

Styles of piety

Notes on the relationship between Baha'i scholars and the Baha'i institutions with reference to academic methodology¹

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Abstract

This paper addresses very broadly a number of issues in contemporary Baha'i scholarship. The approach here is allusive rather than categorical. Starting from the denigration of 'blind faith' by Baha'u'llah, the intellectual heritage of the Islamic world is held up as both mirror and example (both positive and negative) for approaching current problems and questions arising from an encounter between scholarship and administrative authority. Some thoughts are expressed touching upon the role of the scholar in the community. The phenomenon of the Internet is briefly discussed. The article ends with some reflection on the idea or institution of the Covenant.

On the subject of methodology one can do no better than draw attention to a sacred tradition that the Bab was fond of quoting; the prophet Muhammad is reported as having said: 'The Paths to God are as numerous as the very breaths of His creatures'. One of the more appealingly progressive, if not 'postmodern' features of the Baha'i Faith is the institutionalized self-consciousness that is built into the teachings. Such calls to mind the striking and perhaps even troubling image of the aware foetus introduced a half-century ago by the science-fiction writer Arthur C. Clarke. Baha'is believe that the Baha'i Faith of today is evolving or developing into what it is destined to become; and what it is destined to become is intimately connected with something referred to as a New World Order. While there is no precise blueprint or clear and precise image for this future, the Universal House of Justice has indicated its 'apophatic' nature in a statement largely devoted to the nature of deepening:

A detailed and exact knowledge of the present structure of Bahá'í administration, or of the bylaws of national and local spiritual assemblies, or of the many and varied applications of Bahá'í law under the diverse conditions prevailing around the world, while valuable in itself, cannot be regarded as the sort of knowledge primarily intended by deepening. Rather is suggested a clearer apprehension of the purpose of God for man, and particularly of His immediate purpose as revealed and directed by Bahá'u'lláh, a purpose as far removed from current concepts of human well-being and happiness as is possible.²

Baha'i teachings indicate that the 'organs of perception and consciousness' of this 'embryonic world order' are the various consultative and deliberative institutions of the Faith. Thus, esteeming and honouring the idea of multiple paths to the truth taught by the Bab and Baha'u'llah is destined to lead

1 This essay is a development of a talk given at the conference on 'Foundational Issues in the Baha'i Faith' held under the auspices of the Baha'i Society of Oxford University at Merton College, April 2000. I would like to thank the editors of *Baha'i Studies Review* for their valuable suggestions and would especially like to thank Gary Fuhrman, Arash Abizadeh and Udo Schaefer for reading earlier drafts and making valuable comments and criticisms.

2 *Wellspring of Guidance*, Wilmette, IL: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1976, p. 113.

to the ultimate and complete transformation of human life on the planet. This transformation will, we feel, characterize a time when the important Baha'i principle of the harmony of science and religion is so etched into the cultural mind of that far-off time that the thought of a conflict between Baha'i scholars and Baha'i institutions will be unformulable. Among the paths to the truth so considered, then, there seems to be no compelling reason to omit academic methodology. A methodology is a tool, it can be used well or it can be used badly. As for the path to truth, there is no guarantee that everyone who esteems themselves treading it, is actually doing so. It is possible to stray from such a path, just as it is possible to stray from any path. But this does not mean that the whole notion of a scientific method or academic *modus operandi* should be demonized.

There are then at least two ways of speaking about the relationship between Baha'i scholars and Baha'i institutions: (1) in terms of the very desirable state of affairs that will characterize the living and working conditions of the New World Order, and (2) in terms of the current stage in the development towards that goal. My comments will address only this second item, and I will take for granted that the ideal conditions towards which we are all working are generally agreed upon, even if we remain ignorant of precise details. My comments will also take for granted that among the most important factors that condition the ideal relationship between Baha'i scholars and Baha'i institutions are those spiritual – moral and ethical – virtues all Baha'is are called upon to embody. These are frequently the same as the basic prerequisites of civilized society in general: honesty, humility, generosity, patience, sincerity, mutual respect, a sense of humour, and so on. It is true that every Baha'i is in some sense a Baha'i scholar when attempting to apply the teachings to a lived experience or to study the Baha'i writings. Indeed, because of the sacramental status of intellect in the Baha'i view of things, it could be said that any time a mind is 'deployed' Baha'i scholarship ensues, no matter where that mind might find itself. Such a mystico-philosophical view is, I think, directly related to a basic anti-clerical motif running throughout the writings of the Bab and Baha'u'llah. This anti-clerical motif is one of the more foundational and formative themes in the writings and has helped to energize a characteristic Baha'i impulse towards a kind of democratization, if you will, of religion. This is the bright side. But my comments are not about the scholarship that comes under this category, the 'every Baha'i is a Baha'i scholar' proposition, although what is said on the topic here could have relevance for that category.

