

Toward a Framework for Action

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Toward a Framework for Action1

visant à encourager les jeunes croyants à s'engager dans l'étude de la Révélation et à réaliser des travaux académiques y faisant référence, à stimuler chez les amis leur capacité de mettre en corrélation les enseignements bahá'ís et le discours sur les enjeux contemporains, ainsi qu'à offrir aux universitaires bahá'ís une tribune pour y présenter leurs travaux et collaborer entre eux. Une lettre datée du 24 juillet 2013

For nearly four decades, the Association universelle de Bahá'í Studies in North America has labored to promote Bahá'í scholarly activity through a range of efforts that include encouraging young believers in their study of the Revelation and their academic pursuits, fostering approaches to assist the friends in correlating the teachings with issues arising in contemporary thought, and providing a forum for Bahá'í academics to present their work and collaborate with one another. A letter dated 24 July 2013, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of Canada, set forth fresh insights to assist the Association in reflecting on its progress to

écrite au nom de la Maison justice et adressée à nationale du Canada nouvelles visant à aider pencher sur les progrès ses perspectives d'avenir et sur la « notion d'un cadre lutif ». L'auteur présente personnelles à ce sujet.

Resumen

Por casi cuatro décadas, la Asociación de Estudios Bahá'ís en Norte laborado para promover Bahá'í a través de un rango que incluyen animar a creyentes

jóvenes en

date and its prospects for the future, cen-
en sus intere-

tered around developing the "notion of an
enfoques para

evolving conceptual framework." The fol-
correlacionar las

lowing are some personal thoughts about
del pens-

the nature of such a framework and what
proveyendo un

some of its elements might be.
bahá'ís donde

pueden presentar su trabajo y colaborar
Résumé

carta con fecha
Pendant près de quarante ans, l'Associ-

escrita de parte de
ation d'études bahá'íes en Amérique du

Justicia para la Asam-
Nord a cherché à promouvoir l'érudition

Canadá, expu-
bahá'íe par la tenue d'activités diverses

a la Asociación
reflexionar sobre su progreso hasta la fe-

1 This article is based on the plenary
futuro, centra-

talk by the same title presented at the 38th
la "noción

Annual Conference of the Association for
evolución". Los

Bahá'í Studies, Toronto, Ontario, August
pensamien-

2014.
12

THE CONCEPT OF A FRAMEWORK
community members sometimes ig-

At the start of his ministry, Shoghi
it

Effendi focused the attention of the
preferences.

friends on the importance of building
particu-

the administrative order. For some,
might

at that time, the very notion that the

su estudio de la Revelación y

ses académicos, fomentando

asistir a los amigos en

enseñanzas con temas que nacen

amiento contemporaneo, y

foro para los académicos

los unos con los otros. Una

del 24 de julio de 2013,

la Casa Universal de

blea Espiritual Nacional de

so nuevas ideas para ayudar

cha y sus prospectos para el

do alrededor del desarrollo de

de un marco conceptual en

siguientes puntos son algunos

tos personales sobre este tema.

The Journal of Bahá'í Studies 28.3 2018

or impose personal perspectives, and

nored the Assembly's decision when

did not conform to their

At other times, in response to

lar issues that arose, the friends

have set aside the guidance provided

Bahá'í Faith could be organized—in-
sides
stead of merely being a movement or
a reflection of the spirit of the age—
arose,
was a challenge. A few consciously
resisted the administration, eventually
unity,
falling away or opposing the Faith.
However, even the generality of the
indicated that
faithful believers, who accepted with-
rested
out question Shoghi Effendi's guid-
principles
ance, naturally struggled at this early
written
stage to understand and appropriately
apply the teachings concerning the
administration. Among the issues
that challenged them were the rela-
tionships between the Assemblies and
have
individuals, between the National and
within the framework of the Ad-
Local Assemblies, and between the
ministrative Order. Either they
National Assembly and the National
crystallize it into too set a form,
Convention. The Bahá'í electoral pro-
cess needed to be conceived, grasped,
and translated into an effective pattern
of action. Understanding the nature
and method of Bahá'í consultation ef-
and the importance of upholding the
in
decision of the Assembly, even when
that decision was wrong, or at least
when perceived by some to be wrong,
presented additional challenges.
It can be inferred from guidance
provided by Shoghi Effendi that on
introduced
occasion, owing to a lack of under-
standing or experience, a member of frame-

in the Writings and simply taken
and argued. Again and again, when
these and similar challenges
Shoghi Effendi reminded the believ-
ers of the importance of their
which was grounded in their common
love for Bahá'u'lláh, and
the resolution of their problems
on putting into practice the
of the administration. A letter
written
on behalf of Shoghi Effendi states:
One of the main reasons why
the Faith does not advance more
rapidly is because the friends
not learned to live with, and work
or they rebel against what they
feel to be a System, and do not
give it sufficient support. Both
of these extremes impede the
progress of the Faith, and the
inefficiency of the believers. (qtd.
Hornby 185)
In order to overcome the dichoto-
my of reducing the administration to
a rigid set of procedures or rejecting
it outright, Shoghi Effendi
the concept of a framework.² This
2 Shoghi Effendi used the word

an institution might have used his or her position to achieve personal aims basic

Toward a Framework for Action

concept is useful because the nature of for the Bahá'í efforts for administration are is too too big, too broad, and too organic to way; rather, crystallize it into a fixed form, but the able to system is essential and cannot be set translate the aside. The concept of a framework allows for evolution in understanding as the set of ideas within the framework, large- as well as how they are perceived, began change over time based on experience (1953– and circumstances. Thus, what Shoghi Effendi originally said about Bahá'í administration was elaborated over the sustain and course of his ministry, and more has systematic balance been added since the establishment of the Universal House of Justice. Some consolidation, concepts and practices of the administration are permanent, some are temporary, and some are contextual. Even Year principles—which are unchanging—these efforts may be applied differently in different circumstances or at different times. In

work in relation to the both in terms of its meaning as the

13

understood as a particular lens study of the Revelation, which vast to be restricted in this er, it is a construct for being focus on learning how to Bahá'í teachings into action ticular area. For example, the process of scale expansion of the Faith during the Ten Year Crusade (1963) in the final years of the Shoghi Effendi. However, for forty years, the ability to extend the process on a sis, maintaining the necessary between expansion and remained elusive. To resolve lem, the Universal House of forth the provisions of the Four Plan (1996–2000).³ As ³ "At Ridván 1996, the

Bahá'ís of the world will embark on a global enterprise aimed at one major accomplishment: a significant advance in the process of entry by troops. This is to be achieved through marked progress in the activity of His Administrative Order has opment of the individual and devel- opment of the individual been erected" [World Order 168]) and as believer, of the institutions, and of the local the conceptual structure underlying the community. That an advance in this process administrative system (for example, "One depends on the progress of all three of these inti- mately connected participants is not advance more rapidly is because the abundant- ly clear. The next four years friends have not learned to live with, and must witness a dramatic upsurge in effective work within the framework of the Admin- teaching activities undertaken at the istrative Order," which is "a system both the individual. Thousands upon thousands living and dynamic" that requires "obedi- of believers will need to be ence to its principles and regulations" so aided to ex- press the vitality of their as to "be able to direct their energies as a faith through constancy in teaching the Cause united force into the different channels of and by supporting the plans of their service that lie open to them" [Light of institutions and the endeavors of their Divine Guidance 1:185–86]). communities.

14 The Journal of Bahá'í Studies 28.3 2018

continued to evolve within the Five of entry by troops, it has become increasingly clear that the Year Plan (2001–2006), it was helpful close of the present Five Year Plan to begin to conceive of a framework will mark a decisive moment in for action pertaining to the work of growth and community-building, the unfolding of the

historical
 which has gradually evolved in complexity through experience to guide the work of the series of Five Year required
 Plans through the end of the first century of the Formative Age. As the world
 Universal House of Justice explains: Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation have crystallized into
 Over the past four and a half years, as the believers throughout (Turn-
 the world have striven to pursue the aim of advancing the process
 There is no need here to provide They should be helped to realize that their efforts will be sustained by the degree to which their inner life and private character messages
 'mirror forth in their manifold aspects the 1996 and
 splendor of those eternal principles proclaimed by Bahá'u'lláh.' An acceleration in the tempo of individual teaching must necessarily be complemented by a multiplication in the number of regional and local teaching projects. To this end the 2012, the
 institutions should be assisted in increasing their ability to consult according to Bahá'í principles, to unify the friends in a common vision, and to use their talents in higher service to the Cause. Furthermore, those who enter the Faith must be integrated

enterprise on which the community of the Greatest Name is embarked. The elements
 for a concerted effort to
 the diverse regions of the
 with the spirit of
 a framework for action that now needs only to be exploited.
 ing Point 35:2)
 an overview of the elements of
 framework, which have been set
 and elaborated in numerous
 of the House of Justice since
 with which the community is
 ly familiar. However, another
 ple can be found in the
 Bahá'ís over some three
 field of social and economic
 ment. In a paper published in
 Office of Social and Economic
 opment writes:
 Achieving progressively
 degrees of coherence both
 in and among the broad inter-

into vibrant local communities, characterized by tolerance and love and guided by a strong sense of purpose and collective concern. It will, environments in which the capacities of all components—men, women, youth and children—are developed and their powers multiplied in unified action" (Universal House of Justice, Messages 213:2).
Toward a Framework for Action

connected fields of endeavour which the Bahá'í community engaged is clearly a vital suggests that areas of to be complementary, and mutually supportive. ther, it implies the existence common, overarching framework
15

that gives shape to activities and which evolves and becomes more elaborate as experience accumulates. The expression of the diverse elements of the framework will not, of course, be uniform in all spheres of action. In relation to any given area of activity, some elements move to the fore, while others act only in the background ...
Among the elements most relevant to social action are statements that define the character of progress—that civilization has con-
both a material and a spiritual dimension, that humanity is on the threshold of its collective maturity, that there are destructive and constructive forces operating in the world which serve to propel humanity along the path towards its full maturity, that the relationships necessary to sustain society must be recast in the light of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation, that the transformation required must occur simultaneously within human consciousness and the structure

appropriate technology to social progress are among the issues involved. Views related to the generation and application of knowledge have implications not only for the nature of development but also for the question of methodology. . . . [Y]et another set of elements of the framework [are] . . . those statements that analyze concepts such as individualism, power, authority, personal comfort, selfless service, work, and excellence.

