

Scholarship and the Bahá'í Community

Moojan Momen

Abstract

As the Bahá'í Faith emerges from obscurity, Bahá'í scholars will have an important role in three fields: the presentation of Bahá'í Faith to the world; the defense of the Bahá'í Faith from attacks; and the intellectual growth and development of the Bahá'í community. This paper discusses the question of the place of scholarship in the Bahá'í community. The value of Bahá'í studies to the Bahá'í community is analyzed. The problems that may arise for Bahá'í scholars in relation to their own spiritual life and also in relation to the Bahá'í community are discussed. Some suggestions are then made with regard to the question of what academic approaches are most likely to be fruitful in the study of the Bahá'í Faith. Finally, consideration is given to the mutual obligations of the Bahá'í scholar and the Bahá'í community (in particular, the Bahá'í administrative institutions). Every Bahá'í who surveys the vast range of doctrines and concepts enshrined in the holy writings of the Bahá'í Faith or whose imagination is captured by the intensity of its brief history must, to some extent, be inspired to make a more thorough study of some aspect that interests him or her. To some is given the good fortune to have both the opportunity and inclination to put this study on a more formal basis. Whether this be at an institute of learning or through private study and research, there are many areas of the teachings and history of the Bahá'í Faith that invite painstaking research and thoughtful analysis. Such study is of great benefit to the Bahá'í community as a whole, quite apart from the immense satisfaction that it can bring to the individual student. There are also dangers in such study, particularly for the individual concerned, and often the extent of this danger is not appreciated by someone just setting out on such a course of study.

Résumé

Alors que la foi bahá'íe sort de l'obscurité, universitaires, érudits et hommes de science bahá'ís vont avoir à jouer un rôle important dans trois domaines particuliers: présenter la foi bahá'íe au monde; protéger la foi des attaques dont elle sera l'objet; contribuer à la maturation intellectuelle et au développement de la communauté bahá'íe. L'article développe trois points essentiels: la place du savoir et de l'activité scientifique dans la communauté bahá'íe; la validité des études bahá'íes pour la communauté bahá'íe elle-même; les problèmes rencontrés par les hommes de science bahá'íe aussi bien au sein de leur propre vie spirituelle qu'en relation avec la communauté bahá'íe. Suivent quelques suggestions quant au choix des approches et des champs d'études les mieux susceptibles de produire des résultats tangibles. Finalement, l'article analyse le rapport d'obligations mutuelles qui devrait présider aux relations entre le lettré bahá'íe et la communauté bahá'íe, et plus particulièrement entre le lettré et les institutions administratives. Tout bahá'í qui passe en revue l'éventail impressionnant de doctrines et de concepts enchâssés dans les écrits sacrés de la foi bahá'íe ou dont l'imagination se trouve transportée par l'intensité de sa brève histoire, se doit, dans la mesure de ses moyens, d'effectuer une étude aussi poussée que possible des aspects qui l'intéressent. Certains ont la chance d'avoir à la fois la possibilité et le désir de donner à leur étude un cadre plus formel. Que de telles études se déroulent au sein d'un établissement universitaire ou soient le fruit d'un intérêt personnel, les enseignements et l'histoire de la foi bahá'íe invitent à une recherche minutieuse et à une analyse poussée. De telles études, outre qu'elles procurent une profonde satisfaction à ceux qui les conduisent, profitent grandement à la communauté bahá'íe dans son ensemble. Toutefois, de telles études présentent aussi certains dangers, particulièrement pour la personne concernée, et bien souvent, l'ampleur de ce danger n'est pas évidente pour celui que se lance dans cette voie.

Resúmen

Según la Fe Bahá'í emerge de la oscuridad, los eruditos Bahá'ís tendrán un papel importante en tres campos: la presentación de la Fe Bahá'í al mundo; la defensa de la Fe Bahá'í contra ataques; y el aumento y desarrollo intelectual de la comunidad Bahá'í. Este artículo discute la cuestión del lugar de la erudición en la comunidad Bahá'í. Se analiza el valor de los estudios Bahá'ís en la comunidad Bahá'í. Se discuten los problemas que podrán tener los eruditos Bahá'ís en relación a la comunidad Bahá'í. Se dan sugerencias concerniente a la cuestión de que métodos académicos son más capaces de dar frutos en el estudio de la Fe Bahá'í. Finalmente, se le da consideración a la obligación mutua de los eruditos Bahá'ís y de la comunidad Bahá'í (en particular, las instituciones administrativas Bahá'ís). Cada Bahá'í que inspecciona el vasto alcance de las doctrinas y conceptos venerados en las escrituras sagradas de la Fe Bahá'í o que encuentra su imaginación capturada por la intensidad de su corta historia debe, hasta cierto punto, ser inspirado a estudiar con más detalle algún aspecto que le interesa. A algunos se le ha dado la buena fortuna de tener tanto la oportunidad y la inclinación de hacer

