have seen increasing reports of hopelessness, substance use, electronic media usage, and suicidal ideation emerge during this pandemic (Banerjee et al. 2–3; Statistics Canada; Wong et al. 34).

For those undergoing intense suffering, the establishment of resilience and hope can often rely on an important process: the finding of meaning in suffering (Egnew 171–73; Neimeyer 9–22; Frankl 116). While the biopsychosocial framework can assist in some important ways, it unfortunately cannot address deep, intangible questions such as those of building meaning or finding purpose. New forms of psychotherapy developed within the current framework to help bring meaning out of negative experiences appear to be no more efficacious than other current treatments (D'Souza and Rodrigo; Pearce and Koenig). While the most promising such psychotherapy, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, emphasizes relief from suffering and coherence among one's goals and actions, it relies upon an individual's existing value systems rather than the finding of meaning itself (Hayes et al. 1–5).

Factors Outside the Individual

Furthermore, because the biopsychosocial formulation of mental illness is only able to identify social-environmental factors which operate immediately around the individual, it often cannot address the primary causes of such factors. For example, even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, many across the world lacked safe places to shelter, to cook, to collect clean and potable water, or to learn, conditions which have been worsened by the loss of income and housing, closure of schools, and the strain on public services (Marmot and Wilkinson 6–30; Nicola 186–90; Marmot et al. 1662–68; Jones and Grigsby-Toussaint 1–3; Laborde et al. 501–02; Van Lancker and Parolin 243). Due to dwindling financial resources, opportunities for some communities have disappeared that may not reemerge post-pandemic (Baldwin and Weder di Mauro 45–52; Jones and Grigsby-Toussaint 1–3). Communal spaces—youth centers, community gardens, gatherings for prayer and devotion—can create social support and a sense of belonging and serve as vital defenses against the effects of chronic stress, isolation, and hopelessness during the pandemic (Kingsbury 1294–97); unfortunately, due to the impact of infection and the resulting control measures, these community spaces are now significantly limited, particularly in communities with low rates of vaccination (Flint et al. 1114–15; Bethke and Wolff 366–69).

Thus, while the biopsychosocial framework might recognize specific factors such as community spaces as helpful tools to build resilience against the development of mental illness, it does not have anything to say about the state of the community itself and cannot therefore provide adequate solutions when such environments are not available. Due to its focus on the individual, the biopsychosocial framework might not recognize these key social-environmental factors impacting mental resilience or vulnerability. If a model's scope is such that it cannot incorporate all contributing variables, it will not be able to address them properly.

Lack of Access to Care

Due to the current conceptual framework of mental illness as an individual phenomenon, the resultant practice models have never been able to adequately meet global needs. Population-based interventions, rather than viewed as collective investments in current and future health, tend to be few and poorly funded (GBD; Eaton et al. 1594–601; Alloh et al. 12–13). Many people, facing supply-and-demand models of care designed for commercial markets, either have no primary care provider to offer mental health screenings or simply cannot present to their clinic with adequate frequency (Rhodes et al. 863–66; Wissow et al. 1134–35). As a consequence, mild symptoms develop into difficult-to-treat disorders requiring the aid of mental health specialists. Yet, due to the high barriers to entry for

the training of such specialists, these providers are quite scarce; globally, there is less than one mental health professional for every 100,000 people (GBD; Andrilla et al. S201–03). In re-source-poor communities, this number is still lower (GBD). In short, systems of support and care for the mentally ill have been sorely lacking. Even prior to the pandemic, in low- and middle-in-come countries, between seventy-six and eighty-five percent of people with mental health conditions received no treatment for their condition (GBD; Saraceno and Dua S112–13).

This individually focused care system is unable to predict or pre-vent massive surges in need such as that precipitated by the COVID-19 pandemic. In a healthcare system in which wait times for a mental health specialist can already be months, a seven-fold increase in depression rates will likely cause further delays in treatment.

This is, of course, not to cast blame on medical or governmental institu-tions. In fact, over the past few de-cades prior to the pandemic, many organizations and legislative bodies have attempted to craft a patchwork of solutions to the above challenges, involving policy changes, advocacy campaigns, and efforts at increasing the distribution of limited resources in a more just fashion—a longstanding ideal within medical ethics (Eaton et al. 600–02; Alloh et al. 15–16).

