

New Knowledge from Old: Conceptions of the Library in the Writings of Shoghi Effendi

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Abstract

The meaning of the library as a social institution has changed over time. The library's role in human progress and in the generation of knowledge is alluded to briefly by 'Abdu'l-Bahá and, more frequently, by Shoghi Effendi. These references have historical precedents but are an expression of unique ontological and epistemological commitments in Bahá'u'lláh's vision of an emerging global civilization. This paper compares conceptions of libraries in the writings of Shoghi Effendi to different meanings assigned to libraries throughout history, comments on Bahá'í beliefs that could inform the practice of librarianship, and suggests a number of avenues for future research.

Résumé

La bibliothèque comme institution sociale a changé de sens au fil du temps. Le rôle qu'elle joue dans le progrès humain et dans la diffusion du savoir est brièvement évoqué par 'Abdu'l-Bahá et, plus fréquemment, par Shoghi Effendi. Ces références, fondées sur des précédents historiques, sont l'expression d'engagements ontologiques et épistémologiques propres

à la vision de Bahá'u'lláh d'une civilisation mondiale émergente. L'auteur de cet article compare les conceptions de la bibliothèque qu'on retrouve dans les écrits de Shoghi Effendi par rapport à différentes significations attribuées aux bibliothèques à travers l'histoire. Il aborde ensuite des concepts bahá'ís qui pourraient éclairer la pratique de la bibliothéconomie et suggère un certain nombre de pistes pour de futures recherches sur le sujet.

Resumen

El significado de la biblioteca como una institución social ha cambiado de tiempo a tiempo. Al papel de la biblioteca en el desarrollo humano y en la generación del conocimiento, hace breve alusión 'Abdu'l-Bahá, y mas frecuentemente Shoghi Effendi. Estas referencias tienen precedentes históricos pero son expresiones de un compromiso ontológico y epistemológico en la visión de Bahá'u'lláh de una civilización global emergente. Este artículo compara las concepciones de las bibliotecas en los escritos de Shoghi Effendi con diferentes significados asignados a las bibliotecas a lo largo de la historia, comenta sobre las creencias bahá'ís que podrían informar la práctica del cargo de bibliotecario, y sugiere un número de opciones para investigación futura.

Libraries have been a part of human societies since the advent of the written word. While their role and context has changed over time, libraries have always been connected to the generation, application, and diffusion of knowledge and, by extension, to the advancement of civilization. Bahá'í conceptions of libraries reflect these connections. In fact, libraries have played a role in the

progress of the Bahá'í Faith since the very inception of the religion. Táhirih's first encounter with the writings of *Shaykh* Ahmad-i-Aḥsá'í occurred in the private library of her cousin, Mullá Javád ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Memorials* 189). Beautifully depicting the thirst for knowledge as a motivating force, 'Abdu'l-Bahá describes Táhirih's response: "For a long time now, I have thirsted after this; I have yearned for these explanations, these inner truths. Give me whatever you have of these books" (189). Shoghi Effendi, writing to the Bahá'ís of the West on 6 December 1928, lists libraries as one element of the flourishing Bahá'í communities in Persia in the 1920's (*Bahá'í Administration* 150). Later, in *God Passes By*, he includes libraries as one of the many buildings that signaled the spiritual and material progress of the Bahá'í community in 'Ishqábád (361). In each of these examples, libraries play a supporting role; they are not the central focus of the narrative. Yet there is a sense, particularly in the account of Táhirih from *Memorials of the Faithful*, that libraries can be the site for radical discovery. What more can be gleaned about the role of the library in social life from such references?

In all, there are twenty passages that mention libraries in the English writings of Shoghi Effendi available on the Bahá'í Reference Library website. Across these twenty passages, three conceptions of the library come into view: as a locus for the dissemination of Bahá'í literature, as a support to the Administrative Order, and as a

contributor to the future Bahá'í university. To place these roles in their historical context, this paper begins with a brief summary of the development of libraries prior to the start of the Bahá'í Revelation. The next three sections examine how each conception of the library both builds on and transcends its historical antecedents. The conclusion presents further areas for investigation that have been illuminated by this analysis.

HISTORY OF LIBRARIES AROUND THE WORLD

The history of libraries is bound up with the development of writing, government, science, and religion; it mirrors the history of human progress. A complete review of this history is beyond the scope of this article, but a brief survey of examples will help to place Bahá'í conceptions of libraries in a broader context.

