

Civilizational Revival and Modernity through the Lens of 'Abdu'l-Bahá: An Examination of 'The Secret of Divine Civilization'

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'Abdu'l-Bahá and the Universal Concept of Civilizational Renewal

In the perspective of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the intricate concepts of modernity and social evolution are integral components of a broader and profound process of transformation and rejuvenation within culture and civilization. Much akin to the organic rebirth observed in nature at the onset of spring, there exists a cyclical rhythm inherent to the growth of civilization that perpetually breathes new life into culture, giving rise to novel paradigms of thought, emotion, and behavioral conduct. This cultural revitalization is essentially a response to the historical demands of each epoch, ushering forth a fresh system of meanings and values. When this nascent framework of meaning and values finds tangible expression in the material lives and social interactions of a multitude, a new civilization is born. Thus, this transformative process can be dissected into three distinct dimensions¹:

1. **The Spiritual Dimension:** At its core, this dimension embodies the spirit or Zeitgeist² of the culture, encapsulating the origins of meanings and values. These values and meanings constitute the nucleus, the very essence that bestows inner cohesion upon the culture. 'Abdu'l-Bahá identifies this dimension as the spiritual realm of reality, animated by the advent of the Manifestations of God—figures such as Krishna, Moses, Buddha, Jesus, Muhammad, the Bab, and Baha'u'llah.
2. **The Behavioral/Social Dimension:** This second facet revolves around the mind, the organizing force of human civilization. The potency of the mind assumes multifarious forms, permeating aspects such as politics, economics, science, and technology.

¹ In 'Some Answered Questions' and various collections of his letters and speeches, 'Abdu'l-Bahá delineates the concepts of civilization, education, and human nature by grounding them in fundamental physical, human, and spiritual connections. He posits that civilization encompasses the education of both the individual and the broader human species, advancing across the dimensions of the physical, human, and spiritual realms in tandem.

² Zeigeist refers to the cultural spirit or the spirit of the age that encompasses the entire civilization.

3. **The Scientific and Technical Dimension:** The third dimension encompasses the scientific and technical advancements that act as vehicles for externalizing and socializing meanings and values, thus reshaping the material culture of society.

The process of cultural evolution follows a cyclic pattern. This entails that cultural progress, at some juncture, experiences regression. It is at this juncture that disintegration of meanings and values begins to take root, internal conflicts intensify, and the social order deteriorates into stagnation and crisis. The fundamental theme within this cyclical transformation is the dialectic interplay between system breakdown and system transformation. This dialectical process underscores the recurrent rhythms inherent in social and cultural affairs. Nonetheless, the course of sociocultural rhythm is neither strictly linear (from A to B) nor a ceaseless repetition of identical cycles (purely cyclical). Instead, within the process of disintegration lies the potential for renewal and resurgence. Even as one dominant cultural form diminishes, a novel one simultaneously emerges. Thus, while adhering to a cyclical ebb and flow of integration and disintegration, social evolution spirals along an evolutionary axis, propelling humanity's upward progress in an organized and purposeful manner.³

From an evolutionary standpoint, cultural rejuvenation and societal progress have often emerged from the fusion and, at times, conflicts between civilizations. Intercultural interactions and exchanges among different civilizations have taken place sporadically across various geographic locations and historical epochs. However, in the modern era, intercultural contact has accelerated the processes associated with modernization. Contemporary social scientists are now pointing to the emergence of a global civilization on the horizon, signaling the inevitable reality of a unified global human society.

This steady movement towards a global civilization underscores a profound aspect of human nature: the inherent drive towards rational and moral progress. Individuals and groups can

³ In 'Some Answered Questions,' 'Abdu'l-Bahá likens the advancement of civilization and the evolution of religion to the cycles of the seasons. Just as the creative energies of civilization-building ebb and wane, akin to the onset of autumn and winter when the chill of ignorance envelops society, a new cycle emerges, heralding a renaissance of culture and knowledge.

consciously shape the future through purposeful endeavors. Moreover, within the roots of this emerging global civilization lies an evolutionary force that transcends mere physical and biological impulses. It hints at the cyclical nature of history, marked by progressive phases of unification and the organized management of human affairs.

Civilization, in its essence, is intimately linked with the concepts of modernity and evolution. It signifies the ongoing evolutionary journey that has led humanity away from its primal, animalistic nature toward a more enlightened state—progressing from ignorance to wisdom, and from barbarism to civility. Broadly defined, civilization represents the refinement and organization of human thought, emotions, and actions. Notions like the Enlightenment, the study of literature, and various systems of governance are diverse manifestations of civilization. It arises from transformations in living conditions, social interactions, economic exchange systems, and shifts in ethical and cultural standards. It is closely tied to the circumstances that bring people together to learn how to coexist and interact harmoniously.

In this sense, civilization is synonymous with the process of urbanization and the acceptance of communal citizenship, encompassing the social, political, and cultural norms within a given social group. In simpler terms, civilization is about learning to live together and recognizing the mutual rights of one another. It comprises the necessary social interactions organized by social institutions within a specific geographical region and is often defined in terms of political entities, such as city-states.

However, it is essential to understand that "civilization" transcends the boundaries of the state, political institutions, laws, or artistic and cultural expressions. It encompasses all these facets but goes beyond them. Civilization is a living concept deeply rooted in humanity's innate aspiration for perfection and the desire to distance itself from savagery. It aims to ascend toward the ideals envisioned by religions and philosophies. Although apparent differences exist among civilizations, a common thread, arising from the essential unity of humanity, binds them together. From this perspective, civilization appears as an organic phenomenon inclined toward

integration and disintegration, characterized by peaks and troughs but never at rest. It does not stagnate but continually strives toward ideals of perfection.⁴

Modernity

The overarching perspective of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's worldview underscores that modernity represents a step within an enduring process of social change, or modernization, active across global civilization. While modernity reached its maturity in Europe, it can be seen as the outcome of inevitable material and cultural exchanges between diverse civilizations, eventually converging like tributaries into a broader river. In essence, modernity emerges as a manifestation of this profound cultural and historical interchange.

Nevertheless, misunderstandings arise when modernity is erroneously perceived as an exclusively Western and European phenomenon, confined to a specific era and geographic location. Another common misconception is the assumption that only Westerners have benefited from modernity, with others experiencing only residual, alienating, and corrupting influences.

In reality, modernity should be viewed as a dynamic organism evolving as part of a comprehensive growth and evolution within human civilization. It has been enriched by influences from Eastern civilizations, including Islamic, Iranian, Hebrew, Christian, and Greek philosophies and theologies, on its journey to its current form. Like any living phenomenon, modernity is subject to transformation and disintegration. It possesses a past rooted in all

⁴ The Baha'i worldview is grounded in fundamental concepts that serve as its foundational pillars. These concepts include organic order, substantial motion toward perfection, and the idea of the maturity of the world.

The "maturity of the world" refers to the notion that the world and its civilizations go through distinct stages of development and perfection. These stages encompass the coherent progress of three essential dimensions of civilization: the material, social, and spiritual aspects. This concept underscores the interconnectedness of these dimensions and highlights their collective evolution toward a state of greater maturity.

For a more detailed exploration of this concept and its significance in the Baha'i faith, you can refer to the article provided: [Signs of the Maturity of the World](#).

preceding cultures and civilizations, with each contributing to its development, and its future trajectory points towards the global unification of humanity.

What is commonly referred to as Western modernity is but a brief chapter in the broader history of human social evolution. It does not represent the pinnacle of all human accomplishments but rather constitutes a dynamic phase within an ongoing process of renewal, marked by periods of advancement and regression throughout human history. Modernity should not be perceived as the ultimate culmination of intellectual, political, social, and cultural developments. Instead, it must continue evolving in line with the inexorable law of change, nourishing the progress of civilization.

