CONSULTATION

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Overview

This chapter explores the unique ability of Bahá'í consultation to promote understanding and progress. It begins by examining prevalent and historical modes of communication, including the use of consultation in the Islamic context. It then discusses the centrality of consultation to the Bahá'í community's approach to learning in its endeavours to help foster the spiritual and material prosperity of humankind, as well as the significance of consultation as a mode of communication distinctly conducive to decision-making and the collective investigation of reality. The chapter also considers the individual dispositions and qualities that make consultation possible, and concludes with a discussion of how it facilitates the discovery of truth.

Prevalent modes of expression, communication, and understanding

To appreciate the power of consultation for cultivating understanding, making progress, and discovering truth, it is helpful to begin by reflecting on the following questions: Am I inclined to see the world—to select, organize, categorize, and impute meaning to certain aspects of the world—in a particular way? Am I, further, inclined to hold on to and perpetuate this way of seeing? Do I also feel compelled to disassociate myself from other ways of seeing—or even to actively expose their (supposed) deficiencies?

These are prevalent tendencies that play out wittingly or unwittingly in everyone's lives. The drive to divide, on the one hand, and to raise one's position while debasing others, on the other, contaminates our overall approach to seeking truth, generating knowledge, and promoting

well-being. Consider the masses of students who enter universities to study the social sciences and humanities, for example, who are exposed to a variety of theoretical views in a given area, but who then find themselves gravitating to, and ultimately immersing themselves within, one of these perspectives while also devoting their days and nights to criticizing others. Or, considering party politics, one can reasonably ask: When has one party ever officially said of another party's position: 'That sounds like a viable idea. Let's support it!'? Doing so would typically be deemed a weakness and detrimental to the party. (One can definitely cite exceptions, such as in times of war or crisis; but even then the political divides can be trenchant as the response in many countries to the COVID-19 pandemic has revealed.) Examining the myriad talk shows, news programs, or comments that flood television and the internet these days, one can additionally ask: How often does one see a frank yet respectful discussion among two or more philosophically estranged commentators? How often do they entertain the possibility that their interlocutors may have a point or two, let alone happily shift their perspectives as a result? And as for one's own opinions, one can similarly ask: How often am I willing to see things from the standpoint of those whom I am predisposed to rebuff? Undeniably there are counterexamples, and it would be unfair to ignore the growing number of initiatives in academia aimed at advancing interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary research. However, in general, the drives to delimit and repudiate dominate the drives to elicit and correlate.

To clarify how these prevalent modes of thought and communication operate, we can consider two proclivities that frame the ways in which people interact with one another: the proclivity to fragment and the proclivity to totalise.[1] The first refers to the penchant to reduce

[1] Much of the remainder of this section draws heavily upon passages of one of the co-author's articles entitled 'Crisis and the Power of an Inclusive Historical Consciousness: Progressing From Delusional Habits to Dynamic Freedom' (Smith 2020); in some places the wording

and compartmentalize reality. While this tendency has some merit (e.g., the capacity to analyse and break things down is valuable) and is often characterized by an attitude of tolerance for diversity—a feature of pluralistic societies—the predominant impulse is nevertheless to demarcate rather than to correlate, a predilection found in academic specialism, the legal system, and both party and identity politics. It is typically associated with atomistic freedom, which elevates the individual over society and largely functions in accordance with John Stuart Mill's principle that each should be able to do his or her own thing so long as doing so does not cause harm to others. Taken to its logical extreme, the predominant motivation of fragmentism is to achieve distinction for the sake of distinction (and specialization for the sake of specialization), the central concern of the individual being vindication of self. The invariable results are myopic obstinacy and social estrangement.

