

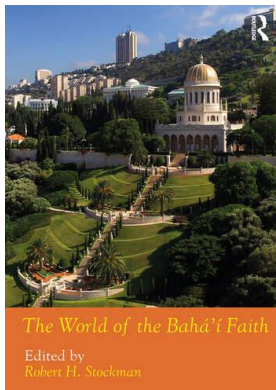
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WORK AND BUSINESS

Wendi Momen

Introduction

In His earliest writings Bahá'u'lláh described the importance and value of work, its nature, and its relationship to wealth and spirituality. More than a way to earn a living, work benefits not only the individual but the family and the wider community (Bahá'u'lláh 1990, Persian Hidden Words no. 80). It confers dignity on the individual and enables him to 'carry other people's burdens, and not himself be a burden to others' ('Abdu'l-Bahá, in *Compilation I*: 1991a: 3).

The necessity and importance of business and trade to a country and individuals is noted by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in *The Secret of Divine Civilization*, a treatise written in 1875 to the leaders and people of Iran, which sets out a framework for social and economic development. He called upon government to 'widen the scope of commerce, industry and the arts' and to 'further such measures as will increase the people's wealth' ('Abdu'l-Bahá 1990, *Secret* 39).

As yet there is no comprehensive 'Bahá'í theory' of work or business whereby all the information found in the Bahá'í texts can be described within a single framework. Nor are there definitions of the terms 'work' and 'business' and no explanation about what activities constitutes work or business. Bahá'í texts offer a few details about the work and businesses practices that might in the future be developed into such a framework, together with the general guidance on ethics, wealth, service, resources, consumption, social responsibility, and prosperity scattered throughout the corpus of Bahá'í literature and the experience of their application to real-life situations. How the guidance relates to individuals, businesses, and the economic, social, and political environment is part of the ongoing work of the Bahá'í community, which is learning through its own experience of applying these and other general principles to their reality.

How Bahá'u'lláh's future world order will emerge depends on the efforts Bahá'ís today make to put His teachings into effect. The current focus of Bahá'í communities, families, and individuals is on effecting change in themselves, their families, neighbourhoods, and work spaces so they can 'learn about how to participate in the material affairs of society in a way that is consistent with the divine precepts and how, in practical terms, collective prosperity can be advanced through justice and generosity, collaboration and mutual assistance' (Universal House of Justice 2017).

For the individual, Bahá'í teachings relate that the work done in trade, crafts, arts, or professions is a significant part of one's life and not merely the source of one's living. Work should be meaningful and, when performed in the spirit of service, is considered an act of worship. The obligation to work is a moral one and is not removed by the possession of wealth. The community owes nothing to those who can work but refuse to do so. However, a person who works has a right to a living and to share in the profits of the enterprise (BIC 1947). The work of the individual is not isolated from the environment in which one lives and they impact each other.

Bahá'ís believe 'true human progress depends on achieving coherence between the material and spiritual dimensions of life' (*Material Means* 2019: 1), thus work and business, personal wealth, and global prosperity are to be seen in this light. Work is intrinsic to one's spiritual, social, and humanitarian life. Similarly, business has a social purpose as well as an economic one (ebbf.org).

Bahá'í teachings concerning work and business are underpinned by concepts, values, and a world view that posits an ever-advancing civilization based on spiritual principles that requires the restructuring of every political, social, and economic system. Among these principles are universal justice based on the recognition of the oneness of humanity, the right to a dignified life, universal education, service to humanity, and excellence.

Establishing true justice in the world economic system, eradicating destitution, and preventing the gross accumulation of wealth requires the organization of the world's economic resources, the coordination and development of its markets, the equitable regulation of the distribution of its products, and the abolition of economic barriers and restrictions. These and the level of collaboration among nations needed to dispel competition and rivalry can only be delivered by a robust system of global governance (Shoghi Effendi 1991, *World Order* 203–04; q.v. 'economics').

