OUTLINE OF

REVELATION & SOCIAL REALITY

Learning to Translate What is Written into Reality

by Paul Lample

Compiled by www.bahaiwritings.wordpress.com
When reading a book, one often finds oneself forgetting what one has read. Furthermore, one might not have read the book in such way as to be able to briefly convey what the main points of the author are or how the author has reasoned in reaching these main points. In an attempt to become a more effective reader, the idea came to identify and number those sentences that convey the basic thought of the author. Numbering these “key sentences” will result in an outline that can be a helpful companion. This outline is an experiment of such a method. It can in no way be a substitute for reading the book nor can it be understood without referring to the book. It is simply a study aid and should be taken as such.

CHAPTER 1 – CONSTRUCTING THE KINGDOM

UNDERSTANDING AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF SOCIAL REALITY 3
THE OBLIGATION OF BAHÁ’ÍS TO CONTRIBUTE TO A NEW SOCIAL REALITY 4
THE ROLE OF REVELATION IN CREATING A NEW SOCIAL REALITY 5
STUDY, CONSULTATION, ACTION AND REFLECTION FOR SOCIAL CHANGE 6

CHAPTER 2 - UNDERSTANDING AND PRACTICE IN THE BAHÁ’Í COMMUNITY 8

AUTHORITATIVE INTERPRETATION AND THE UNDERSTANDING OF THE BELIEVERS 8
HERMENEUTICAL PRINCIPLES IN THE BAHÁ’I TEACHINGS 9
THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE AND BAHÁ’Í PRACTICE 11
CONFERRED INFALLIBILITY AND A LEARNING COMMUNITY 11
LEARNING AND BAHÁ’Í PRACTICE 12

CHAPTER 3 – LEARNING ABOUT GROWTH

A TURNING POINT OF EPOCHAL MAGNITUDE 14
THE EXPERIENCE OF COLOMBIA AND THE RUHI INSTITUTE 14
A DECADE OF PROGRESS 15
CHARACTERISTICS AND ACHIEVEMENTS OF A LEARNING MODE 15
CHANGE IN UNDERSTANDING AND PRACTICE 16

CHAPTER 4 – CONTRIBUTING TO THE ADVANCEMENT OF CIVILIZATION 17

ENGAGED IN DIVERSE FIELDS OF HUMAN ENDEAVOR 18
THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SCIENCE AND RELIGION 18
MOVING BEYOND PERCEIVED TENSIONS BETWEEN SCIENCE AND RELIGION 19
BAHÁ’Í INVOLVEMENT IN SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT 19
METHOD AND LEARNING 20
CONTRIBUTING TO HUMANITY’S COLLECTIVE DISCOURSE 21
THE NATURE OF BAHÁ’Í INTELLECTUAL ACTIVITY 21
UNDERSTANDING AND ACTION AND THE BUILDING OF A NEW WORLD 22
CHAPTER 5 – A PROBLEM OF KNOWLEDGE

THE FALSE CHOICE BETWEEN LIBERALISM AND FUNDAMENTALISM 24
HUMAN RATIONALITY AND THE BAHAI TEACHINGS 25
TRUTH AND THE BAHAI TEACHINGS 25
HUMAN MINDS DIFFER 26
AN EVOLVING BAHAI CULTURE 26
CONSULTATION AND THE COMMUNITY 26
THE COVENANT AND THE PROCESS OF LEARNING 27
AN OVERVIEW OF UNDERSTANDING AND ACTION IN THE BAHAI COMMUNITY 27

CHAPTER 6 – A PROBLEM OF POWER

CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVES ON POWER 29
SOME BAHAI TEACHINGS RELEVANT TO HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS 30
POWER, FREEDOM, AND THE INDIVIDUAL 31
POWER AND SOCIAL ORDER 32
POWER AND PRACTICE 32
Part I – Revelation, Understanding and Action

CHAPTER 1 – CONSTRUCTING THE KINGDOM

1. “The man who lives the life according to the Teachings of Bahá’u’lláh is already a Bahá’í,” while “a man may call himself a Bahá’í for fifty years and if he does not live the life he is not a Bahá’í.

2. Achieving Bahá’u’lláh’s intended purpose for the human race requires new morals, new ways of generating knowledge, new ways of communicating, new ways of acting, and new institutions.

3. How? The answers will have to be found in learning, over time, to better understand the Text and translate it into efficacious action consistent with its divine intent.

Understanding and the Construction of Social Reality

4. Throughout life, interplay between subjective interpretation and objective reality continually shapes understanding and action. Human beings are designed to learn from encounters with reality. Science, one may say, has emerged in this way to be the knowledge system that allows for systematic exploration of and a degree of mastery over physical reality.

5. There is a spiritual reality beyond the physical one. Comprehension of this spiritual reality involves an encounter with Bahá’u’lláh’s Revelation. Reading and study of the Sacred Text, moments of prayer and meditation, discussion with other Bahá’ís, interaction with the Bahá’í community, efforts to live according to the teachings, acts of service, and other similar experiences provide fresh insight into spiritual reality and fruitful patterns of spiritual and moral action.

6. We find in the Bahá’í Writings that both the physical and the spiritual reality, expressed in nature and in Revelation, are expressions of the will of God.

7. We are inserted into this physical and spiritual reality and are shaped by it. Our personal reality then consists of those structures that have formed in our own mind to organize our experience of the outer world. But this process is a dynamic one. Human beings are not passive observers of reality and our personal reality, our thought, is not simply imposed upon us. In a very
specific way we may consider ourselves – collectively – as co-creators of reality.

8. Most of what we perceive to be reality – the world with which we interact every day – is not physical reality at all. It is social reality (The Construction of Social Reality by John Searle)
   a. Facts dependent on human agreement are “Institutional facts” in contrast to noninstitutional or “brute” facts. Institutional facts are so called because they require human institutions for their existence.
   b. In Searle’s perspective, all social reality eventually rests upon the brute facts of physical reality.
   c. Thus participation in social reality by itself shapes what we know and do (the example of slavery page 9).
   d. Yet, social reality is not static; it is mutable. It forms us, but because it owes its existence to common human understanding, we have the power to contribute to reshaping it.

9. Revelation creates consensus around new truths so that we, the co-creators of reality, can begin to transform the existing social order. Indeed, our ultimate aim, the Kingdom of God, a new civilization born of the new world order of Bahá’u’lláh is itself a new social reality.