The second proclivity, to totalise, refers to the penchant to systematically explain the world, or as many perceivable aspects of it as possible, within an increasingly regimented worldview—to grapple with and explain more and more of what is perceived in terms of a single overarching logic. This tendency also has value: conceptually mapping reality in order to make sense of it is both natural and helpful. In practice, however, whatever does not fit neatly within the parameters of the resulting paradigm is typically explained away, dismissed as absurd or senseless, or even repudiated as deviant or antagonistic. The extreme manifestation of this tendency is totalitarianism, but it also takes on other forms such as scientism, reductionist materialism, and religious dogmatism. Here the system or the collective is paramount while the fragment or the individual fades in significance.

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corresponds to the wording used there. The authors are grateful to the editors of *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies* for permission to use this content.

These two tendencies are not mutually exclusive. They often interact, sometimes coalescing to produce various conceptual modes and institutional types, a clear case being the archetypal bureaucratic mindset. As Franz Kafka describes it, bureaucracy comes across as an imposing, monolithic leviathan characterized by an all-embracing, bewildering logic that alienates and yet entangles the individual. This is its totalism. Yet, as Max Weber explains, a bureaucracy also consists of a number of offices and roles that are hierarchical, rule-bound, standardized in terms of their procedures, function-specific (i.e., limited to specific areas of activity), generally closed off from one another except through defined formal mechanisms, and focused on technical training. This is its fragmentism.

Both the proclivity to fragment and to totalise, moreover, are at their core dogmatic tendencies. Each compels us to grasp the world in certain ways, to get comfortable with the ways in which we have come to grasp it, and to thus reify them or see them as inexorable or natural. Each additional encounter with the world, moreover, encourages us to perpetuate and extend our ways of grasping. Granted we may adjust when challenged by anomalies—by evidence that tests, or even defies, our varied worldviews. But when we adjust, we do so more often than not unadventurously, reactively, defensively, making amendments that tend to sustain and legitimize what we consider to be central to our ways of conceptualizing and operating—of grasping—often at the expense of others.

In addition, both fragmentism and totalism contribute to an impoverishment of free expression, one characterized by backbiting, dismissiveness, scapegoating, and vulgarity. In such a state, facts are distorted, dismissed, misconstrued, or even constructed according to the whims of the powerful; truth, more generally, is treated as a ‘negotiable commodity’ (Universal House of Justice 2010b); historical understanding is warped in line with partisan agendas or the perceived interests of the tribe; and deliberation is sapped of its capacity to achieve consensus

through the employment of formulaic slogans, crass soundbites, and monikers meant to ridicule or even dehumanize. Our will to inquire with an open mind, moreover, is vanquished by the will to find comfort within our parochial bubbles—to even encase ourselves in the 'truths' the demagogue-of-the-moment and his or her sycophants tell us to believe.

From a Bahá'í perspective, such 'free speech' and the habits of mind that underpin it have outworn any usefulness they may have had. They are certainly not befitting a humanity that is moving towards its stage of maturity—the acme of its evolutionary process—which, Bahá'ís believe, is the oneness of humankind. This oneness derives from the oneness of reality, which in turn derives from the oneness of God. According to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, 'every part of the universe is connected with every other part by ties that are very powerful and admit of no imbalance, nor any slackening whatever' ('Abdu'l-Bahá in Vader 1984: 165). He states that 'all things are involved in all things' (*Promulgation*), and that 'all created things are connected one to another by a linkage complete and perfect' (*Selections*). In His writings and talks, He defines religion, nature, love, social order, fate and predestination, among other things, as emanating from the necessary relationships of reality (*Selections*; *Risáliy* 94; *Muntakhabátí 7; Some Answered Questions*; Vader 1984: 20). Our natural state, therefore, is one of unity in diversity. Our expected mode of relating is one of collaboration in which each and all feel empowered, in line with their developing capacity, to materially, intellectually, and spiritually uplift their fellow citizens, family, community, and the world as a whole.

