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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/bahauallah-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 journal.bahaistudies.ca/online/about/submissions/.

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 torture and forty years of imprisonment and exile.

In His will, Bahá'u'lláh appointed His eldest 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.

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MISHKÍN-QALAM Zoomorphic calligraphy ca. 1903. The text inscribed in the book held by the rooster is a tablet revealed by Bahá'u'lláh on the theme of the unknowability of God.

Homeward Bound

RAYMOND HUDSON

Standing among the fallen leaves,
between me and his next meal,
the pup rescued from a truck stop
in Florida has never known such joy.

He gives back what the world
gives him, abundantly
and unsolicited. Under. Above.
Among. Beneath. Beside me.

I know little about this world
and nothing about the next.
I know this is our only chance.

Here.

From the Editor's Desk

MICHAEL SABET

REFLECTIONS ON A DECADE OF LEARNING FOR THE ASSOCIATION FOR BAHÁ'Í STUDIES

On 24 July 2013, the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Canada received a message written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice regarding the role of the Association for Bahá'í Studies with respect to “the intellectual life of the Bahá'í community and its greater involvement in the life of society.” To mark the ten-year anniversary of that letter, on 24 July 2023 the ABS shared a retrospective with the National Spiritual Assembly of Canada outlining some of the Association's key developments over the last ten years in response to the invitation of the Universal House of Justice to help build “the capacity of the friends to contribute to the prevalent discourses of society” (24 July 2013), and highlighting some of the objects of learning it envisions shaping its next steps during the Nine Year Plan. This document was the fruit of extensive consultation within and between the ABS Executive Committee, its subcommittees, and other close collaborators. We are excited to be able to share this retrospective document in this issue of *The Journal of Bahá'í*

Studies, and hope that it can broaden and deepen the Bahá'í community's understanding of the range of activities and initiatives that ABS is undertaking.

As a complement to the comprehensive overview provided by the retrospective, we are pleased to be publishing Jordan van Rijn's “Learning to Sift: Reflections on Ten Years of Engaging with the Economics Discourse,” which highlights a particular example of one of the processes ABS has been learning about over the past decade. Van Rijn reflects on the experience of a small group of friends who strove to answer the call of the Universal House of Justice for “Bahá'ís who are involved in various disciplines [...] to earnestly strive to reflect on the implications that the truths found in the Revelation may hold for their work” (24 July 2013 letter). Embarking on this journey in a learning mode, the group gained increasing insight, through cycles of action, reflection, consultation and study, into how to examine certain discourses within the discipline of economics from a Bahá'í perspective. Their efforts are, of course, only one illustration of what such work can look like: since 2013, those helping to advance learning as part of ABS' collaborative initiatives have accumulated a wealth of experiences, large and small, as documented in the retrospective. Yet the value of reflecting on a specific example is well illustrated by “Learning to Sift,” which presents the group's learning with both humility and insight.

With respect to the work of the *Journal* within the ABS ecosystem, one

of the emerging areas of learning highlighted in the retrospective concerns “a collaborative review process, in which a qualified peer reviewer consults with the author on how to strengthen his or her article” (20). It is fitting that, in the same issue in which the retrospective is featured, we can bring to you the first paper to be published having gone through a process of collaborative review. The *Journal* has traditionally employed a double-blind peer review process, a model that has its strengths for certain kinds of scholarly works, and will still be employed where appropriate. However, as an increasing number of scholarly publications turn to more open review processes, centering on a conversation between author and reviewers, it seems timely for the *Journal* to learn about how the unique potential of consultation, which “bestoweth greater awareness and transmuteth conjecture into certitude,” can be applied within the context of scholarly review (*Compilation on Consultation* 3). While our experience in this area is nascent, insights have already emerged around the capacity of collaborative review to foster a spirit of genuine accompaniment in scholarship. Where blind peer review can sometimes risk elevating a reviewer’s interests or opinions to a standard for the author to meet, collaborative review facilitates the development of a shared vision, in which author and reviewer see themselves as part of a team, jointly pursuing excellence.

The fruit of this first collaborative review is Nooshfar Afnan’s

“Encouragement of the Arts During the Ministry of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá: The Services of Master Calligrapher *Mishkín-Qalam*.” Afnan explores the life and work of the celebrated calligrapher from the perspective of what these can teach us about the nature of art, and its role in the individual’s spiritual development and the life of the community. A particular focus is on the relationship between *Mishkín-Qalam* and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Who encouraged the artist in his craft, and provided him the opportunity to make a distinctive artistic contribution to some of the signal accomplishments of the Master’s ministry. As the Bahá’í community continues to develop its understanding of the role of the arts in community building, social action, and contribution to discourses, Afnan’s paper provides rich insights for all of us, whether we consider ourselves artists or not.

In addition to the examples of *Mishkín-Qalam*’s work found within the article, the cover of this issue features one of his exquisite calligraphic birds, formed from an invocation of the Greatest Name of God and holding in its grasp the text of a tablet of Bahá’u’lláh.

We are also pleased to be publishing a beautiful artistic work in a different modality, in Terry Ofner’s poem “Words in Solstice Time” and Raymond Hudson’s “Homeward Bound” and “At the Grave of the King and Beloved of Martyrs.”

You might also like to read...

As a service to our readers, we are including links 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.

THE EVOLVING ROLE OF BAHÁ'Í SCHOLARSHIP

by *Vahid Rafati*

[https://doi.org/10.31581/jbs-25.1-2.2\(2015\)](https://doi.org/10.31581/jbs-25.1-2.2(2015))

The authoritative texts of the Bahá'í Faith leave no doubt that Bahá'í scholars are responsible for protecting and propagating the Faith. They are to be in the forefront in spreading and fostering Bahá'í education, in collaborating with other learned ones of the world for the betterment of the human condition, in joining forces with one another within the Bahá'í community to qualitatively enrich its social fabric and to increase the influence of the Faith globally.

THE CALLIGRAPHY OF MISHKÍN-QALAM

by *Julie and Heshmatollah Badiie*

[https://doi.org/10.31581/jbs-3.4.430\(1991\)](https://doi.org/10.31581/jbs-3.4.430(1991))

The life and work of Áqá Husayn-i Isfahání, called *Mishkín-Qalam*. . . . The discussion centers on the calligraphic compositions created by *Mishkín-Qalam* during his stay in Famagusta and also on those done during his last years where he

rejoined Bahá'u'lláh in the city of 'Akká.

THE SPIRITUAL ROLE OF ART

by *Ludwig Tuman*

[https://doi.org/10.31581/jbs-4.4.4\(1992\)](https://doi.org/10.31581/jbs-4.4.4(1992))

A study of passages from the Bahá'í writings indicates that art can render services of a mystical, moral, and social nature. Such services taken together constitute the spiritual role of art, whose highest purpose is to ennoble the individual soul and the collective life of humanity.

THE ARTIST AND THE GRAMMARIAN

by *Otto Donald Rogers*

[https://doi.org/10.31581/jbs-19.1-4.1\(2009\)](https://doi.org/10.31581/jbs-19.1-4.1(2009))

We all have aspects of both of those conditions in each of us: on the one hand, we want to enthusiastically and with great zeal embrace the unknown, wandering a kind of invisible path in the hope of being confirmed in the living of our life; and on the other hand, we place limits on what life can manifest, afraid of going over the edge.

ART AND ARCHITECTURE: A BAHÁ'Í PERSPECTIVE

by *Fariburz Sahba*

[https://doi.org/10.31581/jbs-7.3.4\(1997\)](https://doi.org/10.31581/jbs-7.3.4(1997))

This essay explores the spiritual significance of the relationship between traditional and new forms of artistic expression from the author's experience as an architect. To Bahá'ís, creating a work of art is equivalent to an act of worship.

Words in Solstice Time

TERRY OFNER

i

Orange light on the back gate.
The longest day dawns, zeros out the night
retreating to shade on the other side.
In the first time there wasn't any.
In the second there's only one escape:
You must sit still forever.
Mama sits still. She is well into it.
She is impossible to see.
The shortest distance between—
a pencil might define it, or a command:
Write tinier lines. Inscribe the Torah
on the head of a nail. Drive it,
syllable by syllable, into mind.
Read it out as Qur'an.

ii

The light stops here.
There's a pile-up at the gate.
I am curious, though I have no desire
to go through just yet.
I hear water over there: Concerto
with moments and stones.
I've caught glimpses of lilies too,
licking up the orange.
A line goes on forever.
But even forever fails
in the face of the real thing.
Orange fails as well, sheds its skin,
hitches a ride on the flesh
of the lily—forever flower.

iii

I hear my granddaughter.
My wife has her on speaker.
She makes a sound like a bird
from the Jurassic. She is prehistoric.
She is full of motion and life.
She runs out of view. Stillness
proves nothing but itself. Still,
it builds, like water's lust for rest.
Mama crossed over years ago.
Daddy, too. There's a pile-up.
A bird makes a sound like a daughter,
or a daughter's daughter
laughing, crying, laughing.
This mother tongue.

Ten Year Retrospective, 24 July 2023

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE OF THE ASSOCIATION FOR BAHÁ'Í STUDIES – NORTH AMERICA¹

1. Introduction
 2. Settings for learning together about contributing to prevalent discourses
 3. Reimagining the annual conference
 4. Evolution of the publications work
 5. Vision of growth and approach to learning
 - 5.1 Objects of Learning
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1. INTRODUCTION

On 24 July 2013, the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Canada received a message written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice regarding the role of the Association for Bahá'í Studies with respect to “the intellectual life of the Bahá'í community and its greater involvement in the life of society.” The House of Justice encouraged the Association to focus on building capacity for engaging in

¹ Written in collaboration with the Executive Committee's subcommittees, staff, and other close collaborators.

the discourses of society, with a particular emphasis on professional and academic discourses. Since then, the Association has progressively learned how to translate this and subsequent guidance into action. Now, ten years later, we feel moved to reflect on the advances made in several related areas: fostering evolving conversations within collaborative settings—such as reading groups, writing groups, and seminars—about contributing to professional and academic discourses from a Bahá'í perspective; reimagining the annual conference; advancing the Association's publishing endeavors; and strengthening the capacity of the Association to operate systematically.

These developments have entailed learning about how various elements of the conceptual framework discussed in the 24 July 2013 message,² including learning in action itself, apply to the work of the Association. Attentiveness to these elements has helped generate new strengths—and given rise to new challenges—which have disclosed new

² “Central to the effort to advance the work of expansion and consolidation, social action, and the involvement in the discourses of society is the notion of an evolving conceptual framework, a matrix that organizes thought and gives shape to activities and which becomes more elaborate as experience accumulates” (Universal House of Justice, 24 July 2013).

References to “the conceptual framework” in this document should be understood in light of this description by the Universal House of Justice, which is explored in section 5.2.

possibilities for advancement.

We have correspondingly refined the mandate of the Association in the light of continuing guidance, such as the 30 December 2021 message of the Universal House of Justice addressed to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors. To this end, we created numerous spaces for consultation and reflection within and between committees, with staff and collaborators, and with our senior institutions. This process led to the generation of the following mandate:

The Association plays a role in fostering the intellectual life of the community, focusing in particular on helping to build the “capacity of the friends to contribute to the prevalent discourses of society in their academic fields and in their professions” in a manner that “enrich[es] the capacity of the Bahá'í community to discharge its mission.”³ It aims to enable participants of varying backgrounds and academic interests to effectively explore how “to provide, in the world of ideas, the intellectual rigour and clarity of thought to match their commitment to spiritual and material progress in the world of deeds.”⁴

Recognizing that all visions evolve, we view this mandate as a point

3 Universal House of Justice, 7 September 2015.

4 Universal House of Justice, 30 December 2021.

of reference that helps to unify the Association's various activities and consolidate our understanding of the mutually reinforcing relationship between its work and the pattern of activity in which the Bahá'í community is engaged. That is, the activities of ABS are understood to complement, and to be nurtured by, the society-building endeavours of the wider Bahá'í community.

In the following retrospective, we outline the main developments of ABS over the last ten years, referring to the 24 July 2013 message as our guide. We also highlight some of our key objects of learning as well as our approach to applying relevant elements of the conceptual framework to the work. A theme that runs throughout this report is how the Association can strengthen its capacity to further expand and consolidate its endeavours in alignment with the provisions of the Nine Year Plan.

2. SETTINGS FOR LEARNING TOGETHER ABOUT CONTRIBUTING TO PREVALENT DISCOURSES

In the fourth paragraph of the 24 July 2013 message, the House of Justice explains:

Every believer has the opportunity to examine the forces operating in society and introduce relevant aspects of the teachings within the discourses prevalent in whatever social space he or she is present. It is, perhaps, as a means to enhance the abilities of the friends to

explore such opportunities in relation to their scholarly interests that the endeavours of the Association for Bahá'í Studies can be conceived. Through the specialized settings it creates, the Association can promote learning among a wide range of believers across a wide range of disciplines.

And further:

As unity of thought around essential concepts emerges, the Association may find it useful to explore fresh approaches with some simple steps that can grow in complexity.

Based on this guidance, the Association has fostered a still-evolving set of activities that aim to promote learning about participation in a variety of academic, professional, and thematic discourses prevalent in society. The Committee for Collaborative Initiatives (CCI) coordinates this dimension of the Association's work, which, as it evolves, is increasingly contributing to the evolution of the annual conference and the publications work.

Specifically, the Association has created several specialized settings and complementary spaces to help enhance the abilities of the friends to "examine the forces operating in society and introduce relevant aspects of the teachings within" prevalent discourses. These settings aim to enable the friends to foster patterns of collaborative scholarship connected with the Association

itself. They may additionally stimulate individuals and groups to pursue their own interests independently, perhaps sharing the results of their inquiries at the annual conference. Inevitably, as these independent initiatives proliferate, many will occur outside our immediate awareness, albeit inspired directly or indirectly by the settings the Association has established. As such, these settings can serve as catalysts for a range of initiatives aiming to contribute to the world of ideas.

The main types of specialized settings are ABS workshops, reading groups, writing groups, other small collaborative projects, seminars, and working groups. These spaces are described immediately below; a list of the workshops, reading groups, and seminars currently known to the Association appears in Appendix A.

WORKSHOPS

Workshops are typically half-day sessions that help familiarize participants with the aims of the Association and its approaches to contributing to professional and academic discourses. They explore themes such as the dispositions conducive to participating constructively in discourses, how to read prevalent discourses for their underlying assumptions, and how attending to the elements of the conceptual framework helps to ensure coherence between the efforts of ABS and the community-building work and social action. The final section of the workshop discusses possibilities for participants' further

engagement in ABS activities (by, for example, forming their own reading groups, as discussed in the next section).

These workshop sessions are currently offered once or twice a month depending on the availability of facilitators and the number of registrants for a given session, with an intensification of offerings in the lead up to the annual conference. Sessions usually bring together between eight and twenty participants and two facilitators. These facilitators are invited to reflect individually and collectively on ways to improve the materials and the workshop space itself based on their experiences.

In the years since the 24 July 2013 message was received, the community has become more familiar with the work of contributing to discourses, particularly since *Ruhi Book 14*, Unit 1 became available. As the community's capacity to engage with discourses grows, it is not entirely clear whether and in what form this workshop will continue to be needed. For the time being, it provides a helpful introduction for those wanting to be connected with ABS.

READING GROUPS

A reading group is a small group that forms to read a book or a set of texts from a given field or on a given theme, and to thoughtfully explore the content in a collaborative environment. It is an accessible way for participants to develop their understanding of a specific

discourse and how it correlates with the teachings of the Faith. Once formed, these groups often come together for six to twelve two-hour sessions, though some develop into longer-term efforts. Reading groups cover an ever-expanding range of themes, such as climate change, education for justice, health promotion, influential women thinkers, reparations and reconciliation, world government narratives, technology and values, and many others (as noted in Appendix A). All reading groups aim to analyze the text(s) they are studying in the light of the writings of the Faith, the experience of the community, and the framework for action that organizes the Bahá'í community's efforts to transform society. They are envisioned as inviting, thoughtful settings in which the friends can "reflect on the implications that the truths found in the Revelation may hold for their work" (24 July 2013).

Reading groups are typically facilitated by one or a few individuals whose primary purpose is to encourage a consultative environment in which participants strive to correlate insights from the text(s) being studied with those from other key sources of knowledge, such as pertinent writings of the Faith, the experience and learning of the participants, and the discussion that ensues within the reading group setting itself. The facilitators are additionally responsible for arranging the meetings (most commonly through online video conferencing), identifying a text or set of texts, designing a reading schedule, distributing materials,

making necessary adjustments to the line of inquiry based on reflections with the group, and liaising with the Association. In some cases, they draft framing questions to assist their groups to read and consult. They may also encourage participants to use informal writing as a tool for clarifying and articulating individual and collective insights that could potentially be shared with others.

A few reading groups have built on this informal writing, evolving into writing groups (discussed below) whose participants eventually present and receive feedback on their work at seminars or during breakout sessions at the ABS conference. Other reading groups have simply given rise to new reading groups. We are, consequently, beginning to see how these reading groups can serve as portals to additional ABS activities, which can in turn lead to yet new reading groups. At the same time, we recognize the value of the reading group in its own right: any short-term reading group can stand on its own as an important contributor to the goals of the Association.

While momentum is building, there is still much to learn about how to multiply these specialized settings; to assist more groups to embark on longer-term, complex efforts; and to enable groups focusing on similar themes to coalesce into more sustained working groups (discussed below). We are also finding that reading groups can benefit from accompaniment. To date, such accompaniment has included regular, one-to-one, or small-group

discussions with facilitators to reflect on progress, opportunities, challenges, and the knowledge being generated within their respective reading groups. We have also held facilitator gatherings where learning can be shared between them. As reading groups and related endeavours multiply, it has become evident that more attention must be paid to how the system of accompaniment, facilitation, coordination, and capacity building can correspondingly evolve.

WRITING GROUPS

The Association has also been exploring how to develop collaborative writing groups that can make significant advances in producing content for the *Journal of Bahá'í Studies* (JBS) and other fora. Of particular concern is how to create consultative environments that enhance individual and collective research, writing, and review. One key example of such a collective initiative led to the JBS special issue on constructive resilience (Vol. 30, No 3). This issue was the fruit of a multi-year collaboration between scholars in a range of disciplines, arising from a series of readings groups and seminars on related themes. This group of authors decided to write a set of essays and consulted on their work at various stages of the writing process. One finding coming out of this initiative was that earlier involvement by the JBS Editorial Committee could lead to a smoother process of moving from group collaboration to publication.

Building on this learning, another

group of collaborators is now submitting six essays for joint publication in JBS. This initiative arose out of a reading group focused on the harmony of science and religion during the summer of 2020. This reading group led to another group that decided to do an in-depth study of Helen Longino's book *Science and Social Knowledge: Values and Objectivity in Scientific Inquiry*, correlating insights from this book with guidance from the writings of the Faith regarding consultation and other related topics. Inspired by this study to begin a writing process, the group began by arriving at a shared vision of a general area of focus for a set of essays, to be authored individually or by pairs. With this vision in mind, it then devoted its already-established weekly pattern of meeting to sharing and providing feedback on the abstracts, outlines, drafts, and redrafts of their respective papers. The core aim of the group was to learn how to foster a humble posture of learning as it applies to the writing and review process—one in which each member of the group felt accompanied by the other members to strengthen his or her paper. The group also held a two-day seminar with a wider group of participants to obtain additional constructive feedback on their papers. Some months later, the group shared the six draft essays with the JBS editor for his initial input. The editor's written comments on each paper, supplemented by a consultation with the group, proved extremely helpful. The members subsequently continued to assist each other to review

and revise their respective drafts with a view to both formally submitting them to JBS and presenting them at a seminar at the 2023 annual conference. This "early and often" model of soliciting feedback from the JBS editor and other collaborators, combined with the group's regular space for consultation on the development of each author's paper, has helped to foster unity of vision and a sense of shared enterprise for the project amongst both the authors and JBS.

Simultaneously, collaborative writing has been emerging out of the methodologies' seminars—distinctive meetings convened in response to the Universal House of Justice's reference in the 24 July 2013 message to disciplinary methodologies. Writing has emerged organically in this context, with groups focused on different disciplines' methodologies initially creating documents for their own internal use. This in turn has led to collaborative writing aimed at wider circulation, including through publication in JBS. A specific writing project currently under way is organized around what is referred to as scholarly "response," in which an initial paper (in this case, a collaboratively written article on methodological trends in the social sciences) is circulated to others with relevant backgrounds to generate a set of written responses, which in turn inform a response by the authors of the initial article. The collaborators in this inherently dialogical process are conceiving of this project as an exercise in consultative inquiry. The aim is to publish

in a special volume of JBS, with three goals: to illustrate a processes-oriented approach to collective learning about methodology, to create a resource that can be studied by others who are learning to navigate methodological decisions in the social sciences and other fields, and to help foster the capacity to participate in discourses on this theme. While this project is in its early stages, there is a shared understanding between the writing collaborators and the Editorial Committee of the importance of learning about how this “response” format can promote rigour and clarity of thought while adhering to consultative standards of unity, candor, courtesy, affection, and generosity in a mutual search for truth, thereby eschewing the often combative stance of academics towards each other’s writing.

OTHER SMALL COLLABORATIVE PROJECTS

The Association has become increasingly aware of the need for sustained consultation and collaboration among the friends as they seek to bring insights from the Faith to bear on their fields. As noted above, reading groups offer a simple yet potentially powerful first step towards this end. The Association aims to encourage the emergence of more complex projects from among some of these reading groups. A small but growing number of these have already developed, and we hope to learn how to support more of them in the coming years. We have gained some initial experience with helping groups

that have been collaborating on a project online to meet in person in order to work more intensively, and we aim to expand such types of support.

To date, most of these sustained endeavours have been writing projects, as described above. Others are focused, at least initially, on less formal kinds of writing as a means of capturing and sharing insights arising from group learning processes. Still others have been focused on attending professional or academic conferences together to collectively read the discourse and reflect on how one might contribute more effectively to it. To encourage such endeavours, the Association has held gatherings for these groups to discuss their connection with seminars and other activities. As noted above, we also assume that other small projects are emerging that we are not aware of, just as some reading groups are likely emerging that we are not aware of.

One small collaborative project, which grew out of a reading group about economic inequality, has produced a document for study with undergraduate students that interrogates the underlying assumptions of introductory economics courses. It seeks to equip students to keep their thinking coherent and aligned with the Bahá’í conceptual framework for social transformation even as they engage with the discipline of economics. Having prepared and refined the document, the group has held several online sessions with students, and will be holding an in-person seminar at the 2023 annual conference. This project has inspired a

similar effort to examine materialist assumptions that are often overlaid onto the scientific study of evolutionary biology and neuroscience, which will also be the focus of a seminar at the 2023 annual conference. Such efforts are contributing to the Association's emerging approach to engaging students in its activities in ways that are complementary to, rather than redundant with, the Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity (ISGP) seminars for students.

Beyond small projects of these kinds, which arise directly or indirectly from ABS-fostered processes, we are also attempting to stay abreast of more advanced endeavours at the frontiers of learning, including the establishment of academic centers, research labs, and so forth, initiated by Bahá'ís and likeminded collaborators. For instance, we have been following developments with the Center on Modernity in Transition, which partners closely with universities such as Duke and NYU; the Center for Resilient Communities at West Virginia University; and the Centre for Digital Tools and Social Transformation at the British Columbia Institute of Technology. We hope to follow and learn from other similar endeavours so that insights gained in these spheres of activity can, over time, be shared appropriately within relevant ABS spaces, and so that systematic learning can begin to occur across a growing range of related initiatives. At some point, it may be appropriate for ABS to also take a role in generating these kinds of initiatives, by convening

spaces in which insights can be shared across academic and professional endeavors of a similar nature, leading to the formation of academic or professional centers.

SEMINARS

In the 24 July 2013 message, the House of Justice states that as clarity and unity of thought gradually emerge within the Association, “a number of small seminars could be held to assist individuals from certain professions or academic disciplines to examine some aspect of the discourse of their field. Specific topics could be selected, and a group of participants with experience could share articles, prepare papers, and consult on contemporary perspectives and related Bahá'í concepts.” Since 2017, the Association has been developing its capacity to hold one to three-day seminars—in person, online, and hybrid—on a range of topics (listed in Appendix A).

To date, we have generated several points of learning regarding the benefits of seminars. In the first place, we have found that seminars can vary in terms of format and size, and yet still contribute to the objectives of ABS. Some seminars have been organized by working groups (discussed below) and have convened dozens of people at a time for relatively broad and inclusive conversations about important trends across a range of discourses in related fields. These include Health Working Group and Media Working Group seminars. Other seminars have gathered smaller groups of collaborators for

more specific conversations informed by substantial preparatory reading. These include seminars on themes in the areas of Africana Studies, narrative ethics and media practice, and cooperatives and next systems. Some of these, as well as other seminars, such as those focused on science and religion, community action, and methodologies, have created spaces for participants to discuss and provide consultative feedback on each other's written work. It has been heartening to witness this diversity of approaches, which has allowed for both a wide range of participation and rigorous engagement with prevalent discourses.

As to other points of learning, we have found that seminars help participants to reflect on how to explicate the principles of the Faith in relation to contemporary perspectives, and to appreciate that the conversation about a given theme has different layers to it, thus demanding both depth and flexibility of thought. Seminars have also been found to draw naturally upon other ABS processes and activities, such as reading and writing groups, thus reinforcing the growing coherence between these activities. They additionally foster a culture of accompaniment among participants with different levels of experience. Finally, allowing sufficient time in these spaces for informal conversation, stories, and the arts evidently plays a key role in building bonds of friendship and "consolidate[ing] understanding".

One major objective of the Association is to multiply these

seminars while ensuring that they are coherent with other ABS activities, including the annual conference, as noted in Section 3 below. Other objectives include further systematizing the logistical organization of these seminars, opening them up to greater participation from the wider community, and perhaps jointly hosting seminars with other groups of scholars or like-minded organizations. On this last point, the Association aims to become much more proactive at inviting academics and professionals to participate in seminars concerned with examining various exigent issues facing humanity today.

WORKING GROUPS

The term "working group" was initially used to describe a range of collaborative efforts. Since that time, it has evolved to signify a group that fosters learning among a growing network of individuals and small collaborative groups within a shared academic or professional field. The spaces organized by working groups—including reading groups, seminars, and other special gatherings—allow participants to enter into a sustained conversation with one another, identify common interests, consult on questions of shared relevance, receive encouragement and support, and initiate or develop new lines of inquiry and new collaborative endeavors. As such, the structure of a working group shows promise as a means of strengthening and extending CCI's scheme of coordination at the level of a discipline or field.

