

Bahá'í Scholarship: Statements from the World Centre

by the Universal House of Justice

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Issued by the International Teaching Centre.

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A STATEMENT ON THE ENCOURAGEMENT OF BAHÁ'Í SCHOLARSHIP

Issued by the International Teaching Centre on 9 August 1984

The Importance of Bahá'í Scholarship:

Over 50 years ago, the Guardian emphasised the need for development of the intellectual life of the Bahá'í community, in the statement:

In these days when people are so skeptical about religion and look with so much contempt towards religious organizations and movements there seems to be more need than ever for our young Bahá'ís to be well-equipped intellectually, so that they may be in a position to present the Message in a befitting way, and in a manner that would convince every unbiased observer of the effectiveness and power of the Teachings.

(From a letter dated 5 May 1934 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer)

Some years later, he described Bahá'í scholarship as being an important aid to teaching the Faith to those who do not find the Bahá'í principles novel in the light of modern thought:

It seems what we need now is a more profound and co-ordinated Bahá'í scholarship in order to attract such men as you are contacting. The world has—at least the thinking world—caught up by now with all the great and universal principles enunciated by Bahá'u'lláh over 70 years ago, and so of course it does not sound 'new' to them. But we know that the deeper teachings, the capacity of His projected World Order to re-create society, are new and dynamic. It is these we must learn to present intelligently and enticingly to such men.

(From a letter dated 3 July 1949 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer)

More recently, attention has been directed to the role to be played by Bahá'í scholarship, in the statement:

The Universal House of Justice regards Bahá'í scholarship as of great potential importance for the development and consolidation of the Bahá'í community as it emerges from obscurity.

(From a letter dated 3 January 1979 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

As the Supreme Body pointed out in the opening sentence of the Ridván 1984 message to the Bahá'ís of the world, the emergence from obscurity of the Faith has been a marked feature of the past five years. This directs unprecedented public attention to the Cause of God, and also necessitates increased emphasis on the

development of Bahá'í scholarship, since in the same message, the House of Justice says:

Persistently greater and greater efforts must be made to acquaint the leaders of the world, in all departments of life, with the true nature of Bahá'u'lláh's revelation as the sole hope for the pacification and unification of the world.

The Nature of Bahá'í Scholarship:

A vital prerequisite to the fostering of Bahá'í scholarship is the acquisition of a clearer understanding of the meaning of this term. We can do no better than to offer an illuminating passage from the writings of the Guardian, which might well be taken as a definition of the attributes toward which a Bahá'í scholar should aspire:

. . . The Cause needs more Bahá'í scholars, people who not only are devoted to it and believe in it and are anxious to tell others about it, but also who have a deep grasp of the Teachings and their significance, and who can correlate its beliefs with the current thoughts and problems of the people of the world.

(From a letter dated 21 October 1943 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer)

This passage calls for distinctive qualities. The description of the kind of Bahá'í scholar of which the Faith stands in such need at this time places emphasis upon belief, devotion to the Faith, a profound understanding of the Teachings and a strong desire to share them with others. A distinctive feature of such Bahá'í scholarship, which is also reiterated in other passages of the writings of the Guardian, is that of relating the Bahá'í teachings to the present-day concerns and thought of the people around us.

Fostering Bahá'í Scholarship:

The Universal House of Justice specified how the Counsellors can foster Bahá'í scholarship:

In the field of Bahá'í scholarship . . . the Boards of Counsellors can render valuable services in this area by encouraging budding scholars and by promoting within the Bahá'í community an atmosphere of

tolerance for the views of others. At the same time the fundamental core of the believers' faith should be strengthened by an increasing awareness of the cardinal truth and vital importance of the Covenant and an ever-growing love for Bahá'u'lláh.

(From a communication dated 10 February 1981 written by the Universal House of Justice to the International Teaching Centre)

We consider first the matter of “encouraging budding scholars”.