Everyone has a right to a dignified life, as all are endowed with the potential to reflect divine qualities. The implication is that everyone should have opportunities to receive a good education and access to healthcare, have healthy families, to practise their spiritual values, and to contribute to the well-being of their communities through their work and acts of service (BIC 2019a). Remediating the crushing effect of generational poverty on individuals, families, and communities requires change in social policies at every level but, more importantly, on the application of moral considerations, such as justice and trustworthiness, which need to drive policy changes.

Serving humanity is everyone's responsibility. People are encouraged to develop and use their natural capacities in work that benefits themselves and others (Universal House of Justice 1966).

Bahá'ís are encouraged to reject 'the low sights of mediocrity', to 'scale the ascending heights of excellence in all they aspire to do', and to 'elevate the very atmosphere' of their places of education and work (Universal House of Justice 1985a).

Bahá'í teachings on social conditions relating to work and business

Work and businesses function within social structures and conditions of their local and national communities as well as in a globalized world. Businesses can transform by focusing on principles and values that promote the welfare of their workforce, stakeholders, and the wider community, and by implementing sustainable practices found, for example, in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations 2020; BIC 2019c).

Environment and sustainable business practices

Decades ago Bahá'ís called for the 'cooperation of the family of nations in devising and implementing measures that will preserve the earth's ecological balance' and Bahá'í communities were asked 'to make the conservation of the environment an integral part of their ongoing activities' (BIC 1991; House of Justice, in *Compilation I* 1991a: 85–6). The role of business in developing sustainable practices is a primary focus of Bahá'í-inspired organizations such as Ethical Business Building the Future and the International Environment Forum.

Racism

Racism, 'one of the most baneful and persistent evils', is a major obstacle to peace (Universal House of Justice 1985b) and to the progress and social and economic development of communities (BIC 2009). Particularly in its most virulent form of slavery, racism has distorted economic, social, and political systems and built wealth for a few on the backs of those whose free labour they exploited. It continues to deprive large numbers of people of the opportunity to develop and use all their capacities, and to live meaningful, prosperous lives—which hinders the progress of everyone. Racism can only be 'supplanted by the establishment of just relationships among individuals, communities, and institutions of society that will uplift all and will not designate anyone as "other"'. The change required is not merely social and economic but moral and spiritual (Universal House of Justice 2020).

Emancipation of women

Another distorting factor in economic, social, and political systems is the continuing discrimination against women and girls. The emancipation of women—the achievement of full equality between the sexes—is a 'prerequisite' of peace. There are 'no grounds, moral, practical, or biological' on which to deny women's equality with men, a practice that 'perpetrates an injustice against one half of the world's population and promotes in men harmful attitudes and habits that are carried from the family to the workplace, to political life, and ultimately to international relations' (Universal House of Justice 1985b, *Promise of World Peace*). The economic empowerment of women is essential for their advancement and equality, ensuring women have education and employment options and can make decisions about their own well-being and that of their families (Institute for Studies 2009: 6–7).

Unemployment

Unemployment is a 'crushing burden and demoralizing influence on governments and peoples' (Shoghi Effendi 1991, *World* 32). Bahá'u'lláh's vision for society and a sustainable world anticipates that everyone will be employed in meaningful work and will be able to support themselves and their families as well as contribute to the common good. While this long-term plan will be realized in stages, in the meantime Bahá'ís should offer assistance to those in need by ensuring their basic requirements are met. This 'sacred task' is to be carried out with a pure heart, patience, sensitivity, and kindness, mindful of the spiritual and moral principles involved and of the people's dignity (Universal House of Justice 2009a, 2009b).

The market economy and competition

Bahá'ís consider the current market system, based on 'tragic' ideologies, to be aggravating the gap between the poverty suffered by much of humanity and the wealth that enables a minority

to live in great affluence (Universal House of Justice 1985b, *Promise of World Peace*). It disproportionately affects the global south and in particular women and children, and fails to fulfil the function of the economic system to equip people and their institutions with the means to cultivate their potential and earn their living (BIC 1998).

Business operates within the prevailing institutional, economic, and social structures largely embedded in a global north culture of competition (BIC 2019b). That culture is based on assumptions such as ‘competition drives progress’. Bahá’í teachings challenge such assumptions (BIC 2018), pointing out that many local economies, often in the global south, are based on small, women-led agricultural enterprises and have valued collective well-being over competition (BIC 2012b).

