

# Learning to Read Social Reality in the Light of the Revelation<sup>1</sup>

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## *Abstract*

Bahá'í contribution to discourses concerned with the betterment of the world and the advancement of civilization is a vast field of diverse activity, and it is by no means the intention of this article to address it in any comprehensive way. The purpose of this discussion is to make a modest offering to understanding one aspect of this endeavor—learning to read social reality in light of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh—as it relates to the thinking behind the programs of the Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity. The Institute works in a relatively narrow area of this field to learn systematically about enhancing the capacity of individuals and groups to participate in some of the prevalent discourses of society.

## *Resumé*

La contribution bahá'íe au discours portant sur l'amélioration du monde et l'avancement de la civilisation est un champ d'activités vaste et diversifié, et l'auteur ne vise nullement à en faire une analyse exhaustive. Il vise plutôt à contribuer modestement à la compréhension de l'un des aspects de cette entreprise, soit d'ap-

prendre à interpréter la réalité sociale à la lumière de la Révélation de Bahá'u'lláh, en rapport avec la réflexion qui sous-tend les programmes de l'Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity (Institut d'études sur la prospérité mondiale). L'Institut se concentre sur un secteur relativement restreint de ce champ d'activités en vue de faire un apprentissage systématique sur l'amélioration de la capacité des individus et des groupes à participer à certains discours dominants de la société.

## *Resumen*

La contribución bahá'í a los discursos relacionados con el mejoramiento del mundo y el avance de la civilización es un vasto campo de diversa actividad, y no es la intención de este artículo de tratar ese tema de una manera exhaustiva. El propósito de esta discusión es hacer una contribución modesta a la comprensión de un aspecto en este esfuerzo, de aprender a interpretar la realidad social a la luz de la Revelación de Bahá'u'lláh, en su relación con el pensamiento detrás de los programas del Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity (Instituto de Estudios en Prosperidad Global). El Instituto se concentra en una area relativamente pequeña en este campo para aprender sistemáticamente acerca de la mejora en la capacidad de individuos y grupos para participar en algunos de los discursos predominantes de la sociedad.

The Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity (ISGP) was created by the Universal House of Justice in 1999 as an educational and research organization whose purpose is to explore the material and spiritual foundations of knowledge, as well as processes of social advancement, to achieve positive

1 Based on a talk given at the Association for Bahá'í Studies 38th Annual Conference, Toronto 2014.

and enduring change for the betterment of the world. ISGP's early efforts were focused on engaging with a number of nongovernmental organizations and development agencies that sought to explore the constructive and complementary roles that both science and religion must play in processes of social and economic development.

Its first initiative was the promotion of a discourse on science, religion, and development, launched in India in 2000 and later extended to several other countries in Asia, Latin America, and Africa. In 2008 ISGP initiated another line of action that focused on raising capacity among a large number of university students and young adults to contribute to contemporary discourses related to the betterment of the world in a framework that draws from both science and religion. Toward this end, ISGP now conducts a series of undergraduate and graduate seminars in an expanding number of countries, as it continues to explore methods, approaches, and instruments with which it can contribute directly to a growing range of contemporary discourses.

#### EXAMINING EXISTING KNOWLEDGE

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

then, does present knowledge belong to the childhood stage of social development and to what extent is this knowledge already the harbinger of the stage of maturity?

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

In following this line of questioning, ISGP has been cognizant of the dangers of the extreme, namely, to reject all the accomplishments of humankind as childish, irrelevant, or wrong-headed, and hence to dream about the appearance of the mature sciences of the future. This is certainly not what happens in the life of the individual as he or she passes through various stages of development. During childhood we develop many elements of our character and personality and

many intellectual tools that we will use throughout our lives. We do not need to throw these out as we grow up; rather we develop them and build on them.

The implications that this kind of thinking has for ISGP's endeavors are clear. We have to encourage those with whom we collaborate to have full mastery over the relevant fields of knowledge, yet approach these fields critically. The level of our acceptance of any set of statements will thus naturally vary from field to field. In the physical sciences, for example, one might believe that in a distant future some other powerful theory will emerge that will yield far more insights into physical reality than, say, quantum mechanics. But such a theory would need not prove quantum mechanics wrong; it would simply define the range of its validity, even as quantum physics did for Newtonian physics. Thus we would approach today's theories of physics and their applications with a great deal of confidence.

