

Conversive Relationality in Bahá'í Scholarship Centering the Sacred and Decentering the Self*

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Abstract

This article explores ways in which the work of Bahá'í scholars might follow the process of consecration by centering the sacred within and decentering the self out of academic work. Academic discourse will be contrasted with a conversive model based conjointly on the Bahá'í writings, American Indian literary models (written and oral), Wittgensteinian philosophy, and contemporary feminist and postmodern theory. A conversive model of communication and scholarship is firmly rooted within the sacred, emphasizing relationality, intersubjectivity, and collaboration while rejecting the questionable benefits of an assumed "objectivity." Such a model is presented as more in line with the Bahá'í teachings than are traditional models of academic discourse. The article ends with several specific suggestions that are developed to provide concrete examples of ways by which a conversive approach could reinform and transform academic and nonacademic writing and scholarship.

Résumé

Le présent article explore comment les travaux d'érudits bahá'ís pourraient suivre un processus de consécration, par un recentrage sur le sacré et un décentrage du soi dans ces travaux. L'auteure met en contraste le discours universitaire et un modèle conversif fondé à la fois sur les écrits bahá'ís, les modèles littéraires amérindiens (tant écrits qu'oraux), la philosophie de Wittgenstein et les théories contemporaines féministes et post-modernes. Un modèle conversif de communication et d'érudition est fermement ancré dans le sacré et met l'accent sur la relationalité, intersubjectivité et la collaboration, tout en rejetant les bénéfices contestables d'une présumée objectivité. Un tel modèle est présenté comme davantage compatible avec les enseignements bahá'ís que les modèles traditionnels de discours universitaire. L'article conclut avec plusieurs suggestions précises qui fournissent des exemples concrets de la manière dont une approche conversive pourrait permettre de réinformer et de transformer l'écriture et l'érudition, tant dans les domaines universitaires que dans d'autres domaines.

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Resumen

Este artículo explora formas en que el trabajo de eruditos bahá'ís pudiera encaminarse al proceso de consagración centrando lo sagrado en lo hondo del ser, apartando el yo propio del trabajo académico. El discurso académico se contrasta con el modelo conversivo basado conjuntamente en los escritos bahá'ís, en los modelos literarios Amerindios (orales y escritos), la filosofía Wittgensteiniana y la teoría contemporánea feminista y postmoderna. Un modelo conversivo de comunicación y erudición está arraigado firmemente dentro de lo sagrado, enfatizando el enlazamiento, la intersubjetividad y la colaboración, mientras se rechazan los dudosos beneficios de una supuesta "objetividad." Tal modelo se presenta como más alineado con las enseñanzas bahá'ís que los modelos tradicionales de discurso académico. El artículo termina con varias sugerencias específicas desarrolladas para proveer ejemplos concretos de modos en que un planteamiento conversivo podrá reinformar y transformar la composición escrita y la erudición, tanto académica como no académica.

In a 1995 talk, Mr. 'Alí Nakhjavání, a member of the Universal House of Justice, emphasized the importance of being consecrated in one's faith to such an extent that the sacred rather than the self becomes central in one's life. He referred to a letter dated January, 1922, in which Shoghi Effendi advised Bahá'ís to be concerned not with how they should serve the Cause of God, but rather with how the Cause of God should be served. The very grammar of Shoghi Effendi's statement (and Mr. Nakhjavání's iteration) holds the keys to the statement's significance. The first clause (how the Bahá'ís should serve the Cause of God) places the individual Bahá'í as the subject of the statement, with the Cause of God being relegated to the subaltern as the passive object to which the individual's service is directed. The second clause, advocated by Shoghi Effendi, gives the Cause of God grammatical primacy as the subject of the clause (how the Cause of God should be served). Here, the individual's service becomes subordinate to, in relation to, and dependent upon the subjective power of the Cause of God.

Furthermore, in the second clause, the individual Bahá'í disappears altogether—the individual being subsumed within his or her service to God. This grammatical disappearance serves as a powerful analogue to Bahá'í teachings which emphasize that individuals gain their significance and place within the Book of God through their service to God and their fellow beings in the world (including humans and nonhumans, e.g., animals, plants, Earth). The disappearance of the individual in the second clause also underscores the importance of the individual's self-effacement and spiritual detachment from the self and the world, along with a concomitant attachment to God and the Cause of God. As Mr. Nakhjavání pointed out in his discussion of Shoghi

Effendi's statement, the distinction Shoghi Effendi makes is whether we place ourselves at the center of our lives and then fit Bahá'u'lláh into those lives, or whether we place Bahá'u'lláh at the center of our lives and reorient ourselves around that center.

To illustrate this point, I would like to share a story that demonstrates the intersubjective relationality, self-sacrifice, and dedication that accords significantly with Bahá'í teachings regarding scholarly and creative work. Shortly after moving to Gallup, New Mexico, I had the good fortune to meet the photographer John Pack, who was about to leave for a prestigious teaching position at an academy of fine arts in Greece.¹ During his final week in Gallup, Pack had a private showing of his Ganado series photographs of the Navajo. I was overwhelmed by what I saw. In his photos, the Navajo people came alive, fully opening themselves to his camera in ways that Native peoples hardly ever do (the history of the past five hundred years makes this reticence very understandable). Anyway, over a luncheon meeting, I asked Pack about his work.

He explained that, after completing his schooling as an artist, he had moved to the Southwest with a dream—he had a vision of the sort of photography he wanted to do of the Navajo. Learning that he would not be able to receive such a gift from the Navajo until he had first been of service to the community, Pack worked as a firefighter and an emergency medical technician (EMT) for four or five years and then taught photography at the local community college. He became a part of the community he desired to photograph. Pack understood that creativity does not come from the solitary individual self but from the relationships that the self makes with other selves (both human and nonhuman) in the world. As the American Indian writer Leslie Marmon Silko (Laguna Pueblo) explains, “. . . relationships. That's all there really is” (“Stories” 22). The Navajo people Pack photographed were people with whom he had developed friendships over the years. These subjects of his photography are in no way objectified or distanced through a questionable professional “objectivity.”²

In one particularly telling photograph, an elderly grandmother sitting at her loom, faces the camera directly with a mysterious look of interest, determination, patience, respect, and a degree of loving amusement. There is no question that much more is going on in this photo than in the more common ethnographic photography that reduces its subjects to subaltern objectivity. Clearly, the photograph is not only a photograph of this elderly Navajo

1. Since this story is from memory, I do not have the exact name of the institution that hired Pack.

2. I have placed the term “objectivity” in quotation marks to underscore that objectivity rarely, if ever, occurs outside the domain of the physical sciences. Within the domains of academia and the creative arts, more often than not, the presumption of “objectivity” is merely the refusal or incapacity of scholars, writers, and artists to recognize their own collusive relations with the “objects” of their work.

grandmother but also a photograph of her relationship with John Pack. Within the conversive relationality of Pack's photograph, this Navajo elder unveils more of herself to the camera than would ever be the case through the more distanced forms of "objective" photography. At the heart of Pack's Ganado series photographs is love—the very real interpersonal love between him and the Navajo people he photographed, worked with, and lived amongst. Instead of the traditional Western paradigm of the individual artist who creates his or her work alone, Pack's Ganado series photographs are, from start to finish, a collaborative process between the photographer and the subjects with whom he worked.