Business can easily be misdirected to support a system that considers profit for a tiny minority a worthy goal. Competition in business should assist innovation, excellence, and wealth creation, benefiting society with needed products and services, and improving the standard of living, including health and well-being, for all. When fortunes for the few outweighs the benefits for the many, these ends are subverted, leading to the extremes of wealth and poverty that keep the world in a ‘perpetual state of instability that fosters political conflict, crime, terrorism and war’ (Karlberg 2004: 38–42). For competition to benefit society, a high level of cooperation, agreement on fair rules and appropriate regulation, and enforcement is required, as well as a new system of values (Miller 2007: 12–13).

Anti-trust (cartels)

Countering a prevailing business practice whereby major producers in a particular industry would agree to control production and prices to benefit themselves and drive competitors out of business through the allocation of shares, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá (2007, *Promulgation* no. 102) stated there would be no trusts in the future, explaining how the shares in a company should be divided so workers become shareholders.

Bahá’í attitude to wealth

Religion has long linked love of money, greed, and parsimony with a lack of spiritual qualities (Proverbs 1: 10–19; 1 Timothy 6: 6–12; Dhammapada 1, 18; Qur’an 4: 37; Bhagavad Gita, ch. 16). Bahá’í texts too describe the appropriate attitude towards money, which requires self-knowledge, social responsibility, personal maturity, and good judgement about how money is acquired and spent (Bahá’u’lláh 1978, *Tablets* 35; ‘Abdu’l-Bahá 1990, *Secret* 24). The purpose of wealth is to serve humanity (Universal House of Justice 2017). Thus the generation, distribution, and utilization of wealth and resources has a moral dimension (Universal House of Justice 2017), the neglect of which is reflected in the wealth gap universally.

It is not wealth itself that is decried in Bahá’í texts but the gulf between poverty and opulence, a gap that must be closed if economic justice is to be established. That is to be accomplished largely by the restructuring of society and all economic and social relationships, a function of the ever-advancing civilization. Personal wealth is acceptable with conditions: that the whole population is wealthy, suggesting a general rise in the standard of living across the world; that money is earned through honest work; and that it is used for the welfare of others (‘Abdu’l-Bahá 1990, *Secret* 24).

One step towards creating greater economic justice for both workers and business is the fair distribution of wealth. While absolute equality of wealth is considered impossible and undesirable, the excessive wealth accumulated by a few in the face of mass poverty is unjust (BIC

1993). Legislation is required to ensure workers receive a liveable wage and that regulations and mechanisms such as taxation are in place to limit the amassing of wealth. This requires a change in attitude on the part of policy-makers: 'Finding novel ways to justify policies that serve the economic interests of the few at the expense of the many is a tendency of humanity's collective childhood, not its coming of age' (Sabet 2020).

Voluntary sharing of wealth is also advocated, whether by wealthy individuals to those less well off or by wealthy states to poorer ones. The 'freely-chosen expending of one's substance' leads to the 'comfort and peace' of society, lights up the world and bestows 'honour upon humankind' ('Abdu'l-Bahá 1978, *Selections* 115).

Wealth should be redistributed efficiently and equitably; otherwise a 'spiritually damaging' dependency can develop. Thus, focusing only on the redistribution of material wealth as a solution to poverty and inequalities is counterproductive in the long run and should be integrated with wealth creation (BIC 1995b). Similarly, 'attention to growth and income generation alone has very often translated into more wealth for those who do not need it, and increased deprivation for those who do', making the application of spiritual principles such as justice imperative (BIC 2019b).

Wealth is created for the individual, the family, and the community 'when work is undertaken not simply as a means of earning a livelihood but also as a way to contribute to society' (BIC 1995b). For individuals to be able to apply this concept, business and the economic system require a reorientation away from the idea that a person's value is measured primarily by wealth and the ability to acquire it, and towards an appreciation of the value of each person's contribution to the well-being of society.

