

# Some Aspects of Bahá'í Scholarship

## Peter J. Khan

### *Foreword*

The acquisition of insight and illumination must surely rank among the highest aims of the adherents of any religion. This pursuit takes a variety of forms, including scholarly endeavors. Bahá'í scholarship, defined here as scholarly activity carried out by members of the Bahá'í community, is a distinctive component of Bahá'í studies. This broader range of scholarship occupies anyone, irrespective of religious affiliation, who is investigating topics that pertain to aspects of the Bahá'í Faith and its teachings or their relevance and application to the wider society.

A close examination of the distinctive features of Bahá'í scholarship is useful and timely for three main reasons: the spread of the Bahá'í Faith to all corners of the earth, the diversification of its community to embrace people of differing cultural, ethnic, and educational backgrounds, and the growing interest in its achievements and potential by academics and other leaders of thought. While this article does not aim to provide a comprehensive treatment of the subject, it does seek to highlight some of the most significant elements of Bahá'í scholarship and draw attention to those aspects in which the Bahá'í approach to scholarly activity is distinct from that prevalent in the wider society.

### *Basic Concepts*

#### **Worldview**

Bahá'ís engaged in any form of intellectual activity begin with belief in the validity of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings. They perceive the universe as having spiritual as well as material dimensions. They accept the existence of God, described in the Bahá'í writings as an "unknowable Essence,"<sup>1</sup> as an article of belief rather than a matter of conjecture or debate. They regard human beings as each having a nonmaterial entity identified as a soul, which exists after death in a state beyond the comprehension of those dwelling in this world, transcending space and time.

The implications of this worldview are extensive. Bahá'í scholars consider forms of religious activity, such as prayer and meditation, and processes such as those that prompt motivation, innovation, and inspiration, which are usually examined from the standpoint of present-day psychology, from a wider and more inclusive perspective. Their approach not only affirms the validity and relevance of conventional psychological insight, but also recognizes that human beings have a spiritual nature and are thus amenable to spiritual influences.

According to the Bahá'í worldview, the forces operating in the world are not confined to those associated with the material realm and studied by disciplines such as physics. The enlarged view encompasses spiritual forces that operate through laws and processes described in the Bahá'í writings and have certain features directly analogous to those studied in the world of physics, such as action at a distance, **nonlocality**, and **nonlinearity** in the relationship between **cause** and **effect**.

The novelty of the Bahá'í perspective has, in recent years, raised some problems for those engaged in scholarly endeavor in both an academic setting and the wider society. Responding to requests for guidance on these issues, the Universal House of Justice has provided a number of useful insights into the implications of the Bahá'í worldview, some of which are presented here.

A number of problems arise from the dissonance between the Bahá'í approach to scholarship and the approach based on materialistic interpretations of reality adopted in most Western academic circles. In a recent letter written on its behalf, the Universal House of Justice referred to "the implications for the study of religion of certain assumptions about human nature and the process of civilization that a purely materialistic interpretation of reality has imposed on scholarly activity of every kind, at least in the Western world." The letter continues:

A related paradigm for the study of religion has gradually consolidated itself in the prevailing academic culture during the course of the present century. It insists that all spiritual and moral phenomena must be understood through the application of a scholarly apparatus devised to explore existence in a way that ignores the issues of God's continuous relationship with His creation and His intervention in human life and history. Yet, from a Bahá'í point of view, it is precisely this intervention that is the central theme of the Teachings of the Founders of the revealed religions ostensibly being studied.

As a result of this insistence, opinions that should have remained matters of learned speculation have tended to assume the character of dogma. Equally regrettable is an intolerant attitude toward other perceptions of reality, which too often characterizes the expression of these opinions. In the context of historical circumstance, this development is understandable. The rigid intolerance exhibited in the past by much of

organized religion, together with the domination of scholarship long exercised by theological elites, could not but arouse strong negative reactions. From a Bahá'í point of view, however, bigotry is retrograde and unacceptable in whatever form it chooses to present itself.<sup>2</sup>

In another letter, the Universal House of Justice stated:

Although the reality of God's continuous relationship with His creation and His intervention in human life and history are the very essence of the teachings of the Founders of the revealed religions, dogmatic materialism today insists that even the nature of religion itself can be adequately understood only through the use of an academic methodology designed to ignore the truths that make religion what it is.<sup>3</sup>

The Universal House of Justice also referred to the problems that would arise "if an attempt is made to impose, on the Bahá'í community's own study of the Revelation, materialistic methodologies and attitudes antithetical to its very nature."<sup>4</sup> While it was natural that some Bahá'í authors, seeking acceptance from their academic colleagues and from editors of academic journals, would attempt to write articles from a perspective similar to that of non-Bahá'ís, the Universal House of Justice pointed out that, in following such an approach,

...they have inadvertently cast the Faith into a mold which is essentially foreign to its nature, taking no account of the spiritual forces which Bahá'ís see as its foundation. Presumably the justification offered for this approach would be that most scholars of comparative religion are essentially concerned with discernible phenomena, observable events and practical affairs and are used to treating their subject from a Western, if not a Christian, viewpoint. This approach, although understandable, is quite impossible for a Bahá'í, for it ignores the fact that our worldview includes the spiritual dimension as an indispensable component for consistency and coherence, and it does not beseem a Bahá'í to write...about his Faith as if he looked upon it from the norm of humanism or materialism.<sup>5</sup>