Finally, at the heart of the conceptual framework for social action lie elements that describe beliefs about fundamental issues of existence, such as the nature of the human being, the purpose of life, the oneness of humanity, and the equality of men and women. While for Bahá'ís these touch on immutable convictions, they are not static—the way in which they are understood and find expression in various contexts evolves over time. ("Social Action" 3–4)

of social institutions. . . . Other elements that speak to the nature of social action are derived from a particular perspective on the role of knowledge in the development of society. The complementarity of science and religion, the imperative of spiritual and material education, the influence of values inherent to technology on the organization of society, and the relevance of

16

The Journal of Bahá'í Studies 28.3 2018

It is evident, from these examples, 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. The Universal House of Justice addresses this concept of a framework in relation to the

work of the Association for Bahá'í Studies and calls for a continuing clarification of its elements in its letter of

course, that it July 24, 2013, to the National Assem-

the bly of Canada:

of expansion and consolidation drew

Every believer has the opportunity to examine the forces operating in society and introduce

Bahá'í relevant aspects of the teachings the within the discourses prevalent in

now. whatever social space he or she is present. It is, perhaps, as a means to enhance the abilities of the

the friends to explore such opportunities in relation to their scholarly

many of them are immediately relevant to interests that the endeavours of such considerations. And it is not the

the Association for Bahá'í Studies purpose of this discussion to provide can be conceived. Through the

This is not to say, of

is necessary to restart such

ations about the work of the

ation from the beginning. Just as

framework pertaining to the work

upon insights and experience that

dated the Four Year Plan, there is a significant legacy pertaining to

scholarly activity and the work of

Association from the 1970s until

Many thoughtful books, articles, and presentations have been prepared by believers intensely concerned with

intellectual life of the community

the course of these decades, and

an extensive exploration of such is-
specialized settings it creates, the
sues but rather simply to touch upon
Association can promote learning
a few concepts specifically mentioned
among a wide range of believers
in the letter from the House of Justice
across a wide range of disci-
relevant

plines. Central to the effort to ad-
vance the work of expansion and
consolidation, social action, and
of the

the involvement in the discours-
es of society is the notion of an
evolving conceptual framework,
a matrix that organizes thought
and gives shape to activities and
which becomes more elaborate as
experience accumulates. It would
be fruitful if the elements of
this framework most relevant to
few

the work of the Associations for
Bahá'í Studies can be consciously
intellectu-
and progressively clarified. (let-
import-

ter dated 24 July 2013)

Because they are addressed at some
Toward a Framework for Action

length elsewhere, only a brief mention
knowledge.

is made here.⁴

consider the

First, as in the other areas of en-
involving

deavor in which the Bahá'í communi-
methods

ty is engaged, learning—an ongoing
systematized

process involving study, consultation,
with-

action, and reflection—is a critical

The Univer-

component of a framework for action

that contribute to clarifying

aspects of a framework that can help
shape the efforts of the Association
in fostering the intellectual life

Bahá'í community. Furthermore, the
ideas offered here are the personal
opinions of one individual.

LEARNING AND THE VITAL CONTRIBUTION OF LEARNED INDIVIDUALS

Before examining at some length a

concepts that come to the fore when
considering progress in the

al life of the community, two

ant points must be mentioned first.

17

and the generation of

Therefore, it is useful to

extent to which this work,

potentially a wide range of

and approaches, can be

among groups of individuals or

in the Association itself.

sal House of Justice raises a

number
pertaining to the work of the Association for Bahá'í Studies in order to gradually but systematically grow in the ability to cultivate the intellectual life of the community and the capacity of succeeding generations of young believers to participate in this process. "Perhaps the most important" of those elements of a framework most relevant to the work of the Association for Bahá'í Studies "is learning in action," the House of Justice explains. In this way, "the friends participate in an ongoing process of action, reflection, study, and consultation in order to assist individuals address obstacles and share successes, re-examine and revise strategies and methods, and systematize and improve discourse efforts over time" (letter dated 24 July 2013).
Much scholarly work is, of course, an individual enterprise. But even in such instances, the aim is not the mere expression of personal opinions. There is also an explicitly col-

of possibilities as starting inquiry:
As unity of thought essential concepts emerges, Association may find it explore fresh approaches some simple steps that can in complexity. Gradually, aspects of the conceptual work pertaining to inquiry in diverse fields come clearer and grow example, a number of small inars could be held to individuals from certain or academic disciplines to ine some aspect of the of their field. Specific be selected, and a group of ticipants with experience could share articles, prepare consult on contemporary tives and related Bahá'í Special interest groups,

such as

lective dimension to such endeavor, in studies,

which individuals collaborate in the intensi-

exchange of views for the investiga- commu-

tion of reality, the search for truth, meetings

could be arranged to increase the

4 See Paul Lample, *Revelation and So-* participation

cial Reality: Learning How to Translate What of these groups of individuals in

Is Written into Reality and Action, chapter 4. aspects of the discourse in their

18 The Journal of Bahá'í Studies 28.3 2018

chosen fields. Focus could also be directed toward those areas in the academic literature pertaining to the Faith that are ignored or dealt with in a misleading or problematic manner. In addition, existing activities, such as the such

hosting of a large conference, may be reimaged. Of course, the

continued exertions must be directed toward preparing and disseminating articles, periodicals, and books. (letter dated 24 July 2013)

of study, whether through rigorous

Second, the Bahá'í Writings are quite explicit in describing the importance as

of the mind, the acquisition of theol-

knowledge, and the contribution that These

learned individuals, with expertise course,

in diverse fields of human endeavor, will need to make toward achieving the aims of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation.

philosophy or religious

could have gatherings to

fy their efforts. Periodic

nications or follow-up

effectiveness of the

of these groups of

aspects of the discourse in

to—and endorse the efforts of—exponents of the arts and sciences, and to esteem and revere those who are possessed of extensive knowledge and scholarly erudition" (qtd. in *Compilation* 348). He envisioned that the friends in fields of human inquiry,

as economics and education, would have to learn over time to translate

teachings into constructive action for the betterment of the world.⁵ Contributions can be made in all disciplines of human endeavor, including, but not limited to, the Faith as an object

examination of the Texts or through closely associated disciplines such

translation, history, philosophy,

ogy, or Middle Eastern studies.

contributions will include, of

rigorous and thoughtful scholarship of a high standard in an academic sense, although such efforts,

owing to

'Abdu'l-Bahá explains:
skill,

will not involve all. In general, how-

There are certain pillars which
have been established as the un-
shakeable supports of the Faith
of God. The mightiest of these is
learning and the use of the mind,
the expansion of consciousness,
and insight into the realities
Compi-

of the universe and the hidden

A letter

mysteries of Almighty God. To
dated

promote knowledge is thus an in-
know

escapable duty imposed on every
Manifesta-

one of the friends of God. (Selec-
destined

tions 126)

themselves

through the instrumentality of His follow-

Shoghi Effendi urges the friends "to
hu-

accord honor, veneration and respect

Toward a Framework for Action

The Cause needs more Bahá'í
scholars, people who not only are
devoted to it and believe in it and
are anxious to tell others about it,
but also who have a deep grasp
of the Teachings and their signif-
icance, and who can correlate its
beliefs with the current thoughts
and problems of the people of the
world.

The Cause has the remedy for
all the world's ills. The reason
why more people don't accept it is
because the Bahá'ís are not always
capable of presenting it to them
in a way that meets the immedi-
ate needs of their minds. (qtd. in

a degree of specialization and

ever, Shoghi Effendi sets forth a wide
definition for such scholarly endeav-
or, emphasizing the sense in which
Bahá'ís are engaged with the world:

5 See "Economics" in *The Light of
Guidance*, p. 626 and "Education" in

Compilation of Compilations, vol. 1, p. 35.

written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi

29 November 1938 states: "as we all

that the powers released by the

tion of Bahá'u'lláh in this day are

in the course of time to reveal

ers, and in every conceivable field of

man endeavour."

19

will be some Bahá'ís who will wish
to work in isolation, while others
will desire consultation and col-
laboration with those having sim-
ilar interests. Your aim should be
to promote an atmosphere of mu-
tual respect and tolerance within
which will be included scholars
whose principal interest is in

theological issues as well as those

scholars whose interests lie in re-
lating the insights provided by the
Bahá'í teachings to contemporary
thought in the arts and sciences.

A similar diversity should char-
acterize the endeavors pursued by
Bahá'í scholars, accommodating

Compilation 431)

their interests and skills as well

as the needs of the Faith. The

To this conception, a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice adds:

work all tend to highlight attrac-

At this early stage in the development of the Faith, it would not be useful to propound a highly restrictive definition of the term "Bahá'í scholarship". In a letter written on behalf of the House of Justice to one of the Associations for Bahá'í Studies recently, it is stated that:

The House of Justice advises you not to attempt to define too narrowly the form that Bahá'í scholarship should take, or the approach that scholars should adopt. Rather should you strive to develop within your Association respect for a wide range of approaches and endeavors. No doubt there

The Journal of Bahá'í Studies 28.3 2018

without, whose aim will be to malign and misrepresent its principles, so that its admirers might be

to disillusioned and the faith of its adherents might be shaken; Bahá'í written

scholars have a vital role to play in the defence of the Faith through their contribution to anticipatory measures and their response to defamatory accusations levelled against the Faith.

Thus, there should be room within the scope of Bahá'í scholarship to accommodate not only those who are interested in theological issues and in the historical origins of the Faith, but also those who are interested in relating the Bahá'í teachings to their

course of world events, the development of new trends of thought and the extension of the teaching

tive and beneficial areas to which Bahá'í scholars might well direct their attention. Likewise, the expansion of the activities of the Bahá'í International Community in its relationship with United Nations agencies and other international bodies creates attractive opportunities for scholars to make

a direct and highly valued contribution to the enhancement of the prestige of the Faith and to its proclamation within an influential and receptive stratum of society. As the Bahá'í community continues to emerge inexorably from obscurity, it will be confronted by enemies, from both within and

for investigating reality, are matters examined in some detail in the Bahá'í Writings. If thoughtful Bahá'ís are

carry out adequately their responsibility to translate what has been

by Bahá'u'lláh into practical and effective action to achieve His purpose, there must be a way to achieve unity of thought within the community on many issues so that the friends are not

pulled in contradictory directions by claims from the diverse fields of human endeavor about what is true or what must be done.

The idiosyncracies of human thought and the understanding of reality are explored by journalist Will Storr in his book *The Unpersuadables: Conversations with the Enemies of*

Sci-
field of academic or professional
interest, as well as those believers
who may lack formal academ-
ic qualifications but who have,
through their perceptive study of
the teachings, acquired insights
which are of interest to others.
(letter dated 19 October 1993)

THE NATURE OF THE QUEST FOR KNOWLEDGE

correct ones. And yet, I have nev-
"One of the critical aspects of a con-
ceptual framework that will require
careful attention in the years ahead,"
the House of Justice indicated with
regard to the work of the Association,
"is the generation and application of
knowledge" (letter dated 24 July 2013).
The human capacity to know—including
both powers and limitations—as
well as the importance and means
Toward a Framework for Action

thought that is unique among hu-
who
mans. Okay, fine. So I accept that
I am wrong about things—I must
be wrong about them. A lot of
them. But when I look back over
my shoulder and I double-check
what I think about religion and
them-
politics and science and all the rest
of
of it . . . well, I know I am right
about that . . . and that . . . and that
and that and—it is usually at this
point that I start to feel strange.
I know that I am not right about
everything, and yet I am simulta-
neously convinced that I am. . . .
the

And I think it is true to say that
it is not just me—that is, we all
concern
secretly believe we are right about

ence, which contains interviews with
individuals who are immersed in worl-
dviews that appear to stand in sharp
contrast to scientific truth. Storr ob-
serves the tendency of human beings
to construct a particular view of real-
ity and then cling tenaciously to that
view despite evidence to the contrary.

