

Generation of Knowledge and the Advancement of Civilization

Based on a plenary talk by Haleh Arbab, presented at the
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I am honored to participate in this conference and to share with you certain ideas based on my experience and my present work. The most cherished goal of every one of us as Bahá'ís is nothing less than the complete unification of the entire human race. To fulfill this purpose, as individuals, we study the writings and make every effort to put the teachings into effect. “Live thou in accord with the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh,” ‘Abdu'l-Bahá tells us. “Do not only read them. There is a vast difference between the soul who merely reads the words of Bahá'u'lláh and one who tries to live them.”¹

Clearly this process of individual transformation is a vital component of the civilization-building process. Its realization depends on a process of learning, the nature of which is described in numerous passages from the writings: “Ponder a while those holy words in your heart, and, with utter detachment, strive to grasp their meaning.”² Or: “Ponder this in thine heart, that the truth may be revealed unto thee, and be thou steadfast in His path.”³ Or: “Number me not with them who read Thy words and fail to find Thy hidden gift which, as decreed by Thee, is contained therein, and which quickeneth the souls of Thy creatures and the hearts of Thy servants.”⁴

As Bahá'ís, of course, we do not engage in this learning process as isolated individuals. We form communities in which we strive to learn together about the application of the writings to our personal and collective lives. The powerful tool of consultation, then, is added to our efforts to read, understand, and apply the teachings, introducing an important dimension to our approach to learning. Through a variety of meetings, deepening classes, conferences, and so on, we read the Text, try to reach a common understanding of its meaning and consult together about specific actions we can take to contribute to the betterment of the world. That we have managed to establish as an integral feature of our worldwide community, in the relatively short period of our

existence, this highly sophisticated yet extremely straightforward way of studying, consulting and acting is, in itself, one of our greatest accomplishments.

Yet, we must realize that such an approach, basic and vital as it is, cannot by itself respond to the needs of a movement the goal of which is the establishment of the oneness of humankind, which according to the Guardian involves an “organic change in the structure of present-day society, a change such as the world has not yet experienced.”⁵ I would like to suggest—and in this I have benefited much from ideas Mr. Paul Lample has set forth in some of his talks—that when in 1996 the Universal House of Justice asked the Bahá’í community to adopt a mode of operation that was characterized by systematic learning, it was calling for our collective methods of learning to be taken to higher levels of complexity. This in turn implied that we should think more deeply about the general question of the generation and application of knowledge in all our efforts to contribute to the rise of a new civilization.

I would like to discuss some of the insights we are gaining into this process in three contexts. First, since the development of the Bahá’í community itself is at the heart of the contributions we can make to the advancement of civilization as envisioned by Bahá’u’lláh, and since the effectiveness of our contributions depends on the size and resources of our community, I will say a few words about how we are learning about the growth of our own community. I will then move on to the question of the generation and application of knowledge in the context of our endeavors in the field of social and economic development. The third set of issues related to knowledge generation and the advancement of civilization I will try to address will be in the context of our efforts to influence, as individuals and as a community, the prevalent discourses of society.

Learning About Growth

The Four Year Plan marked a “turning point of epochal magnitude”⁶ in the life of the Bahá’í community. It set the global community on a course of action, the pursuit of which had but one aim: advancing the process of entry by troops. “[E]ntry by troops,” the House of Justice has written, “is not merely a stage of the progress of the Cause destined to occur in its own good time, dependent on the receptivity of the population as a whole—it is a phenomenon which the Bahá’í communities, by their own activities, can

prepare for and help to bring about. It is also a process which, once started, can be sustained.”⁷

The Bahá’í community was asked to make learning its chief mode of operation as it pursued this single aim. Of course, learning has been a theme present in all of our national and international Plans ever since the time of the Guardian. Beginning with the Four Year Plan, the House of Justice guided us step by step along a process of collective study, consultation, action, and reflection on action that has continually enhanced our ability to understand the writings and to apply them. “Action, reflection and consultation” is not a slogan. The degree to which a community has understood the dynamics of these interrelated elements of a methodology of learning has determined the extent to which its efforts to implement the Plans have met with success. The various steps involved are not carried out haphazardly but within an evolving framework, the development of which has been overseen by the Universal House of Justice itself. In its 27 December 2005 message the House of Justice stated: “The elements required for a concerted effort to infuse the diverse regions of the world with the spirit of Bahá’u’lláh’s Revelation have crystallized into a framework for action that now needs only to be exploited.”⁸

