

“The Intellectual Life of the Bahá’í Community” by Farzam Arbab

Notes and outline by Sana Rezai - The following outline is based on my own notes taken from a talk delivered by Dr. Farzam Arbab at the Association for Bahá’í Studies, North America, 40th Annual Conference in Montreal, Canada, August, 2016. The Association's website may provide an official recording of the talk, upon which more accurate notes can be taken.

Brief summary: Dr Arbab first describes the historical nature of the intellectual life of the Bahá’í community through a simple narrative, yet, then, presents the challenge that there should be more if we are to fulfill our mission to establish the nucleus and pattern of a new world civilization. He then quotes from the Writings about the present, lamentably defective world order. The defects of the order are identified at three levels: visible problems, structures, and intellectual foundations; and we have the challenge of examining the current, defective order and building a new order. It is already an intellectually challenging task to coherently bring to bear spiritual and material forces to social problems, yet it is more intellectually challenging to comment on social structures, and it is still even more intellectually challenging to examine the intellectual foundations of society. Finally, he ends by discussing three conditions that will enable us to develop the intellectual capacity to address these challenges: courage, avoiding elitism, and a deep understanding about the harmony of science and religion. He ends by expressing optimism about developing the intellectual capacity to meet these challenges.

- I. The current nature and challenges of the intellectual life of the Bahá’í community
 - A. Nature of the Bahá’í community to pursue education
 1. Bahá’ís have notably high levels of educational achievement
 2. Bahá’í families give high priority to education of children
 3. Bahá’ís are moving to the forefront of every field of endeavor, and advancing frontiers of knowledge
 4. Characterized by clarity of mind from studying the Writings; upright character; love of truth
 - B. Current point in development
 1. Currently, the Faith is accepted as a world religion among others
 2. People in country after country have high regard for the Bahá’ís
 3. They are beginning to appreciate our contributions to society
 - C. The challenge - shouldn’t there be more?
 1. The Faith is not intended to culminate in a friendly competition of numbers and prestige with other religions.
 2. If so, we will be far behind everyone else; for every one Bahá’í at a high intellectual level, there are thousands of non-Bahá’ís.
 3. Our intellectual pursuits have to be deeper, regarding the profound challenges facing humanity as it emerges from adolescence
 - a) the content of our thoughts

- b) the nature of our questions
- c) the validity and relevance of our answers
- 4. We have a great deal to contribute to the advancement of knowledge and to civilization.

II. The current world order

A. The nature of the transformation underway

1. These challenges have to be examined in the light of the mission of the Faith to transform humanity as it passes from childhood to adulthood.
2. The direction of our thoughts have to be set by an appreciation and understanding of the forces operating in the present, deficient, and moribund order.
3. **“The world’s equilibrium hath been upset through the vibrating influence of this most great, this new World Order. Mankind’s ordered life hath been revolutionized through the agency of this unique, this wondrous System – the like of which mortal eyes have never witnessed”**
4. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá tells us that we **“must now become imbued with new virtues and powers, new moralities, new capacities.”** The gifts of youth are incapable of meeting requirements of maturity.
5. Shoghi Effendi writes about the present world, that it is:
 - a) **dimmed by the steadily dying-out light of religion**
 - b) **heaving with the explosive forces of a blind and triumphant nationalism**
 - c) **scorched with the fires of pitiless persecution**
 - d) **deluded by the false theories and doctrines that threaten to supplant the worship of God**
 - e) **enervated by a rampant and brutal materialism**
 - f) **disintegrating through the corrosive influence of moral and spiritual decadence**
 - g) **enmeshed in the coils of economic anarchy and strife**

B. The present order is lamentably defective

1. Which constituents of the present order are, and are not, defective?
2. Which parts are we to keep, and which are we to reject?
3. How deep do we have to go into the foundations of the present order to find the real causes of its defects?

C. Defects at the level of visible problems

1. There is much wrong with the world; thus, it’s reasonable that we engage with others to seek solutions. For example,
 - a) Problem: lack of education, lack of jobs, plight of the oppressed
 - b) Solution: education for all, jobs for all, democracy for all
2. We would go further than other who are seeking solution, as we know that efforts to overcome problems need spiritual as well as material forces.

