

# Even as the Waves of One Sea: Bahá'í Consultation's Implicit Cultural Support for the Clash of Differing Opinions<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

A 1922 letter from Shoghi Effendi implies cultural dynamics which support Bahá'í consultation's desired but precarious "clash of differing opinions." First, it implicitly establishes the expectation that a swell of apparent disagreement will like-

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ly precede an emergent collective understanding, and that it is not, instead, a sign of failure. Second, it sets an ethos which accommodates errors, fostering growth and broad participation. Third, the prayer to open Assembly meetings that is included in the letter may generate a moral mood and motivation, orienting participants to build a unity within diversity strong enough to contain the possible tumult of clashing opinions. As these features are internalized by and motivate consultors, they can support the group's ability to achieve the volatile but effective and transformative clash of differing opinions while protecting the unity of the group.

## Résumé

Une lettre écrite par Shoghi Effendi en 1922 implique une dynamique culturelle qui permet le « heurt des opinions diverses », souhaité mais éphémère, de la consultation bahá'íe. Premièrement, la lettre établit implicitement l'attente selon laquelle une série de désaccords apparents précédera vraisemblablement l'émergence d'une compréhension collective, et qu'il ne s'agit pas d'un signe d'échec, bien au contraire. Deuxièmement, elle établit une culture qui accepte les erreurs, ce qui favorise la croissance et une large participation. Troisièmement, la prière à lire en début de réunion, qui était incluse dans la lettre, peut favoriser un état d'esprit et une motivation qui incitent les participants à réaliser une unité dans la diversité qui soit suffisamment forte pour contenir le tumulte éventuel d'opinions divergentes. Lorsqu'ils sont intériorisés et motivent les participants, ces éléments peuvent soutenir la capacité du groupe à surmonter le choc périlleux, mais efficace et transformateur, des opinions divergentes tout en protégeant l'unité du groupe.

*Resumen*

Una carta de Shoghi Effendi de 1922 implica dinámicas culturales que apoyan el deseado pero precario “choque de opiniones diferentes” de la consulta Bahá'í. Primero, implícitamente establece la expectativa que el aumento de un aparente desacuerdo probablemente precederá un entendimiento colectivo emergente, y que no es, en su lugar, una señal de fracaso. En segundo lugar, establece un ethos que acomoda errores, estimulando el crecimiento y una amplia participación. En tercer lugar, la oración para iniciar la reunión de Asamblea que está incluida en la carta, puede generar estado de ánimo moral y una motivación que orienta a los participantes a construir una unidad en diversidad suficientemente fuerte como para contener el posible tumulto de las opiniones chocantes. A medida que estas características se internalizan y motivan a los que consultan, pueden apoyar la habilidad del grupo para lograr el volátil pero efectivo y transformador choque de opiniones diferentes mientras que protegen la unidad del grupo.

## INTRODUCTION

This paper explores a single letter from Shoghi Effendi to the American Bahá'ís, dated 5 March 1922.<sup>2</sup> Just three months before that date, Shoghi Effendi had learned upon opening 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Will and Testament that he had been unexpectedly appointed to head the Bahá'í Faith. Bereaved and shocked by the “grievous event and

great calamity” of the sudden loss of his beloved grandfather, and exhausted from the month it took for him to travel home from his studies in Europe, the youthful Shoghi Effendi was further blindsided by the contents of the will addressed to him alone (*Bahá'í Administration* 25). Buffeting tests and trials followed in quick succession, as the absence of 'Abdu'l-Bahá opened the door to rebellious turmoil in the three large Bahá'í communities at the time—the Holy Land, the United States, and Persia—threatening loss of control over the Shrine of Bahá'u'lláh as well as fraying support for the Covenant (Rabbani 16–19). Shoghi Effendi was, in his own telling, “so stricken with grief and pain and so entangled in the troubles (created) by the enemies of the Cause of God” that he felt he needed a health-restoring break in order to “[fulfill his] important and sacred duties” (*Bahá'í Administration* 25). By early April 1922, Shoghi Effendi had retreated for an eight-month respite, consulting German doctors and hiking meditatively in the Swiss Alps, having temporarily reassigned his leadership duties to his great-aunt and steadfast mentor Bahíyyih Khanum (Rabbani 20).

Announcing Shoghi Effendi's departure and the arrangements he had made for his absence, Bahíyyih Khanum stated on April 8 that, as Rúhíyyih Khanum characterizes it, “the Bahá'í world must from now on be linked through the Spiritual Assemblies and local questions must be referred to them” (Rabbani 19). Bahíyyih Khanum's

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2 See extensive excerpts in the section titled “Shoghi Effendi's March 1922 Letter.”

message echoed a theme established in the Guardian's March 5 letter, sent just one month before his departure. In this letter, he declares that the passing of 'Abdu'l-Bahá signaled an "Hour of Transition": Bahá'í communities would need to elect more Assemblies, and those Assemblies would need to develop the relevant understanding and skills to take on some of the leadership work that 'Abdu'l-Bahá had been handling individually.<sup>3</sup>

What guidance did Shoghi Effendi convey to the American Bahá'ís to assist them in these tasks, just before removing himself for nearly a year from close contact with them?

Shoghi Effendi devotes over a third of the letter to encouraging Assemblies

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3 Directly following Shoghi Effendi's decision to build up the Assemblies throughout the world as the foundation for the eventual election of the Universal House of Justice, "he began a programme of education of the believers in the art of Bahá'í administration" (Taherzadeh 300), of which this letter was clearly a part. He also directed the American Bahá'í community's Executive Board of Bahá'í Temple Unity, which had served for twenty-three years as the community's national body, to disband in order for the community to elect in its stead a National Spiritual Assembly; the Bahá'ís of the United States immediately held such an election, at the 22-26 April 1922 annual convention (Gregory 93). The new Assembly and its methods of election continued to evolve, achieving recognition by Shoghi Effendi as a correctly-formed National Spiritual Assembly in 1925 (Cameron and Momen 220).

to engage in consultation. He cites Bahá'u'lláh's admonition in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* that "[i]t is incumbent upon [the Assembly members] to take counsel together" (qtd. in *Principles* 21), and quotes extensively from 'Abdu'l-Bahá on this theme as well (17–24).

The letter builds a solid framework for consultation as a method, including girders such as humility, courtesy, and the prioritization of unity, nonpartisan detachment, universal participation, full support for the collective decision, and majority rule if unanimity is not reached. The letter, I argue, also contains a parallel, more implicit stratum of guidance—implicit in that it subtly nurtures certain expectations, sensitivities, dispositions, motives, and moods. In so doing, the guidance shapes the culture surrounding the method of consultation, a culture which in turn unleashes consultation's full potential by enabling the consultors to use whatever diversity they bring to the table to generate transformative understandings and decisions.

#### METHODS TO STUDY THE POTENTIAL OF BAHÁ'Í CONSULTATION

Contributing to my analysis of the letter's culture-shaping will be observations of consultation in practice, based on my nearly forty years of experience participating in Bahá'í consultation in various formal and informal settings, routine and ad-hoc circumstances, and geographic locales,<sup>4</sup> including over

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4 Mainly in the United States, but also in several indigenous, Ngäbe

thirty years of grateful experience serving on Local Spiritual Assemblies in California. This provides some non-systematic but broad and deep participant observation data on existing practices, drawn from participation in various relatively skilled and unskilled applications of consultation, as well as from experience with instances in which the method of consultation lapsed.

This paper's main focus, however, is Bahá'í consultation's potentiality—a still inchoate phenomenon—rather than its current practice. This potentiality does not correspond to a set of well-developed cultural practices that can presently be observed, but rather to a constellation of practices described in the Bahá'í writings. This focus on potentiality aligns with the Bahá'í community's general recognition of its need to evolve and learn about consultation, which, like other Bahá'í practices, is understood as an ideal that is as yet only partially-realized (Lample, *Revelation* 151). Most Bahá'ís recognize that consultation's potential will be uncovered not through quick study but through generations of active learning.<sup>5</sup> As such, while informed by my participation in consultation's embryonic form, this paper's primary contribution is an exegesis of important texts guiding the practice of Bahá'í consultation.

Our understanding of Shoghi Effendi's letter is shaped by guidelines in the Bahá'í writings and guidance on how they are to be read. These hermeneutics not only address how scholars can discern the intended meaning (Arbab 158), but also shed light on the path Bahá'í communities are likely to follow as they continue to gain understanding of the guidance on consultation, allowing us to envision more accurately consultation's potential development as a practice. This paper seeks both to give due attention to the historical context of Shoghi Effendi's letter in order to better understand his intent (May 47–48), and to explore how the letter puts forward universal principles untethered to the time and place in which they were composed (Lample, *Revelation* 42–43). I draw on the authoritative writings and guidance of the Bahá'í Faith to shape my interpretation of the letter, seeing the complete body of writings as ultimately coherent (38). Mindful of Bahá'u'lláh's statement that the Writings often contain both an outward meaning and an inward meaning, and that “the truly learned” “understandeth the inward meaning in the light of the outward meaning” (qtd. in Lample, *Revelation* 39; Fananapazir and Fazel), I explore both explicit and implicit layers in Shoghi Effendi's guidance on consultation. I present this analysis with humility in the face of the inexhaustible meanings of the Bahá'í writings (39), and with an expectation that our understanding will continue to develop (39–41) as scholars plumb the further depths of the Revelation, and as

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communities of Panama (White).

5 For a description of the mode of learning characterizing the global Bahá'í community, see papers by Friberg and by Smith in this issue.

the community's experience with consultation grows.

Finally, and fundamentally, this paper seeks to engage "a progressive interaction between the truths and principles of religion and the discoveries and insights of scientific inquiry" (Universal House of Justice, 19 May 1995). I aim to unravel layers of the text, examining it through the light of science and reason while, of course, guarding against shoehorning the Bahá'í writings into an alien, distorting model (Lample, *Revelation* 41–42).

Anthropological social science provides the scientific partner in this instance of "progressive interaction." The Universal House of Justice has been explicitly and increasingly mentioning the development and evolution of a Bahá'í culture for at least two decades.<sup>6</sup> What better disciplinary lens through which to explore Bahá'í culture's potentialities than that of anthropology, the field that has centered the culture concept for the last 150 years? Thus, the paper's exegesis uses anthropological methods and insights to delve into implied potential elements in the letter, looking to uncover the cultural ideals woven within. The anthropologically-informed framework guiding this analysis begins with a view of culture as including naturalized and semi- to sub-conscious ideas, patterns of emotion and motivation, and relationship norms, all of which may vary by ethnic

group but also by other kinds of groups such as class (as suggested by Lareau), profession (see, for example, Latour), and, notably, religion.

Seeing culture as an integral dimension of any religion's unique contribution aligns well with the Bahá'í concept of progressive revelation, which holds that the world's religions share their fundamental values and that their variations reflect the needs of the era in which they were revealed (T. Smith, "Interplay" 22). From an anthropological perspective, each religion fosters a distinctive assemblage of moods, motivations, and worldviews among its practicing adherents, and, in turn, shapes in its practitioners what is perceived, how that is interpreted, and even how intensely the religion is used to interpret the world (Geertz 122). How might the guidance on, and practice of, Bahá'í consultation foster and transform the implicit and semi-conscious dimensions of its participants' intellectual, emotional, motivational, and relational understandings and dispositions? And might these cultural shifts work together to enhance consultation as a method of reading reality and making decisions?

#### AN OVERVIEW OF THE PAPER

Using various anthropological theories as lenses through which to read Shoghi Effendi's letter, we can discern three implicit, interlocking, culture-changing elements. First, we see a key expectation about the *rhythm* of the consultation meeting; second, an *ethos* of

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Universal House of Justice, *Message to the Bahá'ís of the World* dated Ridván 2000, and letter dated 28 November 2023.

*unity and difference* which engages and trains participants' skills but also accommodates their mistakes; and, third, a *method of initiating* the meeting that gently orients participants to both moral responsibility and an openness to the collective creation of an enabling unity. I argue that not only is there a particular set of cultural ideals implicit in the letter, but that these elements generate cultural supports for one of consultation's key capabilities—unlocking the powers of diversity.

The first and second examples explore the importance of uncovering diversity within the consultation meeting, in order to achieve better attunement to reality (Smith and Karlberg 77–81, 86–90; see also Smith, this issue), to come to a unity of thought, and to make better decisions. Diversity's powers, I argue in Example 1, emerge from a distinct phase of the consultation meeting, the clash of differing opinions. I deploy anthropological insights on the imagination of the future to help read the text, finding an implied trajectory in the rhythm of the consultation meeting.

In Example 2, I argue that while the clash of differing opinions can ultimately enable unity of thought and purpose, it risks generating counterproductive disunity among the consultors along the way. However, I argue that built into the guidance on consultation is a complex dialectic of unity with diversity, which moderates this risk. Further, and key to consultation's feasibility, I argue that this nuanced mitigation of risk is nevertheless compatible with its imperfect execution. I draw on Linda

Garro's dynamic concept of "enacting ethos" to find that Shoghi Effendi's guidance expects and accommodates mistakes in enacting the ethos of unity's interplay with diversity.

In Example 3, I combine literary analysis with anthropological observations in a study of the Assembly opening prayer. I argue that the prayer's shifts in tone, metaphorical language, and rite-of-passage-like tripartite structure have the potential to generate a certain kind of emotional, intellectual, and moral experience that facilitates the internalization of the prayer's message. This final section draws not only on the anthropology of rites of passage, but Clifford Geertz on religion and Jason Throop on "moral moods." The prayer, I claim, has the potential to empower not only the messages contained within it, but both the explicit and implicit outlooks in the rest of the guidance on consultation; it can generate within the participants a yearning for and openness to new understandings and practices, a spiritualized foundation for increasing willingness to experiment and to be transformed. The opening prayer thus complements diversity's high potential for conflict as well as for growth and transformation; it generates a longing for unity that wraps the prickly clash of differing opinions in an envelope of absolute love and unity.

SHOGHI EFFENDI'S  
MARCH 1922 LETTER

It is worth briefly setting out the context, and some of the key content, of

Shoghi Effendi's letter, before embarking on the exegetical analysis at the core of the paper. Under the extreme circumstances that marked the beginning of his ministry, Shoghi Effendi framed and compiled a touchstone collection of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's guidance on consultation. These passages from 'Abdu'l-Bahá provide centerpieces of guidance on consultation in materials widely used throughout the Bahá'í world in the century since the letter was penned—from every volume of *The Bahá'í World* (1925-1992), to the constantly updated United States community's *Guidance for Local Assemblies*, and from the Bahá'í World Centre's web entry on "The Local Spiritual Assembly" to the Ruhi Institute's unit on consultation (Ruhi Institute 7, 11).<sup>7</sup>

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7 Surveying English-language materials alone, we see paragraphs 11 and 12 of the letter in particular being reproduced, especially in discussions of consultation in Assemblies. In addition to the materials already mentioned, these include the 1970 compilation (updated 2017) on the Local Spiritual Assembly and the 1990 compilation on consultation from the World Centre (*Consultation*), the well-known introduction to the Faith, *Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era* (Esslemont), originally published in 1923 and updated with new editions through 2006, and other presentations of the Faith (including, for instance, Bahá'í International Community, *Consultation and the Protection of Diversity*). The Assembly opening prayer (¶8) is also reproduced in prayer books, categorized under "Spiritual Assembly" (see, *Bahá'í Prayers* 300–301). The original quotes from which Shoghi Effendi drew are in *Selections from*

Emphasizing "the vital necessity of having a local Spiritual Assembly in every locality" where there are sufficient adult Bahá'ís (nine) to hold an election, Shoghi Effendi directs the reader's attention to "[a] perusal of some of the words of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá on the duties and functions of the Spiritual Assemblies" (*Bahá'í Administration* ¶¶ 6, 7). The italicized sentences in the following paragraphs are all text written by 'Abdu'l-Bahá:

Addressing the members of the Spiritual Assembly in Chicago, the Master reveals the following:—"Whenever ye enter the council-chamber, recite this prayer with a heart throbbing with the love of God and a tongue purified from all but His remembrance, that the All-Powerful may graciously aid you to achieve supreme victory. O God, my God! We are servants of Thine that have turned with devotion to Thy Holy Face, that have detached ourselves from all besides Thee in this glorious Day. We have gathered in this Spiritual Assembly, united in our views and thoughts, with our purposes harmonized to exalt Thy Word amidst mankind. O Lord, our God! Make us the signs of Thy

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*the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*. The letter was published in its entirety for American Bahá'ís to read immediately in May 1922 (*Star of the West*, vol. 13, no. 4, 1922, pp. 83–88), as well as being republished in *The Bahá'í World* many times.

*Divine Guidance, the Standards of Thine exalted Faith amongst men, servants to Thy mighty Covenant, O Thou our Lord Most High, manifestations of Thy Divine Unity in Thine Abhá Kingdom, and resplendent stars shining upon all regions. Lord! Aid us to become seas surging with the billows of Thy wondrous Grace, streams flowing from Thine all-glorious Heights, goodly fruits upon the Tree of Thy heavenly Cause, trees waving through the breezes of Thy Bounty in Thy celestial Vineyard. O God! Make our souls dependent upon the Verses of Thy Divine Unity, our hearts cheered with the outpourings of Thy Grace, that we may unite even as the waves of one sea and become merged together as the rays of Thine effulgent Light; that our thoughts, our views, our feelings may become as one reality, manifesting the spirit of union throughout the world. Thou art the Gracious, the Bountiful, the Bestower, the Almighty, the Merciful, the Compassionate.”* (¶ 8)<sup>8</sup>

*“The prime requisites for them that take counsel together are*

*purity of motive, radiance of spirit, detachment from all else save God, attraction to His Divine Fragrances, humility and lowliness amongst His loved ones, patience and long-suffering in difficulties and servitude to His exalted Threshold. Should they be graciously aided to acquire these attributes, victory from the unseen Kingdom of Bahá shall be vouchsafed to them.”* “In this day, assemblies of consultation are of the greatest importance and a vital necessity. Obedience unto them is essential and obligatory. The members thereof must take counsel together in such wise that no occasion for ill-feeling or discord may arise. This can be attained when every member expresseth with absolute freedom his own opinion and setteth forth his argument. Should any one oppose, he must on no account feel hurt for not until matters are fully discussed can the right way be revealed. The shining spark of truth cometh forth only after the clash of differing opinions. If after discussion, a decision be carried unanimously, well and good; but if, the Lord forbid, differences of opinion should arise, a majority of voices must prevail.” (¶ 11)

Enumerating the obligations incumbent upon the members of consulting councils, the Beloved reveals the following:—*“The first condition is absolute love and harmony amongst the members of*

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8 Note that there are seven slight differences in capitalization and grammar between how this prayer originally appeared in *Bahá'í Administration* and its form in more recent publications (*Bahá'í Prayers* 300–301). This is the most recent version, inserted after the original introduction from Shoghi Effendi's letter in *Bahá'í Administration* (20).

