

Baha'i Scholarship: Readings

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Envy and Encouragement¹

Extracts from two letters of the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'í world; the first is a section from the Ridván 1984 letter to the Bahá'í world, and the second is taken from a letter on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an institution, dated 18 April 1989.

There can be no doubt that the progress of the Cause from this time onward will be characterized by an ever increasing relationship to the agencies, activities, institutions and leading individuals of the non-Bahá'í world. We shall acquire greater stature at the United Nations, become better known in the deliberations of governments, a familiar figure to the media, a subject of interest to academics, and inevitably the envy of failing establishments. Our preparation for and response to this situation must be a continual deepening of our faith, an unwavering adherence to its principles of abstention from partisan politics and freedom from prejudices, and above all an increasing understanding of its fundamental verities and relevance to the modern world.

Newly enrolled professionals and other experts provide a great resource for the development of Bahá'í scholarship. It is hoped that, as they attain a deeper grasp of the teachings and their significance, they will be able to assist Bahá'í communities in correlating the beliefs of the Faith with the current thoughts and problems of the world. In some instances Bahá'ís of a particular profession have come together in special conferences or organised themselves into an association for this purpose. This also allows them to support one another as Bahá'ís and to take advantage of their professional status to promote the interests of the Faith. Current examples of professional associations of this type are the Bahá'í Justice Society and the Bahá'í Medical Association, both in the United States. Special encouragement should therefore be given to believers of unusual capacity to consecrate their abilities to the service of the Cause through the unique contribution they can make to this rapidly developing field of Bahá'í endeavour.

Baroque Constructions

From The Priceless Pearl, Rúhíyyih Rabbaní's biography of the Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith, published by the Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1969.

The language in which Shoghi Effendi wrote, whether for the Bahá'ís of the West or the East, has set a standard which should effectively prevent them from descending to the level of the illiterate literates which often so sadly characterizes the present generation as far as the use and appreciation of words are concerned. He never compromised with the ignorance of his readers but expected them, in their thirst for knowledge, to overcome their ignorance. Shoghi Effendi chose, to the best of his ability, the right vehicle for his thought and it made no difference to him whether the average person was going to know the word he used or not. After all, what one does not know one can find out.

From Glenford Mitchell's analytical survey of the Guardian's writings, "The Literature of Interpretation: Notes on the English Writings of Shoghi Effendi." World Order 7.2 (Winter 1972-73):12-37.

1 I am grateful to John Danesh for his comments on earlier drafts of these "Readings".

One could remark randomly about his [Shoghi Effendi's] mastery of what is sometimes called the periodic sentence in which multiple compounds of phrases explode with brilliant sparks of meaning at the ending statement, about the baroque constructions in which words are arranged in rich designs of meaning and imagery like settings of fine stones, about his appreciation of assonance and alliteration, about the lyrical cadence of his sentences which sound better and seem to enlarge upon their meanings when read aloud, about his one-sentence paragraphs, about the mathematical precision of his usage, or about his ability to compress multitudinous meanings into slight space, to reconcile conciseness and amplitude, precision and suppleness, force and elegance.

. . . You might say in the end that Shoghi Effendi has distilled the ancient classical virtues; in fact, he has distilled the virtues of language in any age and clothed them with principles of the spirit.

“I was Oppressed”

From a discussion of the implications for Bahá'í scholars of the story of Mullá 'Abdu'l-Karím, an early Bábí whose quest to the promised Qá'im led him from the prominence of the pulpit to the bazaar's anonymity. In Asking Questions: A Challenge to Fundamentalism by Bahíyyih Nakhjavání. Oxford: George Ronald, 1990.

Among the many reasons why I think this episode vital to any discussion about the nature of scholarship is the simple fact that its conclusion defies analysis. That seems to me to be one of the prerequisites of a Bahá'í definition of scholarship: that we should admit, from the outset, the limitations of our analytical means and recognize the immensity that we leave unprobed by the scurryings of our minds. With that vast immensity unfathomed, the value and importance of scholarship can then assume its proper place, serving as it does as the foundation and not as the ultimate goal of 'Abdu'l-Karím's original motive.