Pack devoted more than six years of his life to this one project, resulting in a major show at a New York gallery showcasing some of the most impressive color photographs I have ever seen. I have never forgotten John Pack, his story, and his photographs (several of which I have hanging in my office and home), and I am still learning from his sacrifice of time, his patience, and his profound respect for his *subjects* and his work. John Pack provides an example of the sort of patience, devotion, and respect that underlies all of our meaningful engagements and accomplishments in the world. Pack does not place himself at the center of his artistic work. At the center is the collaboration, the relationships, the love. Pack committed his time and his life to the fulfillment of his artistic vision, producing a remarkable legacy and an offering to others through his Ganado series photographs.

John Pack's story, and those of others who sacrifice themselves to greater ends, can help us understand the precious station artists, creative writers, and scholars hold within the Bahá'í dispensation. Unfortunately, this high station and its crucial role in the health of any society are misunderstood and devalued almost to the point of absence, as art, literature, and scholarly work are seen as either irrelevant to people's lives or as a means of personal self-aggrandizement and self-importance. Not only does the general populace need to learn the value of such work but also scholars, writers, and artists need to recenter their work in the sacred and in the interrelationships that make scholarship, words, and art meaningful beyond the narrow confines of self. In that process scholars, writers, and artists need to decenter themselves from the increasingly meaningless solipsism of work whose value is disappearing within the changing demands of a globally diverse community.

Respect for Scholarship

Today, individuals tend to want to achieve their fifteen minutes of Warholian fame as quickly and as often as possible; this is particularly evident in the proliferation of second-rate scholarship and increased numbers of publications. But the entry of our names into the Book of God does not come quite so easily. Our words that serve purposeful ends are the meaningful service that counts as worship—those words that reflect our service to the Cause of God. I doubt that

many would have the audacity to attempt to publish critical pieces on Milton or Chaucer without "extensive knowledge and scholarly erudition" in those areas. To do otherwise shows a profound disrespect for the field about which one is writing. Unfortunately, the pressure to publish, combined with a more competitive job market, pushes scholars to hasten the publication of their work. For a variety of reasons, the patience and devotion of John Pack are now rare, and yet, to me, he is a model for all to emulate. For Pack, service to his work came first, his entire life being adjusted to fit around that work.

There is currently an analogous tendency for the general public to devalue the accomplishments of academically trained scholars. The so-called ivory tower is perceived as being out of touch with the lives and realities of everyday folks—except, of course, when these "others" become the objects of academic study (an objectification that only serves to increase the perceived and actual differentiation and distance between academics and the "real world"). The continuing debates in Washington over funding for the NEA, NEH, and NSF³ underscore the extent to which the work of scholars, artists, and creative writers is negatively perceived. There is a disturbing trend towards a dangerous sort of populism that rejects willy-nilly the authority and expertise of those in positions of power.

Perhaps Bahá'ís could begin to provide new models that cross the divide between academia and the rest of the world. Through collaborative projects between academics and nonacademics, the work of scholars would be more responsive and comprehensible to those outside the walls of academe. In those countries in which scholars speak directly to the people, there is much greater respect for the learning of academics—even to the point of academics taking on important roles of state governance. Examples of such accessibility to the insights of scholars and writers can be seen in the more popular work of figures such as Roland Barthes, Umberto Eco, or Vaclav Havel, whose comments on current events and popular culture have often been directed towards the general populace. Nevertheless, even in these cases, there is still a hierarchized divide between the power of the scholar and the less-respected views of the nonscholar. A balance must be found where expert opinion is valued and respected, but not to the extent that it is uncritically valorized.

While the Bahá'í teaching of "independent investigation of truth" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá* 298) stresses the importance of the individual's critical thinking capacity, this in no way signifies a categorical rejection of expert knowledge and authority. On the contrary, the Bahá'í writings make it very clear that scholars are to be respected for their

3. The National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), and National Science Foundation (NSF) are three of the U.S. federal funding agencies whose funds have served to support new research in the sciences and humanities, as well as the creative productions of artists and writers. The value of governmental support for such endeavors is currently being questioned and seriously criticized.

knowledge and years of devotion to their fields of study. In one particularly strong passage, Bahá'u'lláh writes:

Respect ye the divines and learned amongst you, they whose conduct accords with their professions, who transgress not the bounds which God hath fixed, whose judgments are in conformity with His behests as revealed in His Book. Know ye that they are the lamps of guidance unto them that are in the heavens and on the earth. They who disregard and neglect the divines and learned that live amongst them—these have truly changed the favor with which God hath favored them. (*Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh* 128)

Respect for "the divines and learned" ("divines" signifying members of the clergy and theologians; "learned" referring to those with scholastic learning)⁴ is directly linked with one's own place in the Book of God. To "disregard and neglect the divines and learned" is to alter the favor one would otherwise receive from God.

The respect that scholars are to be accorded is further emphasized by Shoghi Effendi. A letter (December 14, 1924) written on his behalf points out "that both Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá have given a very high position to men of culture and knowledge and Bahá'u'lláh says in one of His Tablets that respect shown to such people is incumbent upon all Bahá'ís" (quoted in *Scholarship* 5). In another letter to the Spiritual Assemblies in Iran, Shoghi Effendi exhorts the Bahá'ís "to esteem and revere those who are possessed of extensive knowledge and scholarly erudition . . ." (quoted in *Scholarship* 10). For example, even though I might study electrical systems on my own and become sufficiently proficient to wire my own home and my friends' homes, that alone would hardly qualify me to present myself either as an electrical engineer or an electrician. "Extensive knowledge" in a field is not something that comes as readily as many would like to believe, and it involves substantial devotion to one's chosen field. In fact, many scholars conducting serious scholarly research in their fields spend as much as sixty to seventy hours a week devoted to their work. While such a commitment is often exhausting, the work is that to which scholars dedicate their very lifeblood. Scholars, and especially Bahá'í scholars (in the profoundest sense of that phrase), deserve to receive the esteem and respect of not only peers but also nonscholars; however, in turn, Bahá'í scholars need to communicate clearly the nature of their work to the broader audience of the general population as a means of helping nonscholars understand the value of scholarly work better.

At this point, I want to clarify that I am in no way arguing that only academically trained scholars can offer substantive scholarship. As I note

4. For these definitions, I have turned to a 1935 unabridged Webster's dictionary, whose definitions of these terms would accord with the usage of the terms "divines" and "learned" current when the translation into English was made.

elsewhere, "Throughout much of the history of a patriarchal, classist, and racist world, there has existed a noxious bias regarding the definition and nature of acceptable scholarship. To date, valuable scholarship has been dictated to be that which has been produced by the academic (and usually financially affluent) elite. Yet, has it not often been the uneducated and poor who led the way throughout religious and secular history?" ("Commentary" 64). What is at issue is not the extent to which a scholar has been academically trained, but rather the extent to which a scholar is truly well versed in her or his field. Such depth of knowledge might come from institutionalized education, or it might not. However, depth of learning is not something that comes as quickly and readily as many might like to believe. For example, depth of medical knowledge might come from years of training and work in medical institutions (schools and hospitals); it might also come from years of study and work in the field as a *curandera* (a traditional Hispanic woman healer, herbalist, and/or midwife).

Conversive Scholarship

I offer for consideration by Bahá'í scholars and writers an alternative model based conjointly on Bahá'í principles of consultation, Wittgensteinian philosophy, and American Indian models of verbal communication. This is a conversive model that embodies (1) the notion and practice of intersubjective relationality, which occurs in conversative communication and (2) the very real transformative aspect of interrelational language that effects actual change (conversion) on the part of the participants. As the American Indian poet and critic Gloria Bird (Spokane) writes:

I suspect that once we come to an awareness of the 'word' as a creative force and, with that knowledge, that language has the potential to 'create' or 'make happen,' that we have discovered much—maybe everything. I mistakenly assumed that native people approached language differently because they knew this, but I now realize that Western culture has known all along of the potential for language's capacity to create. ("Towards a Decolonization" 7)

A conversive and consultative strategy emphasizes the creative force of language rather than the more negative paradigms evident in much contemporary scholarship. Conversive scholarly methods are particularly appropriate for Bahá'í scholars disillusioned with the tone and content of contemporary academic *discourse*.