In shaping this framework for action, the House of Justice also provided the instruments necessary for systematizing the learning acquired. Foremost among them is the training institute. The institute is an agency the very purpose of which is to propagate the learning that accumulates on how to apply the teachings in order to bring about the growth of the community.

Acting within the framework provided for us by the House of Justice and utilizing the training institute as the instrument of learning it is designed to be, we have come to better understand how to apply what we read in the writings to an increasing number of endeavors, gaining insights into such questions as how to create an environment that puts people in contact with the spiritual forces that are released through prayer and devotion; how to develop bonds of friendship and establish meaningful patterns of communication among people of various social backgrounds; how to make the education of the children of the world an integral part of our community life; how to create an environment that will help junior youth develop intellectually and spiritually; how to establish groups that

will serve as centers for attraction for youth from the larger society. And, of course, some of our most important insights are related to teaching: the knowledge we have acquired over the past few years about how to identify receptive populations; the insights we have gained about connecting hearts with the Word of God; the strides we have taken in becoming more systematic in our individual and collective teaching efforts.

Above all, the institute has helped us find ways of accompanying each other as we walk paths of spiritual enrichment and service. Such accompaniment occurs in the context of a worldwide conversation that allows knowledge about the process of expansion and consolidation to be generated and diffused. The participants in this ongoing conversation are all the protagonists of the Plan. More and more people join this conversation as they participate in the institute process, as they seek to translate that which they have learned into action, and as they reflect and consult on the results of their efforts. The House of Justice provides guidance that is incorporated into this conversation and gives it direction. The books of the institute organize this conversation. They record the main points and ensure that our thoughts are illumined by the relevant passages from the Writings. They help us to advance in our learning, and this learning changes the nature of what we do and say. And as the conversation on what we are learning about growth moves forward, we find answers to questions that enable us to better align our individual and collective lives with God's purpose for humanity. We increasingly become able to "analyze the lessons being learned in the field and to employ a common vocabulary to articulate [our] findings."⁹

I would like to propose here that the culture of learning which, with such extraordinary rapidity, has come to characterize the Bahá'í community over the past decade, provides the necessary context within which we can organize our other endeavors to contribute to the advancement of civilization. We should recognize, of course, that the generation, application, and diffusion of knowledge in these other areas of activity may call for more complex structures and higher degrees of formality. Still, the corresponding methodologies, no matter how sophisticated, are to take shape, I am suggesting, in the culture of a community that has set as its first priority the acquisition and diffusion of knowledge about the process of entry by troops. In other words, the capacities we need in order to make our other contributions to civilization building more effective will not be

developed separately from our learning about growth. I will try to demonstrate this point by examining the other two types of endeavor I mentioned earlier: programs of social and economic development and efforts to influence the discourses of society.

Learning About Social and Economic Development

The involvement of the Bahá'í community in social and economic development has grown enormously during the past years, both in scope and in diversity of action. I cannot possibly address the entire theme here, and that is certainly not my purpose. What I would like to do is to examine how methodologies for the generation and application of knowledge become more complex as we add efforts concerned with social and economic development to our programs of growth. I have therefore selected the experience of FUNDAEC, Fundación para la Aplicación y Enseñanza de las Ciencias, which is after all the one I am most familiar with. Please consider what I say an illustration and not a description of the Bahá'í approach to social and economic development.

FUNDAEC was born in the early 1970s within a worldwide program called at the time "Education for Development." But as creators of a Bahá'í-inspired organization, its founders were engaged in the constant study of the writings and their application to development issues, a process that led them to define their purpose as a social and economic development institution in this way: to make it possible for the masses of humanity not only to have access to information, but to participate in the generation and application of knowledge. A rigorous study of the social reality in which development-related processes are immersed made it clear to them that the way knowledge flows in society has to be re-examined.

