

# THE JOURNAL OF BAHÁ'Í STUDIES

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# THE JOURNAL OF BAHÁ'Í STUDIES

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LA REVUE DES ÉTUDES BAHÁ'ÍES/LA REVISTA DE ESTUDIOS BAHÁ'ÍS

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Many articles published in *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies* allude to the institutions and central figures of the Bahá'í Faith; as an aid for those unfamiliar with the Bahá'í Faith, we include here a succinct summary excerpted from <http://www.bahai.org/beliefs/bahaullah-covenant/>. The reader may also find it helpful to visit the official web site for the worldwide Bahá'í community ([www.bahai.org](http://www.bahai.org)) available in several languages. For article submission guidelines, please visit [journal.bahaistudies.ca/online/about/submissions/](http://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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ALEA MORREN "Inviting Grace." Alcohol ink on Yupo paper, 11" x 14"

## A Kind of Truth

TAMI HAALAND

A headwind through  
the bones.

My mother, long dead,  
let me know.

I remember the hike,  
the slight rise

in the trail, my son  
ahead,

suddenly knowing I don't  
need to feel

more sorrow for her life  
or her death.

Get on with it, she  
seemed to say.

# From the Editor's Desk

MICHAEL SABET

A COLLABORATIVE EXPLORATION  
OF THE HARMONY OF SCIENCE  
AND RELIGION

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

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

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

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

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

THE HARMONY OF SCIENCE AND  
RELIGION

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

As alluded to above, these authors

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

#### THE COLLABORATIVE PROCESS

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

#### *ENGAGING WITH A DISCOURSE*

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

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

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

### QUALITIES AND ATTITUDES

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

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

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

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

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

#### *POSTURES, HABITS AND PRACTICES*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

It is hoped that these comments may serve as a further contribution to the arc of learning about collaborative scholarship in the Association and the *Journal*, continuing to build on insights shared in the collaborative issue on Constructive Resilience<sup>2</sup> and in Jordan van Rijn's "Learning to Sift: Reflections on Ten Years of Engaging with the Economics Discourse."<sup>3</sup> It is

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

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

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

## You might also like to read...

As a service to our readers, we are including links to articles and books related to the subjects presented in this issue. Articles previously published in the *Journal* are available for free on our website.

### AN INQUIRY INTO THE HARMONY OF SCIENCE AND RELIGION

by *Farzam Arbab*

in *Religion and Public Discourse in an Age of Transition: Reflections on Bahá'í Practice and Thought*, ed. G. Cameron and B. Schewel, 2018

<https://www.bahaistudies.ca/books/religion-and-public-discourse>

### A SCIENTIFIC PROOF OF THE EXISTENCE OF GOD

by *William S. Hatcher*

[https://doi.org/10.31581/jbs-5.4.1\(1993\)](https://doi.org/10.31581/jbs-5.4.1(1993))

In 1921 'Abdu'l-Bahá presented a cogent scientific argument for the existence of an objective, unseen force as the only reasonable explanation for the phenomenon of biological evolution. In the years since 'Abdu'l-Bahá's proof was first published, the findings of science have tended to show that, indeed, the phenomenon of evolution represents a persistent movement from disorder towards order of the kind that strongly suggests the action of some unobservable force different from all other forces so far discovered. In this

article, we present a somewhat detailed reformulation of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's argument using certain contemporary scientific terms that were not current at the time 'Abdu'l-Bahá wrote.

### IN PURSUIT OF HARMONY BETWEEN SCIENCE AND RELIGION

by *Paul Lample*

[https://doi.org/10.31581/jbs-26.4.4\(2016\)](https://doi.org/10.31581/jbs-26.4.4(2016))

The capacity to unite in the investigation of truth for the advancement of civilization requires the harmony of science and religion, in which, as 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains, science is freed from materialism and religion from superstition. This paper looks at how Bahá'ís might understand and increasingly contribute to the effectuation of this principle through action and involvement in contemporary discourse.

### SCIENCE AND RELIGION IN DYNAMIC INTERPLAY

by *Todd Smith*

[https://doi.org/10.31581/jbs-29.4.2\(2019\)](https://doi.org/10.31581/jbs-29.4.2(2019))

This paper proposes an approach to conceptualizing and contributing to the harmony of science and religion. In an effort to find points of unity that can serve as a basis upon which to advance the discourse on the subject, it begins by considering some of the legitimate concerns many thinkers have with religion and correlating them with the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith.

# Morning With Cows

KAT DUNLAP

A silver suggestion of daybreak  
lies thin-lipped at hill's edge.  
Silence owns the dawn  
only interrupted  
by the ticking of my bicycle chain  
and the drag of the coaster brake.

The barn door is a yellow square  
opening into the soft lowing  
of Guernseys,  
the soft hum of milking machines,  
and Beethoven.

Barn boots stand like soldiers,  
autumn chill absorbed  
in their felt linings.  
My stool is as cold  
as my gloveless hands.

One by one I follow  
the stainless steel milkers.  
One by one I strip  
each udder of remaining milk,

send quick squirts  
toward the tiny, opened mouths  
of resident kittens.

I lean my still sleepy head  
against each warm flank  
breathe in the perfumed air  
of molasses-laced feed  
curling into the troughs.

I am fourteen.

# Revelation as Scientific in its Method: Science, Diversity, Consultation, and Learning in Action<sup>1</sup>

STEPHEN R. FRIBERG

## *Abstract*

This paper is an exploration of Shoghi Effendi's statement that Bahá'u'lláh's Reve-

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1 I very much appreciate the continuing inspiration and guidance from Andres Elvira Espinosa, Whitney White Kazemipour, Roger Neyman, Robert Sarracino, Todd Smith, and Charlotte Wenninger, the "joint publication" project team. Special thanks must go to Todd Smith, whose facilitation of the Association for Bahá'í Studies science and religion reading group set us on the path of a teamwork exploration of deep and far-reaching topics in Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation. Special thanks must also go to the warmth and generosity of Michael Sabet, the editor of the *Journal of Bahá'í Studies*, and the expert help of Matthew Weinberg. Also, the helpful and sometimes challenging comments of the reviewers and the reviewing team drove the writing process towards excellence. And finally, additional special thanks to Sodeyo Friberg, my wife and muse, for listening to readings of the constant rewrites that were attempted in the pursuit of legibility.

lation is "scientific in its method," starting from the various ways that scientific methods are implemented and including perspectives from the philosophy of science. We examine the role of diversity in achieving scientific objectivity and escape from bias, and consider how the Bahá'í process of action, reflection, consultation, and study is consistent with modern understandings of the scientific method. Because this form of learning in action can be used by everybody, and because ethical, moral, and spiritual practices are part of its way of doing things, it provides a powerful extension of science and its methods that is available to everyone and allows ready integration of spiritual values into the process.

## *Résumé*

Le présent article explore la déclaration de Shoghi Effendi selon laquelle la révélation de Bahá'u'lláh est « scientifique dans sa méthode », en prenant comme point de départ les diverses façons dont les méthodes scientifiques sont mises en œuvre et en intégrant les perspectives issues de la philosophie des sciences. Nous examinons le rôle de la diversité dans l'atteinte de l'objectivité scientifique et l'évitement des préjugés, et nous voyons comment le processus bahá'í caractérisé par l'action, la réflexion, la consultation et l'étude est conforme aux conceptions modernes de la méthode scientifique. Comme tous peuvent utiliser cette forme d'apprentissage dans l'action et que les pratiques éthiques, morales et spirituelles en font partie intégrante, elle permet une expansion importante de la science et de ses méthodes accessibles à tous, et facilite l'intégration des valeurs spirituelles dans le processus.



*Resumen*

Este artículo es una exploración de la declaración de Shoghi Effendi que la revelación de Bahá'u'lláh es “científico en su método”, empezando de varias maneras que los métodos científicos se implementan e incluyendo perspectivas de la filosofía de la ciencia. Examinamos el papel de la diversidad en el logro de objetividad científica y el alejarse del sesgo, y considerar como el proceso Bahá'í de acción, reflexión, consulta y estudio es consistente con el entendimiento moderno del método científico. Por la razón que esta forma de aprendizaje en acción puede ser utilizado por todos, y porque las prácticas éticas, morales y espirituales son partes de su manera de proceder, provee una poderosa extensión de la ciencia y sus métodos disponibles a toda persona y permite una integración de valores espirituales en el proceso.

## INTRODUCTION

In June of 1933, Shoghi Effendi wrote a letter to the British High Commissioner for Palestine saying that “the Revelation proclaimed by Bahá'u'lláh, His 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.”

What does it mean for a Revelation to be scientific in its method? Does it mean that it uses a well-defined scientific method? If so, what scientific method? Or does it mean that it uses methods that are similar to those used in the sciences? If so, does this mean

the methods of the natural sciences?<sup>2</sup> The social sciences? Or both? Or does it mean that we systematically develop rational understandings of the themes of Revelation and assess and refine our understanding through actions, evaluations, implementations, observations, and experiments?

To answer such questions, we explore what is meant by the phrase “scientific method” and consider the now prevalent view that there is no one single such method, but a diversity of methods. We proceed by looking at new understandings from the philosophy and history of science and then draw on the growing understanding of the power of consultation and learning in action in Bahá'í communities throughout the world.

It is worth noting at the start that the Bahá'í Faith strongly affirms the importance of science, a background for the claim by the Guardian that Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation is “scientific in its method.” Science and religion,

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2 Science casts a wide net, and its activities range from studying the origins of the universe to exploring the crowning complexity of consciousness and people acting together. My experience as a scientist is that of an experimental physicist pursuing an understanding of the quantum mechanical properties of light. I draw on that as it is what I know best. However, as I hope this article makes clear, understandings from the social sciences, from the philosophy of science, and from a diversity of other perspectives are needed if the questions at the heart of this paper are to be answered more fully.

according to its teachings, are “complementary systems of knowledge and practice by which human beings come to understand the world around them and through which civilization advances” (Universal House of Justice, 2 Mar. 2013). True science and true religion are in harmony with each other (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Promulgation* 44:8). Science and religion are “the two most potent forces in human life” (Shoghi Effendi, *World Order* 204) and, as such, they must work together:

Religion and science are the two wings upon which man’s intelligence can soar into the heights, with which the human soul can progress. It is not possible to fly with one wing alone! Should a man try to fly with the wing of religion alone he would quickly fall into the quagmire of superstition, whilst on the other hand, with the wing of science alone he would also make no progress, but fall into the despairing slough of materialism. (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Paris Talks* 44:13)

According to the Bahá’í teachings, “there is no contradiction between true religion and science” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Paris Talks* 44:3). Notably, “religious belief which is not conformable with scientific proof and investigation is superstition” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Promulgation* 44:8). If we “say religion is opposed to science, we lack knowledge of either true science or true religion, for both are founded upon the premises and

conclusions of reason, and both must bear its test” (44:8).

Bahá’ís believe that when religion “shows its conformity with science,” then will there be “a great unifying, cleansing force in the world which will sweep before it all wars, disagreements, discords and struggles” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Paris Talks* 44:23).

The Bahá’í understanding of the validity and utility of science is fully warranted given the power of science. Science reliably produces information and usable knowledge. Through its discoveries, it laid the basis for creating the technologies and systems of modernity. It unveils the facts of various matters and, in many cases, anticipates what will happen in the future. Atmospheric science, for example, can predict the likelihood of rainstorms and give warnings of flooding, tornados, hurricanes, violent winds, heat waves, and the like, saving lives and protecting environments (Cappucci).

The universality and reproducibility of scientific investigations create a common ground for belief and shared knowledge that fends off superstition and can forge unity and cooperation. And “beautiful ideas” from the sciences—such as complementarity, relativity, symmetry, and invariance—bring depth to philosophy and insights into the spiritual aspects of being (Wilczek 75; Phelps).

Science brings more than technical prowess and the accumulation of facts to the table. It also brings systematicity and the use of both rational and empirical methods to generate new

understandings and new knowledge. Logical ideas, rational developments, and exploration of implications are developed conceptually and explored empirically. Science, accordingly, cannot be understood as a system for generating knowledge without reference to the methods by which it proceeds.

An exploration of scientific methods comes at once to a central question. Is there a universal and agreed-on definition of the scientific method? In turn, this gives rise to other questions: What is the role of diversity—the diversity of personalities, cultural backgrounds, genders, and worldviews—in science? What moral, ethical, and spiritual values are involved—or should be involved—in our understanding of the role of science and its methods?

A powerful way of approaching these questions is by considering science as a social process, an approach popularized by Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, published to landmark acclaim in the 1960s. Kuhn emphasized the importance of scientific communities, within which scientists work together based on shared values and agreed-on procedures. In his view, a given community also operates within a specific paradigm of thought, which may well be incommensurable with the paradigm of a different scientific community within the same discipline. While the emphasis on incommensurability has receded, the relevance of social phenomena to the understanding of science retains its force; indeed, there is a growing consensus that ignoring the social

aspects of science can lead to problems (“Overcoming”).

Keeping the social in mind, we first briefly survey scientific methods. What we find is that there is not one single method for doing science, but a wide diversity of methods. Drawing on the work of philosophers of science Sandra Harding, Helen Longino, and coworkers, we conclude that this diversity plays an important—even an essential—role in the development of scientific objectivity. Following this, we then consider the Bahá'í approach to consultation and the widely used Bahá'í process of learning in action.<sup>3</sup>

#### THE SCIENTIFIC METHOD

The unique and fruitful capabilities of science are often ascribed to the scientific method. The mathematician William Hatcher, for example, wrote extensively on the relationship between science and religion in the Bahá'í teachings. He describes science as an activity “characterized by its method”:

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3 For perspectives on similar issues complementary to the approach taken here, we recommend papers in this *Journal* written by Andres Elvira Espinosa on the use of Bahá'í consultation for bias mitigation (forthcoming), by Whitney White Kazempour on the role of the clash of differing opinions in consultation (in this issue), by Roger Neyman and Charlotte Wenninger on transformative dialogue as a way to deepen discourse (forthcoming), by Robert Sarracino on spiritual values (forthcoming), and by Todd Smith on “reading reality” and the interplay of different learning modes (in this issue).

One may . . . ask to what the efficiency and productiveness of modern science is due, and I believe that here there is one basic answer: scientific method. . . . Indeed, we can say that science as an activity is characterized by its method, for the immense diversity of domains which are now the object of scientific study defies any intrinsic characterization in terms of unity of content. (231–32)

Here we look at various definitions of the scientific method, considering whether there is one scientific method or many. Finding the latter to be the case, we look for underlying fundamentals that make a method scientific and note that there is considerable leeway in the use of those fundamentals.

One important way to think about the statement that the Bahá'í Revelation is scientific in its method is to consider the role of the sciences, the applied sciences, and the engineering sciences in the implementation of the vision of humanity's future that is outlined in Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation. Realization of this vision will require new processes, new institutions, new training systems, new social and economic advances, wider deployment of discourse, and the like. These, in turn, will require new scientific understandings (Brooks) as well as new technological advances (M. Weinberg).<sup>4</sup>

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4 A useful and concise overview of how science, engineering, and innovation necessarily go together is given in Brooks: Science, technology and innovation

#### THE MYTH OF THE SINGLE SCIENTIFIC METHOD

The Merriam-Webster online dictionary defines the scientific method as follows:

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each represent a successively larger category of activities which are highly interdependent but distinct. Science contributes to technology in at least six ways: (1) new knowledge which serves as a direct source of ideas for new technological possibilities; (2) source of tools and techniques for more efficient engineering design and a knowledge base for evaluation of feasibility of designs; (3) research instrumentation, laboratory techniques and analytical methods used in research that eventually find their way into design or industrial practices, often through intermediate disciplines; (4) practice of research as a source for development and assimilation of new human skills and capabilities eventually useful for technology; (5) creation of a knowledge base that becomes increasingly important in the assessment of technology in terms of its wider social and environmental impacts; (6) knowledge base that enables more efficient strategies of applied research, development, and refinement of new technologies.

The converse impact of technology on science is of at least equal importance: (1) through providing a fertile source of novel scientific questions and thereby also helping to justify the allocation of resources needed to address these questions in an efficient and timely manner, extending the agenda of science; (2) as a source of otherwise unavailable instrumentation and techniques needed to address novel and more difficult scientific questions more efficiently. (477)

Principles and procedures for the systematic pursuit of knowledge involving the recognition and formulation of a problem, the collection of data through observation and experiment, and the formulation and testing of hypotheses.

This definition succeeds, as others often do not, in that it identifies key components—systemization, problem statements, empirical testing, and data acquisition—as principles and procedures commonly found in various formulations of the scientific method.

If you look through the internet or introductory science books, you will find definitions of the scientific method that suggest it is an uncomplicated process with a fixed number of steps (ranging typically from three to seven).

For example, consider the celebrated Khan Academy, an educational institution providing free world-class education via the Internet used by more than one hundred and forty million people around the world. The Khan Academy characterizes the scientific method for biology and science in general as the following:

At the core of biology and other sciences lies a problem-solving approach called the scientific method. The scientific method has five basic steps, plus one feedback step:

- Make an observation.
- Ask a question.
- Form a hypothesis or testable

explanation.

- Make a prediction based on the hypothesis.
- Test the prediction.
- Iterate: use the results to make new hypotheses or predictions.

This, they claim, is the approach common to all the sciences:

The scientific method is used in all sciences—including chemistry, physics, geology, and psychology. The scientists in these fields ask different questions and perform different tests. However, they use the same core approach to find answers that are logical and supported by evidence.

The model described by the Khan Academy includes hypothesis generation, prediction, empirical testing, and iteration. But it is presented in an outdated Baconian form suggesting that science always starts with an observation, which is followed by a fixed set of step-by-step processes. In practice, this is not how things are typically done. In the work of experimental physicists, for instance, more often than not the hypothesis comes first, then a literature review, and then a funding search. If funding is available, then there is experimental design and fabrication, data taking, analysis, article writing, review with coworkers, submission for publications, and talks at conferences. The ordering is not fixed and may vary as required. Iterations are often left to others.

Henry Cowles, writing in *The Scientific Method: An Evolution of Thinking from Darwin to Dewey*, criticizes the step-by-step model of the scientific method. The “idea of a set of steps that justifies science’s authority has persisted in the face of constant denials of its existence.” It persists because the scientific method is “a myth—and myths are powerful things” (1–2). Hepburn and Andersen, writing in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, say that science is sometimes characterized by “the legend of a single, universal scientific method” and taught as if that method were a well-defined step-by-step procedure. What is important, they note, is the appropriate use of “systematic observation and experimentation, inductive and deductive reasoning, and the formation and testing of hypotheses and theories.” It is these that help distinguish scientific activity from non-science. Appropriate usage is, they note, defined by the community of practice.

#### THE DIVERSITY OF SCIENTIFIC METHODS

If the idea of a single scientific method is a myth, how do we explain the remarkable success of science? The current perspective is that there are many different methods of doing science, not just one. We illustrate this through the testimony of scientists and reports by philosophers of science.

Nobel Prize-winning physicist Steven Weinberg describes simplistic characterizations of the scientific method as artificial rules:

Descartes and Bacon are only two of the philosophers who over the centuries have tried to prescribe rules for scientific research. It never works. We learn how to do science, not by making rules about how to do science, but from the experience of doing science. (214)

Steven Pinker, widely read for his advocacy of science, agrees:

What then distinguishes science from other exercises of reason? It certainly is not “the scientific method,” a term that is taught to school children but that never passes the lips of a scientist. Scientists use whichever methods help them understand the world: drudge like tabulation of data, experimental derring-do, flights of theoretical fancy, elegant mathematics modeling, kludgy computer simulation, sweeping verbal narrative. (392)

The *American Association for the Advancement of Science*, the world’s largest scientific society, holds that “the various scientific disciplines are alike in their reliance on evidence, the use of hypothesis and theories, the kinds of logic used, and much more” (Rutherford and Ahlgren 3). However, “scientists differ greatly from one another in what phenomena they investigate and in how they go about their work; in the reliance they place on historical data or experimental findings and qualitative or quantitative methods;



in their recourse to fundamental principles, and in how much they draw on the findings of other sciences” (3–4).

Philosophers of science line up in support of this perspective. Paul Feyerabend, famously provocative in *Against Method*, makes the point as follows:

The idea of a method that contains firm, unchanging, and absolutely binding principles for conducting the business of science meets considerable difficulty when confronted with the results of historical research. We find, then, that there is not a single rule, however plausible, and however firmly grounded in epistemology, that is not violated at some time or other. (14)

“It is clear,” he writes, “that the idea of a fixed method, or of a fixed theory of rationality, rests on too naive a view of man and his social surroundings” (18).

Naomi Oreskes, the widely respected historian of science, holds that “there is now broad agreement among historians, philosophers, sociologists, and anthropologists of science that there is no (singular) scientific method, and that scientific practice consists of communities of people, making decisions for reasons that are both empirical and social, using diverse methods” (55).

#### THE INGREDIENTS OF SCIENCE

If there is no one scientific method, but rather a plurality of methods used

in a variety of ways, what makes science powerful, a source of truth, and a unifying process? What makes its essential features worthy of emulation? There are many ways to answer the question. Those we consider here are more general and inclusive, broadening the scope of our understanding of science.

A traditional approach to explaining the power of science—one still celebrated in scientific circles—is outlined by Steven Shapin in his description of physics in the early 1960s (around the time that Thomas Kuhn wrote *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*):

Science was seen as the instantiation of rationality, objectivity, open-mindedness, and progressiveness. Science methodically compared theoretical expectations against observational and experimental evidence; it purged itself of bias and prior expectations; its knowledge was cumulative; the quality of that knowledge was guaranteed by explicit methodological standards shared throughout the scientific community; the various bits of science were part of a fundamental unity, whether of concepts, facts, or methods; it arrived at, or at least approached, truth. (32)

Another approach is that given by Paul Hoyningen-Huene.<sup>5</sup> He argues

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5 For a detailed treatment see Paul

that the special status of science is not due to a unique scientific method (or even scientific *methods*) but to rules of procedure. In ancient times, the rule of procedure for science was to use proofs derived logically from evident axioms. In the first parts of the scientific revolution, induction from observation was added to the rules list, and science based on logic and induction was thought to offer a reliable source of knowledge. Starting in the nineteenth century, confidence in such rules weakened, although science kept its special status. In our era, the belief in a special scientific method that gives science its authority has eroded further, especially among philosophers. He concludes that it is “highly plausible that scientific methods with the characteristics [posited in earlier times] do not exist” (“Systematicity” 168).

If rules of procedure are inadequate as a way to explain what makes science unique, where else can we look? Hoyningen-Huene argues that we must look to systematicity. “Scientific knowledge differs from other kinds of knowledge, especially from everyday knowledge, by its higher degree of systematicity” (169). If something is systematic, he notes, it is *not* purely random, accidental, arbitrary, unmethodical, unplanned, or unordered. Rather, it embraces interrelated dimensions of description, explanation, prediction, defense of knowledge

claims, epistemic connectedness, completeness, knowledge generation, and representation of knowledge. “The whole of science,” Hoyningen-Huene concludes, borrowing a phrase from Einstein, “is nothing more than a systematization of everyday thinking” (180).<sup>6</sup>

A similar characterization is supported by the philosopher Susan Haack in *Defending Science-within Reason: Between Scientism and Cynicism*. Borrowing from Charles Peirce, she describes science as “Critical Commonsense.” “It is similar to common sense, but of a special critical kind:”

The core idea of Critical Commonsense is that inquiry in the sciences is like empirical inquiry of the most ordinary, everyday kind—only conducted with greater care, detail, precision, and persistence, and often by many people within and across generations; and that the evidence with respect to scientific claims and theories is like the evidence with respect to the most ordinary, everyday claims about the world—only denser, more complex, and almost always a pooled resource. (iv)

This does not mean that science lacks special qualities. Although science works in ways common to other forms

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Hoyningen-Huene article, “Systematicity: The Nature of Science,” published in *Philosophia*, vol. 36, and his book *Systematicity: The Nature of Science*.

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6 It should be noted that systematization is a principal component of Bahá’í processes of personal and collective transformation. See for example Universal House of Justice, *Social Action*, no. 149.



of inquiry, it differs “in the degree to which it requires broad and detailed background knowledge and a familiarity with a technical vocabulary that only specialists may possess.” There is “no uniquely rational mode of inference or procedure of inquiry used by all.” Rather, there are “many and various scientific methods, constantly evolving, and often local to this or that area of science” (iv).

William Hatcher, as noted at the outset, has explored the relationship between science and religion in the Bahá'í writings in great depth, and agrees with much of what Hoyningen-Huene and Haack have to say. Writing in the 1960s and 1970s, Hatcher came to understand the scientific method as “self-conscious common sense”:

Instead of relying on chance happenings or occasional experiences, one systematically invokes certain types of experiences. This is experimentation (the conscious use of experience). Instead of relying on naive reasoning, one formalizes hypotheses explicitly and formalizes the reasoning leading from hypothesis to conclusion. This is mathematics and logic (the conscious use of reason). Instead of relying on occasional flashes of insight, one systematically meditates on problems. This is reflection (the conscious use of intuition). (233)

The scientific method, according to Hatcher, is systematic, organized, directed, and conscious:

What distinguishes the scientific method of knowing, it seems to me, is the systematic, organized, directed, and conscious nature of the process. However, much as we may refine and elaborate our description of the application of scientific method in some particular domain such as mathematics, logic, or physics, this description remains essentially an attempt on our part to bring to ourselves a fuller consciousness of exactly how we apply our mental faculties in the course of the epistemological act within the given domain. (232)

This leads Hatcher to a definition of the scientific method:

[The] scientific method is the systematic, organized, directed, and conscious use of our various mental faculties in an effort to arrive at a coherent model of whatever phenomenon is being investigated. (232–33)

This broad description implies, among other things, that we should talk about the scientific method based on a more generalized—and more accurate—understanding of how science is done. Where older descriptions of the scientific method outline a fixed set of steps or well-defined rules of procedure, Hatcher's definition captures a more general perspective that sees science as the systematic use of the rational faculty. This perspective, which

is consistent with the extensive comments by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá on the topic, has the important implication that the scientific method is not limited to material or social phenomena.

What this survey of scientific methods shows is that there is a wide variety of ways of doing science and a diversity of scientific methods. Instead of considering the scientific method to be a single well-defined step-by-step procedure, we join scientists and philosophers of science who deny that there is only one scientific method.

By way of summary, then, we can say that science uses approaches that are systematic, directed, and organized, employs inductive and deductive reasoning, uses modeling, hypotheses, and theses, conducts background studies, relies on systematic observation and experimentation, requires analysis of data and observations, and requires verification of results through consultation and review. A particular investigation, of course, does not have to incorporate all of these features to be accepted as scientific—for example, theoretical papers have theory as a result and do not require experiments—but if the methods used do not fit into the broad perspective outlined by Hatcher, for instance, it is unlikely that they will be seen as scientific. Nor does this general list include the wide variety of sub-methods and sub-components of scientific methods to be found in specific scientific disciplines, and which may or may not be useful for a given project.

There are interesting implications of this way of looking at science. One,

as noted, is that science is not limited to material and social phenomena. The wide range of methods, united by the systemic use of the rational faculty, guarantees that such limitations cannot be imposed. Certain specific and common components of science, however, may be limited in their application. Specifically, measurements and observations require something physical to measure or observe. Lacking a physical basis of measurement, there can be no empirical tests or observations.<sup>7</sup>

In the next section of this paper, we look at the role of diversity, a central aspect of the social nature of scientific endeavor. Diversity, we will see, plays a vital role in overcoming bias and creating objectivity if properly harnessed, and thus contributes to both Bahá’í consultation and learning in action, as well as shedding light on the way that Bahá’u’lláh’s Revelation is scientific in its method.

#### THE SOCIAL IN SCIENCE: THE ROLE OF DIVERSITY

Science, as noted at the outset of this paper, is a social phenomenon. Isaac Newton achieved extraordinary success in inventing calculus, deriving the laws of gravity, and demonstrating the photon theory of light (Westfall). None of these discoveries achieved the status of scientific results, however, until his mathematical predictions were

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<sup>7</sup> For a discussion of the study of spirituality in the social sciences, see Sarracino (forthcoming).

evaluated empirically and verified by others. Without the astronomical observations of Tycho Brahe and Johannes Kepler's recognition that planetary orbits were elliptical, Newton's genius could not have borne fruit. Lacking the social phenomena of sharing data, the movements of the sun, stars, and planets could not have been studied systematically in light of Newton's insights.

This account, limited as it is, makes it apparent that social phenomena play a significant role in scientific endeavors. A full grasp of science, therefore, requires an understanding of the social processes that animate its strengths and underlie its weaknesses.

#### SOME SOCIAL ASPECTS OF DOING SCIENCE

The social nature of science often goes unnoticed. This is partly because we conceive of science as the discovery of universal truths that transcend subjectivity. However, developments in the philosophy of science, science studies, history of science, sociology of science, and other areas of thought are bringing social issues to the fore. Here we explore some that are current.

Much of modern thinking about the social dimensions of science is rooted in the nineteenth-century writings of John Stuart Mill. In *On Liberty*, he addresses a critically important problem. If humans are fallible, how is it possible to do objective science? He concludes that objectivity requires unobstructed opportunities for critical discussions that are motivated by the desire to root

out falseness and partiality. Charles Sanders Peirce, the American founder of pragmatism, developed a similar perspective and concluded that truth is what is agreed on by a community of inquirers engaged in critical discussion.

Karl Popper, in the mid-twentieth century, was often taken to be the leading philosopher of science. He emphasized that criticism—a social activity—is necessary for the establishment of scientific truth. He argued that a proper scientific theory must be falsifiable, meaning that critics must be able to prove a theory wrong. For example, Popper looked at Freudian psychoanalytic theory and concluded that it was *not* scientific. Its hypotheses, he argued, cannot be shown to be wrong and therefore must be discarded as non-scientific.

Helen Longino, a modern philosopher of science focusing on the social nature of science, goes further, stating that “scientific knowledge *is* social knowledge” (231, emphasis added). It is “social both in the ways it is created and in the uses it serves” (76). It neither belongs to an individual nor is it the sum of individual contributions. Rather, it is produced by communities that engage in collective dialogue:

What is called scientific knowledge, then, is produced by a community (ultimately the community of all scientific practitioners) and transcends the contributions of any individual or even of any sub-community within the larger community. Once propositions, theses, and

hypotheses are developed, what will become scientific knowledge is produced collectively through the clashing and meshing of a variety of points of view. (69)

A major implication of this perspective is the importance of diversity in the pursuit of science.

#### TURNING THE TABLES ON SUBJECTIVITY THROUGH DIVERSITY

The work of Longino and others has highlighted the ways in which the social aspects of science influence the perspectives of scientists. Suppose a science—say, an evolutionary science exploring eugenics—were to be done exclusively by white northern European males. Would we be surprised if it concluded that white northern European males were more advanced from an evolutionary standpoint than others? Leading thinkers in the evolutionary sciences at the turn of the nineteenth century were indeed white males, and their evolutionary sciences frequently concluded that the nonwhite races were not only less advanced but a threat to progress. Eugenic practices were recommended to resolve the “problem” (A. Rutherford; Kevles).

This raises an important question. Scientific knowledge is generated by a community of individuals, each with their own biases of race, class, ethnicity, and gender, and these biases can erode the objectivity of science. How can science be objective when its contributors are biased?

Longino and her co-workers turn this question on its head. Instead of taking it as a given that the social nature of science undermines objectivity, they ask how our social nature increases objectivity. The thrust of their conclusions is that objectivity is best achieved by bringing a wide variety of perspectives and standpoints to bear. If the “perspectives of women, people of color, the working classes, and many others” are not included, this leads to the “obvious sexism, racism, and class bias of many past scientific theories” (Harding 50). Bringing those perspectives into the discussion increases the points of view available on an issue under consideration:

Our personal experiences—of wealth or poverty, privilege or disadvantage, maleness or femaleness, heteronormativity or queer-ness, disability, or able-bodiedness—cannot but influence our perspectives on and interpretations of the world. Therefore, *ceteris paribus*, a more diverse group will bring to bear more perspectives on an issue than a less diverse one. (Oreskes 50)

Just as the objectivity of a scientific community can be weakened by too much homogeneity, it can be strengthened by increased heterogeneity.

Longino argues that science corrects itself, becomes more objective, and improves its fidelity to the realities it aims to understand through a process she labels *transformative*

*interrogation*. This works through “the give and take of ideas—the challenging, the questioning, the adjusting and amending” that scientists use to interrogate “their colleagues’ work, offer up criticisms, and contribute to the growth of warranted knowledge” (Oreskes 51–52). This means that

[t]he objectivity of individuals in this scheme consists in their participation in the collective give-and-take of critical discussion and not in some special relation (of detachment, hardheadedness) they may bear to their observations. Thus understood, objectivity is dependent upon the depth and scope of the transformative interrogation that occurs in any given scientific community. (Longino 79)

Objectivity, viewed through this lens, comes from community practices that reduce the influence of prejudices, biases, and background assumptions. If we accept this as true, it follows that it will be helpful—even necessary—to have diversity and heterogeneity in our scientific communities. This does not mitigate all problems, but “objectivity is likely to be maximized when there are recognized and robust avenues for criticism, such as peer review, when the community is open, non-defensive, and responsive to criticism, and when the community is sufficiently diverse that a broad range of views can be developed, heard, and appropriately considered” (Oreskes 53). Transformative

interrogation can help decide which “background assumptions are, in a given context, appropriate and helpful or inappropriate and unhelpful” (54). This form of epistemology “soundly refutes the claim that the social character of science makes it subjective,” instead showing that “science is fundamentally consensual” (55).

In summary, then, scientific objectivity is arrived at by social processes, it is the property of communities, and it is improved by a diversity that creates better evaluations and critiques of background assumptions, empirical analyses, and biased perspectives. Given the strong emphasis on diversity in Bahá'í consultation and learning in action, we can expect these important components of the Bahá'í approach to learning to benefit from these advantages as well. We will discuss these next.

#### BAHÁ'Í CONSULTATION

Given the leading role that communities play in the activities of science, it is important to consider the ways that individual members of these communities communicate, share information, allocate resources, make decisions, initiate and carry out actions, review results, and plan further actions. Consultation—between individuals, in and between communities, and in and between institutions—is widely used to achieve these ends. Accordingly, it is a vital component of doing science and, as we will see, learning in action.

## CONSULTATION IN MODERN USAGE

Before exploring consultation as it is understood by Bahá'ís, it is worth briefly reviewing how the term is used outside of the Bahá'í community. Consultation is defined in the *Cambridge English Dictionary* as “the process of discussing something with someone in order to get their advice or opinion about it.” It can also be the “act of exchanging information and opinions about something in order to reach a better understanding” or to make a decision.

A broader definition by *The Consultation Institute*, a British non-profit, defines public consultation as

the dynamic process of dialogue between individuals or groups, based upon a genuine exchange of views, with the clear objective of influencing decisions, policies, or programmes of action. (Jones and Gammell 115)

Core aspects of consultation, they write, are dialogue, genuine exchange, and consultation in the public arena aimed at exercising influence. Much of this is essential to scientific study. In particular, dialogue and verbal exchange are how ideas and analyses are shared and discussed, and the vehicle for review and validation to take place.

## BAHÁ'Í CONSULTATION

Given the significant role of consultation in the activities of Bahá'í

communities and institutions around the world and given the correspondences to roles that consultation plays in science, it makes sense to look at what the Bahá'í writings say about consultation in general and about Bahá'í consultation for community activities and institutional decision-making in particular.

The Bahá'í writings recommend the use of consultation “in all matters.” It is “the lamp of guidance which leadeth the way, and is the bestower of understanding” (Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets* 11:15). “No welfare and no well-being,” Bahá'u'lláh asserts, “can be attained except through consultation” (qtd. in “Consultation” no. 2). “In all things it is necessary to consult” (no. 5). According to ‘Abdu'l-Bahá, consultation is not only to be used for “ordinary and personal matters” but for “affairs which are general in nature and universal” (qtd. in “Consultation” no. 16).

Just as there is no one way to do science, there is no one way to consult. There are, however, a wealth of general guidelines for Bahá'í consultation, all emphasizing the centrality of seeking truth and achieving unity.

Bahá'í consultation does not work in the same way as other forms of consultation, having its own detailed and specific definitions in the Bahá'í writings. For Bahá'í institutions, consultation is used for decision-making and is “the means by which agreement is to be reached and a collective course of action defined” (Universal House of Justice, 24 Jan. 1993). To be effective, “consultation must have for

its object the investigation of truth” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Promulgation* 31:2). It is motivated by a spirit “very different from that current in the decision-making processes of non-Bahá’í bodies” (Universal House of Justice, 6 Mar. 1970).

Bahá’í consultation is more than just a means of reaching decisions and investigating the truth, important as that is. According to the Bahá’í writings, consultation is

spiritual conference in the attitude and atmosphere of love. Members must love each other in the spirit of fellowship in order that good results may be forthcoming. Love and fellowship are the foundation. (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Promulgation* 31:2)

It seems likely that science done with love and a spirit of fellowship will be more successful.

#### *GENERAL FEATURES AND APPLICATIONS OF CONSULTATION*

There is no single step-by-step method for consultation in the Bahá’í writings or Universal House of Justice guidelines. What we find instead are broad principles. The Universal House of Justice, for example, describes those principles as leading to a

consultative process which, understood as the collective investigation of reality, promotes detachment from personal views, gives due importance to valid empirical

information, does not raise mere opinion to the status of fact or define truth as the compromise between opposing interest groups. (2 Mar. 2013)

This sounds a lot like science. Smith and Karlberg describe some of Bahá’í consultation’s properties:

Bahá’í consultation is, in brief, an approach to collective inquiry and deliberation that is intended to be unifying rather than divisive. Participants are encouraged to exercise freedom of expression and engage in probing, critical analysis, yet they must strive to express themselves with care and moderation and remain detached from preconceived opinions and positions. They are to regard diversity of perspective as an asset and actively solicit the views, concerns, insights, and expertise of others. After ideas are expressed, the ideas are no longer bound to the individuals who express them. Instead, ideas become collective resources that can be freely adopted, refined, or discarded, according to the collective wisdom of the group. (68)

The emphasis on diversity in Bahá’í consultation closely echoes the conclusions of Longino and co-workers that objective scientific knowledge is best achieved by bringing a diversity of perspectives and standpoints to the issues at hand.



