

Knowledge and Civilization

Implications for the Community and the Individual

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Originally published in The Bahá'í World 1997–98, this article, the revised text of a presentation given by Farzam Arbab, explores the relationship between science and religion as two great systems of knowledge that have a vital social role to play in the building of a world civilization.

Throughout history, humanity has depended upon science and religion as the two principal knowledge systems that have propelled the advancement of civilization, guided its development, and channeled its intellectual and moral powers. The methods of science have allowed humanity to construct a coherent understanding of the laws and processes governing physical reality, and, to a certain degree, the workings of society itself, while the insights of religion have provided understanding relating to the deepest questions of human purpose and action.

The social role of knowledge as it relates to the building of a world civilization is of immense importance. In this context, the relation between science and religion, the two great systems of knowledge, assumes vital significance, as do issues surrounding the acquisition of knowledge by the individual, since according to the Bahá'í viewpoint, the highest goal of the individual is to be “a source of social good.”

Material and Spiritual Civilization

According to the Bahá'í teachings, there are two facets to civilization: material and spiritual. Bahá'ís believe that for humanity to prosper these must be balanced. Adherence to a strictly materialistic viewpoint requires trying to understand civilization in terms of material complexity in the collective existence of the human species. In this paradigm, the complex structures of atoms and molecules and their interactions that constitute a human being and create in it the potentialities of the mind are seen as preludes to, or building blocks of, more complex entities such as the family, the group, the community, and society. When these higher collective structures come into being, they are viewed as having the potential of certain patterns of behavior associated with civilization.

The materialistic line of thinking, regardless of how many humanistic concepts are introduced into it, dictates acceptance of the idea that the force that pushes humanity towards these higher levels of organization—and, therefore, towards civilization—is the imperative to survive. Somehow the genetic code of every human being (itself the product of physical evolution) contains instructions that oblige the individual to work for the survival of humanity as a species. Thus, the various

manifestations of civilization are explained in terms of their intrinsic value for survival, whether now or at some time in the distant past during some stage of evolution. The fact that human beings are attracted, for example, to beautiful works of art—indeed, the very fact that the concept of beauty exists in human thought—is the result of its utility somewhere in the process of physical evolution. In other words, being able to “think the concept of beauty and react to it” in certain ways must have given some members of the species advantages in the struggle for survival over others who were not able to do so.

Within a worldview of this kind, it would be hard to grant knowledge a transcendental value that would not finally be reducible to some kind of material utility. It is not surprising, then, that as society becomes more and more materialistic, knowledge is increasingly regarded essentially as a commodity. While receiving the highest praise in an age proudly associated with its expansion, knowledge is more and more identified with information, and its generation and application are increasingly ruled by the exigencies of economic growth. This process of production and consumption of goods and services is considered central to humanity’s collective existence and progress.

The Bahá’í view of civilization is very different. Just as the individual has both a spiritual and a material nature, civilization is seen as having two similar aspects. It is an expression of humanity’s collective existence, the spiritual dimension of which is greater than and gives purpose to its material dimension. The Bahá’í writings state that both the life of the individual and that of humanity as a species have a purpose beyond mere existence and survival. The purpose of the individual’s life is to know and worship God, and the purpose of humanity’s collective life is to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization.

It is reasonable to believe that the generation and application of knowledge is the central process that propels the advancement of spiritual and material civilization. Furthermore, it can be affirmed that this knowledge is basically organized in two great systems: religion and science. Neither is static; one progresses through revelation and the other through scientific investigation. The writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá shed light on this subject, as seen in the following passage:

Religion is the light of the world, and the progress, achievement, and happiness of man result from obedience to the laws set down in the holy Books. Briefly, it is demonstrable that in this life, both outwardly and inwardly the mightiest of structures, the most solidly established, the most enduring, standing guard over the world, assuring both the spiritual and the material perfections of mankind, and protecting the happiness and the civilization of society is religion.¹

Further, He says:

Creation is the expression of motion. Motion is life. A moving object is a living object, whereas that which is motionless and inert is as dead. All created forms are progressive in their planes, or kingdoms of existence, under the stimulus of the power or spirit of life. The universal energy is dynamic. Nothing is stationary in the material world of outer phenomena or in the inner world of intellect and consciousness.