*the assembly. They must be wholly free from estrangement and must manifest in themselves the Unity of God, for they are the waves of one sea, the drops of one river; the stars of one heaven, the rays of one sun, the trees of one orchard, the flowers of one garden. Should harmony of thought and absolute unity be nonexistent, that gathering shall be dispersed and that assembly be brought to naught. The second condition: . . . They must when coming together turn their faces to the Kingdom on high and ask aid from the Realm of Glory. They must then proceed with the utmost devotion, courtesy, dignity, care and moderation to express their views. They must in every matter search out the truth and not insist upon their own opinion, for stubbornness and persistence in one's views will lead ultimately to discord and wrangling and the truth will remain hidden. The honored members must with all freedom express their own thoughts, and it is in no wise permissible for one to belittle the thought of another; nay, he must with moderation set forth the truth, and should differences of opinion arise a majority of voices must prevail, and all must obey and submit to the majority. It is again not permitted that any one of the honored members object to or censure, whether in or out of the meeting, any decision arrived at previously, though that decision be not right, for such criticism*

*would prevent any decision from being enforced. In short, whatsoever thing is arranged in harmony and with love and purity of motive, its result is light, and should the least trace of estrangement prevail the result shall be darkness upon darkness. . . . If this be so regarded, that assembly shall be of God, but otherwise it shall lead to coolness and alienation that proceed from the Evil One. Discussions must all be confined to spiritual matters that pertain to the training of souls, the instruction of children, the relief of the poor, the help of the feeble throughout all classes in the world, kindness to all peoples, the diffusion of the fragrances of God and the exaltation of His Holy Word. Should they endeavor to fulfill these conditions the Grace of the Holy Spirit shall be vouchsafed unto them, and that assembly shall become the center of the Divine blessings, the hosts of Divine confirmation shall come to their aid, and they shall day by day receive a new effusion of Spirit." (§ 12)<sup>9</sup>*

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9 The ellipses in paragraph 12 are found in the original letter: two sentences were omitted by Shoghi Effendi, one pertaining to the chairperson's role, and one indicating that by-laws and guidelines were to be laid down by the Assembly. Two spelling changes have since been made in the official translation of paragraph 12, and are reflected here: "non-existent" is now "nonexistent," and "Kingdom on High" is now "Kingdom on high." The

BAHÁ'Í CONSULTATION AND THE  
CLASH OF DIFFERING OPINIONS

Bahá'í consultation is a method of collective understanding and decision-making (Smith and Ghaemmaghami 8–9; Lample, *Revelation* 127–48). Bahá'u'lláh writes that “consultation is the lamp of guidance which leadeth the way, and is the bestower of understanding” (“Lawḥ-i-Maqṣúd” ¶ 15). The Universal House of Justice centers consultation in the learning mode that Bahá'í communities are to engage in, which involves repeating cycles of study, consultation, action, and reflection (see, for instance, its letter dated 28 November 2023 ¶ 14). Consultation is not only a dedicated step in the cycle, but is also often integral to reflection and study.

Consultation aims to generate unity of thought and action within a group (Lample, *Revelation* 25), harnessing participants' diverse perspectives to sharpen understanding of reality (Smith and Ghaemmaghami 16–19). Many elements come together to achieve this aim.<sup>10</sup> As we can readily discern from Shoghi Effendi's letter, Bahá'í consultation promotes and protects universal participation within

a group (Smith and Ghaemmaghami 17; Ruhi Institute 30) and calls for participants' most virtuous selves. Virtues that promote interpersonal unity, such as tact, courtesy, and humility, are particularly stressed (Smith and Ghaemmaghami 13–14). Allied with its truth-seeking purpose, Bahá'í consultation calls for pure intentions and detachment from one's own ideas, with an openness to the opinions of others as a potential corrective to one's own (Karlberg 141, 144; Smith and Ghaemmaghami 17–18).

A propensity to use consultation has long been a pivotal element in the evolution of Bahá'í culture, both as a feature within avowed Bahá'í communities and more broadly in Bahá'í-influenced efforts (Universal House of Justice, 30 Dec. 2021 ¶ 4; Lample, *Revelation* 109, 181). “Populations increasingly adopt the method of consultation, action, and reflection,” the House of Justice notes, “to displace endless contest and conflict” (Universal House of Justice, 28 Nov. 23 ¶ 88). Consultation carries the potential to shift institutions away from adversarial discourses and decision-making (Karlberg 123–76) and could be used to foster justice in communities (Lample, *Revelation* 215). Adopting consultation does not simply amount to replacing conflictual methods with a harmonious one; scholarship on consultation highlights how distinct assumptions and attitudes built into consultation may challenge the prevalent culture of its participants. Consultation prioritizes

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sentence beginning “Discussions” is omitted in the newer version, but is included here (‘Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections* no. 45).

10 *Ruhi Book 10* cogently lists the principles which are patently part of Bahá'í consultation; most of these are derived directly from these ‘Abdu'l-Bahá quotes in Shoghi Effendi's March 5 letter (Ruhi Institute 41).

building unity through kindness and love (Smith and Ghaemmaghami 13–14), values universal participation across any range of diverse characteristics (Smith and Ghaemmaghami 9), and prizes purifying expression from partisanship or machinations (Lample, *Revelation* 199). These features of consultation facilitate a pragmatic expression of an underlying philosophical position: that any individual perspective holds, at best, only relative, not absolute truth (Smith and Ghaemmaghami 12; Lample, *Revelation* 35, 185; Karlberg 141; see Elvira Espinosa, forthcoming), and that “diverse perspectives . . . can be complementary” (Smith and Karlberg 70). This implies that consultation can provide a mechanism for the mutual improvement of thinking (see Elvira Espinosa, forthcoming; Smith, this issue; Smith and Ghaemmaghami 4–5), in addition to being a profound tool for the investigation of reality (Lample, *Revelation* 24; Smith and Ghaemmaghami 16–19).

Consultation can be applied to many purposes—including problem solving, decision making, and investigation of reality—and among many kinds of groups, including all combinations of individual, community, and institution. Examples of consultation use include an individual solving their problems with the help of friends, family members attempting to resolve conflicts, stakeholders in a business striving to better read the reality of the enterprise’s impact

on the community, a Local Spiritual Assembly turning to the community at the Nineteen Day Feast to help guide its planning (Ruhi Institute 23–27; Kolstoe 68–80), and taking counsel together to foster common understanding in a community to inform decision-making by an authority (Office of Social and Economic Development n.p.).<sup>11</sup> Differing settings, participants, and levels of formality will call forth appropriate adjustments to the character of any consultation meeting (Smith and Ghaemmaghami 11).

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11 There are significant numbers of practitioners of Bahá’í consultation around the world, since it is a central, emphasized practice for a religion whose members number around eight million (P. Smith 509). The Universal House of Justice practices consultation, as do the 192 National Spiritual Assemblies, Regional Bahá’í Councils in fifty-nine nations, and around 6,000 Local Spiritual Assemblies; additionally all these institutions’ auxiliary institutions and committees—including the 300 or so worldwide Bahá’í training institutes with tens of thousands of activities around the world (P. Smith 510)—function consultatively. Several Bahá’í-inspired projects, such as Fundación para la Aplicación y Enseñanza de la Ciencia (FUNDAEC) (Lample, *Revelation* 138–39), rely on Bahá’í consultation. Consultation’s fitness is to some extent evidenced by this robust use. Nevertheless, the number of Bahá’ís in proportion to their respective societies remains small enough that the potential for Bahá’í consultation to shape any given society—for example, affecting its institutions or general culture—is still limited.

Although Shoghi Effendi's letter obviously has implications for all kinds of consultation, it targets the use of consultation within Bahá'í Spiritual Assemblies, the elected governing bodies of the Bahá'í Faith at the local, regional, and national levels. Assemblies' individual members cannot act alone as institutional representatives, making the consultative process for collective decision making of vital importance. Consultation within an Assembly is confidential, with decisions conveyed after agreement has been reached, whether by consensus (the ideal) or majority rule (an option). Assemblies set goals for the community's efforts towards collective service and community building, as well as tending to individual or family needs such as marriages and divorces, and so they usually operate under urgent pressure to decide and act. Because Assemblies are elected to serve for a year, the same nine members consult on a regular basis, enabling a cycle of learning as well as promoting familiarity among the members. Because they have been elected, they are not a self-selected group coming together because of shared interests; Bahá'í consultation in Assemblies may need to transform a somewhat random collection of people into a harmonious orchestra, able to improve understandings of reality, generate tentative decisions, and ultimately learn to change the community.

THE CLASH OF  
DIFFERING OPINIONS AND  
TRANSFORMATIVE INTERROGATION

The diversity of the participants generates both the challenge of the consultation meeting and its strength. "The shining spark of truth cometh forth only after the clash of differing opinions" 'Abdu'l-Bahá asserts (qtd. in Shoghi Effendi ¶ 11), highlighting the important function of diversity in Bahá'í consultation. Philosophical insights into how science leverages diversity can enhance our understanding of how differences, properly engaged in consultation, can generate such shining sparks of truth.

As Friberg explains in his article in this issue, the best chance scientists have of getting to a more accurate truth lies in engaging a collectivity of diverse people. Feminist philosophers of science (as well as many social scientists) point out how diverse scientific communities of collective work and critique craft more accurate, collective investigations of reality than do less diverse networks (Steel et al. 779–80). Scientists' backgrounds and standpoints shape all manner of scientific decisions—from what counts as evidence, to whether topics of investigation are selected that are relevant to all members of a society—and outcomes—such as whether research sheds light on hidden power structures or obscures them (Crasnow). Since investigators' societal positions and life experiences impact how they conduct science, diverse scientists can uncover

and correct each other's self-hidden biases and assumptions (Harding 136–62; Longino; Oreskes 49–59; see also Smith, this issue; Elvira Espinosa, forthcoming).<sup>12</sup>

This truth-revealing magic arises not merely from a diverse group of people sitting quietly in the (figurative or literal) room but, as Longino puts it, “through the clashing and meshing of a variety of points of view” (69). Diverse people must be present, not only speaking up but being heard. Their diversity thereby transforms the conversation and the collective thinking as participants correct each other's blind spots. Longino calls this necessary dynamic “transformative criticism” or “transformative interrogation” (Longino 72–79). Bahá'í consultation likewise ties effective and accurate collective thinking not simply to the gathering of a diverse group, but also to a transformative process that unlocks diversity's powers. ‘Abdu'l-Bahá's simple

statement confirms that the emergence of the “spark of truth” requires both a wide diversity of “differing opinions” and their finding a way to “clash”—a transformative interrogation.

While Longino's concept of transformative interrogation overlaps with the “clash of differing opinions,” Bahá'í consultation's requirements go well beyond what Longino covers.<sup>13</sup> This is partly a difference of focus: many scientific disciplines emphasize the pursuit of the understanding of reality over its application in technology or policy, whereas a Bahá'í Assembly typically emphasizes actions, as experimental solutions to problems, over epistemological questions.<sup>14</sup> In addition, science is shaped by professional concerns and the high investment required for certification as a participant in a given scientific discussion (through a PhD, certain kinds of jobs, grants, publications, etc.), whereas participants in Bahá'í consultation are almost exclusively volunteers. As Bahá'í Assembly culture develops, more attention should undoubtedly be paid to questions in the philosophy of science that bear on the

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12 While there are debates around what counts as diversity or what counts as useful diversity (Steel et al.; Crasnow; Harding), as well as around the degree to which knowledge and perspective are situated (Wylie; Haraway), and the degree to which any objectivity can be achieved, some kind of commitment to the value of diverse participation in science is widely defended and reflected in the feminist philosophy of science (Haraway; Crasnow). Diversity as an important institutional goal is also widely embraced by scholars and policymakers, as can be seen in academic policy such as in Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion goals and IRB requirements.

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13 See Friberg's paper in this issue for a more detailed comparison between science and Bahá'í consultation as a method.

14 Ultimately, of course, understandings and beliefs about reality inextricably link with action in both science and Assembly meetings: scientific knowledge is applied to actions such as experimentation and applied science, and Assemblies must base their decisions about action on their reading of reality.

consultative reading of reality, such as how to frame issues, how to designate relevant facts, how to unearth background assumptions, which forms of logic and reason are appropriate, and how to plan and evaluate experimental action (See also Friberg; T. Smith, "Learning in Action"; Elvira Espinosa, forthcoming; Arbab 158; Smith and Karlberg).

While there are what Bahá'ís would call spiritual virtues embedded in the culture of science, such as a devotion to learning and to truth, responsiveness to empirical evidence, and humility (Oreskes 68; McIntyre 47–63), perhaps what most distinguishes Bahá'í consultation from current practices or ideals of professional science is the integration of a particular constellation of spiritual concepts, including those pertaining to certain virtues and practices, the nature and formation of the institution of the Bahá'í Assembly, the prioritization of unity as a value, and reverence towards God and the Bahá'í scriptures; these are discussed in later sections.

Despite these differences, Longino's insights into transformative interrogation can be applied both to improving collective understanding, which she addresses thoroughly, and to collective decision-making, which she mostly does not. By centering the concept of transformation, she highlights how, ideally, a scientific network should bring diverse opinions and perspectives into such close critical contact that the resultant collective understandings are progressively purified of flaws. Seen

in this light, consultation's clash of differing opinions also implies transformation, and the sparks it throws off can potentially include wholly new, emergent understandings or decisions that do not depend on the individual thinking of the participants but emerge instead from the process.

Furthermore, it is not only the *ideas* being considered by the group that must come under the influence of the transformative power of this clashing diversity. Even the *procedures* used to interrogate the ideas are to be subjected to the group's transformative insight. As Longino writes,

The maintenance of dialogue is itself a social process and can be more or less fully realized. . . . A method of inquiry is objective to the degree that it permits transformative criticism. Its objectivity consists not just in the inclusion of intersubjective criticism but in the degree to which *both its procedures and its results* are responsive to the kinds of criticism described (76, emphasis added).

It is in this dual sense, then, that the clash of differing opinions can be considered transformative: through it, diverse views progressively shape not only the ideas under scrutiny but how the process unfolds.

While welcoming the transformative clash of differing opinions, we must be attentive to the relationships among the participants. How can we maintain the quality of group

interaction, reveal and employ latent diversity, cultivate transformation through clashing opinions and their resolution, and still nurture the ability of the group to create and get behind an emergent unity of thought and purpose at the end? In short, how can we harness the power of diversity without splintering the group?

Bahá'í guidance, as I argue through the three examples below, fosters cultural elements that attend to the social requirements of sustaining such a volatile interaction without causing group-breaking stress. Using various anthropological theories, we can discern implicit guidance in the selected quotes from 'Abdu'l-Bahá that not only uncovers the crucial role that the clash of differing opinions plays, but also guides the consultors to appropriately nurture its powers and contain its dangers.

#### EXAMPLE 1.

##### A SWELL OF DISAGREEMENT BEFORE AGREEMENT: AN EXPECTED TRAJECTORY OF CONSULTATION

*This sea had laid up  
lustrous pearls in store;  
The wind hath raised a wave  
that casteth them ashore.*

—Bahá'u'lláh  
(*Gems of Divine Mysteries* 32)

Our orientation toward the future shapes how we experience the present; thus, what we hope, anticipate, or expect will happen in a consultation meeting impacts how we experience that

meeting.<sup>15</sup> I argue here that the Bahá'í guidance on consultation implicitly sets an expectation for sequenced patterns of agreement and disagreement within the consultation meeting. An expectation is an orientation toward the future that establishes what is considered normal and, by extension, what is or is not surprising. Expectations determine “a standard for evaluation, for saying whether outcomes are good or bad, desirable or undesirable, according to those standards” (Bryant and Knight 63). In this example, we will examine how the guidance implies a certain expectation that consultation will occur in three phases, a trajectory which may challenge and shift various cultural assumptions about collective decision making.

Shoghi Effendi's letter sets up an implicit expectation that before a consulting group agrees on a decision, participants will likely first experience a swell of disagreement. This implied trajectory is embedded in the statement noted above—“The shining spark of truth cometh forth only after the clash of differing opinions” (¶ 11)—which suggests that the consultation will likely progress through three broad stages: from an initial state of some level of perceived unity or disunity, through a period of increasing apparent disagreement and perhaps even some disunity

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15 For in-depth explorations of how anthropologists view futural orientations as both culturally-constituted and as shaping the present, see Miyazaki on hope, and Bryant and Knight on orientations such as anticipation, expectation, and speculation.

of feeling, to a resolution in which unity of feeling is restored as an emergent unity of thought and purpose is established.<sup>16</sup> If consultors' expectations for the consultation's trajectory are misaligned with this implicit guidance, they may block the transformative clash of differing opinions. This example explores both the implied trajectory, and the ways it can be misunderstood.

#### STAGE 1: GATHERING TOGETHER

The members may arrive with hope and anticipation that they share similar opinions that will need little adjustment in order to produce a collective decision. As they pray:

*We have gathered in this spiritual assembly, united in our views and thoughts, with our purposes harmonized to exalt Thy Word amidst mankind. (¶ 8)*

Several factors may lead to Assembly members' holding unrealistic expectations of finding easy agreement through placid consultation. They indeed begin with at least some important common ground: they have agreed to meet together, have gathered and prayed together, and have committed

to use Bahá'í consultation as their common framework. Further, Bahá'í guidance—including this letter—underlines the importance of safeguarding unity among people: “The first condition is absolute love and harmony among the members of the assembly” (¶ 11). This emphasis may foster an expectation of beginning-to-end agreement.

Indeed, voluntary groups of all kinds typically come into meetings expecting a certain similarity of opinion amongst themselves; they are gathering, after all, because they share values and affiliations and purposes. Assemblies are ultimately based on voluntary participation. However, because they are elected without nominations or campaigning by self-selected candidates, the members may find themselves in a highly diverse group, with “diverse interests and types of character” varied enough that the meetings elicit “direct training” in achieving unity in diversity (Holley 74). Still, the Bahá'í emphasis on finding, creating, and maintaining unity may prevail over participants' experience with the challenges of diversity, seeding the expectation that the meeting will start with basic agreement.

Assemblies will thus generally stand in contrast with groups whose members may tend to begin meetings expecting dissimilarity or even conflict. Such groups may be comprised of members whose status and livelihood are dependent on claiming some scarce resource—whether with respect to limited available jobs, hierarchical status

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16 In practice, a Spiritual Assembly in particular will often tackle multiple issues in one meeting, and so this cycle may be repeated in various forms. For simplicity, in this paper we will talk about a “consultative meeting” as a single meeting concerning a single issue about which the participants may have differing opinions.

in an academic setting, or any other sort of zero-sum scenario. Participants in these groups may come into a meeting looking to distinguish and shore up their own position, by claiming ownership of discoveries or ideas, or emphasizing critique and argument at the expense of just and fair evaluation or of finding agreement.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, negotiators come into a meeting with a keen sense of how interests differ between them. Finally, groups coming together to discuss what are seen as intractable political differences may start with a maximal expectation of disagreement, even if material outcomes are not at stake (see Neyman and Wenninger, forthcoming). In all these gatherings, surprise over a swell of disagreement in a meeting's trajectory would likely be minimal; if conflict is handled appropriately in these groups, as Neyman and Wenninger point out, they may instead be surprised by discovering how much they can agree on.

Of course, Assembly meetings may start with expectations of some disagreement. This may be the case if, for instance, the Assembly members conceive of the meeting as an opportunity to spread their own, "correct" views to others who are predicted to object—a state of mind that we can easily fall into unconsciously, since we all tend to think our personal understandings are accurate (Lample, "Framework" 43).

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17 For an interesting account of the high stakes of scientific discovery, see chapter 10 of astronomer Mike Brown's travails surrounding his discovery of one large Kuiper belt object (Brown).