Within a conversive model, the emphasis is on the process and on the relationship between individuals or between the scholar and her *subject*⁵ of analysis. This process is interactive throughout, with all those involved being transformed through their conversive engagements with each other. Conversive

5. Within a conversive model, even seemingly inert "objects" of study are granted subjective status as the researcher works interactively with her subjects of study.

scholarship is categorically divergent from those dialectical, discursive, and dialogical⁶ models, which are all "based upon a linear oppositionality that assumes inclusion necessarily at the expense of exclusion. Subjectivity, within a linear division, demands a concomitant object against which one's subjectivity is defined" (Brill, "Discovering" 53). Trinh T. Minh-ha notes, "Power, as unveiled by numerous contemporary writings, has always inscribed itself in language. Speaking, writing, and discoursing are not mere acts of communication; they are above all acts of compulsion" ("Woman" 52). And Baudrillard writes, "This enigmatic game is no longer that of analysis; it seeks to preserve the enigma of the object through the enigma of discourse" ("Ecstasy of Communication" 97). In contrast to discursivity, within conversive and consultative models the problematic objectification and hierarchized distancing inherent to oppositional models are absent.⁷ Discourse by definition privileges the speaker-writer and places emphasis on the self; conversivity assumes a familiarity between the speaker-writer and her listeners-readers and subject matter. Conversive emphasis is placed on the various interrelationships involved in the conversive engagement, not on the self. Here there is no oppositional nor objectified other, since the "other" is always in relation to oneself—and, through that relatedness, the "other" is no longer "other."

Discursive texts have distanced readers from writers through various strategies (e.g., a distancing third-person voice, the rejection of first-person subjectivity, the rejection of second-person voice with the concomitant absenting of the reader from the text altogether, and the devaluation of subjectivity as less scholarly and less scientific than "objective" texts). Such distancing has led to the distrust many aboriginal peoples have felt towards

Heisenberg taught us that even in the domain of physics, the mere presence of an observer impacts what she observes. Native peoples have traditionally understood the fragile interrelationships that exist throughout all of creation. A Navajo elder who collects a plant, sprinkles corn pollen, and utters words of thanks to that plant, is clearly recognizing, accepting, and honoring her intersubjective relationship with that plant and concomitantly with all of creation. This contrasts powerfully with Western scientific discourse poignantly described by Trinh T. Minh-ha: "Have you ever attended a white man's presentation (often also ours) on a 'native' society, be he a photographer, a filmmaker, a choreographer, a musician, a speaker, or a writer? It is as if, unvaryingly, every single look, gesture, or utterance has been stained with anthropological discourse, the only discourse in power when it is a question of the (native) Other" (*Woman* 56).

6. While Mikhail Bakhtin's discussions of dialogism offer a model that is more inclusive in its polyphonic heteroglossia, even dialogism is based on a dualistic foundation of oppositions. For a more complete presentation of Bakhtin's work, I recommend *The Dialogic Imagination*, edited by Michael Holquist.

7. Here I would like to note that consultation is one type of conversive interaction. Conversive engagements can take on a range of forms from oral storytelling to everyday conversation to deliberative consultation. What particularly distinguishes consultation

writing. As Silko explains, "Among the Pueblo people, a written speech or statement is highly suspect because the true feelings of the speaker remain hidden as he reads words that are detached from the occasion and the audience. . . . [W]e don't think of words as being isolated from the speaker which, of course, is one element of the oral tradition" ("Language" 54-55). The interrelatedness inherent within the oral tradition is an inextricable part of conversive and consultative communication. In fact, the transformative power of conversivity and consultation comes through the dynamic interpersonal relationships that form the structure of these methods. Those peoples today who are still close to their respective oral traditions can best instruct those of us whose worlds are more strictly constructed within textually defined boundaries. As Bahá'u'lláh writes in the *Lawh-i-Hikmat* (Tablet of Wisdom), "Know thou, moreover, that the people aforesaid have produced things which the contemporary men of knowledge have been unable to produce" (*Tablets* 150). Insofar as conversive language use is concerned, the oral storytelling traditions of peoples around the world provide a ready model for scholars.

The value of such a shift in scholarly writing is of paramount importance. Through a conversive method, it is less likely that the writing will be the source of alienation and distance any reader might feel in relation to the writer and text. While it is inevitable that there will always be readers who feel excluded from particular texts, it seems to me that Bahá'í scholars and writers have the responsibility to try to provide as many openings into their work as possible as a means of enabling their readers to approach, access, enter, and engage with their writing. Gloria Bird writes, "Everything depends upon something else. Our ability as readers to enter as participants of the story ultimately relies upon our ability to make those connections, to forego on an intuitive level the constricting notions we have of language and its use" (4). The capacity of the reader to enter particular textual worlds can be facilitated or hindered by the openness or closedness of the text. One possible arena for a more open and Bahá'í-informed scholarship might include the beginnings of conversive and consultative endeavors that cut across the seemingly impenetrable boundaries between the scholarly work of academia and the more popular writings of nonacademics. Rather than maintaining such elitist boundaries and continuing to write for audiences of their peers, Bahá'í scholars need to reach across those boundaries that circumscribe the domains of academic scholarship to lay the foundations for new work mutually informed by persons within and without academia.

from other conversive interactions is its specific focus on problem solving. For a wonderful discussion of consultation within a Bahá'í framework, I strongly recommend John E. Kolstoe's work, *Consultation: A Universal Lamp of Guidance*.

The developments in the past thirty years of feminist, minority, cultural, working class, postmodern, poststructural, and postcolonial criticisms have laid bare the questionable foundations upon which the humanities and social sciences have been constructed. The "objectivity" previously assumed as the inviolate requirement for substantive scholarship is now understood to be as ideologically loaded as those liberal agendas that are pejoratively lumped together under the label of political correctness. The Eurocentric, androcentric, and logocentric biases of the Western academic tradition in no way nullify the tremendous contributions of Western scholarship, but neither do they justify the continued elitism of a tradition whose boundaries are rapidly becoming narrower and narrower. The global village we all call our home demands new and more expansive boundaries capable of the fluidity necessary for a world that is changing ever more dramatically with each passing moment. In fact, the most exciting work being done in academia these days is work that straddles and challenges the limits of outdated and anachronistic disciplinary boundaries, assumptions, beliefs, and preconceived notions.