Such an approach

...leads to these authors' drawing conclusions and making implications which are in conflict with the Bahá'í teachings and with the reality of the Faith. A good Bahá'í author, when writing for such a publication, should be fully capable of adopting a calmly neutral and expository tone, without falling into the trap of distorting the picture by adopting what is, in essence, a materialistic and localized stance.<sup>6</sup>

Bahá'ís may sometimes find themselves accused of ignorant fanaticism, or of having closed minds, by basing their scholarship upon acceptance of the Bahá'í worldview. Such accusations are logically inconsistent. One of the fundamental principles of the Bahá'í Faith is independent investigation of truth. The Universal House of Justice emphasizes:

...not only the right but also the responsibility of each believer to explore truth for himself or herself are fundamental to the Bahá'í teachings. This principle is an integral feature of the coming of age of humankind, inseparable from the social transformation to which Bahá'u'lláh is calling the peoples of the world. It is as relevant to specifically scholarly activity as it is to the rest of spiritual and intellectual life. Every human being is ultimately responsible to God for the use which he or she makes of these possibilities...<sup>7</sup>

Bahá'ís independently investigate the claim of Bahá'u'lláh to be a bringer of truth, a Manifestation of God, and having concluded that this claim is valid, they freely choose to identify themselves with this religion. The means by which this investigation is carried out, or the length of time required, is a matter of personal choice, and what constitutes conclusive evidence to one individual may not suffice for another. However, acceptance of Bahá'u'lláh as a Manifestation of God is the crucial element distinguishing Bahá'ís from those who admire the Bahá'í teachings or regard Bahá'u'lláh as a very wise man and a source of profound insight. As a direct corollary to this acceptance, Bahá'ís regard the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh as statements of truth—a view reflected in their scholarly endeavors. For Bahá'ís to write about the Bahá'í teachings in any other way would be inconsistent or deceptive.

The Universal House of Justice has affirmed:

The Bahá'í community is an association of individuals who have voluntarily come together, on recognizing Bahá'u'lláh's claim to be the Manifestation of God for this age, to establish certain patterns of personal and social behavior and to build the institutions that are to promote these patterns. There are numerous individuals who share the ideals of the Faith and draw inspiration from its teachings, while disagreeing with certain of its features, but those who actually enter the Bahá'í community have accepted, by their own free will, to follow the Teachings in their entirety...<sup>8</sup>

This distinctive characteristic of the Bahá'í community is evident in all aspects of its functioning, not least of which is its consistency in the expression of belief that Bahá'u'lláh is a Manifestation of God.

### **Authoritative writings**

Central to Bahá'í scholarly activity is the authority of Bahá'u'lláh's writings, which are much more voluminous than those of any other of the world's major religions. The greatest care is taken to establish the authenticity of that which is accepted as part of the revelation of Bahá'u'lláh. No credence is given to any oral statements that are unsupported by an authentic written text. The documents of that text are analyzed rigorously, using modern techniques when necessary, to confirm their authenticity, and appropriate measures are taken to ensure their preservation.

To a Bahá'í, the Manifestation of God has a nature intrinsically distinct from that of others, and perhaps no phenomenon is more intriguing or mysterious in the study of the Bahá'í Faith than that of the process of revelation, by which the Word of God is transmitted to humanity, often at great speed in a torrent of words, through the Manifestation.

It is clear therefore that Bahá'í scholars approach the study of the writings of Bahá'u'lláh differently from colleagues who do not share their belief. In addressing issues raised by Bahá'í academics, the Universal House of Justice urged them

...to apply to their work the concept which they accept as Bahá'ís: that the Manifestation of God is of a higher realm and has a perception far above that of any human being. He has the task of raising humankind to a new level of knowledge and behavior. In this, His understanding transcends the traditions and concepts of the society in which He appears. As Bahá'u'lláh Himself writes in the Hidden Words:

O Son of Beauty! By My spirit and by My favor! By My mercy and by My beauty! All that I have revealed unto thee with the tongue of power, and have written for thee with the pen of might, hath been in accordance with thy capacity and understanding, not with My state and the melody of My voice.<sup>9</sup>

Bahá'u'lláh's writings address a wide range of subjects that are directly relevant to the activities of Bahá'í scholars. The Universal House of Justice has referred recently to

...the statements in the Bahá'í writings which disclose the relationship between the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh and the knowledge which is acquired as a result of scholarly endeavors. Bahá'u'lláh asserts that:

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

It is evident that the Bahá'í Writings illuminate all areas of human endeavor and all academic disciplines. Those who have been privileged to recognize the station of Bahá'u'lláh have the bounty of access to a Revelation which casts light upon all aspects of thought and inquiry, and are enjoined to use the understanding which they obtain from their immersion in the Holy Writings to advance the interests of the Faith.<sup>10</sup>

A unique aspect of the Bahá'í Faith is the Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh. Adherence to its provisions is essential for the successful pursuit of Bahá'í scholarship. It is a powerful agent in promoting creativity and freedom of thought, since it constrains individual believers from claiming authority for their own views. Through the provision of authoritative interpretations, it offers a productive avenue for Bahá'ís to explore the meaning and implications of the teachings and a means for them to avoid contention.