The dark side of such anti-clericalism sometimes manifests itself in a robust anti-intellectualism and mistrust of the ways and methods of today's secular clergy and their church – academics and the academy. Anyone who has spent any time at all in an academic milieu knows that this mistrust is surely a healthy thing in certain circumstances, just as a small dose of poison can frequently save a life. Mistrust of 'intellectuals' is not new to the world and may be seen full-blown as a polemical topos in such apocryphal tales as that of the burning of the library of Alexandria by the invading Muslim hordes who, so the tale goes, were commanded to burn it because it either contained knowledge that was already in the Qur'an and was therefore redundant and superfluous, or it contained knowledge that was not in the Qur'an and was therefore unnecessary and (*eo ipso*) wrong. In either case, the library was to be destroyed. This never happened, by the way. It is yet another of the seemingly endless examples of Crusades-inspired cultural slurs against Islam.

A person might counter this assertion of anti-intellectualism in the Baha'i community by pointing out that Baha'is are frequently highly educated people and that indeed the Baha'i Faith appears to be a religion for intellectuals (a criticism I am sure we have all heard). But one of the prime inspirations for the calling of this conference is the desire to address some of the issues and problems that have emerged from the recent history of the relationship between Baha'i scholars and Baha'i institutions. I will speak about the type of scholarship that I know best and the type with which I have the most sustained experience: scholarship as a vocation, a profession. Furthermore, the species of scholarship

about which I am interested and most qualified to speak is a type that may be thought to play a particular and distinctive role in the Baha'i community, and according to a recent communication from the World Centre, perhaps a negative one.³ While there are dozens of Baha'i scholars who pursue careers in various disciplines such as law, literature, physics, philosophy, and the sciences, the type of scholarship that has given thoughtful Baha'is more pause for thought is precisely Middle Eastern or Islamic Studies and Religious Studies and History.

It is natural and obvious that this be so. Baha'i scholars who perform scientific research in literature, physics, engineering, medicine, and even philosophy are unlikely to publish books and papers that directly connect with or pertain to Baha'i history and teachings in a primary way. This is not to suggest that the work of such scholars is irrelevant to the Baha'i Faith. Nothing could be further from reality. Because of the basic Baha'i teaching that posits no disjunction or disagreement between 'religion' and 'science', all intellectual endeavour is potentially pertinent to the Baha'i Faith, even if only to continue to demonstrate the soundness of such a principle.

It is sometimes pointed out that some recent Baha'i scholarship is devoid of references to unseen forces and the pivotal function of prophethood in the unfolding of civilization and culture. On the problem of an appropriate methodology in the study of history, one observer has indicated that today it would not be possible for a professional Baha'i intellectual historian to publish assent to the historically problematic statement of Baha'u'llah: 'The sages aforetime acquired their knowledge from the Prophets, inasmuch as the latter were the Exponents of divine philosophy and the Revealers of heavenly mysteries.'⁴ Presumably, the point being made here is that since it is not *yet* possible for a Baha'i scholar to be completely honest in a professional milieu because the conclusions such a scholar is under obligation to uphold are 'unfashionable', it is better for Baha'is to avoid altogether such professions. But, if that Baha'i scholar were living and working in Afghanistan or Iran or Libya, it would be not only possible but also probably expected (and certainly unexceptionable) to publish such a statement.⁵ Except, of course, in this instance the Baha'i scholar would be constrained to avoid mentioning Baha'u'llah in connection with such an assertion. It is thus quite possible that the kind of research results published by a scholar of Islamic studies may at times challenge the Baha'is to ask new questions about the history and teachings of their Faith, because the subject matter of this field of inquiry is intimately connected with the rise, development and establishment of the Faith and intersects the assertions of Baha'i history as written and elaborated by the Guardian. In such cases Baha'is need to keep in mind that Shoghi Effendi was, as has been pointed out by the House of Justice, completely dependent upon his sources for the information that he conveyed and interpreted.

The infallibility of the Guardian is confined to matters which are related strictly to the Cause and interpretations of the Teachings; he is not an infallible authority on other subjects, such as economics, science, etc.

The Guardian's infallibility covers interpretation of the revealed word, and its application. Likewise any instructions he may issue having to do with the protection of the Faith, or its well being must be closely obeyed, as he is infallible in the protection of the Faith. He is assured the guidance of both Bahá'u'lláh and the Báb, as the Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá clearly reveals.⁶

3 See Bahá'í Canada, April 1999.

4 *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas*. Haifa: Baha'i World Centre, 1978, pp. 144–45.

5 See the notes of a talk by John Hatcher: 'The new role of the scholar in Baha'i society' at <http://bahai-library.org/conferences/role.scholar.html>.

6 From a letter of the Universal House of Justice to an individual, 25 July 1974.

It is unlikely, for example, that scholars of American history or musicology will, in the course of their professional duties, come across data which challenge or disagree with assertions made in the standard Baha'i histories. The scholar of Islamic studies and Middle Eastern studies may run into such a problem. The Baha'i scholar who studies the history of the Baha'i Faith according to the canons and methods of the discipline of history as it is now configured will find, for example, that colleagues will raise eyebrows, and perhaps even question competency, if that historian does not take into account all the variants of a pertinent historical tradition. There can be no *prima facie* privileging of sources simply because someone, no matter how many people think he or she is divinely guided, has said, 'This is the truth.'

