

The Holy Grail of Objectivity

Some Considerations for Balancing Sacred and Secular in Baha'i Scholarship

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Author's note: This essay was revised and updated for the web in 2004. In substance it is unchanged. The views expressed are entirely those of its author, and do not necessarily reflect those of the original publisher (Deepen Magazine or the Tsavo West Baha'i Institute). In this updated version the Endnotes have been substantially augmented beyond the norm largely to provide further background information and context for the interested reader. The Baha'i Writings and authoritative interpretations are in italic, while citations from all other authors appear in plain text. Additional corrections and slight alterations were made in Sept. 05.

In response to direct questions from the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of the United States about a perceived lack of progress within the U.S. Baha'i community the Universal House of Justice, after offering considerable praise and encouragement, wrote of the "*corrosive*" influence of an "*overbearing and rampant secularization*" infecting that community and administration[1]. In an earlier 1988 message to the North American believers, and later published under the title *Individual Rights and Freedoms in the World Order of Baha'u'llah*, the House of Justice had already begun to articulate the challenges that confronted the U.S. Baha'i community. They brought attention to the fact that there were "*misconceptions of such fundamental issues as individual rights and freedom of expression in the Baha'i community*", as well as a "*confusion of attitudes*" when encountering "*difficulties in applying Baha'i principles to questions of the day*"[2]. They pointed out that the solution to this "*inadequacy of Baha'i perspective*" was a deeper understanding of Baha'i fundamentals. Might it not be reasonable to assume that this "*rampant secularization*" and resulting "*confusion of attitudes*" within the community at large has had its influence within Baha'i Studies and

Scholarship[3]? Such an assumption would provide an explanation for some of the tensions that have existed in that arena over the last two decades.

It's only natural that tensions exist between some of the underlying assumptions that dominate the academic study of religion and some Baha'i teachings and practices. By exploring the wider context of academia and its assumptions along side selected interpretive principles highlighted in the letters of Shoghi Effendi, these tensions can possibly be better understood. It is up to individual scholars to come to their own conclusions on the matters explored below, but it is hoped that the following discussion and citations from the Writings will be of some assistance in this process[4].

The Baha'i Attitude Toward Science and the Acquisition of Knowledge

One fundamental teaching of Baha'u'lláh is that both science and religion are essential to human progress, and that they are the two most potent forces in human society. 'Abdu'l-Bahá went so far as to say that *"whatever the intelligence of man cannot understand, religion ought not to accept,"* and that any religion contrary to science is not the truth[5]. Another of the fundamental teachings of Bahá'u'lláh is the acquisition of knowledge, and the attainments of the mind. *"God made religion and science to be the measure, as it were, of our understanding,"* 'Abdu'l-Bahá once said, adding also that we should *"weigh all things in this balance"*[6]. Religion itself, He said, is the Divine Reality *"unto which true science and reason must conform"*[7]. From the very beginning of the Cause, reason and faith have been inseparably united. As Bahiyyih Nakhjaváni points out in her book, *Asking Questions*, the Bábí's and early Baha'is were anything but anti-intellectual, a characterization that a few authors have used to describe the spiritual Dawnbreakers of this age (see endnote 17):

"While the followers of Muhammad rose with the sword to

vindicate His holy name, the exemplars of the Bábi Revelation dipped their reed pens into ink with the same fervor. Táhirih writing her eloquent proofs in captivity, Quddüs reading his commentaries as the cannon balls roll at his feet, and Nabil immortalizing both their lives in his chronicles all bear witness to the close association between the passion inspired by this Cause and the patient diligence of a mind seeking after truth"[8].

The ideal union between faith and reason is far from understood much less realized in the larger society at this historical moment. For centuries the gulf has progressively widened, and until only recently has there been any positive movement, and this only from the periphery. The chasm that separates science and religion in the academic world remains un-reconciled, though signs of fundamental changes are everywhere apparent[9].

The Subjectivity of Scholars and Scientists

It is instructive to examine what Paleontologist Steven Jay Gould refers to as the "messy and personal side of science"[10]. The longstanding polarized debate between 'evolutionists' and 'creationists' is a good example of how both secular and religious preconceptions can result in prolonged unproductive and entrenched circular thinking; the Evolutionists' unending search for the mechanism of natural selection and the missing link, and the Special Creationists' incessant denial of paleographic and geologic evidence being familiar examples.

A prominent British Egyptologist, John Romer, offers another striking example of just how subjective historiography actually is in some cases. Romer made telling statements on this issue in a BBC television documentary entitled *Romer's Egypt*, suggesting that religious and secular scholars alike often hold self fulfilling attitudes causing them to engage in extreme circular thinking. For instance, he believes that "Egyptologists are often drawn to places which seem

to fulfill their own interpretations, and their prejudices." Romer tells how he has worked on American, English and German Egyptological missions, all of which conceive "a different ancient Egypt." "It's as if," he says, "their different nationalities are reflected into their subject and we're given three completely different ancient worlds." [11]

Speaking directly about historians, television talk show host, sometime philosopher and historian, and author of over forty books, Steve Allen, made a quote worthy observation about bias in history:

"Although children [and a surprising number of adults] assume that history books written by residents of their own countries are accurate reports of significant events, every informed person knows that a description of, say, World War I written by a French scholar of the highest credentials will differ significantly from one written by an equally responsible German historian." [12]

A further example of how a scholar's worldview can dramatically affect his or her interpretation of the so called 'facts' can be seen in the work of Fyodor Korovkin, whose textbook, *History of the Ancient World*, was awarded the USSR State Prize in 1973 and had run into over twenty editions by 1985. The second intermediate period of ancient Egyptian history is nearly universally considered (in the West) to have been a civil and economic breakdown and a transfer of power to a predominantly Asian people known as the Hyksos. Korovkin interestingly interprets the uprising in classic Marxist terms, as an "uprising of the poor and the slaves" [13], and not surprisingly frames the event as "the struggle of classes in Egypt." Baha'i author Moojan Momen makes a definitive statement on the issue of objectivity in science:

"It is superficially very attractive to state that a scholar who is studying a religion must be a detached and impartial observer and must make no a priori judgments about the object of study. In

practice, however, this proves impossible. Although in the nineteenth century, scholars used to consider that it was possible to observe and analyze all phenomena in a detached and impartial manner, this has been found to be illusory. It was found that as one went from the exact ("hard") sciences such as physics, to the biological sciences, and finally to the ("soft") social sciences, the interrelationship of the observer and the observed had an increasingly large effect upon the observations made. Not only was the observer causing changes in the observed but, in the social sciences, the individual and cultural biases of the observer were also found to be distorting the observations.... A writer who is thought of as impartial is often, in fact, only fashionable"[14].

In Gould's words, the "stereotype of a fully rational and objective 'scientific method,' with individual scientists as logical (and interchangeable) robots is self-serving mythology"[15]. Like the legendary Holy Grail, the coveted ideal of "objectivity" apparently continues to remain beyond the reach of human rationality—even in this postmodern 'scientific' era[16].

The Anti-Theistic Tendency of the Secular Academic World

As can be seen by the several scholars and scientists just quoted growing numbers of scholars understand at the conceptual level that claiming that one's work is "objective" is presumptuous and recalls the children's fable known as "The Emperor Has no Clothes". But this doesn't mean that the consciousness of these limits of rationality and reason (which by the way is by no means universal) are played out at the behavioral level among the majority of scholars. Theistic viewpoints continue to compete in a disadvantaged atmosphere within the academic world. Of course hagiographic and apologetic exaggerations do exist, just as there are those who argue that the claims of all religious authors are not to be believed when writing about their own religions. And naturally all extreme positions should be resisted and weeded out. But apologetic and hagiographic concerns, legitimate as such concerns are when addressed in a

balanced way, have evidently been carried to extreme in academia as a result of the arbitrary separation of science and religion in this age[17].