For the most part, what may be referred to as "modern scientific knowledge" is currently generated in universities and specialized centers of the industrialized countries. Replicas of these institutions created in the so called "South" participate in this process, to whatever extent their resources will allow. The majority of the people of the world receive from this elaborate research and development system an inadequate formal education, instructions by agents of governments and nongovernmental organizations on the proper use of technological packages, and a variety of short courses on the many aspects of a modern life into which the masses of humanity are to be incorporated. They

are simultaneously subjected to the propaganda—commercial, political, and cultural—of innumerable groups and organizations that constantly compete for their attention.

No one would deny the need for highly sophisticated centers in the world dedicated to research and development in the frontiers of modern science. The need for efficient channels through which individuals and communities receive beneficial services in areas such as health, education, and production is also evident. Yet the present arrangement is hardly conducive to creating the kind of capacity in humanity that will be required to build a prosperous global society. Even when the highest levels of the government possess a coherent vision of the services provided to its people, by the time they reach their intended recipients, more often than not they end up as fragmented packages, each one addressing some isolated aspect of the multifaceted problems faced by families and communities in need of assistance. Such a fragmented approach makes capacity building virtually impossible.

This conception of the flow of knowledge is well suited to the vision of development prevalent five or six decades ago when the field came into existence. In its early years, development practice was largely concerned with foreign aid, capital accumulation, and the transfer of know-how. We all know, of course, that those early approaches to development did not bring the results hoped for, nor did subsequent attempts to modify strategies and plans. The present poverty levels worldwide and the ever increasing gap between the rich and the poor speak for themselves.

The founders of FUNDAEC decided early on that issues related to the generation, application, and flow of knowledge need to be approached with a much more sophisticated conception of development, one which recognizes that no enduring change can be brought about without the full participation of the people themselves—they must be the real protagonists of the development process. If indeed that is the conception to which one adheres, then it is no longer acceptable to view the development of a people merely as the object of academic study. Rather, development should be the object of learning of an institution that somehow belongs to the people themselves and which enables them to promote and systematize their own learning. Every developing region, FUNDAEC suggested, is in need of an institution devoted to the formal generation, application, and propagation of knowledge, not necessarily in the forefront of modern

science and technology, but in areas where the natural and social sciences must together tackle specific problems of specific people. It then set out to create such an institution in a particular region, an institution that over the years came to be called University for Integral Development. In the context of development as capacity building, the essential function of this university is research, action, and training that are related to the entire spectrum of processes of social, economic, and cultural life of the population it serves. It is not concerned with mere academic activity, but with research carried out with the participation of the population in the very spaces where they are engaged in such undertakings as agricultural and industrial production, marketing, education, socialization of values, and cultural enrichment.

In its relation to regional development, then, this university is present in almost every instance of social action, accompanying the population, systematizing existing knowledge, generating new knowledge, incorporating the results of systematic learning into programs of formal and non-formal education, and providing decision-making bodies with insights and enlightened perspective. To establish such an institution and define its mode of operation is, FUNDAEC believes, a crucial component of capacity building in any region, and a challenge that calls for creativity and the ability to innovate. Traditional models of higher education have little to offer in this respect. New parameters have to be set for both research and action. The goal is to create a social space, within which every structure—the farm, the factory, the school—serves as a dynamic center of learning.

Let me illustrate how such a university would operate in practice by describing the methodology employed by FUNDAEC in translating these ideas into concrete action. FUNDAEC began by trying to identify those practices—individual, group, and community—that together define the social, economic, political, and cultural life of the inhabitants of the region in which it operated. To do so, it analyzed some of the activities that different individuals and groups within the population carried out on a daily basis, which, once clearly defined, were grouped into sets of related chains of activity. Each set suggested the need for a corresponding learning process that could run along side it and which would help to transform daily practices so as to improve the welfare of the entire population. Learning processes were formally designed and involved action, research,

and training woven into one forward movement. This learning occurred in the very social spaces where the population engaged in the multitude of undertakings essential to its progress.