Styles and tastes in contemporary scholarship are such that questions of divine guidance, revelation, and absolute truth are treated with great scepticism. And, it may be that a given Baha'i scholar chooses to write about the events of history without capitalizing the pronouns referring to the Central Figures of the Faith, or to write in a style that many Baha'is might deem dry and 'intellectual' (a subjective matter of taste?). Furthermore, it may be that such a scholar, in analysing (say) the proclamation of the Bab, seeks to understand such an event by taking for granted that the Bab was a Manifestation of God – a spiritual and confessional proposition that is quite beyond the reach of syllogistic proof or disproof by anyone's standard – and still proceeds to discuss the event by coordinating it with what is known about the state of society at the time, its economics, its sociology, its religious atmosphere and political and religious institutions. It may be that such a scholar after such an analysis concludes that the event of the Bab's proclamation and the subsequent development of the Baha'i Faith and its institutions make perfect sense when studied in such a manner. Does such a conclusion indicate that this scholar is any less a believer than the Baha'i who simply asserts that the Bab was a Manifestation of God and that we know this because he said so? Or are we dealing here with two different styles of piety?

Piety is a tricky topic; for those foolish enough to claim authority for their views upon it demonstrate thereby that they are unequal to the task. But piety is an important topic because it denotes the seriousness towards life, meaning, and truth that religion, and therefore the Baha'i Faith, requires of believers. But what is such seriousness truly about? Does it mean that true believers should never laugh? Certainly some have suggested this in the past. Does it rather mean that human dignity is intimately connected with faithfulness towards the Ten Commandments or, if you will, religious law? Human dignity is seen as preserved, paradoxically, in the submission of the human being to a higher purpose or law. But in the unfolding of history, true piety has been expressed in many different ways. There is a purely civic piety – the term, incidentally, stems from the Latin *pietas*: 'sense of duty'. And there is the purely religious piety. This latter has frequently found itself the butt of jibes and jokes by secularists or even more 'moderate' religious types because of an a priori view of piety in this sense as being self-righteous, irrational, stubborn, pompous, and fanatical. Thus Seneca:

The difference between us and the Etruscans is the following: that whereas we believe lightning to be released as a result of the collision of clouds, they believe that clouds collide so as to release lightning: for as they attribute all to the deity, they are led to believe not that things have a meaning insofar as they occur, but rather that they occur because they must have a meaning.⁷

Where are the Baha'is to be placed along this implied continuum? It would seem that the Senecan attitude is more in line with such Baha'i principles and axioms as the essential harmony of science and religion. Yet, there are strong, clear traces of the 'Etruscan mode' in the Faith. It is perhaps not a

7 Seneca, *Questiones naturales* (trans. Thomas Corcoran), Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971, vol. 1, II.32.

question of either/or, but of emphasis, proportion, taste, and the ever-elusive wisdom that dictates which mode is to be privileged at a given time, or in which combination and ratio the two apparently irreconcilable modes are to be joined together in a specific noetic and/or moral and ethical circumstance. Baha'i institutions recognize, of course, that matters of temperament, style, and taste are not the same as matters of faith; that one's relationship to the Covenant cannot be determined solely on the basis of the manner in which one expresses oneself. For after all, tastes and styles in expression and speech change over time and according to cultural presuppositions. But it is not always the case that all of us recognize this. A person who is so impressed by the Baha'i view of things that they wish to attempt to discover how such a beautiful and compelling teaching came to be should not be penalized for this interest. To examine the circumstances under which Baha'i teachings evolved and the lives of the Central Figures of the Baha'i Faith unfolded is something, according to the writings themselves, that is encouraged by the Baha'i institutions. After all, 'Abdu'l-Baha has said that we can be greedy for knowledge:

[G]reed, which is to ask for something more, is a praiseworthy quality provided that it is used suitably. So if a man is greedy to acquire science and knowledge, or to become compassionate, generous and just, it is most praiseworthy. If he exercises his anger and wrath against the bloodthirsty tyrants who are like ferocious beasts it is very praiseworthy; but if he does not use these qualities in a right way, they are blameworthy.⁸

Seeking to gain a more profound understanding of how the Baha'i religion came to be, then, must not be confused with explaining it away. What is the difference? Better ask, 'Where is the difference?' A phobic reaction to the mindset which scientists and historians must have in order to do their work indicates that inner resources are not up to the task. The 'where' in question then is precisely the soul; a faculty, according to the Baha'i writings, which is best left to err on the side of magnanimity (lit: 'capacious of soul'). Why, otherwise, should anyone fear the truth, be pusillanimous (lit: 'small of soul'). Countless examples from history – including the origin and development of Baha'i teachings themselves – demonstrate that the greatest truths were born as heresies.

