

From the Editor's Desk

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EXPLORING THE IMPLICATIONS
OF A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK
FOR BAHÁ'Í SCHOLARSHIP

This issue is dedicated to the challenge by the Universal House of Justice to the Association of Bahá'í Studies that this strategically important organization utilize its resources to consciously and progressively clarify how the elements of the conceptual framework that encompasses the vision and activities of the worldwide Bahá'í community as it works toward the advancement of spiritual and material civilization can be incorporated into the Association's various initiatives. But first, let us begin by considering what exactly is intended by the terms "conceptual framework" and "framework for action," which are so often used in describing the approach at the heart of the sequence of Five Year Plans initiated by the Universal House of Justice.

Both terms will be discussed at greater length in the first article, "Toward a Framework for Action," by member of the Universal House of Justice Mr. Paul Lamplé. However, we should note that "conceptual framework" is not a phrase coined by the Bahá'í Faith, nor is the process

to which it alludes devised solely for Bahá'í purposes. A conceptual framework, most generally, refers to the process of creating an intellectual tool that provides a way to progressively clarify the available concepts, methods, and strategies for accomplishing a set of objectives that require a complex process, as opposed to defining a clear-cut prescription for action.

From a Bahá'í perspective, perhaps the most powerful example for understanding a conceptual framework can be seen in the indirect, multifaceted, and ingenuous plan devised by the Creator whereby we humans—who are essentially spiritual—gradually learn about our nature and spiritual reality in general. We accomplish this objective by going through an elaborately conceived period of association with physical reality as we navigate the physical avatar that is our body through social and spiritual development by means of a series of increasingly complex relationships: first with parents and siblings, then with friends and playmates, next with our neighborhood and community, and ultimately with the world at large.

This framework for our advancement is conceptual because it is characterized by a process in which the objective (our spiritual enlightenment expressed in spiritual relationships), together with the framework for achieving that objective (individual and collective social action), are both organic and endlessly flexible. Both are capable of a limitless progression that accords with our continually

expanding needs and capacities as inherently social beings.

In this sense, the framework for expressing knowledge in action is never arbitrary or staid because there is no fixed or final point of development in our ultimate objective of bringing about by degrees the spiritual and material civilization that will be the outcome of Bahá'u'lláh's mission. Clearly, then, the framework required to pursue and achieve this goal must itself be flexible and unconstrained in its capacity to evolve to befit every stage in this process. In other words, even as there is no end to human progress, so there is no final stage for the complexification or efficacy of the framework facilitating and fostering that progress.

Another important feature of a conceptual framework is that it accommodates subsystems that likewise are capable of flexibility and a certain degree of autonomy. For this reason, the conceptual framework encompassing the specific features of the "framework for action" in the successive Five Year Plans might be usefully compared to the various systems within the human body. Each system—the nervous system, the circulatory system, the digestive system, the respiratory system, and so on—has a somewhat discrete and well-defined function in maintaining the health and vitality of the body. Yet none is self-sufficient; all are acutely attuned to the constantly changing needs of the body. In this same context, all systems of the body are, more or less, equally essential.

Thus, whereas we might assign a superior status to the brain as being in command of the body, the brain could not long survive without blood from the circulatory system being infused with oxygen from the respiratory system.

Like the conceptual framework that is the Creator's design for us to become gradually acquainted with, so that we may be educated about our essential nature, what the Bahá'í Writings term the "Major Plan of God" is an equally valuable example of a conceptual framework. "The Major Plan," sometimes alluded to as the "Greater Plan of God,"¹ is the "process of world unification . . . whose operation will continue, gathering force and momentum, until the human race has been united in a global society that has banished war and taken charge of its collective destiny" (*Century of Light* 138). Included as the most obvious systematic framework for bringing about this divinely ordained objective for the human race on planet Earth—and presumably any other planet capable of bringing about human life—are the systematic interventions by God involving successive and progressive revelations by His Vicegerents, designated as "Manifestations" by Bahá'u'lláh and characterized as being pre-existent, immaculate, infallible, and omniscient at will.