If the truth were told, it appears that science and academic scholarship are not necessarily more rational or objective than religious perspectives. If God and His Cause are rejected, history has shown that human beings often make gods and religion of all sorts of objects of fancy. It appears that some disciplines rival religious beliefs, and have become a religion of sorts unto themselves[18]. Framed in this way, it can perhaps be better understood why it is so difficult to overturn this apparently widespread notion that secular scientists and academics are—by definition—more objective than those who entertain a theistic worldview. In his essay "The Faith of Science and the Method of Religion" Brian Aull pointed out that prevalent secular models do not "eliminate faith, rather, it simply chooses a particular kind"[19]. Aull muses over the irony of the often-bigoted behavior displayed by many academics toward the idea of a "faith bias" while "unconsciously exempting their own faith bias because it is fashionable"[20]. To many academics the concept of "objectivity" appears to be equivalent to espousing a "nontheological" position, though archeologist Thomas W. Davis has added to the irony by pointing out that "the choice is itself a theological one." [21]

In any case it is being increasingly recognized that this entrenched assumption is misleading, not entirely accurate, and one potential cause of significant distortion in many fields of study. Moojan Momen has made a definitive statement on this subject:

"The criteria and assumptions of the academic world are completely irreligious, the methodology is based on the assumption that God does not intervene in history if in fact He exists at all, and does not reveal himself. All human phenomena can be fully explained by sociology, psychology, economics, cultural factors, and therefore

anything that has happened can be accounted for. For example, the Bábí movement in Iran can be traced back to the Shykhís and Isma'ílís, and to all the various religious movements that existed in Iran in the past. One could investigate how all these historical, social and religious elements converged, and explain the factors that led to the Bábí movement. There is no need to bring God into the equation at all. This is how the academic world thinks and it's very easy, if you are actually in that world all the time, to slip into that mode of thought. It's a natural mode of thought to slip into. There are very brilliant minds all around you producing work based on these assumptions and very soon it also becomes reality for you. If everyone else around you has a certain set of assumptions that they accept as truth, it becomes very easy for you to slip into the same sort of thinking. This is not just a theoretical concern, it's a very real concern." [22]

It's not just in religious studies but across the entire academic spectrum that an "irreligious" posture is upheld and defended. Gould notes that in the field of biological science the very idea of progress is "noxious" because it hints at the ideas of purpose and predestination, and therefore suggests the idea of God [23]. "Apparently most scientists", says Gould, "still prefer to consider human existence as simply 'a cosmic accident' " [24]. Jerry Bergman claims to have searched in vain for over a decade to find a single college biology textbook that even objectively discusses "theistic evolution" in a positive light [25]. Momen shares another relevant insight into this issue:

"The key area in which this dichotomy [between religion and science or faith and reason] becomes problematic for the Baha'í scholar is in the use of methods of critical analysis that reduce all religious phenomena to the interaction of social and economic forces and all religious statements to cognitive meaninglessness" [26].

Such observations as these, as well as discussions such as this one, should not be construed as any kind of anti-intellectualism. Rather it can

reasonably be argued that questioning conventional wisdom is indeed a form of critical thinking; an accounting for those aspects of thought that often allude conscious scrutiny and having nothing at all to do with an aversion to critical thought[27].

Rethinking the "Faith Bias" Rationalization

As might be implied by the above discussion, it has been fashionable in past decades to discredit or disqualify even eyewitness accounts for no other reason than they were conveyed by religious persons who supposedly have a personal stake in the history they report; or in other words, due to assumed hagiographic or apologetic influences. From a Baha'i perspective this is not entirely logical and quite possibly hypocritical. Should not an anti-theistic bias be viewed as a liability even as are other biases and predispositions? And should not the fact that religious persons have the advantage of faith, and possibly even spiritual illumination, and are often restrained by the fear of God from unethical and immoral acts (such as lying, preferring expedience over principle, or stretching or hiding the truth for some personal or perceived advantage) be considered in their favor, or at least be given some consideration?

One convenient example of how this "anti-theistic" bias can play out within the context of Biblical studies can be found in New Testament studies. The majority of academic historians dismissed the trustworthiness of the historical aspects of the various accounts of Luke and Paul as unreliable. It was here again assumed that these impressive travels were made up or grossly exaggerated by the faithful for apologetic purposes or due to hagiographic influences. Subsequent archaeological discoveries, however, forced historians to reconsider the accounts of these writings in terms of their historical

reliability, and they are now considered essentially accurate depictions of the ancient world even by otherwise skeptical academics[28]. There are many other similar examples.

One tragic consequence of these phenomena is that in some cases a single fragment of the secular variety has been necessary to give credence to volumes of evidence whose source is associated with a religious figure, even when numerous ancient copies were in existence. On the other hand, a contradictory fragment of the secular variety has had the power to overturn and discredit volumes of ancient testimony associated with religion, condemning them as hagiographic or apologetic fabrications.

John Hatcher, another widely published Baha'i author, writing in the context of a different but related issue pointed out that there are "a number of common practices of students and scholars of religion that may seem logical and sound but which, in a Baha'i context, are sadly lacking, even illogical and misleading"[29]. One of the most far reaching of these is the concept of Divine intervention in human history, the idea that God is an active force in the life of the individual and society. Surprisingly, this premise is foreign even to many scholars of religion, who tend to follow the prevailing convention of explaining religion in exclusively human and academic terms. Hatcher put it this way: "For the Baha'i scholar, it is this force, so sadly neglected in most contemporary scholarship in religious studies, that will so often have primacy in any study of religion"[30].

Rather than being a disadvantage there are apparently some advantages, including some potential scholastic ones, accruing to those who have attained to faith and spiritual illumination. Philosopher and mathematician William Hatcher once pointed out that "the Baha'i who would be a scholar of the Baha'i Writings has many favorable conditions"[31]. But what are these

“favorable conditions”? “Those who have been privileged to recognize the station of Bahá’u’lláh” writes the House of Justice, “have the bounty of access to a Revelation which casts light upon all aspects of thought and inquiry...”[32].

Another advantage for the scholar of the Faith and its history is that the Baha'i Writings suffer from few of the "higher" criticisms that have plagued the other world religions. That is to say, the authorship and authenticity of the Baha'i Writings is for the most part known and established, unlike most former ancient Scriptures, the origins of which scholars have incessantly debated. Nor are the many and nasty difficulties associated with the "lower" or textual and contextual kinds of criticisms as problematic or as challenging as former religions have had to face. This is to say that the problems faced by former religions related to the interpretation and meaning of various scriptures have been reduced substantially by their historical proximity to the present, the fact that so much has been written down and authenticated in some fashion, and last but certainly not least by the appointment of authoritative Interpreters of the Text. As Hand of the Cause of God William Sears was so fond of pointing out, sixty-five years of uninterrupted infallible interpretation is a unique and wondrous thing. Neither is the student of the Baha'i Writings deprived of those other benefits that Baha'u'lláh has suggested are available to those *"that have come under the shadow of this Name"*[33].

The fact that extreme literalistic interpretations and fanatical behaviors on the part of so called religious persons has discredited historical and other sources of knowledge associated with scholars of faith does not constitute a justification for the current bias. 'Abdu'l-Baha Himself offers support for this line of reasoning:

"It is true that there are foolish individuals who have never properly examined the fundamentals of the divine religions, who have taken as their criterion the

behavior of a few religious hypocrites and measured all religious persons by that yardstick, and have on this account concluded that religions are an obstacle to progress, a divisive factor and a cause of malevolence and enmity among peoples. They have not even observed this much, that the principles of the Divine religions can hardly be evaluated by the acts of those who only claim to follow them”[34].

Along these same lines 'Abdu'l-Bahá once pointed out that Voltaire, that famous man of science who wrote a great number of books attacking the religions (and who is very highly regarded in the Western liberal intellectual tradition), had "failed to grasp the true significance of the sacred Scriptures," and characterized his works which denigrated religion as "*no better than children's plaything*"[35]. It appears that some, or perhaps many Baha'i positions are at odds with the conventional wisdom of the modern secular world, or in any case may not be politically correct in any particular decade or century. In 1983 the Universal House of Justice reminded Baha'i academics of this reality:

"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"[36].

In Search of a Baha'i Position: Some Lessons from History

How one chooses to approach and deal with this issue can have far-reaching consequences and profound implications for how the Baha'i Writings will be received and understood. It also has the potential of significantly altering our understanding of many mundane subjects.

It should not be surprising that some have argued that the only reasonable course in cases of discrepancy of this sort is to accept the prevailing academic position as a sort of default benchmark[37]. This is understandable not only because of the Western practice of relying on academic experts to

resolve such enigmas, and who in some cases have inherited an authority that religious clergy once enjoyed[38], but also because of the formidable socio-political pressures operating within the academic environment[39]. But undoubtedly the most significant factor contributing to this position is the fear of being associated in any way with ‘religious fundamentalism’, an association that can put a virtual end to one’s career in many academic disciplines, or at least derail or marginalize one's career. It must be admitted that reasoning in favor of the ‘apparent’ meaning of religious texts that address mundane subjects associated with history or science—in the face of discordant academic views—naturally looks and feels like ‘fundamentalism’ to most secular scholars who see no reason to treat the Baha’i Writings any differently than other ancient Scriptures in these matters. This has not gone unnoticed nor unappreciated by the Universal House of Justice, as can be seen in this extract written by Its Research Department to a gathering of historians of the Faith:

"Undoubtedly the fact that Baha'i scholars of the history and teachings of the Faith, believe in the Faith, will be a grave flaw in the eyes of many non-Baha’i academics whose own dogmatic materialism passes without comment because it is fashionable"[40].