When it comes to the field of education, to take another example, with its propensity to follow fads and fashions, one might be far more critical. One would not, of course, reject everything offhand but would study prevalent theories carefully and gain as many insights from them as they can offer without becoming rigidly attached to them. The capacity to do so—which includes the capacity to examine in light of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation the assumptions underlying a given set of statements that claim to

describe or explain some aspect of reality, particularly social reality—continues to be foremost in the thinking of ISGP as we try to contribute to the capacity of individuals and groups to participate in the discourses of society.

#### ANALYZING ASSUMPTIONS

This task of analyzing and questioning assumptions is not a simple one and cannot be reduced to a formula. As Bahá'ís we do not dismiss a theory simply because we find that some of its assumptions are not in agreement with the Bahá'í teachings. For example, many scientists carrying out research on the intricacies of the theory of evolution hold that the human being is an advanced animal, whereas the Bahá'í teachings do not accord with this assumption. The Bahá'í teachings assert that the essential reality of the human being, unlike that of other mammalian life, is the soul, a spiritual reality that is responsible for making the human being the most exalted creation in the physical universe. But this assumption on our part does not imply that we would look at the theory of evolution with suspicion.

When the progressive mapping of the genomes of different species allows us to study the relationship among the species, we would not deny the findings that vindicate this extraordinary theory that explains so many observations. We would argue, however, that the assumption of the nonexistence of the soul is not necessary for the success of the theory

of evolution, and that scientists who make the assumption that there is no metaphysical reality are inferring conclusions that are outside their own sphere of competence. We could then comment on certain parts of the theory to show that it is possible to articulate additional statements that would not contradict the theory itself, but would go beyond it.

For example, in response to the statement that “as complexity grows in the process of evolution, a condition is reached where consciousness and powers of the mind emerge” we may add that “as complexity grows, a condition is reached in which the powers of the soul with its own independent existence begin to appear in the human being.” Our additional or supplemental statements would thus not be contradictory to what has been established; rather, statements that express an associational relationship between the soul and body go further than the commonly held scientific theory and in a direction that science has no need to go and, in terms of accepted scientific theory, should not go.

To take another example, our conviction that competition is not the organizing principle of society does not mean that we cannot appreciate and benefit from studying the great advances in the field of economics based on the principle of competition, which seems to explain so much of how contemporary society operates. In short, even while disagreeing with one assumption, one may find another

premise quite appealing, for example, the principle of diminishing returns.<sup>2</sup>

#### THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SCIENCE AND RELIGION

The way we as Bahá'ís view and interact with humanity's growing body of knowledge depends to a large extent on our understanding of issues surrounding the relationship between science and religion, and this concern gives rise to a second set of questions that those of us engaged in the work of ISGP have had to address. Our position in this respect is, of course, defined by the Bahá'í principle of harmony between science and religion. But we have found that there are a number of ways this principle can be understood by Bahá'ís according to individual views about science and religion.

For example, since the Bahá'í texts state that Bahá'u'lláh had access to all knowledge, one might infer that it is possible to find all the verities of science by reading the Bahá'í scriptures, assuming, of course, that one could become sufficiently informed about the limitless levels of meaning contained therein. Some Bahá'ís might also support, usually inadvertently, the secular position that the truths of religion will finally be explained by science, or that the language of religion is a useful

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2 In general terms, the principle of diminishing returns states that if one factor of production is increased while other factors are held constant, the output per unit will eventually diminish.

but pre-scientific way of explaining things that science will gradually become capable of explaining.

A more widespread view—based, we might presume, on a partial reading of certain statements by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá—seems to separate science and religion sharply from each other. According to this view, science, in its empiricist version, discovers truths about the universe and society, whereas religion provides the values needed to exercise science properly and to put the gifts of science—for example, technology, knowledge about systems and processes, and scientific explanations of human behavior—to good use.

