



alienated from their own literary tradition. Language has become sober, rational, and passionless in contrast to the language of Goethe or Dickens. The Church is facing the same problem and in order to bridge the gap between religious and daily life, attempts have been made to re-translate the Bible in the styles of Tarzan, Batman and Asterix. Our own introductory brochures are simple and fragmentary, not meeting the demands of people who want a deeper impression of this new Faith; the purpose of these leaflets being only to draw people's attention to the Faith.

The situation today in the Bahá'í world, one hundred years after the Ascension of Bahá'u'lláh, in the middle of the second century of the Bahá'í Era – not at all long in terms of religious history – is that the Faith has approximately five million adherents and has spread to most countries of the world being, according to the Yearbook of the Encyclopedia Britannica, the most widespread religion after Christianity. This Ridvan 165 National Spiritual Assemblies will be formed. The persecution of Bahá'ís in Iran and the flagrant violation of their human rights has brought the international Bahá'í Community to the attention of the parliaments, politicians, and rulers of this world – an outstanding achievement in the history of religion. The Faith is, indeed, emerging from obscurity.

However, if we compare the development of the doctrines of our Faith, the scholarly systematization and presentation of its teachings in terms of philosophy, theology, religious studies, with that of Islam, for instance, we must admit that we are still in our infancy. The process of reflection and systematization started earlier in Islam. For example, by the middle of the second century, Sunni Islam had founded its four legal schools. In contrast our research has mainly been focused on the history of our Faith with some fine literature including the works of Balyuzi, Momen, and Peter Smith. The theological doctrines, however, which are at the very core of a religion, have not been stressed as much in our research. Apart from Juan Ricardo Cole's excellent essay on the Concept of Manifestation in the Bahá'í Writings[3] and Moojan Momen's contribution Relativism: A Basis for Bahá'í Metaphysics,[4] very little has been written on the metaphysical and theological aspects of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation. For instance, if we glance at the Journal of Bahá'í Studies would support this observation, we find contributions on the relationship of science and religion, agriculture, consultation, the environment, health, psychology, equality of the sexes, international language, family life, and a lot on poetry (!) – among them there are some very interesting articles, but only a few on theology and the Revelation, such as Todd Lawson's article on the Qayyumu'l Asmá'[5] and recently Seena Fazel and Khazeh Fananapazir's contribution on the claim to exclusivity and uniqueness in Christianity.[6]

Two outstanding projects have plainly shown our difficulty in finding Bahá'í writers in this field. One was a series of articles written for the renowned French philosophical encyclopaedia *Encyclopédie Philosophique Universelle*, which is being published by Presses Universitaires de France, including 21

articles on the works of the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh, Abdu'lBahá, Shoghi Effendi and on a small selection of secondary literature. The other project is A Short Encyclopedia of the Bahá'í Faith, a project sponsored by the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States, which is anticipated by the end of the Holy Year. Both projects have shown clearly that the international Bahá'í community has some difficulties in making contributions on an encyclopaedic level.

When asked to write some articles at this level, I started looking for specialised Bahá'í literature on subjects like sin, conscience, ethics, and social teaching, and soon realised that such material simply does not exist. Although ethical statements are scattered throughout the whole body of Bahá'í Scripture and the question of right action is of central import, there has never been any study of the subject. Nobody has tried to research the basic philosophical ideas underlying this ethical system. All we have are some compilations from the Writings – their purpose not being analysis, but rather edification.

In this context I also realised that, for example, the role of reason has never been explored fully. There are seemingly contradictory statements of Abdu'l-Bahá on reason, and up to now, no one has studied the hermeneutic principles underlying them. The same is true for statements on politics which also appear to be contradictory. The easy formula that the Bahá'í Faith is essentially non-political can no longer be justified. Although one of the goals of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation is the advancement of the world and the establishment of a new world order, no comprehensive work on political thought, the social teachings and the philosophical ideas behind them has ever been written. The first and last individual who attempted to enumerate the social principles and laws of our Revelation was Dr. Esslemont – some seventy years ago. Though themes such as consultation, health, family life and so on, are interesting and important, they are not the kernel of our Faith. We run the risk of putting the cart before the horse, if we dive straight into correlating the Bahá'í teachings with current social needs and problems without having made a systematic analysis of the central themes of the Revelation.