A few examples of the chains of activity identified by FUNDAEC and the corresponding learning process it set in motion for each one will serve to clarify the approach further. One of the chains of activity analyzed related to the production of crops and animals on the farm, which led to the establishment of the search for alternative systems of small farm production. The productive activities of those who do not possess even a small farm, but assign areas around the house to raising a reduced number of animals—a few pigs and chickens—required a learning process concerned with the establishment of small units of production and the promotion of group action. The chains of activity that support agricultural and animal production, such as irrigation and land preparation services, the production and distribution of seeds, and food processing, needed a learning process to which FUNDAEC referred as the establishment and strengthening of small support and service enterprises. The set of diverse actions that allow people to maintain and improve individual and community health was the origin of another learning process on community health and environmental sanitation. The analysis of the markets and the flow of goods and money in the region was the basis for the formulation of a set of interrelated actions and research activities in a learning process about marketing and the establishment, flow, and management of funds in the community and in the region. The very important set of activities related to horizontal and vertical communication inside the village, and in the region as a whole, led to the establishment of yet another learning process known as the flow of information. Observations about how children receive their cultural heritage and begin to participate in different chains of activity were the starting point for a learning process related to socialization.

Central to all of these learning processes was another one formulated around the set of practices and activities that define the formal education system. This process focused first on secondary education and eventually grew to include tertiary and post-graduate education. The research, action, and training carried out in this context were directed to effecting profound change not merely in the form but fundamentally in the content of education. One of FUNDAEC's principal concerns was the increasing superficiality of

the education received by the majority of the children and youth in the world. In most cases the result of such education is the fragmentation of the student's mind and its final outcome is compliance with the social and spiritual vacuum that characterizes present-day society. The object of the learning process, then, was to create an educational alternative for the region which would endow the students with a twofold moral purpose: to take charge of their own personal intellectual and spiritual growth and to contribute meaningfully to the transformation of society.

As FUNDAEC set about this task, it succeeded in creating programs that responded to the social, economic, and technological needs of developing regions, while at the same time imparting a scientifically rigorous, high-quality education. Its textbooks became the means not only for bringing together elements of knowledge from diverse fields in a way that proved relevant to the students' reality, but for systematizing the new knowledge being generated by the other learning processes that had been set in motion in the region. In this context, FUNDAEC's texts can be regarded as chronicles of an evolving experience aimed at transforming social reality through dynamic and effective research and the participation of an ever-greater diversity of minds. They are tools for the systematization of the lessons learned through collective action, on the one hand, and the result of that systematization, on the other.

Most notable among FUNDAEC's achievement in this respect is a six-year tutorial program called Sistema de Aprendizaje Tutorial (SAT), officially recognized by the Colombian government as fulfilling the requirements of the entire secondary-level education of the official school system. Today FUNDAEC collaborates with over thirty organizations and municipal institutions around the country in offering the SAT program to a student body of over 25,000, having already graduated some 70,000 individuals. The program is also being implemented in three other Latin American countries, with official recognition from the government in each case, and its textbooks, currently undergoing translation into English, are being adopted by nongovernmental organizations in Africa and Asia, representing a second phase in the program's thirty-year evolution.

As I mentioned before, I have used FUNDAEC as an example to illustrate how methodologies for the generation and application of knowledge used within the Bahá'í community can become more complex when applied to programs for social and

economic development. FUNDAEC is, of course, only one in the network of Bahá'í-inspired institutions, all of which are trying to address some aspect of the social and economic development of specific populations throughout the world. The watchword is again learning, and the Universal House of Justice has given the task of fostering, facilitating, and systematizing this learning to the Office of Social and Economic Development.

Learning How to Influence Contemporary Discourses

Let me now move on to the third area of activity I mentioned earlier and examine the question of knowledge generation and application in that context. Beyond the expansion and consolidation of the community and the adoption of an increasing number of undertakings that enhance the capacity of the peoples of the world to bring about their own social and economic development, the Bahá'í community pursues other kinds of activities specifically to influence humanity's collective discourses on the challenges and opportunities facing the world. Such participation involves individual Bahá'ís who contribute to these discourses either as experts in their chosen fields or through their association with governmental or nongovernmental organizations. It also includes the direct contributions of Bahá'í institutions and agencies, for example those of the Bahá'í International Community at the United Nations, through whose efforts Bahá'í thought has come to influence the global discourse on the equality of women and men, among others.