Toward an Integrative Framework

It is clear that discrete limitations in a framework for conceptualizing and treating mental illness, such as the in-ability to address questions of meaning or purpose and focusing on the individ-ual and their immediate surroundings in both the assessment and treatment process, can have an enormous impact on global outcomes—an impact that is only exacerbated by the ongoing pan-demic. In order to meet the rising needs and more comprehensively address the factors involved, this paper proposes to add to the existing framework several new dimensions. It will be helpful to start by considering the nature of hu-man reality and thought.

The field of neuroscience, while able to discover daily insights into the functional anatomy of the brain, has been thus far unable to solve the puzzle of how our minds produce arguably the most important function: thought itself. Regarding the nature of the human being and the reality of thought, the Writings of the Bahá'í Faith provide a rich body of knowledge from which to draw. 'Abdu'l-Bahá informs us that the "human spirit which distinguishes man from the animal" is the "rational soul," which "discover[s] the realities of things, comprehend[s] their prop-erties," and from which emanates the mind ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 58:3). Thus, from the per-spective of the Bahá'í writings, human reality is in essence a spiritual one.

Here, it is important to define what is meant by "spiritual" in the context

of the Bahá'í writings. 'Abdu'l-Bahá states that humankind is composed of both a material reality and a non-material, or spiritual, one which sustains it and is divine in nature; the immortal soul, our spiritual reality, is "entirely out of the order of physical creation" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks* 29:13). Each of these components, the material and the spiritual, has distinct capacities that can be developed during one's lifetime (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* 68). While physical, or material, capacities can be developed through the provision of basic needs and the training of skills and physical abilities, spiritual capacities can be realized through the nurturing of the intellect with education, the carrying out of will through action, and the development of virtuous qualities through practices such as prayer and service to humankind (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* 262; 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 157, 230–1). "Spirituality," in this way, can be seen as the process of developing one's spiritual capacities, the recognizing of one's non-material nature, and the practicing of virtuous qualities. While the term "spirituality" in the Bahá'í Writings can also refer to a person's sense of connection with God or include the practice of praying for departed souls, the Bahá'í Writings primarily does not define this term as pertaining to external beings acting upon us, but instead as descriptions of our inner nature and capabilities.

Regarding the mind, 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains further that it "is the power of the human spirit. Spirit is the lamp; mind is the light which shines from the lamp" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 58:4). Our minds, therefore, are also of a spiritual nature; conscious thought arises from the reality of our spirit. Because our thoughts drive our actions in the material world via the brain and the body, we can say that our spiritual reality shapes our material reality.

Shoghi Effendi confirms this, describing more concretely a connection between the spiritual and material: "the mind forms a link between the soul and the body, and the two interact on each other" (*Arohanui* 89). In the Bahá'í perspective, our spiritual existence provides an impetus for our brain's conscious thoughts—and therefore our emotions, our behavior, and our very mental health. Likewise, Shoghi Effendi's statement makes it clear that this connection is bidirectional; just as our mind, a spiritual entity, impacts our physical reality, our actions in the world impact our spiritual reality. In this way, the Bahá'í Writings are consistent with some of the most dominant theories in clinical psychology, such as the cognitive-behavioral model wherein thoughts, emotions, and behaviors continually influence one another in bidirectional cycles.

In his study of human nature and mental health, psychologist and Bahá'í scholar Michael Penn succinctly describes three interacting processes which form and shape human identity. He identifies them as "(1) compositional and evolutionary processes, which include biological and genetic

influences (nature); (2) social processes, which include experiential, educational, and cultural forces (nurture); and (3) innate processes associated with the life, development, and activity of the human soul or spirit" (30).

Human thought is influenced by spiritual forces operating within and around us. But this is not the only channel through which spiritual forces exert themselves. In fact, the Bahá'í Writings allow us to recognize that spiritual processes are continually shaping our existential world in direct and indirect ways. These processes act on all things, from the expression of individual virtue to the values of an entire culture or the priorities of international bodies. When a community, an organization, or a culture expresses—or fails to express—spiritual realities such as the oneness of humankind, there is a direct effect on individuals' resilience or vulnerability to mental illnesses. As an example, when extreme poverty and hunger persist across multiple generations—a result of societal value judgments shaped by neglect of the inherent nobility of each individual human being—epigenetic changes occur which affect the biology of future generations and increase the risk of developing mental health challenges (Bahá'u'lláh, Arabic Hidden Words no. 13, n. 22; Kaati et al. 786; Mathers et al.). Likewise, the growing educational, social, and economic disparities which exist between marginalized and privileged populations in many places across the world—also resulting from the lack of acknowledgement of the

oneness of humankind, or of an adequate expression of the values of justice or generosity—impact the risk of developing mental illnesses (Marmot et al. 1662–63). We can see, therefore, that spiritual processes are in fact intertwined with each of the biological, psychological, and social-environmental components that contribute to our mental wellness or illness.

