What Does Spirituality Look Like?[1]

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Abstract

The concept of spirituality defies a rigorous definition, much like some fundamental concepts in mathematics and physics. However, we may gain an understanding of this vital religious concept by asking what spirituality "looks like." In this paper, following a brief overview of the concepts of spirit and spirituality in the Bahá'í writings, we examine a letter of the Universal House of Justice that gives us a picture of what spirituality should look like today, as the Bahá'í community pursues its work of creating vibrant communities. We then explore the question of whether, and to what degree, the social sciences can investigate the phenomenon of spirituality as central to human nature, arguing that they can productively adopt spiritual reality as a background assumption, whose validity can then be evaluated.

Résumé

Le concept de spiritualité échappe à une définition rigoureuse, tout comme certains concepts fondamentaux en mathématiques et en physique. Cependant, on peut mieux comprendre ce concept religieux essentiel en se demandant à quoi « ressemble » la spiritualité. Dans cet article, après avoir fait un bref tour d'horizon des concepts d'esprit et de spiritualité dans les écrits bahá'ís, nous examinons une lettre de la Maison universelle de justice qui nous donne un aperçu de ce à quoi la spiritualité devrait ressembler aujourd'hui, alors que la communauté bahá'íe poursuit son travail de création de communautés dynamiques. Nous nous demandons ensuite si, et dans quelle mesure, les sciences sociales peuvent étudier le phénomène de la spiritualité en tant qu'élément principal de la nature humaine, en soutenant qu'elles peuvent efficacement choisir la réalité spirituelle comme hypothèse de travail, dont la validité peut ensuite être évaluée.

Resumen

El concepto de espiritualidad desafía una rigurosa definición, muy parecida a al-

gunos conceptos fundamentales en las matemáticas y la física. Sin embargo, podríamos lograr un entendimiento de este vital concepto religioso preguntando a qué "se parece" la espiritualidad. En este artículo, después de un breve bosquejo de los conceptos del espíritu y la espiritualidad en los escritos Bahá'ís, examinamos una carta de la Casa Universal de Justicia que nos da un panorama sobre a qué se debe parecer la espiritualidad en tiempos actuales, a medida que la Comunidad Bahá'í prosigue su labor de crear comunidades vibrantes. Enseguida, exploramos la pregunta de que si y a que grado las ciencias sociales pueden investigar el fenómeno de la espiritualidad como un asunto central a la naturaleza humana, argumentando que ellas pueden productivamente adoptar la realidad espiritual como un supuesto, cuya validez puede entonces ser evaluada.

Introduction

The term "spirituality" permeates Bahá'í writings, discourse, and thought. "All men," Bahá'u'lláh writes, "have been created to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization" (*Gleanings* 109:2). This civilization has both material and spiritual elements ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections* 227). In the series of global plans laid before the Bahá'í community by the Universal House of Justice, with the single aim of "the release of the society-building power of the Faith in ever greater measures," Bahá'ís are called upon to "learn . . . how to bring about spiritual and material progress" (30 December 2021). This learning project is at the center of the framework for action for Bahá'í communities that has emerged and evolved over the past twenty-five years.[2]

"Spirit" and "spirituality" do not have rigorous, agreed upon definitions in religion or in philosophy. This is not inherently problematic. At the foundations of mathematics and the sciences, for instance, we find a number of undefined terms. In geometry, terms like "point," "line," and "plane"—elements that are fundamental to this branch of knowledge—are formally labeled as "undefined terms." In physics there isn't such a formal labelling, but fundamental notions including "mass," "energy," "force," and "momentum" stubbornly resist definition, and have continuously been revisited by scientists and philosophers of science (see, for example, Jammer, Sarracino).[3]

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2   See, for example, The Universal House of Justice letter dated 27 December 2005 to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors.

3   As a concrete example, Newton famously defined mass as "quantity of matter," a definition that, inexplicably and confusedly, is still used in some elementary textbooks today. As I further elaborate,

Eventually physicists and philosophers of science became dissatisfied with this metaphysical concept of mass, and rather than the vague "quantity of matter," began to think of mass more as a coefficient in the equation of motion. Euler was the first in this movement when, in 1760, he defined mass as the ratio of force and acceleration. The concept of "force" itself, however, came under attack in the nineteenth century as being an "obscure metaphysical notion." It

Despite this inability to pin down a formal definition, there are relationships among these terms and concepts that can be expressed in equations. Physicists gain a familiarity with their discipline's fundamental terms and concepts by coming to understand these equations and what they represent with respect to the motion of discrete entities and waves, and the interactions between them.

Just as the presence of undefined terms in mathematics and physics is not problematic, so the lack of rigorous definitions for spirit and spirituality is not problematic in the Bahá'í Faith. There is a unity of thought within the Bahá'í community as to the implications of the terms and what they refer to. Bahá'ís come to understand what spirituality *is* and what it *is not* through two complementary avenues of endeavor. The first avenue is detailed study of the writings and guidance of the Faith. The second avenue consists of efforts to translate those writings and guidance, and the principles and injunctions contained therein, into action in personal and community life, and in the functioning of Bahá'í institutions.

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was Ernst Mach who developed the working definition from which twentieth century attempts to define mass have developed, and which is used, more or less, in textbooks today. . . . Ernst Mach formulated mass in terms of mass-ratio, that is, the "negative inverse ratio of mutually induced accelerations" of two interacting bodies. This itself, however, has problems (Sarracino 10–13).

Through these two means the Bahá'í community is able not only to reach a collective, albeit continuously evolving, understanding of what is meant by spirit and spirituality, but also to contribute to answering a more practical question: "What does spirituality *look like*?"

It is to this question that the present paper seeks to make a contribution. It proceeds in three parts. First, it grapples with ontological questions about spirit and spirituality. There is no ambition to do this with great rigor; the goal is simply to suggest a few parameters by which we can understand enough about these concepts to ground the more practical question.

Second, it looks to recent guidance from the Universal House of Justice, specifically a paragraph from the 30 December 2021 letter outlining the qualities and characteristics of "the enkindled souls being raised up through the processes" (¶ 4) of the current series of Bahá'í plans for Jammer, Sarracino the advancement of communities, as a source for outlining what the spirituality the Bahá'í community attempts to act out looks like. Relying on guidance from the central institution of the Bahá'í Faith is particularly useful for our question, because the Universal House of Justice's letters are not only the agreed upon focal point of guidance for the global Bahá'í community, but are also crafted in reflection of what that Body sees emerging from the actual experience of Bahá'ís—individuals, communities, and institutions—worldwide.

Third, the paper turns to how the question "What does spirituality look like?" might help the social sciences come to better grips with a phenomenon—spirituality—whose ontological reality they are incapable of directly assessing, yet one that intimately shapes the motivations and actions of myriad people worldwide. Since those motivations and actions *are* proper studies for the social sciences, the question of how these areas of human inquiry can "quantify" spirituality is an important one. This paper's thesis is that it can best do so by taking the existence of a transcendent spiritual nature in humans as a background assumption to produce evidence from data, and that this evidence can be used to support or falsify well-formulated hypotheses about human spiritual nature.

SPIRIT AND SPIRITUALITY
IN THE BAHÁ'Í WRITINGS:
A BRIEF OVERVIEW

The term "spirituality" is understood in a variety of ways by different individuals and communities in wider society.[4] The views of those unaffiliated with any particular religion range from positive—if often vague—conceptions of spirituality, to the view that spiritual belief is a symptom of human irrationality, referring to ghosts, spirits, and other intangible entities. Some even view spirituality as destructive, leading to anti-social behavior and violence. The problem is compounded by the apparent irrelevance of the concept of "spirit" (and allied concepts like "soul") to the natural sciences, and by the ambiguous reception of the concept in the social sciences, which either consider it meaningless within the predominant materialist paradigm,[5] or simply too difficult to observe the action or effect of in an empirically testable manner.

In contrast to this lack of consensus around what is meant by spirit and spirituality in discourse generally, there is, from what I have observed, a unity of understanding on this topic within the Bahá'í community. It is a characteristically Bahá'í unity—a unity in diversity, in which there is no need to perfectly reconcile the inevitable range of perspectives individuals bring to the question, since this range admits a richer collective understanding than any one perspective could afford.[6]

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4   An illustrative example of this variety can be found in Sena et al.'s 2021 study of the concepts or definitions of spirituality used by researchers in the medical field alone, in which they find, and attempt to categorize, some 166 different definitions.

5   For a more comprehensive treatment, see William B. Hurlbut, "Science, Ethics and the Human Spirit" in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Science*.

6   Indeed, a Bahá'í perspective on this, as on many metaphysical topics, begins with the understanding that the human mind can never perfectly grasp the ontology of anything (*Gleanings* 26), let alone entities, concepts, realms, etc. that are inherently beyond embodied human perception, or beyond the human's own ontological station. As with models of reality

Yet it is nonetheless a unity, in that it builds on certain core propositions in the Bahá'í writings that combine to make "spirit" and "spirituality" *usable* concepts.

From the outset we should distinguish between what might be called the ontology of spirit on the one hand, and the acquisition of spiritual capacities and the expression of spirituality by humans on the other hand.