As this understanding has crystallized, CCI has become more systematic in its accompaniment of working groups as a whole, and more particularly of those serving as conveners or coordinators of these groups. The committee has continued to learn especially from a small number of working groups at varying levels of development and activity (Economies, Health, Media, and Africana Studies), which have organized seminars in addition to reading groups and small projects. Two of these working groups held thematic seminars over the summer of 2022 (a seminar on “Narrative, Ethics and Media Practice” by the Media Working Group, and a seminar on reparations by the Africana Studies Working Group). The Media and Health groups have also organized seminars that convened broad conversations among participants across a variety of subfields and topics.

One of the objectives of CCI is to “multiply working groups while also building their capacity to evolve independently.” CCI has gradually helped certain working groups to define and operate according to cycles of annual activity that include the regular launching and accompaniment of reading groups and small projects as well as more intensive spaces like seminars. In 2020-21, to generate experience that could further inform the functioning of other groups, the CCI coordinators decided to focus on accompanying the Media Working Group—a relatively advanced group—in order to help it establish

its cycle of annual activity. In 2021-22, the Health Working Group was accompanied more intensively along the same lines. The CCI coordinators have been assisting these teams to reflect on and adjust their respective schemes of coordination to develop structures and practices consistent with the need for a growing number of collaborators to organize seminars, facilitate reading groups, and learn from longer-term projects. Moreover, while maintaining ongoing lines of action, these working groups have also been exploring how to help some small initiatives enhance the rigour and depth of their efforts. For one group, this has involved organizing three thematic seminars over the course of a four-month period during the spring and summer of 2023. Another has made preliminary plans to organize a larger seminar aimed at inviting colleagues and professional contacts from the wider society into a sustained process of study and consultation.

While the overall number of working groups has not so far increased in 2022-23, the work of the active groups has continued to expand and deepen. It seems clear that working groups can serve as important structures for supporting sustained intellectual inquiry. A major area of learning now is how to continue multiplying them, given both the importance of accompanying one another in the field of service and the current limitations of CCI’s human resources.

3. REIMAGINING THE ANNUAL CONFERENCE

In addition to multiplying and strengthening specialized settings, we have also explored how to respond to the House of Justice's guidance that, "existing activities, such as the hosting of a large conference, may be reimagined" (24 July 2013). Towards this end, we have taken several steps to reimagine the conference over the past ten years in view of the importance of encouraging more active participation at the gathering, fostering relationships among participants in similar fields, engaging the youth, increasing the conference's coherence with other ABS endeavours, and aligning it with the emerging patterns of community life more generally. As an example of this last point, we have sought to collaborate early in the planning process with relevant Bahá'í institutions in the community hosting the conference, striving to ensure that our communications and programming support and are consistent with their community-building processes. We still have much to learn in this respect.

Also, with respect to communications, we are exploring how to help the Bahá'í community, and in particular young adults who are familiar with programs of ISGP, understand the place of the annual conference in relationship to ABS' overall mandate and specialized settings. We have consequently reached out to the coordinators of ISGP to explore ways in which we can support each other's objectives. To this end, ISGP graduates have been

drawn upon to support ABS reading groups, working groups, and seminars, as well as to present at the conference. The ISGP coordinator in Canada has also presented at the conference to help the audience better understand the nature and purpose of ISGP seminars. Nevertheless, an ongoing question is how to build on these connections and more systematically engage young adults who have benefitted from the institute's programs.

A number of considerations with respect to the conference have been discussed with members of the Universal House of Justice, members of the Continental Board of Counsellors, members of the National Spiritual Assemblies of Canada and the United States, other collaborators, and the National Assembly of Canada itself. These include: 1) the costs involved in attending an annual continental conference, which have rendered it inaccessible to many (if not most); 2) the possibility of decentralizing the conference over time to make it less costly and more geographically accessible to more participants; 3) how the conference might evolve into a space that is directly pertinent to ABS working groups and other small-group initiatives; 4) the amount of time and resources consumed by planning the conference over the course of a year, which can hamper the capacity of the Executive Committee, subcommittees, and other collaborators to initiate and develop new, potentially worthwhile, lines of action; 5) the sentiment that not holding a continental conference

may have negative repercussions in the community, which has grown accustomed to gathering together to explore the development of Bahá'í thought on an annual basis; 6) and the fruitfulness of adopting a gradual approach to reimagining the conference, noting in particular the importance of developing new lines of action and approaches while also working to organically refine ongoing efforts.

Owing to the Coronavirus pandemic, reimagining the conference has also meant learning how to host it online, which we did three years in a row. This in turn entailed learning how to improve accessibility to content, such as by providing captions and additional resources for all recorded presentations.⁵ During this period, we also reframed the call for presentations to specifically welcome contributions aimed at exploring how to participate in relevant discourses in the light of the teachings of the Faith and in view of the provisions of the Nine Year Plan.

With all these considerations in mind, we have developed the following vision for the conference by drawing upon guidance from the 30 December 2021 message of the Universal House of Justice:

The overarching objective of the ABS conference is to serve as an

5 As the presentations are released in various formats, these resources accompany them, providing value for years to come. Further work has been completed to prepare the conference platform for ongoing use.

uplifting, welcoming space for participants to explore learning about contributing to academic and professional discourses essential to the generation of knowledge and the progress of humanity. As one among a growing constellation of ABS activities concerned with promoting the intellectual life of the community, it aims to foster an animated conversation among diverse participants about how “to provide, in the world of ideas, the intellectual rigour and clarity of thought to match their commitment to spiritual and material progress in the world of deeds.”

We have correspondingly identified the following objectives of the conference.

First—in view of the importance of fostering coherence between the various ABS activities—the conference aims to serve as a space of convergence where participants in various collective initiatives (e.g., working, reading, writing, and seminar groups) share with other conference participants insights into the fruits of their learning about how “to explicate the principles” the Bahá'í community advocates, and “demonstrate their applicability to the issues facing humanity.”⁶

6 This is in keeping with the guidance of the Universal House of Justice that “[o]ne of the aims would be to foster a wider participation and to encourage and

Second—in view of the importance of fostering inclusion and diversity—the conference aims to serve as an accessible portal that enables growing numbers of participants with a range of backgrounds and interests to become acquainted with, participate in, and thus benefit from, various ABS capacity-building endeavours.

Third—in line with the conviction that ABS is an association that seeks to harmonize different perspectives—the conference aims to feature scholars and professionals who are contributing substantially to various discourses of pressing concern.

In accordance with these three objectives, we envision the conference as a space that promotes both individual and collective learning about how to participate in relevant discourses from a Bahá'í perspective; stimulates engagement in (and serves as a portal to) other ABS activities, such as working groups, reading groups, writing groups, seminars, and other collaborative initiatives aimed at building capacity to contribute to discourses in academic and professional fields; sharpens clarity of thought among a widening circle of participants about the aims and approaches of ABS in a manner that is progressively inclusive of, and accessible to, diverse populations

and age groups; assists young people to understand that contributing to professional and academic discourses is a core dimension of service that is coherent with the community-building process in which they are engaged; and creates an environment in which conference participants increasingly see themselves as 1) active participants, rather than passive recipients, during the conference itself, 2) part of a learning process that is coherent with (i.e., that builds upon and further enriches) other ABS activities, and 3) contributing to a collective endeavour that is consistent with the provisions of the Plan.

In August 2023, the conference resumes as an in-person gathering in Atlanta, Georgia. A number of seminars will be hosted in conjunction with the conference that will build on the initiatives undertaken throughout the year; they will also complement the plenary and breakout sessions by helping to infuse the annual conference with a dynamic approach to collective learning. As noted above, ongoing considerations include how to make the conference more accessible than it currently is; whether decentralizing the conference plays a role in this regard; how to moderate the amount of energy that goes into planning a conference so that other promising lines of action are not sacrificed; and how, concurrently, to reinforce the vision that the conference is part of a larger interlinked process of learning that upholds the role of the scholar and the efforts of the friends more generally to advance the intellectual life of the community.

inspire many to attempt to correlate ideas within their fields with Bahá'í thought" (Letter dated 7 September 2015).

4. EVOLUTION OF THE PUBLICATIONS WORK

The editorial process for the *Journal of Bahá'í Studies* has evolved considerably during the last ten years, becoming not only more rigorous and systematic, but also more collaborative and more characterized by a spirit of accompaniment.

The beginning of this period was marked by a concerted effort to establish and maintain a regular publishing schedule to ensure a consistent stream of high-quality scholarly articles. JBS also shifted to an online-first publication model, facilitating access to its content. As part of this transition, previously published articles were also made available online.

In addition to these logistical improvements, JBS's Editorial Committee has seen a transformation in its mode of operation. It has expanded its previously narrow focus on soliciting and receiving articles for possible publication by individual authors; while this continues to be an important part of the Committee's work, it is now complemented by the support and accompaniment of collaborative writing projects that emerge out of other collective initiatives, such as reading groups. Examples of such endeavours are provided in Section 2 above (see the "Writing Groups" subsection). Collaborative writing lends itself to the development of thematic issues of the *Journal*, in which authors approach a common topic from a range of perspectives and benefit from each other's

insights as they develop their articles. A thematic issue of this kind has the potential to make a signal contribution to a particular area within Bahá'í studies, accelerating the development of further thought. Collaborative writing processes have so far resulted in a thematic issue on Constructive Resilience, with two other thematic issues (on science and religion, and on disciplinary methodologies) in development.

The emphasis on collaboration also extends to the committee's approach to article review, which continues to evolve to better combine a spirit of consultation and accompaniment with the rigour necessary to meet the high standards expected of an academic journal. While experience in this area is still in its early stages, a collaborative review process, in which a qualified peer reviewer consults with the author on how to strengthen his or her article, has proven to be a rich source of learning for all involved. Authors in this process express feeling supported and accompanied; reviewers gain experience in mentoring; and the Editorial Committee learns how to initiate and sustain a conversation between scholars that is at once rigorous and consultative. Authors are also being more systematically encouraged, where possible, to draw upon insights from previous articles published in JBS and other Bahá'í publications. A major objective here is to inspire authors to write in a manner that illustrates an attempt on their part to contribute to discourses that may already be grounded in valuable insights and theory.

As with JBS, ABS Publications (ABSP) is considered an integral part of the evolving network of ABS activities—reading groups, working groups, writing groups, seminars, the annual conference, among others—that both benefits from, and contributes to, their evolution. Over the last two and a half years, ABSP has been working to build an independent press that can become the preeminent publisher for Bahá'í scholars in North America who are striving to contribute to the intellectual life of the Bahá'í world. The audience for these books consists primarily of individuals seeking to understand how to advance prevalent discourses in society within and across disciplines by exploring how ideas and theories found in contemporary thought relate to Bahá'í teachings. The audience also includes individuals interested in commentary on the teachings themselves. Based on the experience of the Association with Wilfrid Laurier University Press (WLUP) and subsequent investigation into other university presses, it was concluded that it is most propitious for the Association to develop its own independent press. Notably, few authors submitted suitable manuscripts while the Association was collaborating with WLUP. Since becoming independent, ABSP has published two books, by Michael Karlberg and John Hatcher respectively, and is on course to publish at least one book per year over the next few years, building momentum and expanding from there. The ABS Publications Committee is also working on making available again

previously published books that have long been out of print, such as *Logos and Civilization* (Nader Saiedi) and *Planning Progress* (June Thomas), while select essays from *The Vision of Shoghi Effendi* (proceeding from the 9th annual ABS conference) are being considered for republication in JBS.

5. VISION OF GROWTH AND APPROACH TO LEARNING

We have learned much about the pattern of action that enables the Association to advance its work and achieve coherence among its different areas of focus. To this end, we have sought to enhance our approach to learning in action itself. Indeed, strengthening the Association's capacity to operate in a mode of learning and to nurture a culture of accompaniment has proven increasingly vital to advancing every facet of the work. While this is evident throughout this document, it is the specific focus of this section, which outlines the Association's objects of learning and discusses ways in which we have endeavoured to apply the elements of the conceptual framework highlighted by the Universal House of Justice in its 24 July 2013 message. This section also addresses how we have paid attention to the generation and application of knowledge and the subject of methodology.

5.1 OBJECTS OF LEARNING

In our effort to articulate the mandate of the Association discussed in the

introduction to this report, we concurrently sought to articulate its overarching objects of learning. In doing so, we again found inspiration by relating the experience we had accrued to date with the guidance of the 30 December 2021 message. We consequently identified six objects of learning, which are presently conceived of as follows.

The **first** object of learning is how to **multiply the number of settings and processes**—including seminars, reading groups, writing groups, and conferences—in which participants can collaborate, generate collective insights, and share learning about how “to explicate the principles” the Bahá'í community advocates, and “demonstrate their applicability to the issues facing humanity” (30 December 2021).

As alluded to in Section 2 above, which discusses these different settings in detail, questions now before us include: How can we continue to build the capacity to expand and consolidate these settings in view of the growing complexity of the work? How can we do so in a manner that also supports both individual and collaborative initiatives not formally tied to the Association? What human resources are now needed to build momentum in this area, taking into consideration the central roles that both accompaniment and systematization demonstrably play in fostering organic growth?

The **second** object of learning is how to **enable growing numbers of diverse participants**, intent “on transcending differences, harmonizing perspectives, and promoting the use of consultation”,

to assist each other to “contribute to the discourses that influence the direction of [spiritual and material] progress” (30 December 2021). The Association has long been concerned with increasing the diversity of those participating in and coordinating ABS activities. However, we gleaned from the 30 December 2021 message that it is especially important to stress this object of learning given the emphasis the Nine Year Plan places on expanding nuclei and fostering universal participation—albeit recognizing that ABS activities may not be of interest to everyone.

The Association has seen some progress in this regard, specifically owing to the emergence of reading groups and seminars that explore such themes as promoting racial harmony and the role of women in society. In addition, reading groups and seminars concerned with other themes are striving to diversify their circles of participation. The same is true of the annual conference, particularly beginning with the Atlanta conference in 2018. It is, moreover, anticipated that the plenary sessions, breakout sessions, and, to some extent, the seminars at the annual conference this year will go some way towards meeting this objective. The role of the arts (discussed below) is also understood to be vital for promoting broader involvement in ABS activities.

This progress notwithstanding, we are continually asking ourselves: How can the Association continue to encourage greater diversity of participation within its constellation of small- and large-group settings?

The **third** object of learning is to **develop an outward-looking culture** in which participants in different ABS spaces understand themselves to be actively building collaborative learning processes with scholars and professionals in the wider society, and that are concurrently aligned with the provisions of the Nine Year Plan. A major step in this regard has been the efforts of reading groups and working groups to study texts by a range of thinkers and discover points of unity between insights stemming from those texts and the teachings of the Faith. Some reading groups and working groups have also welcomed participants from the wider community, which has added greatly to the quality of their conversations. The same is true of some seminars and panels at the annual conference. There is, consequently, an emerging pattern of learning about how to go beyond inward-looking conversations and provide, “in the world of ideas, the intellectual rigour and clarity of thought to match [our] commitment to spiritual and material progress in the world of deeds” (30 December 2021). Nevertheless, we are conscious that these spaces would be further enriched through a more concerted effort to translate this outward-looking orientation into concrete practice.

Questions before us thus include: How can we promote “deep dives” on a given topic in collaboration with academics and professionals from the wider community, perhaps producing a monograph based on the proceedings (an example being the seminar

on Marxism and the Bahá’í Faith held many years ago)? How can we further involve such scholars and practitioners in spaces and processes that facilitate shared understanding regarding exigent issues of the day?

The **fourth** object of learning is how to **help young people—in particular university students and recent graduates—view participating in professional and academic discourses as a core dimension of their service that is coherent with the imperatives of community-building and social action, the objectives of the training institute, and the programs of the Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity**. While the number of youth and young adults participating in our annual conferences, seminars, and reading groups is relatively small, we are seeking to expand this engagement over time. The 24 July 2013 letter provides a vision of rising generations of youth, shaped by the institute process, who will “wholeheartedly address a wide range of intellectual challenges, overcome all pitfalls and obstacles, and render service for the betterment of the world.” Consistent with this vision, it has become clear that the prior participation of young people in the training institute, community-building process, and ISGP seminars enhances the quality of their participation in ABS spaces and endeavours.

The growing pattern of activity within ABS concurrently provides an increasing range of opportunities for young people to develop their abilities to participate in professional

and academic discourses. Fostering both discipline-specific forms of engagement (particularly among former ISGP participants) as well as patterns of mentorship within professional and academic spaces appear to be distinct contributions the Association can make. Recent efforts along these lines have included the development of an economics seminar that assists students to scrutinize the assumptions underlying their fields through the lens of the Bahá'í teachings (see earlier discussion in Section 2). This seminar has been offered several times to small groups of undergraduate students, and it has proven fruitful. Based on this experience, and as noted earlier, another group is developing materials examining the materialistic assumptions that are often overlaid onto the study of evolution and neuroscience. These materials are also meant to assist young adults studying in relevant fields.

Questions before us regarding this object of learning include: What are effective ways to reach and engage undergraduate, graduate students, and young professionals, particularly in view of the many demands on their time? How can we ensure that the Association's efforts to this end are coherent with the other ways young adults are contributing to the Plan? How can we promote a culture of learning in which more experienced academics encourage and mentor younger scholars in their efforts to participate in discourses and advance research relevant to their chosen fields of study? Also, how can we better coordinate our efforts with ISGP,

whose participants emerge from its seminars eager to find discipline-specific spaces in which they can continue building their capacity to participate in discourses of interest to them.

The **fifth** object of learning is how to **assist a growing number of authors to publish articles and books contributing to “the volume of high-quality literature”** that fosters the “intellectual life” of the Bahá'í community by 1) exploring “certain disciplines” and various themes “in the light of the teachings” (Universal House of Justice, Ridván 2021) and the experience of the community, and 2) correlating insights drawn from the wider society with related themes found in the writings of the Faith. This object of learning, we understand, is consistent with the following statement of Shoghi Effendi:

It is hoped that all the Bahá'í students will ... be led to investigate and analyze the principles of the Faith and to correlate them with modern aspects of philosophy and science. Every intelligent and thoughtful young Bahá'í should always approach the Cause in this way, for therein lies the very essence of the principle of independent investigation of truth. (Quoted in a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice dated 19 October 1993)

Towards this end, the JBS Editorial Committee continues to advance its learning in the areas described in Section 4, “Evolution of the

publications work,” above. These areas include the encouragement of collaborative writing and the shepherding of thematic issues towards publication; the exploration of the possibilities of collaborative review for strengthening both rigour and a consultative approach to scholarship; and the fostering of a greater historical awareness of prior Bahá’í scholarship. These processes are all in their early stages of development; they have already produced significant results and contributed to advances in the Editorial Committee’s understanding and operations, but much more remains to be learned.

The work of ABS Publications has thus far focused on manuscripts by individual authors, but the Publications Committee is alert to opportunities to learn about collaboration in both writing and review. More central to its pursuit of the object of learning noted above is its continuing development of the capacity to work with multiple authors concurrently on projects at various stages of development. One particular question before both JBS and ABSP concerns writing projects that are of an intermediate length—that is, longer than a typical JBS article but shorter than a book. In the early years of ABS, this type of writing was published in monograph form; more recently, pieces of this nature have found a home in JBS. Both the Editorial Committee and the Publications Committee are considering whether it might be timely to revive the monograph, or a similar form, providing a shorter time horizon to publication than is possible with a book.

At this point, additional considerations related to advancing this object of learning include questions such as: How can we concurrently uphold the integrity of the content and standards of JBS while also encouraging writing that reaches a wider, more diverse, audience—that is, while advancing towards the goal of universal participation? Are there different types of writing and/or other media spaces that would facilitate learning about contributing to academic and related discourses—specifically, are there spaces that would enable reading group participants to contribute writing without burdening them with overly-stringent academic standards? What would it look like to promote more inquiry and writing that draws upon and harmonizes insights accruing across different collective initiatives?

The **sixth** object of learning is **how to draw, where appropriate, on the arts as a means of “disseminating knowledge and consolidating understanding”** (30 December 2021). On this point, and particularly in view of this guidance from the Universal House of Justice, the Association is endeavouring to be more systematic in learning about how the arts consolidate understanding within various fields of inquiry, and how they promote a humble posture of learning in so doing.

The Association has sponsored seminars and working groups focused on discourses related to the arts in order to encourage capacity building among those professionally and academically involved in this area. In these settings,

groups have explored historical and theoretical discourses that examine the nature of the relationship between art and society, the role of the artist in society, and insights from the Revelation pertaining to artistic endeavours. Based on the learning generated in these contexts and other consultative spaces, and in view of relevant guidance of the Universal House of Justice, we have identified three connected areas of inquiry: How can the arts be more effectively integrated into various ABS spaces? What are artists themselves learning regarding advancing discourses about the arts? And how can the arts play a direct role in disseminating learning pertaining to various discourses?

Like seminars and working groups, the annual conference offers an important setting for the advancement of these areas of inquiry. This summer's conference features a plenary panel and several breakout sessions focused on the arts and their place in expansion and consolidation endeavors. We anticipate that ideas and concepts emerging from these presentations will quicken our ongoing learning in the three areas of arts-related inquiry outlined above. In particular, we are eager to learn much more about how the arts can be integrated into ABS spaces in a way that inspires universal participation as well as "intellectual rigour and clarity of thought."

5.2 ELEMENTS OF THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

A preeminent factor in the development of the Association has been our

conscious attempt to both clarify and apply elements of the conceptual framework in accordance with paragraph 5 of the 24 July 2013 message. In this paragraph, the House of Justice states:

Central to the effort to advance the work of expansion and consolidation, social action, and the involvement in the discourses of society is the notion of an evolving conceptual framework, a matrix that organizes thought and gives shape to activities and which becomes more elaborate as experience accumulates. It would be fruitful if the elements of this framework most relevant to the work of the Associations for Bahá'í Studies can be consciously and progressively clarified.

Below, we consider each of the eight elements the House of Justice then proceeds to list, briefly outlining how they have come to shape our mode of functioning as an organization. While the letter does not suggest that these elements are exhaustive, they are presented as the most salient ones for ABS to learn about at this point in its development.

The **first** element is **the relationship between study and action**. This element is a growing feature of the different settings discussed above. For example, we are learning in small settings like reading groups and seminars to conceive of what we read and correlate with the guidance as part of the study

component of this dynamic. With these insights in mind, the attempt to then participate in the relevant discourse is the action component of this dynamic; this could take the form of, for example, the simple act of engaging in a discussion with a colleague, or writing on a related subject. Such action can in turn inform subsequent discussions in the group and enable deeper study of the text and the correlated guidance. We are still at the early stages of cultivating this dynamic, but there is evidence that it is taking hold in various groups. Some group members, for example, are finding ways to link their discussions to social action. Others are striving to ensure that they are more outward-oriented, both in terms of what they are studying and with whom they are acting and collaborating.

In addition, it has become clearer over the past ten years that the Association's mode of learning advances when there are sufficient spaces for reflection. These include quarterly reflection meetings as well as regular smaller meetings and informal discussions that bring together the different committees and collaborators to share insights and review progress, challenges, and opportunities for growth, and study relevant guidance. For example, as we resume an annual in-person conference with several seminars and breakout sessions featuring learning generated within various small group settings throughout the year, the level of collaboration between the Conference Committee and CCI has correspondingly increased. We have

also made a conscious effort within these spaces, and particularly the larger reflection gatherings, to turn to the guidance as a lens through which to understand our experience, our current realities, and the vistas of possibility emerging before us. Our motivation to do so increased with the release of the 30 December 2021 message. We have additionally made some efforts to study Ruhi Books 13 and 14. Studying such guidance has helped us to further appreciate that reading reality and acting to transform it must go hand in hand.

The **second** element is **the need for focus**. There is still much to be learned about how to focus our energies, particularly given our human resources. For example, we have identified several priorities, but have not been able to adequately attend to all of them, such as working more closely with students on university campuses or with academics and professionals from the wider community on exigent issues. However, we are building capacity to concentrate on various lines of action and to better appreciate how they and the corresponding activities are mutually enriching—how, for example, seminars, reading groups, writing projects, other smaller collective endeavours, the conference, and publishing, are related, feed into, and benefit from each other. Moreover, the vision and objects of learning we have identified as an association (see Section 5.1) have both emerged out of, and further shaped, which lines of action we have chosen to assiduously pursue—recognizing, of course, that accumulating experience and regular

input from participants and collaborators may disclose new prospects worth exploring.

The **third** element is **the challenge of fostering capacity and accompanying others in service**. It has become evident that a posture of accompaniment is central to eliciting insights; building momentum; removing, and learning from, obstacles; fostering capacity; and promoting organic growth. As noted under Sections 2 and 4 above, this posture has played a significant role in the development of reading groups, working groups, and, more recently, writing groups. An objective now is to expand the nucleus of friends who can accompany a widening network of facilitators, who can in turn help with encouraging and coordinating the expansion and consolidation of a growing number of collaborative settings that “operate . . . on the principle of universal participation” (OSED, 26 November 2012).

The **fourth** element is **the dynamics of organic development**. As is implicit in the foregoing comments, this element of the framework has proven vital to all aspects of the Association’s work. For example, as noted in Section 2 above, a newly formed reading group is encouraged to see itself as a setting that aims to advance understanding about contributing to a particular discourse. At the outset, the group is encouraged not to take on too much. Rather, its main objective is to create a consultative space in which participants can reflectively develop their capacity to correlate ideas from the

text they are reading with passages from the writings, with their own experience, and with the insights of their fellow participants. At the same time, the group is encouraged to view itself as part of a larger learning process, growing and developing in conjunction with other ABS endeavours. Again, as we gain more experience with these groups and other specialized settings, a question before us is how to multiply these endeavours in a way that strikes a healthy balance between centralization and decentralization and is attuned to all the elements of the conceptual framework discussed in this section.

The **fifth** element consists of **the institutional arrangements necessary to sustain ever more complex patterns of activity**. To address the complexity of current patterns of activity, the institutional arrangements have evolved into the following configuration: the Executive Committee; the Committee for Collaborative Initiatives, which coordinates the settings described under Section 2 and related lines of action; the *Journal of Bahá'í Studies* Editorial Committee; the ABS Publications Committee, which focuses on publishing books; the Conference Committee; and various ad hoc and/or short-term task forces. In addition, the number of remunerated ABS staff (now equaling approximately 4.0 full-time employees) has had to grow given the continental mandate of the Association and the evolving complexity of the work. Much of the work entails collaborating with hosts of individuals volunteering their time and energy to facilitate or

coordinate reading groups, working groups, collaborative projects, workshops, seminars, elements of the conference, writing endeavours, and so on. The list of volunteers has been slowly expanding in response. However, we are finding that building a vibrant network of volunteers requires those serving in remunerated positions and close collaborators to devote substantial time to supporting, analyzing, synthesizing, and disseminating learning.