I consider—as everyone surely
does—that my opinions are the

er met anyone whose every single
thought I agree with. When you
take these two positions togeth-
er, they become a way of saying,
'Nobody is as right about as many
things as me.' And that cannot be
true. Because to accept that would
be to confer upon myself a God-
like status. It would mean that I
possess a superpower: a clarity of
21

rationalists: celebrity atheists

have written bestselling books
and sponsored anti-God advertis-
ing on the sides of London buses;
groups of self-declared 'Skeptics'
who toured sold-out concert ven-
ues like rock stars, defining

selves in opposition to the kind
anti-scientific thinking that they
declared dangerous. Every one of
these people, convinced they are
right. None of them convincing
the other. (7–8)⁶

⁶ The problem and limitations of

human capacity to know and describe
reality is, of course, a central
of philosophy, especially

contemporary
 everything and, by extension, we
 mind.
 are all wrong. . . .
 Nowhere,
 I have watched as these per-
 sonal battles have manifested
 concludes
 in the wider world. The decade
 resolve the
 of terrorism we have just lived
 subjective
 through had its roots, of course,
 we
 in mismatched beliefs that are
 of us
 both political and religious. Those
 for ob-
 same years saw what has the ap-
 knowledge
 pearance of an increasing suspi-
 fragmentary,
 cion of science. The white-coated
 since
 priests of the laboratory, to whom
 escape the
 we have granted custody of the
 short-lived
 truth for so long, are seemingly
 best
 being treated with growing lev-
 Third, the
 els of doubt. We don't trust the
 we
 MMR jab, we don't trust climate
 aside
 data, we don't trust genetically
 technology—is
 modified wheat or 'conventional'
 probably
 medicine or supermarket-bought
 of.
 beef. One response has been the
 and
 cultural rise of the radicalized
 does

discussions on the philosophy of
 For example, in *The View from*
 the philosopher Thomas Nagel explores
 the question of knowledge and
 that human beings cannot fully
 tension between objective and
 understanding. He observes: "First,
 are finite beings, and even if each
 possesses a large dormant capacity
 jective self-transcendence, our
 of the world will always be
 however much we extend it. Second,
 the objective self, though it can
 human perspective, is still as
 as we are, we must assume that its
 efforts will soon be superseded.
 understanding of the world of which
 are intrinsically capable—leaving
 limitations of time and
 also likely limited. . . . [R]eality
 extends beyond what we can conceive
 Finally, the development of richer
 more powerful objective hypotheses

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Storr finds that the tendency to hold to a fixed view—considering oneself to be right and others wrong—is not only a characteristic of those maintaining unscientific or irrational views, but also of those who claim to be the champions of rationality. As he notes, such inflexible attitudes are becoming prevalent in the discourse within contemporary society. In the United States, as an example, there is a hardening of viewpoints evident in areas such as media and politics, resulting in polarization and dismissiveness that make it almost impossible to carry out a constructive dialogue on concerns vital to social order and well-being—that is, the attempt to understand reality in the face of differing views in order to find consensus in a search for solutions to humanity's problems. Increasingly in today's world, civility has diminished, absorbing Arrogance is mistaken for leadership, and Self-righteousness supplants righteousness. Hypocrisy abounds. And

It should come as no surprise to Bahá'ís that the disintegration of the old world order described so vividly by Shoghi Effendi consists, to a large extent, in an inability to find agreement about the way things are and about what should be done. "Though the world is encompassed with misery and distress, yet no man hath paused to reflect what the cause or source of that may be," states. "No two men can be found who may be said to be outwardly inwardly united. The evidences of discord and malice are apparent everywhere, though all were made for harmony and union" (Gleanings 112:1). The question, then, becomes how we to resist such forces and not prey to the all too human tendency to insist that one's personal view is correct and take sides and out? And how can we avoid ourselves from the wider society tendencies and habits that stand in marked contrast to the principles and methods

identified
 there is insistence on the correctness of one's views even when they fly in the face of objective evidence. Indeed, in some quarters there is a systematic effort to undermine science, diminish education, or exercise power to bend the perception of reality to serve a basic or particular agenda. "Every one of these systematic people, convinced they are right," as Storr states. "None of them convincing the other" (8).

in the Bahá'í teachings for the search for truth, the investigation of the attainment of unity of and action, and the constructive lution of the ills of humanity? As Bahá'ís, we study the of Bahá'u'lláh—whether at a perhaps at a profound and level—and we strive to teachings and His purpose for ty. In coming to grips with the nature of the limitations of the human mind, nothing to rule out the known and unknown skeptical possibilities which are the other aspect of any realist view" (86).

Toward a Framework for Action

and what Bahá'u'lláh intends—even if at the moment we do not see what that difference might be. And although we strive to understand more, some gap will always remain; the entire dispensation will be the collective effort of the believers and humanity in general to understand more accurately and more deeply what Bahá'u'lláh said and to translate it ever more effectively into action. Humility is necessary,

however, we would have to that there must be some tween what we personally own understanding of the are correct and thus, those of are wrong. Yet the Writings are with advice and admonitions that remind us of the limitations of the and the attitudes that must prevail the search for truth.

The Great Being saith: Human utterance is an essence which aspireth to exert its influence

then, to acknowledge this fundamental gap when sharing personal understanding about the meaning of the teachings and the admonishments and safeguards set forth by Bahá'u'lláh, mod-

'Abdu'l-Bahá, and Shoghi Effendi that preserve their integrity and prevent any individual from imposing personal interpretations upon the community. 198)

For example, as a result of what individual believers personally understand Bahá'u'lláh's teachings to mean, or

a community may move beyond disagreement and diversity of views to fall into disunity and contention. As noted above, Shoghi Effendi observed the tendency of the friends either to crystallize the administration into a set form or else to rebel against it and fail to give it sufficient support. Some both

years ago, tensions arose among some concerning the categorization of believers as liberals or fundamentalists, despite the Guardian's explicit prohibition about the use of such destructive terms. More recently, difficulties arose in some localities about aspects of the prosecution of the Divine Plan. These, and other such examples, commonly emerge from a sense that our

24 The Journal of Bahá'í Studies 28.3 2018

And as a fundamental aspect of the process of consultation 'Abdu'l-Bahá it must

explains:

as

described by Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-

They must then proceed with the utmost devotion, courtesy,

Local

dignity, care and moderation to express their views. They must

and needeth moderation. As to its influence, this is conditional upon refinement which in turn is dependent upon hearts which are detached and pure. As to its

eration, this hath to be combined with tact and wisdom as prescribed in the Holy Scriptures and Tablets. (Bahá'u'lláh, Tablets

Every word is endowed with a spirit, therefore the speaker

expounder should carefully deliver his words at the appropriate time and place, for the impression which each word maketh is clearly evident and perceptible. The Great Being saith: One word may be likened unto fire, another unto light, and the influence which

exert is manifest in the world. Therefore an enlightened man of wisdom should primarily speak with words as mild as milk, that the children of men may be nurtured and edified thereby and may attain the ultimate goal of human existence which is the station of true understanding and nobility. (Bahá'u'lláh, Tablets 172–73)

in various fields of inquiry do not readily lead to conclusions, but

be remembered that consultation,

Bahá, does not pertain merely to the decision-making processes of a

Assembly. "Take ye counsel together in all matters," Bahá'u'lláh

states,
in every matter search out the lamp
truth and not insist upon their own opinion, for stubbornness understanding"
and persistence in one's views "Consultation
will lead ultimately to discord and wrangling and the truth will recertitude.
main hidden. (Selections 88)7
dark
world, leadeth the way and guideth.
To assist mature human beings in their collective investigation of reality perfection
and search for truth, Bahá'u'lláh not only extolled the methods of scientific inquiry, but emphasized the method (qtd.
of consultation. Of course, many Consultation
problems or interesting questions differing views in a common search
7 'Abdu'l-Bahá similarly comments: destructive,
"Consequently, it has become evident that the four criteria or standards of judgment distorting
by which the human mind reaches its conclusions are faulty and inaccurate" (Prom- personal
ulgation 255). Furthermore, He writes: attacks—all of
"In accordance with the divine teachings wrangling
in this glorious dispensation we should hidden.
not belittle anyone and call him ignorant, saying: 'You know not, but I know'.
Rather, we should look upon others with are in-
respect, and when attempting to explain

"inasmuch as consultation is the
of guidance which leadeth the way, and is the bestower of
(Tablets 168). He adds,
bestoweth greater awareness and transmuteth conjecture into
It is a shining light which, in a
For everything there is and will continue to be a station of
and maturity. The maturity of the gift of understanding is made manifest through consultation"
in Compilation 1:93).
establishes a free exchange of
for truth, setting aside
but regrettably all too common, worldly practices such as
or belittling the opinion of
stubbornly insisting upon
views and ad hominem
which lead to discord and
and cause the truth to remain
For Bahá'ís, the quest for
is not something that begins and
in words. Knowledge and action
timately entwined. There is no

knowl-

and demonstrate, we should speak as if we edge of God without deeds faithful to

are investigating the truth, saying: 'Here the prescriptions of His Revelation.

these things are before us. Let us investi- Ideas, even those that touch upon the

gate to determine where and in what form abstract or the metaphysical, have im-

the truth can be found" (Selections 30). plications for human behavior. "One

Toward a Framework for Action

25

word is like unto springtime causing All these points, of course, do not

the tender saplings of the rose-garden mean that in the search for truth, there

of knowledge to become verdant and is no place for critical thought, power-

flourishing, while another word is ful arguments, or the initial clash of

even as a deadly poison," Bahá'u'lláh differing opinions, which is an inher-

states. "It behoveth a prudent man of ent part of the consultative process.

wisdom to speak with utmost leniency Indeed, on many issues, whether conceptual or practical, there is room and forbearance so that the sweetness for

of his words may induce everyone to a range of personal views that never attain that which befitteth man's sta- have to be reconciled with those of tion" (Tablets 175). "Knowledge is not others. Individuals do not have to enough," 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains in one agree about everything. On those sub-

of His talks, "we must also work and jects where truth or collective action

study to bring to maturity the fruit of is the aim, however, contention, in- knowledge" ('Abdu'l-Bahá in London terminable wrangling, or immovable 39). Thus, thought must be tested in insistence on one's personal views are

action and both revised in light of formidable and debilitating obstacles.

outcomes until an efficacious result is achieved.

SHARING PERSONAL OPINIONS

The quest for knowledge, and the

assessment of its implications for

action, may in some cases involve in-
vestigation into a particular question

Another point that is fundamental to

a conceptual framework and that in-
forms the intellectual life of the

Bahá'í

over many years or even generations;
scope

yet systematic progress can be made
through a process of learning cen-
states:

tered on consultation, including re-
flection on action. Such consultation is
an instrument with broad implications
man

whose value for the collective search
may

for understanding is as yet largely
beliefs—devel-

unexplored. The problem of human
understanding and the importance of
discursive methods has not escaped
writ-

the notice of contemporary philoso-
states;

phers; the conversive mode of inves-
God

tigation for the Bahá'í community has
been touched upon by a number of
to

Bahá'í writers and is at the heart of
And

the process that drives the progress of
stages of the Divine Plan.

26

The Journal of Bahá'í Studies 28.3 2018

The interpretations of 'Abdu'l-
Bahá and the Guardian are
divinely-guided statements of
what the Word of God means and
as such these interpretations are
binding on the friends. However,
the existence of authoritative
interpretations in no way precludes
the individual from engaging in
his own study of the teachings
and thereby arriving at his own
interpretation or understanding.
Indeed, Bahá'u'lláh invites the
believers to "immerse" themselves
in the "ocean" of His "words", that
they "may unravel its secrets, and

community is that there is a wide

for individuals to hold and express
personal views. 'Abdu'l-Bahá

"When freedom of conscience, liberty
of thought and right of speech pre-
vail—that is to say, when every

according to his own idealization

give expression to his

opment and growth are inevitable"

(Promulgation 197). "He does not ask
us to follow Him blindly," a letter

ten on behalf of the Guardian

"as He says in one of His Tablets,

has endowed man with a mind to op-
erate as a torchlight and guide him

the truth" (qtd. in Hornby 552).

as a letter written on behalf of the
Universal House of Justice explains:

of the remarks—that such views are

not authoritative and may be wrong.