Without entering into debate on the merits of such views, we at ISGP decided that they are not adequate for our purposes. As it turned out, a deceptively simple statement already put forward by a Bahá’í-inspired organization (FUNDAEC, *Fundación para la Aplicación y Enseñanza de las Ciencias*<sup>3</sup>) that describes science and religion as two complementary and overlapping systems of knowledge and practice has served us well in our subsequent explorations.<sup>4</sup> To characterize science and religion in these terms seems to provide us with a language that facilitates the analysis of the two systems in comparable ways,

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3 In English, “The Foundation for the Application and Teaching of the Sciences.”

4 The implications of this statement are elaborated by Farzam Arbab in his contribution to the book *The Lab, the Temple, and the Market*. See pages 185–87.

and further enables us to focus on the role of knowledge in the civilization-building process to which ISGP intends to modestly contribute.

As our ideas about the harmony of science and religion were taking shape, we decided to promote a discourse on science, religion, and development with theoreticians and practitioners in the field. There is, of course, already a growing conversation about science and religion worldwide, but we decided to anchor the discourse in the process of the social and economic development of the peoples of the world, hoping that we would gain insights into the way the two systems contribute to the advancement of civilization. Our effort evoked encouraging responses in the few countries where the discourse was launched, particularly in India, Uganda, and Brazil. But soon we had to face the limitations of human resources in the Bahá’í community to sustain and coordinate the many activities that were emerging. The urgent need for more individuals to come forward to participate in the discourses of society became readily apparent.

#### REDEFINING SOME CRITICAL CONCEPTS

The experience of promoting a discourse on science, religion, and development was a rich source of learning for what we at ISGP had to do in our capacity-building efforts. Some of the concepts we had discussed in the context of this discourse were essential

elements of the conceptual framework that would continue to guide all our future efforts. Faith, reason, rationality, and objectivity are examples of certain concepts that we felt we had to reexamine if we, together with our collaborators, were to participate effectively in the discourses of society.

## FAITH

A definition of faith given by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in the context of religion would have to guide our conversations with those who perceive faith and reason as being in opposition to one another. Faith, understood as conscious knowledge together with the practice of good deeds, by no means implies passivity, blind imitation, or ignorance.<sup>5</sup> Faith in the existence of order in the universe, the laws of which are accessible to the human mind, is the sort of conscious knowledge essential to the practice of science. No one would argue that the certainty with which scientists hold this article of faith is the result of "fuzzy thinking" or of deep-rooted psychological needs. Most view this sort of faith confirmed by the extraordinary success of the system of knowledge and practice we call science. Then why—it seems equally reasonable to ask—would faith in the inherent nobility of the human being, in the strength of justice, in the power of unity, or in a vision

<sup>5</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá states, "By faith is meant, first, conscious knowledge, and second, the practice of good deeds" (*Tablets of 'Abdu'l-Bahá Abbas*: Volume I, 549).

of transcendence above the animal condition be the outcome of blind imitation, irrational thinking, or plain ignorance?

## REASON

The Bahá'í concept of religion clearly demands the full employment of the human faculty we call "reason" in the generation and application of knowledge with which religion is concerned. Certainly, the members of the Bahá'í community employ the tools of logic and reason, such as analysis, inference, contextualization, justification, induction and deduction, in their reading of the revealed Word, and in the articulation of the learning that is generated from the application of the teachings in day-to-day practice.

As an example, let us take the concept of the equality of men and women, a fundamental truth about human reality articulated in the Bahá'í Writings. The Bahá'í community accepts the statement that the reality of a human being is his or her soul and that the soul has no gender, race, color, nationality, or social class; that all human beings are created equal in the sight of God. Having accepted this, Bahá'ís have striven since the inception of the Faith to express this verity in the practices of the community and in their efforts to contribute to the life of society. Has not this effort been an entirely rational one, and has it not employed the various powers of reason and some of the methods of science?

Here, I should emphasize a point I

have already mentioned. To say that Bahá'ís use scientific knowledge and methods in the application of the teachings to the life of our community and toward the progress of society does not mean, according to my understanding, that science and religion are to be conflated into one amorphous body of knowledge and practice. The intention of our endeavors is neither to measure religion with the yardstick of science nor to bring religion into the domain of science. Science and religion are two separate systems, each with its own body of knowledge and its own set of tools and insights. Any attempt to give a complete account of reality in terms of one or the other will inevitably lead to false reductions. But this insistence on the fact that the two systems are distinct does not imply that we should compartmentalize our lives accordingly—the “I” who is a member of the Bahá'í community and the “I” who is a member of the scientific community. The governing principle in our individual lives—and, of course, in our collective life—is coherence and, as we have noted, complementarity between the spiritual and the material. In the context of this discussion, coherence implies that we would not force a separation between the insights we gain from science and the insights we gain from religion. These insights interact in our minds and help us advance in our understanding of reality as a whole.