Humanity's present state obviously does not reflect its inherent oneness. The welter of material, social, environmental, health, and political issues afflicting the world today makes this abundantly clear. Recognizing that there are notable efforts around the world to foster productive relations and to collaboratively tackle pressing issues both within and across borders, Bahá'ís believe that overcoming this state of disunity and fragmentation ultimately 'calls for a complete

reconceptualization of the relationships that sustain society' (Universal House of Justice 2013). As 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains, '[t]he more this interrelationship is strengthened and expanded, the more will human society advance in progress and prosperity. Indeed without these vital ties it would be wholly impossible for the world of humanity to attain true felicity and success' ('Ḥuqúqu'lláh—The Right of God' 2007/amended 2009: no. 23). Consultation, moreover, given its unique features as a mode of decision making, is deemed essential to fostering this interrelationship and consequently humanity's material and spiritual prosperity. To appreciate why, it is useful to begin by considering the historical approach to consultation in the Islamic Middle East, followed by how it has been developed within the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith.

Etymology of '*mashvarah*' and historical approaches to consultation, focusing on the principle of consultation in Islam (seventh–nineteenth centuries)

The most recurrent term in the Bahá'í Writings for consultation is the Arabic word *mashvarah* (Persian: *mashvarat* or *mashvirat*), denoting deliberation, conference, advice, and more precisely, the extraction or drawing forth of an opinion for the sake of receiving and providing counsel. Words associated with the triliteral root from which *mashvarah* is derived—such as *shúr*, *shúrá*, *mushávirat*, *tashávur*, and *istishárih*, all of which also occur in the Bahá'í Writings—can be traced to the Qur'an and ḥadith. *Shúrá* (also translated as 'consultation') is the title of the forty-second Súrih of the Qur'an. A verse in this Súrih (Qur'an 42: 38) affirms that one of the distinguishing practices of a believer is consultation, suggesting that those who seek counsel with one another will be guided to sound judgment. The Qur'anic command 'consult with them in the conduct of affairs' (Qur'an 3: 159), while traditionally understood as having been addressed to the Prophet Muhammad, is interpreted by at least one Qur'an commentator, Fakhru'd-Dín Ar-Rází (d. 1210), as God's establishment of consultation as a custom and habit of the Muslim community (Nasr, ed., 2015: 174).

With regards to ḥadith, it is helpful to recall two oral traditions attributed to the Prophet Muhammad's cousin and the first Imam of Shi'ih Islam, 'Alí-Ibn-i-Abí-Ṭálib (d. 661): 'There is no aid more reliable than consultation' ('Alí-Ibn-i-Abí-Ṭálib [attributed] 2014: 488); and, 'There can be no good judgment without consultation' (qtd. in al-Qāḍī al-Quḍā'ī 2013: 223). These aphorisms are echoed by Bahá'u'lláh in the second part of His statement, 'No power can exist except through unity. No welfare and no well-being can be attained except through consultation' ('Consultation: A Compilation' 1990: no. 4).

Turning to historical approaches to consultation in the Islamic Middle East, scholars have noted that in pre-Islamic Arabia, it was common for the head of a tribe to consult with the leading men of the tribe. This tribal practice was continued in Islamic history from as early as the seventh century, especially as it concerned the selection of caliphs and other great men in the state (Bosworth et al. 1986). Consultation in early Islamic history was usually practised by a ruler in discussing matters with competent and experienced men before making a decision. Its implementation, however, was inconsistent. Some medieval scholars even argued that if carried to excess, consultation would lead to lawlessness and societal chaos (Lewis 1991).