Traditions of the past that cling to fanaticism and advocate a return to darker eras find themselves in conflict with the tide of modernity. Opposition to modernity equates to a struggle against the natural progression of history. Should flaws emerge in the manifestations of modernity, such as in the realm of democracy, these imperfections should not serve as excuses to reject democracy and justify tyranny. Rather, these defects should be viewed as indicators of an evolutionary dynamism, prompting efforts for improvement rather than destruction. Modernism is an ever-evolving process transitioning from one stage to the next, where each subsequent stage is inherently superior to the preceding one.

Global Civilization

A Global Civilization can be viewed as the realization of an ideal that has gradually grown in significance over time. It represents a higher stage in the ongoing social evolution and human organization. The imperatives of modernity gain even greater prominence within a broader framework that emerges in response to postmodern challenges. These challenges encompass the limitations of pure rationalism, the pitfalls of consumerism and bureaucracy, crises of spirituality and morality, and the pressing issue of environmental degradation.⁵

'Abdu'l-Bahá's critique of materialistic philosophies and totalitarian political and religious ideologies, along with his observation of the West's excessive focus on the material aspects of

⁵ Refer to 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Talks in the West as well as his tablet addressed to the Swiss physician, Dr. Forel.

civilization, resonates with the critiques articulated in the postmodern era. These critiques all underscore the need for humanity to ascend to a more advanced stage of civilization.

It's important to note that 'Abdu'l-Bahá's critical stance is not intended to rebuke modernity but rather to refine and perfect it. In his speeches delivered in the West, he lauds progress and perceives the intellectual, scientific, and technological advancements of the modern age as foundational elements for bridging gaps between societies and establishing a unified world order. In the realm of social development, he acknowledges the benefits of democracy and the associated freedoms, which have catalyzed profound changes over the past centuries.

These changes encompass the abolition of slavery, the emergence of societies with heightened awareness regarding the evils of prejudice and discrimination, the emancipation of women, the establishment of fair standards of living and economic justice, the implementation of compulsory public education, and various other forms of social and economic progress. All of these accomplishments are seen as tangible manifestations of Global Civilization.

'Abdu'l-Bahá argues that these advancements cannot be reversed or undone. The inexorable march of time, akin to the unstoppable forces of electricity and gravity, propels the creative energies and forward momentum of civilization's evolution. A Global Civilization stands as the focal point of humanity's quest for peace and enduring order, serving as the axis around which discussions and aspirations for a stable global society revolve.

The Secret of Divine Civilization

Written in 1875 at the request of his father, Bahá'u'lláh, the founder of the Bahá'í Faith, 'Abdu'l-Bahá penned "The Secret of Divine Civilization" at the age of 31. The book was initially published in India without attribution to its author and later republished in Cairo and Iran. The first English translation, titled "The Mysterious Forces of Civilization," emerged in 1910 in London and was later published again in 1918 in Chicago. The current English translation, undertaken by Marzieh Gail, is known under the title, "The Secret of Divine Civilization."

In addition to this work, 'Abdu'l-Bahá also authored another short treatise, "The Epistle on Politics," in 1893. This treatise can be considered a complement to "The Secret of Divine

Civilization," with the main distinction being that the latter addresses a broader audience, including the people of Iran and the world, while the former focuses more on the specific needs of the Bahá'í community. 'Abdu'l-Bahá's intention in both works was to invite rational minds to explore the ideas he presented without revealing his identity or invoking prejudice against the author.

When approached objectively, "The Secret of Divine Civilization" reveals the genuine concern of its author for the well-being of Iranian society, devoid of any personal agenda. 'Abdu'l-Bahá adopts an approach that seeks to avoid ideological conflicts, offering practical solutions that align with the existing realities of Iran. His emphasis lies in the pursuit of truth and any factors that could contribute to the advancement and prosperity of Iran. The book begins with a social analysis and proceeds to outline a systematic blueprint for Iran's revitalization, all without direct reference to the Bahá'í Faith or his own identity. 'Abdu'l-Bahá extends a public call to the people of Iran, including religious leaders, intellectuals, and politicians, urging them to consider the concepts presented in the book with impartiality.

In essence, the book serves as a comprehensive exploration of the causes and means of building civilization, addressing the factors that foster societal development and progress, ultimately paving the way for a Global Civilization. It also offers an insightful critique of modernity while analyzing the state of Iranian society and the reasons for its underdevelopment. 'Abdu'l-Bahá provides a systematic and precise prescription for a foundation that could propel Iran to become a harbinger of world peace and a catalyst for social progress, akin to its historical role.

"The Secret of Divine Civilization" delves into principles that resonate with Enlightenment ideals and the views of prominent thinkers like Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. While these Enlightenment philosophers emphasized the need to transform social and political conditions, they also recognized the significance of collective morality, social cooperation, and human relationships. 'Abdu'l-Bahá likewise aligns with these principles and underscores the importance of morality in spheres such as politics, economics, and social interactions. According to him, morality is a force that repels falsehood, hypocritical piety, and pretense, and it cannot be imposed by coercion. He emphasizes a morality rooted in virtues such as nonviolence, a culture of peace, and the unity of humanity. This morality should eradicate

prejudices based on religion and race, arising naturally from internal transformation and the maturation of conscience, and thought in society.

While acknowledging the achievements of modern civilization, 'Abdu'l-Bahá also highlights the potential pitfalls. He warns that the excesses of modernity can lead people to become overly focused on material pursuits, neglecting their mental, spiritual, and aesthetic needs.

This review organizes subtitles and discourse sequence in alignment with the ideas presented in 'The Secret of Divine Civilization,' employing interpretive analysis and interdisciplinary macro historical inquiry.

The Significance of Reason and Knowledge in 'The Secret of Divine Civilization

In the opening of "The Secret of Divine Civilization," 'Abdu'l-Bahá underscores the paramount importance of reason as the conduit for acquiring knowledge and understanding. He expresses this concept with eloquence, stating, "Praise and thanksgiving be unto Providence that out of all the realities in existence He has chosen the reality of man and has honored it with intellect and wisdom, the two most luminous lights in either world. Through the agency of this great endowment, He has in every epoch cast on the mirror of creation new and wonderful configurations."⁶

Additionally, 'Abdu'l-Bahá regards the human intellect, the tool for thought and the discovery of truths, as well as the means for acquiring knowledge and cognition, as a divine sign in the world of creation. He holds it in the highest esteem, considering it the most supreme of all created attributes. 'Abdu'l-Bahá extends this perspective to encompass all forms of knowledge, technologies, laws, sciences, industries, and the myriad of innovations, viewing them as the outcomes, effects, and blessings of human intellect. These elements, he asserts, are the driving forces behind civilization and humanity's progress. He eloquently asserts, "Whatever people has

⁶ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Secrets of Divine Civilization, p. 1

ventured deeper into this shoreless sea, has come to excel the rest. The happiness and pride of a nation consist in this, that it should shine out like the sun in the high heaven of knowledge."⁷

What's particularly intriguing is 'Abdu'l-Bahá's choice to commence his exploration of the causes of civilization's growth and decline, particularly in the context of reform and development in Iran, by emphasizing the importance of reason and the pursuit of knowledge. "The Secret of Divine Civilization" offers a contextual perspective on reason and knowledge, utilizing them not as abstract concepts but as indispensable tools for societal transformation and reform.

In 'Abdu'l-Bahá's view, the evolution of society is neither an aimless, arbitrary development nor a predetermined outcome. Instead, it hinges on knowledge and cognition, which are obtained through the dynamic forces of intellect, reason, and wisdom. This perspective on the evolution of thought and knowledge, and their necessity for the betterment and prosperity of Iran, is contextualized within the temporal and geographical setting of the time.