Among the concepts set forth in the

Bahá'í teachings are that individual

opinions should not be suppressed, that

such personal views should not be im-

posed on the community or presented

as if they are authoritative, and that

individuals should not fight with each

other over questions pertaining to the

meaning or application of the Text.

These concepts are not contradicto-

ry but are part of a single integrated

process.

For example, during the ministry of

Bahá'u'lláh, two perspectives emerged

discover all the pearls of wisdom about His station. Some saw Him to be that lie hid in its depths." (letter the Supreme Manifestation of God, dated 9 March 1987) while others went further as a result

of their understanding of certain

Given the limitations of the human passages from the Writings. When mind, it is obvious that such expres- pressed on the matter,

Bahá'u'lláh—

sions of personal views invariably no doubt in appreciation of the limita-

include ideas that are partially, and tions of human capacity to understand sometimes perhaps even largely, incor- completely such profound metaphysi-

cal truths—explained that so long as

rect. This awareness is fundamental to

individuals were sincere, both views

the relationships of individuals, the

were right, but if they argued, both

community, and the institutions as we

were wrong (Tahezadeh 303).⁸ As

engage in the investigation of reality

'Abdu'l-Bahá explains:

and the generation and application of

knowledge as guided by the Revela-

tion and with the aim of the transfor- The text of the Divine Book is

mation of society. As discussed above, 8 Over time, of course, the

every individual will naturally feel

station that his or her ideas about the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh became further

clarified

are correct—and he or she may share through His own Writings and the author-

them with personal conviction and itative interpretations of

'Abdu'l-Bahá and

with the strongest possible supporting Shoghi Effendi. Yet even with such

addi-

arguments. Yet this conviction should tional perspective, the limitations of

the

be accompanied by an appreciation— human mind and the space for

personal

by the presenter and by the recipients understanding remain.

Toward a Framework for Action

27

this: If two souls quarrel and contend about a question of the excel-

diversity of views on a wide variety of subjects, and this is

Divine questions, differing and disputing, both are wrong. The

lent. What it cannot and must not do is to produce "sects" in

relation

wisdom of this incontrovertible law of God is this: That between two souls from amongst the believers of God, no contention and dispute might arise; that they may speak with each other with infinite amity and love. (Tablets 52) frank, and possibly quite diverse exchange The Guardian states that "regarding such interpretations (of verses from the Scriptures) no one has the right to are impose his view or opinion and require his listeners to believe in his particular question of interpretation of the sacred and prophetic writings. I have no objection to and your interpretations and inferences so long as they are represented as your own personal observations and reflections" (Unfolding 423). And the Universal House of Justice writes: "But its root is lack of faith in the system of Bahá'u'lláh, i.e., the Administrative Order—and lack of obedience to Him—for He has forbidden it!" understanding of the revelation of God; it places upon each individual the duty to strive for an ever greater understanding of the Teachings of Bahá'u'lláh, to arrived at apply them to the whole of his

to the Teachings of the Faith; the Covenant provides the centre of guidance which is to prevent such a degeneration. (letter dated 20 October 1977)

In order to allow for a rich, of personal views, certain terms should be understood and carefully used, avoiding dichotomies that often misleading and unproductive. Consider, for example, the criticism. As Bahá'ís, we are aged from criticizing one another, in this regard Shoghi Effendi 'Abdu'l-Bahá's "contempt for and patience of criticism" (Advent 4). cious criticism is indeed a a letter written on his behalf tem of Bahá'u'lláh, i.e., the trative Order—and lack of to Him—for He has forbidden it!" in Hornby 104). 'Abdu'l-Bahá also plains: "It is again not permitted any one of the honored members object to or censure, whether in or of the meeting, any decision previously, though that decision be

not
life; it is the mainspring of ma-
prevent
ture consultation, by which all
(qtd.
the affairs of the community are
the
conducted; it leads men to dis-
the
cover the secrets of the universe
believ-
and promote the sciences. As you
the
point out, this will produce great
28

right, for such criticism would
any decision from being enforced"
in Compilation 1:95). Such a use of
term is different, of course, from
legitimate criticisms that every
er is entitled to convey directly to
Local or National Assembly about the
The Journal of Bahá'í Studies 28.3 2018

affairs of the Cause, or even about the
majority
actions of one of its members⁹; there
tra-
are well-defined channels for such
ideas are
criticism so that it may result in con-
the
structive change rather than disrupt-
perspec-
tion of the community or even schism
ultimately
of the type that affected previous dis-
con-
pensations. "If we disapprove of their
profound
decisions," a letter written on behalf
teachings. Yet
of the Guardian states, "we must be
different
careful to avoid discussing such mat-
dissension
ters with other believers who have no
authoritative
authority to put them right" (qtd. in
one's
Compilation 2:112). It is vital, however,
and
that all such concerns pertaining to
insisting
the issue of criticism should be dis-

is, a view that differs from the
view or from the way an idea is
ditionally understood. Such
welcome and indeed essential in
search for truth; a different
tive on an issue, even if it
proves to be in error, may well
tribute to obtaining a more
grasp of Bahá'u'lláh's
expressing a new idea is quite
than fomenting discord or
by contending with the
Texts, attempting to impose
personal views on the thought
action of the community, or
on the correctness of one's

personal
tinguished from the critical thought interpretations even when
contradict- ed by a passage in the Writings
that is necessary in the search for or by
or by understanding, lest such important a decision of the Universal
House of Justice. For it is the House of
and essential inquiry be inadvertantly Justice. For it is the House of
Justice that is "to safeguard the unity
suppressed. Indeed, the House of Jus- of its
of its followers and to maintain the
tice explains that destructive personal rity and flexibility of its
integ- teachings"
criticism and critical thought are not (Shoghi Effendi, World Order
teachings" to "deliberate upon all problems
the same thing (Messages 60:31). 148) and have caused difference,
148) and are obscure and matters that are
A similar example concerns the use to "deliberate upon all problems
which have caused difference,
of the term "dissent," especially in a are obscure and matters that are
questions that expressly recorded in the Book"
culture infused with the conceptions of du'l-Bahá, Will and Testament
not the same time, dissidence
Western political thought. On a partic- or the provisions of the Covenant
(Ab- 9 "The Bahá'ís are fully entitled to ad- dress criticisms to their assemblies; they
ular topic, a believer may at times ex- press a "dissenting" perspective—that fundamental contradiction for
19).¹⁰ At the same time, dissidence
press a "dissenting" perspective—that or the provisions of the Covenant
directed to- ward the authority of the Text itself
9 "The Bahá'ís are fully entitled to ad- dress criticisms to their assemblies; they
is a fundamental contradiction for
dress criticisms to their assemblies; they anyone
can freely air their views about policies or Bahá'í.¹¹ who professes to be a
Bahá'í.¹¹ individual members of elected bodies to
the assembly, local or national, but then 10 And He concludes:
"Whatsoever they decide has the same effect
they must whole-heartedly accept the ad- as the Text
vice or decision of the assembly, according itself " ('Abdu'l-Bahá, Will
and Testament 19).
to the principles already laid down for such 11 "Such assertions emphasize
a cru- cial point; it is this: in
matters in Bahá'í administration" (Shoghi terms of the cove-

Effendi qtd. in Compilation 2:112–13).
and intellectual

Toward a Framework for Action

As learned believers explore the
meaning of the Revelation, correlate
its concepts and principles with con-
which

temporary thought, and consider its
implications for action in various fields
authors

in light of scientific understanding,
their exchange of views and presen-
acceptable

tation of perspectives are guided by
lead

a host of statements in the Writings.
(qtd. in

For example, Bahá'u'lláh explains:
letter

dated 20 June 1997)

Whatever is written should not
transgress the bounds of tact and
that

wisdom, and in the words used
for

there should lie hid the proper-
ty of milk, so that the children
ev-

of the world may be nurtured
of

therewith, and attain maturi-
unity,

ty. We have said in the past that
one word hath the influence of

(Paris

Talks 136). In a talk He explains:

contradiction of the main objective ani-
mating the Bahá'í community, namely, the
the

establishment of the unity of mankind"
(Universal House of Justice, Messages

investiga-

60:36). And Bahá'u'lláh states: "O ye that
expresses

dwell on earth! The religion of God is for
as

nant, dissidence is a moral

29

spring and causeth hearts to be-
come fresh and verdant, while
another is like unto blight

causeth the blossoms and flowers
to wither. God grant that

among the friends will write in
such a way as would be

to fair-minded souls, and not

to cavilling by the people.

Universal House of Justice,

Further, 'Abdu'l-Bahá observes

unity is essential in the the search

truth. He states: "The fact that we
imagine ourselves to be right and

everybody else wrong is the greatest

all obstacles in the path towards

and unity is necessary if we would
reach truth, for truth is one"

The purpose is to emphasize

statement that consultation must
have for its object the

tion of truth. He who

an opinion should not voice it

love and unity; make it not the cause of
 forth
 enmity or dissension. In the eyes of men
 of insight and the beholders of the Most
 Sublime Vision, whatsoever are the effec-
 tive means for safeguarding and promot-
 ing the happiness and welfare of the chil-
 dren of men have already been revealed by
 the Pen of Glory. But the foolish ones of
 the earth, being nurtured in evil passions
 and desires, have remained heedless of the
 consummate wisdom of Him Who is, in
 truth, the All-Wise, while their words and
 others.

deeds are prompted by idle fancies and
 ex-
 vain imaginings" (Tablets 222).
 30 The Journal of Bahá'í Studies 28.3 2018

worthy, he should accept it im-
 mediately and not willfully hold
 to an opinion of his own. By this
 and
 excellent method he endeavors to
 one
 arrive at unity and truth. Opposi-
 and
 tion and division are deplorable.
 cause

(Promulgation 72–73)
 'Abdu'l-Bahá
 states, "but if they agree and both par-
 The sensitivity and wisdom re-
 uni-
 quired when presenting new and
 the
 challenging ideas are particularly
 Compila-
 important when the topic concerns
 the meaning of the Revelation or
 learn

the action of the community. For the
 community is not an inert object unaf-
 among
 fected by study conducted by detached
 institu-
 and objective observers. Rather, the

correct and right but set it
 as a contribution to the consen-
 sus of opinion, for the light of
 reality becomes apparent when
 two opinions coincide. A spark
 is produced when flint and steel
 come together. Man should weigh
 his opinions with the utmost se-
 renity, calmness and composure.

Before expressing his own views
 he should carefully consider the
 views already advanced by
 If he finds that a previously

pressed opinion is more true and

Assembly, even though it might be
 wrong, because this will be the most
 efficient means to reveal the error
 allow it to be corrected. "Though
 of the parties may be in the right
 they disagree, that will be the
 of a thousand wrongs,"

ties are in the wrong, as it is in
 ty the truth will be revealed and
 wrong made right" (qtd. in
 tion 1:96).

