

‘Abdu’l-Bahá's Blueprint for a Progressive and Prosperous Iran

Adib Masumian

2016

In 1875, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá wrote a book entitled *The Secret of Divine Civilization*. His purpose in writing this book was to offer suggestions for improving the general condition of Persia and the welfare of its citizens. Because he wanted his audience to focus on the book’s content—and not on the author, which might have aroused prejudice—‘Abdu’l-Bahá had the book published anonymously.

Early on in the book, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá laments over the dire state of affairs that had beset his native land by contrasting it with Persia’s glorious past:

O people of Persia! Awake from your drunken sleep! Rise up from your lethargy! Be fair in your judgment: will the dictates of honor permit this holy land, once the wellspring of world civilization, the source of glory and joy for all mankind, the envy of East and West, to remain an object of pity, deplored by all nations? She was once the noblest of peoples: will you let contemporary history register for the ages her now degenerate state? Will you complacently accept her present wretchedness, when she was once the land of all mankind’s desire? Must she now, for this contemptible sloth, this failure to struggle, this utter ignorance, be accounted the most backward of nations? (pp. 8–9)

To treat this despondent condition, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá prescribes this general remedy:

What [Persia] urgently requires . . . is deep reflection, resolute action, training, inspiration and encouragement. Her people must make a massive effort, and their pride must be aroused. (p. 10)

Following this, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá presents a series of more specific proposals, all of which are progressive in nature and call for the advancement of Persian society in a variety of disciplines and sectors. While there is not enough space here to discuss them all, there is certainly ample room to review his most salient recommendations.

An Openness to Learning from Other Nations

At the time when ‘Abdu’l-Bahá wrote this book, there was a contingent of dogmatically religious Persians who opposed the idea of emulating the developments of other nations, rejecting them as “un-Islamic.” Peter Smith notes:

Some Iranians objected that such reforms involved copying the practices of non-Muslims and were hence un-Islamic. This was not valid. There were many Islamic precedents for the adoption of foreign practices, and many elements of European civilization were in any case derived from Islamic roots during the medieval period. Again, reforms such as the introduction of assemblies of consultation could be given Quranic justification. [1]

Addressing these people in particular, 'Abdu'l-Bahá says:

Those who maintain that . . . modern concepts apply only to other countries and are irrelevant in Iran, that they do not satisfy her requirements or suit her way of life, disregard the fact that other nations were once as we are now. Did not these new systems and procedures, these progressive enterprises, contribute to the advancement of those countries? Were the people of Europe harmed by the adoption of such measures? Or did they rather by these means reach the highest degree of material development? (p. 13)

Eventually, 'Abdu'l-Bahá ends this line of reasoning with a rational conclusion—that it would not only be senseless, but also costly in terms of both capital and manpower, for a nation to undertake a significant technological innovation from scratch when it already exists elsewhere in a more advanced and effective form. Drawing on the steam engine to make his point, he says:

Observe for instance that in other countries they persevered over a long period until finally they discovered the power of steam and by means of it were enabled easily to perform the heavy tasks which were once beyond human strength. How many centuries it would take if we were to abandon the use of this power and instead strain every nerve to invent a substitute. It is therefore preferable to keep on with the use of steam and at the same time continuously to examine into the possibility of there being a far greater force available. (p. 113)

The Promotion and Extension of Education

One of the themes 'Abdu'l-Bahá expounded on the most in this work is that of education. He begins this discussion with a rhetorical question, designed to make his audience truly ponder:

Would the extension of education, the development of useful arts and sciences, the promotion of industry and technology, be harmful things? For such endeavor lifts the individual within the mass and raises him out of the depths of ignorance to the highest reaches of knowledge and human excellence. (p. 14)

He then ascribes a special urgency and importance to the subject of education, citing it as an essential prerequisite to a nation's advancement:

The primary, the most urgent requirement is the promotion of education. It is inconceivable that any nation should achieve prosperity and success unless this

paramount, this fundamental concern is carried forward. The principal reason for the decline and fall of peoples is ignorance. Today the mass of the people are uninformed even as to ordinary affairs, how much less do they grasp the core of the important problems and complex needs of the time. (p. 109)

Embedded also in the above passage is a recognition that a proper education instills the learner with the kind of consciousness that is necessary for them to contribute to the progress of their nation.