Written over 148 years ago, during the reign of Nasser al-Din Shah, "The Secret of Divine Civilization" emerged in a socio-political climate characterized by absolute rule and rampant mismanagement, leading to the nation's financial bankruptcy. Nasser al-Din Shah's extravagance and the inefficiency pervading various government institutions had placed Iran under the burden of foreign loans, even to finance the Shah's European travels. However, the Shah's inclination toward impulsiveness and changing interests often left projects unfinished. The central authority was weakened, while feudalism prevailed in the provinces. Widespread famine, starvation, and infectious diseases resulted in devastating mortality rates and population decline.

Nineteenth-century Iranian society was stratified, with a ruling elite comprising the Shah's family, religious scholars, landowners, tribal leaders, and merchants. The majority of the population lived as peasants in villages and towns, with limited access to education, which was predominantly restricted to religious studies. Widespread illiteracy was a societal norm, with women, in particular, facing discrimination and exclusion from educational opportunities. The first signs of change in the educational system appeared with the establishment of the Academy

⁷ Ibid p. 2

of Arts and Sciences⁸ in Tehran in 1851, which introduced subjects like foreign languages, military and technical sciences, and accounting alongside religious studies. Despite these developments, the overall education system lagged behind until the early 20th century, with the Constitutional Revolution leading to the establishment of more public and government schools.

The Secret of Divine Civilization was composed within this complex socio-political milieu, during a decade when Iran witnessed two competing movements: the reforms initiated by Amir Kabir, cut short by his assassination, and a series of reforms in the 1870s led by Prime Minister Mirza Hussein Khan Mushir al-Dawla, which also faced resistance from the conservative ruling class.

In this backdrop, 'Abdu'l-Bahá's emphasis on reason, thought, and the imperative to transform the education system responds to the core obstacle that had hindered Iran's progress for centuries. This obstacle was the socio-political system that advocated traditional education for a select few while depriving the majority, including women, of educational access. This system promoted imitation over innovation, stifled creativity and free thought, and discouraged independent thinking. It propagated submission to authoritarian leadership at the expense of individual will, independence, and rationality.

The model presented by 'Abdu'l-Bahá outlines a clear path to progress, emphasizing the crucial role of knowledge and education. He underscores the precise requirements necessary for the revitalization of Iran. 'Abdu'l-Bahá's guidance underscores the importance of education at all levels, extending to even the smallest villages and towns. He advocates for a universal approach, encouraging everyone, even if it requires compulsory education, to learn how to read and write. 'Abdu'l-Bahá's perspective holds that education serves as the lifeblood, coursing through the veins and nerves of a nation, breathing life into its seemingly lifeless body. Without achieving this fundamental step, all other efforts are rendered futile.

In this context, 'Abdu'l-Bahá reiterates the need to draw wisdom from history and the lessons of acquired experience, applying them on the path to reform. He believes in the manifold benefits of development and restoration, including bolstering the weak, reviving the impoverished,

⁸ Dār ul-Funun, meaning Polytechnic

organizing the mechanisms of governance, increasing public wealth, enhancing knowledge and awareness, and establishing a just and regulated government. He advocates for the protection of individual rights, including the right to life, property, and the preservation of the honor and dignity of all citizens.

Emphasizing the importance of thought and reason from the outset of his treatise, 'Abdu'l-Bahá signals that societal reform and development in Iran depended on the ability to harness the power of reason in evaluating knowledge and understanding. Without fostering an independent quest for truth, any reform or progress initiative would be inherently flawed. In the years that followed, in his various works, speeches, and during his trips to Europe and North America, 'Abdu'l-Bahá consistently elaborated on this theme, asserting that superstition and imitation were the root causes of misunderstanding. Religious tradition must become freed from the shackles of blind emulation of the clergy to be effective and fruitful in individual and social life. So long as the misguided custom of *taqlid*⁹ persists and the teaching of religion presides over and clashes with science and reason, culture and society cannot be renewed.

The Greatness of Iran's Past

Another topic that stands out in the first pages of *The Secret of Divine Civilization* is Abdu'l-Bahá's reference to the greatness of Iran in past times and his expression of regret over the country's present state. Noting the contradiction between the glorious achievements of the past and Iran's social and cultural decline in the nineteenth century, Abdu'l-Bahá questions the causes of this stagnation and asks how, in the face of the prevailing social stalemate, could the way for Iran's future be paved? He writes: "O people of Persia! Look into those blossoming pages that tell of another day, a time long past. Read them and wonder; see the great sight. Iran in that day was as the heart of the world; she was the bright torch flaming in the assemblage of mankind. Her power and glory shone out like the morning above the world's horizons, and the splendor of her learning cast its rays over East and West."¹⁰

⁹ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/taqlid> (the unquestioning acceptance of the legal decisions of another without knowing the basis of those decisions)

¹⁰ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Secrets of Divine Civilization*, p. 6-7

Abdu'l-Bahá goes on to say that at some point in the past, "Iran was the pivot of the world; she was the source and center of sciences and arts, the wellspring of great inventions and discoveries, the rich mine of human virtues and perfections. The intellect, the wisdom of the individual members of this excellent nation dazzled the minds of other peoples, the brilliance and perceptive genius that characterized all this noble race aroused the envy of the whole world."¹¹ Then, referring to the Bible in which King Cyrus of Iran is praised, he writes, "aside from that which is a matter of record in Persian histories, it is stated in the Old Testament—established today, among all European peoples, as a sacred and canonical Text—that in the time of Cyrus, called in Iranian works Bahman son of Išfandíyár, the three hundred and sixty divisions of the Persian Empire extended from the inner confines of India and China to the farthest reaches of Yemen and Ethiopia. As attested by the annals of the world's most illustrious peoples, the first government to be established on earth, the foremost empire to be organized among the nations, was Persia's throne and diadem."¹²

Further along, and recalling the ancient greatness of Iran, Abdu'l-Bahá addresses his countrymen as an Iranian himself and writes: "O people of Persia! Awake from your drunken sleep! Rise up from your lethargy! Be fair in your judgment: will the dictates of honor permit this holy land, once the wellspring of world civilization, the source of glory and joy for all mankind, the envy of East and West, to remain an object of pity, deplored by all nations? She was once the noblest of peoples: will you let contemporary history register for the ages her now degenerate state? Will you complacently accept her present wretchedness when she was once the land of all mankind's desire?"¹³ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, then referring to himself anonymously as the writer, explain his reasoning and motivation for writing *The Secret of Divine Civilization*. "The writer has, for this reason, felt it necessary to put down, for the sake of God alone and as a tribute to this high endeavor, a brief statement on certain urgent questions. To demonstrate that His one purpose is to promote the general welfare, He has withheld His name. Since He believes that guidance toward righteousness is a righteous act, He offers these few words of counsel to His country's sons, words spoken for God's sake alone and in the spirit of a faithful friend. Our Lord, Who knows all things, bears witness that this Servant seeks nothing but what is right and good; for He,

¹¹ Ibid p. 7

¹² Ibid p. 7-8

¹³ Ibid p.8

a wanderer in the desert of God's love, has come into a realm where the hand of denial or assent, of Praise or blame, can touch Him not."¹⁴

The reference to Iran's past greatness was not to provoke nationalistic sentiments because the principle of the unity of mankind is the key to his worldview. In this treatise, he emphasizes the need to form a global covenant based on principles of collective security to maintain lasting peace. Therefore, his reference to the greatness of Iran's past was an attempt to compare the past and the present in order to awaken and warn the Iranian society. A society far removed from its glorious past plunged into stagnation and backwardness and unable to stand on its own two feet to regain its national identity in the turmoil of conflict between tradition and modernity.