Also critical to advancing the work of the Association has been the systematization of its administrative practices. We have paid significant attention to establishing suitably coherent processes supported by apposite technological solutions. The administrative work involves the provision of support to the Executive Committee and other committees and includes attending to logistical matters related to the annual conference and seminars, book-keeping, managing data, maintaining the website, facilitating the editorial process, keeping minutes, handling correspondence, providing IT support, and carrying out other sundry tasks. As the work of the Association evolves, the volume of the administrative work naturally grows, too. Given the advances over the last ten years, and particularly over the last three years, the question of the human resources required to sustain growth and manage the escalating administrative needs of the organization is a regular topic of consultation. To this end, the National Spiritual Assembly of Canada has lovingly encouraged the Association to

be judicious yet clear about its needs going forward, indicating that meeting them is a priority.

The **sixth** element is **the coherence required among all areas of endeavour**. As stated above, the Association has been striving to further articulate its approach to identifying and refining objects of learning, setting goals, and documenting experience and decisions. We have been regularly reflecting on, and identifying, next steps for each line of action; assessing the coherence between these lines of action and how they contribute to and profit from each other; and developing a robust system for the retention, updating, and flow of information. This sixth element we view as tied to the **seventh** element, which consists of **sound relations among individuals, the community, and the institutions**. Here, a major objective of the Executive Committee—still very much in development—has been to facilitate the creation of plans of action for each of the Association’s areas of focus; to disseminate learning across its committees as appropriate; to create spaces for the ongoing generation of insights aimed at articulating an evolving unity of vision of growth; to consult with and accompany staff members and collaborators in their efforts to further coordinate their work; and to explore possibilities with, and receive guidance from, the senior institutions—all of which, finally, is directly related to the **eighth** element of the framework, namely, **learning in action**.

As alluded to throughout this

document, we have been making a conscious effort to read reality through the lens of relevant guidance, to build on strengths, and to cultivate “an ongoing process of action, reflection, study, and consultation to address obstacles and share successes, re-examine and revise strategies and methods, and systematize and improve efforts over time” (24 July 2013). We have certainly not mastered this process, but we feel confident in affirming that we are now much more cognizant than we were ten years ago of the power of learning in action to engender growth in the intellectual life of the community, and of the elements involved in doing so. We are similarly more aware that “[a]s unity of thought around essential concepts emerges [it is] useful to explore fresh approaches with some simple steps that can grow in complexity. Gradually, those aspects of the conceptual framework pertaining to intellectual inquiry in diverse fields will become clearer and grow richer” (24 July 2013). These aspects, we believe, have become clearer. They have, consequently, empowered us to more effectively learn how to learn as an association.

5.3 GENERATING AND APPLYING KNOWLEDGE

In the next paragraph of the 24 July 2013 message, the House of Justice goes on to explain that “One of the critical aspects of a conceptual framework that will require careful attention in the years ahead is the generation and application of knowledge . . . At

the heart of most disciplines of human knowledge is a degree of consensus about methodology—an understanding of methods and how to use them appropriately to systematically investigate reality to achieve reliable results and sound conclusions.” As the previous sections of this retrospective attest, this aspect of the framework has received attention in at least three ways. First, within the various settings described under Sections 2 and 3 above, the Association has made a concerted effort to enable participants to “reflect on the implications that the truths found in the Revelation may hold for their work” and related discourses. The degree to which this has been achieved has naturally varied from setting to setting and depends upon many factors, such as the duration of the setting or process of inquiry, the experience and time availability of the participants, and the quality of the consultative environment that is created.

Second, we have—particularly in more recent years—focused on expanding our understanding of, and applying, the elements of the conceptual framework required to promote the evolution of the Association itself. In addition to those discussed in the previous subsection (5.2), and in view of the conviction that those engaged in scholarly pursuits “are not exempt from the obligations placed upon any believer” (24 July 2013), we have taken to heart the importance of framing participation in the Association’s activities in line with the Universal House of Justice’s descriptions of enkindled

souls in recent messages. These souls

emphasize qualities and attitudes—such as trustworthiness, cooperation, and forbearance—that are building blocks of a stable social order. They champion rationality and science as essential for human progress. They advocate tolerance and understanding, and with the inherent oneness of humanity uppermost in their minds, they view everyone as a potential partner to collaborate with. . . . (30 December 2021)

Ablaze with divine love, they also strive to disseminate this love

through intimate conversations that create new susceptibilities in human hearts, open minds to moral persuasion, and loosen the hold of biased norms and social systems so that they can gradually take on a new form in keeping with the requirements of humanity’s age of maturity. (22 July 2020)

Third, with a view towards exploring spaces for learning and addressing the vital question of methodologies, the Executive Committee, along with two key collaborators, organized three two-day seminars (2019-21) for graduate students and faculty to assemble and explore the question of methodology within their respective fields and to discuss the implications of the Revelation for this facet of scholarship. Each seminar built on the learning of

the year prior. All three functioned as spaces to consolidate and share insights both within and across disciplinary groups. Throughout the year, in advance of each seminar, participants, organized in disciplinary groups, held online meetings (some more frequently than others) to discuss assigned pre-readings and related questions on themes such as the harmony of science and religion, the limits of objectivity, the nature of knowledge, the implications of materialism for various fields of study, and the qualities and attitudes they want to adopt when participating in the generation of knowledge. These seminars also gave birth to a couple of collaborative initiatives and writing groups, including one on social science methodologies discussed under Sections 2 and 4 above. Plans are currently being made for another methodology seminar to be held in the fall of 2023.

6. A LIFETIME OF INQUIRY

Towards the end of the 24 July 2013 message, the House of Justice stresses the pivotal role of the training institute, but then explains that “whatever the scope of its curriculum and no matter how fundamental it is to the progress of the community, involvement in the institute is only a part of a lifetime of inquiry in which these friends will be engaged—one that will include exploration of the Revelation as well as various disciplines of knowledge.” As such, the House of Justice “looks to rising generations of Bahá’ís to

wholeheartedly address a wide range of intellectual challenges, overcome all pitfalls and obstacles, and render service for the betterment of the world”; anticipates that “in the decades ahead...a host of believers will enter diverse social spaces and fields of human endeavour”; and asserts that “[t]o this arena, pregnant with possibilities, the Association for Bahá'í Studies can offer an important contribution.”

We have been learning how participating in the institute constructively affects the work of the Association and how immersing ourselves in its methods and approaches further propels this work forward. Ruhi Book 14 is directly relevant in this regard, but so are other books, such as Ruhi Books 2, 10, and 13. Together, they help to further attune us to the elements of the framework that bear directly on promoting the intellectual life of the community and, hence, the mandate of the Association itself.

These books also assist in disclosing to us the degree to which this arena is pregnant with possibilities—particularly now, given both the momentum being generated around North America as the friends apply the elements of the Nine Year Plan, and the growing contingents of youth and young adults benefiting from the programs of ISGP. As noted above, these programs have shaped how participants are thinking about their lives and intellectual development, as well as how they are adopting and applying the conceptual framework. Such developments bode well for the Association as it seeks to

build on the approaches and content of the institute, thus further enabling participants to “enter diverse social spaces and fields of human endeavour” (24 July 2013), “explicate the principles” the Bahá'í community advocates, and “demonstrate their applicability to the issues facing humanity” (30 December 2021).

APPENDIX A:

SMALL GROUP INITIATIVES

WORKSHOP SESSIONS

2021

Facilitator preparatory sessions: 3
(26 participants)

Workshop sessions: 14
(112 participants)

2022

Facilitator preparatory sessions: 2
(10 participants)

Workshop sessions: 13
(145 participants)

2023

Facilitator prep sessions: 1
(7 participants)

Workshop sessions: 6 as of July 2023
(42 participants)

READING GROUPS

2020

1. Achieving Coherence in Media
2. Arts and the Pandemic
3. Business Capital, Access, and Justice
4. Business Management

- | | |
|--|---|
| 5. Commodification of Knowledge | 11. Southern California Media Professionals |
| 6. Constructive Agency | 12. Speculative Fiction |
| 7. Education | 13. Storytelling and Cinema |
| 8. Evolving Role of Law Enforcement | 14. Technology and Society I |
| 9. Ideological Foundations of Racism and Crime/Deviance | 15. Book: <i>The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and The Making of American Capitalism</i> by Edward E. Baptist |
| 10. Inquiries into World Order | 16. The Village Storehouse |
| 11. International Property Law | 17. Transdisciplinarity and the Intersection of Scientific and Spiritual/Religious Knowledge Systems in Public Health I |
| 12. Jurisprudence | 18. Urbanism: Housing |
| 13. Justice in the Age of Globalization | 19. Virtue, Freedom, and Community: Insights from Influential Women Thinkers I—Simone Weil |
| 14. Minds, Brains, and Consciousness | |
| 15. Questioning Econ 101 | |
| 16. Race, Africanity, and the Bahá'í Faith | |
| 17. Science, Religion and the Generation of Knowledge (2 groups) | |
| 18. Teaching Economics After Covid | |
| 19. Youth, Narrative Media, and Cultural Production | |

Total number of participants: 154

Total number of participants: 206

2021

1. Building Structural Competency in the Classroom and Clinical Setting
2. Climate Change
3. Climate Crisis Narratives
4. Education for Social Justice in the Age of Globalization
5. Examining Health Equity
6. Exploring the Role of Asian Pacific Islanders in Eradicating Anti-Blackness
7. Book: *Food Security: From Excess to Enough* by Ralph C. Martin
8. Book: *Moral Empowerment: In Quest of a Pedagogy* by Sona Arbab I
9. Narrative and Ethics
10. Reparations and Reconciliation

2022

1. Adolescent Nutrition
2. Chaos, Complexity, and the Natural/Human Sciences
3. Climate Change and the Environment
4. Crisis and Opportunity: Towards a Vision of Sustainable Global Development
5. Book: *Eating the Landscape: American Indian Stories of Food, Identity, and Resilience* by Enrique Salmón
6. Critiques of Capitalism
7. Discourses of Diplomacy I
8. Book: *Farming While Black: Soul Fire Farm's Practical Guide to Liberation on the Land* by Leah Penniman
9. Book: *Finding the Mother Tree*, by

- Suzanne Simard
10. Book: *Food, Farmer, and Community: Agriculture and the Reconstruction of the World*, by Winnona Merritt
 11. Book: *Freedom Farmers: Agriculture Resistance and the Black Freedom Movement* by Monica White
 12. Historical and Philosophical Understanding of Complexity, Emergence, and Chaos
 13. Book: *How To Feed The World*, edited by Jessica Eise and Ken Foster
 14. Investigations into Media, Knowledge, and Culture
 15. Just and Sustainable Artificial Intelligence I
 16. Book: *Life in the Soil: A Guide for Naturalists and Gardeners* by James B. Nardi
 17. Book: *Moral Empowerment: In Quest of a Pedagogy* by Sona Arbab II
 18. Nature of Work I
 19. Nature of Work II
 20. News Articles on Climate and Agriculture
 21. Overcoming Material and Spiritual Barriers to Racial Unity: Reviewing *The Sum of Us* by Heather McGhee I
 22. Psychology of Social Change
 23. Book: *Resetting the Table: Straight Talk About the Food We Grow and Eat* by Robert Paarlberg
 24. Technology and Society II
 25. Transdisciplinarity and the Intersection of Scientific and Spiritual / Religious Knowledge Systems in Public Health II
 26. Book: *Unbowed, A Memoir* by Wangari Maathai
 27. Urbanism: Community & Wellbeing
 28. Urbanism: Neighbourhood & Community
 29. Virtue, Freedom, and Community: Insights from Influential Women Thinkers II—Hannah Arendt
 30. Virtue, Freedom, and Community: Insights from Influential Women Thinkers III—Iris Murdoch
 31. Whiteness and Patriarchy: Weeding Out Barriers to Oneness, Cultivating Justice and Authenticity, I
 32. World Citizenship as a Performative Revolutionary Act
 33. World Government Narratives
- Total number of participants: 269
- 2023 (AS OF JULY 24)
1. Discourses of Diplomacy II: Identifying Correlations with Bahá'í Concepts
 2. Books: *How to Feed the World*, Edited by Jessica Eise and Ken Foster and *Food, Farmer, and Community: Agriculture and the Reconstruction of the World*, compiled by Winnona Merritt
 3. Indigenous Studies
 4. Just and Sustainable Artificial Intelligence II
 5. Just and Sustainable Artificial Intelligence III
 6. Looking at Community Building from an Evolutionary Perspective: Contributions from Anthropology and Neuroscience
 7. Methodological Approaches to the Study of Religion

- within the Discipline of History: An Examination of Religion and Speculative Approaches in the Works of Arnold Toynbee
8. Overcoming Material and Spiritual Barriers to Racial Unity: Reviewing *The Sum of Us* by Heather McGhee II
 9. Book: *Regenesi: Feeding the World Without Devouring the Planet* by George Monbiot
 10. Book: *Reinventing Organizations: A Guide to Creating Organizations Inspired by the Next Stage of Human Consciousness* by Frédéric Laloux
 11. Speech/Language Pathology
 12. Storytelling and Cinema
 13. Technology and Society III
 14. The Modern Intellectual Tradition I: From the Scientific Revolution to Immanuel Kant
 15. The Modern Intellectual Tradition II: From German Idealism to Nietzsche
 16. The Nature of Work: Perspectives of Race, Gender, Education, and Justice
 17. The Role of Women in Society: An Exploration of Mothers as the First Educators, Equality, and Social Change
 18. Book: *The Systems View of Life: A Unifying Vision* by Fritjof Capra and Pier Luigi Luisi
 19. Towards Vibrant Communities and Gardening
 20. Transdisciplinarity and the Intersection of Scientific and Spiritual / Religious Knowledge Systems in Public Health III
 21. Whiteness and Patriarchy: Weeding Out Barriers to Oneness, Cultivating Justice and Authenticity II
- Total number of participants to date: 219*
- SEMINARS
- 2016
1. Education
 2. Health
- 2017
- Working Group Seminars*
1. Health Working Group (WG)
 2. Economies WG
 3. Law WG
 4. Media WG
- Thematic Seminars*
1. Religion and Society
- Total number of participants: 122*
- 2018
- Working Group Seminars*
1. Health WG
 2. Law WG
 3. Media WG
 4. Technology WG
- Total number of participants: 149*
- 2019
- Working Group Seminars*
1. Economies WG
 2. Health WG (a)
 3. Health WG (b)
 4. Law WG

5. Media WG

Thematic Seminars

1. Methodologies in Academic Research
2. Propaganda
3. The Bahá'í Faith and Liberalism
4. Education

Total number of participants: 258

2020

1. Business
2. Methodologies in Academic Research

Total number of participants: 52

2021

Working Group Seminars

1. Media WG (seminar and symposium)

Thematic Seminars

1. Questioning Econ 101
2. Methodologies in Academic Research

Total number of participants: 170

2022

Working Group Seminars

1. Africana Studies WG
2. Health WG
3. Media WG

Thematic Seminars

1. Climate Change
2. Cooperatives and Next Systems

3. Narrative and Local Storytelling
4. Resilient Communities
5. Science and Religion

Total number of participants: 136

2023 (AS OF JULY 24)

Thematic Seminars

1. A Revelation Scientific in Its Method
2. Brain, Behavior, and Mental Health in Youth: Exploring Underlying Frameworks and Forces
3. Climate Change and the Environment
4. Collective Inquiry and Social Action: Considering Participatory Action Research in Theory and Practice
5. Engaging Introductory Economics from a Bahá'í Perspective
6. Health Equity
7. Navigating Materialist Assumptions in the Study of Biology
8. Technology and Society
9. Telling the Story of an Evolving World Order
10. The Commodification of Knowledge
11. Trust: The Investigation of Truth and Health Care Delivery
12. Methodologies in Academic Research (in planning)

Total number of participants to date: 202

Learning to Sift: Reflections on Ten Years of Engaging with the Economics Discourse

JORDAN VAN RIJN¹

Abstract

In the decade since the Universal House of Justice wrote its 24 July 2013 message regarding the activities and direction of the Association for Bahá'í Studies, several collaborators have experimented with various approaches to engagement with the

discourse on economics. These efforts have included the collective reading of, and reflection on, various textbooks and articles around a particular theme; the development of a heuristic to help participants acquire the collective capacity to read a discourse; the writing of a document to facilitate seminars intended to help undergraduates studying economics understand “Economics 101” principles in light of the Bahá'í conceptual framework; and the initial examination of experimental methodologies in the economics discipline. A number of preliminary insights have emerged from these activities. This paper documents the experience of this collaborative group, and highlights key areas of learning that may be of assistance to others engaged in similar processes.

Résumé

Au cours de la décennie qui s'est écoulée depuis le message du 24 juillet 2013 de la Maison universelle de justice concernant l'orientation et les activités de l'Association d'études bahá'íes, plusieurs collaborateurs ont expérimenté diverses approches pour contribuer aux discussions sur l'économie. Ces mesures comprenaient la lecture et l'analyse, en groupe, de manuels et d'articles sur un thème particulier; le développement d'une heuristique pour aider les participants à acquérir la capacité à mieux cerner le discours sur un sujet donné; la rédaction d'un document pour l'animation de séminaires visant à aider les étudiants de premier cycle universitaire en économie à comprendre les principes d'« Économie 101 » à la lumière du cadre conceptuel bahá'í, et l'examen initial de méthodes expérimentales dans le domaine de l'économie. Ces activités ont permis de dégager un certain nombre de concepts préliminaires. Dans le présent article,

1 Although this article was principally written by the author, the insights and reflections herein are the result of a collective effort that includes the contributions of many others, including Selvi Adaikkalam Zabihi, Sébastien Box-Couillard, Anissa Collishaw, Stefan Faridani, Holly Hanson, Nazanin Ho, Cameron Milani, Shirin Nikaein, Vesall Nourani, Anis Ragland, Navid Sabet, Andres Shahidinejad, Ryan Siegel, and others. Therefore, I often use “we” throughout the document to refer to this collective process, and have drawn on many notes, proposals and other documents written by various individuals. Nonetheless, although I attempt to include others' reflections when available, I do not claim that this document is a completely accurate expression of the collective's reflections and insights—which would be challenging to obtain at this time—and others involved in this process may naturally have different observations and conclusions.

l'auteur relate l'expérience de ce groupe de collaborateurs et souligne les principales leçons qu'ils en ont tiré et qui pourraient être utiles à d'autres personnes engagées dans des processus similaires.

Resumen

En la década desde que la Casa Universal de Justicia escribió en su mensaje del 24 de julio de 2013 acerca de las actividades y la dirección de la Asociación para Estudios Baha'is, varios colaboradores han experimentado algunos abordajes acerca del involucramiento con el discurso sobre la economía. Estos esfuerzos han incluido la lectura colectiva de, y la reflexión sobre, varios libros de texto y artículos alrededor de un tópico en particular; el desarrollo de una heurística para ayudar a los participantes adquirir la capacidad colectiva de leer un discurso; el escribir un documento para facilitar seminarios que tienen la intención de ayudar a los estudiantes de pregrado de economía comprender los principios de "Economía 101" a la luz del marco conceptual Baha'í; y la prueba inicial de las metodologías experimentales en la disciplina de economía. Un número de comprensiones preliminares han emergido de estas actividades. Este artículo documenta la experiencia de este grupo colaborativo, y expone áreas claves de aprendizaje que pueden ser de ayuda a otros involucrados en procesos similares.

This paper is a humble attempt to share the author's personal reflections on engaging in various spaces and groups related to the Association for Bahá'í Studies' (ABS) efforts to learn about implementing the Universal House of Justice's guidance in its 24 July

2013 letter to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Canada. Specifically, the letter encourages every Bahá'í to "examine the forces operating in society and introduce relevant aspects of the teachings within the discourses prevalent in whatever social space he or she is present," and inspired ABS to create "specialized settings" in which Bahá'ís involved in various disciplines can "reflect on the implications that the truths found in the Revelation may hold for their work." ABS was guided to "explore fresh approaches," such as "small seminars to assist individuals from certain professions or academic disciplines to examine some aspect of the discourse of their field"; "special interest groups" that could hold "gatherings to intensify their efforts"; and "periodic communications or follow-up meetings" to "increase the effectiveness of the participation of these groups of individuals in aspects of the discourse in their chosen fields." Encouraged and inspired by this guidance, in 2013 a small group of collaborators involved in the field of economics as graduate students, practitioners and academics created an initial goal of examining some aspect of the economics discourse from a Bahá'í perspective. What follows is an attempt to document the processes by which our group set about this goal, and to reflect on challenges that arose, and insights that emerged. It is my hope that this paper may be useful, not only to those interested in engaging in this particular discourse, but more broadly to anyone already taking up, or hoping to take up,

the invitation of the Universal House of Justice in its above-mentioned letter. The experiences discussed here are of course only one example of what efforts in this area can look like, and are offered in the spirit of collective learning.

INITIAL ATTEMPTS AT ENGAGING WITH THE ECONOMICS DISCOURSE

ESTABLISHING UNITY OF THOUGHT AS A BASIS FOR COLLECTIVE INQUIRY

Our group almost immediately faced several challenging questions: Which area of economics should we focus on? How are we to practically examine some aspect of a discourse? Given that many academics devote their entire careers to reading and engaging in a discourse, how could we make progress given that we might only meet once or twice per month for an hour or two? Faced with these questions, we decided that we should simply start, confident that through the “ongoing process of action, reflection, study, and consultation” we would make progress.

We began by focusing on the issue of inequality, given the well-known Bahá’í teachings related to reducing extremes of wealth and poverty, and some of the members’ personal interest and experience in this area. We identified a few academic articles that seemed particularly influential in the discourse, and read *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* by Thomas Piketty, a very popular and influential book that had contributed to a renewed

focus on inequality and its causes in the academic discourse and wider community. To organize our group’s collective exploration of these texts, we identified four questions that initially framed our inquiry into this discourse: (i) What are the key concepts discussed in each work? (ii) What are the assumptions and interpretations being invoked? (iii) What valid insights can we draw? (iv) What methodological framework was employed? Following cycles of action and consultation², the group came to the conclusion that, while these questions proved useful in pooling thoughts from the individual members of the group, it was evident that the insights and responses to these questions were biased by each member’s individual academic training and prior experience. The group found it difficult to examine an existing discourse in which the language, assumptions, methodologies and conclusions were derived from the discourse itself, as each participant was influenced by his or her own education, training and background. For example, the definition of “inequality” has a precise meaning in the economics discourse—and in other disciplines—that may be quite distinct from what is intended in the Bahá’í writings. Even the term “economics” itself, as used by

2 In the context of this early examination of a discourse, the cycle of action, reflection, study, and consultation was naturally simplified, with “action” consisting of reading and reflecting on the texts individually, prior to sharing insights collectively. The cycle naturally became more complex with later efforts.

academic economists, is replete with connotations stemming from their specific academic discipline. In fact, for some time we decided to avoid the term “economics” altogether for the less laden term “economies.” How were we to use the language in this discourse when we had no common understanding of what the terms meant, and the prevalent definitions had embedded within them the very underlying assumptions we wanted to examine? The group valued the pooling of insights, but this preliminary action did not lead towards unity of thought. We wanted to think as a collective body, and not limit our collective thought to the sum of its limited parts.

The group determined that it would attempt to establish a collective thought process by returning to the motivating force behind its existence: Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation. Thus, it established a new goal: to begin to elucidate core elements of a framework that guides an inquiry into economics, derived from the Revelation and authoritative sources of guidance branching therefrom. To aid this process, the group began by asking: What are some of the key concepts, metaphors and images in the Writings that can guide our inquiry into economics? After reading a number of Bahá'í texts, compiling relevant quotes, and writing reflections on this question, the group again realized that such a question, perhaps by design, was effective at pooling individual insights, but less effective at organizing a system of collective inquiry around a discourse. Thus, in

2016, the group developed the document *An Evolving Heuristic for the Collective Exploration of Discourses on Economies*. The document's intention was to help participants develop a collective ability to engage in a discourse and describe any economy, including developing a common language that would allow us to think with one mind, using words that we all understood, and which did not have assumptions about economic processes and values encoded in them.

The heuristic asked participants to reflect on two main questions: How do we collectively learn about the nature of economies from the accumulated knowledge published by scholars, experts, technicians, and communities who think deeply about the nature of economic systems? How do we collectively contribute thoughts inspired by the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh to help evolve thinking along these lines? To explore these questions, we first created our own definitions of the terms “actors,” “objects,” “forces,” and “spaces” of an economy or economic system, and then considered the relationships and interconnectedness between them. Using these definitions, we returned to the greater discourse on inequality and read some articles and Bahá'í texts while considering the following questions:

1. Who are the actors implicitly exercising agency in the economy described in these particular texts?
2. What objects are utilized in this economy?

3. What are the main forces perceived to be in operation in this economy?
4. What spaces are outlined by the authors in this economy?
5. What is the objective of the described space?
6. Which forces does each space magnify? How does it magnify the influence of these forces?
7. What kinds of decisions do the forces compel actors to make?

The insights gained from the use of this evolving heuristic were profound on multiple (unexpected) levels. For example, despite the fact that some of the participants did not have robust academic backgrounds, they were all able to contribute thoughts and experiences relevant to our exercise of describing academic articles using our common vocabulary. Another profound insight from one of the participants was that he felt he was able to read the articles in a dispassionate light using the evolving heuristic while simultaneously identifying key assumptions made by the authors. In other words, he did not read the articles, as he normally did, by trying to identify which aspects of the articles he agreed with and which he did not.

By using the heuristic to analyze both academic texts and Bahá'í writings, we were able to construct descriptions of economies using a language common to both sources that allowed for clearer identification of correlations between the two. We felt

that our discussion was able to utilize this common language, and, in so doing, move us closer to the collective thought process we were seeking when we decided to undertake this exercise. The recognition of the heuristic as one that was evolving helped us feel empowered to learn how to construct a common language rather than dwell on whether the language was adequate.

EARLY EFFORTS TO EXAMINE THE DISCOURSE ON INEQUALITY ON THE BASIS OF SHARED UNDERSTANDING

After utilizing the heuristic with a small group of interested participants at the 2016 ABS conference, we established the goal of creating ongoing sub-groups, organized by time zone, that would choose articles and books to read on the subject of economic inequality, and analyze them using the evolving heuristic as well as related Bahá'í material. The purpose was to collectively explore a prevalent discourse in society—economic inequality—and, after first achieving unity of thought by examining this discourse using a common evolving heuristic, to then identify elements of this discourse that correlated with insights from Bahá'í Revelation and related guidance. We set a goal for each sub-group to summarize five to ten articles on economic inequality, developing short statements that, to the best of the group's ability, used the evolving heuristic to describe insights from the articles. We aimed to then compile these articles at an in-person meeting with

all the various sub-groups, in order to synthesize insights from the discourse.