## OBJECTIVITY

At ISGP we constantly remind ourselves that “objectivity” does not imply “truth,” as the concept has to do with methods of inquiry and not with the essence of reality. There is a vast range of phenomena in this world that can and should be studied through the application of methods that adhere strictly to scientific objectivity. But there is a far vaster set of phenomena to which scientific objectivity does not apply. In the study of parts of this “extended reality,” as Thomas Nagel calls it (*The View from Nowhere*), what may be considered subjectivity has to enter with force. And great parts of this extended reality do not lend themselves to study by human beings at all.

## WORKING WITH UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

The nature of human knowledge, harmony between science and religion, faith, reason, coherence between the spiritual and the material, and objectivity are all ideas that ISGP discusses time and again as it tries to contribute to various efforts to build capacity in individuals to participate in the discourses of society. This brief article can hardly go into the details of the few programs we have devised for this purpose. Many Bahá'ís have probably heard of, and some may have participated in, the courses and seminars that ISGP is developing for university students, at both undergraduate and graduate levels. What does seem important to mention here are a few of

the things we have learned from our conversations in these courses and seminars.

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

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

I should mention here that the framework that governs participation in the discourses of society is not something entirely new or divorced from the framework that governs activity in other areas in which the Bahá'í community is engaged, particularly growth and social action. One major goal of all these efforts—to some aspects of which ISGP is contributing—is to enhance a number of interrelated capabilities in the believers that would enable them to focus sizable energy on the twin processes of expansion and consolidation, and at the same time assist interested individuals to lend their talents to social action and to further in society certain discourses concerned with the advancement of civilization. Courses and seminars offered by ISGP for university students thus attempt to address the challenge of building capacity to participate in the discourses of society to whatever extent possible.

#### AREAS OF INQUIRY

For some time now we have been thinking about tackling the question of research in certain areas of inquiry. I would like to say a few words about this aspect of our work and, in that context, discuss a few other fundamental questions we at ISGP have had to consider, especially those which seem relevant to the topic at hand. Our initiative involves the development of capacity to describe and analyze, in the light of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation, certain global social phenomena. Of

course, this is a vast area of endeavor that can be approached in any number of ways, although our own capacity and the size of resources at our disposal impose limitations on the kind of choices we can make.

As we have now learned in relation to so many endeavors, it is only wise for us to start small and gradually add more complexity to our work. It seemed clear to us from the beginning that ISGP could not explore broad disciplines of knowledge—such as history, medicine, education, or economics—but could help individuals and small groups analyze the evolution of thought about a set of interrelated issues associated with themes currently relevant to the life of humanity.

An initial review of some pressing issues led us to topics such as the alleviation of poverty, the movement of populations from one geographic area to another, women's health, the growth and development of cities, peace and justice in societies in transition, and the role played by mass media in shaping culture and forming public opinion. We then decided to choose one of these themes and discover a means whereby a group of people grounded in the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith could go about describing the evolving understanding of humanity on these critical issues. How would they study systematically the many facets of a given social phenomenon, and, through consultation and reflection, develop a profound understanding of it? To begin the process, we chose the theme "Global

Movement of Populations."

It is important to emphasize here that what we would like a group of interested individuals to do with our help is not to attempt field research on some aspect of migration in relation to a specific population. For now, we are only concerned with a first step in research, in forming as thoroughly as possible a picture of the state of knowledge in an area of inquiry. The material for the study of our group, then, would be the studies conducted by others, their observations, their thoughts, and their conclusions.

This approach might sound like a literature review in a university course, but our task is really far more complex. The question before us is this: If a group of people with training in relevant fields examines the body of observations made about the phenomenon in question, scrutinizes the analyses already offered by others, sorts through their conclusions, and at the same time explores the Bahá'í Writings for ideas that shed light on the issues at hand, will their understanding of the phenomenon be greater than prevalent understanding? Will they bring an appreciable number of new insights into the area of inquiry because they benefit from the light of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings?

