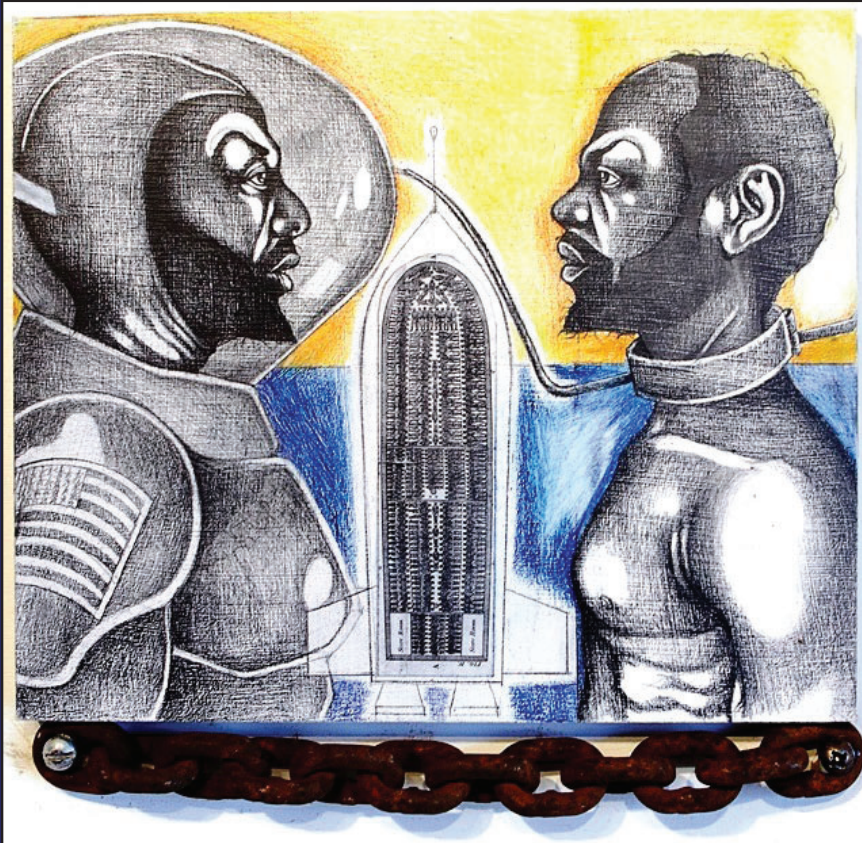


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Many articles published in *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies* allude to the institutions and central figures of the Bahá'í Faith; as an aid for those unfamiliar with the Bahá'í Faith, we include here a succinct summary excerpted from <http://www.bahai.org/beliefs/bahaullah-covenant/>. The reader may also find it helpful to visit the official web site for the worldwide Bahá'í community (www.bahai.org) available in several languages. For article submission guidelines, please visit 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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Volume 36 Number 1-2 Spring-Summer 2026

Contents

- 3 MICHAEL SABET From the Editor's Desk
- 6 You might also like to read...
- 7 ILYA ZRUDLO and ASHRAF RUSHDY Bahá'í-Inspired Educational Endeavors and Social Justice
- 37 YMASUMAC MARAÑÓN DAVIS and JUSTIN SCOGGIN Expanding on a Bahá'í-inspired Pedagogy of Social Transformation
- 65 FELICITY RAWLINGS-SANAEI Interdisciplinarity, Connectivity, and Capability: An Exploration in the Context of Social Change

Book Reviews

- 89 *Exploring the Kitáb-i-Aqdas: The Laws and Teachings of the Bahá'í Faith* by Omid Ghaemmaghani and Shahin Vafai, reviewed by VARGHA BOLODO-TAEFI
- 96 *Exploring the Kitáb-i-Aqdas: The Laws and Teachings of the Bahá'í Faith* by Omid Ghaemmaghani and Shahin Vafai, reviewed by ROSHAN DANESH
- 100 *Millennialism, Millerites, and Prophecy in Bahá'í Discourse* by William P. Collins, reviewed by CALEB GILLELAND

Poems

- 36 TERRY OFNER Some Seeds
- 64 TERRY OFNER Psalm for Mirza Mihdi

105 Biographical Notes

Cover

MASUD OLUFANI "Days of Future Past." Mixed media

From the Editor's Desk

MICHAEL SABET

At least as early as high school, I recognized an uncomfortable dichotomy in my understanding of education, and in the way the educational system presented itself. On the one hand, I could *feel* that my education, at its best, was eliciting something from me, drawing out and developing my mind, expanding my thoughts and broadening my perspectives. On the other hand, I was periodically confronted with a set of perfectly valid practical questions—What will you do when you grow up? What do you need to learn to get a job?—that, taken to their logical extension, seemed to want to flatten all of my lofty ideas about education to a single, purely instrumental concern: *How will this ultimately help me earn a living?*

It would be some years before I found the language, through participation in courses of the Ruhi Institute, to consider the extent to which the societal discourse on education was *fragmented*, and how this fragmentation was reproduced in my own thinking. Reintegrating fragmented ideas, of course, does not mean taking them all as equally valid or fundamental. While educating oneself in order to be able to do valuable work, including in a career, is indispensable, Bahá'u'lláh clarifies

the more fundamental purpose, and power, of education:

Man is the supreme Talisman. Lack of a proper education hath, however, deprived him of that which he doth inherently possess. Through a word proceeding out of the mouth of God he was called into being; by one word more he was guided to recognize the Source of his education; by yet another word his station and destiny were safeguarded. The Great Being saith: Regard man as a mine rich in gems of inestimable value. Education can, alone, cause it to reveal its treasures, and enable mankind to benefit therefrom. (*Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh Revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas* 161–162)

A cursory glance at how the world has changed since Bahá'u'lláh penned the above words reveals that more people than ever before in human history have access to the great bounty of education. Yet do we feel confident that our education systems are allowing us access to the full richness of that which we inherently possess? Are they causing us, and our children, to reveal our treasures, and enabling mankind to benefit therefrom? What ultimately is a “proper” education—an education that enables you to become what you truly are?

In this issue, we are pleased to present three articles that help us consider this complex question.

In *Bahá'í-Inspired Education Endeavors and Social Justice*, Ilya

Shodjaee-Zrudlo and Ashraf Rushdy highlight the shared understanding of the Bahá'í community and of the social justice education tradition that a proper education must concern itself with values, not just facts, and must aim at justice as indispensable to advancing the wellbeing of humankind. Social justice education has inherited some of the genuine moral achievements of the broader discourse on justice: a sharpened sense of human dignity, an insistence on equality, and an awareness and critique of structural oppression. Yet, as the article skillfully diagnoses, certain assumptions within the tradition undermine its own aims. Authority tends to be treated as inherently oppressive, which can undermine the indispensable role of the teacher. The passion for equality can slide into resentment and entitlement. Awareness of how various identities have been structurally marginalized can harden into a fixed insistence on identarian incommensurability and competition. In articulating how the Bahá'í teachings and the community's experience with education might point to resolutions, the authors present a clear and compelling way forward, informed by the Bahá'í Teachings and the community's experience with education, rooted in the conviction that love and justice are not competing moral demands, and that only when social justice education draws on love's "power to transform the world" will it live up to its highest aspirations (Universal House of Justice, 22 July 2020).

Ymasumac Marañón Davis and

Justin Scoggin extend the conversation of how the Bahá'í experience can inform education in *Expanding on a Bahá'í-Inspired Pedagogy of Social Transformation*. Drawing on their experience as both educators and academics, and with practical experience in both the Bahá'í-inspired Wilmette Institute and in mainstream education, the authors are well-placed to diagnose the implicit materialism of the worldview animating much of formal higher education in the West. This worldview, which determines what counts as knowledge and what education is ultimately for, has its clearest symptom in a competency-based education that reduces human development to measurable outputs and evaluates behavioural standards rather than nurturing spiritual qualities. Bahá'í-inspired educational initiatives are learning about a different kind of pedagogy, one focused on developing the powers of the soul to serve a twofold moral purpose—the student's own spiritual growth and the transformation of society. Centered on a humble posture of learning, drawing on cycles of action and reflection, situating faculty and students as walking a shared path of learning and service, and emphasizing fieldwork that inserts students as protagonists in communities, this pedagogy serves as a rich and exciting example of how insights from the community-building process are directly relevant to education more broadly.

In *Interdisciplinarity, Connectivity and Capability: An Exploration in the Context of Social Change*, Felicity

Rawlings-Sanaei grapples with a prevalent feature of education, and the generation of knowledge more generally, that is closely tied to materialism: the fragmentation of knowledge into isolated disciplines, mirroring and reinforcing a fragmented perception of reality itself. When knowledge about things is severed from their underlying unity, it blinds itself to relationality; education produces specialists who cannot read the wholeness of social problems, and institutions generate knowledge about communities rather than with them. Interdisciplinarity is a promising response to this problem, but in its current form it remains largely a top-down enterprise of academics; it addresses fragmentation at the level of disciplines but not at the level of participation. Asking what might it mean for the grassroots to contribute to interdisciplinary generation of knowledge, Rawlings-Sanaei argues that a framework of learning in action, familiar to Bahá'ís as the iterative cycle of consultation, action, reflection, and study, can help reframe capability not as expertise but as the developed capacity to read one's social reality, participate in collective inquiry, and act with agency. When knowledge is produced in this way, the artificial separation between the knower and the known, the specialist and the community, begins to dissolve. Interdisciplinarity becomes genuinely transformative only when it is participatory all the way down.

This issue also features two poems by Terry Ofner exploring the long-term results of sacrifice. A similar long view

of history is reprised by multidisciplinary artist Masud Olufani's cover art. Masud writes, of this incredibly evocative piece:

"Days of Future Past" seeks to collapse time by linking the past to the future. The title is derived from a 2014 *X-Men* film of the same name in which the central characters live in a dystopian future as they oscillate between time periods. I have appropriated the phrase in this multimedia work, to illustrate how time is not simply a linear construct, but rather a constantly shifting reality that is lived in the past, the present and the future simultaneously. We are, in part because we were, and we will be, in part, because we are. We are the embodied realities of "timelessness," our spiritual consciousness a corridor that leads us beyond the limitations of fragmented dichotomies, to an integrated and unified understanding of the interconnectedness of all reality.

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.

EDUCATION AND MORAL DEVELOPMENT IN CHILDREN

by *Susan Clay Stoddart*

[doi.org/10.31581/jbs-1.1.413\(1988\)](https://doi.org/10.31581/jbs-1.1.413(1988))

The author suggests that partly as a result of the controversy over the teaching of religion, schools have avoided teaching children about moral and ethical standards for behavior. . . . The author calls for teaching children about their spiritual identity, defined by their divine qualities and talents, rather than an identity based on characteristics of race, social class, religious background, and ethnicity. She presents strategies that parents and teachers can use to help children develop an identity with all human beings and a common moral code that can be applied to all behavior.

ADVANCING IN BAHÁ'Í-INSPIRED EDUCATION

by *Sona Farid-Arbab*

[doi.org/10.31581/jbs-26.4.5\(2016\)](https://doi.org/10.31581/jbs-26.4.5(2016))

Humbled by the realization of the magnitude of the work ahead, a

growing number of us, together with other like-minded individuals, have to labor in diverse cultural and ecological settings, identifying educational needs, developing elements of a coherent pedagogy, and creating a series of teaching-learning experiences in which these elements are given practical expression. The experience of the Junior Youth Spiritual Empowerment Program is offered as an example of an endeavor to advance Bahá'í-inspired education in which modest contributions accumulate and lead to significant progress.

A READING OF SONA FARID-ARBAB'S *MORAL EMPOWERMENT: IN QUEST OF A PEDAGOGY*

by *Gerald Filson*

[doi.org/10.31581/jbs-28.3.4\(2018\)](https://doi.org/10.31581/jbs-28.3.4(2018))

What should be the goal of education? How can we fit everything into a curriculum at a time when knowledge and information are accumulating at an unbelievable rate? And how can education address our need to learn about both the physical and the social world, different as they are? Farid-Arbab's book, *Moral Empowerment: In Quest of a Pedagogy*, is an admirable effort to provide answers to such questions by starting with two even more fundamental questions: What is the nature of the human being, or learner? And what is the nature of understanding?

Bahá'í-Inspired Educational Endeavors and Social Justice¹

ILYA ZRUDLO

ASHRAF RUSHDY

Abstract

Bahá'í-inspired educational endeavors naturally seek, among other aims, to instill capacity in young people to build a more just society. Other educational efforts in North America share this aim, which is often expressed using the term “social justice.” This paper analyses conceptions of authority, freedom, power, equality, and identity that are mobilized in the context of educational endeavors associated with the aim of social justice. Some of these conceptions, it is argued, can lead to certain confusions in educational thought and practice. If education, Bahá'í-inspired or otherwise, is to contribute to social justice, careful attention needs to be given to the way these concepts are understood and translated into action.

Résumé

Les initiatives pédagogiques d'inspiration bahá'ie visent naturellement, entre autres objectifs, à faire naître chez les jeunes la capacité de bâtir une société plus juste. En Amérique du Nord, d'autres initiatives

pédagogiques poursuivent le même objectif, souvent désigné par le terme de «justice sociale». Le présent article analyse les conceptions de l'autorité, de la liberté, du pouvoir, de l'égalité et de l'identité qui sont utilisées dans le cadre des initiatives pédagogiques axées sur la justice sociale. Certaines de ces conceptions, soutient-on, peuvent entraîner une certaine confusion dans la pensée et la pratique pédagogiques. Si l'éducation, qu'elle soit d'inspiration bahá'ie ou non, doit contribuer à la justice sociale, il convient d'accorder une attention particulière à la manière dont ces concepts sont compris et transposés en actions.

Resumen

Los esfuerzos educativos de inspiración Bahá'í naturalmente buscan, entre otros objetivos, inculcar capacidad en personas jóvenes para construir una sociedad más justa. Otros esfuerzos educativos en América del Norte comparten este objetivo, el cual a menudo se expresa usando el término de “justicia social.” Este artículo analiza los conceptos de autoridad, libertad, poder, igualdad, e identidad los cuales se movilizan en el contexto de esfuerzos educativos asociados con el objetivo de la justicia social. Se argumenta que algunos de estos conceptos pueden resultar en ciertas confusiones en pensamiento y práctica educativos. Si la educación, de inspiración Bahá'í u otra, es para contribuir a la justicia social, se necesita que se preste cuidadosa atención a la manera que estos conceptos son comprendidos y traducidos a la acción.

INTRODUCTION

Bahá'is all over the world are engaged in educational activities that aim to raise capacity in young people to become protagonists in the emergence of

1 The authors would like to thank Dr. Marika St. Rose Yeo for her insights and inputs in the generative conversation on these themes, as well as her substantial contributions to this paper.

just and unified communities, a contribution towards the construction of a new, global civilization. These educational activities are carried out in every corner of the world and range from informal, community-based endeavors to schools and teacher-training. One of the distinctive features of these activities is that Bahá'ís and others with whom they are collaborating are striving to carry them out within a single conceptual framework—drawing on the same set of principles, concepts, and methods. Naturally, there is an ongoing conversation about the nature of this framework, which evolves in light of experience and as understanding deepens. Some contributions to this ongoing conversation have unfolded in the pages of this journal.² We hope that this article, which explores the theme of social justice in relation to this framework, will constitute a meaningful contribution to this conversation, one in which we ourselves are involved as active participants in the educational endeavors of the Bahá'í

community.³ We are, simultaneously, members of academic communities that are striving to articulate and put in practice approaches to education that serve the cause of social justice. This article might therefore also prove helpful for those who, while not involved in the educational activities promoted by the Bahá'í community, are convinced that young people have a role to play in bringing about a more just society, and that education can release this potential.

Why the theme of social justice? First, as mentioned above, we share the concern that permeates our academic fields that education should contribute to the emergence of a more just society. The theme of social justice has also, undoubtedly, become far more prevalent in public discourse generally and in education specifically in recent years.

Second, there are particular challenges associated with maintaining consistency between aims and methods when seeking to advance social justice in the moral and intellectual environment of North America—the context in which we operate. Social justice educators themselves are keenly aware of these challenges: they are conscious, for example, that many efforts that are intended to empower youth may in fact inadvertently perpetuate various forms of injustice.⁴ As such, they strive to remain vigilant for gaps between,

2 We refer the reader to the following articles published in the *Journal of Bahá'í Studies* over the years: Haleh Arbab, “Learning to Read Social Reality in the Light of the Revelation”; Sona Farid-Arbab, “Advancing in Bahá'í-inspired Education”; Gerald Filson, “A Reading of Sona Farid-Arbab’s *Moral Empowerment: In Quest of a Pedagogy*”; Paul Lample, “In Pursuit of Harmony between Science and Religion,” “Toward a Framework for Action,” and “Exploring a Framework for the Elimination of Racial Prejudice in America.”

3 Of course, the ideas in this article are ultimately our own and should not be seen as “the perspective of the Bahá'í community.”

4 For a recent example, see Hosseini et al. (2025).

say, stated principles or commitments and educational approaches. We are similarly concerned about this kind of consistency between principles and practice; this paper aims to illuminate certain areas where this consistency can be strengthened.

Naturally, Bahá'í-inspired educational endeavors are guided by a framework that is explicitly inspired by religion, specifically the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith, as well as the accumulating experience of the Bahá'í community. Bahá'ís have been encouraged to foster consistency “among the explicit and implicit convictions which underpin an initiative, the values promoted by it, the attitudes adopted by its participants, the methods they employ, and the ends they seek” (“Social Action”). The following paragraph, from the same document, comments on the complexities associated with striving to avoid contradictions and to operate within an evolving framework:

If contradictions are to be avoided, the participants in an endeavor need to become increasingly aware of the environment within which their work advances. On the one hand, they are to freely draw insights from the range of philosophies, academic theories, community programs and social movements within that environment and to keep current with the technological trends that influence progress. On the other hand, they should remain watchful lest they allow the teachings [of the Bahá'í

Faith] to be bent into conformity with this or that ideology, intellectual fad or fashionable practice. In this connection, the capacity to measure the value of prevalent approaches, ideas, attitudes, and methods in the balance of the Faith is vital. This capacity enables one, for example, to uncover the aggrandizement of self so often lying behind initiatives that are nominally concerned with empowerment, to discern the tendency of certain development efforts to foist upon the poor an entirely materialistic worldview, to perceive the subtle ways in which competitiveness and greed can be promoted in the name of justice and prosperity, and ultimately to abandon the notion that one or another theory or movement which may fleetingly acquire some prominence in the wider society can provide a shortcut to meaningful change. (“Social Action”)

In North America, there are myriad “philosophies, academic theories, community programmes and social movements” from which Bahá'ís draw insights as they endeavor to raise the capacity of young people in their communities. These philosophies, theories, and approaches are not all consistent with one another, neither are they entirely consistent with the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith. Again, there is an analogous issue for all social justice educators, who need to use their judgment to sift through the large number of

theories about and approaches to social justice, not all of which are consistent with one another⁵ and some of which may be implemented in ways inconsistent with the aim of social justice itself. The purpose of our paper, then, is to examine a few concepts that are central to the loose set of philosophies, theories, and approaches to social justice education that are prevalent in North America, and to determine areas of overlap and inconsistency with the evolving framework guiding Bahá'í-inspired educational endeavors.

APPROACH

We first offer a very brief overview of some of the most prominent “philosophies, academic theories, community programmes and social movements” that link social justice and education. The aim here is to outline a general trend, not to exhaustively list approaches, let alone describe the subtleties of each approach. This is because our purpose in this paper is not to assess a particular theory or movement, or even a group of them, but rather to reflect on the general “ethos” of mainstream social justice education. We recognize, of course, that “social justice education” is not a monolithic enterprise but rather encompasses diverse and sometimes contradictory approaches—from Freirean critical pedagogy to antiracist education, from multicultural

curricula to decolonizing movements. Our interest is in the broad assumptions and sensibilities that cut across these approaches, particularly as they manifest in North American educational settings.

Next, we situate social justice education within the context of a much broader long-term intellectual and moral movement we call the “modern struggle for justice,” which gave rise to our modern sense of justice. This genealogical approach helps reveal the historical contingency of the assumptions of social justice education and opens room for alternative interpretations of its formative concepts.

The bulk of the remainder of the paper is then dedicated to an assessment of the general ethos of social justice education today. We analyze three themes that are central to the language invoked in the context of this discourse: (1) authority, freedom, and power; (2) equality and egalitarianism, and (3) identity. For each theme, we first explain why it has become salient, and then uncover some of the assumptions made about it in social justice education. The North American reader in particular will likely recognize these assumptions, as they saturate our public discourse and educational system. We selected these themes for this very reason, and because, even as they bring certain positive elements into education, they also tend to generate some confusion in educational thought and practice, leading to unintended negative consequences (some of which we ourselves have observed). In many cases, these negative

⁵ There are even uses of the term “social justice” that are meant to provoke contention or obfuscation, such as the derogatory term, “social justice warrior.”

consequences actually work against the aims of social justice itself, generating a contradiction. Our argument, of course, is not (as some do argue) that we should abandon social justice education, but rather that, if we are serious about educating individuals who will promote justice, we should think more carefully about the origins of our core concepts and how we are to understand them and their practical implications.⁶

A thread running through all three themes is the idea that love—understood not as mere sentiment but as a transformative force—must complement and elevate our sense of justice if education is to serve its highest purposes. As we shall argue, the distortions that emerge in each thematic area can be traced, at least in part, to the modern tendency to separate love from justice, treating them as independent or even competing moral demands. We draw on the philosopher Paul Ricoeur's insight that justice requires what he calls a "logic of superabundance"—the logic of love—in order to fulfill its own aims (Ricoeur). This insight, we suggest, finds a profound expression in the Bahá'í teachings, which disclose that love and justice are not merely compatible but mutually necessary.

The selection of these themes was also informed by the authors'

6 Elements of this approach (and some of our analyses of specific concepts) are similar to those adopted by one of the authors in a recent publication. See, Ilya Zrudlo, *Navigating the Moral Landscape of Youth Development and Community Education*.

experience in the educational endeavors of the Bahá'í community, as well as our reading in the field of education. In both of these settings, the authors have worked closely with hundreds of adolescents and youth over the years who, alive to the injustices that surround them, are seeking, encountering, and testing frameworks of action and thought that might effectively address injustice. These experiences were gained in the context of weekly educational and service activities, as well as camp and seminar settings. Our assessment of the concepts associated with each theme draws on numerous sources, including the fields of philosophy of education, social justice theory, and history of education, as well as the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith. While our focus is educational thought and practice, we often take up a wider perspective, since the ethos of social justice extends far beyond education.

Finally, the paper concludes by reviewing some elements of Baha'i-inspired educational processes and how they carry the potential to address the issues raised.

SOCIAL JUSTICE AND EDUCATION

The concern for social justice has, in a sense, been part of modern education from its beginnings. The drive to enhance access to education, especially among people who were previously denied it, may be the most basic manifestation of this concern. Early educational reformers in the United States were also concerned with how

the content of education could advance social justice. The historian of education Herbert Kliebard, surveying the late nineteenth century and first half of the twentieth century, points to a loose group of reformers he calls the “social meliorists,” which included the American educational theorist George Counts (1889–1974). The social meliorists drew attention to the potential of education to contribute to the work of restructuring society; as the title of Counts’ famous book asks: “Dare the school build a new social order?” They felt that the education system could be oriented to empower students to combat a whole range of social ills, including poverty and other inequalities. Schools, they argued, should be democratic training grounds for vocal and active citizens. After World War II, and especially during the Civil Rights Movement era, educational efforts concerned with social justice were infused with, and invigorated by, the language of rights and empowerment. The 1960s Freedom Schools, meant to counter the educational segregation of African Americans, were among these new educational efforts.