Abdu'l-Bahá knew that if Iran's national identity were not awakened, Iran would either lose itself to the influence of the West or sink deeper into the depths of prejudice and confrontational attitudes towards modernity. In referring to Iran's glorious past, 'Abdu'l-Bahá seeks to assert that knowledge and virtue have ancient roots in the culture of Iranian people, and therefore, the new generation must welcome progress like their forefathers did in the past. Iran has been a cradle of civilization, and its contributions to other civilizations have enriched humanity's cultural heritage and universal values. Iran. Accordingly, 'Abdu'l-Bahá points out that the history of civilization in Iran and the civic tradition and love for perfection among Iranians require that its people *stand with* modern developments once again--instead of confronting it. They ought not to lose themselves in its face, 'Abdu'l-Bahá affirms, for Iranians are not newcomers to the arena of civilization and, therefore, are able to face modernity with maturity, wisdom, and excellence.

Breaking the Stalemate

In *The Secret of Divine Civilization*, Abdu'l-Bahá presents a forward-thinking and strategic perspective on sociocultural renewal that remains relevant, even by 21st-century standards. Essays addressing social conditions often reflect the intellectual discourse and prevailing environmental factors of their era, employing terminology specific to that time. The *Secret of Divine Civilization* language is undoubtedly influenced by the discourse of nineteenth-century

¹⁴ Ibid p. 6

Iran. Its form and style follow the Persian literary tradition. Regardless, its vision and content extend beyond the temporal and geographical concerns of its time. The style of 'Abdu'l-Bahá avoids the sterile formality of the Qajar period by harmonizing form and content and focusing on underlying values and meanings of forms.¹⁵

The language and style of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's writing may reflect the literary tradition and terminology of 19th-century Iran, but the concepts he presents go beyond the limitations of that era. For example, the terminology used in the text, such as "abadani"¹⁶ and "Eslah,"¹⁷ should not be confined to their traditional 19th-century definitions. Instead, these terms encompass broader and more modern notions of social development and progress.

The treatise lays out plans and proposals for reform and prosperity in Iran. In the 20th century, the issue of development and the imperative to break free from underdevelopment became paramount, particularly for countries categorized as Third World, developing, or underdeveloped. Social scientists produced extensive literature on this subject, governments and international organizations formulated policies, and diverse models, often rooted in contrasting ideological foundations, were implemented worldwide. These efforts yielded varying outcomes, from success to crisis.

One of the core principles 'Abdu'l-Bahá explores in *The Secret of Divine Civilization* is the critical importance of cultivating an educated and cultured workforce. He provides examples of factors like natural resources, geographical location, and a nation's sociopolitical history. However, he asserts that these elements alone are insufficient to overcome the deadlock of underdevelopment. He emphasizes that even a large population is not enough without formal education in science and technical skills. In his view, the key to progress and national development lies in equipping human resources with the knowledge and skills of science and technology.

¹⁵ Amín Banání, *The Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*
<https://www.bahai.org/documents/essays/banani-amin/writings-abdul-baha>

¹⁶ Prosperity

¹⁷ Reform

'Abdu'l-Bahá draws attention to the historical case of China, which, at the time of his writing, had entered the latter half of the 19th century in a state of stagnation and crisis. While Chinese civilization once flourished, boasting rich cultural traditions and philosophical contributions like Confucianism and Taoism, and even incorporating elements of Hinduism and Buddhism, its feudal system eventually led to internal disintegration, social unrest, political corruption, and external colonization by European powers. Abdu'l-Bahá attributes China's vulnerability to its lack of education among the masses. Despite its enormous population, China was unable to resist foreign aggression effectively due to its population's illiteracy and detrimental societal habits like opium addiction. China's reluctance to reform and embrace the intellectual, social, scientific, and technological advancements brought about by modernity made it vulnerable to external domination. 'Abdu'l-Bahá underscores the significance of educating the masses to empower a nation against external threats.

Reflecting on the Opium Wars between China and Britain,¹⁸ 'Abdu'l-Bahá concludes that lack of education among the masses was the cause of the weakening of the country, and that China, with its massive population, should have been the proudest nation and its people the most famous among all the nations of the world. In reality, China had reached a point where foreign powers could wage war against it and conquer it with little force.

Much has been said and written about these wars' causes and historical significance. In an article in the New York Daily Tribune, Karl Marx named the opium trade and British capitalism the root cause of these wars.¹⁹ Others have called it a cultural confrontation between East and West. But 'Abdu'l-Bahá calls attention to the following oversight: "Had the Chinese government and people been abreast of the advanced sciences of the day, had they been skilled in the arts of civilization, then if all the nations on earth had marched against them the attack would still have failed, and the attackers would have returned defeated whence they had come."²⁰ Further,

¹⁸ The first opium war took place between 1839 and 1842 and the second war took place between 1856 and 1860. The impetus for these wars was colonial ambition for a trade monopoly with China. These clashes, the details of which are recorded in the history books, finally led to the conquest of Beijing, the capital of China, by British forces and its French allies in 1859.

¹⁹ <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1853/china/index.htm>

²⁰ Ibid p. 110-111

'Abdu'l-Bahá points to the developments taking place in Japan²¹ and writes, "Stranger even than this episode is the fact that the government of Japan was in the beginning subject to and under the protection of China, and that now for some years, Japan has opened its eyes and adopted the techniques of contemporary progress and civilization, promoting sciences and industries of use to the public, and striving to the utmost of their power and competence until public opinion was focused on reform. This government has currently advanced to such a point that, although its population is only one-sixth, or even one-tenth, that of China, it has recently challenged the latter government, and China has finally been forced to come to terms."²²

Two Divergent Views. Two divergent perspectives on civilization have emerged over time, each with its own set of beliefs and implications:

1. **Uniformist/Egalitarian Approach:** This perspective emphasizes the equality of civilizations and downplays the significance of influential civilizations in history. It seeks to highlight the contributions of all cultures and societies while resisting the notion of superior civilizations. This perspective promotes cultural relativism and advocates for the equal celebration of all human achievements, regardless of their origin.
2. **Differential Development Approach:** In contrast, this perspective contends that acknowledging the differences among civilizations is crucial to understanding the driving force behind civilization's progress and development. It recognizes that civilizations throughout history have exhibited varying degrees of excellence and that these differences have contributed to the cyclical rise and fall of civilizations. Proponents of this viewpoint argue that civilizations have unique characteristics, achievements, and historical trajectories that shape their destinies. They believe that recognizing these differences can provide valuable insights into the dynamics of human history and help

²¹ Here 'Abdu'l-Baha refers to a period in Japanese history that began in 1868 and lasted until 1919. Historians call this period the Meiji era (attributed to the Emperor of Japan). Trade and conflict with the West ended Japan's isolation during this period, and social, political, and economic reform began. Industry and railways emerged, paving the way for Japan's ambitious entry into international politics and economics.

²² Ibid p. 111

identify the factors that have propelled some civilizations to greatness while causing others to decline.

Abdu'l-Bahá's perspective aligns the two contrasting views on the role of civilizations in human history and emphasizes that they can coexist and complement each other. Embracing the notion that civilizations exhibit differences in their achievements and trajectories does not necessarily imply a belief in cultural superiority or the endorsement of imperialistic agendas. Instead, it allows for a more nuanced understanding of the complex interplay of factors that have shaped human history and the cyclical nature of civilizations' rise and fall. He acknowledges the varying degrees of development but views them in the context of humanity's unceasing progression toward a Global Civilization. This civilization, enriched by cultural contributions from all cultures, advances toward higher planes of existence, anchored in global unity, institutionalized justice, and the civil rights of all human beings. While recognizing differences, 'Abdu'l-Bahá underlines that seeking supremacy in the name of civilization is contrary to the moral spirit of civilization.