This in turn requires a reconceptualization of education systems so that every generation can maximize its potential to contribute to the ever-advancing civilization, the purpose of humanity's creation (Bahá'u'lláh 1983, *Gleanings* 215). Education should enable people to acquire at least one productive skill in which they achieve some level of excellence that assists them to earn their means of existence with dignity and honour (BIC 1989). Business provides the opportunities for people to use their skills and develop them further and, through profit-sharing, gives them a stake in the company itself.

Work

Bahá'u'lláh redefines work, service, education, wealth, and worship, and their relationships with each other.

Work has both a utilitarian purpose and a spiritual one, in that it draws us nearer to God (Bahá'u'lláh 1992, *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, para. 33, 192–3 n. 56). Work confers dignity on the individual ('Abdu'l-Bahá, in *Compilation I* 1991a: 3) and, when performed in the spirit of service, is considered an act of worship. Spiritual growth is dependent on selfless service in one's daily work (Universal House of Justice 1983).

A person's relationship with the community is reinforced by the ability to 'carry other people's burdens, and not himself be a burden to others' ('Abdu'l-Bahá, in *Compilation I* 1991a: 3). The requirement to work is not removed by the possession of wealth. The community owes nothing to those 'idle and worthless souls' who can work but refuse to do so (Bahá'u'lláh, in *Compilation II* 1991b: 6; BIC 1947). Those who work have a right to earn a livelihood sufficient to support themselves and their families and to share in the profits of their companies (BIC 1947).

Bahá'í teachings on work and social welfare bridge what are common societal extremes: one with no social welfare provision such as unemployment benefit and healthcare; and the other where there is no incentive to work because the government provides every need and aspiration.

For example, Bahá'u'lláh prohibits begging as a profession and giving to beggars, yet individuals and institutions may provide financial assistance to the poor and needy and offer them opportunities to acquire skills that would enable them to earn a living; Bahá'u'lláh even requires the members of the House of Justice and the wealthy to provide a monthly allowance for those who are incapable of working or have fallen into extreme poverty (Bahá'u'lláh 1992, *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, para. 33, 192–3 n. 56; para. 147; 235 n. 162).

These concepts become part of the DNA of a community that is learning about community-building when, generation after generation, parents teach them to their children. The Bahá'í community itself and the institutions of the religion support their efforts by providing formal educational classes for children. These educational endeavours include preparation for service and work and teaches them a work ethic that encourages them to dedicate their lives to the betterment of humankind ('Abdu'l-Bahá 1978, *Selections* 129). The Bahá'í Junior Youth Empowerment programme, aimed at young people from 12 to 15, provides, among its many courses, ones that touch on the importance of work and service (*Breezes of Confirmation* 2012) and on efficiency, ethics, and managing money (*Thinking about Numbers* 2017).

Business ethics and work values

Employers and employees alike are responsible for upholding economic justice in the workplace by being honest, having integrity, and observing relevant laws and regulations (Universal House of Justice 2010). Although there are few references in Bahá'í texts to specific business practices, a number of qualities and values are mentioned which business people should evince. Bahá'ís look to the Báb, who in His youth was a wholesale merchant, as an example of the qualities required of people in business (q.v. 'the Báb').

The 'orderly running' and management of business requires devotion, integrity, fair-mindedness, nobility, and wisdom. Those having these qualities will be a model for others and will be known as dependable, honest, enlightened, industrious, high-principled, liberal-minded, and promoters of freedom. Business owners should serve the common good, rather than advance their own interests; further the welfare and prosperity of all, rather than their own; and protect the rights of all people ('Abdu'l-Bahá, in *Compilation II* 1991b: 341).

A principal value for business is trustworthiness, 'the supreme instrument for the prosperity of the world' (Bahá'u'lláh 1978, *Tablets* 38) 'Commerce' is a 'heaven, whose sun is trustworthiness and whose moon is truthfulness' (Bahá'u'lláh, in *Compilation II* 1991b: 335). Business associates are to be treated with trustworthiness and integrity, otherwise any dealings 'will prove barren and unproductive' ('Abdu'l-Bahá, in *Compilation II* 1991b: 340), leading only to 'ever-increasing loss' (Bahá'u'lláh, in *Compilation II* 1991b: 336). Trustworthiness 'is the chief means of attracting confirmation and prosperity' to one's work (Bahá'u'lláh, in *Compilation II* 1991b: 335).