These sorts of discrepancies are apparently not a entirely modern phenomena, as the following example from the Qur’án in the time of the Prophet Muhammad makes apparent. It is particularly noteworthy because it originates from the mind of 'Abdu'l Bahá:

"We [the Research Department] have been asked to say that there is nothing in the Baha’i Writings to support the conclusion that the revelation of a Manifestation of God does not extend to and include the area of historical and scientific "fact." On the contrary, in *Some Answered Questions* pp. 28-29, 'Abdu'l-Bahá points out that when the Qur’án was revealed, it contained verses explaining

the movement of the stars and planets in the universe. Because these statements disagreed with the established theories of the time, the verses were ridiculed by all the mathematicians who "*attributed the theory to ignorance.*" 'Abdu'l-Bahá goes on to say that it was not until 900 years later, when the telescope was invented, that the validity of Muhammad's statements on this subject was proven"[41].

It no doubt stands as a warning to us all that there have been a number of cases of discordance between statements of the Central figures and the science of the last century and a half that eventually turned in favor of the Central figures. For instance Baha'u'llah suggested that "every sun has its planets", a statement that was assumed erroneous during the eighteenth and most of this century, but now appears to be considered all but inevitable by scientists as we approach the third millennium[42]. Similar objections have been raised to statements made by Abdu'l-Baha, such as His predictions pertaining to 'space travel', the 'missing link', His assertion that the 'mechanical' model of the world of nature and the universe was untenable and would eventually be discredited, and His redefining—no doubt in anticipation of quantum physics—of what in his day was called 'ether'. These statements were considered naïve by those informed of the science of the day, but are now for the most part, at the end of the twentieth century, all but vindicated by the latest science—even if the terminology and semantics used by Abdu'l-Baha were not the same as that used in today's science[43]. There are other topics pending, some with profound and far-reaching implications[44].

While insisting that the only reasonable position for Baha'is is to submit to mainstream academic views in such cases may be understandable, such an approach fails to account for the experience of the last century. This perspective or approach was implied by the Universal House of Justice in a letter addressed to a gathering of Baha'i historians in the 1980's:

“...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 overanxious 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”[45].

Apparently the full resolution of many such discrepancies and enigmas will only be resolved and clarified at some future date, when humanity has gained a bit more historical perspective as well as greater spiritual and intellectual maturity. In other words, we are apparently too close to the Baha'i Revelation on the one hand, and too much a part of current revolutionary changes in secular knowledge on the other, to be sure of our judgment on many topics at present—in spite of the insistence of some individuals and disciplines. But there is yet another significant consideration in any attempt to articulate a Baha'i approach to this issue.

In Search of a Baha'i Position: The Guardian's Example and Instruction

Although for the most part the academic world evidently sees itself as detached, objective and enlightened, due to the influence of materialism and secularism many of its pronouncements are not necessarily sound at this particular time. Nor should this be surprising for Baha'is, who can see the disparity between conventional wisdoms and Baha'i thought in many facets of life in this age.

A study of Shoghi Effendi's treatment of historical questions associated with religion sheds further light on this issue. In some cases the Guardian made definitive statements about such things as ancient Scriptural prophecy, the existence of Prophets, the order of their succession and other aspects of their

lives, and naturally about early Baha'i history. At other times he deferred to students of history and religion, declaring that *"such matters, as no reference to them occurs in the Teachings, are left for students of history and religion to resolve and clarify"*[46]. This tenet of the Faith has been demonstrated in many places. The following two statements provide additional nuancing:

"There is no reference to this subject in our teachings, so the Guardian cannot pronounce an opinion"[47].

"There are no dates in our teachings regarding the actual dates of the Prophets of the Adamic Cycle, so we cannot give any. Tentatively we can accept what historians may consider accurate. Naturally the dates referring to Muhammad, the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh we are sure of"[48].

The following extracts from a letters written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi provides further insight into his approach:

"As regards what Mirza Abu'l-Fadl has said concerning the seven religions of the past, Shoghi Effendi wishes to emphasize that what are truly authoritative are the Master's words. In all such cases we should try and find out what He has said, and abide by His words, even though they seem conflicting with the findings of modern scholars. If He does not say anything on the subject then the individual is free to accept or refute what scholars such as Mirza Abu'l-Fadl say. Through the discussions of these the truth will ultimately be found. But at no time should their decision be considered final"[49].

"As regards Confucianism, the Teachings contain no data on this subject, and the Guardian would therefore advise that you refer to authoritative books regarding the history and teachings of this Faith"[50].

Note that the Guardian advises turning to academic authorities when something is not mentioned in the Writings. He also advises that whatever specialists or experts assert (in the above cases it happens to be *"historians"* and scholars of religion) should be received *"tentatively"*. This *"tentative"* status

presumably has something to do with the nature of human knowledge generally, and in particular with the allusive and ephemeral nature of the ancient historical past.

Ralph Gomory, in a commentary in *Scientific American*, provides a convenient illustration immediately relevant to this issue. He points out that in most fields of knowledge we are at the very “edge of the unknown”, and that we consequently tend to think “more is known than actually is”[51]. Gomory makes the point eloquently:

“The frontier of knowledge, where it finally borders on the unknown, seems far away and irrelevant, separated from us by an apparently endless expanse of the known. We do not see that we may be proceeding down a narrow path of knowledge and that if we look slightly to the right we will be staring directly at the unknown”[52].

Gomory cites an example from ancient Greek history (see also endnotes 39 and 44):

“Those of us who learned the history of the Persian Wars in school did not know that the events so vividly described are all based on the writings of the one source who survived-- Herodotus. If you want to know almost anything that happened in the Greece of that time and it was not recorded by Herodotus, it is unknown and in all probability can never be known. But we did not think of his accounts as fragments of knowledge on the edge of the unknown; it was just more stuff from the huge pile of facts we had to learn about the history of Greece”[53].

It is these fragments of knowledge surrounded by a sea of ignorance that the Guardian no doubt discouraged the friends from making into “facts”.

On the other hand, the Guardian also advised believers to accept whatever the Central figures happened to write on mundane topics. For instance in the context of remarks Abdu’l-Baha made about the ancient Greek

philosopher Socrates, that happened to be at odds with modern academic views, the Guardian wrote:

"Historians cannot be sure Socrates did not visit the Holy Land. But believing as we do that 'Abdu'l-Bahá had an intuitive knowledge quite different from our own, we accept His authority on this matter...."[54].

Commenting on the discordance associated with the historical assertions in Baha'u'llah's *Tablet of Wisdom*, Baha'i author Adib Taherzadeh suggests, in his four-volume work *The Revelation of Baha'u'llah*, that "the true version of history is that which is revealed to the Prophets of God", for whom but the Prophets have access to "knowledge of past and future events"[55]. On this general theme the Universal House of Justice has elucidated the approach of Baha'is to this kind of discordance:

"As Baha'is, we know that we must turn to the Writings of Babá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi for authoritative guidance in these matters [i.e. ancient prophecy and historical questions pertaining to religion]. When a subject has not been mentioned or explained in the Sacred Writings, we are free to consult other books and to consider the opinions of scholars if we wish to do so. This principle is affirmed [by the] Guardian ..."[56]

These statements represent nuances of a single hermeneutic principle. It's actually a nuanced version of the far better known interpretive principle that provides for authoritative interpretation in the Faith[57]. This particular application simply addresses an unavoidable scholastic issue. Shoghi Effendi is setting forth an authoritative position for the Baha'i community here, and it should be clear that he is not recommending a methodology for historiography or any other academic discipline. On the other hand, his statements do provide guidance and insight for the consideration of those who will be privileged to forge new models of scholarship recently called for by the Universal House of

Justice[58].

There are undoubtedly exceptions to the above guideline—as some scholars have argued—relating to such things as context, intent, errors in translation, and other considerations[see endnote 59, second paragraph]. Additionally Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha have qualified Their statements on occasion. One example of this relates to something Abdu'l-Baha said about a contemporaneous martyrdom that occurred in Yazd. He stated that what He said on the matter was conveyed to Him by one of the believers (as opposed to coming to this knowledge through some inspirational means)[59]. Abdu'l-Baha's statement turned out to be contradicted by someone allegedly claiming to be an eyewitness, though the actual truth has never been established. There are many other examples of such qualifications in the Writings of the Central figures[60].