Delving more deeply into this subject, 'Abdu'l-Bahá goes on to examine the educational curriculum that was prevalent in Persia at the time, and then elaborate upon its defective state. In so doing, he mentions the study of subjects that are futile or unconstructive—studies that should, therefore, be discarded through serious reform:

Among those matters which require thorough revision and reform is the method of studying the various branches of knowledge and the organization of the academic curriculum. From lack of organization, education has become haphazard and confused. Trifling subjects which should not call for elaboration receive undue attention, to such an extent that students, over long periods of time, waste their minds and their energies on material that is pure supposition, in no way susceptible of proof, such study consisting in going deep into statements and concepts which careful examination would establish as not even unlikely, but rather as unalloyed superstition, and representing the investigation of useless conceits and the chasing of absurdities.

He concludes this observation with a decisive remark:

There can be no doubt that to concern oneself with such illusions, to examine into and lengthily debate such idle propositions, is nothing but a waste of time and a marring of the days of one's life. Not only this, but it also prevents the individual from undertaking the study of those arts and sciences of which society stands in dire need. (p. 106)

Implied in that final sentence is the logical corollary to the discarding of those useless disciplines—that they be replaced with more productive pursuits. In addition to that, however, 'Abdu'l-Bahá also calls on the student to engage in thoughtful reflection on a subject prior to undertaking its study, with a specific view to the ways in which proficiency in it would benefit society:

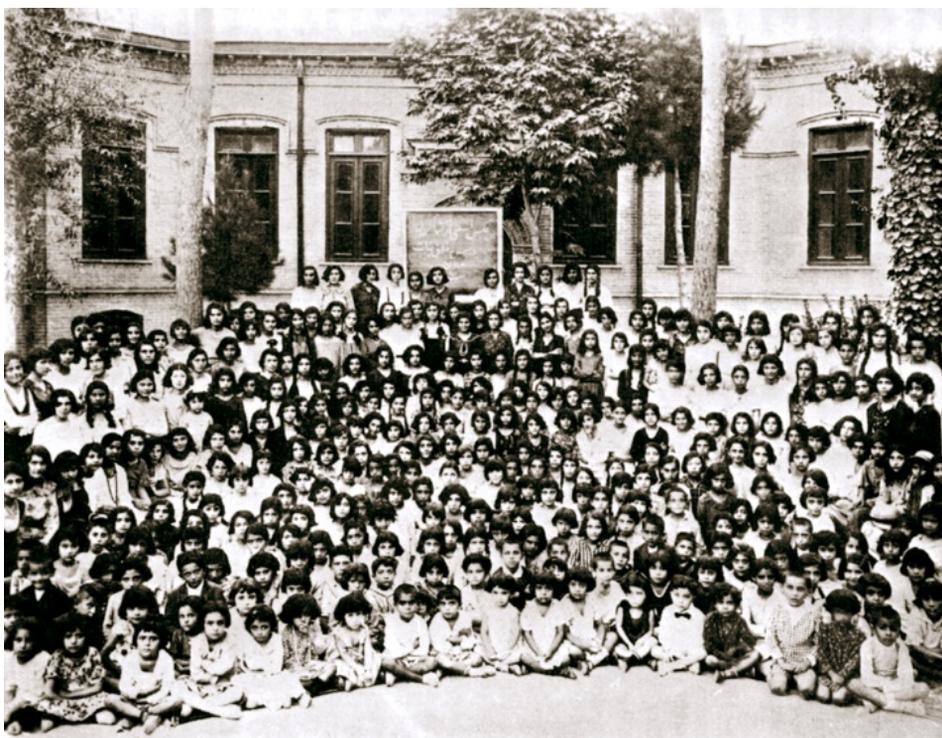
The individual should, prior to engaging in the study of any subject, ask himself what its uses are and what fruit and result will derive from it. If it is a useful branch of knowledge, that is, if society will gain important benefits from it, then he should certainly pursue it with all his heart. If not, if it consists in empty, profitless debates and in a vain concatenation of imaginings that lead to no result except acrimony, why devote one's life to such useless hairsplittings and disputes. (p. 106)

Thus, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s ultimate litmus test for the value of a discipline is the degree to which humanity will benefit from its application.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá concludes the discussion of education by shifting his attention to his native land, and the present need to fill every corner of that country with schools:

It is, furthermore, a vital necessity to establish schools throughout Persia, even in the smallest country towns and villages, and to encourage the people in every possible way to have their children learn to read and write. If necessary, education should even be made compulsory. (p. 111)

To this end, the Bahá’ís of Persia played an instrumental role in modernizing the educational system there by establishing as many as fifty schools throughout Persia over the course of the early twentieth century. While some of these schools were founded in large cities—such as Tehran, Isfahan, and Hamedan—many were also built in small towns and villages. Some of the first schools for girls in Persia were also established by Bahá’ís, including the Tarbíyat (“Education”) school in Qazvin, founded in 1906. [2]



