

Some Aspects of Bahá'í Scholarship*

Peter J. Khan

Abstract

This essay identifies four core ideas that should characterize Bahá'í scholarship: the central position of the Creative Word in the acquisition of knowledge; the interconnected Bahá'í model of the world; the progressive nature of Bahá'í law; and the organic relationship of scholarship and the Covenant. Bahá'í scholarly activity rests on the constructive interaction of faith and reason, avoiding the extremes of materialism and superstition. Five principal forms of Bahá'í scholarly activity are discussed: study of the Faith's historical origins, textual analysis, investigation of religious concepts, application of the teachings to contemporary issues, and study of social and historical phenomena in the growth of the Faith. Suggestions for future research are outlined; the spiritual attributes that should characterize individual scholars are discussed; and the article concludes with prospects for the greater unification of knowledge in the future.

Résumé

Cet essai énonce quatre idées centrales qui devraient caractériser l'érudition bahá'íe: la place centrale de la Parole créatrice dans l'acquisition du savoir, la nature interrelative du modèle bahá'í de la vision du monde, la nature progressive des lois bahá'íes, et la nature organique du rapport entre l'érudition et l'Alliance. L'érudition bahá'íe se fonde sur une interaction constructive entre la foi et la raison, une démarche qui évite les extrêmes associés au matérialisme et à la superstition. L'article aborde cinq formes essentielles d'érudition bahá'íe: l'étude des origines historiques de la Foi, l'analyse textuelle; l'exploration de concepts religieux; les enseignements bahá'ís et leur application aux problèmes contemporains; et l'étude des phénomènes sociaux et historiques en cause dans la croissance de la Foi. L'article propose des pistes de recherches futures, traite des qualités spirituelles qui devraient caractériser les personnes qui se consacrent à l'érudition bahá'íe, et, enfin, aborde les possibilités de parvenir à une plus grande unification des connaissances dans l'avenir.

Resumen

Este ensayo identifica cuatro ideas esenciales que deben caracterizar la

*Transcript of a talk presented at the Bahá'í World Centre on 15 October 1999.
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erudición bahá'í: la posición central de la Palabra creadora en la adquisición de sabiduría; el modelo interconectado bahá'í del mundo; la naturaleza progresiva de las leyes bahá'ís; y la relación orgánica entre la erudición y el Convenio. La actividad erudita bahá'í descansa sobre la interacción constructiva entre la fe y la razón, apartándose así de los extremos tanto del materialismo como de la superstición. Se adelantan cinco formas principales de actividad erudita bahá'í: el estudio de los orígenes históricos de la Fe, análisis de los textos, investigación de conceptos religiosos, aplicación de las enseñanzas a temas contemporáneos, y el estudio de los fenómenos históricos y sociales asociados con el crecimiento de la Fe. Se hace un bosquejo para investigaciones futuras; se refiere a los atributos espirituales que deberán caracterizar los eruditos individualmente, y concluye el ensayo con las perspectivas para la mayor unificación del conocimiento en el futuro.

Introduction

The title "Some Aspects of Bahá'í Scholarship" is not intended to be any kind of complete treatment of a subject which has many facets and ramifications. I have deliberately chosen to focus on those aspects which I see as distinctive to Bahá'í scholarship, as distinct from other forms of scholarship with which we are very familiar in the world around us. In other words, I am deliberately picking out certain points where I see Bahá'í scholarship to be different. I do this for two reasons. First, because I think it is important that we see the distinction, and that we appreciate the characteristics, which are unique to the Bahá'í community in its approach to scholarly endeavor. The other reason is because I think it is useful to us to know what kind of patterns of thought we should avoid falling into unconsciously. Because we are in a milieu where there are many very good people carrying out scholarly activity from their own perspective, which differs from a Bahá'í perspective, we can quite fall into their pattern of thinking. But if we can identify and clarify in our minds those things which are distinctive, it can put us on our guard against unconsciously falling into these other patterns.

In preparing this presentation, I have relied almost entirely on two booklets that have been published recently. One is called *Issues Related to the Study of the Bahá'í Faith*, a collection of excerpts from letters written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice. The other is the *Scholarship* compilation prepared by the Research Department at the Bahá'í World Centre and published in 1995.

Core Ideas

It occurred to me that there are certain core ideas that are very significant in developing the concept of the distinctive nature of Bahá'í scholarship, and I will discuss briefly four of them which I see to be especially pertinent. They may to some extent be obvious, or even self-evident. However, I think it is important

that we remind ourselves of these core ideas and their significance, as it provides a useful background to examining some of the issues we are dealing with in the development of Bahá'í scholarship.

1. The Creative Word

The first of these core ideas is the nature of the Creative Word. Any form of Bahá'í scholarship must necessarily be founded upon our concept of the Creative Word of our Revelation. It is very mysterious. We could spend many hours talking about it and we would have hardly introduced the subject. But it is sufficient to say that to us, as Bahá'ís carrying out any form of intellectual activity including scholarship, the Creative Word occupies a central position in the acquisition of knowledge. Others would regard it as one factor, as one component in whatever subject they are studying. To us, it is central; it is right there in the middle. Bahá'u'lláh in one of His tablets refers to His Revelation, saying that He has “proclaimed before the face of all the peoples of the world that which will serve as the key for unlocking the doors of sciences, of arts, of knowledge, of well-being, of prosperity and wealth” (*Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh* 96). And if in fact He has provided the key for unlocking the doors to all these things, then naturally we will accord the Creative Word a central position.

This has a number of implications. Clearly, we regard the Creative Word as authoritative, irrespective of whether or not it conforms to prevailing trends of thought. ‘Abdu'l-Bahá in *Some Answered Questions* (chap. 7) refers to the apparent dilemma of the early Muslims who found quite categorically, in the statements of the Qur'án, reference to a heliocentric universe with the planets revolving around the sun. At that time the prevailing view was of a geocentric universe with everything revolving around the earth in incredibly complex patterns. He describes that as a very simple example of the centrality of the Creative Word in relation to the prevailing thought which is naturally subject to change with the passage of time.