From the passage of the Guardian's writings dealing with the attributes to which a Bahá'í scholar should aspire, it is evident that Bahá'í scholarship is an endeavour accessible to all members of the Bahá'í community, without exception. All believers can aspire to the attributes described by the Guardian, and can strive to relate the Bahá'í teachings to the thinking and concerns of the non-Bahá'í population around them. You can perform a valuable service in bringing this potential role to the attention of all the believers—including those who may lack formal education, and those who dwell in remote areas, villages and islands—and to discourage any thought that Bahá'í scholarship is an activity open only to those who are highly educated or who are pursuing an academic career.

As the followers of the Blessed Beauty make efforts to correlate the Bahá'í teachings, which impinge upon every aspect of human life, with the thoughts and problems of the people around them, they will inevitably discover new ways of presenting the teachings convincingly and will also acquire an ever-increasing understanding of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh.

At the same time special encouragement should also be given to believers of unusual capacity, training or accomplishment to consecrate their abilities to the service of the Cause through the unique and distinctive contribution they can make to Bahá'í scholarship. The Guardian repeatedly linked the work of Bahá'í scholars to the expansion and consolidation of the Faith, as stated in the following:

If the Bahá'ís want to be really effective in teaching the Cause they need to be much better informed and able to discuss intelligently, intellectually, the present condition of the world and its problems. We need Bahá'í scholars, not only people far, far more deeply aware of what our teachings really are, but also well read and well educated people, capable of correlating our teachings to the current thoughts of the leaders of society.

We Bahá'ís should, in other words, arm our minds with knowledge in order to better demonstrate to, especially, the educated classes, the truths

enshrined in our Faith.

(From a letter dated 5 July 1949 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer)

The Universal House of Justice, in responding to a Bahá'í who wanted to use logical means to convey and prove spiritual principles, wrote that:

. . . the House of Justice understands that you desire to find ways of conveying spiritual truths in logical ways and demonstrating their validity through scientific proofs. There can be no objection to such an attitude. 'Abdu'l-Bahá Himself used such a method. The danger Bahá'í scholars must avoid is the distortion of religious truth, almost forcibly at times, to make it conform to understandings and perceptions current in the scientific world. True Bahá'í scholars should guard against this.

(From a letter dated 7 June 1983 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

The Supreme Body has also referred to the distinctive role to be played by Bahá'ís who acquire expertise in various fields of endeavour, affirming that:

As the Bahá'í community grows it will acquire experts in numerous fields - both by Bahá'ís becoming experts and by experts becoming Bahá'ís. As these experts bring their knowledge and skill to the service of the community and, even more, as they transform their various disciplines by bringing to bear upon them the light of the Divine Teachings, problem after problem now disrupting society will be answered.

(From a letter dated 21 August 1977 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

Closely allied to this role is the call of the House of Justice for:

. . . the promotion of Bahá'í scholarship, so that an increasing number of believers will be able to analyse the problems of mankind in every field and to show how the Teachings solve them.

(From a letter dated 19 January 1983 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

The Counsellors and Auxiliary Board members can do much to assist in the response to this call by their stimulation and encouragement of Bahá'ís of distinctive capacity and promise, especially young Bahá'ís who are choosing their life work. Since the Bahá'í Teachings relate to every dimension of human thought and activity,

believers who become eminent in any legitimate field of knowledge are in an enviable position to make a significant and far-reaching contribution by presenting the Teachings in a way that demonstrates the profundity and efficacy of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh.

The Bahá'í community can already point to the example of several believers who have become recognised widely for their scholarship, and whose intellectual pursuits were enriched by their abiding devotion to the Faith, and their compelling desire to teach the Cause. Within this company is to be found Mírzá Abu'l-Faḍl, who was described by the Guardian as “very excellent and erudite”, as well as the Hands of the Cause of God George Townshend, whose scholarship was praised by the Guardian, and Hasan Balyuzi, who was eulogised by the Universal House of Justice for “his outstanding scholarly pursuits”, as well as others who are presently engaged in like service.