One evident point here is that these are clearly exceptions and not the rule, and that it is important that the issue not become so convoluted in our own minds as to confuse the exceptions with the principle. And naturally this means that Baha'is are going to be out of sync with the conventional secular wisdom on some issues. And naturally such cases will be a test for others[61]. On the other hand, there are those who have argued that the Writings are simply not reliable when speaking about mundane topics such as history or science. Some of these have argued that it was never the intention of the authors for such statements be received as factual, but rather are simile or metaphor. These have argued that the evident meaning was not intended. But most lack any internal support for this position. Related to this notion Universal House of Justice member Mr. Ian Semple in a 1984 talk, "Interpretation and the Guardianship", noted several pitfalls that we potentially face when trying to understand the Writings. One, he says, "is that of ignoring

the obvious meaning of the words." "In the past," says Mr. Semple, "people were sometimes so keen on extracting the esoteric significance of a text (such as its symbolic meaning) that they were blind to the clear meaning of the words." (Haifa, Israel 2/18/84, see BahaiLibrary.org). On this theme 'Abdu'l-Baha wrote:

"The signs (or verses) have exoteric meaning and esoteric meaning, and neither their outward preventeth their inward, nor doth their inward preventeth their outward meaning." (*Tablets of 'Abdu'l-Baha*, p.608)

In His turn Baha'u'llah wrote the following in what is at this time a provisional translation:

"Blessed are they that cling both to the literal and to the esoteric, for those are His servants that have believed in the Universal Word. Know that whoso clingeth to the outward sense of the words, leaving aside their esoteric significance, is simply ignorant. And whoso concentrateth on the metaphorical sense to the exclusion of the prosaic meaning is heedless. Only the one who interpreteth the Verses esoterically *while harmonizing this reading with the literal meaning* can be said to be a complete scholar. This maxim hath dawned from the horizon of knowledge, so know thou its value and cherish its excellence." (*The Surah of the Sun*, provisional translation by Juan Cole, Baha'i Studies Bulletin, Vol. 4, 3-4 April 1990: 4-22)

And again there are those who have reasoned that since the Central figures were not historians, therefore Their statements relating to history need not be taken too seriously. Another theory suggests that such statements constitute convenient coincidental details intended merely as support for a larger proposition; details that were in harmony with the beliefs of those being addressed but not necessarily in harmony with the facts[62]. One variation on this theme reasons that only if nothing in a given statement from the Baha'i Writings can be shown to be in opposition to the 'facts', then Baha'is are free to believe the evident meaning if they wish. The problem with this approach of

course is that it is not entirely consistent with the Guardian's instructions on the one hand, nor does it account for the dubious nature of many so called "facts"[63]. Still others have argued that the Central figures were obviously ignorant of the true facts as now supposedly recognized by modern scientists and academics, because they were naturally—it is apparently reasoned—limited by the prevailing knowledge of the age in which they lived[64]. Although it is probable that there is some truth in some of these views, and that academic methodologies are by all means valid and necessary evaluative tools by which to better understand the Writings, as John Hatcher and many others have argued, and although it is clear that some these approaches have currency within Baha'i Studies at this time, it should not go unnoticed that in most cases the underlying rationale does not entirely harmonize with the particular hermeneutic articulated by Shoghi Effendi above, and in some cases are in rather stark opposition to it.

To summarize, the danger of prematurely doubting—much less of denying—the veracity of statements in the Writings touching upon mundane topics is a very real one for scholars in this age. One obvious lesson to be learned from all of this is that it would be prudent to approach inspired writings or Holy Writ with due reverence and humility, and with considerable caution and conservatism. In the words of the late scholar of note, Mizá Abu'l-Fadl, "a prudent mind will refrain from deciding against that which was revealed... merely because it is unlikely"[65].

Conclusion

The nature and quality of conceptual models and paradigms is crucial to productive scholarly and scientific investigation, and it would seem that Baha'is might have a distinct advantage in having access to the Baha'i Revelation. Certainly it can provide the essential "reality based" foundation for socially

responsible and effectual scientific progress.

The tendency to disfavor theistic perspectives in many disciplines is at present a fact of life. This is indeed true (and perhaps ironically so) in the academic study of religion. In light of this difference in worldview discordance seems inevitable as academic attention is increasingly focused on the Baha'i Writings and its history. But the important point here is not so much that subjectivity and partiality exists in the sciences, or even that theistic interpretations of events continue to be disadvantaged within the academic world, but rather that it is literally impossible (much less desirable) for Baha'i scientists and scholars to release themselves from those underlying preconceptions or paradigms that derive from their acceptance of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh.

Such conceptual under-girding appears to be intrinsic to the way the human mind is meant to function. If this is in fact the case, then, logically speaking, the important questions concern the nature of the models and preconceptions that a scholar embraces to structure and guide her thinking? The simplistic answer to this question is, of course, "truth" or "reality" as it can best be understood. Carrying this logic further, a Baha'i is a person who has recognized Bahá'u'lláh as the Supreme Manifestation of God for this age, and in so doing embraces His Revelation as the highest expression of revealed "Truth" or "reality" to date. Therefore, from this point of view, the Baha'i Writings logically qualify as the preferred foundation to provide anchor points around which empirical and other data can be organized, explored, and synthesized—and to a certain extent and within some disciplines used as a touchstone for evaluating the relative credibility of evidence from other sources. Thus consistency with the spirit of the Baha'i Writings appears to be both from a logical and authoritative standpoint the governing principle that

can insure safe exegetical passage for Baha'i scholars.

The complexity of sorting out statements in the Baha'i Writings in relation to discordant academic assertions—as well as the significant political and emotional baggage that accompany it—certainly make it among the most challenging to face Baha'i scholars in this formative age. It's in light of this complexity that Baha'i scholars have been admonished to resist becoming “*overanxious to encompass the Divine Message within the framework of their [our] limited understanding, to define doctrines where definition was [is] beyond their [our] power, to explain mysteries which only the wisdom and experience of a later age would [will] make comprehensible, to argue that something was [is] true because it appeared [appears] desirable and necessary*”[66]. It was clearly also with this long view in mind that William Hatcher pointed out that “it is reasonable to anticipate that Baha'i intellectual life will [eventually] preserve and enrich, in both spirit and form, the best of traditional scholarly disciplines and will develop imaginative new approaches as Well”[67]. The Guardian suggested that in time these mysteries and questions would be sorted out. Humility and patience are obviously in order.

It can also be expected that Baha'i scholarship will—in time—expose those attitudes, criteria, and methodologies within the academic world that have been unduly influenced by the materialism of the age, and that in some cases have become antithetical to Baha'i thought. These are no doubt at least partially responsible for the generally accepted notion, repudiated by Abdu'l-Baha, “*that it is unscientific to believe in God*”[68]. As the human mind becomes freed from the limitations of materialistic conceptions and dogma, scientists and philosophers will not, in the words of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, be “*deniers of the Prophets, ignorant of spiritual susceptibilities, deprived of the heavenly bounties and without belief in the supernatural...*”[69]. We can further expect, according to the House of Justice, that “*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"[70]. And as William Hatcher further observed, "The development of the most fruitful methodologies will undoubtedly take generations"[71]. The House of Justice went so far as to state that *"both Baha'i institutions and Baha'i 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 Baha'u'llah's work requires"*[72].

Related to all this last point the Guardian, through various letters, articulated a distinctive hermeneutic for negotiating sacred and secular in Baha'i scholarship. Though it appears that his instructions and example constitute guidance for 'believers' and were not intended to inform current academic methodology, they nevertheless will provide valuable insights for those who will have the privilege and formidable task of forging *"new models of scholarly activity"* capable of *"incorporating a proper regard for Baha'u'llah's station within a methodological framework informed by the highest standards of intellectual rigor"*[73]. In any case, there is ample reason to revisit and reconsider many standing academic attitudes and practices in light of the Baha'i teachings and the lessons of the last century.

Returning to our opening paragraph and the question it posed, might it not be reasonable to assume, given the above considerations, that a *'rampant secularization'* and resulting *'confusion of attitudes'* within the community at large has had an influence within Baha'i Studies and Scholarship in recent decades, and that this has undermined our confidence in the Writings in certain respects? As Baha'i scholars work through this issue, they may want to thoughtfully consider what appears on the surface a rather simplistic comment offered casually by another widely published Baha'i author—though after further thought takes on profound implications: "In my understanding of the Baha'i teachings, true objectivity is the equivalent of seeing the world through

God's eyes, because His are the only objective eyes there are”[74]. But it would indeed be at least somewhat ironic if it were ultimately discovered that the highest ideal of ‘objectivity’ were to be found in the Revelations of the Manifestations of God. Given all that we now know, the words of the Supreme Manifestation of God and the Center of His Covenant may be the only logical place left to explore for academia's elusive Holy Grail.

ENDNOTES:

[1] Letter dated May 19, 1994, to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of the United States. This letter was a follow up response to a meeting with the House of Justice at the request of the National Assembly and published in the June 1994 issue of *The American Baha'i*. The context of these comments follows:

“You live in a society caught in the tightening grip of moral decadence on a vast scale. But this should come as no surprise to you. It is the unavoidable consequence of a pervasive godlessness. Its symptoms and repercussions were described in painful detail by Shoghi Effendi in several of his letters to the Western friends. Inevitably, the American Bahá'í community is affected by this condition to some extent. The corrosive influence of an overbearing and rampant secularization is infecting the style of administration of the Faith in your community and threatening to undermine its efficacy.... The aggressiveness and competitiveness which animate a dominantly capitalist culture the partisanship inherent in a fervidly democratic system the suspicion of public-policy institutions and the skepticism toward established authority ingrained in the political attitude of the people and which trace their origins to the genesis of American society, the cynical disregard of the moderating principles and rules of civilized human relationships resulting from an excessive liberalism and its immoral consequences--such unsavory characteristics inform entrenched habits of American life, which imperceptibly at first but more obviously in the long run have come to exert too great a sway over the manner of management of the Bahá'í community and over the behavior of portions of its rank and file in relation to the Cause. This unwholesome influence must be arrested by immediate, deliberate effort--an effort which must surely begin with your Assembly itself. Further accommodation of it will severely impede the progress of your community, despite the abundant possibilities of an imminent breakthrough. It was due to this concern in particular that we anxiously welcomed your request for a meeting with us.”