este estudio de una manera más formal. Ya sea en una institución académica o estudio e investigación privada, hay muchas áreas de las enseñanzas e historia de la Fe Bahá'í que invitan a una investigación minuciosa y un análisis concienzudo. Dicho estudio es de gran beneficio para toda la comunidad Bahá'í, muy a parte de la inmensa satisfacción que le brinda al estudioso. También hay peligro en tal estudio, particularmente para el individuo envuelto y, a menudo la magnitud de este peligro no es apreciada por una persona que justo está empezando tal estudio.

Every Bahá'í who surveys the vast range of doctrines and concepts enshrined in the holy writings of the Bahá'í Faith or whose imagination is captured by the intensity of its brief history must, to some extent, be inspired to make a more thorough study of some aspect that interests him or her. To some is given the good fortune to have both the opportunity and inclination to put this study on a more formal basis. Whether this be at an institute of learning or through private study and research, there are many areas of the teachings and history of the Bahá'í Faith that invite painstaking research and thoughtful analysis. Such study is of great benefit to the Bahá'í community as a whole, quite apart from the immense satisfaction that it can bring to the individual student. There are also dangers in such study, particularly for the individual concerned, and often the extent of this danger is not appreciated by someone just setting out on such a course of study.

The Value of Bahá'í Studies to the Bahá'í Community

The value of Bahá'í scholarship to the Bahá'í community scarcely requires elucidation, although there are always fundamentalist elements in any religious community that deny the need for any delving into or analyzing their religion. In 1932, the following statement was written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi: "Shoghi Effendi surely hopes that before long the Cause may produce scholars that would write books which would be far deeper and more universal in scope [than Esslemont's *Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era*]" (*Dawn* 38). And in 1949: "It seems what we need now is a more profound and coordinated scholarship..." (*Gift* 25). More recently, the Universal House of Justice has stated that it "regards Bahá'í scholarship as of great potential importance for the development and consolidation of the Bahá'í community as it emerges from obscurity."¹

The writings of Bahá'u'lláh, extensive as they are, present only a framework of what will in the future evolve to be the Bahá'í Faith. There will always be a need for individual Bahá'ís to explore the meaning of Bahá'u'lláh's teaching and to present them afresh in the context of the contemporary thought of each generation. For, as social conditions change and evolve, the relevance and application of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings to society will change, and their changing relationship must be thought out and expressed in each generation. Otherwise, the presentation of Bahá'í teachings to the non-Bahá'í world will cease to be challenging or relevant.

The role of Bahá'í scholarship in this process of revitalizing and bringing up to date the application of Bahá'í teachings is of great importance as it is potentially the greatest impetus for such rethinking and development. As long ago as 1949, the following statement was written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi:

The world has—at least the thinking world—caught up by now with all the great and universal principles enunciated by Bahá'u'lláh over 70 years ago, and so of course it does not sound "new" to them. But we know that the deeper teachings, the capacity of His projected World Order to re-create society, are new and dynamic. It is these we must learn to present intelligently and enticingly to such men! (*Gift* 25)

And in the same month, the following letter was written to another individual:

We need Bahá'í scholars, not only people far, far more deeply aware of what our teachings really are, but also well read and educated people, capable of correlating our teachings to the current thoughts of the leaders of society. (Shoghi Effendi qtd. in *Bahá'í Studies Bulletin* 47)

It would, however, be important that in seeking to apply the Bahá'í teachings to contemporary problems, we avoid the risk referred to by the Universal House of Justice in their statement that "attempting to make the Bahá'í Faith relevant to modern society is to incur the grave risk of compromising the fundamental verities of our Faith in an effort to make it conform to current theories and practices" (Letter, 21 July 68).