Some of the earliest libraries include the ancient collections of clay tablets at the Sumerian city of Uruk, dating before 3000 BCE, and the thousands of tablets that archeologists uncovered at the city of Ebla dating from prior to 2250 BCE (Tolzmann 2; Lerner 15). In the intervening millennia, the invention of new writing technologies, the advent of new religious dispensations, and their interaction with governmental institutions have all contributed to the changing roles of libraries in society.

Knowledge of ancient libraries is greatly influenced by the media in which different civilizations captured

the written word. Lerner dates the earliest Chinese libraries to the Chou dynasty in the first millennium BCE, where writing was captured on tablets made by splitting bamboo cylinders lengthwise to make long and narrow pages (52–53). In contrast, the civilizations of the Fertile Crescent relied on clay tablets. During the seventh century BCE, for example, the library of Assurbanipal at Nineveh contained tens of thousands of these tablets in addition to rooms dedicated to baking the requisite clay (Tolzmann 3). Less is known of the libraries of the Egyptian and Hebrew peoples because they wrote on the comparatively fragile media of papyrus and animal skins; nevertheless their reverence for the written word is well documented (Lerner 16).

Moving into the period of classical antiquity, historical accounts of libraries become more common. In Greece, references to libraries date to the sixth century BCE, and it is clear that both Plato and Aristotle had access to a “considerable library” (Tolzmann 5). The famed library at Alexandria was constructed in the third century BCE by Ptolemy, who gathered together a “community of scholars” (Tolzmann 4; Battles 30). During the first and second centuries BCE in China, libraries were explicitly mentioned in imperial plans from the Han dynasty (Lerner 53). Around the same time, authorized texts of the Confucian classics were carved into stone *stèle*, and the introduction of paper at the Imperial Library contributed to greater scribal efficiency (54).

The rise of Christianity in Europe,

accompanied by the spread of the parchment codex book, inaugurated a period of growth in church libraries and the trade in books (Lerner 35). Under Constantine, the church was a state institution and “the disciplinary, organizational, and dogmatic duties of each bishop forced him . . . to maintain a library” (Tolzmann 19). The imperial library at Byzantium was constructed in the fourth century CE (Lerner 49). In the sixth century CE, the presence of abbeys containing libraries extended all the way to Ireland, with monks and pilgrims carrying books from one abbey to another (40).

The advent of Islam provided further impetus to the development of libraries. In his article “The History of the Arabic-Islamic Libraries: 7th to 14th Centuries,” Ribhi Mustafa Elayyan provides a comprehensive explanation for the flourishing of written literature during the early period of Islamic civilization and the necessity of establishing “new institutions to collect, arrange and preserve this literature” (120). The Sankoré mosque and the manuscript libraries of Timbuktu, in present-day Mali, were renowned throughout the Islamic world as centers of learning, science, and Islamic jurisprudence (al-Wangari 278). In addition to libraries such as these, within mosques and private collections, Elayyan identifies the three great libraries of the Abbasid, Fatimid and Umayyad caliphs. He emphasizes that these “were not just store houses where books were seldom used,” but, rather, “centers for learning and teaching” (126). The knowledge

generated in these centers by people striving to put the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad into practice spread across the world. In *The Secret of Divine Civilization*, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá describes how “the peoples of Europe acquired the sciences and arts of civilization from Islám as practiced by the inhabitants of Andalusia” (89). He goes on to describe how these works affected European civilization and persist to the present day: “all the writings of Muslim scholars and divines and philosophers were gradually collected in Europe and were with the most painstaking care weighed and debated at academic gatherings and in the centers of learning, after which their valued contents would be put to use. Today, numerous copies of the works of Muslim scholars which are not to be found in Islamic countries, are available in the libraries of Europe” (89).

The advent of the Bahá’í Faith in the mid-1800s opens new possibilities for the role of libraries in society. In the *Lawḥ-i-Dunyá*, Bahá’u’lláh states that He has “breathed a new life into every human frame, and instilled into every word a fresh potency” (*Tablets* 84). Surely this “world-wide regeneration” includes libraries, but it is up to humanity to realize the potential of these words (84). One good starting point is to sift through the Bahá’í writings for any mention of this particular social institution. However, references to libraries are scarce in the works of Bahá’u’lláh and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá that have been translated into English. For

this reason, I will primarily draw on passages from the writings of Shoghi Effendi to explore three conceptions of the library.

