

Bahá'í Scholarship

By Bahá'u'lláh, Shoghi Effendi, Universal House of Justice

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1. Scholarship and Achievement

Scholarship has a high station in the Bahá'í teachings and Bahá'í scholars have a great responsibility to a growing, divinely-guided world society. The ascertainment of truth and the acquisition of a fuller understanding of the subjects of their scholarship are worthy and high endeavours.

From comments of the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice on the Bahá'í Studies Seminar on Ethics and Methodology dated 3 January 1979.

[1]

Bahá'í scholarship is of great importance in the development and consolidation of the Bahá'í community.

From a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice dated 3 January 1979. [2]

The Supreme Body has informed us that it believes that both the International Teaching Centre and the Boards of Counsellors can render valuable services in the field of Bahá'í scholarship by encouraging budding scholars, and also by promoting within the Bahá'í community an atmosphere of tolerance for the views of others.

From a letter of the International Teaching Centre dated 22 March 1981. [3]

The heart of 'Abdu'l-Bahá longeth, in its love, to find that Bahá'í young people, each and all, are known throughout the world for their intellectual attainments.

From a letter of the International Teaching Centre dated 22 March 1981. [4]

It is just as important for the Bahá'í young boys and girls to become properly educated in Colleges of high standing as it is to be spiritually developed. The mental as well as the spiritual side of the youth has to be developed before he can serve the Cause efficiently.

From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi dated 28 November 1926, cited in Education 63. [5]

What he (Shoghi Effendi) wants the Bahá'ís to do is to study more, not to study less. The more general knowledge, scientific or otherwise, they possess, the better. Likewise he is constantly urging them to really study the Bahá'í teachings more deeply.

From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi dated 5 July 1947, cited in Deepening 38. [6]

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 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi dated 21 October 1943, cited in Deepening 35-36. [7]

Bahá'í scholars and writers will no doubt, gradually appear, and will, as promised by Bahá'u'lláh lend a unique support to the Faith.

From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, cited in US Bahá'í News, August 1936. [8]

As the Cause develops it will need more and more people who are really versed in their branch of learning and who can interpret the teachings to suit the facts.

From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, cited in Bahá'í Youth 16. [9]

It is not difficult to visualize the House of Justice, as Bahá'u'lláh's World Order unfolds, requiring the services of distinguished Bahá'í scientists in all fields.

See [1] above.

Bahá'u'lláh considered education to be one of the most fundamental factors of a true civilization - this education, however, in order to be adequate and fruitful should be comprehensive in nature and should take into consideration not only the physical and the intellectual side of man but also his spiritual and ethical aspects. This should be the programme of the Bahá'í youth all over the world.

From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi dated 9 July 1931, cited in Deepening 25. [10]

2. General Principles of Bahá'í Scholarship

The Bahá'í principle of the harmony of religion and science compels all Bahá'ís to protect themselves from prevalent diseases resulting from the divorce of faith and reason.

The sundering of science and religion is but one example of the tendency of the human mind (which is necessarily limited in its capacity) to concentrate on one virtue, one aspect of truth, one goal, to the exclusion of others. This leads, in extreme cases, to fanaticism and the distortion of truth, and in all cases to some degree of imbalance and inaccuracy.

See [1] above.

It has become customary in the West to think of science and religion as occupying two distinct - and even opposed - areas of human thought and activity. This dichotomy can be characterized in the pairs of antitheses: faith and reason; value and fact. It is a dichotomy which is foreign to Bahá'í thought and should be regarded with suspicion by Bahá'í scholars in every field.

The principle of the harmony of religion and science means not only that religious teachings should be studied in the light of reason and evidence as well as of faith and inspiration, but also that everything in creation, all aspects of human life and knowledge, should be studied in the light of revelation as well as 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.

See [1] above.

The believers must recognize the importance of intellectual honesty and humility. In past dispensations many errors arose because the believers in God's Revelation were over-anxious to encompass the Divine Message within the framework of their limited understanding, to define doctrines where definition was beyond their power, to explain mysteries which only the wisdom and experience of a later age would make comprehensible, to argue that something was true because it appeared desirable and necessary. Such compromises with essential truth, such intellectual pride, we must scrupulously avoid.

The Universal House of Justice, *Wellspring of Guidance* 87-88.

[11]

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.

See [1] above.