Well-grounded Bahá'í scholars, moreover, provide one of the strongest bulwarks of the Bahá'í community in defending itself from the attacks of its enemies. For only through drawing on a body of knowledge can an adequate response be made to those who would launch a verbal or written attack on the history and teachings of the Bahá'í Faith, no matter how unfounded and ill-informed such an attack may be. Once again, only through the development of Bahá'í scholarship can such a body of knowledge be built. In a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi in 1942, there is the following statement:

There is an answer in the teachings for everything; unfortunately the majority of the Bahá'ís, however intensely devoted and sincere they may be, lack for the most part the necessary scholarship and wisdom to reply to and refute the claims and attacks of people with some education and standing.... (*Unfolding* 439)

Among the benefits that Bahá'í scholarship can bring to the Bahá'í community may be included the fact that the publication of detailed studies of the teachings and history of the Bahá'í Faith may inspire other Bahá'ís and stimulate them to deepen themselves in their religion.

Problems and Dangers of Bahá'í Scholarship

There are also dangers and problems associated with Bahá'í scholarship. Some of these affect only the individual concerned, while others affect the individual's relationship to the Bahá'í community.

The greatest and most common challenge facing Bahá'í scholars is that after expending great effort in study and acquiring extensive knowledge about the Bahá'í Faith, one will be tempted to regard oneself as being better in some way than the generality of Bahá'ís who do not know as much about their Faith. This attitude is as old as religion itself. The idea that knowledge and learning bestow spiritual superiority is to be found in the religions of both the Judaeo-Christian-Muslim and the Hindu-Buddhist traditions and has led to the establishment of priesthoods and learned classes who presume to sit in judgement on their fellow believers and who have even arrogated to themselves the power of absolving sins. Yet, it is precisely this belief that is refuted in Bahá'u'lláh's teachings. Neither spirituality nor wisdom, or even discernment, according to Bahá'í teachings, are necessarily brought about by learning and knowledge. Indeed, learning and knowledge can, in some circumstances, be "the most grievous of all veils" (Bahá'u'lláh, *Íqán* 188). This pride, which may well develop so insidiously that it is not recognized by the one so afflicted, can lead the scholars to being impatient and intolerant towards the rest of the Bahá'í community. This is, of course, in complete contradiction to the spirit of Bahá'u'lláh's statement:

Should anyone among you be incapable of grasping a certain truth, or be striving to comprehend it, show forth, when conversing with him, a spirit of extreme kindness and good-will. Help him to see and recognize the truth, without esteeming yourself to be, in the least, superior to him, or to be possessed of greater endowments. (*Gleanings* 8)

Those setting out to do research on the Bahá'í Faith should think about several aspects of their work. The very task of looking at one's own religion requires that one distance oneself from it to a certain extent. This change of perspective may radically alter one's conception about one's religion. For some, this may be merely the preliminary to building a more profound conception of the Faith, but to others, it may be a spiritually shattering experience. For if one analyzes the minutiae of a religion or tries to assess all of the social and economic factors that may have influenced its inception and progress, one may eventually convince oneself that there is no need to postulate any divine or supernatural impulse to account for the religion. These crises and tests, which will occur with most scholars to some degree and at some stage in their endeavors, will test their faith and cast doubts in their minds concerning the sources of authority within their religion. To be well equipped to deal with such crises, the Bahá'í scholar should anticipate them and be prepared for them, should read about and meditate upon the subject, and should have access to others engaged in similar pursuits with whom to discuss the problems that arise. The Bahá'í Faith provides many weapons with which to fight such spiritual battles, and it is important that Bahá'í scholars use these weapons, or they risk losing their faith as a result of these crises.

The process of research may involve the scholar in examining literature by those who are antagonistic to the Faith for one reason or another. Even if the author of such works is a Christian clergyman, it must be borne in mind that much of such material is based on or inspired by the writings of Covenant breakers. The result of much exposure to such material may have the effect of casting the seeds of doubt into the mind and weakening one's faith.

In short, a scholar must seriously consider before setting out on the path of research, whether he or she has the spiritual strength and depth to withstand these dangers. This must be considered at the outset as later may be too late. If the required spiritual strength and depth are not present, it would be vital first to deepen oneself in the Faith before embarking on Bahá'í studies. To neglect this would be to place one's spiritual development in jeopardy.