Alternately, the members may remember disagreements—over an ongoing project, for example—and expect further disagreement along already established positions. In addition, if within the community in which the Assembly serves there is wide apparent diversity of opinion on a topic being taken up, the members may expect greater divergence from the start. Nevertheless, they may anticipate a steady lessening of disagreement, and thus still be surprised if instead the consultation swells from a mere simmer of differing opinions into a boil of disagreement.<sup>18</sup>

Participants may also experience surprise at the swell of disagreement in a consultation meeting due to ignorance about their own thoughts and how they will play out in a community. Consultors, particularly when coming together for the first time or to discuss a new topic, may not yet have investigated the details of the topics they will be consulting on, nor fully articulated their own opinions (Smith and Ghaemmaghami 17), particularly in a group setting, and so may have no idea how people with different perspectives might disagree. This might be

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18 It is important to distinguish between how much *actual* agreement there is at the start of a consultation meeting and the *understood* levels of agreement. This example focuses on the latter; the participants' expectations shape how they experience changes in perceived agreement during the meeting, and thus attending to their expectations better predicts how they will respond to the meeting's social dynamics.

especially true for subtle elements of thinking that tend to be opaque to the thinker, including the usually unrecognized and naturalized background assumptions that deeply shape fundamental thinking (Longino 72–73; see also Elvira Espinosa, forthcoming, and T. Smith, this issue).

Whether or not Assembly members perceive the full extent of their diversity of opinion at the beginning of the consultation, a latent, hidden heterogeneity likely needs to be brought out during the clash of differing opinions. Further, regardless of how similar or dissimilar they experience their various starting positions to be, consultors can easily and erroneously assume that the ideal trajectory of a consultation meeting should be a straight line toward greater unity of thought and purpose. Enlarging disagreement on the way to agreement is counterintuitive; there are many ways to imagine a more direct model of collective decision making, featuring nearly constant lessening of apparent disagreement. These include merely finding common ground, while leaving behind and unsaid all the ways in which the members disagree; heightening the disposition of all or certain participants to compromise or to give in, either to avoid conflict or for fear of not being understood or taken seriously; and attending only to the letter's emphasis on "absolute love and harmony" while ignoring the critical necessity of the clashing, differing opinions. The collective agreement that results from consultation, however, is not to be "a mere compromise, the dilution of

truth, or a hypocritical or utopian consensus" (Universal House of Justice, 29 Nov. 2017 ¶10). Significantly, in all failures to reach a transformative collective understanding, as explored in more detail in the next example, it is minority opinions that are more likely to be squelched, reproducing status quo ideas as well as the broader society's hegemonic relations.

In short, then, if the members enter consultation expecting only an efficient path to their desired endpoint, or linear movement toward greater similarity of thought, it may seem counterproductive when the meeting generates what feels like greater disagreement.

#### STAGE 2: THE SWELL OF DISAGREEMENT

Points of difference—not only those known beforehand, but those hidden at the outset—should ideally become unveiled as the consultation proceeds, through the clash of differing opinions:

*every member expresseth with absolute freedom his own opinion and setteth forth his argument. Should anyone oppose, he must on no account feel hurt for not until matters are fully discussed can the right way be revealed. The shining spark of truth cometh forth only after the clash of differing opinions. (¶ 11)*

Every member's opinion must be shared fully. An open floor for talkative members, and patient encouragement

of quieter ones, uncovers latent diversity of thought. All the subtle ways in which the participants disagree will, ideally, increasingly be aired.

This middle phase of the trajectory, we understand implicitly, may require a substantial investment of time. Because every participant will be expressing their own opinion—that is, we make room for, encourage, and long for universal participation<sup>19</sup>—we know consultation may demand of us “patience and long-suffering in difficulties” (¶ 11). The emphasis on each member sharing their views “with absolute freedom” suggests that consultants should be given room to be a little redundant or inefficient, despite the encouragement to act with “moderation” and curtail this in themselves.

The letter implies that normal, expected trajectories of consultation include expansive disagreement. In order to “clash,” and even throw off “sparks,” two objects need to be coming at each other forcefully enough and from angles wide enough to crash noisily together. As with Longino’s clashing and meshing, the clash of differing ideas in Bahá’í consultation must be penetrating and thorough for transformation to

occur. Critical thinking arises socially, cultivated out of the diversity of opinion the members express, and the reward for their hard work will be an emergent understanding, a “spark of truth,” that will arise when these clashing ideas are harmonized. To the extent that they bear this in mind as the ideal, participants will seek out the maximum diversity of perspective that the group can bring to the discussion as the necessary—the “only”—path to truth. Sharp differences of opinion, far from being a cause for concern, will be seen as a valuable resource.

At the same time, the clash of these freely- and fully-expressed opinions can sting; the guidance prepares the participants to expect that the transformative diversity will undermine pet ideas, long-held certainties, and other intellectual and emotional attachments. By admonishing participants not to “feel hurt” when others oppose their ideas, the guidance simultaneously endorses the benefit of clashing ideas and mitigates its potential to stir up bad feelings among the group. Explicitly, we learn from this warning to modulate our own feelings when stung; implicitly, we learn that we may need to criticize another’s contribution while softening the blow by depersonalizing the targeted idea. Detaching ideas from a sense of ownership or identification, and from other attached feelings,<sup>20</sup>

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19 On the centrality of universal participation in consultation’s power to attune participants to reality, see also Smith and Ghaemmaghami: “we have to be careful never to presume that others have nothing of value to share regarding a given matter. . . . [I]t should be presumed instead that every participant in a discussion has at least the potential to shed some light on the subject being discussed” (17).

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20 This is not to say that emotional reactions to ideas have no capacity to reveal truth, nor to deny that emotions may energize ideas and plans helpfully. This issue, however, goes beyond the scope of this

becomes a key tool to allow the clash of differing opinions to transform the collective understanding. Ideally, the consultors watch with curiosity and anticipation as detached ideas tumble around like stones in a rocky shore break, wearing off sharp edges as they clash, mesh, and harmonize.<sup>21</sup>

This level of detachment is not a given; it may require deliberate cultivation by the consultors. Reminding oneself of the benefit of criticism (in Longino's sense of the term) can help one to detach, as can recognizing

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paper, and might prove fruitful for further analysis. The point here is simply that the clashing of differing opinions is assisted by recognizing how emotions may complicate the intellectual interaction. Even partial success at releasing the identification of particular individuals with particular ideas better allows the collective to prune, mesh, and harmonize the ideas on the table.

21 Example 2 will explore in greater detail how consultors are to avoid rupturing relationships. For now, it is worth noting that the ideal of detachment described here strongly differentiates Bahá'í consultation, even in the most tumultuous clashes of differing opinions, from the antagonism, gamesmanship, and partisanship prevalent in politics, the legal system, lawmaking, and even academia (see also Karlberg 43–67). For example, the House of Justice calls for people to “eschew partisanship and the contest for worldly power. Instead, they are [to be] focused on transcending differences, harmonizing perspectives, and promoting consultation” and “to guard against any tendency to view matters with cynicism or an eye for faults” (Universal House of Justice, 30 Dec. 2021, ¶¶ 4, 36).

that one's own opinions are, inevitably, partial; conversely, a tendency to align with partisan kinds of thinking can be a barrier to detachment (Smith and Ghaemmaghami 3–4; 17–18). As ‘Abdu’l-Bahá's warning against insistence, stubbornness, and persistence in one's own views (¶12) indicates, personal effort is required to dislodge the thinking that our own view is absolutely correct. A “moderate perspective”—one that neither thoughtlessly yields to “mere compromise” nor rigidly “insist[s] upon ideological aims” or personal views—“is a practical and principled standpoint from which one can recognize and adopt valid and insightful ideas whatever their source, without prejudice” (Universal House of Justice, 29 Nov. 2017 ¶10). Neither purely relativistic nor rigid, consultors must “in every matter search out the truth” (¶ 12).

It is worth reflecting here on the term “truth,” which ‘Abdu’l-Bahá uses several times in this guidance. Taking the full range of Bahá'í writings as context, we can avoid reading this literally, in a positivistic way (that is, believing that truth can be fully known), or even in a semi-magical way, expecting that even decisions based in simplistic, inaccurate understandings may be made effective nevertheless due to a miraculous intervention rewarding good intentions and righteousness. The writings of the Bahá'í Faith repeatedly affirm the relativistic ability of humans to understand truth. For example, the Short Obligatory Prayer states that we are created to know God (Bahá'u'lláh,

*Prayers and Meditations*, CLXXXI) despite the ultimate unknowability of God (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, XIX). This very orientation to the unknowable Divine, consciously and collectively recultivated by opening the Assembly meeting with prayer as will be suggested in Example 3, may also remind consultors of their epistemological limits. That consultation may culminate only in sparks of truth rather than a whole sun's worth reflects our limited but not untethered ability to perceive small bits about reality (see also Smith, this issue). 'Abdu'l-Bahá's use of "truth" thus may emphasize the ocean of hidden reality that may at any time challenge and improve our own understanding; it may also cue us to the experience of temporary and evolving certainty that is the continual state of a protagonist in a learning mode. It implies that the ideas we bring into the consultation will be improved in clashing with other ideas, and thus implies as well that our individual understandings are tentative and partial, which in turn fosters humility in ourselves and forbearance for others, making us eager to recognize and adopt "valid and insightful ideas."

Thus, remembering that our apprehension of truth is always relative can contribute to shaping participants' expectations about consultation. In turn, normalizing a trajectory that includes a swell of overt disagreement and the display of the group's diversity shapes the motivations of the consultors, eliciting values and virtues which facilitate Bahá'í consultation's transformative

capacity. This expected trajectory fosters patience with the extended time that universal participation usually requires, and confidence that the growing disagreement does not signal a failure. Likewise, repeated experience with this swell-and-resolution trajectory seeds optimism in the participants that future consultative meetings will swell and resolve also, that widely-varying perspectives can be harmonized, and that even difficult consultations can re-establish the feeling of unity.

Naturally, not every consultation *must* involve the outward clash of differing opinions. Often, the transformation of individuals' opinions may happen silently within their own minds, as they immediately adopt others' expressed opinions as superior to their own, and thus do not state their now outdated views. On other occasions, the opinions of the consultors will not actually differ; here the consultation serves mainly to identify where opinions line up, permitting a decision—as well as unity of thought and purpose—to be rapidly built. We can also envision greater alignment in consultors' opinions as cycles of learning recur and consultative input from the community and from individuals with expertise or experience accumulates; repeated consultations tweak previous decisions in light of experience accrued in implementing them, creating greater alignment.

Of course, alignment could also arise due to lack of capacity for criticism within the consulting group, which may need to be enlarged to

bring in greater diversity in order for true transformative criticism to be possible.<sup>22</sup> Objectivity and effective decision making are imperiled when the resources of diversity—the group's ability to think critically and generatively—are not brought into the consultation and instead remain hidden. We can see from this perspective that it is a greater risk to assume that a quick and easy agreement reflects the transformative interrogative power of Bahá'í consultation than to extend a consultation that may become redundant for the sake of ensuring that all diverse opinions have been aired. Neither the goal of avoiding conflict,<sup>23</sup> nor a desire for efficiency, warrant an incomplete clash of all relevant differing opinions.

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22 Assemblies have the option to consult with experts, for example, or individuals with particular knowledge of a project, and should also consult with the generality of their communities (specifically, though not exclusively, through the Nineteen Day Feast). Annual elections provide an opportunity for an enlargement of the diversity of the Assembly itself (see Abizadeh). In addition, Bahá'u'lláh provides a method of adding more people to a consultative group to improve its ability to get to a unanimous decision, counter-intuitively increasing the number of participants to ultimately reduce the variety of opinions in the decision phase (*Consultation* no.7); the counterintuitive nature of this method points to how Bahá'í consultation is to serve as a tool for greater attunement of the group with reality, and the transformation of the thinking of its participants.

23 See Example 2 for an exception to this principle.

### STAGE 3: UNITY OF PURPOSE AND OF THOUGHT

Part of what can make this expected trajectory tolerable to the participants is the anticipation of a final state of unity. Unity of thought is established “after discussion,” either through the ideal unanimous decision (reflecting a unity of thought), or by majority vote (generating a unity of purpose):

*If after discussion, a decision be carried unanimously, well and good; but if, the Lord forbid, differences of opinion should arise, a majority of voices must prevail. (¶ 11)*

*[S]hould differences of opinion arise a majority of voices must prevail, and all must obey and submit to the majority. It is again not permitted that any one of the honored members object to or censure, whether in or out of the meeting, any decision arrived at previously, though that decision be not right, for such criticism would prevent any decision from being enforced. (¶ 12)*

A majority vote is, however, second-best. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s exclamation about intractable differences of opinion—“the Lord forbid”—might signify that a consultation that ends in a vote has failed to achieve a transformative interaction, or at least one transformative enough to fully unify thought.<sup>24</sup>

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24 Bahá'u'lláh's method of adding people to the consultation to get to unanimity demonstrates, as pointed out by the Universal House of Justice, His preference

This is not to diminish how functionally important it is to come to a collective agreement to act, even without unanimity. Whether a decision in Bahá'í consultation is made unanimously or by majority vote, participants are to unify behind it. This feature of consultation is one of two ways that the heat and sting of the swell of disagreement can be soothed and contained.<sup>25</sup> The decision-making stage opens a passage to a new kind of unity, one where everyone's opinions have been voiced, people's tentative ideas have been tested and molded, and a new, creative harmonization has arisen from the ideas' interaction.

The learning cycle of study, consultation, action, and reflection provides another balm. Either a unanimous decision or a majority vote can provide the pivot from consultation to action, giving the decision room to run, to be studied and reflected on, and to contribute to the next round of consultation; it launches the generation of data to be gathered and analyzed (see also Friberg, Smith, this issue). The reflection, study, and consultation that

follow the action provide more opportunities for minds to be changed, and more chances for sparks of truth to be kindled, seen, and adopted. As they experience repeating cycles, Assembly members come to understand the potentially tentative nature of consultative decisions, and how they function as hypotheses to be tested in action.<sup>26</sup> This dynamic nature of consultative decision-making is highlighted by 'Abdu'l-Bahá's guidance that the community, and the Assembly members themselves, should actively support and implement even incorrect decisions, both for the sake of unity and out of confidence in consultation's capacity to self-correct when put to the test via action (*Consultation* nos. 12, 15). Each step in this mode of operation depends on an ongoing relationship and series of meetings among the participants; thus, ending consultation meetings with some form of satisfying unity maintains the cycle's momentum.

EXAMPLE 1 DISCUSSION:  
A TRANSFORMED EXPECTATION  
FOSTERS A TRANSFORMATIVE CLASH  
OF DIFFERING OPINIONS

Expectations set the grounds for surprise, and surprise demands a reaction and fresh evaluation. If a swell

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for unanimous consultative decisions (*Consultation* no.7).

25 Of course, this does not mean that the promise of a final united decision will always soothe anxieties and hurt feelings, but it mitigates the chances that they will shut down the clash of differing opinions or have a lasting effect on the members' relationships. Like many cultural guidelines, this process recognizes a tendency in human nature and human social needs that requires constraining in order to foster ongoing relationships.

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26 In addition, further dynamic adjustments to any decisions may come from local individual initiative, community social action teams' adaptation to evolving circumstances, or community consultation, and can be contributed to the Assembly's thinking through communication or election.

of disagreement surprises the consultants, they may curtail the crucial stage of the clash of differing opinions. Misinterpreting an increasing level of experienced disagreement as a sign of failure can set off alarms, and shut down the full expression of diverse opinions. Shoghi Effendi elsewhere warns against misreading intra-Assembly disagreement: “The friends should therefore not feel discouraged at the differences of opinion that may prevail among the members of an Assembly, for these . . . fulfil a valuable function in all Assembly deliberations” (*Consultation* no. 33). Consultants who see the uncovering of hidden, differing opinions as the leveraging of the Assembly’s transformative resources come to expect a swell of seeming disagreement as a normal part of the process, for all its potential inefficiency and risk of hurt feelings. The transformative swell of disagreement makes more sense to consultants when they understand that the point of consultation is to generate a shared understanding of reality, likely shifting all members’ understandings, and to create an emergent solution that all participants believe in. Consultants who expect this trajectory view the swell of disagreement not as a failure, but rather as the discordant tension necessary to set up the sweet and complex chord at the end.

Shoghi Effendi’s letter portrays recognizable moments of challenge and success—the somewhat irrational sting of the criticized idea, the impatience with the time it takes to give

everyone a voice, the amazement at the improvements in the ideas at the end. These recognizable elements of the consultative experience facilitate the adoption of the text as a meaningful guide and kindle the desire to practice the skills it asks for. Its correspondence to experience wins the practitioner over to the trajectory it implicitly traces, of storm before the calm. The group gains staying power even as it weathers the strains of the middle part of the trajectory, and because of this, nurtures transformative interrogation.

Expectations such as these are consequential. As Bryant and Knight write, “A change in expectations may lead to practices being suddenly altered, reshaped, overturned, or impeded” (63). As consultants increasingly expect the implied trajectory and leave behind non-transformative expectations, their consultation practices will better and more frequently foster transformative clashes of differing opinions.

#### EXAMPLE 2:

#### ENACTING UNITY’S INTERPLAY WITH DIVERSITY AS AN ETHOS WHICH ACCOMMODATES MISTAKES

*Your souls are as waves  
on the sea of the spirit;  
although each individual is a  
distinct wave, the ocean is one.*

—‘Abdu’l-Bahá  
(*Paris Talks* 28:1)

People’s control over fire enables more easily digestible cooked food, swidden farming’s efficiency, and

even lifesaving wildfire prevention ; nevertheless, an uncontrolled fire can destroy communities, and kill people and wildlife. Wheels and engines have enabled people to travel long distances and transport heavy objects; however, car accidents are a leading killer of adolescents and children. Powerful tools often have inherent risks. The clash of differing opinions, so critical to Bahá'í consultation's power, is one such risky tool.

We have already seen how Shoghi Effendi's letter emphasizes the continuous dance of unity and diversity, in varying ratios in the different phases of a consultative meeting's trajectory. This dance is key to consultation's transformative magic, particularly its ability to improve understandings of reality. Yet, as I argue in this example, the guidance also conveys implicit warnings about risks to the relationships within the Assembly when the dance goes too far awry. We will see how these risks are mitigated by the subtle definitions of diversity and of unity, and by the way in which the two are entangled, mutually moderating each other within a healthy consultation. Finally, I will suggest that enacting true unity in diversity may seem a needle-threadingly difficult task on its face, but that the letter provides implicit guidance apt for even very imperfect consultors. Anthropologist Linda Garro's model of how people imperfectly enact their ideal ethos will guide this final observation. In these ways, this example seeks to demonstrate that the dialectical unity in diversity implicitly modeled in

the guidance fosters a truth-productive clash of differing opinions while maintaining group-protective unity.

'ABDU'L-BAHÁ'S DISTINCTION  
BETWEEN DESTRUCTIVE AND  
PRODUCTIVE DIFFERENCES

In His first Tablet to the Hague, 'Abdu'l-Bahá distinguishes between destructive and productive differences. In this tablet, 'Abdu'l-Bahá advises an organization of advocates trying to establish an enduring peace in the aftermath of the first World War.<sup>27</sup> Addressing people made highly aware of the dangers of human difference by a grueling and deadly conflict, He acknowledges that differences can lead to immense suffering and wasteful destruction when dealt with improperly, but nevertheless forcefully insists that diversity handled in another way can be "the cause of the appearance of divine bestowals." Drawing on metaphors—the rich diversity of a garden, and the varied but coordinated parts of a body—He contrasts the kind of difference "that is the cause of annihilation" with that which "reinforceth harmony, [in which] diversity strengtheneth love, and multiplicity is the greatest factor for co-ordination." Echoing terms used in discussing Bahá'í consultation, He writes that "[n]aught but the celestial potency of the Word of God . . . is

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27 This is the first of two tablets from 'Abdu'l-Bahá written in response to letters to Him from the Executive Committee of the Central Organization for a Durable Peace. See *Tablets to the Hague*, note 1.

capable of harmonizing the divergent thoughts, sentiments, ideas, and convictions” of people (42).