ONTOLOGY OF SPIRIT

SPIRITUALITY AS RELATIVE

A useful starting place is 'Abdu'l-Bahá discussion of the unity, and hierarchy, of creation:

> [T]he truth is that the world of existence is a single world, although its stations are manifold in accordance with the manifold realities of things. For instance, the world of mineral, plant, and animal existence is the same world. Despite this, *the animal world in relation to the world of the vegetable is a spiritual reality* and another world and abode. (*Amr va Khalq* 1:202 provisional translation, qtd. in Phelps; emphasis added)

Spirituality is thus relative: each higher level is a spiritual reality relative to a lower level. The animal has the power of the senses and powers of thought that are absent in the plant. To use the terminology of modern science, these powers are *emergent*, appearing as more complex organizations of matter emerge from simpler ones.[7] At each stage of progression, from the lower to the higher levels, the higher incorporates all the inherent attributes of the lower and adds new attributes (*Promulgation* 85). The lower, by its very nature, remains unaware of, and even denies the reality of, the powers of the higher (*Selections* 163:2).

It would seem to follow from this conception that God—if we might venture to say anything about the "Unknowable Essence"—is the ultimate Spirit, in that there is no perspective from which One Who stands not merely at the apex of creation but utterly beyond it (as its uttermost Source) does not remain "higher."

SPIRIT AS ONTOLOGICAL, UNDERLYING REALITY

"Spirit" is not only a description of the qualities of one entity relative to another, but also, according to Bahá'í thought, an underlying, ontological

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in science, the usefulness of whatever concept we have of a transcendent reality is a good indicator of its relationship to truth.

7   Nobel laureate Philip Anderson describes emergence in these terms:

> The behavior of large and complex aggregates of elementary particles, it turns out, is not to be understood in terms of a simple extrapolation of the properties of a few particles. Instead, at each level of complexity entirely new properties appear . . . (393).

reality. Used in this sense of the term, we find (for instance) that 'Abdu'l-Bahá in *Some Answered Questions* refers to a mineral, a vegetable, an animal, and a human spirit — the human spirit or "rational soul" having two aspects, as will be discussed further. Beyond these, 'Abdu'l-Bahá writes, there is a "heavenly spirit" or "spirit of faith," through which the higher aspect of the human spirit is awakened and animated, and which itself "proceeds through the breath of the Holy Spirit," "the mediator between God and His creation," which is associated with the Manifestation of God (ch. 36).[8]

To understand how "spirit" as a fundamental ontological reality relates to the mundane reality we perceive through our senses, we might analogize to the concept of fields as understood in physics. According to current models, at the most fundamental level matter is comprised of fields—such as the Higgs field—that permeate all space and time, with fundamental particles being particular instantiations of fields. Only very recently—in 2012—have

we actually observed an instantiation of the Higgs field; i.e. a Higgs particle, generated in an experiment at CERN. We can analogously conceive of a human "field" permeating all of reality (purely by way of analogy, and without suggesting that the human spirit has a physical and / or measurable ontology). When the conditions are right—when an organism appears with the requisite level of complexity—the human field instantiates itself in an individual soul—what has been called "the rational soul" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 55:5). As 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains, "if a thousand million years hence, the component elements of man are brought together, measured out in the same proportion, combined in the same manner, and subjected to the same interaction with other beings, exactly the same man will come into existence" (46:7).

SPIRITUALITY
FROM THE HUMAN PERSPECTIVE

To explore how the ideas of underlying ontological spirit and spirituality as a relative condition relate to each other, we can consider spirituality as an inherent, yet latent, property of the human being. Bahá'u'lláh explains that in the human being "are potentially revealed all the attributes and names of God to a degree that no other created being hath excelled or surpassed" (*Kitab-i-Íqán* 101). While these attributes and names are unchanging and eternal in God, and thus have an unchanging ontological existence, their expressions

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8   In some contexts, the Bahá'í writings distinguish clearly between the material and the spiritual as distinct realms of existence that are nevertheless unified as parts of one whole, with "[t]he physical universe [being] . . . in perfect correspondence with the spiritual or divine realm" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation* 93:1). A philosophical treatment of spirit in the Bahá'í writings would explore the relationship between the various presentations of the concept in greater detail than is necessary here.

as spiritual qualities by human beings is not automatic:

> Man is the supreme Talisman. Lack of a proper education hath, however, deprived him of that which he doth inherently possess. . . . Regard man as a mine rich in gems of inestimable value. Education can, alone, cause it to reveal its treasures, and enable mankind to benefit therefrom. (Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets* 161–62)

The attributes of God within human reality thus exist only as potential. They must be developed in order to become manifest—through education and as a result of the individual's own volition (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* ch. 77).

From this perspective, William S. Hatcher proposes a working definition of spiritual growth as "the process of the full, adequate, proper and harmonious development of one's spiritual capacities" ("Concept" 5).

Key to this process is self-reflection. 'Abdu'l-Bahá writes that man's nature "is threefold: animal, human and divine" (*Promulgation* 139:12). The "human," one may conclude from the Bahá'í writings, is that "rational faculty with which God hath endowed the essence of man." This rational faculty is an inextricable and distinguishing facet of the human spirit (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* 83:1).[9]

It distinguishes humans from animals, for "the animal perceives sensible things but cannot perceive conceptual realities" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 48:6). It is a faculty that the individual, through volition, can turn to the animal nature and so choose to descend to that level of being, or orient to the divine and thus acquire the attributes pertaining to *that* world. It is in that sense, one can surmise, that 'Abdu'l-Bahá refers to the "human spirit" as having "two aspects":

> But this human spirit has two aspects: one divine and one satanic—that is, it is capable of both the greatest perfection and the greatest deficiency. Should it acquire virtues, it is the noblest of all things; and should it acquire vices, it becomes the most vile. (*Some Answered Questions* 36:5)

I would thus restate Hatcher's definition of spiritual growth to draw out an implicit feature: spiritual growth is "the process of the full, adequate, proper, harmonious, *and self-reflective*

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9   This rational capacity of the human spirit is the source of science:

The virtues of humanity are many, but science is the most noble of them all. The distinction which man enjoys above and beyond the station of the animal is due to this paramount virtue. It is a bestowal of God; it is not material; it is divine. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation* 20:2)

It is in this sense that one can call science a collective spiritual enterprise.

development of one's spiritual capacities." In other words, we use the powers of the "human" spirit—including the rational power of self-reflection—to acquire the "divine" spirit.

Spiritual growth can thus be considered a process of *growth towards being*, to develop one's divine capacities.[10]

While the essential ontology of the human being is spiritual, the extent to which that spiritual essence develops—or remains largely overridden by the lower animal nature that, in relation to the human spirit, is material—depends on this process of growth ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation* 65).[11]

What, then, is the nature of the divine capacities to which this process is directed? There are myriad passages in the Bahá'í writings specifying some of these capacities. "The purpose of the one true God in manifesting Himself," Bahá'u'lláh writes in one instance,

> is to summon all mankind to truthfulness and sincerity, to piety and trustworthiness, to resignation and submissiveness to the Will of God, to forbearance and kindliness, to uprightness and wisdom. His object is to array every man with the mantle of a saintly character, and to adorn him with the ornament of holy and goodly deeds. (*Gleanings* 137:4)

Yet there is also a sense in which what spirituality looks like—the way in which we must express our spiritual capacities, including both the rationality of the human spirit and the qualities of the divine spirit—will be specific to our time and place. Since this is what motivates my examination of recent guidance of the Universal House of Justice in particular, it merits further exploration.

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10   In section of his paper I have quoted, Hatcher uses the terms "spiritual growth" and "spirituality" interchangeably. There is a strong sense, however, in which spirituality can be considered a condition or state one strives to attain, as reflected in a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi: "How to attain spirituality is, indeed, a question to which every young man and woman must sooner or later try to find a satisfactory answer" (qtd. in *Importance of Prayer* no. 40). There need not be any contradiction, of course, between viewing spirituality as a process or as a state. The thoughts, words, and actions by which a person at a given level of spiritual development can progress to a further level are the very same thoughts, words, and actions that characterize the relative level of spirituality that this person thus attains. The qualities reflected in the guidance of the Universal House of Justice discussed in the next section, for instance, can be considered in either light

11   "But the life of man is not so restricted; it is divine, eternal, not mortal and sensual. For him a spiritual existence and

livelihood is prepared and ordained in the divine creative plan. . . . Therefore, consider how base a nature it reveals in man that, notwithstanding the favors showered upon him by God, he should lower himself into the animal sphere, be wholly occupied with material needs, attached to this mortal realm, imagining that the greatest happiness is to attain wealth in this world" (*Promulgation* 65:4).

EVOLUTION OVER TIME, COLLECTIVE
EXPRESSION, AND SYSTEMATICITY

If this is indeed the time of "the com-
ing of age of the entire human race,"
as the Bahá'í Faith asserts, it should
be no surprise that the Revelation
of Bahá'u'lláh not only renews, but
updates, our concept of spirituality
(Shoghi Effendi, *World Order* 163). We
can expect spirituality, on the one hand,
to bear similarities to understandings
or concepts of the past, but also, in
this age, to exhibit new characteristics.
The individual's spirituality looks dif-
ferent in maturity than in adolescence
or in childhood. As the capacity of the
individual to express spirituality in ac-
tion grows as the individual matures,
[12] we can expect the same to be true of
humanity as a whole.[13]

Indeed, the collective dimension
of spiritual expression can be consid-
ered as another kind of "emergence."
In nature, certain properties of matter
are emergent in that they appear in
collections of particles but are absent
in the individual particles that com-
prise them. Fluidity and its reciprocal,
viscosity, are examples of this emer-
gence: the individual particles of, say,
a body of water do not have fluidity,
but the body itself, composed of these
particles, exhibits this property.