A Bahá'í conceptualization, then, can add to the prevailing biopsychosocial framework a new, spiritual dimension. When seeking to understand the development of a mental health condition in an individual, we must consider the spiritual forces at play within them, around them, and in society itself.

This is not to say that mental health conditions are ailments of the soul or one's character. In keeping with psychological and biomedical research, the Bahá'í Writings tell us that mental health conditions are in reality conditions of the physical body. Bahá'u'lláh states explicitly that "the soul of man is exalted above and is independent of all infirmities of body or mind" (*Gleanings* 80:2). Thus, while spiritual processes at work within an individual and in the society around them can contribute to the development of illness in the brain, the soul itself is unaffected. Regarding the integrity of the soul for those affected by mental illness, 'Abdu'l-Bahá states further:

Now concerning mental faculties, they are in truth of the inherent properties of the soul, even as the radiation of light is the essential

property of the sun. The rays of the sun are renewed but the sun itself is ever the same and unchanged. Consider how the human intellect develops and weakens, and may at times come to naught, whereas the soul changeth not. ("'Abdu'l-Bahá's Tablet")

Still, just as mental health can be affected by intangible forces acting on the world around us, and even though mental illness is not a spiritual phenomenon, the Universal House of Justice informs us that "its effects may indeed hinder and be a burden in one's striving toward spiritual progress" (15 Jun. 1982). Because mental health conditions manifest themselves in our perceptions, thoughts, emotions, and actions, they can serve as a veil between us and the virtues toward which we strive. For example, the condition of major depressive disorder can present with symptoms of slowed cognition, alterations in perception, and a decline in social interest leading to withdrawal from friends and loved ones. These symptoms can prevent an afflicted person from engaging in learning, service, habits of personal wellness, and the practice of virtuous actions which can raise personal and spiritual capacities.

Other researchers have also begun to recognize the need to incorporate spirituality into a mental model, and some have begun proposing such models (e.g., Sulmasy 27). However, these models portray spiritual factors mainly as a set of conscious religious experiences and value systems, or a quantification of religiosity; in other words, they often present spiritual factors as a subset of a person's cultural viewpoints rather than recognizing that spiritual processes are independent and act upon each of the biopsychosocial factors in an individual's health. Also, significantly, a number of non-Western indigenous frameworks for understanding and treating mental illnesses, such as those developed by First Nations and South Asian communities, have long incorporated a spiritual dimension in both mental and physical health (Hatala 8–11; Brown 34–36; Isaak et al. 350–55; Trivedi 18–20). While these conceptualizations are numerous and varied, perhaps one common theme is the recognition of a spiritual self and the need for integration between the spiritual and material identities; here there may be some overlap between these frameworks and a Bahá'í-inspired framework (Fleming and Ledogar 3–9; Hatala 8–11). It would be wise for scholars and mental health practitioners serving such populations to learn more about these conceptualizations, both to better serve their patients and also to reexamine the validity of our current frameworks in various contexts.

The Finding of Meaning and Hope

A framework involving the observation of spiritual processes can allow us to utilize spiritual solutions which the prevailing framework cannot. One example is addressing the unsolved problem of finding meaning in suffering.

For us to create meaning from suffering, it is useful to consider meaning beyond suffering itself, in the very lives we lead as individuals and as a collective society. The writings of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá touch on these topics of meaning and purpose. They assert that the purpose and meaning of life, on an individual level, lie in the recognition of God and spiritual reality, and in the development of our souls through the acquisition and practice of virtue; and that on a collective level, they lie in the building of bonds of love and the promotion of an ever-advancing civilization ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Foundations* 63; Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* 109:2). Bahá'u'lláh explains that knowledge of the self is essential: "The first Taraz and the first effulgence which hath dawned from the horizon of the Mother Book is that man should know his own self and recognize that which leadeth unto loftiness or lowliness, glory or abasement, wealth or poverty" (*Tablets* 4:7). When experiencing events of either joy or great pain, the individual can reflect upon what leads to their lowliness or loftiness in order to examine how they are being affected and determine what they might do next.