As Bahá'ís, we are trying to
 how, in the age of maturity of the
 human race, the relationships
 individuals, communities, and
 tions should be manifested in

order to errors, misperceptions, and biases of right a commentator are introduced into all part the discourse of the community. The discordant contentious insistence on a particular reflex- personal viewpoint, rather than a wise social presentation offered as a contribution to the search for truth, can lead to fields of disunity and confusion as the friends respond in various ways to new ideas.¹² Ultimately, in the Bahá'í community, unity is the highest value, since unity is essential for seeking and finding truth. Without unity, truth remains hidden, for truth is either obscured by continual argumentation or, even if a truth is discovered, lack of unity prevents translating new understandings into practical and effective action. It is for such a reason, where collective action is necessary, that Bahá'ís are advised to support the decision of an

support the search for truth and action. These protagonists are of one organic whole—not and competing elements more tive of the adolescent stage of development. Individuals study the Revelation, as well as diverse human knowledge, and, guarded by a humility born of a recognition of limitations of human understanding and a firm grounding in the share their perspectives and ute to the progress of the Faith the advancement of society. The munity as a whole should welcome and appreciate the contributions learned individuals and provide an vironment that supports their

While, on occasion, the unwisdom of the friends¹³ may become

13 See the Universal House of Justice, 12 See Lample, *Revelation and Social Reality*, pp. 152–54. 1986–2001, 60:46.

Toward a Framework for Action 31

into action. At the same time, it must be recognized that the human mind is limited and prone to error, and thus

scious fomenting of discord, the members of the community should strive to become sensitive to identifying such errors and immune to its harmful influence. Institutions should be tolerant of new ideas, but ultimately they must protect the space for learning from the machinations of insincere individuals, upholding as well as ensure the unity of the community. Over the years, the Universal House of Justice has described various features of the relationship among Bahá'í individuals, communities, and institutions that safeguard the search for and knowledge of the sanctity of the right of the individual and of self-surrender, of vigilance, discretion, and prudence on the one hand, and fellowship, candor, and courage on the other" (Bahá'í Administration 64). The individual Bahá'í community, and its are thus bound in a common effort to strive to understand and act on the teachings while knowing with certainty that there must be, to some extent, a gap between personal understanding and Bahá'u'lláh's intent. As the Universal House of Justice explains: A clear distinction is made in our Faith between authoritative interpretation and the in-

the ultimate safeguard of the individual and the community is firmness in the Covenant and adherence to the principles of the administration. In this way, the integrity of the

ings and the unity in action of the community are preserved. What may seem to be the necessity of

ostensibly contradictory

freedom to seek truth and obedience to authority—is in fact just

example of the spirit of a true

"to reconcile," in the words of

Effendi, "the principles of mercy

justice, of freedom and submission,

vidual and of self-surrender, of vigi-

lance, discretion, and prudence on the

courage on the other" (Bahá'í

tration 64). The individual

Bahá'í community, and its

are thus bound in a common effort to

strive to understand and act on the

teachings while knowing with

ty that there must be, to some

a gap between personal understanding

and Bahá'u'lláh's intent. As the

versal House of Justice explains:

A clear distinction is made in

our Faith between authorita-

tive interpretation and the in-

it is a cardinal principle that individual conscience must not be coerced; each person is enjoined to study the Revelation, understand its meaning, obey its ordinances, and translate it

32 The Journal of Bahá'í Studies 28.3 2018

latter, according to the guidance given to us by the Guardian himself, should by no means be suppressed. In fact such individual interpretation is considered the fruit of man's rational power and conducive to a better understanding of the teachings, provided that no disputes or arguments arise among the friends and the individual himself understands and makes it clear that his views are merely his own. Individual interpretations continually change as one grows in comprehension of the teachings. As Shoghi Effendi wrote: "To deepen in the Cause means to read the writings of Bahá'u'lláh and the Master so thoroughly as to be able to give it to others in its pure form. There are many who have some superficial idea of what the Cause stands for. They, therefore, present it together with all sorts of ideas that are their own. As the Cause is still in its early days we must be most careful lest we fall into this error and injure the Movement we so much adore. There is no limit to the study of the Cause. The more we read the Writings, the more truths we can find in Them, the more we will see that our previous notions were erroneous." So, although individual insights can be enlightening and helpful, they can also be misleading. The friends must therefore learn to listen to the views of others without being

interpretation or understanding that each individual arrives at for himself from his study of its teachings. While the former is confined to the Guardian, the

to be shaken, and to express their own views without pressing them on their fellow Bahá'ís. (Messages 35:13)

A question previously arose as to whether, as with the clergy in past dispensations, the authoritative interpretations of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi, as well as the guidance of the Universal House of Justice, would unduly narrow the scope for personal investigation and understanding. The Universal House of Justice responds:

You express the fear that the authority conferred upon 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the Guardian and the Universal House of Justice could lead to a progressive reduction in the "available scope for personal interpretation," and that "the actual writings of the Manifestation will have less and less import," and you instance what has happened in previous Dispensations. The House of Justice suggests that, in thinking about this, you contemplate the way the Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh has actually worked and you will be able to see how very different its processes are from those of, say, the development of the law in Rabbinical Judaism or the functioning of the Papacy in Christianity. The practice in the past in these two religions, and also to a great extent in Islam, has been to assume that the Revelation

perfect revelation of God's Will to mankind, and all subsequent elucidation and legislation has been interpretative in the sense that it aimed at applying this basic Revelation to the new problems and situations that have arisen. The Bahá'í premises are quite different. Although the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh is accepted as the Word of God and His Law as the Law of God, it is understood from the outset that Revelation is progressive, and that the Law, although the Will of God for this Age, will undoubtedly be changed by the next Manifestation of God. Secondly, only the written text of the Revelation is regarded as authoritative. There is no Oral Law as in Judaism, no Tradition of the Church as in Christianity, no Hadith as in Islám. Thirdly, a clear distinction is drawn between Interpretation and Legislation. Authoritative interpretation is the exclusive prerogative of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and the Guardian, while infallible legislation is the function of the Universal House of Justice.

If you study the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and of the Guardian, you will see how tremendously they differ from the interpretations of the Rabbis and the Church. They are not a progressive fossilization of the Revelation, they are for the most part expositions which throw a clear light upon passages which may

attempt to say what the revealed Word means—it states what

have been considered obscure, they point up the intimate interrelationship between various teachings, they expound the implications of scriptural allusions, and they educate the Bahá'ís in the tremendous significances of the Words of Bahá'u'lláh. Rather than in any way supplanting the Words of the Manifestation, they lead us back to them time and again.

There is also an important distinction made in the Faith between authoritative interpretation, as described above, and the interpretation which every believer is fully entitled to voice. Believers are free, indeed are encouraged, to study the Writings for themselves and to express their understanding of them. Such personal interpretations can be most illuminating, but all Bahá'ís, including the one expressing the view, however learned he may be, should realize that it is only a personal view and can never be upheld as a standard for others to accept, nor should disputes ever be permitted to arise over differences in such opinions.

The legislation enacted by the Universal House of Justice is different from interpretation. Authoritative interpretation, as uttered by 'Abdu'l-Bahá and the Guardian, is a divinely guided statement of what the Word of God means. The divinely inspired legislation of the Universal House of Justice does not

Without such a framework, there is no fruitful result, only chaos. The

Revela-

must be done in cases where the au-
revealed Text or its authoritative interpretation is not explicit. It is, therefore, on quite a different level from the Sacred Text, and the Universal House of Justice is empowered to abrogate or amend its own legislation whenever it judges the conditions make this desirable. Moreover, the attitude to legislation is different in the Bahá'í Faith. The human tendency in past Dispensations has been to want every question answered and to arrive at a binding decision Bahá'í

affecting every small detail of belief or practice. The tendency in the Bahá'í Dispensation, from the time of Bahá'u'lláh Himself, the
has been to clarify the governing principles, to make binding pronouncements on details which are considered essential, but to leave a wide area to the conscience of the individual. The same tendency appears also in administrative matters. (letter dated 3 January 1982)

for different individuals to think differently, rather than contention or in-
In a sport, such as soccer, there is a particular
framework of defined parameters that
or
establish its nature and set its rules. The elements of the framework are not intended to restrict the participants arbitrarily; rather, they create the arena for productive action—the skill and artistry of the game.

Toward a Framework for Action

IMPLICATIONS OF THE PRINCIPLE OF THE HARMONY OF SCIENCE

tion of Bahá'u'lláh and its body of
thoritative interpretation, along with the guidance of the House of Justice that will direct the community's course over centuries, are not intended to shackle, but to liberate the human mind, and prepare and focus the community so that it may explore the oceans of spiritual and material reality and make progress along a course leading to the shaping of a new world order and a new civilization.

Thus, at any given time, there may be a range of ideas about a given aspect of reality in light of the

teachings. Some of these perspectives, after further investigation, may not hold up and can be discarded, resulting in a clear consensus about

truth of a matter. In other instances, there may still remain a range of different perspectives that have some degree of justification and further understanding that requires additional experience and the elaboration of thought. Comfort with ambiguity is required in such instances, with space

for different individuals to think dif-

sistence upon the truth of a

perspective on matters that cannot,

need not, be resolved at a given moment in time. Such an approach safeguards freedom of thought, as well as the unity of action on which the progress of the community depends.

religious doctrines and practices; in the postmodern devaluation of sci-

AND RELIGION entific method and knowledge; in the commercial subjugation of science; in The final concept to be mentioned here, as another element of the frame-scientific work governing engagement in Bahá'í scholarly activity, is the principle of the harmony of science and religion, of reason and faith. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, as the heart of debates between superstition noted above, describes religion and and materialism posing as religion and science as "two wings upon which science; and in other such permuta-man's intelligence can soar into the tions can be found the many strategies heights, with which the human soul and distortions that prevent humani-can progress" (Paris Talks 143). He ty at this time from appreciating the adds, "Should a man try to fly with harmony of science and religion upon the wing of religion alone he would quickly fall into the quagmire of su-advancement perstition, whilst on the other hand, with the wing of science alone he would also make no progress, but fall into the despairing slough of mate-personal rialism" (Paris Talks 143). Thus, in some manner, true religion acts to ensure true science; true science acts to ensure true religion; and these two, conventions in harmony, are the means for human progress. But what is this appropriate interaction? How is it to be defined? How is it realized? Even a cursory survey of the forces at work in the world brings to light for the many challenges arising from a failure to find harmony between the fun-

the lens of materialistic philosophy that systematically distorts assumptions and findings; in the test for power—political and other-wise—that exploits both science and religion; in the false dichotomy at which depends the quest for truth, morality, justice, and the of civilization.