Once again, the process of consultation, action, and reflection on action provides a general methodology through which our community will learn about this kind of activity as well. But advancing the frontiers of knowledge in specific areas of human endeavor, whether we are involved in them as individuals or institutions, demands the use of rigorous and formal methodologies appropriate to the fields themselves, including the evolving methods that are being developed in the forefront of each one. This is a subject that requires a great deal of discussion among Bahá'ís. I can only present a couple of ideas that I hope you will find useful.

Let me begin by reading a few quotations that are probably well known to you. "Knowledge is as wings to man's life and a ladder for his ascent," are Bahá'u'lláh's words, "Its acquisition is incumbent upon everyone."¹⁰ And 'Abdu'l-Bahá states: "Let the loved ones of God, whether young or old, whether male or female, each according to

his capabilities, bestir themselves and spare no efforts to acquire the various current branches of knowledge, both spiritual and secular, and of the arts”¹¹. And also: “Make every effort to acquire the advanced knowledge of the day, and strain every nerve to carry forward the divine civilization. . . . Included must be promotion of the arts, the discovery of new wonders, the expansion of trade, and the development of industry.”¹² Shoghi Effendi explains that “It is just as important for the Bahá’í young boys and girls to become properly educated in colleges of high standing as it is to be spiritually developed.”¹³ The believers should be urged, he indicated, “to make detailed inquiry into the various branches of contemporary learning—arts and sciences alike—and to concentrate their attention on serving the general interests of the people.”¹⁴ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi encouraged individuals to study such fields as the physical sciences, medicine, agriculture, industrial sciences, journalism, philosophy, history, economics, and sociology.

And you are also familiar with the statement of the Universal House of Justice that young Bahá’ís

must move towards the front ranks of the professions, trades, arts and crafts which are necessary to the further progress of humankind—this to ensure that the spirit of the Cause will cast its illumination on all these important areas of human endeavor. Moreover, while aiming at mastering the unifying concepts and swiftly advancing technologies of this era of communications, they can, indeed they must, also guarantee the transmittal to the future of those skills which will preserve the marvelous, indispensable achievements of the past. The transformation which is to occur in the functioning of society will certainly depend to a great extent on the effectiveness of the preparations the youth make for the world they will inherit.¹⁵

The House of Justice cautions youth, however, not to absorb unquestioningly all that they are taught. Theirs is the difficult challenge to evaluate what they learn in the light of the Bahá’í teachings.

The Teachings of Bahá’u’lláh throw light on so many aspects of human life and knowledge that a Bahá’í must learn, earlier than most, to weigh the information that is given to him rather than to accept it blindly. A Bahá’í has the advantage

of the Divine Revelation for this Age, which shines like a searchlight on so many problems that baffle modern thinkers; he must therefore develop the ability to learn everything from those around him, showing proper humility before his teachers, but always relating what he hears to the Bahá'í teachings, for they will enable him to sort out the gold from the dross of human error.¹⁶

To use insights gained from religion to influence a particular field of endeavor that is based on certain assumptions and guided by certain approaches—some of which mirror a materialistic worldview—is no simple task. Insights offered by religion cannot be thrust arbitrarily into the discourse of a particular discipline. Whatever their source of inspiration, ideas must be examined according to scientific methods and standards, producing change that can be articulated and justified within the domain of science. The opposite, of course, is also true. Insights gleaned from various disciplines of human knowledge cannot be arbitrarily imposed on the interpretations and practices of the Bahá'í community. So, then, the question is, How do Bahá'ís, who are working in the context of a long-standing historical disagreement between science and religion, and who are often immersed in contemporary languages and discourses that reflect this conflict, demonstrate in practice, in whatever the field of human endeavor they operate, the principle of the harmony of science and religion?