The groups formed and engaged in their work for some time, and then gathered the following year, in January 2017, at Green Acre Bahá'í School to share reflections and insights. The following questions guided our learning process during this meeting: First, how do we engage in a coherent collective investigation of the discourses of society in light of the Revelation? And second, how do we understand economic inequality after utilizing the heuristic to read and evaluate articles from the discourse on inequality? With respect to the second question, after studying some relevant Bahá'í writings and encouraging participants to read the various articles, each group shared a brief presentation of their understanding of the discourse in light of the heuristic document, which included identifying relevant actors, objects, forces, spaces and relationships. The gathering also included a number of presentations by individual Bahá'ís regarding their attempts to correlate Bahá'í teachings with their academic research and related endeavors.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF READING GROUPS

Overall, these early attempts at engaging with the economics discourse generated substantial insights and momentum. From this gathering, a number of related initiatives resulted, including several groups that would continue to use the heuristic to explore

the economics discourse, as well as others that formed independently to study various books related to finance, economics and cooperatives. Some groups found the heuristic valuable, but others decided not to use it, either because they did not find it useful or, perhaps, because the purpose behind it was not well understood. Nonetheless, these initiatives, as well as the experience of other ABS-inspired working groups focused on various disciplines during this period of initial experimentation, generated useful learning for the Association. ABS began to actively promote the development of *reading groups* to “encourage individuals connected to a given professional or academic discourse to engage thoughtfully and rigorously with important texts in a consultative environment that aims to increase their capacity to contribute to that discourse” (“Reading Groups”). In subsequent years, many ABS reading groups would emerge focused on topics such as education, climate change, the harmony of science and religion, justice and reconciliation, law, media, public health, the dynamics of social change, and urban planning.³

But for our groups focused on economics, new challenges and questions emerged, as is common when progress is made. The questions we were confronting included: Once we build our

3 See, “Bahá'í Studies: ‘Reading Groups’ Enrich Annual ABS Conference.” For a more comprehensive list of reading groups since 2020, see Appendix A of “Ten Year Retrospective, 24 July 2023” in this issue.

capacity to read articles within a discourse, what is the next step? How can we continue to examine a discourse that is so vast? Which books and articles should be chosen? And at what point do we ourselves actively engage in the discourse and “introduce relevant aspects of the teachings,” as opposed to somewhat passively reading the existing discourse generated by others? Moreover, over the ensuing years, it became difficult to maintain the various groups. One particular challenge was that membership would often change and attendance was inconsistent, which made it difficult for groups to progress in their collective understanding. One early insight was the importance of designating a facilitator who would organize the groups, lead the discussion, maintain the meeting schedule, and send reminders and updates. Naturally, however, some facilitators would move on to other endeavors and it was often difficult to find individuals to replace them. It was also difficult to sustain motivation and enthusiasm when groups were reading together but were not actively engaged in some form of service or output. Although groups were encouraged to begin writing reflections, notes, and other documents, writing as a collective often proved quite challenging, as each individual had a different understanding of the purpose of the exercise and varying degrees of ability to dedicate the time required to write, review and edit in a way that ensured progress and reflected the collective views of the group. Thus, many groups naturally

dissolved as progress stalled, participation fell, and enthusiasm waned. Indeed, it was challenging to develop and maintain the unity of thought and enthusiasm required to sustain a long-term commitment when the required steps for understanding and engaging in a discourse remained somewhat nebulous.

ENGAGING INTRODUCTORY ECONOMICS FROM A BAHÁ'Í PERSPECTIVE

IDENTIFYING A NEED: HOW TO SUPPORT UNDERGRADUATES STUDYING ECONOMICS?

At the 2017 ABS Conference, some members of the economics working group reflected and consulted with a couple of more experienced Bahá'í academics and collectively brainstormed various potential future lines of action. One idea that emerged was finding ways to support young Bahá'ís studying economics in university. It was recognized that many undergraduates study economics at some point during their studies, and are often challenged by the assumptions underlying the predominant “Economics 101” curriculum. Examples of these assumptions are mentioned in a message from the Universal House of Justice, including the idea that “self-interest, far from needing to be restrained, drives prosperity, and that progress depends upon its expression through relentless competition” (Letter dated 1 March 2017). We also recognized that the

economics profession is particularly influential in academia and the wider society, with its methodologies and assumptions impacting policymakers, business leaders, and researchers in other social science disciplines. As just one example among many, Robert Bork—former U.S. Solicitor General, circuit court judge and prominent antitrust law scholar with many devoted followers—described studying undergraduate economics as a “religious conversion” that “changed our view of the world,” and that led to his adopting many economics viewpoints in writing important antitrust law (qtd. in Kwak 12). Indeed, in his book *Economism*, James Kwak argues that—despite evidence of their harm, ineffectiveness and unintended consequences—overly simplified concepts from Economics 101 curricula have been commonly used to argue against policies such as minimum wages, environmental regulation, income redistribution, government-sponsored health insurance, and many others.

We also knew that while students majoring (or pursuing graduate studies) in economics often end up receiving a more nuanced, balanced and critical view of economics and economic models, for the majority of Economics 101 students this simplified curriculum is the only exposure to economics that they will receive during their university study. As some of us were PhD students who were teaching (or would likely be teaching in the near future), we felt a certain responsibility regarding how we would accompany

young people in learning and applying economics. We were aware of the academic studies that show that students appear to become more selfish and less cooperative after studying economics,⁴ and were inspired by these insightful observations describing the experience of the Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity (ISGP) concerning how Bahá'í students can respond to the materialistic frameworks of the disciplines they are studying, however challenging a task this may be:

Students who participate in our programs often speak of the strong materialistic worldviews they encounter at university, views that utterly reject their most cherished convictions and thereby leave virtually no room for dialogue between science and religion. They tell us about their difficulty in expressing their ideas freely, and of the absence of mental tools available to them to identify and analyze the basic assumptions underlying the theories with which they are presented. To perform well in university, they feel, they have to think and learn inside the models that dominate their respective fields of study, adopt the methods inherent to these models, and, in the final analysis, work

4 For examples, see John R. Carter and Michael D. Irons “Are Economists Different, and If So, Why?” and Robert H. Frank, Thomas Gilovich, and Dennis T. Regan “Does Studying Economics Inhibit Cooperation?”

uncritically to propagate them. Maintaining a coherent vision of their lives and their involvement in society and, at the same time, adopting methods that are congruent with their beliefs is a tremendous challenge for them.

In response to such concerns, we invite students in our programs to reflect on elements of the conceptual framework that guides Bahá'í participation in the discourses of society, enabling them to take ownership of their education and to prepare themselves adequately to make contributions to their fields without sacrificing their religious beliefs, or without compartmentalizing them into a segregated part of their lives reserved for religious belief. (Haleh Arbab 34)

HOW TO APPROACH THE ECONOMICS 101 DISCOURSE?

Our group decided to create the document *Engaging Introductory Economics from a Bahá'í Perspective*, which would be used in small seminars to stimulate a conversation about the assumptions underlying the Economics 101 discourse and relate these to some basic Bahá'í teachings. But in preparing this document, we again faced challenging questions, such as: How can we help young Bahá'ís understand how to approach and engage with a discourse? How can we examine the discourse while avoiding the common tendency to be overly critical? How

can we appreciate the many insights that the Economics 101 discourse has to offer, without adopting assumptions and approaches that are contrary to the Bahá'í conceptual framework? How can we avoid an attitude of superiority, and preclude excessive speculation on topics about which we have few answers, such as what a future Bahá'í economic system might look like?

We decided to begin the document with a section intended to help seminar participants reflect on how they might approach the economics discourse. One important element of this approach is to encourage participants to guard against adopting an attitude that suggests we know what the future world order will entail. In this regard, we found the following statements by Shoghi Effendi particularly instructive and useful:

To claim to have grasped all the implications of Bahá'u'lláh's prodigious scheme for world-wide human solidarity, or to have fathomed its import, would be presumptuous on the part of even the declared supporters of His Faith. To attempt to visualize it in all its possibilities, to estimate its future benefits, to picture its glory, would be premature at even so advanced a stage in the evolution of mankind. (*World Order* 34)

There are practically no technical teachings on economics in the Cause, such as banking, the price system, and others. The Cause

is not an economic system, nor should its Founders be considered as having been technical economists. The contribution of the Faith to this subject is essentially indirect, as it consists of the application of spiritual principles to our present-day economic system. Bahá'u'lláh has given us a few basic principles which should guide future Bahá'í economists in establishing such institutions which will adjust the economic relationships of the world. (Written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, qtd. in Hornby no. 1868)

In addition, while we attempted to be clear that, as Bahá'ís, we do not question or equivocate on the relevance to our economic life of spiritual principles—such as the oneness of humankind, the harmony between science and religion, the spiritual nature of human beings, the equality of men and women, and the need to eliminate the extremes of wealth and poverty—we were equally clear that it would be misguided to think that having these intellectual commitments implies that one can only learn from the ideas of people who share our assumptions about the fundamental nature of reality. Thus, another element of our approach was to learn from economists who are also deeply concerned about the welfare of society, and to derive insights from the store of knowledge in the field. This approach raises the challenge of discerning which aspects of prevalent thought are in line with our

conceptual framework, and which are partly or wholly incongruent with it.

In our efforts to examine the economics discourse, we have found the following insights and approach of ISGP to be particularly helpful:

One of the main concerns ISGP has been addressing is its own attitude toward the existing body of knowledge of humankind, which is, of course, growing at an astounding rate. As Bahá'ís, we believe that this is the age of humanity's transition from childhood to maturity. To what extent, then, does present knowledge belong to the childhood stage of social development and to what extent is this knowledge already the harbinger of the stage of maturity?

There is no easy answer to this question. It is not difficult for us to see that the affairs of the world at this stage of the evolution of human society—particularly on a global scale—are in disarray. War, terrorism, the degradation of the environment, and numerous other dreadful conditions under which large segments of the population live remind us of the magnitude of the forces of disintegration operating in the world, and confirm for us our belief that the present order is defective indeed. But underlying this disorder is a system of knowledge based on a set of assumptions about the nature of the human being and society. How can the present system of thought and

knowledge be adequate, and yet give rise to such a defective order? Is our plight the result of building faulty structures on a sound and proven foundation?

In following this line of questioning, ISGP has been cognizant of the dangers of the extreme, namely, to reject all the accomplishments of humankind as childish, irrelevant, or wrong-headed, and hence to dream about the appearance of the mature sciences of the future. This is certainly not what happens in the life of the individual as he or she passes through various stages of development. During childhood we develop many elements of our character and personality and many intellectual tools that we will use throughout our lives. We do not need to throw these out as we grow up; rather we develop them and build on them.

The implications that this kind of thinking has for ISGP's endeavors are clear. We have to encourage those with whom we collaborate to have full mastery over the relevant fields of knowledge, yet approach these fields critically. The level of our acceptance of any set of statements will thus naturally vary from field to field . . .

. . . . One would not, of course, reject everything offhand but would study prevalent theories carefully and gain as many insights from them as they can offer without becoming rigidly attached

to them. The capacity to do so—which includes the capacity to examine in light of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation the assumptions underlying a given set of statements that claim to describe or explain some aspect of reality, particularly social reality—continues to be foremost in the thinking of ISGP as we try to contribute to the capacity of individuals and groups to participate in the discourses of society. (Haleh Arbab 29)

Thus, while our approach includes a willingness to radically question assumptions and concepts underlying present-day economic theories and practices, it also recognizes and draws on useful insights and tools the discipline has to offer. The same article quoted above provides an example pertaining to economics:

our conviction that competition is not the organizing principle of society does not mean that we cannot appreciate and benefit from studying the great advances in the field of economics based on the principle of competition, which seems to explain so much of how contemporary society operates. In short, even while disagreeing with one assumption, one may find another premise quite appealing, for example, the principle of diminishing returns. (Haleh Arbab 30)

In approaching the economics discipline, we viewed ourselves and

participants in our seminars as developing the capacity to “sift” the discourse, and found the following statement by Dr. Farzam Arbab particularly useful:

It is evident that a decision to acquire the capacity to engage in a rigorous examination of the intellectual foundations of our civilization places formidable demands on how the intellectual life of the community needs to develop. Sifting through the habits of thought, the principles, the methods, and the conceptions that underlie civilization today and deciding which can be retained and expanded upon and which need to be cast away is not a trivial pursuit. Which of our societies' cherished conceptions of human psyche, which elements of today's elaborate theories of social progress, which methods of education, which conceptions of work, wealth, love, justice, freedom and authority are the playthings of childhood and infancy? And what is to replace them? (15)

Another principle we found helpful to emphasize in *Engaging Introductory Economics from a Bahá'í Perspective* was that of engaging each idea in terms of its best possible interpretation and seeking to understand its most noble aspiration and purpose. This habit helps us expand our capacity to explore questions in a rigorous, open, and unifying way, while avoiding the common tendency among intellectual

communities of dismissing, belittling, and caricaturing the ideas one does not agree with. Bahá'u'lláh warns us “not to view with too critical an eye the sayings and writings of men” and to “approach such sayings and writings in a spirit of open-mindedness and loving sympathy” (*Gleanings* 154:1). Indeed, in some of our early seminars we observed that it was somewhat challenging for certain participants to avoid the tendency to be overly critical of the economics discipline, which would often lead to other participants speaking up to defend it. This back-and-forth would significantly detract from the seminars' main purpose of learning to constructively engage with a discourse, build on existing knowledge, and discover points of unity.

Adopting this principle does not imply naïveté about the way power operates in discourses—certainly, the space in which the intellectual life of society unfolds is shaped by various interests, some powerful and intent on defending the current order. In adopting this practice, we strive to better understand the context in which ideas develop and the challenges they arise in response to; to sharpen our capacity to observe a complex reality; and to develop the kind of nuanced thought that will help us sift through humanity's current store of knowledge. The following passage further clarifies why this principle is a feature of Bahá'í participation in discourses:

If the members of every community are able to find in the teachings

of Bahá'u'lláh the realization of their highest aspirations, it necessarily follows that the followers of Bahá'u'lláh should be able to identify in some way with the highest ideals and precepts cherished by each of the world's peoples. This extends to cases where those ideals and aspirations might not be readily apparent within a particular ideology or practice—sometimes, they might be almost totally obscured. In the context of participation in the discourses of society, such a perspective implies, among other things, that when involved in discussions between groups holding differing worldviews that risk spiralling downward into irreconcilable antipathy, it is necessary to maintain the conviction that by elevating a discourse to the level of principle and high ideals, it becomes possible to achieve unity and consensus. For this reason, a Bahá'í contribution to a prevalent discourse will often seek to reconceptualize the way in which it is being framed and will explore underlying assumptions that represent conceptual obstacles. An effort to reframe the discussion in this way is typically founded on the idea that unity is the critical prerequisite for fundamental progress and that acceptance of the principle of oneness can release moral capacities and induce a positive dynamic in a discourse and a will to find consensus. (Razavi 171).

MODELS IN ECONOMICS TEXTBOOKS

After considering how to approach the economics discourse, the document asks students to reflect on the use of models in the Economics 101 curriculum. Models are central to how the community of economists communicates, and are usually presented as abstractions of social reality that provide insight and make predictions. Models can be incredibly useful in simplifying complex realities and helping students understand basic important concepts, such as supply and demand. However, models are based on assumptions and simplifications that are not always fully articulated, let alone explored, when students first learn to apply them in Economics 101 classes. And models have tremendous power to shape our worldview, intentionally and unintentionally. Models are not mere technical objects and there is a moral dimension to the practice of economic thinking. Simple mathematical models intended to convey basic concepts under certain conditions and in specific contexts may often penetrate the thinking and discourses of society in harmful ways. The following statement made by the Bahá'í International Community (BIC) provides some insight on this subject.

Conceptual models of what is normal, natural, and possible exert a powerful influence on personal behavior. For example, individuals tend to make less generous choices the more they are exposed to the self-centered calculations inherent in classic economic theory. Such models also inform the

structures of society, privileging certain kinds of values over others and shaping ways of seeing, understanding, and approaching the world. The models we employ, therefore, are of crucial importance. Some help to release latent potential, confer greater clarity of thought, illuminate unexpected paths forward, and facilitate constructive action. Others distort, constrain, and confuse.

Humanity has employed countless conceptual models throughout its history, their various elements contributing to progress in some instances and hindering it in others. But regardless of what has come before, it is clear that the transformational change required today calls for new vantage points from which to explore challenges, assess realities, and imagine solutions. We must therefore be prepared to assess—and if necessary, revise—the assumptions that have shaped the current international order and structures of society.

Consider, for example, the belief that humanity is inherently contentious and conflict is unavoidable. That human behaviour is driven primarily by self-interest, and prosperity must therefore be based on the pursuit of personal advantage. That the well-being of groups or nations can be meaningfully understood on their own, disconnected and in isolation from the well-being of humanity as a whole. That the contemporary world is characterized by a fundamental lack of human and material resources, rather than an abundance of them.

Notions such as these, implicit and unspoken in many cases, go largely

unchallenged in contemporary discourse. But their real-world consequences are significant indeed. Can the belief that human beings are inherently selfish be anything but destructive when applied in contexts such as the community, the family, or the school? Can an understanding of economics grounded in a presumption of individuals or groups gaining advantage over others lead to anything but the grossly unequal conditions multiplying on every side? Alternatively, what would global economic structures look like if collaboration were understood to be a more powerful driver of development than competition? How would extremes of poverty and excesses of wealth be addressed if the good of the individual were truly understood to be inseparable from the good of the whole? What policies would be enacted if governmental priorities were shaped primarily by the interests of the citizenry at large, rather than by the preferences of a select few with privileged access to the halls of power? (*Towards*)

In many introductory economics courses, students are presented with the proposition that there is a clear distinction between using economic models to describe the economy *as it is* and using them to make statements about how the economy *should be*. The thinking is that description is a scientific exercise, while decisions about how the economy should function are essentially political. However, the above statement makes it clear that models both describe and shape our reality. Thus, participants are asked

to reflect on the role and usage of models in economics—including the purpose, assumptions, and limitations of models—and to look beyond the superficial distinction between descriptive and prescriptive analysis.

CONCEPTIONS OF HUMAN NATURE

After helping participants develop the capacity to “sift” the Economics 101 discourse with respect to models, the document turns to the capacity of correlating the prevalent discourse on economics with the Bahá’í writings in order to humbly consider how insights from the experience and knowledge of the Bahá’í community can help advance the economics discourse. Undoubtedly, this is a tremendous task that will continue for generations, and it is often difficult to know where to start. Yet, since we viewed this as a capacity-building exercise, we felt that simply considering a couple of relevant examples would be sufficient for our purposes. We decided to focus on two main areas that play a prominent role in introductory economics courses: 1) Conceptions of human nature; and 2) Economic systems based on markets.

Regarding human nature, our document reviews a common model of the human being found in mainstream Economics 101 textbooks, sometimes referred to by the short-hand *homo economicus*. Typically, *homo economicus* is viewed as being completely rational and objective, self-interested, unchanging, and able to make instantaneous calculations about the costs

and benefits of any choice. According to the *homo economicus* model, as humans behave in this self-interested way, through competition and free markets, the “invisible hand” leads to the overall well-being of society. As Adam Smith famously pointed out in 1776, “[i]t is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest” (20).

Yet, the document highlights that this view of human beings was not always prevalent in economics, and instead arose and became influential through a series of historical decisions and circumstances. For example, Amartya Sen argues that whereas the discipline of economics had a predominant focus on the “ethical” in the 1700s and 1800s, an “engineering” approach came to dominate in the mid-1900s, due in part to its focus on prescribing real-world policy and guiding statecraft, and in part to economists’ admiration for the elegance of models in physics, which they desired to emulate in mathematical, impersonal models of economics. In his book, *Economism*, James Kwak argues that in the mid- to late-1900s business leaders, politicians and other elites actively promoted and supported economic models that provided a rationale for free markets, reduced regulation, lower taxes, and rising inequality. They did so by, amongst other things, funding think tanks, politicians and academics that encouraged these viewpoints.

However, as the economics discourse and related policies moved

more in the direction of prescriptive models based on *homo economicus* and free market ideals, there were often unintended and harmful consequences. Samuel Bowles, in *The Moral Economy*, argues that in designing policies and incentives that create monetary rewards and assume that people are inherently selfish we in fact induce individuals to behave in more self-interested ways than they might otherwise. We shared one example of this phenomenon in the *Engaging Introductory Economics* document: when daycare centers in Haifa imposed a fine on parents who picked up their children late, the number of days on which parents were late to pick up their children actually increased. This result was not only contrary to the predictions of the basic Economics 101 model, but suggested that the intrinsic motivation of parents' respect for the daycare workers' time had been supplanted by a market-based belief that they could simply pay for being late.

ECONOMIC SYSTEMS BASED ON MARKETS

After reviewing both the history of how the contemporary model of the individual human being came to dominate the economics discourse and Economics 101, and some of that model's underlying assumptions and limitations, the document explores the Bahá'í Writings and considers some principles that might be useful when reflecting on human nature, and that are largely ignored by the economics discourse. It is important to note that the document

does not disagree with the economics view of the individual as self-interested and competitive. Indeed, the Bahá'í writings also reflect this viewpoint. However, we consider it an *incomplete* picture of the individual human being. In other words, through our process of sifting, we recognize the achievements of the economics discourse in describing how human beings currently behave, and the tremendous amount of important research that has resulted from this model. Yet, from the Bahá'í teachings, we also recognize the spiritual nature of human beings and their resulting capacities for altruism, cooperation, self-sacrifice, and other behaviors not anticipated by the *homo economicus* model. Many passages from the Bahá'í writings touch on this concept, including the following:

Today, all the peoples of the world are indulging in self-interest and exert the utmost effort and endeavour to promote their own material interests. They are worshipping themselves and not the divine reality, nor the world of mankind. They seek diligently their own benefit and not the common weal. This is because they are captives of the world of nature and unaware of the divine teachings, of the bounty of the Kingdom and of the Sun of Truth. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections* 68:3)

In man there are two natures; his spiritual or higher nature and his material or lower nature. In one he

approaches God, in the other he lives for the world alone. Signs of both these natures are to be found in men. In his material aspect he expresses untruth, cruelty and injustice; all these are the outcome of his lower nature. The attributes of his Divine nature are shown forth in love, mercy, kindness, truth and justice, one and all being expressions of his higher nature. Every good habit, every noble quality belongs to man's spiritual nature, whereas all his imperfections and sinful actions are born of his material nature. If a man's Divine nature dominates his human nature, we have a saint. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks* 18:2)

O Son of Spirit! Noble have I created thee, yet thou hast abased thyself. Rise then unto that for which thou wast created. (Bahá'u'lláh, Arabic Hidden Words no. 22)

Thus, we might say that, from a Bahá'í perspective, conceiving of the human being as self-interested is a limited and static view of human nature. It therefore seems reasonable that even as economists intent on designing an economic system must anticipate the possibility of self-interested behavior, they must not view the individual as incorrigibly selfish, as this would prevent them from incorporating features into the economy that could exert an elevating influence on a human being who is striving to overcome their base desires. We conclude this section of

the document by asking seminar participants what aspect of reality we are missing when we adopt such a limited model of the individual as our lens to study human nature. Can we create models, policies, institutions, and communities that, while acknowledging both the lower and higher nature of humanity, help to encourage and develop its highest potential?

In the section regarding economic systems based on markets, the document asks seminar participants to reflect on the purpose of a market, and consider other ways of allocating goods and services, such as lottery, "first come-first served," merit, and greatest need. For example, while many goods and services are allocated by markets, there are many others that are not, such as emergency care, friendship, academic grades, kidneys, and parental love and attention. While recognizing the great benefits that markets have brought to humanity—indeed, we all benefit from markets on a daily basis—we also consider the problems and limitations of markets, such as their tendency to increase inequality, crowd out intrinsic motivation, and demean or diminish the intrinsic value of what is bought and sold. We reflect on whether, from a Bahá'í perspective, it makes sense to use standard economic reasoning or create markets in situations where there is a clear moral dimension, such as paying for votes, for sex, or for a kidney replacement, or where intrinsic motivation may be diminished, such as paying children to read, behave or get good grades.

We then explore the important concept of “community” in the Bahá'í conceptual framework and how different communities have historically allocated and distributed goods and resources in more cooperative ways, such as Muslim communities that rely on social capital to create credit and insurance markets (Udry), and a Bahá'í-inspired community banking program that trains small groups of community members on how to save and manage their money, so they can offer loans from their own modest savings to other bank members and finance development initiatives in the community (“Community Banks”). The document helps participants reflect on the importance of relationships and the concept of the oneness of humankind, illustrated for instance in the BIC's reflections on Bahá'u'lláh's analogy of the human body:

Whether in the form of the adversarial structure of civil government, the advocacy principle informing most of civil law, a glorification of the struggle between classes and other social groups, or the competitive spirit dominating so much of modern life, conflict is accepted as the mainspring of human interaction. It represents yet another expression in social organization of the materialistic interpretation of life that has progressively consolidated itself over the past two centuries.

In a letter addressed to Queen Victoria over a century ago, and employing an analogy that points

to the one model holding convincing promise for the organization of a planetary society, Bahá'u'lláh compared the world to the human body. There is, indeed, no other model in phenomenal existence to which we can reasonably look. Human society is composed not of a mass of merely differentiated cells but of associations of individuals, each one of whom is endowed with intelligence and will; nevertheless, the modes of operation that characterize man's biological nature illustrate fundamental principles of existence. Chief among these is that of unity in diversity. Paradoxically, it is precisely the wholeness and complexity of the order constituting the human body—and the perfect integration into it of the body's cells—that permit the full realization of the distinctive capacities inherent in each of these component elements. No cell lives apart from the body, whether in contributing to its functioning or in deriving its share from the well-being of the whole. The physical well-being thus achieved finds its purpose in making possible the expression of human consciousness; that is to say, the purpose of biological development transcends the mere existence of the body and its parts. (*Prosperity*)

Reflecting on the principle of elevating each thing to its highest aspiration, we consider the role and purpose of a market or economy from a Bahá'í

perspective. While we have no model for what such a market or economy might look like, we know that it should reflect certain principles—such as cooperation and altruism—avoid extremes of wealth and poverty, be in harmony with the environment, communities, and family life, and promote spiritual development:

Society must develop new economic models shaped by insights that arise from a sympathetic understanding of shared experience, from viewing human beings in relation one to another, and from a recognition of the central role that family and community play in social and spiritual well-being. Within institutions and organizations, priorities must be reassessed. Resources must be directed away from those agencies and programs that are damaging to the individual, societies and the environment, and directed toward those most germane to furthering a dynamic, just and thriving social order. Such economic systems will be strongly altruistic and cooperative in nature; they will provide meaningful employment and will help to eradicate poverty in the world. (Bahá'í International Community, *Valuing Spirituality*)

REFLECTIONS ON CONTRIBUTING TO THE ECONOMICS 101 DISCOURSE

We conclude the document by asking participants to reflect on some of the

discourses that they regularly participate in. For example, we ask: In which of these discourses do you discuss topics related to economics? How might the above concepts inform your participation in these discourses? What specific insights have you gained that might help you contribute to these discourses and introduce concepts that can help advance the discourse? Despite the enormity of the task ahead of us, we encourage participants to reflect on the Universal House of Justice's words: "Every choice a Bahá'í makes—as employee or employer, producer or consumer, borrower or lender, benefactor or beneficiary—leaves a trace, and the moral duty to lead a coherent life demands that one's economic decisions be in accordance with lofty ideals, that the purity of one's aims be matched by the purity of one's actions to fulfill those aims" (Letter dated 1 March 2017).