Religion is the outer expression of the divine reality. Therefore, it must be living, vitalized, moving and progressive. If it be without motion and nonprogressive, it is without the divine life; it is dead.²

About science, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states:

All the powers and attributes of man are human and hereditary in origin—outcomes of nature’s processes—except the intellect, which is supernatural. Through intellectual and intelligent inquiry science is the discoverer of all things. It unites present and past, reveals the history of bygone nations and events, and confers upon man today the essence of all human knowledge and attainment throughout the ages. By intellectual processes and logical deductions of reason, this superpower in man can penetrate the mysteries of the future and anticipate its happenings.

Science is the first emanation from God toward man. All created beings embody the potentiality of material perfection, but the power of intellectual investigation and scientific acquisition is a higher virtue specialized to man alone. Other beings and organisms are deprived of this potentiality and attainment. God has created or deposited this love of reality in man. The development and progress of a nation is according to the measure and degree of that nation’s scientific attainments. Through this means its greatness is continually increased, and day by day the welfare and prosperity of its people are assured.³

In sum, religion and science are the two knowledge systems that hold together the foundations of civilization. They are two forces that propel the advancement of civilization. They are two sets of practices that draw upon the higher powers of the human soul and must be in harmony. Understanding the nature of this harmony is essential if humanity is to generate and apply the kind of knowledge that will advance civilization in both its material and spiritual dimensions.

The Standard of Measurement

In a passage describing some of the gifts that God has vouchsafed unto humanity, such as understanding and vision, Bahá’u’lláh states:

These gifts are inherent in man himself. That which is preeminent above all other gifts, is incorruptible in nature, and pertaineth to God Himself, is the gift of Divine Revelation. Every bounty conferred by the Creator upon man, be it material or spiritual, is subservient unto this. It is, in its essence, and will ever so remain, the Bread which cometh down from Heaven. It is God’s supreme testimony, the clearest evidence of His truth, the sign of His consummate bounty, the token of His all-encompassing mercy, the proof of His most loving providence, the symbol of His most perfect grace. He hath, indeed, partaken of this highest gift of God who hath recognized His Manifestation in this Day.⁴

In the Bahá’í view, divine revelation is the standard by which all understanding and all knowledge will finally have to be measured. It encompasses the knowledge of

all reality and stands above the judgement of human beings, whatever the degree of their attainments. As Bahá'u'lláh says in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, His Most Holy Book:

Weigh not the Book of God with such standards and sciences as are current amongst you, for the Book itself is the unerring Balance established amongst men. In this most perfect Balance whatsoever the peoples and kindreds of the earth possess must be weighed, while the measure of its weight should be tested according to its own standard, did ye but know it.⁵

When religion, as a system of knowledge and practices pertaining to human beings, is in conformity with divine revelation and is not contaminated by elements such as superstition, speculation or emotionalism, then it is true religion and illuminates human understanding. It guards the individual against arrogance and conceit, which can turn knowledge into a barrier between him and God. In that way, the spirit of religion illuminates science and protects it from becoming dogmatic materialism.

Human understanding of divine revelation, as distinct from revelation itself, is innately limited, however, and can be mistaken. Religious belief held by individuals and communities needs, therefore, to be carefully examined in the light of scientific truth and of reason. 'Abdu'l-Bahá states that "religion must be reasonable" and that "every religion which is not in accordance with established science is superstition."⁶ Bahá'u'lláh warns that the study of religion should not result in ignorant fanaticism and bigotry and explains that the literal interpretation of divine texts when a spiritual meaning is intended leads to "false imaginings" and to straying from "the infinite mercy of Providence." Thus, in the same way that religion protects science from turning into materialistic dogma, science protects religion from turning into superstition.

Not all conceptions of science and religion hold these two systems to be in harmony, however. The present widespread belief in the intrinsic conflict between science and religion arose at a time in the history of Christendom when conceptions of science and religion were highly inadequate. Bahá'ís believe that a new concept of religion was given to humanity by Bahá'u'lláh, necessitating a reformulation of previously held ideas; similarly, popular notions about science should be informed by the latest developments in the field and by advances in the philosophy and history of science.

Widely held perceptions of science are based on notions that have, in recent decades, been proven either wrong or extremely inadequate. These notions are held not only by the majority of the world's peoples, who see the magical results of scientific progress, but also by those who are engaged in narrow scientific activity without feeling the necessity to reflect in any depth on the nature of science and its offspring, modern technology. Many of these notions fall within a category that has been called "naïve inductivism."

According to these perceptions, science begins with observation of things and occurrences. With an unprejudiced mind and with absolute objectivity scientists faithfully record what they experience through their senses. The resulting "observation statements" form the basis from which the laws and theories of science can be derived.