Second, we regard the Creative Word as limitless in its meaning, of a character radically different from any other statements, because it is the Holy Word. It is the Word of the Manifestation of God, and it can thus convey an infinite degree of meaning in various forms. Much more complicated is the fact that we are told in our Writings that a true or deep understanding of the mysteries of the Creative Word is dependent fundamentally upon our spiritual condition. This is not the place to go into the dynamics of this process, but it is sufficient to point out that, as Bahá'u'lláh says, “The heart must needs therefore be cleansed from the idle sayings of men, and sanctified from every earthly affection, so that it may discover the hidden meaning of divine inspiration, and become the treasury of the mysteries of divine knowledge” (*Kitáb-i-Íqán* 70).

This now leads us into asking ourselves what are the various ways of acquiring knowledge, when the Creative Word is accessible to us. This is a very

complex subject and the remarks I make about it will be fairly superficial, otherwise we will never get through it tonight! 'Abdu'l-Bahá, in *Some Answered Questions* (chap. 83), refers to the four methods of acquiring knowledge. Very briefly, these are: first, through the senses; second, through the power of reason and logical deduction; third, through arguing by analogy from generally accepted statements or traditions; and fourth, through the power of the Holy Spirit. And if I understand correctly, He says the first three—senses, logic, and analogy—are fallible or capable of leading to erroneous conclusions. He uses a variety of illustrations to make His point and then He says that the acquisition of knowledge through the power of the Holy Spirit is infallible—is authoritative, free from error. What I find evident in that talk is that He does not discount the value of, or forbid us from using, the first three of the four methods. What He simply says is that they are not authoritative. But the implication that I get from that talk is that it is perfectly all right to use these three, provided we bear in mind His cautions about these approaches not being authoritative.

In fact we do use these three methods productively; for example, consider the acquisition of knowledge through the senses. The whole of experimental sciences, observations of people and of the dynamics of society, observations of astronomy and chemistry and biology, are made through the senses. It produces very sound knowledge and most useful results. We use the power of reasoning in pure mathematics, various kinds of geometry, and other deductive forms of logic in the physical and social sciences. And it proves a very powerful and useful tool. We use analogy in the process of scientific inference. Arguing by analogy to discover new knowledge is considered to be very acceptable from a Bahá'í perspective. However, we should always be clear that, as Bahá'ís, we regard the results of all of these forms of acquiring knowledge as being ultimately subordinate to the authority of the Creative Word, where it illuminates the subject. The Creative Word does not speak explicitly about the Pythagorean Theorem, or explicitly about the various theories of atomic structure, or the nature of neutrons, protons, or electrons. But where there is any apparent explicit conflict of view, the Creative Word must be given priority.

In applying this principle one learns that nothing is very simple and nothing is very obvious. What we find is that in our use of the authority of the Creative Word we have to avoid some very intriguing extremes. One extreme is that of narrowness, reflected in the erroneous view that we need only the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh and that all secular knowledge is wrong. The physical sciences are stigmatized as being incorrect because they take no account of the spiritual dimension of creation. Psychology is condemned because most theories appear not to take into account the spiritual nature of man. Economics is dismissed as

appearing not to accommodate a spiritual solution to economic problems. Evolution and the Darwinian perspective are condemned as being contrary to the belief in God. Philosophy is regarded as being a waste of time, criticized as being largely unrelated to religion. We Bahá'ís have to be on our guard against this kind of thinking creeping into our Bahá'í discourse. It is dangerous, very narrow, and quite wrong. When I was a youth, growing up in a Bahá'í community, I decided to study at a university. A number of very well-meaning and very good people were very troubled that I would do so, and pointed out to me the passage in the *Kitáb-i-Íqán* where it says that “Knowledge is one point, which the foolish have multiplied” (*Kitáb-i-Íqán* 184). The idea of going to university for ten years, as I did, to acquire expertise in a fairly narrow area seemed to them to be a prime case of somebody multiplying ignorance, whereas I had before me the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh which contained all knowledge. Fortunately, I managed to avoid this pernicious line of thinking. But I saw around me, and I have seen later, in both Australia and the United States, a number of very capable and sincere people who severed their connection with the Faith because of their exposure to this narrow line of thinking. Even here in the Holy Land, one does occasionally see this line of thinking appearing in disguise from time to time. Sometimes the disguise is very attractive, using pilgrim notes and assertions about calamities to create a mind-set which rejects the wider society. We must always be on our guard against this crypto-fundamentalist thinking, which can lead us into error through a narrow approach to the Writings and to the centrality of the Creative Word.

Another extreme, which is also to be avoided, is that of unwarranted inference based on the Writings. For example, the Writings point out to us that the universe is without beginning and without end. One of the very fashionable theories of the origins of the universe is the so-called big bang theory, which maintains that everything was compressed into a singularity and then it all went bang and the universe, with its galaxies and systems of galaxies, was created. I think we have to be very careful to avoid categorical statements such as “The big bang theory is definitely wrong, because Bahá'u'lláh says the universe is without beginning and end!” I regard this as an unwarranted inference. The question of the creation of the universe is far more complex because the big bang theory raises all kinds of questions about space and time, and about the implications of the general theory of relativity.