'Abdu'l-Bahá rebukes the militarism of Western states. He condemns their expansionist policies and underlines the need for a new world order based on international relations, laws, and collective security. In less than two years before the start of the First World War, he told an audience in Montreal in September 1912: "Europe is a storehouse of explosives awaiting a spark. All the European nations are on edge, and a single flame will set on fire the whole of that continent. Implements of war and death are multiplied and increased to an inconceivable degree, and the burden of military maintenance is taxing the various countries beyond the point of endurance. Armies and navies devour the substance and possessions of the people; the toiling poor, the innocent and helpless are forced by taxation to provide munitions and armament for governments bent upon conquest of territory and defense against powerful rival nations. There is no greater or more woeful ordeal in the world of humanity today than impending war. Therefore, international peace is a crucial necessity. An arbitral court of justice shall be established by which international disputes are to be settled. Through this means all possibility of discord and war between the nations will be obviated."²³

²³ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation* 6.11: 451.

He offers a blueprint for collective security and fundamental reforms in the system of global institutions.²⁴ He wrote: “True civilization will unfurl its banner in the midmost heart of the world whenever a certain number of its distinguished and high-minded sovereigns—the shining exemplars of devotion and determination—shall, for the good and happiness of all mankind, arise, with firm resolve and clear vision, to establish the Cause of Universal Peace. They must make the Cause of Peace the object of general consultation, and seek by every means in their power to establish a Union of the nations of the world. They must conclude a binding treaty and establish a covenant, the provisions of which shall be sound, inviolable and definite. They must proclaim it to all the world and obtain for it the sanction of all the human race. This supreme and noble undertaking—the real source of the peace and well-being of all the world—should be regarded as sacred by all that dwell on earth. All the forces of humanity must be mobilized to ensure the stability and permanence of this Most Great Covenant. In this all-embracing Pact the limits and frontiers of each and every nation should be clearly fixed, the 65 principles underlying the relations of governments towards one another definitely laid down, and all international agreements and obligations ascertained. In like manner, the size of the armaments of every government should be strictly limited, for if the preparations for war and the military forces of any nation should be allowed to increase, they will arouse the suspicion of others. The fundamental principle underlying this solemn Pact should be so fixed that if any government later violate any one of its provisions, all the governments on earth should arise to reduce it to utter submission, nay the human race as a whole should resolve, with every power at its disposal, to destroy that government. Should this greatest of all remedies be applied to the sick body of the world, it will assuredly recover from its ills and will remain eternally safe and secure.”²⁵

It can be said that his proposal aims to control *unlimited* political and military power and to bring that power under the oversight of a worldwide mechanism of governance. From this point of view, the goal of the proposed plan is to reject and abolish colonial and imperialist policies

²⁴ His blueprint is an elucidation of the principles enunciated by Bahá'u'lláh in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* and his letters to the rulers of the world.

²⁵ Ibid p.64-65

through international laws. However, it also informs countries that are subjected to colonial policies that it is time to stand on their own two feet — to acquire expertise in the sciences and expand technology; to heed the importance of education; to use their nation's resources to build a capable and skilled workforce rather than giving them away for short-term profit; to end the victim mentality and take action; to take responsibility for their own sins of political corruption, internal crisis, and fiscal bankruptcy and stop blaming others, calling it foreign conspiracy; and to rise and advance their countries through reform and the spirit of peace, reconciliation and international cooperation.

Abdu'l-Bahá's blueprint encompasses both internal and external dimensions. Internally, it calls for the maturation of Iran's national identity by fostering a resolute drive for change and revival across various domains, including science, technology, economy, judiciary, and politics. Externally, it advocates for a global covenant aimed at establishing collective security and a world federation that promotes international order based on lawfulness. These two aspects are interrelated: internal reforms bolster Iran's infrastructure, while a world federation paves the way for a nation-state to thrive. This interpretation serves as a concise summary of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's proposed blueprint, as delineated in his treatise, *The Secret of Divine Civilization*. It presents a vision for Iran to navigate its way out of the impasse of underdevelopment, avoiding both subjugation to the global order and conflict with the world.

Key Social reforms

Abdu'l-Bahá emphasizes that the Iranian nation possesses innate intelligence, talents, and abilities, and it is not inferior to other nations. He highlights Iran's rich history, which attests to a glorious past characterized by a civilization grounded in reason, wisdom, high moral values, and a legacy of illuminating other parts of the world with knowledge. Given these factors, 'Abdu'l-Bahá questions how to explain Iran's current state of backwardness. He poses the critical question of whether Iran should embrace social reforms and modernism to progress or reject all reform under the pretext of opposing tradition and religion.

'Abdu'l-Bahá proceeds to outline several key social reforms that, in his view, constitute measures of civilization. These reforms include:

1. **Expansion of Education and Advancement of Arts and Sciences:** Promoting education, particularly the development of useful arts and sciences, and fostering industry and technology.
2. **Establishment of Just Laws:** Creating fair and equitable laws that safeguard the rights of all members of the country.
3. **Diplomacy and International Relations:** Engaging in diplomacy by forming alliances with neighboring countries, signing treaties with powerful nations, and fostering friendly relations with other countries.
4. **Trade and Economic Development:** Expanding trade with countries in both the East and the West and harnessing and exploiting natural resources for the benefit of the nation.
5. **Wealth Creation:** Enhancing individual wealth and economic well-being.
6. **Judicial Reform:** Restructuring the judicial system to be based on principles of truth and justice, establishing a balance between the severity of punishment and the measure of guilt.
7. **Anti-Corruption Measures:** Implementing measures to counteract bribery and corruption, which undermine social justice.
8. **Military and Defense:** Strengthening and modernizing the military in alignment with modern sciences and improving the living conditions, food provisions, and clothing supplies of soldiers who protect the nation.

These reforms collectively constitute a blueprint for the progress and development of Iran, according to 'Abdu'l-Bahá. He argues that these measures should serve as the foundation for establishing public interest and prosperity for the entire nation, leveraging the nation's innate capabilities and resources to overcome its current challenges and contribute positively to the world.

Having mentioned the necessity of these reforms, 'Abdu'l-Bahá writes: "It is obvious that not until the people are educated, not until public opinion is rightly focused, not until government officials, even minor ones, are free from even the least remnant of corruption, can the country be properly administered. Not until discipline, order, and good government reach the degree where an individual, even if he should put forth his utmost efforts to do so, would still find himself unable to deviate by so much as a hair's breadth from righteousness, can the desired reforms be

regarded as fully established."²⁶ Furthermore, 'Abdu'l-Bahá emphasizes that a modern social order must prevent corruption and abuse of national interests in itself and all its essential disciplines and relations.

In addition, 'Abdu'l-Bahá underscores the importance of establishing a modern social order that effectively prevents corruption and the misuse of national interests across all vital aspects of society. This entails the implementation of just laws and standards that apply equitably to everyone. The political and economic institutions within this social order should be governed by progressive and honorable measures that not only expose violations but also possess the mechanisms to address them, thereby maintaining a crucial balance between individual rights and responsibilities. Moreover, 'Abdu'l-Bahá highlights that universal education of the populace is integral to this process, and he emphasizes that reform must commence at the individual and familial levels. Without this foundation, achieving political and social reform would be an insurmountable challenge.

'Abdu'l-Bahá emphasizes the significance of establishing a parliament and views the creation of assemblies and consultative bodies as a strong foundation for any political system. However, he underscores that the individuals representing the public and entrusted with the nation's affairs must possess strong intellectual and moral character for these assemblies to effectively achieve their objectives and promote reform. If the members of these assemblies lack morality and are ignorant of government laws and political principles, their establishment will yield no fruits or benefits. He outlines several characteristics that these assembly members should possess, including faithfulness, diligence, and chastity. Furthermore, they must be knowledgeable about the law, well-versed in principles of governance, skilled in managing the country's internal affairs, and capable of establishing diplomatic relations with other nations. These individuals should also possess the necessary expertise for advancing civilization and should be content with their lawful benefits and salaries.