There are different possible answers to this question. One is, "Don't bring religion into science!" which, as I have already explained, is not what we intend to do. The other is, "Of course they will!" But then a whole set of issues related to capacity needs to

be addressed. Here are a few examples of such issues.

It seems important that the group engaged in an area of inquiry avoid the simplistic problem-solution mentality: "Humanity has such-and-such a problem; our task is to look in the Bahá'í Writings and come up with a solution." This kind of mindset is not the most appropriate for inquiry into the pressing issues we are facing. There are, of course, many principles and concepts in the Bahá'í teachings that need to be brought to bear on any one of the problems of humanity. But these principles have to be applied, and fruitful application necessarily involves a long process in which many different actors must cooperate. Further, identifying the principles that must govern such a learning process is only one among the many challenges that have to be met. Thus, a mindset according to which enunciation of principles is equated with "giving solutions" will also fall short of helping the kind of inquiry we are proposing.

The Universal House of Justice has encouraged the community to be present in "the many social spaces in which thinking about policies evolve . . . so that they can, as occasions permit, offer generously, unconditionally and with utmost humility the teachings of the Faith and their experience in applying them as a contribution to the betterment of society" (Letter, 4 Jan. 2009). How to offer insights from the Writings with both humility and conviction is a question that all Bahá'ís face.

Clearly, a "humble posture of learning" is rooted in a consciousness of our limited comprehension of the Writings together with the limited experience we have in applying them. But at the same time, Bahá'ís are exhorted to have an unshakeable faith that Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation is indeed a never-ending source of insight and guidance. The combination of such humility with such belief can, we hope, enable those engaged in an area of inquiry to examine the social phenomenon in question from a fresh perspective.

#### THROUGH THE LENS OF A FRESH PERSPECTIVE

But what do we really mean by a fresh perspective? This is clearly not a question we can answer easily; it is precisely what ISGP has set out to learn. But a couple of examples may give an indication of what our efforts to bring the light of the Revelation to illumine our understanding may look like as we study and analyze a social phenomenon.

Let us consider the views we hold about the present world order. The principle of the oneness of humankind, we know, is not a mere call for cooperation among peoples and nations. It implies an organic change in the very structure of society. As Bahá'ís, we anticipate change in the life of the individual and in the relationships that exist among individuals, communities, and institutions. We are also certain that the economic, social, and political

structures of the world will undergo profound transformation. The global movement of populations, which has assumed significant proportions in recent decades, is certainly contributing to this transformation. The studies of this phenomenon available today clearly acknowledge the significant processes of change that are in motion. Yet one can hardly find a study carried out in a paradigm of change informed by the Bahá'í Writings.

For example, there is much said in favor of geographic mobility because it improves the lives of selected groups or contributes to the creation of wealth at the global level and thus strengthens the existing global economic systems. There is also the possibility of an opposite perspective, an analysis that demonstrates the detrimental effects on a country of losing trained human resources and wealth because of migration.

But how would one examine this phenomenon through the lens of justice, a view that does not excuse injustice locally, nationally, or internationally? And what insights would one gain by examining the effects of global movements of people if one were aware of the principle of the oneness of humankind and of the resulting global civilization that Bahá'ís believe is destined to emerge—not in the sense of globalization as it is defined today, but the Bahá'í vision of a global commonwealth as portrayed in the authoritative Bahá'í texts? This kind of thinking has set us on a search for what we may call “an ethical

orientation to the field informed by an understanding of justice and the oneness of humanity” (*Guiding Document* 3). In an evolving working document that is intended to guide our efforts in this area, we at ISGP have written the following note to ourselves:

In view of the fact that the Bahá'í teachings speak directly to many issues related to human mobility, we must necessarily offer thoughts on the normative questions associated with this phenomenon. The implications of the principle of oneness, for example, challenge the conceptual basis of state controls on human movement. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá has written: “All the world is man’s birthplace. These boundaries and outlets have been devised by man. In the creation, such boundaries and outlets were not assigned . . . but some of the souls, from personal motives and selfish interests, have divided each one of these continents and considered a certain part as their own country. God has set up no frontier between France and Germany; they are continuous” (*Selections* 300). Notwithstanding the radical implications of this and other principles, we know that Bahá'u'lláh's vision will not be realized through “the subversion of the existing foundations of society,” but rather by seeking to “broaden its basis, to remold its institutions in a manner consonant with the needs of

an ever-changing world" (*World Order* 41). Therefore, as we introduce normative considerations into our analysis we will aim do so with an exploratory tone, instead of prescribing any narrow course of action (*Guiding Document* 3).