'Integrity' that 'is immune to the promptings of self-interest', uprightness, and sincerity are to be the distinguishing features of a person's actions (Bahá'u'lláh 1983, *Gleanings* 285; 'Abdu'l-Bahá, in *Compilation II* 1991b: 342).

'Freedom from racial prejudice, in any of its forms', Shoghi Effendi (1990, *Advent* 36) wrote in 1938,

should be deliberately cultivated through the various and everyday opportunities, no matter how insignificant, that present themselves, whether in their homes, their business offices, their schools and colleges, their social parties and recreation grounds, their Bahá'í meetings, conferences, conventions, summer schools and Assemblies.

(Shoghi Effendi 1990, *Advent* 36)

The entire economy is distorted by practices that enable fortunes to be ‘unlawfully amassed through extortion, embezzlement and corruption practised at the expense of an exploited populace’ (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, in *Compilation II* 1991b: 343). Freedom from corruption is not, for Bahá’ís, only a legal imperative, it is a spiritual state of being and a way of shaping lives and regulating conduct (Shoghi Effendi 1991, *World* 64).

Personal economy: a coherent life

The Universal House of Justice (1 March 2017) emphasized that if the new model of community life based on Bahá’í teachings is to emerge, individuals need to live a coherent life characterized by a rectitude of conduct:

Every choice a Bahá’í makes—as employee or employer, producer or consumer, borrower or lender, benefactor or beneficiary—leaves a trace, and the moral duty to lead a coherent life demands that one’s economic decisions be in accordance with lofty ideals, that the purity of one’s aims be matched by the purity of one’s actions to fulfil those aims.

Bahá’í teachings inform an individual’s economic relationships. Whatever the values prevailing in their environment, Bahá’ís should apply these teachings to their circumstances and contribute to economic justice and social progress. In so doing, they give practical expression to spiritual qualities such as honesty, integrity, trustworthiness, and generosity. When ‘viewed in this light, many seemingly ordinary economic activities gain new significance because of their potential to add to human welfare and prosperity’.

Personal wealth

How an individual acquires wealth and spends it may create injustice for others and Bahá’í texts set out the moral framework to prevent this. Bahá’u’lláh (1978, *Tablets* 35) encourages the individual to ‘know his own self and recognize that which leadeth unto loftiness or lowliness, glory or abasement, wealth or poverty’. Once the individual has accomplished this and become spiritually mature, he or she ‘standeth in need of wealth’.

Bahá’u’lláh (1990, Persian Hidden Words no. 82) described the moral framework for acquiring that wealth and spending it, defining what a good person is and why that person needs wealth: ‘The best of men are they that earn a livelihood by their calling and spend upon themselves and upon their kindred for the love of God’. The spiritual and social frameworks are linked by the physical act of earning a livelihood and spending one’s earnings appropriately: The ‘beginning of magnanimity’, wrote Bahá’u’lláh (1978, *Tablets* 156), is expending one’s wealth on oneself, one’s family and ‘on the poor among his brethren in his Faith’. People are encouraged to extend their philanthropy to the wider community.

The legitimacy of wealth is based on four elements: that it is derived from honest work, is spent for ‘philanthropic purposes’, produces some benefit, and does not create extremes in the economic system such that ‘a few have inordinate riches while the rest are impoverished’ (‘Abdu’l-Bahá 1990, *Secret* 29). Wealth acquired by other means—exploiting others, manipulating markets—and other purposes, such as producing products that encourage violence and immorality—undermines economic justice, is ‘unworthy and unacceptable’ (Universal House of Justice 2010), and a liability for the possessor (‘Abdu’l-Bahá 1990, *Secret* 24–5).