The second fascinating element in this story is that the good Mullá has used his scholarship first and foremost to acquaint himself with the nature of his own motives and limitations. He is not deluded by his knowledge because it has merely served to highlight his lack of wisdom. “I recognized myself”, he records, “as still a victim of cares and perplexities, of temptations and doubts.” While the aim of all learning may well be the knowledge of God, what the Mullá's story reminds us is that it would all have been a waste of time if this goal had been attempted by one whose days had been spent in utter ignorance of his true self.

The third interesting characteristic of 'Abdu'l-Karím's years of scholastic training is that it appears to have instilled in him a genuine humility, a disinclination to turn around, with these qualifications, and presume to tell others what to think. For all his accomplishments he does not feel he has any prerogative over truth, nor any right to dictate his interpretations of it to others. “I was oppressed”, he says, “by such thoughts as to how I should conduct my classes, how to lead my congregation in prayer, how to enforce the laws and precepts of the Faith.” He abjures the position of the priest even as he attains the goal of the scholar, which is to be one. Most revealing is his reason for doing this. To accept the role of the priest and his assumption of duties in a community, he admits, would be to accept the consequent enslavement to competition, arrogance and pedantry that attended such duties, an enslavement that constituted, for him, the very heart of loss. “I felt continually anxious as to how I should discharge my duties, how to ensure the superiority of my achievements over those who had preceded me.” He achieves the true garland of his scholastic labours and becomes “a fruit upon the tree of humility” when he confesses in the dark night of his soul that “the consciousness of error suddenly dawned upon me.”

As the spokesman of a new day of consciousness, as a scholar redefined in the light of that new day, 'Abdu'l-Karím effectively alienates himself from all the old-world scholars. So profoundly insecure are the mullás of Qazvín that the abdication of one of their number causes “protestations” and “machinations”. It is a lesson not only in honesty and humility, therefore, but in profound courage that he teaches us by returning to Qazvín in the guise of a simple merchant. It is to such courage that Bahá'í scholars are summoned, a courage of disregarding that traditional academic over-anxiety to be accepted by one's peers. With such courage and without crude protestation, it might be possible to reverse quietly all the basic assumptions of an academic profession, its anxiety for prestige, its insecure and vicarious hunger for power, its preoccupation with “making a mark” in whatever field. The sheer anonymity of this

gentle scholar is one of the most threatening aspects of his behaviour.

From an article by Moojan Momen on Bahá'í scholarship, "Scholarship and the Bahá'í Community." The Journal of Bahá'í Studies 1.1 (1988): 25-38.

The scholar, in pursuing studies of the Bahá'í Faith, may be under the impression that he or she is deepening in the Bahá'í Faith, but that is not necessarily so, since the analytical approach to the Bahá'í writings necessary for scholarly work is different from the meditative approach, which is part of the deepening process. Thus, a scholar who has studied a particular passage has not necessarily deepened himself in it. The Bahá'í scholar who has spent all day reading and studying the Bahá'í writings may find it difficult then to spend time deepening in the Bahá'í writings and saying prayers, but this is the only way of fulfilling one's religious obligation and thus continuing to grow spiritually. Neglect of this condition may lead to spiritual stagnation and decay.

Lonely Minds, Broken Hearts

From an editorial by Felicity Rawlings in Forum 2.2 (1993): 2.

Historically, scholarship has involved a kind of retreat. While consultation is often employed during the writing process, the actual assembling of ideas on paper has generally been done individually. I surmise that this poses a stumbling block for many Bahá'ís: first, to those who are not conversant with an academic writing style; and second, to those who feel that writing is too isolating. It is real pity, that because of this, insights and ideas worthy of reflection and analysis are not finding an audience. I suggest that "collaborative writing" may provide a partial solution. Collaborative writing simply means that two or more individuals engage in writing together. Such an approach would overcome a lack of confidence and feelings of isolation.