In a more subtle way, we can detect this distinction in the passages from ‘Abdu’l-Bahá quoted in Shoghi Effendi’s letter. These show both the negative potential of differences—the threat of various kinds of hurt feelings, “discord,” and “estrangement”—as well as the positive contribution of diversity—the truth-generating scrum of clashing opinions that can harmonize into a unity of thought. Notably, too, the passages view differences in different ways, even in contiguous sentences: the wary note struck by “if, the Lord forbid, differences of opinion should arise” directly follows the affirmation that “the shining spark of truth” comes forth from “the clash of differing opinions” (¶ 11). While, as already argued, “the clash of differing opinions” holds a central role in the functioning of Bahá’í consultation, the bulk of the guidance in the letter focuses on ways to moderate the process so as to unify the Assembly members. The clash of differing opinions is enveloped in unity, not only in the arrangement of the text, but in the philosophy, practices, and culture it indicates.

#### THE MUTUAL MODERATION OF UNITY AND DIVERSITY

In ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s writings unity and diversity are inextricably intertwined.<sup>28</sup>

Looking at them as separate categories is more of a heuristic than a reflection of reality. Their intertwining is reflected in Shoghi Effendi’s letter, which constantly shifts focus from unity to diversity: from unifying qualities and acts, to healthy and unhealthy forms of difference. This interplay in the text may suggest that when there is a mix of the right kinds of unity and the right kinds of diversity, they foster each other in a virtuous cycle. As Todd Smith writes,

The relationship between unity and diversity, therefore, is dialectical: each only truly flourishes when in dynamic interplay with the other . . . . In short, unity without diversity is uniformity, lifelessness, subjugation. Diversity without unity is invariably ineffectual and even perilous to both the collective and, consequently (and ironically), the individual. Hence the principle of unity in diversity. (“Crisis” 90)

That is, unity and diversity are in a continuous dance with each other, and only when they each dance their part can their risks be avoided. Consultation “must be a language which encourages the independent candour of individual understanding, and simultaneously protects the close bonds of connection between people” (Nakhjavání 98). As touched on in Example 1 and expanded on below, it is the very unity of the Assembly consultation that fosters the expression of all perspectives,

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<sup>28</sup> This is true as well in the history of philosophy (see T. Smith, “Crisis” 85–92).

especially the exposition of critique and disagreement; simultaneously, the expressed disagreement, when handled correctly, fosters an eventual harmonization of thought and a unity of decision. Furthermore, the tolerance and promotion of the risky business of airing all disagreements also affirms and enhances an implicit confidence in the group's ability to resolve at least some amount of conflict.

#### THE PERILS OF AN EMPHASIS ON DIFFERENCES: CONFLICT AND HURT FEELINGS

Diversity carries with it consultation-breaking and even group-breaking risks. Shoghi Effendi's letter implicitly recognizes the risks of unwrapping the gift of diversity.

One such fundamental risk is that the clash of differing opinions might slide into interpersonal conflict or hardened oppositions. "[T]he truth will remain hidden" if a stubborn expression of differing opinions leads to "discord and wrangling" (§ 12).<sup>29</sup> If inharmonious disputes and angry argument occur, the main goal of the consultation—

the discovery of truth—will be as blocked as if the consultative meeting had never happened. Even worse, if the consultation remains in a state of disunity, it will undermine any agency the group has and may even threaten the continued existence of the institution: "Should harmony of thought and absolute unity be nonexistent, that gathering shall be dispersed and that assembly be brought to naught" (§ 12). If disunity and hurt feelings grow, as the letter implicitly acknowledges may happen, members of the group may refuse to continue discussion, may resist coming to a unity of thought, and may fail to carry out or fully support any decisions made and thus block the gathering of more data through action. Disunity may even sour the members' willingness to reconvene to continue the cycle of learning.

The letter contains even more dire warnings against letting disagreement generate the separation, unfriendliness, or hostility of estrangement:

*the members of the assembly . . . must be wholly free from estrangement . . . . In short, whatsoever thing is arranged in harmony and with love and purity of motive, its result is light, and should the least trace of estrangement prevail the result shall be darkness upon darkness . . . . If this be so regarded, that assembly shall be of God, but otherwise it shall lead to coolness and alienation that proceed from the Evil One. (§ 12)*

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29 The Universal House of Justice notes similarly in a letter to the United States Bahá'ís that "criticism is a two-edged sword: it is all too often the harbinger of conflict and contention. The balanced processes of the Administrative Order are meant to prevent this essential activity from degenerating to any form of dissent that breeds opposition and its dreadful schismatic consequences" (29 Dec. 1988 ¶35).

If even “the least trace of estrangement prevail[s]”—if even the smallest measure of this destructive kind of difference persists in the meeting—then it may infect the whole institution with “coolness and alienation,” creating and widening distance among the members. These passages imply that emotional hardening such as “ill-feeling,” “discord,” and “estrangement” may break the group itself, and the members are advised in Shoghi Effendi’s letter to consult “in such wise” that these will not arise (§ 11). Similarly, in another letter, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá writes that Assembly members “should exert their efforts so that no differences may occur” (*Consultation* no. 18); the effort to prevent “differences” should be a constant undercurrent of the ideal consultation meeting. Note that the “differences” intended here are clearly disputes and quarrels, not the kind of difference required in the clash of differing opinions. “Differences” in this sense, in addition to a hardening of hostile feelings among members, may also imply simply a hardening of the boundaries separating differing opinions. A productive difference, in contrast, allows for the careful work of meshing and harmonizing opinions.

We thus turn again to the balancing act of limiting hurt feelings while enabling full, universal expression of differing opinions, but this time with a closer look at the risks to the relationships within the Assembly.

Additional Bahá’í writings on consultation underline that full expression is protected even at the risk of hurt

feelings. “[E]very member” expressing “with absolute freedom his own opinion” and “[setting] forth his argument” (§ 11) implies a frankness, candor, and unfettered expression in consultation, which Shoghi Effendi repeatedly and explicitly calls for in other letters (*Consultation* nos. 26, 27, 38). Unfettered speech elicits socially challenging opinions, particularly the criticism of fellow members’ cherished ideas, which Example 1 demonstrated is necessary for achieving transformative interrogation during the clash of differing opinions. Likewise, the admonition that “[s]hould any one oppose, he must on no account feel hurt” (§ 11) acknowledges the likelihood that the member whose idea is being criticized will indeed feel hurt by another member; nevertheless, the speaker is not called upon to withhold their criticism. A 1935 letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi confirms that “it is not only the right but the sacred obligation of every member to express freely and openly his views, without being afraid of displeasing or alienating any of his fellow members” (*Consultation* no. 32). This guidance implicitly recognizes that one might be tempted to withhold one’s thoughts for fear of how they will be received; however, this minefield of potential displeasure, hurt feelings, and alienation must be navigated to enable the frank and full expression needed for the clash of differing opinions.

Before considering how the unity called for in the letter might moderate the potential dangers of this kind

of free expression, we must first ask whether unity, when misunderstood, presents its own pitfalls.

#### THE PERILS OF AN EMPHASIS ON UNITY: HEGEMONY AND SILENCE

‘Abdu’l-Bahá emphasizes several variations of unity as critical to the consultation:

*The first condition is absolute love and harmony amongst the members of the assembly. They must be wholly free from estrangement and must manifest in themselves the Unity of God, for they are the waves of one sea, the drops of one river, the stars of one heaven, the rays of one sun, the trees of one orchard, the flowers of one garden. Should harmony of thought and absolute unity be nonexistent, that gathering shall be dispersed and that assembly be brought to naught. (¶ 12)*

Not only does He mention love, harmony, lack of estrangement, and unity itself as necessary here, but He underscores the commitment to unity by revealing its desired qualities. He employs superlative modifiers—“absolute, “wholly free,” “of God”—and plays out a cadence of metaphors—“the waves of one sea,” “the stars of one heaven.” Together these describe an intense ideal and a clear commitment to establishing, maintaining, and augmenting the members’ unity.

The trajectory of a swell of clashing opinions complicates—and sheds

light on—the meaning of this ideal. The intended unity cannot mean that consultors must always avoid disagreement, risky proposals, or any emotionally charged discussion, as that would impede the full, universal expression of differing opinions. This unity cannot be defined as a facile similarity to be discovered, or as a simple evasion of conflict or disagreement. Misunderstanding unity as a uninterrogated, fragile similarity would turn the participants’ attention away from exploring how their opinions differ, shutting down their curiosity and openness to listen to and comprehend others’ perspectives. “[W]ith absolute freedom” (¶ 11) indicates, as discussed above, that it is especially the clashing opinions that must be voiced, heard, and considered. Moreover, it is not *despite* but *because* of the expression of everyone’s opinion that the correct kind of unity is built. It is precisely “when every member expresseth with absolute freedom” their own opinion and argument that the prevention of “ill-feeling or discord . . . can be attained” (¶ 11).

A shared commitment to universal and full expression sensitizes all participants to the ways in which others’ ability or willingness to present their true thoughts might be impinged. Logic, human experience, social science, and psychology flesh out the various, often subtle reasons why someone might be quiet, or be ignored if they speak. Hindrances might include a shy temperament, or fear that comments on sensitive issues may be

taken out of context or shared outside the consultation.<sup>30</sup> They might include one's own discomfort at holding an unconventional idea, or one that challenges cultural norms. Participants might hold back from expressing an idea that could be taken to be critical of another's contribution, or hesitate to share while searching for a tactful way to say something.

Some barriers to free expression relate less to the content being shared, and more to how it is shared or to the social positionality of the speaker or hearers. These may include the fear of misunderstanding when either speakers or listeners are using a non-native language, or when some participants use a dialect or a higher grade-level of language not understood by all, or language that is stigmatized. In diverse settings, differing cultural expectations around how long a pause in speaking is required before the next speaker begins may hinder free expression (Endrass et al. 7); similar gaps may exist between expectations, rooted in culture or individual personality, around how much thought is required before speaking, or even how complex a speaker's contributions should be. If some speakers present and frame ideas in harmful ways that manipulate speech or logic or historical narratives related to the current situation, this can be a barrier to others' contributions (T. Smith, "Crisis"). Hindrances to free

expression may arise "if the friends, knowingly or unknowingly, reproduce in their interactions and their association with society the same tendencies that foment prejudice" (Universal House of Justice, 1 Nov. 2022 ¶ 17), including dynamics in the wider society concerning ethnic-, class-, age-, racial- or gender-based invisibility or hypervisibility (McCluney and Rabelo; Rabelo et al.); participants with personal history experiencing such dynamics may be particularly at risk of being silenced when they are reproduced in consultation (Williams 73–75).<sup>31</sup>

The implicit guidance of the Bahá'í texts on consultation is that we must not only learn about these hindrances, but also notice when they might be in play, and learn how to overcome them. Writing about "the factors that create social environments in which ethnic prejudice proliferates," for example,

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31 The fact that some participants' contributions may, even inadvertently, act to stifle the contributions of others highlights the complexity of the concept of "absolute freedom" to express one's opinion. While the moderating influence of the ideal of unity is used to highlight some parameters for understanding this freedom in this paper, a full discussion of the boundaries of free expression is beyond its scope. On the importance and also limits of freedom, see especially the House of Justice's 29 December 1988 letter to the followers of Bahá'u'lláh in the United States. While discussing the wide freedom encouraged within Assembly consultation, note that the House of Justice draws a line against criticism that undermines the authority of the Covenant.

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30 As noted earlier, consultation within Bahá'í Spiritual Assemblies and the Universal House of Justice is confidential and not to be shared outside the meeting.

the Universal House of Justice asserts that “[a]ll well-meaning people have a duty to increase their consciousness of such factors and to strengthen their capacity to counteract them” (1 Nov. 2022 ¶17).

Enabling others to overcome these kinds of obstacles to expression is likely to involve consciousness raising. The mandate for full, universal expression also implicitly guides participants to notice when and why they themselves are holding back. Rationalizing one’s own continued silence, for whatever reason—as a contribution to a spurious similarity, as protection of one’s own feelings, as a matter of efficiency—becomes less tenable. As Shoghi Effendi emphasizes by calling the expression of one’s opinion “not only the right but the sacred obligation” of the individual consultor, even fear of “displeasing or alienating” other members does not justify withholding the necessary full expression of one’s views.

Further complicating the matter, the number and depth of the challenges to free expression tends to grow as a function of the diversity of the participants. As the Universal House of Justice writes in 1989, the achievement of full participation may require the courage to speak frankly about such hindrances within Assembly consultation, especially noting the kinds of hurdles that stem from more diverse membership:

If an Assembly member feels that there are barriers affecting the consultation of the body, he should frankly and courageously raise

his concerns; these barriers could include, for example, the consultation moving at a speed which confuses him, language being used which he cannot understand, behavioral characteristics which unwittingly express condescension leading to the humiliation of others, or a feeling that one is being ignored. Such barriers may well arise as the Faith continues its inexorable progress in creating dynamic consultative bodies which bring together, in a spirit of unity and equality, the historically divided elements of humanity. (22 Jun. 1989 ¶ 5)

This kind of incisive and challenging criticism of deterrents to full expression can be seen as an extension of the call for detaching oneself “from all else save God” (¶ 11): truly hearing criticism of a barrier that one has contributed to—even (or especially) inadvertently—requires as much detachment as hearing challenges to one’s substantive ideas in consultation, and raising such a criticism of the process the group has co-created and been following requires detachment and courage, too. Thus, another implicit element of the guidance on consultation is that consultors must be willing to do often-challenging emotion work, such as not letting fear or emotional identification with ideas rule their behavior within the consultation meeting. Similarly, a commitment to truth-seeking “in every matter” (¶ 12) is needed to sustain the sometimes-difficult work

of enabling full, universal participation in the clash of differing opinions.

Participants in consultation are facilitators of universal, full expression whether they are currently speakers or listeners. Consultation depends on a “mingling of contraries . . . all the participants are both ear and tongue, are both the active force at one time and its recipient at another” (Nakhjavání 100). ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s passages quoted in Shoghi Effendi’s letter alternate between the perspectives of listener and speaker, subtly indicating that consultants will change roles frequently. For example, “he must with moderation set forth the truth” (¶ 12) shows us how to behave as speakers; “[t]hey must in every matter search out the truth and not insist upon their own opinion” (¶ 12) primarily indicates how we should be as listeners. “Should any one oppose, he must on no account feel hurt” (¶ 11) implicitly pairs the one struggling to not feel hurt with the one trying to tactfully critique the idea, who must with “courtesy . . . care and moderation” (¶ 12) speak “in such wise that no occasion for ill-feeling . . . may arise” (¶ 11). Because the listener has always just finished being the speaker, and the speaker the listener, the role switching nurtures empathy and a golden-rule reciprocity in treating others well. Multiple stints as listener and as speaker rapidly generate a fund of experience from which to learn what it takes to listen attentively and what it takes to speak tactfully, how difficult each of these tools may be to use and the forbearance required to let

others learn how, and the detachment and self-control and creativity required to wield them effectively. In addition, the role switching generates many opportunities to learn from the skillful or even flawed performances of fellow consultants in a sort of apprenticeship (Lave and Wenger); sensitized to the various ideals in the guidance and to the difficulties of getting these dynamics just right, especially skillful consultants will be noticed and learned from as role models. In this way, the learning within the consultation meetings may also generate a change in culture within the group that may possibly radiate outward as well.<sup>32</sup>

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32 This dynamic points toward virtuous cycles of learning about consultation that may exist in several additional forms throughout the community. Skillful consultation can be modeled by any member of the community at Feast, or during team, committee, or nucleus meetings, for example; these can build skills within current or potential members of the Assembly. Instruction in and practice of consultation skills within community children’s classes and junior youth groups can undoubtedly spur on accelerated growth in the communities and institution’s capacity for consultation; children’s capacity to quickly learn may see them exceed their teachers’ and parents’ capacity (for example, see Reynolds and Orellana). In addition, the Assembly can incorporate and advance learning as an institution. These dynamics can be seen as some of the ways that the three protagonists—the key triad in the advancement of civilization identified by the Universal House of Justice—enable each other to manifest their potential (30 Dec. 2021 ¶ 3).

This perspective on the importance of free expression, the barriers it can face, and the “apprenticeship” approach to consultation can help us better understand what is meant by unity in Bahá’í consultation, and what is not meant. Misunderstanding the Bahá’í writings’ emphasis on unity as a call to hide differences can harm social relationships on multiple scales. If criticism is withheld, blocked, or hidden in any society, its capacity for critical thought may suffer grave wounds : such a society risks suppressing freedom, facilitating oppression, causing stagnation, and inviting totalitarianism (Lample, *Revelation* 216). Ruptures in the bonds between community and institutions can be caused if an Assembly blocks criticism, for instance: it thwarts the spirit of the inviting and trust-building relationship it should cultivate with the community, which finds its expression in consultation with and on behalf of the community (*Bahá’í Administration* 143). Within the consultation meeting itself, suppressing diversity can instate oppression of individual members or segments of the community, and lead to stagnation in the institution’s capacity to read reality accurately and creatively. Thus, mistaking mere conflict avoidance for unity can cause an unintentional privileging of one set of ideas over others or one set of people over others; not only does this limit the transformative capacity of the group to investigate reality as explored in Example 1, but it also causes estrangement among the silent or silenced participants. In short, the

unity intended in the passages cited by Shoghi Effendi—a unity that embraces and enables diversity’s expression—is incompatible with hegemony (including of the Assembly over the community or over individual initiative) and actively works against patterns of domination that can be found in the culture at large.

The unity described in Shoghi Effendi’s letter implies a collective commitment to everyone’s full involvement in the consultation process, and to the complicated psychological, social, and cultural understanding this may require. It is a unity that calls for an evolving experience of empathy, a process of learning about each other and about ourselves. After the potential swell of expressions of differences has played out, when the clashing of opinions has meshed and harmonized the no-longer-latent, diverse views, and collectively the group has generated new solutions, then—and only then—the group will be primed to find a unity that is more akin to similarity: unity of thought and commitment to action at the end.

Coming back around to the requisite “first condition” of “absolute love and harmony” and “absolute unity” (¶ 12), we can now see these terms in the light of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s firm commitment to protect and promote the clash of the full range of differing opinions. Absolute love and unity does not require the subjugation of differing opinions to achieve a surface or forced similarity or agreement; the word “absolute” here cannot be understood as

simply a vague intensifier of our assumed definitions of love and unity as free from disagreement (“Absolute,” II8b). We must turn instead to another meaning of absolute—“unconditional, unreserved, unqualified” (“Absolute” IV15a). The absolute love and unity ‘Abdu’l-Bahá describes are unconditioned by the members’ agreement or disagreement, by similarity or dissimilarity, even by natural pulls of either negative or positive emotions. Absolute love and unity call forth the above-mentioned detachment from individual ownership or identification with ideas, and, further, call consultors to remain unflappable in the face of differences of personality, conflictual histories, recognition of others’ flaws, and heated clashes of differing opinions. The ultimate instance of absolute love and unity is found in the love of the infallible God—“exalted above all peer or likeness” (*Bahá’í Prayers* 137)—for innately fallible human souls: an unconditional love reaching across an impassable chasm. And, indeed, Shoghi Effendi’s letter calls on consultors to “manifest in themselves the Unity of God” (¶ 12).

This dive into the perils of a misperceived notion of unity should in no way detract from the repeated emphasis on unity in ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s quotes. Clearly, a correctly perceived unity holds up a shield over the consultation meeting, perhaps even when partially employed: “[i]n short, whatsoever thing is arranged in harmony and with love and purity of motive, its result is light” (¶ 12). While affirming the

fundamental commitment of the faith to self-expression, the House of Justice notes how important it is to preserve “the unifying spirit of the Cause of God” as a protection against the potential splintering harms of full expression: “Motive, manner, mode, become relevant; but there is also the matter of love: love for one’s fellows, love for one’s community, love for one’s institutions” (29 Dec. 1988 ¶ 34). Love, pure intentions, and harmony buffer against the risks of diversity.