However, beginning in the nineteenth century, the pre-modern concept of consultation was revivified in a series of institutions established in the capital of the Ottoman Empire (Istanbul) and in Arab provinces as part of efforts to modernize the Middle East. As early as the 1820s, organizations with the words *shúrá* and *mashvarah* in their title were established with deliberative and advisory authority. For example, a 'Consultative Council of Delegates' was assembled in Egypt in 1866. These bodies represent attempts to interpret and modernize the Qur'anic concept of consultation, to fashion an Islamic ideal of consultation in government, and, perhaps most importantly, to emulate Western parliaments and give them a basis in Muslim-majority lands (Lewis 1991). The term 'consultation' began in this period to connote the newly

revived traditional idea of a ruler or caliph consulting with his chosen group of advisers. The term was subsequently applied to certain governmental bodies and deliberative assemblies in such nations as Yemen and Iran, including elected and representative parliaments. In fact, as a term and a concept in most parts of the modern Middle East, it remains one with strictly political and governmental connotations, with almost no direct application to individual and family deliberations or to community dynamics. This, among other factors, distinguishes it from the novel approach to consultation that Bahá'ís strive to employ in all facets of communal life, as explored in the next section.

Approach to learning and the centrality of consultation

At the heart of its efforts to help bring about true prosperity that encapsulates both the material and spiritual aspects of life is the Bahá'í community's approach to learning, which is scientific in method (Shoghi Effendi 1933). Central to this method is Bahá'í consultation.

This learning approach consists of a process of action, reflection on action, consultation, and study in which all are invited to participate (see 'Culture of Learning' in this volume for an overview of the Bahá'í approach to learning and the generation of knowledge). When Bahá'ís and their collaborators engage in community-building activities—such as those devoted to the spiritual and moral empowerment of children and junior youth, enhancing the devotional life of the community, raising capacity for service through the institute process (see 'Culture of Learning'), strengthening participation in social and economic development projects, and participating in discourses relevant to the advancement of society—they study 'the teachings of the Faith and the guidance of the Universal House of Justice and strive to put the teachings and guidance into practice through consistent, systematic action' (Smith 2020: 84). Further, '[i]n doing so, their knowledge is tested, giving rise to meaningful experience, insights, and questions about which approaches work and what adjustments need to be made to more fruitfully advance

the various endeavours of the community-building process' (ibid.). Through reflection and consultation on such experience in light of their further study of the teachings of the Faith and the guidance of the Universal House of Justice—the latter of which synthesizes, frames, and continuously stimulates such learning—greater understanding is achieved on how best to proceed. This knowledge is again tested in action, prompting yet new insights for reflection, consultation, and study, which produce an even greater level of understanding that is in turn synthesized, framed, and disseminated back to national and local communities. A reciprocal, organic process thus develops that gives rise to a learning spiral—comprised of both advances and setbacks—which enables the community and the individuals that compose it to, over time, progressively flourish as generators of knowledge and servants of humanity.

As the chapter 'The Writings of the Universal House of Justice' (Smith in this volume) explains, essential to this process is the conviction that every member of the human family is able to, and responsible for, helping to bring about the betterment of humankind. The community thus strives to continually widen 'the circle of participation' (Universal House of Justice 2015) and to welcome 'the constructive contributions' of all (Universal House of Justice 2010a). In fact, Bahá'ís and their fellow learners envision themselves as 'treading a common path of service' (ibid.), the contours of which are shaped and further refined as collective experience is accrued and analysed with reference to the guidance of the Universal House of Justice. The idea is that in order to generate knowledge that continually 'beckons to new horizons' (Universal House of Justice 2011) on the journey to humanity's oneness, conditions need to be created in which everyone feels encouraged and empowered to participate 'not in the abstract but on the basis of that intimate knowledge which is only acquired by working side by side in the field of service' (Universal House of Justice 2010b).