Similarly, while there are aspects of
spirituality that can be expressed indi-
vidually, other facets of spirituality are
emergent, appearing when individuals
organize themselves and work togeth-
er. For instance, the individual is en-
dowed with the power of understand-
ing, which is a spiritual power relative
to the animal. When individuals orga-
nize themselves to, say, investigate in
concert some phenomenon of nature,
this spirituality emerges as a property
of the group. Although the individual
may engage in scientific activity, sci-
ence does not arise from the individual:
it is an emergent phenomenon arising
from individuals working in concert.
Similarly, although individuals engage
in religious activity, religion itself does
not come from the individual: religion
arises from entire communities work-
ing in concert. It is when followers of a
particular Messenger of God assemble
and work together that the phenome-
non of religion appears. Religion and
science can thus both be considered
emergent spiritual enterprises.

We should expect, then, that all three
protagonists in the civilization-build-
ing process described by the Universal
House of Justice—the individual, the
community and the institutions—can
develop and express spirituality (28

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12   See 'Abdu'l-Bahá on "the dif-
ference between the perfect man and the
child" (*Promulgation* 53).

13   This may partially explain why
spirituality is viewed as naïve and / or
superstitious by many, including some
scientifically minded people. Conceptions
of spirituality suited to previous stages
of humanity's collective evolution may,
if they linger in the public discourse on
spirituality, obscure more relevant concep-
tions. Science tends to replace outmoded
paradigms over time; religion may need to
learn to do the same to retain, or regain, its
relevance.

December 2010). Spirituality in one of these three protagonists will look different than spirituality in another and, as each protagonist evolves over time, its spirituality will be expressed in new ways. The development of spirituality on the level of the institutions will be reflected in a new aim: "not to control but to nurture and guide" (2 March 2013). The development of a new level of spirituality on the part of the community will be seen as it

> takes on the challenge of sustaining an environment where the powers of individuals, who wish to exercise self-expression responsibly in accordance with the common weal and the plans of institutions, multiply in unified action. (2 March 2013)

Clearly, these expressions of spirituality are emergent, in the sense that the individual, no matter how advanced, cannot achieve them. They require institutions and communities that are progressing along their own paths of spiritual development.

Spirituality appropriate to humanity's age of maturity will also be progressively expressed in the relationships between the three protagonists:

> At the heart of the learning process is inquiry into the nature of the relationships that bind the individual, the community, and the institutions of society—actors on the stage of history who have been locked in a struggle

for power throughout time. In this context, the assumption that relations among them will inevitably conform to the dictates of competition, a notion that ignores the extraordinary potential of the human spirit, has been set aside in favour of the more likely premise that their harmonious interactions can foster a civilization befitting a mature humanity. (2 March 2013)

Before exploring "what spirituality looks like" today, a final general consideration merits mention. Implicit in the educational paradigm for spiritual development, and explicit in many places in the Bahá'í writings, is the principle that spirituality is developed *systematically* at both the individual and collective level. It is thus no surprise that the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, which is intended to "effect a fundamental transformation in the whole basis of human society, which will involve the spiritualization of mankind" (Universal House of Justice *in* Research Dept. *Family* 74), is described by Shoghi Effendi as "scientific in its method" (Letter High Commissioner).

Indeed, the Universal House of Justice has progressively outlined a framework for action for the global Bahá'í community, appropriate to its level of development and systematic in its approach.[14]

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14   For a more focused discussion see Stephen Friberg, "Revelation as Scientific in its Method: Science, Diversity, Consultation, and Learning in Action."

A document prepared on behalf of the Universal House of Justice explains that

> [w]hen efforts are carried out in a learning mode—characterized by constant action, reflection, consultation, and study—visions and strategies are re-examined time and again. . . . The learning process, which is given direction through appropriate institutional arrangements, unfolds in a way that resembles the growth and differentiation of a living organism. Haphazard change is avoided, and continuity of action maintained. (OSED)

The systematic work of the community is a corollary of the practices that have always been at the core of the individual Bahá'í's spiritual life, and that are reflected in other religious traditions: regular prayer, fasting, and immersion in the sacred writings of the Faith amongst others. At both the individual and collective level, then, it is clear that spirituality is not acquired passively. That does not mean that it cannot be an *inner* process, of course, but rather that it is acquired through progressive refinement requiring active, systematic engagement of one's faculties.

WHAT DOES SPIRITUALITY LOOK LIKE?

Having explored a few characteristics of a Bahá'í conception of spirituality,

we can now turn to the central question, and make it more precise: "What does spirituality look like *today, for individuals, communities and institutions*?"

In its pivotal message of 30 December 2021, the Universal House of Justice clearly outlines the task before us, of "building a society that consciously pursues [the] collective purpose" set out for it by Bahá'u'lláh—to "work for the betterment of the world and live together in concord and harmony"—and explains that this is "the work not only of this generation but of generations to come." In the same message the Universal House of Justice outlines three areas of learning that are most crucial *at this time*:[15]

- Learning how to raise up vibrant, outward-looking communities;

- Learning how to bring about material and spiritual progress;

- Learning how to contribute to the discourses that influence the direction of that progress.

In light of this mandate placed before the Bahá'í community and its

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15 Presumably, for the duration of the series of Plans that will occupy the Bahá'í community until the year 2046. Global Plans of fixed durations have been set in place by the central institution of the Bahá'í Faith since the time of the Guardian, Shoghi Effendi, and guide the community's growth as well as its contribution to wider society.

collaborators, spirituality looks like that set of qualities and attributes that will best equip humanity to engage in these three areas of learning over the next quarter century.

As a document that not only clarifies the path before a community dedicated to progressively enacting spiritual behaviour, but reflects back to that community what it is already learning about and putting into practice, this letter, I propose, can itself serve as a rich resource for answering our central question.

In eleven sentences of paragraph four, the letter paints a portrait of "the enkindled souls being raised up through the processes of the Plan":

> They are committed to the prosperity of all, recognizing that the welfare of individuals rests in the welfare of society at large. They are loyal citizens who eschew partisanship and the contest for worldly power. Instead, they are focused on transcending differences, harmonizing perspectives, and promoting the use of consultation for making decisions. They emphasize qualities and attitudes—such as trustworthiness, cooperation, and forbearance—that are building blocks of a stable social order. They champion rationality and science as essential for human progress. They advocate tolerance and understanding, and with the inherent oneness of humanity uppermost in their minds, they view everyone as a potential partner to collaborate with, and they strive to foster fellow feeling even among groups who may traditionally have been hostile to one another. They are conscious of how the forces of materialism are at work around them, and their eyes are wide open to the many injustices that persist in the world, yet they are equally clear sighted about the creative power of unity and humanity's capacity for altruism. They see the power that true religion possesses to transform hearts and overcome distrust, and so, with confidence in what the future holds, they labour to cultivate the conditions in which progress can occur. They share their beliefs liberally with others, remaining respectful of the freedom of conscience of every soul, and they never impose their own standards on anyone. And while they would not pretend to have discovered all the answers, they are clear about what they have learned and what they still need to learn. Their efforts advance to the alternating rhythm of action and reflection; setbacks leave them unfazed. (30 December 2021 ¶ 4)

With an understanding of spirituality as both *inherent*—in the individual—and *emergent*—finding expression at the collective levels of the community and the institution—we can see in this paragraph two clear directives: a guide to individuals engaged in the community-building process, and a

characterization of the qualities that are destined to emerge on both community and institutional levels as the work progresses.

In this section, I explore five dimensions of what spirituality looks like today that emerge from this paragraph: embracing rationality, developing clarity of vision, acquiring particular spiritual qualities, espousing new concepts of power, and working toward reconciliation.

EMBRACING RATIONALITY

Spirituality today must fully embrace rationality and all its fruits, including science. Throughout the Bahá'í writings it is emphasized that, at all times, religious truth must conform to reason, and science and religion[16] must work together. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá underscores, "true science is reason and reality, and religion is essentially reality and pure reason; therefore, the two must correspond" (*Promulgation* 44:8). Although the divine is a higher spiritual power than the human or rational power, in this day when the sciences have become "bridges to

reality" (*Selections* 72:3), spirituality involves embracing fully the rational faculty and its fruits. This is clearly seen in the Universal House of Justice's characterization, in its letter dated 30 December 2021, of the "enkindled souls":

- They champion rationality and science as essential for human progress;

- They promote the use of consultation in exploring reality, developing understanding, and in decision-making;

- Their efforts advance to "the alternating rhythm of action and reflection."

In past dispensations the majority of humanity was illiterate, and science as we know it today did not exist. It is no surprise that the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, originating in the nineteenth century, would emphasize universal education, the development of critical thinking skills, and an orientation towards science and reason. In one of His talks given in America 'Abdu'l-Bahá emphasizes,

[W]e must arise to service in the world of morality, for human morals are in need of readjustment. We must also render service to the world of intellectuality in order that the minds of men may increase in power and become keener in perception, assisting the intellect of man to attain its

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16   Much could be written about the relationship between spirituality and religion, which today is understood from many different perspectives, and in quite contradictory ways. For the purposes of this paper, I simply assert (without trying to prove) the relationship implied by the statement written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi that "spiritual development . . . is the very foundation and purpose of the Religion of God" (in *Prayer and Devotional Life* 71).

supremacy so that the ideal virtues may appear. (*Promulgation* 105:3)

It is clear that the embrace of rationality is not a characteristic of spirituality today that is confined to the individual. Bahá'í communities as a whole are learning about emergent expressions of rationality that the isolated individual cannot achieve. These communities are currently applying a *method* to their three areas of learning that involves "an ongoing process of action, reflection, study, and consultation" (Universal House of Justice, 24 July 2013). Consultation in particular is an inherently *collective* means whereby the rational faculty can be employed to explore material and spiritual reality, whether to make a decision or to simply advance understanding.[17]

In laying before the worldwide Bahá'í community the multiplicity of the tasks before it—tasks in which

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17   In companion papers in this collaborative exploration of the harmony of science and religion other authors have expanded on the role of consultation. See, in this issue, Andres Elvira Espinosa "'Justly and Without Bias': Consultation as a Technique for Mitigating Cognitive Biases," and Roger Neyman and Charlotte Wenninger, "Transformative Dialogue: A Key to Elevating Discourse" and, in vol. 33 no. 3 of *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies*, Whitney White Kazemipour, "Even as the Waves of One Sea: Bahá'í Consultation's Implicit Cultural Support for the Clash of Differing Opinions" and Todd Smith, Becoming Attuned to Reality: Presuppositions and the Power of Learning in Action."