[2] *Individual Rights and Freedoms in the World Order of Baha'u'llah*, p. 3.

[3] *Ibid.*

[4] As author I claim no qualifications. This essay was written in the spirit of the following statements of the Universal House of Justice:

“The House of Justice calls upon the members of the community of the Greatest Name, young and old, men and women alike, to strive to develop and offer to humanity a new model of scholarly activity along the lines set out in this compilation, animated by the spirit of inquiry into the limitless meaning of the Divine Teachings. This scholarly endeavour should be characterized by the welcome it offers to all who wish to be involved in it, each in his or her own way, by mutual encouragement and cooperation among its participants, and by the respect accorded to distinguished accomplishment and outstanding achievement. The spirit and approach should be far removed from the arrogance, contention, and exclusiveness which have too often sullied the name of scholarship in the wider society, and which have created barriers to the sound development of this worthy pursuit.” (Compilations, *Scholarship*; cited in Ocean Resource Library)

“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 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....

“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.... 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.” (19 October 1993 to an individual believer; *Scholarship*, p. 5)

[5] Abdu'l-Baha, *Paris Talks*, p. 131

[6] *Ibid.* p. 146.

[7] Abdu'l-Baha, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 374.

[8] *Asking Questions: A Challenge to Fundamentalism*, pp.36-37

[9] The various expressions of this phenomenon are incredibly diverse. To cite just one example, the research findings in the field of psychology in the closing decades of the twentieth century have dramatically confirmed that “a purely secular view of human mental life has been shown to fail not just at the theoretical, but also at the practical level” according to Patrick Glynn, director and scholar in residence at the George Washington University Institute for Communitarian Policy Studies(*God* p.78). Glynn goes on to point out that “psychology’s [earlier] outright rejection of God [is now seen as] an intellectual error even within the terms of the discipline”(p.74). But even more encouraging is that the “views of the nature of human consciousness derived from modern psychology and from religious revelation have tended to converge [rather] than diverge over the past twenty years”(Ibid.). Anjam Khurhseed’s *Universe Within* and H. B. Danesh’s *The Psychology of Spirituality* offer similar insights into this emerging view of psychology” (adapted from Harmsen, R., “The Coming Synthesis: Baha’i Scholarship in Age of Conflict and Controversy”, 1999; see Winter’s Bahai Library.com).

[10] Gould, Quoted in *Natural History*, February 1994, p. 14.

[11] Romer's Egypt, Lion Heart Television, The BBC in America, MCMLXXXI. See also Shlomo Bunimovitz for an insightful discussion about subjectivity in archaeology (“How Mute Stones Speak.” *Biblical Archaeological Review*. March-April, 1995: 54-61).

[12] *More Steve Allen: on the Bible, Religion, Morality*, p. 163.

[13] Korovkin, F., *History of the Ancient World*, English Translation, Progress Publisher, Moscow, 1985, p. 46.

[14] Momen, Moojan, "Scholarship and the Baha’i Community", *The Journal of Baha’i Studies*, volume 1, number 1, p. 32.

[15] Gould, Quoted in *Natural History*, February 1994, p. 14.

[16] See Schaefer, Towfigh, and Gollmer in *Making the Crooked Straight*, George Ronald, Oxford, 1995 (2000) pages 307-308 for a concise discussion of the limits of reason and its relation to revelation. This issue has much to do with epistemology, but there is not opportunity here to discuss this dimension of the issue (See Peter Terry’s unpublished “Baha’i Epistemology”, a compilation and commentary, for a relatively comprehensive if broad overview of this subject.

[17] See *Making the Crooked Straight* pages 81-82 for a very brief reference to hagiography in relation to Baha’i history. It is undeniable that some authors who are Baha’is have restricted their sources to those that have been blessed in some manner by the Central figures or Shoghi Effendi. David Ruhe’s *Robe of Light* provides a

welcome transparency for those who take this approach to the sources. Dr. Ruhe acknowledges that "...he [Nabil, the historian he cites almost exclusively in his text] is not immune to the predictable effects of his ever-increasing respect and admiration for Baha'u'llah in becoming the contemporary biographer of the Greatest Soul." He goes on to say that "In company with Nabil, the present author [i.e. Dr. Ruhe himself] has inevitably conveyed his overwhelming feeling for the Supreme Prophet." The other end of the spectrum is perhaps represented by authors such as Denis MacEoin, who represent the harsh reality of secular academe discussed by Momen, and whose work is undeniably influenced by an 'anti-theistic' bias. Some of MacEoin's work questions not only the veracity of what he calls the 'approved' or 'authorized' Baha'i sources, but also implicitly questions the integrity of the authors themselves, and indeed the Central figures. For another discussion of hagiography in Baha'i sources we have Steven Lambdon's characterization of the early believers (including the author of *Dawn Breakers*) in his essay "An Episode in the Childhood of the Bab". Although some consider it well balanced, others detect that secular academic tendency to see nearly everything conveyed by 'believers' as hagiographic and tainted.

[18] Stephen Gould notes that in the biological sciences the very idea of progress is "noxious" because it hints at the idea of purpose and therefore suggests the existence of God (Quoted in Lewin, R., "A Simple Matter of Complexity" *New Scientist*, December, 1994, p. 40.). In the field of ancient Middle Eastern history and archaeology the 'Copenhagen School' is perhaps another example of a circle or approach within academia becoming something of a religion unto itself.

[19] Aull, Brian, *Journal of Baha'i Studies*, vol. 1, no 2, p. 11.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Davis, Thomas W., "Faith and Archaeology: A Brief History to the Present" *Biblical Archaeology Review*, March-April 1993: 50-62.

The following comments of the House of Justice in a 8 February 1998 letter to an individual cited in "Issues Related to the Study of the Faith" appears to relate at some level to this very same issue:

"Your email of ... covers a number of issues, the first of which relates to methods followed in researching, understanding and writing about historical events, and the elements of these methods which the House of Justice regards as being influenced by materialism. The purpose of scholarship in such fields should obviously be the ascertainment of truth, and Bahá'í scholars should, of course, observe the highest standards of honesty, integrity and truthfulness. Moreover, the House of Justice accepts that many scholarly methods have been developed which are soundly based and of enduring validity. It nevertheless questions some presumptions of certain current academic methods because it sees these producing a distorted picture of reality.

"The training of some scholars in fields such as religion and history seems to have restricted their vision and blinded them to the culturally determined basis of elements of the approach they have learned. It causes them to exclude from consideration factors which, from a Bahá'í point of view, are of fundamental importance. Truth in such fields cannot be found if the evidence of Revelation is systematically excluded and if discourse is limited by a basically deterministic view of the world.

"Some of the protagonists in the discussions on the Internet have implied that the only way to attain a true understanding of historical events and of the purport of the sacred and historical records of the Cause of God is through the rigid application of methods narrowly defined in a materialistic framework. They have even gone so far as to stigmatize whoever proposes a variation of these methods as wishing to obscure the truth rather than unveil it.

"The House of Justice recognizes that, at the other extreme, there are Bahá'ís who, imbued by what they conceive to be loyalty to Bahá'u'lláh, cling to blind acceptance of what they understand to be a statement of the Sacred Text. This shortcoming demonstrates an equally serious failure to grasp the profundity of the Bahá'í principle of the harmony of faith and reason. The danger of such an attitude is that it exalts personal understanding of some part of the Revelation over the whole, leads to illogical and internally inconsistent applications of the Sacred Text, and provides fuel to those who would mistakenly characterize loyalty to the Covenant as 'fundamentalism'."

[22] Momen, Moojan, "Scholarship and the Baha'i Community", *Journal of Baha'i Studies*, volume 1, number 1, pgs. 45-55.

[23] Stephen J. Gould quoted in Lewin, R., "A Simple Matter of Complexity" in *New Scientist*, December 1994,

p. 40.

[24] Gould, S., *Wonderful Life: The Gurgess Shale and the Nature of History*, 1989, p. 291.

[25] Bergman, J., "The New State Religion: Atheism" *Impact*, November 19-4, p. ii.

[26] Momen, M., "Scholarship and the Baha'i Community" *Journal of Baha'i Studies*, vol. 2 no. 1, p. 33.

[27] In a commentary entitled "Loyalty to the Covenant and Critical Thought" (2003; see "Bahai-Library.com") Udo Schaefer has shown how critical thought is intrinsic to spirituality and to meaningful participation in the Baha'i Faith and the defense of the Cause (p. 5). Dr. Schaefer also makes reference to anti-intellectualism in the Faith, and makes a powerful argument for the need to ask difficult questions about the Covenant, the infallibility of the House of Justice, the Baha'i Administrative order and other topics for apologetic reasons.