3. **“Behind so much of the turbulence and commotion of contemporary life are the fits and starts of a humanity struggling to come of age. Widely accepted practices and conventions, cherished attitudes and habits, are one by one being rendered obsolete, as the imperatives of maturity begin to assert themselves.”**
4. We need to look at these practices, conventions, attitudes, habits, and replace them with spiritually sound equivalents.
5. This challenge requires an intellectuality that brings to bear material and spiritual forces in a coherent way.

D. Defects at the level of structures

1. Cannot think that structures are sound, and simply people - their habits, attitudes, and practices - need to become spiritualized
2. We must go further and identify defective structures than hold the present order together, and what is to take their place.
3. Principle of the oneness of humankind **“implies an organic change in the structure of present-day society”**
4. Example:
 - a) Can't just make arrangements for education for all; can't just make more jobs; can't just spread democratic culture as it is today
 - b) Entire worldwide system of education needs to be transformed; restructuring of economic life considering principles of oneness and justice; culture that deals with freedom, authority, governance in a new way
5. There are optimistic steps towards thinking deeper (like ISGP); yet, it's clear now that we need to move beyond the simple narrative described at the beginning.
6. Thinking deeper about structures, (ie: moving from the social action of establishing education for all in a given population to commenting on the system of education), and thinking about future structures and how to build them, is for more intellectually challenging than addressing problems.

E. Defects of the intellectual foundations, the knowledge systems

1. Cannot think that the ideas and assumptions that underpin thought are sound, but give rise to defective structures, or just that the wrong people are applying knowledge
2. We have to look at the roots of the structures and behaviors, and carefully examine intellectual foundations of social, economic, and cultural thought
3. Must move beyond extremes such as “all of it should be thrown out” or “questioning intellectual foundations is anti-intellectual”
4. This requires scientific and intellectual rigour and spiritual perception. We cannot stand to the side, exclaim that everything will be made new, and then move to the forefront of processes belonging to a world we believe is collapsing.

5. Need to build on the intellectual accomplishments of humanity in its stage of childhood (the analogous skills of reading, writing, arithmetic in the life of an individual as a child).
 6. Need to also advance beyond fairy tales that were also part of humanity in its stage of childhood. **“The playthings of childhood and infancy no longer satisfy or interest the adult mind.”** Which concepts about human psyche, which social theories, which methods of education, which conceptions of work, justice, freedom, authority are playthings, and what is to replace them?
 7. To examine thoughts and conceptions, deciding which are to be expanded upon and which are to be cast away, is an even more formidable challenge than the previous two.
- F. Example of childhood accomplishments vs playthings
1. One intellectual accomplishment of humanity during its childhood that is more like reading and writing is the advances in natural science
 - a) “Science” - including grand theories like newtonian mechanics, quantum mechanics, relativity, evolution - will not be replaced by “Bahá’í science”; though science will, of course, continue to advance, especially with minds illumined by the light of the Revelation and working within systems not corrupted by competition and desire for prestige.
 - b) However, “physicalism” - trying to explain life, consciousness, reason, morality - using these grand theories will fall away.
 2. Other components of the intellectual foundation of western civilization, the social sciences and philosophies, have too many fantasies of childhood
 - a) Something new - social, political, economic thought appropriate for adulthood - will have to replace current social thought
 - b) The light of the enlightenment is too dim compared with the light of the Revelation

III. Conditions that will enable us to identify and describe elements (old and new) of the intellectual foundation of a new civilization

A. Courage

1. Historically: the thinkers of the enlightenment were courageous - questioning the religious orthodoxy that had a grip on the intellectual life of the people, proposing alternatives, presenting evidence, and arguing with clarity - and changed history.
2. Currently: there is another orthodoxy with a similar grip on the human mind called “materialism”, with “priests”, “dogmas”, power and resources.
3. It requires courage to question the assumptions of this orthodoxy, through painstakingly, spiritually illumined, scientific and philosophical inquiry.
4. Courage must be accompanied by sound methodology

- a) We must change our conception of criticism, beyond it being constructive, obviously
- b) Western democracy and its power structures incorporate criticism into their schemes, to perpetuate power and pursue aims.
- c) Bahá'í consultation as the collective investigation of reality is a much better alternative than just voicing criticism.