Difficulties with the Bahá'í Community

In dealing with the Bahá'í community, the scholar also faces severe tests. Individual Bahá'ís may not understand the nature of the scholar's activities or may feel threatened by the result of his research. This can lead to tension arising between the scholar and the community. Occasionally, the scholar may be the victim of resentment or mistrust resulting from these misunderstandings. In such circumstances, it may be useful for the Bahá'í scholar to remember Bahá'u'lláh's own experience. For it was not the harsh treatment meted out by his

enemies that caused Bahá'u'lláh's greatest sufferings. He states that it was the actions of those who called themselves Bahá'ís (Shoghi Effendi, *God* 190). Indeed, this is a general principle, true for all Bahá'ís: that the greatest tests come from other Bahá'ís, and this is one of the means whereby the Bahá'í community provides for the spiritual growth of the individual.

One further area that represents a danger to Bahá'í scholars is their dealings with Bahá'í administration. This may occur particularly in the area of the review of proposed publications. Here, the Bahá'í scholar has different considerations from those of the Bahá'í administration, and these considerations may conflict. The scholar may feel that the reviewers appointed by the Bahá'í administration are not competent to assess his or her work. The scholar must also be prepared to face the possibility that the administrative machinery of the Faith, which exists to promote and protect the interests of the Faith as a whole and not for the sole purpose of advancing scholarship, may decide that it is not in the best interests of the Faith to publish part of the work at present. The scholar will, almost always, be at the forefront pushing for the change and development of the community, but it is the responsibility of the Bahá'í administrative order to judge whether the change is desirable, whether the community is ready for such a change and the rate at which change is introduced. Thus, the institutions of the Faith could act as a brake on the enthusiasm of the scholars. This situation may lead to a certain degree of tension and mutual dissatisfaction between the administration and the scholar and may be a severe crisis for the scholar, testing loyalty to the Covenant. In such a situation, the scholar's pride may make it difficult to submit to administrative will without a sense of bitterness and resentment. Only those with the purest of motives and those who can succeed in the battle against pride and egotism will come out of this crisis well.

In his or her relations with the Bahá'í administration, the Bahá'í scholar needs constantly to bear in mind that, according to Bahá'í teachings, the Administrative Order is not merely a mechanism for organizing the Bahá'í community. The Bahá'í community and the Bahá'í administration are the greatest vehicles for the spiritual growth of the individual. It is in overcoming the crises that arise in one's dealings with the administration that one's spiritual growth is nurtured.

Spiritual Prerequisites

From the above description it is clear that potential Bahá'í scholars must strive to acquire a number of spiritual attributes as armor against the tests that will arise in the course of their work. The first of these spiritual prerequisites must be absolute purity of motive for entering the field of Bahá'í studies. If one is entering this field with intellectual pride, seeking to impress others and increase one's importance either in the Bahá'í world or in the academic world, the most likely result is estrangement from the Bahá'í community, which has no place for those who seek self-aggrandizement. If, however, one's motives for entering the field are a desire to be of service to the Faith and to assist in the development of the Bahá'í community, then one will overcome the tests and crises that arise on this path.

Coupled with the first prerequisite, there must be a profound sense of personal humility. It is all too easy for scholars who are knowledgeable in the Faith to forget that precedence in the Cause, and indeed before God, goes to those whose spiritual development is the greatest and who serve the Cause the most and that mere knowledge is irrelevant. Our example in this must be Mirzá Abu'l Fadl Gulpaygání, who, despite the fact that he was considered in his own lifetime as one of the greatest Bahá'í scholars, demonstrated a profound and genuine humility in the presence of all. The late Hand of the Cause, Mr. Hasan Balyuzi, was another fine example of these qualities.

The third prerequisite is loyalty to the Covenant, for those whose hearts and minds are focussed on the center of the Bahá'í Faith will not allow themselves to deviate from that direction whatever temporary storms and crises arise. In the course of any Bahá'í life, there will always be decisions made by Bahá'í institutions with which one does not personally agree and which one feels are wrong. Only a dogged determination to maintain loyalty to the Covenant will, at such times, overcome all doubts and uncertainties.

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

The fifth condition for embarking on Bahá'í studies consists of a commitment by the Bahá'í scholar to maintain a full and active role in the Bahá'í community including attendance at Nineteen-Day Feasts, serving on administrative bodies, and participating in teaching efforts. For it is partly through this active participation in the Bahá'í community that one's spiritual progress is maintained. Any degree of estrangement from the community, no matter what the cause, could eventually lead to estrangement from the Faith itself. On 9 December 1979,

shortly before his passing, the Hand of the Cause, Mr. Hasan Balyuzi, at the request of the Universal House of Justice, convened a meeting of a number of young Bahá'í scholars in Britain and Europe. His main message on that occasion was a plea to the young scholars to avoid anything that would separate them from the Bahá'í community.