Dr. Schaefer, in this same essay, expatiates on what he considers a "profound mistrust" of critical thinking within the community at large, and the danger of identifying "critical thinking with an absence of spirituality" (p. 3). I would like to affirm these observations on the one hand, while offering a possible reason for some of the perceived 'mistrust' on the other. Recent history has seen a number of learned Baha'i scholars question central verities of the Faith only to be exposed in the end as critics or enemies of the Centre of the Cause and the Baha'i Administration (see Compilation "Issues Related to the Study of the Faith" for a discussion of recent disturbances of this nature by House of Justice). I mention this merely as an alternative explanation for the conservatism that is so often and so broadly characterized as anti-intellectualism by some academics. In other words, in the last decade many Baha'is have literally learned from experience to be cautious and conservative toward academics who question central verities of the Faith, at least in part because all too often they haven't had the interests of the Cause at heart. This is offered simply as another angle to consider in any effort to better understand and heal what some consider a dangerous attitude or prejudice within the Baha'i community. So it would seem to some that there is another side to this two-sided coin of 'anti-intellectualism' within the Baha'i community that needs to be factored in, dispassionately considered, and honestly acknowledged—if one expects to make any real progress in this area.

Dr. Schaefer's closing statement in "Loyalty to the Covenant and Critical Thought" no doubt holds one important key to resolving this issue: "...no amount of education and knowledge will bring success, unless it is combined with humility, when the learned "pride not themselves on their attainments", and unless the teacher "be kindled with the fire of His love" (p. 14). The good news is that such discordance probably represents, and the House of Justice has said as much (and in both directions), an immature understanding of the Teachings on the one hand, and on the other a lack of experience and maturity in relation to consultation and the use of this volatile electronic medium.

[28] For some well-known examples of this phenomenon see Merrill Unger's *Archaeology and the New Testament*, and W.E. Vine's *Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*.

[29] Hatcher, John, *Journal of Baha'i Studies*, vol. 1, no 2, p. 11.

[30] Ibid.

[31] Hatcher, William, "Scholarship: A Baha'i Perspective" *The Journal of Baha'i Studies*, vol. I, no. 2, 1988, p. 41.

[32] Compilations, *Scholarship*, p. 17. The statement goes on, "...and [the believers] are enjoined to use the understanding which they obtain from their immersion in the Holy Writings to advance the interests of the Faith."

[33] Bahá'u'lláh, quoted in Hatcher, W., "Scholarship: A Bahá'i Perspective", *Journal of Baha'i Studies*, vol.1, no.2, p. 41.

[34] Cited in *The Secret of Divine Civilization*, p. 72.

[35] Ibid. p. 72-73.

[36] Quoted in *Bahá'i Scholarship*, p. 7.

[37] Perhaps one of the earliest published essays that implicitly suggested this approach was Juan Cole's 1979 essay, "Problems of Chronology in Baha'u'llah's Tablet of Wisdom" (*World Order* 13.3: 24-39). Since then this position has been much discussed and argued on various email discussion lists, particularly those geared toward academics.

[38] In the compilation "Issues Related to the Study of the Faith", the House of Justice made the following comments regarding the dangers of establishing a distinction between academic scholars of the Faith and other believers:

"You express disquiet that attempts being made to introduce a distinction between 'Bahá'í laymen' and 'Bahá'í scholars' with respect to the study of the Faith tend to generate a spirit of disunity among the friends. Your concern is fully justified. Such an approach to the study of the Cause would betray a fundamental misunderstanding of the pattern of Bahá'í society as set out in the Teachings of the Faith (14 March 1996).

"Comments have been made in recent times, implying the existence of two categories of believers, designated "administrators" and "academics". The House of Justice feels that it is important to recognize the unsoundness of such a concept. In the nature of Bahá'í administration, there is no class of believers who serve as "administrators". Individual Bahá'ís are either elected or appointed to positions of administrative service; they come from every field of endeavour, including academia. There is, moreover, a natural flow of individuals into and out of administrative posts. The same applies to the occupants of those institutions of the Administrative Order which are referred to as being of the "learned" in the Faith. Clearly there are some Bahá'ís who are "academics" and some who are not, but "academics" in no way constitute a recognized group in relation to the structure of the Cause." (7 June 1997)

"There is no profession in either the teaching of the Faith or its administration for which one can train or to which a believer can properly aspire. Cautionary words of Bahá'u'lláh are particularly relevant: "Ever since the seeking of preference and distinction came into play, the world has been laid waste. It has become desolate...." (14 March 1996).

[39] This has already been addressed by Moojan Momen earlier, but there is a whole literature on this subject. In the context of most disciplines we find that those who question the status quo are usually punished rather severely. For one archaeologist insist, for example, "Evidence is not totally lacking that some scholars, unable to meet the challenge of such proposed solutions [evidence questioning the conventional wisdom], do not care to jeopardize their positions professionally by even suggesting that such solutions merit serious consideration". Speaking to his own discipline about a controversy of a similar nature, anthropologist Jose Luis Lorenzo expressed dismay as to "how such an inflexible position [of orthodoxy] is able to obscure the scientific approach under a layer of pettifogging legal phraseology and the threat of ostracism" ("Early Man Research in the American Hemisphere: Appraisal and Perspectives", *Early Man in America from Circum-Pacific Perspective*. Ed. Alan Bryan; Occasional Papers of the Department of Anthropology, University of Alberta, no. 1. Archaeological Researchers International, 1978: 1-9). Even "compelling evidence" and scholarship of "commendable rigor", says archaeologists Kelley and Hanen, are too often ignored, "in large part because [it] conflict[s] with certain views that are deeply entrenched in contemporary beliefs" (*Archaeology* 299). Archaeologist Lynn Rose's puts it this way:

Each new generation of scholars tends to flatter itself regarding its supposed breakthroughs. But the fact is that very little has fundamentally changed during the past one hundred years in the way scholars treat antiquity: the conventional chronology is still adhered to by the vast majority of today's authors; and the archaeological, stratigraphical, monumental, and literary evidence against that conventional chronology is swept under the rug today even more carefully than it was two or three generations ago. Sometimes, in fact, it is necessary to turn to older sources in order to find candid reports and honest discussions of discoveries whose embarrassing nature had not yet been fully realized. ("Just Plainly Wrong" 34)

These lesser known realities appear to be related to what historian David Fischer calls "the fallacy of the prevalent proof", a pervasive form of verification that makes mass opinion into a form of proof: "If the fallacy of the prevalent proof appeared only in...vulgar form, there would be little to fear from it. But in more subtle shapes, the same sort of error is widespread. Few scholars have failed to bend, in some degree, before the collective conceits of their colleagues" (*Historian's Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought*. New York,

London: Harper & Row, 1970). “Actually, there is nothing at all incredible,” says Donovan Courville, “in recognizing the possibility of mass scholarship making fundamental errors of such magnitude.” “The past history of scientific development,” he says, “is replete with examples of the failure of a near total scholarship to recognize error or to perceive truth” (*The Exodus Problem and Its Ramifications*. Vol. 1 Loma Linda, Calif.: Challenge Books, 1971, p. 2). See also the following sources for excellent insights into this phenomenon: Bauer, Henry, *Scientific Literacy and the Myth of the Scientific Method*, Chicago, Ill: University of Illinois Press, 1992; Schick, Theodore Jr., “The End of Science?”, *Skeptical Inquirer*. 21: 2 (1997) 36-39; Wobst, H. Martin, and Arthur S. Keene. “Archaeological Explanation as Political Economy” in *The Socio-Politics of Archaeology* (Research Report Number 23. Department of Anthropology, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, 1983: 79-89); as well as Fritz Machlup’s *Knowledge and Knowledge Production*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980.

[40] "The Challenge and Promise of Bahá'í Scholarship" *Associate*, Issue 7, January 1993, p. 2.

[41] Cited in an unpublished compilation by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice, “Selected Extracts to Guide Baha’i Scholars”, pages 2-3, #7. The citation by Abdu’l-Baha referred to here by the Research Department is on page 23 of *Some Answered Questions* in the latest edition.

[42] The December 2004 issue of National Geographic highlighted an article by senior editor Tim Appenzeller entitled “Search for Other Earths” that discussed the discovery of planets in our universe, stating, “Astronomers are more certain than ever that other planets like our own exist in the universe. Now they just have to find them.” (p.72)

[43] For an enlightening summary of these issues along with a review of recent scientific findings confirming the statements of the Central figures, as well as a couple other cases together with some of the history see chapter 5 in Gary L. Matthews’ *The Challenge of Baha’u’llah* (George Ronald 1993; See 2000 edition). The upcoming 2005 edition will update and expand this theme. See also *He Cometh with Clouds*, pages 220 – 250 by the same author and publisher (1996). The most thorough discussion of Abdu’l-Baha’s treatment of ether and its relation to quantum physics and the latest science see “Ether, Quantum Physics and the Bahá’í Writings” by Robin Míhrshahi, in *Australian Bahá’í Studies Journal* Volume 4, pages 3-20 (Association for Bahá’í Studies Australia, 2002/2003).