The nature, significance, and forms of consultation

It is with this learning process and its emphasis on universal participation in mind that we can understand the significance of Bahá'í consultation, a communicative approach to the collective search for truth that upholds unity over division and which

> presumes the generation of knowledge is something everyone can and should be empowered to engage in…; that insights are provisional and fallible no matter what their human source, but that they are also potentially viable and worthy of consideration; that different viewpoints offer different takes on reality, some of which overlap and reinforce one another; and that a major objective is to collectively scrutinize the value of these perspectives, to weed out the ones that are flawed, and to, where possible, correlate the ones that are beneficial.
>
> (Smith 2019: 37)

Distinct from conflict, contest, and compromise, consultation is held to be a vital means by which doubt, anxiety, and superstition are respectively transmuted into certitude, confidence, and valid belief; well-being in all arenas of human activity is promoted; and true understanding between participants is achieved. Bahá'u'lláh describes the exalted nature of consultation in the following terms:

> The Great Being saith: The heaven of divine wisdom is illumined with the two luminaries of consultation and compassion. Take ye counsel together in all matters, inasmuch as consultation is the lamp of guidance which leadeth the way, and is the bestower of understanding.
>
> ('Consultation: A Compilation,' 1990: no. 1)

He also states:

> Consultation bestoweth greater awareness and transmuteth conjecture into certitude. It is a shining light which, in a dark world, leadeth the way and guideth. For everything there is and will continue to be a station of perfection and maturity. The maturity of the gift of understanding is made manifest through consultation.
>
> (ibid., no. 3)

In fact, so important is this method of communication that at times Bahá'u'lláh Himself deferred decisions about certain matters to the consultative process. For example, in a tablet dated 13 August 1881 and addressed to a distinguished believer of His named Ibn-i-Aṣdaq (d.

1928), Bahá'u'lláh states that whereas previously He had wished for a group of His believers to travel to Tehran, now that they had reached a decision through consultation to travel to Khorasan, their decision was deemed acceptable to Him (Rafati 2005: 77). In a different tablet, He notes the addressee's intention to travel to Karachi and Ashgabat before responding that this decision was conditioned upon consultation and that only after the addressee's decision had been reached and approved by means of consultation should he place his trust in God and proceed with his plans.

Bahá'ís are thus encouraged to consult on matters related to all areas of life. According to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, consultation is considered 'one of the most important instruments conducive to the tranquillity and felicity of the people' ('Consultation: A Compilation' 1990: no. 13). He further admonishes us to '[s]ettle all things, both great and small, by consultation. Without prior consultation, take no important step in your own personal affairs. Concern yourselves with one another. Help along one another's projects and plans' (ibid., no. 19). At the same time, consultation takes on different forms in the Bahá'í community, depending on the participants involved, the setting, and the degree of formality required. In a letter written on its behalf, the Universal House of Justice elucidates two of them:

> Consultation can, of course, assume divers forms. One is the consultation between equals leading to a joint decision, as in the case of the deliberations of a Spiritual Assembly. In consultation between a Local Assembly and a Nineteen Day Feast, the principle finds expression in another way. Here consultation generally takes the form of a discussion, as may be necessary, to draw out thoughts and information towards the enrichment of common understanding, but with the decision being made by those with authority.
>
> (qtd. in Ruhi Book 10 2016: 27)

The qualities of participants in a consultation

As discussed at the outset of this chapter, the proclivities to fragment and to totalise impoverish speech, rendering it hollow and ultimately harmful. Owing to the pervasiveness of these tendencies today, 'speech is often reactive, aggressive, incendiary, motivated by the impulse to

belittle and blame, and regularly suffused with sarcasm, hyperbole, or outright lies' (Smith, 2020: 95). As such, it 'cajoles both the inciter and the listener into adopting limited, skewed, sometimes utterly deranged views of reality, and rationalizes tribalism' (ibid., 96), aggressiveness, insolence, conflict, hostility, hypocrisy, and sycophancy. This, for Bahá'ís, is not true free speech because it alienates, constrains thought, and hampers mutual learning.