The immediate results of observation are singular statements, which refer to particular events at particular times. When enough such statements are gathered on

the basis of repeated observations, it is claimed, one can arrive at universal statements through a process of generalization that is entirely logical.

In order for such generalizations to be considered legitimate by the inductivist, a large number of observation statements must form the basis of each generalization, the observations must be repeated under a wide variety of conditions, and no observation statement should be found that contradicts the derived universal statement.

Induction—the process of going from a sufficiently large number of singular statements to universal statements—is not, however, ruled entirely by the laws of logic, contrary to what is often believed. Its shortcomings are encapsulated in the story about the turkey that was fed every day at 8 a.m. On 23 December, it decided that its observations were large enough in number to justify the conclusion reached by induction that it would always be fed at 8 a.m. Two days later it was being served to a happy group of people as part of their Christmas dinner.

Not even the popular view of science, of course, is so naïve as to depend on induction alone. With laws and theories at their disposal, scientists can derive from them various consequences that serve as explanations and predictions. These predictions and explanations are made through the process of deduction whose rationality, unlike that of induction, no one questions. For example, from the laws of planetary motion the existence of a new planet may be predicted, which, in turn, gives rise to new opportunities for experimentation that strengthen the existing theory or ask for its modification.

According to these views, then, scientific knowledge is built entirely upon observation. As the number of facts established by observation and experiment grows, and as the facts become refined through improvements in observational and experimental skills, more and more laws and theories of increasing generality and scope are constructed. The growth of science is thus continuous and cumulative.

Explanations of science such as this have led the world to the conviction that scientific knowledge is proven knowledge—objective and free of personal opinions, preferences and speculative imaginings. As objectively proven, it is therefore reliable. Language, however, can trick the thought processes. “Objective,” “proven,” and “reliable” are not value-free words. Gradually they become synonymous with “indisputably true,” and “science says” becomes the final arbiter of every argument. As a consequence, science is regarded as the only source of indisputable truth; every other source of knowledge becomes less valuable, less reliable—and then valueless and unreliable. Under such conditions, who would dare to raise religion to a level at which it could be compared with science, and, further, who would dare to speak of harmony between science and religion?

Such perceptions of science are rudimentary at best. They do not stand the test of historical evidence, nor can they stand up to the results of innumerable observations made of scientific practice itself. For these reasons they must be left behind as early attempts to understand the scientific enterprise—attempts that, because they led to valuable insights, became popularized too quickly and gave rise to a general misconception of the nature of science.

Beyond Induction and Deduction

There are, of course, more sophisticated views of science and more valid explanations of the process of scientific investigation. Science, as a vast system of

knowledge and activity, is made up of numerous components, including elements that are articles of faith—faith in the existence of order in the universe and in the ability of the human mind to make sense of that order and express it in a precise language. In the words of Einstein, “...those individuals to whom we owe the greatest achievements of science were all of them imbued with the truly religious conviction that this universe of ours is something perfect and susceptible to the rational striving for knowledge.”

In addition to observation statements, inductive conclusions, and deductive conclusions, another component of the science system consists of assumptions, some of which defy any attempt to be logically proven. They are simply acceptable to human reason and derive their value from the success of the models and theories to which they give rise. For example, for centuries people assumed that the laws governing objects on earth were different from laws governing heavenly bodies. The theories that were based on this assumption proved inadequate, and today one basic assumption of science is that gravity governs the behavior of space, time and matter everywhere in the universe. For the time being, the theories that are based on this assumption seem to explain whatever has been observed, justifying its widespread acceptance.

The practice of science also calls for spiritual qualities such as love for beauty, commitment to veracity, and honesty, and is dependent on such faculties of the human soul as intuition, creativity, and imagination, which are discounted by naïve perceptions of science. This does not mean that science is not rational, for the results of the application of these faculties must finally pass the tests of rationality.

Among the other components of science are the following: a highly complex language that seeks to be rational, unambiguous, and objective; mental processes such as the previously mentioned induction and deduction, as well as the construction of concepts, models and theories; rules and methods of observation that depend on the senses but are highly influenced by theory; and methods suitable to each object of study. Furthermore, scientific activity is carried out within specific research programs by scientific communities that exhibit the many complex types of behavior characteristic of communities of human beings.

Given all of these elements, the complexity and intricacy of the scientific enterprise and the need to abandon simplistic and mechanical explanations of the processes of science should be clear. This does not mean that science is haphazard and devoid of truth, or that scientific practice is arbitrary and driven by thirst for power and control as some would claim in this postmodern era. Science is a mighty system, highly structured and intimately connected to reality—a reality that exists and is not the product of imagination.