I would like to present an example from a cognate problem in another realm of discourse. It may be difficult to imagine, but it is nonetheless true that the various disciplines and fields of study in the academy have spawned their own histories of orthodoxy versus heterodoxy. Even the study of poetry – of all things – shows this pattern. When John Ciardi published what was destined to become a very influential book, it was met with virulent opposition. The book, *How Does A Poem Mean?*,⁹ was thought by some representatives of the literary establishment to violate the sanctity of the poetic by explaining in precise and accurate language the various elements that combine in a successful poem to produce the 'ineffable experience of poetry'. So the author was chastised and condemned by the academic establishment for having taken the magic out of poetry, for explaining it away. (That Ciardi was also at the same time hounded by the FBI seems to have been a coincidence having nothing to do with his scholarly preoccupations.) The author, therefore, was constrained to offer a word of apology. Here is an apposite excerpt:

A poem is a formal structure in which many elements operate at the same time. In analysis, each element must be discussed separately. By nature, analysis is plodding at best. Were an aeronautical engineer to analyse the flight of a gull, for example, he would find himself involved in a great deal of crabbed detail. No one, however, would be tempted to believe that

8 *Some Answered Questions*, Wilmette, IL: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1981, p. 215.

9 John Ciardi, *How Does a Poem Mean?* (ed. Gordon N. Ray), Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1959, pp. 663–64.

the analysis tried to take the place of the gull, or that it damaged the gull in any way . . . Analysis is never in any sense a substitution for the poem. The best any analysis can do is to prepare the reader to enter the poem more perceptively. By isolating for special consideration some of the many simultaneous elements of the poem, analysis makes them more visible in one sense, and less interesting in another. It is up to the reader, once the analysis is completed, to re-read the poem in a way that will restore the simultaneity and therefore the liveliness and interest of the poetic structure. The only reason for taking a poem apart is that it may then be put back together again more richly.¹⁰

There is a tendency to focus on relationships between Baha'i scholars and the Baha'i institutions only when problems and difficulties arise. We all have a vision of what the relationships between these two will be in the hereafter of the New World Order, and we should, of course, maintain such a vision as it will inevitably nourish and cultivate relations as they exist now. Before we conclude this brief exploratory consideration of the current intellectual culture of the Baha'i community, I would like to digress by presenting a very brief sketch of the history of the relationship between scholars and institutions in Islamic culture and history. After all, the Guardian instructs us to study such things in our continuing efforts to determine what the Baha'i Faith is and what it is not. In a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, dated 27 April 1936, the following is found:

The Bahá'í view . . . is that the Dispensation of Muḥammad, like all other Divine Dispensations, has been fore-ordained, and that as such forms an integral part of the Divine Plan for the spiritual, moral and social development of mankind. It is not an isolated religious phenomenon, but is closely and historically related to the Dispensation of Christ, and those of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh. It was intended by God to succeed Christianity, and it was therefore the duty of the Christians to accept it as firmly as they had adhered to the religion of Christ.

. . . Islám constitutes a fuller revelation of God's purpose for mankind. The so-called Christian civilization of which the Renaissance is one of the most striking manifestations is essentially Muslim in its origins and foundations. When medieval Europe was plunged in darkest barbarism, the Arabs regenerated and transformed by the spirit released by the religion of Muhammad, were busily engaged in establishing a civilization the like of which their contemporary Christians in Europe had never witnessed before. It was eventually through Arabs that civilization was introduced to the West. It was through them that the philosophy, science and culture which the old Greeks had developed found their way to Europe. . . It is wholly unfair to attribute the efflorescence of European culture during the Renaissance period to the influence of Christianity. It was mainly the product of the forces released by the Muḥammadan Dispensation.

From the standpoint of institutionalism Islám far surpasses true Christianity as we know it in the Gospels. There are infinitely more laws and institutions in the Qur'án than in the Gospel. While the latter's emphasis is mainly, not to say wholly, on individual and personal conduct, the Qur'án stresses the importance of society. This social emphasis acquires added importance and significance in the Bahá'í Revelation. When carefully and impartially compared, the Qur'án marks a definite advancement on the Gospel, from the standpoint of spiritual and humanitarian progress.

10 John Ciardi, *How Does a Poem Mean?: Part Three of An Introduction to Literature*.

... The Bahá'ís should try to study history anew, and to base all their investigations first and foremost on the written scriptures of Islám and Christianity.¹¹

And Shoghi Effendi himself wrote the following:

[The Bahá'ís] must strive to obtain, from sources that are authoritative and unbiased, a sound knowledge of the history and tenets of Islám – *the source and background of their Faith* – and approach reverently and with a mind purged from pre-conceived ideas the study of the Qur'án which, apart from the sacred scriptures of the Bábí and Bahá'í Revelations, constitutes the only Book which can be regarded as an absolutely authenticated Repository of the Word of God. They must devote special attention to the investigation of those institutions and circumstances that are directly connected with the origin and birth of their Faith, with the station claimed by its Forerunner, and with the laws revealed by its Author.¹²

With such guidance as inspiration, I would like to divert the focus for a moment to offer one instance of how it may be helpful to refer to the history and culture of Islam when attempting to employ a Baha'í paradigm in the pursuit of answers to pressing social and intellectual problems. By the time Islamic history began to be officially sponsored – that is to say written – in Muslim realms, the community had developed and acquired many of the characteristic institutions and vocations that would continue to work themselves out over the course of time. One of the key historiographical principles that informs this early history has to do with the function of various severe crises in early Islamic history. Some of these crises have been characterized as political and some religious. From a Baha'í point of view, it may be suggested that the early crises might have been avoided had the specific provisions of Muhammad's will and testament, his covenant, been universally observed. This is an assertion based on faith and, if you will, ideology. It is a proposition that Baha'ís find congenial, but one that contemporary historians would criticize. It is an assertion that cannot at present be upheld according to the strict demands of contemporary historical and historiographical methodology.