Speech infected by the proclivity to totalise, for example, becomes oppressive, ideological discourse propagated through duplicitous propaganda. Such speech 'distorts truth in line with vested interests through the manipulation of language, the fudging or recasting of history, the deployment of assorted diversionary tactics, and the diminishment or dehumanization of "others"' (ibid.). The proclivity to fragment similarly leads to the degradation of speech—speech characterized by tactlessness, 'spiteful partisan positioning, and the incessant promulgation of various forms of reductionism, such as insulting nicknames' (ibid.), demeaning labels, and absurd, often bigoted, posts, images, and memes on social media. Both tendencies are consequently anti-invitational; both needlessly alienate; both suppress genuine expression in the search for truth and shared understanding.

> Speech that is consultative, on the other hand,
>
> > is invitational, courteous, and humble, but also honest, forthright, and intent on grappling with facts and facing reality … in all its complexity. As such, it attracts rather than polarizes. It uplifts rather than debilitates. It finds points of unity whenever possible and empowers each participant to detach from his or her ideas in the face of countervailing evidence and jettison perspectives that are demonstrably false.
>
> (ibid.)

It entails consideration in two senses of the word: respect for the viewpoints of others and concern for others as noble beings. It operates in accordance with the conviction that to advance together,

> we need to speak and write in a manner that conveys a longing to learn alongside one another, that mistakes are okay, that everyone has the potential to contribute, and that the solution to an issue can rarely be resolved in dichotomous or reductive terms.
>
> (ibid., 97)

Consultation thus demands certain dispositions and approaches on the part of participants that are quite alien to current modes of expression, but which nevertheless befit a humanity evolving towards its age of maturity and oneness. The following passage from a tablet of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá provides an overview of what is expected. Of particular note is the devotional, reverential, and respectful nature of consultation which is essential for disclosing truth:

> 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.
>
> (*Selections*)

He also states:

> Man should weigh his opinions with the utmost serenity, calmness and composure. Before expressing his own views he should carefully consider the views already advanced by others. If he finds that a previously expressed opinion is more true and worthy, he should accept it immediately and not willfully hold to an opinion of his own. By this excellent method he endeavors to arrive at unity and truth.
>
> (*Promulgation*)

This method presumes the acquisition of certain spiritual qualities. These include ‘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’ (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections*). In fact, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá refers to these qualities as ‘[t]he prime requisites for them that take counsel together’ (ibid.). Consultation is thus not a mechanical process of decision making governed by rules and procedures; rather, it is viewed as ‘spiritual conference’ (*Promulgation*) in which the participants

are ‘wholly free from estrangement’, manifesting ‘in themselves the Unity of God’ (*Selections*), and consequently ‘absolute love and harmony amongst’ each other (ibid.).

The manner in which they speak, moreover, stems from this absolute love, and is grounded in the related conviction that kindness fosters the search for truth. In this regard, Bahá’u’lláh teaches that ‘[a] kindly tongue is the lodestone of the hearts of men. It is the bread of the spirit, it clotheth the words with meaning, it is the fountain of the light of wisdom and understanding’ (*Gleanings*). He further explains that for speech to be truly influential, it depends on purity of spirit and sanctity of heart. Opinions should therefore be expressed with freedom and candour combined with devotion, friendliness, compassion, and courtesy. They should also be expressed with tenderness, wisdom, and above all moderation, for without moderation ‘the hearer would be unable to bear it, rather he would manifest opposition from the very outset’ (Bahá’u’lláh, *Tablets*). Such opposition is only too evident in this age of constant, destructive criticism, backbiting, and vitriol—that is, in a society ‘where “telling it like it is” employs a style of expression which robs language of its decorum’ (Universal House of Justice 1994) and where ‘wrongs—both real and imagined—are quickly magnified, and a variety of feelings are easily stirred: righteous indignation perhaps, or a desire to promote one’s point of view, or an eagerness to be seen as the source of new information’ (Universal House of Justice 2019).