With an expanded, more comprehensive view of science, it is possible to approach the question of harmony between science and religion with little difficulty. Religion and science are clearly not the same, or it would be absurd to talk about harmony between them. But while statements about the two systems differ, everything said about science has a parallel in a similar description of religion. The language of religion, for example, does not have to be the same as that of science. Indeed, the language in which religious truth is expressed, while at times as objective and unambiguous as scientific language, often has to transcend the limitations of such language in order to offer insights into reality through the use of poetic imagery. Moreover, religion has access to the words of the Manifestation Himself—words that speak directly to the human heart and mind in ways that no others can.

Harmony of Science and Religion

The harmony between science and religion should be understood as existing at more than one level. At the first level, it can be argued that the two are so distinct that there is no possibility of conflict between them. Science studies the material universe. The knowledge it generates becomes the basis for technological progress. But technology can be used for the good of humanity or to its detriment, for building civilization or for its destruction. Science in itself does not have the ability to determine to what use its products should be put.

Religion, on the other hand, is concerned with the spiritual dimension of human existence. It throws light on the inner life of the individual; it touches the roots of motivation and engenders the system of ethics and morality that directs human behavior. It can set the ethical framework within which technology can be developed and employed. In this sense, civilization needs both religion and science, and as long as each remains within the sphere of its own activities there is no reason to believe that they will come into conflict with each other.

This view of the harmony between science and religion is quite valid at the level of application of scientific results. Indeed, 'Abdu'l-Bahá has used this depiction in His remarks to certain audiences. But most of the time He goes beyond such strict separation and presents a view of science and religion as highly interconnected. Attempts to understand the role of knowledge in the building of civilization should pay a great deal of attention to these interconnections and try to understand their nature.

In this regard, three conceptions have to be ruled out. One is of two entirely disjoint systems with nothing in common. The second is of religion with science as a subsystem, a conception that finally leads to the denial of science's own processes of knowledge generation and the assertion that if one becomes spiritual enough these processes can be set aside. (According to this line of thinking, all necessary scientific knowledge can be discovered through reading religious text.) The third conception is one in which religion is a subset of science, which deals with it as a very complex social and psychological phenomenon to be respected and, if need be, used for the benefit of society.

With these three models discarded, one alternative is left: that of science and religion as two distinct but partially overlapping systems. The area of overlap covers many elements. Some are articles of faith and assumptions, although we must recognize that there are matters of faith and assumptions in each system that are distinct, sometimes simply because they are not needed in the other. These commonalities also extend to matters of method, the object of study, qualities and attitudes, and mental and social processes. This overlap is intrinsic to the two systems and originates in the fact that making a sharp division between matter and spirit is in itself impossible and undesirable. Although for many practical purposes it is possible and necessary to separate the two systems and allow their processes to run parallel to each other, attempts to deny their intimate interactions in the minds of human beings and in society rob them both of the extraordinary powers inherent in them.

In Bahá'í belief, the source of all knowledge, whether scientific or religious, is God. Religion is the direct child of divine revelation. 'Abdu'l-Bahá writes: "Read, in the school of God, the lessons of the spirit, and learn from love's Teacher the innermost truths. Seek out the secrets of Heaven, and tell of the overflowing grace and

favor of God.”⁷ Science also receives its impulse from the powers released by the Manifestation of God, as indicated in the following passage:

... the moment the word expressing My attribute “The Omniscient” issueth forth from My mouth, every created thing will, according to its capacity and limitations, be invested with the power to unfold the knowledge of the most marvelous sciences, and will be empowered to manifest them in the course of time at the bidding of Him Who is the Almighty, the All-Knowing.⁸

As the source of all knowledge is God, to reach and live in His presence is the object of all search. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá has written:

Although to acquire the sciences and arts is the greatest glory of mankind, this is so only on condition that man’s river flow into the mighty sea, and draw from God’s ancient source His inspiration. When this cometh to pass, then every teacher is a shoreless ocean, every pupil a prodigal fountain of knowledge.⁹

The Individual and the Acquisition of Knowledge

For the individual believer, the acquisition of knowledge is a duty prescribed by Bahá’u’lláh: “Knowledge is as wings to man’s life, and a ladder for his ascent. Its acquisition is incumbent upon everyone.”¹⁰ It is clear from numerous passages that both human learning and the knowledge of the teachings of God are intended: “Let the loved ones of God, whether young or old, whether male or female, each according to his capabilities, bestir themselves and spare no efforts to acquire the various current branches of knowledge, both spiritual and secular, and of the arts.”¹¹