Overall, while still preliminary, the feedback from *Engaging Introductory Economics from a Bahá'í Perspective* seminar participants has been quite positive, and most express a desire to continue the conversation. Young people are grateful for the opportunity to connect with and learn from others in similar circumstances and seem to gain valuable insights from the seminars as they continue with their studies and engage in various discourses. Our group has explored possibilities for continuing to accompany these young Bahá'ís and explore the discourse in a more ongoing collective process, such as by holding shorter regular virtual

workshops that touch on related topics or return to themes from the document. But time constraints have proven formidable. For now, we plan to offer the seminar at least once or twice per year—including at the annual ABS Conference—and to continue to refine the document in light of experience.

REFLECTIONS ON METHODOLOGIES IN THE ECONOMICS DISCIPLINE

Another recent initiative by a subgroup of the greater ABS economics working group involved participating in and contributing to the ABS seminars for graduate students and faculty aimed at exploring questions related to methodology. These seminars started in 2019 and were inspired by the Universal House of Justice's appeal to reflect on the methods employed in our respective disciplines:

One of the critical aspects of a conceptual framework that will require careful attention in the years ahead is the generation and application of knowledge, a topic that those gathered at the conference of the Association for Bahá'í Studies will explore in August. At the heart of most disciplines of human knowledge is a degree of consensus about methodology—an understanding of methods and how to use them appropriately to systematically investigate reality to achieve reliable results and sound conclusions. Bahá'ís who are involved in

various disciplines—economics, education, history, social science, philosophy, and many others—are obviously conversant and fully engaged with the methods employed in their fields. It is they who have the responsibility to earnestly strive to reflect on the implications that the truths found in the Revelation may hold for their work. (Letter dated 24 July 2013)

In light of this guidance and related material studied at the methodology seminars, we decided to reflect on the role of Randomized Controlled Trials (RCTs), which have become a ubiquitous methodological tool in empirical economics, particularly in the sub-field of development economics. Beginning with the so-called “credibility revolution” in the 1980s, economists began shifting away from the search for big principles about how the economy works and toward the search for programs and policies that achieve specific economic goals. Empirical methods used by economists today usually aim to statistically estimate the causal impact of a policy or intervention on material outcomes, and RCTs are often framed as the “gold standard” against which all other quantitative program evaluation methods are measured. At the ABS Methodology Seminars, academics from various social science disciplines noted that RCTs and other experimental and statistical methods from economics were influencing their fields, and that they felt pressured to adopt similar methods.

While acknowledging the great benefits of RCTs—indeed, modern-day medicine relies on similar experimental methods to develop and evaluate vaccines, medications, and various other medical treatments that have greatly improved the quality and length of human life—we were concerned about whether the approach was consistent with Bahá’í teachings. Some of us (the author included) had been personally involved with organizing and managing RCTs in developing countries—and had benefited from the resulting data—but felt some discomfort with the approach, at least as it was utilized in development economics research.

Our examination of the RCT methodology revolved around several related questions: When is an RCT a valid research method (such as when testing the effectiveness of a vaccine) and when might it be less useful or relevant? Do RCTs promote a certain mode of thinking that emphasizes outcomes over processes, crowds out other important types of research, and leads to objectification of human beings? Considering our fundamental belief in the oneness of humankind and the conviction that everyone should participate in knowledge generation and be considered a protagonist in his or her own spiritual and material development, is experimenting on others—particularly in poorer countries—consistent with this belief?

Our group’s approach was to meet regularly—often once or twice per month for an hour or so—to reflect on passages from the Bahá’í writings

and texts from authors in the field, gather notes, and begin writing a document (*Experimental Approaches to Knowledge Generation in Economics*) in preparation for sharing our thoughts during an upcoming ABS seminar and at the 2021 ABS Conference. We recognized that there were many critics of the RCT approach—both within and outside the economics discipline—so we did not want to simply repeat what had already been stated by others. We wanted to explore this topic in light of some Bahá’í teachings that seemed particularly relevant, and focus on raising preliminary questions for reflection and consultation. After framing and motivating the topic and spending some time reviewing the history of how the RCT became so prominent in mainstream economics, we considered three Bahá’í teachings or concepts that seemed most relevant for examining the RCT method: 1) Means should be consistent with ends; 2) Participation and the oneness of humankind; and 3) The nature of knowledge.

Regarding the first point, the document recognizes that knowledge generated from RCTs has greatly improved human wellbeing. (Indeed, even while writing the document many of us were benefiting from the COVID-19 vaccine developed through the use of experimental methodologies.) But we also recognized that the means of generating knowledge must be consistent with its ends. For instance, in a message to the Bahá’ís of Iran, the Universal House of Justice writes:

In choosing areas of collaboration, Bahá'ís are to bear in mind the principle, enshrined in their teachings, that means should be consistent with ends; noble goals cannot be achieved through unworthy means. Specifically, it is not possible to build enduring unity through endeavours that require contention or assume that an inherent conflict of interests underlies all human interactions, however subtly. (Letter dated 2 March 2013)

In the medical context, there have been many experiments involving human beings that are clearly morally meritorious. For instance, it would be very dangerous to administer a vaccine to millions of people without first running a trial on a smaller group to determine its safety and efficacy. But other historical medical experiments were clearly unethical, with means that were far from consistent with their ends. The example of the Tuskegee study, in which experimenters deliberately withheld diagnoses from African American men infected with syphilis in order to study the progression of the disease, amply demonstrates this point.⁵

Most RCTs in economics today might be described as falling in between these two extremes. They seek to test the effectiveness of a program or policy at improving some dimension of wellbeing. This involves withholding

the program from a randomly selected group, which may be unethical if the program is known in advance to be very beneficial to everyone. Often, the government or NGO running the program does not have the resources to include everyone, so invitations are allocated by lottery. The economics profession largely accepts this as an ethical protocol, especially when the merits of the program are unknown or unproven within a certain context.

After reflecting on the above concepts, the document then poses the following questions:

- If randomization is deemed appropriate and worthwhile in vaccine trials, are there economic or social scientific trials where this might also be the case?
- If implementers believe from personal experience that a program is valuable, then what are the moral implications of producing a particular kind of evidence by withholding that program from some people at random? Does this imply that there are different ways of “knowing” something?

The document then reflects on questions related to participation. Even in cases where the researcher knows that the program does no harm and does not know whether it causes benefits—in other words, there is no evidence that either group in the randomized trial will be disadvantaged relative to the other—randomized trials can be

⁵ For details, see Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “The Syphilis Study at Tuskegee Timeline.”

conducted in a highly non-participatory fashion—even when informed consent is collected. A prominent critique of the experimental methodology in development economics is that studies are disproportionately implemented by individuals based in prestigious, Western academic institutions, who experiment on individuals in Latin America, Africa, and South Asia as the subjects of study. While these global power relationships are not new nor unique to experimental economics, the research approach has manifested these deep, historical patterns in particularly salient ways. Many development interventions are funded by outside donors who usually ask for evidence of effectiveness before they invest a great deal of resources in the program. Local organizations are then responsible for presenting evidence of the efficacy of their programs in order to receive resources from outside donors. And many donors require this evidence to be generated by a randomized trial.

We then pose the following questions related to participation:

- How might the interplay of responsibility to outside organizations—and carrying the burden of proof—be organized in order to emphasize local agency and learning rather than relegating it to the margins?
- Of particular concern is the attitude and spirit of the experimental process. Do protagonists of development “experiment on” themselves or on their

brothers and sisters? For that matter, to what extent is the experimental approach contingent on governance structures that treat citizens as anonymous (or “others”)? What does the proper attitude look like in practice and how does it affect implementation? If the experimental approach is problematic, does the problem lie in the methodology or in broader structures in society?

- Can we imagine a fully participatory randomized controlled trial? What are its characteristics? Is there something inherently non-participatory about randomization? Is the methodology more or less participatory than approaches in which researchers analyze pre-existing quantitative datasets (collected by, say, the census bureau of a nation)?

Finally, the document considers the nature of knowledge and the kind of knowledge that RCTs aim to generate, and discusses how this differs from other methodologies. Even a series of well-run RCTs is limited in the kinds of insights it can provide. At their best, RCTs generate information about the causal impact of a specific event or action on quantifiable outcomes in a specific context and point in time. This is a very narrow focus. Clearly a process that seeks to improve human wellbeing will need many kinds of knowledge and information generated

by a variety of research methods. This point is not lost on many researchers who implement RCTs, many of whom also use more qualitative methods to refine quantitative measures and test mechanisms that underlie the quantitative results in their studies.

RCTs are used not only to generate knowledge but also to communicate it according to certain standards for empirical evidence. Local implementers who observe a program to be effective in their own experience and wish to communicate that fact in a way that is legible and credible to those with little experience often rely on evidence from randomized trials to do so. This may be due to the perceived replicability of the results, which suggests a relatively high degree of objectivity. We might wonder, though, what is lost along the way and how other means of communication and knowledge generation can complement or replace insights communicated via RCTs.

Related reflection questions in this section include the following:

- What are the ideal conditions within which RCTs can be most effective at contributing to the generation of veritable knowledge? Assuming these conditions are met, what kinds of insights or perspectives might this method usefully generate?
- How might RCTs work in concert with other methods to generate knowledge about the pursuit of economic development or material well-being?

- Closely tied to these questions is our understanding of the nature of social reality. Let us accept that social reality is dynamic and is currently in the midst of a transition towards a mature human race. Are RCTs a tool that, at this point, assist humanity in transitioning towards its next stage of maturity? Generally speaking, how might we situate RCTs as a methodology in the context of this process of transition?

After sharing *Experimental Approaches to Knowledge Generation in Economics* with participants in the ABS Methodology Seminars, a subset of us offered the presentation “Reflections on the Use of Randomized Controlled Trials” at the 2021 ABS Conference. We mainly focused on reviewing the RCT methodology and the history of how it became so prominent, and reflected on the above questions with conference participants. As a relatively new initiative moving at a slower pace than some other ABS initiatives, this sub-group has mostly focused on raising questions and gathering insights from various Bahá'í writings and works by other authors. Going forward, the group hopes to continue its exploration of economics methodologies and questions related to the generation of knowledge. For example: Why do economists care so much about knowledge of causal relationships as opposed to other types of knowledge? What are the boundaries

of causal claims, and how can we identify them? Do we need to use RCTs and sophisticated statistical techniques to determine causality? Or can other methods—such as reflection, observation and consultation—also provide inference into cause and effect, and generate important knowledge? What other types of knowledge have been useful for individual and community development, such as observation, personal reflection, shared wisdom, stories, narratives, etcetera? What can we learn from the Bahá'í community's experience with knowledge generation, which is mostly based on the process of action, reflection, consultation, and reference to authoritative guidance? What do the Bahá'í writings say about knowledge and the various ways of knowing?

SOME PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

In addition to participating in perhaps four or five different versions of ABS economics groups, over the past five years the ABS sub-group I am currently involved with has held five seminars on *Engaging Introductory Economics from a Bahá'í Perspective* in various settings (including two in person at ABS conferences and three in virtual spaces) with approximately sixty to eighty total participants. As other ABS working groups may consider embarking on similar initiatives, in this section I share some reflections on a few practical considerations. The reflections are mostly related to our sub-group's work on engaging the Economics 101

discourse, since this was by far the longest sustained effort I was involved with. But I include insights from other groups as well, where relevant. As always, these are merely humble personal reflections and other ABS groups may have different and equally relevant perspectives, based on the dynamics of their groups and disciplines.

EXAMINING A DISCOURSE: WHERE TO BEGIN?

One constant question that arose—especially during the early years—was where to begin examining a discourse. For example, early on we spent months reading the nearly 700-page book, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* and found it fascinating and insightful. But ultimately it represented merely one individual's viewpoint—one that was in fact quite distinct from mainstream economics. Is this book representative of the discourse on inequality? Are there other ways of approaching a discourse that might cover more distinct viewpoints? Is the way to examine a discourse simply reading and compiling differing viewpoints? While these questions largely remain unanswered (at least in my mind), our group found it helpful to think about the specific discourse related to the Economics 101 curriculum. Once we made the decision to accompany young Bahá'ís studying undergraduate economics, the discourse we were engaged with became much clearer. We simply decided to examine the most commonly used undergraduate economics textbook,

Principles of Economics by Gregory Mankiw. While this is only one of many undergraduate economics textbooks, we knew that it was among the most popular, and we confirmed that other undergraduate textbooks largely covered the same topics and in a very similar manner. Thus, as we wrote our document we quoted, referred to, and examined Mankiw's presentation of economics concepts and models, and we were confident that this was a fairly accurate representation of the discourse that young undergraduate students study. We then read and drew on a few books and articles that seemed to provide relevant alternative perspectives and critiques of the Economics 101 curriculum, such as James Kwak's *Economism*; *The Moral Economy* by Samuel Bowles; *The Dismal Science* by Stephen A. Marglin; *What Money Can't Buy* by Michael Sandel; and the articles "On Ethics and Economics" by Amartya Sen and "A Critical Review of *Homo Economicus* from Five Approaches" by Dante Urbina and Alberto Ruiz-Villaverdes. But the purpose of drawing on these other resources was not to exhaustively examine the economics discourse—a seemingly impossible task—or to look for ways to pick apart and criticize the Economics 101 curriculum. We simply wanted to draw on relevant insights, context and examples from other economists that shared similar views and had invested much more time and energy than us in critically examining the Economics 101 curriculum.

PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS AROUND COLLABORATIVE WRITING

The process of collaboratively writing the Economics 101 companion document—a roughly forty-page manuscript—was quite challenging. We wanted to make sure that it was an accurate reflection of our collective understanding and process of study, reflection and consultation, but ultimately only one person could write at a time. Often, an individual's understanding would not fully reflect the consultation of the group. In this regard, we found that developing a unified vision through regular consultation, reflection and note-taking was extremely helpful. Occasionally, we would neglect to take notes, but then would realize that we were often repeating the same points again and again. The simple process of note-taking was very helpful in avoiding this repetition, and allowed us to make better progress. We would then have a volunteer lead writer create the first draft of a section based on our consultation and notes. This draft would be circulated to the other members for review, and we would often have one person review and edit the entire document for clarity. Now and again, we would also review parts of the document together as a group and discuss any differences of opinion. It was particularly useful to reflect on the main points that we wanted to get across in each section of the document, especially as we were preparing for the seminars. After each seminar, we would immediately reflect on areas where participants

struggled with the material, or where the document or conversation went off point, and make updates based on this reflection. After a while, we found that the updates were relatively minor, and the document appeared to be achieving its goal of building the desired capacities. Finally, one particularly helpful approach was to gather in person to write intensively over a weekend. In these spaces, we would create an outline and overview of what we wanted to write together, then go into separate rooms to write, and then come back to read what had been written together on a shared screen. This process would be iterated several times over the weekend. We found that during these weekends we could make tremendous progress in just a couple of days, often more than what we might accomplish in a year of meeting once or twice per month. Meeting in person also helped strengthen bonds of unity and friendship as we had meals together, enjoyed informal conversation, and met each other's families, which further helped sustain our efforts.

FACTORS SUPPORTING SUSTAINED EFFORT

While many sub-groups of the economics working group were unable to continue for various reasons, our group of four or five individuals has been able to continue learning together for about five years, despite members moving, getting married, having children, studying in PhD programs, and serving intensively in various community

building and administrative capacities. How were we able to sustain this group, despite the great demands on each individual? Although the regularity of meetings has ebbed and flowed (meetings mostly occurred once or twice per month for sixty to ninety minutes, but we often met more regularly when a seminar was approaching), several elements have helped maintain the continuity of the group. For one, having a practical service component has helped motivate the group members. There seems to be something powerfully inspiring in having a concrete view of who we are serving and accompanying through our efforts (for example, young Bahá'ís studying economics), as opposed to simply engaging in an intellectual exercise. Relatedly, having deadlines for upcoming seminars or ABS conferences created clear due dates for when we would review and refine our document, and often pushed us to intensify our efforts when necessary to prepare for facilitation. Second, there is a strong unity of thought among the group members, partly because we have all studied the ISGP materials and are actively involved in the Bahá'í community-building process, but also because the group spent a significant amount of time and energy during its early stages in developing unity of vision. For example, one exercise that we found helpful was to create a list of goals for the seminar and capacities we wanted participants to develop, such as the capacity to "sift" the economics discourse, the habit of going to the Bahá'í writings for guidance, the

capacity to avoid an overly critical attitude, and the ability to see an idea or concept in terms of its best possible interpretation. Once this list was created, we could refer to it to ensure that the various elements in our document were related to one or more of these objectives. As mentioned briefly above, while straightforward, it was also helpful to designate someone who would organize the meetings, take notes and send out reminders. Finally, we did our best to humbly approach our work in a spirit of learning, understanding that our effort is part of a much longer process that will continue for generations, and with faith in the ongoing process of action, consultation, reflection, and continual turning to the guidance outlined by the Universal House of Justice.

THE IMPORTANCE OF IDENTIFYING A TARGET AUDIENCE

Finally, one question that we spent much time pondering was: who is our target audience? When writing the document, we found it very useful to reflect on who we were addressing. At first, we found that we all had differing views of who we were writing for. Sometimes we would write as if we were communicating with undergraduate university students with little economics training, and then we might write—often unknowingly—very technically as if our audience consisted of master's or PhD students. Sometimes we wrote as if we were writing directly to deepened Bahá'ís, while at other times we wrote as if addressing a more

general audience with little background in the Bahá'í Faith. Upon reflection, we noticed that who we thought we were addressing with our document had major implications for how we would write, and what we assumed the reader already knew or believed. Ultimately, we decided that the document is primarily intended for young Bahá'ís and like-minded individuals studying economics at university, which made it easier to assume that the reader had a basic understanding of Bahá'í teachings, faith in Bahá'í principles as solutions to the world's problems, and confidence in the guidance of the Universal House of Justice. We could also assume at least a basic familiarity with economic principles and models (although we still spent a fair amount of time reviewing them when we felt it was necessary for context). Yet, in reality, there were not too many Bahá'ís among our immediate contacts that fell into this category, while there were many others outside of our target group that might benefit from the seminars. We thus had to consider questions pertaining to participation. Who should we invite to the seminars? And once our target population was identified, how would we reach them? Early experience suggested that it might not be beneficial to simply open the seminars to everyone that was interested. Often, Bahá'ís that had been immersed in the economics discipline for many years as academics or practitioners had strong views related to economics, and either dominated conversations or took them in a very different direction

than was intended. On the other hand (though this is something of a generalization), younger participants—particularly undergraduate students and young Bahá'ís that had experience with ISGP and the community-building process—seemed much more open to the ideas presented and capable of humbly engaging with the document's path of inquiry. Ultimately, we felt that we should mainly focus on the original target audience of young Bahá'ís studying economics and like-minded friends, and we have in fact had some friends of the Faith join our seminars and contribute greatly to the consultation. To find these young Bahá'ís and friends, we benefited from partnering with ABS and, in some cases, local agencies and institutions, such as Auxiliary Board members and Local Spiritual Assemblies.

CONCLUSION

Since 2013, the Bahá'í community has been blessed with an abundant flow of additional guidance from the Universal House of Justice regarding not only participation in discourse, but also the specific issue of how we conduct our economic life. In one of its messages, the House of Justice reviews many of the challenges facing society brought about by outdated and incomplete models of the individual and society, including inequity, discrimination, exploitation, and environmental destruction:

Unconscionable quantities of wealth are being amassed, and the

instability this creates is made worse by how income and opportunity are spread so unevenly both between nations and within nations. But it need not be so. However much such conditions are the outcome of history, they do not have to define the future, and even if current approaches to economic life satisfied humanity's stage of adolescence, they are certainly inadequate for its dawning age of maturity. There is no justification for continuing to perpetuate structures, rules, and systems that manifestly fail to serve the interests of all peoples. (Letter dated 1 March 2017)

“With prevailing modes of thought found to be badly wanting,” the letter continues, “the world is in desperate need of a shared ethic, a sure framework for addressing the crises that gather like storm clouds.”

The letter particularly calls on the individual believer to consider the implications of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh for economic behavior as we develop a new model of community life, consider the consequences of our economic choices, and strive to lead coherent lives in accordance with the Faith's lofty ideals. But it also emphasizes how much of the learning about emerging economic structures and related discourses will come from the community-building process in neighborhoods and villages, particularly in clusters where the community-building activities are beginning to embrace large numbers:

The larger the presence of a Bahá'í community in a population, the greater its responsibility to find ways of addressing the root causes of the poverty in its surroundings. Although the friends are at the early stages of learning about such work and of contributing to the related discourses, the community-building process of the Five Year Plan is creating everywhere the ideal environment in which to accrue knowledge and experience, gradually but consistently, about the higher purpose of economic activity. Against the background of the age-long work of erecting a divine civilization, may this exploration become a more pronounced feature of community life, institutional thought, and individual action in the years ahead. (Universal House of Justice, letter dated 1 March 2017)

Thus, as Bahá'ís gain more experience with community building and consider questions of economic activity, we will undoubtedly discover new insights and consider additional implications for the work of contributing to the discourse on economics.

At the recent 2023 ABS Conference—the first in-person conference since before the COVID-19 pandemic—it was heartening to hear the reflections and insights of ABS working groups from a wide variety of disciplines. Although the efforts of our economics group to implement the Universal House of Justice's guidance

often feel halting, haphazard, and laborious, it is also encouraging and exciting to be part of a larger learning process that will continue for generations, with each humble effort yielding fruits for future contributors. Although we do not claim to have learned anything particularly definitive—and future endeavors at contributing to discourse may well lead in very different directions—after reflecting on the last ten years of our group's humble efforts several insights and reflections have emerged that may benefit others on similar paths of service. These include: the importance of simply getting started, and regularly reflecting on action, consulting, and referring to the Revelation for inspiration and guidance; the need to develop unity of thought by dedicating sufficient time to collectively read, consult, reflect and discuss goals and priorities; the importance of creativity, brainstorming and learning from others with more experience to generate ideas and lines of action; the benefit of learning from ISGP's experience with respect to evaluating a system of knowledge and its assumptions, including learning to “sift” humanity's current store of knowledge and identify what is missing; the usefulness of having a practical service component, with consideration for the efforts' target audience; the value of understanding which specific discourse one is contributing to; the need to consider methodological approaches in one's discipline, and examine their underlying assumptions; the significance of understanding historical context, and of maintaining a

long-term perspective on our work; and the value of engaging each idea in terms of its best possible interpretation while avoiding being overly critical of others' theories and approaches.

Going forward, some questions we are reflecting on include: How can our work be more coherent with the community-building process the Bahá'ís are engaging in? How can our efforts both contribute to and learn from initiatives at the grassroots? How can we support youth in advanced communities who are progressing through the institute process but may not come to an annual ABS conference or centralized seminar? How can we further support young people studying and working in economics beyond just the Economics 101 seminar space? How can we accompany them to practically engage in additional discourses related to economics, such as in upper-level economics courses, graduate studies, and their careers? How can we learn from their experience? How can we raise up and accompany new facilitators to expand our capacity to offer more seminars? How can we more rigorously examine methodologies in the economics discipline, and begin to explore methods of knowledge generation that are more coherent with the Bahá'í conceptual framework? For those of us who are in academia and related professions, are there ways to apply and explore these methods in our day-to-day work and research that can engage the greater academic community and related discourses? How do our contributions align with other efforts by ABS (such

as the annual conference), and by ISGP (such as the undergraduate and graduate ISGP seminars)?

As we reflect on the past ten years and consider these exciting questions and the possibilities for future progress, we look forward to the next decade of ongoing action, reflection, consultation and continued learning as we receive additional guidance from the Universal House of Justice, and learn to better apply its wisdom in sifting the economics discourse and accompanying young people on this path.

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At the Grave of the King and Beloved of Martyrs

RAYMOND HUDSON

In the dusk and warmth of a July evening
after the uniform shadows of the great mosque
of Isfahan, its towering blue mosaics,
I was trying to see the world the way

I see a painting. I was looking at the world.
I didn't understand the words chanted
in the tablet of visitation or what it meant
to be a member of a martyr's family and ready

for the repetition that was inevitably
to come. It came after I left, my visa stamped,
my prayers completed. But that evening
I was given cold water in a cup and greeted

as though I belonged there, as though
I had come back after being gone for too long.

Encouragement of the Arts During the Ministry of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá: The Services of Master Calligrapher Mishkín-Qalam

NOOSHFAR AFNAN¹

Abstract

This article examines how ‘Abdu’l-Bahá promoted the arts during His ministry, through His encouragement and support of a prominent artist in the early Bahá’í community. Mishkín-Qalam was the first and most celebrated Bahá’í visual artist

from the East. Best known for his calligraphic design of the Greatest Name, his life exemplified the “twofold moral purpose”: through his art, he was able to develop his own inherent spiritual potential as well as make lasting contributions to society. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá employed his artistic skill in service to some of the most important achievements of His ministry: the interment of the remains of the Báb, the construction of the first Bahá’í House of Worship, and the transcription of Bahá’í literature. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s encouragement might serve as an emerging model for individuals, communities, and institutions of how to engage with artists and the arts, while Mishkín-Qalam’s response stands as an example to artists of how the pursuit of spiritual virtue and excellence in one’s craft can intertwine.