Promoting an Atmosphere of Tolerance:

We now consider “promoting within the Bahá'í community an atmosphere of tolerance for others” and strengthening “the fundamental core of the believers’ faith”. The Universal House of Justice has stated that:

The combination of absolute loyalty to the Manifestation of God and His Teachings, with the searching and intelligent study of the Teachings and history of the Faith which those Teachings themselves enjoin is a particular strength of this Dispensation. In past Dispensations the believers have tended to divide into two mutually antagonistic groups: those who held blindly to the letter of the Revelation, and those who questioned and doubted everything. Like all extremes, both these can lead into error. The beloved Guardian has written that ‘The Bahá'í Faith . . . enjoins upon its followers the primary duty of an unfettered search after truth . . .’ Bahá'ís are called upon to follow the Faith with intelligence and understanding. Inevitably believers will commit errors as they strive to rise to this degree of maturity, and this calls for forbearance and humility on the part of all concerned, so that such matters do not cause disunity or discord among the friends.

(From a letter dated 7 October 1980 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

The challenge to all believers is to develop the balanced combination prescribed by the House of Justice to such an extent that they do not fall into one of the mutually antagonistic groups of which the Supreme Body warns.

On the need for tolerance the Universal House of Justice wrote:

The House of Justice agrees that it is most important for the believers, and especially those who hold positions of responsibility in the Administrative Order, to react calmly and with tolerant and enquiring minds to views which differ from their own, remembering that all Bahá'ís are but students of the Faith, ever striving to understand the Teachings more clearly and to apply them more faithfully, and none can claim to have a perfect understanding of this Revelation. At the same time all believers, and scholars in particular, should remember the many warnings in the Writings against the fomenting of discord among the friends. It is the duty of the institutions of the Faith to guard the community against such dangers.

(From a letter dated 18 July 1979 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

Promotion of an atmosphere of tolerance thus requires that those holding positions of administrative authority not over-react, and that those setting forth their understanding of the Teachings not foster discord and dissension, deliberately or unwittingly. The warning against the fomenting of discord highlights one of the hazards facing believers who embark upon the practice of Bahá'í scholarship. On one occasion the Universal House of Justice felt moved to comment that:

There have, however, been cases of believers who look upon themselves as scholars, and may even be such in an academic sense, who have considerable expertise in certain aspects of the Faith but are lamentably ignorant or misinformed about other aspects of the Cause and the Teachings. Others have expressed bitingly critical views with a quite unscholarly intemperance.

(From a letter dated 8 October 1980 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

By striving to express themselves with courtesy, moderation, tact and wisdom, Bahá'í scholars will contribute to the maintenance within the Bahá'í community of an atmosphere of tolerance which facilitates their limitless exploration of the meaning

and implications of the Bahá'í Revelation.

Strengthening the Core of the Believers' Faith:

This need for Bahá'í scholars to become thoroughly deepened in the spirit of the Cause, and well versed in its Teachings is emphasised in the following passage:

In the application of the social laws of the Faith, most of the difficulties can be seen to arise not only from outright disobedience but also from the actions of those who, while careful to observe the letter of the law, try to go as far as it will permit them away from the spirit which lies at its heart. A similar tendency can be noted among some Bahá'í scholars. The great advances in knowledge and understanding in the vital field of Bahá'í scholarship will be made by those who, while well versed in their subjects and adhering to the principles of research, are also thoroughly imbued with love for the Faith and the determination to grow in the comprehension of its teachings.

(From a letter dated 27 March 1983 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

In the same letter the Supreme Body calls attention to the danger of intellectual pride, which a Bahá'í scholar must combat within himself, in these words:

The House of Justice feels that Bahá'í scholars must beware of the temptations of intellectual pride. 'Abdu'l-Bahá has warned the friends in the West that they would be subjected to intellectual tests, and the Guardian reminded them of this warning. There are many aspects of western thinking which have been exalted to a status of unassailable principle in the general mind, that time may well show to have been erroneous or, at least, only partially true. Any Bahá'í who rises to eminence in academic circles will be exposed to the powerful influence of such thinking.