"increasing attention needs to be given to . . . processes that seek to enhance the life of a community"—the Universal House of Justice emphasizes the importance of the community maintaining a systematic and scientific approach to its own development (Riḍván 2023). It must specifically continue to develop

the capacity to engage in systematic learning . . . a capacity that draws on insights arising from the Teachings and the accumulated store of human knowledge generated through scientific enquiry. As this capacity grows, much will be accomplished over the coming decades. (Riḍván 2023)

There is, of course, an individual responsibility to embrace rationality as well; and even in community processes such as consultation, it is the individual's contribution of reasoned argument that contributes to a whole greater than the sum of its parts. One vital contributor to the individual's rational inquiry is freedom of initiative. The spiritual world, even more than the physical world, is a vast world; a world to be explored. And just as the scientist requires a large measure of freedom in exploring physical reality—freedom to identify lines of inquiry, to hypothesize, to experiment—so a person on the spiritual path requires freedom of initiative to explore that world and garner its fruits. Similarly, communities require the freedom to "read their own reality" (Universal House of Justice, 28 December 2010 ¶

10), to explore that reality, and to advance on their own level and at their own pace. This reading of reality flows from a broader conception of rationality that draws on the powers of mind and spirit, including reference to the insights from both scientific and religious understanding.

One of the natural, inevitable and constructive features of individual initiative is that there will arise, in consultation, what 'Abdu'l-Bahá identifies as "the clash of differing opinions"—as opposed to the "clash of egos," which is almost always destructive. It is through the "clash of differing opinions" that "the shining spark of truth cometh forth" in consultation (*Selections* 44).[18]

DEVELOPING CLARITY OF VISION

Spirituality requires clarity of vision. Although practically one's work may be on a local level—with family, fellow-believers, colleagues, friends, neighbors, or a community—these groups in themselves are limited; that is, they are parts of the whole. A clear vision is a world-embracing vision, and is expressed in selfless service aimed at the betterment of the entire human race. Thus, the House of Justice says of the enkindled souls:

- They have the inherent oneness of humanity uppermost in mind;

- They are committed to the prosperity of all, recognizing that the welfare of individuals rests in the welfare of society at large;

- They are conscious of how the forces of materialism are at work around them, and their eyes are wide open to the many injustices that persist in the world, yet they are equally clear sighted about the creative power of unity and humanity's capacity for altruism. (30 December 2021 ¶ 4)

The faculty of vision, Bahá'u'lláh writes, is derived from the rational faculty (*Gleanings* 83:2), and is "the agent and guide for true knowledge." "Keenness of understanding," He elucidates, "is due to keenness of vision" (*Tablets* 4:7). Hence, clarity of vision is a crucial adjunct to embrace of the rational. Historically, many enterprises that had sound beginnings and potentially promising outcomes lost their way because, partly through narrow focus and partly through distractions arising from the "insistent self" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections* 206:9)—the animal side of human nature—a wider perspective was lost. This can be avoided if the wider perspective of the health of the entire human family— and the long-range goal of achieving the unity of the entire human race—is

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18   The continual "clash of opinions" has been one of the vital features of the collective enterprise of science throughout history. For a deeper discussion and analysis of the operation of this dynamic in Bahá'í consultation see White Kazemipour.

ever held in the consciousness of those working at the grassroots level.

ACQUIRING PARTICULAR
SPIRITUAL QUALITIES

The demands of this period of time require the cultivation of particular, critical qualities. The Universal House of Justice emphasizes specific qualities of the enkindled souls:

- They emphasize qualities and attitudes—such as trustworthiness, cooperation, and forbearance—that are building blocks of a stable social order;

- They share their beliefs liberally with others, remaining respectful of the freedom of conscience of every soul, and they never impose their own standards on anyone;

- While they would not pretend to have discovered all the answers, they are clear about what they have learned and what they still need to learn. (30 December 2021)

Recalling our definition, building on Hatcher, of spiritual growth as the "full, adequate, proper, harmonious, and self-reflective development of one's spiritual capacities," we can nevertheless recognize that at each particular time in history certain qualities rise to the fore as being most conducive to individual and social progress. Cooperation and forbearance are of

obvious importance in an age in which our very ability to speak civilly across lines of difference seems in many places to be eroding (see Wenninger and Neyman, this issue). As for trustworthiness, it must characterize any religious individual or community who seeks to contribute to the social good. Indeed, religion has acquired a bad name among many people of thought in the world, in no small part because of the gross and obvious hypocrisy of many religious leaders and religious organizations.[19]

Hypocrisy is so condemned that Bahá'u'lláh admonishes in one of His tablets,

> Be thou of the people of hellfire,
> but be not a hypocrite.
> (qtd. in *Trustworthiness* 38)

The spiritual qualities of generosity, respect and detachment, reflected in the balance struck by liberally sharing one's belief while never imposing one's standards on others, are equally critical today. The masses of humanity, the great majority of whom are religious, increasingly have nowhere to turn to find inspiration and positive models. One is reminded of Bahá'u'lláh's statement in the Book of Certitude:

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19   The other major cause of this disrepute, namely the disunity of sectarian attachments that plague so many religious communities and institutions today, further speaks to the need for cooperation and forbearance (Universal House of Justice, April 2002).

What "oppression" is more grievous than that a soul seeking the truth, and wishing to attain unto the knowledge of God, should know not where to go for it and from whom to seek it? (*Kitáb-i-Íqán* 31)

On the one hand, the distrust among people who have become cynical about religion needs to be dispelled. On the other hand, those who are religious need to be shown in action what true religion is and what it can accomplish, in a measure that will attract those who have become disillusioned, and enable them to work together for a common purpose. Intellectual humility is equally important in this regard: to know that one has not discovered all the answers even as one is clear about what has been learned so far changes the nature of the invitation, from "join *me*" to "let *us* learn together." These qualities, nurtured in individuals and communities, can foster the kind of fellow feeling that will enable diverse people to work together.

ESPOUSING A NEW CONCEPT OF POWER

Bahá'u'lláh writes that the task of converting "satanic strength" into "heavenly power" is one that "We have been empowered to accomplish" (*Gleanings* 99:1). What is heavenly power? What is the new concept of power that He has been empowered to establish, and what changes in power structures and power relationships is His Revelation destined to bring about?

Like all similar questions, these can most practically be addressed in terms of current needs and current directions to be taken. In the paragraph under study, the Universal House of Justice makes a number of relevant observations about the "enkindled souls":

- They are loyal citizens who eschew partisanship and the contest for worldly power;

- They promote the use of consultation for making decisions;

- They view everyone as a potential partner to collaborate with;

- They see the power that true religion possesses to transform hearts;

- They labour to cultivate the conditions in which progress can occur. (30 December 2021 ¶ 4)

Science and religion are described by the Universal House of Justice as "two complementary systems of knowledge and practice by which human beings come to understand the world around them and through which civilization advances" (2 March 2013). Yet, throughout history, the knowledge generated by both science and religion has also been coopted by those who wield temporal power.

Scientific discovery leads to new technologies that can be used to improve life but also to serve the ends

of those who wish to exert power over others. 'Abdu'l-Bahá described the "destructive and infernal machines. . . . forces of demolition and the invention of fiery implements" of His own time as evidence that the current "civilization is conjoined with barbarism" (*Selections* 225:6). In the twentieth century, discoveries in physics enabled the development of nuclear weapons, while advances in psychology were also weaponized into techniques of persuasion designed to channel human activity into patterns of commercialization (Packard).

Religion, as the historical framework for spirituality, has also generated what we might call "social technologies." These technologies helped create stable and happy families, stable and progressive communities, and well-ordered societies. But through excess of zeal, ulterior motives, and thirst for power, other technologies have been developed that may have passed for spiritualization: forms of social control, coercion, demands for conformity, oppression of the spirit, and the tyranny of forced catechisms and beliefs.

The positive contributions of both science and religion show that each has the capacity to contribute to positive forms of power—to exert an influence on the world that changes it for the better. Yet this is not the sense in which power is often conceived. Animated by an often-unconscious culture of conflict (Karlberg, "Constructive Resilience" and "Constructive Imaginary"), our societies view power as a thing to be wrested from others and used against them in a zero-sum game. As the Universal House of Justice has written regarding the individual, institutions and community,

> Throughout human history, inter-actions among these three have been fraught with difficulties at every turn, with the individual clamouring for freedom, the institution demanding submission, and the community claiming precedence. . . . Today, in this age of transition, as humanity struggles to attain its collective maturity, such relationships—nay, the very conception of the individual, of social institutions, and of the community—continue to be assailed by crises too numerous to count. (28 December 2010)

A reconceptualization of power is central to reimagining the individual, community, and institution in a way that permits harmonious relationships between them. As the Universal House of Justice goes on to point out: "Every follower of Bahá'u'lláh knows well that the purpose of His Revelation is to bring into being a new creation" (28 December 2010).