With so many passages in the Bahá’í writings extolling the acquisition of knowledge, Bahá’ís are bound to pay a great deal of attention to learning, and, therefore, such questions as what to learn and how to learn are of paramount importance in the life of the individual. The first distinction that he or she must make is between knowledge and information. Facts and information are the raw materials of knowledge in the same way that sand and cement, earth, wood, metals and glass are some of the raw materials of a building. Just as these building materials do not in themselves constitute an edifice but must be shaped into a structure, so knowledge is a structured system that includes facts and information but must also contain other elements such as concepts, patterns, connections, and hierarchies.

Knowledge is only meaningful if accompanied by true understanding, as Bahá’u’lláh explains:

Know thou that, according to what thy Lord, the Lord of all men, hath decreed in His Book, the favors vouchsafed by Him unto mankind have been, and will ever remain, limitless in their range. First and foremost among these favors, which the Almighty hath conferred upon man, is the gift of understanding. His purpose in conferring such a gift is none other except to enable His creature to know and recognize the one true God—exalted be His glory. This gift giveth man the power to discern the truth in all things, leadeth him to that which is right, and helpeth him to discover the secrets of creation.¹²

‘Abdu’l-Bahá elaborates:

God’s greatest gift to man is that of intellect, or understanding. The understanding is the power by which man acquires his knowledge of the several kingdoms of creation, and of various stages of existence, as well as of much which is invisible.

Possessing this gift, he is, in himself, the sum of earlier creations—he is able to get into touch with those kingdoms; and by this gift he can frequently, through his scientific knowledge, reach out with prophetic vision.¹³

In exploring the connection between knowledge and understanding, it is possible to claim that the knowledge of things is somehow associated with the things themselves and that the knowledge of the universe is encoded in the universe. But understanding is a power of the human soul. Nature is bereft of it. Nature is ordered but it is not conscious of that order; it behaves according to prescribed laws but it cannot see meaning in them. Understanding, a power of the higher nature of the human being, unravels not only the knowledge of the laws and of the order, but also penetrates the meaning that underlies their existence.

This latter point merits further explanation. Seen from a strictly materialistic viewpoint, knowledge is acquired only through the senses. Stimuli are received by the senses and processed by the brain. The brain itself is, in the final analysis, material—a collection of highly specialized cells communicating with one another through complex physical and chemical interactions. Collective activities of these cells are given names, such as short- and long-term memory, cognition, and affective responses, but there is nothing transcendent about any of them. In this worldview, then, the question of understanding would have to be reducible, at least in principle, to which configuration of atoms and molecules and what set of interactions receive the generic name “understanding.”

In the Bahá’í view, the reality of man is his soul, which is beyond material existence. Through its power the mind understands, imagines, and exerts influence. While the mind comprehends the abstract by the aid of the concrete, the soul has additional means through which it can achieve understanding. Thus, the search for knowledge should not be concerned only with the sharpening of the mind, but also with the development of the soul’s other faculties. The individual must be aware of the potentialities inherent in these other powers of the soul and have an idea of what they can accomplish. The Bahá’í writings are replete with references to these faculties, such as the inner eye, the inner ear, and the heart, as found in the following passages:

[W]e must thank God that He has created for us both material blessings and spiritual bestowals. He has given us material gifts and spiritual graces, outer sight to view the lights of the sun and inner vision by which we may perceive the glory of God.¹⁴

He has designed the outer ear to enjoy the melodies of sound and the inner hearing wherewith we may hear the voice of our Creator.¹⁵

...O brother! kindle with the oil of wisdom the lamp of the spirit within the innermost chamber of thy heart, and guard it with the globe of understanding...¹⁶

Awareness of the role that the various powers of the soul are to play in the search for knowledge and true understanding protects the individual from certain absurd dichotomies introduced in the prevalent intellectual discourse. Of special importance is the false dichotomy between the mind and the heart. It is, of course, legitimate to call certain powers of the soul “the mind” and certain of its other powers “the heart.” These designations enrich the language needed to comprehend such complex concepts as knowing, understanding, feeling, and conjuring up the will to act. But the powers of the soul cannot simply be easily separated and rigidly categorized as, for example, a mind that only thinks rationally and a heart that only feels irrational or super-rational sentiments. Such categorizations finally lead to dead ends those branches of science and philosophy that are concerned with knowledge. In daily life, too, the introduction of such concepts as “mind person” and “heart person” limits the possibilities of human interaction and stunts the development of human potential.