There are different forms of Bahá'í consultation. Individuals, perhaps with specific projects in mind, can consult with others “and the truth will be disclosed” (Abdu'l-Bahá, qtd. in “Consultation” no. 16). If “people of a village consult one another about their affairs, the right solution will certainly be revealed.” Professionals, those in industry, commerce, and business should consult as it “is desirable and acceptable in all things and on all issues” (no. 16). In all cases—from individuals to groups and from families to formal administrative bodies—those wishing to reach decisions or increase insight and understanding are prescribed consultation.<sup>8</sup>

Bahá'í institutions and communities consult in diverse ways as well. In administrative bodies known as Local Spiritual Assemblies, consultation is often focused on making decisions and planning actions (Universal House of Justice, 2 Mar. 2013). In this, the ideal is a unanimous decision. If that is not possible, a vote is to be taken. Those consulting must “abide by the voice of the majority, which we are told by the Master to be the voice of truth, never to be challenged, and always to be

whole-heartedly enforced” (Universal House of Justice, 6 Mar. 1970). However, if circumstances change or added information becomes available, decisions can be reviewed, and adjustments made (White Kazemipour). There are, as well, provisions for appeal of institutional decisions (Universal House of Justice, *Constitution*).

#### FREE EXPRESSION AND SEARCH FOR TRUTH

According to Shoghi Effendi, “consultation, frank and unfettered, is the bedrock” of the Bahá'í order (qtd. in “Consultation” no. 27). The Universal House of Justice advises that in consultation, “the friends must balance the principle that ‘the honored members must with all freedom express their own thoughts’ with the principle that ‘he must with moderation set forth the truth.’” Furthermore, “individuals should be guided by their consciences and the circumstances of each situation. Hard and fast rules cannot and should not be laid down” (qtd. in Ruhi, Unit 2, “Consultation”).

Centrally important is that discord and ill feelings are to be avoided:

This can be attained when every member expresseth with absolute freedom his own opinion and setteth forth his argument. Should anyone oppose, he must on no account feel hurt for not until matters are fully discussed can the right way be revealed. The shining spark of truth cometh forth only

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<sup>8</sup> Speaking generally, Bahá'í consultation can be usefully characterized as *exploratory* “with the purpose of generating collective awareness, insight, and understanding,” *advisory* “with the purpose of providing advice, feedback, suggestions, or constructive criticism to those who will be making decisions” and *decisional* where decisions are the end-product (Karlberg 81).



after the clash of differing opinions. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections* 44:1)

This aspect of Bahá'í consultation mirrors a basic, if mainly unspoken, adage of science: One should speak freely and truthfully about technical matters but remain friends with one's coworkers.

At the heart of Bahá'í consultation, according to the writings, is the search for truth. In every matter, participants "must . . . search out the truth and not insist upon their own opinion, for stubbornness and persistence in one's views will ultimately hide the truth" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections* 45:1). Further, they must "carefully consider the views already advanced by others. If he finds that a previously expressed opinion is more true and worthy, he should accept it immediately and not willfully hold to an opinion of his own" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation* 31). A prime requisite is detachment (Shoghi Effendi, 5 Mar. 1922).

The search for truth in every matter is also a prerequisite of science.

#### *THE ROLE OF SPIRITUAL VALUES*

Spiritual values, the writings make clear, are central to the success of Bahá'í consultation. Two components—the search for truth as just described, and the high regard held for unity—are particularly important. But other spiritual values are important as well.

'Abdu'l-Bahá writes that those engaging in consultation must "proceed

with the utmost devotion, courtesy, dignity, care and moderation to express their views" (*Selections* 45). Further, "the prime requisites for them that take counsel together are purity of motive, radiance of spirit, detachment . . . attraction . . . humility and lowliness . . . patience and long-suffering in difficulties and servitude" (43).

That these spiritual values are important to scientific endeavors as well as to Bahá'í consultation can be seen if we consider which scientific community is likely to progress more effectively: one in which these values are present, or one where their opposite—deceit, distrust, disunity, arrogance, entitlement, and other barriers—dominate.

#### *OUTCOMES OF CONSULTATION: GENERATING UNDERSTANDING AND MAKING DECISIONS*

Consultation generates new knowledge and creates new understanding:

The Great Being saith: The heaven of divine wisdom is illumined with the two luminaries of consultation and compassion. Take ye counsel together in all matters, inasmuch as consultation is the lamp of guidance which leadeth the way, and is the bestower of understanding. (Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets* 11:15)

Consultation can work like scientific and technological brainstorming. During consultation, our brains light up with innovative ideas, concepts, and connections in powerful and creative

ways.<sup>9</sup> Diversity, support for a free and frank exchange of ideas, supportive and encouraging environments, and experienced facilitation are some of the ingredients that lead to new understandings and growing knowledge. Ancient barriers are swept away.

As noted earlier, decisions arrived at by Bahá'í consultation are ideally unanimous, but if this is not possible, a majority decision is made. Crucially, as "soon as a decision is reached it becomes the decision of the whole Assembly, not merely of those members who happened to be among the majority" (Universal House of Justice, 6 Mar. 1970). Thus, decision-making using Bahá'í consultation has a built-in unifying mechanism.

'Abdu'l-Bahá explains why this is the case, noting that if the members "agree upon a subject, even though it be wrong, it is better than to disagree." Even though "one of the parties may be in the right and they disagree, that will be the cause of a thousand wrongs, but if they agree and both parties are in the wrong, as it is in unity the truth will be revealed and the wrong made right" (qtd. in "Consultation" no. 12). Furthermore, "if in one case they take a wrong decision, in a hundred other cases they will adopt right decisions, and concord and unity are preserved. This will offset any deficiency and will eventually lead to the righting of the wrong" (no. 15).

#### CONSULTATION AND SCIENCE

The weighty station that consultation holds in the Bahá'í writings leads many Bahá'ís "to believe that consultation is the preeminent tool for achieving . . . constructive communication" (Smith and Ghaemmaghami 458). This has implications for the relationship between consultation and science. Without constructive communication of the kind enabled by consultation, it is unlikely that the experimentalist will benefit from the understanding of the theorist, or that the theorist will be able to obtain experimental verification from the experimentalist. Neither will benefit from the understanding of colleagues, and the process of review and group validation would miss the important component of human interaction. Consultation clearly is a part of the way that science is done, albeit an often overlooked one. It is not the whole, but it plays a vital and necessary role.

With respect to the work of Longino and others who take into account the social aspects of objectivity, we see that objectivity is enhanced by "the collective give-and-take of critical discussion" and "the depth and scope of the transformative interrogation that occurs in any given scientific community" (Longino 79). The search for truth and unity characterizing Bahá'í consultation looks very much like a key ingredient for that give-and-take to fruitfully take place. The emphasis on the "shining spark of truth" coming forth "only after the clash of differing

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9 For a stimulating article on creativity in business settings, see Amabile and Khaire.

opinions,” combined with the need to maintain unity, seems to be necessary for any successful sustainable engagement in enterprises of truth-seeking like science (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections* 44:1).

Even if conclusions are wrong in Bahá'í consultation, they can be improved on and modified to be more correct in future consultations. This captures one of the key features of science—its capacity for self-correction over time.<sup>10</sup> In a Bahá'í context, the unity of the community making the decision and the emphasis on systematic and ongoing reflection and study in the learning in action mode (which we consider next) strengthens and institutionalizes this self-correcting capability. It does so by putting a collective, consultative decision into practice with an understanding that deficiencies will be modified as needed as improved understandings unfold.

Consultation, however, does not by itself incorporate many of the features of science discussed above. We therefore now consider learning in action, of which consultation is a key component,

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<sup>10</sup> Science is self-correcting, and therefore a reliable source of knowledge, through several processes. These include the critiquing of results in the light of what is known, repeated testing and retesting, thorough reviews of theory and experimental results by qualified interrogators, and by replication, repetition, and reproduction of results. For a current discussion of the self-correcting aspects of science, see Peterson and Panofsky and the references included.

as a process that shares many of the essential features of science. We conclude that it is learning in action in its entirety, not consultation alone, that makes Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation scientific in its method.

#### LEARNING IN ACTION

Bahá'í consultation is a tool that helps make decisions, plan activities, and generate new knowledge and understanding, but it is not an end in itself. As noted before, when used as part of a process known as learning in action, it leads to a “collective investigation of reality [that] promotes detachment from personal views, gives due importance to valid empirical information, does not raise mere opinion to the status of fact or define truth as the compromise between opposing interest groups” (Universal House of Justice, 2 Mar. 2013). Learning in action is a process underway in Bahá'í communities worldwide.

According to the Universal House of Justice, learning in action is “characterized by action, reflection, consultation, and study.” The study part includes “not only constant reference to the writings of the Faith but also the scientific analysis of patterns unfolding.” Maintaining the process of learning in action is “the object of regular examination” (2 Mar. 2013).

The process of learning in action is used to address the important questions facing the community. For example, how is it possible to “bring people of different backgrounds

together”? How is it possible “to administer the affairs of a community in which there is no ruling class with priestly functions that can lay claim to distinction or privilege” (2 Mar. 2013)? Questions at a local level, such as how to increase participation in community activities, are equally addressable.

The methods used in learning in action in some of its implementations have strong similarities to those used in science. To contextualize these, we first explore the role of learning in the Bahá’í Faith.

#### LEARNING AND BAHÁ’U’LLÁH’S REVELATION

Learning and the promotion of knowledge are particularly important aspects of the Bahá’í Revelation. Promotion of knowledge is a duty imposed on all Bahá’ís, according to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá (*Selections* 97:2). Learning is the mightiest pillar supporting the Bahá’í Faith:

There are certain pillars which have been established as the unshakable supports of the Faith of God, the mightiest of these is learning and the use of the mind, the expansion of consciousness, and insight into the realities of the universe and the hidden mysteries of Almighty God. (97:1)

The Universal House of Justice summarizes the role of learning vis-à-vis the Bahá’í Revelation as follows:

Bahá’u’lláh’s Revelation is vast. It calls for profound change not only at the level of the individual but also in the structure of society. . . . Only as effort is made to draw on insights from His Revelation, to tap into the accumulating knowledge of the human race, to apply His teachings intelligently to the life of humanity, and to consult on the questions that arise will the necessary learning occur and capacity be developed. (Riḍván 2010)

Learning—and its systemization—are thus essential if we are to draw on the insights of Revelation. From this standpoint, learning is a “mode of operation . . . that fosters the informed participation of more and more people in a united effort to apply Bahá’u’lláh’s teachings to the construction of a divine civilization” (Riḍván 2010).

An important aspect of such learning is that it “is not limited to study and evaluation . . . [but] comes about in combination with action. The believers must regularly engage in consultation, action, reflection—all in the light of the guidance inherent in the teachings of the Faith” (Lampé 129).

A vital component of Bahá’í activity over the last many years, not surprisingly then, has been addressing the need to develop processes of learning. Shoghi Effendi, and subsequently the Universal House of Justice, has “operated in a systematic learning mode that has continually derived and synthesized new knowledge from the accumulating

experience of the community and all its collaborators” (Karlberg and Smith 466). Initially focused internally, this learning mode was later externalized in interactions with governmental agencies, NGOs, social and economic development projects, as well as a variety of other activities (466).<sup>11</sup>

#### LEARNING AS A MODE OF OPERATION

As previously mentioned, in Bahá'í institutions learning is often done using learning in action processes—defined by the Universal House of Justice as “a mode of operation characterized by action, reflection, consultation, and study—study which involves not only constant reference to the writings of the Faith but also the scientific analysis of patterns unfolding” (2 Mar. 2013).

An overview of Bahá'í social and economic development illustrates one of the ways that learning in action can be effectively used—and reused:

The mode of operation adopted in the area of social and economic development, in common with other areas of Bahá'í activity, is one of learning in action. When efforts are carried out in a learning mode—characterized by constant action, reflection, consultation, and study—visions and strategies are reexamined time and again. As tasks are accomplished, obstacles

removed, resources multiplied, and lessons learned, modifications are made in goals and methods. The learning process, which is given direction through appropriate institutional arrangements, unfolds in a way that resembles the growth and differentiation of a living organism. Haphazard change is avoided, and continuity of action maintained. (OSD)

Another description of learning in action is found in the Bahá'í community's efforts to foster spiritual and intellectual development among adolescents:

Using reason, intuition, and imagination, [the team] formulated some tentative actions that could be implemented on a small scale and they reflected upon the experience thus generated, all in light of the wider conceptual framework guiding the learning processes of the community. Through an iterative, systematic process of action, reflection on action, and consultation about next steps, subsequent efforts yielded further observations, and the programme gradually widened in scope to include a greater diversity of people in different cultural contexts. (Karlberg and Smith 467)

Communities worldwide have learned to understand their local area—and their situation with respect to their local area—through learning in action iterative processes. They have learned

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<sup>11</sup> For a detailed discussion of learning and Bahá'í activities, see Karlberg and Smith.

“to read their own reality, see their own possibilities, make use of their own resources, and respond to the exigencies of large-scale expansion and consolidation to come” (Universal House of Justice, 28 Dec. 2010).

Learning in action incorporates many of the activities and processes found in the sciences, including empirical observation, reflection on the implications of empirical results, engagement with others through consultative processes, and the “development of a shared language that enables diverse participants to communicate effectively and reach shared understandings on a global scale” (Karlberg and Smith 467).

A central constituent of learning in action—and Bahá’í consultation as well—is diversity. Diversity, according to the Bahá’í perspective, “characterizes the human family . . . [and] endows it with richness” (Universal House of Justice, 18 Jan. 2019). It is diversity that saves us from homogeneity.

When “divers shades of thought, temperament and character, are brought together under the power and influence of one central agency, the beauty and glory of human perfection will be revealed and made manifest” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections* 225:25). Shoghi Effendi writes that “diversity in all created things, whether in kind, in physical appearance, or in station, is the means for their protection, their permanence, unity and harmony” (qtd. in Universal House of Justice, *Social Action* no. 196). Thus “great value is placed on the diversity of perspectives and contributions that individuals

bring to the discussion. . . . Diversity is harnessed to enrich collective inquiry and deliberation” (Bahá’í International Community).

Thus, a crucial question for Bahá’í communities is “how to make it possible for decision making to benefit from a diversity of perspectives” (Universal House of Justice, 2 Mar. 2013). This can be done by learning in action processes that explore “how to ensure that growing numbers participate in the generation and application of relevant knowledge, and how to devise structures for the systemization of an expanding worldwide experience and for the equitable distribution of the lessons learned” (2 Mar. 2013).

To illustrate how learning in action can qualify as science, we look at how it maps to the way that physics systemizes learning. The *action* in the *action*, *reflection*, *consultation*, and *study* process might be an experimental test of a phenomenon to be done in a laboratory. *Reflection* on the action can be done by data analysis and comparison to theory. *Consultation* is widely done with the help of colleagues and considers the validity of conclusions, weaknesses in the arguments, assumptions used, and discussions of claims made. This often is done in the weekly review sessions typical of scientific groups and might include planning for the next steps. Finally, *study* is a continuing activity and involves the review of reference materials, the development of models appropriate to what is at hand, and the review of the underlying science. An important part of the process is



publication of the results, presentations at conferences, and discussions with others from different organizations. In sciences other than physics, the procedures will be much the same but adapted to the given discipline's ways of doing things. Learning in action can be used for all these steps.

Learning in action is not the same as science, although it is basically scientific in its methods. It does have an emphasis on the empirical (action, conclusions from empirical studies) and the theoretical (reflection, consultation, and study) that is consistent with key features of scientific methods.

We conclude that learning in action can—and often does—act like science. But to fully do so, it needs to be accepted by an appropriate community. Accordingly, we next consider how community validation is done for learning in action.

#### COMMUNITY VALIDATION

The learning in action processes described above often do not fully incorporate a key ingredient necessary if they are to be seen as completely scientific in their method. What is often missing is the public endorsement by a qualified body of people who form a knowledge community. It should be noted that it is not desirable in many cases to have this, especially when activities are in their earliest stages, as it adds complexity, ties down resources, and can hinder spontaneity.<sup>12</sup>

When learning in action is done by a mature community, by an institution, or by an appointed body, then it is more likely that results and conclusions will be reviewed carefully, methodologies noted, and results considered based on their merits. This could well lead to review processes similar or the same as those done by a scientific community. A learning group active together over an extended period—say, a Bahá'í cluster with a quarterly cycle operating over several years—would be an example of a group of people working together as an institution or a community.

Bahá'í international governance institutions—the Universal House of Justice, the Continental Boards of Counsellors, and the International Teaching Center for example—draw data from Bahá'í communities around the world. The International Teaching Center, for example, has the responsibility to “be fully informed of the situation of the Cause in all parts of the world and, from this information, to make reports and recommendations to the Universal House of Justice and give advice to the Continental Boards of Counselors” (Universal House of Justice, 10 Jun. 1998). This is one way that learning in action can feed into validation by qualified institutions.

In its *Riḍván* 2023 message, the Universal House of Justice refers to “the capacity to engage in systematic learning . . . that draws on insights

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danger of suppressing organic growth by implementation of procedures that would be best introduced later.

12 There might be, for example, a

arising from the Teachings and the accumulated store of human knowledge generated through scientific inquiry.” This indicates that Bahá’í institutions have the capacity to validate scientific or technical knowledge where the veracity of the information is dependent in part on sound verification procedures.

The learning in action method as currently formulated includes a consultation step, and that consultation can be done internally by the learning in action team, or externally by individuals, communities, or institutions. An open question is to what extent external consultation is equivalent to validation as done in scientific communities. Under what situations is validation needed or appropriate? Clearly, information and conclusions derived from learning in action processes can be compiled and studied, and the result shared and evaluated, in the same way as is done in research work or scientific study. This can be extended to include validation, it appears, if the learning in action team or external bodies desire to pursue that path.

Although the full formal apparatus of peer review, community discussion, and the public verification of knowledge is not part of the learning in action process, the means to do validation when needed appears to be available.

#### SUMMARIES AND CONCLUSIONS

In this article, we have looked at what it means for Bahá’u’lláh’s Revelation

to be scientific in its method. In doing so, we have surveyed modern thinking about the scientific method, the role of diversity in science, the unique features of Bahá’í consultation, the Bahá’í learning in action process, and the similarities of that process to science. We have concluded that learning in action is quite flexible in how it can be used and that it can be like science in many ways. Further, when validation methods—or similar mechanisms—are incorporated into learning in action, it and science can overlap.

Our larger question is whether we can show that Bahá’u’lláh’s Revelation is scientific in its method. We address this question in these closing paragraphs.

To better understand the scientific method, we have looked at some of the ways that prominent scientists and philosophers of science think about that method. Some aspects of science—systematicity, modeling, theory development, empirical studies, experiments, reviewing, and community discussion—are features widely shared. However, we find that there is no one specific scientific method that applies overall. Rather, there is a diversity of ways of doing science. We conclude that there is no fixed method—be it adapted from the hard sciences, the social sciences, or otherwise – that is meant by the statement that Bahá’u’lláh’s Revelation is scientific in its method. Rather, consistent with modern science, we can expect a wide variety of ways for Revelation to be scientific.



Because it is done by people, science is intrinsically social. History makes it clear that the embrace of differing worldviews and the effects of biases influence how science is done and sometimes sway its conclusions. These effects can be reduced, or sometimes even eliminated, by the celebrated self-correcting aspects of science: repeated experiments, analyses, reviews, and rethinking. Recently, it has become widely apparent that a diversity of worldviews, lived experiences, and even a diversity of biases can be used to make corrections and move closer to objectivity, one of the most important aspects of scientific understanding.

The growing emphasis on diversity in science is closely consistent with the emphasis on the great importance of diversity in the Bahá'í teachings.

Bahá'í consultation, practiced widely around the world, has characteristics that make it similar in some ways to scientific practice. A major part of its purpose, summarized in brief, is the investigation of truth and the promotion of unity. Like science, there is no one method by which it proceeds.

Bahá'í consultation, in a seeming departure from science, honors spiritual principles and fosters a spirit of fellowship, unity, and loving-kindness. But science too thrives on spiritual values and friendship. Devotion to truth, respect for others, cooperation, and the unifying power of understanding are as much a part of science as they are of spiritual endeavors. Both science and Bahá'í consultation agree on the leading role of the investigation of truth.

Bahá'í consultation does not duplicate the methodologies of science, although it can play a significant role in their implementation. For a fuller accounting of how Bahá'u'lláh's revelation is scientific in its method, we must search further than Bahá'í consultation.

According to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the promotion of knowledge is "an inescapable duty imposed on every one of the friends of God" (*Selections* 97). As one way of addressing this, Bahá'í communities across the globe have adopted the process of learning in action.

Learning in action can have all of the features found in the sciences, including the empirical (actions, observations, conclusions from experiments, empirical studies), the theoretical (reflection, consultation, and theoretical studies), engagement with others, consultation, the "development of a shared language that enables diverse participants to communicate effectively and reach shared understandings on a global scale," "systems for distilling and disseminating new knowledge across [a] global community", and "structures of material and institutional support that enable sophisticated forms of cooperation and coordination on a global scale" (Karlberg and Smith 467).

Learning in action is different from science, but it is scientific in its method in many ways and can be made to act like any given science. Methods of validation and verification are not part of the formal structure, but review by supporting communities and institutions, or by other means, can be used to provide the group validation

that is necessarily part of the scientific process.

We conclude that there is ample support for the view that Bahá'u'lláh's revelation is scientific in its method. One support for this conclusion is that the learning in action process—in wide use throughout the Bahá'í world—in many ways operates as science does. The processes of action, reflection, consultation, and study that make up learning in action correspond to the empiricism and idea generation methods of science, to the analyses and evaluations of experimental data, to the consequent discussion of the implications of those analyses, to the follow-up strategies generated, and to the study of ideas and concepts that help create new knowledge.

Given the considerable overlap of learning in action with the sciences, and given the similar overlap of methods, we can say that one very concrete way the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh is scientific in its method is through the widespread adoption of learning in action modes of activity in Bahá'í communities and institutions.

Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation is scientific in its method in other ways as well. For example, to achieve the goals of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation, scientific progress is needed. Shoghi Effendi tells us about some of what will take place in the unfolding of the Bahá'í Revelation in the future: "The unity of the human race, as envisaged by Bahá'u'lláh," he writes, "implies the establishment of a world commonwealth" including "a mechanism of world

inter-communication . . . embracing the whole planet, freed from national hindrances and restrictions, and functioning with marvelous swiftness and perfect regularity" (*World Order* 204). The goal of world intercommunication has been nearly achieved, brought about by scientific investigation and technical development. The other goals outlined by Shoghi Effendi also depend on science. Two of those—"the extension of scientific research" and the expansion of "the range of human inventions and technical development"—are directly scientific. Given that achieving the goals of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation requires science, it follows that Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation includes the scientific method in the means to achieve its goals.<sup>13</sup>

Systematization and systematic action are also needed to achieve the goals of Revelation:

Systematization ensures consistency of lines of action based on well-conceived plans. In a general sense, it implies an orderliness of approach in all that pertains to Bahá'í service, whether in teaching or administration, in individual or collective endeavor. While

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13 We note that "scientific in its method" does not only mean adhering to scientific methods as ways of planning or understanding things. It can also mean the use of science to achieve ends. Drug development, for example, often directly depends on scientific investigation, so that we must describe it as scientific in its methods.

allowing for individual initiative and spontaneity, it suggests the need to be clearheaded, methodical, efficient, constant, balanced and harmonious. (Universal House of Justice, Ridván 1998)

According to the House of Justice, systemization is something that every “community must learn” if it is “to arrive at a unified vision of growth based on a realistic assessment of possibilities and resources” (27 Dec. 2005).

Systematization is a core component of the scientific method, according to many modern thinkers (Hepburn and Andersen, Haack, Hatcher, Hoyning-Huene). Its use is another way that the implementation of the goals of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation makes it scientific in its method.

Yet another way that the Bahá'í Revelation is scientific in its method is that it uses science to protect religion against superstition (Mehanian and Friberg). According to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, “religion must stand the analysis of reason. It must agree with scientific fact and proof” (*Promulgation* 62:9). Furthermore, “every religion which is not in accordance with established science is superstition. Religion must be reasonable. If it does not square with reason, it is superstition and without foundation” (*Promulgation* 44:8). The use of the scientific method in understanding religion protects against error.

The implications of taking learning in action to be scientific in its method are significant. One is that we can see learning in action as a generalization

of the scientific method, that is, as an expansion of the scope of the scientific method to wider ways of doing things. The methods used in learning in action, combined with the widespread access to knowledge available via the internet and the spread of libraries, make learning in action a democratization of science. Any individual, group, institution, age group, or community can use learning in action, and there are no requirements for formal qualifications. New modes of community interaction, social and economic development, and resource generation are some of the doors being opened.

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# Becoming Attuned to Reality: Presuppositions and the Power of Learning in Action<sup>1</sup>

TODD SMITH

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## *Abstract*

What is entailed in accurately reading reality? The main thesis of this paper is that the learning mode of action, reflection, consultation, and study encourages investigators to attend to at least six “interplays” which, together, work to facilitate collaborative readings that are progressively attuned to reality. Owing to these interplays, this mode of learning in action helps to weed out disabling or harmful presuppositions and corresponding ideas, making it possible to discover and retain enabling or beneficial ones. By doing so, it resolves the longstanding problem of how to conceptualize objectivity and cultivate it in the search for truth.

## *Résumé*

En quoi consiste une lecture adéquate de la réalité? La thèse principale du présent article est que le mode d'apprentissage caractérisé par l'action, la réflexion, la consultation et l'étude incite les chercheurs à tenir compte d'au moins six « interactions » qui, ensemble, facilitent une lecture collaborative de plus en plus fidèle à la réalité. Grâce à ces interactions, un tel mode d'apprentissage dans l'action contribue à éliminer les présupposés invalidants ou nuisibles et les idées correspondantes, ce qui permet de découvrir et de retenir ceux qui sont habilitants ou bénéfiques. Ce faisant, le processus permet de résoudre ce vieux problème du maintien de l'objectivité dans la recherche de la vérité.

## *Resumen*

¿Qué implica una precisa lectura de la realidad? La principal tesis de este artículo es que la modalidad de aprendizaje de acción, reflexión, consulta, y estudio motiva a los investigadores a atender por lo menos seis “interacciones” las

cuales, juntas, funcionan para facilitar lecturas colaborativas progresivamente sintonizadas a la realidad. Debido a estas interacciones, esta modalidad de aprendizaje en acción ayuda a eliminar presunciones deshabilitadoras o dañinas y las ideas correspondientes, haciendo posible descubrir y retener presunciones habilitadoras y beneficiosas. Haciéndolo así, se resuelve el duradero problema de cómo cultivar objetividad en la búsqueda de la verdad.

### INTRODUCTION

In our 2009 paper “Articulating a Consultative Epistemology: Towards a Reconciliation of Truth and Relativism,” Michael Karlberg and I address a central philosophical problem, namely, how to overcome the perennial tension between two opposed approaches to the nature of knowledge. Drawing upon the work of Richard Rorty, we refer to these conflicting approaches as *verticalism* (which is closely allied to objectivism and foundationalism) and *horizontalism* (which is closely allied to relativism and antifoundationalism). The paper maintains that the tension between these approaches can be both reconciled and transcended through the development of a *consultative epistemology*. In providing the rationale for this consultative epistemology, we introduce a number of key concepts including the notions that reality both *constrains* and *enables* the social construction of truth;<sup>2</sup> that phenomena are variously

*tangible* and so variously subject to social construction; and that, consequently, different social constructions are variously *attuned* to different phenomena.<sup>3</sup> These concepts are revisited in more depth under the subsection “Reader and Reality” below.

The aim of the present paper is to build on the concept of attunement by exploring the following question: What is entailed in accurately reading

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social construction of social institutions, social structures more generally, norms, laws, technologies, artifacts, and so on. In both our 2009 paper and the present essay, the concern is specifically with the social construction of truth and the epistemological tools—including models, concepts, categories, theories—used to understand, interpret, and explain different features of reality (or different phenomena).

3 The 2009 paper introduces the terms *general attunement* and *specified attunement*. The former occurs when certain features of reality, or phenomena, are noticed and understood basically for what they are across most, if not all, paradigms. The latter occurs when a paradigmatic framing (interpretation, conceptualization, model, theory, etc.)—a social construction—of a given feature of reality is especially attuned to, or in sync with, that particular feature of reality (whereas the framings of other paradigms may be especially attuned to different features instead). In other words, where there is specified attunement there exists positive feedback or resonance between a particular social construction and a particular feature of reality. Two other forms of attunement are also discussed: *anomalous attunement* and *fabricated attunement* (Smith and Karlberg 86–89).

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2 One can speak broadly of the

reality? Or, to put it another way: What is entailed in achieving interpretations that are especially attuned to reality? In addressing this question, this paper introduces the term *collaborative attunement*. Collaborative attunement occurs when there is a unity among a diversity of attunements to a given reality<sup>4</sup> consistent with the interdependent nature of reality as a whole.

A major consideration in addressing the question of what is entailed in accurately reading reality is the role that presuppositions play in both constraining and enabling our interpretations of it. The main thesis of this paper is that the learning mode of action, reflection, consultation, and study among an ever-widening circle of participants is central to weeding out harmful or disabling presuppositions and corresponding ideas, while also discovering and retaining beneficial or enabling ones. This is because this approach to learning in action encourages diverse investigators to attend to at least *six interplays* which, together, work to facilitate *collaborative readings that are progressively attuned to reality*. These are the interplays between reader and reality; whole and parts; reader and other readers; past, present, and future; action and reflection; and science and religion. These interplays are considered in a preliminary manner below. The paper then concludes with a discussion of how being attentive to

each one of them can help to resolve the longstanding problem of how to conceptualize objectivity and cultivate it in the search for truth, and it offers a few suggestions for further inquiry.

The question of how to accurately read reality is of direct concern to the development of a consultative epistemology because it is specifically tied to the question of what is involved in generating reliable knowledge. Viewed from a Bahá'í perspective, the ability to read reality is also an essential capacity for bringing about human prosperity, given the present challenge before all the inhabitants of the world “to draw on their collective inheritance to take up, consciously and systematically, the responsibility for the design of their future” (Bahá'í International Community). That is, to promote society building and material, social, and spiritual transformation, we as human beings need to be able to discern where we are in order to determine where to go next. In this connection, Bahá'u'lláh counsels us: “Be anxiously concerned with the needs of the age ye live in, and center your deliberations on its exigencies and requirements” (106:1). Similarly, the Universal House of Justice states that “the challenge facing the friends serving at the grassroots is essentially the same in every place. They must be able to read their own reality and ask: ‘what, in light of the possibilities and requirements at hand, would be fitting objectives to pursue in the coming cycle or series of cycles?’” (30 Dec. 2021). This paper aims to help address this challenge by examining

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4 One could also say “a particular feature of reality.” This paper is not concerned with drawing a distinction between reality and features of reality.

some of the dynamics that are most conducive to ensuring that such collective readings are both adequate and productive—that is, collaboratively attuned to reality—thus making it possible to more effectively advance lines of inquiry that will bring about more comprehensive understandings of prevailing exigencies and sustainable constructive change.

#### COLLABORATIVE ATTUNEMENT AND THE PROBLEM OF INTERPRETATION

The challenge of achieving accurate, or attuned, readings of reality is at its core a problem of interpretation. Whereas there is a reality out there—a way things are—whether foundational or contingent, our presuppositions (and by extension our concepts, theories, perspectives, values, objectives, paradigms, worldviews, and so on) influence 1) what we perceive of reality, or what we identify as relevant facts and information; 2) how we interpret, prioritize, or categorize those facts;<sup>5</sup> 3) the meanings, values, and significances we attach to those facts we perceive and categorize; 4) how we choose to act and further investigate reality in accordance with those facts and our interpretations of them; and 5) how our actions then reciprocally inform our perceptions and interpretations of reality, the facts we subsequently go on to identify and categorize, and the

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5 Or, as Sophia Efstathiou and Zara Mirmalek put it, we carve out the world (234).

significances and priorities we attach to them.<sup>6</sup> In our efforts to grapple with aspects of reality, we certainly select, interpret, and attach meanings to them, and construct them accordingly. It is, in effect, impossible not to: we can never approach anything “as it is,” fully divested of our constructed conceptions of it. But this being the case is not inexorably problematic. Our presuppositions, while certainly limiting, can also enable us to read or interpret reality—particularly if we adopt the right disposition, or posture, towards learning.

#### THE ROLE OF PRESUPPOSITIONS

The crucial role of our presuppositions is one of Hans-Georg Gadamer’s pivotal themes. He maintains that we cannot read a given reality, interpret a text, or, for that matter, interact with another person, without presuppositions exerting significant influence over the encounter. Our presuppositions enable us to read or interpret a text or reality, and to interact with others.<sup>7</sup> As William R. Schroeder explains, “cultural background and situational context are necessary for comprehending anything human. Without utilizing this background people

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6 An even more extreme form of the problem is the contention that reality is purely a social construct; this antifoundationalist claim is addressed in the 2009 paper (Smith and Karlberg).

7 Just as the text, reality, or exchange enables our readings of it. The interplay between reader and reality is discussed in some depth below.

cannot even describe events, much less explain them” (151).<sup>8</sup>

And yet Gadamer does not deny that presuppositions have their negative side. While they enable, they also constrain, blind and deprive. And as blinders and deprivers, they lead to conflict and to the oppression of others. History is fraught with examples. Daily life is fraught with examples. One is prejudice in the form of racism which, as the Universal House of Justice states, “is a profound deviation from the standard of true morality. It deprives a portion of humanity of the opportunity to cultivate and express the full range of their capability and to live a meaningful and flourishing life, while blighting the progress of the rest of humankind” (22 Jul. 2020). Gadamer would no doubt agree. At the same time, he stresses that while we can only understand by virtue of our presuppositions—while they *situate* us in relation to that which we seek to understand, especially initially—they need not determine the *outcome* of our understanding. Instead, understanding requires work. It necessitates care, perceptiveness, imagination, and above all, a willingness to put our own presuppositions on trial. This point is vital. According to Gadamer: “The authentic intention of understanding” is that “in reading a text, in wishing to understand it, what we always expect is that it will inform us of something. . . . In keeping to this attitude we grant

the text the opportunity to appear as an authentically different being and to manifest its own truth, over and against our own preconceived notions” (qtd. in Bernstein, *Beyond* 138).

Understanding consequently requires a receptivity to newness, to that which may challenge our presuppositions. We tend to (Gadamer would say we cannot help but) draw upon presuppositions to interact with others, or with a text, or with a feature of natural or social reality, but our motivation should not be to defend these presuppositions; rather, our motivation should be to judiciously appraise them, thus facilitating their refinement, or even their transformation. We must be disposed to “welcome just that guest who promises something new to our curiosity” (Gadamer “Universality” 9).

So, for example, when we read a text by Aristotle, we read it from our own perspective, from within our own paradigmatic constellation, or as Gadamer puts it, from within our own historical horizon. Our reading of it is informed and enabled by our presuppositions. But if we really try to understand it, we likely find that our presuppositions are challenged. By inviting Aristotle’s text to speak to us, by seeking to be informed by it, we open up our presuppositions to scrutiny. And as we are so challenged, we, as Richard Bernstein puts it, “enlarge our own horizon” (*Beyond* 149). We learn about ourselves and our deficiencies, and so make it possible to enrich—perhaps even transform—ourselves. In short, while we rely on our presuppositions

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8 This position applies to the hermeneutic tradition more generally, of which Gadamer is a prominent member.

when entering into an encounter, we simultaneously anticipate that they may be transmuted by the encounter. We may even yearn for their transmutation.

#### INVESTIGATING TOGETHER

Gadamer's approach certainly has much to commend it, especially when we compare it to the culture of myopia, factionalism, disingenuity, incivility, and outright bigotry that infests much of society today. It is hard to deny that opening ourselves up to "otherness"—whether it be other people, a text, a given set of circumstances—is essential for examining, refining, and even revamping our presuppositions or background assumptions when reading or interpreting reality. Doing so is part of adopting what the Bahá'í community identifies as "a humble posture of learning" (Universal House of Justice, Ridván 2008). Thinkers from other philosophical traditions also highlight its importance for advancing inquiry. For example, as Bernstein describes Charles Sanders Peirce's position (representing the pragmatist tradition):

all inquiry, including scientific and philosophical inquiry, begins with tacit prejudices and prejudgments. They provide necessary background and orientation. In the course of a specific inquiry we may come to reject some of these prejudices, but we never escape from having tacit background prejudgments that we do not question. Sorting out which prejudices are

to be criticized or rejected is not the beginning point of inquiry, but an end product, an *achievement of inquiry*. (*Pragmatic Turn* 33)

And as Schroeder explains Friedrich Nietzsche's position (the inspiration behind so many subsequent philosophical traditions), "interpretation is the central cognitive process in all knowledge because every phenomenon is examined from a perspective that limits what can be discovered within it." However, Nietzsche

does not mean . . . that all interpretations are false. On the contrary, most interpretations clarify some feature of the phenomenon; the epistemic task is to integrate multiple perspectives and to compensate for their limitations. The fullest comprehension requires that various perspectives correct and supplement one another and that new corrections emerge where additional illuminating perspectives are discovered. (140)

Along with Gadamer, both of these thinkers point towards the need for interperspectival collaboration so that a community of inquirers can proactively challenge and adjust their presuppositions in an effort to achieve more expansive, shared, understandings of reality. Increasingly, present-day researchers also recognize the need to encourage more participatory research methods across disciplines, involving groups or populations most affected



by such research. This is central, for example, to participatory action research (PAR) (Cornish et al.). Alison Wylie, moreover, provides a concrete example of the efficacy of this inclusive approach among archeologists, whose research benefited greatly by collaborating with regional Aboriginal partners. She concludes that such collaboration is essential for revealing presuppositions, goals, standards, and norms of justification that may otherwise go unnoticed, thus potentially hampering scientific inquiry. She observes: “The result is a process of critical appraisal that opens up alternatives that might never have arisen through internal deliberation” (77).