Another example arises from the question of the creation of life in the test tube. 'Abdu'l-Bahá has said, in *Some Answered Questions* (chap. 47), that attempts at the artificial creation of life will be unsuccessful because it is an unnatural approach. We have to be careful in making inferences from that statement about the ultimate success or failure of attempts to create life in the

test tube. I was alerted to that by seeing the response of the House of Justice to a question about the possible synthesis of an elementary life form. The House of Justice gave a very cautious response, referring to certain key phrases in the statement of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and pointing out that their implications will only become clear as biological science advances. My impression was that the House of Justice was simply indicating the danger of unwarranted inference in comparing the authority of the Text with prevailing views. The same caution should apply to the question of life on other planets, and to questions of the existence of the ether, in relation to nineteenth-century physics, the Michelson-Morley experiment, quantum mechanics, and relativity.

2. Interconnectedness

The second core idea concerns the concept of interconnectedness. My understanding is that the Bahá'í model of the world is one of interconnectedness, and of mutual and reciprocal actions. This may become a little clearer when I give you some examples. What I see as the Bahá'í model, in both the spiritual and the material aspects of creation, is entities and processes which interconnect with each other—a dynamic model of interrelationships, rather than a static model. These relationships may be of a positive feedback form, mutually constructive for growth, or of a negative feedback form, operating to preserve equilibrium.

Let me use some examples. My reading of the Writings is that the concept of individual spiritual development is intimately related to social development, the development of society. This is, I think, the underlying basis for having an Administrative Order and provides insight into the spiritual consequences of the Administrative Order. We see individual and social development as interacting in a mutually supportive and constructive manner. A message of the House of Justice on universal participation written in September 1964 (*Messages* 19) develops that concept in a very interesting way from the organic model—the model of interconnectedness. This stands in contrast to the prevailing view, which embraces what we could describe as a false dichotomy: the view that individual spiritual development occurs by going off into a cave, or in the desert, or withdrawing to a monastery, and working on yourself in isolation, and when you get yourself into a shining, polished condition, then you come out into society. The concept of the Bahá'í Faith is not of withdrawal from the world in order to perfect one's spirituality, but rather doing so interactively with society. We see this separation of individual from society for spiritual development as a false dichotomy.

A similar invalid separation applies to the concepts of spiritual and material. They are, in the society around us, regarded as antithetical. The conventional view is that the more spiritual you are, the less materially involved you should be. People who are rich are, by definition, considered to be unspiritual, as are

people who are involved in commerce. Conversely, some societies in the world are regarded as highly spiritual, as opposed to the Western world which is stigmatized as being corrupt and materialistic, despite the fact that these societies are filthy dirty, with dispirited and apathetic people living in a degraded condition, their womenfolk are suppressed and denied education, and there is no aspiration to education or material development. People of such societies are considered as spiritual by the conventional standards of the world around us. All this, I think, is an example of what I would regard as another false dichotomy.

A comprehensive understanding of the interaction of spiritual and material is obviously far beyond our conception. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, for example, in the *Tablet of Purity* (*Selections* 129), refers to cleanliness as having a spiritual effect. There is obviously a mysterious aspect of the interaction between internal and external environments. The *Guardian*, in often-quoted passage, refers to the interaction of the internal environment within the individual and the external environment in the larger society around us, and describes them as mutually supportive and interactive rather than being unrelated or in conflict with each other. When the Terraces on Mount Carmel are dedicated and the Arc Project buildings are complete, and when the world becomes more clearly aware of them, we will be asked why we have spent so much money on beautiful gardens and marble-clad buildings at a time when people are starving. A fundamental answer to those questions will include our development of the concept of the relationship between the internal and the external environments and their mutually supportive, reciprocal nature.

Several implications arise from this sense of interconnectedness. One is that we might best look at any spiritual concept with which we are dealing from a holistic or systems perspective. Elements interact with each other and processes influence each other; therefore, we cannot accurately get a comprehensive view of any one entity in the Bahá'í model of the universe by looking at it on its own. One also has to look at it in its interaction with other elements of our model of the universe in order to appreciate it. This becomes much more challenging and much more difficult than in traditional scholarship and it requires a more global perspective.

The second implication is that we can profitably draw on analogies and insights from an organic body—from biology, zoology, physiology, and the like—in order to illuminate certain aspects of the Bahá'í model because our concept of the world, with its spiritual and material components, is basically organic. All kinds of interaction, some of a mysterious nature and others more obvious in the universe around us, arise from its organic characteristics. For example, in biology there is the concept called homeostasis, whereby the body has a tendency to use negative feedback to return to equilibrium when subject to perturbation. If the temperature of the body rises as a result of an external

stimulus, certain mechanisms come into play which are designed to return the temperature to the normal 98.6 degrees Fahrenheit. This is a very interesting biological concept, well known to those who study physiology. It has very important implications for the study of Bahá'í law enforcement in the functioning of the Administrative Order, because one can show that the Bahá'í approach to law enforcement, dealing with people who violate Bahá'í law, is intrinsically homeostatic. It is designed to return the body of the community to equilibrium, and to a proper healthy condition. One can get greater insight into the Bahá'í administrative processes, and make a number of aspects of Bahá'í law enforcement palatable to those who may be skeptical about it, by appealing to the homeostatic analogy from biology.

3. The Nature of Bahá'í Law

The third of the four core ideas concerns Bahá'í law. As you might expect, a certain amount of Bahá'í scholarship is concerned with the analysis of Bahá'í law. This is partly because law is a means of defining a community and its functioning, with the interrelationship between its members of the community as well as with the larger society; and also because people are quite naturally interested in relating the laws of the Bahá'í Faith to the precepts of other religions or to the laws of civil society. In this discussion of the distinctive nature of Bahá'í scholarship, we should bear in mind the fact that Bahá'í law is a very unusual entity, having three characteristics that are quite different from the prevailing systems of law in the rest of the world, particularly those in other religious communities. This is discussed more fully in the book on *Advancement of Women*, but we can review it briefly here.