Later in the twentieth century, the critical pedagogy movement, inspired by Paulo Freire and others, began to exert influence on education. Freire’s analysis of the relationship between education and oppression—particularly his critique of the “banking” model of education, in which students are treated as passive receptacles of knowledge—was profoundly influential. His work spurred a greater focus

on the oppressed and marginalized and the relationship between education and the broader social and economic structures of society. In terms of pedagogy, critical educators deemphasized the role of the teacher as a conveyor of knowledge, strove to equalize the relative statuses of student and teacher in the context of dialogue, and prioritized raising consciousness about injustices and inequalities. It is important to note that Freire himself understood dialogue as a demanding practice requiring both humility and a commitment to truth, not merely the elimination of the teacher’s authority. His concept of “problem-posing education,” (79) at its best, engaged teacher and student in a shared investigation of reality—an approach resonant of the spirit of consultation and collaborative inquiry that animates the educational endeavors of the Bahá’í community. Besides inspiring many grassroots movements, critical pedagogy also influenced the academic field of education. Today, there are whole departments and programs within faculties of education at universities that have a similar, critical orientation, such as the Department of Social Justice Education at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education.

The influence of all these ideas on mainstream schooling has often been relatively limited, in part because there are other, competing forces affecting educational discourse and practice. Nonetheless, many educators, especially in the twenty-first century, have begun to absorb the kind of thinking and language associated with the social

meliorists and critical pedagogy. In recent years, especially since the global pandemic, certain social justice concerns—particularly eliminating racism and promoting equity, diversity, and inclusion—have become far more widespread in mainstream educational thought and practice in North America than they ever were before, although they have encountered strong backlash in some contexts.

There is much that Bahá'ís can learn from and appreciate about these ideas and efforts. For example, to the extent that approaches to education inspired by social justice theories and movements assist students to overcome self-centeredness or apathy and nurture in them a genuine and universal concern for the well-being of others, especially the marginalized, we can say that these approaches manage to strengthen certain dimensions of young people's sense of justice,⁷ which is certainly an aim of Bahá'í-inspired education. Some programs can also help students understand how prejudice “permeates the structures of society and is systematically impressed on the individual consciousness” (Universal House of Justice, 28 December 2010), a condition to which the Universal House

of Justice, the governing body of the worldwide Bahá'í community, has drawn the attention of all those working to advance community-building efforts, including educational activities. This type of education is paramount in assisting young people to sharpen their perception in order to detect the more subtle operations of prejudices in society—an important capacity for someone aiming to contribute to the betterment of their community. Relatedly, social justice approaches to education often help students appreciate the extensive range of changes that need to be made if our world is to become more just. Bahá'í-inspired educational efforts should also yield a vision of the magnitude of social transformation ahead of us. Finally, educators such as bell hooks have shown how love and care can be placed at the center of pedagogical practice—an idea that also resonates with Bahá'í-inspired education. These examples suggest that, in many ways, Bahá'í-inspired educational endeavors and social justice education look towards the same horizon—a more just and loving world.

THE MODERN STRUGGLE
FOR JUSTICE AND THE MODERN
SENSE OF JUSTICE

7 One example, which involves undergraduate students, is the Multi-Racial Unity Living Experience (MRULE) program at Michigan State University (see Gazel). Briefly, MRULE aims to facilitate intercultural understanding and friendship by involving students from different backgrounds in discussions and service projects.

The process described above, in which mainstream education has been gradually infused with various concepts and values associated with social justice, can be situated within a much broader moral and intellectual movement, stretching back even before the

emergence of modern schooling. For the purposes of this paper, we will refer to this broader movement as “the modern struggle for justice” and the ethos or sensibility associated with it as “the modern sense of justice.” This historical view can help us better analyze the motivations behind the endeavor to promote social justice in education, as well as its key concepts and assumptions. It also helps us avoid extremes in our assessment: historical shortsightedness can lead us to either over-glorify or, conversely, to undersell this endeavor, depending on which of its aspects we have within our sights.

Justice is not an invention of modernity. In the pre-modern period, however, most people’s sense of justice would not have been particularly offended by, say, a rigid social hierarchy with poor laborers at the bottom and the nobility on top, or even the practice of slavery. That individuals were unequal by nature—say, in “honor” or worth, with implications for the social order—was a widespread, almost unquestioned assumption. One of the forces that contributed to the erosion of the assumption of natural inequality was the gradual unfolding of the Christian notion of the equality of souls in the eyes of God. Philosopher Larry Siedentop, for example, traces the influence of monastic practices, church canon law, and theological debates on Western European thought and norms, gradually leading to the emergence of the ideas of natural rights, moral equality, and even representative government. The philosopher Charles Taylor explains

this shift in terms of a gradual replacement of the notion of “honor”—a key concept of the social imaginary that sustained pre-modern social hierarchies—by the modern idea of “dignity” (Taylor, *Multiculturalism*). Where an individual’s honor could be earned, bestowed, lost, or taken away, dignity was inherent, inalienable. While at first the concept of dignity was extended only to Christians, over subsequent centuries it inevitably came to encompass others. The Enlightenment thinkers carried this burgeoning sense of universal equality into a new key, using it to critique the authority of both clergy and absolute monarchies. Liberty and reason were recast as diametrically opposed to authority and tradition.

Thus, a relatively new set of convictions—about individual freedom, universal equality, and human dignity—emerged in the modern period, gradually giving a new impulse and direction to our sense of justice (Taylor, *Sources*). A modern mission eventually took shape to eliminate suffering, injustice, and grave inequalities. Concern for the conditions of workers, the abolition movement, efforts to advance the rights of women and children, and various revolutionary movements can all be considered part of this modern struggle for justice. Over time, the circle of those included within the scope of this mission was painstakingly expanded; it now encompasses all of humanity, at least at the level of reasonable public discourse. We might say, then, that in the modern period humanity is gradually developing an acute

sense of justice. For Bahá'ís, this is, in a sense, to be expected: the Bahá'í teachings explain that humankind as a whole is currently in a period of transition akin to adolescence (Universal House of Justice, 2 March 2013), and the experience of the Bahá'í community suggests that adolescents, far from being naturally egocentric, are distinguished by their acute sense of justice. The entire range of contemporary theories and movements dedicated to social justice can, in this light, be seen as expressions of humanity's developing sense of justice.

A great deal of progress has been achieved thanks to this modern sense of justice—a great deal we would want to maintain, emphasize, strengthen, and so on. However, the question remains: is this modern sense of justice up to the task of building a more just world, a task to which we hope the graduates of our educational systems will dedicate themselves? Like all elements of modernity, the modern sense of justice is a mixed blessing; we must sift the gold from the dross (Taylor, *Sources*). Moreover, it is a premise of this journal that the Bahá'í teachings offer insight into reality—including, as we will attempt to show, into the concepts that give shape to a sense of justice that can empower individuals to contribute to the construction of a more just and mature civilization. Again, the suggestion is not to downplay what has already been achieved by the modern sense of justice. Rather, we argue, this sense of justice needs to be further developed, refined, and elevated in order

to ready it for the work ahead. The three sections below, each focused on one salient theme, offer some analysis that may help us identify areas for this work of refinement. The themes we now examine—authority/freedom/power, equality, and identity—are each products of this modern struggle. They represent achievements of real moral progress: the critique of arbitrary authority, the quest for equality, and the demand for recognition of diverse identities have each contributed to a more just world. But they also carry assumptions shaped by the particular historical conditions of their emergence—assumptions that, when absorbed uncritically into educational practice, can generate confusions that undermine the very justice they seek.

AUTHORITY, FREEDOM, AND POWER

Our modern sense of justice, especially in the West, has been particularly sensitive to any limitations placed upon the individual, often perceived as an imposition upon their freedom and rights. Combined with our collective awareness of the defectiveness of our institutions—both historically and today—we have become inclined to radically distrust any and all authorities. Freedom is of course an important good, and its wanton and unjustified restriction by various authorities, past and present, is to be denounced. The Bahá'ís of Iran are unfortunately all too familiar with the indiscriminate use of authoritarian power to limit their educational and economic freedoms (see

Karlberg, “Constructive Resilience”). However, the modern struggle for justice has yielded a tendency to think of authority and power as at best necessary evils, which need constant and rigorous checks and balances, and of freedom, defined narrowly as being able to do what one likes, as a good always to be increased. These assumptions are widely held in society, and they influence education in particular ways that demonstrate their limitations.

The philosopher Hannah Arendt (“Crisis”) observed that this radical suspicion of authority could cause major problems in education. She saw that educators were becoming overly self-conscious about their authority and were inclined to relinquish it, or to share their power with their students, who were to govern themselves, the teacher only intervening if necessary. This contributed to widening the gulf between child and adult, relegating the former to their own world, somewhat cut off from the world of adults. Arendt pointed out that, although under this arrangement the student was to a degree emancipated from the authority of the teacher, they were now under a potentially far more dangerous authority: the tyranny of their peer group. While an authoritarian teacher was undesirable, the peer group could be even more tyrannical. She explained that the result was “either conformism or juvenile delinquency, and . . . frequently a mixture of both” (*Between Past and Future* 182).

There is a close connection, for Arendt, between authority and

responsibility: if you have authority, you have the responsibility to, for example, make laws for the public good, while others have the responsibility to uphold them. The modern flight from authority has entailed a widespread relinquishing of responsibility in public life, both for making and following the law. However, Arendt felt that authority was a natural part of educational practice and could not be jettisoned:

Children cannot throw off educational authority, as though they were in a position of oppression by an adult majority—though even this absurdity of treating children as an oppressed minority in need of liberation has actually been tried in modern educational practice. Authority has been discarded by the adults, and this can mean only one thing: that the adults refuse to assume responsibility for the world into which they have brought the children. (Arendt, *Between Past and Future* 190)

What Arendt helps us see is that the relinquishing of authority is not, as it may appear, an act of love or generosity toward students. Rather, it is the abdication of a responsibility rooted in care—the adult’s care for the child and for the world the child will inherit. True authority in education, then, is not the opposite of love but one of its expressions. A teacher who loves her students exercises authority precisely because she cares about their development and about the world they will help shape.

The influential American philosopher and educationalist John Dewey warned in 1938 that “progressive education” was leaning dangerously towards the other extreme in its reaction to the errors of so-called traditional education: “When external authority is rejected, it does not follow that all authority should be rejected, but rather that there is need to search for a more effective source of authority” (21). We can see this distrust of authority in education in the moral sensibility that prompts some educators to insist that they are not teachers but merely “facilitators.” The solution is not to reinstate the traditional form of authority in education, but rather, as Dewey suggests, to search for a more suitable conception of authority.⁸

Dewey also pointed out that “an educational philosophy which professes to be based on the idea of freedom may become as dogmatic as ever was the traditional education which is reacted against” (Dewey, *Experience* 22). Freedom is a notoriously slippery idea. The philosopher of education Louis Arnaud Reid distinguishes between three interrelated types of freedom relevant to education: freedom from external restraints, freedom of choice,

and the freedom that comes from submission to certain kinds of discipline or authority. He argues that students should be given as much of the first kind of freedom as possible, so that they can be assisted to freely choose to submit to the authority of the spiritual and physical laws that govern the universe and the disciplines that investigate this order—the source of the third kind of freedom, arguably the true end of education. Acquiring the discipline of scientific thought, for example, develops the student’s rational powers, freeing them to undertake systematic action. Learning to distinguish between one’s lower and higher nature⁹ and submitting oneself to the discipline demanded by the latter allows one to be free from the demands of one’s passing whims and desires. A dogmatic concern for freedom is often insensitive to differences between these three forms of freedom and can mistake even knowledge itself as a

⁸ While Dewey is, rightly to an extent, seen as one of the progenitors of progressive education, by 1938 (if not earlier) he no longer wished to associate himself with that label, in part for philosophical reasons, but also because of what he was seeing on the ground in terms of the influence of progressive pedagogical thinking on the discourse and practices of teachers.

⁹ Here we are referring to a concept in the Bahá'í Writings described by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá as the following: “In man there are two natures; his spiritual or higher nature and his material or lower nature. In one he approaches God, in the other he lives for the world alone. Signs of both these natures are to be found in men. In his material aspect he expresses untruth, cruelty and injustice; all these are the outcome of his lower nature. The attributes of his Divine nature are shown forth in love, mercy, kindness, truth and justice, one and all being expressions of his higher nature” (*Paris Talks* 18:2).

kind of oppressive authority imposed on students.¹⁰ The focus on the first two kinds of freedoms obscures the need to foster in students receptivity to the truth, without which it is incredibly difficult to advance understanding.

The concept of power is likewise distorted or narrowed as a result of our modern distrust of it. This is eloquently discussed elsewhere,¹¹ but briefly, power is often reduced to domination, or political or economic power. Analyses of these forms of power carried out by social justice theorists and educators have been and can still be insightful, helping students see previously hidden injustices. We can learn a great deal from penetrating analyses of this kind. However, if this is all we understand by power, we lose sight of its other manifestations, such as mutual empowerment. The former conception of power, often associated with politics or economics, is also usually conceived

in a zero-sum fashion, ignoring the existence of powers that do not diminish when exercised (for instance, the power of love). An effective and loving teacher does not have to “give up” her own power and distribute it among her students. Sharing her knowledge does not reduce it in any way, and leads to mutual empowerment, releasing the powers of her students. Our spiritual and intellectual powers are quite unlike economic or political power as typically understood. Education clearly requires an expanded conception of power—one animated by love, in which the exercise of power serves the growth and flourishing of all involved.

Radical distrust of power and authority may also manifest in education in the emphasis placed on developing in students what are often called critical thinking skills. Social justice education typically emphasizes the need for students to develop skills and capacities to keep their government and other powerful individuals and groups in check by, for example, scrutinizing legislation or the actions of companies for traces of the abuse of power. The idea is to directly transmit to students the same suspicion of power and authority that animates the modern struggle for justice, a suspicion that is viewed as central to being a good citizen. We should be careful here to distinguish between different forms of critical thinking. The capacity to think independently, to evaluate evidence, and to reason carefully about complex problems is indispensable to education and to the promotion of justice. This

10 There are cases in which illusions or superstitions are labeled knowledge and imposed on students. For example, the idea that human nature is fundamentally self-interested passes as knowledge in much of economics. For a profound discussion of the idea of sources of knowledge in education, and their relationship to oppression and empowerment, see Sona Farid-Arbab, *Moral Empowerment: In Quest of a Pedagogy*, especially pp. 281–284).

11 See, Sona Farid-Arbab, *Moral Empowerment: In Quest of a Pedagogy*; Michael Karlberg, “The Power of Discourse and the Discourse of Power,” *International Journal of Peace Studies*, vol. 10, no. 1.

same kind of thinking is upheld as a spiritual principle in the form of the independent investigation of truth in the writings of the Bahá'í Faith. What is problematic is a specific orientation that goes beyond these capacities—an orientation we might call a “hermeneutic of suspicion,” in which the student is trained to assume that hidden power dynamics and malicious intentions underlie all social arrangements. While students should certainly avoid naïveté regarding the injustices and tyranny that saturate many of the structures and systems in our world today, it is doubtful whether fostering in them the attribute of suspicion will aid them in their efforts to promote justice or effect lasting transformation. The suspicious eye tends to project malicious intentions onto others; the suspicious mind constrains its imagination of what is possible by taking self-interest and power-based manipulation as inevitable.¹² This can crush the will to act. For our own part, if we are to become true champions of justice, the Bahá'í writings suggest, we should cleanse our own deeds “from craftiness and suspicion” (Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets* 138).

Scholars have also pointed out that emphasizing the acquisition of “context-free” critical thinking in education may inadvertently increase societal distrust of science, which is already

dangerously waning (Latour). Again, a measure of distrust is not entirely unwarranted, particularly in light of abuses committed by scientific institutions, but it is all too easy for this attitude to encompass scientific investigation itself, which after all takes place within institutions. Some scholars have even noted the link between educational efforts promoting uncritical forms of skepticism and the general upsurge of interest in conspiracy theories (Burbules). Taken to its extreme, an ethos that vindicates generalized suspicion of power and authority opens the way for individuals and groups to imagine, impute, and accept conspiracy.

These are some of the educational problems that emerge when authority and power are seen as inherently oppressive and freedom as an unqualified good. These assumptions ultimately prevent educators and students from cultivating loving relationships of trust that allow students to develop the many powers they will need to create a more just society.

EQUALITY AND EGALITARIANISM

The modern sense of justice is characterized by a passion for equality which contributes to its distrust of authority. In general, this passion has led to many positive developments, including a growing sensitivity to the extremes of wealth and poverty, the identification of structural injustices that reflect and reproduce prejudicial treatment of identity groups, and the general sensitization of individuals to multifarious

12 Book 10 of the Ruhi Institute, *Building Vibrant Communities*, offer a number of insights about suspicion, and how it interferes with the process of accompanying one another on the path of service (sections 3, 17, and 18 of unit 1).

inequities. All of these are entirely welcome developments for Bahá'ís, given the centrality of the principles of the elimination of the extremes of wealth and poverty, the elimination of prejudices of all kinds, and the equality of the sexes to our vision of the civilization we are striving to build. However, the modern passion for equality can also have undesirable effects on educational processes. The concept of equality intersects with education in many different ways, given the many ways in which human beings might be argued to be, or to deserve to be, equal. These merit unpacking, since unexamined assumptions about what we mean by equality can contribute to some of the undesirable effects of the concept's application.

At a fundamental level, the idea that we are equal before the law (or equal in the sight of God, etc.) informs the way teachers should interact with students and how students should behave towards one another. We might say that an ethos of equality by which each individual has an equal right to be treated with dignity should pervade schooling. As already explained, this does not mean that teachers should abandon their responsibilities. In fact, in order to preserve the dignity of each student, and create an uplifting environment in their classrooms, teachers *need* to exercise their authority. If a student mistreats another, the teacher cannot stand idly by.

Another important facet of equality in the educational context is equality of opportunity. It is crucial that

educational systems should give each child an equal chance to succeed. It is already well-recognized in educational theory and practice that, far from implying that each student should be treated in exactly the same way, equality of opportunity requires recognition of the reality that human beings are *not* equal in the sense of being identical. In this connection, certain structural forms of injustice in every society create patterns in which certain groups struggle more than others in schools. Teachers should be aware of these patterns and ensure that they do not inadvertently reproduce them. This often requires giving additional attention to some students, or to all students in ways that are new to the educational setting.

While some forms of inequality between students result from structural injustices that should be dismantled, others stem from the irreducible differences between human beings. Thus, even if structural injustices are mitigated or eliminated, not all students will excel in the same way. We should encourage all, equally, to strive for excellence, but this does not mean that *outcomes* will be equal or identical. Human beings have different talents and capacities.¹³ In this connection, Martha

13 In this connection, 'Abdu'l-Bahá states the following: "There is nevertheless a difference in the intrinsic or natal capacity of individuals. Ten children of the same age, with equal station of birth, taught in the same school, partaking of the same food, in all respects subject to the same environment, their interests equal and in common, will evidence separate and

Nussbaum has suggested that, rather than measuring justice solely in terms of equal outcomes or equal resources, justice requires ensuring that each person has the opportunity to develop and exercise their central human capabilities. This resonates with the emphasis in the Bahá'í Faith on building the capacity of every individual to contribute to the common good. Crucially, from a Bahá'í perspective, none can know the full extent of an individual's capacities save God—not even the individual themselves. An individual, therefore, should strive to do their best, improving day by day, as opposed to comparing themselves to others.

The idea of comparison brings into view what we might call the dark side of equality. The writer Alexis de Tocqueville described some of the dangers lurking in the passion for equality in the context of his famous study of American democracy in the mid-1800s. While valuing many of the positive developments brought about in America due to its commitment to equality, he noted that this passion for equality could become twisted and “depraved” (41), encouraging us to drag others down to our level rather than causing us to take inspiration by their advances. This “depraved taste for equality” makes it nearly impossible to take joy in the progress of others and can also cause us to shun high standards and excellence. Individuals whose passion for equality has become corrupted in

this way respond to the envy or guilt associated with perceiving a comparative standard of perfection that is out of reach by seeking to debase the standard. Michael Sandel's analysis of meritocratic thinking further illuminates this dynamic: he shows how the modern rhetoric of “rising” and “succeeding” generates not only hubris among the successful but a corrosive resentment among those who feel left behind—a resentment that has become a powerful force in contemporary politics.

Striving for intellectual and spiritual excellence, which is at the heart of Bahá'í-inspired educational efforts, surely demands that we set certain standards before our eyes and work systematically to reach them. Not everyone will advance at the same pace in this regard, and therefore certain inequalities in attainment will persist. Those who do advance more quickly are presented with the challenge of avoiding a sense of superiority, which is *always* unwarranted and pernicious according to Bahá'í teachings. A strong sense of equality—grounded in the idea that we are all created from the same dust—helps prevent a sense of superiority from taking root. Those who advance more slowly, on the other hand, if gripped by ego and comparison, risk falling into jealousy and entitlement-based resentment justified by “equality.”

It is worth spelling out more explicitly how and why feelings of resentment are particularly undesirable in the educational context, especially for the individual holding such feelings.

distinct degrees of capability and advancement” (*Promulgation* 85).

Educational theorists have pointed out that the false notion that everyone is equal in talent and capacity can distort young peoples' self-perception (Jonas and Yacek). Students inevitably recognize differences in attainment, and when they notice that some are more capable than they are in some respect, they may begin to feel alienation, jealousy, and resentment, instead of striving to learn from their friends. These feelings limit an individual's ability to strive for excellence. Feelings of resentment and entitlement fostered within educational settings may have broader societal consequences as well. They can, for example, be ruthlessly exploited by certain populists. There are many examples of politicians who do not genuinely care about the well-being of the many, but who nevertheless co-opt the language of equality to stoke anger and resentment towards "the establishment." They thus seize political power, but they also numb the aspiration for excellence among their supporters, instead reinforcing the consoling notion that they are just as good as everyone else. In the final analysis, resentment is "an enervating psychological state; it makes individuals weaker by channeling their psychological energy into bitterness, hostility and anger" (Jonas and Yacek 154).

Closely linked to resentment is the concept of "entitlement," which has itself become politically loaded. It seems to be used occasionally by the complacent rich as a way of critiquing the poor, who are perceived as lazy and feeling unjustifiably "entitled." Conversely,

the rich are also thought of as feeling entitled, being used to having their will done without any obstacles hampering their efforts. The charge of entitlement has therefore become a kind of weapon used in political conflict. The truth is that one can feel entitled no matter how poor or wealthy one is. The Universal House of Justice explains that the "seductive messages" of materialism "fuel an increasingly entrenched sense of personal entitlement, which uses the language of justice and rights to disguise self-interest" (1 March 2017).

Thus, while teaching students about equality is a praiseworthy aim, we should be careful how we go about doing so. The emphasis in social justice education tends to be on the idea that everyone *is* equal and therefore deserves to *be* equal—to be treated equitably. Our individualistic culture, however, easily warps this superficially praiseworthy affirmation into a sense of entitlement—that *I*, deserving to be equal, should receive *my* fair share; that is, in a just world, I would always receive what I see others having. That we live in an unjust society founded on a host of inequalities means that we often do not receive our fair share, even if we are legitimately entitled to receive it. We cannot afford complacency in the face of injustice, yet we should be careful that education does not develop in individuals a sense of entitlement, or that, even worse, we become resentful of others. Saturated as we are in a culture of materialism, entitlement can generate jealousy, competition, and an insatiable thirst for more wealth and

attention *in order to* be equal to those we see as materially better off than us.