. . . Of course many Bahá'ís (myself included) enjoy the challenge of writing on their own. Well and good. However, collaborative writing should also be encouraged. If it is, we may well see an exponential growth in Bahá'í scholarship.

From Antony Lee's introduction to Circle of Unity. Edited by A. Lee. Los Angeles: Kalimát Press, 1984: xii-xiii.

Today . . . it has become increasingly difficult to ignore the need to take a new look at the social principles that Bahá'ís have repeated for over seventy years. While the message of the Faith is still vital and progressive, our approach to current issues has become rather outmoded. The familiar twelve Bahá'í principles are still universal, but to the sophisticated reader the list today appears more a register of platitudes than a progressive social program. . . Perhaps the time has come for the attention of the Bahá'í Community to be turned once again to its social teachings. Building on the foundation laid by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, a new and challenging approach to the problems of contemporary society can be developed.

Internal dissent, External attack

From an article by Udo Schaefer, "Challenges to Bahá'í Studies," The Bahá'í Studies Review 2.1 (1992): 25-32.

Attacks on the Faith, from both within and without the Bahá'í community, pose another challenge that will increasingly encourage our ability to develop a more methodical and systematic presentation of the teachings.

The refutation of such attacks has to be done by rational, logical and cogent arguments. An adequate response must be grounded on a solid body of knowledge of the Bahá'í Faith, its history, the history of religions, especially Islamic history, and a grasp of Christian theology. A significant advantage would also be a basic knowledge of philosophical thought. The Guardian stated: "The Cause of God must be protected from the enemies of the Faith, and from those who sow the seeds of doubt in the hearts of the believers, and the greatest of all protection is knowledge", and as Dr. Momen has aptly put it: "Well-grounded Bahá'í scholars provide one of the strongest bulwarks of the Bahá'í Cause in defending itself from the attacks of its enemies."

From the history of the Faith, we know to what extent such attacks by the enemies of the Cause “fuel the unfoldment of the Faith”. The Universal House of Justice has called upon the believers not to allow themselves “to be perturbed by any increase of opposition to the Cause” and to understand the “creative interaction between crisis and victory in the evolution of the Faith”. The defence of the Faith from attacks is a tremendous challenge and stimulus for a deeper understanding of the Cause of God. It assists in the development of our knowledge and ability to engage in dialogue with those who regard us critically. Apologetics was the main impetus for the development of Christian theology. The Fathers of the Church were apologists. Attacks, no matter how unfounded and ill-informed, compel us to think more deeply about the teachings of our Faith. Reproaches like the Bahá'í Faith does not take “sin” seriously and neglects evil, that it is “quasi-fascist movement” striving for world supremacy, are certainly distortions of our Faith but reflection is nevertheless necessary before a rebuttal can be made. Another example is the Bahá'í law on the expulsion of Covenant-breakers from the community, which has been criticised very harshly by Church leaders as well as Covenant-breakers themselves. For a justification of this law, one needs to have some knowledge of Church history and Canon Law. The rebuttal of such attacks is clearly not every person's responsibility, but we need some deepened friends in all countries who are equipped with the knowledge and the command of convincing debating skills to undertake this service.