A number of new challenges facing us will undoubtedly encourage the Bahá'ís to acquire a deeper understanding of the significance of the teachings of their Faith and will, consequently, enhance the quality of and contribution made by Bahá'í scholarship.

#### The Breakdown of Communism in Eastern Europe

The obvious failure of a paradise based solely on human knowledge and political struggle has left a spiritual vacuum which offers the Bahá'í community unique opportunities for teaching. However, many of the people interested in new moral standards, new goals and new meanings of life, come from an intellectual background. A young Russian intellectual who joined the Faith two years ago complained about the uncritical and superficial knowledge that many travel-teachers from the West have, who are often not able to answer basic

questions about the Faith. The methods of mass teaching employed in other regions of the world do not work in countries where people are more inclined to a philosophical and methodical approach to truth. There are fascinating opportunities for which we should be prepared. As Shoghi Effendi put it: The Bahá'ís should . . . arm our minds with knowledge in order to better demonstrate to, especially, the educated classes, the truth enshrined in our faith.'[7] The following example will serve to highlight this point.

On the 22-26 November 1991, a National Symposium on Moral Education' was held in Tirana, Albania. The Landegg Academy of Switzerland had been invited by the Ministry of Education of Albania to hold the Symposium and conduct the sessions. According to a report of the Landegg Academy the Symposium was attended by over 600 university professors and students, teachers and educational administrators from different parts of the country. It was opened by the Minister of Education himself, who in his opening speech said, Albanians are badly in need of a new philosophy of life, new sets of guidelines.' A team of fourteen resource persons from six different countries, sponsored by the National Spiritual Assemblies of Italy and Germany, conducted the sessions and presented papers. In addition to the Symposium, a number of other activities were simultaneously conducted by the Landegg team members. The Symposium was open to the public and was publicised in the mass media. As a result another 'National Symposium on Moral Education in the Family' will be organised jointly by the Landegg Academy and the Albanian Institute of Educational Studies. The Ministry of Education requested copies of all papers presented at the Symposium for inclusion in a publication of the conference's proceedings. Another outcome is the plan for the joint establishment of a Moral Education Centre', in either the University of Tirana or the National Academy of Science. It was also suggested that the Landegg Academy should appoint the director of this Centre. In addition, Bahá'í literature can now be placed in the public libraries, and Ministry officials, charged with the responsibility of publishing textbooks, asked for assistance in incorporating materials on moral education in school textbooks. Furthermore, a project for a seminar on pre-school education will also be organised together. The department of philosophy will sponsor a seminar on 'The Spiritual Heritage of Mankind', and a course on Philosophy of Religion', is planned and to be conducted by Dr. Julio Savi of Italy.

The Landegg team were not formally representing the Bahá'í Faith and the concepts and ideas they presented in the seminar were not explicitly put forward as Bahá'í ones. The focus of the courses was not the Bahá'í Faith, but rather religion in general. A prerequisite for success was that the ideas of the Faith were not presented in a direct and descriptive way, but on a reflective and thoughtful level.

### Teaching Prominent People

An important goal of the worldwide Bahá'í community is to foster friendly relations with prominent people, politicians, leaders of thought, the educated classes, intellectuals, and scholars. This objective was repeatedly emphasized by Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi as reflected in the recent compilation from

the Bahá'í Writings entitled *Prominent People* compiled by the Universal House of Justice. Shoghi Effendi wrote in 1949: It seems what we need is a more profound and co-ordinated Bahá'í scholarship in order to attract such men.' We have to learn to present the deeper teachings, as Shoghi Effendi put it, intelligently and enticingly to such men!'[8]

### Apologetics

Attacks on the Faith, from both within and without the Bahá'í community, pose another challenge that will increasingly encourage our ability to develop a more methodical and systematic presentation of the teachings.

The refutation of such attacks has to be done by rational, logical and cogent arguments. An adequate response must be grounded on a solid body of knowledge of the Bahá'í Faith, its history, the history of religions, especially Islamic history, and a grasp of Christian theology. A significant advantage would also be a basic knowledge of philosophical thought. The Guardian stated: The Cause of God must be protected from the enemies of the Faith, and from those who sow the seeds of doubt in the hearts of the believers, and the greatest of all protection is knowledge',[9] and as Dr. Momen has aptly put it: Well-grounded Bahá'í scholars provide one of the strongest bullwarks of the Bahá'í Cause in defending itself from the attacks of its enemies.'[10]