The Bahá'í Writings can assist us, too, in understanding the meaning and purpose of suffering. In the Hidden Words, Bahá'u'lláh tells us, "My calamity is My providence, outwardly it is fire and vengeance, but inwardly it is light and mercy" (Persian n. 51). Shoghi Effendi eloquently observes in a letter to a believer that "suffering, although an inescapable reality, can nevertheless be utilised as a means for the attainment of happiness," that it is "both a reminder and a guide" (*Unfolding Destiny* 434). 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains that events such as the ones we witness in these times can have an ultimately spiritual purpose:

> Do not grieve at the afflictions and calamities that have befallen thee. All calamities and afflictions have been created for man so that he may spurn this mortal world—a world to which he is much attached. When he experienceth severe trials and hardships, then his nature will recoil and he will desire the eternal realm—a realm which is sanctified from all afflictions and calamities. (*Selections* 197:1)

These writings emphasize that a primary purpose of suffering is the recognition of our spiritual natures. Afflictions on the body of humankind, then, can cause us to bring our attention from a transient material reality to the more significant spiritual reality and therefore help us to develop our spiritual capacities. In this way, the purpose and meaning of human life, according to the Bahá'í Writings, are perhaps more accessible to us during times of suffering, and suffering can indeed help us orient toward this purpose and meaning.

In another letter, Shoghi Effendi makes it clear that crises are in fact necessary and indispensable components of the spiritual development of

both individuals and human civilization as a whole:

> You seem to complain about the calamities that have befallen humanity. In the spiritual development of man a stage of purgation is indispensable, for it is while passing through it that the over-rated material needs are made to appear in their proper light. . . . The present calamities are parts of this process of purgation, through them alone will man learn his lesson. They are to teach the nations, that they have to view things internationally, they are to make the individual attribute more importance to his moral than his material welfare. (14 Oct. 1931, qtd. in Hornby no. 441)

From writings such as these, and from the writings of other world Faiths, we can understand that there might indeed be a greater meaning and purpose to our suffering, both individual and collective. By reminding us of this purpose, a spiritually informed framework can allow suffering to bring us toward a pattern of living that integrates the development of both our physical and spiritual capacities—rather than casting suffering solely as a risk factor for the development of physical and mental illnesses.

In addition, a framework that helps to maintain a sense of meaning can also reduce the consequences of hopelessness on our population; meaning breeds hope, which for many can help to prevent suffering from developing into illness (Ribeiro et al. 283–85). Psychological research has shown that the creation of meaning in suffering and trauma can greatly assist in the process of healing from it (Edwards and Van Tongeren 725–30; Egnew 171). Some researchers have even been developing scales of spiritual meaning to assist clinical efforts in this direction, although these have not been widely utilized (e.g., Mascaro et al. 848).

Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to detail recommendations for clinical practice, one can see how this spiritually informed framework could serve as an invaluable tool for practitioners serving patients who are struggling with this question of meaning in suffering. Any such practitioner would want to be aware of several points, of course: First, meaning can be simultaneously both transcendent and personal; in other words, while this framework proposes that ultimate meaning and purpose are spiritual and that suffering can in fact reveal such meaning, each individual seeking meaning and purpose in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic has a unique story and a particular perspective, which can also have a significant impact on their understanding of current and past events and which should be nurtured by a mental health provider. Second, mental health providers must seek to avoid bias, discrimination, and coercion in their treatment of patients, such as the implication that quality of care is dependent on a patient adopting a particular set of spiritual beliefs (American Psychiatric Association

3–4). Any implementation of this spiritually informed framework would need to be performed with the informed consent of a patient, and while the practitioner may guide the patient toward new understandings of meaning and purpose through their treatment, care must be taken to avoid imposing the clinician's own beliefs onto the patient.

It is important to note that transformation of pain into meaning is not the same as denial of pain. When experiencing chronic stress, isolation, and psychological suffering in the wake of the pandemic, it is not useful to minimize these factors, nor to rely upon a fragile optimism that they will simply vanish. Rather, one benefits from first acknowledging the suffering, grieving these changes, and seeking to find meaning and purpose.