From an article by a non-Bahá'í, Denis MacEoin, in response to criticism by two Bahá'ís over his interpretation of an episode in Bábí history, “Bahá'í Fundamentalism and the Academic Study of the Bábí Movement.” Religion 16 (1986): 57-84

Bahá'ísm has inherited from Islam a tradition of apologetic centred around the notion of defending the faith from both internal and external attack. Bahá'í sensitivity to misrepresentation owes much to the attitudes and values of Shi'ism, out of which it emerged, where the notion of the misunderstood and maligned minority has dominated the group self-image from the sect's inception. Defence of the faith was made a religious duty by . . . Bahá' Alláh: 'It is incumbent upon all men . . . to refute the arguments of those that have attacked the Faith of God'. It is a measure of the importance of this injunction in Bahá'í life that it has been institutionalized in the modern period in the form of continental and national bodies for 'protection', the purpose of which is to refute internal dissent and external attack. This is, of course, an entirely legitimate exercise for members of a small and often genuinely misrepresented religious community, particularly where intelligent attacks on it (as in Iran) have tended to be gross, dishonest and vitriolic, and where calculated misrepresentations has led and still leads to physical violence. Nevertheless, it is worth pointing out that, in common with many modern Muslims, Bahá'ís tend to be unfamiliar with and resistant to the assumptions and methods of contemporary western scholarship, to the extent that independent academic studies which contradict established dogma are often lumped together with religiously - or politically - motivated polemic produced by non-academics.

From Moojan Momen's general conclusions after exploring the above controversy over the academic study of the Bábí religion, “The Bábí Upheavals 1848-1853.” Bahá'í Studies Bulletin 4.2 (January 1990): 4-21.

In general . . . we can say that the scholar is left with one of two possible courses of action in attempting to analyse the material relating to a particular historical event.

1. He or she may try to follow all the threads of all the different viewpoints available for analysing the event - to explain the event in terms of every available paradigm. But this may lead to a mind-boggling complex process and would require a book to be written about even the most trivial episode. Also the resulting loss of clarity will diminish the usefulness of the exercise.
2. Alternatively, the writer may commit himself or herself to one particular paradigm and write from just that viewpoint. Although this would inevitably give a certain narrowness of vision, at least the argument can be carried further and with greater clarity.

What we really appear to be saying is, at the most general level, that thought can never occur in an ideational vacuum. All human thought and activity is grounded in values. One cannot begin to think about a question without having a starting point for one's thought and a certain direction or pathway to follow in the process of thinking. But this starting point and pathway of thought to a large extent pre-determines the outcome of the process of thinking. Every individual, whether following a particular discipline of thought or not, has pre-set, pre-figured guiding images and unproven assumptions - a mythology if one follows

the terminology of depth psychology. And so the writing of history inevitably brings into play an ideological component from the writer's mind. This component may or may not be a conscious position adopted by the writer. Indeed in most cases, adoption of a paradigm occurs at a pre-conceptual, pre-critical level. It is the starting point for the writing of a history. It is the direction from which the writer approaches the subject and this prefigures everything that flows therefrom. . . .

These different paradigms are due to the different mind-sets of their authors. It is impossible to say that one is the Truth and the others are false because there is no Absolute truth to act as the criterion. The historian is like someone who is trying to walk across a narrow bridge. On the one side we are in danger of falling into the comfortable assumption that we have access to “pure facts” and can give objective judgements about them, on the other side we are in danger of coming to the nihilistic conclusion that all history is subjective and that therefore one can write whatever one wants and it is just as acceptable as anything else is because there are no objective or absolute criteria by which to judge these matters. Somehow we have to steer a course between these two sides of the narrow bridge without any firm guidance.

Scapegoats and Scholars

From a foreword by the late Professor Alessandro Bausani to the English translation of Letters and Essays, 1886-1913 by Mírzá Abú'l-Fadl Gulpaygání. Translated by Juan R.I. Cole. Los Angeles: Kalimát Press, 1985.

I remember writing . . . some time ago that I did not think that it was yet time to study the Bahá'í Faith historically and scientifically. It seemed as inconceivable to me as suggesting that in the first century A.D. Christians should have written on the Christian religion scientifically. I felt that we, as Bahá'ís, were too close, too interested, too emphatically involved in Bahá'í history to write about it objectively.

The books of Bahá'í scholarship that have been published since that time have convinced me of the contrary.