At this stage in the development of the Bahá'í community, we can expect to see a range of diverse views about the principle of the harmony of science and religion, and the conception of some believers will reflect widely held social or the perspectives derived from the various disciplines of human thought. Of course, 'Abdu'l-Bahá's state-ments about these principles would be accepted by all. Yet knowledgeable Bahá'ís with scientific training, example, acutely aware of and sensi-tive to the excesses of religious

two. In the prejudice, fanaticism, and violence sweeping the globe in the guise of religion; in the assaying of the truth of scientific findings in the separate

balance of religious beliefs; in the stubborn perpetuation of irrational

36 The Journal of Bahá'í Studies 28.3 2018

At the same time, other devoted believers immersed in a profound study of the Writings may be convinced, by responsible-

an understanding of certain passages, on the

that ultimately it is science that will in

evolve in the future to conform to, or be subsumed under, the truths of

In

Revelation. A range of views by others may fall within these extremes. Rather than creating contentious debates by insisting on the correctness of one's personal interpretation about the meaning of the principle or its application in a particular instance, however, what is necessary—as in so many other areas of inquiry—is for the religious friends to consult, act together, and thereby advance within an evolving framework that will allow for unity of thought to emerge through experience over time.

such a process, a tendency toward dichotomies and extreme perspectives that stand in contradiction to the

principle of the harmony of science and religion may be avoided because the

desired methods are not a reduction

to creationism or scholasticism or to

neither tending theological schools;

is it scientism, nor secular

religious studies, nor philosophical

materialism. Science, in its method,

restricts the scope of its investigations to

increase the reliability of its findings;

however, contrary to the understanding of

Those engaged in Bahá'í scholarly many, religion is not faith in the

unbelievable or irrational. Philosophy

inquiries from any point along a scientific spectrum of approaches representing very different views about the relationship of science and religion—for example, should be from the natural sciences, from the various social sciences, from history, from philosophy, from secular religious studies, from theology, or from the study of the Sacred Texts within the community. It thus falls to these friends to weigh the value of the methods within these various approaches, assessing their strengths and limitations. As brief, "Bahá'ís who are involved in various disciplines—economics, education, history, social science, philosophy, and many others—are obviously conversant and fully engaged with the

Toward a Framework for Action

are limited. In science, advancement is made because there is a truth referent greater than the conclusions of the human mind alone—the testing of ideas against the brute facts of nature through the scientific method. The reliability of science is based on the extent to which it can be grounded on these brute facts, rather than on personal impression. So too, for Bahá'ís, the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh provides a truth referent against which human conceptions must be weighed. In prin-

may well serve to interpret findings, but philosophical conclusions cannot be conflated with scientific truth. Careful attention given by Bahá'ís engaged in fields to the assumptions pertaining the relationship between science and religion that govern them, and while these assumptions cannot be summarily dismissed by the friends who participate in these spheres, neither Bahá'ís ignore the truths the authoritative Bahá'í Texts. In an effort must be made to deal reconcile all points of Thus, we need to recognize our condition at this stage in the development of the Faith. Human minds

37

disagree and dismiss them out of hand. But a view can be wrong, even mostly wrong, without being altogether wrong. When you consider the historical development of theories in the philosophy of mind, you can see that the same difficulties cycle into again and again. One generation addresses the qualitative of mentality, the next focuses its scientific understanding, its successor takes up the problem

ciple, the individual Bahá'í bends to the truth of this Revelation—the Revelation

relation is not interpreted according to the wishes of the individual. So the teachings, and their authoritative interpretations, are statements of truth that cannot be altered. Of course, in the pursuit of truth there is latitude in personal understanding, but this freedom is intended to serve the purpose of finding the truth—and truth is one. impli-

Reason alone is subject to certain limitations. In this respect, a difference can be observed between consultation and learning within an evolving framework and the circularity that nat-

can overtake continuous debate and Revelation argumentation about personal views. that

In his book *The Philosophy of Mind*, the John Heil describes a tension within practice the discipline of philosophy that tends grounded toward cycles of thought rather than pre-

toward a systematic progress in capturing insights and refining understanding over time: Bahá'u'lláh.

In philosophy there is a tendency to take doctrines with which we 38 The Journal of Bahá'í Studies 28.3 2018

examines how in the fourth century of Christianity, doctrinal disagreements on theological issues, which previous-

of mental content. The cycle then starts over, each

recovering what had been largely invisible to its immediate predecessor. (199–200)

Another example of a potential challenge in the encounter between reason and religion may be found within the discipline of theology when emphasis shifts from the

cations of the meaning of the teachings for the unity of the community and the betterment of society to

cern with the Faith primarily as object of study. While there are

usually many aspects of the

that address theological concepts

must be constructively examined,

discipline of theology and the

of theologians or 'ulamá is

in assumptions and approaches of

vious dispensations that have no

in the Bahá'í dispensation and

indeed, have even been proscribed by

In the book *Doctrine and Power*, theologian Carlos Galvao-Sobrinho

against its limitations and the

tive characteristics and injunctions of the Revelation. Ultimately, it is

ly were resolved through a search for learned Bahá'ís in any field who, hav-

consensus, evolved to become a means ing studied in a profound manner both by which bishops exerted power: the Writings and their disciplines, are

responsible for carefully considering

Persistent confrontation, com- such issues, shedding light on the val- bined with a determination to un- ue of methods, and serving as the first- dermine fellow prelates, replaced line of defense against extremes that the former striving for consensus. lead either to imposing naïve personal . . . Challenged by their rivals and religious beliefs on science or to plac-

driven by a new certainty that ing an exaggerated value on certain they possessed the truth, church interpretations of scientific method leaders embarked on a disruptive while imposing the materialistic inter- quest to prove their orthodoxy pretations of such findings in an un- and to discredit their opponents. scientific manner on the evolution of . . . with unprecedented zeal and the Bahá'í community.

passion, they set out to convince Attaining this capacity requires a other Christians that their views true understanding of a discipline, its represented the truth about God strengths and limitations, and not sim- and the orthodox teachings of the ply insisting to the Bahá'í community church. (6) that a particular point is true based on

an appeal to authority from a particu-

As a result of this change, the es- lar field of inquiry. It is the responsi-

sense of theological effort shifted bility of "Bahá'í scholars, people who

from a search for truth to the imposi- not only are devoted to [the Faith] tion of power. Theologians and eccle- and believe in it and are anxious to siastics insisted upon the correctness tell others about it," those "who have a

of their own views, and by this means deep grasp of the Teachings and their they accrued power and influence. At significance, and who can correlate its

the same time, they used what power beliefs with the current thoughts and and influence they had to ensure the problems of the people of the world" acceptance of their views. The history (Shoghi Effendi qtd. in Compilation of Christianity was thereby stained by 2:226) to acknowledge the range of these struggles, which resulted in end- legitimate debate within a discipline,

less bloodshed and countless divisions. help the community understand the

Consequently, we can appreciate range of its assets and liabilities as why any inquiry into the value of the an instrument in the investigation of discipline of theology or its methods truth, and correlate and resolve the for Bahá'í thought must be weighed apparent points of conflict between

the perspectives of that field and the opinion may continue to prevail, ow- ing to the limitations of the current understanding of the Bahá'í human mind to grasp such truths, even teachings. when

The scope of the challenge may vary they are discussed at some length by across different disciplines. In the nat- Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Again, ural sciences, there may be little over- such diversity is to be expected, and lap between the knowledge systems of although Bahá'ís may hold different science and religion, while across the opinions on such issues, there is no social sciences and humanities the area reason that this diversity itself should of overlap grows more extensive. Ed- lead to discord, so long as individuals ucation as a field, for example, can only do not insist upon the correctness of advance so far without an appreciation their own views or try to impose their of the spiritual reality of a human opinions on others. being. The study of religion, and par- For many other questions, ticularly the study of the Bahá'í Faith just as in science, truth—or at least in the context of the discipline of re- ever more robust insights into the ligious studies, whether from a secular nature of reality—will emerge over or theological perspective, is subject to time. At first, many different views on a given topic may be held significant distortion by assumptions simultaneously by different Bahá'ís. Then, and methods that stand in sharp con- trast to the Bahá'í teachings. Indeed, time, as sound arguments are set forth this sharp distinction begins at the that draw upon science and an analysis of the teachings and as outset with Bahá'u'lláh's definition of knowledge- able believers consult on the religion itself. Every learned believer evidence,

has the opportunity to experience the joy and challenge of tackling such difficult problems that can contribute to the progress of the Faith and advancement of human knowledge. truth—the strength of a particular perspective—

AN EXAMPLE OF HOW DIFFERING OPINIONS MAY GIVE WAY IN THE SEARCH FOR TRUTH

As individuals, communities, and institutions gradually learn how to harmonize their efforts in the investigation of reality, truth will emerge over time in greater depth and abundance.

In some instances associated with metaphysical questions, a diversity of philosophical

40 The Journal of Bahá'í Studies 28.3 2018

implications for humanity since Darwin presented his findings in the mid 1800s. A range of personal interpretations about the meaning of what 'Abdu'l-Bahá said have been set forth by Bahá'ís over the years. And while Still

it is not our purpose here to examine the Bahá'í perspective on evolution in depth, a general overview of these personal interpretations sheds light on the process of understanding the Bahá'í teachings by illustrating how diverse and sometimes conflicting opinions may be resolved over time in the search for truth.

At least four general perspectives

some perspectives will eventually be demonstrated to be weaker or somehow defective, while others will be stronger and more robust, issues are clarified and the

is revealed. On some subjects, this process may happen fairly quickly, while other questions may require genera-

The subject of evolution may provide a useful illustration of process. In His talks and writings, 'Abdu'l-Bahá touches upon the

ry of evolution, a subject in the field of biology that, beyond science, had profound social and

shares the biological history of animals and is most closely related to apes, this view concludes that

Bahá is in error about the scientific basis of evolution and His statements in this context should be set aside.

another distinct perspective proposes that 'Abdu'l-Bahá's statements are essentially in harmony with the contemporary findings of science. A fourth suggests that 'Abdu'l-Bahá's argument is not so much about the scientific basis of evolution, but rather, using the language common to the debates on evolution at that time

in the Middle East, it is intended to

have been set forth by individuals on 'Abdu'l-Bahá's statements about evolution. A traditional and somewhat widely held perspective, dating, perhaps, from Dr. John Esselmont's description of the topic in Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era, suggests that, from the beginning of the appearance of life on earth, there has been a separation between the line of organisms that led to animals and the line that led to human beings. Drawing upon quotations from 'Abdu'l-Bahá, such as "from the beginning of his existence man has been a distinct species" (Some Answered Questions 47:10), it is concluded that there has never been a common biological ancestor between animals and humans.

A second perspective is similar to the first, but in emphasizing that this conclusion about human biological distinctiveness stands in sharp contrast to the findings of evolutionary science that humanity
Toward a Framework for Action

make certain points about the social and philosophical principles of the new theory.

In the case of these four perspectives on evolution, the first, a kind of "parallel" evolution of animal human, is incompatible with science. Advances in DNA analysis make it possible to determine the genetic similarities between humans and other species and impossible to imagine how such similarities could come about by any means other than biological kinship. 'Abdu'l-Bahá's strong admonition to weigh religious beliefs in the light of science would seem to require that any concept of parallel evolution should be set aside by Bahá'ís as an error in the individual interpretation

of the meaning of His statements and thereby avoid the appearance of clinging to a theory of some kind of "creationism"—the antiscientific opinion articulated by adherents of some religious demoninations.

41

Of course, it is possible to make the argument that what 'Abdu'l-Bahá says is true in a given case and that a contemporary scientific understanding is wrong and will be revised in the future. For example, in Some Answered Questions, He explains that the Sacred Texts may indeed state truths not understood by science (7:14).