But what are the conditions that enable such participation to proceed most effectively? And further, what are the conditions that promote collaborative attunements to reality?

#### INTERPLAYS THAT FACILITATE READINGS OF REALITY

In order to read or interpret reality effectively and achieve collaborative attunements that (where merited) build on and weave together the varied attunements attained by different collaborators, a particular approach to systematic inquiry is required. A preeminent example of such an approach is the learning mode that the Universal House of Justice has been helping the Bahá'í community to understand and implement for a number of decades now. This mode is referred to as learning in action and is “characterized by constant action, reflection,

consultation, and study” (Office of Social and Economic Development (OSD), 26 Nov. 2012), a process which “[raises] up thoughtful, creative protagonists of the progress of the Faith, not mere technicians implementing a fixed methodology or formula for expansion” (Lample 83). Recently, the Universal House of Justice highlighted the significance of this approach, stating: “The conscious grasp of the process of learning and its extension worldwide, from the grassroots to the international arena, are among the finest fruits of the first century of the Formative Age” (28 Nov. 2023).

As noted above, the main thesis of this paper is that a systematic learning mode of this kind facilitates readings of reality partly because it engenders, incorporates, attends to, and quickens various “interplays”—mutually reinforcing and uplifting dynamics between two or more elements. Together, these interplays aid in weeding out inefficacious presuppositions, even harmful prejudices, while enabling the generation of new insights, some of which are more helpful and of lasting value—are more attuned to reality—than others. They do so, moreover, as part of an ongoing process of inquiry carried out in diverse settings.

Of the interplays that can be identified, the following six are considered in a provisional manner,<sup>9</sup> namely, those

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9 Much more could be said about each of them, especially in view of the wealth of relevant thinking one could appeal to within various disciplines. What follows is no more than an attempt to



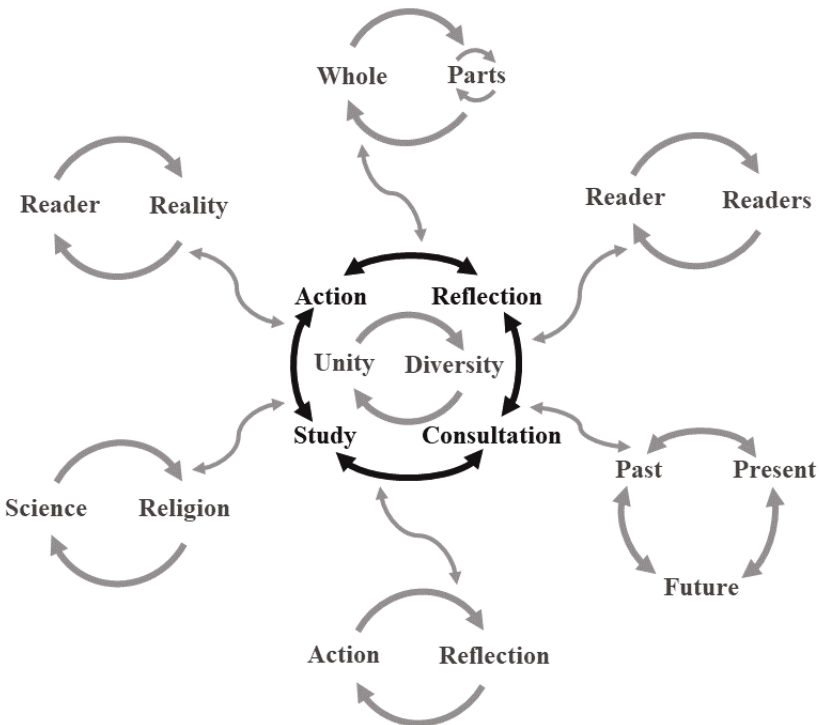
between 1) reader and reality; 2) whole and parts; 3) reader and other readers; 4) past, present and future; 5) action and reflection; and 6) science and religion. Each interplay is posited as necessary for the investigative process—including the interpretive reading of reality—to proceed in the most constructive way possible. Because this paper represents only a preliminary contribution, these interplays are, for the most part, considered on their own terms. While there are some allusions below to how they interact with each other, a full discussion of this larger dynamic is beyond the scope of this paper.

That said, it is important to keep  


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 justify further inquiry into the significance and implications of these interplays.

in mind that each interplay is deemed insufficient on its own to produce the best outcomes. Instead, the most productive investigations, or readings, come about when there is an interaction between these six (or more) interplays. The learning mode of action, reflection, consultation, and study precipitates each interplay while also encouraging an evolving (macro) interplay between all six of them in the sense that they continually incorporate and vitalize each other. Each interplay can also be viewed as a different expression of the fundamental dynamic between unity and diversity, which is understood to lie at the core of the learning process. The figure below illustrates this relationship. It is anticipated that future papers will tackle this subject more directly.



## READER AND REALITY

This interplay was discussed at some length in the 2009 paper (Smith and Karlberg). To recap, the gist is that as we engage with and reflect on a given reality, this reality has a say in how it is read or interpreted. It has push. It makes demands. While our presuppositions constrain and enable what we see of reality and how we categorize and describe it, they are conversely constrained and enabled by the conditions of reality itself. Paul Feyerabend says that scientists “are sculptors of reality” (269). But scientists—or indeed sculptors of any variety—“need materials with which to work, otherwise they cannot sculpt; and those materials must retain properties, otherwise they would not be materials; and those properties must involve conditions, otherwise they would not be properties; and those conditions must impose demands, otherwise they would not be conditions; and those demands must constrain, otherwise they would not be demands” (Smith and Karlberg 79). Our capacity to socially construct any given reality,<sup>10</sup> like the capacity to sculpt a piece of marble, is limited by the properties and demands that stem directly from that reality.

Consider: Is it possible to socially construct a three-ton rock, or boulder, so that it is understood, related to, and addressed in the same way that a

rainbow is understood, related to, and addressed? Is it possible to thoroughly perceive a rainbow and a rock in the same way? Perhaps it is, but it seems unlikely that the construct “a rock is a rainbow” is sustainable when consciously experiencing the two phenomena. Why? Most fundamentally, because they exercise constraints over how they are understood and what can be made of them. They impinge, they make demands. In a manner of speaking, they have a say over what is conceived of or done with them. More generally, reality moderates the extent to which social construction can have its way with it. Social construction can make many things of the phenomenon “rock.” It cannot, however, make it into just anything. It could not easily render it as a rainbow. And if it could, it is unlikely the construction “rock-as-rainbow” would last for very long. Both the rainbow and the rock, upon sufficient experience with them, would prevail upon reflective beings to construct them otherwise. Their feedback would invariably diffuse any such extreme manifestations of social construction.

To be sure, social construction orders and manipulates reality. It, at the very least, imbues phenomena with meanings. Yet, reality can only be manipulated just so far. It sets parameters on how it is comprehended and socially expressed, which means that our social constructions of reality—our conceptions or theories of what it is—cannot develop unrestrained. As Helen Longino puts it: “There is ‘something

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10 As mentioned above, only epistemological social constructions are being considered.

out there' that imposes limits on what we can say about it" (222). This is essential because, as John McDowell explains: "If our activity in empirical thought and judgment is to be recognizable as bearing on reality at all, there must be external constraint" (9). Without such constraints, our constructions would be devoid of any intelligibility.

At the same time, if (any given) reality constrains how it is socially constructed, it is equally true that it enables its social construction as well. This is key: one cannot sculpt unless there is something with properties (and hence conditions, demands, and constraints) to sculpt. Consequently, *reality-as-constraining* and *reality-as-enabling* are two sides of the same coin (Smith and Karlberg 79). The properties of reality may be paradigmatically manipulable, but they exist, nonetheless. If they did not exist, social construction could not proceed: it would have nothing to grab hold of; it would have nothing with which to work. More precisely, different phenomena or realities impose demands. And because they do, they both constrain and enable what we, in our diversity, see and construct of them.

The degree to which our constructions are constrained and enabled, moreover, is in large measure a factor of the *tangibility* of a given phenomenon. Sometimes reality speaks in a *more tangible* voice or speaks truth about itself in ways that most, if not everyone one of us, can hardly ignore. For example, that the sun provides light is a highly tangible feature of the sun. Upon

encountering the sun it seems unlikely that many of us would socially construct it as not providing light notwithstanding the varying paradigmatic lenses through which we view it, although we may attach different meanings to sunlight (it represents life; it represents skin cancer). The fact that light projected onto an object produces a shadow is another tangible phenomenon. These are obvious facts about reality that, in a manner of speaking, clamor to be pervasively known as what they happen to be. They "are noticed and understood basically . . . for what they are across a wide variety of paradigmatic lenses" (Smith and Karlberg 86). In other words, most paradigms are highly attuned to them (insofar as they can be humanly understood).<sup>11</sup>

In other situations, (a given) reality is *intangible*, and so cannot be constructed. Perhaps one example is the fleeting image that occurs out the corner of one's eye. Here, one does not really make anything of the image because one does not take much notice of it or register it as being worthy of attention. As such, it is not prone to being socially constructed.

Then there are times when (a given) reality speaks in a more *semi-tangible*

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11 There are always exceptions. For example, in this example, those without sight would not perceive the sun as providing light. The point is that, in cases of highly tangible phenomena, most, if not all paradigmatic lenses allow observers to perceive these phenomena for pretty much what they are (as far as is humanly possible).

voice, and so is socially moldable. The more semi-tangible a phenomenon is, the more amenable it is to being highly socially constructed because it is both noticeable and pliant. And because paradigmatic assumptions differ, the resulting social constructions of these semi-tangible phenomena can vary significantly in relation to each other. One example is that certain physical or mental symptoms can be constituted as manifestations of a biological problem, a psychological problem, or sociological problem (considered a manifestation of oppression, for example), or some combination thereof. The varying constructions of the “disease” hysteria is a case in point. Another is the “disease” category drapetomania, which is highly socially constructed compared to, say, the medical condition aortic stenosis.<sup>12</sup> The former is a social construction erected in affirmation of racist ideology and practices, whereas the latter is less socially constructed in that it has clear ties to an actual biological disorder. Certainly, each disease category is a social construction—every conception is socially constructed. The pivotal question, therefore, is the degree to which any given conception, or social construction, is attuned to a given reality.<sup>13</sup>

Since the concern here is with reading or interpreting reality, a natural analogy can be made to how we read a written text. Consider the revealed

Word of God. Paul Lample explains that in the Revelation, “meaning is sometimes explicit and sometimes veiled.”

Bahá’u’lláh explains that the Manifestation of God speaks a “twofold language.” “One language, the outward language, is devoid of allusions, is unconcealed and unveiled. . . . The other language is veiled and concealed, so that whatever lieth hidden in the heart of the malevolent may be made manifest and their innermost being disclosed.” Thus, at times we are dealing with explicit meanings and an esoteric interpretation would be inappropriate and incorrect. . . . At other times a verse has deeper meanings . . . (38)

An example of the former is the verse in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas which states that if anyone “layeth claim to a Revelation direct from God, ere the expiration of a full thousand years, such a man is assuredly a lying impostor” (165:1). Bahá’u’lláh continues in the same paragraph by stating: “Whosoever interpreteth this verse otherwise than its obvious meaning is deprived of the Spirit of God and of His mercy which encompasseth all created things.” In other words, one cannot justifiably interpret this verse to be saying something other than what it is clearly saying. It has high tangibility and, as such, has notable push and therefore largely constrains how it is read and interpreted. The same can be said about various passages in the Bahá’í Writings

<sup>12</sup> See Todd Smith, *The Relativity of Social Construction* ch. 6.

<sup>13</sup> Where there is such attunement, it is referred to as specified attunement.

outlining certain principles of the Faith. One, for example, could not easily misinterpret 'Abdu'l-Bahá's many statements on the equality of women and men to mean other than that women and men are equal. Again, these statements are highly tangible, meaning that most, if not all of us, perceive these statements to be saying basically what they are in fact saying. We are generally attuned to them.

On the other hand, many of the passages from Bahá'u'lláh's *The Seven Valleys* are more esoteric, and in this sense more semi-tangible. What we make of them is thus more likely to be shaped in accordance with the presuppositions and knowledge we bring to bear on their reading. Additionally, "the meaning of the Book cannot be exhausted" (Lample 39). This inexhaustibility "opens the Text to a range of individual interpretations, including instances in which an authoritative interpretation has been made" (39). At the same time, "meaning continually emerges through study and application throughout one's lifetime and over the entire course of the dispensation in a changing historical context" (39). Thus, even in the case of highly tangible texts—such as those that clearly espouse the equality of women and men or unequivocally state that racial prejudice is repugnant—our understanding of the essential principles they espouse is subject to perpetual development as we learn to apply them through action (which is taken up under the fifth interplay "Action and Reflection") and as social conditions advance.

The upshot is that in both tangible and semi-tangible cases, our presuppositions about reality can be tested and refined. Testing takes place through "dialogue with the text," and when this "dialogue is serious, the horizons of text and interpreter interrogate each other and new revelations emerge" (Schroeder 167). This dialogue, or interplay, is a necessary condition for adequate, and evolving, readings of a text. The same holds for the "text" of reality more generally.

This being acknowledged, the crux of the matter is that some phenomena, namely, semi-tangible phenomena, are more prone to being variously socially constructed than others. That is, some phenomena are more relative than others, which is the same thing as saying that relativity is itself relative. This is called *the relativity of relativity* (Smith and Karlberg 84). The point, then, is to figure out which social constructions, amongst the relativity of social constructions, are more attuned to reality than others, and to incorporate these attunements into our collective understanding of reality. This is where the next five interplays are directly relevant.

#### WHOLE AND PARTS

This interplay is consistent with the emphasis the Universal House of Justice places on "the coherence required among all areas of activity" (2 Mar. 2013); its warning that "difficulties often arise when phrases and sentences are taken out of context and viewed as

isolated fragments”; and, consequently, its admonition that “[t]he institutions and agencies of the Faith should help the believers to analyse but not reduce, to ponder meaning but not dwell on words, to identify distinct areas of action but not compartmentalize” (28 Dec. 2010). This interplay is, moreover, a central concern of the hermeneutic tradition and a vital consideration when reflecting on action (see the fifth interplay, “Action and Reflection”).

A simple thought experiment can demonstrate the importance of this dynamic. Think of how you, the reader, attempt to understand an essay such as this one. According to the hermeneutician, you are most successful when you employ a particular method. Namely, you begin by paying attention to various aspects or details of the essay. You subsequently relate those details to each other and then to other details you come across in your reading of the text. Each such detail forms a building block in your emerging understanding, providing additional context through which you go about understanding additional details, which then modify your understanding of previous details. The details, and the relationships between them, together form a basis upon which you come to an appreciation of the global thrust of the essay. Attention to the global, in turn, further informs your understanding of various details. All these elements take on meaning for you through comparison and contrast, and the global takes on meaning through attention to the details. You consequently participate in and

understand the essay by moving back and forth between the different parts and your maturing understanding of it as a whole.

This process is called the hermeneutic circle, which is the intellectual movement of understanding that proceeds through

a continuous dialectical tacking between the most local of local detail and the most global of global structure in such a way as to bring both into view simultaneously. . . . Hopping back and forth between the whole conceived through the parts which actualize it and the parts conceived through the whole which motivates them, we seek to turn them, by a sort of intellectual perpetual motion, into explanations of one another. (Geertz 239)

Friedrich Schleiermacher refers to this process as the mutual interanimation of the parts and whole of a text. As Schroeder summarizes it, “any thesis about the parts will be dependent on claims about the whole and vice versa” (153). Each clarifies the other through this dynamic interplay.

The value of this approach to the relationship between whole and parts can be understood by considering the human body. We can understand the heart as a part, but to gain a true appreciation of it as an organ in all its potential, we need to view it also in relationship to the other components of the body and the body as a whole. Contrarily, seeing

things, such as organs, only in isolation impoverishes understanding of both the parts and the whole and leads to unnecessary fragmentation and alienation. It amounts to disregarding ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s claim

that the greatest relationship that bindeth the world of being together lieth in the range of created things themselves and that co-operation, mutual aid and reciprocity are essential characteristics in the unified body of the world of being, inasmuch as all created things are closely related together and each is influenced by the other or deriveth benefit therefrom, either directly or indirectly. (qtd. in *Huqúqu’lláh* no. 23)

The same dynamic holds for social phenomena. For example, when participating in community-building activities, it is helpful to see one’s endeavors in the context of what others are doing, paying due attention to how the various activities are working together and reinforcing one another.<sup>14</sup> This does not preclude specialization or the notion that certain activities (such

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14 In its letter of 19 April 2007 to a National Spiritual Assembly, the Universal House of Justice states that institutions and agencies guiding the community building process “need to examine the dynamics of growth on a regular basis and analyze the way in which these elements are working together, in order to identify gaps and determine what adjustments should be made.”

as children’s classes) have their own characteristic discourses and learning processes. It does mean, however, that specialization becomes fragmentation when the activity specialized in is divorced from other processes and the whole itself. Specialization and harmonization are essential to each other in the way that diversity and unity are essential to each other.

It is, admittedly, not always easy to read reality in this way. It requires unremitting practice, particularly if we are to avoid falling into either one of two extremes, namely, “the extreme of mutely contemplating something without any understanding, and the extreme of too easily and facilely projecting our own well-entrenched beliefs, attitudes, classifications, and symbolic forms onto the alien phenomenon” (Bernstein, *Beyond* 91).<sup>15</sup> Achieving hermeneutic understanding “is an art that requires patience, imagination, attention to detail, and insight” (91). It additionally requires a sense of adventure, an openness to change, and a willingness to engage with what might otherwise be considered foreign. Through such investigation, the individual strives to participate in the world of the other, to truly engage with the other, as discussed below under the third interplay (“Reader and Other Readers”). Yet, even the concept of “the other,” if taken too literally, is problematic given the intimacy

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15 These extremes are a type of what Lample calls “the extreme of irresponsible freedom and the extreme of fundamentalism” (175).



of our organic ties as articulated by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in the passage above.<sup>16</sup>

At the same time, to adequately understand the organic relationship between any given set of entities, we cannot lose sight of the entities themselves and their distinctive roles. Again, distinction and harmony go hand in hand. For example, the three protagonists identified in the Bahá’í community’s concept of the society-building process—the individual, the community, and the institutions—are distinct and yet bound together in the way that the leaf, the branch, and the fruit of a tree are concurrently distinct and bound together. The flourishing of each protagonist is a distinctive concern, yet the realization of its full potential is

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16 This worldview has affinities with Indigenous epistemology, which affirms that all existence is connected and that each part of a community is “an integral part of the whole flowing movement and . . . modelled on the inward wholeness and harmony” (Ermine 105). See also John Fitzgerald Medina’s discussion of American Indian holism in chapter 6 of his book. These affinities deserve further exploration in future work. The Hegelian notion of identity is also helpful to consider here. As Schroeder explains it, identity emerges “when two terms that were originally thought to be distinct and independent are shown to be two aspects of a larger whole. The two terms are different expressions of the whole, dissolving and merging into one another, and thus cannot be independent. Hegelian identity is thus a dynamic process in which each term becomes the other. The dynamic unity underlying both terms is the ultimate reality” (53).

conditional upon the simultaneous flourishing of the other two. The development of each part necessarily depends on strengthening the interrelationships between all three of them. As explained by the Universal House of Justice:

These three constant protagonists of the Plan each have a part to play, and each one has capacities and qualities that must be developed. However, each is incapable of manifesting its full potential on its own. It is by strengthening their dynamic relationships with one another that their powers are combined and multiplied. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains that the more the qualities of cooperation and mutual assistance are manifested by a people, “the more will human society advance in progress and prosperity”; in the Faith, this principle distinguishes and shapes the interactions of individuals, institutions, and communities, and it endows the body of the Cause with moral vigour and spiritual health. (30 Dec. 2021)

This second interplay is directly tied to the third.

#### READER AND OTHER READERS

As noted above in the discussion on interpretation, when striving to read reality, it is critical for each reader to consider the standpoints of other readers. However, it is insufficient to simply see

things from different perspectives. It is also necessary to explore the potential interplay between these perspectives. There are a few related reasons for this.

First, the interplay between reader and other readers exposes theoretical or perspectival anomalies in the face of empirical evidence and enables presuppositions to be probed, thereby facilitating transformation in understanding. Naomi Oreskes observes that “[a] homogeneous community will be hard-pressed to realize which of its assumptions are warranted by evidence and which are not” (137). On the other hand, as Sharon Crasnow explains with reference to Alison Wylie’s version of feminist standpoint theory, “a particular social/political location *may* allow one access to evidence that is not available from other locations” (154). This evidence may reveal unwarranted presuppositions or biases among members of a given scientific community. There is, consequently, enormous benefit in being attentive to it.

Second, not all descriptions of the world are valid (see the first interplay between reader and reality). They are only potentially valid.<sup>17</sup> That is, all perspectives, with few exceptions, have at least the *potential* to shed light on different aspects of reality, but they *do not necessarily expose reality equally*. This is especially the case when specific phenomena or texts are being considered. Lamplé explains that

“[k]nowledge, in a nonfoundational sense, is not an object that can be possessed. . . . But neither are all views equal, or all ways of knowing as valid as any other. Many beliefs do not correspond to reality” (173). Similarly, as Schroeder observes, “[n]ot everyone has a *considered* interpretation: not every interpretation meets serious tests of evidence; and some interpretations account for more of the text (and do so more illuminatingly) than others” (150). For example, it would be difficult to take someone’s interpretation of Plato’s *Apology* seriously if that person had not in fact read it and was basing his or her assessment on the random comments of others. A goal of interspectival interaction, therefore, would be to allow the more helpful, illuminating perspectives—the more attuned ones—to come to the fore.

Then again, third, it follows from the relativity of the social construction of reality that the potential to contribute valuable insights into the way things are (or could be) is latent within practically any paradigm or perspective.<sup>18</sup> It is therefore essential to never automatically presume that others have nothing of value to share when reading a given reality. The aim is to learn from each other, because by remaining locked into our own ways of thinking we deprive ourselves of the opportunity to appreciate how attuned to reality our respective constructions really are. In other words, we lapse

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17 The following repeats and elaborates upon an argument outlined in Smith and Ghaemmaghami (“Consultation”).

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18 The following again closely draws upon Smith and Ghaemmaghami.

into paradigmatic insularity and paradigmatic inelasticity, which are notable characteristics of dogmatism, factionalism, and fundamentalism. Alternatively, interspectival collaboration offers the possibility of richer, more incisive readings of reality and corresponding, more inclusive visions of how to advance inquiry.

Many thinkers advocate a move towards intersubjectivity for similar reasons. Gadamer, Peirce, Nietzsche, Longino, Oreskes, Wylie, and Crasnow have already been cited in this regard. Hannah Arendt is another; she states:

The more people's standpoints I have present in my mind while I am pondering a given issue, and the better I can imagine how I would feel and think if I were in their place, the stronger will be my capacity for representative thinking and the more valid my final conclusions, my opinion. (237)

Yet another is, of course, John Stuart Mill, who, in his influential essay *On Liberty*, provides many compelling reasons for cultivating ongoing exchange, emphasizing the perils of suppressing opinions even if they are wrong. In the first place, every opinion is fallible, so it is prudent to consider alternative opinions for their truth value. We are prone to missing out if they are not considered. In the second place, even if a competing opinion is false, it is still crucial that it be carefully considered. Confidence in any given belief can only be justified if it is readily

subjected to and weathers regular challenges through meaningful exchange. The more often different perspectives come into contact with each other, the greater the opportunity there is for the valid ones to prove themselves and thus retain their vivacity. Otherwise, the valid belief becomes dogmatic and sterile, dulling the independent investigation of truth and itself degenerating into the shell of a belief with little more integrity than a superstition. Finally, according to Mill, the most likely situation is that different opinions on any given matter will harbor different facets of the truth of that matter. The point then is to contrast and, where possible, combine these facets into more accurate and expansive horizons of shared understanding. Again, we lose out if we refrain from doing so. Along similar lines, Efstathiou and Mirmalek advise researchers to be "humble about what [their] discipline can see" (238), and they stress the importance of different specialists "sharing some understanding and experience of each others' [*sic*] tools for producing knowledge" (243).

It is beyond the scope of this essay to consider with any justice the valuable contributions of such thinkers—along with many others—and how they correlate with the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith. In addition, as noted above and below, viewpoint diversity is one factor among others promoting attunement to reality. For now, the main objective is to substantiate the claim that interspectival collaboration is desirable because it helps to reveal the strengths and challenges of

participating viewpoints and the prospects for further inquiry. Through it, “interpretations are subject to revision [as] new and intersubjectively convincing hypotheses are offered” (Schroeder 150). The result is an ongoing process of learning, a human enterprise which entails, as Lample puts it, “the never ending investigation of reality, the search for truth, the quest for knowledge, and as important, the application of knowledge to achieve progress, the betterment of the world, and the prosperity of its peoples” (173).

The question then becomes how such interspectival collaboration can be realized, since it cannot be achieved through the methods of communication typical of much of society today. That is,

[i]t cannot be achieved—indeed, it is severely handicapped—by the culture of protest that is [a] widely prevailing feature of contemporary society. Debate, propaganda, the adversarial method, the entire apparatus of partisanship that have long been such familiar features of collective action are all fundamentally harmful to . . . arriving at consensus about the truth. . . (Bahá'í International Community)

The claim here is that effective communication is facilitated by a commitment to the ontological assumptions of oneness, nobility, and purpose (see the sixth interplay between science and religion below); to eliciting the insights of others; and to a systematic approach to learning, which

includes study, action, reflection, and “a consultative process in which the individual participants strive to transcend their respective points of view” (Bahá'í International Community) and achieve “[t]he maturity of the gift of understanding”—a gift that “is made manifest through consultation” (Bahá'u'lláh qtd. in “Consultation” no. 3).

In his book *Intuition Pumps*, Daniel Dennet recommends Rapoport's Rules as a method for composing a successful critical commentary. Specifically, he advises the individual to:

1. Re-express your target's position so clearly, vividly, and fairly that your target says, “Thanks, I wish I'd thought of putting it that way.”
2. List any points of disagreement (especially if they are not matters of general or widespread agreement).
3. Mention anything you have learned from your target.

Dennet then states:

4. Only then are you permitted to say so much as a word of rebuttal or criticism. (33–34)

Following these steps, Dennet maintains, will make the target more receptive to criticism.

Undoubtedly much of benefit can be derived from this approach. Communication between individuals and groups with differing perspectives

is certainly facilitated when everyone involved strives to understand and demonstrate what they have learned from each other before offering their own opinions. However, consultation takes such interaction, and hence understanding, to another level.<sup>19</sup> It does so in part by creating an environment in which no one is viewed as a target or adversary; rather all are seen as fellow participants seeking mutually beneficial truth. This search is a collective endeavor that requires the participants to “speak as if [they] are investigating the truth, saying: ‘Here these things are before us. Let us investigate to determine where and in what form the truth can be found’” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections* 15:3). Likewise: “The [individual] should not see in himself any superiority; he should speak with the utmost kindness, lowliness and humility, for such speech exerteth influence and educateth the souls” (15:4). In such an environment, “characterized by both candor and courtesy, ideas belong not to the individual to whom they occur during a discussion but to the group as a whole, to take up, discard, or revise as seems to best serve the goal pursued” (Bahá’í International Community). Both individuals and

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19 On a related theme, Roger Neyman and Charlotte Wenninger argue that to truly rise above the many corrosive dysfunctionalities thwarting our capacity to address the problems of the age we live in, a new approach to transformative dialogue is required. See the forthcoming issue of this journal.

the group are more readily able to assess the adequacy of the insights or ideas shared—to determine how attuned they are to current conditions and to the way things could be.<sup>20</sup>

Contrarily, outside a consultative environment, people tend to evaluate, probe, advise, and interpret from their own perspectives. Worse, they tend to indulge their presuppositions and biases and manipulate the contributions of others in ways that conform to their own ideological or egoistic perspectives.<sup>21</sup> Yet, if the point is to achieve truth, foster greater understanding, and obtain more complete views of the subject matter at hand, our aim should be to consciously open ourselves up to diverse perspectives and allow them to have an impact on how we perceive and read reality. More than that, it should be “to pursue the generation of knowledge through mutualistic relations of power” (Karlberg 105) aimed at enabling “people from diverse backgrounds to transcend differences and harmonize perspectives” (Universal House of Justice, 1 Nov. 2022)—to foster a unity in diversity

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20 They are, moreover, better able to mitigate both individual and group biases by disclosing the cognitive heuristics they tend to employ and scrutinizing the efficacy of their reasoning practices. This theme is covered in Andres Elvira Espinosa’s forthcoming article in this journal.

21 Especially in the polarized social and political environments now common throughout the world where “the generation of knowledge is characterized by adversarial power relations” (Karlberg 105).

of understanding among all involved in a given exchange.<sup>22</sup>

In this context, our primary motivation<sup>23</sup> is to treat personal views and opinions not as finalities, but rather as constructions that are more or less attuned to reality and that belong to the group for it to work with, stretch, mold, or discard in light of other opinions, views, and evidence. Detachment is not the same thing as neutrality, much less apathy. Nor is it the same thing as being free of presuppositions. As discussed above, an individual utterly free of presuppositions would be at pains to offer any insights. Instead, detachment implies that whatever the individual brings to an interaction, she or he does so with a desire to see how all insights brought to the interaction play off, contravene, enhance, and correlate with, each other.

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22 This aim applies notwithstanding the subject matter being considered. As OSED puts it: "Whether concerned with analysing a specific problem, attaining higher degrees of understanding on a given issue, or exploring possible courses of action, consultation may be seen as collective search for truth. Participants in a consultative process see reality from different points of view, and as these views are examined and understood, clarity is achieved. In this conception of the collective investigation of reality, truth is not a compromise between opposing interest groups. Nor does the desire to exercise power over one another animate participants in the consultative process. What they seek, rather, is the power of unified thought and action."

23 The following two paragraphs additionally draw upon Smith and Ghaemmaghani.

All insights are seen as contributions for the group to evaluate in light of other views in its mutual quest for truth. In this regard, 'Abdu'l-Bahá states:

Man should weigh his opinions with the utmost serenity, calmness and composure. Before expressing his own views he should carefully consider the views already advanced by others. If he finds that a previously expressed opinion is more true and worthy, he should accept it immediately and not willfully hold to an opinion of his own. By this excellent method he endeavors to arrive at unity and truth. (*Promulgation 31:2*)

In such an environment of reciprocal empowerment, if an idea of an individual is rejected by the group, then all participants including that individual accept the rejection. The individual who offered the idea may even actively participate in its refutation partly because the refutation is not considered to be an attack on her or him. The individual is never the target. An individual's idea may or may not hold up, but her or his nobility and capacity to generate knowledge always hold up. In fact, unless all participants scrupulously adhere to the concept of nobility and the virtue of detachment, the truth will remain obscured. Accordingly, when consulting, the participants

must then proceed with the utmost devotion, courtesy, dignity, care and moderation to express



their views. They must in every matter search out the truth and not insist upon their own opinion, for stubbornness and persistence in one's views will lead ultimately to discord and wrangling and the truth will remain hidden. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections* 45:1)

This approach, to recall, is close to Gadamer's views on communication. He stresses, according to Bernstein, "not only the common bond and the genuine novelty that a turn in the conversation may take but the mutuality, the respect required, the genuine seeking to listen to and understand what the other is saying, the openness to risk and test our own opinions through such an encounter" (*Beyond* 162). Similarly, David Bohm emphasizes the importance of moving beyond a culture of aggression and debate. Consistent with his claim that it is the wholeness, rather than the fragmentation, of reality that is real, he advocates for a condition in which people think together and nurture a spirit of sharing where "[e]verybody wins if anybody wins" (7) and where "[e]ach person is participating, is partaking of the whole meaning of the group and also taking part in it" (27) (which evokes the second interplay between whole and parts, discussed above).

Such communication, moreover, requires all participants to listen attentively, earnestly, and devoid of the intention to correct. It involves striving "to discover that precious point of unity" (Universal House of Justice, 25 Nov.

2020) upon which to build, informed by a deep regard for the nobility of each individual as well as for the potential value of her or his perspective. Through such humility and consideration, everyone is empowered, openness and joint exploration are encouraged, more resonant readings of reality are obtained, and collaborative attunement is thereby more readily achieved.

#### PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

Martin Heidegger, Wilhelm Dilthey and others make compelling cases that we are beings of time. For Dilthey, "[t]he central fact of human life is lived temporality, which orients persons in three directions simultaneously: backward toward past meanings, forward to future goals, and outward toward present demands" (Schroeder 157). It is often held that we should live in the present, but this is in fact undesirable, if not impossible. The present becomes stripped of meaning if the past and the future are somehow exorcised from consciousness in the same way that a particular moment of music loses its potency if separated from the rest of the song of which it is a part. As I argue in "Crisis and the Power of an Inclusive Historical Consciousness," the significance of this moment is largely a factor of how it comingles with the rest of the song—of how it blends with the musical continuum of which it is an integral component. More broadly, the present is interpenetrated by what has occurred leading up to it and by anticipation of what is to come.



This is not to say that we should not make the best of every moment—rendering it its proper due. We certainly should. Rather, it is to say that we are hindered from doing so when we are unattuned to our lived temporality—when we just live in the moment. One of our tendencies in modern society is to fragment time and to lose sight of it as an unfolding process—as what Henri Bergson calls *duration*. This tendency contributes to our overall sense of alienation from the world and from our own selves. Furthermore, we are presently unaccustomed to thinking of the present in light of the grand historical process of which we are a part. Yet, thinking in this way is essential for imbuing any given moment with significance.<sup>24</sup> It helps to frame that moment with genuine import and meaning.<sup>25</sup>

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24 Simone de Beauvoir makes a similar point, arguing that we should see specific human adventures as standing out against the background of time while also discerning historical patterns and progress. These two viewpoints are essential to each other.

25 Doubtless, other factors play a role in making a moment meaningful, as suggested by the discussions regarding the other interplays in this essay. These factors include relating an activity in any given moment to other activities going on in the community (second interplay); seeking points of unity with others (third interplay); seeing in each person the capacity to contribute to the generation of knowledge (third interplay); and framing each moment through the lens of certain fundamental beliefs about the world and human beings (discussed below under the sixth interplay regarding science and religion).

An inclusive historical consciousness is also essential to any adequate reading of reality and efforts to change it for the better. In this regard, the Universal House of Justice explains that “a particular conception of history, its course and direction,” underlies every Bahá'í endeavor. This conception is that humanity “is approaching today the crowning stage in a millennia-long process which has brought it from its collective infancy to the threshold of maturity—a stage that will witness the unification of the human race” (2 Mar. 2013). Without such a conception of history, people “can tenaciously cling to divisive identities that may have had their roots in an oppressive past”, thereby promulgating “[s]kewed historical accounts . . . employed to propagate narrow notions of belonging, to advance claims of exceptionalism, to stir old rivalries, or to stress past events that evoke a sense of victimhood” (1 Nov. 2022).

More specifically, adequate readings of reality involve, to the extent possible, an inclusive narrative approach that articulates current conditions (the present) in light of what has been collectively achieved so far (the past), what can possibly be done next (the immediate future), and our overarching objective (the long-term future). By the same token, the immediate future can be read in light of the past, the present, and the long-term future. By participating in the learning process, we weave together these dimensions of time and accordingly

enrich our readings, or understandings, of the realities with which we are concerned.

The Bahá'í community has been learning to model this dynamic in relation to its approach to the work of community building, which is currently organized and framed within the context of three-month cycles of activity. In community spaces such as the quarterly reflection gathering, readings of reality can involve, among other activities, reviewing previous conditions and objectives; assessing the steps taken over the previous three-month cycle to achieve these objectives, as well as the mistakes, accomplishments, and strengths accrued along the way; analyzing current conditions based on both quantitative and qualitative data; further developing the vision of growth in view of the progress achieved to date; and planning objectives and related next steps taking into account the capacities and resources presently at hand. Regarding the vision itself, the aim is to “express a general idea of how goals are to be achieved: the nature of the strategies to be devised, the approaches to be taken, the attitudes to be assumed, and even an outline of some of the methods to be employed” (OSSED). This vision is further informed and vitalized by the conviction that humanity “[a]s a distinct organic unit... has passed through evolutionary stages”; that it “has been moving forward along the path of its maturation”; that “it has, from one age to the next, received impetus from successive

Divine Revelations sent by God to progressively educate and civilize it”; that it is “now in the concluding period of its turbulent adolescence” and is “[s]tanding at the threshold of a long-awaited coming of age”; and that, consequently, “its needs are no longer served by the ideas and behaviours of prior stages” (Universal House of Justice, 1 Nov. 2022).

Consistent with the second interplay discussed above, such collaborative readings are most effective when they correlate the parts (such as discrete activities) and the whole (the efforts of the entire community), and when those most affected by, or immersed in, the reality in question are inspired to systematically contribute their own learning (third interplay between reader and other readers). No reading, moreover, is ever fixed or final. Through the process of learning in action—of action, reflection, consultation, and study—new experience is always generated, demanding an agility that allows for modifications in readings and adjustments to plans as circumstances demand. Further, through such a learning process, reality itself can be transformed, sometimes in line with expectations and sometimes not. “Conditions,” therefore, “need to be understood progressively, both from the perspective of a particular endeavour’s purpose and in the context of a vision of humanity’s collective existence” (OSSED). This leads to the fifth interplay.