#### IMPLICATIONS FOR THE IMPERFECTIONS OF ACTUAL PRACTICE

Shoghi Effendi alludes in a different letter to the complexity—the challenging balance of principles—required to achieve “the spirit of frank and loving consultation”:

Nothing short of the spirit of a true Bahá’í can hope to reconcile the principles of mercy and justice, of freedom and submission, of the sanctity of the right of the individual and of self-surrender, of vigilance, discretion and prudence on the one hand, and fellowship, candor, and courage on the other. (*Consultation* no. 23)

Given the complexity of the many dialectical principles involved, does Bahá’í consultation require highly skilled consultors in order to work? Can the subtle and intricate dance of the unfettered expression of difference and the ideal kinds of unity be

accomplished by everyday people, full of mistake-making possibilities?

The Universal House of Justice, in emphasizing how important it is to be ready to accept that mistakes will occur in our attempts to build the world anew, calls us to be ready to cope with imperfection—in ourselves, as well as in others. In its *Ridván 2021* message, the House of Justice reviews the accomplishments of Bahá'í communities in the preceding quarter century, describing mistakes as an innate part of community learning:

A commitment to learning also meant being prepared to make mistakes—and sometimes, of course, mistakes brought discomfort. Unsurprisingly, new methods and approaches were handled inexpertly at first because of a lack of experience; on occasion, a newly acquired capacity of one kind was lost as a community became absorbed in developing another. Having the best of intentions is no guarantee against making missteps, and moving past them requires both humility and detachment. When a community has remained determined to show forbearance and learn from mistakes that naturally occur, progress has never been out of reach. (¶ 10)

While the House of Justice's commentary here pertains to collective plans and a community's cycles of learning, this anticipation of mistakes may apply also to the smaller-scale interactions

that form the backbone of the consultative meeting. What is explicit in this statement, I suggest in the remainder of this example, is implicit also in Shoghi Effendi's guidance on Bahá'í consultation.

A deep self-analysis and a lifelong spiritual practice might be required to move a person significantly towards ideals such as “purity of motive, radiance of spirit, [and] detachment from all else save God” (¶ 11). If achievement of this ideal level of absolute love and a dialectical unity in diversity were considered prerequisites to Bahá'í consultation, then few would be able to participate. Shoghi Effendi clearly does not intend to place restrictions on who should employ consultation, which Bahá'u'lláh prescribes “in all matters” (“*Lawḥ-i-Maqṣúd*” ¶ 15); indeed, his letter's purpose is to advocate adoption of this method by all Bahá'í Assemblies, no matter how new and inexperienced.

In addition to these ideals, and consistent with consultation's intended use by all, Shoghi Effendi's letter also contains simpler, practical, and perhaps even technical guidance, accommodating consultors' flaws and adapted to varying levels of consulting and spiritual capacity. This straightforward guidance can help prevent the more destructive kinds of differences from arising among the consultors, provides means to mitigate them if they do appear, and indicates an expectation of and accommodation for a range of mistakes.

### “ENACTING ETHOS” AS A MODEL OF MANAGING MORAL MISTAKES

My reading of Shoghi Effendi's letter as anticipating and accommodating mistakes, rather than as expounding an explicit, invariable, pure, and inflexible moral code demanding nothing less than perfect adherence is based on viewing the subtle and complex observations in the guidance as weaving an implicit “ethos,” an ideal “emotional atmosphere” (Garro 301; Bateson 30, 118–59), for those seeking to practice consultation.

An ethos describes a particular set of relational and emotional values and ideals toward which people, through their small-scale interactions, continually attempt to move. Garro uses this term to describe what shapes the everyday adjustments of the parents and school-aged children in a Mexican-American family in Los Angeles. She shows how the family members constantly reshuffle the sometimes-competing demands of their family ethos of “individual contentment and family harmony.” They are “enacting [the] ethos” in a “recurring interactional dynamic” of parents with children (Garro 301). The family ethos may arise when negotiating bedtime stories, enforcing the consequences of a 10-year-old dawdling over her shower, or encouraging the daughter to finish her plate of beans before drinking any more soda; in enacting the family's ethos the parents continually maintain and occasionally reestablish harmonious relationships and contentment for the individual

children within the micro-decisions of the “local moral world” of home life (304). In any given situation, especially when an individual child's desires conflict with a schedule or practice designed to promote family harmony, one or another of the sometimes-competing values may win out, generating errors and lapses and requiring constant adaptation to imperfections. Mom's unfulfilled request for the daughter to get showered in time to make cookies together before Mom's meeting pits the child's desire (to shower later but still make cookies) against the harmonious running of the family's schedule (not to mention the individual contentment of the mother). By figuring out how to resolve the unshowered child's dilemma, rather than insisting on strict application of the mother's instructions or punishment, the family elicits instead a creative working with the particular, often-urgent situation at hand.

Garro's analysis finds in the daily life of a family something more than simply a set of shared ideals. There is a flexible, gentle influence exerted by their family ethos. Garro's model for the enactment of an ethos anticipates imperfect and occasionally lapsing attempts by the participants to decide what to do in any specific instance, the whole complex set of ethos principles providing potentially contradictory indications for each case. This model, likewise, is useful for our analysis of the implicit processes underlying the guidance on Bahá'í consultation. The implied definitions of unity and diversity, and their intertwined, dialectical

nature in Shoghi Effendi's letter can be perceived more clearly when we see these definitions as a gently influential ethos, which we expect to be enacted in imperfect and uneven efforts.

We have already seen that the guidance's description of Bahá'í consultation in terms of unreachable ideals<sup>33</sup>—such as the “prime requisites” of “purity of motive” and “detachment from all else save God”—cannot logically imply that perfect compliance is necessary in order to practice Bahá'í consultation. Elucidated by the model of “enacting ethos,” we can instead view these ideals, woven throughout the passages, as exerting a weak magnetic force, drawing the consultors softly but persistently towards them. Where pure motives, detachment, and absolute love can be seen as elements of the ethos of Bahá'í consultation, their enactment might take the form of halting, but repeated and progressive, steps toward purifying motives, gaining detachment, or building empathy and noticing co-members' virtues. In this enactment of the ethos, a spiritual environment which fosters unity in diversity can be built incrementally.

Consistent with this model of an enacted ethos, we can detect in Shoghi Effendi's letter an implied theme of consultors' repeated mistake-filled efforts within imperfect conditions. In

a separate tablet, mentioned above, ‘Abdu'l-Bahá states that consulting Assembly members “should *exert their efforts* so that no differences may occur” (*Consultation* no.18, emphasis mine); this implicitly envisions imperfect attempts rather than a perfect prevention of differences. Thus, where “no differences” is the ideal ethos, “exerting efforts” is the imperfect enactment of it. Exertion of effort—the enactment of the ethos—is similarly implicit in Shoghi Effendi's letter. While “absolute love and harmony amongst the members” is the “first condition” (i.e., the ideal ethos), the statement that “[s]hould harmony of thought and absolute unity be nonexistent, that gathering shall be dispersed” (¶ 12) implies that there is hope for the results of the gathering if even a little bit of harmony and unity exists (its imperfect enactment). While the members “must be wholly free from estrangement,” “should the least trace of estrangement prevail” (¶ 12) indicates that, if estrangement arises during the meeting, the members need to make sure it does not prevail—that it does not become predominant or widespread within the consultation, or remain so at the end of the meeting. Members are to consult “in such wise that no occasion for ill-feeling or discord may arise”; nevertheless this principle is followed immediately by guidance on how to cope with such an occasion by quelling one's own ill-feeling during the clash of differing opinions by recalling its necessity: “Should any one oppose, he must on no account feel hurt for not until matters

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33 The assertion that perfect achievement of these ideals is ultimately unreachable should not be mistaken for the view that progress towards these ideals cannot be made. Even an asymptotic, near-perfect achievement may be possible.

are fully discussed can the right way be revealed” (§ 11). The letter implicitly anticipates these thorns of disunity and hurt—perhaps even implying that they may all be “natural” human tendencies, as Shoghi Effendi states about consultors’ tendency “to take sides” in a 1949 letter (*Consultation* no. 40). It is the repeated efforts to avoid or dull the thorn pricks of consultors’ errors that makes the consultation effective.

Not only do we find elevated ideals side-by-side with their imperfect enactments in the letter, but there is also an implied embrace of a wide range of consultation skill levels and a variety of consultation conditions. We will look at two examples taken from the letter to see how the enactment of ethos is expected, and mistakes accommodated, across this range.

#### AN ETHOS OF UNRUFFLED HARMONY AND A SPECTRUM OF ENACTMENT FROM HARMONY TO DISCORD

The ideal ethos for the clash of differing opinions, as we can discern from our previous discussions, might be conceived of as an unruffled harmony. In this ideal, the group collectively heightens and attunes understandings as insights are born from the clashing and meshing of the fully expressed opinions of all members. Everyone considers all contributed ideas with calm, rational detachment, taking no offense. Unity and diversity are flawlessly reconciled. In this perfect form, the clash of differing opinions is handled peacefully and productively “in

such wise that no occasion for ill-feeling or discord may arise” (§ 11).

Conversely, counter-productive and destructive ways of handling difference—those that cause “ill-feeling” and “discord”—are implicitly anticipated even in the statement of the ideal. A process in which difference is handled destructively might be imagined as the opposite of the ideal ethos described above: it would consist of negatively-charged, personalized, judgmental conflict, devoid of love and respect, which drives members’ relationships apart. This extreme case highlights the fact that a given instance of consultation might deviate from the ideal to a slight or a severe degree.

We might usefully envision a spectrum, with the harmonious ideal and its discordant contrary constituting the opposing poles, and a range of possible flawed enactments arrayed in between them. The broader context of Shoghi Effendi’s letter, as well as an additional letter from ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, supports a reading of the letter as implicitly referring to such a spectrum of mistakes in harmony-building. In an earlier section (§ 5) of the March 1922 letter, Shoghi Effendi warns Bahá’í communities against a variety of relationship-destructive, backbiting-adjacent differences, advocating that the community “obliterate as much as possible all traces of censure, of conflicting discussions, of cooling remarks, of petty unnecessary observations.” While this part of Shoghi Effendi’s guidance is not specific to consultation, we might consider avoidance of these behaviors

as ways in which the Assembly members are to build the “*first condition*” of “*absolute love*” and perhaps also the “*prime requisites*” of “*purity of motive*” (¶ 12 and ¶ 11). Crucially, the emphasis on removing *as much of these as possible* implies once again that a perfect enactment is not necessary to achieve the core function of managing differences while enhancing unity.

A similar implication arises from the passage cited above in which ‘Abdu’l-Bahá writes of the need to “exert efforts.” He goes on to clarify where the furthest point of acceptable discord within consultation lies:

The honoured members of the Spiritual Assembly should exert their efforts so that no differences may occur, and if such differences do occur, they should not reach the point of causing conflict, hatred and antagonism, which lead to threats. When you notice that a stage has been reached when enmity and threats are about to occur, you should immediately postpone discussion of the subject, until wranglings, disputations, and loud talk vanish, and a propitious time is at hand. (*Consultation* no. 18)

This passage again implies a spectrum, between the ideal where no differences occur and the point of conflict, hatred, antagonism, and threats. Within the spectrum defined by these poles, there is a wide expanse of less-than-ideal consultation, within which repair is possible through the members’

exerting efforts to (re)establish enough unity to enable the clash of differing opinions. Even if a group nears the negative extreme of the spectrum, and experiences “wranglings, disputations, and loud talk,” repair is still possible—although the appropriate repair involves the relatively extreme step of delaying the consultation. A growing estrangement severe enough to require shutting down the consultation topic before the clash of differing opinions has completed its work can be seen as the extreme boundary beyond which the meeting is irreparable.<sup>34</sup>

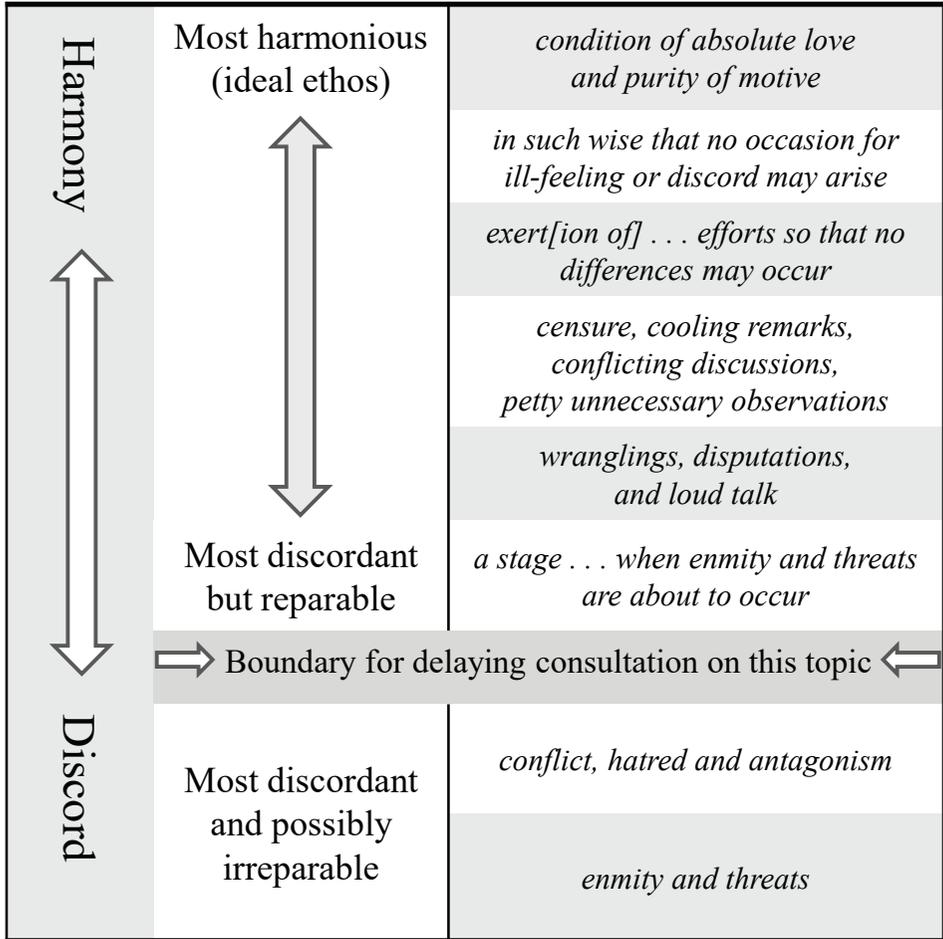
We might visualize a spectrum of consultative conditions, from harmony to discord, as follows, with the ideal

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34 It is worth noting that simply taking a vote is *not* prescribed as the solution to a heated disagreement, whether it reaches the point indicated by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá or not. Taking a vote and abiding by the majority decision could be seen as a way to create harmony “if . . . differences of opinion should arise.,” that is, in context, when the differing opinions are not harmonizing and meshing. I suggest, however, that this should only happen in the later stage of consultation, “after discussion,” during the period in which consultors are attempting to come to a collective conclusion; in other words, after the conclusion of the clash of differing opinions (¶ 11). If an Assembly develops the habit of moving too quickly to a vote in order to cool down emotions, it risks concluding that the issue has been rationally resolved and need not be taken up again. Using voting as an escape from the discomfort of disagreement, then, can become an inadvertent means for suppressing minority opinions.

ethos representing the extreme of harmony, the irreparable condition the extreme of discord, and the expected imperfect enactments of the ethos arrayed in between:

Figure A: ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s guidance on harmony and discord in consultation visualized as a spectrum. All passages are quoted from *Bahá’í Administration* and from *Consultation: A Compilation*.



Seeing these various levels of harmony and discord arrayed on a spectrum allows us, practically speaking, to detect trends of growing discord or of budding harmony within a given consultation meeting. The spectrum shows that “loud talk” is more concerning than “petty unnecessary observations” and less concerning than a gathering storm of threats, and differentiates the kinds of discord that

demand “efforts” to build a more unified spirit for the consultation from those that require the consultation to be delayed. Additionally, a spectrum suggests the possibility of near-infinite gradations. It can accommodate other, unmentioned signs of discord or harmony such as those already discussed that social science may help to identify, and which also may require the members’ efforts to quell or

foster. A spectrum expands our sensitivities and imaginations, alerting us to warning signs that the potential risks of full, diverse, differing expression are being realized, and need to be immersed in greater unity. Bearing this spectrum in mind can help consultants maintain optimism about the possibility of improvement, learning, repair, and mitigation in the face of mistake-making in the enactment of the ideal ethos of harmony, particularly since the extreme boundaries of reparable discord are clearly marked. Consultants are assured implicitly that even “wranglings,” a series of “cooling remarks,” or some hurt feelings can still be repaired.

AN ETHOS OF VIRTUE-MODERATED  
SPEECH AND A SPECTRUM  
OF ENACTMENT FROM IDEALLY-  
MODERATED TO UNMODERATED

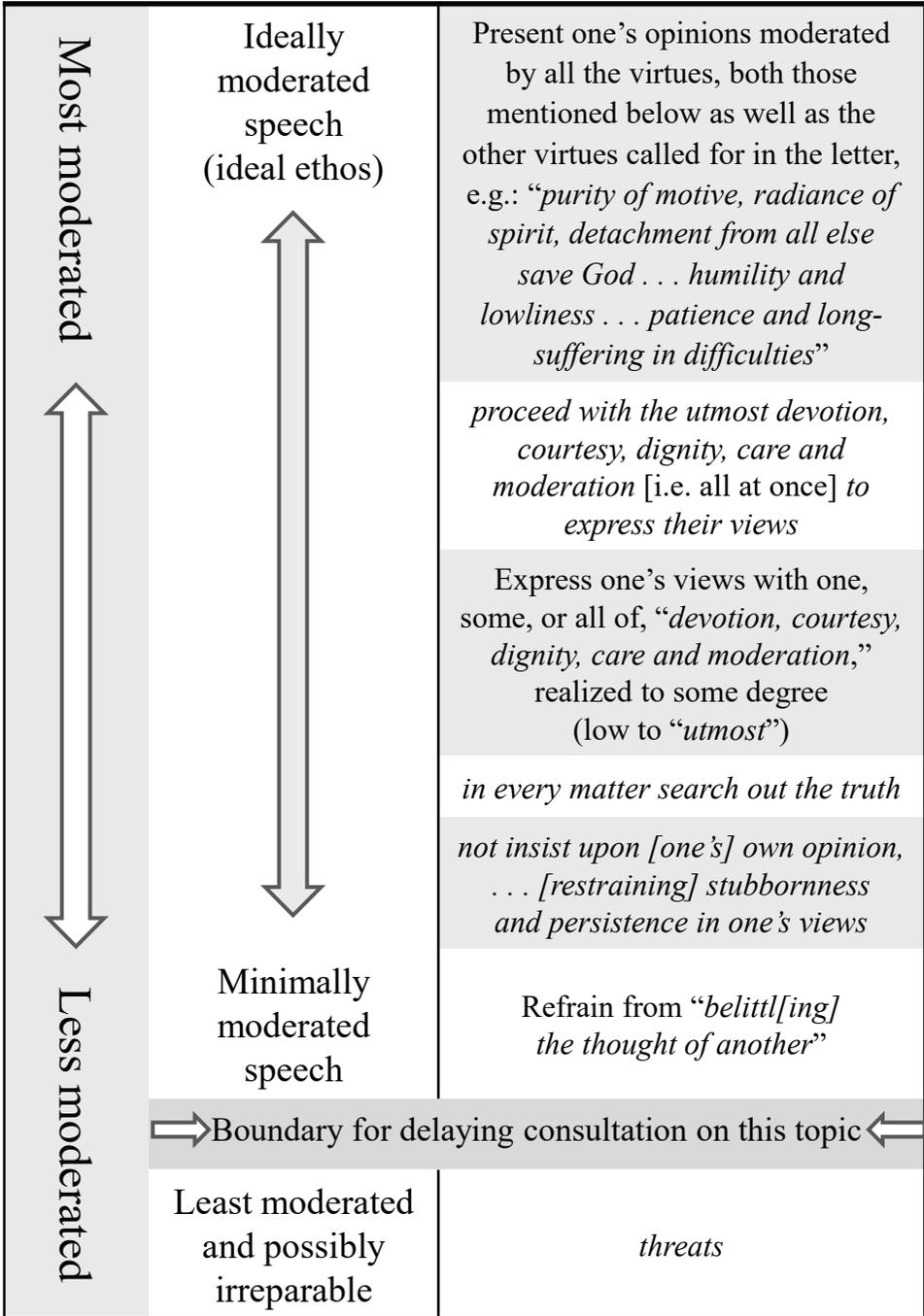
The second example of an ethos of enactment relates to the ideal of moderation of speech. As Bahá'u'lláh writes, “Human utterance is an essence which aspireth to exert its influence and needeth moderation. . . . As to its moderation, this hath to be combined with tact and wisdom as prescribed in the Holy Scriptures and Tablets” (“Lawḥ-i-Maqṣúd” ¶ 29). Consciousness of unity ideally moderates speech in consultation (Smith and Ghaemmaghani 14), and moderation of speech in turn nurtures unity among the members. This theme of moderation is addressed in Shoghi Effendi’s letter, which also can be seen as describing an implicit spectrum involving an ideal ethos and its imperfect enactment.