So, we must say that for whatever reasons, these social, political and religious crises occurred and left in their wake a number of groups with varying theologies and visions of the 'true Islam'. By the early 9th century, as a result of the vast wealth and power accumulated during the Abbasid dynasty, the court mounted one of the most impressive state-sponsored scholarly enterprises up to that time: the attempt to collate and classify all the knowledge in the world, and of course to translate it into Arabic. This project brought Muslims into direct contact with Greek (pagan) philosophy, and the Muslims – supremely confident of their place in the world as followers of the most recent divine revelation – set about coordinating this foreign knowledge with Qur'anic revelation. It was the supreme confidence of Islamic society that allowed it to take truth from whichever quarter it might be found. After all, according to Islam, all knowledge comes from God, a God who communicates such knowledge and truth to humans through specially chosen messengers. Therefore, truths and knowledge found outside of the Islamic cultural sphere might be imported, as long as it is recognized that these too will have their ultimate source in revelation, even if there exists no historical record of God's revelatory activity in the foreign culture. The all-important epistemological presupposition is: if it is true, it must have its source in prophecy, and if there is no record of such, say in ancient Greece, then it must be the case that the traces of such an event have been lost forever, the Greeks travelled to the Holy Land (Israel) for knowledge at some stage, or that emissaries from the Holy Land travelled to pagan lands to

11 *Lights of Guidance: A Bahá'í Reference File* (comp. Helen Hornby), New Delhi: Baha'í Publishing Trust, 2nd edn., 1988, no. 1664, pp. 495–96.

12 *Guidance for Today and Tomorrow*, London: Baha'í Publishing Trust, 1973, p. 226 (italics added).

enlighten them. It is absolutely untenable that any truth could occur outside the system of monotheistic prophecy. (Thus my earlier comment that Baha'u'llah's assertion, while clearly unacceptable in the post-enlightenment West, would find an assenting readership in some of the more so-called fundamentalist Muslim countries today. The thesis is basically an Islamicate one.) This supreme confidence that evidence can confirm belief but can never contradict it typifies the Rationalist style of piety.¹³

The proof of Islam's own truth was precisely the prosperity and triumph of Islam over the previous religions of Mesopotamia and the Iranian plateau. It was in such a euphoric atmosphere that Islamic philosophy began. Having clearly nothing to fear, official scholars such as al-Kindī (d. c. 870 CE) serenely asserted that it was the scholar's duty to take knowledge and truth wherever it was found, even if this be in the midst of the most godless of people. His successor al-Fārābī (d. c. 950 CE), in a characteristic expression of Islamicate cosmopolitanism, asserted unflinchingly that all religion is the same, but varies only according to language, history, weather or geography – which factors give rise to different articulations of the same basic truths. So sanguine and powerful was the Abbasid court that it eventually attempted to impose on the populace what it esteemed the most rational (and therefore, according to the prevailing court mood, most godly) interpretation of Islam. One of the mottoes of this 'inquisition' was that God is constrained to behave in a way that never conflicts with reason. But this inquisition resulted in the eventual triumph not of so-called Islamic Rationalism, but rather Islamic Traditionalism/Fundamentalism. The Traditionalists were scandalized by the arrogance of the philosophers who presumed to set limits, no matter how abstract and metaphysical, to the nature of God. Possibly even more crucial, such philosophic discussions appeared to take too scant notice of Islamic scripture. That is to say, the words of the philosophers were presented by their critics as forming something of a self-serving new scripture intended by their authors to supersede the sacred verities of the Qur'an and Hadith. Consequently, the Islamic Rationalists lost more and more credibility and authority until they all but disappeared from view and the Traditionalists grew in influence.

In addition to these two modes of Islamic piety, Rationalism and Traditionalism, several others were in operation. The activity of the philosophers qualifies as religious on the grounds that they sought to justify the theological and cosmological claims of the Qur'an and the Hadith with the axioms of Hellenistic philosophy and science. There were also the Sufis and mystics, and the experts in Islamic law – and then of course there were the fissiparously burgeoning Shi'i movements that would eventually issue in the Fatimid political experiment and the Twelver or Imami intellectual tradition out of which the Baha'i Faith would eventually grow.

The achievement of Islam may in part be spoken of in connection with the way Islamic society ultimately came to accommodate such different modes or styles of piety within it.¹⁴ Amongst those who expressed their piety through the Law, such statements ascribed to Muhammad as 'Difference of opinion with my community is a divine mercy' and 'My community will never agree on an error' tended to reassure even this least flexible of piety-minded Muslims that unity was not the same as uniformity.¹⁵ As seen above, the accommodation was not always without conflict. But, even in the

13 I am grateful to G. Fuhrman for this sentence and several other formulations.

14 See Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization*, 3 volumes, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974: vol. 1, book 2, ch. 4, pp. 359–409.