## ACTION AND REFLECTION

OSD states that “[a]t the heart of every development endeavour is consistent, systematic action. Action, however, needs to be accompanied by constant reflection to ensure that it continues to serve the aims of the endeavour.” Equally, reflection needs to be accompanied by constant action. Thus, OSD also describes a learning process that “unfolds in a way that resembles the growth and differentiation of a living organism. Haphazard change is avoided, and continuity of action maintained” (26 Nov. 2012). Fundamental to learning, therefore, is the interweaving of action and reflection. Such an interweaving assumes sufficient time and space to reflect and then act in accordance with a given reading so that its merits can be adequately assessed. Reflection and analysis are critical, but they cannot go on at the expense of focused activity. For without such activity, without effort being put into empirically testing an interpretation and its underlying presuppositions, readers cannot legitimately feel the push of reality and truly learn from it (which recalls the first interplay between reader and reality).

This point has some parallels with Richard Rorty’s neo-pragmatist approach, which recognizes the value of coming to agreements and supporting them for at least a time. He talks in terms of setting criteria by which to abide, because if we never set criteria, we cannot really get anywhere. In this connection, he argues:

In a post-philosophical culture . . . criteria would be seen as the pragmatist sees them—as temporary resting places constructed for specific utilitarian ends. On the pragmatist account, a criterion . . . is a criterion because some particular social practice needs to block the road to inquiry, halt the regress of interpretation, in order to get something done. (*Contingency* xli)

Rorty’s account in turn has affinities with Shoghi Effendi’s admonition that “[o]nce a decision is taken, it is incumbent upon all to follow the majority view, and to enforce and put it into effect, even if the decision is a wrong one” (qtd. in “Consultation” no. 38). Otherwise, we inhibit ourselves from discovering if the decision is in fact wrong. Furthermore, we impede ourselves from learning how attuned a particular reading is to reality. We, instead, simply wade in needless ambiguity and muddle about in pointless disagreements, unreflectively allowing our presuppositions to hold sway. Obviously, ambiguity is an inherent part of the learning process, but it can also be unduly self-inflicted and inflated. In another place, Rorty refers to “toeholds” (*Objectivity* 14). Without stepping into them, inquiry slides into the depths of equivocality.

Similarly, Longino, says that “if scientific inquiry is to have any effect on a society’s ability to take advantage of natural processes for the improvement of the quality of life, criticism of assumptions cannot go on indefinitely.”

Rather, “[t]he utility of scientific knowledge depends on the possibility of finding frameworks of inquiry that remain stable enough to permit systematic interactions with the natural world” (79). More than that, the utility of knowledge depends on the possibility of generating readings that remain stable enough to guide interactions with reality characterized by a unity in diversity of application. Certainly, re-readings of any given reality are necessary, but they are also deficient if they are uninformed by experience guided in the first place by a particular reading. At some point, we need to collectively settle on a decision, an agreement, a criterion, an interpretation—a collaborative reading—so that we can genuinely test it out in our diversity (that is, from our different disciplinary perspectives, standpoints, positions, life circumstances, and so on), and thereby generate insights that can inform further collaborative readings and, where appropriate, shed light on which strategies would conduce to bringing about beneficial change to prevailing conditions.

In other words, through such experimentation, the merits of a collaborative reading and the presuppositions that underpin it are more readily exposed. While the purpose is not to actively disprove or falsify a given interpretation, this unity in diversity of application enhances the likelihood that the interpretation’s strengths and weaknesses will be brought to light, particularly when the different readers then reflect and consult together (third

interplay) on their resulting experiences and findings. New knowledge is thus generated, setting the stage for more advanced collaborative readings and inquiry.<sup>26</sup> The past, present, and future (fourth interplay) of a given reality are conceptually rewoven and, as such, interpreted afresh.

Taken together, the result is a genuinely scientific process (see Friberg, this issue) in which any given reading of reality is reached through a unity in diversity of exchange, which is tested through a unity in diversity of application, which is then assessed in light of those applications, which is then further refined/altere/d/transformed through a unity in diversity of exchange, which is again tested through a unity in diversity of application, and so on. And it is through this process that a community of inquirers avoids paradigmatic stagnation and domination. Instead, interspectival collaboration flows; fabrications are culled, revised, and/or jettisoned; attunements are recognized, harmonized, and accentuated; and transformation is accelerated. This is what a consultative epistemology is all about. As Karl Marx reminds us, “Philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it” (245). However, pointed change

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26 Some readers will note that there are similarities and differences here with Karl Popper’s approach to falsification. This warrants further discussion, which is reserved for subsequent work on this theme.

depends on interpretation—or adequate readings—and vice versa. Change and interpretation are interconnected. The process of action, reflection, and consultation discussed so far engenders this dynamic and enables participants to achieve progressively higher levels of collaborative attunement to reality.

In 2005, the Universal House of Justice explained that one of the

primary concerns will be to strengthen appreciation for systematic action, already heightened by the successes it has brought. To arrive at a unified vision of growth based on a realistic assessment of possibilities and resources, to develop strategies that lend structure to it, to devise and implement plans of action commensurate with capacity, to make necessary adjustments while maintaining continuity, to build on accomplishments—these are some of the requisites of systematization that every community must learn and internalize. (27 Dec. 2005)

One could extrapolate from this passage that new readings of what is the case, and corresponding visions of what could be the case, should be based on clear assessments of prevailing opportunities, strengths, challenges, capacities, and the overall experience amassed to date. Operating systematically in this way—in a way that harmonizes continuity with

flexibility—is necessary for achieving the focus required to advance understanding among a diverse community of inquirers.<sup>27</sup>

#### SCIENCE AND RELIGION

But systematization on its own is not sufficient, which raises the sixth interplay for consideration, that between science and religion. This interplay, in turn, highlights the importance of the fourth component of the mode of learning in action, namely, study. Such study “involves not only constant reference to the writings of the Faith but also the scientific analysis of patterns unfolding” (Universal House of Justice, 2 Mar. 2013).

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27 Much more could be said about the interplay between action and reflection and the related harmony between continuity and flexibility in relationship to the advancement of learning. For example, the Universal House of Justice observes: “We note that, as learning accelerates, the friends grow more capable of overcoming setbacks, whether small or large—diagnosing their root causes, exploring the underlying principles, bringing to bear relevant experience, identifying remedial steps, and assessing progress, until the process of growth has been fully reinvigorated” (29 Dec. 2015). It also calls for cultivating “an atmosphere that encourages the friends to be methodical but not rigid, creative but not haphazard, decisive but not hasty, careful but not controlling, recognizing that, in the final analysis, it is not technique but unity of thought, consistent action, and dedication to learning which will bring about progress” (28 Dec. 2010).

The relationship between science and religion is a complex subject as outlined in the paper “Science and Religion in Dynamic Interplay” (Smith), some elements of which are further discussed in Stephen Friberg’s article (this issue).<sup>28</sup> However, a few points warrant emphasis in view of the five interplays examined above.

In “Science and Religion in Dynamic Interplay,” I propose that the scientific process of action, reflection, consultation, and study cultivates the development of religion by, among other things, helping to ensure that religion does not degenerate into superstition and inelastic ritual. Prior to that, the essay proposes various ways in which religion in turn cultivates the development of science by, for example, furnishing it with various ontological assumptions, constructive dispositions, and teleological objectives. Of significance in this regard is the particular role that study plays in relationship to action, reflection, and consultation, especially as it pertains to communing with, and being inspired by, the Word of God. The proposition in the present paper is that, along with scientific analysis, study of the Sacred Texts is

essential for achieving collaborative attunements to reality and thus for advancing inquiry and the generation of beneficial knowledge.

The House of Justice emphasizes the vital relationship between reading reality and study of the Sacred Texts, stating that “[c]apacity rises to new levels, of course, as the protagonists of social change learn to apply with increasing effectiveness elements of Bahá’u’lláh’s Revelation, together with the contents and methods of science, to their social reality. This reality they must strive to read in a manner consistent with His teachings” (Riḍván 2010). More recently, and alluding to a number of themes discussed above, it states that, “individuals express their views and seek out the truth through a process of consultation, without insisting upon the correctness of their own ideas” and that, together, individuals “read the reality of their surroundings, explore the depths of available guidance, draw relevant insights from the Teachings and from accumulating experience, create cooperative and spiritually uplifting environments, build capacity, and initiate action that grows in effectiveness and complexity over time” (28 Nov. 2023). Regarding the significance of turning to the Word of God specifically, Lample explains that “[m]ental structures and habits of behavior of a Bahá’í are continually tested and shaped in response to the verses of the Word” (5). The same can be said of our interpretations, or readings, of reality. In other words, without turning to the teachings of the Sacred Texts and

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28 Friberg discusses how ethical, moral, and spiritual values and practices integrate with the scientific process of learning in action. On a similar theme, Robert Sarracino (forthcoming) correlates spirituality with rationality and clarity of vision, among other characteristics, drawing upon the fourth paragraph of the 30 December 2021 message of the Universal House of Justice.



striving to see reality in their light, we risk socially constructing phenomena in ways that simply fit our paradigmatic presuppositions, notwithstanding how scientific we may be. We risk reifying our diverse social constructions and regressing into a state of paradigmatic intransigence. Conversely, our readings are most fruitful and conducive to interspectival collaboration when we strive, in our diversity, to consultatively perceive our varied experiences through the lens of the Writings of the Bahá'í Faith and other religions as well as the guidance of Shoghi Effendi and the Universal House of Justice. This idea resonates with themes discussed in Whitney White Kazemipour's article in this issue, where, drawing upon anthropological theories, she explores how guidance found in the Bahá'í writings influences the capacity of groups to maintain unity while enabling the desired precarious "clash of differing opinions" necessary to generate "the shining spark of truth" ('Abdu'l-Bahá *Selections* 44:1).

The proposition, further, is that certain convictions enable interspectival collaboration to proceed most effectively, and that religion grounded in the Word of God furnishes us with these convictions. One conviction is that it is essential to entreat God to ensure that our presuppositions do not become impediments to achieving faithful readings of reality.<sup>29</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá exhorts

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29 There are connections here with Indigenous philosophy, which maintains that "[u]nderstanding the universe must be grounded in the spirit. Knowledge must

us to "[t]urn to God, supplicate humbly at His threshold, seeking assistance and confirmation, that God may rend asunder the veils that obscure [our] vision" (*Promulgation* 97:8). In another passage, 'Abdu'l-Bahá beseeches God that we may "purify [our] sight and behold all humankind as leaves and blossoms and fruits of the tree of being" (*Selections* 1:3). While our presuppositions make it possible for us to engage with reality and each other, *some presuppositions are far more suitable for this purpose than others*. In contrast, some, as already discussed, are repulsive and thus disabling and blinding, having dire consequences for human wellbeing and the course of beneficial inquiry. For example, Amín Egea points out that at the turn of the twentieth century, racism "was endorsed by a significant portion of the scientific community of the time" and was "even undergoing a major transformation equipped by new 'scientific' techniques—such as craniometry, phrenology, and physiognomy—that inspired new and abhorrent 'social reform' initiatives, such as eugenics and racial hygiene." By turning to the Revelation and diligently immersing ourselves in the Word of God, we are duly admonished and thereby rendered better equipped to dispense with such unseemly veils. We are similarly enjoined

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be sought through the stream of the inner space in unison with all the instruments of knowing and conditions that make individuals receptive to knowing" (Ermine 108). Such correlations deserve far greater attention than can be offered here.



to do our utmost to observe reality with an open and unbiased mind—to in fact become “endowed with a new eye, a new ear, a new heart, and a new mind.” Bahá’u’lláh teaches us that this is only possible “when the lamp of search, of earnest striving, of longing desire, of passionate devotion, of fervid love, of rapture, and ecstasy, is kindled within the seeker’s heart, and the breeze of His loving-kindness is wafted upon his soul.” Only then “will the darkness of error be dispelled, the mists of doubts and misgivings be dissipated, and the lights of knowledge and certitude envelop his being” (125:6).

This teaching relates to a second conviction furnished by religion, namely, the stipulation that certain presuppositions fundamentally befit the collective investigation of reality and are thus nonnegotiable—that the Sacred Texts provide core presuppositions that are especially conducive to productive inquiry.<sup>30</sup> For example, should we ever abandon the religious convictions that humans are inherently noble, that reality is essentially one, or that women and men are fundamentally equal, regardless of what others espouse? These beliefs are vital for shaping investigation. As ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states: “In proportion to the acknowledgment of the oneness and solidarity of mankind,

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30 Science, of course, is based on core presuppositions of its own—that reality exists, operates according to universal laws, and is meaningfully accessible to our senses—without which our investigation of nature is hampered. See Sona Arbab’s helpful discussion of this matter (158-163).

fellowship is possible, misunderstandings will be removed and reality become apparent” (*Promulgation* 105:6). Certainly, we should always, along with Gadamer, yearn to welcome “that guest who promises something new to our curiosity,” to seek as best we can to learn from her, him, or it. But in the case of these principal tenets, the purpose of such encounters, scientific or otherwise, would be to mature our understanding of them, never to discard them. This, it could be argued, is part of what it means to combine an unshakable confidence in the precepts of Revelation with a humble posture of learning. Alternatively, what we might call secondary presuppositions can be modified or even discarded through such encounters, but again, without imperiling those which are core.<sup>31</sup>

This in turn relates to a third conviction furnished by religion, namely the certitude that these core presuppositions, being matters of faith, provide the unifying basis upon which meaningful scientific interaction can proceed. That is, appealing to such teachings is pivotal for facilitating unity of vision when reflecting on experience, checking assumptions, and refining interpretations of any given phenomenon—for achieving collaborative readings that are increasingly attuned to reality. Without them, and the dispositions they entail, we are unable to truly achieve Gadamer’s fusion of horizons

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31 There are parallels here with Imre Lakatos’s concepts of the “hard core” and “protective belt” of a research programme.

or the dynamic interplay between perspectives that fosters mutually beneficial investigation and transformation.<sup>32</sup>

A fourth conviction provided by religion is that chief among the dispositions for advancing inquiry is that

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32 From a Bahá'í perspective, the Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh provides the unifying basis upon which the learning of the community in all its potential can advance. According to the Universal House of Justice: "Out of love for Bahá'u'lláh and reassured by His explicit instructions, individuals, communities, and institutions find in the two authoritative centres of the Covenant [the Book and the Universal House of Justice] the necessary guidance for the unfoldment of the Faith and the preservation of the integrity of the Teachings. In this way, the Covenant protects and preserves the process of dialogue and learning about the meaning of the Revelation and the implementation of its prescriptions for humankind over the course of the Dispensation, avoiding the detrimental effects of endless contention about meaning and practice. As a result, the balanced relationships among individuals, communities, and institutions are safeguarded and develop along their proper path, while all are enabled to attain to their full potential and exercise their agency and prerogatives. Thus, the Bahá'í community can unitedly advance and increasingly fulfil its vital purpose by investigating reality and generating knowledge, extending the reach of its endeavours, and contributing to the advancement of civilization. After more than a century, the truth of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's affirmation is ever more evident: 'the axis of the oneness of the world of humanity is the power of the Covenant and nothing else'" (28 Nov. 2023).

of love. This is because perceiving the world through the vantage point of love allows us to transcend narrow materialistic understandings of human potential and purpose. Some thinkers, such as Iris Murdoch, have made this case, arguing that "[i]t is in the capacity to love, that is to *see*, that the liberation of the soul from fantasy consists" (82) and that "virtue [especially love] is the attempt to pierce the veil of selfish consciousness and join the world as it really is" (109). The Universal House of Justice takes the concept further, asserting that it is *divine love* that opens hearts and minds, thus enabling personal and systemic prejudices to be transformed into veritable attunements to the way reality is and the way it is meant to become:

Ultimately, the power to transform the world is effected by love, love originating from the relationship with the divine, love ablaze among members of a community, love extended without restriction to every human being. This divine love, ignited by the Word of God, is disseminated by enkindled souls 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. You are channels for this divine love; let it flow through you to all who cross your path. (22 Jul. 2020)

As discussed at length above, our presuppositions can both restrict and enable our readings of texts, reality, or other perspectives. Part of the aim of scientific inquiry and of intersperspectival communication is to place our presuppositions on trial and to weed out or alter those that are not conducive to further investigation. Encouraging diversity of participation—and eliciting different perspectives or insights—is vital for disclosing and shedding unwarranted presuppositions (third interplay between reader and other readers) that hamper the scientific process and the generation of knowledge more generally. However, the proposition here is that to truly enable such communication to advance and thus further cultivate the investigation of reality, certain dispositions, such as love for others, buttressed by certain nonnegotiable religious convictions, such as belief in human nobility, are essential. Specifically, without these dispositions and convictions, the clash of perspectives can backfire, leading to acrimonious obstinacy in place of mutually enabling investigation and transformation. Such convictions are admittedly grounded in faith. However, as argued in the paper “Science and Religion in Dynamic Interplay,” the same holds for any legitimate claim—scientific, religious, normative, or otherwise. The point, therefore, becomes whether such beliefs or statements of faith are held unreflectively or blindly, or whether, instead, they are consciously held and increasingly understood by deliberately putting them into practice and reflecting on their implications.

These, again, are just some of the proposed ways in which religion cultivates science; together, they provide no more than a partial view of how these two systems of knowledge are in dynamic interplay. The central idea is that this interplay is firmly grounded in the process of action, reflection, consultation, and study, and that it, along with the other five interplays discussed in this essay, is an essential factor in promoting our collaborative attunement to reality.

#### CONCLUSION:

##### RECONCEPTUALIZING OBJECTIVITY

This essay began by referring to Richard Rorty’s distinction between verticalism and horizontalism, which was the starting point for delineating the merits of articulating a consultative epistemology. Having himself embraced a horizontalist epistemology, Rorty writes that “[i]f one reinterprets objectivity as intersubjectivity, or as solidarity, in the ways I suggest below, then one will drop the question of how to get in touch with ‘mind-independent and language-independent reality’” (*Objectivity* 13). He writes further that “[p]ragmatists would like to replace the desire for objectivity—the desire to be in touch with a reality which is more than some community with which we identify ourselves—with the desire for solidarity with that community” (39). There is only solidarity for Rorty. Any ambition beyond that—any aspiration to get at the truth of reality—is imprudent.

From the perspective of a consultative epistemology, there is no reason

to replace objectivity with solidarity. In fact, solidarity, and in particular a solidarity that embraces heterogeneity, helps to promote objectivity. This is because it is a key—albeit, as suggested below, not the only—factor in becoming collectively attuned to (a given) reality to the extent that such attunement is humanly possible.

The relationship between diversity and objectivity is not a new concept. Gadamer, as we have seen, makes a strong case for intersperspectival interrogation. So, as we have also seen, does Longino. In her view:

The greater the number of different points of view included in a given community, the more likely that its scientific practice will be objective, that is, that it will result in descriptions and explanations of natural processes that are more reliable in the sense of less characterized by idiosyncratic preferences of community members than would otherwise be the case. (80)

“Values are only visible by contrast” says James Robert Brown in reference to Longino (56). Feyerabend agrees. The assumptions—prejudices—which shape our world remain largely unnoticeable to us until “we encounter an entirely different cosmology,” since “prejudices are found by contrast, not by analysis” (22). We cannot truly know our presuppositions, or their effects, simply from “the *inside*. We need an *external* standard of criticism.” Better yet, we need many

external standards of criticism to reveal as many perspectival and presuppositional merits and insufficiencies as possible. Through such a revelation there is a cleansing, an expunging of perspectival waste. Alternatively, we fall into dogmatism and gravitate towards totalitarianism. On this point, Naomi Klein offers the following warning, drawing on Arendt:

it is when everyday people *lose* their capacity for internal dialogue and deliberation, and find themselves only able to regurgitate slogans and contradictory platitudes, that great evil occurs. So, too, when people lose the ability to imagine the perspectives of others, or as [Arendt] put it in her essay “Truth and Politics,” “making present to my mind the standpoints of those who are absent.” In that state of literal thoughtlessness (i.e., an absence of thoughts of one’s own), totalitarianism takes hold. Put differently, we should not fear having voices in our heads—we should fear their absence. (65)

Longino, moreover, says that objectivity is a matter of degree, that it is relative to the extent to which transformative criticism is practiced. The more inclusive the community (or group) of inquirers is of diversity in its theory making, the better. Feyerabend agrees again, stating:

Unanimity of opinion may be fitting for a rigid church, for the

frightened or greedy victims of some. . . myth, or for the weak and willing followers of some tyrant. Variety of opinion is necessary for objective knowledge. And a method that encourages variety is also the only method that is compatible with a humanitarian outlook. (31–32)

The claim that objectivity is a function of intersubjectivity certainly has merit. However, intersubjectivity, while necessary, is insufficient to produce objectivity on its own. Objectivity depends on more than simply welcoming viewpoint diversity and encouraging dialogical exchange.<sup>33</sup> Based on what has been advanced in this paper, the claim should be accompanied by at least two additional claims. Together, these three claims support the idea that objectivity can be productively reconceptualized as collaborative attunement to reality.

The first additional claim is that the objectivity of any method of inquiry increases with the degree to which it

fosters synergistic collaboration.<sup>34</sup> As suggested under the third interplay (“Reader and Other Readers”), consultation encourages this synergistic collaboration. Through true consultation—with its emphasis on detachment, humility, and being oriented to unity—we achieve a veritable clash of opinions and perspectives, not a clash of personalities, while our less favorable biases and presuppositions are more readily subjected to productive scrutiny, revision, or rejection than would otherwise be the case.

The second additional claim is that objectivity, to the extent that it can be achieved, is made possible by the entire process of action, reflection, consultation, and study and the six interplays (or more) precipitated by this process. Intersubjective exchange and dialogue is woven into this dynamic process.

For example, through the interplay between action and reflection (fifth interplay), we test in unity the adequacy of a particular social construction’s attunement to a particular reality. From our diverse vantage points, we may see different effects when testing or applying the construction, or we may interpret the same effects differently. This is because reality can speak out in different ways to different readers (first interplay between reader and reality), perhaps sending messages of positive fit—of attunement—to some while sending messages of anomaly, or

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33 In this connection, Longino argues that the objectivity of a method of inquiry depends “not just in the inclusion of intersubjective criticism but in the degree to which both its procedures and its results are responsive to the kinds of criticism described” (76). Similarly, Lee McIntyre maintains that “[n]o matter the biases, beliefs, or petty agendas that may be put forward by individual scientists, science is more objective than the sum of its individual practitioners” (91).

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34 The word synergistic is chosen because it connotes a vibrant, evolving, harmony.

negative fit, to others. That is, emerging anomalies may indicate the need for further reflection between the different readers (third interplay), generating a consultative encounter that may in turn produce a more refined, or a more attuned, reading of the reality. Conversely, ensuing encounters or experiences may largely corroborate the previous reading, affirming that what were initially understood to be anomalies may justifiably be interpreted as congruent with the initial reading—albeit, perhaps also indicating the need for minor enhancements to this reading. In either case, the interpretation of any given experience is additionally facilitated when all participants strive to view it in light of the experience (fifth interplay between action and reflection again) and interpretations of other participants (third interplay between reader and other readers again); the present conceptual framework of collective understanding—including how other realities are currently being read—which may in turn adjust in response to individual and collective application and reflection (second interplay between whole and parts); both the learning to date and the evolving short and long-term learning objectives, which are themselves situated within an inclusive historical narrative (fourth interplay between past, present, and future); and the participants' study of the Sacred Text, which provides unifying dispositions and presuppositions that shape individual and collective inquiry, and that are, reciprocally, further understood as experience in applying

them accumulates (sixth interplay between science and religion).

This entire approach is aimed at achieving collaborative attunement to reality, and hence objectivity. Through the process of action, reflection, consultation, and study and the six interplays this process engenders, social constructions are efficaciously tested for their worth as attunements to reality. If this process proceeds in a spirit of true learning in action, anomalies are considered and dealt with to the satisfaction of all; social constructions are revised and unitedly applied once again in diversity; new synergies are achieved through reflection on experience, consultation, and study; and hence the march towards objective understanding advances. In sum: the degree of objectivity achieved is tantamount to the degree of collaborative attunement achieved, which is in turn a product of a unity in diversity of learning in action shaped by the varying demands of reality, attentiveness to the present context of knowledge, the capacity to consult, the cultivation of an inclusive historical consciousness, the interweaving of action and reflection, and an evolving commitment to ennobling assumptions and dispositions furnished by constant reference to insights enfolded within the Word of God.

#### NEXT STEPS

As mentioned at the outset, the foregoing is an attempt to justify further inquiry into the significance and workings of these six interplays. Much more



could be said about their implications for promoting collaborative attunement to reality and thus objectivity, and for the further articulation of a consultative epistemology. As noted earlier, the interrelationship between these interplays also deserves much greater attention. The following are a few related considerations that also warrant additional exploration.

First, it is important to reiterate that when reading reality, we never reach the truth of it in essence. We can agree with Rorty when he says there will never be “a moment at which the human race could settle back and say, ‘well, now that we’ve finally arrived at Truth we can relax’” (*Objectivity* 39). When it comes to discovering reality, we can only proceed towards it, never fully achieving an objective understanding of it in all its complexity. Anomalies will always rear their head. Repeated application of any reading in diversity will invariably lead to a clash with some aspect of reality hitherto missing from the picture. This notwithstanding, the claim here, contra Rorty, is that we can *proceed towards* truth. That is the key point. As Lample helps us to understand, the process of learning in action works to keep us on the right track—albeit with bumps and setbacks along the way. It helps to protect us from producing gratuitous social constructions, from reifying such constructions, and—as in cases of ideological hegemony—from making them a burden for all to bear. Rorty says we need to keep the conversation going. To be more precise, we need to keep learning in action going.

Second, notwithstanding the foregoing discussion, it might be objected that this process of learning invariably undermines diversity because it ultimately inclines us towards the creation of some inflexible, super-homogeneous, meta-paradigm to which we will all eventually succumb. This is owing to the stress placed on collaborative attunement and unity of understanding. In one respect, it is certainly conceivable that the process reduces diversity. The learning mode of action, reflection, consultation, and study necessarily delimits the possible variation in social construction. Through this process, ill-suited social constructions are more prone to refutation. The process also highlights certain questions worth consideration for a given time, making it possible to get on with inquiry without being waylaid by too many second thoughts and what-ifs.

Yet, it does not follow that learning in action invariably leads to the suppression of diversity altogether. Quite the contrary. People will always experience reality multifariously owing to their varying interests, intellectual pursuits, specializations, capacities, and skills, as well as their social, environmental, family, and other life circumstances. They will consequently investigate and grapple with reality differently which means that reality will speak to them differently, revealing distinctive anomalies or emitting tailored feedback deserving measured scrutiny. Moreover, learning in action necessarily involves an orientation to otherness (which necessarily means



not othering). It begets the independent investigation of truth, encouraging exploration into the many corners of reality. It also encourages specialization. But the specialization that it encourages is a permeable one that concurrently draws sustenance from, and nourishes, collective understanding.

As such, a meta-paradigm certainly does emerge through learning in action. But far from being homogeneous or totalitarian in nature, it is a dynamic unity that emerges, one that reciprocally invigorates and thrives on diversity of investigation. Perhaps a better term than meta-paradigm is *conceptual framework*, which, as the Universal House of Justice describes in relationship to the Bahá'í community's "effort to advance the work of expansion and consolidation, social action, and the involvement in the discourses of society," is "a matrix that organizes thought and gives shape to activities and which becomes more elaborate as experience accumulates" (24 Jul. 2013). Such a framework provides coherence—owing, for example, to the core principles, assumptions, and dispositions it champions—and guides learning, but it also grows in complexity in response to such learning carried out in a multiplicity of contexts and oriented by varying, yet symphonic, objectives. In short, the relationship is dialectical and reciprocally animating (recalling once again the second interplay between whole and parts).

A third consideration is that, as acknowledged a few times already, this paper only discusses six interplays

that flow from the process of action, reflection, consultation, and study. There are others that flow from this mode of operation as well. Two that come immediately to mind are the interplay between worship and service and the interplay between the individual and the community. As discussed in "Crisis and the Power of an Inclusive Historical Consciousness," these interplays are essential for overcoming two delusional macro habits of mind that currently plague society, namely, the habit of totalizing reality and the habit of fragmenting reality. However, much more could be said about how these interplays contribute to collaborative attunement, objectivity, and the generation of knowledge. This would entail, for example, further uncovering the benefits of "developing a culture which promotes a way of thinking, studying, and acting, in which all consider themselves as treading a common path of service—supporting one another and advancing together, respectful of the knowledge that each one possesses at any given moment" (Universal House of Justice, Riḍván 2010). Much more could also be said about the role of other interplays in this respect, such as "the dialectic of crisis and victory" (28 Dec. 2010).

Finally, there is plenty to explore regarding the implications of learning in action for democracy, authority, and freedom. For example, according to Jürgen Habermas, societies, cultures, and political arrangements should be assessed according to the degree to which they foster communicative

rationality, or ideal speech situations. Along these lines, questions worth considering include: 1) To what extent is mutually empowering, emancipatory discourse achieved through the process of action, reflection, consultation, and study and the interplays this process engenders? 2) How can this process contribute to the enrichment, even the transformation, of democracy? 3) What are the implications of this process for the exercise of authority and, more generally, for the relationship between the individual, the community, and the institutions? 4) Should not any system of governance be at least partly assessed according to how it fosters a culture of learning in action in all settings, from the grassroots to the global? Should it not be assessed, for example, by its capacity to “facilitate creative and collaborative exchanges among all elements of the community”; by its proclivity “to build consensus, to overcome challenges, to foster spiritual health and vitality, and to determine through experience the most efficacious ways to pursue the community’s aims and purposes”; and by the conscientious commitment of its elected representatives “to set aside their own likes and dislikes, to never consider themselves to be . . . central ornaments . . . or superior to others, and to eschew any attempt to exercise control over the thoughts and actions” (Universal House of Justice, 28 Nov. 2023) of their fellow citizens? 5) Is not such a culture of learning consistent with the promotion of true freedom and empowerment? And, finally,

6) Consistent with the principle of the harmony of science and religion, what, more specifically than has been offered above, is the role of Revelation in realizing these long-sought emancipatory goals?

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# A Reason to Remain

KAT DUNLAP

*after a painting by Mary Jain Poiries*

was it the bouquet wrapped  
in coral tissue  
offered by a trembling hand

or the dropped flowers  
broken and scattered  
like so many angry words

was it that one remained whole  
among the broken stems  
and strewn petals

perhaps the tissue reminded you  
of breakfast on the balcony  
that first morning

the bowl of peaches  
their soft flesh so sweet  
a fresh breeze from the sound

perhaps it was the Bach Air  
that drifted with the sunrise  
and softened the moments

look – you said  
as a pair of spoonbills  
fed below among the reeds

magenta feathers riffling  
as together they sifted the shallows  
steadily wading on impossible legs



# Even as the Waves of One Sea: Bahá'í Consultation's Implicit Cultural Support for the Clash of Differing Opinions<sup>1</sup>

WHITNEY WHITE  
KAZEMIPOUR

## Abstract

A 1922 letter from Shoghi Effendi implies cultural dynamics which support Bahá'í consultation's desired but precarious "clash of differing opinions." First, it implicitly establishes the expectation that a swell of apparent disagreement will like-

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ly precede an emergent collective understanding, and that it is not, instead, a sign of failure. Second, it sets an ethos which accommodates errors, fostering growth and broad participation. Third, the prayer to open Assembly meetings that is included in the letter may generate a moral mood and motivation, orienting participants to build a unity within diversity strong enough to contain the possible tumult of clashing opinions. As these features are internalized by and motivate consultors, they can support the group's ability to achieve the volatile but effective and transformative clash of differing opinions while protecting the unity of the group.

## Résumé

Une lettre écrite par Shoghi Effendi en 1922 implique une dynamique culturelle qui permet le « heurt des opinions diverses », souhaité mais éphémère, de la consultation bahá'íe. Premièrement, la lettre établit implicitement l'attente selon laquelle une série de désaccords apparents précédera vraisemblablement l'émergence d'une compréhension collective, et qu'il ne s'agit pas d'un signe d'échec, bien au contraire. Deuxièmement, elle établit une culture qui accepte les erreurs, ce qui favorise la croissance et une large participation. Troisièmement, la prière à lire en début de réunion, qui était incluse dans la lettre, peut favoriser un état d'esprit et une motivation qui incitent les participants à réaliser une unité dans la diversité qui soit suffisamment forte pour contenir le tumulte éventuel d'opinions divergentes. Lorsqu'ils sont intériorisés et motivent les participants, ces éléments peuvent soutenir la capacité du groupe à surmonter le choc périlleux, mais efficace et transformateur, des opinions divergentes tout en protégeant l'unité du groupe.

*Resumen*

Una carta de Shoghi Effendi de 1922 implica dinámicas culturales que apoyan el deseado pero precario “choque de opiniones diferentes” de la consulta Bahá'í. Primero, implícitamente establece la expectativa que el aumento de un aparente desacuerdo probablemente precederá un entendimiento colectivo emergente, y que no es, en su lugar, una señal de fracaso. En segundo lugar, establece un ethos que acomoda errores, estimulando el crecimiento y una amplia participación. En tercer lugar, la oración para iniciar la reunión de Asamblea que está incluida en la carta, puede generar estado de ánimo moral y una motivación que orienta a los participantes a construir una unidad en diversidad suficientemente fuerte como para contener el posible tumulto de las opiniones chocantes. A medida que estas características se internalizan y motivan a los que consultan, pueden apoyar la habilidad del grupo para lograr el volátil pero efectivo y transformador choque de opiniones diferentes mientras que protegen la unidad del grupo.

## INTRODUCTION

This paper explores a single letter from Shoghi Effendi to the American Bahá'ís, dated 5 March 1922.<sup>2</sup> Just three months before that date, Shoghi Effendi had learned upon opening 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Will and Testament that he had been unexpectedly appointed to head the Bahá'í Faith. Bereaved and shocked by the “grievous event and

great calamity” of the sudden loss of his beloved grandfather, and exhausted from the month it took for him to travel home from his studies in Europe, the youthful Shoghi Effendi was further blindsided by the contents of the will addressed to him alone (*Bahá'í Administration* 25). Buffeting tests and trials followed in quick succession, as the absence of 'Abdu'l-Bahá opened the door to rebellious turmoil in the three large Bahá'í communities at the time—the Holy Land, the United States, and Persia—threatening loss of control over the Shrine of Bahá'u'lláh as well as fraying support for the Covenant (Rabbani 16–19). Shoghi Effendi was, in his own telling, “so stricken with grief and pain and so entangled in the troubles (created) by the enemies of the Cause of God” that he felt he needed a health-restoring break in order to “[fulfill his] important and sacred duties” (*Bahá'í Administration* 25). By early April 1922, Shoghi Effendi had retreated for an eight-month respite, consulting German doctors and hiking meditatively in the Swiss Alps, having temporarily reassigned his leadership duties to his great-aunt and steadfast mentor Bahíyyih Khanum (Rabbani 20).

Announcing Shoghi Effendi's departure and the arrangements he had made for his absence, Bahíyyih Khanum stated on April 8 that, as Rúhíyyih Khanum characterizes it, “the Bahá'í world must from now on be linked through the Spiritual Assemblies and local questions must be referred to them” (Rabbani 19). Bahíyyih Khanum's

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2 See extensive excerpts in the section titled “Shoghi Effendi's March 1922 Letter.”

message echoed a theme established in the Guardian's March 5 letter, sent just one month before his departure. In this letter, he declares that the passing of 'Abdu'l-Bahá signaled an "Hour of Transition": Bahá'í communities would need to elect more Assemblies, and those Assemblies would need to develop the relevant understanding and skills to take on some of the leadership work that 'Abdu'l-Bahá had been handling individually.<sup>3</sup>

What guidance did Shoghi Effendi convey to the American Bahá'ís to assist them in these tasks, just before removing himself for nearly a year from close contact with them?

Shoghi Effendi devotes over a third of the letter to encouraging Assemblies

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3 Directly following Shoghi Effendi's decision to build up the Assemblies throughout the world as the foundation for the eventual election of the Universal House of Justice, "he began a programme of education of the believers in the art of Bahá'í administration" (Taherzadeh 300), of which this letter was clearly a part. He also directed the American Bahá'í community's Executive Board of Bahá'í Temple Unity, which had served for twenty-three years as the community's national body, to disband in order for the community to elect in its stead a National Spiritual Assembly; the Bahá'ís of the United States immediately held such an election, at the 22-26 April 1922 annual convention (Gregory 93). The new Assembly and its methods of election continued to evolve, achieving recognition by Shoghi Effendi as a correctly-formed National Spiritual Assembly in 1925 (Cameron and Momen 220).

to engage in consultation. He cites Bahá'u'lláh's admonition in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas that "[i]t is incumbent upon [the Assembly members] to take counsel together" (qtd. in *Principles* 21), and quotes extensively from 'Abdu'l-Bahá on this theme as well (17–24).

The letter builds a solid framework for consultation as a method, including girders such as humility, courtesy, and the prioritization of unity, nonpartisan detachment, universal participation, full support for the collective decision, and majority rule if unanimity is not reached. The letter, I argue, also contains a parallel, more implicit stratum of guidance—implicit in that it subtly nurtures certain expectations, sensitivities, dispositions, motives, and moods. In so doing, the guidance shapes the culture surrounding the method of consultation, a culture which in turn unleashes consultation's full potential by enabling the consultors to use whatever diversity they bring to the table to generate transformative understandings and decisions.

#### METHODS TO STUDY THE POTENTIAL OF BAHÁ'Í CONSULTATION

Contributing to my analysis of the letter's culture-shaping will be observations of consultation in practice, based on my nearly forty years of experience participating in Bahá'í consultation in various formal and informal settings, routine and ad-hoc circumstances, and geographic locales,<sup>4</sup> including over

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4 Mainly in the United States, but also in several indigenous, Ngäbe

thirty years of grateful experience serving on Local Spiritual Assemblies in California. This provides some non-systematic but broad and deep participant observation data on existing practices, drawn from participation in various relatively skilled and unskilled applications of consultation, as well as from experience with instances in which the method of consultation lapsed.