'Abdu'l-Bahá advises the kings and ministers of the country to emulate the Prophet as a role model and conduct themselves accordingly. He encourages them to refrain from pursuing personal wealth at the expense of their fellow countrymen and instead prioritize the nation's

²⁶ Idib p. 16

affairs, the welfare of its people, the prosperity of the country, and the promotion of progress as their primary duty. 'Abdu'l-Bahá stresses that the primary purpose of establishing consultative governance bodies is to ensure fairness and justice. He asserts that if the elected representatives of the people act with pure intentions, seeking the public good, honesty, and truth, they will achieve unexpected reforms. However, if these institutions are neglected or misused, their work will be in vain.

'Abdu'l-Bahá recognizes the importance of the material aspects of civilization and their role in supporting the spiritual and moral dimensions of human life. He believes that while the purpose of life is primarily spiritual and moral, neglecting the economic and material aspects can compromise the virtuous and honorable aspects of human nature. He emphasizes that the material foundation of civilization is essential for the growth and maturity of spiritual and moral goals.

In 'Abdu'l-Bahá's view, there is a symbiotic relationship between the material requirements of civilization and its spiritual and moral manifestations. He advises the Iranian nation to actively pursue and adapt to the material requirements of civilization rather than overlooking them. He acknowledges the value of wealth and riches but emphasizes that their benefits should reach the people of the nation and contribute to their transformation and prosperity.

For 'Abdu'l-Bahá, economic and social development involves a dynamic interplay between various factors, including ethics, education, labor, technology, agriculture, industry, trade, and political systems. These elements should work together to advance civilization and administer the affairs of the global community.

'Abdu'l-Bahá's work, "The Secret of Divine Civilization," stands out in the context of 20th-century Iranian writings on social transformation and modernity. During that era, many works and treatises were influenced by extremist ideologies advocating for centralized, state-run economies. These ideologies often carried a moral judgment that viewed all forms of wealth as immoral and condemned them.

In contrast, 'Abdu'l-Bahá's treatise strikes a delicate balance between the material and spiritual aspects of civilization. It recognizes the importance of economic justice and strongly condemns both extreme poverty and extreme wealth. It promotes the eradication of poverty not only through charity but also through the implementation of just laws and the intervention of social institutions.

At the same time, 'Abdu'l-Bahá acknowledges the constructive role of wealth and capital in driving social change and fostering political democracy. His perspective aligns with social justice theories but avoids the class-based versions that denounce personal property. Instead, he advocates for a balanced approach that addresses economic disparities while respecting the principles of personal property and individual prosperity.

Modernity and Western Civilization

'Abdu'l-Bahá recalls the example of the Middle Ages, from the fifth century to the fifteenth century AD -- the period in European history dubbed the "Dark Ages"-- citing the emergence of reformist ideas and developments in science and crediting them as the driving force that led to the *Enlightenment* in the West. In this vein, he then asks: What harm and weakness could possibly come to Iran from adapting to new ideas? He then cites the objections to change voiced by Iranians in the following way: "Some say that these are newfangled methods and foreign isms, quite unrelated to the present needs and the time-honored customs of Persia. Others have rallied the helpless masses, who know nothing of religion or its laws and basic principles and therefore have no power of discrimination—and tell them that these modern methods are the practices of heathen peoples, and are contrary to the venerated canons of true faith... Those who maintain that these modern concepts apply only to other countries and are irrelevant in Iran, that they do not satisfy her requirements or suit her way of life, disregard the fact that other nations were once as we are now. Did not these new systems and procedures, these progressive enterprises, contribute to the advancement of those countries? Were the people of Europe harmed by the adoption of such measures? Or did they rather by these means reach the highest degree of material development?"²⁷

²⁷ Idib p. 12

Abdu'l-Bah points out that these reforms, i.e., the creation of the means of material civilization and the advancement of science and technology and the expansion of the circle of industries, as well as the regulation of the affairs of the country according to the new rules, do not contradict the principles of religion and morality. He then cites examples from the history and tradition of the divine religions that true religion has always been the promoter of science, knowledge, and education. He also points out that divine revelation and law are different from ignorant cultural customs, traditions, and prejudices. We must pay attention to the principle of religion and its dynamic and evolving aspects. If we combine religion with the worn-out customs and tribal prejudices of the past, religion will become a barrier to progress and development. He says that in religious narrations, it is stated that man can even adapt from beasts and learn a lesson. So if learning from an animal is permissible, if even an animal can teach a human being something, why can't we adapt and acquire science and technology from other nations?

'Abdu'l-Bahá emphasizes the importance of adapting civil principles, knowledge, and industry as essential conditions for the transfer of various manifestations of civilization throughout history. This transfer occurs from one society to another, one culture to another, and one region to another, ultimately laying the foundations for a Global Civilization.

He clarifies that the acquisition of knowledge should not be limited to the mere imitation of the ways and customs of a specific culture. Instead, it should be viewed as a universal and general process that reflects the inherent human desire for knowledge and understanding. This process has a long history and has consistently enriched human thought and expanded minds, transcending ethnic boundaries. He contends that logical reasoning buttresses this universal theme of knowledge dissemination.

Abdu'l-Bahá regards Western civilization as advanced in material, scientific, and technological aspects, as well as in social organization. However, he asserts that the material aspect of Western civilization requires a spiritual worldview that aligns with scientific thought, upholds modern social achievements, and supports global unity. This spiritual perspective should also address humanity's eternal quest for meaning, understanding the ultimate causes, and recognizing values beyond the material world.

The Secret of Divine Civilization also criticizes Western militarism and underscores the imperative of world peace. 'Abdu'l-Bahá views peace and unity as fundamental to moral principles, without which the pursuit of virtue becomes compromised. He highlights the devastating consequences of wars between European nations, emphasizing the immense human toll, orphaned children, displaced populations, and the societal costs. Such behaviors, he contends, fall short of the standards of civilization, and true authenticity in civilization cannot be claimed until they cease. To address this, 'Abdu'l-Bahá presents a comprehensive plan that outlines the principles for collective security, serving as a guideline for nations worldwide, particularly the advanced industrial states of the West. He envisions a transformation in the organization of nations, emphasizing general disarmament under specific conditions. This disarmament would render the production of war ammunition unnecessary, requiring only minimal forces for internal security.

Notably, this book, written in 1875, stands as one of the few treaties of its time that meticulously delineates the principles and strategies for collective security. 'Abdu'l-Bahá's plan for collective security is practical, binding all nations universally, and comprehensive in its approach to disarmament. His vision of peace is not merely a pacifist dream; it allows for the use of military force when consistent with the mechanisms for securing collective security and upholding the universal peace accord, making it a tangible and realistic proposal.

Abdu'l-Bahá was cognizant of the prevailing political conditions in the world and understood that many might perceive his views as out of touch with reality, deeming their implementation challenging or even impossible. Despite acknowledging the difficulties in achieving collective security, he firmly believed it was attainable. He regarded peace as aligning with the Divine will and asserted that no noble endeavor in the realm of existence is beyond the realm of possibility. He drew lessons from history, emphasizing that numerous complex developments that were once unimaginable to human intellect had, over time, become realities.

He posited that the proliferation of instruments of war and the physical and psychological toll it exacts on people would reach a point beyond endurance. Humanity, he believed, would grow

weary of war as the suffering and hardship it brought about would trigger a psychological and moral response. This collective reaction to war, which he saw as a transformative force, stemmed from the innate spiritual reality of humans and the power of conscience, inherently inclined toward peace. The accumulated experience of thousands of years of warfare and violence would eventually saturate human consciousness, prompting a call from humanity's conscience, wisdom, and morality in response to the suffering wrought by war.

In 'Abdu'l-Bahá's view, the displays of power, aggression, and dominance could not persist indefinitely, as no force could withstand the might of justice. Justice, he believed, would illuminate the crown of governance, signifying that the pursuit of justice would ultimately prevail over conflict and aggression.