Our writings, of course, emphatically state that there is no conflict between science and religion. “Any religious belief which is not conformable with scientific proof and investigation is superstition, for true science is reason and reality, and religion is essentially reality and pure reason; therefore, the two must correspond,”¹⁷ states ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. “We may think of science as one wing and religion as the other; a bird needs two wings for flight, one alone would be useless. Any religion that contradicts science, or that is opposed to it, is only ignorance—for ignorance is the opposite of knowledge.”¹⁸

In this light, I would like to propose that advancing knowledge in different fields of endeavor demands a careful examination of our notions of science and religion and requires an open dialogue with theoreticians and practitioners from various fields on the nature of science and religion and their relationship. It was precisely with these thoughts in mind that the Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity, known as ISGP, took up as its initial task the promotion of a discourse on science, religion, and development. ISGP,

with which I am happy to be associated, is an educational and research organization created to explore the material and spiritual foundations of knowledge, as well as the processes of social advancement to achieve positive and enduring change for the betterment of the world. There is, of course, already a growing conversation about science and religion worldwide, but ISGP decided to anchor the discourse it is promoting in the process of social and economic development of the peoples of the world, in an effort to address in a very specific way the role that both science and religion can play in building an ever-advancing civilization.

In extending an invitation to individuals to join the discourse, usually those from the academic sector or from government and nongovernmental organizations, we share with them a set of documents that describes science and religion as two systems of knowledge and practice that overlap and complement each other. This statement—that science and religion are two systems of knowledge and practice that overlap and complement each other—is not, of course, intended to be a definition of either science or religion; nevertheless, despite its simplicity, or maybe because of it, it has given rise to a rich conversation, full of insights into the nature of the interaction between the two, specifically as it relates to civilization building. What is more, it has endowed us with a language that facilitates the analysis of the two systems in comparable ways, enabling us to explore those instances in which they overlap or complement each other and to understand better how the knowledge generated by one can advance the other.

The response to our initiative has been uniformly positive. There are a great many theoreticians and practitioners in the field who acknowledge that the theories and plans of the past decades of development, no matter how thorough and elaborate in design, failed to bring material prosperity to the vast majority of the inhabitants of the planet. Many see the present situation as the failure of materialism. Materialistic theories of development that focus on economic growth and the accumulation of wealth, they agree, have fallen short of their high aspirations, largely because they have not taken into account the ethical, the cultural, and the spiritual dimensions of the life of the populations they have meant to serve. However, most of the voices calling for change do not seem to offer any viable solutions. To demonstrate, even to those who acknowledge the existing vacuum in development theory and practice, the value of religion as a system of

knowledge that can be employed in harmony with science to propel civilization is a challenging task, to say the least, but one that we are gradually learning to tackle. An immediate tendency is to suggest that we should replace the word *religion* with *spirituality*, perhaps to make the discourse more universally appealing. But the truth is that there is not much consensus about the meaning of spirituality either. To create a discourse that can accommodate increasing numbers, we have found that we need to explore with participants prevalent assumptions about science and religion and spirituality, as well as certain misconceptions, and examine carefully how science and religion as two systems of knowledge and practice contribute to the advancement of civilization. As we learn to converse with our partners on these issues, we also clarify some of our own notions, which are openly and unapologetically inspired by the Bahá'í teachings.

We have learned that, in order to elicit meaningful participation, the discourse should avoid giving the impression that either science or religion is a subsystem of the other. To speak of religion as a subsystem of science—that is, to suggest that whatever truth expounded today by religion about spiritual phenomena will later be explained by science—is not acceptable to many of those who contribute to our endeavor and who have strong religious faith. In no way is religion to be seen as that aspect of human existence which gives partial answers to mysteries that will be unraveled for us later with the progress of science. Yet the opposite position is equally untenable. The notion that, because religion arises out of God's Revelation, and because God is all knowing, it must contain all scientific truth, does not help us much to advance in understanding the relationship between the two. The statement that the system we are calling religion is the response of human beings to reading the book of "Revelation", in the same way that the system we call science is the reading by human beings of the book of "Creation", tends to open the way for more fruitful discussion. To say that science is a subsystem of religion, in the sense that human beings can discover the workings of the physical universe by reading religious scriptures, it can be easily argued, is to deny the value of science.