Since this Covenant has no parallel in religious history, its novel features require careful consideration, and the implications of its provisions merit thorough study by Bahá'ís embarking on scholarly endeavors. In a document calling for greater impetus to be given to fostering Bahá'í scholarship, the Universal House of Justice called for Bahá'í institutions to render valuable services "by promoting within the Bahá'í community an atmosphere of tolerance for the views of others. At the same time," the House of Justice continued, "the fundamental core of the believer's faith should be strengthened by an increasing awareness of the cardinal truth and vital importance of the Covenant, and an ever-growing love for Bahá'u'lláh."<sup>11</sup>

The essential feature of the Covenant is that Bahá'u'lláh, in clear and unambiguous writing, designated His eldest son 'Abdu'l-Bahá as having the power and authority to provide an authoritative interpretation of His writings. In accordance with the explicit provisions of the Covenant, this authority was conferred subsequently on 'Abdu'l-Bahá's eldest grandson, Shoghi Effendi, who was designated as the Guardian of the Cause. Neither 'Abdu'l-Bahá nor Shoghi Effendi is regarded as occupying a station even remotely approaching that of the Manifestation of God, but their interpretations are accepted by Bahá'ís as statements of religious truth with an authority derived directly from statements of Bahá'u'lláh. As Shoghi Effendi wrote:

The fact that the Guardian has been specifically endowed with such power as he may need to reveal the purport and disclose the implications of the utterances of Bahá'u'lláh and of 'Abdu'l-Bahá does not necessarily confer upon him a station co-equal with those Whose words he is called upon to interpret. He can exercise that right and discharge this obligation and yet remain infinitely inferior to both of them in rank and different in nature.<sup>12</sup>

The Covenant also establishes the institution of the Universal House of Justice, the supreme legislative body of the Bahá'í Faith, one of the functions of which is, as specified by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, to "deliberate upon all problems which have caused difference, questions that are obscure and matters that are not expressly recorded in the Book. Whatsoever they decide has the same effect as the Text itself"<sup>13</sup> The difference between this function and that of interpretation has been discussed in some detail in the Bahá'í writings.

Bahá'í scholars, thus, have access to a wealth of guidance through the authoritative Bahá'í writings and the elucidations of the Universal House of Justice. These writings provide a stimulus to their intellectual activities and are a source of new insights that give additional impetus to their studies. Individual expressions of opinion and understanding can proceed freely as a necessary part of the creative endeavor without any apprehension that these diverse views will impair the unity of the Bahá'í community. In almost every instance, the Universal House of Justice observes this process with pleasure, as an indication of the community's intellectual vitality. However, in an extreme case, where differences arose over a fundamental issue of Bahá'í belief and gave rise to contention between those involved, the Universal House of Justice commented:

...the resolution of differences of opinion on such fundamental questions is not to be found by continued discussion, but in referring to the Universal House of Justice itself, as you have done. Prolonged, unresolved, public discussion of these fundamental questions can do nothing but breed confusion and dissension.<sup>14</sup>

### **The acquisition of knowledge**

One of the most unusual features of the Bahá'í Faith is the strong emphasis it places on the effort to acquire knowledge from all sources. The Bahá'í principle of the independent investigation of truth derives its origin from explicit statements of Bahá'u'lláh Himself, such as the following:

Knowledge is as wings to man's life, and a ladder for his ascent. Its acquisition is incumbent upon everyone... Great indeed is the claim of scientists and craftsmen on the peoples of the world... In truth, knowledge is a veritable treasure for man, and a source of glory, of bounty, of joy, of exaltation, of cheer and gladness unto him.<sup>15</sup>

'Abdu'l-Bahá reinforces this principle when He tells Bahá'ís: "Make every effort to acquire the advanced knowledge of the day, and strain every nerve to carry forward the divine civilization..."<sup>16</sup> He further admonishes that Bahá'ís should

...make every effort, as much as lieth within their competence, along these lines. The harder they strive to widen the scope of their knowledge, the better and more gratifying will be the result. Let the loved ones of God, whether young or old, whether male or female, each according to his capabilities, bestir themselves and spare no efforts to acquire the various current branches of knowledge, both spiritual and secular, and of the arts.<sup>17</sup>

To Bahá'ís, the effort to acquire knowledge is a spiritual duty and an integral part of their worship of God. It is also necessary for the realization of the Bahá'í aim to contribute to the process of building a new civilization and creating a society in which all people can find the means to fulfill their potential. 'Abdu'l-Bahá emphasizes this spiritual perspective when He says, "All blessings are divine in origin, but none can be compared with this power of intellectual investigation and research, which is an eternal gift producing fruits of unending delight."<sup>18</sup> He has also written:

There are certain pillars which have been established as the unshakeable supports of the Faith of God. The mightiest of these is learning and use of the mind, the expansion of consciousness, and insight into realities of the universe and the hidden mysteries of Almighty God. To promote knowledge is thus an inescapable duty imposed on every one of the friends of God.<sup>19</sup>

The pursuit of knowledge takes many diverse forms, one of which is through Bahá'í scholarship. Its significance for Bahá'ís is described in the following excerpt from a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice: "The Universal House of Justice...regards Bahá'í scholarship as of great potential importance for the development and consolidation of the Bahá'í community as it emerges from obscurity. .."<sup>20</sup>

Some religious systems look with suspicion upon immersion in the secular pursuit of knowledge and encourage their followers to remain aloof from academic studies, apprehensive that such an endeavor will weaken the faith of their adherents or give rise to irreconcilable differences between the findings obtained from religious and those from scientific sources, eroding belief. In contrast, Baha'is are strongly encouraged to participate in academic studies, if circumstances allow. As the Universal House of Justice has clearly stated:

Those believers with the capacity and opportunity to do so have repeatedly been encouraged in their pursuit of academic studies by which they are not only equipped to render much-needed service to the Faith, but are also provided with the means to acquire a profound insight into the meaning and implications of the Bahá'í Teachings. They discover also that the perceptions gained from a deeper understanding of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh clarify the subjects of their academic inquiry.<sup>21</sup>

The potential for constructive interaction between academic studies and the Bahá'í teachings is illustrated in two letters written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi in March 1944. In the first, he encouraged young Bahá'ís who were so inclined to give special attention to such subjects as history, economics, and sociology in their academic program, writing that these subjects are "all related to the teachings and aid in understanding the Faith."<sup>22</sup> A second letter referred to these subjects as "fields in which Bahá'ís not only take a great interest but also cover subjects which our teachings cast an entirely new light upon."<sup>23</sup> Bahá'í students can thus approach their academic studies eager to learn, confident that they will obtain new and beneficial insights into the Bahá'í teachings and that, as their knowledge increases, they may well be able to contribute to their academic field of endeavor through their understanding of these teachings.

With the prospect for such mutual reinforcement between academic studies and the Bahá'í teachings, it can hardly be surprising that another letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi states: "What he wants the Bahá'ís to do is to study more, not to study less. The more general knowledge, scientific and otherwise, they possess, the better. Likewise he is constantly urging them to really study the Bahá'í teachings more deeply."<sup>24</sup>

The very strong encouragement of scholarship is allied with a call to Bahá'ís to honor and respect distinguished accomplishment in any form. Such respect should be unstinting and genuine, but no form of priestly authority should be conferred on Bahá'ís who have acquired academic expertise in any field which relates to an aspect of the teachings. Responding to a question on this subject, the Universal House of Justice has written:

In the study of the Revelation of God, an individual's proficiency in one of the physical or social sciences, in law, philology, or other fields of specialization will often throw valuable light on issues being examined, and such contributions are greatly to be appreciated. The field of Near East studies, mentioned in your letter, is one that can assist in this way. However, no one specialization among the many branches of

scholarly research can confer upon its practitioners an authoritative role in the common effort of exploring the implications of so staggering and all-encompassing a body of truth.

Collateral with His summons to the pursuit of knowledge, Bahá'u'lláh has abolished entirely that feature of all past religions by which a special caste of persons such as the Christian priesthood or the Islamic 'ulamá came to exercise authority over the religious understanding and practice of their fellow believers.<sup>25</sup>

In these early days of the Bahá'í Faith, it is especially important that no actions be taken to give unwarranted authority to those believers who have achieved academic eminence, lest the seeds be sown inadvertently for the later creation of a quasi-priestly caste, contrary to the explicit provisions of the Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh.

### **Bahá'í Approach to Scholarly Activity**

In the wider society, those planning to embark on scholarly activity are advised to pursue a subject in which they have a keen interest and a strong desire to contribute to its advancement. Further, they are encouraged to prepare by acquiring a thorough familiarity with their subject matter. Preparation also includes the development of a well-trained mind and mastery of research techniques relevant to their field of inquiry. Little attention, if any, is paid to personal qualities and values, as they are regarded as totally irrelevant to scholarly pursuit. What does it matter whether scholars are arrogant or modest, contemptuous of the achievements of others or respectful toward their contributions, rude or well mannered?

Much more is expected of Bahá'ís embarking on scholarly endeavors. They have access to guidance within the authoritative Bahá'í writings which is specifically applicable to them, and which they are expected to strive to follow. In carrying out their work they must remember that they are not exempt from the responsibility laid on all Bahá'ís to strive continually to develop their spiritual nature and to follow the laws and principles of their religion. They are also reminded that the mysterious spiritual powers animating their Faith are a source of energy and inspiration for those who sincerely wish to use them. These inspirational powers are central to the creative process that lies at the heart of discovery and the acquisition of new insights.