The radical shifts occurring within academia should come as no surprise to Bahá'ís, who understand this to be a period of great global change. As Bahá'u'lláh writes, "A new life is, in this age, stirring within all the peoples of the earth; and yet none hath discovered its cause or perceived its motive" (*Gleanings* 196). The challenge for Bahá'í scholars is to clarify for others the divine source underlying all of the changes of our times—but this means our own reorientations of the sacred to the center of our work. Fixity lies here; elsewhere, scholarship must be open to change. As I have noted elsewhere, "The Bahá'í Faith is dynamic, progressive, and evolutionary, and as such must always be flexible and responsive to the 'exigencies of the occasion and the people' (Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets* 172) So must be Bahá'í scholarship" ("Commentary" 66). Our words are contingent—it is the Word of God that is constant and round which our own words must revolve. The power, value, and effectiveness of our own words and scholarship will reflect the extent to which they are in relation to the Word of God and to our readers—listeners.⁸

Within the bounds of the predominantly secular domain of academia, scholars center their work around particular theoretical orientations against which scholarship is weighed. As Bahá'u'lláh explains, whatever we do must be

8. Throughout the Bahá'í writings, there are passages in which Bahá'u'lláh explains that the power of our words is directly proportional to the extent to which those words are centered in the Word of God. As Bahá'u'lláh writes, Bahá'ís must speak from "minds that are wholly centered in Him, and with hearts that are completely detached from and independent of all things, and with souls that are sanctified from the world and its vanities. . . . If they do so, their words shall influence their hearers" (*Gleanings* 201).

weighed by a divine standard as articulated in the Book of God.⁹ “[T]he Book itself is the unerring balance established amongst men. In this most perfect balance whatsoever the peoples and kindreds of the earth possess must be weighed . . .” (*Gleanings* 198). The turbulence of our times directly reflects the extent to which lives, worlds, and words increasingly struggle with innumerable transitory centers that can only provide illusory semblances of stability and balance. This unrest is being felt everywhere, even in the so-called ivory towers of the various institutions of our world.

Dyscursive Scholarship

In the March, 1995/Bahá 152 B.E. issue of the Association for Bahá'í Studies—North America *Bulletin*, Peter P. Morgan asks, “What can Bahá'í scholars contribute to the evolution of a courteous, nourishing, fragrant style of written debate that in no way inhibits the interplay of observations, ideas, and logic?” (“Interchange” 2). In light of the very disturbing extremes of antipathy and criticism that academic *dys*course can take, Bahá'í scholars are uniquely situated to offer new models for scholarly writing that are informed by and centered in the wisdom of the Bahá'í writings. While I wholeheartedly concur with Morgan's concerns regarding a discourse that is Bahá'í informed, it strikes me that Morgan's goal of scholarly “debate that in no way inhibits the interplay of observations, ideas, and logic” is theoretically and practically unrealizable for several reasons. It is not “scholarly debate” that will provide the end Morgan advocates, but rather new forms of scholarly communication that build on the Bahá'í principles underlying consultative and conversive methods. Let me explain.

First of all, the very concept of a debate embodies the elements of distance, objectification, monologism (with merely the appearance of dialogue), and oppositionality—all of which impede the sort of intersubjective relationality that is at the heart of any endeavor centered in the domain of the sacred. The absence of the centering force of the sacred results in the spurious creations of other centers to which we grant objective and totalizing status. In fact, in her introduction to Jacques Derrida's *Of Grammatology*, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak points out, “It is this longing for a center . . . that spawns hierarchized oppositions” (Translator's Preface, lxix). In the absence of the sacred, we end up battling each other as we desperately fight to establish our positions in

9. The concept of the Book of God refers to the articulation of God's will in the world. The Manifestations of God (the divine founders of religion such as Bahá'u'lláh, the Báb, Moses, Jesus, Muḥammad, or Buddha, among others) are referred to as the Word of God. The Book of God most commonly refers to their articulations of the divine will, in some cases as actual written Books (e.g., the Torah, the Christian Bible, the Qur'án, the Bahá'í writings), or in most cases throughout the history of the world as oral articulations passed down through oral traditions of the sacred.

whatever we define as central to our understandings of ourselves and the world. The contentious and oppositional nature of debates precludes the consultative notion of individuals working together to gain new insights and resolutions about a specific issue. Within the bounds of any debate, individuals lobby for their own positions, even though those positions may be somewhat modified in the process. Even though the final result may be ostensibly dialogic, it is nevertheless the result of oppositional struggle.¹⁰ Of course, this does not signify the absence of divergent ideas. The "clash of differing opinions" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, quoted in Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá'í Administration* 21) is invaluable in the consultative process, but within the framework of oppositional debate such a "clash" reflects the assertion of positionality rather than the process of effective consultation.

Second, the definitional boundaries that circumscribe the discourse of debate are boundaries that have been inherited through a 2500-year hegemony of Western logocentric and androcentric discourse. The applied geometry of the Egyptians, translated and abstracted into propositional form by the Greek pre-Socratics, provided the base for the mathematical propositions upon which Greek logic, rhetoric, and argument were developed and which in turn have served as the models for the predominant forms of scholarly discourse in the West. The androcentric biases of this tradition (which, biases notwithstanding, has left a tremendous and valuable scientific legacy) have served to silence the voices of women and all other peoples whose words diverged from the phallogocentric standards of the privileged discourse.¹¹ This is not to devalue the Western tradition and its legacy, but rather to point out that this is merely one of many traditions throughout human history. To expect that Bahá'í scholarship must necessarily be subservient to the narrow bounds of one tradition is to privilege that one tradition at the expense of all others. As Ludwig Wittgenstein notes, ". . . not every deviation from the norm must be a blindness, a defect" (*Remarks on Colour* 3e). In fact, the broadening of the expectations of scholarly norms will yield new, as yet unimagined insights and discoveries. The postmodern scholarly work of feminist, working-class, and minority academics in the West and of so-called Third World academics throughout the world has demonstrated the wealth and power of such a diversity of scholarship.

10. As Mikhail Bakhtin explains, the very notion of dialogism is based upon a grammar of oppositionality, "one point of view opposed to another, one evaluation opposed to another, one accent opposed to another" (*Dialogic Imagination* 314).

11. The androcentrism of Athens (and more broadly of classical studies) has been well documented and discussed by the current generation of feminist scholars in the fields of classical studies and archeology. I strongly recommend *Feminist Theory and the Classics*, edited by Nancy Sorkin Rabinowitz and Amy Richlin, a collection that delineates the androcentric, Athenocentric, and ethnocentric biases of classical studies. The use of the term *phallogocentric* emphasizes the extent to which androcentric realities have been vested within extreme emphases on the body and particularly sexual difference, and such difference is further embodied within language and scholarship—hence the conjoint emphasis of phallus and logos in the concept of phallogocentrism.

Third, the emphasis on achieving a form of debate that manifests the virtues of courtesy and openness assumes that the form, style, and manner of scholarship is fixed, but that it can be modified after the Bahá'í teachings. The primary emphasis is thereby placed on the discursive form rather than on the Bahá'í Faith itself. Wittgenstein says in several passages, "We must be prepared to learn something totally new" (*Remarks* 4e). Here I would suggest that Bahá'í scholars consider decentering the traditions upon which our studies have been based, recentering our focus on the Bahá'í writings and the Cause of God, and then discovering anew what forms and directions our scholarship will take as Bahá'í scholarship.