Further, within each Revelation are likewise subsidiary plans for promulgating and instituting this central

1 See Wendi Momen, *A Basic Bahá'í Dictionary*, p. 89.

spiritual objective and bringing about individual and collective transformation appropriate to the age in which the Revelation occurs. It is in this context that the specific plans of the Guardian and the Universal House of Justice are designated as constituting aspects of the Minor Plan of God:

Our fellow human beings everywhere are insensibly subjected at one and the same time to the conflicting emotions incited by the continuous operation of simultaneous processes of “rise and of fall, of integration and of disintegration, of order and chaos.” These Shoghi Effendi identified as aspects of the Major Plan and Minor Plan of God, the two known ways in which His purpose for humankind is going forward. The Major Plan is associated with turbulence and calamity and proceeds with an apparent, random disorderliness, but is, in fact, inexorably driving humanity towards unity and maturity. (Universal House of Justice, Ridván 155)

Because these parts of the Minor Plan are set forth systematically and logically by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and the authoritatively appointed agencies of the Bahá’í Faith—the Guardianship and the Universal House of Justice—and because our capacity as human beings for thought and action is necessarily limited and grows through experience over time, a conceptual framework for action that structures our continually

evolving understanding and practice is helpful for organizing our systematic execution of the Minor Plan: “Unlike His Major Plan, which works mysteriously, God’s Minor Plan is clearly delineated, operates according to orderly and well-known processes, and has been given to us to execute. Its ultimate goal is the Most Great Peace” (Universal House of Justice, Ridván 155).

In the context of the strategic role that the Revelation of Bahá’u’lláh plays at this turning point in human history—the maturation of the human body politic—we can appreciate how the framework for action in earlier plans by the Guardian and the Universal House of Justice—although part and parcel of Bahá’u’lláh’s overarching framework for bringing about the Most Great Peace² and the Golden Age of Bahá’u’lláh³—devised distinctive functions requiring frameworks appropriate to the various stages of progress toward this long-range objective. For example, the primary objective of the Guardian’s final plan, the Ten Year World Crusade (1953–1963), was to establish a sufficient number of National Spiritual Assemblies to function as pillars (the electorate) for the future Universal House of Justice.

2 “A condition of permanent peace and world unity to be founded on the spiritual principles and institutions of the World Order of Bahá’u’lláh” (Momen 175).

3 “A future age of the Bahá’í Era, the arrival of which will be signaled by the establishment of the World Order of Bahá’u’lláh” (Momen 88).

But in a more “down to earth” and directly relevant manner, the conceptual framework in which the Bahá'í community is presently involved is the attempt by Bahá'ís to approach the tasks Bahá'u'lláh gave us in an evolving, more systematic manner. What we as Bahá'ís are doing now is trying, in this age of maturity, to be more conscious of how we are participating in this great enterprise, and the idea of a conceptual framework is important because with our limited capacity, we cannot grasp all at once the guidance we have been given by Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Shoghi Effendi, and the Universal House of Justice. Therefore, we do the best we can by assembling the relevant parts of that conceptual guidance and gradually putting them into practice through continuous study, consultation, action, and reflection.

The “framework for action,” then—as the term has been applied repeatedly during the last two decades (1996–2018) of plans conceived and implemented by the Universal House of Justice—refers to our effort to be conscious of the concepts, methods, practices, and instruments required to undertake an organic process capable of responding to an organic objective. And the principal objective for this process is stated clearly at the outset by the Universal House of Justice: “At Ridván 1996, the Bahá'ís of the world will embark on a global enterprise aimed at one major accomplishment: a significant advance in the process of entry by troops” (letter dated 26 December 1995).

Note that the goal stated here is not merely an increase in the number of adherents, but an advancement *in the process itself*. In short, while still an integral part of the conceptual framework of the Divine Plan instigated by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, this new stage of plans emphasizes establishing the foundational requirements for the other parts of the framework that followed: the creation of training institutes and elected Regional Councils that would oversee these institutes, as well as the cultivation of a culture of learning and the need to develop individual and institutional capacity for sustainable growth.

During the 2000-2001 Twelve-Month Plan and in the years following, the framework for action—many elements of which had already been conceived and applied in various parts of the world in the preceding years—was consolidated and developed across a sequence of four Five Year Plans. As these Plans unfolded, we witnessed the creation of clusters, the devising of agencies necessary to translate vision into action within each cluster, the further development and implementation of the curriculum for the institutes (the Ruhi sequence), and three other core activities (children's classes, junior youth groups, and devotional meetings) to accompany the Ruhi study circles. What soon became apparent to all involved was the necessarily flexible and organic nature of the framework as vision begat action, and as reflection on the experience gained from the action helped refine

the vision and, subsequently, the conceptual framework itself.

Again, the worldwide success with this sequence of plans has derived from the organic nature of all the components of the framework for action within each plan. But as I discuss at some length in my recent book *God's Plan for Planet Earth—And Your Neighborhood*, for some believers and local Bahá'í communities that had become accustomed to a certain fixed and sometimes inflexible pattern of action for almost a century, switching to a continually changing and evolving grassroots process has been a substantial challenge. But, over time, it has become increasingly apparent that this conceptual framework and its emerging features greatly assist Local Spiritual Assemblies by eliminating some of the arduous and time-consuming work formerly dedicated to devising new local teaching plans every year. Now, instead, an inspiring, vital, and flexible a framework for outreach to the larger community is already in place and capable of being adapted to the exigencies of any community at whatever stage of development it may be and wherever in the world it may exist.