15 It is interesting here to recall the words of 'Abdu'l-Baha apropos the legalistic mode of piety: 'No obstacle should be placed before any soul which might prevent it from finding the truth. Baha'o'llah [sic] revealed his directions, teachings, and laws so that souls might know God, and not that any utterance might become an obstacle in their way. Holding to the letter of the law is many times an indication of a desire for leadership. One who assumes to be the enforcer of the law shows an intellectual understanding of the Cause, but that spiritual guidance in them is not yet established. The alphabet of things is for children, that they may in time use their reasoning powers. "Following the spirit" is a guidance by and through the heart, the prompter of the spirit. The Pharisees were extremely orthodox, holding strictly to the law. They

absence of a universally honoured covenant, this was by any measure a remarkable development. Despite the various and frequently competing spiritual hues, emphases and doctrines, the Islamic polity may be thought to have achieved a degree of universalism established throughout a vast geography on a scale previously unknown and probably unpredictable. This is what may be referred to as catholic Islam. In the process, philosophy, which started life in Islamic culture under a very auspicious star, was eventually demonized by the ‘orthodoxers’ of Islam. And rationalism and the philosophic spirit sought refuge in the Shi’i movement and some Sufi movements. This led to what has been described as an intellectual stagnation during the middle periods of Islamic history. Because there was not a single universally recognized source of spiritual and political authority, the various trends in Islamic intellectual history were, by and large, left to seek their own destinies and levels.

It is true that scholars and scientists continued to be patronized by the various caliphs and sultans whose careers punctuate Islamic history and that there never seems to have been any doubt that one could also be a Muslim and be interested in science and scholarship.¹⁶ It seems as if the more the Muslim seekers of knowledge penetrated the mysteries of creation, the more they exulted in and celebrated the mysterious and elegant workings of an all-powerful Creator. Thus the earliest histories of the Prophet (9th century CE) are full of minute details describing the conditions and the causes that led to various revelations of verses in the Qur’an. This knowledge, far from being considered dangerous to faith, was embraced as its constituent and prime element. The intricacies by which the Divine Will made itself known were never seen as a proof for an assertion that ‘as soon as one understands the influence of these “intricacies” one is no longer required or permitted to believe in a Higher Intelligence’. There was Qur’anic support, e.g. 41: 53, from the very beginning for the view that contemplating (*tadabbur/tadhakkur/tafakkur*) the Signs of God (i.e. the natural realm) is an act of piety. According to this naturalistic (and semiotic) style of piety, understanding (*fahm*) the workings of nature and society is a desideratum for anyone who would call themselves believer.

But then Islam – catholic Islam – cultivated and nurtured these various modes of piety from a position of near-absolute strength. Islam had defeated the old and venerable civilizations even as it had incorporated many of their achievements into its own culture, and it was clear that Islam had

were the cause of the condemnation and ultimate crucifixion of Jesus. . . . The ones in real authority are known by their humility and self-sacrifice and show no attitude of superiority over the friends. Some time ago a tablet was written stating that none are appointed to any authority to do anything but to serve the Cause as true servants of the friends – and for this no tablet is necessary; such service when true and unselfish requires no announcement, nor following, nor written document. Let the servant be known by his deeds, by his life! To be approved by God alone should be one’s aim. When God calls a soul to a high station, it is because . . . that soul has supplicated to be taken into His service. No envies, jealousies, calumnies, slanders, plots, nor schemes, will ever move God to remove a soul from its intended place, for by the grace of God, such actions on the part of the people are the test of the servant, testing his strength, forbearance, endurance, and sincerity under adversity. At the same time those who show forth envies, jealousies, etc. toward a servant, are depriving themselves of their own stations, and not another of his, for they prove by their own acts that they are not only unworthy of being called to any station awaiting them, but also prove they cannot withstand the very first test – that of rejoicing over the success of their neighbor, at which God rejoices. Only by such a sincere joy can the gift of God descend unto a pure heart. Envy closes the door of Bounty, and jealousy prevents one from ever attaining to the Kingdom of Abha. No! Before God! No one can deprive another of his rightful station, that can only be lost by one’s unwillingness or failure to do the will of God, or by seeking to use the Cause of God for one’s own gratification or ambition. No one save a severed soul or a sincere heart finds response from God. By assisting in the success of another servant in the Cause does one in reality lay the foundation for one’s own success and aspirations. Ambitions are an abomination before the Lord! How regrettable! Some even use the affairs of the Cause and its activities as a means of revenge on account of some personal spite, or fancied injury, interfering with the work of another, or seeking its failure. Such only destroy their own success, did they know the truth.’ *Star of the West*, vol. 6, no. 6 (June 24, 1915).