From the history of the Faith, we know to what extent such attacks by the enemies of the cause 'fuel the unfoldment of the Faith.'[11] The Universal House of Justice has called upon the believers not to allow themselves to be perturbed by any increase of opposition to the Cause' and to understand the creative interaction between crisis and victory in the evolution of the Faith'.[12] The defence of the Faith from attacks is a tremendous challenge and stimulus for a deeper understanding of the Cause of God. It assists in the development of our knowledge and ability to engage in dialogue with those who regard us critically. Apologetics was the main impetus for the development of Christian theology. The Fathers of the Church were apologists. Attacks, no matter how unfounded and ill-informed, compel us to think more deeply about the teachings of our Faith. Reproaches like the Bahá'í Faith does not take sin' seriously and neglects evil, that it is quasifascist movement' striving for world supremacy, are certainly distortions of our Faith but reflection is nevertheless necessary before a rebuttal can be made. Another example is the Bahá'í law on the expulsion of Covenant-breakers from the community, which has been criticised very harshly by Church leaders as well as Covenant-breakers themselves. For a justification of this law, one needs to have some knowledge of Church history and Canon Law.[13] The rebuttal of such attacks is clearly not every person's responsibility, but we need some deepened friends in all countries who are equipped with the knowledge and the command of convincing debating skills to undertake this service.

We can be sure that the publication of an authoritative English translation of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* in the Holy Year will provoke much discussion among the friends and prompt attacks by enemies of the Faith. The revelation of a

concrete law with binding rules of behaviour, with its demand of absolute obedience, its provision of a law that sets absolute limits to personal freedom and that cannot be questioned and criticised, will invoke the abhorrence and repulsion of sceptical contemporaries. I am sure that some laws, especially the penal provisions of the Book, will be the target of harsh criticism, and it is quite obvious that the Bahá'ís must reach a new level of knowledge and understanding of their Faith in order to protect the Cause.

There is an abundance of encouraging statements in Bahá'í Scripture on the need to defend the Faith against those who assail, in their inflammatory writings, the tenets of the Cause of God' (Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings 329):

It is incumbent upon all men, each according to his ability, to refute the arguments of those who have attacked the Faith of God... If any man were to arise to defend, in his writings, the Cause of God against its assailants, such a man, however inconsiderable his share, shall be so honoured in the world to come that the Concourse on High would envy his glory. No pen can depict the loftiness of his station, neither can any tongue describe its splendour' (ibid.).

Thus, it comes as some surprise that there is some reluctance and suspicion in the Bahá'í community against entering the arena of responding to attacks, and unfortunate that many obstacles exist against developing a new degree of knowledge imperative for convincing argumentation. This spirit of anti-intellectualism, which is very strong in some communities, must be overcome; otherwise the Cause of God will suffer setbacks.

What is the reason for the very emotional attitude which considers scholarly activities a threat that undermines the integrity of the belief system of our Faith? The following verse in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, 'Immerse yourselves in the ocean of My words, that ye may unravel its secrets, and discover all the pearls of wisdom that lie hid in its depths' (Synopsis 27), provides an important insight. If one primarily understands 'immerse' to mean meditation and contemplation on the Word of God, then certainly this meditative, contemplative approach to Scripture is indispensable. However is it the only legitimate one? There is another approach; an approach which employs rational, analytical, and methodical thought. Individuals do not only wish to understand through their hearts, but also through their mind<sup>3</sup>. The European Enlightenment, which over-emphasised the 'mind', resulted in a uni-dimensional way of thinking, which today is recognised and criticised. However, by over-emphasizing the 'heart' alone, such critics are in danger throwing the baby out with the bath water. Undoubtedly, meditation has a unique position in the Writings. For instance, to read the Gleanings, and contemplate on some verses is definitely of immense spiritual benefit: 'One hour's reflection is preferable to seventy years of pious worship' (Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Íqán 238). However, since human beings are essentially 'rational souls', they seek and need to understand rationally. To understand a certain passage of Scripture, one must try to see it in context. One must approach it systematically – collecting and comparing all passages relating to the subject. For example, if I want to

understand a passage on liberty in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, I have to see it in the context of the whole body of Bahá'u'lláh's Writings, in the context of his denunciations of tyranny and oppression, his exhortations to follow justice and moderation, and so on. Otherwise, I could arrive at incorrect conclusions as the famous orientalist Ignaz Goldziher did, when he wrote about the Aqdas: 'One should expect Bahá'u'lláh as far as politics are concerned, to be among the liberals. However, we are disappointed to find him among those who struggle against freedom.'[14]