Much emphasis is placed on the spiritual virtues of humility and modesty about one's accomplishments, which the Universal House of Justice has related to the inspirational process:

[Bahá'í scholars] are urged to be modest about their accomplishments, and to bear in mind always the statement of Bahá'u'lláh that: The heart must needs therefore be cleansed from the idle sayings of men, and sanctified from every earthly affection, so that it may discover the hidden meaning of divine inspiration, and become the treasury of the mysteries of divine knowledge.<sup>26</sup>

The practice of such virtues confers many benefits, among which are the role it plays in the creation of a new kind of scholarly community that is distinguished by respect for accomplishment, mutual encouragement among all members, kindness and consideration to those who are struggling to acquire an understanding of any subject, and a spirit of unity in the quest for truth. It is far removed from the divisiveness, arrogance, and posture of superiority found in some quarters of the scholarly community at the present time.

So important is this subject that Bahá'u'lláh addresses it in His weightiest work, the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, saying: "Amongst the people is he whose learning hath made him proud, and who hath been debarred 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."<sup>27</sup> Here Bahá'u'lláh refers symbolically to those who derive inordinate satisfaction from a following of devotees who hang upon their every pronouncement and who take their views as authoritative. His condemnation is trenchant and poetically evocative: "Say: O rejected one! Where now is his abode? By God, it is the nethermost fire."<sup>28</sup>

In the same book Bahá'u'lláh calls attention to the hypocrisy and false modesty of those who pretend to be self-effacing and humble, while inwardly regarding themselves as entitled to the highest honors. He writes, "Amongst the people is he who seateth himself amid the sandals by the door whilst coveting in his heart the seat of honor,"<sup>29</sup> and "And among the people is he who layeth claim to inner knowledge, and still deeper knowledge concealed within this knowledge."<sup>30</sup> The essential poverty of such an attitude is conveyed vividly in His words, "What thou dost possess is naught but husks which We have left to thee as bones are left to dogs."<sup>31</sup>

While Bahá'ís with capacity and opportunity are encouraged to pursue academic studies, they are advised not to regard academic accomplishment as an essential prerequisite for Bahá'í scholarship. The Universal House of Justice has called for Bahá'í scholarship to include within its embrace "those believers who may lack formal academic qualification but who have, through their perceptive study of the Teachings, acquired insights which are of interest

to others"<sup>32</sup> and has warned Bahá'ís who are engaged in scholarly activities against the "assumption that only a person equipped with conventional academic training is capable of an unbiased attitude and of truly understanding the points at issue, leading to disdain of questions raised by 'unqualified' individuals."<sup>33</sup> In the wider society, such attitudes have been barriers to the advancement of knowledge and a source of the denigration of valuable insights from those who approach a topic of study with a fresh perspective.

The Bahá'í code of conduct must govern all interactions between Bahá'í scholars and others having similar interests, whether those interactions occur through personal contact or by electronic means. While this code does not inhibit the forthright promulgation of an individual's views, it does require that courtesy and consideration for the feelings of others inform all scholarly discussion by Bahá'ís. In this regard, the Universal House of Justice has commented:

As believers with various insights into the Teachings converse—with patience, tolerance and open and unbiased minds—a deepening of comprehension should take place. The strident insistence on individual views, however, can lead to contention, which is detrimental not only to the spirit of Bahá'í association and collaboration but to the search for truth itself.<sup>34</sup>

If creative interchange and discussion of differing views are replaced by contention, to the extent that the unity of the community is disrupted, the institutions of the Faith can be expected to call for restraint and moderation.

The Bahá'í worldview is the bedrock of the approach to be adopted by all Bahá'ís engaged in scholarly activities. It challenges believers studying subjects related to the Bahá'í Faith to pursue an approach that, as stated by the Universal House of Justice, combines "absolute loyalty to the Manifestation of God and His Teachings, with the searching and intelligent study of the Teachings and history of the Faith which those Teachings themselves enjoin."<sup>35</sup> However, this approach also provides Bahá'í scholars with the opportunity to make a notable contribution to the advancement of knowledge and understanding through taking "advantage of the divine Revelation for this Age, which shines like a searchlight on so many problems that baffle modern thinkers."<sup>36</sup>

### **The Range of Bahá'í Scholarship**

One of the objectives of the Bahá'í Faith is to stimulate the intellectual life of humanity, and its teachings provide an impetus to studies in all fields. The Universal House of Justice has stated:

...the Bahá'í Writings illuminate all areas of human endeavor and all academic disciplines. Those who have been privileged to recognize the station of Bahá'u'lláh have the bounty of access to a Revelation which casts light upon all aspects of thought and inquiry, and are enjoined to use the understanding which they obtain from their immersion in the Holy Writings...<sup>37</sup>

This broad definition of the range of endeavors falling within the scope of Bahá'í scholarship stands in sharp contrast to the narrow definitions of legitimate scholarly activity in some disciplines within the academic community. The Bahá'í Faith seeks to establish respect and amity between those engaged in a wide range of approaches and endeavors. In guidance given to an Association for Bahá'í Studies, the Universal House of Justice advised:

Your aim should be to promote an atmosphere of mutual respect and tolerance within which will be included scholars whose principal interest is in theological issues as well as those scholars whose interests lie in relating the insights provided by the Bahá'í teachings to contemporary thought in the arts and sciences. A similar diversity should characterize the endeavors pursued by Bahá'í scholars, accommodating their interests and skills.<sup>38</sup>

Commenting on the diversity of interests which should be accommodated in Bahá'í scholarly work, the Universal House of Justice has stated that "there should be room within the scope of Bahá'í scholarship to accommodate not only those who are interested in theological issues and in the historical origins of the Faith, but also those who are interested in relating the Bahá'í Teachings to their field of academic or professional interest."<sup>39</sup> It appears that the range of scholarly pursuits can be divided into the following five broad categories, described briefly below.