Bahá'u'lláh writes, "Nothing whatever can, in this Day, inflict a greater harm upon this Cause than dissension and strife, contention, estrangement and apathy, among the loved ones of God. Flee them, through the power of God and His sovereign aid, and strive ye to knit together the hearts of men, in His Name, the Unifier, the All-Knowing, the All-Wise" (*Gleanings* 9). 'Abdu'l-Bahá also relates this advice to consultation:

They must in every matter search out the truth and not insist upon their own opinion, for stubbornness and persistence in one's views will lead ultimately to discord and wrangling and the truth will remain hidden. The honored members must with all freedom express their own thoughts, and it is in no wise permissible for one to belittle the thought of another. . . . (Quoted in Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá'í Administration* 22)

Yet 'Abdu'l-Bahá further asserts, "The shining spark of truth cometh forth only after the clash of differing opinions" (quoted in *Bahá'í Administration* 21). It is clear that the Bahá'í model accepts and even encourages the "clash of differing opinions," while discouraging and rejecting the clash of individual wills and egos. To couch opposing positions in the genteel decorum of courtesy and scholarly objectivity, however, merely gives the illusion of interchange, which, at best, is continually mediated through the actual monologism of each writer's vocalization. The participants are, thereby, distanced further from each other by means of their own illusory dialogue, which proves to be, in fact, more monologue rather than any sort of real engagement of souls. As Bahá'u'lláh writes:

Say: Human utterance is an essence which aspireth to exert its influence and needeth moderation. As to its influence, this is conditional upon refinement which in turn is dependent upon hearts which are detached and pure. As to its moderation, this hath to be combined with tact and wisdom as prescribed in the Holy Scriptures and Tablets. (*Tablets* 143)

I agree with Susan Allen in her concern about "any point-by-point discussion of how [another's] views diverge from one's own . . ." (quoted in Morgan, "Interchange" 2). As she notes, this is clearly "at variance with 'Abdu'l-Bahá's

example," and, yes, it is clearly disturbing for the individuals involved who end up battling further as they stubbornly defend their own positions, and it is disturbing for those of us reading, hearing, and observing such debates, for we become voyeurs whose passive participation is as well culpable. As Bahá'ís, we are not only told not to backbite but are also told not even to listen to backbiting. I think it is fair to draw the analogy that while it is clear we are not to participate in such oppositional verbal sparring, even further, we are not to encourage such debates by validating those behaviors through our collusive positioning as supporters in the camps of the individuals "duking it out."

Within the written domain, the mediation of the text contributes to the dialogic distancing between individuals. Within the more conversively relational quality of oral communication (and here I include conversations as well as those written works that are significantly informed by their respective oral traditions, such as many of the writings of Canadian and American Indian writers, and religious texts that communicate the Word of God, such as the Bahá'í writings), words are spoken to readers-listeners in a very direct and interactively relational manner. The process of textualization, which distances words from their oral roots and thereby distances writers and readers from each other through increasing levels of textual mediation, offers the appearance of scholarly objectivity, but this is at the expense of the transformative power of conversive writing and speaking that is lost in the textualizing process.

The even greater mediation of cyberspace technologies has been a continual source of concern for feminist scholars who struggle to find ways of mitigating the distancing effect that seems to engender a more combative discourse than is all too frequently the case even in debates appearing in scholarly journals. It seems that the public domain of such forums encourages individual combativeness as the writers lobby not only for their respective positions but, perhaps even more importantly, also for the validation of their readers-supporters. In the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, Bahá'u'lláh explicitly tells his followers not to even read such debates: "We have permitted you to read such sciences as are profitable unto you, not such as end in idle disputation . . ." (48). Language, in whatever form, is not only a creative force in the world but (as difficult as it may be for many to understand) also the most deadly. With a Word, God creates humankind; with another word, we destroy ourselves.¹²

12. Here I would like to note the increasing proliferation of words and books being articulated and circulated more frequently and more loudly to such an extent that our own vocalizations drown out the words of others and, most seriously, the Word of God, as our books supplant the very Book of Origin from which all books hail even in its ostensive absence. In so doing, we privilege ourselves at the expense of our realities as relational souls in the world; and in our own books, we end up inscribing ourselves therein through an inscription that concomitantly erases our names from the Book of God to the same extent that we inscribe it elsewhere.

The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein has discussed analogous sorts of academic debates and the extent to which such debates serve meaningful purposes (*Culture and Value* 30e). While reviews and critiques can serve the valuable goal of assisting others in refining their understandings of particular issues, when these debates take on defensive and offensive tones, they become oppositional to the extent that they serve little purpose beyond their own embattlement. This is particularly disappointing when there are substantial points being made below the surface level of battle. Such critiques demonstrate the astuteness of the writer in discerning the failures of his (or her) opponent, but it strikes me that a more useful approach for scholars would be primarily to stress the valuable aspects of the other's position and to do so without overlooking the presence of significant weak spots in the work. These weaknesses could be presented not as categoric failures, but simply as aspects of the work with their own relative strengths. And discussion of those aspects could be framed within a context of possibly stronger approaches that the critic could note as suggestions for future work.

Conversive vs. Discursive Criticism

A 1980 letter from the Universal House of Justice cites a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi: “. . . if we show love, patience, and understanding of the weakness of others, if we seek to never criticize but rather encourage, others will do likewise, and we can really help the Cause through our example and spiritual strength” (*Lights of Guidance* 90). A frequently quoted passage from ‘Abdu’l-Bahá speaks to this concern:

To be silent concerning the faults of others, to pray for them, and to help them, through kindness, to correct their faults.

To look always at the good and not at the bad. If a man has ten good qualities and one bad one, to look at the ten and forget the one; and if a man has ten bad qualities and one good one, to look at the one and forget the ten.

Never to allow ourselves to speak one unkind word about another, even though that other be our enemy. (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, quoted in Esslemont, *Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era* 83)

Both ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi emphasize the importance of stressing the good qualities of others while downplaying or even ignoring the negative. What this signifies for scholarly endeavors such as published reviews and critical writing is the value of introducing new and valuable work (of others and our own) to wider audiences in order to disseminate the new ideas more broadly. It is unclear, however, what value lies in the writing of reviews, responses, and other critical pieces that are largely negative in tone and content.

If confusions are due to divergent definitions of Bahá'í scholarship, then perhaps more valuable work might be done through new writing that explicitly

treats such topics in greater depth than is possible within the scope of reviews and responses. On this note, one specific suggestion that I have is for Bahá'í scholars to write publishable reviews for those texts that they feel have significant merit and deserve a wider audience. For those texts that they perceive to be more problematic, rather than writing negative reviews, perhaps a more appropriately Bahá'í response would be to write to the authors, privately sharing their concerns and offering suggestions for future work. For serious flaws in the work sufficiently problematic such that they deserve a public response (such as outright attacks on the Bahá'í Faith), then I would suggest critical responses that focus on the problematic ideas, rather than specifically targeting the individual author and his or her writing.

The practice of attacking other scholars and writers is very disturbing—especially when it is done under the guise of legitimate scholarship. It may be tolerated within the dominant scholarly community, but it is hardly acceptable as Bahá'í scholarship. Holding the work of others up to ridicule in the public domain seems blatantly contrary to the behavioral directives Bahá'ís are given. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi make very clear, scholars have two general options. One is to overlook the faults of others; the second is to address those weaknesses by means of kindly encouragement. The type of public discourse current within the halls of academe hardly reflects what is advised by 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi. It is the responsibility of Bahá'í scholars and writers to begin to develop and propagate *new* models of public colloquy in order to provide the sorts of examples Shoghi Effendi recommends.

The sort of constructive criticism (e.g., encouragement and kindly helpfulness) advocated by 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi is categorically different from the sort of embattlement in which individuals find themselves more alienated from each other instead of grateful for the other's suggestions. Rather than stepping back from the argument as a means of determining the value of such engagements, more often than not we battle back and forth to little end, beyond the repeated assertions of our own opposing positions. "There is no longer any transcendence or depth, but only the immanent surface of operations unfolding" (Baudrillard, *Ecstasy of Communication* 12). As Wittgenstein points out, "We say: but that *isn't* how it is!—it *is* like that though! and all we can do is keep repeating these antitheses" (*Culture and Value* 30e). As I explain elsewhere, "Wittgenstein makes the inutility of such debates clear as he gives them the tone of an argument between two small children: 'Es *ist* doch nicht es!—aber es *ist* doch so!' (no, it *isn't*!—yes, it *is*!)" (Brill, *Wittgenstein and Critical Theory* 8). Wittgenstein emphasizes that meaningfulness in the world comes from use ("Let the use *teach* you the meaning" [*Philosophical Investigations* 212e]). From a Wittgensteinian perspective, the important questions to ask in regard to this exchange are What do we really learn from this? What can we gain from this beyond the obvious acrimony expressed therein? What Wittgenstein would refer to as "usefulness" strongly parallels the Bahá'í emphasis on service and fruitfulness.