(From a letter dated 27 March 1983 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

The provisions of the Covenant stand as our inviolable protection against distortion of the Teachings and against the subtle temptations of intellectual pride. Central to the Covenant is the authority of the Manifestation of God and of the

infallible institutions that the Holy Writings ordained. 'Abdu'l-Bahá has specified that:

Unto the Most Holy Book everyone must turn and all that is not expressly recorded therein must be referred to the Universal House of Justice. That which this body, whether unanimously or by a majority doth carry, that is verily the Truth and Purpose of God Himself.

(From Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Part Two)

The Universal House of Justice has clarified that:

In the Bahá'í Faith there are two authoritative centres appointed to which the believers must turn, for in reality the Interpreter of the Word is an extension of that centre which is the Word itself. The Book is the record of the utterance of Bahá'u'lláh, while the divinely inspired Interpreter is the living Mouth of that Book - it is thus he and he alone who can authoritatively state what the Book means. Thus one centre is the Book with its Interpreter, and the Other is the Universal House of Justice guided by God to decide on whatever is not explicitly revealed in the Book.

(From a letter dated 7 December 1967 written by the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

and it has pointed out that:

While it may often be the part of wisdom to approach individuals or an audience from a standpoint of current knowledge, it should never be overlooked that the Revelation of the Manifestation of God is the standard for all knowledge, and scientific statements and theories, no matter how close they may come to the eternal principles proclaimed by God's Messenger, are in their very nature ephemeral and limited. Likewise, attempting to make the Bahá'í Faith relevant to modern society is to incur the grave risk of compromising the fundamental verities of our Faith in an effort to make it conform to current theories and practices.

(From a letter dated 21 July 1968 written by the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly)

A vital element of Bahá'í scholarship is humility in recognising the limitations of the human mind in its attempts to encompass the Divine Message. Bahá'u'lláh addresses the Creator in prayer, using these terms:

Exalted, immeasurably exalted art Thou, O my Beloved, above the strivings of any of Thy creatures, however learned, to know Thee; exalted, immensely exalted art Thou above every human attempt, no matter how searching, to describe Thee! For the highest thought of men, however deep their contemplation, can never hope to outsoar the limitations imposed upon Thy creation, nor ascend beyond the state of the contingent world, nor break the bounds irrevocably set for it by Thee.

(From *Prayers and Meditations* by Bahá'u'lláh CLXXXIV)

Another vital provision of the Covenant is that concerning interpretation. The Universal House of Justice states:

. . . individual interpretation is considered the fruit of man's rational power and conducive to a better understanding of the teachings, provided that no disputes or arguments arise among the friends and the individual himself understands and makes it clear that his views are merely his own. Individual interpretations continually change as one grows in comprehension of the teachings.

. . . although individual insights can be enlightening and helpful, they can also be misleading. The friends must therefore learn to listen to the views of others without being overawed or allowing their faith to be shaken, and to express their own views without pressing them on their fellow Bahá'ís.

(From a letter dated 27 May 1966 written by the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

The Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh gives rise to a Bahá'í community which will increasingly become known for its fostering of creative development and for its encouragement of individual expression. The Covenant also provides guiding principles by which a Bahá'í scholar can exemplify that harmony of faith and reason which is a hallmark of the Bahá'í Dispensation.

With the Seven Year Plan calling for the fostering of the intellectual life of the Bahá'í community, and with the closely-associated development of Bahá'í scholarship, the world-wide community of the Greatest Name embarks upon an exciting phase in its development, which will widen the range of people attracted to its truths, greatly enhance its prestige and influence, and broaden the foundation of the world civilization to which the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh will ultimately give rise.

COMMENTS ON BAHÁ'Í SCHOLARSHIP

On behalf of the Universal House of Justice, dated 3 January, 1979

To the Participants in the Bahá'í Studies Seminar held in Cambridge on 30 September and 1 October 1978.