Our claim that science and religion can be explored as two overlapping and complementary systems of knowledge and practice also sets us apart from those who see them as totally separate from one another. The view that the truths enshrined in science

and religion cover two completely separate and mutually exclusive areas of existence may be valid, but mostly at the level of application. It is quite valid, for example, to state that science leads to discoveries, the use of which it cannot prescribe by itself, and that it is religion that makes possible moral decisions about the proper use of the fruits of science. But this view proves to be limited when one considers, on the one hand, the metaphysical component of the paradigms within which scientific activity takes place and, on the other, the vast number of questions of physical, social, and psychological existence that religion tries to address in its own way. In our discussions with partner organizations, while acknowledging that the two possess certain distinct characteristics and are concerned with specific aspect of reality, we have also underscored the parallels that exist between them and their commonalities, commonalities that arise from the fact that a sharp distinction between matter and spirit is itself impossible. This way of thinking about science and religion has allowed us to systematically widen the circle of those eager to explore with us how the two systems can be brought to bear on the process of the social and economic development of the people of the world.

The discourse is presently being promoted in ten countries. The way it unfolds in each depends, of course, on the social reality in which it is emerging. From among the ten, Brazil and India are the two that have been able to reach the largest number of people. As we engage in conversations with our partner organizations in these countries, we encounter areas in which research needs to be undertaken. We have identified governance and decision-making, education, economic activity, and technological development as broad themes along which our explorations need to be channelled. Of course, since ISPG is small and its resources few, we are only beginning to examine such matters. It may prove useful to take a few minutes and look at one of the research-action projects we are currently pursuing so that you can see through an example what ISGP is doing.

It became clear from our conversations with development organizations engaged in the discourse in India that they hoped to achieve at least two goals from their participation: first, to increase their own effectiveness by expanding their vision and by improving their methodologies, and second, to clarify the nature of programs that employ insights from religion, as well as scientific knowledge and methods. The learning

acquired as a result of their efforts, they were convinced, could be used to influence the direction of social policy in the country. In this light, ISGP was requested by the organizations to define the parameters of a research project that would help them to articulate in a structured way their own experiences in applying spiritual principles to their daily work. As a first step, we prepared a document in which we presented some of the broadest aims of development and the challenges that organizations face as they strive to reach these aims. Participants have been asked to reflect on their own experience and to describe how they try to overcome the challenges encountered in their day-to-day work in realizing the aims presented.

A detailed description of the document is, of course, beyond the scope of this talk. I would only like to show you how it tries to help the participants think about the implications of certain spiritual principles for their operations through a series of concrete topics. The document begins by affirming that it is impossible to bring about change without the determination and the will to struggle for change. In fact the aim of most development organizations that wish to go beyond the present materialistic conceptions of development is to contribute to the empowerment of a people and to strengthen in them the will to transform their social environment. Yet, struggle cannot become an end in itself. Most organizations, whether explicitly or not, cherish the ideal of a society which embodies the principle of the oneness of humankind, a society that is free from the prejudices of race, nationality, ethnicity, class, and gender that have afflicted humanity throughout its history. In this light, the document encourages participants to reflect on how they deal in their programs with the apparent tension between the spiritual principle of unity and the need for individuals and groups to struggle for their own advancement and the progress of their communities. What are the characteristics of the kind of struggle that leads not to violence and perpetual conflict, but to a society which embodies the principle of oneness? How do we make sure that raising consciousness does not result in the narrow struggle for one's own interests, but in concern for the common good, avoiding in this way the replication of today's structures of oppression? How do we assure that the emphasis placed on unity and oneness does not reinforce passive habits of acceptance and resignation but rather strengthens the will to champion justice?