Girl students at the Tarbíyat school in Tehran, 1933

Expenditure of Wealth for the Improvement of Society

‘Abdu’l-Bahá believed very strongly that wealth must be spent on the improvement of society. To that effect, he lists several examples of this kind of expenditure early on in the book:

If . . . a few have inordinate riches while the rest are impoverished, and no fruit or benefit accrues from that wealth, then it is only a liability to its possessor. If, on the other hand, it is expended for the promotion of knowledge, the founding of elementary and other schools, the encouragement of art and industry, the training of orphans and the poor—in brief, if it is dedicated to the welfare of society—its possessor will stand out . . . as the most excellent of all who live on earth . . . (pp. 24–5)

The first part of that observation, in which he discourages the concentration of wealth in the hands of a few, echoes one of the core tenets of the Bahá'í Faith—the elimination of the extremes of poverty and wealth. This is a theme on which 'Abdu'l-Bahá would later elaborate during his travels to the West in the early twentieth century, where he mentioned the voluntary redistribution of wealth as a measure that will conduce to societal prosperity.

'Abdu'l-Bahá advocated this sort of philanthropy so strongly that he called it the greatest possible undertaking for a person:

. . . if a judicious and resourceful individual should initiate measures which would universally enrich the masses of the people, there could be no undertaking greater than this . . . for such a benefactor would supply the needs and insure the comfort and well-being of a great multitude. (p. 24)

These passages, of course, deal with the expenditure of wealth on a mass scale, but the same advice also holds true on an individual level. For his own part, 'Abdu'l-Bahá's generosity to the poor—whether in the streets of Palestine, or at the Bowery mission in New York City—has been recorded in various accounts. [3] It would be difficult to ignore how unusual it was for anyone, much less a Persian man living more than a century ago, to render untiring service and show unconditional generosity to his fellow man.

Democratic Additions to the Structure of Government

'Abdu'l-Bahá was a proponent of parliamentary democracy. According to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, parliaments should be composed of elected representatives who are fair-minded and conscientious citizens of their country, and who continually strive to carry out “justice and righteousness” in their land:

It is unquestionable that the object in establishing parliaments is to bring about justice and righteousness, but everything hinges on the efforts of the elected representatives. If their intention is sincere, desirable results and unforeseen improvements will be forthcoming; if not, it is certain that the whole thing will be meaningless, the country will come to a standstill and public affairs will continuously deteriorate. (p. 23)

'Abdu'l-Bahá then goes on to note that representatives must be mindful of their constituents, lest those officials fall out of favor with the public and jeopardize their position as a result. In making

this observation, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is affirming a now commonly-understood truth about real democracy—that its power rests in the hands of the people:

. . . it would be preferable if the election of nonpermanent members of consultative assemblies in sovereign states should be dependent on the will and choice of the people. For elected representatives will on this account be somewhat inclined to exercise justice, lest their reputation suffer and they fall into disfavor with the public. (p. 24)

With regard to the structure of government, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá puts forth the intriguing suggestion that “bodies of scholars” be formed—assemblies comprised of the foremost scholars in their respective disciplines. Ruling governments could consult with these bodies to make more informed decisions on a variety of subjects, thereby empowering them to “bring about equilibrium and order” more effectively than they might otherwise:

In view of the fact that at the present time such fully developed and comprehensively learned individuals are hard to come by, and the government and people are in dire need of order and direction, it is essential to establish a body of scholars the various groups of whose membership would each be expert in one of the aforementioned branches of knowledge. This body should with the greatest energy and vigor deliberate as to all present and future requirements, and bring about equilibrium and order. (p. 37)

Conclusion

The Secret of Divine Civilization “received wide circulation in Iran” [4] after it was first published in Bombay in 1882, but information on how it was received by its contemporaries is scarce. In hindsight, this is understandable. According to Momen, anyone who may have been influenced by the book at that time would have never admitted to it, “since any degree of association with what was regarded as a heretical and religiously-obnoxious sect [the Bahá’í Faith] would [have been] a bar to one’s advancement in public life . . .” [5]

In spite of that stigma, however, there are records of praise for the book some time after it was published. Some of that praise came from high places, including the Persian aristocracy. The following statement—written in 1912 by ‘Aynu’s-Salṭanih, a Qájár prince—is one example:

The book was written thirty years ago. The author does not reveal his name but it is obvious he is a Bahá’í. He stresses ethics and morality, encourages the people of Iran to educate themselves, and speaks of the benefits of constitutional government, stressing the need for elected representatives to be educated and behave ethically. Had the king and people of the time acted according [to the precepts of this book], the current conditions of our country would be significantly improved. [6]



'Aynu's-Salṭanih

Iranian thinkers today have also begun to rediscover the book, and to recognize its value as a charter for progressive reform and national rehabilitation. Last year, the online news outlet *Iran Emrooz* ("Iran Today") published an article by Mohammad Arasi, an independent researcher who is not a Bahá'í, to commemorate the 140th anniversary of the publication of *The Secret of Divine Civilization*. [7] Arasi begins his article with these words:

The Secret of Divine Civilization is a highly reputable work in the realm of reformism and rationalism. It advances a philosophy of progressivism and enlightenment, and stresses the urgent need to develop the infrastructure of Iran and improve the condition of its society.