16 This is why the formulation of Islamic fundamentalism is so problematic, because at least as far as the study of the natural sciences is concerned, Islamicate culture never spawned the kind of allergy to ‘science’ we see arising in the 19th century in response to Darwinism and other developments. Indeed, it was in response to Darwinism that the term ‘fundamentalism’ was born when a group of Christians sought to distinguish themselves with it for the purposes of asserting their faithfulness to the letter of the cosmogonic myth presented in Genesis.

nothing to fear from knowledge of any kind. Thus, the euphoria continued more or less unabated until the Mongol ‘occupations’ at which time the fictional centre of the Islamic world was finally exposed for what it was and the self-confidence of Islam was profoundly shaken. After 1258 CE, the year of the destruction of Baghdad and the execution of the Abbasid caliph, much of the progress in the intellectual tradition was halted and there was a mass exodus, once again, into the conservatism of Traditionalism. It is as if Muslims felt that the Mongol invasions were a punishment from God for their having strayed from the true path – perhaps through the kinds of intellectual experimentation and cultivation indicated above.

So from the 13th century until the rise of the Safavids at the beginning of the 16th century, the main spiritual and intellectual pursuits were frequently found amongst the Sufis, the mystics. Not necessarily because of the mysticism, but because Sufism was reconfiguring itself in numberless and sometimes competing organizations (lit. ‘paths’, *turuq*) to respond to the profound identity crisis resulting from the Mongol devastations. The unthinkable had occurred: Islam was defeated. Alexander’s wall had been breached and the forces of Gog and Magog set loose upon the lands of Islam – the Land of the Covenant (viz. ‘civilization’). Sufi organizations now spoke of a Land of the Covenant that was inaccessible to barbarians because it was located in the spiritual realm. In much the same way, various Shi’i groups speak of the Hidden Imam, the focus of all authority whether spiritual or political, as residing in an inaccessible, mysterious, unseen realm from which he exercises his rule.¹⁷ At the same time, these same organizations constructed numerous earthly institutions through which this Land of the Covenant could be travelled to and inhabited. Islam was once again inviolable and the confidence of the Sufi brotherhoods, together with their altruism and commitment to the noble ideals of Islam, influenced and helped heal the terrible psychological dislocations of the Mongol conquests . . . to such a degree that the conquerors themselves eventually embraced Islam and helped re-establish its health. This was the triumph of the Sufi style of piety.

In the 16th century the remarkable Safavid dynasty was established and triumphed over Iran. The vast wealth that flowed to the capital was used in the promotion of high culture and the consolidation, in a new era, of the Twelver Shi’i religion. This religion elevated to the highest possible level the mystic devotion to and love of the Imams. In the process, and in the context of historical and religious factors which would take us too far afield, Safavid Shi’ism also elevated ‘sacred hatred’ to the highest possible level.¹⁸ Such ‘sacred hatred’ was directed precisely to those deemed unfaithful to the Covenant – the majority Sunni Muslims. Most alarmingly, it was a perversion of the sacred duty of scholarship that was ultimately responsible for the thoroughness of this development. In large measure, it was against the deleterious and culturally exhausting effects of this ‘sacred hatred’, that Baha’u’llah first raised his voice. And since it was in large part the religious scholars who laid the foundations and propagated this hatred, a large part of the Baha’i critique of society is aimed at them, the mullas and mujtahids, the religious authorities first of Islam and by extension, the clerical class in all religious traditions.

So, for better and for worse, throughout its history, Islam never despised the activity of the individual independent scholar. Indeed, the tradition holds that a scholar is amongst the most valuable of citizens. The Safavid instance reminds us that not everything that goes by the name of scholarship is necessarily so, for in the Baha’i view, scholarship and truth are proven in the fostering of a social unity thought to be an earthly reflection of divine unity. In other words, and as Baha’u’llah has

17 e.g. al-Ghayb (the Unseen Realm), Jābalsā, Jābalqā, two mysterious cities inhabited by the Hidden Imam and his cohort. Hūrqulyā, another name for a mysterious, spiritual realm sometimes used as a synonym for Jābalsā and Jābarqā, and sometimes used to indicate a separate but related phenomenon, especially in the works of Shaykh Ahmad al-Ahsā’ī and the Shaykhī school in general.

18 Muhammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, *The Divine Guide in Early Shi’ism: The Sources of Esotericism in Islam*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994, pp. 87–88.

insisted, if religion causes disunity then it is better done without, no matter how compelling it might otherwise be.

Because of the nature of 'truth' partly delineated above, knowledge and learning has from Islam's inception until the present day performed something of a sacramental function with practical implications and ramifications. It is because it is so highly esteemed that it is also susceptible of perversion and manipulation for selfish political ends. There have been times when a certain intellectual attitude or theology was imposed upon the Muslims: the inquisition referred to above, the Wahhabi movement of the Arabian peninsula, the Khomeinist regime in Iran, the Taliban of Afghanistan. But these seem to stand out in intaglio against the guiding ethos of a classical age that was one of relative intellectual freedom and scientific experimentation. And this was a result (indeed no doubt possible only because) of the deep certitude Islam felt about its rightful place in the world. As this certitude fluctuates through history, we can see that intellectual attainment also rises and falls. Today, for example, as Islam feels itself besieged on all sides by hostile forces, it has circled its wagons and, in some cases, apparently abandoned the noble tradition of liberalism and research that once characterized its most prosperous periods. This is, I think, something that the Guardian wanted the Baha'is to observe in their study of Islamic history, so that Baha'i history might renew its nobler qualities and avoid the baser – such as the occasional tendency to defend the Faith against opposition by attacking certain styles of piety.