We need, then, a new concept of power.

The writings and guidance of the Bahá'í Faith help us understand the relationship between spirituality and power. On the one hand, there is an unambiguous affirmation that spiritual actions—from prayer to service to

study of the Revealed Word of God—give us access to sources of power that can effect real change in ourselves and the world. At the same time, it is made equally clear that spiritual power of this kind is not a power to be used *against* others; coercion to advance spiritual ends is not countenanced. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains,

> But in this wondrous Dispensation, the Blessed Beauty hath . . . abrogated contention and conflict, and even rejected undue insistence. He exhorted us instead to "consort with the followers of all religions in a spirit of friendliness and fellowship". He ordained that we be loving friends and well-wishers of all peoples and religions, and enjoined upon us to demonstrate the highest virtues in our dealings with the kindreds of the earth. (*Light* 32:2)

The Bahá'í concept of the exercise of power involves *empowerment*—empowering individuals through emphasis on the "twofold moral purpose, to develop their inherent potentialities and to contribute to the transformation of society" (Universal House of Justice, Riḍván 2010); empowering communities through practices such as consultation to become unified protagonists of their own progress; and empowering institutions through development of a culture of service and empathy, on the one hand, and of equity, justice and trustworthiness, on the other hand. In this context, the

promotion of consultation, and the willingness to view everyone as a potential partner, are both expressions of the new conception of power.

This focus on empowerment, and eschewing coercion, can be seen for example in Bahá'u'lláh's explanation of how to teach, a fundamental spiritual activity for Bahá'ís:

> Should anyone among you be incapable of grasping a certain truth, or be striving to comprehend it, show forth, when conversing with him, a spirit of extreme kindliness and goodwill. Help him to see and recognize the truth, without esteeming yourself to be, in the least, superior to him, or to be possessed of greater endowments. (*Gleanings* 5:3)

If spirituality today looks like developing this new kind of power—empowering ourselves and others—then it equally requires that we avoid becoming entangled in the pursuit of that other kind of power. Thus, spirituality requires that the individual "eschew . . . the contest for worldly power" (Universal House of Justice, 30 December 2021). I venture to suggest that we see here a concrete example of the transformation of "satanic strength"—which, given the Bahá'í conception of Satan as "the lower nature in man" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation* 97:12), might be understood as an individual's (community's or institution's) efforts to advance their own selfish interests, even at the expense of others—into "heavenly

power," a power that is deployed for the betterment of all, that refuses to overbear anyone's freedom of conscience, and is thus truly spiritual.

WORKING TOWARD RECONCILIATION

The cultivation of spirituality in this period of time demands a more active attempt at religious reconciliation—both between religions and between those who are religious and those who have separated themselves from religion. In describing the enkindled souls, the Universal House of Justice notes:

- They see the power that true religion possesses to transform hearts and overcome distrust, and so, with confidence in what the future holds, they labour to cultivate the conditions in which progress can occur;

- They advocate tolerance and understanding, and they strive to foster fellow feeling even among groups who may traditionally have been hostile to one another;

- They are focused on transcending differences and harmonizing perspectives. (30 December 2021)

Just as the principle of the oneness of humanity is "the pivot round which all the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh revolve" (Shoghi Effendi, *World Order* 42), "[d]isunity is the crux of the problems which so severely afflict the planet" (Universal House of Justice 26 November 1992). Well aware of the pivotal importance of the principle of unity, the Bahá'í community has, over the decades, worked to root out prejudice of all forms within its own ranks. This important work is by no means complete and must continue; it is, however, no longer sufficient.

Religion inherently has the power to tame the passions of disunity, but when religion itself is divided, it loses this power. Religiously motivated animosity and violence, as well as the entanglement of religion with divisive partisan politics, feed polarizations that threaten to tear national communities apart, and thus contribute to a situation in which "the world is becoming increasingly ungovernable" (Universal House of Justice, 28 December 2010).

In its letter to religious leaders, the Universal House of Justice, after outlining the salutary effect of the erosion of prejudices that in the past have plagued the world, notes that, regrettably,

[i]n contrast to the processes of unification that are transforming the rest of humanity's social relationships, the suggestion that all of the world's great religions are equally valid in nature and origin is stubbornly resisted by entrenched patterns of sectarian thought. (April 2002)

This is arguably the single greatest obstacle to religion's ability to contribute its vital role to the advancement of civilization.

Spirituality, then, looks like "striv[ing] to foster fellow feeling even among groups who may traditionally have been hostile to one another." Individuals, communities, and institutions can do this work at the neighborhood level—the level at which people interact on a daily basis and live their daily lives—by being "focused on transcending differences, harmonizing perspectives," and viewing "everyone as a potential partner to collaborate with" (30 December 2021 ¶ 4).

Today, it is not a sufficient expression of spirituality for the individual or community to transform only itself, striving to hold itself up as a model to be emulated. Spirituality means actively working to bring about reconciliation and transformation of one's neighborhood, and wider society, through the daily activities in which one is engaged.

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I have here looked at only one paragraph of one letter from the Universal House of Justice. Many other such passages could be similarly explored. I believe that the foregoing clearly demonstrates that the ongoing guidance of this supreme institution of the global Bahá'í community is a rich source for understanding what spirituality looks like today, for individuals, communities, and institutions. We can see in the single passage under study elements of a lived spirituality that should be recognizable and laudable both to people from a religious background and to those with no religious background but who are committed to a moral vision for social transformation.

This spirituality looks like the embrace of rationality and the infusion of the collective use of reason, through consultation, into community life. It looks like the adoption of a clear vision of the inherent oneness of humanity, and an understanding that the welfare of each depends on the welfare of all. It looks like the cultivation of the qualities of trustworthiness, cooperation, forbearance, generosity and respect. It looks like the commitment to empowering others rather than trying to gain power over them. And it looks like the resolve to focus on transcending differences and working towards reconciliation.

The harmony of science and religion has always been a core principle of the Bahá'í Faith. Spirituality can demonstrably embrace science. Is the converse true? Can science be similarly receptive to spirituality?

One challenge to such receptivity is that science, as discussed at the outset of the paper, has largely not understood spirituality as an object of study. Religion and spirituality as *social phenomena* have, of course, been studied in the social sciences. But can these sciences go beyond treating spirituality's impact in the world as originating in the subjective belief of individuals and groups, and consider what it might mean for spirituality to have a basis in "objective" ontological reality?[20] It is to this question that I now turn.

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20   For an insightful article on this see Craig, "A Lamp in the Darkness: How Bahá'í Communities Can Uplift Individuals Lost in the Darkness of Trauma."

SCIENCE AND HUMAN
SPIRITUAL NATURE

Where science has previously asked what effect humans' spiritual beliefs have—on their individual lives and the wider world—could it turn to the more fundamental question of whether humans have a spiritual nature, an ontological underpinning to their being that bears a truth relationship with (at least some of) their spiritual beliefs?

As a question for science this may seem unanswerable. Science is about things that can be observed and measured because they have a physical ontology, not about things like "spirit" that are supposed to have a (primarily) non-physical, or supra-physical, ontology that our powers of observation and measurement cannot access.

I argue here that spirituality *can* be investigated by science. If we have a clear sense of what spirituality looks like, then we can construct different theories—incorporating contrasting background assumptions about the ontological basis for this spiritual behavior—and generate falsifiable hypotheses that can be evaluated in light of data. To support this claim, I first specify which of the sciences might be able to do this, before turning to the way in which this might be done in spite of the non-physicality of spiritual reality.

THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

Different scientific disciplines confine themselves to the investigation of specific categories of phenomena.

It is not necessary for the prosecution of physics, for example, to assume that large collections of molecules are able to reach a state of self-organization: that is the province of biology. As a physicist, one can carry on quite well without bothering with that higher level of emergence. Similarly, the natural sciences as a whole—physics, chemistry and biology—can pursue their investigation of the world of nature without assuming the existence of realities beyond the level of the biological animal. The human body, which shares in this animal nature, can be investigated through these sciences, but what we think of as "humanity"—the inner life and social reality of the human being— requires different disciplinary approaches. The very existence of the social sciences, as independent scientific disciplines, attests to the inadequacy of biology to investigate this reality.

If humans do possess a transcendent nature, then, study of this transcendent nature would become the province of the social sciences. Considering the materialist / reductionist paradigm that at present exerts such a strong grip on the evolution of the social sciences, this would initially require *consideration* that humans may have a higher nature. And this consideration, if taken seriously, could find shape in the formulation of testable hypotheses.

PRESUPPOSITIONS AND BACKGROUND ASSUMPTIONS IN SCIENCE

Most of us, if asked to describe how science works, might say something

like this: in science we accumulate data, which serves as evidence for or against formulated hypotheses.

A key criterion for a scientific hypothesis, familiar again to many, is that, as proposed originally by the Muslim scholar Ḥasan Ibn Al-Haytham and later the medieval scholar Robert Grosseteste, it must be *falsifiable*—that is, it must be formulated in such a way that one can demonstrate it to be wrong if, indeed, it is.[21]

As philosopher of science Helen Longino points out, what is missing in this picture is the role of background beliefs or assumptions. Background assumptions invariably exist, in all the sciences, and form the link between raw data and what is accepted as evidence.