The negative tone that pervades contemporary academic debates demonstrates the extent to which such arguments reflect more the individual psychologies of those involved rather than the issues ostensibly under debate. This should not strike anyone as surprising. Academics are by no means above the increasing balkanization and besiegement of our postmodern times: the divided camps debating the concerns of political correctness demonstrate this profoundly and ominously. The relative and momentary subjectivities that we gain through our conflicts with others give us our fleeting senses of security and power in a world whose foundations are increasingly doubtful and threatening. Rather than getting caught up in these debates, we need to understand where the conflictual attitudes are coming from and to respond to these argumentative attacks with love and patience. Granted, this is not easy. There is a seductiveness to these debates—a seductiveness that offers us discursive power and presence in the world.¹³ In a world in which all of our realities and lives have been compromised in so many ways in our own lifetimes and in the historicities of our families and our communities in which we, in turn, live (through them and in ourselves)—in this world in which we have all been silenced, devalued, abused, and marginalized to varying extents and degrees—the offer of discursive power (even at the expense of the disempowerment of others) is seductively appealing.

A number of contemporary North American Indian writers have discussed this very dilemma. In Leslie Marmon Silko's novel *Ceremony*, the main character, Tayo, is a Laguna man whose life has been embattled by the racism of a nation in which his mixed-blood reality is rejected by his family and tribal community. Tayo, the offspring of an alcoholic Laguna mother and some unknown "Anglo" father, is the sign of the failure of his family, his tribe, and the greater community to accept the living diversity that is our world—a lack of acceptance that pushes all of us to more margins than our imaginations can even comprehend. Tayo struggles to heal beyond his birth; beyond his mother's life; beyond his own abused childhood, first with his alcoholic mother on the streets of Gallup and then in the home of his abusive Christian aunt who is ashamed of Tayo and what he represents; beyond his experiences in World War II and thereafter as an American Indian veteran; and beyond his own alcoholism.

13. On this point, I recommend Jean Baudrillard's *Seduction*. This is a very disturbing work that lays bare the barrenness of our times. Baudrillard writes, "... we are living today in non-sense, and if simulation is its disenchanting form, seduction is its enchanted form. . . . We are living, in effect, amongst pure forms, in a radical obscenity, that is to say, in the visible, undifferentiated obscenity of figures that were once secret and discrete. The same is true of the social, which today rules in its pure—i.e., empty and obscene—form. The same for seduction, which in its present form, having lost its elements of risk, suspense and sorcery, takes the form of a faint, undifferentiated obscenity" (180, 179).

Through the assistance of a mixed-blood Navajo medicine man (Betonie), Tayo finally learns that true healing and strength come only once one disengages from the battles of the world, only once one ceases fighting the witchery surrounding us all, and only once one turns away from the witchery to refocus on the beauty and harmony that surround us even more profoundly and powerfully than does the witchery.¹⁴

Debates, arguments, battles, wars (*sometimes* necessary, although far less often than many are prepared to admit) do not bring harmony into the world. Balance is achieved neither through arms build-ups nor from continued argumentation; for, in these situations, the balance is always tipped in one direction or the other. I wonder about our insecure needs to vocalize our presences and places in the world with ever-increasing degrees of loudness, force, and rapidity. The new electronic technologies facilitate the transmission of information in valuable ways, but they also enable our frantic attempts to drown out the words of others and, as well, the Word of God itself through our own incessant words—words whose semiology lies more in those acts of vocalization than in the much more bounded significances of the words themselves. Such continual jockeying back and forth certainly reflects our frenetic times, but it is hardly conducive to peace or to the sort of calm reflection necessary for individuals to hear their own souls resonating with the Word of God.

The way of the sacred is a way of balance, harmony, beauty, a way in which difference is not seen as oppositional but simply as difference whose significance lies not in essential categories of hierarchized power differentials, but lies in actual practice, since what might be unimportant in one situation could very well be crucial in another. As Wittgenstein points out, “. . . the meaning of a word is its use in the language” (*Philosophical* 43). ‘Abdu’l-Bahá writes, “. . . bereft of His love, learning is barren—indeed, it bringeth on madness” (*Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá* 181). Much of the current state of academic fury (regardless of its particular ideological stamp) is more reflective of such madness than of meaningful knowledge.

Objectification and Objectivity

As a scholar who works in the two divergent areas of critical theory and Native American literatures, I have been grappling with the difficulties presented by critical methods and theories that approach the world and texts through a discursive oppositionality—a strategy in which whatever one investigates necessarily takes on an objective status as the *object* of study. As Trinh explains,

14. The use of the term “witchery” is in no way gender biased. Leslie Marmon Silko and other Indian writers use the term to refer to evil in the world. Among many Indian tribes, witches (always understood as evil) are believed to exist. Witches may be male or female.

"There is no such thing as a 'coming face to face once and for all with objects'; the real remains foreclosed from the analytic experience" (*Woman, Native, Other* 76). Silko (Laguna Pueblo) portrays this problem in her story/poem, "Long time ago":

Then they grow away from the earth
 then they grow away from the sun
 then they grow away from the plants and animals.
 They see no life
 When they look
 they see only objects.
 The world is a dead thing for them
 the trees and rivers are not alive
 the mountains and stones are not alive.
 The deer and bear are objects
 They see no life.
 They fear
 they fear the world.
 They destroy what they fear.
 They fear themselves.

(*Storyteller* 33–34)

Apache writer Carlson Vicenti echoes Silko's concerns about white America: "Trees are not alive in this world. They make paper to fill minds with words. The spoken word no longer has meaning because the spirit of life is now meaningless" ("Hitching" 10). The mediation of writing further serves to exacerbate the subject-object dichotomy between the subjective scholar and his (or her) objective topic of analysis; this also gives scholarship the illusion of objectivity. As Roland Barthes has made very clear, what we have traditionally assumed to be objective and "evident truths," in fact, "are *already* interpretations" and are "essentially normative" (*Criticism and Truth* 39, 35). While scientific method applied to the realms of social science and humanities has produced tremendous results over the past century, these results have been at great cost for those peoples, cultures, perspectives, beliefs, understandings, and traditions ostensibly at variance with scientific knowledge.

The all too real hegemony of analytic science reduces the living diversity of the world (actual and textual) to quantifiable facts, defines truth as that which is verifiable and falsifiable through logical analysis, and disparages the role of the sacred as insignificant and irrelevant to scholarly knowledge (except, of course, to the extent that the sacred can be objectified within the bounds of religious studies). As Christopher Buck notes, ". . . academic studies are a quest for demonstrable truth . . . that satisfies strict canons of verifiability and falsifiability . . ." (Book Reviewer's Response 6.1:73). In his book *Logic and Logos: Essays on Science, Religion and Philosophy*, William S. Hatcher echoes

Buck's faith in "the universality and applicability of many seemingly subjective ideas . . ." (8). Hatcher writes, "Science is defined by its method" (38), and this method "is the systematic, organized, directed, and conscious use of our various mental faculties in an effort to arrive at a coherent model of whatever phenomenon is being investigated" (99). For Hatcher, such model building is only *seemingly* subjective and, in fact, is objective science.