[44] A convenient example of one unresolved enigma with rather profound implications has to do with ancient Greek and Hebrew history. The conventional wisdom happens to be at odds with Scriptural and traditional views. In aggregate the Baha’i Writings say quite a lot about this subject and, in spirit at least, happen to harmonize more with traditional ancient beliefs and other Scriptural accounts than with modern views in some important ways.

Until modern times it was believed that the ancient Greece of Empedocles, Pythagoras, Socrates, and Plato was indebted to Middle Eastern or Levantine religious and cultural contributions. With the rise of the currently reigning ‘Aryan model’ however, a process was set in motion that systematically discredited this ancient view. This was carried out on the pretext that the wide ranging ancient testimonies suggesting Egyptian, Semitic, and even Hebrew influences—and their later repetition by Jewish, Christian, and Muslim writers through late antiquity and the middle ages—were for the most part apologetic and hagiographic exaggerations or fabrications. It was reasoned that these were parroted by later scribes and historians, and eventually—and mistakenly according to the reigning view—adopted as actual history. From one point of view the process of discrediting these ancient sources was about a difference in hermeneutic [for an interesting discussion of some of the broader implications of hermeneutics see “Remembering Shoghi Effendi as Interpreter”, a talk by Glenford Mitchell (July 27, 1997, at Foundation Hall of the House of Worship, Wilmette, Illinois)].

The ‘Ancient Model’, as it is sometimes called, was thus discredited. The Ancient Model is essentially the view of the ancient Middle East and Aegean that was held by the ancients themselves (including the ancient Greeks). This worldview continued to dominate through the enlightenment and nearly until the twentieth century. The current mainstream academic view, or ‘Aryan Model’, derives from the idea that the heyday of Greek philosophy and high culture is to be attributed primarily to Aryans of European extraction invading from the north during Greece’s Dark Age (rather than from centuries of cultural contact with Middle Eastern Semites and Egyptians—i.e. Africans—as the ancient Greeks themselves maintained). As has already been said, the Baha’i Writings appear to harmonize more with the Ancient Model than with the reigning Aryan model on this and a number of other points—such as the chronological synchronisms between ancient Greece

and Palestine alluded to in Baha'u'llah's Tablet of Wisdom [See for instance Peter Terry's essay "Some Chronological Issues in the Lawh-i-Hikmat of Baha'u'llah" (*Lights of Irfan, Book One*, 2000, Haj Mehdi Arjmand Memorial Fund); also see assorted comments in several volumes of Adib Taherzadeh's *The Revelation of Baha'u'llah*; Juan Cole was the first to write in English about this issue in his 1979 *World Order* article "Problems of Chronology in Baha'u'llah's Tablet of Wisdom". Terry's essay includes a sampling of the ancient sources supporting the view that Hebrew thought influenced Greek religion and culture that have been systematically discredited under the auspices of the Aryan model].

It may be noteworthy that the 'Aryan model' is not without its critics from both within and outside the academy, nor free of significant and numerous anomalies and enigmas. A growing number of heterodox academics and historical revisionists continue to offer evidence of weaknesses within the foundations of the prevailing Aryan Model and argue for revisions of various sorts, some of them profound and fundamental. To name just a few credentialed scholars critical of the established model, we can think of such names as Peter James et al, I. J. Thorpe, John Bimson, Peter van der Veen, Tory Thorpe, Richard Abbot, Nikos Kokkinos, Robert Morkot et al, John Frankish, David Rohl, Martin Bernal, S.V.M. Clube, and William Napier. It is perhaps noteworthy that Isaac Newton, a luminary of his or any age, was perhaps the founding father of all revisionists as expressed in his 1728 *Chronology of Ancient Kingdoms Amended* [still available in facsimile form]. In it he advocated for significant changes in the chronology of the ancient world that continue to be advocated by some scholars to this day. Apparently some of the foundations of the current Aryan model were laid at the time of Newton's writing.

IN recent decades Martin Bernal, following the path of other noted scholars such as Semitists Cyrus Gordon and Michael Astour, has marshaled massive evidence in his volume one of *Black Athena* showing the presence of pervasive anti-Semitic, racial, Euro-centric, and other less than scientific influences at the time that the foundations of the 'Aryan model' were first being conceptualized and reared (For an excellent overview of this process see the first half of the 'Introduction' to volume one of Martin Bernal's *Black Athena: The Afro Asiatic Roots of Classical Civilization: The Fabrication of Ancient Greece 1785-1985*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1987). In it he proposes what he calls the 'Revised Ancient Model', which retains significant portions of the Ancient Model with significant differences. Bernal argues that the above-mentioned pervasive social constructs significantly influenced the Aryan model's current structure and present form. It does appear plausible and perhaps even likely, as it is convincingly argued, that these less than 'objective'—and hardly scientific—influences discouraged acceptance of any evidence that suggested Levantine or Egyptian religious and cultural contributions to the Greek mainland. In other words, it is argued that the Aryan Model systematically suppressed any and all evidence that supported the Ancient Model (not arbitrarily but because the model demanded it). Nor does it appear at all unreasonable to suppose, as its proponents further argue, that in subtle and perhaps even subliminal ways these early influences unavoidably continue to influence academic thought, and continue to obstruct an objective and comprehensive re-evaluation of the issue in light of all the data now available [for a discussion of just how little is actually known for certain about ancient Greece from orthodox Classical academics of considerable repute see J. E. Bickerman's *Chronology of the Ancient World* (Ithaca, NY.: Cornell University Press, 1968) and Michael Grant's *Greek and Roman Historians: Information and Misinformation* (London: Routledge, 1995)]. It is further argued that there is just too much invested and too much at stake to allow for an objective and comprehensive review of the status quo [See also endnote 39]. Not surprisingly Classicists in particular have stridently denounced the 'Revised Ancient Model', denying its considerable evidence any merit whatsoever [See for instance Mary Lefkowitz' *Black Athena Revisited*, University of North Carolina, 1996; and *Black Athena Writes Back: Martin Bernal Responds to His Critics* by Bernal and David Chioni Moore. If nothing else Bernal has demonstrated to any unbiased reader that the reigning Aryan model fails to give an accurate picture of the ancient middle east and the cultural connections between it and Greece. The bottom line for this discussion is simply that it is, all things considered, an as yet unsettled issue and at the same time appears to hold profound implications for how the Baha'i Writings on this subject will be received. See also endnote 39.

[45] *Wellspring of Guidance: Messages 1963-1968* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1976), pgs. 87-88.

[46] Quoted in Hornby, H., *Lights of Guidance: A Baha'i Reference File*, 1st Ed., 1983, p. 382.

[47] *Ibid.* p. 381.

[48] Ibid. p. 382.

[49] Letters of The Universal House of Justice, 1987 Sept 14, Resurrection of Christ (Ocean Research Library).

[50] Ibid.

[51] Gomory, Ralph E. "The Known, the Unknown and the Unknowable," *Scientific American*. June 1995: 120-124 (p. 120).

[52] Ibid. 120.

[53] Ibid.

[54] Shoghi Effendi, Arohanui, *Letters to New Zealand*, p. 88.

[55] Taherzadeh, Adib, *The Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh*, vol.4, p. 46.

[56] Letters of The Universal House of Justice, 1987 Sept 14, Resurrection of Christ (cited in Ocean Resource Library).

[57] The primary sources for this are the *Kitab-i-Aqdas*, the *Kitab-i-Ad*, and the *Will and Testament of Abdu'l-Baha*. For a discussion of authoritative interpretation in the Baha'i Faith as well as its hermeneutics see for instance "Remembering Shoghi Effendi as Interpreter", a talk by Glenford Mitchell (see the on-line Baha'i Library at <http://bahai-library.com>). Other accessible and interesting papers on hermeneutics at the same site are "Interpretation and the Guardianship" presented at a Haifa Seminar in 1984 by Universal House of Justice member Ian Semple, "Some Interpretive Principles in the Baha'i Writings" by Seena Fazel and Khazeh Fananapazir; "Interpretation in the Baha'i Faith" by Juan Cole; and Dann May's "A Preliminary Survey of Hermeneutical Principles Found within the Bahá'í Writings". It does not appear, however, that any of these discussions have addressed directly the particular hermeneutic application focused on in this paper.