One of these is the concept of progressive clarification. Rather than Bahá'í law being given to us in one great big document, all together in one place, and indexed and codified, it is progressively clarified. If you look at the structure of the teachings, there are statements in an early stage of the Revelation, such as Hidden Words, that are ambiguous and susceptible to many meanings if taken in isolation. They become clearer when considered in the light of subsequent components of the Revelation or its authoritative interpretation. This can lead critics to imagine they have found contradictions, or to claim that changes were made for reasons of expediency or pressure. The concept of progressive clarification is intrinsic to the structure of the Bahá'í law, and also relates to the organic nature of the development of the community. It is analogous to embryology, where the components of the embryo progressively become more differentiated with the progression of its evolution.

The second distinctive characteristic of Bahá'í law is its progressive application in a gradual manner, when the House of Justice so decides. For example, the law of Huqúqu'lláh was enunciated by Bahá'u'lláh, but only in recent years has its universal application come into being. There are a number of laws of the Aqdas which are not applied in all parts of the world at the present time but will be applied

in due course. This, of course, opens the way to those wanting to criticize the Faith to misrepresent progressive application as arising from fear, expediency, or pressure. It is more properly viewed from an evolutionary perspective as the Bahá'í community develops.

The third feature of Bahá'í law is that there are laws which are not found in the explicit Text. These are laws made by the Universal House of Justice, operating with its defined sphere of validity, in legislating on matters not covered in the Writings. The House of Justice has done this very rarely and very infrequently. As the Dispensation continues, presumably it will do more of this. But there are some examples where the House of Justice has made pronouncements on matters not covered in the Writings, for example, its condemnation of the deplorable practice of female genital mutilation.

4. Organizational Issues

I believe that one cannot legitimately separate the Covenant from any form of Bahá'í activity including that of Bahá'í scholarship. One cannot say, "Today we are going to work on these aspects of the teachings and next week we will tackle the Covenant and see how it all fits in." The Bahá'í teachings are organic, forming an integrated whole, and hence one cannot separate the Covenant from any other part of the Faith, most especially Bahá'í scholarship. Why do I make so sweeping and so categorical a statement? There are several reasons. One is the crucial role of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi, acting under the provisions of the Covenant, in providing authoritative clarification of the statements of Bahá'u'lláh. Although their stations are radically different—the Guardian from 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and 'Abdu'l-Bahá from the Manifestation—nevertheless, the authority is the same. This is discussed with precision by Shoghi Effendi in "The Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh" in the book *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*.

An example of this arises with the statements of Bahá'u'lláh in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas about monogamy. The wording in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas (par. 63) can be regarded as equivocal, if taken in isolation, and could be considered as permitting bigamy. It seems deliberately to have been ambiguous, leaving to 'Abdu'l-Bahá to provide authoritative interpretation which makes it absolutely clear that it refers to monogamy, not bigamy. Beyond that, Shoghi Effendi in *God Passes By* states that the Kitáb-i-Aqdas prescribes monogamy. Unless one is oriented to the provisions of the Covenant, one could be inclined to question this statement, saying, "I read the words of the Aqdas, and I don't see it *prescribing* monogamy; I see a very ambiguous statement, which could include bigamy. And yet Shoghi Effendi says that the Kitáb-i-Aqdas *prescribes* monogamy!" This simple example shows how, unless one includes the provisions of the Covenant, one can be led to incorrect conclusions.

A few years ago a small group of people initiated something called a "back to

Bahá'u'lláh" movement. This approach asserted rather self-righteously that it would go back to Bahá'u'lláh with no reference to the Covenant and focus only on His statements. As one might expect, it led to all kinds of strange conclusions, which were grossly erroneous, and even self-contradictory, because it was based on a conscious attempt to ignore the authoritative clarifications of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and the Guardian. The same processes apply to the Bahá'í teachings forbidding homosexual conduct, with the statements in the Aqdas (par. 107) progressively clarified through the authoritative interpretation of the Guardian.

The role of the Universal House of Justice, in elucidating matters that are obscure or cause differences, is also an example of the provisions of the Covenant impinging on Bahá'í scholarship. We are all free as individuals to offer to the world the benefit of our creative thinking, but in the last resort it is the Universal House of Justice that has the function, prescribed in the Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, to provide elucidation.

There are other ways in which the Covenant affects Bahá'í scholarship. An important aspect of the Covenant is that it forbids priesthood. When you look at the way priesthood arose in Islam, and to a large extent in Christianity, it came about incrementally, almost unobtrusively. In these early years of the development of the Bahá'í Faith, we have the danger of attempts to create a quasi-priesthood from any group either claiming to have authority or being given an unwarranted status as an authority—because they are older or appear smarter or perhaps have higher academic qualifications, are from renowned families, are male rather than female, or are from a particular country or cultural background. So the forbidding of priesthood has implications far beyond the literal or the obvious. Another aspect is the tendency of humanity to want to give allegiance to a strong leader on a white horse, behind whom you can march. And so one finds occasionally an attempt to maneuver Bahá'ís who are prominent, or who have eminent positions in the Administrative Order, into acting in a quasi-priestly manner and to become gurus. And those who see themselves as disciples of that particular person go around quoting what they heard him say, with the clear implication that it must be right because he said it. So this is also a very important element of Bahá'í scholarship—that we avoid ourselves being maneuvered into being cast as gurus or priests, and also that we avoid the tendency of anybody or any particular class or group of people to claim a quasi-priestly position in relation to knowledge and understanding of the teachings.

Our treatment of this subject would be incomplete if we did not take these rulings against priesthood, which are a part of our Writings, in conjunction with the fact that we seek creative expression and freedom of thought in the Bahá'í community. We also seek respect for accomplishment or achievement. We are not seeking to create a hyper-egalitarian community. We recognize that some

people are very good at certain functions; some are outstanding musicians, some are distinguished at craftsmanship, some are highly accomplished in other activities. We are expected to recognize, and show respect for, highly outstanding accomplishments in various areas. So our Bahá'í community does not seek to become a uniform gray mass, but it does balk at going beyond respect to the point of according authority to individuals beyond the provisions of the Covenant.