Furthermore, for those who have become Bahá'ís as this framework has been unfolding, there is no longer a long-term process whereby a new believer needs to go through a gradual and sometimes disorganized or haphazard education before knowing what Bahá'í life is about, what one does in the community, and how

action is carried out. New believers quickly become teachers, and any sense of rank—which might formerly have been characterized as being synonymous with longevity of membership—has been largely relegated to the past. Instead, believers old and new are challenged and exhorted to be attentive to the continuous changes and insights derived from the evolving framework, the newly emerging terminology to describe those changes, and the most recent messages from the House of Justice and the International Teaching Center—guidance that nurtures and sustains the global Bahá'í community as it builds communities in every country, territory, and island, from large urban environments to remote villages.

Returning, then, to the original concern about the implications of this conceptual framework for the work of the Association of Bahá'í Studies, the *Journal of Bahá'í Studies*, and Bahá'í scholarship in general, we are challenged to answer some hard questions. How does Bahá'í scholarly activity serve the advancement of spiritual and material civilization? What elements of a conceptual framework does it share with other aspects of Bahá'í endeavor, such as expansion and consolidation, social action, or involvement in the discourses of society, and what elements are distinct for its specific purposes? How does the cultivation of the intellectual life of the community serve all of these actions? Certainly, scholarship is not a thing of the past, a remnant of a dying age in

which the “learned” in “ivory towers” spoke in coded jargon to one another while the world fell into disarray. And because ABS is also endeavoring to encourage scholarship and create spaces for relevant scholarly discourse, it is likewise attempting to develop its own evolving framework for action.

The impulse that initiated serious consideration of how to identify the elements of this framework came in the form of a milestone letter on 24 July 2013 from the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Canada—the institution charged with oversight of ABS. Part of this important document states the following about the relationship between ABS and the framework for action:

Through the specialized settings it creates, the Association can promote learning among a wide range of believers across a wide range of disciplines. Central to the effort to advance the work of expansion and consolidation, social action, and the involvement in the discourses of society is the notion of an evolving conceptual framework, a matrix that organizes thought and gives shape to activities and which becomes more elaborate as experience accumulates. It would be fruitful if the elements of this framework most relevant to the work of the Associations for Bahá'í Studies can be consciously and progressively clarified.

Dedicated to elucidating and expanding this insight, Mr. Lample's article does much more than merely explain the conceptual framework currently being implemented by the worldwide Bahá'í community. This substantial discourse is specifically aimed at both defining and encouraging scholarship, especially as scholarship relates to the major objectives of the Bahá'í Faith. Mr. Lample's discourse also usefully rehearses some caveats derived from past misunderstandings about the role of the scholar in the Bahá'í community.

The second article, “Transformative Leadership: Its Evolution and Impact” by Joan Barstow Hernandez, also demonstrates the practical application of scholarship in the transformation of society. Hernandez discusses the conceptual framework and the eighteen capabilities developed by Núr University as part of its Transformative Leadership program. Developed in the 1990s as a Bahá'í-inspired approach to leadership, this program has since been used in approximately sixty projects or workshops in forty countries in North and South America, Europe, Africa, and Asia. Hernandez focuses on the six elements that constitute the conceptual framework of this innovative approach.

The third article—by member of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Canada, Dr. Gerald Filson—began as a lengthy book review that the editorial board felt merited being further refined into what we believe a valuable assessment of

Sona Arbab's book, *Moral Empowerment: In Quest of a Pedagogy*. Filson both rehearses the salient features of this work on education and assesses its contribution in considering what makes education effective. More specifically, he focuses on the method by which Arbab responds to the question of the central goal of education and, beyond that, how education can address our evolving need to learn about both the physical and social world at a time when knowledge and information are accumulating at such an incredible pace.

Finally, we have two lyric poems that demonstrate beautifully the subtle power that the poetic sensibility is capable of discovering, sometimes in the most unexpected places and circumstances. The first is "Slipping into the Light" by Cole Eubanks, and the second is "Silent Trades" by Cynthia Arriue-King. Both require reflection on our part, and both are well worth many readings. We also for the first time include two grayscale pictures—these from professional photographer Susan Jeffers—and we encourage further submissions from others whose talents lie in this field.

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