From William Collins' introduction to his Bibliography of English Language Works on the Bábí and Bahá'í Faiths 1844-1985. Oxford: George Ronald, 1990.

In a religion where creative thought is encouraged and indeed required as Bahá'ís strive to come to a better understanding of the teachings of their Faith and attempt to relate them to current issues, and given the cultural and educational diversity of the Bahá'í community, tensions can arise between innovative and traditional thinking, between scholarly and popular study. Greater diversity and a larger Bahá'í community are lessening the perceived importance of most individual contributions to the literature, but the need for openness on the one hand and responsibility on the other will continue to challenge the present generation of Bahá'í readers and scholars.

The response of the editors of World Order magazine to the criticism that the magazine's content is too intellectual, too difficult to read and “is written by University professors and for University professors only”. “Interchange,” World Order 7.3 (1973): 14-18.

Clearly, the task of any Bahá'í bringing the message of God to the people is to get to know those to whom he brings it, in terms of their “outlook and interests.” It would appear, from the policy statement concerning the content of the magazine, that World Order's reading public might fairly be described as “intellectual.” Now, what is an “intellectual”? In the first place, this is a term that neither praises nor blames. It does not mean “intelligent,” and it does not mean “pedantic”; it does not necessarily even mean “educated” or “well-read,” although there is a certain positive correlation between the “intellectual” and the “well-read.” It can conveniently be taken to refer to a social subgroup: “Intellectuals” are to be found in certain professions; they range typically within a certain income group; they have, or claim to have – which from the sociological point of view is just as important – roughly the same tastes (literature, music, art, and so on) and the same social attitudes. Like any other social group, intellectuals are subject to superstitions, taboos, prejudices, blind spots, more or less peculiar to them. Intellectuals are important, from a purely practical point of view, because they represent an influence on our destinies far out of proportion to their numbers. They exert enormous influence in government, in moral attitudes, in popular

taste; and they exert this influence quietly, in a way of which the common man is mostly unaware.

If one examines the taboos, the “folkmores” of the intellectual, what does he see? Primarily, a dedication to objective truth, as it is called. This has the consequence that there are certain cues or clues that arouse the instant suspicion of the well-indoctrinated intellectual. It means that no statement can be confidently asserted without objective proof. It also means that emotion and intuition are not constituents of proof – that is, that proof must carefully exclude appeals to intuition, to faith, to feeling; it must rest solely on objective fact.

The intellectual position described here is defective in that it defeats its stated purpose of seeking truth. The Editors hold that the exclusion of feeling, of faith, of intuition, is an impossibility. Those who claim to be capable of it are simply fooling themselves. They are doing themselves two kinds of harm: first, they are repressing the whole world of feeling and love, on which their mental and emotional health depends – they impose on their lives a kind of barrenness that leads to confusion and despair. Second, in hiding from themselves the emotional and intuitive basis of whatever they claim to believe, they are allowing free play to the disguised forces of passion, of the very baneful interferences with truthful insights that they think they are avoiding. Let them discover the richness of an honest emotional and spiritual life, and they will be much fortified in their search for the truth. . . .

The Bahá'í who does not think of himself as an intellectual must make a decision as to his way of adjusting to his status, largely self-conferred. In a very positive way, every Bahá'í has found his life immeasurably enriched by his feeling – a feeling reinforced by knowledge – of kinship to all peoples: to the nomads, the tribesmen, the people of distant lands and different cultures. When this feeling is translated into action, the Bahá'í finds that he can talk and interact with an enormous variety of people; he can explain the Faith to Catholics and Muslims, to Buddhists and atheists; his new and intense interest in religion has led him to examine religions of whose existence, very often, he was only dimly aware, before he became an adherent to the Cause of God. Let him, therefore, inform himself about the preoccupations, the ideals, the love of truth that characterize the intellectual at his best, just as he informs himself about the religion of the seeker with whom he is speaking; for 'Abdu'l-Bahá has said that the seeker must first be confirmed in his own faith.