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

The Universal House of Justice has read with great interest the report of your seminar. It regards Bahá'í scholarship as of great potential importance for the development and consolidation of the Bahá'í community as it emerges from obscurity. It noted that there are a number of problems with which you have been grappling, and while it feels that it should, in general, leave the working out of solutions to Bahá'í scholars themselves, the House of Justice has the impression that it would be helpful to provide you, at this relatively early stage of the development of Bahá'í scholarship, with a few thoughts on matters raised during your seminar. Reports of your seminar were therefore referred to the Research Department, and the Universal House of Justice commends to your study the enclosed memorandum which that Department has prepared.

The House of Justice also urges you not to feel constrained in any way in consulting it about problems, whether theoretical or practical, that you meet in your work. It has noted, for example, the difficulties presented by the current temporary requirement for the review of publications, and in this connection it asks us to inform you that it has already established the policy that doctoral theses do not have to be reviewed unless there is a proposal to publish them in larger quantities than is required by the examining body.

You are still in the early stages of a very challenging and promising development in the life of the Bahá'í community, and the Universal House of Justice is eager to foster and assist your work in whatever ways it can. We are to assure you of its prayers in the Sacred Shrines on behalf of you all and of the progress of Bahá'í scholarship.

ETHICS AND METHODOLOGY

Comments by the Research Department at the Bahá'í World Centre

This seminar [The Bahá'í Studies Seminar held in Cambridge, England on 30 September and 1 October, 1978] seems to have provided a very valuable forum for the discussion of a number of aspects of Bahá'í scholarship, and the airing of certain problems which have been worrying some of the friends in relationship to their work and to their fellow believers. We believe that many of the problems arise from an attempt by some Bahá'í scholars to make use of methodologies devised by non-Bahá'ís without thinking through the implications of such a course and without working out a methodology which would be in consonance with the spirit of the Faith. The seminar itself may well prove to be an initial step in such a working out. The following remarks are intended merely to draw attention to certain aspects which we believe can help to advance this process.

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, we feel, 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 with the light of reason and evidence as well as of faith and inspiration, but also that everything in this 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 Bahá'u'lláh, 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.

It has been suggested that the words of Bahá'u'lláh that a true seeker should “so cleanse his heart that no remnant of either love or hate may linger therein, lest that love blindly incline him to error or that hate repel him away from the truth”, support the viewpoint of methodological agnosticism. But we believe that on deeper reflection it will be recognized that love and hate are emotional attachments or repulsions that can irrationally influence the seeker; they are not aspects of the truth itself. Moreover, the whole passage concerns taking “the step of search in the path leading to the knowledge of the Ancient of Days” and is summarized by Bahá'u'lláh in the words: “Our purpose in revealing these convincing and weighty utterances is to impress upon the seeker that he should regard all else beside God as transient, and count all things save Him, Who is the Object of all adoration, as utter nothingness.” It is in this context that He says, near the beginning of the passage, that the seeker must, “before all else, cleanse and purify his heart . . . from the obscuring dust of all acquired knowledge, and the allusions of the embodiments of satanic fancy.” It is similar, we think, to Bahá'u'lláh's injunction to look upon the Manifestation with His Own eyes. 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 that they are studying 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.

If Bahá'í scholars will try to avoid this snare of allowing a divorce between their faith and their reason, we are sure that they will also avoid many of the occasions for tension arising between themselves and their fellow believers.

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 utter 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. All men, not scholars alone, 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. We believe that they would do well to concentrate upon the ascertainment of truth - of a fuller understanding of the subject of their scholarship, whatever its field - not upon exposing and attacking the errors of others, whether they be of non-Bahá'ís or of their fellow believers. Inevitably the demonstration of truth exposes the falsity of error, but the emphasis and motive are important. We refer to these words of Bahá'u'lláh:

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 kindness 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 kindness 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)

In our view there are two particular dangers to which Bahá'í scholars are exposed, and which they share with those believers who rise to eminent positions in the administration of the Cause. One danger is faced by only a few: those whose work requires them to read the writings of Covenant-breakers. They have to remember that they are by no means immune to the spiritual poison that such works distil, and that they must approach this aspect of their work with great caution, alert to the danger that it presents. The second danger, which may well be as insidious, is that of spiritual pride and arrogance. Bahá'í scholars, especially those who are scholars in the teachings and history of the Faith itself, would be well advised to remember that scholars have often been most wrong when they have been most certain that they were right. The virtues of moderation, humility and humour in regard to one's own work and ideas are a potent protection against this danger.