'Abdu'l-Bahá's vision of future civilization entails two complementary perspectives regarding the relationship between individual nations and the international community:

1. **Global Responsibility and Collective Security:** According to this view, all nations share the responsibility for resolving global issues and challenges. The use of military force for domination is discouraged, and instead, nations are encouraged to rely on the power of reason, justice, and the inherent skills and abilities of humanity. By fostering global consensus and collective security, the foundations for lasting world peace can be established. This perspective underscores the idea that the peaceful resolution of conflicts and the pursuit of common goals are more effective and enduring than military means.
2. **National Responsibility for Development and Maturity:** In addition to their global responsibilities, 'Abdu'l-Bahá highlights the importance of individual nations taking ownership of their development, cultural advancement, social progress, and political maturity. Each nation should assume responsibility for its own growth and prosperity. Rather than dwelling on past grievances or shortcomings, nations are encouraged to actively engage in the process of progress. This involves utilizing the tools of civilization and drawing from the collective knowledge and experiences of world civilizations. Nations are expected to exchange knowledge and insights to promote mutual growth and development.

In summary, 'Abdu'l-Bahá's perspective envisions a world where nations work collaboratively on global issues while also taking proactive steps to advance their own societies. This dual approach emphasizes both collective security and individual national development as essential elements of a harmonious and progressive global civilization.

Intellectuals and Religious Enlightenment

In Iran, the first waves of enlightenment began to take shape in the second half of the nineteenth century. Since that time, discussions about religion and its role in the transformation of society and the relationship between religion and modernity have been the subject of debates in intellectual circles and at the center of social and political interactions. On one side, some have argued that the way to free Iran from centuries of living in the stone age is to abandon Islam and become westernized entirely. On the other side, religious fundamentalists consider the establishment of Islamic laws to be the only solution for the salvation of Iran. Others have taken the middle-of-the-road approach and are of the opinion that a compromise and element of harmony between the requirements of the *new age* and Islamic *sharia* should be reached. The contradictions between these conceptualizations came to the fore on the stage of the Constitutional Revolution of 1905-1911. On one side stood the intellectuals and anti-tyrannical activists who had been influenced by Western democracy, and on the other, Shiite scholars who wanted to force constitutionalism to come in line with Sharia law. During the 1979 Iranian revolution, this conflict was once again at the heart of the intellectual and political debate²⁸: Islamists who tried to present themselves as enlightened progressives by chanting slogans, such as democracy, freedom and calling for struggle against imperialism, while the intellectuals believed they could rouse the deep-seated religious sentiments of the populous only to quell those fomenting forces once the regime had changed. Aspects of these contradictions are also the subject of Abdu'l-Baha's treatise, *The Secret of Divine Civilization*.

²⁸ Mottahedeh, Roy, *The Mantle of the Prophet: Religion and Politics in Iran*.

'Abdu'l-Bahá acknowledges the profound influence of religion on social change, recognizing its capacity to inspire individuals to embrace spirituality, morality, and service to humanity. He contends that religion is an indelible part of society and cannot be entirely removed from it. Instead, religion can serve as a catalyst for infusing societies with spirituality and moral values, fostering a balance between material and spiritual needs. However, 'Abdu'l-Bahá vehemently opposes the manipulation of religion for political purposes. During the Constitutional Revolution in Iran, the Bahá'í community, under 'Abdu'l-Bahá's guidance, adhered to the principle of not using religion as a tool for political action or wielding it as a means to seize political power. He strongly cautions against the involvement of clergy in politics, citing the historical consequences of such interference in Iran, which led to the disintegration of institutions, economic and cultural decline, and internal and external strife.

For 'Abdu'l-Bahá, religion can coexist harmoniously with enlightenment when it is free from superstition, aligned with scientific and rational principles, avoids fostering religious prejudices and conflicts, renounces violence and religiously motivated wars, and promotes a culture of peace. He believes that Iranian intellectuals should leverage the peaceful values ingrained in their culture, such as respect for freedom of religion and thought, as well as the rich heritage of Iranian poetry and literature. By rejecting deep-seated prejudices and embracing these values, Iran can regain its historical dignity and standing in the global community.

'Abdu'l-Bahá's approach to religion transcends narrow, exclusionary interpretations. He emphasizes the spiritual, inclusive, and universal dimensions of religion, recognizing them as the core essence of all major world religions. Rather than attempting to reconcile ancient religious myths with the demands of the modern world, he encourages a broader understanding of religion that aligns with contemporary values and aspirations.

Regarding the relationship between religion and modernity, 'Abdu'l-Bahá asserts that the spirit of modernity requires dialogue with spirituality and values that transcend the material world. He believes that modernity without the crucial element of spirituality will suffer a bout of anxiety resulting from a decline in moral values and spiritual blindness. He maintains that just as modernity characterizes the arrival of a new historical stage in social life, so must the awareness

of a *permeating* spiritual force of conscience. Moreover, he affirms that the decline of religion in the present age should not be equated with the extinction of the *light* of spirituality.

Abdu'l-Bahá's perspective on the relationship between spirituality and modernity finds resonance in the ideas of modern philosophers like Martin Buber. Buber introduces the concept of the "eclipse of God" to describe a phenomenon in which organized religion may experience a decline in influence and authority in the modern world. Importantly, Buber emphasizes that this eclipse should not be misconstrued as the death of the divine or the complete eradication of spiritual values.

In this context, the "eclipse of God" signifies a temporary obscuring or diminishing of the traditional, institutional manifestations of organized religion. It reflects the idea that while traditional religious institutions may face challenges and declining relevance in modern society, the spiritual essence and transcendent values they represent remain intact. Buber's perspective aligns with 'Abdu'l-Bahá's belief that spirituality persists and remains relevant even as society undergoes profound changes associated with modernity.²⁹

Peace and Progress: The True Meaning of Religion

'Abdu'l-Bahá's perspective on the true meaning of religion diverges from historical practices that have often seen religion used as a justification for violence and conflict. According to him, genuine spirituality should serve as a unifying force that reconciles religious differences and fosters a culture of peace. He firmly rejects the use of violence, including the sword, as a suitable means for spreading faith in the modern age, emphasizing that such methods would only instill fear and revulsion in people's hearts. He wrote, "If, however, they would carefully examine this question, they would see that in this day and age the sword is not a suitable means for promulgating the Faith, for it would only fill peoples' hearts with revulsion and terror."³⁰

Religious conflicts and strife have marred human history for centuries, perpetuating the perception that religion can be a source of division and violence. However, 'Abdu'l-Bahá

²⁹ Martin Buber, *Eclipse of God*, translated into Farsi by Abbas Kashef & Abutorab Sohrab

³⁰ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Secrets of Devine Civilization*, p. 43

presents an alternative viewpoint that transcends these conflicts. He defines the essence of true religion as a spiritual force that operates within the individual, effecting inner transformation. Any external changes in one's life should be a reflection of these internal spiritual changes.

According to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, religion, in its purest form, should actively promote education and align itself with the progressive march of civilization. He addresses religious leaders, urging them to reconsider their approach. Rather than resorting to intimidation and violence to assert the legitimacy of their beliefs, he suggests that true religious legitimacy should be demonstrated through personal moral virtues, intellectual development, educational pursuits, and a commitment to social order and justice. By aligning with the evolving needs of society and respecting the rights and freedoms of all individuals, religion can achieve genuine credibility and contribute to the betterment of humanity.

In essence, 'Abdu'l-Bahá's vision of religion transcends doctrinal disputes and theological differences, focusing instead on the spiritual and moral refinement of individuals and the promotion of a just and harmonious society.

'Abdu'l-Bahá's stance against clergy involvement in political affairs is clear and emphatic. He views the clergy's primary duty as the promotion of knowledge and morality rather than the pursuit of political power and control over a country and its people. In his works, "The Secret of Divine Civilization" and "Epistle on Politics," 'Abdu'l-Bahá advocates for the separation of clergy and the state, emphasizing that when clergy enter politics and assume authority, they compromise their own sanctity. Religion, he argues, should not seek to gain influence through political power or authoritarian methods.