Yet despite this, 'Abdu'l-Bahá does not state that the truth of scientific views should be weighed in the light of religious Texts. If Bahá'ís were to

generally, any personal interpretation of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's statements that contradicts scientific understanding be set aside as erroneous—or at least called into question—and an alternative interpretation sought. Given the limitations of human understanding, one obviously cannot insist one's personal interpretation of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's statements is exactly what He actually intended. Personal interpretation can be wrong.

this second perspective is

illogical in
 take this position continually when presuming that 'Abdu'l-Bahá would
 science and the interpretation of insist on an incorrect understand-
 scripture conflict, they would be right- ing of scientific aspects of
 evolution,
 ly regarded as unscientific, and they while at the same time
 urging—based
 would undermine the principle of the on the principle of the harmony of
 harmony of science and religion as science and religion—that
 believers
 set forth by 'Abdu'l-Bahá. As scientif- not accept religious views that
 contra-
 ic understanding advances, however, dict science and reason. Stated
 another
 certain wisdom hidden in the Text way, why would 'Abdu'l-Bahá contra-
 may come to light. If one imagines dict the very principles He
 expounds?
 that science changes in the future as a In seeking to understand the state-
 result of shedding certain of its ma- ments about evolution in the
 Bahá'í
 terialistic philosophical assumptions, Writings, therefore, Bahá'ís
 should
 this change will be the result of ad- expect the principle of the harmony
 vancement within science rather than of science and religion to be upheld
 scientists being compelled to accept and not succumb to either
 superstition
 the dictates of religious beliefs. or materialism.
 The second perspective on state- It would not be unreasonable to
 ments in the Writings about evolution, conclude, then, that the first two
 per-
 spectives are questionable and
 although upholding scientific findings, should
 also appears to have some problems be set aside, while the truth may be
 in that it insists there is only one way sought in a more rigorous examina-
 to interpret what 'Abdu'l-Bahá said tion of the arguments pertaining to
 and that this interpretation stands the latter two. This is not, of
 course,
 in contradiction to science. Yet it is an exhaustive analysis of Bahá'í
 views
 'Abdu'l-Bahá Himself Who said that on evolution, but hopefully it
 serves
 science and religion agree. It therefore as a useful illustration of how
 various
 seems reasonable to conclude that, conflicting opinions may be resolved
 42 The Journal of Bahá'í Studies 28.3 2018
 over time in the search for truth. Rather, on matters pertaining to

the Sound conclusions should correlate si- Faith and its teachings, all are bound bound by the provisions of the Covenant. It is by this means that Bahá'u'lláh has resolved the question of religious Sacred Text. By proceeding in such a truth and practice, quenching the fire of contention and sectarianism that dimmed the light of religion in previous dispensations. Human beings differ. Their views differ. Their interests differ. History demonstrates the wide range of strategies employed to resolve or live with such differences, from blind obedience to unrestricted freedom, from brutal manifestations of power to tolerance and reasoned discourse. Bahá'u'lláh, responding to human reality and his- torical circumstances, sets forth the Bahá'í community. Many more could be added. But it is necessary, at basis for the protection of the prerog- atives and the harmony of relations this time, to include one additional among Bahá'í individuals, consideration pertaining to a poten- and the community within the frame- tial pitfall that can obstruct the search work of His administrative order. for truth and, in its most extreme and As a virulent form, is a threat to the very letter written on behalf of the House of Justice states: existence of the Faith, whose central principle is unity. Upon becoming a Bahá'í, one ac- As previously mentioned, in the cepts certain fundamental Cause of Bahá'u'lláh, while the free- beliefs; but invariably one's knowledge of dom of conscience of the individual

is upheld, as is the freedom to express often personal understanding, the views of an individual have no authority. Individuals or groups of individuals, no matter how learned, no matter the field of expertise, cannot insist upon for the correctness of a personal interpretation of the Writings, impose Over such a view on others, or insist such a view is a guide to the action of individual believers or the community. yield

Toward a Framework for Action

to a more profound understanding and what of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation. achieve His Service to the Cause plays a particular role in the process, for the particular meaning of the Text is clarified as about one translates insights into effective action. As a matter of principle, individual understanding or interpretation should not be suppressed, but valued for whatever contribution it can make to the end-discourse of the Bahá'í community. Nor should it, through dogmatic insistence of the individual, Bahá'u'lláh be allowed to bring about disputes

the Teachings is limited and

mixed with personal ideas. Shoghi Effendi explains that "an exact and thorough comprehension of so vast a system, so sublime a revelation, so sacred a trust, is obvious reasons beyond the reach and ken of our finite minds."

time, through study, prayerful reflection, and an effort to live

Bahá'í life, immature ideas

43

Bahá'u'lláh's Writings mean

must be done in order to

intended purpose for humanity.

problem is the insistence that a

particular view of an individual

the meaning of the Bahá'í

correct and that, as a result,

community must accept this

individual's interpretation and its

for Bahá'í practice—or at

the community should be open to

less dissent and disputation

matters, while ignoring the

conventional methods established by

for resolving disagreements.

and arguments among the friends; issues personal opinion must always be distinguished from the explicit Text and its authoritative interpretation by 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Administrative Order of Shoghi Effendi and from the elucidations of the Universal House of Justice—of Justice on "problems which objective have caused difference, questions that are obscure and matters that which are not expressly recorded in the Faith, Book." (letter dated 14 November 2005)¹⁴ integrity and flexibility of its teachings" in acting The problem described here is not coordinate a matter of Covenant-breaking in the interests, expense of challenging the authority as subsidiary Center of the Cause or claiming to World have equal authority, as witnessed at the time of the passing of Bahá'u'lláh, the community of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, or Shoghi Effendi. Rather, it centers on the question of what by an individual or a group of individuals on the 14 For an overview of Bahá'í hermeneutics and practice, see Paul Lample, *Revelation* natural for

Such a posture, especially on central to the Covenant and the tice of the Faith, strikes at of the authority invested in the institutions of the der of Bahá'u'lláh—the and the Universal House of whose common fundamental is to "insure the continuity of divinely-appointed authority flows from the Source of our to safeguard the unity of its ers and to maintain the to "administer its affairs, its activities, promote its ecute its laws and defend its institutions" (Shoghi Effendi, Order 148). The intellectual life of nity is vulnerable to this there is excessive insistence correctness of their personal standing. Again, it is quite

tion and Social Reality, especially chapter 2. an individual to believe that his or her

44 The Journal of Bahá'í Studies 28.3 2018

personal understanding of the teachings is in precise conformity with the Bahá'í

meaning intended by Bahá'u'lláh. It is light of

also obvious that this cannot always be true. Humility is required, as well on

as an attitude of learning, in order to community

work in harmony with other believers under the direction of the institutions to achieve Bahá'u'lláh's intended will opposition"

and purpose. This condition includes the freedom to share one's views with others. However, for an individual to become so convinced of the truth of a personal interpretation, or even of His

what he or she concludes to be a limitation of Bahá'u'lláh's thought or of author-

the interpretations of 'Abdu'l-Bahá or Writings"

Shoghi Effendi, and then for this same in-

individual to attempt continually to bend the community to this personal understanding, is to strike at the unity counter-

of the community and to subvert the enterprise

search for truth and the endeavor to translate the teachings into effective action. This attitude or action is very different from setting forth a point if

of view with sound arguments within

out insisting it is correct and without challenging an authoritative statement in the Writings or a decision of the

progress, distort the understanding of the wider society about the

teachings, and extinguish the

faith in some misled souls.

In response to one such assault

the intellectual life of the

some years ago, the Universal House of Justice observed that there was a "campaign of internal

(Messages 296:2), which, "while purporting to accept the legitimacy of the Guardianship and the Universal House of Justice as twin successors of Bahá'u'lláh and the Center of

Covenant," attempted "to cast doubt on the nature and scope of the

ity conferred on them in the

(Messages 296:5). The individuals

involved "sought to use the language, the occasions and the credibility of scholarly activity to lend a

feit authority to a private

which was essentially ideological in nature and self-motivated in origin"

(letter dated 8 February 1998). The House of Justice stated that "Even

their original aims were idealistic

nature—no matter how ill-informed and erroneous in concept—they had evolved in practice into an assault

on

House of Justice. It is, instead, an attempt to impose a change in the Bahá'í which

community in direct opposition to the intends"

safeguards Bahá'u'lláh put in place to as-

maintain the unity of His Cause and preserve the integrity of His teachings. While, owing to the provisions of the Covenant, such improper efforts

will ultimately fail, they can in free-

the short term foment discord and confusion, create division, obstruct form

Toward a Framework for Action

of ecclesiastical authority to usurp of

the authority Bahá'u'lláh placed in an corruption

elected body. As the House of Justice of the

explained at the time, "by diminishing design

the station of Bahá'u'lláh—a disservice

done to previous Manifestations participants

by people similarly inclined—by casting were to

ing doubt on the authority conferred scholarship

on 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the Guardian and the 1998).

Universal House of Justice, and by His re-

calling into question the integrity of from

Bahá'í administrative processes, they and

would be able to persuade a number of unwary followers that the Bahá'í Faith dispensation.

the Covenant which Bahá'u'lláh has created as a stronghold within

His Cause would evolve as He

(letter dated 8 February 1998). In

serting and attempting to win sympathy for their views, this group of individuals complained that a fundamentalist religious authority was

tempting to suppress intellectual

dom; yet what actually occurred was an effort to create and impose a

45

aroused the concern of the House

Justice was "the systematic

of Bahá'í discourse in certain

Internet discussion groups, a

which became increasingly

to many of the Bahá'í

and whose first victim, if it

succeed, would be Bahá'í

itself " (letter dated 8 February

In establishing the basis of

ligion, Bahá'u'lláh seized power

ecclesiastics, ended priesthood,

abrogated powers exercised by the learned in the Islamic

is in fact not a Divine Revelation but He a kind of socio-political system being guard-manipulated by ambitious individuals" the (letter dated 8 February 1998). The These scheme insisted "that even the nature of religion itself can be adequately because it understood only through the use of the shelter an academic methodology designed to Beauty, and ignore the truths that make religion bounden and what it is" (Messages 296:6). In the obligation, absence of a Guardian, they claimed (qtd. in to possess "quasi-doctrinal authority, 1:323). parallel to and essentially independent March of the local House of Justice, which the would permit various interests to in-Guardian's Secre-sinuate themselves into the direction principle of the life processes of the Cause" vote. He (Messages 296:7).¹⁵ The problem that was certain individuals who 'accounted themselves

15 Such vain and idle imaginings turn in on its head the authoritative guidance that it of 'Abdu'l-Bahá: "Let it not be imagined the most that the House of Justice will take any proved decision according to its own concepts contention.' and opinions. God forbid! The Supreme

While extolling the truly learned, redefined their obligations and ed against their excesses through instrument of His Covenant.¹⁶ confirmation of the Holy Spirit, is in the safekeeping and under and protection of the Ancient obedience to its decisions is a essential duty and an absolute and there is no escape for anyone" Compilation of Compilations 16 "In a letter written on 14 1927 to the Spiritual Assembly of Bahá'ís of Istanbul, the tary explained, on his behalf, the in the Cause of action by majority pointed out how, in the past, it as superior in knowledge and elevated position' who caused division, and was those 'who pretended to be distinguished of all' who 'always themselves to be the source of 'But praise be to God,' he

continued, 'that

House of Justice will take decisions and the Pen of Glory has done away with the establish laws through the inspiration and unyielding dictatorial views of the learned