This paper's main focus, however, is Bahá'í consultation's potentiality—a still inchoate phenomenon—rather than its current practice. This potentiality does not correspond to a set of well-developed cultural practices that can presently be observed, but rather to a constellation of practices described in the Bahá'í writings. This focus on potentiality aligns with the Bahá'í community's general recognition of its need to evolve and learn about consultation, which, like other Bahá'í practices, is understood as an ideal that is as yet only partially-realized (Lample, *Revelation* 151). Most Bahá'ís recognize that consultation's potential will be uncovered not through quick study but through generations of active learning.<sup>5</sup> As such, while informed by my participation in consultation's embryonic form, this paper's primary contribution is an exegesis of important texts guiding the practice of Bahá'í consultation.

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communities of Panama (White).

5 For a description of the mode of learning characterizing the global Bahá'í community, see papers by Friberg and by Smith in this issue.

Our understanding of Shoghi Effendi's letter is shaped by guidelines in the Bahá'í writings and guidance on how they are to be read. These hermeneutics not only address how scholars can discern the intended meaning (Arbab 158), but also shed light on the path Bahá'í communities are likely to follow as they continue to gain understanding of the guidance on consultation, allowing us to envision more accurately consultation's potential development as a practice. This paper seeks both to give due attention to the historical context of Shoghi Effendi's letter in order to better understand his intent (May 47–48), and to explore how the letter puts forward universal principles untethered to the time and place in which they were composed (Lample, *Revelation* 42–43). I draw on the authoritative writings and guidance of the Bahá'í Faith to shape my interpretation of the letter, seeing the complete body of writings as ultimately coherent (38). Mindful of Bahá'u'lláh's statement that the Writings often contain both an outward meaning and an inward meaning, and that “the truly learned” “understandeth the inward meaning in the light of the outward meaning” (qtd. in Lample, *Revelation* 39; Fananapazir and Fazel), I explore both explicit and implicit layers in Shoghi Effendi's guidance on consultation. I present this analysis with humility in the face of the inexhaustible meanings of the Bahá'í writings (39), and with an expectation that our understanding will continue to develop (39–41) as scholars plumb the further depths of the Revelation, and as

the community's experience with consultation grows.

Finally, and fundamentally, this paper seeks to engage "a progressive interaction between the truths and principles of religion and the discoveries and insights of scientific inquiry" (Universal House of Justice, 19 May 1995). I aim to unravel layers of the text, examining it through the light of science and reason while, of course, guarding against shoehorning the Bahá'í writings into an alien, distorting model (Lample, *Revelation* 41–42).

Anthropological social science provides the scientific partner in this instance of "progressive interaction." The Universal House of Justice has been explicitly and increasingly mentioning the development and evolution of a Bahá'í culture for at least two decades.<sup>6</sup> What better disciplinary lens through which to explore Bahá'í culture's potentialities than that of anthropology, the field that has centered the culture concept for the last 150 years? Thus, the paper's exegesis uses anthropological methods and insights to delve into implied potential elements in the letter, looking to uncover the cultural ideals woven within. The anthropologically-informed framework guiding this analysis begins with a view of culture as including naturalized and semi- to sub-conscious ideas, patterns of emotion and motivation, and relationship norms, all of which may vary by ethnic

group but also by other kinds of groups such as class (as suggested by Lareau), profession (see, for example, Latour), and, notably, religion.

Seeing culture as an integral dimension of any religion's unique contribution aligns well with the Bahá'í concept of progressive revelation, which holds that the world's religions share their fundamental values and that their variations reflect the needs of the era in which they were revealed (T. Smith, "Interplay" 22). From an anthropological perspective, each religion fosters a distinctive assemblage of moods, motivations, and worldviews among its practicing adherents, and, in turn, shapes in its practitioners what is perceived, how that is interpreted, and even how intensely the religion is used to interpret the world (Geertz 122). How might the guidance on, and practice of, Bahá'í consultation foster and transform the implicit and semi-conscious dimensions of its participants' intellectual, emotional, motivational, and relational understandings and dispositions? And might these cultural shifts work together to enhance consultation as a method of reading reality and making decisions?

#### AN OVERVIEW OF THE PAPER

Using various anthropological theories as lenses through which to read Shoghi Effendi's letter, we can discern three implicit, interlocking, culture-changing elements. First, we see a key expectation about the *rhythm* of the consultation meeting; second, an *ethos of*

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Universal House of Justice, Message to the Bahá'ís of the World dated Ridván 2000, and letter dated 28 November 2023.

*unity and difference* which engages and trains participants' skills but also accommodates their mistakes; and, third, a *method of initiating* the meeting that gently orients participants to both moral responsibility and an openness to the collective creation of an enabling unity. I argue that not only is there a particular set of cultural ideals implicit in the letter, but that these elements generate cultural supports for one of consultation's key capabilities—unlocking the powers of diversity.

The first and second examples explore the importance of uncovering diversity within the consultation meeting, in order to achieve better attunement to reality (Smith and Karlberg 77–81, 86–90; see also Smith, this issue), to come to a unity of thought, and to make better decisions. Diversity's powers, I argue in Example 1, emerge from a distinct phase of the consultation meeting, the clash of differing opinions. I deploy anthropological insights on the imagination of the future to help read the text, finding an implied trajectory in the rhythm of the consultation meeting.

In Example 2, I argue that while the clash of differing opinions can ultimately enable unity of thought and purpose, it risks generating counterproductive disunity among the consultors along the way. However, I argue that built into the guidance on consultation is a complex dialectic of unity with diversity, which moderates this risk. Further, and key to consultation's feasibility, I argue that this nuanced mitigation of risk is nevertheless compatible with its imperfect execution. I draw on Linda

Garro's dynamic concept of "enacting ethos" to find that Shoghi Effendi's guidance expects and accommodates mistakes in enacting the ethos of unity's interplay with diversity.

In Example 3, I combine literary analysis with anthropological observations in a study of the Assembly opening prayer. I argue that the prayer's shifts in tone, metaphorical language, and rite-of-passage-like tripartite structure have the potential to generate a certain kind of emotional, intellectual, and moral experience that facilitates the internalization of the prayer's message. This final section draws not only on the anthropology of rites of passage, but Clifford Geertz on religion and Jason Throop on "moral moods." The prayer, I claim, has the potential to empower not only the messages contained within it, but both the explicit and implicit outlooks in the rest of the guidance on consultation; it can generate within the participants a yearning for and openness to new understandings and practices, a spiritualized foundation for increasing willingness to experiment and to be transformed. The opening prayer thus complements diversity's high potential for conflict as well as for growth and transformation; it generates a longing for unity that wraps the prickly clash of differing opinions in an envelope of absolute love and unity.

SHOGHI EFFENDI'S  
MARCH 1922 LETTER

It is worth briefly setting out the context, and some of the key content, of



Shoghi Effendi's letter, before embarking on the exegetical analysis at the core of the paper. Under the extreme circumstances that marked the beginning of his ministry, Shoghi Effendi framed and compiled a touchstone collection of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's guidance on consultation. These passages from 'Abdu'l-Bahá provide centerpieces of guidance on consultation in materials widely used throughout the Bahá'í world in the century since the letter was penned—from every volume of *The Bahá'í World* (1925-1992), to the constantly updated United States community's *Guidance for Local Assemblies*, and from the Bahá'í World Centre's web entry on "The Local Spiritual Assembly" to the Ruhi Institute's unit on consultation (Ruhi Institute 7, 11).<sup>7</sup>

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7 Surveying English-language materials alone, we see paragraphs 11 and 12 of the letter in particular being reproduced, especially in discussions of consultation in Assemblies. In addition to the materials already mentioned, these include the 1970 compilation (updated 2017) on the Local Spiritual Assembly and the 1990 compilation on consultation from the World Centre (*Consultation*), the well-known introduction to the Faith, *Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era* (Esslemont), originally published in 1923 and updated with new editions through 2006, and other presentations of the Faith (including, for instance, Bahá'í International Community, *Consultation and the Protection of Diversity*). The Assembly opening prayer (§8) is also reproduced in prayer books, categorized under "Spiritual Assembly" (see, *Bahá'í Prayers* 300–301). The original quotes from which Shoghi Effendi drew are in *Selections from*

Emphasizing "the vital necessity of having a local Spiritual Assembly in every locality" where there are sufficient adult Bahá'ís (nine) to hold an election, Shoghi Effendi directs the reader's attention to "[a] perusal of some of the words of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá on the duties and functions of the Spiritual Assemblies" (*Bahá'í Administration* ¶¶ 6, 7). The italicized sentences in the following paragraphs are all text written by 'Abdu'l-Bahá:

Addressing the members of the Spiritual Assembly in Chicago, the Master reveals the following:—"*Whenever ye enter the council-chamber, recite this prayer with a heart throbbing with the love of God and a tongue purified from all but His remembrance, that the All-Powerful may graciously aid you to achieve supreme victory. O God, my God! We are servants of Thine that have turned with devotion to Thy Holy Face, that have detached ourselves from all besides Thee in this glorious Day. We have gathered in this Spiritual Assembly, united in our views and thoughts, with our purposes harmonized to exalt Thy Word amidst mankind. O Lord, our God! Make us the signs of Thy*

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*the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*. The letter was published in its entirety for American Bahá'ís to read immediately in May 1922 (*Star of the West*, vol. 13, no. 4, 1922, pp. 83–88), as well as being republished in *The Bahá'í World* many times.



*Divine Guidance, the Standards of Thine exalted Faith amongst men, servants to Thy mighty Covenant, O Thou our Lord Most High, manifestations of Thy Divine Unity in Thine Abhá Kingdom, and resplendent stars shining upon all regions. Lord! Aid us to become seas surging with the billows of Thy wondrous Grace, streams flowing from Thine all-glorious Heights, goodly fruits upon the Tree of Thy heavenly Cause, trees waving through the breezes of Thy Bounty in Thy celestial Vineyard. O God! Make our souls dependent upon the Verses of Thy Divine Unity, our hearts cheered with the outpourings of Thy Grace, that we may unite even as the waves of one sea and become merged together as the rays of Thine effulgent Light; that our thoughts, our views, our feelings may become as one reality, manifesting the spirit of union throughout the world. Thou art the Gracious, the Bountiful, the Bestower, the Almighty, the Merciful, the Compassionate.”* (¶ 8)<sup>8</sup>

*“The prime requisites for them that take counsel together are*

*purity of motive, radiance of spirit, detachment from all else save God, attraction to His Divine Fragrances, humility and lowliness amongst His loved ones, patience and long-suffering in difficulties and servitude to His exalted Threshold. Should they be graciously aided to acquire these attributes, victory from the unseen Kingdom of Bahá shall be vouchsafed to them.”* “In this day, assemblies of consultation are of the greatest importance and a vital necessity. Obedience unto them is essential and obligatory. The members thereof must take counsel together in such wise that no occasion for ill-feeling or discord may arise. This can be attained when every member expresseth with absolute freedom his own opinion and setteth forth his argument. Should any one oppose, he must on no account feel hurt for not until matters are fully discussed can the right way be revealed. The shining spark of truth cometh forth only after the clash of differing opinions. If after discussion, a decision be carried unanimously, well and good; but if, the Lord forbid, differences of opinion should arise, a majority of voices must prevail.” (¶ 11)

Enumerating the obligations incumbent upon the members of consulting councils, the Beloved reveals the following:—“*The first condition is absolute love and harmony amongst the members of*

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8 Note that there are seven slight differences in capitalization and grammar between how this prayer originally appeared in *Bahá'í Administration* and its form in more recent publications (*Bahá'í Prayers* 300–301). This is the most recent version, inserted after the original introduction from Shoghi Effendi's letter in *Bahá'í Administration* (20).

*the assembly. They must be wholly free from estrangement and must manifest in themselves the Unity of God, for they are the waves of one sea, the drops of one river, the stars of one heaven, the rays of one sun, the trees of one orchard, the flowers of one garden. Should harmony of thought and absolute unity be nonexistent, that gathering shall be dispersed and that assembly be brought to naught. The second condition: . . . They must when coming together turn their faces to the Kingdom on high and ask aid from the Realm of Glory. They must then proceed with the utmost devotion, courtesy, dignity, care and moderation to express their views. They must in every matter search out the truth and not insist upon their own opinion, for stubbornness and persistence in one's views will lead ultimately to discord and wrangling and the truth will remain hidden. The honored members must with all freedom express their own thoughts, and it is in no wise permissible for one to belittle the thought of another; nay, he must with moderation set forth the truth, and should differences of opinion arise a majority of voices must prevail, and all must obey and submit to the majority. It is again not permitted that any one of the honored members object to or censure, whether in or out of the meeting, any decision arrived at previously, though that decision be not right, for such criticism*

*would prevent any decision from being enforced. In short, whatsoever thing is arranged in harmony and with love and purity of motive, its result is light, and should the least trace of estrangement prevail the result shall be darkness upon darkness. . . . If this be so regarded, that assembly shall be of God, but otherwise it shall lead to coolness and alienation that proceed from the Evil One. Discussions must all be confined to spiritual matters that pertain to the training of souls, the instruction of children, the relief of the poor, the help of the feeble throughout all classes in the world, kindness to all peoples, the diffusion of the fragrances of God and the exaltation of His Holy Word. Should they endeavor to fulfill these conditions the Grace of the Holy Spirit shall be vouchsafed unto them, and that assembly shall become the center of the Divine blessings, the hosts of Divine confirmation shall come to their aid, and they shall day by day receive a new effusion of Spirit." (§ 12)<sup>9</sup>*

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9 The ellipses in paragraph 12 are found in the original letter: two sentences were omitted by Shoghi Effendi, one pertaining to the chairperson's role, and one indicating that by-laws and guidelines were to be laid down by the Assembly. Two spelling changes have since been made in the official translation of paragraph 12, and are reflected here: "non-existent" is now "nonexistent," and "Kingdom on High" is now "Kingdom on high." The

BAHÁ'Í CONSULTATION AND THE  
CLASH OF DIFFERING OPINIONS

Bahá'í consultation is a method of collective understanding and decision-making (Smith and Ghaemmaghami 8–9; Lample, *Revelation* 127–48). Bahá'u'lláh writes that “consultation is the lamp of guidance which leadeth the way, and is the bestower of understanding” (“Lawḥ-i-Maqṣúd” ¶ 15). The Universal House of Justice centers consultation in the learning mode that Bahá'í communities are to engage in, which involves repeating cycles of study, consultation, action, and reflection (see, for instance, its letter dated 28 November 2023 ¶ 14). Consultation is not only a dedicated step in the cycle, but is also often integral to reflection and study.

Consultation aims to generate unity of thought and action within a group (Lample, *Revelation* 25), harnessing participants' diverse perspectives to sharpen understanding of reality (Smith and Ghaemmaghami 16–19). Many elements come together to achieve this aim.<sup>10</sup> As we can readily discern from Shoghi Effendi's letter, Bahá'í consultation promotes and protects universal participation within

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sentence beginning “Discussions” is omitted in the newer version, but is included here (‘Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections* no. 45).

10 *Ruhi Book 10* cogently lists the principles which are patently part of Bahá'í consultation; most of these are derived directly from these ‘Abdu'l-Bahá quotes in Shoghi Effendi's March 5 letter (Ruh Institute 41).

a group (Smith and Ghaemmaghami 17; Ruh Institute 30) and calls for participants' most virtuous selves. Virtues that promote interpersonal unity, such as tact, courtesy, and humility, are particularly stressed (Smith and Ghaemmaghami 13–14). Allied with its truth-seeking purpose, Bahá'í consultation calls for pure intentions and detachment from one's own ideas, with an openness to the opinions of others as a potential corrective to one's own (Karlberg 141, 144; Smith and Ghaemmaghami 17–18).

A propensity to use consultation has long been a pivotal element in the evolution of Bahá'í culture, both as a feature within avowed Bahá'í communities and more broadly in Bahá'í-influenced efforts (Universal House of Justice, 30 Dec. 2021 ¶ 4; Lample, *Revelation* 109, 181). “Populations increasingly adopt the method of consultation, action, and reflection,” the House of Justice notes, “to displace endless contest and conflict” (Universal House of Justice, 28 Nov. 23 ¶ 88). Consultation carries the potential to shift institutions away from adversarial discourses and decision-making (Karlberg 123–76) and could be used to foster justice in communities (Lample, *Revelation* 215). Adopting consultation does not simply amount to replacing conflictual methods with a harmonious one; scholarship on consultation highlights how distinct assumptions and attitudes built into consultation may challenge the prevalent culture of its participants. Consultation prioritizes

building unity through kindness and love (Smith and Ghaemmaghmi 13–14), values universal participation across any range of diverse characteristics (Smith and Ghaemmaghmi 9), and prizes purifying expression from partisanship or machinations (Lample, *Revelation* 199). These features of consultation facilitate a pragmatic expression of an underlying philosophical position: that any individual perspective holds, at best, only relative, not absolute truth (Smith and Ghaemmaghmi 12; Lample, *Revelation* 35, 185; Karlberg 141; see Elvira Espinosa, forthcoming), and that “diverse perspectives . . . can be complementary” (Smith and Karlberg 70). This implies that consultation can provide a mechanism for the mutual improvement of thinking (see Elvira Espinosa, forthcoming; Smith, this issue; Smith and Ghaemmaghmi 4–5), in addition to being a profound tool for the investigation of reality (Lample, *Revelation* 24; Smith and Ghaemmaghmi 16–19).

Consultation can be applied to many purposes—including problem solving, decision making, and investigation of reality—and among many kinds of groups, including all combinations of individual, community, and institution. Examples of consultation use include an individual solving their problems with the help of friends, family members attempting to resolve conflicts, stakeholders in a business striving to better read the reality of the enterprise’s impact

on the community, a Local Spiritual Assembly turning to the community at the Nineteen Day Feast to help guide its planning (Ruhi Institute 23–27; Kolstoe 68–80), and taking counsel together to foster common understanding in a community to inform decision-making by an authority (Office of Social and Economic Development n.p.).<sup>11</sup> Differing settings, participants, and levels of formality will call forth appropriate adjustments to the character of any consultation meeting (Smith and Ghaemmaghmi 11).

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11 There are significant numbers of practitioners of Bahá’í consultation around the world, since it is a central, emphasized practice for a religion whose members number around eight million (P. Smith 509). The Universal House of Justice practices consultation, as do the 192 National Spiritual Assemblies, Regional Bahá’í Councils in fifty-nine nations, and around 6,000 Local Spiritual Assemblies; additionally all these institutions’ auxiliary institutions and committees—including the 300 or so worldwide Bahá’í training institutes with tens of thousands of activities around the world (P. Smith 510)—function consultatively. Several Bahá’í-inspired projects, such as Fundación para la Aplicación y Enseñanza de la Ciencia (FUNDAEC) (Lample, *Revelation* 138–39), rely on Bahá’í consultation. Consultation’s fitness is to some extent evidenced by this robust use. Nevertheless, the number of Bahá’ís in proportion to their respective societies remains small enough that the potential for Bahá’í consultation to shape any given society—for example, affecting its institutions or general culture—is still limited.

Although Shoghi Effendi's letter obviously has implications for all kinds of consultation, it targets the use of consultation within Bahá'í Spiritual Assemblies, the elected governing bodies of the Bahá'í Faith at the local, regional, and national levels. Assemblies' individual members cannot act alone as institutional representatives, making the consultative process for collective decision making of vital importance. Consultation within an Assembly is confidential, with decisions conveyed after agreement has been reached, whether by consensus (the ideal) or majority rule (an option). Assemblies set goals for the community's efforts towards collective service and community building, as well as tending to individual or family needs such as marriages and divorces, and so they usually operate under urgent pressure to decide and act. Because Assemblies are elected to serve for a year, the same nine members consult on a regular basis, enabling a cycle of learning as well as promoting familiarity among the members. Because they have been elected, they are not a self-selected group coming together because of shared interests; Bahá'í consultation in Assemblies may need to transform a somewhat random collection of people into a harmonious orchestra, able to improve understandings of reality, generate tentative decisions, and ultimately learn to change the community.

THE CLASH OF  
DIFFERING OPINIONS AND  
TRANSFORMATIVE INTERROGATION

The diversity of the participants generates both the challenge of the consultation meeting and its strength. "The shining spark of truth cometh forth only after the clash of differing opinions" 'Abdu'l-Bahá asserts (qtd. in Shoghi Effendi ¶ 11), highlighting the important function of diversity in Bahá'í consultation. Philosophical insights into how science leverages diversity can enhance our understanding of how differences, properly engaged in consultation, can generate such shining sparks of truth.

As Friberg explains in his article in this issue, the best chance scientists have of getting to a more accurate truth lies in engaging a collectivity of diverse people. Feminist philosophers of science (as well as many social scientists) point out how diverse scientific communities of collective work and critique craft more accurate, collective investigations of reality than do less diverse networks (Steel et al. 779–80). Scientists' backgrounds and standpoints shape all manner of scientific decisions—from what counts as evidence, to whether topics of investigation are selected that are relevant to all members of a society—and outcomes—such as whether research sheds light on hidden power structures or obscures them (Crasnow). Since investigators' societal positions and life experiences impact how they conduct science, diverse scientists can uncover

and correct each other's self-hidden biases and assumptions (Harding 136–62; Longino; Oreskes 49–59; see also Smith, this issue; Elvira Espinosa, forthcoming).<sup>12</sup>

This truth-revealing magic arises not merely from a diverse group of people sitting quietly in the (figurative or literal) room but, as Longino puts it, “through the clashing and meshing of a variety of points of view” (69). Diverse people must be present, not only speaking up but being heard. Their diversity thereby transforms the conversation and the collective thinking as participants correct each other's blind spots. Longino calls this necessary dynamic “transformative criticism” or “transformative interrogation” (Longino 72–79). Bahá'í consultation likewise ties effective and accurate collective thinking not simply to the gathering of a diverse group, but also to a transformative process that unlocks diversity's powers. ‘Abdu'l-Bahá's simple

statement confirms that the emergence of the “spark of truth” requires both a wide diversity of “differing opinions” and their finding a way to “clash”—a transformative interrogation.

While Longino's concept of transformative interrogation overlaps with the “clash of differing opinions,” Bahá'í consultation's requirements go well beyond what Longino covers.<sup>13</sup> This is partly a difference of focus: many scientific disciplines emphasize the pursuit of the understanding of reality over its application in technology or policy, whereas a Bahá'í Assembly typically emphasizes actions, as experimental solutions to problems, over epistemological questions.<sup>14</sup> In addition, science is shaped by professional concerns and the high investment required for certification as a participant in a given scientific discussion (through a PhD, certain kinds of jobs, grants, publications, etc.), whereas participants in Bahá'í consultation are almost exclusively volunteers. As Bahá'í Assembly culture develops, more attention should undoubtedly be paid to questions in the philosophy of science that bear on the

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12 While there are debates around what counts as diversity or what counts as useful diversity (Steel et al.; Crasnow; Harding), as well as around the degree to which knowledge and perspective are situated (Wylie; Haraway), and the degree to which any objectivity can be achieved, some kind of commitment to the value of diverse participation in science is widely defended and reflected in the feminist philosophy of science (Haraway; Crasnow). Diversity as an important institutional goal is also widely embraced by scholars and policymakers, as can be seen in academic policy such as in Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion goals and IRB requirements.

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13 See Friberg's paper in this issue for a more detailed comparison between science and Bahá'í consultation as a method.

14 Ultimately, of course, understandings and beliefs about reality inextricably link with action in both science and Assembly meetings: scientific knowledge is applied to actions such as experimentation and applied science, and Assemblies must base their decisions about action on their reading of reality.



consultative reading of reality, such as how to frame issues, how to designate relevant facts, how to unearth background assumptions, which forms of logic and reason are appropriate, and how to plan and evaluate experimental action (See also Friberg; T. Smith, "Learning in Action"; Elvira Espinosa, forthcoming; Arbab 158; Smith and Karlberg).

While there are what Bahá'ís would call spiritual virtues embedded in the culture of science, such as a devotion to learning and to truth, responsiveness to empirical evidence, and humility (Oreskes 68; McIntyre 47–63), perhaps what most distinguishes Bahá'í consultation from current practices or ideals of professional science is the integration of a particular constellation of spiritual concepts, including those pertaining to certain virtues and practices, the nature and formation of the institution of the Bahá'í Assembly, the prioritization of unity as a value, and reverence towards God and the Bahá'í scriptures; these are discussed in later sections.

Despite these differences, Longino's insights into transformative interrogation can be applied both to improving collective understanding, which she addresses thoroughly, and to collective decision-making, which she mostly does not. By centering the concept of transformation, she highlights how, ideally, a scientific network should bring diverse opinions and perspectives into such close critical contact that the resultant collective understandings are progressively purified of flaws. Seen

in this light, consultation's clash of differing opinions also implies transformation, and the sparks it throws off can potentially include wholly new, emergent understandings or decisions that do not depend on the individual thinking of the participants but emerge instead from the process.

Furthermore, it is not only the *ideas* being considered by the group that must come under the influence of the transformative power of this clashing diversity. Even the *procedures* used to interrogate the ideas are to be subjected to the group's transformative insight. As Longino writes,

The maintenance of dialogue is itself a social process and can be more or less fully realized. . . . A method of inquiry is objective to the degree that it permits transformative criticism. Its objectivity consists not just in the inclusion of intersubjective criticism but in the degree to which *both its procedures and its results* are responsive to the kinds of criticism described (76, emphasis added).

It is in this dual sense, then, that the clash of differing opinions can be considered transformative: through it, diverse views progressively shape not only the ideas under scrutiny but how the process unfolds.

While welcoming the transformative clash of differing opinions, we must be attentive to the relationships among the participants. How can we maintain the quality of group



interaction, reveal and employ latent diversity, cultivate transformation through clashing opinions and their resolution, and still nurture the ability of the group to create and get behind an emergent unity of thought and purpose at the end? In short, how can we harness the power of diversity without splintering the group?

Bahá'í guidance, as I argue through the three examples below, fosters cultural elements that attend to the social requirements of sustaining such a volatile interaction without causing group-breaking stress. Using various anthropological theories, we can discern implicit guidance in the selected quotes from 'Abdu'l-Bahá that not only uncovers the crucial role that the clash of differing opinions plays, but also guides the consultants to appropriately nurture its powers and contain its dangers.

#### EXAMPLE 1.

##### A SWELL OF DISAGREEMENT BEFORE AGREEMENT: AN EXPECTED TRAJECTORY OF CONSULTATION

*This sea had laid up  
lustrous pearls in store;  
The wind hath raised a wave  
that casteth them ashore.*

—Bahá'u'lláh  
(*Gems of Divine Mysteries* 32)

Our orientation toward the future shapes how we experience the present; thus, what we hope, anticipate, or expect will happen in a consultation meeting impacts how we experience that

meeting.<sup>15</sup> I argue here that the Bahá'í guidance on consultation implicitly sets an expectation for sequenced patterns of agreement and disagreement within the consultation meeting. An expectation is an orientation toward the future that establishes what is considered normal and, by extension, what is or is not surprising. Expectations determine “a standard for evaluation, for saying whether outcomes are good or bad, desirable or undesirable, according to those standards” (Bryant and Knight 63). In this example, we will examine how the guidance implies a certain expectation that consultation will occur in three phases, a trajectory which may challenge and shift various cultural assumptions about collective decision making.

Shoghi Effendi's letter sets up an implicit expectation that before a consulting group agrees on a decision, participants will likely first experience a swell of disagreement. This implied trajectory is embedded in the statement noted above—“The shining spark of truth cometh forth only after the clash of differing opinions” (¶ 11)—which suggests that the consultation will likely progress through three broad stages: from an initial state of some level of perceived unity or disunity, through a period of increasing apparent disagreement and perhaps even some disunity

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15 For in-depth explorations of how anthropologists view futural orientations as both culturally-constituted and as shaping the present, see Miyazaki on hope, and Bryant and Knight on orientations such as anticipation, expectation, and speculation.

of feeling, to a resolution in which unity of feeling is restored as an emergent unity of thought and purpose is established.<sup>16</sup> If consultors' expectations for the consultation's trajectory are misaligned with this implicit guidance, they may block the transformative clash of differing opinions. This example explores both the implied trajectory, and the ways it can be misunderstood.

#### STAGE 1: GATHERING TOGETHER

The members may arrive with hope and anticipation that they share similar opinions that will need little adjustment in order to produce a collective decision. As they pray:

*We have gathered in this spiritual assembly, united in our views and thoughts, with our purposes harmonized to exalt Thy Word amidst mankind. (¶ 8)*

Several factors may lead to Assembly members' holding unrealistic expectations of finding easy agreement through placid consultation. They indeed begin with at least some important common ground: they have agreed to meet together, have gathered and prayed together, and have committed

to use Bahá'í consultation as their common framework. Further, Bahá'í guidance—including this letter—underscores the importance of safeguarding unity among people: “The first condition is absolute love and harmony among the members of the assembly” (¶ 11). This emphasis may foster an expectation of beginning-to-end agreement.

Indeed, voluntary groups of all kinds typically come into meetings expecting a certain similarity of opinion amongst themselves; they are gathering, after all, because they share values and affiliations and purposes. Assemblies are ultimately based on voluntary participation. However, because they are elected without nominations or campaigning by self-selected candidates, the members may find themselves in a highly diverse group, with “diverse interests and types of character” varied enough that the meetings elicit “direct training” in achieving unity in diversity (Holley 74). Still, the Bahá'í emphasis on finding, creating, and maintaining unity may prevail over participants' experience with the challenges of diversity, seeding the expectation that the meeting will start with basic agreement.

Assemblies will thus generally stand in contrast with groups whose members may tend to begin meetings expecting dissimilarity or even conflict. Such groups may be comprised of members whose status and livelihood are dependent on claiming some scarce resource—whether with respect to limited available jobs, hierarchical status

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<sup>16</sup> In practice, a Spiritual Assembly in particular will often tackle multiple issues in one meeting, and so this cycle may be repeated in various forms. For simplicity, in this paper we will talk about a “consultative meeting” as a single meeting concerning a single issue about which the participants may have differing opinions.

in an academic setting, or any other sort of zero-sum scenario. Participants in these groups may come into a meeting looking to distinguish and shore up their own position, by claiming ownership of discoveries or ideas, or emphasizing critique and argument at the expense of just and fair evaluation or of finding agreement.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, negotiators come into a meeting with a keen sense of how interests differ between them. Finally, groups coming together to discuss what are seen as intractable political differences may start with a maximal expectation of disagreement, even if material outcomes are not at stake (see Neyman and Wenninger, forthcoming). In all these gatherings, surprise over a swell of disagreement in a meeting's trajectory would likely be minimal; if conflict is handled appropriately in these groups, as Neyman and Wenninger point out, they may instead be surprised by discovering how much they can agree on.

Of course, Assembly meetings may start with expectations of some disagreement. This may be the case if, for instance, the Assembly members conceive of the meeting as an opportunity to spread their own, "correct" views to others who are predicted to object—a state of mind that we can easily fall into unconsciously, since we all tend to think our personal understandings are accurate (Lample, "Framework" 43).

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17 For an interesting account of the high stakes of scientific discovery, see chapter 10 of astronomer Mike Brown's travails surrounding his discovery of one large Kuiper belt object (Brown).

Alternately, the members may remember disagreements—over an ongoing project, for example—and expect further disagreement along already established positions. In addition, if within the community in which the Assembly serves there is wide apparent diversity of opinion on a topic being taken up, the members may expect greater divergence from the start. Nevertheless, they may anticipate a steady lessening of disagreement, and thus still be surprised if instead the consultation swells from a mere simmer of differing opinions into a boil of disagreement.<sup>18</sup>

Participants may also experience surprise at the swell of disagreement in a consultation meeting due to ignorance about their own thoughts and how they will play out in a community. Consultants, particularly when coming together for the first time or to discuss a new topic, may not yet have investigated the details of the topics they will be consulting on, nor fully articulated their own opinions (Smith and Ghaemmaghami 17), particularly in a group setting, and so may have no idea how people with different perspectives might disagree. This might be

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18 It is important to distinguish between how much *actual* agreement there is at the start of a consultation meeting and the *understood* levels of agreement. This example focuses on the latter; the participants' expectations shape how they experience changes in perceived agreement during the meeting, and thus attending to their expectations better predicts how they will respond to the meeting's social dynamics.

especially true for subtle elements of thinking that tend to be opaque to the thinker, including the usually unrecognized and naturalized background assumptions that deeply shape fundamental thinking (Longino 72–73; see also Elvira Espinosa, forthcoming, and T. Smith, this issue).

Whether or not Assembly members perceive the full extent of their diversity of opinion at the beginning of the consultation, a latent, hidden heterogeneity likely needs to be brought out during the clash of differing opinions. Further, regardless of how similar or dissimilar they experience their various starting positions to be, consultants can easily and erroneously assume that the ideal trajectory of a consultation meeting should be a straight line toward greater unity of thought and purpose. Enlarging disagreement on the way to agreement is counterintuitive; there are many ways to imagine a more direct model of collective decision making, featuring nearly constant lessening of apparent disagreement. These include merely finding common ground, while leaving behind and unsaid all the ways in which the members disagree; heightening the disposition of all or certain participants to compromise or to give in, either to avoid conflict or for fear of not being understood or taken seriously; and attending only to the letter's emphasis on "absolute love and harmony" while ignoring the critical necessity of the clashing, differing opinions. The collective agreement that results from consultation, however, is not to be "a mere compromise, the dilution of

truth, or a hypocritical or utopian consensus" (Universal House of Justice, 29 Nov. 2017 ¶10). Significantly, in all failures to reach a transformative collective understanding, as explored in more detail in the next example, it is minority opinions that are more likely to be squelched, reproducing status quo ideas as well as the broader society's hegemonic relations.

In short, then, if the members enter consultation expecting only an efficient path to their desired endpoint, or linear movement toward greater similarity of thought, it may seem counterproductive when the meeting generates what feels like greater disagreement.

#### STAGE 2: THE SWELL OF DISAGREEMENT

Points of difference—not only those known beforehand, but those hidden at the outset—should ideally become unveiled as the consultation proceeds, through the clash of differing opinions:

*every member expresseth with absolute freedom his own opinion and setteth forth his argument. Should anyone oppose, he must on no account feel hurt for not until matters are fully discussed can the right way be revealed. The shining spark of truth cometh forth only after the clash of differing opinions. (¶ 11)*

Every member's opinion must be shared fully. An open floor for talkative members, and patient encouragement

of quieter ones, uncovers latent diversity of thought. All the subtle ways in which the participants disagree will, ideally, increasingly be aired.

This middle phase of the trajectory, we understand implicitly, may require a substantial investment of time. Because every participant will be expressing their own opinion—that is, we make room for, encourage, and long for universal participation<sup>19</sup>—we know consultation may demand of us “patience and long-suffering in difficulties” (¶ 11). The emphasis on each member sharing their views “with absolute freedom” suggests that consultants should be given room to be a little redundant or inefficient, despite the encouragement to act with “moderation” and curtail this in themselves.

The letter implies that normal, expected trajectories of consultation include expansive disagreement. In order to “clash,” and even throw off “sparks,” two objects need to be coming at each other forcefully enough and from angles wide enough to crash noisily together. As with Longino’s clashing and meshing, the clash of differing ideas in Bahá’í consultation must be penetrating and thorough for transformation to

occur. Critical thinking arises socially, cultivated out of the diversity of opinion the members express, and the reward for their hard work will be an emergent understanding, a “spark of truth,” that will arise when these clashing ideas are harmonized. To the extent that they bear this in mind as the ideal, participants will seek out the maximum diversity of perspective that the group can bring to the discussion as the necessary—the “only”—path to truth. Sharp differences of opinion, far from being a cause for concern, will be seen as a valuable resource.

At the same time, the clash of these freely- and fully-expressed opinions can sting; the guidance prepares the participants to expect that the transformative diversity will undermine pet ideas, long-held certainties, and other intellectual and emotional attachments. By admonishing participants not to “feel hurt” when others oppose their ideas, the guidance simultaneously endorses the benefit of clashing ideas and mitigates its potential to stir up bad feelings among the group. Explicitly, we learn from this warning to modulate our own feelings when stung; implicitly, we learn that we may need to criticize another’s contribution while softening the blow by depersonalizing the targeted idea. Detaching ideas from a sense of ownership or identification, and from other attached feelings,<sup>20</sup>

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19 On the centrality of universal participation in consultation’s power to attune participants to reality, see also Smith and Ghaemmaghami: “we have to be careful never to presume that others have nothing of value to share regarding a given matter. . . . [I]t should be presumed instead that every participant in a discussion has at least the potential to shed some light on the subject being discussed” (17).

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20 This is not to say that emotional reactions to ideas have no capacity to reveal truth, nor to deny that emotions may energize ideas and plans helpfully. This issue, however, goes beyond the scope of this

becomes a key tool to allow the clash of differing opinions to transform the collective understanding. Ideally, the consultors watch with curiosity and anticipation as detached ideas tumble around like stones in a rocky shore break, wearing off sharp edges as they clash, mesh, and harmonize.<sup>21</sup>

This level of detachment is not a given; it may require deliberate cultivation by the consultors. Reminding oneself of the benefit of criticism (in Longino's sense of the term) can help one to detach, as can recognizing

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paper, and might prove fruitful for further analysis. The point here is simply that the clashing of differing opinions is assisted by recognizing how emotions may complicate the intellectual interaction. Even partial success at releasing the identification of particular individuals with particular ideas better allows the collective to prune, mesh, and harmonize the ideas on the table.

21 Example 2 will explore in greater detail how consultors are to avoid rupturing relationships. For now, it is worth noting that the ideal of detachment described here strongly differentiates Bahá'í consultation, even in the most tumultuous clashes of differing opinions, from the antagonism, gamesmanship, and partisanship prevalent in politics, the legal system, lawmaking, and even academia (see also Karlberg 43–67). For example, the House of Justice calls for people to “eschew partisanship and the contest for worldly power. Instead, they are [to be] focused on transcending differences, harmonizing perspectives, and promoting consultation” and “to guard against any tendency to view matters with cynicism or an eye for faults” (Universal House of Justice, 30 Dec. 2021, ¶¶ 4, 36).

that one's own opinions are, inevitably, partial; conversely, a tendency to align with partisan kinds of thinking can be a barrier to detachment (Smith and Ghaemmaghami 3–4; 17–18). As ‘Abdu'l-Bahá's warning against insistence, stubbornness, and persistence in one's own views (¶12) indicates, personal effort is required to dislodge the thinking that our own view is absolutely correct. A “moderate perspective”—one that neither thoughtlessly yields to “mere compromise” nor rigidly “insist[s] upon ideological aims” or personal views—“is a practical and principled standpoint from which one can recognize and adopt valid and insightful ideas whatever their source, without prejudice” (Universal House of Justice, 29 Nov. 2017 ¶10). Neither purely relativistic nor rigid, consultors must “in every matter search out the truth” (¶ 12).