Consultation and truth

There are some similarities between the Bahá’í approach to consultation and what other thinkers advocate as good communicative practice. John Stuart Mill (1859), for example, makes his case for free speech by highlighting the damage that could result from suppressing a dissenting or controversial opinion. He argues that such a view may be false, but it could also be true. More likely, it may contain some truth to which we may not yet be attuned. Additionally, we have no solid grounds, according to Mill, for believing that our own views are correct, or at least that they

are infallibly correct. Thus, we lose by not considering a dissenting view, no matter what its value for understanding the truth might be. Why? Because if the dissenting view turns out to be true, or to contain some truth, we deprive ourselves of this truth and persist in error, or in partial error. Should, on the other hand, the dissenting view be false, through listening to and engaging with it, we still gain because the very act of doing so keeps what is true about our own ideas alive. That is, without such engagement, we sidestep the discomfort of testing our own views against reality, and thereby risk falling into apathy and/or dogmatism.

Some of Hannah Arendt's ideas also correlate well with certain features of the consultative process discussed above. Of particular note is her position on the true nature of judgement in the political realm. Such judgement involves an 'enlarged way of thinking, which…cannot function in strict isolation or solitude' (Arendt 2001: 20). Instead, 'it needs the presence of others "in whose place" it must think, whose perspectives it must take into consideration, and without whom it never has the opportunity to operate at all' (ibid.).

Jonathan Haidt offers additional insights into the dynamics of communication, focusing in particular on how liberals and conservatives can learn from each other. On the one hand, he affirms that '[o]nce people join a political team, they get ensnared in its moral matrix. They see confirmation of their grand narrative everywhere' (Haidt 2012: 365). Speaking more personally, he states: 'We circle around sacred values and then share post hoc arguments about why we are so right and they are so wrong' (ibid., 312). Yet, we can also work to bridge the divide. This, according to Haidt, involves focusing on the moral foundations that underpin each political view and striving to see which one is most relevant to a given issue. He also states that 'if you really want to open your mind, open your heart first' because '[i]f you can have at least one friendly interaction with a member of the "other" group, you'll find it far easier to listen to what they're saying, and maybe even see a controversial issue in a new light' (ibid., 312).

Amanda Ripley's recent work is also directly relevant. Her interrogation of the root causes of division and polarization prompted her to think deeply about the nature of conflict and in turn to juxtapose what she calls 'high conflict' and 'good conflict'. High conflict is motivated by the perceived superiority of one's own position and the degradation and humiliation of others, and promotes a good-versus-evil, zero-sum mentality. It is rigid, adversarial, self-perpetuating, and paralyzing (Ripley 2021: 12–13, 296). Ripley studied individuals and communities who have escaped the us-versus-them worldview of high conflict and instead created or cultivated what she terms good conflict. Good or healthy conflict is serious, frank, and intense, but always respectful. It steers clear of generalizations and absolutes, and never collapses into caricature and dehumanization. It is characterized by humility, fluidity, complexity, curiosity, non-zero-sum thinking, and an abiding awareness of our common humanity and interconnectedness (ibid., 12, 271).

For Bahá'ís, these are all valid insights, and they certainly do not exhaust the thinking of these thinkers and others, including David Bohm (1996), Hans-Georg Gadamer (2013), and Jürgen Habermas (2018), all of whom have much to say on the matter of effective communication. Yet as the foregoing discussion will have made clear, Bahá'ís believe that consultation is the preeminent tool for achieving what such thinkers value: constructive communication that promotes understanding, well-being, and social progress. Paul Lample (2009: 45) makes this position clear in his discussion of interpreting the sacred text:

> The quest for sound understanding … involves a community engaged in consultation, where differing views are welcome, unity is maintained, each individual exercises self-discipline, and varying perspectives are tested through action and reflection in a collective search for meaning that operates within the boundaries marked by the Covenant.

By the same token, and as alluded to earlier, consultation facilitates the discovery of truth. It does this in at least four important ways.