This list of spiritual prerequisites is only intended to highlight those of particular relevance to the Bahá'í scholar and is not exhaustive. It does not, of course, mean that the potential Bahá'í scholar should not seek to achieve all of the other spiritual and social attributes enjoined in the Bahá'í writings.

The Approach to Bahá'í Scholarship

The approach that one makes to Bahá'í studies is of critical importance. There has been a great deal written on the subject of the scientific study of religion and the correct approach to this by the scholar.

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. When even in the field of physics, the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle means that the phenomena observed depend on the methods used to observe them and thus, ultimately, on the observer, how much more in the less exact sciences does the observer influence the observation made.

In studying religion, which must be considered at the extreme "soft" end of the range of "hard" and "soft" sciences in that it is an area of human activity guided by emotion and abstract thought rather than rational and verifiable processes, any claim of impartial observation is untenable. Indeed, the claims made by a religion are so far-reaching and so all-encompassing that one is forced, in one's mind, to adopt an attitude of either acceptance or rejection of the claim. Having once made up one's mind about the claims of a religion, one cannot then be said to be a detached and impartial observer. The more one researches and delves into the subject, the less detached and impartial one becomes. Impartiality is illusory under such circumstances, and the more any particular scholar claims impartiality, the more likely it is that he or she is either trying deliberately and dishonestly to conceal a bias or deluding himself. A writer who is thought of as impartial is often, in fact, only fashionable.

The phenomenological approach is similarly filled with pitfalls. It is impossible to include in one's work every fact relating to a topic, and the very process of selection of facts to be included introduces the biases within the selector's mind.² In the light of what the Bahá'í teachings tell us of man's tendency towards prejudice and bias and how it is the lifelong struggle of a Bahá'í to try to eliminate these tendencies from his mind, it would be a very spiritually-proud and self-deluded Bahá'í scholar who would claim that his mind was free of bias.

There is, indeed, a more fundamental reason for us to be suspicious of any scholar who claims to have achieved an impartial and penetrating view of the Bahá'í Faith. For the Bahá'í experience is, finally, a religious one, and as such, its full meaning can only be known by those who have lived it. The language of the scholar seeks to encapsulate the Faith in a series of concepts and doctrines, but the Faith is a religion that lives in the hearts of believers and, as such, can only be partially encapsulated by conceptual analysis. Concepts tell us nothing about the actual experience of being a Bahá'í.³ There are scholars who are not Bahá'ís and who have appreciated this dichotomy between concepts and experience, and it is perhaps their work that provides a suitable starting point for studies of the Bahá'í Faith.⁴

Another dichotomy that must concern the Bahá'í scholar is that between religion and science or faith and reason. The key area in which this dichotomy becomes problematic for the Bahá'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. This reductionism, which is so prevalent in the academic world, is not, however, without its critics inside the academic community, those who recognize that reductionism can do little justice to the reality of the individual religious experience. In its statement on Bahá'í scholarship, the Research Department of the Bahá'í World Centre stated:

It has become customary in the West to think of science and religion as occupying two distinct—and even opposed—areas of human thought and activity. This dichotomy can be characterized in the pairs of antitheses: faith and reason; value and fact. It is a dichotomy which is foreign to Bahá'í thought and should be regarded with suspicion by Bahá'í scholars in every field. The principle of the harmony of science and religion means not only that religious teachings should be studied in the light of reason and evidence as well as of faith and inspiration, but also that everything in creation, all aspects of human life and knowledge, should be studied in the light of revelation as well as in that of purely rational investigation. In other words, a Bahá'í scholar, when

studying a subject, should not lock out of his mind any aspect of truth that is known to him.⁵

Given then that a truly independent and impartial study of religion is impossible, it would be much better for scholars to try to analyze those biases that do exist in their minds (and which therefore color their approach) and to take these biases into account. For Bahá'í scholars this may mean that they must be careful not to be blinded by their commitment to the Bahá'í Faith. There are episodes in Bahá'í history, for example, where Bahá'ís did not act correctly and caused the Faith much harm. The scholar must not try to conceal or dishonestly present such a matter. For there are important lessons to be learned in this as in other aspects of Bahá'í history, and the scholar is not assisting the Faith by concealing them.