The Obligation of Bahá’ís to Contribute to a New Social Reality

10. It is incumbent upon every man of insight and understanding, Bahá’u’lláh states, to strive to translate that which hath been written into reality and action.

11. Among the results of the manifestation of spiritual forces will be that the human world will adapt itself to a new social form, the justice of God will become manifest throughout human affairs, and human equality will be universally established.

12. This fermentation, involving a twofold process of integration and disintegration, is a result of the direct impact of a new Revelation.
   a. Why, Shoghi Effendi asks, should the arrangements that constitute the basis of the old social order not give way to new assumptions and new structures that can better serve humanity?
13. Nothing short of implementation of Bahá'u'lláh's program for humanity, can restore the equilibrium of the social order.

14. In this light, Shoghi Effendi continually calls for direct action on the part of the Bahá'í Community to contribute to rebuilding an ailing world.

15. The ultimate aim is the achievement of humanity's highest aspirations.

The Role of Revelation in Creating a New Social Reality

16. Revelation is adapted to the capacity of humanity to hear the message and to the particular social context of the age in which it appears. This adaptation is both a compromise with human limitations and confirmation of human progress allowing for an increasing measure of Revelation in each dispensation.

17. It can be argued that social reality emerges through the vehicle of language and, at the same time, language is a component of social reality.

   a. The instances where the Manifestation violates the accepted rules of grammar are, in this sense, highly symbolic, by contradicting the consensus on language, the Word demonstrates that new truths and a new standard have appeared.

18. Naught but the celestial potency of the Word of God, which ruleth and transcendeth the realities of all things, is capable of harmonizing the divergent thoughts, sentiment, ideas, and convictions of the children of men.

19. The change in social reality effected by the Revelation occurs in a different way than the change designed by some segment of society itself (example of the slavery being abolished by law but was replaced by cultural and economic forms of oppression)

20. This brief reflection on Revelation and its impact on social structure suggest a number of levels associated with comprehending reality from the perspective of religion.

   a. The first is reality itself, what we might consider the “mind of God”, reality “as it is” without any point of view, far above human capacity to understand.

   b. The second level is the revealed Word. Each Revelation is a representation of the knowledge of reality tailored by the Manifestation for a specific audience to enable them to achieve an intended purpose.
c. Revelation gives rise to religion, a third level of the comprehension of reality, which is the body of understanding of the Book by the believers and the efforts to translate this knowledge into action, establishing new patterns of behavior and raising a new social order.

**Study, Consultation, Action and Reflection for Social Change**

21. As noted above, the objective reality that human beings can know is the will of God as expressed in nature and in Revelation. Therefore science ... and religion ... are two means for exploring reality and for shaping social reality. These knowledge systems are complementary and overlapping in their domains. Science and religion can be likened to two “poles” that hold up the enormous tent that encompasses our view of reality.

   a. At this point in history, only one pole is raised, so vision in the tent is restricted – much of reality is obscured.

   b. The exploration of the will of God enshrined in Revelation calls for an ongoing study of Bahá’u’lláhs teachings.

22. Study of the Word of God must be complemented by the effort to put the teachings into effect through a simultaneous process of action and reflection.

23. The shaping of social reality is not, however, an individual but a collective act.

24. Where the teachings of the Book are not explicit, where personal interpretations differ, or where views about alternative applications of the teachings vary, consultation provides a means for the believers to unify their thoughts and actions.

   a. “A wide latitude for action must be allowed them, which means that a large margin for mistakes must also be allowed. . . . The Cause is not so fragile that a degree of mistakes cannot be tolerated.”

   b. Rather than taking sides and arguing about matters, the believers need to become comfortable with ambiguity, content to allow others their opinions. If these are erroneous, they will, presumably, yield to continued learning.

25. Our work as Bahá’ís constitutes part of an organic process that unfolds over time.

   a. The perspective of organic growth also suggests a balance between conditions that are fixed and those that are susceptible to human action, much like the kind of balance that must exist in the work of a farmer or a
parent. The farmer must understand the requirements of the plant in order to ensure a bountiful harvest.

b. In the same way, our job as believers is to understand the purpose and organic nature of the Cause and serve it.

26. The nature of organic growth implies a certain tension between past and future. The Bahá’í community is, at any given moment, a mix of what we should be and what we have carried over from the old world order from which we must free ourselves.
CHAPTER 2 - UNDERSTANDING AND PRACTICE IN THE BAHÁ’Í COMMUNITY

27. What,” he asked, “can possibly be the agency that can safeguard these Bahá’í institutions, so strikingly resemblant, in some of their features, to those which have been reared by the Fathers of the Church and the Apostles of Muhammad, from witnessing the deterioration in character, the breach of unity, and the extinction of influence, which have befallen all organized religious hierarchies?

28. In answer to this profound question, the Guardian points to the divinely conceived, organically developing world order of Bahá’u’lláh, which is born of and safeguarded by his inviolable Covenant.

Authoritative Interpretation and the Understanding of the Believers

29. The challenge of engagement with the Book is first, to determine to the extent possible Bahá’u’lláh’s intended meaning and second, to reshape personal understandings by striving to move them into correspondence with his teachings.

a. Because of our limited capacity we are, of course, always faced with the danger of diverging from the meaning and purpose of the Author.

30. Authoritative interpretation conveys the true meaning of the Revelation, while individual interpretation is a function of human knowledge and subject to its limitations.

a. The authoritative interpretation of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and Shoghi effendi is “a divinely-guided statement of what the Word of God means.”

b. Authoritative interpretation is a “statement of truth which cannot be varied.”

c. Perhaps the most significant feature of authorized interpretation is that it allows for the progressive revelation of the meaning of the text within the dispensation.

d. Authoritative interpretation does not add to the Revelation; rather, it clarifies and makes apparent veiled or potential implications of the Revelation that are not explicit.

e. Authorized interpretation does not, however, exhaust the meaning of the Sacred text. Verses from the Revelation often contain multiple meanings
and “the existence of authoritative interpretations in no way precludes the individual from engaging in his own study of the teachings and thereby arriving at his own interpretation or understanding.”

31. At the heart of the Cause is the freedom of individuals to study the teachings, to strive for deeper understanding, and to express their views with candor.

32. Understanding the meaning of the Revealed Word is not simply a rational exercise but depends upon spiritual conditions.

33. Individual interpretations “continually change as one grows in comprehension of the teachings.” “So, although individual insights can be enlightening and helpful, they can also be misleading.”

Incomplete understandings are, therefore, part of the natural and healthy process of learning about the Faith over time, and no one can be said to be fully free of misperceptions.