B. Avoiding elitism

1. Elitism implies a sense of entitlement, aloofness, superiority; privilege demanding more privilege.
2. The Bahá'í community is protected from elitism through the teachings and the administration.
3. Features of the culture we are developing, that is countering the forces of an elitist society
 - a) Should recognize the accomplishments of the individual, for breakthroughs need brilliant minds; talent should be nurtured; knowledge respected; ideas and art admired - this is not elitism.
 - b) Knowledge is not the property of a few; it is accessible to all; oppression that results from masses of ignorant people is avoided
 - c) Needs a worldwide intellectually and spiritually sound conversation at its grassroots
 - (1) Speaking in language that transcends parochial thought, where words have the same meaning to people from different backgrounds
 - (2) Conversation about the application of teachings to individual and collective life
 - (3) On practical matters raised to spiritual levels
 - (4) Profound yet not pointlessly difficult
 - (5) Accessible to all, then builds capacity more more complex thoughts
 - d) The institute process is making significant contributions to this conversation and this culture
 - (1) Organized around a path of service into which multitudes are invited
 - (2) People learn together how to fulfil twofold moral purpose
 - (3) Learning through study and experience, avoiding false dichotomy between knowledge from a heart connected to the Revelation and knowledge from experience
 - (4) Acknowledges the importance of evidence, to separate knowledge from fancy
 - e) Easier to avoid elitism when the relationship among those who walk a path of service together is one of accompanying each other, not competing, not managing, not manipulating, not gaining power over each other

C. Harmony between science and religion

1. Statement that is becoming more and more common in the Bahá'í community: "Science and religion as two complementary, overlapping systems of knowledge and practice"
2. Regarding religion
 - a) A materialist would reject the above statement, since it includes religious belief as knowledge.
 - b) Some religious people, including Bahá'ís, are uncomfortable with the idea of religion as a system of knowledge and practice
 - c) First thing that comes to mind with "faith" is not a system, but the dazzling light of the Revelation, the greatness of this Day, the power of the Covenant, the joy of turning to the Most Great Beauty.
 - d) Yet, Shoghi Effendi states that the Cause is "**scientific in its method**"
 - e) Religion becomes a system of knowledge and practice in the context of our efforts to advance civilization, which needs to be build with knowledge from both religion and science
3. Relation between science and religion
 - a) The above statement rejects religious belief as "speculative" knowledge, waiting for definitive scientific knowledge
 - (1) Positivism failed. Logical positivism fell apart.
 - b) The above statement rejects the apparent expression of faith that real science will be the result of the correct and imaginative reading of scripture
 - (1) This arises from a misunderstanding of the word "religion", sometimes used as what God revealed, sometimes used as the being, doing, and knowing of a religious community.
 - (2) A unique feature of the Bahá'í community is the Covenant, through which the latter "religion" (system of knowledge and practice) will correspond closely to the former "religion" (revealed text)
 - c) To collapse scientific knowledge into religion takes us back to the middle ages; to collapse religious/moral knowledge into methods of science fails, as the positivists proved.
 - d) Clarity around how knowledge from both systems is used together is an indispensable characteristic of the intellectual life we are trying to develop
 - e) When complemented, it can help humanity raise this world of dust to the heaven of glory
4. Regarding science
 - a) A faculty of the human soul

- b) Gift from God that allows humanity to construct a powerful system of knowledge and practice
- c) Not “scientism”, not magic, not the mere knowledge of technology
- d) **“The first emanation from God towards man”**
- e) Illuminates human understanding, enables penetration into the mysteries of the universe
- f) As the Bahá’í community grows, and the masses of humanity see the light of Bahá’u’lláh, the resulting community also needs to increase its understanding of science.

IV. Concluding points

- A. How challenging the road is ahead
- B. Yet, seeing this challenge with optimism
 - 1. I see the prospects of the development of this intellectual life
 - 2. I have longed for the appearance of an intellectuality that
 - a) integrates material and spiritual, theory and practice
 - b) is rooted in civilization-building and has access to the forefront of intellectual development
 - 3. This intellectuality is appearing.