It is worth reflecting here on the term “truth,” which ‘Abdu'l-Bahá uses several times in this guidance. Taking the full range of Bahá'í writings as context, we can avoid reading this literally, in a positivistic way (that is, believing that truth can be fully known), or even in a semi-magical way, expecting that even decisions based in simplistic, inaccurate understandings may be made effective nevertheless due to a miraculous intervention rewarding good intentions and righteousness. The writings of the Bahá'í Faith repeatedly affirm the relativistic ability of humans to understand truth. For example, the Short Obligatory Prayer states that we are created to know God (Bahá'u'lláh,



*Prayers and Meditations*, CLXXXI) despite the ultimate unknowability of God (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, XIX). This very orientation to the unknowable Divine, consciously and collectively recultivated by opening the Assembly meeting with prayer as will be suggested in Example 3, may also remind consultors of their epistemological limits. That consultation may culminate only in sparks of truth rather than a whole sun's worth reflects our limited but not untethered ability to perceive small bits about reality (see also Smith, this issue). 'Abdu'l-Bahá's use of "truth" thus may emphasize the ocean of hidden reality that may at any time challenge and improve our own understanding; it may also cue us to the experience of temporary and evolving certainty that is the continual state of a protagonist in a learning mode. It implies that the ideas we bring into the consultation will be improved in clashing with other ideas, and thus implies as well that our individual understandings are tentative and partial, which in turn fosters humility in ourselves and forbearance for others, making us eager to recognize and adopt "valid and insightful ideas."

Thus, remembering that our apprehension of truth is always relative can contribute to shaping participants' expectations about consultation. In turn, normalizing a trajectory that includes a swell of overt disagreement and the display of the group's diversity shapes the motivations of the consultors, eliciting values and virtues which facilitate Bahá'í consultation's transformative

capacity. This expected trajectory fosters patience with the extended time that universal participation usually requires, and confidence that the growing disagreement does not signal a failure. Likewise, repeated experience with this swell-and-resolution trajectory seeds optimism in the participants that future consultative meetings will swell and resolve also, that widely-varying perspectives can be harmonized, and that even difficult consultations can re-establish the feeling of unity.

Naturally, not every consultation *must* involve the outward clash of differing opinions. Often, the transformation of individuals' opinions may happen silently within their own minds, as they immediately adopt others' expressed opinions as superior to their own, and thus do not state their now outdated views. On other occasions, the opinions of the consultors will not actually differ; here the consultation serves mainly to identify where opinions line up, permitting a decision—as well as unity of thought and purpose—to be rapidly built. We can also envision greater alignment in consultors' opinions as cycles of learning recur and consultative input from the community and from individuals with expertise or experience accumulates; repeated consultations tweak previous decisions in light of experience accrued in implementing them, creating greater alignment.

Of course, alignment could also arise due to lack of capacity for criticism within the consulting group, which may need to be enlarged to



bring in greater diversity in order for true transformative criticism to be possible.<sup>22</sup> Objectivity and effective decision making are imperiled when the resources of diversity—the group’s ability to think critically and generatively—are not brought into the consultation and instead remain hidden. We can see from this perspective that it is a greater risk to assume that a quick and easy agreement reflects the transformative interrogative power of Bahá’í consultation than to extend a consultation that may become redundant for the sake of ensuring that all diverse opinions have been aired. Neither the goal of avoiding conflict,<sup>23</sup> nor a desire for efficiency, warrant an incomplete clash of all relevant differing opinions.

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22 Assemblies have the option to consult with experts, for example, or individuals with particular knowledge of a project, and should also consult with the generality of their communities (specifically, though not exclusively, through the Nineteen Day Feast). Annual elections provide an opportunity for an enlargement of the diversity of the Assembly itself (see Abizadeh). In addition, Bahá’u’lláh provides a method of adding more people to a consultative group to improve its ability to get to a unanimous decision, counter-intuitively increasing the number of participants to ultimately reduce the variety of opinions in the decision phase (*Consultation* no.7); the counterintuitive nature of this method points to how Bahá’í consultation is to serve as a tool for greater attunement of the group with reality, and the transformation of the thinking of its participants.

23 See Example 2 for an exception to this principle.

### STAGE 3: UNITY OF PURPOSE AND OF THOUGHT

Part of what can make this expected trajectory tolerable to the participants is the anticipation of a final state of unity. Unity of thought is established “after discussion,” either through the ideal unanimous decision (reflecting a unity of thought), or by majority vote (generating a unity of purpose):

*If after discussion, a decision be carried unanimously, well and good; but if, the Lord forbid, differences of opinion should arise, a majority of voices must prevail. (¶ 11)*

*[S]hould differences of opinion arise a majority of voices must prevail, and all must obey and submit to the majority. It is again not permitted that any one of the honored members object to or censure, whether in or out of the meeting, any decision arrived at previously, though that decision be not right, for such criticism would prevent any decision from being enforced. (¶ 12)*

A majority vote is, however, second-best. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s exclamation about intractable differences of opinion—“the Lord forbid”—might signify that a consultation that ends in a vote has failed to achieve a transformative interaction, or at least one transformative enough to fully unify thought.<sup>24</sup>

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24 Bahá’u’lláh’s method of adding people to the consultation to get to unanimity demonstrates, as pointed out by the Universal House of Justice, His preference

This is not to diminish how functionally important it is to come to a collective agreement to act, even without unanimity. Whether a decision in Bahá'í consultation is made unanimously or by majority vote, participants are to unify behind it. This feature of consultation is one of two ways that the heat and sting of the swell of disagreement can be soothed and contained.<sup>25</sup> The decision-making stage opens a passage to a new kind of unity, one where everyone's opinions have been voiced, people's tentative ideas have been tested and molded, and a new, creative harmonization has arisen from the ideas' interaction.

The learning cycle of study, consultation, action, and reflection provides another balm. Either a unanimous decision or a majority vote can provide the pivot from consultation to action, giving the decision room to run, to be studied and reflected on, and to contribute to the next round of consultation; it launches the generation of data to be gathered and analyzed (see also Friberg, Smith, this issue). The reflection, study, and consultation that

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for unanimous consultative decisions (*Consultation* no.7).

25 Of course, this does not mean that the promise of a final united decision will always soothe anxieties and hurt feelings, but it mitigates the chances that they will shut down the clash of differing opinions or have a lasting effect on the members' relationships. Like many cultural guidelines, this process recognizes a tendency in human nature and human social needs that requires constraining in order to foster ongoing relationships.

follow the action provide more opportunities for minds to be changed, and more chances for sparks of truth to be kindled, seen, and adopted. As they experience repeating cycles, Assembly members come to understand the potentially tentative nature of consultative decisions, and how they function as hypotheses to be tested in action.<sup>26</sup> This dynamic nature of consultative decision-making is highlighted by 'Abdu'l-Bahá's guidance that the community, and the Assembly members themselves, should actively support and implement even incorrect decisions, both for the sake of unity and out of confidence in consultation's capacity to self-correct when put to the test via action (*Consultation* nos. 12, 15). Each step in this mode of operation depends on an ongoing relationship and series of meetings among the participants; thus, ending consultation meetings with some form of satisfying unity maintains the cycle's momentum.

EXAMPLE 1 DISCUSSION:  
A TRANSFORMED EXPECTATION  
FOSTERS A TRANSFORMATIVE CLASH  
OF DIFFERING OPINIONS

Expectations set the grounds for surprise, and surprise demands a reaction and fresh evaluation. If a swell

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26 In addition, further dynamic adjustments to any decisions may come from local individual initiative, community social action teams' adaptation to evolving circumstances, or community consultation, and can be contributed to the Assembly's thinking through communication or election.

of disagreement surprises the consultants, they may curtail the crucial stage of the clash of differing opinions. Misinterpreting an increasing level of experienced disagreement as a sign of failure can set off alarms, and shut down the full expression of diverse opinions. Shoghi Effendi elsewhere warns against misreading intra-Assembly disagreement: “The friends should therefore not feel discouraged at the differences of opinion that may prevail among the members of an Assembly, for these . . . fulfil a valuable function in all Assembly deliberations” (*Consultation* no. 33). Consultants who see the uncovering of hidden, differing opinions as the leveraging of the Assembly’s transformative resources come to expect a swell of seeming disagreement as a normal part of the process, for all its potential inefficiency and risk of hurt feelings. The transformative swell of disagreement makes more sense to consultants when they understand that the point of consultation is to generate a shared understanding of reality, likely shifting all members’ understandings, and to create an emergent solution that all participants believe in. Consultants who expect this trajectory view the swell of disagreement not as a failure, but rather as the discordant tension necessary to set up the sweet and complex chord at the end.

Shoghi Effendi’s letter portrays recognizable moments of challenge and success—the somewhat irrational sting of the criticized idea, the impatience with the time it takes to give

everyone a voice, the amazement at the improvements in the ideas at the end. These recognizable elements of the consultative experience facilitate the adoption of the text as a meaningful guide and kindle the desire to practice the skills it asks for. Its correspondence to experience wins the practitioner over to the trajectory it implicitly traces, of storm before the calm. The group gains staying power even as it weathers the strains of the middle part of the trajectory, and because of this, nurtures transformative interrogation.

Expectations such as these are consequential. As Bryant and Knight write, “A change in expectations may lead to practices being suddenly altered, reshaped, overturned, or impeded” (63). As consultants increasingly expect the implied trajectory and leave behind non-transformative expectations, their consultation practices will better and more frequently foster transformative clashes of differing opinions.

#### EXAMPLE 2:

#### ENACTING UNITY’S INTERPLAY WITH DIVERSITY AS AN ETHOS WHICH ACCOMMODATES MISTAKES

*Your souls are as waves  
on the sea of the spirit;  
although each individual is a  
distinct wave, the ocean is one.*

—‘Abdu’l-Bahá  
(*Paris Talks* 28:1)

People’s control over fire enables more easily digestible cooked food, swidden farming’s efficiency, and

even lifesaving wildfire prevention ; nevertheless, an uncontrolled fire can destroy communities, and kill people and wildlife. Wheels and engines have enabled people to travel long distances and transport heavy objects; however, car accidents are a leading killer of adolescents and children. Powerful tools often have inherent risks. The clash of differing opinions, so critical to Bahá'í consultation's power, is one such risky tool.

We have already seen how Shoghi Effendi's letter emphasizes the continuous dance of unity and diversity, in varying ratios in the different phases of a consultative meeting's trajectory. This dance is key to consultation's transformative magic, particularly its ability to improve understandings of reality. Yet, as I argue in this example, the guidance also conveys implicit warnings about risks to the relationships within the Assembly when the dance goes too far awry. We will see how these risks are mitigated by the subtle definitions of diversity and of unity, and by the way in which the two are entangled, mutually moderating each other within a healthy consultation. Finally, I will suggest that enacting true unity in diversity may seem a needle-threadingly difficult task on its face, but that the letter provides implicit guidance apt for even very imperfect consultants. Anthropologist Linda Garro's model of how people imperfectly enact their ideal ethos will guide this final observation. In these ways, this example seeks to demonstrate that the dialectical unity in diversity implicitly modeled in

the guidance fosters a truth-productive clash of differing opinions while maintaining group-protective unity.

#### 'ABDU'L-BAHÁ'S DISTINCTION BETWEEN DESTRUCTIVE AND PRODUCTIVE DIFFERENCES

In His first Tablet to the Hague, 'Abdu'l-Bahá distinguishes between destructive and productive differences. In this tablet, 'Abdu'l-Bahá advises an organization of advocates trying to establish an enduring peace in the aftermath of the first World War.<sup>27</sup> Addressing people made highly aware of the dangers of human difference by a grueling and deadly conflict, He acknowledges that differences can lead to immense suffering and wasteful destruction when dealt with improperly, but nevertheless forcefully insists that diversity handled in another way can be "the cause of the appearance of divine bestowals." Drawing on metaphors—the rich diversity of a garden, and the varied but coordinated parts of a body—He contrasts the kind of difference "that is the cause of annihilation" with that which "reinforceth harmony, [in which] diversity strengtheneth love, and multiplicity is the greatest factor for co-ordination." Echoing terms used in discussing Bahá'í consultation, He writes that "[n]aught but the celestial potency of the Word of God . . . is

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27 This is the first of two tablets from 'Abdu'l-Bahá written in response to letters to Him from the Executive Committee of the Central Organization for a Durable Peace. See Tablets to the Hague, note 1.

capable of harmonizing the divergent thoughts, sentiments, ideas, and convictions” of people (42).

In a more subtle way, we can detect this distinction in the passages from ‘Abdu’l-Bahá quoted in Shoghi Effendi’s letter. These show both the negative potential of differences—the threat of various kinds of hurt feelings, “discord,” and “estrangement”—as well as the positive contribution of diversity—the truth-generating scrum of clashing opinions that can harmonize into a unity of thought. Notably, too, the passages view differences in different ways, even in contiguous sentences: the wary note struck by “if, the Lord forbid, differences of opinion should arise” directly follows the affirmation that “the shining spark of truth” comes forth from “the clash of differing opinions” (¶ 11). While, as already argued, “the clash of differing opinions” holds a central role in the functioning of Bahá’í consultation, the bulk of the guidance in the letter focuses on ways to moderate the process so as to unify the Assembly members. The clash of differing opinions is enveloped in unity, not only in the arrangement of the text, but in the philosophy, practices, and culture it indicates.

#### THE MUTUAL MODERATION OF UNITY AND DIVERSITY

In ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s writings unity and diversity are inextricably intertwined.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> This is true as well in the history of philosophy (see T. Smith, “Crisis” 85–92).

Looking at them as separate categories is more of a heuristic than a reflection of reality. Their intertwining is reflected in Shoghi Effendi’s letter, which constantly shifts focus from unity to diversity: from unifying qualities and acts, to healthy and unhealthy forms of difference. This interplay in the text may suggest that when there is a mix of the right kinds of unity and the right kinds of diversity, they foster each other in a virtuous cycle. As Todd Smith writes,

The relationship between unity and diversity, therefore, is dialectical: each only truly flourishes when in dynamic interplay with the other . . . . In short, unity without diversity is uniformity, lifelessness, subjugation. Diversity without unity is invariably ineffectual and even perilous to both the collective and, consequently (and ironically), the individual. Hence the principle of unity in diversity. (“Crisis” 90)

That is, unity and diversity are in a continuous dance with each other, and only when they each dance their part can their risks be avoided. Consultation “must be a language which encourages the independent candour of individual understanding, and simultaneously protects the close bonds of connection between people” (Nakhjavání 98). As touched on in Example 1 and expanded on below, it is the very unity of the Assembly consultation that fosters the expression of all perspectives,

especially the exposition of critique and disagreement; simultaneously, the expressed disagreement, when handled correctly, fosters an eventual harmonization of thought and a unity of decision. Furthermore, the tolerance and promotion of the risky business of airing all disagreements also affirms and enhances an implicit confidence in the group's ability to resolve at least some amount of conflict.

#### THE PERILS OF AN EMPHASIS ON DIFFERENCES: CONFLICT AND HURT FEELINGS

Diversity carries with it consultation-breaking and even group-breaking risks. Shoghi Effendi's letter implicitly recognizes the risks of unwrapping the gift of diversity.

One such fundamental risk is that the clash of differing opinions might slide into interpersonal conflict or hardened oppositions. "[T]he truth will remain hidden" if a stubborn expression of differing opinions leads to "discord and wrangling" (§ 12).<sup>29</sup> If inharmonious disputes and angry argument occur, the main goal of the consultation—

the discovery of truth—will be as blocked as if the consultative meeting had never happened. Even worse, if the consultation remains in a state of disunity, it will undermine any agency the group has and may even threaten the continued existence of the institution: "Should harmony of thought and absolute unity be nonexistent, that gathering shall be dispersed and that assembly be brought to naught" (§ 12). If disunity and hurt feelings grow, as the letter implicitly acknowledges may happen, members of the group may refuse to continue discussion, may resist coming to a unity of thought, and may fail to carry out or fully support any decisions made and thus block the gathering of more data through action. Disunity may even sour the members' willingness to reconvene to continue the cycle of learning.

The letter contains even more dire warnings against letting disagreement generate the separation, unfriendliness, or hostility of estrangement:

*the members of the assembly . . . must be wholly free from estrangement . . . . In short, whatsoever thing is arranged in harmony and with love and purity of motive, its result is light, and should the least trace of estrangement prevail the result shall be darkness upon darkness . . . . If this be so regarded, that assembly shall be of God, but otherwise it shall lead to coolness and alienation that proceed from the Evil One. (§ 12)*

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29 The Universal House of Justice notes similarly in a letter to the United States Bahá'ís that "criticism is a two-edged sword: it is all too often the harbinger of conflict and contention. The balanced processes of the Administrative Order are meant to prevent this essential activity from degenerating to any form of dissent that breeds opposition and its dreadful schismatic consequences" (29 Dec. 1988 ¶35).



If even “the least trace of estrangement prevail[s]”—if even the smallest measure of this destructive kind of difference persists in the meeting—then it may infect the whole institution with “coolness and alienation,” creating and widening distance among the members. These passages imply that emotional hardening such as “ill-feeling,” “discord,” and “estrangement” may break the group itself, and the members are advised in Shoghi Effendi’s letter to consult “in such wise” that these will not arise (§ 11). Similarly, in another letter, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá writes that Assembly members “should exert their efforts so that no differences may occur” (*Consultation* no. 18); the effort to prevent “differences” should be a constant undercurrent of the ideal consultation meeting. Note that the “differences” intended here are clearly disputes and quarrels, not the kind of difference required in the clash of differing opinions. “Differences” in this sense, in addition to a hardening of hostile feelings among members, may also imply simply a hardening of the boundaries separating differing opinions. A productive difference, in contrast, allows for the careful work of meshing and harmonizing opinions.

We thus turn again to the balancing act of limiting hurt feelings while enabling full, universal expression of differing opinions, but this time with a closer look at the risks to the relationships within the Assembly.

Additional Bahá’í writings on consultation underline that full expression is protected even at the risk of hurt

feelings. “[E]very member” expressing “with absolute freedom his own opinion” and “[setting] forth his argument” (§ 11) implies a frankness, candor, and unfettered expression in consultation, which Shoghi Effendi repeatedly and explicitly calls for in other letters (*Consultation* nos. 26, 27, 38). Unfettered speech elicits socially challenging opinions, particularly the criticism of fellow members’ cherished ideas, which Example 1 demonstrated is necessary for achieving transformative interrogation during the clash of differing opinions. Likewise, the admonition that “[s]hould any one oppose, he must on no account feel hurt” (§ 11) acknowledges the likelihood that the member whose idea is being criticized will indeed feel hurt by another member; nevertheless, the speaker is not called upon to withhold their criticism. A 1935 letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi confirms that “it is not only the right but the sacred obligation of every member to express freely and openly his views, without being afraid of displeasing or alienating any of his fellow members” (*Consultation* no. 32). This guidance implicitly recognizes that one might be tempted to withhold one’s thoughts for fear of how they will be received; however, this minefield of potential displeasure, hurt feelings, and alienation must be navigated to enable the frank and full expression needed for the clash of differing opinions.

Before considering how the unity called for in the letter might moderate the potential dangers of this kind

of free expression, we must first ask whether unity, when misunderstood, presents its own pitfalls.

#### THE PERILS OF AN EMPHASIS ON UNITY: HEGEMONY AND SILENCE

‘Abdu’l-Bahá emphasizes several variations of unity as critical to the consultation:

*The first condition is absolute love and harmony amongst the members of the assembly. They must be wholly free from estrangement and must manifest in themselves the Unity of God, for they are the waves of one sea, the drops of one river, the stars of one heaven, the rays of one sun, the trees of one orchard, the flowers of one garden. Should harmony of thought and absolute unity be nonexistent, that gathering shall be dispersed and that assembly be brought to naught. (¶ 12)*

Not only does He mention love, harmony, lack of estrangement, and unity itself as necessary here, but He underscores the commitment to unity by revealing its desired qualities. He employs superlative modifiers—“absolute, “wholly free,” “of God”—and plays out a cadence of metaphors—“the waves of one sea,” “the stars of one heaven.” Together these describe an intense ideal and a clear commitment to establishing, maintaining, and augmenting the members’ unity.

The trajectory of a swell of clashing opinions complicates—and sheds

light on—the meaning of this ideal. The intended unity cannot mean that consultants must always avoid disagreement, risky proposals, or any emotionally charged discussion, as that would impede the full, universal expression of differing opinions. This unity cannot be defined as a facile similarity to be discovered, or as a simple evasion of conflict or disagreement. Misunderstanding unity as a uninterrogated, fragile similarity would turn the participants’ attention away from exploring how their opinions differ, shutting down their curiosity and openness to listen to and comprehend others’ perspectives. “[W]ith absolute freedom” (¶ 11) indicates, as discussed above, that it is especially the clashing opinions that must be voiced, heard, and considered. Moreover, it is not *despite* but *because of* the expression of everyone’s opinion that the correct kind of unity is built. It is precisely “when every member expresseth with absolute freedom” their own opinion and argument that the prevention of “ill-feeling or discord . . . can be attained” (¶ 11).

A shared commitment to universal and full expression sensitizes all participants to the ways in which others’ ability or willingness to present their true thoughts might be impinged. Logic, human experience, social science, and psychology flesh out the various, often subtle reasons why someone might be quiet, or be ignored if they speak. Hindrances might include a shy temperament, or fear that comments on sensitive issues may be

taken out of context or shared outside the consultation.<sup>30</sup> They might include one's own discomfort at holding an unconventional idea, or one that challenges cultural norms. Participants might hold back from expressing an idea that could be taken to be critical of another's contribution, or hesitate to share while searching for a tactful way to say something.

Some barriers to free expression relate less to the content being shared, and more to how it is shared or to the social positionality of the speaker or hearers. These may include the fear of misunderstanding when either speakers or listeners are using a non-native language, or when some participants use a dialect or a higher grade-level of language not understood by all, or language that is stigmatized. In diverse settings, differing cultural expectations around how long a pause in speaking is required before the next speaker begins may hinder free expression (Endrass et al. 7); similar gaps may exist between expectations, rooted in culture or individual personality, around how much thought is required before speaking, or even how complex a speaker's contributions should be. If some speakers present and frame ideas in harmful ways that manipulate speech or logic or historical narratives related to the current situation, this can be a barrier to others' contributions (T. Smith, "Crisis"). Hindrances to free

expression may arise "if the friends, knowingly or unknowingly, reproduce in their interactions and their association with society the same tendencies that foment prejudice" (Universal House of Justice, 1 Nov. 2022 ¶ 17), including dynamics in the wider society concerning ethnic-, class-, age-, racial- or gender-based invisibility or hypervisibility (McCluney and Rabelo; Rabelo et al.); participants with personal history experiencing such dynamics may be particularly at risk of being silenced when they are reproduced in consultation (Williams 73–75).<sup>31</sup>

The implicit guidance of the Bahá'í texts on consultation is that we must not only learn about these hindrances, but also notice when they might be in play, and learn how to overcome them. Writing about "the factors that create social environments in which ethnic prejudice proliferates," for example,

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31 The fact that some participants' contributions may, even inadvertently, act to stifle the contributions of others highlights the complexity of the concept of "absolute freedom" to express one's opinion. While the moderating influence of the ideal of unity is used to highlight some parameters for understanding this freedom in this paper, a full discussion of the boundaries of free expression is beyond its scope. On the importance and also limits of freedom, see especially the House of Justice's 29 December 1988 letter to the followers of Bahá'u'lláh in the United States. While discussing the wide freedom encouraged within Assembly consultation, note that the House of Justice draws a line against criticism that undermines the authority of the Covenant.

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30 As noted earlier, consultation within Bahá'í Spiritual Assemblies and the Universal House of Justice is confidential and not to be shared outside the meeting.

the Universal House of Justice asserts that “[a]ll well-meaning people have a duty to increase their consciousness of such factors and to strengthen their capacity to counteract them” (1 Nov. 2022 ¶17).

Enabling others to overcome these kinds of obstacles to expression is likely to involve consciousness raising. The mandate for full, universal expression also implicitly guides participants to notice when and why they themselves are holding back. Rationalizing one’s own continued silence, for whatever reason—as a contribution to a spurious similarity, as protection of one’s own feelings, as a matter of efficiency—becomes less tenable. As Shoghi Effendi emphasizes by calling the expression of one’s opinion “not only the right but the sacred obligation” of the individual consultor, even fear of “displeasing or alienating” other members does not justify withholding the necessary full expression of one’s views.

Further complicating the matter, the number and depth of the challenges to free expression tends to grow as a function of the diversity of the participants. As the Universal House of Justice writes in 1989, the achievement of full participation may require the courage to speak frankly about such hindrances within Assembly consultation, especially noting the kinds of hurdles that stem from more diverse membership:

If an Assembly member feels that there are barriers affecting the consultation of the body, he should frankly and courageously raise

his concerns; these barriers could include, for example, the consultation moving at a speed which confuses him, language being used which he cannot understand, behavioral characteristics which unwittingly express condescension leading to the humiliation of others, or a feeling that one is being ignored. Such barriers may well arise as the Faith continues its inexorable progress in creating dynamic consultative bodies which bring together, in a spirit of unity and equality, the historically divided elements of humanity. (22 Jun. 1989 ¶ 5)

This kind of incisive and challenging criticism of deterrents to full expression can be seen as an extension of the call for detaching oneself “from all else save God” (¶ 11): truly hearing criticism of a barrier that one has contributed to—even (or especially) inadvertently—requires as much detachment as hearing challenges to one’s substantive ideas in consultation, and raising such a criticism of the process the group has co-created and been following requires detachment and courage, too. Thus, another implicit element of the guidance on consultation is that consultors must be willing to do often-challenging emotion work, such as not letting fear or emotional identification with ideas rule their behavior within the consultation meeting. Similarly, a commitment to truth-seeking “in every matter” (¶ 12) is needed to sustain the sometimes-difficult work

of enabling full, universal participation in the clash of differing opinions.

Participants in consultation are facilitators of universal, full expression whether they are currently speakers or listeners. Consultation depends on a “mingling of contraries . . . all the participants are both ear and tongue, are both the active force at one time and its recipient at another” (Nakhjavání 100). ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s passages quoted in Shoghi Effendi’s letter alternate between the perspectives of listener and speaker, subtly indicating that consultants will change roles frequently. For example, “he must with moderation set forth the truth” (¶ 12) shows us how to behave as speakers; “[t]hey must in every matter search out the truth and not insist upon their own opinion” (¶ 12) primarily indicates how we should be as listeners. “Should any one oppose, he must on no account feel hurt” (¶ 11) implicitly pairs the one struggling to not feel hurt with the one trying to tactfully critique the idea, who must with “courtesy . . . care and moderation” (¶ 12) speak “in such wise that no occasion for ill-feeling . . . may arise” (¶ 11). Because the listener has always just finished being the speaker, and the speaker the listener, the role switching nurtures empathy and a golden-rule reciprocity in treating others well. Multiple stints as listener and as speaker rapidly generate a fund of experience from which to learn what it takes to listen attentively and what it takes to speak tactfully, how difficult each of these tools may be to use and the forbearance required to let

others learn how, and the detachment and self-control and creativity required to wield them effectively. In addition, the role switching generates many opportunities to learn from the skillful or even flawed performances of fellow consultants in a sort of apprenticeship (Lave and Wenger); sensitized to the various ideals in the guidance and to the difficulties of getting these dynamics just right, especially skillful consultants will be noticed and learned from as role models. In this way, the learning within the consultation meetings may also generate a change in culture within the group that may possibly radiate outward as well.<sup>32</sup>

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32 This dynamic points toward virtuous cycles of learning about consultation that may exist in several additional forms throughout the community. Skillful consultation can be modeled by any member of the community at Feast, or during team, committee, or nucleus meetings, for example; these can build skills within current or potential members of the Assembly. Instruction in and practice of consultation skills within community children’s classes and junior youth groups can undoubtedly spur on accelerated growth in the communities and institution’s capacity for consultation; children’s capacity to quickly learn may see them exceed their teachers’ and parents’ capacity (for example, see Reynolds and Orellana). In addition, the Assembly can incorporate and advance learning as an institution. These dynamics can be seen as some of the ways that the three protagonists—the key triad in the advancement of civilization identified by the Universal House of Justice—enable each other to manifest their potential (30 Dec. 2021 ¶ 3).

This perspective on the importance of free expression, the barriers it can face, and the “apprenticeship” approach to consultation can help us better understand what is meant by unity in Bahá’í consultation, and what is not meant. Misunderstanding the Bahá’í writings’ emphasis on unity as a call to hide differences can harm social relationships on multiple scales. If criticism is withheld, blocked, or hidden in any society, its capacity for critical thought may suffer grave wounds: such a society risks suppressing freedom, facilitating oppression, causing stagnation, and inviting totalitarianism (Lample, *Revelation* 216). Ruptures in the bonds between community and institutions can be caused if an Assembly blocks criticism, for instance: it thwarts the spirit of the inviting and trust-building relationship it should cultivate with the community, which finds its expression in consultation with and on behalf of the community (*Bahá’í Administration* 143). Within the consultation meeting itself, suppressing diversity can instate oppression of individual members or segments of the community, and lead to stagnation in the institution’s capacity to read reality accurately and creatively. Thus, mistaking mere conflict avoidance for unity can cause an unintentional privileging of one set of ideas over others or one set of people over others; not only does this limit the transformative capacity of the group to investigate reality as explored in Example 1, but it also causes estrangement among the silent or silenced participants. In short, the

unity intended in the passages cited by Shoghi Effendi—a unity that embraces and enables diversity’s expression—is incompatible with hegemony (including of the Assembly over the community or over individual initiative) and actively works against patterns of domination that can be found in the culture at large.

The unity described in Shoghi Effendi’s letter implies a collective commitment to everyone’s full involvement in the consultation process, and to the complicated psychological, social, and cultural understanding this may require. It is a unity that calls for an evolving experience of empathy, a process of learning about each other and about ourselves. After the potential swell of expressions of differences has played out, when the clashing of opinions has meshed and harmonized the no-longer-latent, diverse views, and collectively the group has generated new solutions, then—and only then—the group will be primed to find a unity that is more akin to similarity: unity of thought and commitment to action at the end.

Coming back around to the requisite “first condition” of “absolute love and harmony” and “absolute unity” (§ 12), we can now see these terms in the light of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s firm commitment to protect and promote the clash of the full range of differing opinions. Absolute love and unity does not require the subjugation of differing opinions to achieve a surface or forced similarity or agreement; the word “absolute” here cannot be understood as



simply a vague intensifier of our assumed definitions of love and unity as free from disagreement (“Absolute,” II8b). We must turn instead to another meaning of absolute—“unconditional, unreserved, unqualified” (“Absolute” IV15a). The absolute love and unity ‘Abdu’l-Bahá describes are unconditioned by the members’ agreement or disagreement, by similarity or dissimilarity, even by natural pulls of either negative or positive emotions. Absolute love and unity call forth the above-mentioned detachment from individual ownership or identification with ideas, and, further, call consultants to remain unflappable in the face of differences of personality, conflictual histories, recognition of others’ flaws, and heated clashes of differing opinions. The ultimate instance of absolute love and unity is found in the love of the infallible God—“exalted above all peer or likeness” (*Bahá’í Prayers* 137)—for innately fallible human souls: an unconditional love reaching across an impassable chasm. And, indeed, Shoghi Effendi’s letter calls on consultants to “manifest in themselves the Unity of God” (¶ 12).

This dive into the perils of a misperceived notion of unity should in no way detract from the repeated emphasis on unity in ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s quotes. Clearly, a correctly perceived unity holds up a shield over the consultation meeting, perhaps even when partially employed: “[i]n short, whatsoever thing is arranged in harmony and with love and purity of motive, its result is light” (¶ 12). While affirming the

fundamental commitment of the faith to self-expression, the House of Justice notes how important it is to preserve “the unifying spirit of the Cause of God” as a protection against the potential splintering harms of full expression: “Motive, manner, mode, become relevant; but there is also the matter of love: love for one’s fellows, love for one’s community, love for one’s institutions” (29 Dec. 1988 ¶ 34). Love, pure intentions, and harmony buffer against the risks of diversity.

#### IMPLICATIONS FOR THE IMPERFECTIONS OF ACTUAL PRACTICE

Shoghi Effendi alludes in a different letter to the complexity—the challenging balance of principles—required to achieve “the spirit of frank and loving consultation”:

Nothing short of the spirit of a true Bahá’í can hope to reconcile the principles of mercy and justice, of freedom and submission, of the sanctity of the right of the individual and of self-surrender, of vigilance, discretion and prudence on the one hand, and fellowship, candor, and courage on the other. (*Consultation* no. 23)

Given the complexity of the many dialectical principles involved, does Bahá’í consultation require highly skilled consultants in order to work? Can the subtle and intricate dance of the unfettered expression of difference and the ideal kinds of unity be

accomplished by everyday people, full of mistake-making possibilities?

The Universal House of Justice, in emphasizing how important it is to be ready to accept that mistakes will occur in our attempts to build the world anew, calls us to be ready to cope with imperfection—in ourselves, as well as in others. In its *Riḍván* 2021 message, the House of Justice reviews the accomplishments of Bahá'í communities in the preceding quarter century, describing mistakes as an innate part of community learning:

A commitment to learning also meant being prepared to make mistakes—and sometimes, of course, mistakes brought discomfort. Unsurprisingly, new methods and approaches were handled inexpertly at first because of a lack of experience; on occasion, a newly acquired capacity of one kind was lost as a community became absorbed in developing another. Having the best of intentions is no guarantee against making missteps, and moving past them requires both humility and detachment. When a community has remained determined to show forbearance and learn from mistakes that naturally occur, progress has never been out of reach. (¶ 10)

While the House of Justice's commentary here pertains to collective plans and a community's cycles of learning, this anticipation of mistakes may apply also to the smaller-scale interactions

that form the backbone of the consultative meeting. What is explicit in this statement, I suggest in the remainder of this example, is implicit also in Shoghi Effendi's guidance on Bahá'í consultation.

A deep self-analysis and a lifelong spiritual practice might be required to move a person significantly towards ideals such as “purity of motive, radiance of spirit, [and] detachment from all else save God” (¶ 11). If achievement of this ideal level of absolute love and a dialectical unity in diversity were considered prerequisites to Bahá'í consultation, then few would be able to participate. Shoghi Effendi clearly does not intend to place restrictions on who should employ consultation, which Bahá'u'lláh prescribes “in all matters” (“*Lawḥ-i-Maqṣúd*” ¶ 15); indeed, his letter's purpose is to advocate adoption of this method by all Bahá'í Assemblies, no matter how new and inexperienced.

In addition to these ideals, and consistent with consultation's intended use by all, Shoghi Effendi's letter also contains simpler, practical, and perhaps even technical guidance, accommodating consultors' flaws and adapted to varying levels of consulting and spiritual capacity. This straightforward guidance can help prevent the more destructive kinds of differences from arising among the consultors, provides means to mitigate them if they do appear, and indicates an expectation of and accommodation for a range of mistakes.

“ENACTING ETHOS” AS A MODEL OF  
MANAGING MORAL MISTAKES

My reading of Shoghi Effendi's letter as anticipating and accommodating mistakes, rather than as expounding an explicit, invariable, pure, and inflexible moral code demanding nothing less than perfect adherence is based on viewing the subtle and complex observations in the guidance as weaving an implicit “ethos,” an ideal “emotional atmosphere” (Garro 301; Bateson 30, 118–59), for those seeking to practice consultation.

An ethos describes a particular set of relational and emotional values and ideals toward which people, through their small-scale interactions, continually attempt to move. Garro uses this term to describe what shapes the everyday adjustments of the parents and school-aged children in a Mexican-American family in Los Angeles. She shows how the family members constantly reshuffle the sometimes-competing demands of their family ethos of “individual contentment and family harmony.” They are “enacting [the] ethos” in a “recurring interactional dynamic” of parents with children (Garro 301). The family ethos may arise when negotiating bedtime stories, enforcing the consequences of a 10-year-old dawdling over her shower, or encouraging the daughter to finish her plate of beans before drinking any more soda; in enacting the family's ethos the parents continually maintain and occasionally reestablish harmonious relationships and contentment for the individual

children within the micro-decisions of the “local moral world” of home life (304). In any given situation, especially when an individual child's desires conflict with a schedule or practice designed to promote family harmony, one or another of the sometimes-competing values may win out, generating errors and lapses and requiring constant adaptation to imperfections. Mom's unfulfilled request for the daughter to get showered in time to make cookies together before Mom's meeting pits the child's desire (to shower later but still make cookies) against the harmonious running of the family's schedule (not to mention the individual contentment of the mother). By figuring out how to resolve the unshowered child's dilemma, rather than insisting on strict application of the mother's instructions or punishment, the family elicits instead a creative working with the particular, often-urgent situation at hand.

Garro's analysis finds in the daily life of a family something more than simply a set of shared ideals. There is a flexible, gentle influence exerted by their family ethos. Garro's model for the enactment of an ethos anticipates imperfect and occasionally lapsing attempts by the participants to decide what to do in any specific instance, the whole complex set of ethos principles providing potentially contradictory indications for each case. This model, likewise, is useful for our analysis of the implicit processes underlying the guidance on Bahá'í consultation. The implied definitions of unity and diversity, and their intertwined, dialectical

nature in Shoghi Effendi's letter can be perceived more clearly when we see these definitions as a gently influential ethos, which we expect to be enacted in imperfect and uneven efforts.