Another register in which the passion for equality is expressed relates to the relationships between individuals: it is the insistence on equal and reciprocal respect or fair treatment. We should respect and treat others fairly and they should do the same for us. While helping students appreciate the norm of reciprocity is certainly a praiseworthy aim, a subtle form of self-interest can cause us to interpret it in a conditional sense: “*If I am treated fairly, then I will reciprocate.*” Someone who understands reciprocity conditionally might, at most, begin by treating others fairly, but if this treatment is not reciprocated, become resentful and pull out of the reciprocal agreement since the other party is not playing by the rules. Political theorists have described this as the “problem of assurance.” It exacerbates the possibility of breakdowns in public reason and can precipitate “an escalation of antagonism and a cycle of confrontation” (Chan 98–99). Reciprocity by itself, then, is not necessarily enough.

The philosopher Paul Ricoeur suggests that, in order to protect reciprocity from degenerating into self-interested calculation, we need to have recourse to love, with its “logic of superabundance,” to complement the logic of equivalence (equality) associated with reciprocity. Love helps us interpret the norm of reciprocity in the true spirit of justice, therefore promoting real cooperation and solidarity, and not the mere “equilibrium of rival

interests” (36). Nel Noddings, working from a care ethics perspective, makes a complementary point: she argues that the relational ethic of care precedes and enables justice, since we must first be attentive to and concerned for the other before questions of fair distribution can even arise. The capacity to love allows us to transcend self-interest and continue treating others fairly even if we are not receiving fair treatment; it protects our hearts from the bitterness of resentment. Indeed, one of the premises from which Bahá'í-inspired educational efforts proceed is that the proper standard for ethical behavior is to *prefer others to ourselves*. Bahá'u'lláh writes: “Blessed is he who preferreth his brother before himself” (*Tablets* 71). This exhortation is in some ways not intuitively egalitarian at all, but, if taken to heart, Bahá'ís believe it would create a far more just society. Preferring others to ourselves may be thought of as an expression of love’s logic of “superabundance,” going beyond equality. Love unlocks the powers of forbearance and forgiveness, and one of its highest expressions in this regard is the love of one’s enemies. The preference of others before oneself, moving beyond reciprocity, helps orient those with means and social benefits to seek ways to willingly give of their own substance to others around them; to educate themselves about others to whom preference must be given; and to dedicate themselves to the service of others.

There is a tendency in contemporary society to think of love and justice as

placing incompatible demands on us. To retain clarity, Bahá'í-inspired educational efforts need to be able to articulate the coherence between these two important moral imperatives. Love and justice, in this view, are not competing forces but complementary dimensions of a single moral reality.

IDENTITY

Marginalized groups and populations in many societies, moved by a passion for equality and the modern sense of justice, have often become involved in struggles aimed at achieving full recognition as true equals—a recognition that must respect specific identities. As a result, the concept of “identity” has come to play a central role in conversations within social justice education. While some progress has been made in the direction of the elimination of prejudice in this way, many of the strategies employed have fallen short of transforming the conditions that generate injustice in the first place.¹⁴

14 Scholars explore this topic through various angles. Glen Coulthard, for example, argues that while the politics of recognition “may alter the intensity of some of the effects of colonial-capitalist exploitation and domination, it does little to address their generative structures, in this case a capitalist economy constituted by racial and gender hierarchies and the colonial state.” He further writes that when there is too much focus on recognition of identities, “colonialism’s deep-seated structural features” can remain unquestioned (35).

This is in part because these movements sometimes, intentionally or inadvertently, affirm a notion of human identity that falls short of the recognition of the oneness of humanity, of key importance for Bahá'ís.

Before developing this argument, it is important to acknowledge why identity-based movements have been considered necessary and, in many respects, have been necessary. When one’s identity is systematically denigrated, erased, or rendered invisible—as has been the case for countless groups throughout history—the assertion of that identity can be an act of resistance and an important step toward justice. Literary theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has described this as “strategic essentialism”: the temporary adoption of a unified identity position for political purposes, even when one recognizes that the identity in question is more complex and contested than it appears.

However, the question for our purposes is not whether such assertions are understandable or justified in their historical context, but whether, as a long-term educational strategy, the reinforcement of separable group identities can ultimately deliver the transformation that justice demands.

Scholars have suggested that one historical source of this “limited” notion of human identity is the way in which racial, tribal, linguistic, and regional divisions in Western Europe were (re)constructed as separate, even antagonistic “communities of natural identity” (Greenfeld 113; Robinson 10;

Topinka 7). This “artifactual carving up of human differences into distinct groups,” each of which was assigned “innate and ontological characteristics,” was often accompanied by a system in which these groups were “ranked hierarchically,” leading to “othering, denigration, stigmatization and . . . vulnerability” (Gordon 310). Human differences were resolved into “separability” (da Silva).

Even if they are not ranked hierarchically, however, these distinct groupings of humanity, which generate distinct identities of a collective nature, can be problematic, depending on how they are conceptualized. Collective identities provide individuals who identify with them with “notions of how a proper person of that kind behaves” (Appiah 195). Today, many groups seek educational means to instill a collective identity into their members. This can be experienced as empowering, but if the collective identity in question is seen as “separable” from, or in competition with, other identities, we not only risk producing (or re-producing) conditions for subjugation, we also risk contributing to the conditions that call students to turn away from their interconnectedness with others (Stein et al. 2). Kimberlé Crenshaw’s foundational work on intersectionality offers a partial corrective here, showing that identities are not discrete and separable categories but are constituted through their intersections. Her analysis reveals that treating identity groups as monolithic can obscure the experiences of those who sit at the

intersection of multiple marginalized identities. Intersectionality is, in this light, a concept that challenges the notion of entirely separable identities from within the social justice tradition.

Kwame Anthony Appiah illustrates some of the risks of identity-based education with an educational thought experiment:

For consider what might happen if we adopted a policy in which the public schools set out to teach children according to their identities and subcultures; that not only taught *about* collective identities but set out to reinforce and transmit them. If carried to its ultimate, this policy would require segregation into cultural and religious groups either within or between public schools, in ways that would be plainly unconstitutional in the United States since the *Brown* decision. For if we did have unsegregated classes teaching Jewish history, and African-American history, and Anglo history and Hispanic history and Chinese history in our schools, by what right would we forbid children from going to the “wrong” classes? Finally, too many of us have multiple identities—we would have to be in too many classrooms at once. (15)

What is needed, it seems, is an understanding of the profound connections that exist between unity and diversity. The Bahá'í teachings suggest

that diversity is a source of richness. The Bahá'í Faith “does not ignore, nor does it attempt to suppress, the diversity of ethnical origins, of climate, of history, of language and tradition, of thought and habit, that differentiate the peoples and nations of the world.” Rather, it “calls for a wider loyalty, for a larger aspiration than any that has animated the human race” (Shoghi Effendi 41–42).

This “wider loyalty” need not lead, then, to the abandonment of our collective identities. The political scientist Shahrzad Sabet explains the value of these identities: “Shared identities, furthermore, bind us together in social and moral enterprises, providing a basis for community, collective action, and mutual support. At a more personal and subjective level, our particular experiences and perspectives constitute important parts of our self-concept as human beings: they legitimately yearn for recognition, inclusion, and expression.”

It is only when these shared or collective identities end up drawing ontological lines of separation between groups that the principle of the oneness of humanity—so central to Bahá'í-inspired educational efforts—is threatened. The Universal House of Justice states the following regarding humanity's crisis of identity and the concept of oneness:

Humanity is gripped by a crisis of identity, as various peoples and groups struggle to define themselves, their place in the world, and how they should act. Without a vision of shared identity and

common purpose, they fall into competing ideologies and power struggles. Seemingly countless permutations of “us” and “them” define group identities ever more narrowly and in contrast to one another. Over time, this splintering into divergent interest groups has weakened the cohesion of society itself. Rival conceptions about the primacy of a particular people are peddled to the exclusion of the truth that humanity is on a common journey in which all are protagonists. Consider how radically different such a fragmented conception of human identity is from the one that follows from a recognition of the oneness of humanity. In this perspective, the diversity that characterizes the human family, far from contradicting its oneness, endows it with richness. (18 January 2019)

Focusing students' attention solely on what makes up their material identity, or encouraging a singular fixation on the traditions and models within their own culture, may risk closing them off from other standards of excellence, including moral exemplars from other cultures.¹⁵ In other words, it can become increasingly difficult to relate to something or someone that is not associated with one's narrow identity-group. Furthermore, for Bahá'ís,

15 Bahá'ís will also note that this approach may limit the extent to which young people can relate to the example of 'Abdu'l-Bahá.

this kind of narrow attention to contextually-bound material identities could also obscure the recognition of one's eternal, spiritual identity.

Human diversity, in the Bahá'í writings, is always placed in the broader context of our fundamental oneness, recognition of which is what allows a proper and full appreciation of our diversity. An unshakeable conviction in the oneness of humanity is ultimately what will empower students to love all the diverse peoples of the earth and collectively work towards the creation of a more just civilization.¹⁶ This is not an abstract universalism that erases difference—the charge that critics of universalism often, and sometimes rightly, level against it. Rather, it is a vision in which the universal and the particular are understood to be mutually constitutive: it is precisely by embracing a genuine sense of shared humanity that the full richness of our diversity can be appreciated and protected.

THE BAHÁ'Í COMMUNITY'S EDUCATIONAL PROCESSES

The experience of the Bahá'í community over the past few decades is a

rich source of insight into the question of how to empower young people to overcome injustice. Like all communities, the Bahá'í community's efforts to translate its principles into practice remain a work in progress, shaped by many of the same currents described above. What it can offer, however, is a framework—rooted in the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh—that addresses the confusions we have been examining. The Universal House of Justice states:

It should be apparent to all that the process set in motion by the current series of global Plans¹⁷ seeks, in the approaches it takes and the methods it employs, to build capacity in every human group, with no regard for class or religious background, with no concern for ethnicity or race, irrespective of gender or social status, to arise and contribute to the advancement of civilization. We pray that, as it steadily unfolds, its potential to disable every instrument devised by humanity over the long period of its childhood for one group to oppress another may be realized. (28 December 2010)

16 For a concrete and incisive exploration of how this dynamic might be considered in relation to the elimination of racial prejudice in America, we recommend a recent article by Paul Lample, "Exploring a Framework for the Elimination of Racial Prejudice in America" in *Journal of Bahá'í Studies* vol. 35 no. 1-2 (also published as a book titled, *In Pursuit of a More Superb Mission*).

17 The global Bahá'í community coordinates its efforts to systematically learn about the application of the writings of Bahá'u'lláh to the betterment of the world through a shared framework for thought and action which evolves based on experience, is coordinated by a network of diverse institutions, and is shepherded by the Universal House of Justice—the community's governing head.

For Bahá'ís, the conviction that this process has the “potential to disable every instrument devised by humanity over the long period of its childhood for one group to oppress another” is central to our understanding of the transformative power of Bahá'u'lláh's revelation. Realizing this potential, however, depends on the quality of effort that the worldwide community and its collaborators bring to it—and the Bahá'í community is the first to recognize that its practice has not yet caught up with the standard set by this vision. We invite the reader to consider how the themes we have examined in this paper can serve as a lens for understanding how this process addresses some of the confusions that can beset educational efforts aimed at justice.

RECONCEIVING AUTHORITY

Central to this process is a reconceptualization of authority in the context of education. Those who serve as tutors in the Bahá'í community's study circles are called to be neither authority-free facilitators nor authoritarian dispensers of knowledge. Their authority is grounded in service and in a commitment to the spiritual and intellectual development of each participant—an authority rooted in love and experience walking the path of service. The tutor's role is to create an environment in which individuals “come to see themselves as active agents of their own learning, as protagonists of a constant effort to apply knowledge to effect individual and collective transformation” (Universal

House of Justice, Ridván 2010). The community's experience of living up to this standard is, naturally, still developing; but the framework itself calls for authority exercised as an expression of love, with the expectation that those entering the process may rapidly advance and even surpass the knowledge and experience of their tutors. At earlier stages of development, children and younger youth are encouraged by their educators in Bahá'í-inspired educational settings to grow in this direction. Bahá'ís draw inspiration from quotes that encourage them to see that “every teacher is as a shoreless ocean, every pupil a prodigal fountain of knowledge” (‘Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections* 72). Clearly, teacher and student are not “equal” in knowledge, neither do they stand in a unidirectional relationship where the teacher “fills” the students.

NAVIGATING EQUALITY AND EXCELLENCE

The educational materials being used by the Bahá'í community avoid either of the extremes we have described: the levelling impulse that shuns excellence, and the meritocratic hubris that breeds resentment. All participants are treated with equal dignity and are equally encouraged to strive for excellence. The worldwide reach of these educational processes and the flow of insights among peoples from vastly different circumstances attest to the power of this approach, even as the community continues to learn how to realize this vision more fully in practice. The

standard toward which participants are encouraged to strive is not comparison with other individuals or groups but the unfoldment of one's own potential through service, oriented by the standards set by the teachings. This emphasis on striving for excellence without comparison to others, combined with the principle of preferring others to oneself, aims to create an environment in which equality and excellence can reinforce rather than undermine one another. Humble service, in this emerging pattern, helps each find joy in the accomplishments of others.

APPROACHING IDENTITY THROUGH SPIRITUAL ONENESS

Perhaps the most distinctive element that Bahá'í-inspired education brings to the broader conversation about social justice is its emphasis on the spiritual dimension of human identity. The educational materials used by the community invite participants to explore the idea that their true identity is spiritual; that every human being has been created noble; and that the very purpose of our lives is to nurture the development of the powers of our higher nature and to contribute to the building of a new civilization. That these ideas are being studied by people from all races, nationalities, religions, and castes, and that in the context of such conversations, participants are developing loving bonds of friendship as they strengthen their commitment to social change, is a development of profound significance.

At the level of methods and approaches, Bahá'ís are striving to avoid, on the one hand, cultural relativism, in which the conceptions, social structures, and practices of every culture are considered sacrosanct, and, on the other, any form of cultural imperialism, which would simply impose the idiosyncratic conceptions and practices of one culture onto another. Starting from the premise of our common spiritual identity, certain activities are carried out that respond to this identity, including efforts to spiritually educate young people. In this context, no one group should dictate to another who or what they are. Each is meant to draw from the knowledge systems of science and religion in order to gain insight into their true nature and the meaning of true prosperity for their community, and to engage in a learning process that aims to translate this evolving understanding into practice. Irrespective of race, gender, class, or religious background, all are seen as having the right and responsibility to contribute to this community-building process.

It is possible, naturally, for one to be wholeheartedly engaged in this process and still unintentionally undermine its efficacy or fail to realize its potential for eliminating injustice. As the Universal House of Justice mentions in its *Riḍván 2010* message:

What is imperative is that the quality of the educational process fostered at the level of the study circle rise markedly . . . so that the potential of local populations to

create such dynamics is realized. Much will fall on those who serve as tutors in this respect. Theirs will be the challenge to provide the environment that is envisioned in the institute courses, an environment conducive to the spiritual empowerment of individuals, who will come to see themselves as active agents of their own learning, as protagonists of a constant effort to apply knowledge to effect individual and collective transformation. Failing this, no matter how many study circles are formed in a cluster, the force necessary to propel change will not be generated.

This process, then, is not a kind of formula. Even though it aims at a more just society (among other things), it can be implemented by individuals and groups in a way that does not move us in this direction. It depends (again among other things) on a vision of personal and collective transformation, held by all those involved, which itself is continuously clarified and elaborated as experience is gained. Indeed, many of the very confusions we have described in this paper—the distrust of authority, the slide from equality into entitlement, the fragmentation of identity—can and do manifest within the Bahá'í community's activities, precisely because Bahá'ís are not immune to the broader moral and intellectual currents of the societies in which they live. The acknowledgement that Bahá'í-inspired educational processes are not perfect,

but perfecting, is not a rhetorical concession but a recognition that the community is itself learning.

CONCLUSION

The radical distrust of authority and power can obscure the responsibilities of educators and the ways teachers can empower their students. If we transmit to students this same radical distrust of authority, we can foster in them suspicion, which can crush the will to act and may interfere with their ability to work for justice. Just as there are both legitimate and illegitimate expressions of authority, there are also different kinds of freedom, which the modern struggle for justice tends to elide. Finally, the narrow conception of power that animates this struggle sometimes leads to cynicism about social change, which likewise obscures possibilities.

Regarding equality and egalitarianism, while we should naturally reinforce efforts to establish equality between people and to, for example, eliminate the extremes of wealth and poverty, we should be careful lest our passion for equality is distorted by our culture of individualism and materialism, letting it slide into entitlement and resentment. These attitudes can prevent us from drawing on each other's strengths to create an environment in which all can flourish. Finally, while equal (and not identical) treatment is certainly desirable, we should be wary of the self-interested interpretations of this norm; to spiritually educate young people, we need to emphasize the logic

of love, which motivates us to *prefer* others to ourselves.

If we are able to empower young people to prefer others before themselves and to acknowledge and honor the inherent connection that exists with others, we can begin to dissolve the barriers to acknowledging our oneness and our true spiritual identity. Rather than resolving uniqueness and difference into separation and affirming it as the focus of our material identity, education based on the oneness of humanity can help students to recognize that a focus on their spiritual identity holds the potential to reveal powers latent within them; powers that will allow them to work towards justice alongside a notion of difference and diversity that acknowledges humanity's inherent oneness.

Running through this analysis is an argument that love—far from being a merely private sentiment—is a force that can help resolve some of the confusions we have identified. Love provides a context for the constructive exercise of authority, the antidote to resentment in our pursuit of equality, and a force that draws diverse peoples into a genuine oneness. Without love, justice degenerates into suspicion, reciprocity into calculation, and diversity into fragmentation. With love, authority finds expression in service, equality becomes the aspiration for mutual flourishing, and identity becomes an expression of our interconnectedness. The coherence of love and justice is, we suggest, an insight that Bahá'í-inspired education can offer to strengthen the

broader discourse on social justice—one that resonates with the deepest intuitions of educators like bell hooks and philosophers like Ricoeur—and one that deserves greater attention in educational thought and practice.

There are no doubt other dimensions of the modern struggle for justice, some of which we can benefit from and others of which we should be wary as we continue to learn about educational endeavors aimed at empowering young people to become champions of justice. To reiterate what was mentioned at the outset of the paper, there is no theory or movement in society that offers a shortcut to meaningful change. Thus, we need to constantly refine our ability to weigh prevalent approaches and ideas—and, for Bahá'ís, to weigh them in light of the teachings of the Faith.

Pursuing justice without falling into any of these traps is no easy feat. It requires a new kind of maturity, one that enlists the transformative power of love towards the ends of justice:

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. (Universal House of Justice, 22 July 2020)

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Some Seeds

TERRY OFNER

Some like those of the mulberry,
must pass through the gullet of a bird
to germinate. Some must lie for months
in the cold under snow. Some must burn.

To save Nineveh, Jonah had to run away,
hide on a ship bound for Tarshish,
sleep, plunge into that dream-like sea,
and wake up in the suburb of the city.

Such a fine city, with a hundred thousand
people, none knowing their right hand
from their left, and many heads of cattle,
soon, nonetheless, to be sacked.

Oh, Nineveh, up the Tigris from Bagdad.
Oh, Babylon. What dark, what sleep, what fire?
What seed doth sprout in your heart of hearts?
What tree will bear fruit on your banks?

Expanding on a Bahá'í-inspired Pedagogy of Social Transformation

YMASUMAC MARAÑÓN
DAVIS
JUSTIN SCOGGIN

Abstract

The authors, both collaborators with the Wilmette Institute, are learning what pedagogical principles can be gleaned from community-building and training processes in the global Bahá'í community and how to apply these principles in formal higher education. Worldviews are deceptively complex and impactful in learning processes. Therefore, the authors challenge dominant models shaped by materialism and partisan onto-epistemologies. Rejecting competency-based education, Wilmette Institute programs aim to build capacity for contributing to prevalent discourses informed by our approach to engaging with them through the Bahá'í-inspired evolving framework for collective learning. The Institute's curriculum design encourages faculty and students to adopt a learning posture through an environment that fosters a humble, searching heart, pure motive, and willingness to transform.

Résumé

Les auteurs, tous deux collaborateurs de l'institut Wilmette, étudient les principes pédagogiques qu'on peut tirer des processus de développement

communautaire et de formation au sein de la communauté mondiale bahá'ie, ainsi que la manière d'appliquer ces principes à l'enseignement supérieur formel. Les visions du monde sont d'une complexité trompeuse et influencent grandement les processus d'apprentissage. C'est pourquoi les auteurs remettent en question les modèles dominants façonnés par le matérialisme et les onto-épistémologies partisans. Rejetant l'éducation axée sur les compétences, les programmes de l'institut Wilmette visent à renforcer la capacité de contribuer aux discours dominants à la lumière de notre approche qui consiste à y participer en recourant au cadre évolutif d'apprentissage collectif inspiré de la foi bahá'ie. La conception du programme d'études de l'Institut incite les professeurs et les étudiants à adopter une attitude d'apprentissage dans un environnement qui encourage l'humilité, la soif de connaissances, la pureté d'intention et la volonté de transformation.

Resumen

Los autores, ambos colaboradores del Wilmette Institute, están aprendiendo qué principios pedagógicos se puede aprender de los procesos educativos y de construcción de comunidad en la comunidad mundial Baha'i y cómo aplicar estos principios en la educación superior formal. Los puntos de vista globales son engañosamente complejos e impactantes en los procesos de aprendizaje. Por lo tanto, los autores desafían los modelos dominantes formados por materialismo y onto-epistemología partidaria. Rechazando la educación basada en competencia, los programas de William Institute tienen el objetivo de construir capacidad para contribuir a los discursos prevalentes informados por nuestro abordaje de

involucramiento con ellos por medio del marco evolutivo de inspiración Baha'í para un aprendizaje colectivo. El diseño curricular del Instituto motiva que los docentes y alumnos adopten una postura de aprendizaje en un ambiente que fomenta un corazón humilde y buscador, motivo puro y deseo de transformarse.

A compelling, global drama is unfolding today in education. In 1996, the Universal House of Justice, the central governing body of the Bahá'í community, initiated a series of plans to build capacity in the worldwide Bahá'í community to rise as protagonists in building vibrant, outward-facing, diverse, and prosperous local communities.

The mission of the Bahá'ís is to learn to apply the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh in their individual and collective lives and in the life of their society. Through well-ordered efforts and in collaboration with many others who are dedicated to bettering the world, Bahá'ís bring the principles suited to humanity's age of maturity to bear on the conditions of the world's peoples. (Universal House of Justice, 1 November 2022 ¶4)

Three key elements center this global endeavor: a stream of letters from the Universal House of Justice with guidance addressing a coherent framework for learning about society-building processes; national and regional training institutes, employing materials developed by the Ruhi Institute, focused on helping the individual, community,

and institutions develop and act on a sense of moral purpose in a systematic capacity-building, grassroots endeavor aimed at supporting Bahá'ís and like-minded individuals in rising to serve their communities effectively; and an evolving institutional structure that guides and accompanies individuals and teams in a cyclical learning process involving study, consultation, action, and reflection.

Taken together, these elements comprise a remarkable example of a transformative constructive program. Indeed, the methodology used by the Universal House of Justice to educate and train the worldwide community of Bahá'ís and their friends to improve their communities is potentially illuminating for other educational endeavors. We have thus sought to glean pedagogical principles from the community building and training processes of the Bahá'í community and apply them in our professional work in formal institutions of higher learning. We believe that in this way, such institutions of learning can become spaces characterized by the “environment that is envisioned in the institute courses, an environment conducive to the spiritual empowerment of individuals, who will come to see themselves as active agents of their own learning, as protagonists of a constant effort to apply knowledge to effect individual and collective transformation” (Universal House of Justice, Ridván 2010 ¶11).