The challenge for Bahá'í scholars is to produce material that will stand a triple test: first, it must satisfy the scholars themselves that they have been sincere and true to themselves in the data used, analyses presented, and conclusions drawn; second, it must satisfy other scholars that it conforms to the highest standards of scholarship and leads to useful academic insights into the subject matter; third, it must satisfy the Bahá'í community that it is a true representation and analysis of the community. Such exacting standards will not be easy to achieve, but the resulting work will be all that much more worthwhile and of permanent value.

One of the most important tasks of the Bahá'í scholar should be to strive as hard as possible to oppose the natural tendency of religious groups to fall into two mutually-antagonistic groups: fundamentalists, who hold to the literal meaning of the Bahá'í sacred texts, and liberals, who question and doubt everything and probe the most extreme interpretations of scripture. Bahá'í scholars should strive to carry both groups with them since all mutual antagonisms and tensions weaken the Faith itself.

There will also be questions in the field of Bahá'í doctrine that cannot at present be resolved or on which there is contradictory information. Again, rather than trying to impose an arbitrary resolution on such questions, it would be better to leave such matters open. In 1949, the following statement was written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi: "One may liken Bahá'u'lláh's teachings to a sphere; there are points poles apart, and in between the thoughts and doctrines that unite them" (*Bahá'í Studies Bulletin* 46). In such matters, it is important to realize that there is no necessity to come to firm conclusions as even apparently contradictory conclusions can both be true. Just as in physics, most subatomic entities can equally correctly be observed as both particles and waves, depending on the way in which they are observed, so apparently contradictory statements can both be different aspects of the truth. The danger of trying to force conclusions is highlighted by the Universal House of Justice:

...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. Such compromises with essential truth, such intellectual pride, we must scrupulously avoid. (*Wellspring* 87-88)

An important aspect of a Bahá'í approach to scholarship would be the exhibition of a spirit of kindness, courtesy, and goodwill. This would include the avoidance of launching direct attacks upon the works and opinions of others, which is so often a feature of modern scholarship.

If ye be aware of a certain truth, if ye possess a jewel, of which others are deprived, share it with them in a language of utmost kindness and goodwill. If it be accepted, if it fulfil its purpose, your object is attained. If any one should refuse it, leave him unto himself, and beseech God to guide him. (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* 289)

The Bahá'í scholar should put forward what he or she believes to be the truth with courtesy and consideration. It is almost unnecessary to add that the scholar must always treat the central figures of the Bahá'í Faith (and indeed of the other religions) with the utmost respect and reverence. In all this, it is not so much the content of what is produced by the scholar that is important but the tone and emphasis. The same set of facts can be set down in a manner that is courteous and constructive or in a manner that is disrespectful, discourteous, and hurtful. For example, it is seldom necessary to specify that one is refuting the opinions of another scholar. It is sufficient to expose the facts as they appear to one and leave it for others to make their own conclusions.

Mutual Obligations of the Bahá'í Scholar and the Bahá'í Community

Bahá'í scholars have an important duty to take great care over what they produce. Scholars must be careful that what is presented to fellow believers is appropriate to their level of understanding and does not cause dismay and consternation. It is very tempting to present to the Bahá'í community startling facts and unexpected conclusions that one has arrived at as the result of one's research. But this temptation must be resisted and such matters presented with the utmost tact and wisdom. Thus, one of the Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh states:

Thou hast written that one of the friends hath composed a treatise. This was mentioned in the Holy Presence, and this is what was revealed in response: Great care should be exercised that whatever is written in these days doth not cause dissension, and invite the objection of the people. Whatever the friends of the One true God say in these days is listened to by the people of the world.

It hath been revealed in the Lawh-i-Hikmat: “The unbelievers have inclined their ears towards us in order to hear that which might enable them to cavil against God, the Help in Peril, the Self-Subsisting.” Whatever is written should not transgress the bounds of tact and wisdom, and in the words used there should lie hid the property of milk, so that the children of the world may be nurtured therewith, and attain maturity. We have said in the past that one word hath the influence of spring and causeth hearts to become fresh and verdant, while another is like unto blight which causeth the blossoms and flowers to wither. God grant that authors among the friends will write in such a way as would be acceptable to fairminded souls, and not lead to cavilling by the people.⁶

The Bahá'í community has, along with every other nonacademic group of people, a natural tendency to distrust and fear scholars and academics, particularly if the latter group feed this distrust by their arrogance. It is a continuing challenge to Bahá'í scholars to overcome this fear and convince the Bahá'í community of their sincerity and devotion to the Cause. However, the Bahá'í community has reciprocal obligations towards the Bahá'í scholar. First, the Bahá'í community must cultivate tolerance towards the opinions of others while maintaining the right of each individual to their own point of view. On this, the Universal House of Justice has stated: “... although individual insights can be illuminating and helpful, they can also be misleading. The friends must therefore learn to listen to the views of others without being overawed or allowing their faith to be shaken, and to express their own views without pressing them on their fellow Bahá'ís” (Letter, 27 May 66).