Life balance

Bahá'ís are to earn a livelihood, serve the community, bring up their families, and participate fully in Bahá'í community life. How to do this depends upon individual possibilities and circumstances, and is determined through consultation (Shoghi Effendi, in *Lights* 1994: 118), including how to arrange one's time so that service to the religion does not result in the neglect of the family (House of Justice, in *Compilation I* 1991a: 412).

Material well-being versus materialism

A successful person is often thought to be someone able to increase his material well-being by acquiring 'every modern convenience and luxury'. While to progress materially is useful, 'Abdu'l-Bahá urged people not to neglect their more important spiritual development, for only by improving spiritually as well as materially can 'any real progress be made' ('Abdu'l-Bahá 1967, *Paris Talks* 62).

Materialism spawned the modern culture of consumerism, whereby people's worth is determined by their purchasing power, how much they own, and how many goods they can consume (Universal House of Justice 2017). This materialistic world view has created a 'system dependent on excessive consumption by the few, while reinforcing exclusion and poverty for the many'. It ignores other aspects of what it means to be human—love, the search for knowledge and truth, the aspiration for justice, and the need for meaning and purpose in one's life. Bahá'ís strive to establish, initially at the neighbourhood level, a sustainable and just social order founded on a coherent relationship between the material and spiritual dimensions of life, one in which every individual has a contribution to make (BIC 2012a).

Guidance for business

As a provider of services and goods to the whole community, business can create employment and opportunities, enable young people to develop knowledge and skills, help stakeholders, and contribute through taxation to beneficial social activity. Business innovation can find solutions to pressing needs such as climate change and design new eco-friendly products and production processes. Businesses can also provide stimulating spaces for research, development, and thoughtful conversations, nurture the development of new ideas and ethical practices, and be a source of philanthropic giving.

The 'competent running' of a business is a 'moral obligation' and 'the wise and proper thing to do' (Shoghi Effendi, in *Compilation II* 1991b: 354). The Bahá'í Faith, as a religion, does not provide many details on how to run a business but offers moral guidelines. Other recommendations are drawn from general principles found in Bahá'í texts.

'Abdu'l-Bahá (in *Compilation I* 1991a: 98) advocated consultation within businesses and professions to identify issues, plan, and resolve problems. He urged relatives in business together to consult, as consultation will assist in getting to the nub of issues and enables them 'to find the right solution' to difficulties ('Abdu'l-Bahá, in *Lights* 1994: 228–9).

'Abdu'l-Bahá was particularly concerned with the plight of workers and proposed that one way of securing justice for them was profit-sharing:

the owners of properties, mines and factories should share their incomes with their employees and give a fairly certain percentage of their products to their workingmen in

order that the employees may receive, beside their wages, some of the general income of the factory.

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá 2007, *Promulgation* no. 102)

Strikes are typically the result of injustice within a company, the policies of a government, or the deficiencies of an entire social and economic system. Bahá’í texts suggest that ‘conflicts between labour and capital can best be solved through the peaceful and constructive methods of cooperation and of consultation’. They cannot be resolved ‘through the sheer force of physical violence’ or ‘non-cooperation, which is generally ineffective’ (Shoghi Effendi, in *Lights* 1994: 427). Bahá’ís may join trade unions, provided they are not also required to join a political party. They are free to decide for themselves whether to go on strike, given the particular circumstances (Shoghi Effendi, in *Lights* 1994: 627).

Individuals may invest funds and receive an income from them. In *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas* Bahá’u’lláh (1992, para. 27) mentions that the inheritance of minors is to be ‘invested on their behalf in trade and business until they come of age’. He also stated that interest on money should be treated like any other business transaction and that to charge interest on it is lawful (1978, *Tablets* 133).

Pricing of goods requires thought and readjustment as the wide margin between production costs and their selling price is ‘often unjustifiable’ (Universal House of Justice 2010).

Responsibilities of employers, government, and employees

Business and industrial justice

‘Abdu’l-Bahá (2014, *Some Answered Questions* 78: 7–8) touched on a number of themes relating to economic justice, including relations between labour, capital and management, owners and workers; the need for legislation; unemployment, incapacity benefit and old age pensions; and the role of government. Businesses should ‘show regard for the welfare of the poor and the needy’, ‘fix a daily wage for the workers’, and allocate a ‘share of the total profits’ of the company to them. Business owners and employees have mutual rights and legislation is required to enable owners to make reasonable profits and workers to be ‘provided with their present necessities and their future needs’.