Hermeneutical Principles in the Bahá’í Teachings

34. To assist in the challenging process of acquiring understanding, many hermeneutical principles—that is, principles pertaining to interpreting or discerning the meaning of the Sacred text—are presented in the Bahá’í Writings to guide the seeker of truth.

a. The Book has an intended meaning. Bahá’u’lláh urges us to “Meditate upon that which hath streamed forth from the heaven of the Will of thy lord” so that we may “grasp the intended meaning which is enshrined in the sacred depths of the holy Writings.”

b. Judgments about meaning should be made from the perspective of the Revelation. Bahá’u’lláh states that “If it be your wish, o people, to know God and to discover the greatness of his might, look, then, upon Me with Mine own eyes, and not with the eyes of any one besides Me. Ye will, otherwise, be never capable of recognizing Me, though ye ponder My Cause as long as My Kingdom endureth. . . .”

c. There is no contradiction between authoritative passages. It may appear that certain statements in the Book contradict one another. But a difference in context or emphasis or the exploration of a single reality from different perspectives should not be misconstrued as contradiction.

d. Meaning is sometimes explicit and sometimes veiled. Bahá'u'lláh explains that the Manifestation of God speaks a “twofold language.” “one language, the outward language, is devoid of allusions, is unconcealed and unveiled;
that it may be a guiding lamp and a beaming light whereby wayfarers may attain the heights of holiness, and seekers may advance into the realm of eternal reunion. . . . The other language is veiled and concealed, so that whatever lieth hidden in the heart of the malevolent may be made manifest and their innermost being be disclosed.”

e. *The meaning of the Book cannot be exhausted.* “Know assuredly,” Bahá’u’lláh states, “that just as thou firmly believest that the Word of God, exalted be his glory, endureth for ever, thou must, likewise, believe with undoubting faith that its meaning can never be exhausted.”

f. *Truth unfolds progressively within the dispensation.* The meaning of the Revelation is intentionally disclosed in a gradual manner over time. “Consider the sun,” Bahá'u'lláh explains. “how gradually its warmth and potency increase as it approacheth its zenith. . . . [I]f the Sun of truth were suddenly to reveal, at the earliest stages of its manifestation, the full measure of the potencies which the providence of the Almighty hath bestowed upon it, the earth of human understanding would waste away and be consumed.”

g. *Understanding is influenced by the stages of the Faith's organic development.* The Bahá’í community evolves organically over time and certain passages may pertain to specific stages in this developmental process. Furthermore, each stage of the community's organic development influences the manner in which it approaches the Book and the questions it asks.

h. *Personal interpretations of the meaning of the Text should be weighed in the light of science and reason.* Scientific knowledge and reason make an essential contribution to a sound understanding of the Bahá’í Writings.

i. *History and context have implications for understanding the meaning of the Text.* Understanding the historical or specific context of a portion of the Book helps to shed light on its meaning.

35. The quest for sound understanding, instead, involves a community engaged in consultation, where differing views are welcome, unity is maintained, each individual exercises self-discipline, and varying perspectives are tested through action and reflection in a collective search for meaning that operates within the boundaries marked by the Covenant.
The Universal House of Justice and Bahá’í Practice

36. The Universal house of Justice is the agency of the Bahá’í Covenant that prescribes proper action within the framework of the teachings according to the exigencies of the time.

a. Guiding the progress of the Faith should not be confused with narrowly dictating a fixed set of doctrines or directing a highly centralized process.

b. The authority of the Universal house of Justice, within its well-defined sphere of action, is indisputable and clearly established.

c. The scope of the jurisdiction of the house of Justice is broad.

d. Among the many responsibilities of the Universal house of Justice is legislation. Its “exclusive right and prerogative is to pronounce upon and deliver the final judgment on such laws and ordinances as Bahá’u’lláh has not expressly revealed.”

e. Closely related to legislation is the responsibility for elucidation. Shoghi Effendi stated that various matters “have to be explained and elucidated by the Universal house of Justice, to which, according to the Master’s explicit instructions, all important fundamental questions must be referred.”

f. Another responsibility of the Universal house of Justice is to protect the Faith. This includes preserving proper relations of power.

Conferred Infallibility and a Learning Community

37. In striving to acquire a better appreciation of how Bahá’ís understand the teachings and translate them into action, the question arises as to how the practice of a community that develops in a learning mode can be reconciled with the concept of conferred infallibility presented in the Bahá’í Writings.

38. The comments here are not intended to be definitive, but are offered to clarify that there is no contradiction between the Bahá’í concept of infallibility and the ideas presented about an evolving understanding and practice in the Bahá’í community.

a. Essential infallibility means, therefore, that the very words of the Manifestation are the will and purpose of God himself.
b. Rather, conferred infallibility is an assurance that a statement or decision arising from within the designated domain of responsibility is in accordance with the will and purpose of God.

c. It also should be noted that nothing in the Bahá’í concept of infallibility implies that all outcomes will be painless or free of difficulties.

**Learning and Bahá’í Practice**

39. The practice of the Faith within the framework of the Bahá’í teachings by the individual believer includes elements such as spiritual disciplines, deepening in the Writings, contributing to the progress of the Cause, and living the Bahá’í life.

40. Living a Bahá’í life involves the twofold purpose of individual and social transformation.

41. Learning—study of the Bahá’í Writings, consultation, action and reflection on action in light of divine guidance—over the course of our lives and over the course of the dispensation is the means by which we find our way forward toward Bahá’u’lláh’s intended purpose for humanity.

a. The learning that generates new knowledge must be subsequently incorporated into educational efforts. Education and training, therefore, continually evolve as practice evolves.

b. After continual practice and accumulation of experience, knowledge and action become integrated into a coordinated pattern without the need to remember context-independent facts and rules.

c. One additional aspect of learning and progress concerns the opportunity available to individuals who possess knowledge and capacity to advance the process. This place in the Faith is not reserved only for members of institutions or for a narrow intellectual class, but for all who strive to understand and act.

d. Applying knowledge for constructive change in the Bahá’í community does not involve self-certainty or self-interest, but self-sacrifice.
CHAPTER 3 – LEARNING ABOUT GROWTH

42. Having gained deeper insight into the nature of understanding and action associated with learning to translate Bahá’u’l Kháb’s teachings into reality, we can now explore their expression in specific contexts, beginning with the expansion and consolidation of the worldwide community.