DISSEMINATION OF BAHÁ’Í LITERATURE

The majority of Shoghi Effendi’s references to libraries arise in connection with the dissemination of Bahá’í literature, a strategic goal that continued throughout his ministry and into the present day. It is clear from the relevant passages that the Guardian’s goal was to increase opportunities for the “reading public” to engage with the writings of Bahá’u’lláh (*God Passes By* 385). For example, in a letter dated 5 June 1947 written in the midst of the Second Seven Year Plan,¹ the Guardian references libraries in connection with the growth of the Faith in Europe:

The translation, the publication and dissemination of Bahá’í literature, whether in the form of leaflets, pamphlets or books, in the nine selected languages, should, as the work progresses and the demand is correspondingly increased, be strenuously carried out, as a preliminary to its free distribution among the public on certain occasions, and its

1 One of several consecutive global plans for the expansion and consolidation of the Bahá’í Faith. The first plans were initiated by Shoghi Effendi, and they now unfold under the direction of the Universal House of Justice.

presentation to both the leaders of public thought and the numerous and famous libraries established in those countries. (*Citadel* 23)

Later in that same message he lists a number of goals to be achieved in the United States and Alaska, noting that the

beneficial and highly responsible activities undertaken by the Publishing, the Reviewing, the Library . . . Committees, designed to disseminate and insure the integrity of Bahá'í literature, should, however indirectly connected with the purposes of the Plan, and within the limits imposed upon them through its operation, be steadily expanded, consolidated and be made to promote, in whatever way possible, its paramount interests. (*Citadel* 9)

Both of these passages demonstrate that libraries, inasmuch as they supported the dissemination of Bahá'í literature, played a strategic role in the Guardian's plans.

The work of disseminating literature, including placing books in hundreds of libraries, was pursued both by individuals and institutions. In *God Passes By*, Shoghi Effendi notes that both these protagonists have a "duty to place this literature at the disposal of the public in state, university and public libraries, thereby extending the opportunity to the great mass of the reading public of familiarizing itself

with the history and precepts of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh" (385). This shared responsibility to increase the availability of Bahá'í literature went hand in hand with the international expansion of teaching activities. In describing this process, the Guardian notes that "books [in many languages], mostly through the initiative of individual Bahá'ís, and partly through the intermediary of Bahá'í assemblies, were published, widely distributed, and placed in private as well as public libraries in both the East and the West" (381).

In these documents, libraries are seen as repositories for Bahá'í literature, a conception with strong historical precedents. The development of libraries across the Near East, Europe, northern Africa and the Sahel was frequently driven by the dissemination of the Gospel and the Qur'an, as well as works by Christian and Islamic scholars (Lerner 35; Elayyan 120; al-Warangi 278). During the ministry of the Guardian, in contrast, the library was already a familiar social institution around the world. What may be more novel is that the head of a world religion was able to direct the dissemination of literature to "numerous and famous libraries" as part of a world-wide strategic goal to translate, publish and disseminate its sacred texts to a wider audience (Shoghi Effendi, *Citadel* 23).

This conception of libraries as repositories of literature also highlights the relationship between libraries and the collections they house. Different approaches to librarianship can be

characterized by considering this relationship. David Lankes, for example, suggests that an excessively transactional approach to library collections can devalue the role of librarians in supporting the generation of knowledge and obscure the need to ensure adequate training and funding for these professionals (*Atlas* 16). Jaroslav Pelikan, writing in the context of academic libraries, speaks of the centrality of the library collection to the teaching mission of the university. The library collection reflects the “mysterious and ongoing process” by which new knowledge and existing knowledge are transformed through teaching and research (114). He describes the collegial relationship between librarians and faculty, resulting in library collections that contribute “not only to the What but the How of knowledge,” and thereby “provide context, balance, and correction” to the evolving scholarly conversations in various disciplines (115).

Clearly, the relationship between libraries and collections can take many forms. For Shoghi Effendi, it was of strategic importance that the writings of Bahá'u'lláh be available in the libraries of the world, so much so that in major messages detailing the goals of global plans he explicitly called for this work to be pursued. Decisions about which titles to include in a library have an impact on the educational experience of the library's patrons, constraining or expanding their opportunities to have a radical encounter with new ideas. History testifies to the importance of

such decisions. How different would the course of Táhirih's life have been had her cousin's library not contained copies of the writings of Shaykh Ahmad? Would she have recognized the Báb, become one of the Letters of the Living, and attended the Conference of Badasht?