As educators learning to move through a liminal space of change, we are not immune to the push-and-pull

sequela of our journey. We see multiple oppressive forces, associated with the traditional Western notions of education that form the context of our own educational and professional trajectories, resisting the limitless possibilities for education that emerge through the recognition of the oneness of humanity. In our work at the Wilmette Institute,¹ we have been learning how to translate the vision of Bahá'u'lláh for humanity into reality through the framework for collective learning emerging throughout the Bahá'í world. Specifically, we strive to marshal elements of a Bahá'í-inspired pedagogy to raise the capacity in our faculty and students to contribute to prevalent public discourses in formal graduate-level educational settings.²

1 The Wilmette Institute is a Bahá'í-inspired institution of higher education that has provided community courses since 1996. It began offering an online graduate-level certificate program in Social Transformation in 2023.

2 The Universal House of Justice has identified three areas of endeavor in the current series of global plans: community building, social action, and contribution to public discourse. As Bahá'ís establish friendships through community-building efforts, they are drawn further into the life of society and learn to respond to a widening range of issues that face their locality through the three areas of endeavor. One of these responses is efforts to participate in and contribute to discourses about humanity's well-being and progress on various issues. Learning with and from others, insights are offered, informed by the Bahá'í teachings and experience, to influence public thought.

This paper aims to describe our nascent learning process around identifying and applying elements of the educational process implemented by the Universal House of Justice. Our intention is not to make a comprehensive list of these methodological elements. Instead, we reviewed letters written by the Universal House of Justice since 2010 to identify methodological elements most salient to our formal educational environment, which we have been learning to apply in our curriculum design and courses. After providing an overview of our framework for collective learning, we will explore the implications, and application, of the three most salient elements of the framework for our context: worldview apperception, learning as a mode of operation, and capacity-building in burgeoning transformative education, and specifically within the context of the course project of our certificate program.

AN EVOLVING FRAMEWORK FOR COLLECTIVE LEARNING

In social transformation movements, attention must be given to the dual transformation of the individual and the collective. Efforts to contribute to societal prosperity are reciprocal with the inner journey of the soul to develop and express spiritual qualities; each nourishes the other. The worldwide Bahá'í community thus places at the center of its mission a search for truth that is both individual and collective. Bahá'ís are learning that truth is neither

given in its entirety by God, requiring us only to follow it blindly, nor is it the province of a class (of clerics, the learned, etc.) to discern truth and give it to the masses. Bahá'ís believe that truth is one, and that any understanding of truth at a given time is relative and contextual, requiring a process to maintain unity of vision and purpose. This process is a search for truth that nourishes and is subsequently guided by an evolving framework for learning.

Some may perceive a framework for learning as a strategy or a prescription for action to achieve a goal. Far from “a narrow imposition of methods or formulaic procedures,” a framework, rather, “is intended to provide an evolving, shared understanding of beliefs, concepts, methods, practices, vision, and approaches relevant to advancing work in the particular arena of endeavor at hand” (Lample 15).

Some framework elements originate within the Bahá'í Revelation itself, and though our understanding of them evolves, they will remain foundational into the foreseeable future—such as the oneness of humanity and justice. Other elements can emerge and evolve through our learning processes, but can also be changed or dropped. Examples include organic growth and learning as a mode of operation.

The framework for collective learning continually evolves as the worldwide Bahá'í community gains insights into the development process. In the 2023 publication *For the Betterment of the World*, the Bahá'í International Development Organization (BIDO)

presented an overview of the framework to illustrate how Bahá'í social and economic development is carried out worldwide. BIDO identified seven elements that are further elaborated in the 2023 publication:

- Humanity's movement towards its collective maturity
- Oneness and justice
- Coherence between the spiritual and the material
- Universal participation
- Capacity building
- Organic growth
- Learning as a mode of operation (6–8)

Granting the indispensability of all the above elements in efforts made towards the betterment of the world, this paper focuses on two—capacity building and learning as a mode of operation—that have proven particularly salient in our own efforts to learn about an emerging pedagogy that draws on the experience of the Bahá'í community. Before turning to these, we will first consider worldview, an often implicit yet defining element of all learning processes.

WORLDVIEW

Bahá'u'lláh affirms that every human being is created noble and exhorts us to rise to the station for which we were created (Hidden Words, Arabic no. 22) by expressing the “capacity to know [God] and to love Him—a capacity that must needs be regarded as

the generating impulse and the primary purpose underlying the whole of creation” (*Gleanings* 27:2). The nobility of the human being is thus an inextricable part of the worldview that grounds the evolving framework for learning in the Bahá'í community. While we hold this nobility to be an ontological reality, its expression can be aided or hampered by both the individual's efforts and the broader social context that operates on the individual. As Shoghi Effendi points out, “[m]an is organic with the world. His inner life moulds the environment and is itself also deeply affected by it” (qtd. in *Social Action* 90). Competing forces of materialism and dogmatic expressions of spirituality have distorted humanity's self-identity, have become entrenched worldviews, and hampered our capacity to express our nobility. For our purposes in this paper, we briefly outline the hegemonic materialist worldview, contrast it with a worldview centered on human nobility, identify the relationship between worldviews and pedagogy, and determine how this relationship ultimately transforms our learning processes.

In attempting to understand the materialist worldview and its impact, it is helpful to turn to the Universal House of Justice:

Consider, when one looks about at the world and at the condition into which its peoples have fallen and the untold agony of human suffering, what could have caused such a lamentable state of affairs?

Is it not a fair assumption that the reigning materialist worldview, with its inordinate emphasis on individual liberty and its discounting of ordering norms and mores, is at least partly to blame? (1 August 1994 ¶4)

The concept of “discounting” highlights an important aspect of worldviews: they are not merely different lenses for an agreed upon set of phenomena. Our students often liken a worldview to a perspective, a different angle on the same reality; they invoke the story of a group of blind people, each of whom describes a distinct part of an elephant, with a clearer picture of the whole emerging as they share their perspectives. However, worldviews also dictate what phenomena are real to begin with. In other words, epistemology—how we know what we know is true—is often inseparable from ontology—the study of being and what exists in the world (De Leon).

At the core of modernity is an object-driven ontology (de la Cadena and Escobar), which we believe is driven by a materialist worldview. Through a materialist lens, then, the ontology of humans is reduced to the material plane. Spiritual reality is discounted or at minimum side-lined.

We do not always hold our worldviews explicitly. Each of our worldviews is shaped by myriad factors—home environment, culture, and life experiences. According to De Leon, worldviews are “often crafted from oral histories, origin stories, lived

experience, and socialisation . . . typically unconsciously adopted and taken for granted” (774). Faith communities also shape how many people engage with the world. Yet for many—likely most—of us living in the West, our worldview is also impacted by Western culture’s emphasis on our material nature. This inevitably distorts how we view human nature, since what we believe to be true about human nature is determined through our worldview. Worldviews become deeply entrenched mental lenses (Olsen), and can be likened to affective, cognitive, and empirical maps we use to make sense of the world around us (De Leon). While no two human beings will share identical worldviews, given the numerous social and individual factors that contribute to them, it is fair to say that many of us operate within worldviews to which the Western materialist outlook is a major contributor; we can thus speak of a broadly “reigning materialist worldview” (Universal House of Justice, 1 August 1994).

The forces that distort human nature and purpose towards materialism gradually become cultural. Materialist culture is perpetuated through many channels, and principal among them are our educational institutions. Modern Western education places an “inordinate emphasis on individual liberty” and discounts “ordering norms and mores.” For example, our academic institutions teach freedoms—expression, association, worship, privacy, etc.—as long as they are granted in ways that serve dominant economic, political,

and social dogmas. As an example, consider the reception of a grassroots movement like the Black Panthers in the United States. The Black Panthers were critical of the systemic institutional violence their community experienced and they developed legal protocols to protect the Black community from police brutality, along with educational opportunities to develop a greater pride in the onto-epistemological worldview of the Black community. These efforts challenged racialized hierarchies and the criteria of onto-epistemological expression academic institutions viewed as valid or in line with social dogmas. In essence, they contradicted the political and sociological worldview of the West largely ascribed to the United States, thus these grassroots movements were often vilified as violent and terrorist in nature, out of all proportion to their actual actions—particularly when compared to the violence perpetrated by groups or institutions that align with the dominant worldview, which is largely invisibilized. Without access to onto-epistemological viewpoints that can challenge the dominant materialist worldview in the West, people become pliable objects learning to normalize contradictions between ideals (e.g., democracy) and malicious actions (e.g., gerrymandering), between noble goals (e.g., law and order) and ignoble means (e.g., mass supervision and incarceration), thus justifying the contradictions as necessary for the common good.

A materialist worldview is hegemonic in nature, and impacts our

nobility by centering the non-spiritual, corporeal aspect of human nature. It also conditions the scope and quality of our happiness and relationships on material considerations. When we operate within the materialist worldview, we see problems as material at heart, and look for purely material solutions. The Universal House of Justice explains,

the expenditure of enormous energy and vast amounts of resources in an attempt to bend truth to conform to personal desire is now a feature of many contemporary societies. The result is a culture that distorts human nature and purpose, trapping human beings in pursuit of idle fancies and vain imaginings and turning them into pliable objects in the hands of the powerful. (19 April 2013 ¶5)

People are not hapless victims of the cultural tyranny described by the Universal House of Justice. If nobility is inherently human, then the agency to express it cannot be permanently lost; it can emerge (or re-emerge) through processes of transformation. Often, an encounter with a different worldview can catalyze such a transformation. In a recent course, one of our students, speaking of their own transformation, noted that to live in a just society, we need to accept the “Indigenous story” as real, and just as legitimate as the “story they grew up with.” If we accept various “stories” on their terms, they continued, we can learn from and collaborate with each other and grow

in unity. This acceptance implies more than a relativistic acknowledgment that other people may see the world differently than us; it means taking the ontological, epistemological, and axiological (value judgment) positions of their worldviews seriously, and being willing to consider whether they should influence, or even displace, elements of our own worldviews. Indeed, working to build an internally coherent worldview in this way—by learning to see previously marginalized worldviews on their own terms, and letting them illuminate truths hidden by the hegemonic worldview—is profoundly decolonial; it unravels patterns of oppression humanity has systematically experienced through centuries of colonialism.

While encounters with any worldview different to our own may catalyze transformation, the spiritual worldview that underpins the evolving framework for collective learning that is unfolding under the direction of the Universal House of Justice has a particular transformative power to displace the hegemonic materialist worldview. This transformative power is rooted in the Bahá'í writings that form the core of that framework; for, as Bahá'u'lláh states, “is not the object of every Revelation to effect a transformation in the whole character of mankind, a transformation that shall manifest itself, both outwardly and inwardly, that shall affect both its inner life and external conditions?” (Kitab-i-Íqán 240). The vision for a future society enshrined in the writings, and reflected in the framework

for learning, radically differs from our past and present, and calls on humanity to undergo a complete individual and collective regeneration. To aid in this regeneration, the spiritual principles that animate the framework enable us to critically examine materialism.

To further appreciate the scope of the change in worldview implied by our framework for learning, consider the transformative power of these principles when they are taken up by youth, as described by the Universal House of Justice:

The key to resolving these social ills rests in the hands of a youthful generation convinced of the nobility of human beings; eagerly seeking a deeper understanding of the true purpose of existence; able to distinguish between divine religion and mere superstition; clear in the view of science and religion as two independent yet complementary systems of knowledge that propel human progress; conscious of and drawn to the beauty and power of unity in diversity; secure in the knowledge that real glory is to be found in service to one's country and to the peoples of the world; and mindful that the acquisition of wealth is praiseworthy only insofar as it is attained through just means and expended for benevolent purposes, for the promotion of knowledge and toward the common good. Thus must our precious youth prepare

themselves to shoulder the tremendous responsibilities that await them. And thus will they prove immune to the atmosphere of greed that surrounds them and press forward unwavering in the pursuit of their exalted goals. (2 April 2010 ¶10)

Part of the value of this list of keys to resolving social ills is that it is not a simple repetition of the elements found in the framework for learning. Rather, we can see an elucidation of the mores, thought processes, attitudes, and actions implied in the framework, an important clue to the nature of the framework. The framework consists of broad truths about human nature and prosperity gleaned from two sources: Bahá'u'lláh's revelation and decades of experience applying the tenets of the revelation through grassroots community building and social action projects around the world. Each framework element is like the tip of an iceberg: its elucidation reveals abundant axioms and lessons. The framework works when people gain broad consensus on its elements, even though the circumstances of each person, community, or institution may elicit distinct perspectives. Unity in diversity is the watchword, even within the framework.

The framework thus invites us on a journey from our current condition characterized by the "untold agony of human suffering" to a future characterized by relationships analogous to the human body, in which "every cell, every organ, every nerve has its

part to play” making a “healthy, vigorous, radiant” body (Universal House of Justice, September 1964 ¶4). This journey is the human condition; it is the purpose of religion and the essence of life.

Moving from here to there is the task at hand for humanity. The more unaware we are of the extent to which materialism permeates our thought processes, actions, and relationships, the easier it is to accept a future that reflects the values of materialism. The more unaware we are of what is contained in our worldview, the more we impair our movement toward change by clinging to potentially outworn ways of being and understanding.

Much of the modern language of development used by civic organizations and the United Nations, for example, deeply resonates with Bahá'ís. Who can argue with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) no. 1 to “end poverty in all its forms everywhere”? Or with SDG no. 5 to “achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls”? These are certainly noble and urgent goals. Nevertheless, lofty goals may be framed in ways that incorporate some of the underlying assumptions about human nature and development that created the conditions for poverty and misogyny in the first place, and the means used to advance these goals may also rely on means that perpetuate the root causes of the ills they seek to address. For example, in contrast to the framework's emphasis on the coherence between the material and spiritual

aspects of humanity and the world, the SDG goals assume that addressing material poverty and policies contributing to gender inequality will suffice to set humanity on a prosperous path. Carrying out the same analysis for other elements of the framework we see that the SDG goals are important, but partial; necessary but incomplete: they fail to address the spiritual aspect of human nature, or to set learning as a mode of operation at the center of their means of implementation, or, more importantly, to explicitly place the oneness of humanity and justice at their heart.

Of course, it would be possible for those working in development—or any other field—to adopt elements of the framework on an ad hoc basis without considering their implications for a coherent worldview. Indeed, a vague idea of human oneness, or of human dignity, is arguably implicit in the existence of the SDGs to begin with. The same is true in the field of education. Because many elements of our framework for collective learning are deceptively simple, and could even be viewed as a list of lofty ideals and precepts that are easy to agree to in principle, people may actively work to implement the framework while retaining core assumptions of a materialist worldview. But we have foregrounded the discussion of worldview because educators and students alike will suffer significant setbacks in understanding and appropriately applying the framework for learning if they remain steeped in a materialist worldview. Our

motivation to explore worldview as a key element in our pedagogical approach is that the framework can hardly be built in learners, or anybody else, upon a materialist worldview. Learning about the framework while living in a materialistic society naturally implies a transition period in which the tentacles of materialism gradually release their hold on the mind, allowing for a fuller understanding of the framework. The issue lies in actively gaining awareness of the effects of materialism and purging them from the mind to release the potential in the framework's elements.

For example, as delineated above, science and religion are "two independent yet complementary systems of knowledge that propel human progress." Yet, because of the excesses, brutality, divisiveness, manipulation, and all manner of heinous acts perpetrated in the name of organized religion over centuries, it is often challenging to promote the idea in educational spaces that religion is a system of knowledge that propels human progress. Framing religion as spirituality has gained widespread appeal precisely because it allows for an alternative to materialism without historical baggage. Nevertheless, spirituality, when used in this sense, connotes reflection on individual behavior without accountability—a far cry from religion, which, when conceived of in the way Bahá'u'lláh revealed, is a knowledge system with far-reaching implications for the structures of both the mind and society. The Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity explains the

relationship among science, religion, and development:

What development thought and practice needs today is to acknowledge and take advantage of the unifying, integrating and organizing functions of religion. It is these functions that make religion a system of knowledge and practice that parallels and complements the system of science. By using science and its methods—empirical observation, induction and deduction, falsification and experimentation—humanity explores and exerts influence over the phenomenal world. The methods of religion, both in its individual and collective dimension, which include the study of religious scriptures along with practices of prayer, reflection, and group deliberation, allow humanity to gain insights into the spiritual aspects of existence, insights that can be applied toward the betterment of the human condition. Rigid and dogmatic interpretations of religious traditions have led to superstition, blind imitation, and at times conflict, yet this should not lead to a wholesale rejection of religion. After all, science too has been abused and corrupted, yet few would argue that it should be abandoned. While science and religion are both susceptible to abuse, they are also both indispensable to human progress. (18)

A materialist worldview, no matter how many discrete elements of the framework it might explicitly or implicitly adopt, cannot ultimately accommodate the role for religion described in this passage; as such, any project rooted in such a worldview will be incomplete.

Another example of how a materialist mindset influences thought that we often encounter in our work as educators lies in a corollary—and historical sibling—of materialism: Western exceptionalism. This phenomenon is described by the Universal House of Justice: “Buttressed by its material and intellectual achievements and emboldened by a narrative of accomplishment and superiority that pervades its culture, the West puts itself forward in various ways as a model and measure for others” (19 April 2013 ¶3). Far from being confined to the realm of European or American conquests and militarism on the international stage, Western imperialism continues to frame race and class relations around the world, hegemonically confines knowledge to empirically gained information, and promotes perceptions of the environment and animals as inert resources to be “civilized” and exploited for profit. Even a brief list of the ubiquitous consequences of Western imperialism on society would render this essay unwieldy and divert us from our central theme. The most salient effect on our work is the challenge among educators and learners alike of appreciating and validating multiple ways of knowing. We could mention

Indigenous or Indian epistemologies that permeate our courses, but instead we will stay close to home: the elements of the framework for learning necessarily live in a space untouched by Western imperialism. We often ask ourselves what educational approach, course design, and pedagogy allow educators and learners to access and gradually take ownership of the framework’s elements outside of a Western lens.

Citing the ramifications of fundamentalism, which is itself arguably a species of materialism as well as a critical issue driving divisiveness and prejudice, the Universal House of Justice illustrates the manipulation people need to unmask and overcome to work within the framework for learning: “In its most extreme form, it [fundamentalism] conditions the resolution of the problems of the world upon the occurrence of events derived from illogical and superstitious notions. It professes to uphold virtue yet, in practice, perpetuates oppression and greed” (2 April 2010 ¶9). As an example, we see that the Conference of the Parties, “the supreme decision-making body” of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), fits this description. We see that peak carbon is still in the future (Le Quéré), even after thirty annual global conferences that condition planetary wellbeing on keeping average global temperatures below 1.5°C above pre-industrial averages. The 1.5°C goal is praiseworthy, but it fails to address the underlying “oppression and greed”

that brought about global warming in the first place. The 1.5°C target assumes that parties can work towards it without fundamentally changing the materialistic (extractive, profit-driven / capitalist, unlimited growth-oriented, natural world and animals as simply means and not ends, etc.) worldview that governs the economic life of their societies. Our courses explore this and other examples of fundamentalism, and the underlying “oppression and greed” that challenge how we read the conditions of our society and how we act to improve it.

As educators, then, we aspire to help students be self-reflexive about their worldview and gain immunity to the “atmosphere of greed that surrounds them” by creating a learning environment in which students eagerly seek a deeper understanding of human nature and the true purpose of existence through the course topic. To do this, we first ask ourselves a series of questions that emerge from the previously mentioned list of potentialities of youth. For example, how can students learn to distinguish between divine religion, spirituality, and mere superstition? What course design and pedagogy allow students to experience “science and religion as two independent yet complementary systems of knowledge that propel human progress”? How can students become conscious of and drawn to the beauty and power of unity in diversity? How can service to humanity define our educational experiences? How do we help students build genuine relationships through

meaningful and uplifting conversations with diverse people and organizations in their localities? What obstacles must be overcome for students to free their minds from prejudice and embrace a learning posture? What educational approach actively extirpates materialism from our minds, allowing us to embrace the framework for learning?

Worldview plays a central role in the capacity at the heart of our educational endeavor: contributing to prevalent public discourses. Effective contributions to prevalent public discourse begin by uncovering the underlying assumptions and worldview of the current discourse. Underlying assumptions are often implicit or hidden, requiring us to discover and name them. Beyond this, we must learn to articulate the actual or potential possible consequences of each assumption, as students may wonder why the underlying assumptions need to be challenged. If ours is a response “to some understanding of the nature and state of society, its challenges, the institutions operating in it, the forces influencing it, and the capacities of its peoples,” then our ability to read society with both our hearts and minds becomes paramount (Office of Social and Economic Development, 26 November 2012 ¶47):

A Bahá'í recognizes that one aspect of his spiritual and intellectual growth is to foster the development of his conscience in the light of divine Revelation—a Revelation which, in addition to providing a wealth of spiritual and

ethical principles, exhorts man “to free himself from idle fancy and imitation, discern with the eye of oneness His glorious handiwork, and look into all things with a searching eye”. This process of development, therefore, involves a clear-sighted examination of the conditions of the world with both heart and mind. (Universal House of Justice, 8 February 1998 ¶13)

Educators consider outcomes when they engage others in a learning experience. The educator’s worldview shapes assumptions about learning priorities, how students should go about learning, and what it should look like when a student achieves a course learning outcome. How learning outcomes can be liberated from materialism and adhere more closely to the elements of the framework for learning is a central concern for our pedagogy. A materialist worldview that is at least partially to blame for the “untold agony of human suffering” is surely the object of individual and collective transformation.

The process of discovering, exposing, and evolving our worldview and seeking answers to the above questions about learning environments that empower youth begins by exploring our outlook on learning itself.

A POSTURE OF LEARNING

A deeper understanding, by both teacher and student, of worldview and its relationship to pedagogy implies student and teacher reflection on how they will

undergo their transformative journey and what their learning process will look like. Posture, then, within the context of this paper, is the attitude with which we approach a topic, a course, and learning itself. When learning objectives are set from a perspective of material-spiritual harmony, the posture of learning students must adopt to fulfill those objectives requires them to pay attention to the attitudes and spiritual qualities that shape their thinking and interactions. Posture inevitably shapes the environment faculty seek to create among students, a key factor for the success of all engaged in a learning process.

Much will fall on those who serve as tutors . . . to provide . . . an environment conducive to the spiritual empowerment of individuals, who will come to see themselves as active agents of their own learning, as protagonists of a constant effort to apply knowledge to effect individual and collective transformation. (Universal House of Justice, Ridván 2010 ¶11)

Educators are like the tutors described above, shaping the educational environment and creating conditions for a transformative learning process. Service shapes the entire learning experience: those with more experience with a given topic or activity accompany others who rise to walk a path of learning with them. A key lesson learned in the educational approach the Bahá'í community uses is that because

the goal of a course is not limited to transmitting information, faculty and students become co-creators of new knowledge. When faculty members walk on the same path as the students, an environment of collective learning and community building is generated.

Essential to this environment is for faculty and students to bring into the learning space a humble, searching heart, a pure motive, and a willingness to be transformed. Looking within themselves as they work in learning spaces, they might ask how they can carry a humble learning posture. Faculty continuously seek pedagogical practices to help students recognize the level of purity of their motives. An example of such a practice is the field notes students keep to document, reflect on, and analyze fieldwork. The faculty are expected to provide constant feedback to students on the field note document, which encourages students to view the issue they are tackling through the framework, and as a process that is not solution-oriented. Student reflection on the framework and on their process is expected. A key to quality student reflection is a parallel process of faculty reflection on the course topic and resources; as in all aspects of education, faculty demonstrate that they are also on a path of maintaining a searching heart and a willingness to be transformed. Our course topics include some of the most vital and complex issues faced by society, and just as students are expected to gradually build their capacity to make meaningful contributions to public

discourse, faculty are expected to acknowledge the complexity of the social issues studied in our courses.