Forms of Bahá'í Scholarly Activity

Bahá'í scholarly activity rests on the foundation of the constructive interplay between reason and faith expressed through our concept of the complementarity of religion and science. Upon this foundation, we seek mechanisms for the advance of truth by drawing upon this interaction of faith and reason, noting that faith and reason are elements of both religion and science.

We have gone beyond the days where matters appeared simple, that religious people were those of faith and scientific people were those of reason. Many scientists have called attention to the role of faith in scientific endeavor, in the regularity of the operation of scientific principles and in the reproducibility of experimental results. So we see the interplay of faith and reason as occurring in both religion and science. We should value both religion and science. We have to avoid the danger I mentioned earlier of saying that because we are religious people, religion is all we need and anything else is just superfluous. Religion provides a comprehensive nonmaterialistic worldview, which includes the operation of spiritual forces and the central role of the Manifestations. This has implications for our approach to science. It moderates the tendency of science to be materialistic or to rely entirely on the observations of the senses. Conversely, science can aid us to avoid the involuntary infusion of superstition and anti-intellectualism into religion, while accepting that religion is transrational and has a mystic core.

My reading of history is that once a religion feels that it is not in danger of being obliterated, and feels confident, that is the time that it is susceptible to anti-intellectualism. Historically, the religion sees itself surrounded by a hostile world, people seem to be getting by very well without adhering to it, even to be thriving and flourishing—and so the followers decide to put the wagons in a circle and keep those unbelieving people out, and it becomes anti-intellectual. In the Bahá'í Faith, the provisions of the Covenant protect us from following the historical precedent, but one does find occasional tendencies to anti-intellectualism even within the Bahá'í community. By reliance upon the constructive interaction of faith and reason, we can augment our religious understanding as well as contribute to science.

I have come to the personal conclusion that there are five principal forms of Bahá'í scholarly activity. Let me go through them one by one.

1. Historical Origins

The first is scholarly investigation of the historical origins of the Faith; for example, its relationship to Islam and the influence of the Islamic matrix from which the Faith grew. It could well include historical issues related to the early days of the Faith and the progressive disclosure to which I have referred earlier; the relationship between the Bábí and Bahá'í Dispensations, which of course would include study of the laws of the Bábí Faith, the reason for their apparent severity and their harshness or even impracticality, and the legitimacy of such laws in a Dispensation ordained by God; the study of some of the misrepresentations about the early days of the Faith and of the accusations of dissimulation, expediency, inconsistency, and political involvement leveled against it.

Particularly interesting is the study of accusations of delusion or megalomania. If you look at the statements of Bahá'u'lláh about the preeminence of His knowledge, His station, and His position, we quite properly accept these statements as deriving from the exalted position of Bahá'u'lláh as the Promised One of all ages. But skeptics could also inquire whether such remarks arise from delusion or insanity. Rather than taking exception to anyone daring to make such an offensive statement, we can react calmly and show on rational grounds that such assertions are invalid. I have seen very good papers written by Bahá'ís, which address this theme in terms of the self-consistency, the impeccable logic, the insight into human nature, and the wisdom shown in the statements of the Revelation. Much more remains to be done in sound scholarly study of historical origins.

2. Textual Analysis

This refers to the study of the original documents of the Faith. The clarification of authenticity is a very complex realm in which the Bahá'í scholars will find a lot to occupy them probably for centuries. The clarification of what is authentic, what is of dubious nature, and what is spurious may well be a very challenging task and there may be gradations between the indubitably authentic and the clearly spurious.

The context in which statements were made, or passages revealed by the Manifestation or 'Abdu'l-Bahá, is certainly an important subject for Bahá'í scholarship. The historical and intellectual climate in which the Revelation appeared is of great interest to us. The answers given to certain questions are best appreciated in the context of the original question and the milieu in which that question arose. This is an important area but some caution is needed. Fundamentally we look upon the Kitáb-i-Íqán in the way the Guardian describes, as the preeminent doctrinal work of Bahá'u'lláh. As we know from the history of the Faith, the revelation of the Kitáb-i-Íqán was triggered by questions addressed to Him by a maternal uncle of the Báb. That is interesting

to note historically, but it is not intrinsically necessary for understanding the wisdom of the Kitáb-i-Íqán. The same applies, perhaps to an even greater extent, to the Epistle to the Son of the Wolf. Essentially, we do not really care who was the individual stigmatized as the Son of the Wolf. What we care about most of all are the things Bahá'u'lláh says in that book. Certain passages are clarified by knowing who that person was and what were his misdeeds, but fundamentally Bahá'u'lláh seemed to be addressing the community of Bahá'ís of this generation, and untold future generations in the distant future, rather than devoting Himself to the revelation of so weighty a document to a non-entity who vanished from the scene within a few years. So contextualization is useful but also has its limitations; carried to excess it can narrow our focus to an unwarranted extent.

In this realm of contextual analysis, one could profitably study the allusions to literary and religious works and concepts, for example, in the passages where Bahá'u'lláh quotes from Jalálu'd-Dín Rúmí and from Ḥáfiz and from other great poets. The relationship of the Seven Valleys to seven stages or stations described in Muslim mystic literature several centuries ago is a very interesting and very significant area to be explored.

The time sequence of the revelation of various passages of our Sacred Text is a significant aspect of contextual analysis. The accuracy of translation and the relationship between translation and interpretation, in terms of clarification of meaning, is an extremely complicated area, which merits exploration. Since any form of translation involves a degree of interpretation, the interpretations of the Guardian play a crucial role, and much can be learned from a careful study of his approach to translation. This is also an area for scholarly endeavor in the future.