My argument, then, is that the existence of a transcendent spiritual nature in humans can be taken as a background assumption in the social sciences to produce evidence from data, and that this evidence can be used to support or falsify well-formulated hypotheses about human spiritual nature. Though this may at first glance appear to be a circular argument, it is not, for the reason that hypotheses are always falsifiable. If humans are, as the reductionist paradigm holds, nothing but animals, background assumptions to that effect will produce a better set of hypotheses.

Before providing examples to illustrate the argument, it would be useful to explore the respective roles in the sciences of *presuppositions*

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┌────────┐  ┌──────────────┐        ┌──────────┐       ┌────────────┐
│  DATA  │  │  BACKGROUND  │\       │ EVIDENCE │\      │ HYPOTHESIS │
│        │  │  ASSUMPTIONS │/       │          │/      │            │
└────────┘  └──────────────┘        └──────────┘       └────────────┘
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and *background assumptions*—two very different things, but both inescapable—from the perspective of the philosophy of science. Hugh Gauch presents a model of science as based on evidence, logic, and a small set of presuppositions without which "evidence loses its evidential role" (*Practice* 112). The role of these presuppositions is perhaps the aspect of science that is least understood and least appreciated (*Practice* ch. 4; *Brief* ch. 5).

Essentially, a presupposition is a belief that is required to reach a particular conclusion, and yet it cannot possibly be proved. A presupposition cannot be proved in the ordinary sense of marshalling

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21   This has led some to claim that science can never prove anything, but only show things to be false. This notion calls into question the nature of inductive proof, which is beyond the scope of this paper. Suffice it to say that this feature of inductive proof gives to scientific truth that curious property of being enduring, on the one hand, and relative, on the other hand. Some scientific theories are later shown to be completely incorrect—as was the case with the caloric theory of heat and the phlogiston theory of combustion—while others are shown to be approximations of a more sophisticated and encompassing theory—as is the case with Newtonian mechanics and gravitation, or with equilibrium thermodynamics which, in the twentieth century, gave way to a wider theory of nonequilibrium thermodynamics.

definitive evidence because pre-suppositions precede and empower evidence. But that does not necessarily mean that presuppositions are arbitrary and shaky. Rather, presuppositions should be chosen carefully, disclosed, and then legitimated. Because presuppositions are just as necessary as evidence for science to reach any conclusions, a reflective account of science must discuss them. (*Brief* 73)

Gauch cites Caldin's useful summation of the role of presuppositions: "Most scientists take for granted their metaphysical assumptions, but they are nonetheless necessary logically to the conclusions of science" (*Brief* 73).

So what are these presuppositions of science? As put forward by Thomas Reid and the Scottish School of Common Sense, they are the same as the presuppositions behind "common sense," which hinge on the idea that our senses (and the instruments that extend them), in aggregate, reveal to us true information about the real world (Gauch, *Practice* 64-65, 120–23). Furthermore, the truths and secrets of nature are susceptible to being understood through rational enquiry and the exercise of the human intellect. While these presuppositions may seem obvious, in the history of philosophy they have been denied by skeptics, most notably Pyrrho of Elis, Sextus Empiricus, David Hume, and some of the postmodernists (*Practice* chs. 2, 4; *Brief* chs. 3, 5).[22]

Whereas this small set of presuppositions is necessarily shared by all scientists as the basis for scientific activity to have any meaning, background assumptions, in contrast, are not universal and to some extent are culture-dependent. Background assumptions, as stated above, are inescapable in science, linking data to evidence as they do. Crucially, the same set of data interpreted on the basis of different background assumptions can lead to different evidentiary conclusions.[23]

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22   The Bahá'í writings, on the other hand, fully support the validity of these presuppositions. 'Abdu'l-Bahá affirms the reality of the world we experience: "The sophists hold that all existence is illusory. . . . This notion is false, for although the existence of things is an illusion compared to the existence of God, yet in the contingent world it is established, proven, and undeniable" (*Some Answered Questions* 79:1). Bahá'u'lláh further confirms that this world can be meaningfully apprehended by human senses and understood by the human mind: "Look at the world and ponder a while upon it. It unveileth the book of its own self before thine eyes and revealeth that which the Pen of thy Lord, the Fashioner, the All-Informed, hath inscribed therein. It will acquaint thee with that which is within it and upon it and will give thee such clear explanations as to make thee independent of every eloquent expounder" (*Tablets* 9:13).

23   Data is the raw material out of which evidence is constructed. Evidence, in turn, is used to support or refute mental constructs, conjectures, hypotheses, and ultimately laws or theories: in short, to create scientific truth. It is in the process of interpreting data—of using it to generate

In *Science As Social Knowledge* Helen Longino gives a number of examples of this.[24] Longino argues, however, that background assumptions do not undermine objectivity in science; it is preserved, through a process of *transformative criticism* or *transformative interrogation,* within a scientific community (63–82). In transformative interrogation, background assumptions are aired and examined, alternative ways of looking at the data (i.e. through different background assumptions) are explored and, ultimately, consensus may be obtained. Naomi Oreskes, in support of Longino, notes that the objectivity of science rests on the ability of the scientific community of experts to identify the operating background assumptions and to evaluate them, as well as on its ability to assess the links between evidence and theory (25–143).[25]

INTELLIGIBLE REALITIES IN SCIENCE

One more feature of science needs to be mentioned: the accumulation of data (things measurable) and the study of patterns and consistencies in that data lead science to usefully hypothesize the existence of what 'Abdu'l-Bahá calls "intelligible" or intellectual realities (*Some Answered Questions* 16), or what a physicist might call mathematical realities: ontologically real phenomena that cannot be directly observed (they are not "sensible," as 'Abdu'l-Bahá puts it).

For example, because a vast range of phenomena can be understood if we hypothesize that *fields* exist—such as the Higgs field referred to above, or the electron field—we infer that fields exist. Yet the field cannot be directly observed; only the particle that instantiates it can be. These entities, which have a precise mathematical formulation, are considered in the physical

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evidence—that background assumptions play a role.

24   One example she gives is an experiment performed by Priestey and repeated by Lavoisier. Both performed the same experiment and obtained the same data, but each had a different background assumption. Priestley believed in the phlogiston theory which held that combustion resulted from the release of a combustible substance (phlogiston) from the burning matter into the air. Lavoisier believed that combustion was due to combination of the combusting substance with a substance in the air (what is now known as the Oxygen theory). Each scientist saw the data as evidence for his own hypothesis about combustion. Longino writes,

The two thus had the same experimental information but approached it with different background beliefs. . . . In the context of their differing background beliefs and assumptions different aspects of the same state of affairs became evidentially significant. (47–48)

25   For a deeper analysis of transformative interrogation and a proposed extension to transformative dialogue, see Neyman and Wenninger. For further discussion of the role of diversity in science, and truth-seeking more generally, from a Bahá'í perspective, see Friberg, Smith, and Espinosa.

sciences to be *real,* and are *physical.* Although "non-sensible" they are, nevertheless, entities that inhabit the *physical* universe in which we live.

In the sense that the Bahá'í writings conceive it—as a transcendent intellectual power and, beyond that, as a transcendent divine power, both of which the human possesses but the animal lacks—spirituality is an intelligible, and not a sensible, reality. Moreover, as mentioned earlier, while 'Abdu'l-Bahá affirms that intelligible realities include some physical realities (*Some Answered Questions* 48), we can presume that the human (and higher) spirits are not physical.

SPIRITUALITY AS A
BACKGROUND ASSUMPTION
IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

So far, then, we have seen that scientists interpret data through background assumptions, and that science can hypothesize the existence of intelligible realities that cannot be directly observed or measured. What would it then look like for the social sciences to treat spirituality as a background assumption?

Successful scientific theories—those that, amongst other things, incorporate effective background assumptions—have two features:

1. Explanatory power (and dramatically, sometimes, the ability to explain bodies of data that in the absence of the theory would appear to be disconnected);
2. Predictive power.

If spirituality were adopted as a background assumption in the social sciences, the evidence that would then emerge out of the data could be evaluated according to these two features, to see if the assumption has traction.[26] Does a theory, incorporating the background assumption of the reality of spirituality, not only *explain* the evidence, but also have the power of *prediction*? And just as importantly, can such a theory be used to develop technologies—social technologies, such as pedagogies, or therapeutic technologies[27]—that, when applied, help to propel society forward?

To see how this might work, we can consider two rival theories, one that takes spirituality as a background assumption, and the other that assumes (in line with the prevailing, if often implicit, scientific paradigm) that the human is simply an animal, with no spiritual nature.

Turning first to explanatory power, we must acknowledge that certain kinds of data that we might initially think support the former theory are potentially equally well explained by

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26   As noted above, data can be analyzed through several lenses, each representing a different set of background assumptions. Undoubtedly, over time, a single, perhaps broad, set of background assumptions—even a worldview—will emerge with the potential to become a new paradigm.

27   For example, forms of psychoanalysis that account for the existence of the human being's spiritual reality. See John S. Hatcher.

the latter. Animal emotion and behavior, the current paradigm runs, are emergent properties arising from the physical world and are intimately tied with self-interest, whether that interest be of the organism itself or of its genetic line. Animals can sacrifice themselves in order to reproduce; they can sacrifice themselves for their young; they can sacrifice for the hive, the family, the herd, the pride. In some circles the case has been made that they sacrifice themselves so that their genes survive—what George Wald has called "vicarious selection" (61). Thus, the fact that a human parent sacrifices her life for her child, for example, does not necessarily support the "spirituality" theory more strongly than its alternative.