Another essential element of a posture of learning is for educators to consider the qualities that are required in students to collaborate among themselves. Faculty seek to create an environment where the knowledge within the collective surpasses the knowledge of the individual working alone; they take a collective view of the history of learning, seeing the emergence of learning around particular concepts, not through individual achievements but through a collective contribution to understanding; and they consider qualities like courage, reciprocity, and humility, along with thoughtful strategies that create an environment where the hesitant can be reassured.

Our perceptions of reality and each other are deeply impacted by the socially constructed narratives and patterns of a colonial world.³ Learning requires educators and students to be conscious of eschewing any trace of prejudice and paternalism. A deeply reflective process for the individual becomes necessary to create an opportunity for the cleansing of the heart in our methodology. Faculty members may regularly ask themselves who they are learning from and how they and students can widen their learning circles to broaden their perspectives and bring new understanding. A praxis

3 For an overview of postcolonialism, see Young; for its specific implications in education, see Andreotti.

incorporating continuous reflection on worldview and actions aims to enhance learning.

We will mention an additional element of the learning posture that has been influential in our thinking. Social action endeavors and operational processes of the Bahá'í Faith are themselves learning and capacity-building processes that operate through an evolving pedagogical model, elements of which are identified, systematized, and defined by the Universal House of Justice in their letters. Elements of such non-formal capacity-building processes that foster reciprocity, resilience, cooperation, and capacities that help new knowledge flow can be applied in formal higher education:

To strengthen the effectiveness of such efforts, the Bahá'í community has built systems of learning and capacity building into its operational processes. To give one concrete example, coordinators of various kinds provide support, assistance, and accompaniment to those engaged in particular types of endeavours, helping them to face challenges, think through problems, and recover from inevitable setbacks. Working at levels ranging from the national to the neighbourhood, they contribute to a global system of learning in which experiences around a particular line of action can be systematically collected from local communities, aggregated at the national or global level, and analysed

to identify significant trends and emerging patterns. Insights that arise from this process can then be disseminated back to the grassroots through these same channels, thereby informing future planning and action. (Bahá'í International Community ¶16)

Referring to the Rural University in Cauca, Colombia, Dr. Farzam Arbab describes an institutional “methodological perspective based on the establishment of learning processes” (12). An institutional learning posture implies that the learning cycle defines its identity, meaning a permanent and complex dialogue with grassroots, national, and international actors. We are inspired by Arbab’s definition of a university as a learning institution, a space where new knowledge is generated at the grassroots, systematized, and disseminated back to the grassroots.

CAPACITY-BUILDING

These reflections on worldviews and their relationship to pedagogical practices and the posture carried in learning spaces make it clear that capacity-building must take a central position in a burgeoning transformative educational environment. As an introduction to capacity-building, it may be insightful to briefly review the educational aspect of the most impactful discourse on global development. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goal no. 4 (“Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote

lifelong learning opportunities for all.”) has three parts.

- Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education. This part identifies two essential characteristics of formal pre-primary, primary, and secondary education.
- Promote lifelong learning opportunities. The Incheon Declaration explains that this part points to “technical and vocational education and training and higher education and research,” which are elements of formal education. But it also mentions non-formal education: “In addition, the provision of flexible learning pathways, as well as the recognition, validation and accreditation of the knowledge, skills and competencies acquired through non-formal and informal education, is important” (¶10).
- For all. This part coincides with the element of the framework for learning—universal participation—that highlights that everyone needs education that empowers them to contribute to building a better society.

The most prevalent global discourse about education emphasizes formal education and generally discounts non-formal education (only one of the ten targets for Sustainable Development Goal no. 4 mentions non-formal education). Formal education happens in

institutions and involves certificates and diplomas as symbols of broadly recognized validity. Non-formal education involves curricula, instructors, and learning outcomes, but learners are not graded or awarded diplomas, and it happens outside the formal educational system.⁴

Formal education is more broadly available to and compulsory for the world’s children, youth, and adults than at any time in human history—a significant achievement. In tandem with transborder and national efforts and policies to offer education to all, the last four decades have seen an explosion of propitious attempts to improve instruction and learning by transcending traditional information transmission methods. Among the most influential developments are Pedagogy of the Oppressed, student-centered pedagogy associated with Constructivism, Hybrid Pedagogy, Fugitive Pedagogy, pedagogy associated with Land Education, pedagogy associated with Education for Sustainable Development, Place-Based education, Global Citizenship education, Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy, Open Pedagogy, and Asset-based pedagogy.

Yet in both breadth and depth—in who it reaches, and in its quality—formal education has far to go: “there are too many thoughtful analyses of the shortcomings of current educational

4 Non-formal education is distinct from informal education, which involves individual, unstructured, and self-directed opportunities to advance learning about topics of personal interest.

systems and processes for anyone to deny that the crisis of education has continued to deepen over the decades” (Farid-Arbab 61). For example, at the most basic level, many people still do not have access to education, and the COVID-19 pandemic deepened this problem. The consequences of formal education that is inadequate—whether because it is inept, oppressive, discriminatory, misguided, irrelevant, elitist, and/or materialist—reverberate for generations. Denying quality education to a population has always been one of the most potent strategies to maintain the status quo of inequality.

In response to the educational emergency and the adverse social and economic conditions it engenders, Sona Farid-Arbab, a Bahá'í educator, proclaims that “Educational processes must emerge, then, that enable a vast number of people to develop intellectual and spiritual powers, already present in potential to a degree far surpassing the achievements of past generations” (29).

To this end, through global plans, the Universal House of Justice places great importance on building capacity in people to contribute to advancing civilization:

It should be apparent to all that the process set in motion by the current series of global Plans seeks, in the approaches it takes and the methods it employs, to build capacity in every human group, with no regard for class or religious background, with no concern for

ethnicity or race, irrespective of gender or social status, to arise and contribute to the advancement of civilization. We pray that, as it steadily unfolds, its potential to disable every instrument devised by humanity over the long period of its childhood for one group to oppress another may be realized. (28 December 2010 ¶34)

Capacity is outward facing; it is conceptualized in terms of being able to *do* something meaningful and contributory in the world—“to arise and contribute to the advancement of civilization.” Yet the process of building capacity is one of inward development:

For the individual, building capacity implies developing a number of interrelated capabilities—scientific, artistic, technical, social, moral, and spiritual. Individuals must be endowed with an understanding of concepts, knowledge of facts, and mastery of methods, as well as the skills, attitudes, and qualities required to lead a productive life. (Bahá'í International Development Organization 11)

Developing capabilities is thus fundamental in a broader capacity-building scheme.

Non-formal education projects often emerge in response to weaknesses in formal education systems. The principal instrument the Bahá'í community uses to build capacity is the training institute, a non-formal educational

endeavor that functions in countless localities worldwide and offers education for children, junior youth, youth, and adults of all ages. The introduction to the first book of the training institute places capacity-building within a context that points to human nature and its source of joy:

From the outset, it should be clear to every participant that the courses of the Ruhi Institute trace a path of service to humanity, upon which we each walk at our own pace, assisting and being assisted by others. Treading this path implies the pursuit of a twofold moral purpose: to attend to one's own spiritual and intellectual growth and to contribute to the transformation of society. Progress on the path entails the development of a number of capabilities that require understanding and knowledge, spiritual qualities and praiseworthy attitudes, as well as a host of abilities and skills. (Ruhi Institute v)

To appreciate the nature of capacity-building within this educational paradigm, it is useful to contrast it with an overlapping yet distinct concept: competency-based education, which has gained momentum in the United States in high schools and universities for over four decades, as mentioned in the Incheon Declaration (UNESCO). Gervais defines competency-based education (CBE) as a “demonstration of the knowledge, attitudes, values,

skills, and behaviors required for the degree sought” (Gervais ¶6). Bridges defines competence as the ability to do something in a particular setting. Other definitions set life roles instead of degrees as the objective. CBE originated in Behaviorism (see below), and is now driven by specific performance outcomes.

Competencies and capabilities have several commonalities. Farid-Arbab defines the “concept of capability as ‘developed capacity to think and act in a particular sphere of activity and according to an explicit purpose’” (265)—remarkably similar to Bridges’ definition of competency. Further, competencies and capabilities share key elements: knowledge, attitudes, and skills. However, their differences are instructive. Perhaps the most visible difference is the “meritocratic benefit of competence-based models” (Ruitenbergh 125); CBE is, in effect a goal-oriented scheme useful for determining candidate suitability for training, promotion, or qualification. Building a capability, in contrast, is a training process, in our case in pursuit of fulfilling the twofold moral purpose. Competencies are primarily concerned with “measurement, assessment, and accreditation” (Hyland) of an aspirant, a competitor, a contender, or a nominee. Conversely, attending to “one’s own spiritual and intellectual growth” in a capability-based scheme implies self-awareness, internal reflection, and resolution, conditions that allow people to look outwards, rise up, and “contribute to the transformation of

society” at their own pace and to the extent and scope their current situation allows.

Two further distinctions between competency and capability-based schemes are central to our analysis. The first is the emphasis on behavior in competency-based education. Behaviorism in education emphasizes the role of external stimuli and consequences in shaping behavior or performance outcomes as key learning indicators. Teachers use repetitive stimuli to show students how they should react and respond. Behaviors are believed to be learned from the environment through positive reinforcement, reducing the influence of innate or inherited factors.

Capacity-building education conceived by the Bahá'í community is of course not unconcerned with student behavior. The individual aspect of the twofold moral purpose is a personal journey toward moral excellence that must be expressed in speech and conduct. Unexamined speech and behavior impede the fulfillment of the social aspect of the twofold moral purpose, as the two are mutually dependent. Nevertheless, capacity-building education does not seek predetermined performance outcomes or behaviors that allow those outcomes. Rather, understanding the learning process becomes paramount for students to gain ownership of their learning. Learning happens in cycles of action-reflection, individually and collectively, and cognizance of this process allows students to participate fully. In any situation,

students can decide which behaviors are most appropriate to fulfill their twofold moral purpose, what knowledge they will need for that purpose, which attitudes contribute to their goal, and which spiritual qualities will be needed. The goal is to gain the agency to think, act, and reflect.

The second distinction is that “values” in competency-based education are replaced with spiritual qualities in capacity-building education. As practiced by the Bahá'í community, capacity-building education distinguishes between values and spiritual qualities as an essential building block toward walking a path of service and assisting others along their path. Because the term “virtues” can sometimes be used in both competency-based education—as a stand-in for “values”—and in Bahá'í education—as a synonym of spiritual qualities—we might initially think that values and spiritual qualities are essentially the same. An approach that aims to develop values in students focuses on strengthening beliefs, ethics, or moral standards and their finite expressions through behavior. Developing a goodly character, then, happens by understanding a value and by receiving positive reinforcement to achieve certain behaviors related to that value. Examples include assertiveness, caring, cleanliness, confidence, consideration, courage, courtesy, and creativity.

All of these qualities would be recognized as virtues within an educational approach focused on spiritual qualities. However, such an approach

emphasizes the student's perception of the infinite dimension of certain virtues that, rather than describing outward expressions of beliefs, describe fundamental attributes of the human soul (Farid-Arbab 101). Unlike other types of virtues, each spiritual quality implies the others (118). For example, the Bahá'í writings declare that no other praiseworthy human attributes can be developed without truthfulness. A wrong or delusional person can be honest, but truthfulness implies a commitment to seeking the truth and living by it. The student's efforts to develop a goodly character should not be reduced to the resulting behavior changes, but should instead be conceived of as the development of spiritual qualities as permanent aspects of the student's soul. Some examples are love, generosity, compassion, forgiveness, humility, unity, and justice. Focusing on behavioral outcomes, then, will not allow adequate attention to be paid to the interactions among spiritual qualities in educational efforts (Farid-Arbab).

OUR COURSE PROJECT
AS AN EMERGING CASE STUDY IN
BUILDING SPIRITUAL QUALITIES

The desire of school and university administrators and accreditors to measure outcomes has led to the entrenchment of a competency-driven approach in formal education. Capacity building—in general, and specifically from a Bahá'í perspective—which is more process-oriented, is more common in non-formal education. The training

institute and the Preparation for Social Action, a Bahá'í-inspired education program “that equips young people with the necessary skills to become promoters of community well-being” (FUNDAEC), are both non-formal.

An observer might therefore ask why we take a capacity-building approach in our graduate-level, online, formal education programs. The simple answer is that capacity-building is coherent with the rest of the framework for learning, and it is more important to be internally coherent than to fit our approach into widely accepted but constricting competency-based models. But the observer might press the point: might formal education, with its requirements like accreditation, grades, certificates, diplomas, and learning outcomes, simply be less compatible with efforts to build capacities related to social transformation than non-formal education would be? It is to this question we now turn our attention.

Since early 2023, the Wilmette Institute has offered a graduate-level, online certificate program in Social Transformation to the general public, as well as individual courses in a partner university. The central capacity the Wilmette Institute aims to build in our courses is to contribute to prevalent public discourses from a Bahá'í perspective. All aspects of Wilmette Institute courses contribute to this overarching goal, but the course project plays a special role in this regard. In the course project, students identify an area of social change which they want to explore more deeply. Students

are expected to enter into iterative dialogue, over the course of three conversations, with individuals working (alone or on behalf of organizations) in the chosen area of social change in their locality. The conversations aim to produce two-way learning in which students listen, observe, inquire, and learn while prudently introducing concepts from the course resources into the conversations as potential avenues of exploration. Students keep a log where they plan for, document, and reflect on their conversations. Faculty provide periodic feedback in the log to support students, offer guidance, encourage reflection on the framework, and provide resources. Feedback emphasizes student attitudes and the spiritual qualities that allow students to interact on a spiritual level with their collaborators, take action, reflect, and learn. Students present their learning to the people they engaged with, and later to the class.

For example, one of our courses explores the issue of racial justice from a spiritual and material perspective. Each student is asked to have meaningful conversations with people in their community involved in the issue, read their local reality, and share key concepts from the course within a regular space for reflection. The project goals are based on working with community collaborators and drawing upon the concepts in the course materials to contribute to public discourse.

Mindful that any capacity consists of a number of components—“understanding and knowledge, spiritual

qualities and praiseworthy attitudes, as well as a host of abilities and skills” (Ruhi Institute v)—we designed this course project as a venue for students to acquire and develop all of these components of the specific capacity to contribute to discourse. Through the project, and supported by other aspects of the course such as video conferences and faculty feedback, students insert themselves into the prevalent discourse on the course topic, read the reality of the endeavor and community, and use their agency to contribute to the discourse from a Bahá'í perspective. The project focuses on building student capacity, not performance outcomes, behavior, or competencies.

The capacity to contribute to public discourse entails deep listening and critical discourse analysis to understand the subtleties, implications, and historical influences of speech. It requires a thoughtful review of the student's own worldview and its implications for social change; requires skills related to consultation, planning, research, and synthesizing information; requires knowledge of the field, the local community, and its challenges; requires a learning posture and the refinement of various spiritual qualities including humility, unity, and justice.

Faculty strive to cultivate an environment in which the oneness of humanity frames all relationships, allowing all to acknowledge the strengths each student brings to a collaborative project, and to cultivate the target capacities. Love among faculty and students allows them to establish bonds of

friendship and to overcome difficulties inherent in collaboration. Farid-Arbab reminds us, “Would it not, therefore, be more consistent to say that the exercise of one requires the presence of all other spiritual qualities?” (118). Developing multiple spiritual qualities coherently, each supporting the other, becomes an academic imperative. According to Farid-Arbab, “the capacity to manifest such powers as thought, comprehension, insight, reflection, and vision – as well as other powers of the human spirit like the power of unity, of humble service, of noble deeds, and of love mentioned earlier—must increase enormously” (29).

KNOWLEDGE

We have addressed spiritual qualities and praiseworthy attitudes, and specifically a posture of learning, as essential elements of capability-focused or capacity-building education. We will leave an exploration of skills and abilities for a more appropriate venue. The remaining element of capabilities—understanding, and knowledge—now deserves our attention to round out our exploration of using capacity-building in formal education.

Carrying out iterative conversations with people in the field demands that students plan, act, reflect, and study several times with the same people. This systematic, iterative approach is novel to many graduate students. Moving away from conducting interviews and embracing two-way conversations has proven challenging as

it bucks their previous undergraduate and graduate-level training and experience with fieldwork, research methodologies, and epistemology.

A capacity-building approach redefines the role of knowledge in courses. Although capacity-building and competency-based approaches share knowledge as a core component, we suggest that knowledge takes on a new definition and role in a capacity-building scheme. How education programs view the human mind and what they believe to be true about the whole human being determines curriculum development, methodology, assessment, the relationship between educators and students, and the nature and process of knowledge and understanding. The ways in which one views the mind and human nature are held within one's worldview, as discussed earlier in this paper. The western axio-onto-epistemological paradigm that was carried throughout the world through colonialism is materialist, capitalist, and hierarchical in nature (Quijano, 2000). According to Marañón Davis, “knowing where one stands in relation to colonialism can be helpful in identifying ways learning communities can unlock these traumatic patterns and systems established by a colonial past as they create new knowledge and systems of learning” (46). When the nature of educational systems is implicit, as it often is, they can institutionalize privilege that is associated with the ontological and epistemological constructs they use (Bang et al.). For these reasons, educational systems designed

through these colonial structures reify assumptions and Western ideologies. It is through this Western framework that information-based instruction and standardized testing can often cater to a view of the mind as a physical and independent brain that gathers and processes information like a computer. Patel connects such a view of the mind with colonial “projects of knowledge for the purposes of segmenting and the overriding ability to segment, to own the truth about the parts“ (19).

The mind is to the soul as radiation is to the sun, and it is “through the powers of the soul that the mind comprehends, imagines, and exerts influence, while the soul is a power that is free“ (Farid-Arbab 78). From this viewpoint on the nature of the mind,

Intelligence ceases to be defined merely as the capacity of the brain, but more broadly as the combined capacity of a number of interacting faculties of the human soul. Objectives of curricula are formulated so as to include the sharpening of these faculties, allowing the powers of the spirit to flow and bring harmony and prosperity to the life of the individual and of humanity. (Farid-Arbab 79)

A capacity-building approach moves away from simple knowledge transmission, which values knowledge for its own sake. Building capacity implies that students acquire only the knowledge they need to develop and apply the capabilities stated in the learning

outcomes—capabilities that aim to sharpen the faculties of the human soul. Gaining knowledge is a key element in capacity-building endeavors, but only as a means to contribute to an iterative action-reflection process which aims to generate and disseminate new, locally relevant knowledge:

What appears to be called for in any given region, microregion or cluster is the involvement of a growing number of people in a collective process of learning, one which is focused on the nature and dynamics of a path that conduces to the material and spiritual progress of their villages or neighbourhoods. Such a process would allow its participants to engage in the generation, application, and diffusion of knowledge, a most potent and indispensable force in the advancement of civilization. (Office of Social and Economic Development ¶24)

A pedagogy defined by capacity-building embraces students as spiritual-material human beings, their social and natural environments as spiritual-material spaces, and learning outcomes that express a holistic vision of prosperity. Engaging the human soul requires carefully selecting academic resources through which students gain insights into prevalent discourses and connect with people’s struggles and victories through investigative journalism, documentaries, articles, stories, and art pieces in which moving

narratives express hard-won truths. Fieldwork to apply new knowledge and reflect on action gives students opportunities to insert themselves in communities of practice and in local discussions of prevalent discourses. Exposing students to authors from underrepresented minority populations that speak eloquently to a spiritual perspective on human and social development helps students explore underlying assumptions, including their own, and root causes of individual and community issues, and connect to people's struggles to find and live in truth.

CONCLUSION

Formal institutions of learning have been developed primarily through a Western framework that has been heavily impacted by colonial forces, causing the dominant framework of learning in educational spaces to be limited to a material lens. We have explored the application of the Bahá'í-inspired framework for learning in a formal educational institution of higher learning, specifically having looked at three elements: worldview apperception, learning as a mode of operation, and capacity-building in a burgeoning transformative education.

An abundance of pedagogical models have been developed to innovate within spiritual worldviews, many by Indigenous scholars. For example, Simpson describes Nishnaabewin pedagogy, which is that of her Ojibwe tribe, as one in which “each individual must have the skills and knowledge

to ensure their own safety, survival and prosperity in both the physical and spiritual realm, their existence is ultimately dependent upon intimate relationships of reciprocity, humility, honesty and respect with all elements of creation, including plants and animals” (9).

Nevertheless, innovative pedagogies often respond to structures imposed by formal, materialist, colonial educational systems. Non-formal education seems to hold more promise for pedagogies free from such constraints. Through our programs, we work within formal education spaces but are pushing the bounds of how schools and universities currently function. The pedagogy has outgrown the institutional structures, and now the educational setting must rise to the occasion to fit the pedagogy. We aim to set forth an internally coherent pedagogical model regardless of existing institutional structures. Non-formal learning can stretch beyond its traditional confinements to respond to humanity's vital needs, and it is now time for formal educational spaces to follow suit. We are gaining increasing clarity about using elements of non-formal learning in formal learning environments—with their requirements of managing accreditation, grades, certificates, and expectations of partner universities—which we anticipate will be challenging.

A pedagogy can only be as effective as the limits imposed by the educational system (administration, curriculum, teachers, infrastructure) that houses it. Educational systems and their

pedagogies co-evolve symbiotically within the worldview that spawned them. Attempts to rebuild pedagogical models from the ground up require imagining truly innovative educational systems that may not resemble education as we know it today. A pedagogy of social transformation demands an entirely new conception of formal education. Until one emerges, we will forge ahead with our learning processes, open to the twists and turns such a path may take.

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Psalm for Mirza Mihdi

TERRY OFNER

You fall.
This means something to us—
this gesture not unlike our own.

We who are prone to losing ourselves
in ourselves. We who turn to the right
and to the left, examining the merchandise.

It would be easy to over-interpret this,
like a lover lost in his lover's eyes.
Sunlight, too, falls through the skylight.

But misery awaits in the packing crates
below. No attention held will hold you,
though I hold my breath long enough

to write this poem, long enough to open
a cell of silence that might buoy somehow.
Still, you fall from one light

to another. The prison gates open
as well as close.

Mirza Mihdi was a son of Bahá'u'lláh and younger brother of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. One summer evening in 1870, while pacing on the prison rooftop deep in prayer, as was his custom, Mírzá Mihdí failed to notice an open skylight and fell onto a wooden crate that pierced his chest. A physician was called to the prison, but he died the next day, 23 June. As he lay dying, Mirza Mihdi requested that his death might be accepted as a sacrifice so that those who sought to visit Bahá'u'lláh might be allowed into the prison

Interdisciplinarity, Connectivity and Capability: An Exploration in the Context of Social Change¹

FELICITY RAWLINGS-
SANA EI

Abstract

Gaining insight into the complex problems facing humanity requires an ability to read one's social reality, a right and responsibility shouldered by all. This paper explores the strengths and limitations of an interdisciplinary approach to reading social reality in the context of an interconnected world beset by attitudinal and social fragmentation. Having articulated certain limitations of interdisciplinarity as currently conceived, it examines "learning in action" (an iterative process involving consultation, action, reflection and study of the Sacred Texts) and its role in the promotion of human agency through the development

of new capabilities, leading in turn to purposeful action and societal transformation.