43. Before any extensive consideration of the subject, however, it is important to recall that, far from a narrow concern with increasing membership, the purpose of teaching others about the Faith is “to attract human beings to the divine Message and so imbue them with its spirit that they will dedicate themselves to its service, and this world will become another world and its people another people.”

44. Initially, however, the means for prosecuting this Plan collectively was absent, and therefore, “It was held in abeyance for well-nigh twenty years while the fabric of an indispensable Administrative order, designed as a divinely appointed agency for the operation of that Plan, was being constructed.”

a. This first stage in the development of the administration involved a learning process that included education of the believers and the refinement of various procedures and practices pertaining to local and National Assemblies, National Convention, elections, and the like.4

b. Once the prerequisite institutional capacity was in place, Shoghi effendi called upon national communities to adopt formal teaching plans.

c. Institutions and methods evolved through experience under the direction of the Guardian. Because of the careful education and loving guidance of Shoghi effendi over the course of his ministry, the Bahá’í world was able to launch the first global Plan in 1953, the ten Year Crusade, which linked the efforts of the twelve existing National Assemblies.

45. Shoghi effendi explained that the growth of the Faith would involve three stages, beginning with a “steady flow” of fresh recruits that would be followed by entry by troops and mass conversion.

a. Despite the success in obtaining new enrollments, however, no national community was able to achieve the appropriate balance between expansion and consolidation necessary to sustain the process of entry by troops.
A Turning Point of Epochal Magnitude

46. The Four Year Plan in 1996 marked a “turning point of epochal magnitude.” From the experience and struggles of the previous period, it was now possible to set the global community on a new course of action. “entry by troops,” the house of Justice wrote, “is not merely a stage of the progress of the Cause destined to occur in its own good time, dependent on the receptivity of the population as a whole—it is a phenomenon which the Bahá’í communities, by their own activities, can prepare for and help to bring about. It is also a process which, once started, can be sustained.”

47. Furthermore, the house of Justice was able to pinpoint for the Bahá’í world the central obstacle to sustaining entry by troops: the inability to develop human resources at a rate necessary for carrying out the multitude tasks involved in accelerated growth. The central concern of the new Plan was to confront this challenge.

48. The Four Year Plan resulted in a change in the Bahá’í community. A new state of mind, a new culture, systematization, and learning became the watchwords of a transition in Bahá’í practice related to growth and development.

49. The Four Year Plan, the twelve Month Plan, the Five Year Plans beginning in 2001 and 2006, and the subsequent Plans that will unfold until the year 2021 are a series of progressive steps of action and reflection on action in which the Bahá’í world is learning how to advance the process of entry by troops.

The Experience of Colombia and the Ruhi Institute

50. Early in the Four Year Plan, a number of national communities attempted to develop training materials for their new institutes based on the criteria outlined by the Universal House of Justice, which called for a “well-defined sequence of courses” and “well-organized, formal programs consisting of courses that follow appropriately designed curricula.”

51. As it turned out, diverse attempts by communities to create materials for a sequence of institute courses did not produce the desired result. Over time, more and more national communities adopted materials developed years earlier by the Ruhi Institute in Colombia, which enabled them to greatly accelerate their training process. The efficacy of these materials proved themselves through experience worldwide; so pronounced were the results that the materials were eventually promoted directly by the International teaching Centre in 2000.
A Decade of Progress

52. A decade of experience from 1996 to 2006, spanning the unfoldment of the Four Year, the twelve Month, and the first Five Year Plan, illustrates how a dialogical learning process, operating under the guidance of the Universal house of Justice, contributes to the systematic progress of the Faith.

a. The Four Year Plan, the house of Justice explained in 1995, would have the single aim of advancing the process of entry by troops. This was to be achieved by “marked progress in the activity and development of the individual believer, of the institutions, and of the local community.”

b. Creating in each country a system for effective training proved to be a formidable challenge. Some countries continued to struggle beyond the Plan’s conclusion.

c. Learning new patterns of effective, systematic action was extended in subsequent Plans. The twelve Month Plan was designed to build directly on the work of the Four Year Plan. Institutes were to become fully operational in every country.

d. The Five Year Plan began with the effort to define specific geographic regions within a country—clusters—according to social patterns of the general population. Bahá’í communities then began to learn how to focus and organize their activities in order to reach out to the inhabitants of each cluster and to gradually create the conditions in which ever-increasing numbers would enter the Faith and assume responsibility for its progress.

e. Three core activities devised principally to benefit the believers themselves—study circles, children’s classes, and devotional meetings—emerged as portals for entry by troops.

Characteristics and Achievements of a Learning Mode

53. Learning about growth did not result in a simple formula for action. Rather, sacrifice and perseverance, critical thought, and constant valuation and revising of methods were required. ... Therefore, a key feature of the Five Year Plan was the systematization of learning at the cluster level.

54. Progress did not depend on an elaborate decision-making process. Rather, in such gatherings the friends gained insights that shaped their future actions.
Change in Understanding and Practice

55. The change in culture in the Bahá’í community over the decade that made possible an advance in the process of entry by troops was, in essence, a change in understanding and practice. The Bahá’í community became increasingly involved in a dialogical process combining study, consultation, action and reflection to understand the Writings and the guidance of the Universal House of Justice and translate this understanding into practical and effective action.
CHAPTER 4 – CONTRIBUTING TO THE ADVANCEMENT OF CIVILIZATION

56. One of the distinctive features of the age of maturity in humanity’s development, however, is that the civilization associated with Bahá’u’lláh’s dispensation will not be a mere by-product of the principles and teachings he has revealed. Rather, its unfoldment will be a conscious process in which individuals endowed with a new understanding create new patterns of action to translate his vision into social reality.

57. So too, emphasis on the contributions Bahá’ís are to make to the civilization-building process is not intended to diminish the significance of efforts being exerted by others. A host of individuals and institutions contribute to the forces that are propelling social transformation.

58. Bahá’ís, then, develop their own capacity to draw on the power of divine assistance in service to humanity while learning to collaborate effectively with like-minded individuals and organizations.

59. The movement toward a global civilization is, therefore, an organic process in which God’s purpose for humanity becomes gradually realized.

60. The promotion of fundamental change in the very structure of society requires that systematic yet informal learning to foster the development of the Bahá’í community, as illustrated in the previous chapter, be complemented by a process of learning that employs more formal methods—involving both religion and science—in which Bahá’u’lláh’s teachings are applied in the diverse fields of human endeavor.