Résumé

Dans le présent article, l’auteure examine comment ‘Abdu’l-Bahá a fait la promotion des arts durant son ministère par son encouragement et son soutien à un artiste éminent de la jeune communauté bahá’ie. Mishkín-Qalam a été le premier et le plus célèbre artiste visuel bahá’í de l’Orient. Surtout connu pour sa calligraphie du Plus Grand Nom, il a incarné de par sa vie le « double objectif moral » : grâce à son art, il a développé son potentiel spirituel et apporté une contribution durable à la société. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá a mis les talents de l’artiste au service de quelques-unes des réalisations les plus importantes de son ministère : l’inhumation des restes du Báb, la construction de la première Maison d’adoration bahá’ie et la transcription d’écrits bahá’ís. L’encouragement prodigué par ‘Abdu’l-Bahá peut servir de modèle aux individus, aux communautés et aux institutions quant à la façon de

¹ This article is based on a paper presented in 2021 at the 45th annual conference of the Association for Bahá’í Studies.

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faire appel aux artistes et aux arts, tandis que, pour les artistes, la réponse de Mishkín-Qalam illustre comment peuvent se conjuguer la quête de spiritualité et l'excellence dans la pratique de son art.

Resumen

Este artículo examina como 'Abdu'l-Bahá promovió las artes durante su ministerio, por medio de su motivación y apoyo a un prominente artista en la temprana comunidad Bahá'í. Mishkín-Qalam fue el primero y el más célebre artista visual Bahá'í del Este. Major conocido por su diseño caligráfico del Más Grande Nombre, su vida ejemplificó el “doble propósito moral” por medio de su arte, pudo desarrollar su inherente potencial espiritual así como hacer una contribución duradera a la sociedad. 'Abdu'l-Bahá utilizó su habilidad artística como un servicio a algunos de los logros más importantes de Su ministerio: la sepultura de los restos del Báb, la construcción de la primera Casa de Adoración, y la transcripción de la literatura Baha'í. El ánimo dado por 'Abdu'l-Bahá podría servir como un modelo emergente para individuos, comunidades, e instituciones de como involucrar a los artistas y las artes, mientras que la respuesta de Mishkín-Qalam se destaca como un ejemplo para los artistas de como la búsqueda de la virtud y excelencia espiritual en el arte de uno pueden entretenerse.

Bahá'ís reflecting on the role of art in their communities are faced with an interesting tension. On the one hand, art is accorded great importance, not only in the Writings of the Central Figures of the Bahá'í Faith, but in the ongoing plans of the community for its own development and growing impact on society. On the other hand, there cannot yet be said to be a distinctly “Bahá'í” form of any art—visual, musical, architectural—at this early stage in the Faith's development. Therefore, what may merit particular attention at this point in time are questions about art that focus on *processes* as much, or more, than on the substance of art itself. What ends should art serve? How should the artist relate to her art, to the community, and to her faith? And how should the community and its institutions relate to the artist (a question of importance even for those who do not currently see themselves as artists)?

As a contribution to exploring some of these questions, this paper examines the life, character, and work of a prominent early Bahá'í artist, the calligrapher Mishkín-Qalam. His career provides a useful lens through which we can consider the insights of several later Bahá'í artists and scholars into what it might mean for Bahá'ís to make art. The themes these artists highlight—such as the perfection of art as worship, the importance of fostering spiritual growth, the relationship between art and service, and the purpose of beauty, love and excellence—all resonate with the life and work of Mishkín-Qalam.

After briefly reviewing Mishkín-Qalam’s life and career, this paper will explore some of the existing literature on Bahá’í art, to see how that life and career reflect its insights. Then, the specific services of this “leading calligrapher of Persia,” who “was besides, for human virtues, a bright star” (*Memorials* 38:1) will be examined—both in terms of the nature of their tangible artistic contribution, and the process by which ‘Abdu’l-Bahá encouraged and guided their development. Indeed, Mishkín-Qalam’s relationship with ‘Abdu’l-Bahá makes his story particularly instructive. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s encouragement not only resulted in the remarkable artistic works that will be reviewed in the paper, but provides a model for individuals, communities, and institutions on how to encourage the arts. In turn, Mishkín-Qalam’s response to his own artistic impulse and the encouragement of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá provides an example to artists of the importance of spiritual virtue and the pursuit of excellence.

MISHKÍN-QALAM: A BRIEF INTRODUCTION

MISHKÍN-QALAM’S ARTISTIC MILIEU

Born Mírzá Husayn-í-Isfahání in Shíráz, Persia, Mishkín-Qalam (ca 1826-1912) grew up and was trained in an Islamic cultural milieu in which calligraphy was considered the highest art form (Hattstein and Delius 574; Oeming Badiee and Badiee 3). A brief discussion of why this was so will help

contextualize the prominence and reputation that Mishkín-Qalam attained by excelling at this art.

One of the distinctive characteristics of traditional Islamic religious art is its scarcity of icons or images. Termed *an-iconism* by scholars, this practice “removes the possibility of the concretization of the Divine Presence,” and reflects the idea of God’s omnipresence in Islamic thought (Nasr 187). Given this constraint, writing and calligraphy became highly developed (Grabar 6,74), with the written word replacing icons as “the visible embodiment of the Divine Word” (Burckhardt 5). In Islam, calligraphy is thus considered “the most noble of the arts, because it gives visible form to the revealed word of the Koran” (Burckhardt 52). Calligraphy is referred to as “heavenly” or “divine” (*ásimání*) art (Motamed 128) as it is associated with holy scripture, namely the Qur’án, and is generally considered “the most characteristic feature of the visible aspect of Islamic civilization” (Nasr 19). Arabic, the language of the Qur’án, is considered to be the language of God, and given the importance of the Arabic script and its religious meaning it is not surprising that Arabic words and letters are the basic “subject matter” of Islamic art, and can be found not only on paper but on ceramics, textiles, and glass, as well as incorporated into architectural decoration on mosques (Oeming Badiee and Badiee 3).

From a purely formal point of view, the “elasticity” of Arabic script—the way letters can be elongated or

shortened—lends itself well to creative application in art. Arguably only Chinese calligraphy rose to artistic heights comparable to those of Islamic calligraphy. However, the two traditions have notable differences. Where the Chinese calligrapher uses a soft brush, the Arabic calligrapher employs “the calamus—a reed trimmed to a double point—with which he traces out precise and frequently interlacing lines” (Burckhardt 52); it is this instrument whose “shrill” sound as it moves across paper is often mentioned in the Bahá'í Writings.² Where in Chinese calligraphy each logogram retains its individual or distinct character, “the Arab . . . has no inclination to isolate the signs but prefers to integrate them in a continuous rhythm . . .; in fact the whole charm of Arabic calligraphy lies in the way it can combine the distinctive shape of the characters with the fluidity of the whole” (Burckhardt 52).

MISHKÍN-QALAM'S FAITH AND CAREER

Those familiar with Mishkín-Qalam's well-known calligraphic design of the Greatest Name—let alone his more intricate works, such as those in the shape of birds (shown later)—can readily see how his work reflects the harmony between “the distinctive shape of the characters” and “the fluidity of the

whole.” Long before he created these works inspired by the Bahá'í Faith, he was already renowned for his skill, and came to be highly regarded in royal circles. Indeed, he was employed as a tutor to the crown prince by Naṣíri'd-Dín Sháh himself, who gave him the title *Mishkín-Qalam*, meaning musk-scented or jet-black pen. However, upon learning about the message and person of Bahá'u'lláh, *Mishkín-Qalam* left his enviable court position, wealth, and fame, and hurried to attain His presence in Adrianople. From then on, his life and art were dedicated to the service of his newfound Faith (Nakhjavání, *Four* 22).



Fig. 1. *Mishkín-Qalam*.
The Greatest Name.

Image ©British Library Board
(shelfmark, Or 11098 f. 19 digitized image 7)

From the time he embraced the Bahá'í Faith, *Mishkín-Qalam* was deeply influenced by its Writings, which visibly left their mark on his artistic output. Many of his works not only use Bahá'í holy texts or concepts as their subject matter, but

² See, for instance, Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, ¶ 41: “Say: O concourse of divines! Hear ye not the shrill voice of My Most Exalted Pen?”

also manifest the great love he had for the three Central figures by invoking their names and titles. At the behest of Bahá’u’lláh, he went to Constantinople, where “the leading Persians and Turks received him with every honor at first, and . . . were captivated by his jet black, calligraphic art” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Memorials* 38:3). However, the Persian ambassador, knowing that Mishkín-Qalam was a Bahá’í, slandered the artist as a mischief maker to the Ottoman authorities (*Memorials* 38:3; Balyuzi, *Eminent Bahá’ís* 272). As a result, he was eventually jailed and sent to Gallipoli where Bahá’u’lláh and His company were also temporarily being held (*Memorials* 38:3; Balyuzi, *King of Glory* 260). In 1868 Mishkín-Qalam and a few others were exiled to the citadel of Famagusta in Cyprus, whereas Bahá’u’lláh and most of His companions were sent to the prison city of ‘Akká. Mishkín-Qalam was confined in Cyprus for about eighteen years.³ When in 1886 he was finally released, he immediately set out for ‘Akká to be near Bahá’u’lláh once again (*Memorials* 38:6; *Eminent Bahá’ís* 272; Momen, *Bábí and Bahá’í Religions* 306, 311). After Bahá’u’lláh’s passing in 1892,

Mishkín-Qalam continued to serve ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, both in ‘Akká and further afield. Toward the end of his life, he undertook more trips, including to India. Upon hearing that Mishkín-Qalam was getting weak, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá asked him to return to ‘Akká where he died on 6 December 1912 (Rafati). Shoghi Effendi designated nineteen outstanding early believers as “Apostles of Bahá’u’lláh”; Mishkín-Qalam was one of them (*The Bahá’í World*, vol. III 80-81). Today his masterful calligraphies can be found at the Bahá’í World Centre, in private collections, and in museums worldwide, including the British Museum and the Harvard University Museum. His beautiful calligraphic art has stood the test of time and continues to be appreciated today. One of his calligraphic birds was featured in the design of two stamps issued by the postal service of the Netherlands on the occasion of the Twin Bicentenaries in 2017 and 2019 (see fig. 2a and 2b).



Fig. 2a and 2b. Mishkín-Qalam’s bird features prominently in stamps issued in commemoration of the bicentenaries of the births of Bahá’u’lláh and the Báb.

³ In *Memorials of the Faithful*, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá gives the dates of the calligrapher’s time in the citadel and city of Famagusta, from “85 till 94” AH [1868-1878c]; while he was released from confinement with the start of British rule in 1878, his petition to leave the island was only accepted in 1886.

‘ABDU’L-BAHÁ ON MISHKÍN-QALAM
IN *MEMORIALS OF THE FAITHFUL*, AND
OTHER TRIBUTES⁴

In *Memorials of the Faithful*,⁵ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá offers an account of Mishkín-Qalam and lavishes much praise on both his artistic attainments and his spiritual qualities. His description of the calligrapher displays His encouragement of excellence in both the arts and in moral virtue, a theme we will return to later. In one passage He states,

Among the exiles, neighbors, and prisoners there was also a second Mír ‘Imád, the eminent calligrapher, Mishkín-Qalam. He wielded a musk-black pen, and his brows shone with faith. He was among the most noted of mystics, and had a witty and subtle mind. The fame of this spiritual wayfarer reached out to every land. He was the leading calligrapher of Persia and well known to all the great; he enjoyed a special position among the court ministers of Tīhrán, and with them he was solidly established. He was famed throughout Asia Minor; his pen was the wonder of all calligraphers, for he was adept at every

calligraphic style. He was besides, for human virtues, a bright star. (38:1)

In the above passage ‘Abdu’l-Bahá compares Mishkín-Qalam to one of the most celebrated Persian calligraphers, Mír ‘Imád Hassani Seifī Qazvīnī (1554-1615), who lived during the Safavid period and excelled in the *nasta‘liq* style (“Preface” Persian Letters). Islamic calligraphy developed into a number of recognizable styles. *Nasta‘liq* is admired for its “beauty and grace”, its “regularity [and] firmness” (Yúsofi section II); other styles include the early *kufic*, the flowing *thulth*, the *nashki*, and the later *shikastih* scripts (Kvernen). ‘Abdu’l-Bahá notes that Mishkín-Qalam “was adept at every calligraphic style,” and later reiterates: “Wherever he went, his many calligraphic styles were a substantial capital, and his great accomplishment brought him attention and respect from rich and poor alike” (38:9).

‘Abdu’l-Bahá is not alone in praising Mishkín-Qalam’s calligraphy. In his book *Peydáyish-i Khat va Khattátán* (Calligraphy and Calligraphers), Abdu’l-Muhammad Irani makes this remark about Mishkín-Qalam, “In mastery of the seven styles⁶ he was

4 All references from ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in this section are from *Memorials of the Faithful* unless otherwise indicated.

5 For the complete text see chapter 38. In this collection of talks by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, we find short yet insightful biographical essays on the lives and spiritual qualities of over seventy early followers of the Báb and Bahá’u’lláh.

6 Mishkín-Qalam was also a master of nail script (*nákhúní* or *khatt-i-nákhún*) where an image is created by pressing down with one’s fingernails, which are cut in a particular shape, on a piece of paper. This technique creates a very soft, relief- or indent-like script or motif, almost like chiseled marble. For a detailed treatment

indeed peerless among his contemporaries and must be counted among the geniuses of his age. His work which is of unparalleled beauty is now displayed in libraries in Syria and Egypt” (qtd. in Persian Letters and Arts Society, “Preface”). Another expert who praised Mishkín-Qalam’s calligraphy is Mehdi Bayani, author of the three-volume work *Ahvál va Áthár-i Khushnivísán-i Nasta‘līq Nivísán* (Life and Work of Calligraphers in Nasta‘līq). Bayani singles out Mishkín-Qalam’s mastery of *nasta‘līq*, *shikastih ta‘līq*, and *shikastih nasta‘līq* calligraphy. Professor Schimmel of Harvard University calls him “one of the finest calligraphers at the turn of the century.” “His rounded letters in *nasta‘līq* are of flawless beauty.... Remarkable is also his elegant way of writing the heart-shaped medial *h* which occurs so frequently in the worlds bahá and abhá.”

Mishkín-Qalam created calligraphies of great beauty and elegance by employing the various scripts from the Islamic calligraphic tradition. However, for the most part he used as his textual material the holy writings of the Bahá’í Faith, which in their original were revealed in Arabic and Persian. His most outstanding contributions are his calligraphic compositions, in which he uses invocations made up of Arabic letters, often from the Bahá’í Writings,

of this art form see, for example, Mihan, “Fingernail Art (I): Three-Dimensional.” This was the technique that initially gained him notice in royal circles and secured him a position at the court of the Sháh (Nakhjavání 21).

to form objects such as faces, trees, and birds.⁷ The birds he portrays most often are roosters, which are associated with the dawn of a new day—an allusion to the new day of God.⁸ He demonstrated an attitude of learning, and adopted new calligraphic ideas during his travels, such as the mirror script⁹ popular during that time in the Ottoman empire, which he worked into innovative designs such as his heavenly double-roosters, a reference to the Twin Manifestations of God who usher in a new day for humanity (see fig. 3). A recent scholarly study discusses the rich symbolism in Mishkín-Qalam’s works and draws a connection between

7 For example, in several of his works both the bodies of the twin-birds and the central cypress tree are made up of the invocation *Bismiláhil-Bahí’ul-Abhá* in different scripts.

8 There are numerous instances where Bahá’u’lláh likens Himself to a bird. For example, “the immortal Bird of Heaven, warbling upon the Sadrih [lote-tree] of Bahá” (*Kitáb-i-Íqán* 78); “the Nightingale of Paradise” which “singeth upon the twigs of the Tree of Eternity” (“Tablet of Ahmad”, Arabic); “the Mystic Dove raised its call upon the branches and boughs of heaven” (*Days of Remembrance* 44:4). For in-depth discussions of Mishkín-Qalam’s use of cockerels and their symbolism see Schimmel; Oeming Badiée & Badiée 10–11; Motamed 135; and Stermotich-Cappellari 144–48.

9 According to Motamed, his mirror script (*tughra-nigári* or *aynih-namá’i*) calligraphies have been executed with such precision that if one were to fold the paper along its central axis, the two sides of the image would align perfectly (135).

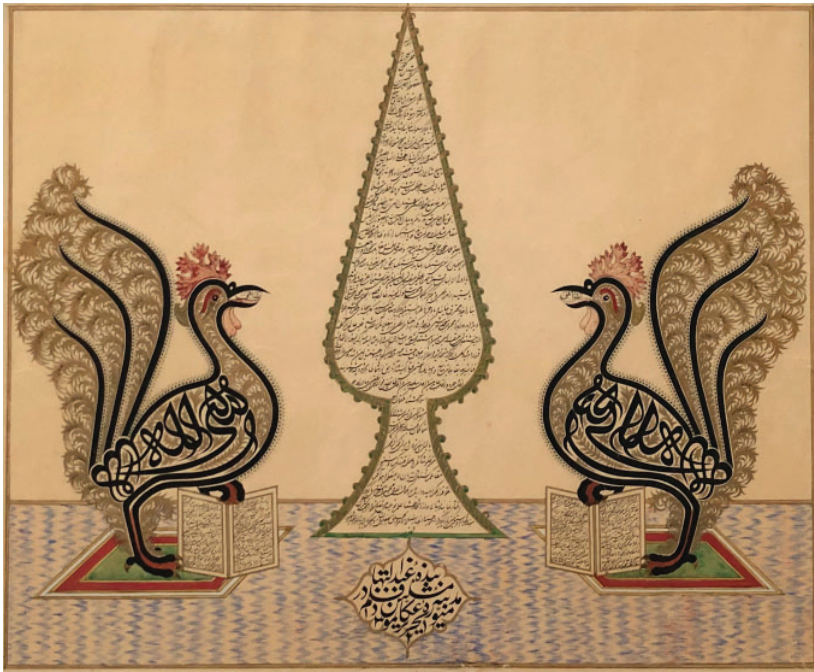


Fig. 3. *Mishkin-Qalam*. Double rooster with central cypress tree. Signed and dated “Servant of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá *Mishkin-Qalam*, ‘Akká, 1321” (c.1903)

Image ©Private collection

the divine roosters, mirrored around a tree, and the concept of the eternal Covenant (Stermotich-Cappellari 151).

‘Abdu’l-Bahá not only lauds the matchless artistic achievements of *Mishkin-Qalam* but also praises his spiritual qualities: “He was a compendium of perfections: believing, confident, serene, detached from the world . . . his character like a garden in full bloom. . . . For sincerity and loyalty he had no match, nor for patience and inner calm. He was selflessness itself” (38:8).

There is a widely held belief in the Islamic tradition of calligraphy that the inner character of the calligrapher determines the outer expression in their art. If the character of the artist

is excellent, if the mind is tranquil and the heart pure, so will the resulting calligraphy be harmonious and beautiful. The curators of an exhibition on calligraphy¹⁰ explain that Islamic calligraphy “is understood to leave a trace (*athar*) of the writer’s moral fiber, and the quality of writing is believed to reveal the writer’s character and piety” (Asia Society). Oeming Badiée and Badiée concur: “No educated Muslim

10 The exhibition “Traces of the Calligrapher: Islamic Calligraphy in Practice, c. 1600–1900” was curated by Mary McWilliams and David J. Roxburgh and showcased at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, 2007 and the Asia Society Museum 2008/2009.

would neglect the skills of calligraphy, for in Muslim lands the connection between moral rectitude and calligraphic excellence was often made" (3).¹¹

As we will see, Mishkín-Qalam worked on perfecting both his character and his art. In offering his masterful calligraphic skills to the service of the Bahá'í Faith he provided an example of fulfilling one's "twofold moral purpose . . . to develop [one's] inherent potentialities and to contribute to the transformation of society" (Universal House of Justice, Ridván 2010). Before exploring his specific contributions in this regard, however, it will be helpful to reflect on the nature of artistic contributions in the Bahá'í Faith.

11 This is a concept also commonly accepted in the Chinese calligraphic tradition; calligraphy was seen as a way of expressing one's character, and it was believed that if someone had a bad character, it was impossible for them to create beautiful things such as art and poetry. The earliest record in ancient China (sixth century BCE) where a relationship is drawn between writing poetry and the spiritual condition of the writer is found in *Shang Shu Shun Dian* ("The Book of History—Document of Yu Shun"). This concept has become widely accepted by the public and it has been adapted to various literary and artistic undertakings, including calligraphy. There is a well-known saying today that "words are the sound of the heart; calligraphy and writing are the paintings of the heart." (I thank my friend Hou Changheng, curator of Chinese ink art and chief editor of *Ink* magazine, for providing this information.)

A BAHÁ'Í PERSPECTIVE ON THE ROLE OF THE ARTS

The important role of the arts is firmly established in the sacred Writings of the Bahá'í Faith. Art is notably connected to the cyclical, quickening power of the Manifestations of God: 'Abdu'l-Bahá states for instance that through Them "the arts and sciences are revived in each age" (qtd. in Khan 87). Each religious cycle has its mature expression as a civilization and culture, and this is reflected in the arts. However, as Shoghi Effendi pointed out in a 1957 letter to a National Spiritual Assembly, given that the Bahá'í Faith is still in its early stages of development "there is no cultural expression which could be called Bahá'í at this time" (qtd. in compilation *Music* no. 24). How then, at this early stage, can we develop the arts, and encourage artists, along lines that can increasingly be inspired by and reflect the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith?

Fortunately, the Bahá'í community has the benefit of a number of methodologies for thinking about such questions. One, of course, is the cycle of action, reflection, consultation and study that has been developed under the guidance of the Universal House of Justice in the context of community building, and which can lend itself to other areas of endeavor. But the methodology that this paper will focus on in contributing to thought around this question is that of looking at the Perfect Exemplar of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings, 'Abdu'l-Bahá. By examining how

He encouraged one of the foremost artists of His time in *Mishkín-Qalam*, we can glean insights that can guide individuals, institutions, and communities today as to the attitudes and actions needed to effectively assist in the development of art and artists in the Bahá'í community. In order to contextualize 'Abdu'l-Bahá's encouragement and try to understand its significance, we can first consider the role of the arts as gleaned in the Bahá'í writings.

ART AND THE TWOFOLD MORAL PURPOSE

To say that there is not yet something we can call "Bahá'í art" in no way diminishes the importance of the work of Bahá'í artists. Quite the opposite: it is through the work of artists like *Mishkín-Qalam* and all those who have come after him that mature artistic expressions reflective of the Bahá'í Revelation may increasingly emerge in the future.

But the artistic expression of Bahá'í artists is not only important because of its role in advancing and enriching human civilization. Like all facets of a Bahá'í life, it has implications for the twofold moral purpose of the human being "to develop their inherent potentialities and to contribute to the transformation of society" (Universal House of Justice, Ridván 2010).

In terms of civilizational advance, a brief review of passages from the Bahá'í writings demonstrates the prominent role the arts and artists are given in society. For example, in one

of His Writings, Bahá'u'lláh states that "[a]rts, crafts and sciences uplift the world of being, and are conducive to its exaltation" (*Epistle* 26). In another passage He exhorts us: "the true worth of artists and craftsmen should be appreciated, for they advance the affairs of mankind" (*Compilation* no. 10). One way in which artists advance the affairs of mankind is by their ability to express ideas, and shed light on topics, that are difficult to grasp or explain.¹² They can unravel truths and deepen knowledge. They can also impart joy and beauty, and provide powerful examples of the human capacity to perfect things; all these are cause of spiritual development as will be discussed further. Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá praised and encouraged artists on numerous occasions, highlighting the quality of their work.¹³

As for the role of artistic expression in the artist's own spiritual journey, according to the Bahá'í Writings, any work that is performed in a spirit of service and with an attempt at achieving excellence is deemed equal to worship ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks* 55:1). This also holds true for the work of artists. 'Abdu'l-Bahá states that "in accordance with the divine teachings

12 "Common to art and Revelation is a concern with meaning, and a reliance on metaphor as a means of expressing the inexpressible" (Filson 37).

13 For example, Bahá'u'lláh praised the poetry of an early believer and called it "highly impressive" (*Tablets* 176); see discussion of the *Lawh-i-Maqsúd* later in this paper.

the acquisition of sciences and the perfection of arts are considered acts of worship” (*Selections* 126:1). To the American portrait painter Juliet Thompson (1873-1956), one of the early Bahá’ís of the West, He wrote, “I rejoice to hear that thou takest pains with thine art, for in this wonderful new age, art is worship. The more thou strivest to perfect it, the closer wilt thou come to God. What bestowal could be greater than this, that one’s art should be even as the act of worshipping the Lord? That is to say, when thy fingers grasp the paintbrush, it is as if thou wert at prayer in the Temple” (*Additional Tablets*). The idea that art-making is worship, and can bring the artist closer to the divine, is surely a source of great inspiration and encouragement to any Bahá’í artist, including Mishkín-Qalam.

Over the course of his life, Mishkín-Qalam honed and developed both his spiritual qualities as well as his calligraphic skills and offered them to the service of his community and the wider society. Mishkín-Qalam’s life can thus be seen as an example of the pursuit of the human being’s twofold moral purpose through the arts.

ART, BEAUTY, AND SPIRITUALITY

In ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s writing, we find a number of guidelines that might help Bahá’í artists in the execution of their work. In one passage addressed to “the craftsmen of the world,” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá urges them “to exert their highest endeavour and diligently pursue

their professions so that their efforts may produce that which will manifest the greatest beauty and perfection” (*Selections* 127:2). In a Tablet written about Mishkín-Qalam, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá praises his persistent efforts and diligence: “night and day he was occupied with transcribing and arranging the Holy Writings and touching-up specimens of the Greatest Name” (qtd. in Ishráq-Khávárí 63, provisional translation). These qualities—persistence, diligence, and hard work—were likely indispensable to Mishkín-Qalam’s development as an artist, as well as the reason he was able to leave behind such a rich body of beautiful calligraphies.

In addition to these qualities pertaining to effort, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá offers further guidance to artists by encouraging “symmetry, harmony, and perfection.” He highlights the fact that this artistic guidance applies to a broad range of endeavors—there is art in “a beautiful house, a well designed garden, a symmetrical line, a graceful motion, a well written book, pleasing garments.” He concludes that “all things that have in themselves grace or beauty are pleasing to the heart and spirit” (qtd. in compilation *Music* no. 15).