3. Investigation of Religious Concepts

The third area of the five is the study of religious concepts. We can obtain greater insight through the power of intellectual inquiry, carried out in the proper way with respect for the authority of the Manifestation and the centrality of the Text, in studying certain religious concepts. The concept of a Manifestation of God is one that we Bahá'ís take for granted. We are very comfortable with it, but the world around us regards it as very strange that we regard this Person, who came from Iran in the nineteenth century, with such authority that every statement He makes is taken to be infallible truth. The phenomenon of the Manifestation of God can well be examined, in a very useful way, and with a proper degree of respect and authority, from the perspective of history, and in relation to human experience.

The process of revelation is a truly fascinating phenomenon. There are passages in the Bahá'í literature about people being present when Bahá'u'lláh revealed a tablet and they experienced a tremendous sense of power and light.

There is a story in the *Star of the West* (23:73–74) about a young man named Azízu'lláh Varqá, who was present when Bahá'u'lláh appeared to be chanting passages from previously revealed Writings. After a few minutes, he had a sense of power and light filling the room and he fainted. When he woke up, people were putting cold water and rose water on his forehead. He asked, “What happened to me?” and was told, “You were present when Bahá'u'lláh was revealing a tablet!” This is part of the mystery of revelation. I remember in my pre-Bahá'í days, I was very intrigued to read eyewitness accounts of the effect upon Muḥammad when revelation came to Him; there was intense physical stress and a sense of power. On one occasion, eyewitnesses reported that He was on a camel and the power of the revelation was so great that the camel was forced to its knees. Those of you here tonight who have had anything to do with the camels in the Negev desert know how difficult it is to get them to do anything! So this is a very mysterious process.

The concept of human nature, with its spiritual and material components, is an important subject in the study of the phenomenon of religion. Our view of creation and evolution, the concept of spirit in its various forms, and insights into other religions are all interesting areas for scholarly inquiry. Of great interest are the psychological and sociological implications of the Covenant; we bind ourselves voluntarily to the concept of the Covenant and its apparent restrictions on thought because we see it as a channel for the liberation of the human individual's creative thought processes and for human happiness. But one needs to show this, not only from the Text, but with support also from a highly insightful study into human nature.

4. Application to Contemporary Issues

The application of the Bahá'í teachings to contemporary issues is very much pertinent to the present day, when so much of our energy is occupied with teaching the Faith. The Guardian says, in a letter written on his behalf, that “If the Bahá'ís want to be really effective in teaching the Cause they need to be much better informed and able to discuss intelligently, intellectually, the present condition of the world and its problems. We need Bahá'í scholars, not only people far, far more deeply aware of what our teachings really are, but also well read and well educated people, capable of correlating our teachings to the current thoughts of the leaders of society.” (Shoghi Effendi, in *Importance of Deepening*, no. 153). So the fourth of the five areas is the correlation between the Bahá'í teachings and contemporary thought. It is very important, but this does not mean one should necessarily concentrate only on this aspect of Bahá'í scholarly activity and neglect the other four. There is no limit to the kinds of things one can do in this area.

Shoghi Effendi has pointed out, and it has been reiterated by the Universal House of Justice, that the true relationship between the study of the Bahá'í texts

and academic study is mutually constructive and mutually supportive, rather than being antagonistic. One can get insights into academic studies through the Bahá'í Writings, as we all realize. However, the Guardian and also the Universal House of Justice point out the converse applies as well, that academic studies can give new insights into the Bahá'í teachings if approached with the correct attitude.

I recall some time ago visiting the University of Western Australia campus where the Bahá'í students had been very active and had proclaimed the Faith to a senior university administrator, who was a professor of political science, and had persuaded him to read something about the Bahá'í Administrative Order. After I was introduced to him as a Bahá'í who was a professor from the University of Queensland, he invited me to lunch. We had a very fascinating discussion of the Bahá'í Administrative Order from a political science perspective. I found to my amazement that this person, who was not a Bahá'í, had a degree of insight into it beyond my own, to the extent I found myself learning from him. From his political science perspective, he could clearly see the necessity for the interlocking nature of the various provisions of the Administrative Order and their contribution to the strength and the integrity of the whole system. To my knowledge, he never became a Bahá'í, but certainly his professional expertise gave him a fresh insight into, and admiration for, the Bahá'í Administrative Order.

Let me present a highly incomplete list of possible areas for scholarly study in this aspect of Bahá'í scholarship, for the purpose of stimulating your own thinking about other possibilities.

- Theories of personality, motivation, and creativity; the nature of creativity—a very mysterious subject in relation to what our teachings say about the creative power of the spirit and about meditation.
- The dynamics of group decision making, which we call consultation and which has a great many profound implications for the way people make decisions in marriage, family relationships, and also in the business setting and in management science.
- Social organization and governance from a Bahá'í perspective, particularly useful at this time when the prevailing approaches in the wider society are being seen to be defective.
- The role of values and motives in economic functioning.
- Theories of history and the role of religion in the events of history.