From the comments of one individual quoted in Jack McLean's unpublished survey of 13 Bahá'í scholars on various aspects of Bahá'í theology, 1993. This is a response to the question, “Why do you feel the Bahá'í community has been so reluctant where the question of theology is concerned?”

(i) The practice of the community associated with a new revelation to reject some of the practices and dogmas of the previous revelation. This would include theology. This constitutes “Baby and bath water thinking”. (ii) Scapegoating. “the tendency for Bahá'ís to scapegoat the dominant religion of their country and/or religion they converted from, for all the current problems facing the world . . . since Christianity is now suspect for these Bahá'ís; its theology is partially to blame, and thus by implication, so is the discipline of theology.” (iii) Bahá'ís in the West come out of “nonreligious or marginally religious backgrounds” and would thus hold little sympathy for theology. (iv) There is a “disdain or contempt” for theology because of the ascendancy of science and technology. (v) “The Bahá'í community has a clear and recognizable anti-intellectual tendency which is readily observable at almost any Bahá'í gathering. Such an anti-intellectualism would naturally reject any attempt at theology.”

University Challenge

From A Bahá'í Student Handbook privately published by the European Bahá'í Youth Council, 1993.

Bahá'í Societies can become a forum for the creative development of specialist interests, providing members with many opportunities to apply the Bahá'í Faith and its principles to the study of specific issues.

Opportunities exist for:

- presenting correlative studies at Bahá'í Society meetings, exploring how an aspect of the subject you are studying can be related to Bahá'í principles.
- producing position papers to be distributed by the Society to all students.

- working with other organised student groups to expand your understanding of issues, especially to obtain a grasp of important subjects from other perspectives, which we may fail to appreciate.
- forming study groups with non-Bahá'í friends and systematically exploring various issues to which we can contribute a Bahá'í viewpoint. The Bahá'í Writings can act as a focus for such groups.

The role of consultation and networking includes:

- through Bahá'í Societies you can emphasize the part played by cooperation and consultation in the development of Bahá'í studies.
- you can support each other's efforts by discussing approaches and methods, and by suggesting references and other relevant material.
- you can establish an e-mail network, a facility of particular value to those who are the only Bahá'í students in their universities.
- the Association for Bahá'í Studies can offer supportive forums appropriate for the presentation, discussion, networking and publication of such attempts at Bahá'í studies.

Added benefits consist of:

- Bahá'í studies may benefit an individual in his or her particular course of study by adding to the richness of understanding and the widening of horizons.
- Bahá'í Societies can also attempt to address any prejudice towards Bahá'í studies which may exist in the community.

From Societies for Bahá'í Studies, a handbook for Bahá'í groups at universities published by the Association for Bahá'í Societies - Australia in 1993.

A vibrant [University Bahá'í] Society will attract attention. Part of its maturation process will involve learning to deal with this attention and to utilise it. One important method of utilisation is for the Society to strive to have the Faith included on the curriculum of any appropriate courses such as, for example, sociology, Middle-Eastern studies, theological studies, criminology, philosophy, law, education and so on.

This could be initiated by approaching lecturers and ascertaining their interest in having a guest lecturer on the syllabus in the following year who would present a Bahá'í perspective. If this is successful, it could be followed up by more extensive coverage in the following years. It is this process which eventually leads to the development of entire subjects devoted to a study of the Faith and the establishment of Bahá'í Chairs at Universities . . .

The amount of preparation required to successfully begin such a process may be mind-boggling for those Societies just beginning on this route, but again, it is a natural extension of the “nuts and bolts” you are currently occupied with. There is no reason that any Society, no matter how young, should not be thinking about such grand propositions. Laying the foundations for these achievements can never begin too early and is well within the grasp of all Societies who are committed to developing and engaging in Bahá'í scholarship.

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