If it is accepted that to achieve true understanding the individual must draw on the many powers of the soul, then one of the most challenging tasks in the pursuit of knowledge and understanding is to purify one’s inner being. The opening passages of Bahá’u’lláh’s central theological treatise, the *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, speak to this point:

No man shall attain the shores of the ocean of true understanding except he be detached from all that is in heaven and on earth. Sanctify your souls, O ye peoples of the world, that haply ye may attain that station which God hath destined for you and enter thus the tabernacle which, according to the dispensations of Providence, hath been raised in the firmament of the Bayán.

The essence of these words is this: they that tread the path of faith, they that thirst for the wine of certitude, must cleanse themselves of all that is earthly—their ears from idle talk, their minds from vain imaginings, their hearts from worldly affections, their eyes from that which perisheth. They should put their trust in God, and, holding fast unto Him, follow in His way. Then will they be made worthy of the effulgent glories of the sun of divine knowledge and understanding, and become the recipients of a grace that is infinite and unseen
....¹⁷

When knowledge is accompanied by true understanding, it leads to wisdom, to which Bahá’u’lláh refers as humanity’s unfailing protector and the foremost teacher in the school of existence. One of the characteristics of wisdom is that it connects knowledge and action in a particular way, fitting the application of knowledge to the exigencies of each situation. As ‘Abdu’l-Bahá advises:

Follow thou the way of thy Lord, and say not that which the ears cannot bear to hear, for such speech is like luscious food given to small children. However palatable, rare and rich the food may be, it cannot be assimilated by the digestive organs of a suckling child. Therefore unto everyone who hath a right, let his settled measure be given

First diagnose the disease and identify the malady, then prescribe the remedy, for such is the perfect method of the skillful physician.¹⁸

The Bahá’í writings clearly state that the essence of wisdom is the fear of God, and the beginning of wisdom is to acknowledge whatsoever God has clearly set forth.

Acquiring knowledge and seeking wisdom are goals that every Bahá'í pursues according to his or her talents and capacities. The pursuit of knowledge in a scholarly way by its members brings numerous benefits to the Bahá'í community and provides the means for those who excel in a field of human endeavor to influence that field and infuse it with the light of Bahá'u'lláh's revelation. The Universal House of Justice has stated:

As the Bahá'í community grows, it will acquire experts in numerous fields—both by Bahá'ís becoming experts and by experts becoming Bahá'ís. As these experts bring their knowledge and skill to the service of the community and, even more, as they transform their various disciplines by bringing to bear upon them the light of the Divine Teachings, problem after problem now disrupting society will be answered.¹⁹

Bringing the light of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings to bear on a certain field is not a simple task. It cannot be achieved through mere criticism, nor through superficial appeals to spirituality, nor through embracing the propositions of pseudoscience. It calls for a rigorous study of the field in question, mastery of it, and then, from a position of knowledge, effort to influence its development.

In seeking to attain knowledge, understanding and wisdom, the individual should be cognizant of the characteristics that 'Abdu'l-Bahá attributes to those who are to be considered as truly learned. Certain passages from His treatise *The Secret of Divine Civilization* are especially significant in this respect. In them, 'Abdu'l-Bahá begins by asserting that for everything

God has created a sign and symbol, and established standards and tests by which it may be known. The spiritually learned must be characterized by both inward and outward perfections; they must possess a good character, an enlightened nature, a pure intent, as well as intellectual power, brilliance and discernment, intuition, discretion and foresight, temperance, reverence, and a heartfelt fear of God. For an unlit candle, however great in diameter and tall, is no better than a barren palm tree or a pile of dead wood.²⁰

'Abdu'l-Bahá then goes on to cite an authoritative tradition of Islam, which says: "As for him who is one of the learned: he must guard himself, defend his faith, oppose his passions and obey the commandments of his Lord."²¹

In His discourse on these various requirements that pertain to the truly learned, 'Abdu'l-Bahá addresses the first, guarding oneself, in these words:

It is obvious that this does not refer to protecting oneself from calamities and material tests, for the Prophets and saints were, each and every one, subjected to the bitterest afflictions that the world has to offer, and were targets for all the cruelties and aggressions of mankind. They sacrificed their lives for the welfare of the people, and with all their hearts they hastened to the place of their martyrdom; and with their inward and outward perfections they arrayed humanity in new garments of excellent qualities, both acquired and inborn. The primary meaning of this guarding of oneself is to acquire the attributes of spiritual and material perfection.²²