- A theory of environmental development. This would be very interesting because on the one hand we have a great respect for the environment and we regard ourselves as its custodians for the future generations, yet on the other hand we are also committed to the creation of an ever-advancing civilization. How do we reconcile these two apparent opposites? How do we avoid turning the earth into a giant parking lot, paved in concrete, and how do we advance a civilization while maintaining respect for nature and for environmental balance? Our commitment to beauty and the preservation of nature is apparent in Bahá'í monumental edifices and gardens. This is a very complex subject and we will ultimately have Bahá'ís developing a coherent and comprehensive theory which does not have contradictions within it.
- Criminology and the rehabilitation of criminals. I know of a few Bahá'í criminologists working in this area but much more work is needed. The whole theory of the rehabilitation of criminals is susceptible to a vast amount of illumination from Bahá'ís, who can examine the laws of the Aqdas relating to the spectrum of penalties for various crimes, in context with the other Bahá'í teachings including our concepts of mercy, forgiveness, and spiritual development as explained by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in *Some Answered Questions* (chap. 77). Through this approach, Bahá'í criminologists can make an original contribution to their professional field and also provide new insight into this aspect of the Bahá'í teachings.
- Conflict resolution, which is of course central to our religion. The various theories of conflict resolution which are prevalent in our society can be usefully related to Bahá'í concepts and insights.
- Marriage and family development, in which we have a unique contribution to make from our principle of the equality of the sexes.
- Concepts in physics and astrophysics. The Bahá'í teachings can illuminate a number of concepts about the nature of matter and of creation, the evolution of the universe, and can stimulate creative thought about the influence of other galactic entities, such as comets, on life here. Nonlinear phenomena, such as chaotic behavior, fractals, and nonequilibrium thermodynamics provide useful models for systems falling within Bahá'í purview.
- Peace studies, and the means by which peace can be established and maintained in the face of aggressive conduct by nations, terrorist groups, or alienated segments of the society.

5. Social and Historical Phenomena

The final of the five areas is the study of social and historical phenomena in the growth of the Bahá'í Faith. Among the subjects in which Bahá'í scholarly activity could usefully be carried out are:

- Examination of the way in which the Bahá'í Faith has addressed racial problems, and the degree of success it has thus far attained in dealing with racial issues in the United States between African Americans and the majority of the population, in breaking down tribal prejudices in various places in Africa, and in achieving the integration and flourishing within the European Bahá'í community of gypsy or Romani people. There is room for quite a lot of useful study here. We will have to be careful that we retain intellectual honesty in such studies, and that we adopt a systems perspective in assessing the ultimate effect of processes we are initiating now. Our work is incomplete in the eradication of prejudices, and we have not always had shining successes. But I believe we can show to the world that we have done some very interesting, and very important, things in this area.
- A similar approach applies to examination of the effect of the Bahá'í community in breaking down class prejudices in societies which have traditionally been ridden with it, including England, Iran, India, and Polynesia.
- The results we have thus far achieved in the implementation of the principle of the equality of men and women. What have we actually accomplished beyond the simple enunciation of this principle? What barriers have we broken down? What successes can we point to? What are the challenges we have faced and still do face, psychological and sociological? These, I think, are very interesting and important areas for scholarly investigation.
- There is also the question of modeling of the factors involved in growth and in forecasting. This is an area I find particularly fascinating because there is a lot of good work going on in the wider society in modeling and in study of the dynamics of growth. I remember talking about this subject to a Bahá'í scientist who was visiting the World Centre. He pointed out to me that he felt there was an existing body of mathematics which could be applied in its entirety to a Bahá'í theory of modeling of community growth, if we could identify the variables. This was the mathematics of epidemiology, since the process of the spread of the Faith is similar to that

of an epidemic. I was left with the thought that I would have to choose my words very carefully in discussing this matter with others, since people would feel that we are comparing the spread of the Faith to that of an epidemic, which in some ways it is!

Prescribed Attributes

One of the interesting features of Bahá'í scholarship is the emphasis placed on the spiritual attributes of the individual carrying it out. This is quite unusual when, for example, compared with scholarship in the wider society. If we are looking at the work of Einstein, it would be of minor interest whether he was modest or arrogant, whether he rode a bicycle, or whether he remembered to get a haircut. The emphasis is very different in Bahá'í scholarship, for reasons which derive from the nature of the Creative Word, to which I referred early in my talk.

The practice of Bahá'í scholarship calls upon the individual practitioner to have due regard for personal humility and modesty about his own achievements. Let me call your attention to some fascinating passages in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas where Bahá'u'lláh warns us very strongly against the absence of modesty and humility in such areas of scholarship and the acquisition of knowledge. It states in the Aqdas, "Amongst the people is he whose learning hath made him proud, and who hath been debarred thereby from recognizing My Name, the Self-Subsisting; who, when he heareth the tread of sandals following behind him, waxeth greater in his own esteem than Nimrod" (par. 41). You can see what He is talking about—the person who becomes puffed up because he hears followers behind him, the tread of their sandals making him feel that he is a guru with this whole motley crowd worshipping him and following him wherever he leads them. He is waxing greater in his esteem than Nimrod. And then Bahá'u'lláh goes on: "Say: O rejected one! Where now is his abode? By God, it is the nethermost fire." As you can see, Bahá'u'lláh does not mince His words here.

Of a different degree of subtlety is Bahá'u'lláh's statement that "Amongst the people is he who seateth himself amid the sandals by the door whilst coveting in his heart the seat of honour" (Kitáb-i-Aqdas par. 36). This is a person who presents himself as self-effacing, so very humble, almost apologizing for even breathing in your presence and using up some of the oxygen; deep down this individual thinks: I am actually quite an important person; you know, I present myself as a nonentity, but I am really very knowledgeable and eventually these ignorant people around me will recognize my worth! And to him Bahá'u'lláh says, "What manner of man art thou, O vain and heedless one, who wouldst appear as other than thou art? And among the people is he who layeth claim to inner knowledge, and still deeper knowledge concealed within this knowledge." And then Bahá'u'lláh condemns him also and says, "Say: Thou speakest false! . . . What thou dost possess is naught but husks which We have left to

thee as bones are left to dogs.” (Kitáb-i-Aqdas par. 36). So again, He is not mincing his words. These are very strong statements. We ourselves would not make them, as individuals, but Bahá'u'lláh, as the Manifestation of God, makes these statements in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas to warn us against pride, arrogance, and hypocrisy in the pursuit of knowledge.