Despite the eradication by Baha'u'llah from the religious repertoire of anything resembling 'sacred hatred', tensions have developed between some Baha'i scholars and Baha'i institutions in recent years. They are, in some ways, the reappearance of typical relationships that everyone knows well from the experience of other religious communities. It makes sense to assume that the institutions of the Faith are evolving as the individuals who serve on assemblies also evolve and mature spiritually and intellectually. The Baha'i vision is one that assumes gradual and perhaps even slow development towards its destiny. But Baha'i institutions as sensory organs and the conscience of the infant Baha'i community are infallibly designed to guide. It is the degree to which the individuals serving on these assemblies are able to establish a cognitive and contemplative distance between their divergent, distinct (but mutually energizing) roles as simultaneous members of the infant community and participants in the collective mode of consciousness and perception that is designed to lead the community, that these institutions will be permitted to acquit themselves of this unique calling – 'to enter the poem more perceptively'. The destiny, as is well known, is something that must be won by the Baha'is through mutuality, cooperation, intellectual honesty and liberality, detachment and work. This victory is unlikely to be won without recognition of, and genuine respect for, diverse styles of piety.

These days, part of the tension may arise from uneasiness with the somewhat anarchic nature of the Internet. Fear of the new is an occupational hazard of institutions. Indeed, the closest word for heresy in Islamic theology is precisely 'innovation'. The Internet is new but definitely here to stay, so institutions have to adjust to its presence. Tools are neither good nor bad in themselves, but are only made so as a result of the way they are used. It is much too early to think about how the Internet might eventually function within the Baha'i community, but it is certain that it will continue to play a larger and larger role.¹⁹ If that role can be worked out through trial and error, in a spirit of cooperation, with goodwill and humour it will clearly enhance the quality of Baha'i community life to an unforeseeable

19 See now David Piff's 'The Globalisation of Information: Bahā'ī Constructions of the Internet', a paper read at the recent 'Bahā'ī and Globalisation' conference held under the auspices of the Research Network on New Religions and the Department of the History of Religions, University of Copenhagen, Tune Landboskole, 22–24 August 2001.

degree.²⁰ The proper relationship between all Baha'is and the sources of authority in the Faith is characterized in the writings as one of love, mutuality, cooperation, trust, obedience and respect. If the epithet 'Baha'i scholars' means 'scholars who identify themselves as Baha'is', then this relationship should include them as well. That the organizers of this conference have included this general topic among the few 'foundational issues' is a direct result of the somewhat vexed, more or less public, relationship between some Baha'i scholars and 'the institutions' of late. These recent developments are in some ways typical of the historical relationship between an intelligentsia and authority-wielding institutions in general, and as long as authority is wielded, there will be challenges to it. This is not the same as saying that as long as there is an intelligentsia, there will be challenges to authority.

The brighter and more mature future that we as Baha'is can and should look forward to is not necessarily one in which Baha'i scholars and intellectuals will cease questioning the institutions about interpretations and applications of Baha'i teachings. The conception of authority developed in the Baha'i writings is itself an evolving idea. It is an authority of magnanimity, of patience, of love, of strength, of generosity. It is in some ways the authority of a parent, or of a spouse (male or female) who by virtue of a commitment to a marriage acquires authority in the relationship commensurate with such a commitment. Individual believers – scholars included – as constituents of the Baha'i institution of community are called upon in their authority to be no less magnanimous, loving and generous than their counterparts in the Faith.

Many of the recent difficulties in the relationship we are discussing came about because of insecurity, fear and a lack of fair play. I think chief amongst the lapses was gossip – replacing dialogue with storytelling. Difficulties will never cease, either inside or outside the Faith. But we can perhaps strive for ever more interesting and engaging difficulties, and even more importantly, more elevated and worthy ways of coming to some harmonious outcome.

Finally, there seems to be a confusion between the pious and the pietistic, especially in styles of writing about the Faith and its history. Faithfulness to the Covenant is sometimes confused with a style which advertises its own faithfulness by repetition of pietistic formulas, while the scholarly style which places facts before self-expression is regarded with suspicion. But these different styles simply reflect different styles of piety, neither of which is inherently more faithful to the Covenant than the other. The community needs both styles; and from its academic members, the community needs scholarship on Faith-related matters in which it remains tacitly understood that God is the author of creation and that Baha'u'llah is a Manifestation of God and that the House of Justice is infallible. Writing which constantly interrupts the investigation to make these assertions explicit would defeat the sacred purpose of scholarship.

20 On the importance of humour see Arash Abizadeh's recent paper in political philosophy: 'Engaged Detachment, Comic Detachment: Modernity and the Mystic's Last Laugh', an unpublished paper presented at the Harvard Political Theory Research Workshop, February 2000, Cambridge, Massachusetts.