First, consultation is not simply about seeing things from different perspectives because not all interpretations of reality are similarly valid. They are only potentially valid. That is, different perspectives have the potential to shed light on different aspects of reality, but it does not follow that they necessarily expose different aspects of reality equally. As Schroeder puts it regarding the interpretation of texts, 'Not everyone has a considered interpretation: not every interpretation meets serious tests of evidence; and some interpretations account for more of the text (and do so more illuminatingly) than others' (2005: 246). It would be difficult, for example, to take someone's interpretation of Plato's *Republic* seriously if he or she had not in fact read it and was basing his or her assessment on the random comments of others who may or may not have read it themselves. A goal of consultation, therefore, is to allow the more helpful, illuminating interpretations to come to the fore. This goal applies when considering any facet of reality.

At the same time, and second, we have to be careful never to presume that others have nothing of value to share regarding a given matter. In accordance with the emphasis on universal participation, it should be presumed instead that every participant in a discussion has at least the potential to shed some light on the subject being discussed, and that facilitating a rigorous exchange of opinions helps to uncover the shortcomings of certain perspectives, to challenge assumptions, and thus to enable the discovery of truth and deepen collective understanding. In 'Abdu'l-Bahá's words, 'The shining spark of truth cometh forth only after the clash of differing opinions' (*Selections*). Put another way, the primary motivation of participants in a consultation is to treat their own views and opinions not as finalities, but rather as constructions that are more or less attuned to a given feature of reality and that belong to all members of the group to consider, stretch, mould, or discard in view of other opinions, insights, and the evidence at hand. A particular individual's idea itself may or may not hold up—and it often will not—but his or

her potential to generate knowledge always holds up and accordingly deserves consideration. Concurrently, the individual with initially little insight into a particular matter will want to be as realistic as possible about this and allow his or her thinking to evolve in consultation with other participants. Michael Karlberg (2004: 41) helpfully puts this point in the following way:

> Given the limited and circumscribed nature of our views, Baha'is accept that … access to truth is not absolute but relative. Therefore, while consultative groups strive to solicit the widest possible diversity of views on a given subject, the individuals who offer those views strive to do so in a spirit of detachment—confident that their views will be considered by the group, yet aware of the limitations of those same views.

Third, it follows that through the process of consultation, partisanship, fundamentalism, and antagonism are transcended as is the more basic desire to remain enveloped in restricted worldviews. As we have seen, the upshot of paradigmatic insularity is, invariably, dogmatism of either the totalistic or fragmented kind, or both. In such a state, we deprive ourselves of the opportunity to test how attuned our respective worldviews really are (or are not) to reality. By contrast, because consultation places such emphasis on each participant's maintaining a posture of humility and detachment, a spirit of selfless service, a preeminent desire to explore each other's perspectives, and freedom from any trace of stubbornness, prejudice, estrangement, exclusivity, and vain imaginings, we achieve richer, more incisive readings of reality and correspondingly more inclusive visions of how to advance the mutual generation of knowledge in a given area.

Fourth, consultation facilitates the discovery of truth because, as has been shown, it is part of a learning mode that comprises action, reflection on action, consultation, and study. Consultation takes into account diversity of experience accumulated through action carried out in different contexts, is informed by fundamental assumptions such as the oneness and nobility of humankind, is animated by the disposition of participants to learn from each other, and requires kindly, moderate, yet candid speech for such learning to occur. Because of such characteristics

and others discussed previously, consultation generates unity of vision about the way things are, about what could be, and about how to achieve what could be. Empowered by such unity of vision, participants are inspired to then carry out decisions with an equal measure of unity because they understand that this is the only way to genuinely test the truth value of such decisions and their efficacy for promoting progress. They, in fact, take to heart the following admonishment of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá (*Selections*):

> It is … 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.

The results of such experimentation, often carried out in diverse circumstances, are then assessed through further reflection, consultation, and study, which together lead to yet further clarity of understanding and harmony in action; and so on. The outcome is an ever-evolving unity of vision among an expanding collective of participants that continually discloses new possibilities for progress toward the oneness of humankind.

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