We feel that by following such avenues of approach as those described in this memorandum Bahá'í scholars will find that many of the "fears, doubts and anxieties" which were aired at the seminar, will be dispelled.

THE POLICY OF PREPUBLICATION REVIEW

On behalf of the Universal House of Justice, enclosed to a letter to an individual dated 5 October 1993

With regard to the current policy of advance review, all Bahá'ís, whatever their professions, are challenged to reflect on the implications of our common struggle to achieve Bahá'u'lláh's purpose for the human race, including the use of our intellectual resources to gain deeper understanding of that Revelation and to apply its principles. In pursuing this course that has been set for it so explicitly and emphatically by its Founder, the Bahá'í community acts through the institutions that He has provided.

Scholarly endeavors are not an activity apart from this organic process answering

to standards and operating on authority outside it. The House of Justice believes that part of the difficulty that some Bahá'í academics are having with the question of prepublication review may arise from the fact that, in their scholarly work, such believers do not see themselves as full participants in this process, free to act with the spiritual autonomy they exercise in other aspects of their lives. What the Bahá'í community is engaged in bringing into visible expression is a new creation. In this, the Cause has urgent need of the unfettered and wholehearted assistance of its scholars. The House of Justice has sought to point out that, as in every other field of Bahá'í endeavor, there are certain conditions under which this assistance may be rendered, conditions implicit in the nature of the process and made explicit in the Divine Text.

These requirements are of course not reflected in the standards currently prevailing in Western academic institutions. Rather, both Bahá'í institutions and Bahá'í scholars are called on to exert a very great effort, of heart, mind, and will, in order to forge the new models of scholarly activity and guidance that Bahá'u'lláh's work requires. The House of Justice believes that you will serve the interests of the Faith best if you will direct your thoughts to this end. Merely to reiterate the conventions and requirements of systems which, whether academic, political, social, or economic, have been shown not to have adequate answers to the anarchy now engulfing human society, or any willingness to come to grips with the implications of their impotence, is of little practical help. We do a grave disservice to both ourselves and the Faith when we simply submit to the authority of academic practices that appeal for their claim of objectivity to theories which themselves are being increasingly called into question by major thinkers. While non-Bahá'í academics may slip carelessly into regarding the institutions founded by Bahá'u'lláh as simply another form of "religious establishment" and avoid serious examination of the truths of His Revelation in this fashion, it is clearly impossible for anyone who is a Bahá'í to follow them down this empty track.

The House of Justice is aware that the continuation of the policy of review can cast a shadow on the good name of the Faith in the eyes of certain non-Bahá'í academics. In an environment where publication is vital to advancement and recognition, any requirement that delays or inhibits this activity must be a matter of grave consideration, not only by the individual scholar but by the governing institutions of the community that eagerly watches his rise and counts anxiously on his effective assistance. But is that not precisely the kind of spiritual dilemma being faced by many Bahá'ís in their efforts to serve Bahá'u'lláh's purpose? On many occasions, in developing lands particularly, believers of capacity have had to forgo opportunities for promising political careers, careers whose value they could easily have justified on the

basis of public service, because such a choice was not in conformity with Bahá'u'lláh's teaching and purpose. There are, likewise, many examples of believers who have had to set aside both a professional life and legitimate family concerns in order to pioneer in inhospitable regions of the globe.