In presenting the library as a repository of literature, the Guardian's writings also reflect certain fundamental re-imaginings of the relationship between different protagonists in society. Reflected in these passages, one can see an interplay between the individual and the institutions in relation to the library. Shoghi Effendi speaks of the duty shared by both protagonists to place Bahá'í literature at the disposal of the public. These efforts are distinct but overlapping, perhaps reflecting the shared responsibility that individuals and institutions in the Bahá'í Faith have for spreading the message of Bahá'u'lláh. Furthermore, there is a recognition that the various entities working to disseminate Bahá'í literature have “limits imposed upon them” through the operation of the Plan² (Shoghi Effendi, *Citadel* 9). In making this point explicit, he effectively cautions the Bahá'í community that the library will not always be the first priority. A close reading of his letter dated 5 June 1947 reveals the Guardian's nuanced and integrative approach—in this case that the work of disseminating Bahá'í literature through libraries is

2 The Second Seven Year Plan, 1946 to 1953.

important and should be pursued, even though such efforts might sometimes need to be limited in scope or temporarily set aside when priority must be given to other goals of the Plan. This nuanced understanding continues to the present day. Professional librarians and volunteers maintaining small, local Bahá'í libraries may be aware of certain pressing needs related to their work, but Shoghi Effendi's caution to the community in 1947 continues to be relevant. The needs of the Plan at any particular moment may understandably prioritize goals related to teaching the Faith, for example. Those working with libraries should be watchful for ways in which their efforts, such as those related to the dissemination of literature, can "be made to promote, in whatever way possible, [the Plan's] paramount interests" (*Citadel* 9).

THE LIBRARY AND THE ADMINISTRATIVE ORDER

A second set of selected passages describes the role of the library in relation to the Administrative Order of the Bahá'í Faith, as one of the agencies contributing to the efficient functioning of institutions, and as a marker of the increasing national endowments and administrative capacity of various national communities. The Guardian describes this relationship in a variety of ways. In a letter to the American National Spiritual Assembly dated 26 November 1923, he lists the National Library, a committee of the National Assembly, as one of the agencies

whose "diligent efforts . . . constitute in themselves a convincing evidence and inspiring example . . . of the efficient spiritual administration of the affairs of the Bahá'í world" (*Bahá'í Administration* 56). In *God Passes By*, Shoghi Effendi includes libraries as one of the "factors contributing to the expansion and establishment of the Administrative Order" (341). And in that same chapter, he mentions libraries as an example of the increasing national endowments of Bahá'í communities:

Whether in the form of land, schools, administrative headquarters, secretariats, libraries, cemeteries, hostels or publishing companies, these widely scattered assets, partly registered in the name of incorporated National Assemblies, and partly held in trust by individual recognized believers, have contributed their share to the uninterrupted expansion of national Bahá'í endowments in recent years as well as to the consolidation of their foundations. (339)

The acquisition and development of land and buildings to support the varied and complex organizational structures that constitute these endowments is not trivial; it requires the development of significant institutional capacity. The capabilities required to maintain a library, both in terms of physical space and in terms of its interaction with the Administrative Order of the Bahá'í Faith, would be fruitful objects for further research.

That libraries would develop in relation to administrative institutions and government agencies is not without precedent. Indeed, throughout history libraries have responded to the information needs of both religious and governmental administrations. They informed legislative and administrative decision-making in the Tang dynasty in China, during the reign of Charlemagne in Europe, and under the 'Abbasid caliphate (Lerner 44, 55, 70). Today in the United States, the Library of Congress continues to support the deliberations of that legislative body through the Congressional Research Service (Lankes, *Expect More* 23). But Shoghi Effendi makes clear that the Administrative Order of Bahá'u'lláh is unlike any system of governance that has come before: "Neither in theory nor in practice can the Administrative Order of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh be said to conform to any type of democratic government, to any system of autocracy, to any purely aristocratic order, or to any of the various theocracies, whether Jewish, Christian or Islamic which mankind has witnessed in the past" (*God Passes By* 326). Through it, Bahá'u'lláh has called into being institutions and administrative entities that are unique. It is the uniqueness of the Bahá'í Administrative Order that transcends these historical precedents.