Our personal attributes should also include a nonexclusive and nonadversarial attitude to others. For example, we are encouraged not to get preoccupied with defining who is a scholar and who is not, or whether that Bahá'í scholar is of a higher level than you are, and whether this is scholarship and that is not. This is a very important matter because some scholarly areas in the wider society are riven by this sense of definition and competition. I have endured many battles between pure and applied mathematicians: the pure mathematicians feel that applied mathematicians get their hands dirty, have to make approximations and assumptions, and can never be sure of their conclusions; the applied mathematicians respond by pointing out that the entire pure mathematical structure is built upon a set of axioms, some of which defy common sense in fields such as projective geometry. So there can be antagonism and jockeying for power and status in university departments where these attitudes exist. A similar situation can apply in such fields as psychology, economics, physics, and even biology. This does not occur everywhere, and there are many wonderful people working in these areas. We must take care that scholarly activity in the Bahá'í community is not afflicted with sterile controversies over what is, or is not, Bahá'í scholarship, or what activities are of higher intellectual content than others.

The Bahá'í attitude towards those who have trouble grasping something should always be uppermost in the minds of scholars. There are beautiful passages in the Writings where Bahá'u'lláh calls for kindness, gentleness, and consideration towards anybody who has trouble understanding something, rather than expressions of superiority or condemnation.

Respect for the accomplishment of others and an orientation to service to the Faith are also enjoined upon all Bahá'ís, especially those engaged in scholarly work.

The Future

A passage written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice in August 1977, published in the Bahá'í Scholarship compilation, discloses to us a vision of the future, particularly useful to us now as we struggle to build the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh. It states:

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

Divine Teachings, problem after problem now disrupting society will be answered. . . .

Paralleling this process, Bahá'í institutional life will also be developing, and as it does so the Assemblies will draw increasingly upon scientific and expert knowledge—whether of Bahá'ís or of non-Bahá'ís—to assist in solving the problems of their communities.

In time great Bahá'í institutions of learning, great international and national projects for the betterment of human life will be inaugurated and flourish. (no. 39)

This indicates where we are going with our first halting, and indeed rudimentary, steps in Bahá'í scholarship. We are heading towards a Bahá'í community which will be composed of individuals who are active rather than passive; a community of people oriented towards the development of the powers of the mind, reveling in the statements made by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in *Secret of Divine Civilization*, where He praises the powers of the mind and celebrates its capability for contributing to human progress. It will be a community in which the members are mutually encouraging, free from jockeying for position and from an obsessive desire for status and position. It will be disciplined but open-minded. It will be at the forefront of progressive ideas and it will be the leaven for the creation of a new civilization. The process of civilizing humanity, and of sustaining an advancing civilization, will be fueled by those future Bahá'ís who have drawn on insights from the Bahá'í Writings.

Conclusion

My concluding remarks are of a highly speculative nature concerning the more distant future. It seems to me that we can envisage ultimately a greater unification of knowledge. The first rudimentary steps taken into interdisciplinary studies are no more than a beginning towards a unification of knowledge, perhaps in a distant part of the Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh.

In the message titled “The Unfoldment of World Civilization,” in the book *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, the Guardian refers to the great advances in knowledge which will occur in that period. The notes to the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* also mention a statement of Bahá'u'lláh about the emergence of a science which He calls “divine philosophy” at the time of “the coming of age of the human race” (*Kitáb-i-Aqdas* 250). My speculation is that the fusion of various forms of knowledge will occur in this more distant time. We will at that time have a far deeper insight into the nature of matter and its relationship to spirit.

'Abdu'l-Bahá identifies spirit with the power of attraction at the mineral level (*Bahá'í World Faith* 338) and relates it to one aspect of a generalized characteristic of the world of creation, which He describes by the term “love” (*Promulgation of Universal Peace* 255). When, at a distant time, we obtain a deeper understanding into the nature of matter and its relationship with spirit, we can expect that it will yield greater insight into such things as:

- The interaction between physical medicine and attitudes of mind in promoting the healing process, which is intrinsically a question of matter and spirit, with the human spirit interacting with matter
- Questions of psychology, creativity, motivation, and the nature of human beings
- Particle physics, now confronted with a bewildering array of subatomic particles, and the various endeavors to develop a unified field theory
- Issues in astrophysics, such as the interconnectedness of the elements of the universe
- The nature of life

‘Abdu’l-Bahá speaks of the influence of the remote elements of the universe on life on earth, and of the influence of the Revelation of Bahá’u’lláh being unconstrained, as far as its effect in the universe. At some future time our concept of matter and spirit will include a comprehensive understanding of the interaction of the very distant parts of the physical universe with life on this earth, perhaps through fields and particles, and it will prove to be far more mysterious and subtle than we can imagine today, and far beyond the pseudo-scientific assertions of astrology.

We have intriguing statements of Bahá’u’lláh that “every fixed star hath its own planets, and every planet its own creatures, whose number no man can compute” (*Gleanings* 163). Now, we can take this narrowly and anticipate that the Mars Lander will meet little green men on that planet. Or we can take it at a more fundamental level and ask ourselves, what does this say about life? What does Bahá’u’lláh mean by this term? What is the nature of the evolution of life in the universe? I think this subject will be illuminated in the more distant future, as our knowledge of matter and spirit grows.

Finally, we can well envisage what Bahá’u’lláh foreshadows as a sign of the coming of age of mankind—a new approach to the transmutation of elements. This must await that time of maturity when we have a deeper understanding of interaction of matter and energy and have developed that “divine philosophy,” the nature of which is beyond our comprehension—just as scientists in 1900 could not comprehend, to even the slightest extent, the progress which has been made in this century in semiconductors, optical communication, computers, electron microscopy, surgical techniques, genetic engineering, molecular biology, and medical diagnosis. How much greater will be the progress in the future, and how great will be the wonders of the ever-advancing civilization which is the destiny of humanity.

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