[58] "The House of Justice calls upon the members of the community of the Greatest Name, young and old, men and women alike, to strive to develop and offer to humanity a new model of scholarly activity along the lines set out in this compilation, animated by the spirit of inquiry into the limitless meaning of the Divine Teachings. This scholarly endeavour should be characterized by the welcome it offers to all who wish to be involved in it, each in his or her own way, by mutual encouragement and cooperation among its participants, and by the respect accorded to distinguished accomplishment and outstanding achievement. The spirit and approach should be far removed from the arrogance, contention, and exclusiveness which have too often sullied the name of scholarship in the wider society, and which have created barriers to the sound development of this worthy pursuit." (Compilations, *Scholarship*; cited in Ocean Resource Library)

"The Universal House of Justice does not see itself obliged to prescribe a new scientific methodology for Bahá'í academics who make study of the Faith, its teachings and history the subject of their professional activities. Rather has it concentrated on drawing the attention of these friends to the inadequacy of certain approaches from a Bahá'í point of view, urging them to apply to their work the concept which they accept as Bahá'ís: that the Manifestation of God is of a higher realm and has a perception far above that of any human being. He has the task of raising humankind to a new level of knowledge and behaviour. In this, His understanding transcends the traditions and concepts of the society in which He appears. (Letter dated 8 February 1998 cited in "Issues Related to the Study of the Faith" Compilation)

Moojan Momen in "Methodologies in Baha'i Scholarship" (*Baha'i Studies Review*, vol. 10, 2001/2002) suggests some approaches Baha'is can take toward academics and Baha'i studies, and has some ideas about what a Baha'i methodology might look like.

[59] Extract from a letter of the House of Justice dated 25 July 1974. The Universal House of Justice wrote: "... The Guardian was meticulous about the authenticity of historical fact. One of the friends in Yazd wrote to him stating that the account given by Abdu'l-Baha in one of His Tablets about events related to the martyrdom of some of the believers in that place was in conflict with known facts about these events. Shoghi Effendi replied saying that the friends should investigate the facts carefully and unhesitatingly register them in their historical records, since Abdu'l-Baha Himself had prefaced His recording of the events in His Tablet with a

statement that it was based on news received from Yazd." Note the significance of the word "since" used by the Guardian.

The House of Justice has also affirmed the validity of many other concerns on the part of some scholars, such as the need to consider context, or the accuracy of translation. For instance they write: "In attempting to resolve a seeming contradiction between two statements, it is often illuminating to consider each statement in the context in which it appears. It is also important to consider the reliability of the translations. With the obvious exception of translations of the Guardian, early translations may be inaccurate and misleading"(Letter dated 28 May, 2002, "Reconciliation of Apparent Contradictions in the Baha'i Writings" pg. 1).

[60] Another convenient example from the Writings of Baha'u'llah can be seen in a statement He made in the Kitab-i-Iqan about the Prophet Hud. "For well-nigh seven hundred years, according to the sayings of men, He exhorted the people to turn their faces and draw nearer unto the Ridvan of the divine presence (p. 8). Baha'u'llah here qualifies the "seven hundred years" statement by adding: "according to the sayings of men". He makes a similar qualification in reference to Noah. Whether details such as these relating to such ancient prophets should be understood literally is another issue all together, and in any case it is not unlikely that these very ancient scriptures require symbolic and perhaps numerological interpretations rather than literal. For instance one non-authoritative interpretation suggests that the ages given in Genesis refer to the dispensations of these prophets, another to the period of time in which their teachings held sway over their people, rather than to the length of their physical lives on earth. It is also reported that the Guardian once suggested that in that ancient time before the time of Abraham years represented another denomination different from what we now call a year, perhaps seasons. In any case this is all speculation and beyond the scope of this discussion. The majority of references to the ancient past in the Writings of the Central figures are not so clearly symbolic, for example the numerous statements of Abdu'l-Baha about the nation of Israel in his talks and writings [see endnote 44].

[61] There are many known cases that are potential tests, and many more that are left to the individual to interpret. One classic case of the former type is the Baha'i belief in the virgin birth of the mother of Jesus, which the Guardian appears to affirm as a literal fact: in his interpretation of the words of Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha. For example, speaking in reference to this belief he states: "...the Father of the Universe, can, in His wisdom and omnipotence, bring about any change, no matter how temporary, in the operation of the laws which He himself created." (Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, 27 February 1938, published in *Baha'i References to Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, comp. James Heggie, Oxford: George Ronald, 1986, p. 143)

[62] It is well known that the Word of God is creative, and full of symbolism, and that in many cases cannot reasonably be taken literally. Much has been written about this. But in the cases referred to here, such as Abdu'l-Baha's references to physical reality or to ancient philosophers or religions, one would be hard pressed to discard the evident meaning in the vast majority of these cases.

Juan Cole's 1979 *World Order* article, "Problems with Chronology in Baha'u'llah's Tablet of Wisdom" appears to be part of the first wave of this type of reasoning. These and similar views have been expressed in the past on such internet discussion lists as Baha'i-St and Bridges, as well as purely academic lists. The House of Justice appears to have left the door open on these approaches and apparently prefers to allow individual believers latitude in how they understand these Writings, and in any case discourages dogmatism and deplors contention and discordance among the believers when it comes to interpretation. One letter I'm aware of but no longer have access to states, and I paraphrase, that the House of Justice was impressed with how Dr. Cole in "Problems of Chronology..." handled this sensitive and ramified subject, even if it didn't necessarily agree with all his conclusions. Cole's position in "Problems of Chronology in Baha'u'llah's Tablet of Wisdom" suggests Baha'u'llah's statement about the contemporaneous relationship between Empedocles and David and between Pythagoras and Solomon is "factually inaccurate by any standards of reasoning and historical documentation available to contemporary historians" [see also note 44] while at the same time suggesting that this does not invalidate "the central propositions contained in the Tablet of Wisdom"("Problems..." pgs 38-39).

[63] Kevin Brown's fascinating essay titled "Hermes Trismegistus and Apollonius of Tyana" published in *Revisioning the Sacred: New Perspectives on a Baha'i Theology* (Kalimat Press 1997) articulates a similar hermeneutic, though different in one significant way. Brown states that "Since nothing in Baha'u'llah's account of Hermes and Balinus can be shown to be in opposition to historical facts, there is no reason why Baha'is should not

accept Baha'u'llah's statements, in this case, as factually intended"(178). Brown further points out that the statements "are also not verified by known historical facts". The Guardian, as we have seen, appeared to advise that the Master was to be believed in such matters even in the face of opposing academic views. In any case we have also seen that so-called "historical facts" are often extremely allusive. The ephemeral nature of certain kinds of knowledge—including what are often thought of and sometimes improperly called 'facts' at one time or another—is perhaps especially true in regards to knowledge such as ancient history, and especially is this the case with such legendary and elusive figures as Hermes and Balinus. Hershel Shanks 1999 essay, "Everything You Ever Knew About Jerusalem Is Wrong (Well, Almost)," dramatically underscores this point, because it is about a much less obscure historical subject:

To say that you should throw out all your books on the archaeology of Jerusalem would be going too far, especially since I wrote two of them. But it is true that books on the archaeology of Jerusalem, including my own, now contain a lot of misinformation. More bluntly, they are wrong. The lesson: The archaeological story is never finished (Shanks, Hershel. "Everything You Ever Knew About Jerusalem Is Wrong (Well, Almost)," *Biblical Archaeological Review*. 25.6 (November/December 1999: 20-29).

One key to this issue appears to relate to one's understanding of the role of theory and models in the derivation of 'the facts'. As Albert Einstein put it in 1926, the notion that scientific theory is derived exclusively from 'the facts' is "nonsense". Rather, he wrote, it is "the theory that determines what we can observe"—and what are usually assumed to be 'the facts' (quoted in Brush, Stephen G. "Should the History of Science be Rated X?: The way scientists behave might not be a good model for students". *Science*. vol. 184, 22 March 1974, p. 1167). My reading of several House of Justice letters that address this issue of discordance appear to leave considerable latitude to the judgment and conscience of individual scholars.

[64] Much of this particular approach comes, of course, from critics and enemies of the Faith and has been present on some academic Internet discussion lists such as H-Baha'i and the earlier and later Talisman.

[65] *Miracles and Metaphors*, p. 8. The unedited sentence reads: "A prudent mind will refrain from deciding against that which was revealed in the Holy Qur'an merely because it is unlikely. "It is verily a decisive word, nor is it in jest."

[66] 27 May 1966, *Wellspring of Guidance: Messages 1963-1968* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1976), pp. 87-88).

[67] "Scholarship: A Bahá'í Perspective" in *The Journal of Baha'i Studies*, vol. I, no.2, pp. 44-45.

[68] *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, pg. 311.

[69] Ibid.

[70] From a letter dated 27 March 1983 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer (cited in *Baha'i Scholarship*, International Teaching Centre, 1984 Aug 09).

[71] Hatcher, William, "Scholarship: A Bahá'í Perspective" in *The Journal of Baha'i Studies*, vol. I, no.2, pp. 44-45.

[72] Letters of The Universal House of Justice, 1992 Dec 10, in "Issues Related to Study of the Faith" Compilation.

[73] Letter dated 16 February 1998 to an individual believer (email transmission). On this theme the House of Justice has written: "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" (Letters of The Universal House of Justice, 1992 Dec 10, Issues Related to Study Compilation).

[74] Letter dated October 4, 1994. Anonymity was considered appropriate in the case of personal correspondence.