One of the ways that libraries support administrative bodies is by providing resources that inform the decision-making processes of these institutions. In the context of the Bahá'í Faith, this role is perhaps most clearly

demonstrated through Shoghi Effendi's description of the Ḥaziratu'l-Quds,³ where the library is listed as one of its "component parts":

Complementary in its functions to those of the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár⁴ . . . this institution, whether local or national, will, as its component parts, such as the Secretariat, the Treasury, the Archives, the Library, the Publishing Office, the Assembly Hall, the Council Chamber, the Pilgrims' Hostel, are brought together and made jointly to operate in one spot, be increasingly regarded as the focus of all Bahá'í administrative activity, and symbolize, in a befitting manner, the ideal of service animating the Bahá'í community in its relation alike to the Faith and to mankind in general. (*God Passes By* 339)

In this description of the Ḥaziratu'l-Quds the Guardian does not elaborate on the specific functioning of the library itself but chooses, instead, to emphasize its joint operation with the other agencies of the Spiritual Assembly. This highlights the supporting role that the library (and librarians) play in contributing to

3 "Sacred Fold." The term is used primarily to refer to national, regional, or local centers for Bahá'í administrative offices.

4 "The Dawning Place of the Praise of God." The term is used primarily to refer to Bahá'í Houses of Worship and their surrounding dependencies.

informed decision-making by institutions and implies a posture of mutual support and assistance between the various component parts of the Ḥaziratu'l-Quds. In considering the organization of such systems, the metaphor of the human body that Bahá'u'lláh shared with Queen Victoria comes to mind. Referring to this metaphor in a letter dated September 1964, the Universal House of Justice states: "In the human body, every cell, every organ, every nerve has its part to play. When all do so the body is healthy, vigorous, radiant, ready for every call made upon it. No cell, however humble, lives apart from the body, whether in serving it or receiving from it." In this light one might ask, "Which part of the body is represented by the Library, and how does it interact with the other component parts of the Ḥaziratu'l-Quds and the Administrative Order in a spirit of organic wholeness?" Furthermore, the unique and world-embracing character of the Administrative Order suggests that these libraries are placed in a common, world-wide institutional and conceptual framework unmatched by any previous governmental or religious library system.

The role that libraries play in supporting institutional decision-making continues to the present day. During his tenure as leader of the Bahá'í Faith, Shoghi Effendi began construction of the International Archives Building and placed copies of Tablets and manuscripts in places of prominence (Giacchery 148–51). Later, under the guidance of the Universal House of Justice,

the Centre for the Study of the Texts was constructed on Mount Carmel, and plans were drafted for the International Bahá'í Library. Describing those plans in a letter dated 31 August 1987, the Universal House of Justice states: "This Library is the central depository of all literature published on the Faith, and is an essential source of information for the institutions of the World Center on all subjects relating to the Cause of God and the conditions of mankind. In future decades its functions must grow, it will serve as an active center for knowledge in all fields, and it will become the kernel of great institutions of scientific investigation and discovery." Indeed, in speaking of the slope of Mount Carmel the Guardian alluded to "those world-shaking, world-embracing, world-directing administrative institutions" that would eventually be raised (*This Decisive Hour* 33). While the International Bahá'í Library has yet to be built, one of its key functions—that of making the Bahá'í writings available to the world—is currently addressed through the Bahá'í Reference Library, a website that provides the "authoritative online source of Bahá'í writings" and "contains selected works of Bahá'u'lláh, the Báb, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Shoghi Effendi, and the Universal House of Justice, as well as other Bahá'í texts" ("Bahá'í Reference Library").

These passages regarding libraries and the Administrative Order also reflect some of the ways in which the relationship between individuals and institutions has been recast in the

Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh. The individual, conceived of as a soul with an innate desire to understand reality, cannot simply be seen as an information-seeking agent trying to fill a gap in their store of data, nor as a consumer seeking products conforming to their preferences. Thus, the library as an institution of society cannot be reduced to a market mechanism that coordinates matches between readers and books. Nor does it solely exist as a site for resistance to propaganda and oppression—a romanticized view of the library which may stem from its professed value for universal access to information and ideas. Its sights cannot even be set on the relatively narrow purpose of producing informed citizens who participate in democratic processes (Budd, *Self-Examination* 185; Lankes, *Expect More* 20). Many of these views presume a neutral or antagonistic relationship between individuals and institutions. In contrast, the writings of Shoghi Effendi suggest that libraries have the potential to be social spaces in which individuals and institutions support each other in their efforts to work for the betterment of society. The library is an institution that seeks to release the potential of individuals. At the same time, those who work in libraries that serve Bahá'í spiritual assemblies have the unique responsibility of assisting to locate information that informs institutional decisions. These conceptions of the library demonstrate the Bahá'í understanding that individuals and institutions are mutually constitutive and supporting. In the context

of the Administrative Order, libraries reflect this mutuality.