We have already seen that the guidance's description of Bahá'í consultation in terms of unreachable ideals<sup>33</sup>—such as the “prime requisites” of “purity of motive” and “detachment from all else save God”—cannot logically imply that perfect compliance is necessary in order to practice Bahá'í consultation. Elucidated by the model of “enacting ethos,” we can instead view these ideals, woven throughout the passages, as exerting a weak magnetic force, drawing the consultors softly but persistently towards them. Where pure motives, detachment, and absolute love can be seen as elements of the ethos of Bahá'í consultation, their enactment might take the form of halting, but repeated and progressive, steps toward purifying motives, gaining detachment, or building empathy and noticing co-members' virtues. In this enactment of the ethos, a spiritual environment which fosters unity in diversity can be built incrementally.

Consistent with this model of an enacted ethos, we can detect in Shoghi Effendi's letter an implied theme of consultors' repeated mistake-filled efforts within imperfect conditions. In

a separate tablet, mentioned above, 'Abdu'l-Bahá states that consulting Assembly members “should exert their efforts so that no differences may occur” (*Consultation* no.18, emphasis mine); this implicitly envisions imperfect attempts rather than a perfect prevention of differences. Thus, where “no differences” is the ideal ethos, “exerting efforts” is the imperfect enactment of it. Exertion of effort—the enactment of the ethos—is similarly implicit in Shoghi Effendi's letter. While “absolute love and harmony amongst the members” is the “first condition” (i.e., the ideal ethos), the statement that “[s]hould harmony of thought and absolute unity be nonexistent, that gathering shall be dispersed” (§ 12) implies that there is hope for the results of the gathering if even a little bit of harmony and unity exists (its imperfect enactment). While the members “must be wholly free from estrangement,” “should the least trace of estrangement prevail” (§ 12) indicates that, if estrangement arises during the meeting, the members need to make sure it does not prevail—that it does not become predominant or widespread within the consultation, or remain so at the end of the meeting. Members are to consult “in such wise that no occasion for ill-feeling or discord may arise”; nevertheless this principle is followed immediately by guidance on how to cope with such an occasion by quelling one's own ill-feeling during the clash of differing opinions by recalling its necessity: “Should any one oppose, he must on no account feel hurt for not until matters

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33 The assertion that perfect achievement of these ideals is ultimately unreachable should not be mistaken for the view that progress towards these ideals cannot be made. Even an asymptotic, near-perfect achievement may be possible.

are fully discussed can the right way be revealed” (§ 11). The letter implicitly anticipates these thorns of disunity and hurt—perhaps even implying that they may all be “natural” human tendencies, as Shoghi Effendi states about consultants’ tendency “to take sides” in a 1949 letter (*Consultation* no. 40). It is the repeated efforts to avoid or dull the thorn pricks of consultants’ errors that makes the consultation effective.

Not only do we find elevated ideals side-by-side with their imperfect enactments in the letter, but there is also an implied embrace of a wide range of consultation skill levels and a variety of consultation conditions. We will look at two examples taken from the letter to see how the enactment of ethos is expected, and mistakes accommodated, across this range.

#### AN ETHOS OF UNRUFFLED HARMONY AND A SPECTRUM OF ENACTMENT FROM HARMONY TO DISCORD

The ideal ethos for the clash of differing opinions, as we can discern from our previous discussions, might be conceived of as an unruffled harmony. In this ideal, the group collectively heightens and attunes understandings as insights are born from the clashing and meshing of the fully expressed opinions of all members. Everyone considers all contributed ideas with calm, rational detachment, taking no offense. Unity and diversity are flawlessly reconciled. In this perfect form, the clash of differing opinions is handled peacefully and productively “in

such wise that no occasion for ill-feeling or discord may arise” (§ 11).

Conversely, counter-productive and destructive ways of handling difference—those that cause “ill-feeling” and “discord”—are implicitly anticipated even in the statement of the ideal. A process in which difference is handled destructively might be imagined as the opposite of the ideal ethos described above: it would consist of negatively-charged, personalized, judgmental conflict, devoid of love and respect, which drives members’ relationships apart. This extreme case highlights the fact that a given instance of consultation might deviate from the ideal to a slight or a severe degree.

We might usefully envision a spectrum, with the harmonious ideal and its discordant contrary constituting the opposing poles, and a range of possible flawed enactments arrayed in between them. The broader context of Shoghi Effendi’s letter, as well as an additional letter from ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, supports a reading of the letter as implicitly referring to such a spectrum of mistakes in harmony-building. In an earlier section (§ 5) of the March 1922 letter, Shoghi Effendi warns Bahá’í communities against a variety of relationship-destructive, backbiting-adjacent differences, advocating that the community “obliterate as much as possible all traces of censure, of conflicting discussions, of cooling remarks, of petty unnecessary observations.” While this part of Shoghi Effendi’s guidance is not specific to consultation, we might consider avoidance of these behaviors

as ways in which the Assembly members are to build the “*first condition*” of “*absolute love*” and perhaps also the “*prime requisites*” of “*purity of motive*” (§ 12 and § 11). Crucially, the emphasis on removing *as much of these as possible* implies once again that a perfect enactment is not necessary to achieve the core function of managing differences while enhancing unity.

A similar implication arises from the passage cited above in which ‘Abdu’l-Bahá writes of the need to “exert efforts.” He goes on to clarify where the furthest point of acceptable discord within consultation lies:

The honoured members of the Spiritual Assembly should exert their efforts so that no differences may occur, and if such differences do occur, they should not reach the point of causing conflict, hatred and antagonism, which lead to threats. When you notice that a stage has been reached when enmity and threats are about to occur, you should immediately postpone discussion of the subject, until wranglings, disputations, and loud talk vanish, and a propitious time is at hand. (*Consultation* no. 18)

This passage again implies a spectrum, between the ideal where no differences occur and the point of conflict, hatred, antagonism, and threats. Within the spectrum defined by these poles, there is a wide expanse of less-than-ideal consultation, within which repair is possible through the members’

exerting efforts to (re)establish enough unity to enable the clash of differing opinions. Even if a group nears the negative extreme of the spectrum, and experiences “wranglings, disputations, and loud talk,” repair is still possible—although the appropriate repair involves the relatively extreme step of delaying the consultation. A growing estrangement severe enough to require shutting down the consultation topic before the clash of differing opinions has completed its work can be seen as the extreme boundary beyond which the meeting is irreparable.<sup>34</sup>

We might visualize a spectrum of consultative conditions, from harmony to discord, as follows, with the ideal

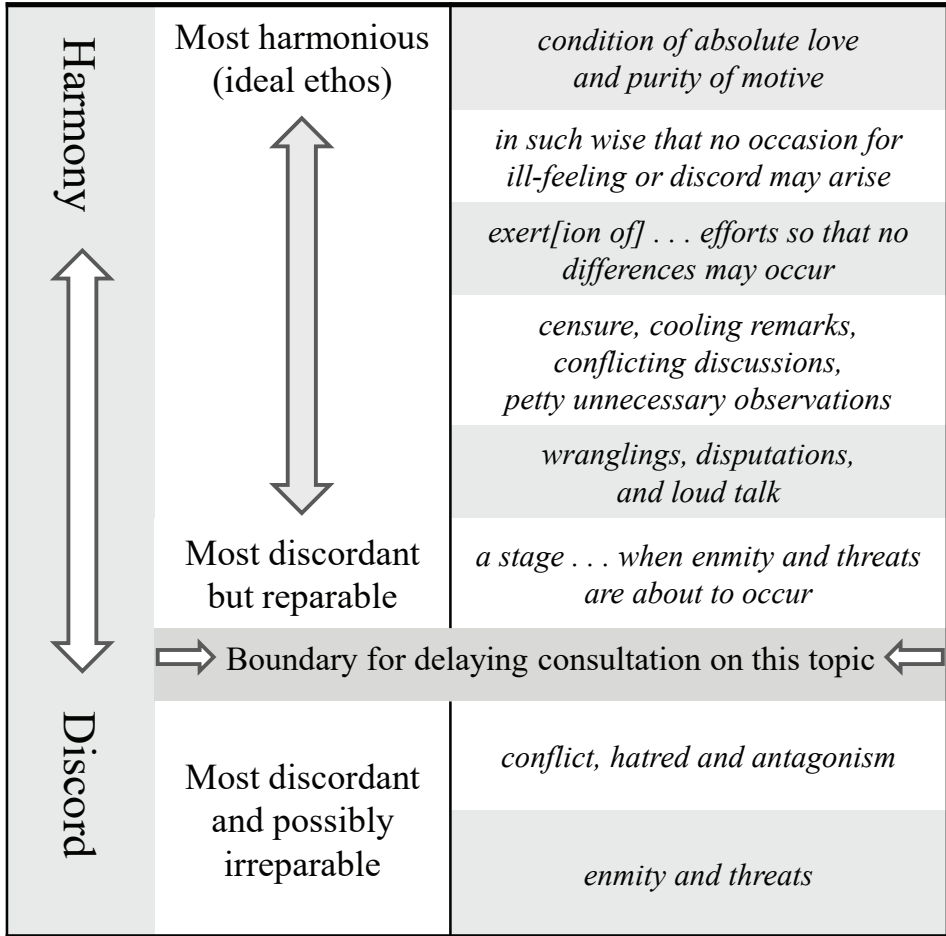
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34 It is worth noting that simply taking a vote is *not* prescribed as the solution to a heated disagreement, whether it reaches the point indicated by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá or not. Taking a vote and abiding by the majority decision could be seen as a way to create harmony “if . . . differences of opinion should arise.,” that is, in context, when the differing opinions are not harmonizing and meshing. I suggest, however, that this should only happen in the later stage of consultation, “after discussion,” during the period in which consultors are attempting to come to a collective conclusion; in other words, after the conclusion of the clash of differing opinions (§ 11). If an Assembly develops the habit of moving too quickly to a vote in order to cool down emotions, it risks concluding that the issue has been rationally resolved and need not be taken up again. Using voting as an escape from the discomfort of disagreement, then, can become an inadvertent means for suppressing minority opinions.



ethos representing the extreme of harmony, the irreparable condition the extreme of discord, and the expected imperfect enactments of the ethos arrayed in between:

Figure A: ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s guidance on harmony and discord in consultation visualized as a spectrum. All passages are quoted from *Bahá’í Administration* and from *Consultation: A Compilation*.



Seeing these various levels of harmony and discord arrayed on a spectrum allows us, practically speaking, to detect trends of growing discord or of budding harmony within a given consultation meeting. The spectrum shows that “loud talk” is more concerning than “petty unnecessary observations” and less concerning than a gathering storm of threats, and differentiates the kinds of discord that

demand “efforts” to build a more unified spirit for the consultation from those that require the consultation to be delayed. Additionally, a spectrum suggests the possibility of near-infinite gradations. It can accommodate other, unmentioned signs of discord or harmony such as those already discussed that social science may help to identify, and which also may require the members’ efforts to quell or

foster. A spectrum expands our sensitivities and imaginations, alerting us to warning signs that the potential risks of full, diverse, differing expression are being realized, and need to be immersed in greater unity. Bearing this spectrum in mind can help consultors maintain optimism about the possibility of improvement, learning, repair, and mitigation in the face of mistake-making in the enactment of the ideal ethos of harmony, particularly since the extreme boundaries of reparable discord are clearly marked. Consultors are assured implicitly that even “wranglings,” a series of “cooling remarks,” or some hurt feelings can still be repaired.

AN ETHOS OF VIRTUE-MODERATED  
SPEECH AND A SPECTRUM  
OF ENACTMENT FROM IDEALLY-  
MODERATED TO UNMODERATED

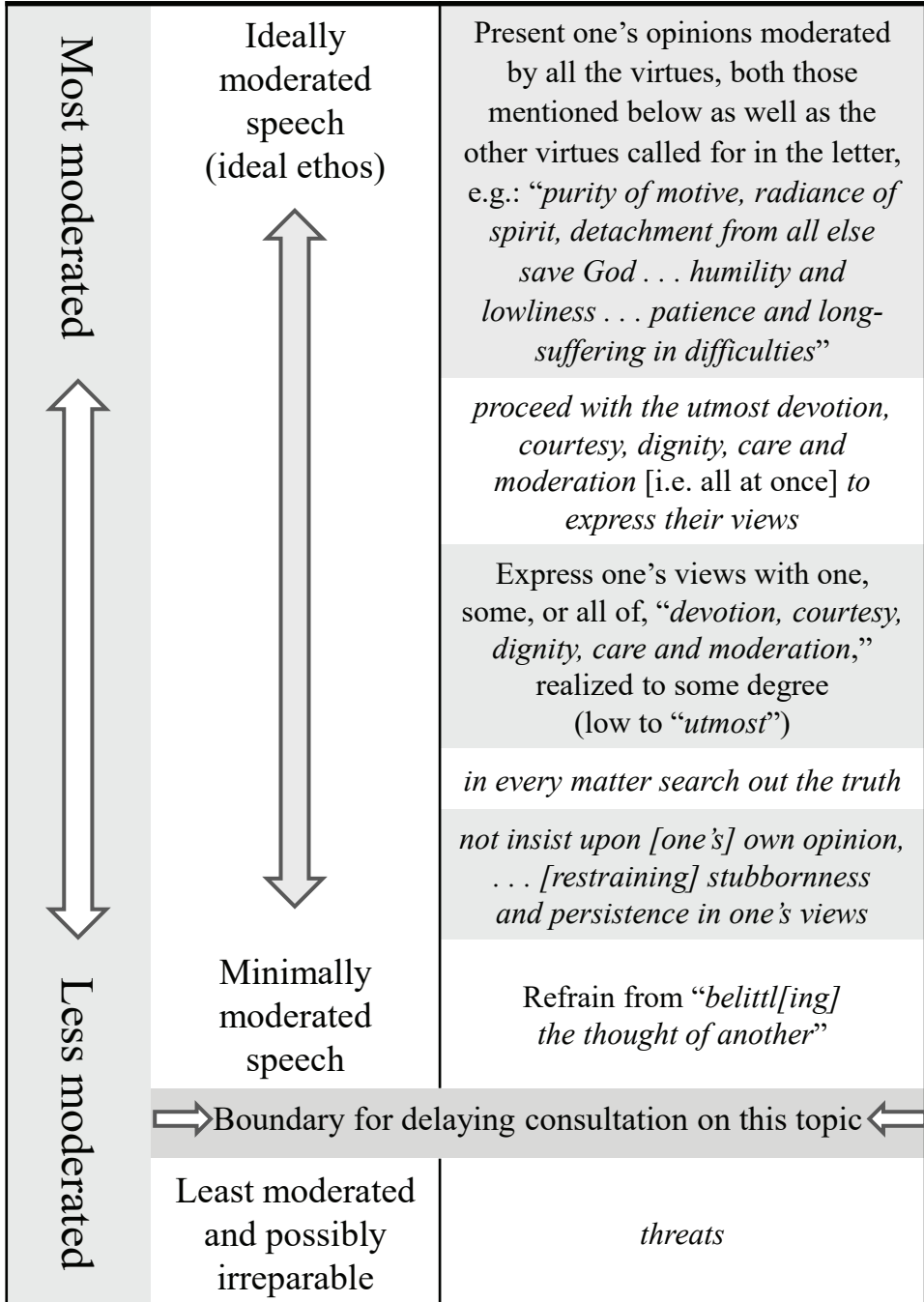
The second example of an ethos of enactment relates to the ideal of moderation of speech. As Bahá'u'lláh writes, “Human utterance is an essence which aspireth to exert its influence and needeth moderation. . . . As to its moderation, this hath to be combined with tact and wisdom as prescribed in the Holy Scriptures and Tablets” (“Lawḥ-i-Maqṣúd” ¶ 29). Consciousness of unity ideally moderates speech in consultation (Smith and Ghaemmaghami 14), and moderation of speech in turn nurtures unity among the members. This theme of moderation is addressed in Shoghi Effendi’s letter, which also can be seen as describing an implicit spectrum involving an ideal ethos and its imperfect enactment.

Ideally-moderated speech entwines several virtues:

*They must then proceed with the utmost devotion, courtesy, dignity, care and moderation to express their views. They must in every matter search out the truth and not insist upon their own opinion, for stubbornness and persistence in one’s views will lead ultimately to discord and wrangling... The honored members must with all freedom express their own thoughts, and it is in no wise permissible for one to belittle the thought of another; nay, he must with moderation set forth the truth. (¶ 11)*

Courtesy, humility, truth-seeking motives, respect, detachment, control over one’s emotions, recognition of the social and intellectual cues occurring in the meeting—these are the virtues and skills of an ideal consultor. Of course, all the virtues and relationships discussed in the letter moderate the quality of speech during consultation, but we can consider the ones mentioned here as especially important for the moderation of speech in order to build unity among the members. I suggest the following tentative ordering of virtues and skills as corresponding to more or less moderate speech; while the specific ordering is certainly open to rearrangement, the goal is to again highlight the range of ways in which the ethos (of moderation, in this case) can foster a productive consultation even when imperfectly enacted:

Figure B: ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s guidance on moderation of speech in consultation visualized as a spectrum. All passages are quoted from *Bahá’í Administration* and from *Consultation: A Compilation*.



In practice, within a consultation meeting each individual consultor will have their own mix of these strengths and weaknesses, and in varying intensities. Yet, broadly speaking, there is a rough continuum of moderate speech during consultation, spanning from its ideal ethos through its various imperfect enactments.

As with the discord-harmony spectrum, this moderated speech spectrum covers a wide range of behavior and attitudes, from the nuanced presentation of “courtesy, dignity, care and moderation” to the rudimentary non-belittling of others’ opinions. The consultors’ skills and virtues will likely improve with more practice, and as they observe their fellow consultors employing them skillfully. Participants in any given consultation meeting will likely exhibit a range of combinations of moderating virtues, each expressed to a different level. One consultor may excel most in courtesy while another may always search out the truth—perhaps, sometimes, without tact. This skill diversity generates opportunities for all the members to learn and improve, and for accompaniment to occur in cycles of humble collective learning. The implied spectrum in the letter indicates that consultation can proceed well enough despite an imperfectly enacted ethos of moderated speech, which enables this learning. No one error in speech (or expression of discord, as in the previous spectrum) necessarily dooms the consultative clash of differing opinions—at least up to the outer boundary of enmity and threats.

As long as enough of any mistakes that cause some degree of estrangement are remedied within the consultation meeting—so that “the least trace of estrangement” does not “prevail”—there is hope for an emergent truth to spark out of the clash of differing opinions.

#### EXAMPLE 2 DISCUSSION

Bahá’í consultation’s power, as we saw in Example 1, arises from the transformative gathering, unveiling, and clashing of differing opinions. Example 2 demonstrates how, although this clash of differing opinions risks disunifying the group, a dialectic of unity and diversity moderates these risks. Achieving the ideal balance of unity and diversity hinges on participants’ adept virtues, social acumen, and skillful communication; however, consultation nevertheless can be effectively used despite substantial mistakes.

Using Garro’s “enacting ethos” model as a lens reveals that the conflict-moderating principles and skills which can catalyze the unity-diversity dialectic are presented in two forms in Shoghi Effendi’s letter: first, as an ideal ethos which magnetically draws consultors toward its high standard, and, second, as imperfect enactments of this ideal, providing examples at various skill levels. The letter’s inclusion of imperfect enactments signals that mistakes are expected and that consultation is not too fragile to handle errors. This welcomes relatively unskilled or inexperienced consultors to participate in consultation.

Complementing the welcomed mistakes, Bahá'í consultation champions a love and unity that helps to repair relationships after mistakes, and thus encourages learning through experience and the achievement of transformative interrogation. An environment of love buffers consultors, enabling them to learn how to recognize when differences become destructive, and how to enact better versions of consultation's virtues and skills. This love and unity will be explored further in Example 3.

EXAMPLE 3. THE ASSEMBLY  
OPENING PRAYER AS A MINIATURE  
RITE OF PASSAGE

The blessings of Bahá'u'lláh are a  
shoreless sea. . . .

The waves of that sea are  
continually lapping against  
the hearts of the friends . . .  
until the heart giveth way,  
and willing or not,  
turneth humbly in prayer  
unto the Kingdom of the Lord.

—‘Abdu'l-Bahá  
(*Selections* 162:2)

Shoghi Effendi includes in his letter a prayer which ‘Abdu'l-Bahá advises Assembly members to recite “*whenever ye enter the council-chamber*” (qtd. in ¶ 8). How might this prayer be related to consultation? Why did Shoghi Effendi and ‘Abdu'l-Bahá prescribe it as the Assembly members’ preparation for the consultation meeting?

I argue that the Assembly opening prayer does not merely state and

reiterate key themes relevant to consultation, but facilitates their internalization: that is, the prayer’s structure may adjust understandings, feelings, and especially motivations in the consultors, facilitating their adoption of the complex consultation guidance examined earlier. I first briefly survey the themes of the prayer, before exploring how the prayer enables their internalization.

THE PRAYER’S EXPLICIT THEMES:  
SERVING GOD THROUGH  
THE PATH OF UNITY

The prayer sets out the overarching purpose for the coming Assembly meeting, that of translating the Bahá'í Revelation into service. It ushers the consultors to an explicit turning towards God, inviting detachment from concerns other than God, calling them to expect divine assistance, and refocusing their attention on service to God. Invocations to God punctuate the whole prayer, with no fewer than five interjections (such as “O God, my God!”) in this nine-sentence prayer. “[I]n this glorious Day”—the day of Bahá'u'lláh’s Revelation—the purpose of the members’ coming together is clearly stated as “exalt[ing] [God’s] Word amidst mankind.” To “achieve supreme victory,” members ask to be made “the signs of [His] Divine Guidance, the Standards of [His] exalted Faith,” and “servants to [His] mighty Covenant,” building into the personal practice of the members virtues, service, and support for the institutions of the Bahá'í Revelation.

These explicit statements mark out a clear purpose for the coming consultation meeting: translating Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation into active attempts at building the world anew. We see this purpose reflected a few paragraphs later in Shoghi Effendi's letter, when 'Abdu'l-Bahá lists exemplar topics for an Assembly consultation:

*Discussions must all be confined to spiritual matters that pertain to the training of souls, the instruction of children, the relief of the poor, the help of the feeble throughout all classes in the world, kindness to all peoples, the diffusion of the fragrances of God and the exaltation of His Holy Word. (§ 12)*

Each of these discussion topics—whether as specific as children's education or as broad as “the diffusion of the fragrances of God”—center around translating the divine remedies into service through the Assembly's leadership.

In addition to defining the purpose of the meeting, the prayer lays out the path the consultors need to follow: building unity amongst themselves. Four paragraphs after the Assembly opening prayer in Shoghi Effendi's letter, 'Abdu'l-Bahá describes the “first condition” of “absolute love and harmony” and “absolute unity.” 'Abdu'l-Bahá illustrates this ideal unity ethos through nature metaphors, calling on the members to “*manifest in themselves the Unity of God, for they are the waves of one sea, the drops of one river,*

*the stars of one heaven, the rays of one sun, the trees of one orchard, the flowers of one garden*” (§ 12). These unity metaphors plainly echo those used in the Assembly opening prayer that the reader of the letter will have just perused: “*that we may unite even as the waves of one sea and become merged together as the rays of Thine effulgent Light*” (§ 8). The possibly metonymic repetition of unity metaphors of sea waves and light rays may suggest that the opening prayer is, by extension, also calling the consultors to the ethos of absolute love and unity.

Implicitly, absolute love and unity among the Assembly members during the meeting and beyond will facilitate the translation of the Bahá'í Revelation into active service. Achieving the divinely aided “supreme victory” will require the consultors to “[manifest] the spirit of union throughout the world,” and that unity-building clearly starts among the Assembly members.

#### THE PRAYER AS A STRUCTURED EXPERIENCE THAT GENERATES INTERNALIZATION OF DEEPER UNDERSTANDING AND MORAL OBLIGATION

We have seen how risky the necessary clash of differing opinions can be to the members' relationships, and how complex (though forgiving) the dance of unity with diversity that tends to these relationships. In the remainder of this example, anthropological theories will shine a light on the prayer's implicit mechanism for helping the



consultors internalize a kind of spirit that might most effectively mitigate these risks and inspire them to keep trying. That spirit is absolute love and unity, which we might again understand as an element of the ideal ethos that is asymptotically achievable. Beyond its substantive content, I argue, the text contains a built-in mechanism that shapes the prayer experience: it molds motive and mood to generate a desire in the consultors to embrace a more absolute, unconditional form of unity as the path to achieve the Assembly's purpose, and can thus foster an understanding and motivation useful to the consultation meeting.

To transform their practices, people must do more than simply recognize a goal, become familiar with a new practice, or understand the logic of a process (Strauss and Quinn 47, 93). In anthropological terms, there must be an *internalization*—in the case of the practice of Bahá'í consultation, the internalization of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's guidance, which transforms it from mere words to motivation and action (Spiro 2–9; Strauss, "Models and Motives" 1–2; Strauss and Quinn 9, 101–10, 258 n. 8). A scriptural idea's potential to affect the world is dependent on it traveling along a chain of deeper and deeper internalization: the ideas in the text need to be encountered, understood, become motivating, and get translated into behavior. Melford Spiro illustrates this principle by talking about different Christians' attitudes towards the principle of care for the poor. One

may merely acknowledge that charity is good, giving lip service to the principle, while another—say, Mother Teresa—may reorganize their whole lives to support the poorest people.

There are, of course, many ways to parse the meaning of this Assembly prayer, and its multivocality no doubt plays out in people's experiences of it, providing connections to varying life experiences, understandings, and situations. In what follows, I map out how its structure, shifting tone, and figurative language might foster a shared, overlapping experience for the consultors praying together. Why are there metaphors of resplendent stars, surging seas, flowing streams, and breezy, fruit-laden trees in the middle of a prayer to open the consultative meetings of Assemblies? Informed by anthropological theory, I explore how these literary elements might affect the experience of the Assembly members who recite this prayer—together, repeatedly—at the start of their meetings, and how it interacts with the other consultation guidance presented in Shoghi Effendi's letter.

#### THE STRUCTURE AND EFFECTS OF A RITE OF PASSAGE

In this reading of the prayer, I suggest that those who pray it together take a collective journey through six distinct and ordered steps corresponding to six sections of the prayer, which group together further into three stages. This three-stage journey follows the basic structure of a rite of passage, as

understood in anthropological theory, with a *pre-liminal* stage of separation; a *liminal* stage which generates *communitas*, an experience of a kind of unity; and a *post-liminal* stage which reintegrates the members into an orientation towards action. Viewed as a rite of passage in miniature, the prayer gently elicits a metamorphosis of the members' understanding and motivation, spurring them to leave behind individual concerns in order to embrace a heady vision of collective effectiveness.

Rites of passage intend to elicit psychological evolution and social changes in participants. The quintessential rite of passage restructures a person's social role and identity from child to adult, with others aimed at different kinds of social transformations—for instance to elevate someone to serve as tribal chief (*Drama* 13). Victor Turner argues that the rite's tripartite structure, discovered by Arnold van Gennep by comparing rites of passage across multiple cultures, comprises a kind of psychologically-salient cultural technology. Through the three stages of the rite, initiates journey from one state to another (hence *passage*). The first stage (pre-liminal) separates the initiate from everyday life and the customary social order, the middle stage (liminal) effects the desired transformation of the initiate, and the final and third stage (post-liminal) reintegrates the initiate back into society, in their new role.

The middle, liminal stage—a stressful intermediary condition for all

participants<sup>35</sup>—upends the social order, opening the participants' awareness to social potentialities beyond the daily status quo (Turner, *Ritual Process* 94–130; van Gennep 115); it suspends the societal norms the participants normally live by (Turner, *Drama* 13), generating an egalitarian awareness of the essential bond among all humans (Turner, *Ritual Process* 96). This effervescent experience of equality, which Turner calls “communitas” (96–97), allows “periodical reclassifications of reality and [humankind's] relationship to society, nature, and culture” (128–29). Revitalized by their experience of this mind-opening communitas, participants return to the world of action ready to put into practice what they have learned. The liminal stage gives the participants a temporary, expansive feeling of oneness and potentiality, and with it, a yearning to translate this oneness into reality.

That these rituals are so widespread across cultures indicates that they may be leveraging universal psychological susceptibilities to address an inherent feature of social structures—the periodic need for individuals to transition from one role to another—by facilitating the adaptation of the individual and the community to that transition. Might the Assembly opening prayer have the

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35 Liminal stages typically incorporate bodily and emotional stressors for the initiates, such as pain, isolation, severe and extraordinary experiences, or hallucinogenic drugs; the shift in embodied state aids in shifting the initiates' psychological and spiritual state.

potential to tap into similar psychological and social levers?<sup>36</sup>

The Assembly opening prayer provides a transformational experience *in miniature*, I suggest, both because of its simplicity and short duration, and because rather than enabling one large, single transition as in most rites of passage—from, say, “child” to “adult”—it has a gentle transformative effect, gaining in power over time as the prayer is repeated and the ensuing Assembly consultation is attempted. The opening

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36 While suggesting that the prayer might be employing these levers, I am not arguing that the Assembly opening prayer is a ritual, according to Bahá'í definitions. There are strong warnings in the Bahá'í writings against developing rituals beyond what Shoghi Effendi characterizes as the “absolute minimum” to which “Bahá'u'lláh has reduced” them (*Importance* no. 58). He specifically tells us to guard against developing rituals or ritualistic ways around reciting prayers (*Importance* no. 35) and “to avoid all forms of rigidity and uniformity in matters of worship” (*Prayer and Devotional Life* no.35). With few exceptions, there is no rigid requirement to use a particular prayer or passage for particular occasions (*Principles* 14), including this Assembly opening prayer. Indeed, this is not even the only opening prayer option currently available in the English language Bahá'í prayer books. Using the literature on rites of passage as a lens through which to view the prayer instead suggests that, since these rites are so universal, the form taps into something about human individual and social nature that promotes the transformation of understandings and motivation.

prayer plays out as waves breaking on a shoreline, gradually reshaping it through repetition. Any Bahá'í serving on a Spiritual Assembly will be familiar with this prayer, and will likely have experienced it tens of times in a single year; a Bahá'í who has served on Assemblies for many years will have prayed it a significant number of times and will have experienced it through different life events and stages.

Repetition does not automatically cause internalization. Whitehouse points out that some kinds of religious repetition may actually dull agency and subjectivity, “produc[ing] tedium and lower[ed] motivation” (9), causing the audience to “switch off”—perhaps simply recalling the embodied movements associated with the repetition and forgetting the meaning. This can cause the audience to stop generating new ways to understand and apply the knowledge embedded in the practice or recitation (5), or even to stop pondering why it is being repeated (94). Shoghi Effendi’s warnings against uniformity and rigidity in Bahá'í practices help guard against the kind of tedious, rigidly enacted repetition Whitehouse observes.

On the other hand, does an experience need to be shocking or traumatic to facilitate internalization (Whitehouse 4)? Given the claim I make here about the tripartite rite of passage drawing on cultural levers of transformation, it is important to acknowledge that I am also claiming that a miniature version of one will still exert powers of transformation. Through the same tripartite

structure as a conventional rite of passage, and by pulling on the same cultural levers of transformation, the gentle breezes of the Assembly opening prayer can generate, over time, some of the power of the gale-force winds of a typical rite of passage, effecting a similar transformation from one state to another.

Other anthropological theories lend support to this claim. Religious practice in general has the power to effect a gentler kind of internalization than a traditional rite of passage, including the kind of internalization that persists over time. As anthropologist Clifford Geertz argues, religion's distinction from philosophy is that it does not merely describe but shapes its participants' social and psychological reality, and does so by generating specific, recurring dispositions. Religion does this, in part, by generating both "a persisting set of motivations" and "a recurring mood." These motives<sup>37</sup> and moods are specific, he argues, to each religion, and each configures distinct sets of qualities (93–98). Motives can be understood as the more explicit direction given by tenets and principles of a faith, such as the clearly-stated purpose of Bahá'í consultation and its procedural guidelines; they "describe a certain overall course" and "are 'made meaningful' with reference to the ends toward which they are conceived to conduce" (97). Moods, in contrast, are "like fogs, they just settle

and lift; like scents, suffuse and evaporate. When present they are totalistic: if one is sad everything and everybody seems dreary" (97). In other words, moods arise more stealthily, wordlessly coloring perception, emotion, and thought.

Jason Throop expands on Geertz's notion of mood, coining the term "moral mood." A moral mood generates an intermittent, lightly emotional experiencing of one's moral place in the world, bringing intangible and ambiguous notions briefly to the surface of consciousness. A moral mood reveals "moral concerns in flux. . . . inhabit[ing] an ambivalent existential expanse where the possible, the ideal, and the actual coalesce in rather complicated ways" and allows for "shifting and differing forms of moral reflection" (Throop 70–71). A moral mood contrasts with a harsh and explicit moral self-judgment—such as shame—that might arise from breaking an explicit moral code. The lightness and fleeting self-consciousness of a moral mood allow an individual to grapple with ambiguity through a gradual self-evaluation over time (Throop 70).

This understanding of moral mood resonates with the kind of moral engagement elicited by the opening prayer. Rather than presenting an unambiguous, urgent choice, this moral engagement is atmospheric, immersive, and repeated through regular recitation.

By combining the concept of rite of passage with the idea of moral mood, then, we can gain valuable analytical

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37 I follow Geertz in using "motivation" and "motive" interchangeably.

perspective on the power of this prayer to effect transformation over time. While retaining the tripartite structure of the rite of passage, the prayer does not grab hold of the devotee and irrevocably transform them. If a prototypical rite of passage is a rogue wave washing people off a jetty into the water, the opening prayer—understood as a moral-mood-infused, miniature rite of passage—is the softer surf that gently reshapes the shore.

THE ASSEMBLY OPENING PRAYER

With these anthropological lenses in mind, we turn now to the opening prayer. Before discussing how overarching themes and features of the prayer interact with the theories just reviewed, let us walk the path the prayer lays out, taking note of its lush details and breathing in its fragrant poetry.

Figure C shows how the prayer maps on to the tripartite structure.

Figure C: One possible interpretation of the opening prayer

<i>PRE-LIMINAL STAGE</i>		
<i>Start, sacralization</i>	SECTION A Preface	<i>Whenever ye enter the council-chamber, recite this prayer with a heart throbbing with the love of God and a tongue purified from all but His remembrance, that the All-Powerful may graciously aid you to achieve supreme victory.</i>
<i>Separation from society</i>	SECTION B Recognizing existing commonalities: “we are”	<i>O God, my God! We are servants of Thine that have turned with devotion to Thy Holy Face, that have detached ourselves from all besides Thee in this glorious Day. We have gathered in this Spiritual Assembly, united in our views and thoughts, with our purposes harmonized to exalt Thy Word amidst mankind.</i>
	SECTION C Affirming aspirational ideals: “make us”	<i>O Lord, our God! Make us the signs of Thy Divine Guidance, the Standards of Thine exalted Faith amongst men, servants to Thy mighty Covenant, O Thou our Lord Most High, manifestations of Thy Divine Unity in Thine Abhá Kingdom,</i>

LIMINAL STAGE

SECTION D  
Vision of  
paradise:  
“aid us  
to become”

*and resplendent stars shining upon all regions. Lord! Aid us to become seas surging with the billows of Thy wondrous Grace, streams flowing from Thine all-glorious Heights, goodly fruits upon the Tree of Thy heavenly Cause, trees waving through the breezes of Thy Bounty in Thy celestial Vineyard.*

POST-LIMINAL STAGE

*Reincorporation  
into society*

SECTION E  
New requests,  
new ideals:  
“make us . . .  
that we may  
become”

*Reflection of  
liminal stage*

*O God! Make our souls dependent upon the Verses of Thy Divine Unity, our hearts cheered with the outpourings of Thy Grace, that we may unite even as the waves of one sea and become merged together as the rays of Thine effulgent Light; that our thoughts, our views, our feelings may become as one reality, manifesting the spirit of union throughout the world.*

*Finish*

SECTION F  
Coda

*Thou art the Gracious, the Bountiful, the Bestower, the Almighty, the Merciful, the Compassionate.<sup>38</sup>*

THE PRE-LIMINAL STAGE

*THE FIRST STEP OF THE JOURNEY  
(SECTION A): GATHERING TOGETHER  
AND TURNING TOWARD GOD*

38 ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Bahá’í Prayers* 300–01 The original source from which Shoghi Effendi excerpted the prayer must have been the letter that is reproduced more fully in *Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá* (86–87).

The preface (Section A) commandingly launches the prayer experience: ‘Abdu’l-Bahá not only presents instructions on when and where to recite it, but powerfully evokes how



and why. The repetition of the prayer, in the group setting, at the beginning of each meeting provides a trigger to remember and re-embody a personal and collective history of saying, thinking, and feeling this prayer; each encounter with it reinforces insights and feelings experienced before, and provides opportunities to articulate new connections to and within it. The preface also serves another function commonly found at the beginning of rites of passage: it establishes a more formal attitude and sacralizes the space, disengaging the participants from the everyday, social world (van Gennepe 67). While most Local Spiritual Assemblies today will not have a dedicated Assembly meeting room, the prayer opens the figurative door to a sacred place (van Gennepe 192): the ordinary room becomes the council-chamber.

How are the members to enter that chamber? What alterations of their outlook and behavior are called for? The prayer's preface lays out the appropriate emotion ("heart throbbing with the love of God"), restricts talk to the appropriate speech ("tongue purified from all but His remembrance"), reminds members of their humble dependence on God's assistance ("that [God] may graciously aid you"), and stresses they should aim to be effective in the work of the Cause ("to supreme victory"). To attempt to achieve these most personal of conditions, the members must draw on their individual spiritual work, work which has happened primarily outside of the

council-chamber.<sup>39</sup> They expand spiritual capacities they have been working on, and they banish other capacities (such as by restricting the topics of their speech). The transformative process built into the opening prayer begins by calling forth the participants' individual spirituality.