Résumé

Pour appréhender les problèmes complexes auxquels l'humanité fait face, il faut être en mesure de lire sa réalité sociale, un droit et une responsabilité qui incombent à chacun. Cet article explore les atouts et les limites d'une approche interdisciplinaire de la lecture de la réalité sociale dans le contexte d'un monde interconnecté en proie à une fragmentation comportementale et sociale. Après avoir exposé certaines limites de l'interdisciplinarité telle qu'elle est actuellement conçue, il examine « l'apprentissage par l'action » (un processus itératif faisant appel à la consultation, à l'action, à la réflexion et à l'étude des textes sacrés) et son rôle pour promouvoir l'intervention humaine grâce au développement de nouvelles capacités, qui conduisent à leur tour à une action résolue et à une transformation de la société.

Resumen

Adquirir conocimiento de los complejos problemas que enfrenta la humanidad requiere una habilidad para que uno lea su propia realidad social, un derecho y una responsabilidad asumidos por cada quien. Este artículo explora las fortalezas y las limitaciones de un abordaje interdisciplinario para leer la realidad social en el contexto de un mundo interconectado hostigado por fragmentación actitudinal y social. Habiendo articulado las limitaciones de la interdisciplinariedad, tal como se concibe actualmente, el artículo examina "aprender en acción" (un proceso iterativo que involucra consulta, acción, reflexión y estudio de los Textos Sagrados) y su papel en la promoción de agencia/autonomía humana por medio del desarrollo de nuevas

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capacidades, abriendo el camino a su vez a la acción con sentido y la transformación social.

INTRODUCTION

Over thirty years ago, in 1990, when announcing the establishment of the Bahá'í Chair for World Peace at the University of Maryland, the Universal House of Justice located its activities in an “interdisciplinary context”: “The stated purpose of the Chair is ‘to conduct and publish research, design courses and conduct seminars in the field of Bahá'í studies and world peace within an interdisciplinary context’” (12 February 1990). Later, in 2012, the Universal House of Justice called for “interdisciplinary and multisectoral action” in the context of social and economic development and pointed to the need to build capacity in this relation:

That the development process is inherently complex is undeniable. It can involve activity in areas such as agriculture and animal husbandry, manufacturing and marketing, the management of funds and natural resources, health and sanitation, education and socialization, communication and community organization. The knowledge that must be brought to bear on the development concerns of the communities of the world, then, does not fit into a single area or discipline. Interdisciplinary and multisectoral action is clearly called for. Yet the capacity to pursue

such coordinated action will only appear in the Bahá'í community over the course of decades, as will the capacity to address development issues at increasingly higher levels of complexity and effectiveness. (26 November 2012)

In recent years interdisciplinarity has gained considerable momentum with many advocates viewing it as a vital step to addressing the complex and multidimensional nature of humanity's problems. Perhaps most vocal in the call for an interdisciplinary approach have been public health experts and medical scientists—not only in relation to COVID-19 (Bontempi, Vergalli, and Squazzoni; Meisner et al; Sentell, Vamos and Okan; and Tyagi, Nigam and Chauhan)—but also in the area of chronic disease where the intersection of nutrition, socio-economic background, and ethnicity play a crucial role in both its prevention and management (Mann et al.; Skegg; and Zimmet).

Interdisciplinarity is variously defined and is subject to manifold interpretations. Drawing on J.A. McLean's definition, interdisciplinarity connotes a movement “beyond the strictures of one discipline only, to embrace larger horizons of analysis” (3). There is generally an acknowledgement that interdisciplinarity relies on solid foundations across the disciplines insofar as a strong command of the disciplines is integral to its effective operability. An interdisciplinary approach allows one to learn about the interconnections

between the various disciplines; navigate the disciplinary interfaces; consider multiple perspectives; and generate new insights. Interdisciplinarity sits within a family of interrelated concepts including multidisciplinary and trans-disciplinarity. It is not, however, the intention here to undertake an excursion into the distinction between multi / inter and trans / disciplinary studies as this would detract from our core concern: to explore the interrelationship between interdisciplinarity, connectivity and capability in the context of social change.

The paper will explore (1) how notwithstanding the underlying unity of creation, human striving to understand reality has led to fragmentation; (2) how interdisciplinarity can be seen as a potential response—or partial response—to our growing appreciation of the problems created by the disparity between a unified reality and a fragmented perception of knowledge; (3) some of the challenges to be addressed in our efforts to move towards interdisciplinarity, and specifically (3a) the tension between the need for disciplinary specialization, and the need for humanity as a whole to recognize the inherent oneness of knowledge. This leads to (4), an argument for the merit of the Bahá'í experience worldwide in creating a culture of learning through its learning in action framework, which points to a pathway to resolving the tension in 3a. The discussion of the learning in action framework draws on existing scholarship in this area; the paper's original contribution is to

link that scholarship to the developing discourse on interdisciplinarity which is of growing interest in wider society.

CONNECTIVITY AND FRAGMENTATION

Bahá'u'lláh explains that all existence originates from one unified divine principle: “The world of existence came into being through the heat generated from the interaction between the active force and that which is its recipient. These two are the same, yet they are different” (*Tablets* 140). ‘Abdu’l-Bahá further explains that all created things are interconnected:

Were one to observe with an eye that discovereth the realities of all things, it would become clear 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 *Compilation* 1, 71)

It can be surmised that “the unified body of the world of being” corresponds to the unified orderliness of the universe as understood by the ancient Greeks, and resonant in other religious scriptures and Indigenous

cosmologies.² Such an understanding of the interconnectedness of the world has as its corollary that knowledge is an interconnected whole, that is to say, “the knower, the knowledge, and the objects of knowledge are one single reality” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 291). As John Hatcher observes, “from a Bahá’í perspective, every branch of scholarly endeavor at every level of discourse, is examining a dimension of a single reality—diverse in its constituent components, coherent in its structure, and purposeful in its design.” (“From the Editor’s Desk” 5).

While a conception of the universe as an interconnected whole is gaining wider scientific support (Capra and Luisi) and is affirmed in its philosophical articulation in works such as David Bohm’s *Wholeness and the Implicate Order*, the idea that everything created is from the same source and that a deep relationship exists between all things struggles to find expression in many areas of social reality—from the relationship between nation-states and the peoples therein³ to the relationship between humanity and nature.⁴ Fundamental to this incongruity is a widely held assumption of a negative view of human nature characterized by selfishness and aggression giving rise to a sense of hopelessness and causing inertia and apathy. Such a cynical belief, fueled by a culture of

consumerism, has taken firm hold resulting in exploitative human relationships—along lines of gender, race, ethnicity and other social markers—and a widespread disregard for the environment, both of which run counter to the truth of oneness. The Universal House of Justice observes,

The forces of materialism promote a . . . line of thinking: that happiness comes from constant acquisition, that the more one has the better, that worry for the environment is for another day. These seductive messages fuel an increasingly entrenched sense of personal entitlement, which uses the language of justice and rights to disguise self-interest. Indifference to the hardship experienced by others becomes commonplace while entertainment and distracting amusements are voraciously consumed. The enervating influence of materialism seeps into every culture . . . (1 March 2017)

Arguably, a new conception of human nature is required during this critical juncture in human history—one underpinned by a belief in the inherent nobility of human beings, that can give rise to new modes of thinking, being and doing. As Haleh Arbab observes,

The Bahá’í belief in the primacy of the spiritual dimension of the human being is not rooted in a naïve attitude toward existence; Bahá’ís have not closed their eyes to the

2 See for example, *The Holy Bible* John 1:1; *The Holy Qur’án* 21:30; and Atkinson, “Negotiating Worldviews.”

3 See Danesh and White III.

4 See Poelina et al., and Shiva.

cruelty, injustice, oppression, and thirst for power that permeate human relations. But how will these forces be overcome if humanity insists on building society according to the dictates of our lower, materialistic nature? (38)

If a materialistic view of human nature is one barrier to a holistic worldview, then its corollary is a distorted view of history as similarly fragmented, a narrative of conflict and division with no overriding purpose or direction, reinforcing a sense of hopelessness. To propose that aggression and selfishness are immature human traits that can yield overtime and ultimately be supplanted by ennobling qualities necessitates a careful re-thinking of historical processes.

Shoghi Effendi's analysis of historical processes sheds light on our understanding of the course of social evolution and the contemporary condition of society more generally. Taking an evolutionary view of history,⁵ Shoghi Effendi portrays historical development in terms of a successive progression of levels of unity in the ordering of human society: units of social organization have evolved from their earliest stages in kinship groups, through the establishment of the city-state, to the formation of independent sovereign nations. The nation state, however, is not the endpoint in these historical processes. In the Bahá'í view, the processes of disintegration and fragmentation

currently confronting humanity will, at some future point, give way to the promising integrative forces emergent in the world and which will ultimately herald a unified global society which Shoghi Effendi asserts "is the goal towards which a harassed humanity is striving" (*World Order* 202). Accordingly, this "inclusive historical consciousness" or "grand narrative" (Smith, "Crisis" 85) entails an upheaval in all aspects of our lives. Hence, the weakening and ultimate disappearance of certain social institutions and practices should be expected insofar as they will no longer serve the next stage of humanity's development. Shoghi Effendi writes:

If long-cherished ideals and time-honoured institutions, if certain social assumptions and religious formulae have ceased to promote the welfare of the generality of mankind, if they no longer minister to the needs of a continually evolving humanity, let them be swept away... Why should these, in a world subject to the immutable law of change and decay, be exempt from the deterioration that must needs overtake every human institution? For legal standards, political and economic theories are solely designed to safeguard the interests of humanity as a whole, and not humanity to be crucified for the preservation of the integrity of any particular law or doctrine. (*World Order* 42)

5 See also Laszlo 1989a and 1989b.

It is not surprising that a view of humanity itself as a disunified collection of self-interested individuals, and of history as a directionless arena of conflict, contribute to a fractured perception of the world which for many is still characterized by what Bohm lamented as “a fragmentary atomistic approach to reality.” Resonant with a Bahá'í perspective, it is a “fragmented self-world view” (19) which has distorted the prevalent perception of the world. Accordingly, this fragmented lens on the world has impacted our understanding of knowledge itself. As Bahá'u'lláh observes, “Knowledge is one point which the foolish have multiplied” (*Gems* ¶39).⁶ It is hardly surprising, therefore, that disciplines have become isolated one from another. In a letter written on its behalf, the Universal House of Justice observes, “One of the problems of modern times is the degree to which the different disciplines have become specialized and isolated from one another. Thinkers are now faced with a challenge to achieve a synthesis, or at least a coherent correlation of the vast amount of knowledge that has been acquired during the past century” (23 March 1983).

To what extent can an interdisciplinary approach assist our efforts to address this challenge? Arguably, it has certain potential if it is applied in keeping with Bahá'u'lláh's criterion for the proper study of sciences and arts: He counsels, “It is permissible to study sciences and arts, but such sciences

as are useful and would redound to the progress and advancement of the people” (*Tablets* 26). To this end, (furthering the “progress and advancement of the people”), an interdisciplinary approach can serve as a point of departure to gaining a more holistic view of knowledge.

It will be helpful at this point to consider some of the possible ways to frame interdisciplinarity.

1. Interdisciplinarity as the use of methodologies from various disciplines to explore an object of study

The sheer complexity of the problems confronting humanity dictates the need to employ methodologies from a range of disciplines to properly consider their interrelationships. Recognizing this need, Adaikkalam et al. observe, “we discern growing aspirations for triangulation and integration at both methodological and theoretical levels in the search for solutions to pressing social problems” (14). Interestingly, bearing on this point in relation to the law of Ḥuqúqu'lláh,⁷ Chief Trustee of Ḥuqúqu'lláh, Hand of the Cause of God Dr. 'Alí-Muhammad Varqá⁸

7 Ḥuqúqu'lláh, translated as “The Right of God” is considered by Bahá'ís as a spiritual bounty and obligation. It involves a payment from one's surplus capital (above a certain threshold) offered to the Universal House of Justice to support the work of the Bahá'í Faith and for public welfare.

8 Dr. 'Alí-Muhammad Varqá (b.1911-d.2007), Hand of the Cause of God,

6 From a Ḥadīth.

signaled the anticipated insights from both science and the humanities:

Evidently the scientific progress and philosophic deductions in the coming centuries will shed light on the hidden realities of this great law, particularly in the fields of cause and effect, reciprocity, and mutual assistance, which bind together all the component parts of the world of creation and control their cooperation in harmony and balance. (184)

Interdisciplinarity in this sense is also exemplified in Nader Saiedi's approach in *Gate of the Heart*. On the back cover we read, "Taking an interdisciplinary approach, Nader Saiedi examines the Báb's major works in multifaceted context, explaining the unique theological system, mystical world view, and interpretive principles they embody as well as the rhetorical and symbolic uses of language through which the Báb radically transforms traditional concepts."⁹

A discussion of interdisciplinarity as a kind of multi-methodology invites us to consider the advent of generative Artificial Intelligence. On the one hand, AI holds significant promise for problem solving and innovation, including

served as Chief Trustee of Ḥuqúqu'lláh from 1955 to 2007.

9 The reason for highlighting Nader Saiedi's work, in particular is that Bahá'ís may be familiar with it; of course, many scholars in other contexts use this kind of interdisciplinarity.

from an interdisciplinary perspective, through its ability to analyze vast amounts of data and integrate knowledge from multiple fields. On the other hand, the pressing ethical issues presented by AI—bias, misinformation, lack of transparency, etc.—indicate that close human oversight remains a moral imperative. This oversight must itself be interdisciplinary, involving computer science and a range of social sciences in a conversation that can inform both technical design and government policy (see Al-kfairy et al. for an example of such an approach).

2. *Interdisciplinarity as bringing two bodies of knowledge into relationship*

Ernest Boyer's work is helpful in this connection. Perceiving the dangers of the lack of connectivity in prevailing conceptions of the world and the implications for a fragmented view of knowledge, he set forth in his celebrated work *Scholarship Reconsidered*, a "scholarship of integration" (16) as one of the four functions of an educator.¹⁰ He writes: "By integration, we mean making connections across the disciplines, placing the specialities in larger context, illuminating data in a revealing way, often educating non-specialists, too. . . . What we mean is serious, disciplined work that seeks to

10 For Boyer, the four functions of an educator are "the scholarship of discovery; the scholarship of integration; the scholarship of application; and the scholarship of teaching" (*Scholarship Reconsidered* 16).

interpret, draw together, and bring new insight to bear on original research” (18–19). For example, Herman Pi’ikea Clark, a Kanaka Maoli, tells the story of how he, as an Indigenous Hawaiian art educator, discovered a reconnection to the Kanak Maoli cultural framework through immersion in the Māori art context in Aotearoa / New Zealand, ultimately giving rise to the emergence of an Indigenous cultural-based alternative educational practice in Hawaii (Clark). Clark’s experience also speaks to Boyer’s conception of a certain beauty in connectivity, one which both reflects a “more integrated view of knowledge” (*Scholarship Reconsidered* 19) and yields “authentic discoveries” (“From Scholarship” 132).

3. Interdisciplinarity as bringing a diversity of perspectives to bear on the object of study

Seeking to enhance our understanding of the world, Stephen Friberg, drawing on the work of Helen Longino, argues that diversity of perspective is necessary in the search for objective scientific knowledge. He observes, “Diversity . . . 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” (23). Obtaining a fuller picture of reality necessarily involves diverse perspectives, whether in the form of diverse disciplinary

perspectives, diverse disciplinary training or diverse life experience / background and so forth. Diversity of perspectives enables participants to question assumptions and explore ambiguities in light of empirical evidence giving rise to new insights. Todd Smith puts it this way: “[I]nterperspectival collaboration offers the possibility of richer, more incisive readings of reality and corresponding, more inclusive visions of how to advance inquiry” (“Becoming” 60). Ien Ang draws on the concept of hybridity to highlight its importance. She observes, “research and writing from a hybrid perspective always has to establish itself relationally, articulating a shifting multiplicity of standpoints that are put into dialogue with one another to bring about a more comprehensive, multifaceted understanding of the world” (26).

4. Interdisciplinarity as an expression of systems thinking

Christine Blackmore and John Smyth advocate a systems approach to illustrate the need to engage with multiple perspectives in order to understand the whole. In the context of teaching global citizenship,¹¹ they write:

11 From a Bahá’í perspective, education in global citizenship is an integral element in the promotion of human agency. It is regarded by the Universal House of Justice to be “part of the standard education of every child” (Message, October 1985) so that children “see themselves as citizens of one world, the builders of a just and prosperous world civilization”

Taking a systems approach involves thinking in terms of being part of a system rather than a separate entity; appreciating a range of different perspectives and motivations as well as one's own and understanding relevant interconnections. Our perspectives on the world are partial and we cannot understand the whole unless we take multiple perspectives into account. (204)

By affirming the integral relationship between an individual and its environment and the importance of multiple perspectives, a systems approach opens up possibilities for diverse forms of connectivity to flourish and the ripe conditions for reciprocity to emerge. The role of reciprocity in the unshackling of asymmetrical relationships is highlighted by Rebecca Bilous et al.: "Adopting an ethics of reciprocity in the context of research, learning and teaching is an attempt to reframe unequal power dynamics that can dominate researcher-researched, and academy-community relationships" (292).

Indigenous peoples have long experience in this connection. Their enhanced ability to see the world through multiple lens has opened new vistas of research and enquiry. The first part of the next section of this paper will explore some such experience.

CHALLENGES ASSOCIATED WITH AN INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACH

Aboriginal educator, Judy Atkinson, a Jiman (from Central West Queensland) and Bundjalung (Northern New South Wales) woman, also with Anglo-Celtic and German heritage, points to the need to build a bridge between Indigenous ways of knowing and the academy.¹² Reflecting upon the challenge entailed in this undertaking, Atkinson observes:

I struggle to negotiate a place for Indigenous worldviews and pedagogical practice, within a space that was, and continues to be controlled by a dominance that, too often, believes in its own superiority. In an attempt to create safe *places* of learning and healing, within academic space—I often found a continuation of colonial systems of power, perpetuated by the very institution(s) in which I was working. ("Negotiating Worldviews" 42; italics in original)

Atkinson has developed a person-centered approach to healing referred to as "educaring." This approach—which recognizes the reciprocal relationship between healing and education and is located in a "multi-disciplinary and cross-cultural education" framework ("Negotiating Worldviews" 51)—invites participants

(Bahá'í International Community, "World Citizenship").

12 Academy denotes "institutions of higher learning" (Atkinson, "Occasional Address").

to “understand the social, political, psychological, environmental, family and community functions that have made them who they are, and how they relate to the world in which they live” (*Trauma* 84) and “take charge of their own lives, and that of their families and communities” (“Negotiating Worldviews” 51).

Ocean Rīpeka Mercier, a Māori from the Ngāti Porou tribe on the East Coast of Aotearoa/New Zealand tells of similarly hazardous “border crossings” (Aikenhead and Jegede 271) in her narrative about her experience as a physicist and teacher in unfamiliar spaces transitioning from Physics to Māori Studies at the Victoria University of Wellington Te Herenga Waka in 2004 (Mercier). So “immense” were the differences between the two departments, at once “philosophical, structural and social” (64) that she equates the disciplinary divide with a “faultline.” She observes, “Characterising the disciplinary divide as a faultline is evocative of: historical rifts, the ever-present potential of shifting landscapes, uncertainty in building on top of the faultline, but an area in which renewal and growth is seen. Making camps either side of the disciplinary divide necessitates crossing this line” (64). While facing numerous challenges in this transition, Mercier’s migratory experience has ultimately enabled her to set up camp on the “faultline” where she has opened up new cultural spaces and initiated innovative interdisciplinary work drawing on the rich resources available to her at the disciplinary interface. For example,

she has introduced two interdisciplinary courses “Science and Indigenous Knowledge” which explores Indigenous knowledge systems and their interface with Western science; and “Cultural Mapping” which introduces students to the practice of cultural mapping at the intersection of Geography and Māori Studies in the context of Māori development (Mercier).

While an interdisciplinary approach may be helpful in many areas of endeavor, its enactment, however, as demonstrated by Atkinson and Mercier, is challenged by a range of considerations. The following discussion begins by considering one of the central “overt” problems of interdisciplinarity—the practical challenge of putting disciplinary perspectives into conversation in a coherent way—before then introducing the more fundamental challenge of the human dimension, i.e. the key requirement of universal participation.

THE “FUSION OF HORIZONS”

The challenges associated with enacting an interdisciplinary approach are wide-ranging: inherent power differentials that advance the interests of certain disciplines while diminishing others; evolving methodologies; structural inequities in relation to resources, etc.; a lack of established benchmarks; and disparate cultural and academic conventions, to name but a few (see for example, Atkinson, “Negotiating Worldviews”; Mann; Tuck and McKenzie).

In “A Reading of Sona Farid-Arbab’s *Moral Empowerment: In Quest of a Pedagogy*” with reference to curriculum, Gerald Filson, while acknowledging the role of interdisciplinary studies in “putting concrete problems of human life at the center [of education]” (98) also concurs with Farid-Arbab that “the logic or form and development in specific disciplines of knowledge, whether in science or the arts and humanities, can be very poorly covered in some interdisciplinary studies approaches, and a sound mastery of pertinent disciplines can be neglected if the formal logic of disciplines is ignored” (98–99). How then to address such valid concerns around superficiality while yet responding to the “challenge to achieve a synthesis, or at least a coherent correlation of the vast amount of knowledge that has been acquired during the past century”? (Universal House of Justice, 23 March 1983). In this connection, recognizing both the strengths and limitations of the methods employed across the disciplines, it is fully acknowledged that the nature of the integrative process which utilizes disciplinary perspectives is both dynamic and complex, requiring a certain humility to be willing “to put our own presuppositions on trial” (Smith “Becoming” 49) and be receptive to a broadened understanding of one’s discipline. Further, in a discussion on the interplay of science and religion, the Universal House of Justice highlights the need to anticipate ambiguities and underlines the importance of not imposing methodological limits on science:

The prosecution of this vast enterprise [to create a global civilization which embodies both the spiritual and material dimensions of existence] will depend on a progressive interaction between the truths and principles of religion and the discoveries and insights of scientific inquiry. This entails living with ambiguities as a natural and inescapable feature of the process of exploring reality. It also requires us not to limit science to any particular school of thought or methodological approach postulated in the course of its development. (19 May 1995)

In reflecting on the “dynamic interplay” of science and religion (Smith “Science” 13), and pointing to a way forward, Smith draws on Hans-Georg Gadamer’s concept of the “fusion of horizons” (317). Gadamer observes:

The concept of “horizon” suggests itself because it expresses the superior breadth of vision that the person who is trying to understand must have. To acquire a horizon means that one learns to look beyond what is close at hand—not in order to look away from it but to see it better, within a larger whole and in truer proportion. (316)

Smith suggests that the “fusion of horizons” is “where different systems of knowledge mature through an ongoing interchange that challenges their respective preconceptions, opens

up new vistas of understanding, and thereby leads to their reciprocal enrichment without necessarily compromising that which is core to each of them” (“Science” 13). Ever mindful of the attendant problems associated with implementing such an approach, noting *inter alia* the “culture of protest” (Bahá'í International Community “Prosperity”) far removed from the “ethics of reciprocity” (Bilous et al. 292) required for effective interchange, Smith invokes a commitment to “the ontological assumptions of oneness, nobility, and purpose” (“Becoming” 62). Recognizing ontological oneness as the basic premise that governs human relations presupposes—nay, enjoins—collective participation in human affairs. Such a recognition affirms the “constructive contributions” (Universal House of Justice, Ridván 2010) of every member of the human family. Accordingly, to be true to its purpose, interdisciplinarity relies on universal participation, where everyone who is impacted by a decision is able to contribute on an equal footing. The appeal for the participation of people at the grassroots is not new. Kurt Lewin’s introduction of “action research” in the 1940s has long been influential (34). The crescendo of interest is widespread and is recently evident in the International Science Council’s call for “actionable knowledge” (Kaiser and Gluckman 18). The question then arises: how can individuals be empowered to participate? To this discussion we now turn.