61. Given the magnitude of the transformation ahead and the scope of human suffering today, the current efforts of the Bahá’í community may appear to be but a mere drop. For a period of time, Bahá’í influence on the social order will obviously be limited. Yet, at least three areas of activity can be immediately identified.

a. Bahá’ís contribute through their work and professions to the generation and application of knowledge in various disciplines

b. We contribute to the social and economic development of our communities by carrying out specific projects that benefit the general population in their immediate surroundings.

c. And we also participate in humanity’s collective discourse, seeking solutions to problems and encouraging action according to insights provided by Bahá’í teachings.
Engaged in Diverse Fields of Human Endeavor

62. Bahá’ís are called to engage in all fields of endeavor that are of benefit to humanity. In referring to the arts, crafts and sciences, Bahá'u'lláh states: “Knowledge is as wings to man’s life and a ladder for his ascent. Its acquisition is incumbent upon everyone.”

63. Participation in the various fields of human endeavors is an essential aspect of service to humanity.

64. The house of Justice cautions youth, however, that they must not merely absorb all they are taught—rather, they face the difficult challenge of evaluating what they learn in the light of the Bahá’í teachings.

The Relationship Between Science and Religion

65. The engagement of Bahá’ís in all fields of knowledge, then, requires the struggle to draw upon insights from religion and science on theory, method and practice. The efforts of learned Bahá’ís to find an appropriate engagement between religion and science, however, can never be reduced to scholasticism or scientism.

66. While there has been, of course, a traditional tension between science and religion (or more broadly, between the disciplines of human knowledge and religion), Bahá’ís seek a harmony between the two.

67. A religious perspective that fully embraces science seeks a harmony between science and religion, and can legitimately challenge philosophical assumptions and conclusions that are imposed upon scientific inquiry or proffered in the guise of scientific truth.

68. Bahá’ís are involved in a new undertaking, but the approach and the specific language used to explore the relationship between science and religion has developed within the historical experience of the encounter between Christianity and an emerging empirical science in Western thought.

69. The Bahá’í teachings offer an approach to reality that lies beyond the debates arising from modern and postmodern thought, without ignoring the truths or valid criticisms in each. This approach encompasses a scientific worldview but is more comprehensive, addressing a wider range of questions that are essential to human progress.31
Moving Beyond Perceived Tensions Between Science and Religion

70. From this perspective, Bahá’í scholarship, as described by the Central Figures of the Faith and the Universal house of Justice, is an internal function of the Bahá’í community of practice; it is not the academic study of the Bahá’í Faith. It is open to all believers according to their capacity, not just Bahá’í academics. It serves the purposes of the Faith.

71. How is it possible to work within two practices that sometimes have divergent assumptions or standards—in particular, the practice of a religion and the practice of the academic study of religion that cannot take into account metaphysical influences?

Bahá’í Involvement in Social and Economic Development

72. A brief account of the evolution of thought and practice in the Bahá’í community regarding the social and economic development of peoples may shed further light on its attempts to contribute to the civilization-building process.

a. Bahá’í engagement in development receives its impulse from Bahá’u’lláh’s Revelation.

b. Social and economic development is an aspect of the consolidation of Bahá’í communities. It is that part of community life which is to be associated, in the fullness of time, with the dependencies of the Mashriqu’l-Adhkár, “the spiritual center of every Bahá’í community round which must flourish dependencies dedicated to the social, humanitarian, educational and scientific advancement of mankind.”

c. The principle that development is intended for the well being of all, not just Bahá’ís alone, governs Bahá’í endeavors in this field.

73. For more than a century after the birth of the Faith, the number of believers was too small and communities were too weak for Bahá’ís to be systematically engaged in development activities anywhere outside of Iran.

74. The year 1983 saw the beginning of a new phase in the evolution of the Bahá’í community. In its message of 20 October, the Universal house of Justice explained that “the community of the Greatest Name has grown to the stage at which the processes of [social and economic] development must be incorporated into its regular pursuits.”

a. The first decade of involvement in social and economic development included a wide variety of activities; it constituted “a period of
experimentation, characterized simultaneously by enthusiasm and trepidation, thoughtful planning and haphazard action, achievements and setbacks.”

b. In 1993, an analysis of the experience to date was conducted and new strategies formulated. These were presented in “Bahá’í Social and economic Development: Prospects for the Future,” a statement prepared in August 1993 at the Bahá’í World Centre and approved by the Universal House of Justice.

c. After the first quarter century of systematic development activity, there are several thousand social and economic development activities conducted by Bahá’ís in more than 100 countries. They span such diverse domains as agriculture, education, microenterprise, governance, environment, vocational training, technology, rural development, literacy, health, race unity, children’s rights, youth empowerment, and the advancement of women.

75. The approach being promoted by the office of Social and Economic Development centers on two complementary undertakings.

a. The first involves building institutional capacity to guide the learning of the people of a region to become the protagonists of their own progress, which includes the development of human resources through formal educational programs.

b. The second involves consolidating the learning experience of these institutions and disseminating it effectively to other communities.

76. Today’s worldwide Bahá’í activity directed towards the spiritual empowerment of junior youth is the result of this approach to the systematization of experience.

Method and Learning

77. The most fruitful approach up to now continues to be one of action, reflection on action, consultation, conceptualization, and the study of both the text of science and the text of religion, in this case the Bahá’í teachings. But in a field that touches on so many academic disciplines, methodological concerns cannot remain at this level of generality. Specific methods of learning have to be explored as dictated by the nature of the problems being addressed. The experience of one Bahá’í-inspired organization, la Fundación para la Aplicación y enseñanza de las Ciencias (Foundation for the Application and
teaching of the Sciences, FUNDAEC) helps illustrate the nature of this methodological exploration.

78. Rather than being “objects” of study, the individuals from the local population who have participated in the University for Integral Development have become active agents in research, reflection, and action. They have freed themselves from the dichotomy of the traditional and modern, a major cause of confusion throughout the planet, and have fully engaged in the elaboration of a vision of progress for the realization of which they have learned to work systematically.

79. FUNDAEC's experience is valuable largely because of its attempt to create a framework within which it can act and generate knowledge. This evolving framework is built of insights from the various fields of human learning, particularly science, and of certain beliefs, practices, and principles, drawn largely from the Revelation—the oneness of humankind, consultation, justice, the equality of men and women, and so on.

**Contributing to Humanity’s Collective Discourse**

80. A third aspect of the contributions Bahá’ís make to the civilization-building process is through participation in humanity’s collective discourse on the challenges and opportunities facing the world.