In his discussion of the role of beauty in art, and in particular art by Bahá’ís, composer and pianist Ludwig Tuman makes a connection between spiritual development and the service that can be rendered by an artist:

In the Bahá’í writings, beauty is associated not merely with sensual and intellectual pleasure but with

divinely revealed truth, with the spiritual principles and teachings that constitute truth insofar as we can know it, and ultimately with the attributes of God. . . . Thus viewed, beauty is not an end in itself but a means to an end. Its purpose in the world of creation is to draw the human soul into a spiral of spiritual growth, carried upward on the wings of love toward the kingdom of the most great Beauty. Its purpose in the realm of human creativity is the same. Art attracts the soul, through beauty, to a work in which the knowledge of things divine is imparted, by which attitudes to life are spiritualized, morality is strengthened, and service is rendered to the cause of spiritual growth. Acting as an agent of spiritual attraction, beauty thus plays an essential role in the process whereby art seeks to help ennoble the human soul. (79)

In a passage specifically addressing the art of music, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá highlights this capacity of art to attract and uplift the soul in terms that are applicable to the arts more broadly. He explains that blending melodies with the holy writings can “impart solace” and “everlastingly stimulate spiritual feelings” (qtd. in *Importance of Arts* no. 10).

Art, from a Bahá'í perspective, is thus a powerful phenomenon. Its power may be particularly effective when joined with the power inherent in the Word of God. An exploration of the concept of the power of the Word of

God is beyond the scope of this paper, but the great unifying power of the Word of God, emphasized by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, may be particularly worth noting in this context: “Naught but the celestial potency of the Word of God, which ruleth and transcendeth the realities of all things, is capable of harmonizing the divergent thoughts, sentiments, ideas, and convictions of the children of men. Verily, it is the penetrating power in all things, the mover of souls and the binder and regulator in the world of humanity” (*Selections* 225). This power may hold particular insight into the calligraphic art, which can incorporate sacred texts into artistic designs. Mishkín-Qalam’s art in particular “reflected his meditation on and expression of the power of the Word of God” (Nakhjavání, *Four* 49).

While the above passage suggests that the Word of God has a unique power to unify at a universal level, art too can strengthen unity and enrich the life of a community as a whole, as highlighted in a recent message of the Universal House of Justice:

Indeed the arts as a whole, so integral a part of the development of a community from the start, stand out in such settings as an important means of generating joy, *strengthening the bonds of unity*, disseminating knowledge, and consolidating understanding, as well as of acquainting those in the wider society with the principles of the Cause. (30 December 2021 ¶ 12, emphasis added)

As we will see, Mishkín-Qalam's artistic contributions are not only beautiful, educational, and uplifting for the individual who views them, but they can also nurture the spirit of community life and fulfill the qualities identified by the Universal House of Justice in this passage. His calligraphic rendition of the Greatest Name is a particularly good example of art that is able to strengthen bonds of unity. It is a symbol ubiquitous in Bahá'í homes and centres, as well as many of the Houses of Worship. It is a common visual reference point recognized by all; it helps instill a sense of unity and belonging, and bridges any barriers, be they of language or culture.

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND THE EMERGENCE OF NEW FORMS

Another Bahá'í teaching that has profound implications for the encouragement of Bahá'í artists is the principle of freedom of expression. Shoghi Effendi states, for example, that the "believers are free to paint, write, and compose as their talents guide them" (qtd. in compilation *Music* no. 22). The Universal House of Justice states that "freedom of expression, [is] a fundamental principle of the Cause. . . . Bahá'u'lláh has extended the scope and deepened the meaning of self-expression. In His elevation of art and of work performed in the service of humanity to acts of worship can be discerned enormous prospects for a new birth of expression in the civilization anticipated by His World Order" (Letter dated 29 Dec.

1988). One consequence of this concept is that artists need not feel bound by traditional forms of artistic expression.

What considerations might guide artists' work, either within existing traditions or in the development of new forms? Even though these are the relatively early stages of the development of the Bahá'í community, artists and writers have begun to reflect on questions revolving around the essential characteristics of Bahá'í art and its appreciation. For example, writer and author Bahíyyih Nakhjavání in her prescient 1982 article "Artist, Seeker and Seer" sets out "to use selected imagery and metaphor from the Bahá'í Writings in order to discover therein the guidelines for both the appreciation and the creation of art by Bahá'ís" (3). Although the focus of her paper is poetry and literature, some of the concepts she explores can equally apply to the visual arts, including the artistic output of Mishkín-Qalam. Nakhjavání speaks of the use of "image and sign, symbol and metaphor" as some of the most significant characteristics of this Revelation (6).

Bahá'í abstract artist Otto Donald Rogers also stresses the importance of metaphor in allowing the audience to easily understand complex themes (6, 8). He references the words of a leading art critic who suggests that what distinguishes a great work of art "is a set of deeply felt relationships" (6). Rogers suggests that for art created by Bahá'ís, "a fundamental relationship occurs as a result of the juxtaposition of an artistic discipline, or combination of disciplines, with the Creative Word of God

itself" (6). Of course, this relationship with the Creative Word is particularly evident in the calligrapher's work, which directly represents it. As we will later see, *Mishkín-Qalam* also drew upon the rich metaphors and symbolism found in the Bahá'í Writings and used them as the foundational material for his calligraphies. He combined calligraphic writing of sacred texts with calligraphic compositions of invocations, often in the form of birds, to convey such themes as the Covenant, or the Twin Manifestations as harbingers of a new day.

Returning to *Nakhjavání's* essay, she proposes that "the true believer or artist . . . must strive to obtain a glimpse of the first streaks of the promised dawn. And dawn in the field of aesthetic response to the Bahá'í Faith, is any form that both contains the promise and the proof of beauty still unborn" (*Artist* 6). It thus behoves a Bahá'í artist "to strive, to seek no rest, to search perpetually forward" (*Four* 6). This is what we perceive in the works of the celebrated calligrapher—even though living in the earliest days of the Revelation, he produced art of the highest calibre and continually sought to invent, adopt, and incorporate new ideas while conveying the truths of the new Revelation.

Await the break of His sovereign
morn,
These are but effects of its early
dawn!¹⁴

Art historian Julie Oeming Badiee suggests that many twentieth-century artists, whether Bahá'í or not, were sensitive to the new age they lived in, which called for new expressions in art and a break with tradition (5). This sensitivity to the dawn of a new age prompted them to turn from material to non-material, from objective to non-objective modes of expression, and hence abstract art became more dominant. Oeming Badiee proposes that,

a study of twentieth-century art can show that amidst the destruction and despair there is . . . this quiet but persistent theme of birth and new beginnings. . . . Even if they were unaware of the magnitude of the coming of the Bahá'í Revelation, there were artists who were sensitive not only to the death of the old order but also to the birth of something unprecedented from the ruins of an old way of life. Indeed, this theme of a new beginning runs quietly through twentieth-century art, persistent and unmistakable. (4)

Mishkín-Qalam was of course aware of the new Revelation, which deeply informed his art. His most imaginative and celebrated calligraphic compositions—those depicting the twin cockerels, representing the Twin Manifestations of God—unmistakably announce a new day for humanity.

14 Anvarí (1126-1189) quoted by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Light of the World* 203.

RECURRING THEMES IN ART INSPIRED
BY THE BAHÁ'Í REVELATION:
REUNION AND SEPARATION,
AND LOVE OF GOD

Nakhjavání directs our attention towards the "Lawḥ-i-Maqsúd," proposing that in it "Bahá'u'lláh offers . . . some of the most significant guidelines concerning the standards of true art and the techniques of appreciation . . . as a result of His Revelation" (10). In this Tablet, Bahá'u'lláh praises the recipient's poetry and states that it "proved highly impressive, for it was indicative of both the light of reunion and the fire of separation." Nakhjavání suggests that "the concept of reunion and separation . . . is one of the central aesthetic principles for any work that presumes to reflect the spirit of the Bahá'í Revelation" (11). "Reunion and separation" are themes amply demonstrated in the works of Mishkín-Qalam. Indeed, they take on an additional poignancy in some of his art, which seems to have been created not only as an expression of the spiritual separation from God that, from a mystical perspective, is common to all human beings, but also as a response to his physical separation from Bahá'u'lláh. In these cases, His art can be viewed as a way of attaining a kind of spiritual reunion. One highly stylized work, consisting entirely of Bahá'u'lláh's given names, 'Husayn and 'Alí', bears an inscription revealing that it was made "during the 9th year of his imprisonment in the citadel of Maghúsih

[Famagusta, Cyprus]."¹⁵ The calligraphy is written in mirror script, simultaneously adding a sense of urgency to his supplication by doubling the text while also making it hard to decipher. One of the ways the exiled calligrapher, far away from his Beloved, could overcome the sorrow caused by physical distance was by employing his art to "praise Him, and call Him continually to mind" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections* 150:3). Through writing out invocations, and the names and titles of his Beloved One, with his calligraphic pen, he sought spiritual proximity with Him. In doing so, Mishkín-Qalam, who prior to joining the Bahá'í Faith was a Sufi of the Ni'matu'lláhi order (Balyuzi, *Eminent Bahá'is* 270), is enacting a form of *dhikr* 'u'lláh, remembrance of God. This practice, while typically associated with the recitation of the names of God, is also a central theme in Islamic art, especially among some Sufis, for whom "mediation upon the calligraphic form of the Name is used as a spiritual method for realizing the Named" (Nasr 38; "Dhikr" in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*).

Mishkín-Qalam's later work during the ministry of 'Abdu'l-Bahá continues to reflect the theme of reunion and separation. When, for instance, he was

15 See plate 20 in *Mishkín-Qalam XIX Century Artist and Calligrapher*. This inscription is found in the right cartouche; the left cartouche reads: "Imprisoned for the love of God engaged in creating this work Mishkín-Qalam 1294" (ca CE 1877). It is one of the earliest works we know of in which the artist employs mirror script.

sent to Bombay for the express purpose of transcribing Bahá'í texts for printing, and again found himself far removed from the centre of his Faith, he wrote out in calligraphic form an invocation of the name of the Master, *Yá 'Abdu'l-Bahá*. This work, dated 1325 AH (ca CE 1907), features cartouches in smaller script displaying the invocations *Yá-Bahá'ul-Abhá* (top left) and *Yá 'Alíyyu'l-'Alá* (top right), and one at the bottom stating that the work was “executed in the port of Bombay, [by] servant of ‘Abdu'l-Bahá *Mishkín-Qalam*.”¹⁶ This work, while not neglecting the mention of Bahá'u'lláh and the Báb, shows the artist's love and devotion to ‘Abdu'l-Bahá. In this period of separation, he sought spiritual proximity both through rendering service to Him by transcribing holy texts and by invoking His name in his art.¹⁷

The theme of reunion and separation is, of course, informed by the more general theme of love of God that pervades religious art of all kinds. Indeed, the theme of love expressed in art is mentioned by Bahá'u'lláh in the “*Lawḥ-i-Maqsúd*”: “Every word of thy poetry is indeed like unto a mirror in which the evidences of the devotion

and love thou cherishest for God and His chosen ones are reflected” (*Tablets* 11:42). ‘Abdu'l-Bahá's statement that “[a]ll things are beneficial if joined with the love of God” similarly highlights the value of art that is infused with this love (*Selections* 154).¹⁸ Love of God and “His chosen ones” was perhaps the defining theme of *Mishkín-Qalam*'s life as a whole, and strongly informed his art. The artist had a deep love for God and the three Central Figures of the Bahá'í Faith that manifested itself in the choices he made in his spiritual life, which in turn impacted his actions in the physical world and his artistic output. In *Memorials of the Faithful*, ‘Abdu'l-Bahá mentions that *Mishkín-Qalam* was “ashine with the love of God,” that he had “intense love,” that he was “love embodied;” He also refers to the artist's love for “the Blessed Beauty” (100–101). There is ample proof in *Mishkín-Qalam*'s works that his “artistic spirit drove him to find expression for his love in designs of ecstatic praise” (*Nakhjavání Four* 94). As is evident from the descriptions of his work throughout this paper, *Mishkín-Qalam*'s love and devotion were manifest throughout his oeuvre.

16 Plate 64 in Persian Letters and Arts Society, *Mishkín-Qalam, XIX Century Artist and Calligrapher*.

17 In another calligraphy dated 1316 AH (1898/99) the artist has written out in beautiful *nasta'liq* script many of the titles of ‘Abdu'l-Bahá. See plate 63 in *Mishkín-Qalam, XIX Century Artist and Calligrapher*.

18 It is interesting to note that this principle applies to not only the creator of art, but to its audience: “For example, a melody, sweet to the ear, bringeth the very spirit of life to a heart in love with God, yet staineth with lust a soul engrossed in sensual desires” (‘Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections* 154:3).

ARTISTIC EXPRESSION AS A COHERENT PART OF A SPIRITUAL LIFE

Tuman, in his discussion of the relationship between art and spirituality, argues that “the common, the most general and fundamental aim of the arts and sciences, indeed of all human endeavors, however material or mundane they may seem, is to foster spiritual growth” (62). He identifies three facets of life that, in the Bahá’í teachings, are “inseparably woven together in the golden brocade of spiritual growth;” these are “the worship of God, the gaining of divine knowledge, and purehearted service to humanity” (62).

All three are reflected in the life, and artistic efforts, of Mishkín-Qalam. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá attests that Mishkín-Qalam “spent his days and nights supplicating and communing with God” (*Memorials* 101), and that he was “among the most noted mystics” who “reached the heights of faith and assurance . . . and drank the wine of certitude” (98). As to “purehearted service to humanity,” this was expressed by Mishkín-Qalam chiefly through his pen. “For this calligrapher, the words embodied deeds; the dance of his pen expressed his very life” (*Nakhjavání Four* 49). His calligraphic works—from unique contributions such as the design of the inscriptions on the sarcophagus of the Báb and the first House of Worship, to written mementos for pilgrims and transcription of holy texts for the purposes of printing—resonated with significance for Bahá’ís the world

over. His famous calligraphic design of the Greatest Name in particular continues to serve as a tangible point of focus for individuals and communities around the world in their efforts to increasingly reflect the spiritual teachings brought by the One it alludes to. We can conclude that Mishkín-Qalam’s art fulfilled the aim that Tuman highlights for them: “to foster spiritual growth.” His art was not only conducive to his personal spiritual growth, but also to that of his audience.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá also praises other services rendered by Mishkín-Qalam. While in Constantinople, where he was falsely accused of being an “agitator” and eventually imprisoned and exiled, he had in fact been “of service to strangers and was helping to educate the native people. He was a refuge to the hapless and a horn of plenty to the poor. He invited all comers to the oneness of humankind” (*Memorials* 38:4).¹⁹ He also taught calligraphy

19 Although Mishkín-Qalam seems to have spent a considerable amount of his time working on Bahá’í-related calligraphies and giving of his talent and skill to the Bahá’í community, it is quite certain that it was not his sole occupation. For example, while in Constantinople he is said to have “executed some illuminations” for Sultán Abdu’l-Azíz (quoted in Momen *Accounts* 311). His calligraphic works have also been documented in mosques in Cairo (Meshgin 4) and Akká (Blomfield 241). Again ‘Abdu’l-Bahá verifies that Mishkín-Qalam produced “his marvelous calligraphs and sen[t] them about” (*Memorials* 38:6).

and penmanship to the children in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's household in 'Akká (Afroukhteh 160).



Having reflected on some ways of understanding art from a Bahá'í perspective, and briefly considered how they are reflected in Mishkín-Qalam's life, we now turn to a more thorough—though still necessarily cursory—examination of some of the artist's outstanding works and services. The intent here is not merely to celebrate the accomplishments of one artist, but to specifically illuminate the dynamic of encouragement that enabled and sustained his efforts.

Indeed, a theme running through the stories behind each of the artistic works highlighted below is that Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá strongly reciprocated Mishkín-Qalam's love, and that this was perhaps the greatest source of encouragement for the artist. For example, in Adrianople, Bahá'u'lláh encouraged and supported his artmaking—a “house was rented for Mishkín-Qalam so that he could practise his art unhindered” (Balyuzi, *King of Glory* 243). And when the artist made a rendition of the Greatest Name and “rearranged it into the beautifully organised order in which we have it today. . . . Bahá'u'lláh . . . pleased with this exquisite design [...], although living in great austerity, honoured him with a gift of 50 pias (lira) and approved his penmanship” (Meshgin 7).

'Abdu'l-Bahá regularly corresponded

with the artist, especially when the latter was an exile in Cyprus, conveying His encouragement and love.²⁰ Perhaps the greatest manifestation of that love was that 'Abdu'l-Bahá regularly commissioned calligraphic works from the artist, knowing that practicing his art was an essential part of his life. Mishkín-Qalam's absolute need to practice his art is attested by one of his fellow prisoners in Constantinople, who noted that the artist was greatly distressed when no writing materials were available to him (Salmání 63). This caused him great agony: unable to exercise his craft, he felt that he was “denied the means to justify the purpose of his life” (Nakhjavání, *Four* 49). We may well suppose that 'Abdu'l-Bahá's frequent commissioning of work from Mishkín-Qalam reflected not only the needs of the community, but His understanding of the artist's need to create art in service to God and humanity.

MISHKÍN-QALAM'S SERVICES DURING THE MINISTRY OF BAHÁ'U'LLÁH

THE GREATEST NAME

Mishkín-Qalam is perhaps best known for his calligraphic representation of the invocation “O Glory of the All-Glorious” (*Yá Bahá'u'l-Abhá*), commonly referred to as the “Greatest

20 In one such letter, He acknowledges Mishkín-Qalam's suffering and commends him for “enduring separation, affliction and captivity” “in the path of the Heavenly Beauty” ('Abdu'l-Bahá, qtd. in Nakhjavání 51).

Name” (figure 1). The Greatest Name consists of the letters *bá* and *há* which make up the Arabic term *Bahá*, a reference to Bahá’u’lláh (qtd. in Hornby 271). Derivatives of the word *Bahá*—including the invocation *Yá Bahá’u’l-Abhá* and the greeting *Alláh’u’Abhá* (God, the All-Glorious)—are also considered forms of the Greatest Name (Bahá’u’lláh, *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* Note 33; Faizi 12-13). The Greatest Name has profound spiritual as well as symbolic significance; as stated in a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, it “is a distinctive mark of the Cause and a symbol of our Faith” (qtd. in Hornby 267).

until the advent of the Revelation of Bahá’u’lláh, “[l]ike a brilliant sun wrapped in clouds, the Greatest Name remained hidden and unknown” (3). It was acknowledged “that the new Name of the Great One to come” was associated with “light,” “splendour,” and “glory”—words which all culminate in the word *Bahá* (4). Schimmel explains that “the hope of discovering the Greatest Name of God has inspired many a Sufi who dreamed of reaching the highest bliss in this world and the next by means of this blessed name” (qtd. in Oeming Badiée and Badiée 17). It is not surprising that Mishkín-Qalam, who was well-versed in the



Fig. 4a & 4b. Calligraphic designs of the Greatest Name by Mishkín-Qalam (left) and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá (right); the latter is commonly known as the Bahá’í ringstone symbol.

©Bahá’í International Community

Allusions to the Greatest Name of God can be found in many faith traditions and mystical writings.²¹ Abu’l-Qásim Faizi explains that

21 For in-depth explanations and references to other Faith traditions see Lambden, “The Word *Bahá*’: The Quintessence of the Greatest Name of God,” and Faizi, *Explanation of the Symbol of the Greatest Name*.

Sufi traditions, should, upon discovering the Greatest Name, have repeatedly written it out over the course of his life and in a variety of arrangements and scripts.

Mishkín-Qalam started to render the invocation of the Greatest Name in calligraphic form, once he joined

Bahá'u'lláh in Adrianople.²² Printed copies of Mishkín-Qalam's design of the Greatest Name can be found today in many Bahá'í homes, and early pilgrims to the Holy Land considered original renditions by the artist a most treasured keepsake (see fig. 5a) (Hogenson 171). The calligrapher's skillful design of the Greatest Name has become one of the symbols of the Bahá'í community, which is often referred to as "the community of the Greatest Name."²³ While the design featured in figure 1 is by far the most well known, 'Abdu'l-Bahá highlights the creativity of Mishkín-Qalam in arriving at multiple calligraphic versions: "he would write out the Most Great Name . . . with marvelous skill, in many different forms, and would send them everywhere" (*Memorials* 38:2).

Mishkín-Qalam's masterful renditions of the Greatest Name exemplify art that "attracts the soul, through beauty, to a work in which the knowledge of things divine is imparted" (Tuman 79). It is also an example of "fostering spiritual growth

in all of our activities" (Tuman 62): for Mishkín-Qalam, writing out the Greatest Name over and over again must have been an act of worship, and of meditation on the exalted station of his Beloved. The artist's creative act was conducive to his own spiritual growth and the development of his art, while at the same time offering a service to Bahá'ís, both as individuals and communities, as his beautiful calligraphy of the Greatest Name was highly sought after and was proudly hung in Bahá'í centers and homes alike.

Mishkín-Qalam's calligraphy of the Greatest Name, which as a "symbol of our Faith" represents in visual form a potentially infinite depth of meaning, exemplifies the centrality of "image and sign, symbol and metaphor" highlighted by Nakhjavání as important characteristics of art inspired by the Bahá'í Revelation (6). Further, as a highly recognizable symbol that all Bahá'ís identify with, Mishkín-Qalam's design powerfully demonstrates the role of the arts, highlighted by the Universal House of Justice, in "strengthening the bonds of unity" (Letter dated 30 December 2021). And as his designs of the Greatest Name manifest "symmetry, harmony, and perfection" they "are pleasing to the heart and spirit" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, qtd. in compilation *Music* no. 15) and hence "an important means of generating joy" (Universal House of Justice, Letter dated 30 December 2021).

22 It may be that Mishkín-Qalam was inspired to begin rendering the invocation *Yá Bahá'u'l-Abhá* by the new currency of another form of the Greatest Name: it was at this time that the common Islamic salutation *Alláh-u-Akbar* was superseded by the Bahá'í greeting *Alláh-u-Abhá* among the early believers (Shoghi Effendi 176).

23 In 1934 the calligraphic rendering of the Greatest Name was registered as a trademark with the U.S. patent office (*Bahá'í World* vol. VI 350).



Fig. 5a. Early Western Bahá’ís holding a copy of the Greatest Name, Paris c. 1901 (It is not clear who the calligrapher is.)

©Bahá’í International Community

The inherent symbolism and significance of the Greatest Name, combined with the matchless form given to it by the pen of *Mishkín-Qalam*, have meant that his design continues to be adopted by contemporary Bahá’í artists from different cultural backgrounds and incorporated into their own creations.²⁴ African American Bahá’í

24 Bahá’ís everywhere identify the symbol of the Greatest Name with their faith, and have strong attachment to both the design of *Mishkín-Qalam* and the so called “ringstone symbol” designed by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá (Faizi 11). The latter has been incorporated into the art works of contemporary Bahá’í artists and architects as well, including Bunch Washington as well as New Zealand senior artist Robin White, who is partly of Maori descent. The ring symbol



Fig. 5b. McCleary Bunch Washington, *My Love is My Stronghold* (ca 1990), oil on board, 8^{1/8} x 11.

Image courtesy of the Bunch Washington Foundation

artist McCleary “Bunch” Washington (1937-2008) is one of them. In a brochure written for one of Washington’s exhibitions, the well-known visual artist Romare Bearden mentions the use of “symbols” in Washington’s art. Bearden explains that these symbols “relate to his study of Persian Arts and his dedication to the Bahá’í Faith” (de Souza 44). Indeed, Bearden is here referring to Washington’s repeated use of the Greatest Name in his artistic output—in works such as *Holding the Greatest Name* (ca 1980s), a self-portrait of the artist executed in his self-devised “transparent collage” technique that uses resin to mimic the appearance

also adorns the dome of the New Delhi Bahá’í House of Worship.

of stained glass,²⁵ and *My Love is My Stronghold* (ca 1990; see fig. 5b), an oil painting showing a woman of African descent with her child at her side, holding the Greatest Name up high. These works convey how Washington has made the symbol of the Greatest Name his own. It is not a foreign symbol in an illegible script; it is the symbol of *his* Faith, and his subjects always display it with pride. As Bahá'í architect Fariborz Sahba explains, “[a]rt is the indigenous offspring of a society: that is to say, it originates from within that society, rather than being something that comes to it from outside” (53). It is a testament to the power of Mishkín-Qalam’s design that, although it was the work of a Persian calligrapher living during the time of Bahá’u’lláh, a century later an artist on the other side of the world with very different life experiences “views it as something essential to his being” (de Souza, personal correspondence).²⁶ The calligraphic Greatest Name connects Washington with the Founders of his Faith, and with others across the globe who share its world-changing vision. Washington is able to incorporate the Greatest Name into his own art in a way wholly his own, an “indigenous offspring.”

25 For a colour reproduction of this work see Elizabeth de Souza, “Views from a Black Artist in the Century of Light” in *Journal of Bahá'í Studies*, vol. 30, no. 3.

26 According to the artist’s daughter and co-founder of the Bunch Washington Foundation, Elizabeth de Souza, her father dearly loved both the Greatest Name and the artist Mishkín-Qalam (Personal correspondence).

MISHKÍN-QALAM’S SERVICES DURING THE MINISTRY OF ‘ABDU’L-BAHÁ

There were “three principal objectives” which ‘Abdu’l-Bahá labored towards and accomplished during His ministry from 1892-1921: the establishment of His Father’s Faith in North America; the internment of the Báb’s remains in their final resting-place on Mount Carmel; and lastly, the construction of the first House of Worship in the Bahá’í world (Shoghi Effendi 273). ‘Abdu’l-Bahá engaged Mishkín-Qalam’s artistic talent in the last two of these principal objectives of His ministry, and also employed his talents in the production of the Bahá’í Faith’s first printed literature.

CALLIGRAPHIC DESIGNS FOR THE MARBLE SARCOPHAGUS OF THE BÁB

Towards the end of His life, on a visit to Mount Carmel in Haifa, Bahá’u’lláh pointed out to His eldest son the location where the remains of the Báb, the Herald of His Faith, should be buried. The designated land was later purchased by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, and a special sepulchre was erected by Him, with much toil and hardship, during the most difficult period of His incarceration. It took sixty years from the time of the Báb’s martyrdom for His remains to finally be interred in that spot.²⁷

Around 1894/5, as part of the

27 For a detailed account of the early history of the Shrine of the Báb see Michael V. Day, *Journey to a Mountain*.

preparations for the interment on Mount Carmel, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá sent “[s]pecial instructions” as well as “a design” to Rangoon, Burma, “for a sarcophagus to be made of the marble of that region” to hold the sacred remains of the Báb. The Bahá’ís of Rangoon were given the challenging task of carving this sarcophagus “from a single piece of stone.” In addition, “a casket made of the finest Indian wood” was ordered, to fit inside the sarcophagus (*Light of the World* 28).