Second, no individual Bahá'í, if he or she considers that the work of a Bahá'í scholar has led to erroneous conclusions, has the right to call into question that scholar's loyalty to the Cause or firmness in the Covenant in public. The most that any individual can do is to report doubts on this matter to the institutions of the Faith. Only the institutions have any right to launch an investigation into such a matter.

Third, the administrative institutions of the Bahá'í Faith have the obligation to provide encouragement and support to all endeavors that seek to promote and develop the Bahá'í Faith. They should not seek to impose a dogmatic orthodoxy and should intervene only if they are reasonably sure that a certain development threatens to damage the Faith. On the need for tolerance in the Bahá'í administration, the Universal House of Justice has stated:

The House of Justice agrees that it is most important for the believers, and especially those who hold positions of responsibility in the Administrative Order, to react calmly and with tolerant and enquiring minds to views which differ from their own, remembering that all Bahá'ís are but students of the Faith, ever striving to understand the Teachings more clearly and to apply them more faithfully, and none can claim to have a perfect understanding of this Revelation. (Letter, 18 July 79)

This broad tolerance should also be reflected in the review process, which is not intended to be a system of censorship or a mechanism for imposing upon the Bahá'ís a uniform interpretation of the Faith but is merely a temporary measure for the protection of the Faith in its early days when many of the believers are inadequately informed of the teachings of the Faith and there is a need for a check on the dignity and accuracy of the presentation of the Faith. Shoghi Effendi stated in 1930: “...the administration of the Cause...should guard against such rigidity as would clog and fetter the liberating forces released by His Revelation....The present restrictions imposed on the publication of Bahá'í literature will be definitely abolished ...” (*World Order of 9*).

Conclusions

As the Bahá'í Faith emerges from obscurity, Bahá'í scholars will have an important role in three fields: the presentation of Bahá'í teachings to the world; the defence of the Faith from attacks; and the growth and development of the Bahá'í community. They will only be able to fulfil these functions effectively, however, if they maintain close links with the Bahá'í community. Any degree of estrangement from the community will both lead to tension between them and the community and negate the results of their efforts.

There is, at present, a resurgence of interest in academic research into the Bahá'í Faith, both within the Bahá'í community and in the academic world. Bahá'í scholars should be at the forefront leading this renewal of interest. The administrative institutions of the Faith should take an active role in these developments, guiding and encouraging them. The Bahá'í community should welcome this activity as evidence of the increasing prominence of the Faith and should look forward to the positive results that will emerge from it.

Notes

1. Letter from the Department of the Secretariat, Universal House of Justice, 3 January 1979, to participants at the Bahá'í Studies Seminar, Cambridge, England, 30 September–1 October, 1978.
2. Indeed, the phenomenological approach is severely limited because it fails to take into account the truth and meaning of the Bahá'í Faith for the individual. For a more detailed look at phenomenology in relation to Bahá'í scholarship, see “Phenomenology, Methodological Agnosticism and Apologetics” by Robert Parry, a paper prepared for the Second Cambridge Seminar on Methodology and Ethics, 15–16 September 1979.
3. See Robert Parry, “Rational/Conceptual Performance—The Bahá'í Faith and Scholarship,” a discussion paper prepared for the Seminar on Methodology and Ethics held at North, England, 29–30 January 1983. Published in *Bahá'í Studies Bulletin*, 1:4 (1983):13–21.
4. See, for example, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, “Comparative Religion: Whither—and Why?” in *The History of Religion: Essays in Methodology* 31–58.
5. Comments by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice on the report of the Bahá'í Studies Seminar on Ethics and Methodology held in Cambridge, England, 30 Sept.–1 Oct. 1978. Also published in *Bahá'í News*, June 1979.
6. Tablet of Bahá'u'lláh, quoted in a letter from the Department of the Secretariat of the Universal House of Justice, 18 July 1979, to an individual believer.

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