81. Such participation includes individual Bahá’ís who contribute as experts in their fields, or through their involvement in governmental or non-governmental organization, as well as Bahá’i-inspired initiatives. It also involves the direct contributions of Bahá’í institutions, especially through the Bahá’í International Community at the United Nations.

**The Nature of Bahá’í Intellectual Activity**

82. Bahá’u’lláh and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, as well as the Guardian and the Universal House of Justice, leave no room for doubt regarding the essential value of Bahá’í intellectual activity. No romantic notions, no appeal to mystical insight, nor any apposite principles associated with obedience, unity, or spirituality can call into question the attainments of the mind and the vital role of the truly learned in this dispensation.

83. Perhaps the learned Bahá’í is more like the “scout” who helps to guide an expedition on a journey into unexplored territory. This role involves investigating the unknown and generating and applying knowledge to contribute to the success of the mission at hand. It is someone who participates actively in the journey, but whose specialized knowledge, skills,
and experience informs various aspects of the struggle to make progress: constructive perspectives into the past, present, and future; insight and technical capacity for ongoing study of the text; problem posing and problem solving; the defining of culture and intercultural relations. On this journey, the learned individual/scout does not have authority, and, while making a vital contribution, like any other participant is fallible and learns over time.

**Understanding and Action and the Building of a New World**

84. At this early stage in the Faith’s development, Bahá’ís must learn how to engage in a process of understanding and practice that translates the teachings into reality, so as to weave the tapestry of Bahá’í life and gradually, of social reality, that reveals Bahá’u’lláh’s intended design.
Part II – Additional Considerations

CHAPTER 5 – A PROBLEM OF KNOWLEDGE

85. However, there are certain predominant perspectives in contemporary thought that clash with this approach to understanding and action, viewing it as hopelessly naïve, as rigid and fundamentalistic, or as potentially oppressive.

86. Since the enlightenment, humanity (more particularly, Western thought) has sought universal and objective standards for the investigation of reality and discovery of truth so that understanding and practice could be freed from subjective influences.

87. Modern thought sought methods and ideals that would provide a sure basis for prosperity and justice. Postmodern thought challenges these assumptions and approaches, but cannot provide a satisfactory alternative.

88. The tension between modern and postmodern ideas can be seen as part of what is more commonly understood by Bahá’ís as the breakdown of the old world order. The assumptions and intersubjective agreements that formed the basis of the social reality that became the modern world have been challenged, contributing to the process of disintegration that is tearing asunder institutions, belief systems and social relationships. New understandings, new agreements, new behaviors, and new social structures are needed.

89. We cannot completely escape the influence of culture or the breakdown of the old world order. We need to be aware of the ways that traditional religious practice, modern thought, and postmodern thought influence our consciousness and our approach to the Revelation if we are to acquire a deeper understanding of how Bahá’u’lláh expects us to read the Sacred text and translate his guidance into action.

a. The first challenge centers on the question of knowledge. What is knowledge? How do human beings know? How do we determine what is true? How reliable is knowledge derived from religion or from science? Is there some foundation upon which human knowledge rests, or are we forever left with uncertainty and doubt? How do we know that our understanding of the Bahá’í teachings is correct? Must we accept every statement of the text as equal to any other? When it comes to knowledge,
why have religious communities typically divided along the lines of liberalism and fundamentalism? Must this fate inevitably befall the Bahá’í Faith?

b. The second challenge concerns the question of power as it pertains to the relationship between individuals and groups. What perspective can be drawn from the Bahá’í teachings about the contemporary discourse on power? What are the relationships among individuals and between individuals and institutions that make the exercise of power possible? How is it determined which practical measures are to be taken? Is unity and peace dependent upon the control of power? What is the relationship between power and freedom? Is Bahá’í consultation an example of power-free discourse? How do we interact with other individuals and communities without imposing our views, values, and judgments upon them? How do we balance the competing claims of personal conscience and collective action, of independent investigation and obedience, of critical thought and unity?

The False Choice Between Liberalism and Fundamentalism

90. Generally speaking, the fundamentalist, or conservative, clings to the scripture as absolute truth, assumes that the text means what it plainly says and asserts that the world must be shaped by this truth.

91. The liberal believes that the understanding of scripture must be adapted to the needs of a changing world, asserts that the Book is largely metaphorical in its meaning, works to modify religious forms and communities to fit changing conditions, and is often concerned with social action before individual salvation or sectarian interests.

92. Yet, liberalism and fundamentalism, no matter how moderately presented, insist on specific requirements for understanding that are completely foreign to Bahá’í thought and action.

a. The liberal-fundamentalist dichotomy is a schema, a lens, through which reality is perceived. However, in certain situations a lens will enhance sight, in others it will distort it.

b. The believers commit themselves precisely to learning how to treat diversity in a way that does not lead to conflict or division.

c. Another essential contradiction that arises from imposing a liberal-fundamentalist framework onto the Faith is that it locks individuals into
conflicts that can never reach resolution. Bahá’ís are encouraged by Bahá’u’lláh to “be united in counsel, be one in thought.”

d. Any attempt to impose a liberal-fundamentalist divide on Bahá’í discourse produces the same type of intractable moral arguments that plague society as a whole.

e. A liberal-fundamentalist framework further contradicts Bahá’í practice through a misdiagnosis of challenges and incorrect prescriptions for action.

f. A liberal-fundamentalist mindset does not assess challenges from this perspective, but views problems as inherent to structure.

Human Rationality and the Bahá’í Teachings

93. The Bahá’í teachings, however, resolve the apparent contradictions among these questions by transcending the grand “either/ or” of foundationalism verses relativism. “It is not for anyone to exceed the limits laid down by God and his law, nor should anyone follow his own idle imaginings,” Bahá’u’lláh states. As previously mentioned, Shoghi Effendi warned against both extremes in the development of the Cause.

94. Nevertheless, a review of a range of passages from the Bahá’í Writings, including those presented above, leads to a broader perspective. The absolutist dimensions of foundationalism are absent in the Bahá’í conception of knowledge. Indeed, in one instance Bahá’u’lláh even associates the consciousness of the limitation of human capacity to know with the pinnacle of understanding:

95. A nonfoundational approach to knowledge, like relativism, recognizes the legitimacy of different points of view and the limitations on certainty. Unlike a relativistic approach, however, it permits judgments about inadequacy or error.

96. Among the many aspects of a Bahá’í approach to human understanding found in the teachings that correspond with a nonfoundational approach to knowledge are the following.