Data could, however, be generated showing that humans have the ability to acquire loyalty to abstract entities far above any level of self-interest or "gene-interest" and to sacrifice for such abstract concepts as truth, love, justice, humanity, and the sacred. Humans have the capacity to treat all fellow humans with kindness and love, no matter how they are treated in return; to consider all life itself as something sacred. They have the power to conceptualize a world far above the world of the senses and to gain deep reverence for that world. One of the distinguishing characteristics of human societies, according to the anthropologist, is not so much that they are great at surviving (which they are, of course), but that being to a great extent masters of their environment, their seeking

after *meaning*, which transcends pure survival, assumes central importance. One would not say this about animal groups, except to the extent that the human observer might ascribe "meaning" to them. The question then becomes which theory—the one that incorporates a background assumption of spiritual reality, or its lack—better explains this data. Are these unique human traits truly transcendent, or are they merely extensions of animal emotion and behavior?

Here it may seem that the spirituality theory is better supported: the human is exhibiting intellectual and emotional capacities that categorically transcend the animal.[28] That is certainly the interpretation confirmed in the Bahá'í writings, as when 'Abdu'l-Bahá notes that "the animal perceives sensible things but cannot perceive conceptual realities" (*Some Answered Questions* 48:6), giving as an example the ability of the earth-bound human to extrapolate from observation the non-observable fact that the earth is spherical (48:6–7).

However, even a scientist who agrees that this is a difference in kind,

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28   Note that, given the current reductionist / materialist paradigm that rules both the physical and the social sciences, we can expect even this statement to be controversial. There would thus be great value in research aimed at openly considering this question—asking whether human intellect, capacities, societies, and civilization differ from their animal counterparts in degree or in kind. For a recent survey of this question from a Bahá'í perspective, see Filson.

and not in degree, between the human and the animal might challenge 'Abdu'l-Bahá's conclusion that "man is endowed with a power of discovery that distinguishes him from the animal, *and this power is none but the human spirit*" (*Some Answered Questions* 48:7, emphasis added). In terms of the inherent and the emergent, the scientist could argue that animal intellect and emotion are emergent phenomena arising out of collections of extremely large numbers of elements that interact in very complex ways. When the elements decompose, the animal, and the qualities it manifests, disappears. He might say that the same is true with regard to the human, regarding the human mind as simply a higher order of emergent phenomenon transcending animal intelligence.[29]

It might seem that we are at an impasse between the view of unique human attributes as emergent physical phenomena and, say, the Bahá'í view that the human soul is a single, non-physical entity, and that the powers of the intellect and of the divine in the individual are, therefore, inherent rather than emergent. How could the social sciences decide between these paradigms while remaining sciences, that is, employing methods that put them firmly in the camp of science rather than

sliding into metaphysics? To answer this, we can turn to the second feature of successful scientific theories—their predictive power, including the power to generate new technologies.

As an example of such a hypothetical technology, consider this statement of Bahá'u'lláh:

> In the treasuries of the knowledge of God there lieth concealed a knowledge which, when applied, will largely, though not wholly, eliminate fear. This knowledge, however, should be taught from childhood, as it will greatly aid in its elimination. Whatever decreaseth fear increaseth courage. (*Epistle* 32)

This would, on its face, appear to be a knowledge that could be discovered by science and applied as a technology of that science. Baha'u'llah's *prediction* regarding this knowledge and its future discovery would contribute towards proof—scientific proof—of the truth of the background assumption that man is a spiritual being. With the development of more technologies, based on the predictive power of the theory that human beings have a transcendent spiritual nature, the background assumption that man has such a spiritual nature would evolve into a new paradigm.

TESTING THE
BACKGROUND ASSUMPTION

While it would take time, and the accumulation of a robust body of research,

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29   Terrence Deacon takes this stance. "Biologically we are just another ape; mentally we are a whole new phylum of organism" (Goodenough and Deacon 862). Deacon, who calls himself "a religious non-theist" (865), takes a strict emergentist view of this phenomenon.

to effect this paradigm shift, we can look to a couple of available examples of the kind of scientific investigations that could contribute to this.

In 2018, *Science* published a lengthy article on resilience. One of its sections presents a trio of studies that merged in Katrina@10, a long-term study looking at resilience in people who lost their homes in New Orleans because of Hurricane Katrina. The goal of the study is ambitious: "to build a crystal ball that uses a few characteristics to predict disaster recovery in the long term," with one possible result being to "help policymakers and disaster recovery programs pick out especially vulnerable groups" and "even steer them toward interventions that do the most good"—i.e. to develop a technology to increase resilience (Servick).

The study found that among the pre-storm predictors of resilience, "psychological strength"—which included religiosity and perceived ability to respond to stressors—was the primary factor, with household income over $20,000 a close second. In general religiosity was a factor in recovery, both among communities who returned to their old homes and rebuilt, and among those who rebuilt their lives elsewhere. One survivor in particular, who seemed to have built a better life than the one she had before the hurricane, reported that she had "developed a deeper relationship with God." One group, an immigrant Vietnamese community that showed great resilience, returned almost immediately and began to rebuild. They started by rebuilding their church, and only then began working together to rebuild their houses.

A number of factors were identified as having a negative effect on recovery, among them the amount of time spent in shelters. Being older than fifty or disabled were also strong negative indicators. But in the case of the Vietnamese community, internal cohesion coupled with their religiosity helped motivate them to return to their old homes quickly, reducing the negative effect of spending a long period of time in shelters. Presumably, this same internal cohesion—which one might say was closely tied to the community's religiosity—also mitigated against the negative factors of age and disability. In general, as one might expect, it was a combination of inner and outer factors that contributed to, or detracted from, the ability to recover.

Given this kind of data, showing that religious affiliation was a cause of greater resilience,[30] it would be possible for social science researchers to formulate theories, and hypotheses, that take spiritual reality as a background assumption, and then to evaluate their predictive power.

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30 Note that within a materialistic paradigm one could argue that religious belief or affiliation may be correlated with resilience but is not its cause; that some other factor drives both religiosity and resilience for instance. A good research design would be able to evaluate this possibility; I assume for the purposes of this discussion a data set that shows that religious affiliation was in fact causally connected to resilience.

One could, for example, adopt as a background assumption that humans are spiritual beings, in the sense that (a) we have a transcendent intellect, and (b) we can acquire divine attributes. This could be accompanied by the background assumptions that religion, to the degree that it has remained faithful to the unifying principles of its foundational scriptures, meaningfully reflects and nurtures the divine attributes humans possess, and in so doing contributes to resilience.[31]

One could simultaneously generate theories and hypotheses consistent with a materialist set of background assumptions. These theories could acknowledge that religion is a cause of resilience, but not conclude that religion's beliefs are true. Here the background assumptions could include the following:

1. Human beings have evolved in certain ways due to the beliefs and practices of religion—that is, religion itself has evolved as a beneficial adaptation in humans, and

2. Human beings have been made to benefit from religion *purely through the operation of natural selection*, not through the action of a Creator or through interaction with an underlying spiritual reality.

This is a stance often taken within evolutionary psychology, "a theory about the origins of the human mind. It assumes that all human behavior, like that of animals, is directed towards competitive advantage in the evolutionary struggle of life." Within this paradigm, religion can be evolutionarily adaptive without being accurate in its description of reality:

> Sociobiologist E.O. Wilson sees religious belief in particular as providing a sense of 'sacredness' on which principles of social co-operation can be firmly constructed. . . . Yet Wilson is not arguing for the reality of religious belief as some kind of transcendent truth, only the utility of the belief in benefiting the individual and sustaining social unity. Indeed, Wilson claims that morality has no other demonstrable function than to keep human genetic material intact. (Hurlbut 874)

Here we see the operation of Longino's model. The data is filtered through a particular background

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31 These background assumptions are made explicit in the Bahá'í writings and guidance. For instance, the Universal House of Justice writes that

> [r]eligion, as we are all aware, reaches to the roots of motivation. When it has been faithful to the spirit and example of the transcendent Figures who gave the world its great belief systems, it has awakened in whole populations capacities to love, to forgive, to create, to dare greatly, to overcome prejudice, to sacrifice for the common good and to discipline the impulses of animal instinct. (April 2002)

assumption to create evidence—in this case, evidence for the validity of the idea that man is an animal, and all human behavior is rooted in the evolutionary struggle for survival. The hypotheses formulated from the evidence arising from data as filtered through this particular background assumption have some degree of *explanatory* power, just as hypotheses formulated based on a background assumption of spiritual reality have explanatory power. But do they have *predictive* power?

One of the "overriding principles of nature" governing "all population behavior," as noted by physicist Marvin Chester, is that "the effect on the environment of a population's success is to alter that environment in a way that opposes the success" (*Populations* 1). The developing climate crisis, which threatens human civilization, can be seen as a dramatic illustration of this "overriding principle." The hypotheses of evolutionary psychology would predict, if anything, that our civilization, which has carried our (animal) species to an unprecedented and "unnatural" state of success, will suffer collapse. The human race, greatly reduced in numbers, may revert to a tribal stage, with religion (which helped bring about this crisis) most likely returning to those forms that served the interests of tribal society so well in the past. Conversely, if our civilization survives, it will be through the (unpredictable) emergence of new capabilities that are not connected to the religious beliefs that helped us in our evolutionary past. Specifically, beliefs that there is a God

and that man has a transcendent reality should be superfluous to our survival. Evolution occurs in response to immediate conditions; it has no ability to see into, or to prepare for, the future. It would be an extraordinary coincidence if something necessary for our past evolution were to prove to be a significant factor in helping us advance into a new state, or society, totally different from the one we came out of. If this did in fact prove to be the case, it would support the non-materialist paradigm, in which the existence of spiritual reality, and religion's capacity to meaningfully generate knowledge about that reality, are background assumptions.