Hatcher and Buck correctly delineate the definitional boundaries that have circumscribed the majority of modern scholarship. What Hatcher and Buck do not point out, however, is the extent to which those boundaries, far from essential to scholarly and scientific endeavor, are the narrow constructions of our own preconceived notions of how we expect the world to be. Jacques Derrida's groundbreaking work *Of Grammatology* seriously problematizes any claims regarding even "the possibility of objective description" (Spivak, Preface, lvii), as has the work of such germinal thinkers of the past hundred years as Nietzsche, Freud, Heidegger, Marx, Althusser, Foucault, and Lacan. In light of the tremendous amount of work delineating the extent to which our previous understandings of the world and of texts were more the products of our own preconceived notions than they were our arrival at some realm of objective and totalizing truth, contemporary claims of objectivity within the various fields of the social sciences and humanities rest upon epistemological and methodological foundations that are, at best, anachronistic and, at worst, downright absurd.¹⁵ Specifically in relation to the field of anthropology, Trinh notes, "What a man looks for . . . is fortunately what he always/never finds: a perfect reflection of himself" (58),—what Claude Lévi-Strauss refers to as "the superposition of himself on the other" (*Scope of Anthropology* 15).

The self-referentiality of Western science has been carefully hidden behind the sacrosanct veils of objective knowledge. The cause-and-effect linearity which delineates falsity from truth merely provides the psychological security that one's facts are more grounded and stable than in fact they ever are. And both cause and effect prove to be little more than their own solipsistic mirror images, which in turn reflect our own preconceived expectations and theories. As Wittgenstein makes very clear throughout much of his later writings, more often than not, what we believe to be explanations of the world are merely our own

15. For discussions of such concerns in various social sciences, I recommend the work of Peter Ossorio and other Descriptive Psychologists for criticisms of the foundations of contemporary psychology (e.g., Ossorio, "What Actually Happens": *The Representation of Real-World Phenomena* where he simply says, "Sometimes it is better just to make a fresh start" (ix), and much of the work that has appeared in the journal *Advances in Descriptive Psychology*); in the field of sociology, the work of social theorists such as Jean Baudrillard, Pierre Bourdieu, and Michel Foucault; and the work in interpretive and dialogical anthropologies pioneered by such scholars as Clifford Geertz, Dennis Tedlock, and Victor Turner.

interpretive expressions of those objects against which we impose our interpretive and preconceived theories that hold us captive—what Baudrillard refers to as “the anthropological dream: the dream of the object as existing beyond and above exchange and use, above and beyond equivalence; the dream of a sacrificial logic” (11). “And we could not get outside it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably” (Wittgenstein, *Philosophical* 115).

More than fifty years ago, Wittgenstein made it very clear that the rigid application of scientific method in the areas of social science and humanities is fraught with serious fundamental weaknesses. In his *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein refers to a statement from his earlier work, the *Tractatus*. His statement regarding logical propositions, “This is how things are,” points to those preconceived notions against which he had previously measured and evaluated the world. In his later work, he wrote very clearly about the dangers latent within such theoretical and methodological rigidity. In regard to the earlier statement, “This is how things are,” he responds:

That is the kind of proposition that one repeats to oneself countless times. One thinks that one is tracing the outline of the thing's nature over and over again, and one is merely tracing round the frame through which we look at it. (*Philosophical* 114)

Instead of meaningfully discerning the nature of those objects we study, we end up within a solipsistic trap in which what we find is largely that which our method dictates. As Wittgenstein further explains, we get entangled in those rules to which we assume “reality *must* correspond”—a process that he explicitly delineates as dogmatic (*Philosophical* 125, 131). If, for example, our approaches to the world are oppositionally discursive in nature, then what we will find is a world whose discursive structures we reductively misconstrue as inherently and unavoidably oppositional.

'Abdu'l-Bahá defines knowledge as “light, life, felicity, perfection, beauty and the means of approaching the Threshold of Unity,” adding that knowledge “is identical with guidance . . .” (*Some Answered Questions* 137). Accordingly, it seems that those scholarly discursive models in which scholars battle against each other, rather than working together as fellow guides, are inappropriate for those interested in following a Bahá'í model. Bahá'u'lláh explicitly warns scholars against dogmatism and pride. In the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, Bahá'u'lláh criticizes the man¹⁶ “whose learning hath made him proud, and who hath been debarred

16. While this criticism may be nongendered, within the English translation it is unclear whether the male pronoun indicates a gendered reference or a nongendered reference. In the future, I trust that new translations will be made so that pronoun references in the Arabic and Persian languages that are gendered as male will be clearly differentiated from those that are nongendered to give the clarity and precision that would be helpful for future generations of readers and scholars.

thereby from recognizing My Name, the Self-Subsisting; who, when he heareth the tread of sandals following behind him, waxeth greater in his own esteem than Nimrod" (34). As Bahá'u'lláh elsewhere explains, "True learning is that which is conducive to the well-being of the world, not to pride and self-conceit, or to tyranny, violence and pillage" (*Scholarship* 11). Here it is important to note that tyranny need not be limited to the domain of political governance but can take on the form of an intellectual tyranny; and violence need not be physical but can often be even more dangerous and hurtful in its verbal forms.

Suggestions for Consultative Scholarship and Criticism

I wholeheartedly agree with Peter P. Morgan that Bahá'í scholars and Bahá'í journals like *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies* should set an example for other scholarly journals" and for other scholars ("Interchange" 2). And such an example needs to be primarily rooted in the Writings of our religion with those other models (regardless of how valorized by the public domain—academic or otherwise) modified in accordance with Bahá'í principles. On this note I would like to make a couple of specific suggestions for Bahá'í scholars and Bahá'í journals. The first addresses the very real problem of second-rate scholarship in too many publications on the Bahá'í Faith by Bahá'ís. This is a serious problem. Shoghi Effendi provides a model for us to follow. The writings of Shoghi Effendi are written for literate and educated readers at a level that I expect will be standard for all readers in the future. Unfortunately, the current levels of literacy and education are far below the standard set by Shoghi Effendi. Does this mean that we lower these standards to fit with the lower capacities of today? Of course not. If our targeted readership is the general public, then the writing needs to be at a level these individuals can comprehend; but this in no way signifies the need for a lower level of substantive scholarship. Accessibility ought not be confused with lesser quality.

The boundaries that delineate academia from the rest of the world have become as problematic in a changing world as have many of the other anachronistic boundaries we have inherited from the past (recent and distant). For example, some of the most creative and challenging writing today comes not from the creative writing programs in universities but rather from the avant-garde camps of language poets and the work of contemporary aboriginal writers around the world. At a 1994 colloquium I attended at the University of Chicago, Stephen H. Kellert (then a philosophy professor at Indiana University) pointed out to his audience that the most interesting and substantive philosophy today is being produced within university English departments. Boundaries are being challenged, crossed, and redrawn, and one of these changing boundaries is the one that has traditionally kept the academic so-called ivory tower inviolate. Accordingly, I would further suggest not only that Bahá'í academics provide accessible models of solid scholarship but also that Bahá'í writers and scholars

within academia consider working with nonacademic Bahá'í writers and scholars on conjoint projects. The Bahá'í academics would raise the scholarly level of the work, and the nonacademic Bahá'í writers would give the work the breadth necessary to make it available to a readership beyond the limited domain of academia.