Truth and the Bahá’í Teachings

97. The Bahá’í Writings about the nature of truth, taken as a whole, reject a strict foundationalist or relativistic position.
Outline of Revelation & Social Reality

a. There is a clear distinction between the mind of God, or more particularly that of his Manifestation, as expressed in Revelation and human understanding of the meaning of the text.

b. Thus, the Bahá’í teachings indicate that our grasp of truth lacks the assurance of certainty necessary for foundationalism, or extreme orthodoxy, as well as the arbitrariness implicit in relativism, or irresponsible freedom.

Human Minds Differ

98. It is the difference in human minds that gives rise to the debate between foundationalism and relativism. Some are inclined to seek a basis for truth and identify it as a concrete reality; they appreciate the strength provided by certainty. Others see the elusiveness of truth, its shades of gray, and the urgent requirement for free exchange in order to pursue new avenues to acquire truth; they are suspicious of any attempt to rest upon what is already known.

99. Rejecting the false dichotomy of liberalism and fundamentalism, therefore, does not impose uniformity or diminish the diversity of views in the Bahá’í community; rather, it preserves the entire spectrum of individual interpretation as an asset in the search for truth. All views are welcome save those that persist in extremes of orthodoxy or irresponsible freedom, since these extremes are in themselves threats to the process of free investigation.

An Evolving Bahá’í Culture

100. As it grows and develops, the Bahá’í community accumulates beliefs, knowledge, methods, habits, and practices. This culture, or tradition, shapes the believers, and through their experiences they in turn contribute to modifying the tradition.

Consultation and the Community

101. Central to the Bahá’í teachings on the investigation of truth is Bahá’u’lláh’s exhortation to consult on all things, for consultation is the “lamp of guidance which leadeth the way” and the “bestower of understanding.”
The Covenant and the Process of Learning

102. In establishing a community capable of such learning and progress, Bahá'u'lláh has empowered it through the guidance found within the texts, and has established the Covenant to preserve the necessary and proper relationships on which progress depends.

An Overview of Understanding and Action in the Bahá’í Community

103. The ideas presented offer the general outlines of an approach to understanding and applying the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh that stands in sharp contrast to a fundamentalist-liberal, foundationalist-relativist, or modern-postmodern dichotomy. Its basic features are as follows:

a. The Bahá’í world community walks a “Straight Path” from the dawn of the Revelation to its Golden Age. Extreme orthodoxy and unfettered freedom are proscribed, yet, minds differ, and the believers represent a wide continuum of opinion, thought, and sentiment that is harmonized in the context of the Revelation.

b. Progress on the path is made by “translating that which hath been written into reality and action.” The creation of the Kingdom of God on earth, the transformation of society in accordance with the will of God, requires the believers to be engaged in an integrated process striving for greater understanding and improving practice. Their understanding of reality is shaped by the knowledge systems of science (the reading of the book of creation) and religion (the reading of the book of religion). Action is necessary to test the truth of any interpretive insights. Over the course of the dispensation, Bahá’ís draw closer to achieving Bahá'u'lláh’s intended will and purpose.

c. As the believers walk the “Straight Path” they advance through learning: a systematic, dialogical process involving study, consultation, action and reflection in the light of divine guidance. Over a lifetime, one investigates reality and attempts to replace erroneous beliefs and practices; the community similarly advances in its collective understanding and development. The process of consultation assists Bahá’ís to harmonize divergent views in the search for truth and in the application of principles in diverse and often ambiguous contexts. Once a decision is reached, all support it, for in this way, ‘Abdu'l-Bahá explains, even if the decision is wrong, the foundation of unity is preserved, the truth will be revealed, and the wrong made right. Latitude for initiative and tolerance of mistakes is needed. Reflection on action is indispensable, and, in this regard, constructive criticism is a welcome and essential aspect of learning.
d. **At certain times in history, it is not possible to validate a single understanding or course of action.** Standards for making such judgments may emerge at a later date. At best, it may be possible to bracket a range of possible alternatives, ruling out some options and defining a legitimate selection of others according to current criteria for understanding and action. Thus, the believers are free to hold their own views yet they do not impose them on others or contend with the center of authority. They need to be comfortable with ambiguity and allow time, experience, consultation informed by differing perspectives, and the guidance of the Universal house of Justice to gradually resolve all questions associated with achieving the aims of the Faith.

e. **As the community engages in dialogue and systematic learning, a culture, or tradition, emerges and evolves over time, moving toward a fuller expression of Bahá’u’lláh’s will and purpose.** This process has unfolded since the beginning of the dispensation and will continue through its Golden Age. The tradition has both universal and particular aspects across the diverse peoples of the Bahá’í world. Among the aspects of the tradition are practices (such as a particular approach to the Feast), a body of knowledge (such as our understanding of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s station), methods (such as firesides or teaching projects), institutional arrangements (such as the organization and operation of training institutes), and a view of history (such as one conveyed in a historical piece from a particular period). The believers of each new generation are educated within the tradition and, in turn, are enabled to contribute to it and gradually reshape and advance it through their understanding and action so that it may reflect more and more Bahá’u’lláh’s meaning and purpose—all within limits defined by the Covenant.

f. **The Covenant preserves the conditions necessary to guarantee steady progress, to protect against extremes, and to provide proper orientation for progress on the path.** The two authoritative centers are the Book, with its authorized Interpreter, and the guidance of the Universal house of Justice. The house of Justice, by framing the successive stages of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Divine Plan, directs the believers toward actions appropriate to the current stage of the Faith’s organic unfoldment, while guiding progress along the “Straight Path.” Although it does not interpret the text, the house of Justice preserves its purity by directing the collective action of the community in response to the writings and by preventing individual interpretations from being imposed on the community. There is an integral relationship between the learning undertaken by the believers and the guidance provided by the house of Justice.
CHAPTER 6 – A PROBLEM OF POWER

104. The problem of power involves the political order, but, more broadly, it is concerned with how individuals relate to one another, how society impacts individuals, and how the various institutions and structures within society interact.

105. In the Bahá’í teachings, the proper relationships governing individuals, groups, and society are described with the help of the metaphor of the human body. All of the cells, organs and systems have a part to play and when all are in harmony, the full capacity of the body is manifest. In this perspective, it makes no sense to speak of the power of a cell in contrast to the power of an organ or of the body as a whole. Even when taking into account human agency, the aim of the individual or purpose of a social structure is to achieve unity and harmony through cooperation and complementarity.