As a Bahá'í, you know that what Bahá'u'lláh teaches about the purpose of human life, the nature of the human being and the proper conduct of human lives, is divinely revealed and therefore true. However, it will inevitably take time for you not only to study the Bahá'í teachings so that you clearly understand them, but also to work out how they modify your professional concepts. This is, of course, not an unusual

predicament for a scientist. How often in the course of research is a factor discovered which requires a revolution in thinking over a wide field of human endeavour.

Universal House of Justice, *Messages 1968-1973* 111-112.

[12]

We should be confident that there is consistency in the universe, that the Manifestation is aware of that consistency, and we must ourselves be aware that the principle of the harmony of religion and science is a dynamic one which will require new levels of understanding of true science and true religion alike.

From a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, dated 22 June 1977.

[13]

3. Purpose of Bahá'í Scholarship

3.1 Refutation of Attacks on the Faith:

There is an answer in the teachings for everything; unfortunately the majority of the Bahá'ís, however intensely devoted and sincere they may be, lack for the most part the necessary scholarship and wisdom to reply to and refute the claims and attacks of people with some education and standing.

From a letter on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, dated 25 September 1942, cited in *Unfolding Destiny* 439.

[14]

3.2 Deeper Understanding of the Bahá'í Faith:

In connection with the question as to whether Bahá'ís should be familiar with the different sciences and branches of study, Shoghi Effendi wishes me to inform you that both Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá have given a very high position to men of culture and knowledge and Bahá'u'lláh says in one of His Tablets that respect shown to such people is incumbent upon all Bahá'ís. Furthermore there is no doubt that familiarity with different branches of study widens one's point of view and we can then understand and realize the significance of the Bahá'í Movement and its principles much more.

From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi dated 14 December 1924.

[15]

The Guardian has always advised young people to study deeply subjects as History,

Economics and Sociology as they are all related to the teachings and aid in understanding the Faith.

From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, cited in *Bahá'í Youth* 15.

[16]

3.3 Contributing to Scholarly Development:

History, Economics or Sociology ... are fields in which Bahá'ís not only take a great interest but also cover subjects which our teachings cast an entirely new light upon.

See [16] above.

Psychology is still a very young and inexact science, and as the years go by Bahá'í psychologists, who know from the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh the true pattern of human life, will be able to make great strides in the development of this science, and will help profoundly in the alleviation of human suffering.¹²

See [12] above.

Bahá'u'lláh has given us a few basic principles which should guide future Bahá'í economists in establishing such institutions which will adjust the economic relationships of the world.

From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, dated 26 December, 1935.

As more and more Bahá'ís enter the world of higher learning they will have the opportunity of exerting great influence in bringing about in human consciousness and outlook that harmony of religion and science which is so great a principle of their Faith.¹

The Teachings of Bahá'u'lláh throw light on so many aspects of human life and knowledge that a Bahá'í must learn, earlier than most, to weigh the information that is given to him rather than to accept it blindly. A Bahá'í has the advantage of the Divine Revelation for this age, which shines like a searchlight on so many problems that baffle modern thinkers.

The Universal House of Justice, *Wellspring of Guidance* 96.

3.4 Teaching the Faith:

The University training which you are receiving at present will be of immense help to you in your efforts to present the Message in intellectual circles. 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 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi dated 5 May 1934, cited in *Deepening* 31.

Shoghi Effendi's hope is that they will ... become able and devoted speakers on the Cause and subjects akin to it. To do this properly they will need a firm foundation of scientific and literary training which fortunately they are obtaining.⁵

It is very important that the movement should enter the Colleges and start to acquire the support of student bodies. No one can attempt such a task better than Bahá'í students.⁹

The Cause has the remedy for all the world's ills. The reason why more people don't accept it is because the Bahá'ís are not always capable of presenting it in a way that meets the immediate needs of their minds. Young Bahá'ís like yourself must prepare themselves to really bring the message to their generation who need it so desperately and who can understand the language it speaks so well.⁷

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 or otherwise, they possess, the better. Likewise he is constantly urging them to really study the Bahá'í teachings more deeply.⁶

A sound knowledge of history, including religious history, and also of social and economic subjects, is of great help in teaching the Cause to intelligent people.

From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi dated 4 May 1946, cited in *Deepening* 37.

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 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi dated 3 July 1949, cited in *Deepening* 39.

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 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.²²

From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi dated 5 July 1949, cited in *Deepening* 39-40.

