

ASKING QUESTIONS: A CHALLENGE TO FUNDAMENTALISM

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In eight, finely crafted essays, Bahíyyih Nakhjavání inquires into relationships between patterns of fundamentalist thinking and responses to them drawn from dramatic episodes in Bahá'í history, as well as from philosophical reflection upon Bahá'í teachings. The author finds a "deep-rooted" tradition of question-asking in Bahá'í texts: Bahá'u'lláh revealed many passages in response to questions. She notes the addendum to the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, Bahá'u'lláh's *Su'ál va Javáb*—Questions and Answers; 'Abdu'l-Bahá's *Some Answered Questions*; and the method of question-answering implemented by Shoghi Effendi and by the Universal House of Justice. She notes also the important function that questions fulfill in such of Bahá'u'lláh's tablets as "The Tablet of Carmel" and "The Fire Tablet." More than any past religion, the Bahá'í revelation espouses the relativity of truth, and hence, the inadequacy of fixed doctrine: it is better to ask appropriate questions at suitable times than it is to master unchanging answers to issues of a by-gone era; religious answers will only be as satisfactory as the questions to which they respond.

The author suggests fundamentalism is a "measure of the hold which 'priestcraft' has upon the crowd," something that "defines our dependency as a collective conscience upon the interpretation of the few elect," and the "fear of being numbered by them [the elect] as among 'the erring'" (59). The Bahá'í writings thwart the potential for fundamentalism by cautioning against individuals assuming power over "the group" and by training the crowd to respond more responsibly and intelligently to the calls made on it in the name of religion.

Before examining the hostile crowds in fundamentalist nineteenth-century Persia, Nakhjavání describes the historical relationship between priestcraft and scholarship. She notes that those who ask questions begin to regard themselves as scholars, just as scholars then tend to regard themselves as priests: if priestcraft is so "antithetical" to the Bahá'í religion, how can the process of scholarship be sustained? The author examines this question by reconstructing the text of dramatic episodes in *Nabíl's Narrative*, *The Dawnbreakers*. Chapter three of *Asking Questions*, "Priestcraft," thus involves reexamination of the conference of Badaght; while chapter four, "Fundamentalism," reexamines public martyrdoms of the heroic Bábís. Later chapters "Fear," "Freedom," and "And the Law" offer deliberations and subtle insights on rereadings of—in addition to *The Dawnbreakers*—'Abdu'l-Bahá's *Memorials of the Faithful*, the Universal House of Justice's 19 December 1988 "Letters to the Followers of Bahá'u'lláh in the United States," and the laws defined in Bahá'u'lláh's *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*. In the process, the story of Badí' is given enlightening reconsideration.

In writing on women, Nakhjavání examines the potential "erasure" of

women from the historical record and relates the stories of two "quiet sisters of Ṭáhirih"—Mullá Ḥusayn's sister and Laura Clifford Barney. The personal name of the former, Jináb-i-Maryam, the author notes, Nabíl "omitted to mention, so opaque is she . . ." (126). The chronicle of her life "lies obscure, in a thicket of references, in both French and English footnotes, devoted ostensibly to her brother Mullá Ḥusayn and her respected husband, *Shaykh* Abú-Turáb of Qazvín" (127). The author's point here is that Nabíl's *Dawnbreakers* is "filled with countless women" who "ride beside their husbands and sacrifice their children," who "carry stones and build forts," but who "have no names and Nabíl does not go out of his way to mention them" (130). While momentarily a criticism of Nabíl's patriarchal construction of history, the work under consideration seeks to set such writing about Bábí women in the "social context of Persia in the mid-nineteenth century . . ." (130).

Where the record of the intellectual and spiritual attainments of such women is barely preserved, the questioning mind of Laura Clifford Barney is displayed in her lasting contribution to Bahá'í scholarship—formulation of questions put to 'Abdu'l-Bahá in 'Akká during four visits between 1904–1908:

But what of the nature of these queries and the mind of the inquirer? We have looked at the book for its answers but haven't realized how many of them lie in the nature of the questions asked. Laura herself states in her Preface to the first edition [of *Some Answered Questions*], "I believe that what has been so valuable to me may be of use to others, since all men, notwithstanding their differences, are united in their search for reality" [vi]. Clearly there is some value for us in trying to understand her motives. (141)

Nakhjavání subsequently places Barney in the context of relationships with her Jewish grandfather, bohemian mother, notorious sister, and supportive husband. While comparatively brief, the reading of *Asking Questions* arouses pleasure and provokes thought, as it explores its textual, feminist, and religious themes. It places the tendency toward fundamentalism in contemporary thinking in the context of philosophical solutions derived from reflections on Bahá'í history and scriptures, and in doing so, it encourages a rereading of Bahá'í texts, which might otherwise have been regarded as already familiar. It suggests that through exploration of Bahá'í and other texts, the individual can "map" his or her life's path according to searchable laws and principles. This is the constructive—rather than the destructive—role of religion; where individuals fail to prepare their own maps, Bahá'í laws and exhortations provide ready-made standards. *Asking Questions* challenges the virtues of fundamentalist beliefs and, by the manner in which it does so, makes a valuable contribution to our understanding of the purpose, method, and potential for contemporary Bahá'í scholarship.

Editors' Note: Shortly after the publication of Dr. Hassall's review of four books on Bahá'í history (*The Journal of Bahá'í Studies*, 3.3), the Association received the following additional information from Dr. Hassall on the text of Shoghi Effendi's cables, as mentioned on page 75 of his review in that issue of the *Journal*:

IMPORTANT CABLE FROM SHOGHI EFFENDI DATED 2 NOVEMBER 1931: "Urge all English speaking Believers concentrate study Nabil's immortal Narrative as essential preliminary to renewed intensive Teaching campaign necessitated by completion Mashriqu'l-Adhkár. Strongly feel widespread use of its varied rich and authentic material constitutes most effective weapon to meet challenge of a critical hour. Unhesitatingly recommend it to every prospective visitor of Bahá'u'lláh's native land" (*Bahá'í News*, no. 56 [Oct.-Nov., 1931]: 2).

This was followed by a second cable, 21 June 1932, "Feel impelled appeal entire body American believers (to) henceforth regard Nabil's soul-stirring Narrative as essential adjunct to reconstructed Teaching program, as unchallengeable textbook in their Summer Schools. as source of inspiration in all literary (and) artistic pursuits, as an invaluable companion in times of leisure, as indispensable preliminary to future pilgrimage (to) Bahá'u'lláh's native land, and as unfailing instrument to allay distress and resist attacks of critical, disillusioned humanity" (*Bahá'í News*, no. 64 [July, 1932]: 1).