Arasi mentions 'Abdu'l-Bahá alongside other eminent Iranians of his time—namely, Mírzá Faṭḥ-'Alí Ákhundzádih (1812–1878) [8] and Sháhzádiḥ Jalálu'd-Dín Mírzá Qájár (1827–1872) [9]—who, like 'Abdu'l-Bahá, also invoked Persia's glorious past to elicit in their audience a sense of national pride, and thus galvanize them into bringing about reform in their nation. Arasi notes, however, that there is a fundamental difference between the works of those Iranians and *The Secret of Divine Civilization*:

'Abdu'l-Bahá's patriotism is completely free of anti-Arab, anti-Muslim, anti-Western, and anti-Semitic sentiment. Much to the contrary, he invites all Iranians to peace and friendship not only with their own neighbors, but with the entire world. Furthermore, he

warns Persians not to hold any feelings of ethnic, sectarian, or national superiority, for these beliefs would prevent mankind from becoming truly united.

In making this observation, Arasi is demonstrating that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s worldview was so enlightened and unprejudiced that it exceeded even the “progressivism” of his most notable contemporaries.

Now that more than a century has passed since the publication of this book, we might do well to reflect on a few questions. Is *The Secret of Divine Civilization* a dead letter? Or are ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s characterizations of the status quo, as well as his suggestions for improving it, still relevant today? Could they have the potential, in the words of the prince ‘Aynu’s-Saltānih, to “significantly improve the conditions” of Iran?

Notes:

[1] Peter Smith, *A Concise Encyclopedia of the Bahá’í Faith*. Oxford: Oneworld, 2000, p. 308.

[2] Soli Shahvar (trans. Hourivash Rahmani), *Madáris-i Farámúsh Shudaní*. Spånga, Sweden: Nashr-i Baran, 2013, p. 262. See also the original version of this book, written in English: Soli Shahvar, *The Forgotten Schools*. London: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 2009. For an exclusive treatment of the schools for girls, readers of Persian are also advised to consult Mehdi Samandari, *Az Píshgámán-i Íjád-i Madáris-i Dokhtaránih-yi Bahá’í dar Írán*. Payám-i Bahá’í no. 183, Feb 1995, pp. 74–9.

[3] Examples of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s generosity can be found throughout the following books: Annamarie Honnold, *Vignettes from the Life of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, Oxford: George Ronald, 1997; H.M. Balyuzi, *‘Abdu’l-Bahá: The Centre of the Covenant of Bahá’u’lláh*, Oxford: George Ronald, 1992; and Juliet Thompson, *The Diary of Juliet Thompson*, Los Angeles: Kalimát Press, 1983.

[4] Peter Smith, *A Concise Encyclopedia of the Bahá’í Faith*. Oxford: Oneworld, 2000, p. 308.

[5] Moojan Momen, “The Bahá’í Influence on the Reform Movements of the Islamic World in the 1860s and 1870s.” Published in *Bahá’í Studies Bulletin*, vol. 2, no. 2, Sept 1983, p. 48. Full text available online here: <http://www.momen.org/relstud/RefMov.htm>

[6] Mina Yazdani, “‘Abdu’l-Bahá and the Iranian Constitutional Revolution: Embracing Principles while Disapproving Methodologies.” Published in *Journal of Bahá’í Studies*, vol. 24, no. 1–2, 2014, p. 49, note #4. Full text available online here: <https://goo.gl/6XMWhc>

[7] Mohammad Arasi, *The 140th Anniversary of “The Secret of Divine Civilization.”* Iran Emrooz, 2015. <http://www.iran-emrooz.net/index.php/think/more/55308/>

[8] Hamid Algar, “ĀḲŪNDZĀDA,” Encyclopædia Iranica. <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/akundzada-playwright>

[9] Abbas Amanat, Farzin Vejdani, “JALĀL-AL-DIN MIRZĀ,” Encyclopædia Iranica. <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/jalal-al-din-mirza>