CAPABILITY AND TRANSFORMATION

Dr. Farzam Arbab, in his book chapter “Promoting a Discourse on Science, Religion and Development”, highlights the vulnerability of an interdisciplinary approach to misuse if certain conditions are neglected. He relates his experience as a member of an interdisciplinary group concerned with rural development at the Universidad del Valle in Columbia. The challenging issue was that the group had already previously determined their definitions about development which were to shape the model to guide the implementation of their plans in the region. Commenting on the disjuncture between two distant realities, he observes, “The gap between the reality of life we encountered there [Norte del Cauca, a rural region near Cali] and the elaborate constructs of the interdisciplinary group uncovered contradictions that I found difficult to ignore” (152). Accordingly, such an approach would deprive the local villagers of any involvement in planning or development of proposed models prior to the point of implementation. This ultimately led Dr. Arbab to gradually withdraw himself from the group and together with a few other colleagues engage in the activities of Fundación para la Aplicación y Enseñanza de las Ciencias (FUNDAEC, Foundation for the Application and Teaching of the Sciences) a non-governmental development organization in Colombia.¹³

A core guiding principle of FUNDAEC is “people centred development” (Arbab F. 154), a principle which implies that community members should actively participate in the development of their own regions. Central to the framework developed by FUNDAEC is the concept of “capability.” Capability is defined by FUNDAEC as the “developed capacity to think and to act in a well-defined sphere of activity and according to a well-defined purpose” (*Basic Concepts* 60–61). Conceived of as a means “to integrate theoretical and practical knowledge” (Farid-Arbab 274), the concept of capability has a pivotal role to play in promoting the modes of thought and behavior commensurate with a unified global society. Reflecting on the education of youth in the context of a fragmented curriculum, Dr. Arbab positions capability front and center in addressing this challenge:

This situation calls for a fresh look at the universe of knowledge and for a new way to bring together its diverse elements in curricula that respect the wholeness of knowledge yet anticipate specialization at a later stage. The focus of each set of interrelated educational activities should be the development of one or more capabilities—scientific, artistic, technical, social, moral, and spiritual—endowing the individual

with the understanding of concepts, knowledge of facts, and mastery of methods, as well as the skills, attitudes, and qualities he or she needs to lead a fruitful life. Specifically, in this age of transition, it is imperative to endow youth with a twofold moral purpose: to take charge of their own intellectual and spiritual growth and to make significant contributions to the transformation of society. (Arbab F. 223)

The depiction of a learning culture that respects the “wholeness of knowledge” as the backdrop for the development of individual capabilities and the associated “two-fold moral purpose” is similarly portrayed by Boyer. In Boyer’s account one’s “sense of purpose” is conditional on the integration of knowledge into a “larger pattern.” He observes: “If there is a failure in the academy today, it is that there are fragments of knowledge without a larger pattern. So we develop our own special categories and speak only to ourselves, and we fail to give any sense of purpose or larger perspective to our students” (“From Scholarship” 132). Hence, the foregoing discussion would suggest that there is a correspondence between the realization of a “larger pattern” in the “universe of knowledge” and the promotion of human agency. Why so? The awareness of global interconnectivity—embedded in the “inclusive historical consciousness”—and its corollary—the reciprocal relationships that bind the

“fragments of knowledge”—entails an empowering conceptual shift in understanding inasmuch as individuals begin to see a connection between their own actions and their impact on the broader society. In this way, they derive meaning through their actions and this in turn develops individual capacity to contribute to the betterment of society; a capacity augmented by the learning acquired through action.

By illustrating the close connection between deeds and the unlocking of the portals of vision, Bahá'u'lláh makes the connection between action and learning crystal-clear: “O people! Words must be supported by deeds, for deeds are the true test of words. Without the former, the latter can never quench the thirst of the yearning soul, nor unlock the portals of vision before the eyes of the blind” (*Tabernacle* 1.13). Recognizing the significant role of action and vision in learning, David Hicks and Cathie Holden conceptualize the relationship between action and vision in terms of symbiosis, positing that vision leads to empowerment because it sustains action:

Vision offers direction and energy because it harnesses deep aspirations. Direction and energy lead to effective work and action, which may in turn lead to modification of the vision. It may broaden it, also strengthen it. The test of any vision is whether it speaks to people's hearts, to their sense of compassion and justice, for both people and planet. (138)

Keeping in mind the important interplay between action and the power of vision, we will now explore “learning in action” from a Bahá'í perspective.

LEARNING IN ACTION

In the Bahá'í community “learning in action” is a widely adopted framework for social action. It has been defined as a “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” (The Universal House of Justice, qtd. in *Social Action*, ¶151). To allay any concerns in this context about the possible rigidity of such a framework, Paul Lample observes that, “the idea of a ‘framework’ has nothing to do with a narrow imposition of methods or formulaic procedures, but is intended to provide an evolving, shared understanding of beliefs, concepts, methods, practices, vision and approaches relevant to advancing work in the particular arena of endeavor at hand” (15). In implementing this framework, all those engaged in its activities—the individual, the community and the institutions—are encouraged to gather insights through social action in the field as they emerge. By engaging in activities and decision-making at the grassroots, informed by the guidance accrued from study, there is a “reciprocal flow of learning” (Smith and Sabet 11) among the participants generating new insights, along with shared responsibility and a sense of

empowerment. The Universal House of Justice has noted that the “insights that arise from applying the guidance are recognized, articulated, absorbed, and shared” (29 December 2015). Such a systematic, collaborative and integrated approach to knowledge generation helps one to make sense of the complexity of reality by identifying areas of need and opportunity; existing capabilities; and emerging currents of inquiry thereby better positioning the community to collectively move forward to address complex problems. To better understand the operative aspects of this mode of learning in action we can draw on the concept of “interplays” defined by Smith as “mutually reinforcing and uplifting dynamics between two or more elements” (“Becoming” 51). Several interplays are identified such as “reader and reality”; “science and religion”; (“Becoming” 52) “the individual and the collective” (“Crisis” 92) etc. Insofar as the mode of learning in action “engenders, incorporates, attends to and quickens” the various interplays (“Becoming” 51), together they enable the filtering of the learning process to distil the wheat from the chaff so that those insights of value can be harnessed and any bias or prejudice can be set aside. Simultaneously, individuals develop the capacity to think and act in accordance with them reciprocally (Smith “Becoming”). In this way, then, it becomes possible in our reading of reality to promote “collaborative attunement”, a term that denotes the occurrence of “a unity among a diversity of attunements

to a given reality consistent with the interdependent nature of reality as a whole” (“Becoming” 47).¹⁴ Of course, the effective functioning of the mode of learning in action is integral to the degree of “collaborative attunement” which occurs. We will now briefly examine the role of consultation in this framework.

The role of consultation—an effective tool to distil understanding—is explained by the Universal House of Justice:

If learning in action is to be the primary mode of operation in the area of social and economic development, the Bahá’í principle of consultation needs to be fully appreciated. 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

14 See Smith “Becoming Attuned to Reality: Presuppositions and the Power of Learning in Action” and “Crisis and the Power of an Inclusive Historical Consciousness: Progressing from Delusional Habits to Dynamic Freedom” for a detailed discussion on various interplays and their role in collaborative attunement to reality in the context of the mode of learning in action.

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. (Message, 26 November 2012)

Interestingly, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá indicates that it is “only after the clash of differing opinions” that the “shining spark of truth cometh forth” Here, there is “no occasion for ill-feeling or discord” (*Selections* ¶44). Rather, what is needed is adherence to truth-seeking and universal participation in order that a “culture of learning” may emerge (Kazemipour 149). Assuredly, alongside the frank exchange of opinions, there needs to be a concomitant commitment to the development of personal qualities such as a sense of justice, an understanding of the equality of women and men, freedom from prejudice, humility, courtesy, patience and unity of purpose. In this way, consultation, as a key collective practice in the process of learning in action serves as “the collective investigation of reality” in which all can participate, regardless of background or experience. Further, consultation “generates unity of vision about the way things are, what could be, and how to achieve what could be” (Smith and Ghaemmaghami 460). Accordingly, not only do participants gain insight into the root causes underpinning social problems in their local realities and in wider contexts, as well

as resources and possibilities therein, they also gain linguistic capital and the power of expression—an important capability and source of empowerment—enabling individuals to see themselves as agents of social change.

PARTICIPATION IN THE DISCOURSES OF SOCIETY

It is worthy of note that in seeking to apply knowledge gained in the field to address complex problems in their communities, Bahá'ís are also encouraged to gain further insights through participation in prevalent discourses in society. In this undertaking the method of correlation—whereby correlative linkages are identified between different areas of knowledge in order to measure the degree to which two variables are related (Martin, Carlson, and Buskist)—has especial significance. Accordingly, where the correlation is negative, the subjects of enquiry are understood to be mutually exclusive; where the correlation is positive, new connections can be made and new insights harnessed (see McLean). The method has been advocated by Shoghi Effendi for investigating and analyzing the relationship between the Bahá'í teachings and the academic disciplines as well as other systems of truth. For example, Shoghi Effendi encouraged Bahá'í students “to investigate and analyze the principles of the Faith and to correlate them with the modern aspects of philosophy and science . . . for therein lies the very essence of the principle of independent investigation

of truth” (Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi qtd. in *Issues*). In this connection, the weighty task involves correlating the teachings across the compass of “modern thought.” The Universal House of Justice observes:

This process [of learning in which the Bahá’í community is engaged] will be augmented by research and discussion and by attempts to correlate the teachings with modern thought, including the identification of similarities and distinctions between the teachings and contemporary social constructs. Involvement in the discourses of society by believers in various social spaces will sharpen the insights gained. (qtd. in *Social Action* ¶153)

Hence, the active participation of Bahá’ís in the discourses of society is an indispensable adjunct to the learning in action framework.

CONCLUSION

Addressing the fundamental challenge to interdisciplinarity—the need to ensure the full participation of people at the grassroots so that its protagonists are both generating knowledge while learning in the field of action and incorporating elements of interdisciplinarity at a conceptual level into that learning—is key to its efficacy. The intentional integration of the learning in action framework involving the iterative process of consultation, action,

reflection and study of the Sacred Texts, is integral to building that capacity. Whatever the complex problems to address, a necessary ability is to be able to read one’s social reality in the evolving global narrative—to identify the interplays shaping that reality and to lend one’s thought and action to their reciprocal advancement in the direction of a unified global society. Thus, where an interdisciplinary approach is embedded in a context where the generation of knowledge occurs as and when knowledge is applied and also engages a group of learners in which all participants are equal partners, it has true potential to serve beneficial ends. For it is through engagement in this process that individuals gain a positive sense of self-worth which in turn engenders a will to act and arise with confidence, foresight and a clear vision to shoulder their responsibilities to contribute to societal transformation. In this way, the constructive forces of motivation which can dismantle the underpinning assumptions about the negative view of human nature and overcome inertia and apathy, are set in motion.

Inasmuch as the need to restore confidence and envision a better future has never been greater than in the current reality, it may be helpful to consider the words of Clifford Geertz which point to a new reality. Reflecting on changes to prevailing conceptions of knowledge, Geertz points out that while expressions of “blurred genres” (165) are not new, it is their rapid and widespread proliferation which takes us by surprise. For Geertz, there is

a “refiguration” in the way we think (165). He observes:

It is a phenomenon general enough and distinctive enough to suggest that what we are seeing is not just another redrawing of the cultural map—the moving of a few disputed borders, the marking of some more picturesque mountain lakes—but an alteration of the principles of mapping. Something is happening to the way we think about the way we think. (166)

To conclude, we would do well to ponder the words of Bahá'u'lláh: “Every single letter proceeding from Our mouth is endowed with such regenerative power as to enable it to bring into existence a new creation—a creation the magnitude of which is inscrutable to all save God. He verily hath knowledge of all things.” (qtd. in Shoghi Effendi, *Advent* 67–68)

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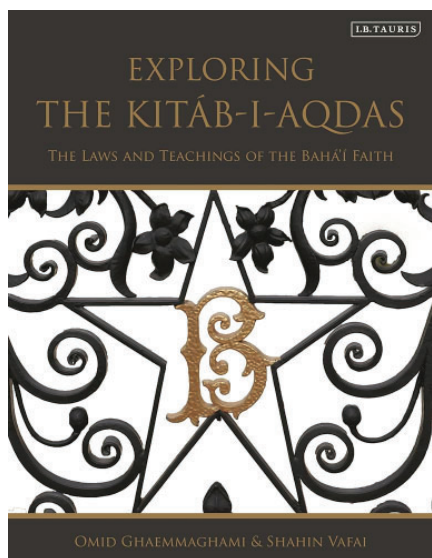
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Book Reviews

Omid Ghaemmaghami and Shahin Vafai, *Exploring the Kitáb-i-Aqdas: The Laws and Teachings of the Bahá'í Faith*. London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2025.

VARGHA BOLODO-TAEFI

The publication of *Exploring the Kitáb-i-Aqdas* marks a significant contribution to Bahá'í studies. In this broad-ranging, detailed volume, Omid Ghaemmaghami and Shahin Vafai have begun to address a longstanding gap in Bahá'í studies: the creation of an extensive, accessible, clearly articulated, carefully structured, and meticulously researched academic introduction to the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, the Mother-Book and the Most Holy Book of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation, the charter of the future

world civilization, and the legislative nucleus of the Bahá'í Faith. By synthesizing available scholarship, textual exegesis, and historical analysis, the authors have provided a foundational reference work and study guide to the Kitáb-i-Aqdas that will serve both academics and general readers.

OBJECTIVE AND SCOPE

Ghaemmaghami and Vafai state their objective unambiguously in the Preface: to explore “the Kitáb-i-Aqdas’s most consequential provisions” and present an account that is “textual” rather than “anthropological or sociological” (xviii)—one that lays a foundation for systematic study of the Book’s history, language, laws, and theological framework. They seek to synthesize and clarify rather than to exhaustively analyze every ordinance, and focus instead on the overarching features and themes that give the Kitáb-i-Aqdas its distinctive structure and meaning. Their declared objective is deliberately circumscribed, though the scope and depth of execution extend well beyond a minimal exposition.

METHODOLOGY

The authors define their book as, first, expository and, second, analytical, to the extent that space allowed. They establish a broad foundation and analytical framework for more focused and specialized scholarship to follow.

To this end, the authors employ a systematic, textual-historical

methodology that is primarily expository in nature. Their approach involves providing a structured framework for approaching the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* by history, language, theology, and legal classifications; citing heavily from primary Bahá'í and related scriptural sources; and applying rigorous scholarly analysis to specific textual elements to facilitate understanding of the text. While it is not a pure work of novel analysis, in that it is not an exploration of a single new theoretical argument, the authors' do rigorously apply analytical tools to the source material, such as textual and comparative analysis, literary and stylistic analysis, systematic categorization of complex concepts to facilitate rigorous study and discussion, and historical analysis. Their heavy reliance on primary Bahá'í texts to support their analysis allows readers to assess their conclusions.

THEME AND THESIS

At its core, *Exploring the Kitáb-i-Aqdas* examines Revelation as law in the service of spiritual and ethical transformation and as the juridical and moral architecture of a global religious order. The unifying theme of the study is the integration of the spiritual and the social—that Bahá'u'lláh did not intend to promulgate “a mere code of laws” but to awaken “divine perfections in all human souls” (7), and that His Most Holy Book transforms the idea of divine legislation into a universal ethical and spiritual framework.

By situating the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*

within Bahá'u'lláh's broader Revelation, Ghaemmaghami and Vafai present the Most Holy Book not simply as a legal corpus but as the textual cornerstone of the Bahá'í Dispensation—a Book that articulates the theological, metaphysical, moral, and institutional foundations of a global faith. This approach captures the essence of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* as a living document that continues to shape the practices, discourses, doctrines, texts, institutions, and experiences of the Bahá'í community.

CONTENT AND STRUCTURE

After a short introductory chapter on the Bahá'í Faith that orients non-specialist readers, Chapter 1 traces the history of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*: its anticipation, composition, dissemination, early manuscripts, and publication. The inclusion of rare images—such as the Bassett manuscript, an early transcription by Zaynu'l-Muqarrabín, and the 1891 Bombay publication—makes this chapter a concentrated documentary resource on the history of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* (53–58). This chapter synthesizes an impressive range of sources—published or out of print—pertaining to the history of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, and is replete with new historical findings. Among its most significant contributions is the authors' refinement of the date of the completion of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* to early January 1873, based on close internal textual analysis and contemporaneous Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh (23–27). The chapter's

exploration of the Bassett Manuscript held at Columbia University, which the authors identify as the earliest known Bahá'í Text accessioned by a research library in the United States and as material evidence for the circulation of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* in Persia by 1877, is noteworthy (pp. 32–34). In addition, the authors revisit the 1891 Bombay edition, correct the historical record through a careful reading of its “*Khatt-i-Badí*” colophon, and identify the scribe as Mírzá Ḥusayn-i-*Khurtúmi* rather than the commonly cited Mírzá Muḥammad-‘Alí (37–39).

Further, Ghaemmaghami and Vafai present compelling evidence showing that “Questions and Answers” appears to have been completed shortly before Bahá'u'lláh's passing in 1892. While most previous accounts suggest the work was a compilation exclusively of questions posed in writing by Zaynu'l-Muqarrabín, and one indicates that it was written in the early years of Bahá'u'lláh's exile in ‘Akká and completed by 1873, this chapter offers a much more nuanced historical reconstruction, and provides new insights of great interest to the field of Bahá'í studies (45–49).

Chapter 2 offers an erudite exploration of the language, style, and translation of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*. The authors analyze its elliptical Arabic prose, its referential density, and its stylistic nonlinearity (69–74). They also provide the most complete account yet of the English translation process—from early unofficial attempts, through Shoghi Effendi's translation of selected

passages, to the intentional delay and eventual release of the authorized translation in 1992 (78–92). This discussion will be of particular value to scholars of translation studies and scripture alike, as it reveals how Shoghi Effendi and the Universal House of Justice approached the formidable challenge of rendering Bahá'u'lláh's dense and allusive Arabic into accessible and dignified English. The authors' sophisticated analysis of the grammar of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* is novel. They argue that Bahá'u'lláh's deviations from standard Arabic rules in early manuscripts were deliberate “speech acts” to assert divine authority, which were standardized in later recensions (63–65). An important discussion is the comparative analysis of paragraph 181 that demonstrates how Shoghi Effendi's translation contains a significant interpretive element regarding the “new World Order” that is not immediately apparent in the literal Arabic (91–92).

Subsequent chapters move thematically through the theological foundations of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation, its anthropological underpinnings, the Covenant, devotion, ethics, family law, community institutions, and the principles of unity and justice. Chapter 3, on theological foundations, examines the central metaphysical premise of Bahá'í Revelation and explains how the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* articulates a Bahá'í theology in which the Manifestation of God functions as the perfect locus of divine Revelation and the sole epistemic path to the knowledge of God. By centering the discussion on the Manifestation of

God as the core theme of the future Bahá'í theology, cosmology, epistemology, eschatology, and ethics, the authors address and resolve some of the misunderstandings that can arise from human efforts to grapple with the paradoxes involved in recognizing God, Whose absolute transcendence sits in tension with the human purpose of attaining His presence. They also speak to the tendency of some to conflate the Essence of God, His names and attributes, and their reflections in the world of creation. The authors' rigorous exploration of the concept of the Manifestation of God also sheds light on complex doctrinal topics like the "Seal of the Prophets" and the "Day of Resurrection". This chapter clearly illustrates how the theological framework of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* specifically and the Bahá'í Faith broadly revolutionizes the conceptual scope of Revelation previously found in older religious traditions. The exploration culminates in Section F, "Relationship among the Manifestations and Claims of Exclusivity and Finality," which provides a unifying understanding that resolves claims of religious finality and offers a novel contribution to religious discourse.

Chapter 4 examines the Bahá'í conception of human ontology—body, mind, and soul; higher and lower natures; purpose and spiritual duties—and outlines the soul's continual progress in this world and the next. Chapter 5 analyzes the explicit provisions in *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* for succession, authoritative interpretation, and institutional

governance, and demonstrates how these structures safeguard unity and doctrinal integrity in the Bahá'í community. In this regard, the discussion of the anticipation, in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, of the institution of Guardianship before its formal establishment in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Will and Testament, as well as the possibility of a break in the line of the Guardians, is noteworthy (177–181).

Chapter 6 surveys the spiritual disciplines mandated in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*—obligatory prayer, fasting, recitation, meditation, immersion in scripture, and pilgrimage—and explains their individual purposes, history, and modes of observance. A special highlight, which offers entirely novel and compelling research, is the detailed history of the evolution of the Bahá'í law of obligatory prayer. The authors provide a fascinating reconstruction of the three distinct periods in which Bahá'u'lláh prescribed different sets of obligatory prayers. They explore why Bahá'u'lláh composed two obligatory prayers which He never disclosed and then replaced them with a third set of prayers (202–205).

Chapter 7 describes the ethical vision of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* by analyzing its injunctions to cultivate specific virtues and adhere to laws that promote moral refinement, purity, and the embodiment of divine attributes. We again find wholly original textual analysis in this chapter, pertaining in this case to the prohibition of opium, whose repetition in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* (¶155 and ¶190) is explored (257–259). While

some have observed that the last paragraph of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* (§190) proscribing opium seems to repeat an already existing proscription in the Text (§155) and, further, that paragraph 190 is missing from some manuscripts of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, the authors have explored both when paragraph 190 was likely added to the Text and, more importantly, why it was added. They suggest that Paragraph 190 was a later addition to the Text owing to the increase in opium production and use, especially in the 1870s and 1880s in Persia, and intended to address the specific shift from eating to smoking opium in nineteenth-century Persia (257–259).

Chapter 8 outlines the Bahá'í laws governing family life, marriage and divorce, rites of burial, and the distribution of estates. This chapter provides a novel interpretation of the intestacy laws. It argues that the “House of Justice” designated as the residuary beneficiary refers specifically to the *Local* House of Justice, not the Universal House of Justice. The authors support this interpretation by correlating it with ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s teachings on the “general storehouse” and a 1932 codification of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*’s laws of personal status prepared by the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Egypt (293–294).

Chapter 9 explores the communal dimensions of Bahá'í law and analyzes how provisions related to education, consultation, worship, and institutional life contribute to the development of a spiritually oriented and

socially cohesive community. Chapter 10 explores key teachings of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* that promote, foster and operationalize unity at the interpersonal, communal, and societal levels. This chapter provides an important analysis of the prohibitions on slavery and “uncleanness,” or ritual impurity—two revolutionary provisions within the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* without parallel in previous main Scriptures, including the *Bayán*. The authors present powerful arguments here that the explicit abolition of slavery in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* represents a definitive moral and legal break from the past and elevates the inherent dignity of the human being (348–350). Ghaemmaghami and Vafai also discuss that by abolishing the concept of ritual uncleanness—an idea prevalent in Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam—the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* dismantles the primary psychological and social obstacles to interreligious fellowship and global integration (344–346). The presence of such unprecedented provisions highlights why the Most Holy Book demands rigorous study by both students and scholars of religion, as it articulates a unique legislative and ethical paradigm designed to facilitate the transition to a unified world civilization.