Workers must be paid fairly. Their wages should correspond to their ‘varying capacities and resources’ (Shoghi Effendi, in *Lights* 1994: 550), ‘adequately’ meet their daily needs, and ‘enable them save a little’ (‘Abdu’l-Bahá 2014, *Some Answered Questions* 78: 5). In fixing wages and salaries, employers need to consider the ‘relationship between minimum wage and the cost of living’, bearing in mind ‘the contribution workers make to a company’s success’ and their right to a fair share of the profits (Universal House of Justice 2010). Governments are to ensure that people are able to get the training and education they need to find employment and that they have the opportunity to use their skills (Shoghi Effendi, in *Lights* 1994: 623).

Employers not only have a responsibility to look after the well-being of their employees financially (‘Abdu’l-Bahá 2014, *Some Answered Questions* 78: 8) but also through the improvement of their work conditions (Blomfield 2007: 183). Using factory owners as an example, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá (*Some Answered Questions* 78: 7–8) indicated that employers are to provide, from the ‘revenues of the factory itself’, a ‘modest pension’ to their workers ‘if they become incapacitated, grow old, or die and leave behind small children’ so ‘they or their children will not be overcome by dire poverty’ (‘Abdu’l-Bahá 2014, *Some Answered Questions* 78: 8).

Bahá'ís are to protect their health, take care of their bodies, and make time for 'real rest and relaxation' (Shoghi Effendi, in *Lights* 1994: 297). The implication for employers is that they need to provide time off from work for this purpose.

Their rights having been 'officially fixed and established according to the laws of justice and compassion', workers are to fulfil their work commitments. They 'should not make excessive demands', demand 'exorbitant wages', 'ask for more than they deserve, or go on strike' ('Abdu'l-Bahá 2014, *Some Answered Questions* 78: 9).

The Bahá'í Writings do not mention a retirement age, only that it is a matter on which the Universal House of Justice will have to legislate (Shoghi Effendi 1992, in Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas* 193 n. 56).

Job and career choices

'Every Bahá'í has the duty to acquire a trade or profession through which he will earn that wherewith he can support himself and his family' and the sort of work undertaken is left up to individuals to determine. People are encouraged to develop and use their natural capacities in work that benefits themselves and others, whether as 'farmers, teachers, doctors, artisans, musicians or any one of the multitude of livelihoods that are open to them' (Universal House of Justice 1966).

Factors to consider when making a career choice include: that it is of benefit to others and does not merely promote one's personal interests; that it has no harmful effects (Universal House of Justice 1996: 283); that it requires some effort: 'All humanity must obtain a livelihood by sweat of the brow and bodily exertion' ('Abdu'l-Bahá 2007, *Promulgation* no. 66); and its earning capacity (Universal House of Justice 1982).

A number of occupations, professions, sciences, arts, and crafts are mentioned in the Bahá'í teachings as being useful to society. Some occupations and lifestyles are praised, for example, artists and craftsmen, who 'should be appreciated, for they advance the affairs of mankind' and the 'means of livelihood' depend upon them (Bahá'u'lláh, in *Compilation I* 1991a: 3). In some instances the Bahá'í texts offer guidance to those engaged in a particular career or job, challenging the prevailing norms of the day, warning of potential pitfalls, or expanding the vision of the value of the employment to the betterment of society.

Among the business careers and opportunities mentioned in Bahá'í texts are merchants; the owners of properties, mines, and factories and factory workers; 'capitalists' (shareholders) ('Abdu'l-Bahá 2007, *Promulgation* no. 102; 2014, *Some Answered Questions* 71: 1); and entrepreneurs. In the informal sector, comprising mostly women workers, both paid or unpaid, are carers, cleaners, roadside stall holders, and handicraft makers. These jobs are often low paid and workers lack access to capital, education, and training (BIC 1995a) but they are honourable occupations.