Ideally-moderated speech entwines several virtues:

*They must then proceed with the utmost devotion, courtesy, dignity, care and moderation to express their views. They must in every matter search out the truth and not insist upon their own opinion, for stubbornness and persistence in one’s views will lead ultimately to discord and wrangling... The honored members must with all freedom express their own thoughts, and it is in no wise permissible for one to belittle the thought of another; nay, he must with moderation set forth the truth. (¶ 11)*

Courtesy, humility, truth-seeking motives, respect, detachment, control over one’s emotions, recognition of the social and intellectual cues occurring in the meeting—these are the virtues and skills of an ideal consultant. Of course, all the virtues and relationships discussed in the letter moderate the quality of speech during consultation, but we can consider the ones mentioned here as especially important for the moderation of speech in order to build unity among the members. I suggest the following tentative ordering of virtues and skills as corresponding to more or less moderate speech; while the specific ordering is certainly open to rearrangement, the goal is to again highlight the range of ways in which the ethos (of moderation, in this case) can foster a productive consultation even when imperfectly enacted:

Figure B: ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s guidance on moderation of speech in consultation visualized as a spectrum. All passages are quoted from *Bahá’í Administration* and from *Consultation: A Compilation*.



In practice, within a consultation meeting each individual consultor will have their own mix of these strengths and weaknesses, and in varying intensities. Yet, broadly speaking, there is a rough continuum of moderate speech during consultation, spanning from its ideal ethos through its various imperfect enactments.

As with the discord-harmony spectrum, this moderated speech spectrum covers a wide range of behavior and attitudes, from the nuanced presentation of “courtesy, dignity, care and moderation” to the rudimentary non-belittling of others’ opinions. The consultors’ skills and virtues will likely improve with more practice, and as they observe their fellow consultors employing them skillfully. Participants in any given consultation meeting will likely exhibit a range of combinations of moderating virtues, each expressed to a different level. One consultor may excel most in courtesy while another may always search out the truth—perhaps, sometimes, without tact. This skill diversity generates opportunities for all the members to learn and improve, and for accompaniment to occur in cycles of humble collective learning. The implied spectrum in the letter indicates that consultation can proceed well enough despite an imperfectly enacted ethos of moderated speech, which enables this learning. No one error in speech (or expression of discord, as in the previous spectrum) necessarily dooms the consultative clash of differing opinions—at least up to the outer boundary of enmity and threats.

As long as enough of any mistakes that cause some degree of estrangement are remedied within the consultation meeting—so that “the least trace of estrangement” does not “prevail”—there is hope for an emergent truth to spark out of the clash of differing opinions.

#### EXAMPLE 2 DISCUSSION

Bahá’í consultation’s power, as we saw in Example 1, arises from the transformative gathering, unveiling, and clashing of differing opinions. Example 2 demonstrates how, although this clash of differing opinions risks disunifying the group, a dialectic of unity and diversity moderates these risks. Achieving the ideal balance of unity and diversity hinges on participants’ adept virtues, social acumen, and skillful communication; however, consultation nevertheless can be effectively used despite substantial mistakes.

Using Garro’s “enacting ethos” model as a lens reveals that the conflict-moderating principles and skills which can catalyze the unity-diversity dialectic are presented in two forms in Shoghi Effendi’s letter: first, as an ideal ethos which magnetically draws consultors toward its high standard, and, second, as imperfect enactments of this ideal, providing examples at various skill levels. The letter’s inclusion of imperfect enactments signals that mistakes are expected and that consultation is not too fragile to handle errors. This welcomes relatively unskilled or inexperienced consultors to participate in consultation.

Complementing the welcomed mistakes, Bahá'í consultation champions a love and unity that helps to repair relationships after mistakes, and thus encourages learning through experience and the achievement of transformative interrogation. An environment of love buffers consultors, enabling them to learn how to recognize when differences become destructive, and how to enact better versions of consultation's virtues and skills. This love and unity will be explored further in Example 3.

#### EXAMPLE 3. THE ASSEMBLY

##### OPENING PRAYER AS A MINIATURE RITE OF PASSAGE

The blessings of Bahá'u'lláh are a  
shoreless sea. . . .

The waves of that sea are  
continually lapping against  
the hearts of the friends . . .

until the heart giveth way,  
and willing or not,

turneth humbly in prayer  
unto the Kingdom of the Lord.

—'Abdu'l-Bahá  
(*Selections* 162:2)

Shoghi Effendi includes in his letter a prayer which 'Abdu'l-Bahá advises Assembly members to recite "*whenever ye enter the council-chamber*" (qtd. in ¶ 8). How might this prayer be related to consultation? Why did Shoghi Effendi and 'Abdu'l-Bahá prescribe it as the Assembly members' preparation for the consultation meeting?

I argue that the Assembly opening prayer does not merely state and

reiterate key themes relevant to consultation, but facilitates their internalization: that is, the prayer's structure may adjust understandings, feelings, and especially motivations in the consultors, facilitating their adoption of the complex consultation guidance examined earlier. I first briefly survey the themes of the prayer, before exploring how the prayer enables their internalization.

#### THE PRAYER'S EXPLICIT THEMES: SERVING GOD THROUGH THE PATH OF UNITY

The prayer sets out the overarching purpose for the coming Assembly meeting, that of translating the Bahá'í Revelation into service. It ushers the consultors to an explicit turning towards God, inviting detachment from concerns other than God, calling them to expect divine assistance, and refocusing their attention on service to God. Invocations to God punctuate the whole prayer, with no fewer than five interjections (such as "O God, my God!") in this nine-sentence prayer. "[I]n this glorious Day"—the day of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation—the purpose of the members' coming together is clearly stated as "exalt[ing] [God's] Word amidst mankind." To "achieve supreme victory," members ask to be made "the signs of [His] Divine Guidance, the Standards of [His] exalted Faith," and "servants to [His] mighty Covenant," building into the personal practice of the members virtues, service, and support for the institutions of the Bahá'í Revelation.

These explicit statements mark out a clear purpose for the coming consultation meeting: translating Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation into active attempts at building the world anew. We see this purpose reflected a few paragraphs later in Shoghi Effendi's letter, when 'Abdu'l-Bahá lists exemplar topics for an Assembly consultation:

*Discussions must all be confined to spiritual matters that pertain to the training of souls, the instruction of children, the relief of the poor, the help of the feeble throughout all classes in the world, kindness to all peoples, the diffusion of the fragrances of God and the exaltation of His Holy Word. (¶ 12)*

Each of these discussion topics—whether as specific as children's education or as broad as “the diffusion of the fragrances of God”—center around translating the divine remedies into service through the Assembly's leadership.

In addition to defining the purpose of the meeting, the prayer lays out the path the consultors need to follow: building unity amongst themselves. Four paragraphs after the Assembly opening prayer in Shoghi Effendi's letter, 'Abdu'l-Bahá describes the “first condition” of “absolute love and harmony” and “absolute unity.” 'Abdu'l-Bahá illustrates this ideal unity ethos through nature metaphors, calling on the members to “*manifest in themselves the Unity of God, for they are the waves of one sea, the drops of one river,*

*the stars of one heaven, the rays of one sun, the trees of one orchard, the flowers of one garden*” (¶ 12). These unity metaphors plainly echo those used in the Assembly opening prayer that the reader of the letter will have just perused: “*that we may unite even as the waves of one sea and become merged together as the rays of Thine effulgent Light*” (¶ 8). The possibly metonymic repetition of unity metaphors of sea waves and light rays may suggest that the opening prayer is, by extension, also calling the consultors to the ethos of absolute love and unity.

Implicitly, absolute love and unity among the Assembly members during the meeting and beyond will facilitate the translation of the Bahá'í Revelation into active service. Achieving the divinely aided “supreme victory” will require the consultors to “[manifest] the spirit of union throughout the world,” and that unity-building clearly starts among the Assembly members.

#### THE PRAYER AS A STRUCTURED EXPERIENCE THAT GENERATES INTERNALIZATION OF DEEPER UNDERSTANDING AND MORAL OBLIGATION

We have seen how risky the necessary clash of differing opinions can be to the members' relationships, and how complex (though forgiving) the dance of unity with diversity that tends to these relationships. In the remainder of this example, anthropological theories will shine a light on the prayer's implicit mechanism for helping the

consultors internalize a kind of spirit that might most effectively mitigate these risks and inspire them to keep trying. That spirit is absolute love and unity, which we might again understand as an element of the ideal ethos that is asymptotically achievable. Beyond its substantive content, I argue, the text contains a built-in mechanism that shapes the prayer experience: it molds motive and mood to generate a desire in the consultors to embrace a more absolute, unconditional form of unity as the path to achieve the Assembly's purpose, and can thus foster an understanding and motivation useful to the consultation meeting.

To transform their practices, people must do more than simply recognize a goal, become familiar with a new practice, or understand the logic of a process (Strauss and Quinn 47, 93). In anthropological terms, there must be an *internalization*—in the case of the practice of Bahá'í consultation, the internalization of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's guidance, which transforms it from mere words to motivation and action (Spiro 2–9; Strauss, "Models and Motives" 1–2; Strauss and Quinn 9, 101–10, 258 n. 8). A scriptural idea's potential to affect the world is dependent on it traveling along a chain of deeper and deeper internalization: the ideas in the text need to be encountered, understood, become motivating, and get translated into behavior. Melford Spiro illustrates this principle by talking about different Christians' attitudes towards the principle of care for the poor. One

may merely acknowledge that charity is good, giving lip service to the principle, while another—say, Mother Teresa—may reorganize their whole lives to support the poorest people.

There are, of course, many ways to parse the meaning of this Assembly prayer, and its multivocality no doubt plays out in people's experiences of it, providing connections to varying life experiences, understandings, and situations. In what follows, I map out how its structure, shifting tone, and figurative language might foster a shared, overlapping experience for the consultors praying together. Why are there metaphors of resplendent stars, surging seas, flowing streams, and breezy, fruit-laden trees in the middle of a prayer to open the consultative meetings of Assemblies? Informed by anthropological theory, I explore how these literary elements might affect the experience of the Assembly members who recite this prayer—together, repeatedly—at the start of their meetings, and how it interacts with the other consultation guidance presented in Shoghi Effendi's letter.

#### THE STRUCTURE AND EFFECTS OF A RITE OF PASSAGE

In this reading of the prayer, I suggest that those who pray it together take a collective journey through six distinct and ordered steps corresponding to six sections of the prayer, which group together further into three stages. This three-stage journey follows the basic structure of a rite of passage, as

understood in anthropological theory, with a *pre-liminal* stage of separation; a *liminal* stage which generates *communitas*, an experience of a kind of unity; and a *post-liminal* stage which reintegrates the members into an orientation towards action. Viewed as a rite of passage in miniature, the prayer gently elicits a metamorphosis of the members' understanding and motivation, spurring them to leave behind individual concerns in order to embrace a heady vision of collective effectiveness.

Rites of passage intend to elicit psychological evolution and social changes in participants. The quintessential rite of passage restructures a person's social role and identity from child to adult, with others aimed at different kinds of social transformations—for instance to elevate someone to serve as tribal chief (*Drama* 13). Victor Turner argues that the rite's tripartite structure, discovered by Arnold van Gennep by comparing rites of passage across multiple cultures, comprises a kind of psychologically-salient cultural technology. Through the three stages of the rite, initiates journey from one state to another (hence *passage*). The first stage (pre-liminal) separates the initiate from everyday life and the customary social order, the middle stage (liminal) effects the desired transformation of the initiate, and the final and third stage (post-liminal) reintegrates the initiate back into society, in their new role.

The middle, liminal stage—a stressful intermediary condition for all

participants<sup>35</sup>—upends the social order, opening the participants' awareness to social potentialities beyond the daily status quo (Turner, *Ritual Process* 94–130; van Gennep 115); it suspends the societal norms the participants normally live by (Turner, *Drama* 13), generating an egalitarian awareness of the essential bond among all humans (Turner, *Ritual Process* 96). This effervescent experience of equality, which Turner calls “communitas” (96–97), allows “periodical reclassifications of reality and [humankind's] relationship to society, nature, and culture” (128–29). Revitalized by their experience of this mind-opening *communitas*, participants return to the world of action ready to put into practice what they have learned. The liminal stage gives the participants a temporary, expansive feeling of oneness and potentiality, and with it, a yearning to translate this oneness into reality.

That these rituals are so widespread across cultures indicates that they may be leveraging universal psychological susceptibilities to address an inherent feature of social structures—the periodic need for individuals to transition from one role to another—by facilitating the adaptation of the individual and the community to that transition. Might the Assembly opening prayer have the

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35 Liminal stages typically incorporate bodily and emotional stressors for the initiates, such as pain, isolation, severe and extraordinary experiences, or hallucinogenic drugs; the shift in embodied state aids in shifting the initiates' psychological and spiritual state.

potential to tap into similar psychological and social levers?<sup>36</sup>

The Assembly opening prayer provides a transformational experience *in miniature*, I suggest, both because of its simplicity and short duration, and because rather than enabling one large, single transition as in most rites of passage—from, say, “child” to “adult”—it has a gentle transformative effect, gaining in power over time as the prayer is repeated and the ensuing Assembly consultation is attempted. The opening

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36 While suggesting that the prayer might be employing these levers, I am not arguing that the Assembly opening prayer is a ritual, according to Bahá'í definitions. There are strong warnings in the Bahá'í writings against developing rituals beyond what Shoghi Effendi characterizes as the “absolute minimum” to which “Bahá'u'lláh has reduced” them (*Importance* no. 58). He specifically tells us to guard against developing rituals or ritualistic ways around reciting prayers (*Importance* no. 35) and “to avoid all forms of rigidity and uniformity in matters of worship” (*Prayer and Devotional Life* no.35). With few exceptions, there is no rigid requirement to use a particular prayer or passage for particular occasions (*Principles* 14), including this Assembly opening prayer. Indeed, this is not even the only opening prayer option currently available in the English language Bahá'í prayer books. Using the literature on rites of passage as a lens through which to view the prayer instead suggests that, since these rites are so universal, the form taps into something about human individual and social nature that promotes the transformation of understandings and motivation.

prayer plays out as waves breaking on a shoreline, gradually reshaping it through repetition. Any Bahá'í serving on a Spiritual Assembly will be familiar with this prayer, and will likely have experienced it tens of times in a single year; a Bahá'í who has served on Assemblies for many years will have prayed it a significant number of times and will have experienced it through different life events and stages.

Repetition does not automatically cause internalization. Whitehouse points out that some kinds of religious repetition may actually dull agency and subjectivity, “produc[ing] tedium and lower[ed] motivation” (9), causing the audience to “switch off”—perhaps simply recalling the embodied movements associated with the repetition and forgetting the meaning. This can cause the audience to stop generating new ways to understand and apply the knowledge embedded in the practice or recitation (5), or even to stop pondering why it is being repeated (94). Shoghi Effendi's warnings against uniformity and rigidity in Bahá'í practices help guard against the kind of tedious, rigidly enacted repetition Whitehouse observes.

On the other hand, does an experience need to be shocking or traumatic to facilitate internalization (Whitehouse 4)? Given the claim I make here about the tripartite rite of passage drawing on cultural levers of transformation, it is important to acknowledge that I am also claiming that a miniature version of one will still exert powers of transformation. Through the same tripartite

structure as a conventional rite of passage, and by pulling on the same cultural levers of transformation, the gentle breezes of the Assembly opening prayer can generate, over time, some of the power of the gale-force winds of a typical rite of passage, effecting a similar transformation from one state to another.

Other anthropological theories lend support to this claim. Religious practice in general has the power to effect a gentler kind of internalization than a traditional rite of passage, including the kind of internalization that persists over time. As anthropologist Clifford Geertz argues, religion's distinction from philosophy is that it does not merely describe but shapes its participants' social and psychological reality, and does so by generating specific, recurring dispositions. Religion does this, in part, by generating both "a persisting set of motivations" and "a recurring mood." These motives<sup>37</sup> and moods are specific, he argues, to each religion, and each configures distinct sets of qualities (93–98). Motives can be understood as the more explicit direction given by tenets and principles of a faith, such as the clearly-stated purpose of Bahá'í consultation and its procedural guidelines; they "describe a certain overall course" and "are 'made meaningful' with reference to the ends toward which they are conceived to conduce" (97). Moods, in contrast, are "like fogs, they just settle

and lift; like scents, suffuse and evaporate. When present they are totalistic: if one is sad everything and everybody seems dreary" (97). In other words, moods arise more stealthily, wordlessly coloring perception, emotion, and thought.

Jason Throop expands on Geertz's notion of mood, coining the term "moral mood." A moral mood generates an intermittent, lightly emotional experiencing of one's moral place in the world, bringing intangible and ambiguous notions briefly to the surface of consciousness. A moral mood reveals "moral concerns in flux. . . . inhabit[ing] an ambivalent existential expanse where the possible, the ideal, and the actual coalesce in rather complicated ways" and allows for "shifting and differing forms of moral reflection" (Throop 70–71). A moral mood contrasts with a harsh and explicit moral self-judgment—such as shame—that might arise from breaking an explicit moral code. The lightness and fleeting self-consciousness of a moral mood allow an individual to grapple with ambiguity through a gradual self-evaluation over time (Throop 70).

This understanding of moral mood resonates with the kind of moral engagement elicited by the opening prayer. Rather than presenting an unambiguous, urgent choice, this moral engagement is atmospheric, immersive, and repeated through regular recitation.