## Historical origins

The early days of the Bahá'í Faith were a time of great drama, due to the magnitude of the claims made successively by the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh, and the fierceness of the reaction which these announcements provoked. The martyrdom of the Báb and of many of His followers, and the prolonged incarceration and confinement of Bahá'u'lláh rank as the principal features of this turbulent period in Bahá'í history.

Much scholarly work is required to clarify these events and to assess their significance. A historian investigating this period is challenged by a multitude of factors, including the fragmentary eyewitness accounts which have survived, the conditions of emotional stress under which these documents were prepared, and the inevitable divergence of the various eyewitness accounts set down some time later. This lack of clarity is further complicated by the actions of antagonists of the Faith who maliciously prepared and widely circulated false reports designed to discredit or malign the central figures of the Faith or their adherents. A contemporary historian who is unable to comprehend the degree of animosity the Cause of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh aroused within fanatical elements and who makes an uncritical synthesis of this material can be expected to reach grossly incorrect conclusions.

Scholars might also give attention to the progressive growth in the early followers' understanding of the magnitude of the Báb's mission in terminating the dispensation of Muhammad, and the station of Bahá'u'lláh as the Inaugurator of a vast new cycle of human history destined to extend over untold millennia into the future. The early followers only dimly perceived the dimensions of the processes being set in motion and the revolutionary nature of the teachings being propounded. The gradual emancipation of the Bahá'í Faith from its Islamic matrix and its emergence as an independent religion are important aspects of the relationship between the Bahá'í religion and Islam to which scholars might profitably direct their attention.

Studying historical facts, historians who are not Bahá'í are likely to make inferences and come to conclusions quite different from those of their Bahá'í colleagues, regarding the motives and the sources of information accessible to the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh. Their views must, of course, be respected; however, Bahá'ís cannot be expected to agree with materialistic interpretations of reality that ignore what believers hold to be the central issue—the intervention of God in human life and history through the appearance of the Manifestations of God. It is unfortunate that this legitimate divergence of viewpoint should have, on occasion, given rise to contention, with some Bahá'ís being subject to criticism for their intellectual honesty in writing from a perspective which reflects what they believe to be true. The Universal House of Justice warned the Bahá'ís about the intolerance of those who maintain

...that the only way to attain a true understanding of historical events and of purport of the sacred and historical records of the Cause of God is through the rigid application of methods narrowly defined in a materialistic framework. They have even gone so far as to stigmatize whoever proposes a variation of these methods as wishing to obscure the truth rather than unveil it.<sup>40</sup>

To be intellectually honest, Bahá'í historians must include within the scope of their inquiry into truth the evidence which has led them to conclude that the claims of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh to be Manifestations of God are valid.

## Textual analysis

A vast arena of activity stands before Bahá'ís whose interests and accomplishments draw them to the scholarly investigation of many issues associated with the sacred texts of the Bahá'í Faith.

As a religion that makes a sharp distinction between authoritative texts and unsubstantiated oral statements, the Bahá'í Faith attaches great importance to the authentication of documents that record these texts. In some instances this will require prolonged study of the documents and their provenance. Issues of accuracy of transcription, the characteristics of the various amanuenses, and publication history may also have to be considered. Attention must also be given to interpolations in some of the texts made by malicious elements bent on deviating the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh from its intended direction and advancing their own personal interests.

Both the context in which a passage was revealed by the Manifestation of God and the time sequence of the various components of the revelation are of great interest to the Bahá'í scholar, as the progressive disclosure of Bahá'u'lláh's mission and the gradual unfoldment of His laws and principles are clarified through study of the time sequence.<sup>41</sup> Of historical interest in itself, the context helps to clarify references and allusions occurring within the text. Caution is required, however, to avoid reaching misleading conclusions through attaching excessive importance to the circumstances under which a book or tablet was revealed; the Manifestation addressed a far wider audience than that immediately at hand. The Epistle to the Son of the Wolf, for example, has an importance and relevance far

beyond that of an appeal addressed to an inveterate opponent of the Faith who is no longer of any significant historical interest.

Another avenue of textual analysis lies in the quotations from distinguished poets and philosophers, references to historical figures and events, allusions to a variety of trends of thought, and the novel use of existing literary forms that are all found in Bahá'u'lláh's writings, which will all attract the attention of scholars for centuries to come.

The translation of the Bahá'í writings from Arabic and Persian into English and other languages raises many challenging issues, since the translation process necessarily implies a degree of interpretation. The definitive work of Shoghi Effendi as authorized interpreter will continue to be the central reference in this process, which will no doubt be advanced through breadth of scholarship, mastery of the languages involved, and the gradual development of a comprehensive translation theory.