Contemporary Perspectives on Power

106. Over the centuries, Western thought primarily approached power in terms of the capacity of institutions to compel individuals to conform to certain patterns of behavior, either through oppression and tyranny or by the rule of law within a just social order.

a. Recent thinkers have addressed the problem of power from a modernist perspective by considering not only the structures of society, but also the role of the individual.

b. Postmodern thought calls into question the modern perspective on power. Power is seen to be ubiquitous: all, at least potentially, exercise power, and they do so for their own ends.

c. The work of French philosopher Michael Foucault offers insight into the postmodern perspective on power. "Power," Foucault explains, "is not an institution, and not a structure; neither is it a certain strength we are endowed with; it is the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society." According to Foucault, power is everywhere. It lies in the hands of individuals and groups as well as with government. It is not possible for the state to contain or even to place adequate checks upon power relations, nor can political institutions or legislation guarantee freedom.

107. Thus, in the Bahá’í teachings, the quest for order and rationality is complemented by equally important elements of critical thought, learning, diversity, and attention to local context. Unbending rules of behavior and
overcentralization of authority belong to the age of humanity’s childhood; similarly, unchecked freedom and unrelenting criticism are representative of the age of adolescence. New insights on power are required for the age of human maturity.

Some Bahá’í Teachings Relevant to Human Relationships

108. For Bahá’ís, the social and ethical arrangements that govern relations among individuals, groups and society from which the question of power arises are forged in every age by the Manifestation of God, Who brings the divine teachings adapted to the prevailing contingencies of human reality—both the capacity of human beings to understand and the degree of human social progress to date.

a. Thus, from a Bahá’í perspective, divine law does not take an absolute form that is grounded upon an absolute reality. God appears in this sense to be quite pragmatic: taking various kinds of action within specific contexts to achieve desirable results.

b. At the same time, the Revelation is suited to the capacity of the hearer. “All that I have revealed unto thee with the tongue of power, and have written for thee with the pen of might,”

c. Just as the divine standard of Revelation stands apart from foundationalism and relativism, so too, the effort to understand and apply it should avoid these extremes. The laws, principles, and exhortations are not translated into practice in a fixed and inflexible manner, a code that determines what must be done in every circumstance.

d. The concept of flexibility in applying the teachings should not be confused with amorality or license, or with a malleability or arbitrariness that conforms to relativism.

e. Application of the teachings also applies to interaction with those who are not a part of the community. Bahá’ís certainly make an effort to exert an influence, either by teaching the Faith and giving people an opportunity to accept it, or by sharing the principles in the hope of shaping thought and action. However, the Bahá’í standard is not imposed.

f. The Bahá’í concept of wisdom is yet another illustration of how, in matters associated with power, the Faith has a more nuanced approach that avoids foundationalism and relativism. The concept of truth, derived from the enlightenment tradition, suggests that an individual should strive for objective truth, and then act to uphold that truth in all circumstances. The
upholder of truth must depend upon personal conscience as the sole guide; must be unafraid to speak truth to power (that is, to some institution that holds power); and must completely disclose the truth without concern for consequences (since partial disclosure is dishonest).

g. Wisdom is not dissimulation. It is not artifice. It is that capacity of reason that balances knowledge, action, values, and context.

Power, Freedom, and the Individual

109. From a Bahá’í perspective, the human relationships that give rise to considerations of power cannot simply be reduced to a continual struggle between competing interests, but may be so arranged as to constructively shape human character and contribute to beneficial social outcomes.

110. Religion is concerned with forces intended to mold human action. In the Bahá’í teachings, discipline is not primarily imposed from the outside, but through personal struggle and self-mastery, as a believer exerts an effort to conform to the teachings in daily life.

111. In the Bahá’í teachings, the question of human agency is, of course, not completely divorced from extrinsic discipline and restraint. Certain Bahá’í laws are prohibitions or restrictions intended to inhibit certain destructive kinds of action. Such restraints, however, are not perceived to be an imposition on the prerogatives of the individual but are the source of God’s grace. They govern only a small portion of human actions.

112. Within the boundaries of law, human beings are not inert and submissive, but empowered to make their mark on the world. An active good is required, rather than a passive good that is merely the result of not doing bad things. This positive effort is cultivated by at least three influences: education, attraction, and reflection.

a. Through education, the individual’s character is formed and virtues are acquired, noble goals are cultivated including commitment to the betterment of the world, and attitudes such as tolerance, trustworthiness, love, and freedom from prejudice that are necessary for human solidarity are fostered.

b. Spiritual attraction is another means to foster the positive expression of human agency. It implies love for God, a desire to do that which is pleasing to God, and recognition that service to God is service to humanity.

c. Yet another factor that helps to constrain and direct initiative is reflection. Each individual is responsible for investigating reality; “each human
creature has individual endowment, power and responsibility in the
creative plan of God.”

Power and Social Order

113. Instead, the Bahá’í teachings envision striving and struggle toward a dynamic
balance of relations in order to construct a pattern of social advancement
that is at the same time incremental and surging, systematic and chaotic,
integrated and diverse.

114. While adherence to most Bahá’í laws are left to the conscience of individuals,
disobedience to some have social implications and may result in the
implementation of administrative sanctions that are designed to protect the
community and to encourage the individual to rethink his or her actions.

115. The purpose of Bahá’í administration is not to restrict but to release,
harmonize and canalize the creative powers of individuals to achieve focused,
collective action. A positive expression of power is evident, therefore, in
Bahá’í social relations.

116. One additional consideration in the relations of power between the
individual and institutions involves the evolution of Bahá’í administration.
The Bahá’í teachings do not offer a fixed set of rules that govern collective
affairs or an immutable structure for institutional arrangements. Instead,
“the whole machinery of Assemblies, of committees and conventions is to be
regarded as a means, and not an end in itself.”

Power and Practice

117. As a result of Bahá’í influence, other individuals and other areas of human
endeavor may change, but this is because a responsive chord is struck in
their internal criteria for justification. Other disciplines, equally, have the
opportunity to exert influence on the Bahá’í community; but this effect is
mediated by Bahá’í standards and methods.

118. Consider another example of the exercise of power through influence, that of
Bahá’í involvement in social action. Bahá’ís do not work to directly
incorporate Bahá’í teachings into law, as noted above. Nor do they believe
that the solutions to humanity's problems can be found merely in attacking,
in an isolated fashion, specific ills. Rather, Bahá’í efforts for social change are
intended to contribute toward a general transformation of society.