By combining the concept of rite of passage with the idea of moral mood, then, we can gain valuable analytical

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37 I follow Geertz in using "motivation" and "motive" interchangeably.

perspective on the power of this prayer to effect transformation over time. While retaining the tripartite structure of the rite of passage, the prayer does not grab hold of the devotee and irrevocably transform them. If a prototypical rite of passage is a rogue wave washing people off a jetty into the water, the opening prayer—understood as a moral-mood-infused, miniature rite of passage—is the softer surf that gently reshapes the shore.

#### THE ASSEMBLY OPENING PRAYER

With these anthropological lenses in mind, we turn now to the opening prayer. Before discussing how overarching themes and features of the prayer interact with the theories just reviewed, let us walk the path the prayer lays out, taking note of its lush details and breathing in its fragrant poetry.

Figure C shows how the prayer maps on to the tripartite structure.

Figure C: One possible interpretation of the opening prayer

### PRE-LIMINAL STAGE

*Start,  
sacralization*

SECTION A  
Preface

*Whenever ye enter the council-chamber, recite this prayer with a heart throbbing with the love of God and a tongue purified from all but His remembrance, that the All-Powerful may graciously aid you to achieve supreme victory.*

*Separation  
from society*

SECTION B  
Recognizing  
existing  
commonalities:  
“we are”

*O God, my God! We are servants of Thine that have turned with devotion to Thy Holy Face, that have detached ourselves from all besides Thee in this glorious Day. We have gathered in this Spiritual Assembly, united in our views and thoughts, with our purposes harmonized to exalt Thy Word amidst mankind.*

SECTION C  
Affirming  
aspirational  
ideals:  
“make us”

*O Lord, our God! Make us the signs of Thy Divine Guidance, the Standards of Thine exalted Faith amongst men, servants to Thy mighty Covenant, O Thou our Lord Most High, manifestations of Thy Divine Unity in Thine Abhá Kingdom,*

## LIMINAL STAGE

SECTION D  
Vision of  
paradise:  
“aid us  
to become”

*and resplendent stars shining upon all regions. Lord! Aid us to become seas surging with the billows of Thy wondrous Grace, streams flowing from Thine all-glorious Heights, goodly fruits upon the Tree of Thy heavenly Cause, trees waving through the breezes of Thy Bounty in Thy celestial Vineyard.*

## POST-LIMINAL STAGE

*Reincorporation  
into society*

SECTION E  
New requests,  
new ideals:  
“make us . . .  
that we may  
become”

*Reflection of  
liminal stage*

*O God! Make our souls dependent upon the Verses of Thy Divine Unity, our hearts cheered with the outpourings of Thy Grace, that we may unite even as the waves of one sea and become merged together as the rays of Thine effulgent Light; that our thoughts, our views, our feelings may become as one reality, manifesting the spirit of union throughout the world.*

*Finish*

SECTION F  
Coda

*Thou art the Gracious, the Bountiful, the Bestower, the Almighty, the Merciful, the Compassionate.<sup>38</sup>*

## THE PRE-LIMINAL STAGE

*THE FIRST STEP OF THE JOURNEY  
(SECTION A): GATHERING TOGETHER  
AND TURNING TOWARD GOD*

38 ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Bahá’í Prayers* 300–01 The original source from which Shoghi Effendi excerpted the prayer must have been the letter that is reproduced more fully in *Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá* (86–87).

The preface (Section A) commandingly launches the prayer experience: ‘Abdu’l-Bahá not only presents instructions on when and where to recite it, but powerfully evokes how

and why. The repetition of the prayer, in the group setting, at the beginning of each meeting provides a trigger to remember and re-embody a personal and collective history of saying, thinking, and feeling this prayer; each encounter with it reinforces insights and feelings experienced before, and provides opportunities to articulate new connections to and within it. The preface also serves another function commonly found at the beginning of rites of passage: it establishes a more formal attitude and sacralizes the space, disengaging the participants from the everyday, social world (van Gennepe 67). While most Local Spiritual Assemblies today will not have a dedicated Assembly meeting room, the prayer opens the figurative door to a sacred place (van Gennepe 192): the ordinary room becomes the council-chamber.

How are the members to enter that chamber? What alterations of their outlook and behavior are called for? The prayer's preface lays out the appropriate emotion ("heart throbbing with the love of God"), restricts talk to the appropriate speech ("tongue purified from all but His remembrance"), reminds members of their humble dependence on God's assistance ("that [God] may graciously aid you"), and stresses they should aim to be effective in the work of the Cause ("to supreme victory"). To attempt to achieve these most personal of conditions, the members must draw on their individual spiritual work, work which has happened primarily outside of the

council-chamber.<sup>39</sup> They expand spiritual capacities they have been working on, and they banish other capacities (such as by restricting the topics of their speech). The transformative process built into the opening prayer begins by calling forth the participants' individual spirituality.

*THE SECOND STEP*  
*(SECTION B): RECOGNIZING*  
*EXISTING COMMONALITIES*

In the next step in this journey (Section B), the prayer reminds the Assembly members, as they come together in the council-chamber, of all they already have in common with each other. The operative verb phrases in this section—"we are" and "we have"—speak to what they are "being" and "doing" in common: "We are servants of [God]," we have already "turned with devotion to God." We have set aside the time and shown up: we "have gathered" together. We can recognize that we start with a fund of unity and harmony in our views, thoughts, and purposes. Our devotion to God finds unified expression in our shared purpose to exalt God's Word amidst all of humankind.<sup>40</sup>

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39 This function of soliciting a shift in spiritual condition and attention is shared with the second section, the beginning of the prayer proper, which calls for detachment from anything but God: "We are servants of [God] . . . detach[ing] ourselves from all besides Thee."

40 Note how the general purpose of the Assembly meeting, as discussed earlier, is interwoven with the prayer journey. This

We understand that we are dealing with ideal aspirations: to “[turn] with devotion” to God’s “Holy Face” and to “[detach] ourselves from all besides” God is a level of detachment and focus we are more likely to achieve partially and intermittently than completely and perpetually. We understand that these ideals are likely to be shared among the members, whom the community has called on for this service. Despite our diversity in social roles and life positions, we are reminded in the prayer experience of our basic unity as similar individuals. These ideals can also establish aspirational goals for the relationships building within and outside the meetings, indicating rough edges that might need sanding in order to make the Assembly run more smoothly.

*THE THIRD STEP (SECTION C):  
RECOGNIZING EXISTING IDEALS*

Section C shifts the prayer from statements about what “we are” to requests of God to “make us,” specifically to make us into conduits of God’s bounties. The set of requests signals a need for openness to transformation, specifically transformation under God’s influence. The prayer once again shifts the attention of the supplicants: having become alert to their commonalities in Section B, their attention now turns to asking God for a series of powerful

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comports with van Gennep’s observation that rites of passage often incorporate purposes specific to the targeted life transition, such as promoting fertility in a marriage ritual (11–12).

transformations. Indeed, most of the rest of the prayer consists in requests for transformation, in three distinct tones (corresponding to Sections C, D, and E).

Section C can be seen as a statement of four ways in which to advance the common purpose of the members, expressed in the previous section, “to exalt [God’s] Word amidst mankind.” Members can become visible, noticeable supporters and conduits of God’s laws and guidance by becoming “signs,” “Standards,” and “manifestations” of divine bounties, and “servants” to the Covenant. These are roles that individuals can take on while acting alone, even if the group is not able to adopt them collectively. They call individuals to excellence in channeling the remedies of Bahá’u’lláh’s Revelation through living it and communicating it (and, by implication, understanding its content). The potentiality of fulfilling these roles grows in the soil of Bahá’í daily practice—of reading, meditating, praying, teaching, serving, and supporting Bahá’í administration—and the prayer thus implicitly communicates the feasibility, through straightforward obedience, of the individual’s contribution to the Assembly’s work. Signs, standards, and manifestations are typically understood as visual representations of abstract or hidden phenomena. Through these terms, the prayer emphasizes how living a Bahá’í life—inwardly and outwardly—can serve as a mode of communication to the community; it thus illuminates these Bahá’í

practices in the light of their effect on society. The degree to which these ideals are put into practice by individual Bahá'ís becomes implicated in their moral responsibility to demonstrate Bahá'u'lláh's guidance to the society at large. In the context of beginning a meeting of the Spiritual Assembly, this section of the prayer shifts the suppliant's mind toward the function of the Assembly as a conduit of guidance and a standard-bearer for the community at large. Viewed in this light, this section takes on a largely straightforward and practical tone.

#### THE LIMINAL STAGE

##### *THE FOURTH STEP (SECTION D): A METAPHORIC LEAP TO A PARADISE*

As the long, paragraph-like sentence that begins in Section C enters its final phrase, the tone dramatically transfigures, signaling a new stage of the prayer experience. Five paradisiacal images take the reins of the prayer's journey, and leave behind the readily understood, the pragmatic, the straightforward, and the individualized tasks. The first image—of stars—maintains its connection to the sentence it ends, by painting a vision of members distributing divine gifts “upon all regions,” but its tone has already morphed, conjuring up a euphoric vision. The prayer glides from metaphor to metaphor, asking God to make us “resplendent stars,” to “aid us to become seas surging,” “streams flowing,” “goodly fruits,” and “trees waving through the

breezes.” Powerful forces arising from God's grace and bounty are envisioned as potentially emanating through the divinely-aided beseechers. The new tone—more poetic, more sensorial, multivocal and flexible—befits these images of paradise.

Together these evocative metaphors compose an ecosystem of beauty and bounty, and evoke the easy fulfillment of health and basic needs through plentiful food (fruits, vineyard, seas), water (streams), mild weather (breezes), and, implicitly, clean and clear air (resplendent stars) and fertile, clean soil (goodly fruits). Sensory codes (Lévi-Strauss 157–63) of all sorts—visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory, tactile, kinesthetic—paint a vivid scene that imaginations can immerse themselves in and articulate by drawing on knowledge of the world of being as “we ponder each created thing” (Bahá'u'lláh, *Seven Valleys* 32). This vibrant habitat carries a natural stirring: the stars twinkle and radiate light; the seas surge with tides and waves, alive with myriad creatures; the streams twist and turn, carrying rain and snow melt to downstream locales, delighting ears with the sounds of running water; the trees luxuriate in temperate weather, dripping with nutritious fruits that feed people and wildlife while spreading seeds to places far afield; the breezes ventilate the air, freshening it with oxygen from the trees, filling lungs of humans and animals alike, and spreading the fruit blossom fragrances. The rhythms and kinetics align with the dynamic spirit built into Bahá'í principles and

methods: the beauty of one entity providing for another, reflecting the joy of service, or the pulsating evolution arising from a posture of learning with its cyclic, consultative action, evaluation, and adjustment. So central to human health and existence is this kind of abundant, animated environment that this imagined landscape may trigger evolutionarily-adapted cognitive algorithms (Cosmides and Tooby) which have guided our desires for millennia toward what promotes life, health, and vibrancy. This stage of the prayer seems to leverage our in-built attraction to such natural resources to trigger an emotional, ecstatic desire for what the prayer, as a whole, is offering.

In this way, the prayer readies the members to allow in the offered spiritual transformation. In the relaxed but alert, meditative and focused state of prayer, visualizing and otherwise imaginatively experiencing this particular multisensorial paradise fosters a certain mood—an optimism arising out of the sense of security and fruitful dynamism and a yearning for the abundance and beauty depicted in the prayer. This section of the prayer assigns no specific, pragmatic tasks; rather, it paints an emotive sense of the group's potentiality for transmitting divine bounty to the world (its purpose) and for a fundamental unity (its path). This stage of the prayer experience does not center intellectual meaning-making. As with traditional rites of passage, the liminal stage generates an embodied shift; unlike most rites of passage, the prayer's liminal stage generates this shift not

with bodily stress but with imagination and desire, enlarging and uplifting emotion and mood; it swaps out the pain of a typical rite of passage for pleasure, and deprivation for abundance. The consultants engage with particular processes and patterns, absorbing them and normalizing them subconsciously; they are synchronized with the prayer's spiritual and intellectual content but do not demand rationalization. The prayer engages souls without moving them away from heart to mind.

Those praying sense they are sailing beyond as-yet-unexplored horizons, encountering ideas and experiences so new and unarticulated that they break the bounds of regular language and require instead the use of metaphors. While "language has words and phrases only for familiar notions" (Langer, qtd. in Bregnbæk and Gammeltoft 244), metaphor allows language to allude to what it cannot fully capture. It casts "intelligible realities which have no outward form or place"—like love, or magnetic fields—into the language of the senses to approximate an abstract reality whose essence can never be fully described ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 93–96). Like a walled garden with an opened gate, sensing what cannot be described beckons curiosity, inquiry, and exploration.

The metaphors in this section implicitly convey equality and reciprocity, values congruent with the aim of transformative interrogation, and with the democratization and reciprocity of the ideal clash of differing opinions.

This section asks God to “[a]id us to become” metaphorical forces—stars, seas, streams, fruits, trees—imparting God’s bounty. Implicitly, if all of those who are praying spiritually transform into these diverse, interconnected elements of the depicted paradise, then they will transform also into serving each other: seas giving up their water for rain, streams watering trees, breezes spreading seeds. Embodying diverse elements of a divine paradise, they are equally humble before God the Creator. The social order is thus reorganized, as the liminality “liquif[ies]” the structure of roles and statuses “into a living form of *communitas*” (Turner, *Drama* 251) and engages the oneness of humankind’s untapped potential to completely reconceptualize relationships (Universal House of Justice, 2 Mar. 2013 ¶ 6). The next section of the prayer builds upon this section’s theme of equality.

#### THE POST-LIMINAL STAGE

*THE FIFTH STEP (SECTION E):  
REINCORPORATION TO THE WORLD OF  
DECISION-MAKING AND ACTION WITH  
NEW REQUESTS FOR NEW IDEALS*

From this vision of paradise, the prayer moves, post-liminally, back into a more pragmatic, explicitly principled tone. A new set of requests is made in Section E, asking God to further refashion the members. If the previous section is viewed as triggering a desire for the divine paradise, this fifth section answers the natural follow-up question: “How

do I get to this paradise?” Somewhat like the beginning of the prayer (Sections A-C) with its emphasis on personal spiritual actions, this section begins by asking God to “[m]ake our souls dependent upon the Verses . . . [and] our hearts cheered with . . . Thy grace.” These two requests might be seen as shaping mind and feeling respectively, with the first promoting intellectual attachment to and use of the Revelatory guidance, and the second the emotional fortitude of confidence in God’s grace and providence.

Suddenly resurfacing mid-sentence from out of these pragmatic principles, the tone and metaphorical language of the paradisiacal liminality returns, carrying forward the atmosphere of the liminal section and influencing our understanding of the post-liminal Section E. The requests return to nature metaphors—sea and light—but with a twist. Instead of multiple seas, we have a single sea, and the members are only as individuated as the waves of that sea, which, despite their idiosyncratic details, are still merely pulses moving through a continuous substance. Instead of several, separate points of light in the sky, the members are to become like the rays of a single, greater, effulgent light; again, merely manifestations of the same substance, though seen from different angles and inhabiting different time-spaces. As with the pinnacle liminal moment in Section D, the implicit meaning here speaks to the unity of the members. In the liminal stage metaphors, however, unity operates as an additive principle—the

more stars, or the more fruits, the better. Now the unity is intrinsic, and the power of unity will be geometrically enhanced when the components or emanations of the underlying reality move in the same direction: one sea's waves sculpting the same shore, one sun's rays merged into brilliance. No longer can these metaphors be seen as indicating a collection of individual spiritual contributions; the supplicants are seeking transformation into one substance, "manifesting the spirit of union." Returning to a more analytical tone, the end of the sentence underlines the kind of unity ultimately desired, listing the facets of their human souls that the members hope will become "as one reality:" "our thoughts, our views, our feelings." As in the pre-liminal Sections B and C, and helping to weave all three sections together, the stated aspirations of the members conclude with an indication of their earthly (geographic and demographic) intended scope: "amidst mankind," "upon all regions," and "throughout the world." These earth-bound aims contrast with the ethereality of liminal Section D, underlining an abrupt shift back into the world of decisions and actions.

*THE SIXTH STEP (SECTION F):  
A CODA OF RELIANCE ON GOD*

Finally, the prayer ends, like most Bahá'í prayers, with a listing of relevant aspects of God's divinity: "the Gracious, the Bountiful, the Bestower, the Almighty, the Merciful, the Compassionate" (11). The last

section might be read as a coda, as a reminder of our dependence on God, or as the grateful recognition of the qualities of God which enable these transformations.

THE INTERNALIZATION POWER  
OF THE PRAYER

The analysis so far has been chronological, following along as the prayer takes the members on a rite-of-passage-like journey. Having detailed how ideas transform from one stage to another, and traced the rise and fall of emotions in the text, we are ready to draw out crosscutting themes and dynamics, and return to the question of the prayer's capacity to facilitate the internalization of ideas, orientations, and motivations by the Assembly members.

We can envision the prayer working as a cultural, social, and psychological internalization technology, employing mechanisms of internalization to infuse members with specific cultural content. We might think of this internalization technology as an orchestra: just as the different instruments of an orchestra translate notes on a sheet into music, there are different "instruments" operating within this technology that translate the explicit and implicit content of the prayer into a symphonic polyphony of understanding, meaning, and motivation. We can analyze each instrument's part separately, while understanding that these ultimately create the music holistically. The metaphorical orchestra of the prayer, I argue, fosters internalization not only of the

prayer's claims about the Assembly's purpose of service and its path of unity, but also of other foundational elements of the members' outlook. Five specific instruments of internalization—playing their specific parts—can be readily seen from the chronological account.

#### *ATTENTION AND DETACHMENT*

First, the prayer captures the members' attention, detaching them from extraneous interests. As the members close their eyes and quiet their talking, the prayer turns their attention away from everyday concerns and toward what is happening as the preface's influence sacralizes the Assembly chamber. The group's embodied practice of silently attending to the reader, the emotional rhythm of the interjections crying out for God, and the prayer's melodious cadences combine to gently separate those praying from everyday life, and turn their attention to God's will, the Assembly's purpose of exalting God's Word, and their path of unity. Members' attentiveness may be reinforced by their awareness of other exhortations in Bahá'í guidance, brought to mind by daily practice and study, that implicitly equate better attention during prayer with better outcomes: for example, Bahá'u'lláh's Tablet of Ahmad ties recitation with "absolute sincerity" to remedies to problems (*Bahá'í Prayers* 310), and 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains that "[t]he worshipper must pray with a detached spirit, unconditional surrender of the will, concentrated attention and spiritual fervour. . . . Automatic, formal

prayers which do not touch the core of the heart are of no avail" (*Prayer and Devotional Life* no.34). As Writings such as these permeate into the members' and into the community's awareness, the Assembly prayer will gain greater power to capture attention and begin a process of detachment.

#### *EXPERIENCING POTENTIALITY*

A second instrument of internalization plays its part when the members imaginatively experience still-hidden potentials waiting to be uncovered, which is a signal characteristic of the liminal phase in a rite of passage. The multisensorial vision of abundance, peace, reciprocation, and security in the prayer promotes an attractive and life-like experience of an alternate lifeway, asserting with its extreme alterity vast realms of hidden ways of being yet to be uncovered. The multivocality of the metaphors promotes creative thinking and the linking together of various far-flung ideas, emotions, and experiences. Closely related to the orientation toward transformation (discussed next) is the confidence in that transformation's potentiality. Unlocking agency and experimental action depends on the members' confidence that efforts at improvement of the community, society, and civilization—in ways that have not been achieved before—are possible. The brief upending of the social world, and the experience of *communitas*, reinforces the sensed potential.