THE LIBRARY AND THE UNIVERSITY

The third role that emerges from a review of Shoghi Effendi's references to the library relates to those schools and institutes "that bid fair to evolve into the Bahá'í universities of the future" (*God Passes By* 341). The Guardian includes the establishment of libraries in a list of developments undertaken by the "embryonic Bahá'í educational institutions" at Geyserville, Green Acre, and Louhelen (341). He suggests that these and other institutions built along the same lines will evolve into Bahá'í universities. This is the only passage where the Guardian makes an explicit link between libraries and the concept of a Bahá'í university. That such a relationship would exist is not surprising. Many of the universities in the Islamic world, such as Al-Azhar in Cairo and Al-Zaitunah in Tunis, grew out of mosques that held renowned libraries (Elayyan 121). In Europe, university libraries have been a feature of the educational landscape since at least as early as that continent's first universities in the eleventh and twelfth centuries (Lerner 83). That a Bahá'í understanding of libraries would encompass university libraries therefore has strong historical precedents, yet it is uniquely shaped by Bahá'í conceptions related to knowledge and education.

The very idea of a university is recast by Bahá'í epistemological commitments. Bahá'u'lláh says, "Knowledge

is as wings to man's life, and a ladder for his ascent. Its acquisition is incumbent upon everyone. The knowledge of such sciences, however, should be acquired as can profit the peoples of the earth, and not those which begin with words and ends with words" (*Tablets* 51–52). Rather than commodifying knowledge and treating it solely as information that can be bought and sold, the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh teaches that knowledge must be actively generated by individuals, communities, and institutions as they work for the advancement of civilization: "True learning is that which is conducive to the well-being of the world" (Bahá'u'lláh, qtd. in *Scholarship* 8). Others have explored Bahá'í perspectives on knowledge, drawing connections to nonfoundational and consultative epistemologies that emphasize the social processes and social purpose of knowledge generation (Lample 178; Smith and Karlberg 68). The imagery of wings and ladders used by Bahá'u'lláh emphasizes the transformative effect of knowledge on the knower: it elevates one's understanding and enables one to see reality with greater and greater perspective. A university that reflects these conceptions might deliberately move away from educational approaches that place undue emphasis on the material, transactional aspects of knowledge generation.

A penetrating examination of universities and their role in the generation of knowledge is found in Farzam Arbab's discussion of science, religion, and development in *The Lab, the Temple, and*

the Market. Writing in the context of rural development, Arbab envisions the university as "an institution devoted to the formal generation, application, and propagation of knowledge," systematizing a process of learning that lies at the heart of development for the population in a given region (216, 228). In comparison to a materialistic conception of the university that focuses on skill transfer and employability, Arbab's description is rooted in processes of community life and aligned with the needs of the particular regional population served by the university. In particular, universities assist the population to "deal with the generation and application 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" (207). And in so doing, they "break the present pattern of flow of knowledge in the world," more effectively enabling human progress (207). Indeed, "the right of the masses of humanity not only to have access to information but to participate fully in the generation and application of knowledge" lies at the heart of this vision of progress (206). The library associated with this vision might therefore raise its sights beyond questions of access and consider how to assist populations both to engage with an existing body of knowledge and to begin making new contributions.

Sona Farid-Arbab alludes to a similar vision of universities in her book *Moral Empowerment: In Quest of a*

Pedagogy, where she describes “educational programs that . . . would empower the peoples of the world to contribute to a fundamental transformation of their societies” (201). She discusses the relationship between knowledge and action, noting: “The knowledge that students must make their own through education cannot be acquired in isolation from the imperative that they are to act on the reality of their own lives and of society” (199). In a similar vein, a statement on social action written in 2012 by the Office for Social and Economic Development (OSED) at the Bahá'í World Centre describes what happens when a community engages with a body of existing knowledge, putting it into practice. “The application of existing knowledge,” they write, “is invariably accompanied by the generation of new knowledge” (335). OSED goes on to emphasize the importance of systematizing the generation and application of knowledge, noting that “appropriate structures have to be put in place at the local level, among them institutions and agencies invested with authority to safeguard the integrity of the learning process and to ensure that it is not reduced to opinion or the mere collection of various experiences—in short, to see to it that veritable knowledge is generated” (336). While the form these structures will eventually take is yet unknown, we can look to the network of training institutes that has risen throughout the Bahá'í world since 1996, as well as the network of sites for the dissemination of learning about the