Indeed, such an outcome would seem to validate the vision for humanity's future contained in the Bahá'í writings. Bahá'u'lláh predicts emphatically: "These fruitless strifes, these ruinous wars shall pass away, and the 'Most Great Peace' shall come" (qtd. in *God Passes By* 194)—a Peace established "by the direct operation of the laws and principles revealed by Bahá'u'lláh" (from a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi qtd. in *Peace* 64). Further, the arrival of this "Great Peace . . . for which from age to age the sacred scriptures of mankind have constantly held the promise" would validate the predictive power of religion itself (*Promise of World Peace* 1).

So here we have two clearly different sets of predictions, stemming from theories incorporating different background assumptions. On the one hand, the prediction that if humanity is to resolve the crises currently facing

it, then religion—having arisen as an evolutionarily selected response to conditions in our distant past—will have little role to play. On the other hand, the prediction that only with religion—specifically the *eternal principles of religion*, and full embrace of the *reality* of the divine—can humanity bring civilization back into moderation. To say that only with religion can we do this is not to say that religion *alone* can do it—it must be religion in harmony with science. The fruit of this happy union will be an ever-advancing civilization characterized by both material and spiritual prosperity. This, then, is the *prediction* we can make from hypotheses derived from evidence arrived at by filtering the data through the background assumption that God, and hence spirituality, is *real* and that the essential purpose of life is not to propagate one's genes, but to develop one's spiritual capacities, and, in so doing, contribute to an "ever-advancing civilization."

While it would be foolhardy for proponents of either theory to claim, at this early stage and with humanity's future path seemingly still in question, that the evidence conclusively proves them right, there are emerging examples we can look at as support for the prediction that religion can act as a remedy for the crises facing our societies—that it can, for instance, contribute to a community's resilience in the face of these crises, and empower it to contribute to the advancement of civilization at the local or national level.

One of the most remarkable stories of resilience in the modern period is the development of the Bahá'í community in Iran, both materially and spiritually, despite severe clerical and governmental opposition since the birth of the Bahá'í Faith in the mid-nineteenth century. The document *Century of Light* notes that the immediate agent of this transformation in the early twentieth century was none other than 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Though confined to 'Akka and physically distant from the Persian Bahá'í community, He sent "a flood of Tablets" (letters) through which "the Persian believers were revived and heartened." These communications "provided not only the spiritual sustenance they needed, but leadership in finding their way through the turmoil that was undermining the established order of things in their land." These letters, "reaching even the smallest villages across the country, responded to the appeals and questions of countless individual believers, bringing guidance, encouragement and assurance" (8). *Century of Light* concludes this section with this observation:

Social historians of the future, with a perspective far more dispassionate and universal than is presently possible, and benefiting from unimpeded access to all of the primary documentation, will study minutely the transformation that the Master ['Abdu'l-Bahá] achieved in these early years. Day after day, month after month, from a distant exile where He was endlessly harried by the host of enemies surrounding Him, 'Abdu'l-Bahá

was able not only to stimulate the expansion of the Persian Bahá'í community, but to shape its consciousness and collective life. The result was the emergence of a culture, however localized, that was unlike anything humanity had ever known. Our century, with all its upheavals and its grandiloquent claims to create a new order, has no comparable example of the systematic application of the powers of a single Mind to the building of a distinctive and successful community that saw its ultimate sphere of work as the globe itself. (10)

There are similarly a number of remarkable instances of resilience within the global Bahá'í community in the postwar period that have yet to be fully studied. The Bahá'í community of Iran after the Islamic Revolution provides one outstanding example. A steady stream of letters from the Universal House of Justice has helped sustain that beleaguered community against the onslaught of a vicious foe determined to exterminate it. *Century of Light* notes that early on, after the Islamic Revolution, it was the Bahá'ís, rather than their oppressors, who "quickly set the terms of the encounter" (119).

Against the backdrop of dramatic struggles for social change in the twentieth century, characterized by non-violent opposition and civil disobedience, the Bahá'í community of Iran has pursued a distinctively non-adversarial approach to social change under conditions of violent oppression. (Karlberg, "Constructive Resilience" 1)

In the face of the fiercest opposition they have steadfastly kept to their fundamental principles by maintaining the integrity of their faith and beliefs, on the one hand, and continuing to strive, as much as was in their power, to work for the welfare of their nation and their fellow-citizens, on the other hand. The community's capacity to achieve these things in the face of such circumstances supports the argument that their religious faith and teachings, far from merely providing some general sense of social cohesion within the community, allow them to work in ways that reflect *real* spiritual dynamics, and to access *real* spiritual power. Recent scholarship using the lens of "constructive resilience" to study the response of the Iranian Bahá'í community to oppression points the way to productive future research.[32]

What about Bahá'í communities elsewhere? One story that remains to be told in detail is that of the Bahá'í community of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), a country that has seen abusive totalitarian government, civil war, corruption, serious human rights violations, and deep divisions due to ethnic hostilities, for virtually its entire existence since obtaining

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32 See, for example, Michael Karlberg's articles "Constructive Resilience: The Bahá'í Response to Oppression" and "The Constructive Imaginary."

independence in 1965. Against this backdrop, the Bahá'í community in the DRC has emerged, grown, and flourished, showing not only remarkable resilience but also a remarkable internal cohesion and outwardly-focused spirit of tolerance and inclusiveness that stand in stark contrast to the problems facing the nation to which it belongs. The Bahá'í community of the DRC has, in fact, risen to become one of the foremost Bahá'í communities in the world. Critical to its success has been the continual guidance Bahá'ís in general, and the Congolese Bahá'í community in particular, has received from the Universal House of Justice, directing them always to be cognizant of their spiritual capacities and diligent in their continued cultivation of those qualities.

A recent letter from the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the DRC acknowledges that "alas, your nation has time and again suffered from conflict among some of its peoples… [Y]ou are, of course, not immune to the forces that generate and drive conflict," a state of affairs that demands "vigilance by all the believers in ensuring that divisions, especially those related to ethnicity, do not take root in your community." The letter goes on to say,

> The mission of the Bahá'ís is to learn to apply the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh in their individual and collective lives and in the life of their society. Through well-ordered efforts and in collaboration with many others who are dedicated to bettering the world, Bahá'ís bring the principles suited to humanity's age of maturity to bear on the conditions of the world's peoples. They strive for the transformation of the inner and outer realities of human life, and for the cultivation of spiritual and social conditions that will give rise to a new kind of people and a new society founded on unity. . . . (1 November 2022)

It is a testament to the Congolese Bahá'í community's success in living up to this mandate—to demonstrating in practice "what spirituality looks like"—that their country was chosen as the site of the first national House of Worship in the Bahá'í world, completed in 2023 (*Bahá'í News*).

In these two brief examples—that of Iran and of the DRC—we see both 'Abdu'l-Bahá and the Universal House of Justice basing their appeals to the community on an unshakeable belief that humans are spiritual beings and have the capacity, no matter what their external circumstances, to develop their spiritual qualities. If humanity did not have this capacity, then messages such as those above could have only a very limited effect, at best. Clearly these are capacities that, if they do indeed exist in humanity, can be discovered and studied by the sciences, and systematically developed through technologies arising from those discoveries.

In summary, scientific truth is both *explanatory* and *predictive*. Let us,

for the moment, adopt a background assumption that man has a spiritual nature. Filtering the data concerning the rise and resilience of the Bahá'í communities of Iran and the Congo through that background assumption, one obtains *explanatory* evidence supporting a hypothesis that humans have a spiritual nature as outlined in the Bahá'í writings. That hypothesis also allows us to *predict* that once the Bahá'í community of Iran is freed from the egregious restrictions placed on it by Iran's current government, the Bahá'í community will, in the words of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, "contribute in making of the land of Iran the envy and admiration of the peoples and nations of the world" (qtd. in Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá'í Administration* 173). Similarly, we can *predict* that the people of the Democratic Republic of the Congo will be able to overcome the "divisions related to ethnicity" that so severely afflict their country, with the Bahá'í community becoming a model and playing a significant role in helping its nation overcome these divisions. Here, then, we have both explanation and prediction that, in concert, can provide proof of the hypothesis.

CONCLUSION

In this paper I have examined some of the features and characteristics of spirituality, and have presented, by examining a particular passage from a recent letter of the Universal House of Justice, an overview of what spirituality would look like at this point in human history. In the evolution of its conceptual understanding and of its expression of spirituality at the levels of the individual, the community and the institutions, the worldwide Bahá'í community is blessed by the ongoing program of learning of the International Teaching Centre and the constant stream of guidance coming from its supreme governing institution, the Universal House of Justice. Indeed, the Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith wrote in the 1930s that

> the machinery of the Cause has been so fashioned, that whatever is deemed necessary to incorporate into it in order to keep it in the forefront of all progressive movements, can, according to the provisions made by Bahá'u'lláh, be safely embodied therein. (*World Order* 22–23)

Finally, I have presented an argument that human spirituality can be investigated by science—specifically the social sciences—by examining data in light of the background assumption that man is a spiritual being, and from the evidence derived from filtering data through that background assumption, forming testable hypotheses.

Over the next twenty-five years the Bahá'í worldwide community will be focusing on "the release of the society-building powers of the Faith in ever-greater measures" (Universal House of Justice, 30 December 2021 ¶ 3). As Bahá'u'lláh declared to British orientalist E.G. Browne, "*We desire but the*

good of the world and the happiness of the nations (qtd. in Shoghi Effendi, *Advent* 37). This good and this happiness are the aim and focus of spirituality at this time in history.

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