Of course, many who read spiritual texts and already have a developed sense of meaning are still suffering from mental health decline during the pandemic. Such individuals might seek to build upon their current understanding of meaning or seek to learn from that of others.

Outside the Individual: The Three Protagonists

This paper has thus far described how examining the spiritual dimensions of biological, psychological, and social-environmental factors can assist us in combating the mental health challenges exacerbated by the current pandemic. Still, as elaborated earlier, we know that the social and psychological components of mental health and illness do not occur only within the vacuum of an individual and their direct environment. Indeed, enmeshed and intertwined social ills such as lack of affordable housing, unequal distribution of quality education, and discriminatory and prejudicial practices significantly impact mental health (Burns 108–10; Marmot et al. 1663–66). Each of these, of course, is affected by spiritual forces; thus, social ills can be seen as spiritual ills, and spiritual principles at the level of community are needed to resolve these challenges. Spiritual ills at the level of institutions impact mental health too, such as the unjust delivery of healthcare, laws and policies that provide preferential advantages, and organizations that drive consumerism by promoting feelings of low self-worth (Cook et al.). We learn from Shoghi Effendi that "man is organic with the world. . . . The one acts upon the other and every abiding change in the life of man is the result of these mutual reactions" (qtd. in *Compilation* 84).

We can take our spiritually informed framework of the biopsychosocial model of mental illness further, then, to acknowledge that mental health, just like other realities, is influenced by the whole of society. To be complete, an effective framework must integrate individual factors with these broader societal influences. One way to do this is to examine the three actors that make up human society: other individuals, the community, and our institutions.

The Universal House of Justice writes of these three social actors—which

Bahá'ís have come to term the "three protagonists"—in its Ridván 2012 message that "relations among the three corresponding actors in the world at large—the citizen, the body politic, and the institutions of society—reflect the discord that characterizes humanity's turbulent stage of transition" (2). Given the still-present stigma toward mental health conditions within communities and the low public trust in established institutions of government, economy, and healthcare around the globe, how accurate this is proving to be now regarding the mental health of the world's population (Hosking 77–86; Rüsch et al. 530–32; Shore 4–7).

Bahá'u'lláh also references the need for the integration of various actors in the healing of the world's current challenges, telling us to "regard ye the world as a man's body, which is afflicted with divers ailments, and the recovery of which dependeth upon the harmonizing of all its component elements" (Bahá'u'lláh, *Summons* ¶ 152). We must realize that our mental health challenges are not simply the problems of many individuals but rather problems involving our collective community. Under the prevailing framework for mental illness and treatment, a prescription is offered at the level of the individual. What we need are prescriptions at the levels of the community and institutions as well.

Addressing Access to Care

Here, this paper will provide a few brief suggestions for how an integrative, spiritually informed framework can better address the lack of access to mental health treatment, a major limitation of the current model. Institutions of medicine and government play a large part in setting priorities for funding research and clinical care, promoting or preventing opportunities for training, and assessing the efficiency of current practices. Despite the clear impact of mental health conditions on populations, little funding has thus far been dedicated to mental health research or the expansion of clinical services. On average, less than two percent of countries' health budgets is allocated to the treatment of mental health conditions (GBD). In addition, problems of large-scale poverty and poor literacy still impact access to care and result in poor mental health outcomes (Lynch and Kaplan; Backlund et al. 1377–80).

This framework acknowledges how such institutional prioritization contributes to the development of mental illness, and that no amount of individual treatment will be sufficient without correcting this problem. It recognizes that governments and institutions of healthcare have a duty to establish clear priorities for increasing access to care for those who do not receive it and for those who are at highest risk. This might include: assessing efficacy of current funding; examining and balancing other expenditures; establishing internationally agreed-upon measurement tools to ensure broader segments of the population are screened; and preparing potential resources should future surges of mental illness occur.

In understanding the global mental health challenges as a problem of community and not just individuals, this framework also recognizes the vital role that communities must play in increasing access to care. Indeed, in present-day society, especially in individualistic cultures, the community as an actor in social and spiritual progress has often been overlooked as inconsequential compared to the power of individuals and institutions. When calamity occurs and when access to immediate social support is more limited, we have an opportunity to see a cherishing of community as a spiritually and materially powerful force in the shaping of our lives.