His comment on the second spiritual standard, namely, that the truly learned individual should be the defender of his faith, is this:

It is obvious that these holy words do not refer exclusively to searching out the implications of the Law, observing the forms of worship, avoiding greater and lesser sins, practicing the religious ordinances, and by all these methods, protecting the Faith. They mean rather that the whole population should be protected in every way; that every effort should be exerted to adopt a combination of all possible measures to raise up the Word of God, increase the number of believers, promote the Faith of God and exalt it and make it victorious over other religions.²³

As to the third requirement, that of opposing one's passions, 'Abdu'l-Bahá says:

How wonderful are the implications of this deceptively easy, all-inclusive phrase. This is the very foundation of every laudable human quality; indeed, these few words embody the light of the world, the impregnable basis of all the spiritual attributes of human beings. This is the balance wheel of all behavior, the means of keeping all man's good qualities in equilibrium.

For desire is a flame that has reduced to ashes uncounted lifetime harvests of the learned, a devouring fire that even the vast sea of their accumulated knowledge could never quench. How often has it happened that an individual who was graced with every attribute of humanity and wore the jewel of true understanding, nevertheless followed after his passions until his excellent qualities passed beyond moderation and he was forced into excess. His pure intentions changed to evil ones, his attributes were no longer put to uses worthy of them, and the power of his desires turned him aside from righteousness and its rewards into ways that were dangerous and dark. A good character is in the sight of God and His chosen ones and the possessors of insight, the most excellent and praiseworthy of all things, but always on condition that its center of emanation should be reason and knowledge and its base should be true moderation. Were the implications of this subject to be developed as they deserve the work would grow too long and our main theme would be lost to view.²⁴

Finally 'Abdu'l-Bahá refers to the fourth condition required of the learned, which is to be obedient to the commandments of their Lord, by saying:

It is certain that man's highest distinction is to be lowly before and obedient to his God; that his greatest glory, his most exalted rank and honor, depend on his close observance of the Divine commands and prohibitions. Religion is the light of the world, and the progress, achievement, and happiness of man result from obedience to the laws set down in the holy Books.²⁵

Other passages in the Bahá'í writings provide further insights into the characteristics of the learned. They state, for example, that the pursuit of knowledge should not lead to self-righteousness, which arises from an exaggerated regard for one's own self and should not be confused with the highly desirable quality of righteousness. In fact, righteousness requires the individual to measure him- or herself

scrupulously against the standards of the divine teachings and to exert every effort to overcome his or her shortcomings. As ‘Abdu’l-Bahá wrote:

It is my hope that you may consider this matter, that you may search out your own imperfections and not think of the imperfections of anybody else. Strive with all your power to be free from imperfections. Heedless souls are always seeking faults in others. What can the hypocrite know of others’ faults when he is blind to his own?²⁶

This injunction to measure one’s own behavior in the balance of the very high standards contained in the Bahá’í teachings goes hand in hand with the exhortation to show tolerance towards others. Bahá’u’lláh describes righteousness and tolerance as two qualities that need to complement each other:

The heaven of true understanding shineth resplendent with the light of two luminaries, tolerance and righteousness.

O my friend! Vast oceans lie enshrined within this brief saying. Blessed are they who appreciate its value, drink deep therefrom and grasp its meaning, and woe betide the heedless.²⁷

Regarding tolerance, Bahá’u’lláh has stated that one should not be too critical of “the sayings and writings of men” but should approach them in a spirit of open-mindedness and loving sympathy. A letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, the Guardian of the Bahá’í Faith, emphasizes the importance of tolerance in all aspects of community life:

The people of the world not only need the laws and principles of the Bahá’í Faith—they desperately need to see the love that is engendered by it in the hearts of its followers, and to partake of that atmosphere of tolerance, understanding, forbearance and active kindness which should be the hallmark of a Bahá’í community.²⁸

Another important issue that arises regarding knowledge and wisdom concerns the individual’s motivation to pursue knowledge and engage in scholarly activity. In one of His tablets ‘Abdu’l-Bahá observes:

Glory be to God! What an extraordinary situation now obtains, when no one, hearing a claim advanced, asks himself what the speaker’s real motive might be, and what selfish purpose he might not have hidden behind the mask of words. You find, for example, that an individual seeking to further his own petty and personal concerns, will block the advancement of an entire people. To turn his own water mill, he will let the farms and fields of all the others parch and wither. To maintain his own leadership, he will everlastingly direct the masses toward that prejudice and fanaticism which subvert the very base of civilization.²⁹