'Abdu'l-Bahá recognized that in a world where global interactions and contacts were expanding, a lack of peaceful relations among religions could lead to cultural clashes and interfaith conflicts. By rejecting authoritarian and violent approaches, he called for a global dialogue between religions as part of the effort to establish an international order. He encouraged Eastern societies to embrace the benefits of modernity while urging Western societies to balance their freedoms with moral discipline. He cautioned that an excessive departure from moderation in the pursuit of civilization could lead the world astray.

In the twenty-first century, there is a renewed need for spirituality and a deeper understanding of the purpose of life and the human condition. However, this resurgence in spirituality also provides an opportunity for prejudice and religious sectarianism to exploit metaphysical concerns, exert influence, and undermine the achievements of the modern age. Consequently, one of the key challenges facing the world today is how to harness the true essence of religion to benefit civilization without succumbing to prejudice and ignorance. 'Abdu'l-Bahá's foresight in addressing these issues remains relevant and instructive in navigating the complexities of the twenty-first century.

In his book, 'Abdu'l-Bahá highlights the *spiritual* aspects of Islam, free from the cultural dross that settles on all religions over time. The gist of these highlights, gleaned from the tenor of his words, is that the growing crisis in the Islamic world behooves religious scholars and thinkers to take the helm and offer a new interpretation of religion illuminating its role in society—a role that is based on respect for human dignity and equal rights for all, regardless of religion or nationality. This new edict should condemn the use of religion as a tool to gain political power, and even further, to separate the meaning of religion from sanctioning slander and violence against nonbelievers. It should offer a reading that does not seek special privileges for a particular religion or creed and one that considers all of humanity as children of one God, affirming individual and civil rights for all citizens.

Attributes of True Scholarship

'Abdu'l-Bahá places a high value on the attributes of a true scholar³¹, emphasizing that such individuals should embody attributes of perfection. He outlines several key attributes that define a genuine scholar:

³¹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá's message primarily addresses the ulama (Muslim legal and theological scholars), who held considerable influence over social and political discussions during the nineteenth century in Iran. At the same time, he seeks to broaden the definition of a genuine scholar to encompass individuals beyond religious scholars. His intent appears to emphasize the need for traditional religious scholarship to embrace a more extensive knowledge base and a contemporary understanding of the world that aligns with modern times.

1. **Perfection of Knowledge and Wisdom:** A true scholar must strive to attain both knowledge and wisdom. These virtues are considered divine truths and essential principles for the advancement of civilization. This scholar should be well-versed in various fields, including history, politics, the material and cultural strengths of other nations, and the useful sciences of their time. This breadth of knowledge encompasses familiarity with holy texts, theology, natural laws, religious law, political science, contemporary affairs, and significant events in the history of other countries.
2. **Understanding of Present and Future Needs:** Scholars involved in devising legislation and contributing to the nation's progress should possess a deep understanding of the current and future requirements of the nation. They should be well-equipped with knowledge and skills in various technologies and sciences relevant to their responsibilities.

The comprehensive nature of knowledge and wisdom as described by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, along with the qualifications he attributes to true scholars and experts, points to the image of an educated, cultured, and well-rounded individual. This individual is deeply rooted in the cultural and religious heritage of the past while also being well-versed in the progress and demands of contemporary society. Their knowledge encompasses a wide range of subjects and transcends the boundaries of any specific field of interest or ideological framework. They hold a universal perspective on education and value knowledge for its essence and truth, regardless of its origin or cultural roots. This approach to knowledge recognizes the ongoing evolution of thought and wisdom, connecting the past and the future in a logical and coherent manner. It emphasizes the importance of preserving the knowledge and experiences of previous generations within the context of our collective human identity while also staying attuned to the ever-evolving universe and adapting our worldview accordingly.

It can be argued that the concept of limitless knowledge³², as discussed in *The Secret of Divine Civilization*, can be associated with the intellectual and scientific developments that followed the Renaissance in Europe. These developments marked a revival of intellectual and cultural life, leading to the resurgence of the Greek spirit of inquiry and intellectual philosophy. This period witnessed a readiness to embrace new ideas, and prominent figures like Giordano Bruno and Francis Bacon expanded the scope of human exploration and learning to encompass the entire universe.

As a result of these scientific and intellectual advances, ancient theological beliefs were increasingly questioned, and the study of nature and empirical methods of research gained prominence. In *The Secret of Divine Civilization*, 'Abdu'l-Bahá acknowledges the importance of natural sciences and modern knowledge and emphasizes the necessity of acquiring this knowledge as a fundamental requirement for the progress of civilization. He advocates the use of reason and logic, asserting that ideas or opinions not grounded in the power of reason cannot be deemed reliable.

The book underscores the theme of pragmatism, highlighting the value of practical sciences over esoteric discussions, wordy debates, and abstract religious speculations. 'Abdu'l-Bahá encourages the pursuit of practical sciences that can enhance the quality of life and contribute to social progress, as opposed to the ornate and often empty rhetoric that was prevalent in the educational and cultural milieu of Iran during that time.

'Abdu'l-Bahá identifies the second attribute of perfection as justice and righteousness. He posits that true justice is attained when each person considers themselves an integral part of the human family, where the suffering of any individual resonates as pain throughout the entire human community. This perspective goes beyond a mere moral concept or advice; it is presented as the foundational principle for global civilization. This underscores the idea that the scope of human society extends far beyond cities, tribes, and nations to encompass all individuals and the entire planet. Consequently, contemporary individuals are citizens of the global village, necessitating

³² A Renaissance man, often referred to as a Universal Man, epitomized the core principles of Renaissance humanism. In this view, humanity occupied the central position in the universe, possessing boundless potential for growth and striving to encompass the interconnectedness of all branches of knowledge.

significant reforms in the world's political and economic institutions to manifest the concept of organic unity in the tangible structure of civilization.

'Abdu'l-Bahá's emphasis on the necessity of education, together with his advice regarding the study of *useful* sciences and the avoidance of fruitless subjects--complemented by his later works--clearly lays out a new educational system, which he believes should become the axis around which the revival of the Iranian society must revolve. Acquiring new sciences and knowledge is one of the fundamental pillars for the evolution of the education system. These sciences are required to be fruitful and yield social improvements. Reflections of social pragmatism that later emerged in the works of the American philosopher John Dewey, one of the founders of modern education, can be recognized from 'Abdu'l-Bahá's earlier works. This perspective also bears similarities to the educational theories of the English/American philosopher and mathematician Alfred North Whitehead, who saw the purpose of education as the acquisition of *creative knowledge* rather than *inert ideas*, which bring on the dullness of the mind and abate and impede the process of social transformation.

It is widely recognized that 'Abdu'l-Bahá's teachings and perspectives played a pivotal role in inspiring and guiding the Bahá'í community in Iran to prioritize education. Educational institutions established under his influence and guidance, such as the Tarbiyat School³³, positioned the Bahá'í community at the forefront of the modernization movement in Iran. These Bahá'í schools assumed the responsibility of educating girls and adapted their curricula to align with the societal and scientific advancements of the time.

'Abdu'l-Bahá considered educational progress as a crucial factor in the political transformation and maturation of society. He believed that the changes needed in nineteenth-century Iranian society could only be achieved through the education of the masses. This, in turn, would strengthen the societal foundation, paving the way for the acceptance and institutionalization of social and political reforms. He drew parallels between political and social life and organic development, likening it to the transformation of an egg into a fetus and beyond. Therefore, the

³³ Shahvar, Soli, *The Forgotten Schools: The Bahá'í Schools and Modern Education in Iran, 1899-1934*

advancement of education was a fundamental element in the organic emergence and flourishing of social and political structures.

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