The document suggests that participants seek answers to these questions by examining the programs of their organizations in terms of principles such as reciprocity, cooperation, and interconnectedness, both at the level of theory and practice. What direction do they try to give to the struggle in which they accompany the people? How do they motivate people to arise and dedicate themselves to the improvement of their social environment? The document asks them to reflect on the statement by the Guardian that “Man is organic with the world. His inner life molds the environment and is itself also deeply affected by it,”¹⁹ and to consider how they can move past the false dichotomy so prevalent today between the individual and society. It invites them to think about how their programs contribute to building the capacity of people to generate and apply knowledge. What are the sources of knowledge that they use for these programs? It explicitly asks them to reflect on their organization’s conception of the human being, on its notion of freedom and the question of work.

Concluding Comments

I apologize if the constraints of time have obliged me to go through this example rather hastily. But what I hope my entire presentation has conveyed is that there is a degree of coherence that we must strive to achieve between all the areas of activity in which we are engaged: between our endeavors to promote the growth of the community, and our projects of social and economic development, and our efforts to influence the discourses under way in various fields of human endeavor. Achieving this degree of coherence will depend, in no small measure, on our ability to develop methods for the generation and application of knowledge at different levels of formality and complexity, appropriate to the area of activity concerned. Yet, irrespective of the specific methods we develop and apply, they will all need to emerge out of a culture of learning that is characterized by action, reflection and consultation. To achieve this coherence, to develop appropriate methods, to generate and systematize the vast amount of knowledge needed to build the civilization that will be the fairest fruit of Bahá’u’lláh’s Revelation, it has been my intention to suggest, is an aim of great relevance to Bahá’í scholarly activity. The examples that I have provided in trying to demonstrate this are not necessarily the best ones, but are the ones with which I am most familiar as a result of my own experience. I hope, however, that you will find my suggestion worthy of consideration.

Notes

- ¹ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, “Star of the West”, vol. 7, no. 18, p. 178, published in *The Compilation of Compilations*, vol. I (Australia: Bahá’í Publications, 1991), p. 203.
- ² Bahá’u’lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Íqán* (Wilmette: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 2003), p. 5.
- ³ *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh* (Wilmette: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1976), XXXII, p. 76.
- ⁴ Bahá’u’lláh, *Prayers and Meditations* (Wilmette: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1987 ed.), LVI, p. 83.
- ⁵ Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá’u’lláh: Selected Letters* (Wilmette: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1991), p. 43.
- ⁶ Ridván 1996 message written by the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá’ís of the world, *Turning Point: Selected Messages of the Universal House of Justice and Supplementary Material 1996-2006* (West Palm Beach, FL: Palabra Publications, 2006), p. 31.
- ⁷ Message dated 9 November 1993 written by the Universal House of Justice to all National Spiritual Assemblies, cited in *Turning Point*, p. 227.
- ⁸ Message dated 27 December 2005 written by the Universal House of Justice to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors, published in *Turning Point*, p. 195.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 195.
- ¹⁰ *Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas* (Wilmette: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1988), p. 51.
- ¹¹ Tablet of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, translated from the Arabic and cited in *The Compilation of Compilations*, vol. I, p. 374.
- ¹² Tablet of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, translated from the Persian and cited in *The Compilation of Compilations*, vol. I, p. 6.
- ¹³ A letter dated 28 November 1926 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, cited in *Compilation of Compilations*, vol. 1, p. 297.
- ¹⁴ Letter dated 30 January 1926 written by Shoghi Effendi to the Spiritual Assemblies in Iran, translated from the Persian for a compilation on Bahá’í scholarship, prepared by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice, February 1995, no. 20.
- ¹⁵ Message dated 8 May 1985 written by the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá’í youth of the world, published in *Messages from the Universal House of Justice 1963-1986: The Third Epoch of the Formative Age* (Wilmette: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1996), p. 669.
- ¹⁶ Message dated 10 June 1966 written by the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá’í youth in every Land, published in *Messages from the Universal House of Justice*, p. 94.
- ¹⁷ *The Promulgation of Universal Peace: Talks Delivered by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá during His Visit to the United States and Canada in 1912* (Wilmette: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1982), p. 107.
- ¹⁸ *Paris Talks: Addresses Given by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in 1911* (London: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1995), p. 130.
- ¹⁹ Letter dated 17 February 1933 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, published in *Conservation of the Earth’s Resources*, comp. Research Department of the Universal House of Justice (London: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1990) p. 15.