Motivation to pursue knowledge should not be the need to feel superior to others or the desire to advance oneself over others. Effort to distinguish oneself through deeds, words, and even through knowledge and wisdom is most praiseworthy, but there is another kind of distinction that should be avoided. Of it, Bahá’u’lláh wrote:

“Ever since the seeking of preference and distinction came into play, the world hath been laid waste. It has become desolate.”³⁰

We live in a time when dominant social theories assign great value to aggression and unbridled competition. Such theories go as far as to assert that competition is the only means through which excellence can be achieved and that it is inherent in the human condition. In contrast, Bahá’u’lláh says: “O Son of Dust! Verily I say unto thee: Of all men the most negligent is he that disputeth idly and seeketh to advance himself over his brother.”³¹

In another passage He writes: “It behoveth not, therefore, him who was created from dust, who will return unto it, and will again be brought forth out of it, to swell with pride before God, and before His loved ones, to proudly scorn them, and be filled with disdainful arrogance.”³² An indispensable quality of the learned is true humility, beginning with humility before God and leading to humility before His creatures, who are brought into being to reflect His names and attributes.

Although thirst for knowledge in itself should impel the individual to pursue knowledge, Bahá’ís can never separate their goals and desires from the central theme of their lives, which is service. Seeking knowledge, true understanding and wisdom is not, for them, a mere matter of personal satisfaction; it has a definite social purpose. As the Bahá’í writings state:

And the honor and distinction of the individual consist in this, that he among all the world’s multitudes should become a source of social good. Is any larger bounty conceivable than this, that an individual, looking within himself, should find that by the confirming grace of God he has become the cause of peace and well being, of happiness and advantage to his fellow men? No, by the one true God, there is no greater bliss, no more complete delight.³³

An essential quality of the learned, then, is generosity of the soul, for without it, knowledge becomes a tool for control and even oppression.

Conclusion

The fundamental challenge before humanity at this stage in its development is the creation of a civilization in which all peoples and cultures can participate—a civilization that represents a fusion of the material and spiritual imperatives of life. In this endeavor, both individuals and communities have vital roles to play. The scale at which knowledge must be generated and applied if humanity is to be ushered into an age of true prosperity calls for society to develop the means for all its members to have access to knowledge. In this way, everyone can become meaningfully engaged in applying knowledge to create well-being. Recognizing that religion and science, as two interacting knowledge systems and two complementary sources evolving with human society itself, constitute the main forces that impel social progress, the Bahá’í worldview envisions a moderate approach, acceptable to both religion and science, in which the generation and application of knowledge form the central axis around which other processes of society are organized. Through such means all can contribute, according to their capacities, to the progress of knowledge and to “an ever-advancing civilization.”

Notes

1. *The Secret of Divine Civilization* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1994), 71–72.
2. *The Promulgation of Universal Peace: Talks Delivered by 'Abdu'l-Bahá during His Visit to the United States and Canada in 1912* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982), 140.
3. *Ibid.*, 49.
4. *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1994), 195.
5. *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas: The Most Holy Book* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1993), 56–57.
6. *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, 63.
7. *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1997), 116.
8. *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, 142.
9. *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, 116.
10. *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1994), 51.
11. From a Tablet of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, cited in the compilation *Excellence in All Things* (London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1989), #24: 8.
12. *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, 194.
13. *Paris Talks: Addresses given by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in Paris in 1911* (London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1995), 32.
14. *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, 90.
15. *Ibid.*, 90.
16. *The Kitáb-i-Iqán* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1989), 61.
17. *Ibid.*, 3.
18. *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, 281–82.
19. From a letter dated 21 August 1977, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual, cited in *Messages from the Universal House of Justice 1963–1986* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1996), 369.
20. *The Secret of Divine Civilization*, 33–34.
21. *Ibid.*, 34.
22. *Ibid.*, 34–35.
23. *Ibid.*, 41.
24. *Ibid.*, 59–60.
25. *Ibid.*, 71.
26. *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, 244.
27. *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, 169–70.
28. From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, 5 December 1942 (unpublished).
29. *The Secret of Divine Civilization*, 103–04.
30. From an unpublished Tablet of Bahá'u'lláh, quoted in a letter from the Universal House of Justice to all National Spiritual Assemblies, dated 27 March 1978, cited in the compilation, *The Continental Boards of Counsellors* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1981), 59–60.
31. *The Hidden Words* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1981), 23–24.
32. *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, 231.
33. *The Secret of Divine Civilization*, 2–3.