Communities across the globe, assisted by specific institutions with enough resources, can implement health strategies which have already been effective on smaller scales, and which could fill the gap left by the worldwide scarcity of mental health specialists (Kola 656–57). One main way in which communities can do this is to train lay health workers to deliver mental healthcare. This process, called "task-shifting," has previously helped to meet the needs in regions where little or no care existed. With a flexible workforce of local, trusted individuals, stigma can be reduced, mental healthcare can be sought more frequently, and workers can serve within a number of settings such as homes, schools, workplaces, and care centers (Kohrt et al. 10–15). Communities, perfectly poised to provide solutions such as this, can vastly reduce the problem of mental health access if task-shifting is broadly implemented. Clinical guides already created by the World Health Organization (*mhGAP*) and other organizations can assist in the training of these workers and the implementation of such strategies.

In order to bolster resilience against the development and progression of mental health challenges, communities can also implement strategies that go beyond healthcare itself. In light of a spiritually informed framework, these efforts could focus on: the development of strong and extensive networks of support for individual community members; the strengthening of communal spaces; the provision of basic resources for the mitigation of various risk factors; the offering and support of spiritual education and practice; the nurturing of opportunities for service; and the creation of spaces to discuss and learn about factors contributing to mental health and illness more directly. While it is certainly a challenge to implement such measures—during and emerging from the lockdown—as have been needed for immediate safety, communities can strive to enact creative approaches such as the use of virtual gatherings, individual visits among community members at safe distances, and the sharing of visual, musical, and written media as rich means of communication and collaboration. As one example, the Bahá'í world community has been undergoing a process of learning and practice in its community-building endeavors, both prior to and during the pandemic, which could

serve as a model or a starting point for other communities around the globe. Such endeavors often start with a small cohort of individuals spending time and effort gaining an understanding of the conditions, strengths, and challenges of their local communities; then, in consultation with each other and with like-minded community members, they initiate various short- or long-term activities meant to address such challenges. These may include teaching groups for children and youth meant to develop moral perception and become active protagonists within communities; organizing gatherings for prayer, community discussion, and deepening on issues of import; visiting various community members to enhance bonds of friendship and support; and creating spaces for training of others on paths of service to community. As these endeavors organically grow, opportunities arise to address specific mental health needs. These efforts can go a long way toward building resiliency factors within communities. Importantly, the Bahá'í framework for community-building operates within a mode of learning and utilizes a high degree of flexibility, as conditions are ever-changing.

It becomes clear, then, that we need an integrated framework which understands the spiritual contributions to our current crisis and which can offer insights at the levels of communities and institutions, as well as individuals.

Conclusion and Future Directions

In this phase of humankind's collective evolution, we are becoming acutely aware of the interconnected forces involved in our rising mental health challenges and the need for an integrative, spiritually informed approach. The COVID-19 pandemic and resulting lockdowns have created an ever-changing psychological landscape, one to which we must readily adapt. In the interests of both scholarship and practical need, this author invites like-minded scholars to examine this framework and any others which might be able to meet the challenges of the present pandemic.

Further work is needed during this critical time. First, as an application of this conceptual framework, this author intends to examine in more detail the major elements related to the three societal actors—individuals, communities, and institutions—which have contributed to our present mental health challenges, and hopes to publish any findings. Of course, as these factors are numerous and intertwined, any single study of such factors would likely be incomplete; again, this author invites others to collaborate and contribute to this growing body of knowledge.

Second, as these factors are determined, it is just as important to implement action to address these factors at all the relevant societal levels. This author invites discussion on this topic. Any real solutions will likely require dedication, perseverance, and intense cooperation.

Third, as there exist multiple conceptual frameworks for understanding psychological phenomena across cultures and traditions, this work can be significantly supplemented with a more thorough investigation into the other frameworks which incorporate a spiritual dimension. For example, several non-Western frameworks for mental health and illness should be further studied and examined alongside the framework presented here to better understand and meet rising mental health needs.

Perhaps this is one of many inflection points in the trajectory of our global civilization, one in which the world can turn to the wisdom of the Bahá'í writings and look to the examples within its communities and institutions. Ultimately, as the shockwaves of this series of global events are still reverberating, it will be the work of individuals across the world, communities they form, and institutions they build to act and together develop a new, sustainable system of mental healthcare for the global population in years to come.

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