It is apparent that the crisis of contemporary civilization is impelling thinkers in many lands to explore new scholarly methodologies capable of coming to grips with spiritual, moral, cultural, and social phenomena not hitherto encountered. No segment of humanity is so well equipped as the Bahá'í community to take a leading role in this effort. As a body of people who are being steadily freed by the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh from the "gravitational pull", so to speak, of the cultures in which their habits of mind have been formed, the community already has a unique approach to the exploration of reality. This approach needs to be sharply honed as an ever more effective instrument of social transformation. The devising of the new scholarly paradigm called for by this circumstance offers a priceless opportunity of service and achievement to those Bahá'ís who enjoy the dual gifts of spiritual faith and intellectual faculties trained in the best that contemporary society has to offer.

The Universal House of Justice can only invite Bahá'í scholars, as it invites all other believers, to respond to this historic challenge, in whatever way and to whatever extent each person considers possible. It is confident that, in Bahá'í scholarship as in all other areas of Bahá'í service, the essential resources will gradually be forthcoming and the required models of research and study will be refined through the process of consultation. It is this achievement, the House of Justice believes, that in the long run will best protect the reputation of the Cause from whatever immediate misunderstandings and criticisms it may encounter. Indeed it is greatly encouraged by the response that Bahá'í scholars in many fields are already making.

FURTHER COMMENTS ON BAHÁ'Í SCHOLARSHIP

From a letter on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, dated 19 October 1993

The House of Justice suggests that the issues raised in your letter might best be considered in light of the statements in the Bahá'í Writings which disclose the relationship between the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh and the knowledge which is acquired as a result of scholarly endeavours. Bahá'u'lláh asserts that:

Unveiled and unconcealed, this Wronged One hath, at all times, proclaimed before the face of all the peoples of the world that which will serve as the key for unlocking the doors of sciences, of arts, of knowledge, of well-being, of prosperity and wealth. . .

It is evident that the Bahá'í Writings illuminate all areas of human endeavour and all academic disciplines. Those who have been privileged to recognize the station of Bahá'u'lláh have the bounty of access to a Revelation which casts light upon all aspects of thought and inquiry, and are enjoined to use the understanding which they obtain from their immersion in the Holy Writings to advance the interests of the Faith.

Those believers with the capacity and opportunity to do so have repeatedly been encouraged in their pursuit of academic studies by which they are not only equipped to render much needed services to the Faith, but are also provided with the means to acquire a profound insight into the meaning and the implications of the Bahá'í Teachings. They discover also that the perceptions gained from a deeper understanding of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh clarify the subjects of their academic inquiry.

It is useful to review a number of statements written by Shoghi Effendi on this subject. To a believer who had completed advanced academic studies in a subject related to the Teachings the Guardian stated, in a letter written on his behalf:

It is hoped that all the Bahá'í students will follow the noble example you have set before them and will, henceforth, be led to investigate and analyse the principles of the Faith and to correlate them with the modern aspects of philosophy and science. Every intelligent and thoughtful young Bahá'í should always approach the Cause in this way, for therein lies the very essence of the principle of independent investigation of truth.

When he was informed of the enrolment of a scientist in the Faith, the response set out in the letter written on his behalf was:

We need very much the sound, sane, element of thinking which a scientifically trained mind has to offer. When such intellectual powers are linked to deep faith a tremendous teaching potential is created. . .

His secretary wrote, on another occasion, that:

Shoghi Effendi has for years urged the Bahá'ís (who asked his advice, and in general also) to study history, economics, sociology, etc., in order to be au courant with all the progressive movements and thoughts being put forth today, and so that they could correlate these to the Bahá'í teachings. What he wants the Bahá'ís to do is to study more, not to study less. The more general knowledge, scientific and otherwise, they possess, the better. Likewise he is constantly urging them to really study the Bahá'í teachings more deeply. . .

