**THE CHALLENGE AND PROMISE OF BAHÁ’Í SCHOLARSHIP**

A Statement by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice[[1]](#footnote-1)

B A H Á ’ Í scholarship is of great importance in the development and consolidation of the Bahá’í community. Historical research, orientalism and Islamic studies are obvious fields in which Bahá’ís can render great service to the Faith; there are many others. Indeed, it is not difficult to visualize the House of Justice, as Baha’u’llah's World Order unfolds, requiring the services of distinguished Bahá’í scientists in all fields.

Inevitably a number of problems will confront Bahá’í scholars, who will themselves have to discover the solutions, both empirically and otherwise. Nonetheless it may be useful to offer at this early stage of the development of Bahá’í scholarship a few thoughts on these matters.

It has become customary in the West to think of science and religion as occupying two distinct— and even opposed—areas of human thought and activity. This dichotomy can be characterized in the pairs of antitheses: faith and reason; value and fact. It is a dichotomy which is foreign to Bahá’í thought and should be regarded with suspicion by Bahá’í’ scholars in every field. The principle of the harmony of science and religion means not only that religious teachings should be studied in the light of reason and evidence as well as of faith and inspiration, but also that everything in creation, all aspects of human life and knowledge, should be studied in the light of revelation as well as in that of purely rational investigation. In other words, a Bahá’í scholar, when studying a subject, should not lock out of his mind any aspect of truth that is known to him.

It has, for example, become commonplace to regard religion as the product of human striving after truth, as the outcome of certain climates of thought and conditions of society. This has been taken, by many non-Bahá’í’ thinkers, to the extreme of denying altogether the reality or even the possibility of a specific revelation of the Will of God to mankind through a human Mouthpiece. A Bahá’í who has studied the Teachings of Baha’u’llah, who has accepted His claim to be the Manifestation of God for this Age, and who has seen His Teachings at work in his daily life, knows as the result of rational investigation, confirmed by actual experience, that true religion, far from being the product solely of human striving after truth, is the fruit of the creative Word of God which, with divine power, transforms human thought and action.

A Bahá’í, through this faith in, this ‘conscious knowledge’ of, the reality of divine Revelation, can distinguish, for instance, between Christianity, which is the divine message given by Jesus of Nazareth, and the development of Christendom, which is the history of what men did with that message in subsequent centuries; a distinction which has become blurred if not entirely obscured in current Christian theology. A Bahá’í scholar conscious of this distinction will not make the mistake of regarding the sayings and beliefs of certain Bahá’ís at any one time as being the Bahá’í Faith. The Bahá’í Faith is the Revelation of Bahá’u’lláh: His Own Words as interpreted by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and the Guardian. It is a revelation of such staggering magnitude that no Bahá’í at this early stage in Bahá’í history can rightly claim to have more than a partial and imperfect understanding of it. Thus, Bahá’í historians would see the overcoming of early misconceptions held by the Bahá’í community, or by parts of the Bahá’í community, not as ‘developments of the Bahá’í Faith’——as a non-Bahá’í’ historian might well regard them—but as growth of that community‘s understanding of the Bahá’í Revelation. In scientific investigation, when searching after the facts of any matter, a Bahá’í must, of course. be entirely open-minded, but in his interpretation of the facts and his evaluation of evidence we do not see by what logic he can ignore the truth of the Bahá’í Revelation which he has already accepted; to do so would, we feel, be both hypocritical and unscholarly.

Undoubtedly the fact that Bahá’í scholars of the history and teachings of the Faith, believe in the Faith, will be a grave flaw in the eyes of many non-Bahá’í academics whose own dogmatic materialism passes without comment because it is fashionable; but this difficulty is one that Bahá’í scholars share with their fellow believers in many fields of human endeavour, and the Bahá’í principle of the harmony of religion and science compels all Bahá’ís to protect themselves from the prevalent diseases resulting from the divorce of faith and reason.

The sundering of science and religion is but one example of the tendency of the human mind (which is necessarily limited in its capacity) to concentrate on one virtue, one aspect of truth, one goal, to the exclusion of others. This leads, in extreme cases, to fanaticism and the distortion of truth, and in all cases to some degree of imbalance and inaccuracy. A scholar who is imbued with an understanding of the broad teachings of the Faith will always remember that being a scholar does not exempt him from the primal duties and purposes for which all human beings are created. Not scholars alone, but all men are exhorted to seek out and uphold the truth, no matter how uncomfortable it may be. But they are also exhorted to be wise in their utterance, to be tolerant of the views of others, to be courteous in their behaviour and speech, not to sow the seeds of doubt in faithful hearts, to look at the good rather than at the bad, to avoid conflict and contention, to be reverent, to be faithful to the Covenant of God, to promote His Faith and safeguard its honour, and to educate their fellow—men, giving milk to babes and meat to those who are stronger.

Scholarship has a high station in the Bahá’í teachings, and Bahá’í scholars have a great responsibility to a growing, divinely-guided world society. The ascertainment of truth and the acquisition of a fuller understanding of the subjects of their scholarship are worthy and high endeavours. But Bahá’u’lláh has seen fit to dwell at some length on the way to offer the fruits of scholarship and expose error:

‘Thou hast written that one of the friends hath composed a treatise. This was mentioned in the Holy Presence, and this is what was revealed in response: Great care should be exercised that whatever is written in these days doth not cause dissension, and invite the objection of the people. Whatever the friends of the One true God say in these days is listened to by the people of the world. It hath been revealed in the Lawh-i—Hikmat: “The unbelievers have inclined their ears towards us in order to hear that which might enable them to cavil against God, the Help in Peril, the Self-Subsisting.” Whatever is written should not transgress the bounds of tact and wisdom, and in the words used there should lie hid the property of milk, so that the children of the world may be nurtured therewith, and attain maturity. We have said in the past that one word hath the influence of spring and causeth hearts to become fresh and verdant, while another is like unto blight which causeth the blossoms and flowers to wither. God grant that authors among the friends will write in such a way as would be acceptable to fair-minded souls, and not lead to cavilling by the people.’ Elsewhere He has written:

‘Consort with all men, O people of Bahá, in a spirit of friendliness and fellowship. If ye be aware of a certain truth, if ye possess a jewel, of which others are deprived, share it with them in a language of utmost kindliness and good will. If it be accepted, if it fulfil its purpose, your object is attained. If any one should refuse it, leave him unto himself, and beseech God to guide him. Beware lest ye deal unkindly with him. A kindly tongue is the lodestone of the hearts of men. It is the bread of the spirit, it clotheth the words with meaning, it is the fountain of the light of wisdom and understanding . . .’ (Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh: CXXXII) And again:

‘Should any one among you be incapable of grasping a certain truth, or be striving to comprehend it, show forth, when conversing with him, a spirit of extreme kindliness and good will. Help him to see and recognize the truth, without esteeming yourself to be, in the least, superior to him, or to be possessed of greater endowments.’ (Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh: V)

As more and more Bahá’ís enter the world of higher learning they will have opportunities of exerting great influence in bringing about in human consciousness and outlook that harmony of religion and science which is so great a principle of their Faith. The distinction desired by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá for all Bahá’í’s is certainly for attainment by Bahá’í scholars, who by following the exhortations of Bahá’u’lláh to moderation, kindliness, tact and wisdom, may restore scholarship to that high station of dignity and admiration which it formerly held and which is confirmed by the utterances of Bahá’u’lláh.

1. Printed as “Universal House of Justice” in Volume 17 of Bahá’í World. Later correct in the footnotes of the *Scholarship* compilation prepared by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)