Regarding the dilemma of an acceptable discourse for Bahá'ís who publish reviews of the work of others, I would emphasize the importance of Bahá'ís providing new Bahá'í models for others to emulate. The concern about the current state of peer review is not new, and its many abuses are widely known.¹⁷ Regarding the specific domain of anonymous peer review, Ken Coates strongly questions whether “the peer-review process today actually conform[s] to the pristine intellectual objectivity that its defenders describe” (“Peer Review” A40). While Coates advocates the continuation of individual peer review, he argues for the process to include open disclosure in order to hold those involved to public accountability. He then points out that one outcome might be that “the academy could begin to regain some of the public trust that it has squandered in recent decades” (A40). Coates advocates open review on the assumption that public accountability is necessary to control the abuses of the system. Coates’s remedy addresses the external symptom of a much more serious problem, namely, the extent to which scholars and writers have become as balkanized and alienated from each other within an illusory survival of the fittest that is realized in their competitive *dys*course.¹⁸

Rather than simply accepting and perpetuating the forms and abuses of contemporary scholarship and writing, might not Bahá'í writers and scholars be eminently suited to providing Bahá'í remedies? To this end, I would like to delineate several specific suggestions for the domain of published reviews:

- ♦ The first is that Bahá'í reviewers primarily publish reviews of those works which they feel have substantial merit and that deserve to be disseminated more widely by means of reviews. There will certainly be times when a problematic text needs to be contested in the public domain, but I would urge

17. Ken Coates relates a story that underlies the problems of peer review which pervade academia: “During a session on academic publishing at a meeting of historians, the editor of a university press was asked to comment on the value of peer reviews. He replied that he relied heavily on external evaluations, so much so that he often sent a manuscript to four or five reviewers before he got the kind of critique he wanted. . . . Senior scholars, familiar with the reality of academic publishing, chuckled; junior scholars, still believing in the mystique of the academy were horrified” (Coates, “Opening up the Peer Review Process,” A40).

18. My reference to an “illusory survival of the fittest” is not intended to ignore or minimize the severe conditions of the current academic job market. Nevertheless, I do believe that scholars working together cooperatively and creatively could find a range of remedies even given the financial exigencies of the day.

Bahá'í reviewers to consider the end that will be served by primarily negative reviews.

◆ The reviews and the process of crafting the reviews could take a conversive rather than a discursive form. Here I would suggest that the potential reviewer directly contact the author(s) of the work being considered for review, requesting further information, asking for clarification of particular points, and simply getting to know the author as a means of better understanding the orientation of his or her work. This interpersonal human contact between reviewer and author would move it beyond the more formal and distanced practice of a decorous courtesy and into the realm of "forbearance and benevolence and love" (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* 8). Also, such interpersonal relations would move the review out of the illusory domain of "objectivity" and into the more accurate and honest realm of intersubjective scholarship—a shift that need not signify any diminution in the quality of the scholarly review.

◆ After the conversation/consultation with the author, both the author and reviewer would together decide if they felt an appropriate fit between the reviewer and the author's work. The author and reviewer would need to feel comfortable that the reviewer had a solid grasp of the author's work, and the reviewer would need to be convinced that a review of the specific work would be a valuable contribution to make.

◆ Once the author and reviewer conjointly agree upon the value of the proposed review, the reviewer would have free rein in crafting the review, which would be sent directly to the publishing journal (and *not* sent to the author for further approval). In the actual writing of the review, I would argue for total freedom on the part of the reviewer. The Universal House of Justice has emphasized "the importance of intellectual honesty and humility" (*Wellspring* 87), and rather than any censorship of written reviews, it seems to me that after an author and reviewer have consulted and decided the reviewer's work would be accurate, valuable, and useful, the reviewer really ought to have complete freedom.

Such a process emphasizes the collaborative nature of the review, with the reviewer and writer working together to ensure an accurate and substantive review that, in turn, emphasizes the aspects of service and utility. All too often in contemporary reviewing, either reviews are published merely to ensure the existence of minor publications to be listed on reviewer's curriculum vitae, or to benefit the writer and/or reviewer through their self-assertions in the world.

Instead of focusing on the individuals involved, the process I am advocating emphasizes the importance of texts and of introducing useful texts to the attention of others. The published review is not the end product, but rather the means of enabling others to discern if a particular work would be useful for them to read. The question for the readers would not be whether the work is valuable in and of itself (since the presence of the review would convey that) but whether the text would be useful for particular readers to procure and read. Finally, I would like to suggest that such a model be considered by Bahá'ís reviewing works by Bahá'í and non-Bahá'í writers for non-Bahá'í journals, magazines, and newspapers.¹⁹ I would imagine that such a concern for accuracy and good will would impress the authors of works under review by Bahá'ís and that Bahá'í reviewers would be exemplary in regard to integrity, thoroughness, and kindness.

Furthermore, such a procedure would also draw individuals together who might not otherwise converse—perhaps with the result of friendship, future collaborative work, and, most certainly, an increase in respect for the Bahá'í Faith. In a world daily torn apart by dissension, conflict, and discord, such professional interpersonal relations are the sort of connections the world desperately needs. Granted, such a procedure may slow down and even reduce the number of reviews being published,²⁰ but it would without a doubt raise the quality and depth of those published. As a final comment on this suggestion, I would note that Bahá'í journals might want to consider such conversive procedures as policy for their published reviews and commentaries.

I would like to conclude with a quotation from Bahá'u'lláh:

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

Conversive, rather than monologic or discursive, methods of scholarship will provide the necessary models for articulating and manifesting the directives

19. On this note, perhaps the *Journal for Bahá'í Studies* might consider an open call for papers dealing with the topic of academic discourse and processes of review and evaluation. This could be an open call for Bahá'í and non-Bahá'í scholars, provided that all contributors understand that their submissions are to be in line with Bahá'í teachings. The compilation *On Scholarship* could be made available to possible contributors for their reference. Provided there was a solid response, perhaps the essays could then be published as a collected volume by an appropriate university press.

20. The reduction in the number of published reviews might even prove to be a benefit since the proliferation of reviews is such that most go unread or, at best, read only by a few.

given to us all by Bahá'u'lláh. As Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o comments in relation to the importance of writers in Africa, the scholar and writer "must be part of the song the people sing . . . [towards] the liberation of the human spirit to become even more human" (*Writing against Neocolonialism* 20). Bahá'í scholars and writers must step to the forefront of global change by learning and developing new and distinctively Bahá'í modes of scholarship and writing. Relationality, a rejection of illusory claims of "objectivity," assertions of *others'* subjectivities in the world as persons rather than objects, a privileging of and emphasis on oneself *only* in relation to others, and, throughout, a process in which the sacred is at the center with all else in relation to that center. As Peggy Beck and Anna Lee Walters (Pawnee/Otoe-Missouria) point out in their volume *The Sacred: Ways of Knowledge, Sources of Life*, "Through this interdependency and awareness of relationships, the universe is balanced. . . . [a belief which is] at the root of native North American sacred tradition" (13). Pawnee, Otoe, Navajo, Christian, Bahá'í, through a reorientation by which the sacred is recognized as central, peoples throughout history have transformed their beliefs, perceptions, understandings, and behaviors . . . even scholars. Such transformations are vitally necessary today, and Bahá'í scholars and writers have a great responsibility to the world. "Respect ye the divines and learned amongst you, they whose conduct accords with their professions, who transgress not the bounds which God hath fixed, whose judgments are in conformity with His behests as revealed in His Book. Know ye that they are the lamps of guidance unto them that are in the heavens and on the earth" (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* 128).

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