*THE SECOND STEP*  
*(SECTION B): RECOGNIZING*  
*EXISTING COMMONALITIES*

In the next step in this journey (Section B), the prayer reminds the Assembly members, as they come together in the council-chamber, of all they already have in common with each other. The operative verb phrases in this section—"we are" and "we have"—speak to what they are "being" and "doing" in common: "We are servants of [God]," we have already "turned with devotion to God." We have set aside the time and shown up: we "have gathered" together. We can recognize that we start with a fund of unity and harmony in our views, thoughts, and purposes. Our devotion to God finds unified expression in our shared purpose to exalt God's Word amidst all of humankind.<sup>40</sup>

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39 This function of soliciting a shift in spiritual condition and attention is shared with the second section, the beginning of the prayer proper, which calls for detachment from anything but God: "We are servants of [God] . . . detach[ing] ourselves from all besides Thee."

40 Note how the general purpose of the Assembly meeting, as discussed earlier, is interwoven with the prayer journey. This

We understand that we are dealing with ideal aspirations: to “[turn] with devotion” to God’s “Holy Face” and to “[detach] ourselves from all besides” God is a level of detachment and focus we are more likely to achieve partially and intermittently than completely and perpetually. We understand that these ideals are likely to be shared among the members, whom the community has called on for this service. Despite our diversity in social roles and life positions, we are reminded in the prayer experience of our basic unity as similar individuals. These ideals can also establish aspirational goals for the relationships building within and outside the meetings, indicating rough edges that might need sanding in order to make the Assembly run more smoothly.

*THE THIRD STEP (SECTION C):  
RECOGNIZING EXISTING IDEALS*

Section C shifts the prayer from statements about what “we are” to requests of God to “make us,” specifically to make us into conduits of God’s bounties. The set of requests signals a need for openness to transformation, specifically transformation under God’s influence. The prayer once again shifts the attention of the supplicants: having become alert to their commonalities in Section B, their attention now turns to asking God for a series of powerful

transformations. Indeed, most of the rest of the prayer consists in requests for transformation, in three distinct tones (corresponding to Sections C, D, and E).

Section C can be seen as a statement of four ways in which to advance the common purpose of the members, expressed in the previous section, “to exalt [God’s] Word amidst mankind.” Members can become visible, noticeable supporters and conduits of God’s laws and guidance by becoming “signs,” “Standards,” and “manifestations” of divine bounties, and “servants” to the Covenant. These are roles that individuals can take on while acting alone, even if the group is not able to adopt them collectively. They call individuals to excellence in channeling the remedies of Bahá’u’lláh’s Revelation through living it and communicating it (and, by implication, understanding its content). The potentiality of fulfilling these roles grows in the soil of Bahá’í daily practice—of reading, meditating, praying, teaching, serving, and supporting Bahá’í administration—and the prayer thus implicitly communicates the feasibility, through straightforward obedience, of the individual’s contribution to the Assembly’s work. Signs, standards, and manifestations are typically understood as visual representations of abstract or hidden phenomena. Through these terms, the prayer emphasizes how living a Bahá’í life—inwardly and outwardly—can serve as a mode of communication to the community; it thus illuminates these Bahá’í

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comports with van Gennep’s observation that rites of passage often incorporate purposes specific to the targeted life transition, such as promoting fertility in a marriage ritual (11–12).

practices in the light of their effect on society. The degree to which these ideals are put into practice by individual Bahá'ís becomes implicated in their moral responsibility to demonstrate Bahá'u'lláh's guidance to the society at large. In the context of beginning a meeting of the Spiritual Assembly, this section of the prayer shifts the suppliant's mind toward the function of the Assembly as a conduit of guidance and a standard-bearer for the community at large. Viewed in this light, this section takes on a largely straightforward and practical tone.

#### THE LIMINAL STAGE

##### *THE FOURTH STEP (SECTION D): A METAPHORIC LEAP TO A PARADISE*

As the long, paragraph-like sentence that begins in Section C enters its final phrase, the tone dramatically transfigures, signaling a new stage of the prayer experience. Five paradisiacal images take the reins of the prayer's journey, and leave behind the readily understood, the pragmatic, the straightforward, and the individualized tasks. The first image—of stars—maintains its connection to the sentence it ends, by painting a vision of members distributing divine gifts “upon all regions,” but its tone has already morphed, conjuring up a euphoric vision. The prayer glides from metaphor to metaphor, asking God to make us “resplendent stars,” to “aid us to become seas surging,” “streams flowing,” “goodly fruits,” and “trees waving through the

breezes.” Powerful forces arising from God's grace and bounty are envisioned as potentially emanating through the divinely-aided beseechers. The new tone—more poetic, more sensorial, multivocal and flexible—befits these images of paradise.

Together these evocative metaphors compose an ecosystem of beauty and bounty, and evoke the easy fulfillment of health and basic needs through plentiful food (fruits, vineyard, seas), water (streams), mild weather (breezes), and, implicitly, clean and clear air (resplendent stars) and fertile, clean soil (goodly fruits). Sensory codes (Lévi-Strauss 157–63) of all sorts—visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory, tactile, kinesthetic—paint a vivid scene that imaginations can immerse themselves in and articulate by drawing on knowledge of the world of being as “we ponder each created thing” (Bahá'u'lláh, *Seven Valleys* 32). This vibrant habitat carries a natural stirring: the stars twinkle and radiate light; the seas surge with tides and waves, alive with myriad creatures; the streams twist and turn, carrying rain and snow melt to downstream locales, delighting ears with the sounds of running water; the trees luxuriate in temperate weather, dripping with nutritious fruits that feed people and wildlife while spreading seeds to places far afield; the breezes ventilate the air, freshening it with oxygen from the trees, filling lungs of humans and animals alike, and spreading the fruit blossom fragrances. The rhythms and kinetics align with the dynamic spirit built into Bahá'í principles and

methods: the beauty of one entity providing for another, reflecting the joy of service, or the pulsating evolution arising from a posture of learning with its cyclic, consultative action, evaluation, and adjustment. So central to human health and existence is this kind of abundant, animated environment that this imagined landscape may trigger evolutionarily-adapted cognitive algorithms (Cosmides and Tooby) which have guided our desires for millennia toward what promotes life, health, and vibrancy. This stage of the prayer seems to leverage our in-built attraction to such natural resources to trigger an emotional, ecstatic desire for what the prayer, as a whole, is offering.

In this way, the prayer readies the members to allow in the offered spiritual transformation. In the relaxed but alert, meditative and focused state of prayer, visualizing and otherwise imaginatively experiencing this particular multisensorial paradise fosters a certain mood—an optimism arising out of the sense of security and fruitful dynamism and a yearning for the abundance and beauty depicted in the prayer. This section of the prayer assigns no specific, pragmatic tasks; rather, it paints an emotive sense of the group's potentiality for transmitting divine bounty to the world (its purpose) and for a fundamental unity (its path). This stage of the prayer experience does not center intellectual meaning-making. As with traditional rites of passage, the liminal stage generates an embodied shift; unlike most rites of passage, the prayer's liminal stage generates this shift not

with bodily stress but with imagination and desire, enlarging and uplifting emotion and mood; it swaps out the pain of a typical rite of passage for pleasure, and deprivation for abundance. The consultants engage with particular processes and patterns, absorbing them and normalizing them subconsciously; they are synchronized with the prayer's spiritual and intellectual content but do not demand rationalization. The prayer engages souls without moving them away from heart to mind.

Those praying sense they are sailing beyond as-yet-unexplored horizons, encountering ideas and experiences so new and unarticulated that they break the bounds of regular language and require instead the use of metaphors. While "language has words and phrases only for familiar notions" (Langer, qtd. in Bregnbæk and Gammeltoft 244), metaphor allows language to allude to what it cannot fully capture. It casts "intelligible realities which have no outward form or place"—like love, or magnetic fields—into the language of the senses to approximate an abstract reality whose essence can never be fully described ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 93–96). Like a walled garden with an opened gate, sensing what cannot be described beckons curiosity, inquiry, and exploration.

The metaphors in this section implicitly convey equality and reciprocity, values congruent with the aim of transformative interrogation, and with the democratization and reciprocity of the ideal clash of differing opinions.

This section asks God to “[a]id us to become” metaphorical forces—stars, seas, streams, fruits, trees—imparting God’s bounty. Implicitly, if all of those who are praying spiritually transform into these diverse, interconnected elements of the depicted paradise, then they will transform also into serving each other: seas giving up their water for rain, streams watering trees, breezes spreading seeds. Embodying diverse elements of a divine paradise, they are equally humble before God the Creator. The social order is thus reorganized, as the liminality “liquif[ies]” the structure of roles and statuses “into a living form of *communitas*” (Turner, *Drama* 251) and engages the oneness of humankind’s untapped potential to completely reconceptualize relationships (Universal House of Justice, 2 Mar. 2013 ¶ 6). The next section of the prayer builds upon this section’s theme of equality.

#### THE POST-LIMINAL STAGE

##### *THE FIFTH STEP (SECTION E): REINCORPORATION TO THE WORLD OF DECISION-MAKING AND ACTION WITH NEW REQUESTS FOR NEW IDEALS*

From this vision of paradise, the prayer moves, post-liminally, back into a more pragmatic, explicitly principled tone. A new set of requests is made in Section E, asking God to further refashion the members. If the previous section is viewed as triggering a desire for the divine paradise, this fifth section answers the natural follow-up question: “How

do I get to this paradise?” Somewhat like the beginning of the prayer (Sections A-C) with its emphasis on personal spiritual actions, this section begins by asking God to “[m]ake our souls dependent upon the Verses . . . [and] our hearts cheered with . . . Thy grace.” These two requests might be seen as shaping mind and feeling respectively, with the first promoting intellectual attachment to and use of the Revelatory guidance, and the second the emotional fortitude of confidence in God’s grace and providence.

Suddenly resurfacing mid-sentence from out of these pragmatic principles, the tone and metaphorical language of the paradisiacal liminality returns, carrying forward the atmosphere of the liminal section and influencing our understanding of the post-liminal Section E. The requests return to nature metaphors—sea and light— but with a twist. Instead of multiple seas, we have a single sea, and the members are only as individuated as the waves of that sea, which, despite their idiosyncratic details, are still merely pulses moving through a continuous substance. Instead of several, separate points of light in the sky, the members are to become like the rays of a single, greater, effulgent light; again, merely manifestations of the same substance, though seen from different angles and inhabiting different time-spaces. As with the pinnacle liminal moment in Section D, the implicit meaning here speaks to the unity of the members. In the liminal stage metaphors, however, unity operates as an additive principle—the

more stars, or the more fruits, the better. Now the unity is intrinsic, and the power of unity will be geometrically enhanced when the components or emanations of the underlying reality move in the same direction: one sea's waves sculpting the same shore, one sun's rays merged into brilliance. No longer can these metaphors be seen as indicating a collection of individual spiritual contributions; the supplicants are seeking transformation into one substance, "manifesting the spirit of union." Returning to a more analytical tone, the end of the sentence underlines the kind of unity ultimately desired, listing the facets of their human souls that the members hope will become "as one reality:" "our thoughts, our views, our feelings." As in the pre-liminal Sections B and C, and helping to weave all three sections together, the stated aspirations of the members conclude with an indication of their earthly (geographic and demographic) intended scope: "amidst mankind," "upon all regions," and "throughout the world." These earth-bound aims contrast with the ethereality of liminal Section D, underlining an abrupt shift back into the world of decisions and actions.

*THE SIXTH STEP (SECTION F):  
A CODA OF RELIANCE ON GOD*

Finally, the prayer ends, like most Bahá'í prayers, with a listing of relevant aspects of God's divinity: "the Gracious, the Bountiful, the Bestower, the Almighty, the Merciful, the Compassionate" (11). The last

section might be read as a coda, as a reminder of our dependence on God, or as the grateful recognition of the qualities of God which enable these transformations.

THE INTERNALIZATION POWER  
OF THE PRAYER

The analysis so far has been chronological, following along as the prayer takes the members on a rite-of-passage-like journey. Having detailed how ideas transform from one stage to another, and traced the rise and fall of emotions in the text, we are ready to draw out crosscutting themes and dynamics, and return to the question of the prayer's capacity to facilitate the internalization of ideas, orientations, and motivations by the Assembly members.

We can envision the prayer working as a cultural, social, and psychological internalization technology, employing mechanisms of internalization to infuse members with specific cultural content. We might think of this internalization technology as an orchestra: just as the different instruments of an orchestra translate notes on a sheet into music, there are different "instruments" operating within this technology that translate the explicit and implicit content of the prayer into a symphonic polyphony of understanding, meaning, and motivation. We can analyze each instrument's part separately, while understanding that these ultimately create the music holistically. The metaphorical orchestra of the prayer, I argue, fosters internalization not only of the



prayer's claims about the Assembly's purpose of service and its path of unity, but also of other foundational elements of the members' outlook. Five specific instruments of internalization—playing their specific parts—can be readily seen from the chronological account.

#### *ATTENTION AND DETACHMENT*

First, the prayer captures the members' attention, detaching them from extraneous interests. As the members close their eyes and quiet their talking, the prayer turns their attention away from everyday concerns and toward what is happening as the preface's influence sacralizes the Assembly chamber. The group's embodied practice of silently attending to the reader, the emotional rhythm of the interjections crying out for God, and the prayer's melodious cadences combine to gently separate those praying from everyday life, and turn their attention to God's will, the Assembly's purpose of exalting God's Word, and their path of unity. Members' attentiveness may be reinforced by their awareness of other exhortations in Bahá'í guidance, brought to mind by daily practice and study, that implicitly equate better attention during prayer with better outcomes: for example, Bahá'u'lláh's Tablet of Ahmad ties recitation with "absolute sincerity" to remedies to problems (*Bahá'í Prayers* 310), and 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains that "[t]he worshipper must pray with a detached spirit, unconditional surrender of the will, concentrated attention and spiritual fervour. . . . Automatic, formal

prayers which do not touch the core of the heart are of no avail" (*Prayer and Devotional Life* no.34). As Writings such as these permeate into the members' and into the community's awareness, the Assembly prayer will gain greater power to capture attention and begin a process of detachment.

#### *EXPERIENCING POTENTIALITY*

A second instrument of internalization plays its part when the members imaginatively experience still-hidden potentials waiting to be uncovered, which is a signal characteristic of the liminal phase in a rite of passage. The multisensorial vision of abundance, peace, reciprocation, and security in the prayer promotes an attractive and life-like experience of an alternate lifeway, asserting with its extreme alterity vast realms of hidden ways of being yet to be uncovered. The multivocality of the metaphors promotes creative thinking and the linking together of various far-flung ideas, emotions, and experiences. Closely related to the orientation toward transformation (discussed next) is the confidence in that transformation's potentiality. Unlocking agency and experimental action depends on the members' confidence that efforts at improvement of the community, society, and civilization—in ways that have not been achieved before—are possible. The brief upending of the social world, and the experience of *communitas*, reinforces the sensed potential.

*ORIENTATION TOWARDS  
TRANSFORMATION*

Third, the prayer accustoms the members to transformation as a mode of doing and of being, with its attendant ambiguity, continual accretion, and possible pivotal reconfigurations. This orientation towards transformation begins at the outset of the prayer, which sets out explicit purposes and methods for the Assembly—a kind of agenda and handbook, inherently motivating to participants at the beginning of any meeting. The members are called to actions—“enter the council-chamber,” “recite this prayer,” “exalt [God’s] Word amidst mankind,” and “[depend] upon the Verses”—that all serve the goal of effecting change: “to achieve supreme victory.”

Additionally, the prayer invokes various kinds of spiritual transformation—of members in relationship to each other, of the world outside the consultation room, and, ultimately, of self—each operating at a different scale. Specifically, as will be discussed below, there is an implicit evolution of the notion of ideal, unified relationships among the Assembly members, calling for a series of transformations among them. The Assembly’s purpose of building the world anew is expressed in the aspiration to “manifest[] the spirit of union throughout the world.” The heightened feeling of abundance and security created by the liminal images of paradise nudges the members toward a mood of openness to transform in the direction of these visions; the liminal

experience of *communitas* not only makes the transformation seem possible, but provides through the members’ powers of guided imagination the experience of changed circumstances. Finally, the evolving chorus of requests of God in the liminal stage—“make us,” “aid us to become,” “make us that we may become”—centers personal transformation. Even the pre-liminal statements of ideals—of how “we are” devoted, detached, united, and aligned with each other—are cast in a new light by the later repeating requests for divine transformation of selves: the way for members to find this unity and harmony seems to be by nurturing their devoted and detached higher natures. The members are not merely agents of change, but targets of the force of transformation.

Further, not only are the explicit and implicit topics of the prayer centered on change, but as the prayer itself evolves, it shapes an evolving experience for the consultor. The prayer moves between different tones and atmospheres, swings towards and away from metaphor, and the topics themselves steadily but subtly evolve as the prayer proceeds through these shifting phases.

*EVOLVING FORMS OF UNITY*

Fourth, the three-stage rite of passage transmutes the relationships within the group. Where a prototypical rite of passage might transform the status of an individual within a static social structure (as in transforming a person

from “girl” to “woman”), the opening prayer’s journey traces the transformation of the collective relationship among the members. That is, instead of merely breaking down the social structure only to reinstate it but with new members, the prayer’s liminality seeks to permanently instantiate a disruption in the structure. The liminal phase’s egalitarian *communitas* reinforces and advances the targeted transformation, that is, the evolution of the group’s unity. The diversity of “our purposes harmonized” becomes the still-individuated-but-similar “stars shining upon all regions,” and then, finally, and most powerfully, the single-substance “merged together as the rays of [God’s] effulgent light.” That is, the form of unity evolves within the prayer from a unity based on found similarity between distinct entities, to a unity of diverse parts of one whole, and, finally, to a unity of intrinsic parts of one more powerful whole. The evolving ideals of unity implicitly turn the members’ attention to the care of the relationships among them, altering how the individual sees herself in relation to the other members.

A formidable level of unity of understanding and intention is called forth in the last iteration in particular (in Section E), with the vision of the members’ thoughts, understandings, and feelings becoming “as one reality.” On the surface, this does not so much presage what is likely to immediately follow the prayer—the expanding clash of differing opinions—as the unity of thought longed for and hoped for at the

end of the coming consultative cycle. In this light, we can understand the tumultuous waves of clashing differing opinions as simply the surface disturbances of a deeper calm. Absolute unity and love rest partly on remembering that ultimately the sea is one, and that the waves arise from and can always rejoin the vast unity.

*MORAL MOOD: BUILDING  
MORAL RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE  
BETTERMENT OF THE WORLD*

The final instrument of the orchestra is the moral mood created by the prayer, which shapes a sense of moral responsibility out of the gentle moral reflection it facilitates. The prayer lays out a vision of the betterment of the world, and the means to achieve it as well, through the translation of the Revelation into service and via the path of advancing unity among the Assembly members. Becoming aware that the Assembly holds the potentiality to build the world anew pricks the conscience, creating a moral obligation to start.

The prayer resolves with the reincorporation of the members into a mindset more pragmatic, purposeful, and feasible than the blissful paradise it presents at its emotional apex. Likewise, the ecstatic prayer itself will be followed directly by the pragmatic consultation meeting. The gap between the ideal and the experiential (Geertz 119–20) becomes an itch that needs scratching (Oettingen et al. 748–49), provoking participants to incorporate bits of the ideal into the process and the plans.

THE PRAYER AS A COMPLEMENT TO  
THE CLASH OF DIFFERING OPINIONS  
AND TO CONSULTATION

We can return now to the question posed at the beginning of this example: How might the Assembly opening prayer relate to consultation? I suggest that the prayer's potential powers to facilitate internalization of the ideas, moods, and motivations discussed above ideally complements the consultation.

What the prayer proclaims has been accomplished at the start—the members being “united in [their] views and thoughts, [their] purposes harmonized”—is also precisely what the prayer helps to (further) accomplish, a concept that makes sense through the lens of progressive enactments of an ideal ethos. The prayer establishes certain ideals, like the purpose of building the world anew and the path of unity, which are crucial to the coming consultation, but it does not do so simply through divine assertion; it also sends the members on an imagination-enriched journey—shifting their ways of understanding and feeling, imbuing them with deepened motivations—and thereby bends the consultants' views, thoughts, and purposes toward each other.

The prayer clips the threads holding the members to the existing structures and interests of their quotidian lives, reminding them that their society can be structured in vastly different and better ways with alternate cultural elements. They come to understand that they hold some measure of agency to

effect transformation toward these better ways, and that walking this path depends on their own relationships being reconfigured by the oneness of humankind. This grand vision can be incrementally embraced as moral moods allow for a gradual internalization of the moral responsibility the Assembly members are called to.

The transformative pattern embedded in the prayer may then serve as a model for the consultation itself. In the beginning of the prayer, members tentatively recognize each other's similarities; in the clash of differing opinions, they may begin with finding patterns of similarity or agreement. In the prayer, they next understand their unity as diverse beings working together; in the clash, they may start to find harmonies among the nodes of similarity or of difference, as members' opinions change to adopt better conceptions, and emergent ideas arise. Finally, in the prayer, the members are drawn to transform their group into an integrated, efficacious whole, just as, ideally, the clash of differing opinions yields an emergent understanding and plan of action that all support.

Instead of what would be typical of a full-blown rite of passage—a dramatic, fundamental, and sudden reordering of “what it is like to live one's life and to be the person that one is” (Bregnbæk and Gammeltoft 241)—the gentle transformational experience of this miniature rite of passage suggests gradual enlargements in moral responsibility. With each Assembly meeting, the lapping waves of the

repeated prayer carry the consultors recurrently to a paradise of *communitas*. This pattern is more compatible with a culture of learning than a single dramatic transformation, as the pulses of creativity and motivation intersect with the rhythms of action, reflection, consultation, and study to open new understandings over time.

More important, perhaps, than the establishment of the desire to translate the Revelation into action, the fostering of the “absolute love and harmony” elicited by these metaphors is especially suited to protect the group from the risks of the clash of differing opinions during consultation. Out of the universe of virtues and spiritual capacities, in any given era certain ones come to the fore as being most conducive to social progress (as Sarracino concludes, forthcoming). Likewise, the Assembly opening prayer nurtures the kind of spiritual enhancement that complements Bahá'í consultation, buffering the risks of the transformative clash of differing opinions.

The opening prayer establishes at the beginning of the meeting not only the recognition of all the similarity that brought the participants together—a unity that may not hold as the differing opinions are fully exposed and allowed to clash, that may be felt to be refuted by the discovery of all the ways in which individuals disagree. The prayer calls, with a moral clarity, for the participants to find a deeper unity, a same-substance kind of unity, a called-by-God-into-being kind of unity: an absolute—that is, unconditional—love

and unity. This kind of unity can hold up to the fire of intense diversity of perspective and opinion, and grant steadfastness, confidence, and patience to the members as they undertake the hard work to uncover, mesh and harmonize their diverse perspectives, patiently pulling them out and searching for the emergent truth. The kind of unity the prayer induces in the participants is one that views their diversity as a resource and their unity as unyielding: a diversity within unity rather than a compromise. The clash of differing opinions is a boiling stew; a deep faith in the fundamental unity in the group becomes the pot that can endure the fire, and hold the bubbling ingredients until they transform and meld together into something delicious.

#### FINAL OBSERVATIONS

Diverse representation needs to be paired with transformative interrogation if diversity's reality-uncovering powers are to be released. The explicit methods of Bahá'í consultation pour the foundation upon which transformative interrogation can be built: gathering people with diverse experiences; facilitating universal and free expression; considering the ideas at hand as a collective project rather than partisan argumentation; seeking a unity of thought and commitment at the end; and considering the resulting action an empirical experiment as part of a continuing cycle of learning. I have argued in this paper that there is also additional, implicit guidance built into

Shoghi Effendi's letter which supports the capacity of Bahá'í consultation to achieve transformative interrogation by enabling a clash of differing opinions.

This paper's three examples suggest that the implicit guidance in Shoghi Effendi's letter nurtures intertwined concepts, values, and emotions in such a way as to foster transformative encounters among diverse people. Each example focuses on a distinct dimension of human capacity. The first example explores how to enhance thinking, and how employing implicit models of distinct, expected phases of a transformative consultation enables better ideas to emerge and rise to the surface. Example 2 focuses on how to develop and maintain relationships within the consultative interaction, calling consultants to engage in the dialectical dance of unity and difference while still accommodating bumble-footed errors. The third example examines how to nurture the spirituality fit for enabling consultation, fostering an openness in the participants to a unity strong enough to surround the clash of differing opinions with an envelope of love. Together, these intertwined dimensions promote a distinct method of effective collective thinking.

Bahá'í consultation's implicit guidance selects threads to be woven into the cultural fabric of the Assembly and the community, coloring expectations, a shared ethos, and dispositional motives and moods. These culture-shaping filaments call forth virtues and relational skills specific to the functions

they address: patience and encouragement to facilitate universal participation during the swell of the clash of differing opinions; micro-repairs to fraying unity and forbearance to cope with inevitable mistakes; a grounding in the dynamic Creative Word and a constant scanning for God's will during the opening prayer. These psychologically and socially astute elements respond to the tensions generated by the explicit methods of consultation, and, because of this, they are more likely to be internalized into the consultants' awareness, understanding, motivation, and actions.

Much of what is distinctive about this implicit guidance pertains to the process of cultural change implicated by it. This model of culture change is indicated by at least four characteristics that weave together ideas, relational skills, and spiritual values: facilitating and centering a culture of learning, committing to the capacity of individuals to draw increasingly on their higher natures, nurturing an incremental change open to all, and building momentum through virtuous cycles of growth within and between institutions.

First, consultation's implicit mechanisms and values institute and promote a culture of learning. The clash of differing opinions is itself a process of learning: learning about others' points of views, learning about one's own ideas by figuring out what their weaknesses are and investigating their implications, collectively identifying gaps in knowledge to be filled, collectively



uncovering emergent ideas, and possibly transforming the process by which this happens. The flexible ethos implied by the letter's interweaving of apothecotic virtues with anticipated errors highlights that the consultation meeting is a space of learning, where consultors of potentially wide skill ranges gather together, allowing each to learn through practice as they strive to follow the paths to improvement found within the guidance and modeled by high-skilled consultors within the meeting room. The opening prayer promotes learning as it fosters in the consultors an openness to transformation, of themselves as individuals and of the relationships among them, shifting their understandings gradually as the prayer progresses. Even the repetition of the same prayer over time further facilitates a process of learning, nurturing a continual dialogue between the repeated prayer and the changing circumstances of the community: just as a constant drumbeat can take on new significance as the listener follows it through a song, the prayer's fixed wording becomes dynamic in interaction with the shifting contexts in which it is said.

Secondly, the letter's embrace of varying skill levels, recognition of fallibility, opening of space for learning, and (in the opening prayer in particular) repeated use of metaphors about unity all imply a commitment to the capacity of people to transform. It recognizes the universally-human gap between what is experienced and what is held as ideal (Geertz 119–20). As

Bahíyyih Nakhjavání points out, the Bahá'í Revelation calls us to strive to “discover a fit form for our visions,” “the clearest and most congruent outward expression of the flame within,” and to persist in doing so despite repeated failures (84–91). She points out that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s robust definition of “striving” “seems to tell us that our responsibility lies precisely in this ability to yearn, aspire, and endeavour again and again to conform our lives to Divine commands and behests” (91). With ideational and social support for this kind of persistent striving, the rifts between what we can do and what we envision become not a source of jaded cynicism and defeatism, but rather a call to our personal and collective transformation.

Third, the implicit elements in the letter promote an incremental rate of change. Facilitating a gradual internalization, the implicit consultation guidance acts as a call for “making progress from day to day, and . . . becoming ever more illumined” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections* 162:1). The implicit trajectory welcomes but does not demand diversity's expression; the implicit ethos of building harmony and moderated speech accommodates imperfectly enacted understandings; and the opening prayer renews hope for growth at each Assembly meeting. A stark and daunting ideal may be perceived by a person as too remote from the scope of agency, allowing them to keep it compartmentalized through lip service (Strauss, “Research on Cultural Discontinuities” 223). The letter's implicit elements of

Bahá'í consultation instead pulse out repeated small exposures, fostering a gentle moral mood and a forbearing disposition. Rather than generating a moral crisis, the rhythm, expectations, and pace implicit in the guidance promote comfort with the ambiguity of learning a new way of imagining, of relating, and of seeking truth. In this way, these small repetitions may better foster internalization of the ideas—from paper to mind, from mind to motivation, and from motivation to practice. Incremental change, too, synchronizes with the Assembly's rhythm of practice, with its continually evolving work and repeated meetings: each task and meeting provides a fresh opportunity to grow.

Finally, the guidance implicit in the letter can foster virtuous cycles. As members observe how their individual errors in thinking and judgment are balanced through the clash of differing opinions, the institution can gain confidence in a flourishing transformative interrogation. As experience is gained tacking back and forth from unity to diversity, the members can learn to accommodate and repair mistakes, and this in turn can support participants' longing for universal, diverse, full expression. As members grow in their love and affection for one another, becoming more familiar with each other and passing through challenges together, they can witness the power of absolute love and unity to envelope risky clashes, and their commitment to that standard of unity grows. Not only individuals but institutions can become more skillful with experience, carrying

forward greater capacity to embrace diversity and clashing differing opinions, to accommodate and repair mistakes, and to plan for transformation. Virtuous cycles of learning<sup>41</sup> reflect effective solutions, which tend to diffuse to other individuals and communities (Strauss and Quinn 125); this is especially so in the global Bahá'í community, given its many interlaced channels for sharing knowledge (Shoghi Effendi's letter being an early example of how knowledge can be shared from the World Centre).

In keeping with the wide range of anticipated error-making and an implicit culture of learning, Bahá'í consultation can be fruitfully pursued by people who do not recognize the guidance as divine in origin; consultors can adopt its use as reasonable theoretically, and perhaps eventually as rooted in empirical, social scientific evidence. Indeed, the Universal House of Justice and the Bahá'í International Community promote the use of Bahá'í consultation for all, whether Bahá'í or not, from the press (Universal House of Justice, 29 Dec. 1988 ¶41) to those seeking to create a “sustainable relationship with the natural world” (BIC, *One Planet*).

However, this paper suggests as well that the religious devotion and general

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41 A similar dynamic may be detected in the Universal House of Justice's comment that “It is this growing capacity to resolve complex questions and then to take on still more complex questions that characterizes the process of learning that is propelling the progress of the Faith” (8 Nov. 23 ¶ 79).

practice of a member of the Bahá'í faith would enhance consultation (Lample, *Revelation* 183). Devotedly referring to and rereading the guidance, with faithful confidence in its efficacy, should facilitate more meaningful, motivating, and rapid internalization of both the explicit and implicit guidance built into Shoghi Effendi's letter. Finding this guidance in scripture can reassure Bahá'í consultors of the necessity of the clash of differing opinions and the Assembly's capacity to handle it. Confidence in the promises of the Faith's writings supports persistent striving towards the ideal ethos of consultation, supported by the guidance's insistence that absolute love and unity can be sufficiently achieved among the consultors, and that the group can find a harmonized unity of thought and action at the end. No doubt, of the three examples in this paper, the Assembly opening prayer would be most affected by whether those praying are believers or not, given that its guidance comes in the form of a conversation with God; nevertheless, perhaps it might still be able to function as a poetic mission statement for non-adherents.

Systematic empirical research into consultation could draw on various social science methodologies to further investigate the claims made in this paper. Since Assembly meetings are confidential, limiting opportunities for direct observation (except by Assembly members themselves), research outside of meetings with experienced members about their understandings could ground further exploration of

Assembly consultation. The internalization of explicit and implicit guidance on consultation, the evolution of Bahá'í culture, and understandings of the role of differing opinions could all be explored empirically. Applied research could include evaluation of the extent to which consultors are studying and drawing on the guidance and repeatedly trying to apply it during meetings. Markers could be developed to measure the degree to which various consultation skills and understandings are evidenced in groups employing Bahá'í consultation, and could even be used as a tool for institutional learning. The role Assembly chairs and other meeting facilitators play in shepherding consultation and encouraging universal and free participation and transformative interrogation would be another fruitful area of investigation.

Another line of inquiry could focus on the influence that participating in consultation has on institutions, community, and individuals. Of particular interest would be how the relationships between the three are impacted, since in addition to the unique roles, "capacities and qualities that must be developed" in each of these three protagonists, "each is incapable of manifesting its full potential on its own. It is by strengthening their dynamic relationships with one another that their powers are combined and multiplied" (Universal House of Justice, 30 Dec. 2021 ¶ 3).<sup>42</sup> Does a regular practice of

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42 I am grateful to Matthew Weinberg for suggesting lines of inquiry pertaining to

robust and loving clash of opinions facilitate community members—whether declared Bahá'ís or participants in the community's activities in general—seeing themselves as protagonists of change? Do community members feel empowered to express minority opinions during consultation? How effectively might friends of the Faith use Bahá'í consultation after training in it with skilled and loving consultants? What might be the relationships between improved consultation skills within Assemblies and how these skills are taught in children's classes and junior youth groups?<sup>43</sup>

The application of anthropological lenses to Shoghi Effendi's letter suggests that an emerging Bahá'í culture might influence and develop thought, feeling, motivation, learning, and relationship in ways that are crucial to catalyzing consultation's potential. Social science wields special powers to illuminate implicit meanings which are woven into Bahá'í guidance—not only in the case of consultation, but surely for other topics, too. Social scientific analysis can both enhance the understanding of the Creative Word and uncover implications of practices arising from it. This productive interaction of science and the Revelation bears out

what 'Abdu'l-Bahá has explained repeatedly: though science and religion may be separate mirrors, they harmonize because they reflect the same, single reality. The vibrating harmonies of science, reason, and religion not only hone our ability to see reality more clearly—with understandings more astute, more thorough, and more tested—but launch new cycles of learning. The steadfastness, courage, and faith to fully test our practices depends on such a progressive interaction between these divine bestowals. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá insisted,

If religious belief and doctrine is at variance with reason, it proceeds from the limited mind of man and not from God; therefore, it is unworthy of belief and not deserving of attention; the heart finds no rest in it, and real faith is impossible. How can man believe that which he knows to be opposed to reason? Is this possible? Can the heart accept that which reason denies? Reason is the first faculty of man, and the religion of God is in harmony with it. (*Promulgation* 82:9)

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chairpersons and to the dynamic relationships among the three protagonists.

43 I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer for suggesting the potential for enhanced community learning through the development of consultation skills in Bahá'í activities for children, junior youth, and youth.

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## Legacy: A Conversation

TAMI HAALAND

Ripples on the pond, this splayed willow  
a bouquet of branches. Insects and doves,  
the conversation of white-billed ducks  
practicing for the long way ahead. Red-winged  
blackbirds trill from dead sentinel trees.

Before my father died, he and I spent  
a day alone in the house. I watched him  
do bicep curls with an old spring device,  
all the rage in the 60s. I didn't know what  
to think of his frailty. We talked about  
keeping his strength up. He said  
he always thought he would have more.

Money, he meant, but he could have  
meant time. Blue dragonflies hover  
in grass he must have planted, finches  
shelter in cattails I seeded one summer  
on this pond he made. Swallows dart  
and dip, part of the conversation.

## Biographical Notes

KAT DUNLAP grew up in Norristown, PA, and now resides in Massachusetts where she is a member of the Tidepool Poets of Plymouth. She received a BA in English from Arcadia University and holds an MFA from Pacific University. She edited two college writing publications as well as the Tidepool Poets Annual. For many years she was Director of the National Writing Project site at University of Massachusetts Dartmouth and is currently the co-owner of Writers Ink of MA. Her chapbook *The Blue Bicycle* is being prepared for a summer 2024 launch.

STEPHEN R. FRIBERG is a physicist with a research background in quantum and nonlinear optics. His Ph.D. is from the University of Rochester for an early demonstration of quantum entanglement. After a post-doc at Bell Labs, he worked a decade at NTT Basic Research Labs in Tokyo, at a start-up in Silicon Valley, and in the semiconductor industry. A founding member of ABS Japan, and a past member of the Executive Committee of ABS North America, he is a teaching lead for the Wilmette Institute. His focus is the harmony of science and religion and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s comments on evolution.

TAMI HAALAND is the author of three poetry collections: *What Does*

*Not Return, When We Wake in the Night, and Breath in Every Room*, a Nicholas Roerich First Book Award winner republished by Red Hen Press. Lost Horse Press is publishing her fourth collection, *Her Alternate Selves*, in Fall 2024. Haaland’s poems have appeared in *The Journal of Bahá’í Studies*, *Ascent*, *Consequence*, *The American Journal of Poetry*, *december*, *The Ecopoetry Anthology*, *Cascadia*, and have been featured on *The Writer’s Almanac*, *Verse Daily*, *American Life in Poetry*, and *The Slowdown*.

WHITNEY WHITE KAZEMIPOUR earned a Ph.D. and an M.A. in Anthropology from UCLA, specializing in psychocultural anthropology, and an A.B. in Intellectual and Cultural History from Princeton, specializing in revolution. As a Wilmette Institute faculty member, she co-teaches “Science, Religion, and the Bahá’í Faith.” Her three daughters inspire her.

Her dissertation investigates how migration impacted Iranian-Americans as mothers, and her master’s thesis argues that changing gender roles in a Panamanian Ngäbe community resulted from generations of Bahá’í belief and practice.

ALEA MORREN is a Bahá’í visual artist working with alcohol ink and acrylic painting mediums. Her work explores ideas related to inner experience, contemplation and connectedness with the Divine. A lot of her work deals with images of water as metaphor, as it relates to energy, creativity,



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TODD SMITH holds a Ph.D. from the University of Toronto where he focused on developing a consultative epistemology concerning health, illness, and disease. He has since published articles on epistemology, the harmony of science and religion, freedom, and historical consciousness. He was recently the Coordinator of the Research Department at the Bahá'í World Centre in Haifa, Israel, and currently serves on the Executive Committee of the Association for Bahá'í Studies in North America.

*The Journal of Bahá'í Studies*

From the Editor's Desk

*Michael Sabet*

Revelation as Scientific in its Method: Science, Diversity,  
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*Stephen R. Friberg*

Becoming Attuned to Reality: Presuppositions and  
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*Todd Smith*

Even as the Waves of One Sea: Bahá'í Consultation's Implicit  
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