We need profound Bahá'í scholars in the future, both to teach and to administer the Cause, and to answer the questions of the public, and help rebuild the world. This is a great challenge to you all, and presents a wonderful opportunity for service to humanity.

From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi dated August 1943.

4. Attitudes of Bahá'í Scholars

A scholar who is imbued with an understanding of the broad teachings of the Faith will always remember that being a scholar does not exempt him from the primal duties and purposes for which all human beings are created. Not scholars alone, but all men are exhorted to seek out and uphold the truth, no matter how uncomfortable it may be. But they are also exhorted to be wise in their utterance, to be tolerant of the views of others, to be courteous in their behaviour and speech, not to sow the seeds of doubt in faithful hearts, to look at the good rather than at the bad, to avoid conflict and contention to be reverent, to be faithful to the Covenant of God, to promote His Faith and safeguard its honour, and to educate their fellow men, giving milk to babes and meat to those who are stronger.¹

The distinction desired by 'Abdu'l-Bahá for all Bahá'ís is certainly for attainment by Bahá'í scholars, who by following the exhortation of Bahá'u'lláh to moderation, kindness, tact and wisdom, may restore scholarship to that high station of dignity and admiration which it formerly had and which is confirmed by the utterances of Bahá'u'lláh.¹

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 goodwill. 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 ...

Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* CXXXII.

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.

Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* V.

A Bahá'í must develop the ability to learn everything from those around him, showing proper humility before his teachers, but always relating what he hears to the Bahá'í teachings, for they will enable him to sort out the gold from the dross of human error.¹⁸

5. Some Specific Disciplines

Education:

The task of formulating a system of education which would be officially recognized by the Cause, and enforced as such throughout the Bahá'í world is one which the present-day generation of believers cannot obviously undertake, and which has to be gradually accomplished by Bahá'í scholars and educationalists of the future.

From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi dated 7 June 1939, cited in *Education* 70.

Philosophy:

Philosophy, as you will study it and later teach it, is certainly not one of the sciences that begins and ends in words. Fruitless excursions into metaphysical hair-splitting is meant, not a sound branch of learning like philosophy. . . he would advise you not to devote too much of your time to the abstract side of philosophy, but rather to approach it from a more historical angle. As to correlating philosophy with the Bahá'í teachings:

this is a tremendous work which scholars in the future can undertake. We must remember that not only are all the teachings not yet translated into English, but they are not even all collected yet.

From a letter on behalf of Shoghi Effendi dated 15 February 1947, cited in *Unfolding Destiny* 445.

Pure Mathematics:

Bahá'u'lláh's comment ("strictures against 'such sciences as begin in mere words and end in mere words'") does not apply to the systematic study of natural phenomena in order to discover the laws of order in the physical universe, an order which mathematics seeks to explore. Pure mathematics frequently has application in practical matters, such as in your example of group theory, and also in your own field of fundamental particles.¹³

Biology:

Your second question concerning the possible synthesis of an elementary 'life' form such as a simple virus relates to the statement made by 'Abdu'l-Bahá ... 'For example, if a man of his own mind and intelligence collects some elements and combines them, a living being will not be brought into existence, since the system is unnatural ...'

To understand the implications of this statement it is necessary to know what the Master meant by 'a living being' and what limitations He intended by the phrases 'of his own mind and intelligence' and 'since the system is unnatural.' As the science of biology develops and men acquire ever deeper insights into the nature of living things, these implications will no doubt become clearer.¹³

Psychology:

See Section 3.3 above

History, Economics, Sociology:

See Section 3.3 above

6. Some Pitfalls

Compromise:

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 principle 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 on behalf of the Universal House of Justice dated 21 July 1968.

[28]

Misunderstanding About Religion:

It has . . . 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 ... 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 scholar ... 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 ... 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 a growth of the community's understanding of the Bahá'í Revelation ...

Undoubtedly the fact that Bahá'í scholars of the history and teachings of the Faith believe in the Faith will be a grave flaw in the eyes of many non-Bahá'í academics, whose own dogmatic material 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 ...

See [1] above.

Neglect of the Covenant:

The Boards of Counsellors can render valuable services in the field of Bahá'í scholarship by encouraging budding scholars, and also by promoting within the Bahá'í community an atmosphere of tolerance for the views of others. . . At the same time, the Counsellors have a basic responsibility to strengthen the fundamental core of the faith of the believers by promoting an increasing awareness of the cardinal truth and vital importance of the Covenant, and an ever-growing love for Bahá'u'lláh.

See [3] above.

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