Let us now consider another set of convictions that underlie all the endeavors taken by ISGP: our view of human nature. The Bahá'í belief in the primacy of the spiritual dimension of the human being is not rooted in a naïve attitude toward existence; Bahá'ís have not closed their eyes to the cruelty, injustice, oppression, and thirst for power that permeate human relations. But how will these forces be overcome if humanity insists on building society according to the dictates of our lower, materialistic nature?

Among the diverse questions that emerge from the two main concerns of research on the theme of global movement of populations—namely, why do people move, and what happens when they move—one can hardly find any answer that does not touch on one's conception of human nature. What are people's aspirations? What motivates them to move? What do they expect to get out of geographic mobility? How do they deal with change once they have moved? How do they build new communities?

One of our assumptions, which we invite others to consider and examine, is that a more complete concept of the nature of the human being—an understanding that benefits both from

scientific findings and relevant teachings of the Bahá'í Faith—can provide new insights into these questions. The Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, we believe, provides us with a lens through which we can see, recognize, and explain behavior that is largely ignored by research based solely on materialistic assumptions, though such a perspective need not discount all insights generated under those assumptions.

What is currently considered normal human conduct is shaped by the forces operating in what the authoritative Bahá'í texts allude to as an age of transition. Insights are needed that help explain the forces that motivate the human soul, forces that can, when tapped into, invigorate and utilize capacities that go largely unnoticed in the majority of today's society. This is the purpose of research carried out by an organization such as ISGP: to generate knowledge that can help transform social reality. If we learn to do it effectively, we should be able to help groups overcome the contradictions of those who see no alternative but to try to channel selfish desires and egotistical forces toward the collective good.

To illustrate this idea, let us return to the question of why people move. The underlying assumption in the prevailing discourse on migration is that material inequality between countries is one of the main forces driving human movement, and most research focuses on the hopes and aspirations of those who decide to leave their homes in search of a better life. But

what about those who choose to stay in spite of difficult material conditions? Perhaps an examination of the rationale behind their behavior would open a window into some of the non-material factors that can affect the decision-making process concerning migration.

For example, an appreciable number of the Bahá'ís of Iran are, in fact, living examples of individuals and families who have chosen to remain in their native land in spite of the consecutive waves of persecution directed toward them. The existing body of knowledge would certainly benefit from research based on the different assumptions and alternative questions that arise in light of such a response.

#### CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

These, then, are some of the challenges ISGP has encountered in trying to learn about how to build capacity in individuals and groups to engage in the discourses of society. But I would like to share one more thought. When we talk about studying some social phenomenon in light of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation, we need to remember that, unlike the fruits of human intellectual endeavors to which we have become accustomed, the Revelation is not a step-by-step study of some narrow aspect of reality. It embraces reality as a whole. Therefore, when we go to the Bahá'í Writings for insights, we need to be careful not to fragment the teachings according to our own perceptions, zeroing in on a few passages

out of context, thereby deriving some formulaic statements that actually limit our explorations of reality. Rather, we must immerse ourselves in the ocean of the Writings while we constantly strive toward new horizons of knowledge.

So it is that in the study of the phenomenon of the global movement of populations, we cannot focus only on suffering; we must also describe joy. We should not forget that in real life, joy and sorrow embrace each other. We must see light despite the darkness in which people and governments constantly get lost. We must be aware of the intricate connections between the processes of integration and disintegration. Only by this means can the knowledge we generate in these first stages of inquiry lead to processes of action and reflection in which the protagonist populations can participate. And only by this means can the knowledge that will continue to be generated help the disempowered and disenfranchised victims of oppression become effective participants in the civilization-building process. This is the kind of knowledge that we at the Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity are seeking through our inquiries.

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