46 The Journal of Bahá'í Studies 28.3 2018

actions, which reflect the maturity of will, of the human race that the provisions of the high ex-Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation seek to foster, Bahá'u'lláh and in no way diminishes the vital importance of learning and scholarship, extent of but frames, reinforces, protects, and internalizes such essential powers and they are contributions. In this way, Bahá'u'lláh upholds freedom of conscience and the expression while safeguarding the development of the Faith and aspects of a serving the integrity of the teachings. The personal interpretation of individuals is both respected and bound us, guard us, within the constraints of wisdom. In this dispensation, there will be no St. Paul who recasts the thought of the Manifestation, no Arius whose actions sever the bonds of union among the believers.¹⁷ "The friends who seek opposition, but must find harmonious expression along

to excel in scholarly activity course, strive to live up to expectations set forth by 'Abdu'l-Bahá," the Universal Justice states. "Whatever the their achievements, they are an integral part of the community; Firmness in the Covenant is not the opposite of the freedom to personal views; both are a harmonious body of thought set forth by 'Abdu'l-Bahá. They are points of guidance intended to lift and propel us, not clubs to use each other. In this respect, the individual, the community, institutions again arises. The and obligations, the expectations, of each are not in

and the wise, dismissed the assertions of organic development according to the will of Bahá'u'lláh as expressed in His Teachings and by His authoritative interpreters. "The ocean of the Covenant shall send forth a wave and shall disperse and throw out these foams. Consider thou, with the absolute authority to deal with time of Christ and after Him, how many childish attempts were made by such general matters as affect the interests of different persons! What claims they have advanced and what a multitude have they gathered around themselves! Even Arius of one House of Justice, one divinely-appointed Centre, so that there would be only to himself a million and a half followers and strove and endeavoured to sow the seeds of sedition in the Cause of Christ. But eventually the sea of ly-designated Pivot, thus making them all and cast out all the gathering Christ surged and nothing was left behind save proof against schism and division" (Universal House of Justice, Messages 111:12). everlasting

17 Attitudes toward theology should not give rise to dichotomous thought. Toward a Framework for Action malediction." ('Abdu'l-Bahá qtd. in Star of the West 10:5:96). 47

not exempt from obligations placed upon any believer and, at the same time, deserve the community's understanding, forbearance, support, and respect" (letter dated 24 July 2013). "Whatever comes within the sphere of God would be shaken. (qtd. in Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Aqdas 8) In the course of history, human beings have learned the rules of logic and reasoned argument. If someone

of human comprehension must be systematically violates these principles, limited and finite," 'Abdu'l-Bahá affirms (Promulgation 72–73). In the Bahá'í Faith, no individual or group of scholars can say what the Bahá'í electoral pro-teachings really mean or how Bahá'ís and an ought to behave, and certainly no person could ever claim authority on the basis of their academic credentials or their "learned" opinions to challenge the actions or the elucidations of the House of Justice. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá emphatically affirms: the principles governing the action of learned individuals in contributing to Today this process of deduction is the right of the body of the House of Justice, and the deductions and conclusions of individual learned men have no authority, unless they are endorsed by the House of Justice. The difference is precisely this, that from the conclusions and endorsement of the body of the House of Justice whose members are elected by and known to the worldwide Bahá'í community, no differences will arise; whereas the conclusions of individual divines and scholars would definitely lead to differences, and result in schism, division, and dispersion. The oneness of the Word would be destroyed, the unity of the Faith would disappear, and the edifice of the Faith

there is no need for contention, for it is recognized by all that the is inferior and unsound, and others ignore it. In the Bahá'í cess, there is no electioneering, individual who acts in such an obvious manner to attract attention will not receive the votes of the electors who find such behavior to be unacceptable for qualification for membership in a Bahá'í institution. In a similar manner,

the search for truth, the progress of the Cause, and the betterment of the world, have been clearly set forth by Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá and must be increasingly understood and internalized by the community. "Now some of the mischief-makers, with many stratagems, are seeking leadership, and in order to reach this position they instill doubts among the friends that they may cause differences, and that these differences may result in their drawing a party to themselves," 'Abdu'l-Bahá states. "But the friends of God must be awake and must know that the scattering of these doubts hath as its motive personal desires and the achievement of leadership. Do not disrupt Bahá'í unity, and know that this unity cannot be maintained save through faith in the Covenant of God" (Selections 214).

48 The Journal of Bahá'í Studies 28.3 2018

Although in some extreme cases, it gradual- may be necessary for the institutions is an respected, and mistakes will ly be resolved. However, if there

to act, the generality of the believers should grow in understanding and wisdom to be impervious to such machinations.¹⁸ Truth and right action emerge in the course of sincere individuals making efforts, and sometimes choosing, making mistakes. They cannot emerge from a misplaced desire to prevent all mistakes. What is more important, perhaps, is to discern the intent associated with the appearance of mistakes and the effort exerted by an individual to adhere to Bahá'í principles associated with collective action. If the desire is to assist the progress of the Faith, if there is an effort to uphold the principles of consultation and of the administration, then unity is maintained, the decisions of the institutions—and particularly the guidance of the House of Justice to resolve difficult problems—will be and confusion, one of the learned Bahá'ís

intent to impose personal views the meaning of the Text on the understanding of the community, contention, spread calumny, or power to direct the community's affairs along the path of one's then such intention or action blow at the very process of the for truth and sound collective for the progress of the "Mere intellectual understanding the teachings is not enough," a written on behalf of the plains. "Deep spirituality is and the foundation of true is steadfastness in the Covenant" in Hornby 85). When, in the 1890s, despite efforts of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, news of machinations of Muhammad Ali began to circulate to the believers the Holy Land, creating doubts wrote to Him seeking clarification about what was happening and

of the Covenants of both Bahá'u'lláh and proper
 'Abdu'l-Bahá. This is the stronghold of sincere
 the Faith of every Bahá'í, and that which Tablet,
 enables him to withstand every test and personal
 the attacks of the enemies outside the anguish and His resolute guidance
 for Faith, and the far more dangerous, insidi- the safeguarding of the Faith of
 God. God.
 ous, lukewarm people inside the Faith who He advises the friends of their
 atti- tudes toward others and of their
 have no real attachment to the Covenant, need
 and consequently uphold the intellectual to guard themselves:
 aspect of the teachings while at the same Conduct yourself with the
 time undermining the spiritual foundation utmost
 upon which the whole Cause of God rests" gentleness, affection,
 friendliness,
 (letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, qtd. in Light of Divine Guidance 2:86). well-wishing and compassion. .
 ..
 di, qtd. in Light of Divine Guidance 2:86). Pray for all and implore God
 for

Toward a Framework for Action

49

everyone's welfare. Mention every person with perfect courtesy. Do not anger anyone and treat all with kindness. . . . Like this servant, behave with the greatest forbearance and patience, and be accustomed to the holy fragrances. However, do not be deceived by anyone, and do not lend ears to the flattery of some. Quickly discern the doubts of the doubtful. Be perspicacious. Do not be misled. Do not be attracted to the praise of the waverers. Fix your gaze on the Light of God and be the manifestation of "Beware the discernment of the believer, for he sees with the Light of God" teach-

But if the friends should truly rise as is incumbent on them in accordance with the Covenant and Testament, and manifest steadfastness and influence, then others will despair of changing and perverting the Centre of the Covenant, and will give up their provocations and deliberations. Gradually the radiant horizon of the Lord's Cause will be cleansed and sanctified of these dense clouds and the true friends and the sincere supporters, like your kind self, will be cheered and inspired. (provisional translation)

It is evident, from the Bahá'í

(provisional translation). In the face of such obvious errors—that is, their immunity to such machinations—would be the ultimate remedy for and safeguard against attempts to disrupt the Cause. He writes: economic needs, and to participate in But you inquired about the remedy for this situation. As long as some have hope that through machinations and false rumors this upwelling of the life of the Covenant could be diverted from its natural channel and this effulgent star may be shifted from its heavenly orbit to another course, never shall these seditions end Bahá'u'lláh nor will these dark clouds be dissipated off the horizon of God's Cause.

ings, that religion is to be the cause of the upliftment, the empowerment, and the liberation of the individual. Human conscience is free. And through true religion, the individual's ties are cultivated to serve the Faith, to raise and nurture a family, to build community, to engage in occupations and in activities to address social and the wide range of human discourse directed toward the advancement of civilization. But to do this, religion must be safeguarded from fruitless theological debates that have divided it in the past and from the efforts of those who, because of pride or the desire for leadership, attempt to use religion for their own purposes. It was to preserve His Faith from these ills that He instituted His Covenant. The freedom of the individual—indeed, the freedom of all individuals that emerges

50 The Journal of Bahá'í Studies 28.3 2018

from the application of the teachings pertaining to the scholarly or intellectual work of the Cause. Much of Bahá'u'lláh—depends on steadfastness and the internalization of the message, of course, has already been written over several decades. The message of become inoculated against the kind of behavior that would subvert it. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá states: the task at hand is not about starting over, but of taking stock and renew-

24 July 2013, written on behalf of the House of Justice to the National Assembly of Canada, makes it clear that

hearing ear to my counsel and refrain from stirring up sedition. If you ever detect the odor of dissention from any soul, even though to outward seeming he be a prominent person or an accomplished scholar, you should know of a certainty that he is an anti-christ among men, an opponent of the religion of the glorious Lord, an adversary of the Almighty, a destroyer of the divine edifice, a violator of His Covenant and Testament, an outcast from the threshold of the All-Merciful. Indeed a man of experience and discernment is even as a brilliant light, is a moving impulse for the felicity and well being of the dwellers of both this petty world and of the Great Beyond. Prompted by faith and invested with the power of the Covenant he strives for the highest good of humanity and for the peace and security of mankind. (Risaliy-i-Siyasiyyih, provisional translation)

CONCLUSION

of participants in a pattern of Bahá'í community life that is vibrant, meaningful, and growing. These are merely a few thoughts on the elements of a framework for action. Toward a Framework for Action

further consideration are: What are the elements of the framework for Bahá'í action for scholarly endeavor? How is it possible to strengthen the capacity of individuals to engage in a process of drawing relevant insights from the teachings and applying them in some manner to the concerns of their fields of interest? What structures can be

ing and revitalizing effort. As noted, the nature of the framework that governs Bahá'í endeavors is evolving, and through study, consultation, experience, and reflection, the framework for action becomes richer and better defined over time.

The challenge is not unlike the effort for learning about growth and community-building in the last two decades. At the start of the Five Year Plan in 2001, for example, it was impossible to define an intensive program of growth, but only to point to some principles and prerequisites. By the end of that Plan in 2006, some 100 clusters achieved a certain level of activity that allowed the friends to extend a similar productive pattern of activity to 1,500 clusters worldwide. This progress then allowed for a further refinement of understanding in 2010, and a further advance in the efforts so that now work has begun in more than 5,000 clusters and at least 200 clusters have reached a level where hundreds of active workers have learned to engage thousands

of participants in a pattern of Bahá'í

ingful, and growing.

Among the questions that require

51

The task, then, before the

tion for Bahá'í Studies and the

community worldwide is to learn to contribute to bringing these

to bear in a pattern of action that

comes increasingly more expansive and effective over time.

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created to accompany them, and what spaces can be created to assist them in reflecting on their efforts and learning to improve them over time? As the House of Justice writes: Given by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in Paris in 1911— It is timely, then, to reflect upon the many years of experience of the Association, the coherence of Universal its undertakings with the major areas of action in which Bahá'ís Visit are engaged, and the possibilities Canada for the most productive avenues of endeavour in the future. . . . Every believer has the opportunity to examine the forces operating in society and introduce relevant aspects of the teachings Provi- within the discourses prevalent in whatever social space he or she is present. It is, perhaps, as a means to enhance the abilities of the Civiliza- friends to explore such opportunities in relation to their scholarly interests that the endeavours of Writings of the Association for Bahá'í Studies Pub- can be conceived. Through the specialized settings it creates, the Association can promote learning among a wide range of believers across a wide range of disciplines. (letter dated 24 July 2013)

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