junior youth spiritual empowerment program and the burgeoning number of Bahá'í-inspired organizations for social action, as examples of the potential for educational agencies to systematize the generation of knowledge. Taken as a whole, these perspectives and developments point toward a future Bahá'í university, an institution perhaps distinct from traditional conceptions of the university, yet still concerned with the generation of knowledge for the transformation of society. The continuing need to engage with existing bodies of knowledge in the generation of new knowledge suggests a clear role for the library in supporting this vision.

The relationships sketched out in this section between epistemology, universities, social action, and the institutional capacity needed to support community learning all inform this nascent conception of a Bahá'í university library. With that said, these topics have not gone unexamined in the literature of librarianship. For example, John Budd treats epistemological questions at depth in his *Knowledge and Knowing in Information Science*. He is attentive to a tendency toward objectivism in library and information science, calling for a new approach to knowledge in the discipline (329). He presents hermeneutic phenomenology as a way of knowing (and an idea of knowledge) that admits realism while remaining open to “human action and perception,” and he invites further theory and practice to engage with this way of knowing (329). In imagining the future of university libraries, Budd

warns of a tension between instrumental definitions of libraries that see knowledge as existing within things—the objectification of knowledge—and seeing the library as a “place where people encounter ideas” (*Self-Examination* 252). In another example, Jaroslav Pelikan envisions the university library as a space in which scholars can come into conversation with existing knowledge *en route* to the generation of new knowledge. He speaks of the “dynamic interrelation of research with teaching, and of both with the acquisition, preservation, and circulation of documents and artifacts” while noting that “the relation between scholars and libraries is a symbiosis” (113). The relationship between the application of existing knowledge and the generation of new knowledge, described earlier in the social action document from OSED, is alluded to by Pelikan: “In the modern university . . . new knowledge has repeatedly come through confronting the old, in the process of which both old and new have been transformed” (120).

What the future development of Bahá’í universities might imply for academic libraries remains to be seen, but this brief examination has raised a few possibilities. Bahá’í universities of the future may be much more rooted in questions of concern to the specific regional populations they serve. The library collections at such institutions may in part be comprised of works that speak to those more local realities. Eventually, a significant part of the collections would represent that “veritable

knowledge” generated by the community itself as it pursues efforts to strive for both material and spiritual progress across a range of community processes (Office of Social and Economic Development 336). Librarians at such institutions would see their patrons as protagonists in an effort to generate and apply knowledge for the progress of their region, pushing back against a dominant ideology that reduces patrons to customers or to information-seeking agents. As our understanding of the generation and application of knowledge for the transformation of social reality continues to evolve, so too will our understanding of the role of the university and the library. While much remains as yet unknown, it is not difficult to see that these new conceptions will move beyond historical precedents.

CONCLUSION

The conceptions of libraries drawn from the writings of Shoghi Effendi are not unexpected; they build on historical precedents that stretch back millennia. Nevertheless, the structures and institutions called into being by Bahá’u’lláh, including the Ḥaziratu’l-Quds, the institutions of the Administrative Order, and the future Bahá’í university, reconfigure our understanding of what libraries can be. New conceptions of knowledge, human nature, and the fundamental relationships between individuals, communities, and institutions—each informed by the Revelation of Bahá’u’lláh—have important consequences for the role that libraries

play in human progress. This initial survey presents a number of areas where further contributions can be made to relevant discourses in librarianship and related fields. What role might such libraries play as social spaces in which communities can explore questions of knowledge and progress? How might a Bahá'í librarian assist a Local Spiritual Assembly to compile relevant literature on pressing social questions, as the institutions find themselves “drawn further and further into the life of the society” (Universal House of Justice, *Riḍván Message* 2008)? Is it possible for such libraries to purchase access to literature from the wider society without contributing to the commodification of knowledge? How can they support burgeoning efforts by training institutes and Bahá'í-inspired educational agencies to articulate experiences, identify patterns, and disseminate bodies of knowledge? Exploring these practical questions will shed further light on Bahá'í conceptions of libraries and the role they play in the generation, application, and diffusion of knowledge for human progress.

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