‘Abdu’l-Bahá instructed that the marble sarcophagus be adorned on its top and sides with gilded calligraphic renderings of the Greatest Name, as well as the invocation commonly associated with the Báb, *Yá ‘Alíyyu’l-‘A’lá* (O Exalted of the Most Exalted One). The task of designing the calligraphic inscriptions for the marble sarcophagus was given by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá to Mishkín-Qalam (Afnán 416; Day 38).

In a photograph taken in Burma (figure 6), a large group of people is seen gathered around the completed marble sarcophagus. The banner above the sarcophagus is dated 22 May 1898 (1316 AH). Mishkín-Qalam’s rendering of the Greatest Name can be seen, repeated three times, on the front of the sarcophagus. The invocation *Yá ‘Alíyyu’l-‘A’lá* is not visible in this image, and may have been engraved on the top or the back-side of the sarcophagus which are not visible. Háji Mírzá Haydar-‘Alí, one of the artist’s friends and contemporaries, confirms in his memoirs that “[t]he designs were prepared in exquisite penmanship by the calligrapher, Mishkín-Qalam” (149–50).

In one account, we read that Mishkín-Qalam asked ‘Abdu’l-Bahá whether he had permission to sign his name in an obscure corner of the marble sarcophagus. He was known to sign most of his



Fig. 6. The Bahá’ís of Burma gathered around the sarcophagus made for the sacred remains of the Báb. Mishkín-Qalam’s rendering of the Greatest Name can be seen along its side.

works executed during the ministry of Bahá'u'lláh with “Servant at the Gate of Bahá Mishkín-Qalam,”²⁸ thus simultaneously referencing the Báb (the Gate) and Bahá'u'lláh.²⁹ By contrast, most of his calligraphies made during the ministry of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá bore the signature “Servant of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá Mishkín-Qalam.”³⁰ The account goes on to say that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá consented to him adding his signature, under the condition that he change it to “Servant at the Gate of Bahá” instead of dedicating it to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá (Mooghen 147). The mention of the Gate seems particularly fitting given Whose remains the sarcophagus was to receive.

The Bahá'í community of Rangoon gifted the finished marble sarcophagus to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, a gesture Shoghi Effendi termed “an offering of love” (275). It was brought by several friends from Burma and arrived in Haifa in 1899 (Butt). ‘Abdu’l-Bahá had also sent instructions

to transport the remains of the Báb from Persia, where they had been carefully concealed and guarded for the past fifty years, to the Holy Land. The casket containing the remains arrived in Haifa on 31 January 1899 (Shoghi Effendi 274). It would be another ten years before the remains would be interred on Mount Carmel, in a ceremony described by Shoghi Effendi:

[on] the . . . day of the first Naw-Rúz (1909), which He celebrated after His release from His confinement, ‘Abdu’lBahá had the marble sarcophagus transported with great labor to the vault prepared for it, and in the evening, by the light of a single lamp, He laid within it, with His own hands—in the presence of believers from the East and from the West and in circumstances at once solemn and moving—the wooden casket containing the sacred remains of the Báb and His companion. (276)

28 In the original it reads, “Bandiy-i-báb-i-Bahá, Mishkín-Qalam.” For the origin of this signature see Rafati 9.

29 Cambridge Orientalist Edward Granville Browne suggests that, were it not for his profession of faith in his signatures, Mishkín-Qalam could have sold even more of his calligraphies (Nakhjavání, *Four* 22). He in fact would sometimes sign his works with a pseudonym such as Mirzá Muhammad Husayn, or not sign them at all. (Motamed 136). According to Christie’s website, “The calligraphic specimens signed by Mirza Husayn are mostly dated to the last decade of his life which was spent in India.”

30 In the original it reads “Bandiy-i-‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Mishkín-Qalam.”

It is possible, though sources available at the time of writing do not confirm it, that Mishkín-Qalam was present to see the sarcophagus that bore his calligraphy receive its sacred contents. In *Memorials of the Faithful*, after noting Mishkín-Qalam’s time spent in India, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states: “When I learned that he was getting helpless, I sent for him at once and he came back to this Most Great Prison, to the joy of the believers, who felt blessed to have him here again” (101). The latest calligraphy that has been identified from

Mishkín-Qalam’s time in Bombay is signed and dated 1326,³¹ which makes it possible that he had returned to the Holy Land by March 1909.³² In that event, he would have surely been part of this stirring and historical event.

Shoghi Effendi describes ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s transference and internment of the remains of the Báb as “one of the most signal acts of His ministry” and “one of the outstanding events in the first Bahá’í century” (273). It also signified the fulfillment of prophecies found in the Holy Books of other Faith traditions about the future greatness of Mount Carmel.

It is worth reflecting on the meticulous care ‘Abdu’l-Bahá took with every detail of this project: the sarcophagus had to be shaped from a single piece of precious stone; the casket that was crafted to fit inside the sarcophagus had to be made of “the finest Indian wood”; calligraphies by the eminent calligrapher were ordered to adorn the stone; and finally the remains were laid to rest in a most sacred and moving ceremony, in the Shrine that had been constructed in the face of many obstacles and difficulties. We seem to glimpse here some profound relationship between the arts and the sacred act of interring the body of the Manifestation. Once placed in its vault, the specially designed and purpose-built sarcophagus, with its exquisite calligraphies, would never be

seen again by visitors or pilgrims. Here the calligraphies do not serve a didactic purpose, nor do they delight the eyes of the onlooker. They seem to hold some much deeper, spiritual significance. We can only speculate as to what this may be, but perhaps the inscriptions represent humanity’s invocation and supplication of the One Whose mortal remains were placed within. Did Mishkín-Qalam, under the direction of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, “utter” through his calligraphy an invocation of the names of the Twin Manifestations on behalf of all of humanity—a humanity that, at the time, had not recognized the Báb befittingly? Does this sarcophagus, as an act of grace on behalf of a heedless people, eternally voice an invocation in praise of the Báb and Bahá’u’lláh?

For Mishkín-Qalam’s own part, the calligraphic work he rendered for the sarcophagus meant that now he had been enabled to serve, through his artistic endeavours, all three Central Figures of the Faith.

CALLIGRAPHIC DESIGNS FOR THE FIRST BAHÁ’Í HOUSE OF WORSHIP

The first major construction project that the young Bahá’í community embarked upon took place in the city of ‘Ishqábád in Russian Turkistan. The construction of the first House of Worship provided another opportunity for the inclusion of the arts, and for Mishkín-Qalam’s calligraphies to again serve in one of the most important initiatives of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s ministry (see fig. 7).

31 1326 AH, corresponding to 4 February 1908 to 22 January 1909.

32 See plate 73 in *Persian Letters and Arts Society, Mishkín-Qalam, XIX Century Artist and Calligrapher*.

During Bahá'u'lláh's lifetime, a Bahá'í community was founded in 'Ishqábád, consisting mostly of believers from Persia who had fled religious persecution in their native land. There they created "a pattern of life that . . . reflect[ed] the exalted spiritual and social principles enshrined in the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh" (Universal House of Justice, letter dated 1 August 2014). During His lifetime and with His consent, "facilities were built for communal well-being—a meeting hall, schools for children, a hostel for visitors, and a small clinic, among others." In 1902 the community was ready to build a House of Worship as part of this Mashriqu'l-Adhkár complex. The term Mashriqu'l-Adhkár, meaning "dawning place of the remembrance of God," refers to a House of Worship and its surrounding educational, humanitarian, social and scientific institutions. The institution of the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár allows the interconnected elements of worship and service at the core of religion to reinforce and act upon one another.³³

'Abdu'l-Bahá initiated the House of Worship project and closely monitored its development. He instructed a cousin of the Báb, Hájí Mírzá Muḥammad-Taqí, the Vakílu'd-Dawlih,³⁴ to personally

supervise it. The construction, including the external decorative work, was completed in 1919 (Momen, "Bahá'í Community of Ashkhabad" 285). Once built, it was "the most prominent edifice in the area" and became the centre of activity of the community, whose members would gather there every morning for devotions, and then go out to engage in their chosen professions and service to the community (Universal House of Justice, letter dated 1 August 2014). 'Abdu'l-Bahá states that the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár in 'Ishqábád "possesses superlative importance, because it was the first Mashriqu'l-Adhkár built" (*Promulgation* 30).



Fig. 7. The first Bahá'í House of Worship, 'Ishqábád, Turkistan.

©Bahá'í International Community

Unfortunately, this first House of Worship has not survived. Political changes in the area resulted in its

33 "The Mashriqu'l-Adhkár, described by 'Abdu'l-Bahá as 'one of the most vital institutions in the world', weds two essential, inseparable aspects of Bahá'í life: worship and service" (Universal House of Justice, Riḍván 2012).

34 Which means "agent of the state." However 'Abdu'l-Bahá gave him the title Vakílu'l-Haqq (agent of God).

expropriation by the government in 1928. In 1938, members of the local Bahá’í community were either sent back to Persia or into exile and labour camps. The Temple was converted into an art gallery. A severe earthquake in 1948 devastated the city and caused damage to the House of Worship. With poor maintenance contributing to the weakening of its foundations, the building had to be demolished in 1963 (Momen “Bahá’í community of Ashkhabad” 291–94).

As the *Ishqábád* Temple was inspired by Islamic architecture, and in particular the Mughal architecture of the Taj Mahal in India (Shoghi Effendi 301), it is not surprising that calligraphy is extensively woven into the design of the building.³⁵ Subsequent Bahá’í Houses of Worship typically only have a single rendering of the Greatest Name, usually placed at the apex of the interior of the dome. An article published in 1909 by the French Bahá’í Hippolyte Dreyfus, who was one of the earliest Westerners to visit the still-incomplete House of Worship in June 1906 (Ballanger 65–66), attests that the interior decoration included calligraphic inscriptions in plaster relief executed by “the artistic pen of the celebrated *Mishkín-Qalam*” (*Bahá’i World* VIII 528).

While the House of Worship no longer stands, there still exist drawings used by *Mishkín-Qalam* as part of

his work on the Temple’s calligraphy, which have been passed down in the family of the Vakílu’d-Dawlih. These are in the form of two unusually large calligraphies, measuring around 95 x 65 cm, each bearing the signature and date “Servant of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá *Mishkín-Qalam* 1321” (ca 1903) (Carter and Afnan 50). Both the signature and the date match the circumstance: they were executed during the ministry of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and fit the start of the construction period of the Temple. What suggests that these are working drawings rather than final works of art is their lack of any ornamentation, illumination or use of marbled paper—techniques commonly employed by *Mishkín-Qalam* to enhance his calligraphies. The calligraphic invocations on these maquettes match calligraphy that can be seen in photographs of the interior and, in one case, the exterior of the Temple. They are likely made to scale and are characterized by bold letters in *nasta‘liq* script.³⁶

36 Yúsofi describes the process by which working drawings such as this would be used in the creation of inscriptions on building surfaces: “Inscriptions . . . are first written by the calligrapher on paper in large, clearly drawn letters and then transferred to the slab of stone or the tiles. They are placed on façades, walls, and portals of mosques, shrines, and important secular buildings.” Schimmel comments on the calligrapher’s facility with the large calligraphy required to produce an inscription in this way, stating that “*Mishkín-Qalam*’s firm hand makes the observer feel that he was well versed in large inscriptions for he

35 Throughout the Taj Mahal, one finds passages from the Qur’an executed mainly in florid thuluth script, such as around the tomb entrance.

As already mentioned, while Mishkín-Qalam was known for the well-balanced design of the Greatest Name that is easily recognizable by Bahá'ís today, he evinced great creativity in creating a wide range of forms for the Greatest Name. One of the two maquettes for the Temple is, in fact, an unconventional calligraphic rendering of the Greatest Name (figure 8 a). In Mishkín-Qalam's standard design of the Greatest Name (figure 1), two single dots for the two *b* and a double-dot for the *ye* in "Yá" are all placed at the bottom half of the composition. Here, the design is different—perhaps because the artist was inspired to come up with a fresh concept for this new House of Worship, or perhaps as a simple matter of scale, with gaps that naturally appear due to enlarging and elongating letters needing to be filled. Whatever the reason, the artist chose to add a set of diacritical double-dots for the second *ye*, which usually would not have dots, to fill the large empty space. Additionally, he included the *maddah* diacritic (l) on top of the *alif* and moved the dot for the second *b* closer to where it would be found in normal script. All these measures ensure the overall balance and harmony of the piece, reflecting the importance of composition to the calligrapher. As Yúsofi explains, composition is "the most important factor in calligraphy. It is the arrangement of letters and words . . . sentences, and lines . . . to

forms his letters (e.g. the wide initial *kh*) in the style used in architectural inscriptions."

produce a beautiful layout.³⁷ This is a particularly demanding task in the case of inscriptions, where the space is limited." We know that Mishkín-Qalam made careful preparations before executing his calligraphies, taking accurate measurements to make sure that the selected text would perfectly fit on the prepared paper (Faizi, qtd. in Aidun).³⁸ This same care is reflected in the innovations he made to this larger, inscribed design of the Greatest Name.

The new rendition of the Greatest Name was found in the interior and exterior of the temple. Inside the building,

37 Composition in this sense is, for Yúsofi, the most important of the "four basic principles" at the core of calligraphic excellence, which he describes as follows:

1. "Respect for the elements" means giving all the letters of the alphabet proper degrees of "boldness" (*qúwa/qowwa*) or "faintness" (*ža'f*) and proper shape.
2. "Proportion" (*nesba* or *tamásob*) means that identically or similarly shaped letters, whether detached or joined, should be of the same size in all contexts.
3. Composition (*tarkib*) is the most important factor in calligraphy. It is the arrangement of letters and words (*tarkib-e joz'i*), sentences, and lines (*tarkib-e kollí*) to produce a beautiful layout. . . .
4. "Seating" (*korsí*) refers to the placement of the letters and words of a line or hemistich in relation to each other and to the "horizon" of the line, or *katt-e korsí*. . . ("Scripts")

38 This care was also reflected in the fact that Mishkín-Qalam made his own ink (Faizi qtd. in Aidun).

“[o]n the third story of the rotunda” are “a series of nine blank arches filled with fretwork, between which are escutcheons bear[ing] the Greatest Name” (qtd. in Shoghi Effendi 301). This design was repeated several times around the rotunda, and according to Dreyfus was made of plaster relief (see fig. 8b).³⁹ Additionally, the far-right dot has been moved to fit into its surrounding frame, so it no longer strictly adheres to the original design as reflected in the working drawing. We find this composition of the Greatest Name, but perhaps in a smaller size, also flanking the exterior of the main entrance doors. On the right and left of each, there is additional sacred text visible.



Fig. 8a. *Mishkín-Qalam*. An alternative arrangement of the Greatest Name. Signed and dated 1321 (ca 1903).

©Private collection



Fig. 8b. Epigraph of the Greatest Name in the interior of the Bahá’í House of Worship in *Ishqábád*.

©Bahá’í International Community

The second working drawing in the handwriting of *Mishkín-Qalam* features a design of the invocation *Yá ‘Alíyyu’l-‘Alá* which, as mentioned earlier, references the Báb (see fig. 9a). *Mishkín-Qalam* has presented it in a bold, well-balanced and legible design. A photograph of the first floor of the rotunda, just above the arches, reveals two epigraphs with this invocation in plaster relief (see fig. 9b). This design arrangement was possibly repeated over several of the arches. Placed in between them is a seal of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s which is also executed in *nasta‘līq* style.⁴⁰

39 Due to the curved walls, the Greatest Name executed in plaster relief looks somewhat skewed. It is possible that the artist designed the calligraphy without knowing that it would be used on a curved wall.

40 The seal reads, “O my two fellow prisoners! ‘Abdu’l-Bahá ‘A.” It is a verse from the *Súrih* of Joseph in the *Qur’án* that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá had inscribed on His seal. ‘A. represents the first letter of His name ‘Abbás (Ghaemmaghami)



Fig. 9a. Mishkín-Qalam. *Yá 'Alíyyu'l-'Alá*. Signed and dated 1321 (ca 1903).

©Private collection

Another inscription for which we have some evidence to attribute it to Mishkín-Qalam is a different rendition of the Greatest Name, found on the exterior, that covers perhaps eight or nine large panels positioned around the dome of the Temple (see fig. 10a). The material they were fashioned of is unknown. This version features the two sets of double-dots found in the working drawing discussed above, in addition to two single dots placed at the far corners of *bahá* as in the standard design (fig. 1). A very large⁴¹ calligraphy by Mishkín-Qalam, larger than the ones discussed above, measuring 203 x 135 cm, was auctioned (figure 10 b) several years ago and has the same design outline as the Greatest Name found on the

41 Meshgin explains the special arrangements and technique required when Mishkín-Qalam decided to create a very large-sized Greatest Name: "He made long and tedious preparations of special paper and ink, ordered a peculiar pen, approximately 10 centimetres in diameter, from India and cut the top to resemble a reed pen. It was so difficult to wield that he used both hands to hold it while transcribing the Greatest Name" (7).



Fig. 9b. Epigraph of *Yá 'Alíyyu'l-'Alá* in the interior of the Bahá'í House of Worship in Ishqábád.

©Bahá'í International Community

Temple dome. However, it was executed in 1889/90 (1307 AH), several years before the Temple project was begun.⁴²

While we only know of the above-mentioned working designs in Mishkín-Qalam's own hand, it is very likely that he executed all or most of the calligraphic work for this first Bahá'í House of Worship. In a Tablet, 'Abdu'l-Bahá mentions that Mishkín-Qalam's calligraphies were found in many parts of the world including Iran, Transoxiana (*Túrán*), Europe, America, Asia and Africa (*Ishráq-Khávarí* 63). *Ishqábád* in Turkmenistan would very likely have been considered part of Transoxiana. It is plausible that the artist could have designed all the calligraphies to be used in the House of Worship before his death in 'Akká in 1912, and that these were in fact implemented when the external decorative work for the building was

42 Ustád 'Alí-Akbar Banná conceived of the plan for the Temple while on pilgrimage in 1311 AH (1893-4) (Taherzadeh 122).

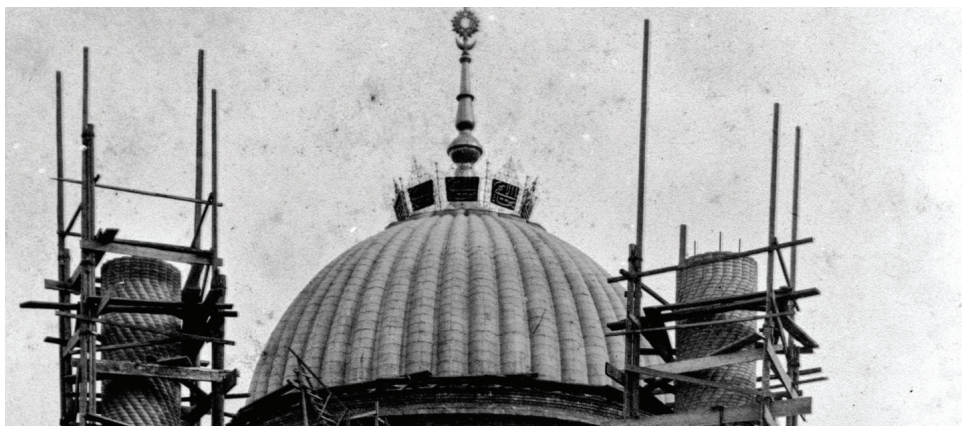


Fig. 10a. Panels of the Greatest Name surrounding the top of the dome of the Bahá'í House of Worship in Ishqábád.

©Bahá'í International Community



Figure 10 b. Mishkín-Qalam. The Greatest Name. This calligraphic rendering resembles the design found around the roof of the House of Worship in Ishqábád, signed and dated 1889-90.

Image ©Christie's

carried out.⁴³ However, pending further research, this is merely conjectural. For now, while historical photographs document the epigraphs on the building, no further

43 For example, the beautiful epigraph in *nasta'liq* style, found above the main entrance's high arched portico, might be in Mishkín-Qalam's handwriting. It is a passage from Bahá'u'lláh's *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* (The Most Holy Book): "Blessed is he who, at the hour of dawn, centering his thoughts on God, occupied with His remembrance and supplicating His forgiveness, directeth his steps to the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár and, entering therein, seateth himself in silence to listen to the verses of God, the Sovereign, the Mighty, the All-Praised" (§ 115). I thank Dr. Elham Afnan for helping identify this passage in April 2019.

documentation or calligraphic blueprints have been found to establish a clear link to the artist.

As the Bahá'í community embarks on the construction of more Houses of Worship at local and national levels, what are the lessons we can learn from 'Abdu'l-Bahá's incorporation of the arts in the design of the 'Ishqábád Temple? Recalling Tuman's explanation about the spiritual role of the arts and beauty, the calligraphic designs of the invocations in the House of Worship seem intended to "attract[] the soul, through beauty, to a work in which the knowledge of things divine is imparted" (79). The House of Justice confirms that the arts are, among other things, "an important means of . . . strengthening the bonds of unity, disseminating knowledge, and consolidating understanding" (Letter dated 30 December 2021). Given the particular power of "the juxtaposition of an artistic discipline . . . with the Creative Word of God itself" (Rogers 6), the elegantly rendered quotations from the sacred Writings at the entrance of the Temple doubtless helped spiritualize the believers' attitudes to life as they entered for dawn prayers. If we agree with Tuman that all human activity, including art, is to foster spiritual growth and that the three ingredients necessary for that growth are "the worship of God, the gaining of divine knowledge, and pure-hearted service to humanity" (62), then we might see the inscriptions as serving a liminal role in the interplay between worship and service that is the essence of the *Mashriqu'l-Adhkár*. They invite the believer in to worship; they impart

knowledge by conveying the Word in artistic form; and then the believers passes back out under them as they go out into the world to serve humanity.

Although the Temple in *Ishqábád* has not survived, it is considered "one of the most brilliant and enduring achievements in the history of the first Bahá'í century" (Shoghi Effendi 300). The construction of this Temple provided *Mishkín-Qalam* the opportunity to both contribute his services to this unique endeavour, and to exercise and develop his own art even further, and must once again have been a source of great joy and encouragement to him.

TRANSCRIPTION OF HOLY TEXTS FOR PUBLICATION



Fig. 11. Tablet of Bahá'u'lláh in the handwriting of *Mishkín-Qalam*, signed and dated 1310 (1892/93).

like “the erection of the first Mashriqu'l-Adhkár of the Bahá'í world,” “the expansion of Bahá'í literature” is also designated by the Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith as one of “the outstanding achievements that have embellished the brilliant record of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's unique ministry” (Shoghi Effendi 296). 'Abdu'l-Bahá's efforts to advance the printing of the Bahá'í Holy Writings were of great importance in ensuring their wide dissemination among the Bahá'í community, which had previously relied on the immeasurably lengthier process of transcription by hand. 'Abdu'l-Bahá sent Mishkín-Qalam to Bombay for the express purpose of transcribing the holy texts in his beautiful handwriting, to ready them to be lithographed (Balyuzi, *King of Glory* 388; *Eminent Bahá'ís* 121) (figure 11).

Both in “Iran and India—calligraphers and scribes were key figures ensuring the production of aesthetically pleasing manuscripts” (Vejdani 504). Lithography—a printing technique in which an original copy is drawn on stone rather than assembled using moveable type—was favoured by readers in India and Persia, because it was produced by hand and hence retained the beauty of calligraphy (Vejdani 504, 506).

According to historian Hasan M. Balyuzi, “the first Bahá'í books ever to be printed were. . . in the handwriting of Mishkín-Qalam;” among them are Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh in volumes such as *Kitáb-i-Iqtidárát* and *Kitáb-i-Mubín*

(*King of Glory* 388).⁴⁴ In *Memorials of the Faithful* 'Abdu'l-Bahá mentions that after the ascension of Bahá'u'lláh, the master calligrapher took a trip to India (101). It must have been during this trip that the first dated lithographed copy of the *The Kitáb-i-Iqán* (May-June 1893) in Mishkín-Qalam's masterful *nasta'liq* script was published in Bombay (Buck “Kitab-i-Iqan”). The holdings of the British Library contain a volume with various Bahá'í sacred texts, including Bahá'u'lláh's “Tablet to Queen Victoria” in the handwriting of Mishkín-Qalam. According to the library's records, it was probably lithographed in Bombay in 1893 (“Bahá'u'lláh's letter”). 'Abdu'l-Bahá's own *Treatise on Politics*, which Mishkín-Qalam had transcribed in 1893, was also published in Bombay in the same year (Rafati 9). Mishkín-Qalam was sent at least one more time to Bombay for the purpose of transcribing holy texts, this time at the end of 1904, in the evening of his life.

Once again, we see the example of 'Abdu'l-Bahá engaging the services of an artist in one of the most significant endeavours of his ministry—the transcription and publication of Bahá'í literature. Mishkín-Qalam, in turn, agreed to be far away from his Beloved in order to devote himself to the transcription of the sacred writings for printing. His artistic contribution allowed holy

44 There may be a couple of exceptions to Balyuzi's statement; the first edition of the *Kitáb-i-Iqán*, lithographed in Bombay in the early 1880s, was not in the handwriting of Mishkín-Qalam (Buck).

texts to be widely disseminated at a far faster pace than handwritten copies ever could be, while retaining the beauty and grace of calligraphy. It also allowed Mishkín-Qalam to hone his artistic skills while immersing himself in the sacred writings. As with his other artistic projects, Mishkín-Qalam's contribution in this area allowed him to advance the dual moral purpose that animates the existence of a human being.

CONCLUSION

As the horizons stretching before the Bahá'í community grow ever broader, and its activities increase in both range and complexity, it remains our great blessing to be able to return, again and again, to the example set by 'Abdu'l-Bahá. The crucial role of the arts in the unfolding of His Father's vision for humanity was evidenced in each of the epochal achievements that defined 'Abdu'l-Bahá's ministry, just as it continues to be reflected in the successive plans guiding the community today. The Perfect Exemplar of the Bahá'í Teachings understood the essential place of the arts in the spiritual life of the individual and community, but in no way reduced them to an instrumental role, for He equally understood the urge of the artist to create. In Mishkín-Qalam—who as attested by 'Abdu'l-Bahá Himself excelled both in spiritual virtue and artistic skill—He seems to have found a capable soul eager to discover what art can become when elevated, as service, to worship. Theirs was a relationship of love, expressed

as devotion on the part of the artist, and boundless encouragement on the part of the Perfect Exemplar. It is my hope that, as we reflect on this relationship and the efflorescence of art that it nurtured, all of us—whether we think of ourselves as artists or not—may be inspired to learn through action how to encourage the artists amongst us, and how art may become an ever more effective means to advance the “twofold moral purpose . . . to develop [one's] inherent potentialities and to contribute to the transformation of society” (Universal House of Justice, Ridván 2010).

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