A large number of professions are mentioned in Bahá'í texts, including teachers, farmers and agriculturalists, artists and craftsmen from many disciplines, homemakers, household servants and maids, journalists, magistrates and judges, scientists, civil servants, and military personnel. Several of these are discussed in some detail, particularly regarding their contribution to society and the values they must uphold.

Other Bahá'í teachings relating to work and business

The relationship between one's daily work and worship is integral to the Bahá'í vision of a coherent society. One of the characteristics of Bahá'í society in the future will be the gathering

of believers every morning to listen to Bahá'í scriptures (Bahá'u'lláh 1992, *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, para. 115).

Bahá'ís do not go to work or school on their main holy days and Bahá'í-owned businesses and shops must close.

Bahá'ís must obey the government ('Abdu'l-Bahá 1921, *Will*). This includes any laws regulating businesses and business practices, for example, employment law, taxation, statutory workers' rights, and insurance. It also includes any trading regulations and standards that are to be met, such as environmental measures, equal pay legislation, and upholding international sanctions and trade restrictions.

Applying Bahá'í concepts

To better appreciate the application of Bahá'í principles to business, a useful model for study is 'Adasiyyih, a village in the northwest of Jordan, where Bahá'í farmers, food growers, and sharecroppers worked for over half a century (1906–60), initially under the direct guidance of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. His business policies, working methods, treatment of workers, and innovations turned a scrubland of wild vegetation into fertile, productive farmlands. 'Abdu'l-Bahá introduced and implemented such concepts as business ethics, profit-sharing, safe and fair tenancy agreements privileging the tenants, and use of regular consultation among the farmers as a tool for decision-making and problem-solving. His innovations included an early form of permaculture to rid the area of malaria, diversification of crops, spacing of trees to increase yield, and experimenting with vegetables and fruit not previously grown in the region. 'Abdu'l-Bahá was particularly concerned with the welfare of all workers, including day labourers, who received as well as wages a share of the farm produce or income. Concerned not only for His own business but for the surrounding villages, He explained to the Bahá'í farmers how to build community. He constructed houses, farm roads, feeder roads, irrigation systems, and bridges, set up education classes for local children, and established adult literacy classes. It was produce from this village that helped stave off widespread famine in the Haifa-'Akká area during World War I, for which 'Abdu'l-Bahá was knighted by the British (see Poostchi 2010).

'Abdu'l-Bahá (in *Compilation I* 1991a: 98) recommended members of each profession, such as in industry and commerce, to consult on business affairs. Bahá'ís and colleagues in various professions and businesses have come together in professional organizations inspired by Bahá'í principles and values to consult and learn through their experience how to apply Bahá'í ideas into their work spaces and companies. For example, Ethical Business Building the Future (ebbf.org), founded in 1990, brings together people from many work-related disciplines to consult about a range of issues including sustainability and corporate responsibility. It has developed core values based on Bahá'í teachings and practical applications of them in work settings.

The International Environment Forum (iefworld.org) is a Bahá'í-inspired professional organization founded in 1997, largely composed of scientists, academics, experts, and educators working in relevant fields. It provides a platform for consulting about the environment and sustainability and offers support to nations that have recognized the importance of the environment. IEF is accredited by the United Nations in the science and technology major group, collaborating with the International Council for Science (ICSU), and participating in international conferences on sustainability and climate change.

Conclusion

Although there is no 'Bahá'í theory' of work or business that as yet can place Bahá'í texts on these subjects into a single framework, there are a number of significant concepts and practices

identified within those texts on which such a framework might be built as experience is gained. The values and ethics underpinning the religion as a whole, such as trustworthiness and honesty, and the combination of such spiritual principles with their social application—universal education, service to humanity, excellence, universal justice based on the recognition of the oneness of humanity, and the right to a dignified life, for example—will, Bahá'ís assert, be the basis of the restructuring of every political, social, and economic system necessary for the emergence of a civilization that is just, peaceful, sustainable, nurturing, and prosperous. Work and business—and the individuals and companies they encompass—are to be major contributors to the advancement of such a civilization.

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