### **Study of religious concepts**

Through a combination of profound faith in the validity of Bahá'u'lláh's revelation and use of the power of intellectual inquiry, Bahá'ís can make a unique contribution to the understanding of intrinsically religious concepts that are illuminated through examination of the Bahá'í teachings.

Thorough and careful study of the concept of the Manifestation of God and of the historical details of Bahá'u'lláh's life that bear upon this theme would contribute much-needed illumination in scholarly circles. The existence of a Manifestation of God is foreign to everyday experience, and His claim must inevitably be treated with suspicion by a society that has seen the great harm wrought by those deluded and megalomaniac leaders who have attracted, for a time, a mass of followers prepared to follow blindly wherever they might lead.

Analytical study of the process of revelation, by which the Manifestation transmits the Word of God as the basis for the religion, is also needed. Muslim scholars have carried out useful work in exploring the revelatory process of the Qur'an, but the material available for this kind of study in the context of the Bahá'í Faith is greatly augmented by historical accounts of those who were with Bahá'u'lláh when revelation came to Him, and by references to the revelatory process in His own writings.

Concepts such as the nature of creation, the relationship of matter and spirit, the process of evolution, the nature and role of the human spirit, and immortality are a few areas in which Bahá'í scholars find much to engage their interests and skills. Such philosophic issues as hermeneutics and epistemology are also illuminated through reference to the Bahá'í writings.

Another fruitful area of Bahá'í scholarship is the relationship between the Bahá'í Faith and the other religions of the world, including subjects such as the concept of progressive revelation; prophecies and their fulfillment; the evolution of concepts of law, society and worship; the status of women; forms of organization; and the handling of divergences of opinion and dissent.

### **Application of the Bahá'í teachings to contemporary issues**

From the earliest days of the Faith, Bahá'ís have been urged to apply its teachings to the issues and needs of society and to relate these precepts to contemporary thought. Thus, 'Abdu'l-Bahá called upon Spiritual Assemblies to encourage the members of their communities "to deepen themselves by attentive study of the sacred Texts, and to apply the divine guidance they contain to the circumstances, needs and conditions of society today."<sup>42</sup>

Shoghi Effendi expressed the hope that Bahá'í students would "be led to investigate and analyze the principles of the Faith and to correlate them with the modern aspects of philosophy and science"<sup>43</sup> and advised the believers "to be *au courant* with all the progressive movements and thoughts being put forth today... so that they could correlate these to the Bahá'í teachings."<sup>44</sup>

Bahá'ís who achieve expertise in a field of knowledge could well find it fruitful to pursue the relationship between issues and concepts in that field and the Bahá'í teachings in areas such as the following: the dynamics of group decision-making, and the principles of conflict resolution and of mediation, related to the Bahá'í approach to consultation and group truth-seeking; the principles of social organization and governance, considered through the theory of Bahá'í administration and the Bahá'í approach to world order; psychological theories of personality, motivation, and creativity, related to the Bahá'í teachings on the nature of human beings and their development of spiritual attributes; approaches to law enforcement, the punishment of lawbreakers, and the rehabilitation of criminals, considered in the light of the Bahá'í concepts of law, penalties for the violation of law, rehabilitation, and behavioral change; marriage guidance, family development, and the principles of child education, related to the Bahá'í teachings on these subjects; the developing field of peace studies, considered with the Bahá'í approach to both the attainment of world peace and its maintenance in the face of aggression.

Bahá'ís with expertise in economics can find ways of contributing to their field, drawing on Bahá'í insights about the role of values in economic activity and the necessity for a global perspective. Physicists can draw upon

Bahá'í insights to contribute to aspects of their work such as field theory, cosmology, and astrophysics. Bahá'í biologists, environmental scientists, chemists, and medical scientists can also apply insights from their Faith to their work. In fact, the Bahá'í teachings can provide an impetus to the entire range of human thought.

### **The Bahá'í community**

At this time when, after decades of sustained effort coordinated through a series of plans, the Bahá'í Faith has spread to all parts of the world and has penetrated almost all strata of society, the Bahá'í community itself has become a topic for scholarly study.

It would be useful to investigate the Bahá'í community's progress on a national, regional and global scale, in the implementation of Bahá'í teachings on such subjects as the growth of world-mindedness, the breakdown of class barriers, the achievement of interracial unity and genuine fellowship, the advancement of women and their full participation in Bahá'í community and administrative functioning, and the long-term effect of the Bahá'í commitment to education.

Dispassionate observers regard the growth of the Bahá'í community in size, geographical spread, and cohesion as without parallel. The means by which this has been accomplished, including the community's approach to planning and the deployment of meager resources, is worthy of scholarly study. The effects of opposition, misrepresentation, and calumny from its antagonists on the growth of the community also merit analysis. Dynamic modeling, leading naturally to a forecasting model, is another area for scholarly study. While the growth factors for a belief system such as the Bahá'í Faith necessarily include unquantifiable characteristics and the growth modelling will be approximate, it should be sufficient to provide useful conclusions.