*ORIENTATION TOWARDS  
TRANSFORMATION*

Third, the prayer accustoms the members to transformation as a mode of doing and of being, with its attendant ambiguity, continual accretion, and possible pivotal reconfigurations. This orientation towards transformation begins at the outset of the prayer, which sets out explicit purposes and methods for the Assembly—a kind of agenda and handbook, inherently motivating to participants at the beginning of any meeting. The members are called to actions—“enter the council-chamber,” “recite this prayer,” “exalt [God’s] Word amidst mankind,” and “[depend] upon the Verses”—that all serve the goal of effecting change: “to achieve supreme victory.”

Additionally, the prayer invokes various kinds of spiritual transformation—of members in relationship to each other, of the world outside the consultation room, and, ultimately, of self—each operating at a different scale. Specifically, as will be discussed below, there is an implicit evolution of the notion of ideal, unified relationships among the Assembly members, calling for a series of transformations among them. The Assembly’s purpose of building the world anew is expressed in the aspiration to “manifest[] the spirit of union throughout the world.” The heightened feeling of abundance and security created by the liminal images of paradise nudges the members toward a mood of openness to transform in the direction of these visions; the liminal

experience of *communitas* not only makes the transformation seem possible, but provides through the members’ powers of guided imagination the experience of changed circumstances. Finally, the evolving chorus of requests of God in the liminal stage—“make us,” “aid us to become,” “make us that we may become”—centers personal transformation. Even the pre-liminal statements of ideals—of how “we are” devoted, detached, united, and aligned with each other—are cast in a new light by the later repeating requests for divine transformation of selves: the way for members to find this unity and harmony seems to be by nurturing their devoted and detached higher natures. The members are not merely agents of change, but targets of the force of transformation.

Further, not only are the explicit and implicit topics of the prayer centered on change, but as the prayer itself evolves, it shapes an evolving experience for the consultor. The prayer moves between different tones and atmospheres, swings towards and away from metaphor, and the topics themselves steadily but subtly evolve as the prayer proceeds through these shifting phases.

*EVOLVING FORMS OF UNITY*

Fourth, the three-stage rite of passage transmutes the relationships within the group. Where a prototypical rite of passage might transform the status of an individual within a static social structure (as in transforming a person

from “girl” to “woman”), the opening prayer’s journey traces the transformation of the collective relationship among the members. That is, instead of merely breaking down the social structure only to reinstate it but with new members, the prayer’s liminality seeks to permanently instantiate a disruption in the structure. The liminal phase’s egalitarian *communitas* reinforces and advances the targeted transformation, that is, the evolution of the group’s unity. The diversity of “our purposes harmonized” becomes the still-individuated-but-similar “stars shining upon all regions,” and then, finally, and most powerfully, the single-substance “merged together as the rays of [God’s] effulgent light.” That is, the form of unity evolves within the prayer from a unity based on found similarity between distinct entities, to a unity of diverse parts of one whole, and, finally, to a unity of intrinsic parts of one more powerful whole. The evolving ideals of unity implicitly turn the members’ attention to the care of the relationships among them, altering how the individual sees herself in relation to the other members.

A formidable level of unity of understanding and intention is called forth in the last iteration in particular (in Section E), with the vision of the members’ thoughts, understandings, and feelings becoming “as one reality.” On the surface, this does not so much presage what is likely to immediately follow the prayer—the expanding clash of differing opinions—as the unity of thought longed for and hoped for at the

end of the coming consultative cycle. In this light, we can understand the tumultuous waves of clashing differing opinions as simply the surface disturbances of a deeper calm. Absolute unity and love rest partly on remembering that ultimately the sea is one, and that the waves arise from and can always rejoin the vast unity.

*MORAL MOOD: BUILDING  
MORAL RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE  
BETTERMENT OF THE WORLD*

The final instrument of the orchestra is the moral mood created by the prayer, which shapes a sense of moral responsibility out of the gentle moral reflection it facilitates. The prayer lays out a vision of the betterment of the world, and the means to achieve it as well, through the translation of the Revelation into service and via the path of advancing unity among the Assembly members. Becoming aware that the Assembly holds the potentiality to build the world anew pricks the conscience, creating a moral obligation to start.

The prayer resolves with the incorporation of the members into a mindset more pragmatic, purposeful, and feasible than the blissful paradise it presents at its emotional apex. Likewise, the ecstatic prayer itself will be followed directly by the pragmatic consultation meeting. The gap between the ideal and the experiential (Geertz 119–20) becomes an itch that needs scratching (Oettingen et al. 748–49), provoking participants to incorporate bits of the ideal into the process and the plans.

THE PRAYER AS A COMPLEMENT TO  
THE CLASH OF DIFFERING OPINIONS  
AND TO CONSULTATION

We can return now to the question posed at the beginning of this example: How might the Assembly opening prayer relate to consultation? I suggest that the prayer's potential powers to facilitate internalization of the ideas, moods, and motivations discussed above ideally complements the consultation.

What the prayer proclaims has been accomplished at the start—the members being “united in [their] views and thoughts, [their] purposes harmonized”—is also precisely what the prayer helps to (further) accomplish, a concept that makes sense through the lens of progressive enactments of an ideal ethos. The prayer establishes certain ideals, like the purpose of building the world anew and the path of unity, which are crucial to the coming consultation, but it does not do so simply through divine assertion; it also sends the members on an imagination-enriched journey—shifting their ways of understanding and feeling, imbuing them with deepened motivations—and thereby bends the consultors' views, thoughts, and purposes toward each other.

The prayer clips the threads holding the members to the existing structures and interests of their quotidian lives, reminding them that their society can be structured in vastly different and better ways with alternate cultural elements. They come to understand that they hold some measure of agency to

effect transformation toward these better ways, and that walking this path depends on their own relationships being reconfigured by the oneness of humankind. This grand vision can be incrementally embraced as moral moods allow for a gradual internalization of the moral responsibility the Assembly members are called to.

The transformative pattern embedded in the prayer may then serve as a model for the consultation itself. In the beginning of the prayer, members tentatively recognize each other's similarities; in the clash of differing opinions, they may begin with finding patterns of similarity or agreement. In the prayer, they next understand their unity as diverse beings working together; in the clash, they may start to find harmonies among the nodes of similarity or of difference, as members' opinions change to adopt better conceptions, and emergent ideas arise. Finally, in the prayer, the members are drawn to transform their group into an integrated, efficacious whole, just as, ideally, the clash of differing opinions yields an emergent understanding and plan of action that all support.

Instead of what would be typical of a full-blown rite of passage—a dramatic, fundamental, and sudden reordering of “what it is like to live one's life and to be the person that one is” (Bregnbæk and Gammeltoft 241)—the gentle transformational experience of this miniature rite of passage suggests gradual enlargements in moral responsibility. With each Assembly meeting, the lapping waves of the

repeated prayer carry the consultors recurrently to a paradise of communities. This pattern is more compatible with a culture of learning than a single dramatic transformation, as the pulses of creativity and motivation intersect with the rhythms of action, reflection, consultation, and study to open new understandings over time.

More important, perhaps, than the establishment of the desire to translate the Revelation into action, the fostering of the “absolute love and harmony” elicited by these metaphors is especially suited to protect the group from the risks of the clash of differing opinions during consultation. Out of the universe of virtues and spiritual capacities, in any given era certain ones come to the fore as being most conducive to social progress (as Sarracino concludes, forthcoming). Likewise, the Assembly opening prayer nurtures the kind of spiritual enhancement that complements Bahá'í consultation, buffering the risks of the transformative clash of differing opinions.

The opening prayer establishes at the beginning of the meeting not only the recognition of all the similarity that brought the participants together—a unity that may not hold as the differing opinions are fully exposed and allowed to clash, that may be felt to be refuted by the discovery of all the ways in which individuals disagree. The prayer calls, with a moral clarity, for the participants to find a deeper unity, a same-substance kind of unity, a called-by-God-into-being kind of unity: an absolute—that is, unconditional—love

and unity. This kind of unity can hold up to the fire of intense diversity of perspective and opinion, and grant steadfastness, confidence, and patience to the members as they undertake the hard work to uncover, mesh and harmonize their diverse perspectives, patiently pulling them out and searching for the emergent truth. The kind of unity the prayer induces in the participants is one that views their diversity as a resource and their unity as unyielding: a diversity within unity rather than a compromise. The clash of differing opinions is a boiling stew; a deep faith in the fundamental unity in the group becomes the pot that can endure the fire, and hold the bubbling ingredients until they transform and meld together into something delicious.

#### FINAL OBSERVATIONS

Diverse representation needs to be paired with transformative interrogation if diversity's reality-uncovering powers are to be released. The explicit methods of Bahá'í consultation pour the foundation upon which transformative interrogation can be built: gathering people with diverse experiences; facilitating universal and free expression; considering the ideas at hand as a collective project rather than partisan argumentation; seeking a unity of thought and commitment at the end; and considering the resulting action an empirical experiment as part of a continuing cycle of learning. I have argued in this paper that there is also additional, implicit guidance built into

Shoghi Effendi's letter which supports the capacity of Bahá'í consultation to achieve transformative interrogation by enabling a clash of differing opinions.

This paper's three examples suggest that the implicit guidance in Shoghi Effendi's letter nurtures intertwined concepts, values, and emotions in such a way as to foster transformative encounters among diverse people. Each example focuses on a distinct dimension of human capacity. The first example explores how to enhance thinking, and how employing implicit models of distinct, expected phases of a transformative consultation enables better ideas to emerge and rise to the surface. Example 2 focuses on how to develop and maintain relationships within the consultative interaction, calling consultants to engage in the dialectical dance of unity and difference while still accommodating bumble-footed errors. The third example examines how to nurture the spirituality fit for enabling consultation, fostering an openness in the participants to a unity strong enough to surround the clash of differing opinions with an envelope of love. Together, these intertwined dimensions promote a distinct method of effective collective thinking.

Bahá'í consultation's implicit guidance selects threads to be woven into the cultural fabric of the Assembly and the community, coloring expectations, a shared ethos, and dispositional motives and moods. These culture-shaping filaments call forth virtues and relational skills specific to the functions

they address: patience and encouragement to facilitate universal participation during the swell of the clash of differing opinions; micro-repairs to fraying unity and forbearance to cope with inevitable mistakes; a grounding in the dynamic Creative Word and a constant scanning for God's will during the opening prayer. These psychologically and socially astute elements respond to the tensions generated by the explicit methods of consultation, and, because of this, they are more likely to be internalized into the consultants' awareness, understanding, motivation, and actions.

Much of what is distinctive about this implicit guidance pertains to the process of cultural change implicated by it. This model of culture change is indicated by at least four characteristics that weave together ideas, relational skills, and spiritual values: facilitating and centering a culture of learning, committing to the capacity of individuals to draw increasingly on their higher natures, nurturing an incremental change open to all, and building momentum through virtuous cycles of growth within and between institutions.

First, consultation's implicit mechanisms and values institute and promote a culture of learning. The clash of differing opinions is itself a process of learning: learning about others' points of views, learning about one's own ideas by figuring out what their weaknesses are and investigating their implications, collectively identifying gaps in knowledge to be filled, collectively

uncovering emergent ideas, and possibly transforming the process by which this happens. The flexible ethos implied by the letter's interweaving of apothecic virtues with anticipated errors highlights that the consultation meeting is a space of learning, where consultors of potentially wide skill ranges gather together, allowing each to learn through practice as they strive to follow the paths to improvement found within the guidance and modeled by high-skilled consultors within the meeting room. The opening prayer promotes learning as it fosters in the consultors an openness to transformation, of themselves as individuals and of the relationships among them, shifting their understandings gradually as the prayer progresses. Even the repetition of the same prayer over time further facilitates a process of learning, nurturing a continual dialogue between the repeated prayer and the changing circumstances of the community: just as a constant drumbeat can take on new significance as the listener follows it through a song, the prayer's fixed wording becomes dynamic in interaction with the shifting contexts in which it is said.

Secondly, the letter's embrace of varying skill levels, recognition of fallibility, opening of space for learning, and (in the opening prayer in particular) repeated use of metaphors about unity all imply a commitment to the capacity of people to transform. It recognizes the universally-human gap between what is experienced and what is held as ideal (Geertz 119–20). As

Bahíyyih Nakhjavání points out, the Bahá'í Revelation calls us to strive to “discover a fit form for our visions,” “the clearest and most congruent outward expression of the flame within,” and to persist in doing so despite repeated failures (84–91). She points out that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s robust definition of “striving” “seems to tell us that our responsibility lies precisely in this ability to yearn, aspire, and endeavour again and again to conform our lives to Divine commands and behests” (91). With ideational and social support for this kind of persistent striving, the rifts between what we can do and what we envision become not a source of jaded cynicism and defeatism, but rather a call to our personal and collective transformation.

Third, the implicit elements in the letter promote an incremental rate of change. Facilitating a gradual internalization, the implicit consultation guidance acts as a call for “making progress from day to day, and . . . becoming ever more illumined” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections* 162:1). The implicit trajectory welcomes but does not demand diversity's expression; the implicit ethos of building harmony and moderated speech accommodates imperfectly enacted understandings; and the opening prayer renews hope for growth at each Assembly meeting. A stark and daunting ideal may be perceived by a person as too remote from the scope of agency, allowing them to keep it compartmentalized through lip service (Strauss, “Research on Cultural Discontinuities” 223). The letter's implicit elements of

Bahá'í consultation instead pulse out repeated small exposures, fostering a gentle moral mood and a forbearing disposition. Rather than generating a moral crisis, the rhythm, expectations, and pace implicit in the guidance promote comfort with the ambiguity of learning a new way of imagining, of relating, and of seeking truth. In this way, these small repetitions may better foster internalization of the ideas—from paper to mind, from mind to motivation, and from motivation to practice. Incremental change, too, synchronizes with the Assembly's rhythm of practice, with its continually evolving work and repeated meetings: each task and meeting provides a fresh opportunity to grow.

Finally, the guidance implicit in the letter can foster virtuous cycles. As members observe how their individual errors in thinking and judgment are balanced through the clash of differing opinions, the institution can gain confidence in a flourishing transformative interrogation. As experience is gained tacking back and forth from unity to diversity, the members can learn to accommodate and repair mistakes, and this in turn can support participants' longing for universal, diverse, full expression. As members grow in their love and affection for one another, becoming more familiar with each other and passing through challenges together, they can witness the power of absolute love and unity to envelope risky clashes, and their commitment to that standard of unity grows. Not only individuals but institutions can become more skillful with experience, carrying

forward greater capacity to embrace diversity and clashing differing opinions, to accommodate and repair mistakes, and to plan for transformation. Virtuous cycles of learning<sup>41</sup> reflect effective solutions, which tend to diffuse to other individuals and communities (Strauss and Quinn 125); this is especially so in the global Bahá'í community, given its many interlaced channels for sharing knowledge (Shoghi Effendi's letter being an early example of how knowledge can be shared from the World Centre).

In keeping with the wide range of anticipated error-making and an implicit culture of learning, Bahá'í consultation can be fruitfully pursued by people who do not recognize the guidance as divine in origin; consultors can adopt its use as reasonable theoretically, and perhaps eventually as rooted in empirical, social scientific evidence. Indeed, the Universal House of Justice and the Bahá'í International Community promote the use of Bahá'í consultation for all, whether Bahá'í or not, from the press (Universal House of Justice, 29 Dec. 1988 ¶41) to those seeking to create a “sustainable relationship with the natural world” (BIC, *One Planet*).

However, this paper suggests as well that the religious devotion and general

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41 A similar dynamic may be detected in the Universal House of Justice's comment that “It is this growing capacity to resolve complex questions and then to take on still more complex questions that characterizes the process of learning that is propelling the progress of the Faith” (8 Nov. 23 ¶ 79).

practice of a member of the Bahá'í faith would enhance consultation (Lample, *Revelation* 183). Devotedly referring to and rereading the guidance, with faithful confidence in its efficacy, should facilitate more meaningful, motivating, and rapid internalization of both the explicit and implicit guidance built into Shoghi Effendi's letter. Finding this guidance in scripture can reassure Bahá'í consultors of the necessity of the clash of differing opinions and the Assembly's capacity to handle it. Confidence in the promises of the Faith's writings supports persistent striving towards the ideal ethos of consultation, supported by the guidance's insistence that absolute love and unity can be sufficiently achieved among the consultors, and that the group can find a harmonized unity of thought and action at the end. No doubt, of the three examples in this paper, the Assembly opening prayer would be most affected by whether those praying are believers or not, given that its guidance comes in the form of a conversation with God; nevertheless, perhaps it might still be able to function as a poetic mission statement for non-adherents.

Systematic empirical research into consultation could draw on various social science methodologies to further investigate the claims made in this paper. Since Assembly meetings are confidential, limiting opportunities for direct observation (except by Assembly members themselves), research outside of meetings with experienced members about their understandings could ground further exploration of

Assembly consultation. The internalization of explicit and implicit guidance on consultation, the evolution of Bahá'í culture, and understandings of the role of differing opinions could all be explored empirically. Applied research could include evaluation of the extent to which consultors are studying and drawing on the guidance and repeatedly trying to apply it during meetings. Markers could be developed to measure the degree to which various consultation skills and understandings are evidenced in groups employing Bahá'í consultation, and could even be used as a tool for institutional learning. The role Assembly chairs and other meeting facilitators play in shepherding consultation and encouraging universal and free participation and transformative interrogation would be another fruitful area of investigation.

Another line of inquiry could focus on the influence that participating in consultation has on institutions, community, and individuals. Of particular interest would be how the relationships between the three are impacted, since in addition to the unique roles, "capacities and qualities that must be developed" in each of these three protagonists, "each is incapable of manifesting its full potential on its own. It is by strengthening their dynamic relationships with one another that their powers are combined and multiplied" (Universal House of Justice, 30 Dec. 2021 ¶ 3).<sup>42</sup> Does a regular practice of

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42 I am grateful to Matthew Weinberg for suggesting lines of inquiry pertaining to

robust and loving clash of opinions facilitate community members—whether declared Bahá'ís or participants in the community's activities in general—seeing themselves as protagonists of change? Do community members feel empowered to express minority opinions during consultation? How effectively might friends of the Faith use Bahá'í consultation after training in it with skilled and loving consultants? What might be the relationships between improved consultation skills within Assemblies and how these skills are taught in children's classes and junior youth groups?<sup>43</sup>

The application of anthropological lenses to Shoghi Effendi's letter suggests that an emerging Bahá'í culture might influence and develop thought, feeling, motivation, learning, and relationship in ways that are crucial to catalyzing consultation's potential. Social science wields special powers to illuminate implicit meanings which are woven into Bahá'í guidance—not only in the case of consultation, but surely for other topics, too. Social scientific analysis can both enhance the understanding of the Creative Word and uncover implications of practices arising from it. This productive interaction of science and the Revelation bears out

what 'Abdu'l-Bahá has explained repeatedly: though science and religion may be separate mirrors, they harmonize because they reflect the same, single reality. The vibrating harmonies of science, reason, and religion not only hone our ability to see reality more clearly—with understandings more astute, more thorough, and more tested—but launch new cycles of learning. The steadfastness, courage, and faith to fully test our practices depends on such a progressive interaction between these divine bestowals. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá insisted,

If religious belief and doctrine is at variance with reason, it proceeds from the limited mind of man and not from God; therefore, it is unworthy of belief and not deserving of attention; the heart finds no rest in it, and real faith is impossible. How can man believe that which he knows to be opposed to reason? Is this possible? Can the heart accept that which reason denies? Reason is the first faculty of man, and the religion of God is in harmony with it. (*Promulgation* 82:9)

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chairpersons and to the dynamic relationships among the three protagonists.

43 I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer for suggesting the potential for enhanced community learning through the development of consultation skills in Bahá'í activities for children, junior youth, and youth.

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