In the simultaneous endeavour to pursue their studies and to delve deeper into the Bahá'í Teachings, believers are enjoined to maintain a keen awareness that the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh is the standard of truth against which all other views and conclusions are to be measured. They are urged to be modest about their accomplishments, and to bear in mind always the statement of Bahá'u'lláh that:

The heart must needs therefore be cleansed from the idle sayings of men, and sanctified from every earthly affection, so that it may discover the hidden meaning of divine inspiration, and become the treasury of the mysteries of divine knowledge.

At this early stage in the development of the Faith, it would not be useful to propound a highly restrictive definition of the term “Bahá'í scholarship”. In a letter written on behalf of the House of Justice to an Association for Bahá'í Studies recently, it is stated that:

The House of Justice advises you not to attempt to define too narrowly the form that Bahá'í scholarship should take, or the approach that scholars should adopt. Rather should you strive to develop within your Association respect for a wide range of approaches and endeavours. No doubt there will be some Bahá'ís who will wish to work in isolation, while others will desire consultation and collaboration with those having similar interests. Your aim should be to promote an atmosphere of mutual respect and tolerance within which will be included scholars whose principal interest is in theological issues as well as those scholars whose interests lie in relating the insights provided by the Bahá'í teachings to contemporary thought in the arts and sciences.

A similar diversity should characterize the endeavours pursued by Bahá'í scholars, accommodating their interests and skills as well as the needs of the Faith. The course of world events, the development of new trends of thought and the extension of the teaching work all tend to highlight attractive and beneficial areas to which Bahá'í scholars might well direct their attention. Likewise, the expansion of the activities of the Bahá'í International Community in its relationship with United Nations agencies and other international bodies creates attractive opportunities for scholars to make a direct and highly valued contribution to the enhancement of the prestige of the Faith and to its proclamation within an influential and receptive stratum of society. As the Bahá'í community continues to emerge inexorably from obscurity, it will be confronted by enemies, from both within and without, whose aim will be to malign and misrepresent its principles, so that its admirers might be disillusioned and the faith of its adherents might be shaken; Bahá'í scholars have a vital role to play in the defence of the Faith through their contribution to anticipatory measures and their response to defamatory accusations levelled against the Faith.

Thus, there should be room within the scope of Bahá'í scholarship to accommodate not only those who are interested in theological issues and in the historical origins of the Faith, but also those who are interested in relating the Bahá'í Teachings to their field of academic or professional interest, as well as those believers who may lack formal academic qualifications but who have, through their perceptive study of the Teachings, acquired insights which are of interest to others.

Since you have raised the question of whether physics is more than tangentially related to Bahá'í issues, you might consider the following comments of a well-known scientific thinker, who is not a Bahá'í, about the correlation between the Bahá'í Teachings and recent developments in the physical sciences:

In our times we can only survive, and our civilization can only flower, if we reorient the conventional wisdom and achieve the new insights which have been proclaimed by the Bahá'í Faith and which are now also supported by the latest discoveries of the empirical sciences.

Bahá'ís proclaim that the most important condition that can bring about peace is unity—the unity of families, of nations, and of the great currents of thought and inquiry that we denote science and religion.

Maturity, in turn, is a prerequisite for such unity. This is evolutionary thinking, and its validity is shown by the new theories which emerge from non-equilibrium thermodynamics, dynamical systems theory, cybernetics, and the related sciences of complexity. They are supported by detailed empirical investigations in such fields as physical cosmology, paleobiological macroevolutionary theory, and new trends in historiography.

The House of Justice wishes to avoid use of the terms “Bahá'í scholarship” and “Bahá'í scholars” in an exclusive sense, which would effectively establish a demarcation between those admitted into this category and those denied entrance to it. It is clear that such terms are relative, and that what is a worthy scholarly endeavour by a Bahá'í, when compared to the activities of those with whom he is in contact, may well be regarded as of vastly lesser significance when measured against the accomplishments of the outstanding scholars which the Faith has produced. The House of Justice seeks the creation of a Bahá'í community in which the members encourage each other, where there is respect for accomplishment, and a common realization that every one is, in his or her own way, seeking to acquire a deeper understanding of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh and to contribute to the advancement of the Faith.