Bahá'í social and economic development initiatives are multiplying rapidly in all parts of the globe, yielding impressive results and a wealth of experience. Studies of the achievements of long-term projects aimed at social advancement might examine the influence of the spiritual component that distinguishes these projects and is manifested in such characteristics as enduring attitudinal change, cooperation, altruism, and unity.

Historical studies, including biographies of Bahá'ís who have played a distinctive role in the progress of the Faith and accounts of events and processes related to the Faith, constitute another area suitable for scholarly work, especially if considered within the context of the social, political, and economic milieu in the wider society.

In assessing progress achieved and needs yet unmet, those investigating Bahá'í community functioning and achievement must be realistic and intellectually honest. If they retain a process orientation, setting the present state within a perspective of evolutionary movement toward the ultimate attainment of the goals of the Faith, they should have no fear that their assessment and conclusions will have a discouraging effect on implementation endeavors. In so vast and fundamental a process of change, there will be some setbacks and reverses along the way, and some barriers to progress will prove stubbornly resistant as age-old prejudices and ingrained habits are encountered and ultimately overcome.

### **The Future**

These are the earliest days in the development of Bahá'í scholarship, and the future is rich with promise as the Bahá'í Faith grows and advances along the path of stimulating the development of a world civilization during the course of the Bahá'í dispensation and beyond. Shoghi Effendi provides some indication of the future that lies ahead in his description of the features of the unified world that humanity is destined to attain. He refers to the consecration of the energies of the people of the world

...to such ends as will extend the range of human inventions and technical development, to the increase of the productivity of mankind, to the extermination of disease, to the extension of scientific research, to the raising of the standard of physical health, to the sharpening and refinement of the human brain, to the exploitation of the unused and unsuspected resources of the planet, to the prolongation of human life, and to the furtherance of any other agency that can stimulate the intellectual, the moral, and the spiritual life of the entire human race.<sup>45</sup>

## Notes & References

1. Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-Iqán*. Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1974, p.98.
2. *Issues related to the Study of the Bahá'í Faith: Extracts from Letters Written on Behalf of the Universal House of Justice*. Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1999, pp. 32-33.
3. The Universal House of Justice, Message to all National Spiritual Assemblies, 7 April 1999.
4. *Issues Related to the Study of the Bahá'í Faith*, p. 33.
5. *Scholarship: Extracts from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá and from Letters of Shoghi Effendi and the Universal House of Justice*, prepared by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice, Bahá'í World Centre. Mona Vale: Bahá'í Publications Australia, 1995, p. 37.
6. *Scholarship*, pp. 37-38.
7. *Issues Related to the Study of the Bahá'í Faith*, p.39.
8. *Issues Related to the Study of the Bahá'í Faith*, p. 27.
9. *Issues Related to the Study of the Bahá'í Faith*, pp. 38-39.
10. *Issues Related to the Study of the Bahá'í Faith*, p. 13.
11. *Scholarship*, p. 40.
12. Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh: Selected Letters*, 1st pocket sized ed. Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1991, p. 151.
13. *The Universal House of Justice*, compiled by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice, Bahá'í World Centre. Oakham: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1984, p. 14.
14. *Issues Related to the Study of the Bahá'í Faith*, p. 30.
15. *Scholarship*, p. 1.
16. *Scholarship*, p. 1.
17. *Scholarship*, pp. 1-2.
18. *Scholarship*, p. 2.
19. *Scholarship*, p. 9.
20. *Scholarship*, p. 16.
21. *Issues Related to the Study of the Bahá'í Faith*, p. 13.
22. *Bahá'í Youth: A Compilation*, prepared by the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of United States. Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1973, p.15.
23. *Bahá'í Youth*, p. 15.
24. *Scholarship*, p. 7.
25. *Issues Related to the Study of the Bahá'í Faith*, p. 20.
26. *Scholarship*, p. 25.
27. Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas: The Most Holy Book*. Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1992, K 41. The main text of the presently published version of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas has sequentially numbered paragraphs, indicated here by the letter "K" followed by the relevant number.
28. *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, K 41.
29. *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, K 36.
30. *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, K 36.
31. *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, K 36.
32. *Issues Related to the Study of the Bahá'í Faith*, p. 16.
33. *Issues Related to the Study of the Bahá'í Faith*, p. 5.
34. *Issues Related to the Study of the Bahá'í Faith*, p. 38.
35. *Scholarship*, p. 23.
36. *Scholarship*, p. 30.
37. *Issues Related to the Study of the Bahá'í Faith*, p. 13.
38. *Issues Related to the Study of the Bahá'í Faith*, p. 15.
39. *Issues Related to the Study of the Bahá'í Faith*, p.16.
40. *Issues Related to the Study of the Bahá'í Faith*, p. 37.
41. Janet A. Khan and Peter J. Khan, *Advancement of Women, A Bahá'í Perspective*. Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust 1998, pp. 98-102.
42. *Scholarship*, p. 10.
43. *Issues Related to the Study of the Bahá'í Faith*, p. 14.
44. *Issues Related to the Study of the Bahá'í Faith*, p. 14.
45. *World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 204.

Source: *The Bahá'í World 1999-2000*, pp. 197-221