Chapter 11 discusses the approach of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* to justice, including its moral principles, its administrative implications, and its vision for an ordered society governed by institutions dedicated to justice and welfare. Finally, Chapter 12 situates the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* within the

context of Bahá'u'lláh's proclamation to the kings and rulers of the world and contextualizes its summonses as the culmination of a process that began in Constantinople and Adrianople. The authors bring together, in a single study, all available historical information on the major proclamatory Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh—their chronology, circumstances of revelation, modes of delivery, and early dissemination. This chapter provides detailed evidence about their chronology and analyzes the thematic architecture of these Tablets.

EXECUTION AND ACHIEVEMENT

Ghaemmaghani and Vafai effectively achieve their declared goal. Their treatment is exhaustive, analytical, and interpretive. They strike a careful balance between academic rigor and devotional sensitivity, a balance that is not always achieved in the study of religious texts. Every chapter demonstrates the authors' mastery of both primary Bahá'í Texts and secondary scholarship in multiple languages. The clarity of their citations and the scrupulousness of their documentation exemplify a high standard of scholarship in Bahá'í textual studies.

The achievement of the authors lies not only in what they include but in how they organize and interpret it. Equally impressive is their engagement with the hermeneutic implications of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas. By emphasizing Bahá'u'lláh's fusion of law and spirituality, for instance, they implicitly address one of the central

questions in Bahá'í hermeneutics: how can divine law be both obligatory and liberating? Their answer—rooted in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's assertion that “His laws all grant liberation rather than restriction”—presents the Kitáb-i-Aqdas as a framework cultivating and empowering human capacities rather than a set of confining legal prescriptions (369–371). This interpretive stance renders their study relevant not only to researchers in Bahá'í studies but also to students of comparative religion and moral philosophy.

INTELLECTUAL MERIT

In addition to the many contributions already noted, this work catalogues every known reference, study, and commentary—Persian, Arabic, and Western—pertaining to the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, creating a bibliographic repository of remarkable depth and range, unmatched in scope within the existing field of Bahá'í studies.

Exploring the Kitáb-i-Aqdas lays the groundwork for future scholarship on this critical topic in Bahá'í studies. While the volume is exhaustive in its internal textual analysis, it naturally leaves room for further research that engages more deeply with external contexts. Scholars interested in placing the legal principles of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas in dialogue with broader theories of comparative law or postcolonial religious studies, or in exploring the socio-historical question of how the laws of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas have been practically applied by Bahá'í communities

since its revelation, will find this work invaluable.

More broadly, the book sets a benchmark for the academic study of Bahá'í scripture. The authors' methodology engages the full corpus of primary texts, manuscripts, and authoritative editions; is informed by careful integration of the relevant secondary scholarship; and is characterized by meticulous attention to language, terminology, and textual precision. This can serve as a model for future studies of other best-known works of the Central Figures of the Bahá'í Faith.

This book advances Bahá'í scholarship on several important fronts. Perhaps most notably, although a number of valuable introductory works on the Kitáb-i-Aqdas are available, this is the first published by a prominent academic press in the English-speaking world; as such, it is positioned to reach an audience beyond the Bahá'í community.

CONCLUSION

Exploring the Kitáb-i-Aqdas is likely to remain a primary introduction and study guide to Bahá'u'lláh's Most Holy Book for years to come. It is both the culmination of prior scholarship and the foundation for future enquiry. In scope and execution, it is a significant reference work that helps transform the study of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation from scattered commentary into systematic understanding.

By unveiling the historical circumstances of the revelation of the

Kitáb-i-Aqdas, the evolution of its manuscripts, its publication, circulation, and translation, the intricacies of its style and language, the philosophy and implications of its laws, and the nature and significance of its summonses, Ghaemmaghami and Vafai have done more than provide an introduction to the Kitáb-i-Aqdas; they have illuminated the intellectual and spiritual architecture of the Bahá'í Dispensation itself. Their book is a scholarly and devotional landmark; it is a testament to the increasing maturity of Bahá'í studies and an indispensable aid for those engaged in the serious study of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation.

Omid Ghaemmaghami and Shahin Vafai, *Exploring the Kitáb-i-Aqdas: The Laws and Teachings of the Bahá'í Faith*. London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2025.

ROSHAN DANESH

In 2003 Udo Schaefer, a preeminent scholar of Bahá'í law, commented in an article published in *The Journal of Law and Religion* that “it is remarkable” that, with only a few exceptions, the subject of Bahá'í law “has not yet been taken up in the generally much more abundant literature [on the Bahá'í Faith] published in English.” He further noted that he had no choice but to cite his own academic work in the article “for the simple reason that other relevant academic literature on this subject scarcely exists” (308).

Schaefer's seeming incredulity at the lack of scholarship on Bahá'í law is understandable given the central place of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas in the Bahá'í canon. The Kitáb-i-Aqdas, while many things at once, is also fundamentally a book of laws, intended to “build anew the whole world” (1) as the “Charter of the future world civilization” (1–2).

In the years since Schaefer's observations—which came eleven years after the release of the official English translation of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas in 1992—some growth in scholarship on Bahá'í law has taken

place.¹ It remains true, however, that the study of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, and its legal contents, does not hold a central place in the current culture or practice of Bahá'í studies.

In *Exploring the Kitáb-i-Aqdas: The Laws and Teachings of the Bahá'í Faith* Omid Ghaemmaghami and Shahin Vafai aim to help fill some of this gap. The authors undertake one of the most comprehensive studies of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas in English to date, setting out to describe “the Kitáb-i-Aqdas's overarching features and themes—its history and style; theological foundations; institutional, devotional, personal, and community provisions; teachings and perspectives on unity, justice, and law; and messages to political and religious leaders” (xviii).

Exploring the Kitáb-i-Aqdas achieves this ambitious and daunting goal. Students and scholars of the Bahá'í Faith, as well as the Bahá'í community generally, will benefit greatly from the depth of information and analysis provided by the authors, and their mastery of the subject-matter.

Structured in twelve chapters, the book's focus flows logically from the contextual to the textual. The first five chapters, which are more contextual in focus, are especially valuable. They address the history of the text (Chapter 1) and its language and style (Chapter 2),

1 For an overview of the development of English language scholarship on Bahá'í law see, Roshan Danesh, “Themes in the Study of Bahá'u'lláh's *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*: Emerging Approaches to Scholarship on Bahá'í Law.”

the core teachings of the Bahá'í Faith on theology (Chapter 3) and human nature and purpose (Chapter 4), and the Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh (Chapter 5). While many of these topics are directly discussed in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* itself, these chapters position that Book within the universe of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings and writings, while also referencing Islamic, Bábí, and other relevant influences and roots.

The *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* is a notoriously challenging text that is difficult to approach. One of the reasons for this is its dual character: it exists both within historical time, and, as revealed scripture, outside of it. The *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* is deeply embedded within and comments upon the cultural, social, and religious milieu within which it was revealed. At the same time, it is explicitly seeking to articulate Bahá'u'lláh's eternal and universal teachings, and the aspirational vision of a distant future. For many readers, this dual aspect of the text has an element of dissonance: we must struggle to identify clearly the connection between Bahá'u'lláh's references to the world He lived within and the world He says must be created.

Ghaemmaghami and Vafai thus do a tremendous service for readers in these early chapters by providing invaluable contextual information about the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*. Much of this information will be new for English readers, and certainly for those who are not students of Islam.

For example, discussion of the stylistic elements of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, including Bahá'u'lláh's Arabic, as well

as nonlinearity, the elliptical mode of legal expression, and various literary devices, will help readers gain insight into why Bahá'u'lláh may be stating a given point in a certain way, and appreciate the layers of meaning they may have to seek out (Chapter 2). Similarly, the extensive discussion of the Bahá'í concept of human nature provides a vital lens for the reader seeking to understand their own relationship to the laws in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* (Chapter 4). In this regard, the extensive discussion of the opening paragraph of the book and the "twin duties" to recognize Bahá'u'lláh and to "observe every ordinance" He revealed provides a guiding entry point for the reader into connecting the Bahá'í concept of human nature with the Bahá'í approach to law (142–56).

The remaining seven chapters are generally more textual in focus. Many of these chapters are more explicitly organized around paragraphs of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, and how those paragraphs may be categorized. Chapters 6–9 are structured around categories of laws, chapters 10 and 11 are structured around legal concepts or themes, and chapter 12 is focused on Bahá'u'lláh's messages to kings and rulers that are included in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*.

The strength of this part of the book is its comprehensive approach to the text: it seeks to account for the full contents of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*. This approach helps the reader find a path through the text, including by connecting those paragraphs that may initially appear disconnected in the unique and

challenging flow and structure of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas. For many readers, this part of the book will be an invaluable resource as they seek to deepen their reading and understanding of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas.

In places, the structure of these later chapters reflects some of the complexities and challenges involved in writing about the Kitáb-i-Aqdas. For example, while it makes sense to have chapters focused on “Personal Devotional Laws: Prayer, Fasting, and Other Practices” (Chapter 6) and “Laws Related to Personal Status and Death: Marriage, Divorce, Burial, and Inheritance” (Chapter 8), the organization of some other chapters is puzzling. Another example, is how the inclusion of consultation in Chapter 9 on “Community Laws: Education, Consultation, the Calendar, the Feast, and the Mashriqu'l-Adhkar” could be questioned: consultation applies to all facets of an individual's life, and not just as a “community” law. It is also unclear why other areas of law, such as those related to the administrative order or community safety, are not included in this category.

Similarly, the decision to have discrete chapters on chapters “Unity: Vision and Provisions” (Chapter 10) and “Justice and Law: Principles and Administration” (Chapter 11) could give the impression that the Bahá'í teachings of unity and justice are primarily related to the areas of law discussed in those chapters. This is a difficult assertion to maintain given the centrality of both unity and justice to

the Bahá'í teachings and worldview. Indeed, one could make a case that a chapter on unity should be the conceptual framing for *all* areas of Bahá'í law, and the Kitáb-i-Aqdas as whole, given the centrality of unity to Bahá'í theology, ontology and philosophy. Granted, the authors focus in Chapter 10 on the specific concept of the unity of “humankind”— but this then raises other questions, such as whether consultation, which is central to the creation and maintenance of social unity, should also be discussed in this chapter.

There are examples of other approaches to the categorization of the legal content of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas that may have been helpful to consider and draw on more explicitly, even if they were not ultimately followed. For example, the Universal House of Justice states:

As to the laws themselves, a careful scrutiny discloses that they govern three areas: the individual's relationship to God, physical and spiritual matters which benefit the individual directly, and relations among individuals and between the individual and society. They can be grouped under the following headings: prayer and fasting; laws of personal status governing marriage, divorce and inheritance; a range of other laws, ordinances and prohibitions, as well as exhortations; and the abrogation of specific laws and ordinances of previous Dispensations. (“Introduction” in Kitáb-i-Aqdas 4)

Scholars, such as Schaefer, have also presented categorizations of the legal content of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* that are more specific and detailed.

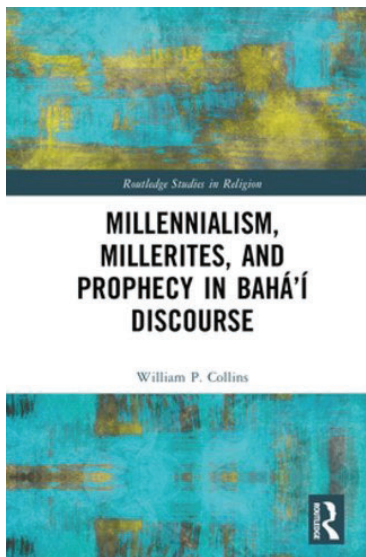
One area of exploration that would have benefited from an expanded discussion by the authors is the Bahá'í concept of law itself—a subject that has been the subject of some focus in the secondary literature. This literature has included debates, and concerns, about the dangers of taken-for-granted assumptions about what is meant by the term “law” in the Bahá'í conception, including a facile understanding of Bahá'í law as a set of rules.

While the authors do helpfully touch on a number of aspects of this discussion, it is also somewhat left aside as beyond the scope of their stated project. One result of this is that in some areas where a reader might perceive surface inconsistencies, tensions, or even explicit conflicts in Bahá'í law or teachings—such as those regarding gender equality, sexual orientation, or gender identity—not much new insight or ground is covered. Seeking to develop coherent understandings of these topics, and addressing the apparent dissonance that exists in Bahá'u'lláh's writings to discover ways in which the apparent tensions can be reconciled, is not possible without diving deeper into the Bahá'í concept of law itself. Nonetheless, *Exploring the Kitáb-i-Aqdas* strengthens the foundation of scholarship upon which future inquiries into these important questions can be built.

A last challenge with the book—which is no fault of the authors—is that like much academic literature on the Bahá'í Faith, *Exploring the Kitáb-i-Aqdas* will struggle, because of its cost, with being accessible. It would be a tremendous mistake if this important book does not find its way to being read, studied, and used by Bahá'í institutions, communities, and individuals. It is hoped that ways will be found to promote and disseminate this work so that the advances in Bahá'í scholarship it makes can be widely appreciated, understood, and built upon.

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Millennialism, Millerites, and Prophecy in Bahá'í Discourse. William P. Collins. London & New York: Routledge (Taylor & Francis), 2025. xxxiii + 261 pp. Hardback. ISBN 978-1032504032.

CALEB GILLELAND

William P. Collins's *Millennialism, Millerites, and Prophecy in Bahá'í Discourse* is an uncommonly rich and comprehensive study of how millennial expectation has shaped both the history of the Bahá'í Faith and the ways North American Bahá'ís have understood their place in a wider religious story. Collins has clearly spent decades thinking deeply about these questions, and this book shows it. He draws together materials that are rarely brought into the same conversation—Millerite Adventism (and its offshoots), Shia expectations of the Qa'im and Mahdi,

the Bábí upheaval, and the experience of the earliest Americans Bahá'ís—and manages to weave them into a coherent narrative without losing sight of the distinctiveness of each tradition. The result is a work that fills a long-standing gap in Bahá'í studies and offers one of the clearest explorations to date of how prophecy and millennialism function within a framework centered on progressive revelation.

One of the strengths of the book is its thoroughness. It soon becomes clear that Collins has read almost everything—nineteenth-century Protestant bible commentaries, early observers and participants of the Bábí movement, obscure Adventist pamphlets, and possibly every Bahá'í commentary on prophecy yet published—all while connecting it to the broad sweep of Bahá'í writings on prophecy and history. Crucially, readers who know only fragments of this story will immediately see how much insight the book offers by placing all these strands in conversation with each other. Even those already familiar with Bahá'í millennialist discourse will likely find sources and interpretive traditions here that they have never encountered before. It is in all probability the most complete map yet produced of how North American Bahá'ís have interpreted prophecy from the nineteenth century to the present.

The structure of the book helps make this wide field manageable. Collins begins by tracing the development of millennial themes in Christian and Islamic thought, moves through the

intense period of the Bábí movement, and then shows how early American Bahá'ís—especially those shaped by Protestant culture at the turn of the twentieth century—interpreted the new faith through prophetic frameworks that were familiar to them. By the time he turns to the postwar era and the twenty-first century, the reader can see how Bahá'í thought gradually shifts from short-term expectation to a much longer, more process-oriented view of history. Collins' distinction between catastrophic and progressive millennialisms is especially helpful here, giving the reader a clear lens through which to understand what changed and what remained constant for Bahá'ís across these different periods.

In fact, this distinction between catastrophic millennialism (the one that most non-specialists would best recognize) and the more gradual, world-building millennialism that characterizes the Bahá'í revelation is at the heart of Collins' analysis. Though the Bábí movement, with its heady revolutionary flavor, intense expectation, and open conflict with the Qajar religious establishment, understandably bears some of the features associated with millennialism of a more catastrophic nature, Collins does a careful job tracing how those early energies are reinterpreted and redirected by Bahá'u'lláh, who rejects militancy and places the emphasis instead on long-term transformation, institution-building, and social renewal amid the backdrop of a disintegrating, yet increasingly global society. This framework—catastrophic

versus progressive—provides readers with a clear conceptual lens that underpins many of the book's later chapters, and it helps set the Bahá'í experience in a broader conversation with the varieties of millennial thought.

His treatment of the transition from the Bábí movement to the Bahá'í Faith is especially strong. Collins shows how deeply the Báb drew on Shia apocalyptic themes, and how those themes shaped the expectations of early Bábís who saw themselves living on the threshold of dramatic divine intervention. But as Collins makes clear, the shift from the Báb's short-lived, revolutionary dispensation to Bahá'u'lláh's longer and more expansive vision is not a simple break. Instead, it involves a reinterpretation of familiar concepts—resurrection, the Day of Judgment, divine justice—in ways that preserve their spiritual force while disentangling them from expectations of imminent political upheaval and armed conflict. Collins explicates this section with nuance, and readers will come away with a more precise sense of how Bahá'í millennialism grew from the soil of, and yet decisively transcended, its Shia and Bábí inheritance.

The chapters dealing with the American Bahá'í community are among the most vivid in the book. Collins traces how early American believers, coming almost entirely from Protestant backgrounds, instinctively read the new faith through familiar prophetic frameworks. Figures such as Ibrahim Kheiralla, Thornton Chase, as well as later interpreters like William

Sears helped connect Bahá'í claims to the Adventist excitement of the 1840s, especially the Millerite movement. Collins' account shows how these efforts shaped early teaching work in the United States and contributed to a shared narrative that linked the year 1844 with both the Báb's declaration and the high point of American prophetic expectation. These chapters help explain why certain styles of prophecy interpretation came to have such a lasting presence in North American Bahá'í culture, even as the community gradually moved toward a more process-oriented understanding of millennial themes.

One area where I think the book would have benefited from a wider comparative frame is in its discussion of other religious movements that embrace a form of progressive millennialism. The most natural comparison is the Latter-Day Saint tradition, which Collins himself has analyzed in a 1990 research note in this journal.¹ Although the Bábí movement emerged out of a very different religious and cultural world, both it and the early Latter-Day Saint movement took shape during a period of intense millennial expectation in the mid-nineteenth century. In the American context, the Latter-Day Saints developed around the same "burned-over district" in upstate New York that helped shape William Miller

and early Adventism, both taking energy from an environment where apocalyptic imagination and new religious claims were taken very seriously. Interestingly, even the year 1844 carries significance for Mormons (albeit for different reasons than Adventists and Bahá'ís) as it marks the martyrdom of Joseph and Hyrum Smith just weeks after the Báb's declaration in Shiraz. These parallels in timing, general atmosphere, and millennial expectation make the comparison especially suggestive.

A short reflection on these parallels would have strengthened Collins's distinction between catastrophic and progressive millennialisms and would have highlighted what is distinctive about the Bahá'í trajectory. The Latter-Day Saint tradition and the Bahá'í Faith share several structural features: new scripture, a self-conscious sense of continuing sacred history, an emphasis on communal discipline and ethics, and a gradual shift from revolutionary energy to sustained development and organized expansion. Contrasts, real or imagined, between these two millennialist movements could provide even greater clarity about the positionality of the Bahá'í revelation and community. That said, Collins's analysis provides more than enough material for future work in this direction, and the absence of such a comparison does nothing to diminish the value of the study as a whole.

Another theme that could have been developed further is Collins's suggestion that Bahá'í millennial

1 See William Collins, "Mormonism or the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-day Saints." *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies*, vol. 3, no. 2, 1990, doi: 10.31581/jbs-3.2.6(1990).

expectations become “self-fulfilling” through the actions of the community itself. This insight, which appears most clearly in the final chapters, is one of the book’s most promising theoretical contributions. It captures something essential about the Bahá’í understanding of history: that millennial promises are not simply predictions to be awaited, but goals toward which the community actively works. Collins notes this dynamic, but he does not pursue it in detail, and readers may wish for a fuller engagement with the wider sociological literature on how religious movements translate long-term eschatological visions into sustained patterns of practice. Even so, the idea is compelling, and Collins’s framing provides a strong foundation for future studies of how Bahá’í millennialism functions not just as belief, but as an engine of social action.

Lastly, there is an area where I found myself wanting just a bit more detail. Collins’s discussion of prophetic fulfillment—especially Bahá’u’lláh’s statements concerning Napoleon III and the trajectory of the German Empire—is excellent, but these examples were more illustrative of the general theme than trying to be comprehensive. Given the thoroughness of his treatment of most other aspects of prophecy in the Bahá’í Faith, further reflection on Baha’u’llah’s prophecies regarding the future of the Ottoman Empire, Queen Victoria, or even the slow unraveling of the Qajar state and its historical reception would have been a welcome addition.

What emerges from Collins’ study is a portrait of the Bahá’í Faith that is deeply shaped by millennial expectation, but not in the way that term is often used in religious studies. Collins shows that, in the main, Bahá’í millennialism is not constructed around a single dramatic event or around anxieties about the end of the world. Instead, it reflects a broad-based understanding of history in which divine guidance unfolds gradually and invites human participation. By situating the Bahá’í narrative alongside the Bábí upheaval and the currents of Millerite Adventism, Collins helps readers see how these different streams converge and then take on a new, distinctly Bahá’í form within the North American context. The result is a clearer picture of how Bahá’ís in this region have reconciled belief in a seemingly “foreign” religion while still carrying forward many of the narratives, assumptions, and occasionally the biases of the Protestant milieu in which the community first took shape.

The shift from focusing on the fulfillment (or not) of particular prophetic events to understanding sacred history as more of a divinely guided process is one of the book’s most compelling themes, and Collins explicates it with both clarity and precision. He demonstrates how early Bahá’ís—especially in North America—gravitated toward specific dates and proofs, yet gradually adopted a broader, more process-oriented vision of spiritual and social change. This trajectory mirrors the evolution of Bahá’í community life itself, which has steadily moved toward

patterns of learning, service, and institution-building. Collins captures this movement without either nostalgia or defensiveness, offering an account that should be helpful not only to scholars of millennialism and comparative eschatology, but also to Bahá'ís interested in how their own interpretive habits have developed over time.

For all its breadth and attention to detail, *Millennialism, Millerites, and Prophecy in Bahá'í Discourse* remains a remarkably coherent and engaging study, offering a perspective on Bahá'í millennialism that is historically informed while remaining theologically sensitive. Collins has drawn together sources and conversations that are rarely placed side by side in either academic or popular settings, and done so in a way that clarifies how Bahá'ís have understood prophecy, history, and their own emerging community. Even where readers may wish for further comparative or theoretical development of the ideas presented in this work, Collins has opened paths for exactly this kind of future scholarship. It is a significant contribution to Bahá'í studies and to the wider study of millennial movements, and it will remain a valuable reference point for anyone interested in how religious communities navigate the tension between expectation and unfolding historical reality.

Biographical Notes

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The Journal of Bahá'í Studies

From the Editor's Desk

Michael Sabet

Bahá'í-Inspired Educational Endeavors and Social Justice

Ilya Zrudlo and Ashraf Rushdy

Expanding on a Bahá'í-inspired Pedagogy
of Social Transformation

Ymasumac Marañón Davis and Justin Scoggin

Interdisciplinarity, Connectivity, and Capability:

An Exploration in the Context of Social Change

Felicity Rawlings-Sanaei

BOOK REVIEWS

Exploring the Kitáb-i-Aqdas: The Laws and Teachings of the

Bahá'í Faith, by Omid Ghaemmaghami and Shahin Vafai

Vargha Bolodo-Taefi

Roshan Danesh

Millennialism, Millerites, and Prophecy in Bahá'í Discourse,

by William P. Collins

Caleb Gilleland

POEMS

Some Seeds

Psalm for Mirza Mihdi

Terry Ofner

COVER

Days of Future Past

Masud Olufani