Moreover, for a deeper understanding, it is helpful to also include in one's research the broad stream of mankind's spiritual heritage, Western and Eastern philosophy, and the philosophy of past religions. In this way, one can arrive at much clearer insights than through a solely Bahá'í-focused methodology. The idea that all the spiritual heritage of mankind has now been put on the rubbish heap of history through Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation is erroneous and in contradiction to Bahá'u'lláh's statements, which declare that 'All men have been created to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization' (Gleanings 215). In the light of this verse, culture and civilization are a continuum.

Bahá'u'lláh built on the whole spiritual heritage of mankind in His Writings, as His many references, allusions and quotations from the Bible, the Qur'án, the hadith, and Arabic-Persian poetry show. How great is His praise of the Greek philosophers such as Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle in the Lawh-i-Hikmat,[15] philosophers who had a tremendous impact on Christian and Islamic thought. The oft-repeated opinion by zealous Bahá'í that Bahá'u'lláh has said everything and we don't need any other philosophers in order to know truth, is narrow-minded, completely unfounded and can generate sectarian attitudes within the Bahá'í community. Bahá'u'lláh has answered many questions which have been discussed for centuries by philosophers, and many passages of His Writings can therefore be understood in the light of these discussions.

The 'arrogance of the intellectuals' is a real danger which has been described by Moojan Momen in his fine article on Bahá'í scholarship[16] – has been superseded by this anti-intellectualism, the 'arrogance' of those who rely only on the spirit, who regard rational thought to be inconsequential, unspiritual, and contrary to the spirit of the Faith. One cannot but wonder how this attitude has become so strong in the communities when we consider Bahá'u'lláh's statements on the mind, which He calls 'First and foremost' among the favours 'which the Almighty hath conferred upon man' (Gleanings 194); 'This gift giveth man the power to discern the truth in all things, leadeth him to that which is right, and helpeth him to discover the secrets of creation' (ibid.). The 'rational faculty' has been called a 'sign' of the 'sovereign Lord' (Gleanings 164).

The attitude that simply ignores the attacks of enemies, and refrains from all rebuttal, putting all confidence in divine assistance – an attitude of the mutawakkilán[17] – has already resulted in severe damage. For example, in 1981, an agency of the Protestant Church in Germany published a monograph on

the Bahá'í Faith of 480 pages in length, written by a Swiss Covenant-breaker. The book has been promulgated with enormous publicity, and has been announced as the 'standard work of Bahá'ism for the next decades. The work, which is now available in all libraries in Germany, is probably the most horrible penned by a non-Bahá'í author; a crafty concoction of truths, half-truths, misunderstandings, distortions, manipulations and plain lies. The book, which manages to cleverly distort the Bahá'í Faith, is well done, and so it is not surprising that it has been reviewed very favourably and been taken seriously as a scholarly presentation of the Bahá'í Faith. I doubt if the author, Francesco Ficicchia, who has certainly contributed a lot of material, was able to write the book himself in the style of a methodical, scholarly work, using the terminology of theology and religious studies and Hebrew, Arabic, Persian, Greek and Latin terms – languages of which the author, himself a social worker, has no knowledge. It is very probable then that the book was written by an expert of religious studies and that Ficicchia contributed some material and his name.

In order to avoid entering the arena of confrontation and controversy at a time when a dialogue of the world religions was increasingly advocated by theologians such as Hans Kung, William Oxtoby or Wilfred Cantwell Smith, there was no rebuttal made to this work, in the hope that it would disappear into oblivion with time. Unfortunately, this was not the case. Moreover, the views and assertions presented in this book have been adopted by orientalists in other countries, although two facts should have warned them against its scholarly value. Firstly, the author is a renegade, and renegades, renowned for their highly emotional attitude, are usually not considered to be reliable scholars when they analyse the religious movement to which they belonged. Secondly, the publisher is a Protestant information agency, whose motivation is certainly not the promotion of academic literature.

Furthermore, in my opinion, a clear distinction between the attacks from within and without the Faith is not possible. It is my strong conviction that the machinations of the Covenant-breakers would have been less successful if the Bahá'ís had reacted and analysed their absurd propositions instead of tabooing them. For example, Dr. Jensen, a Covenant-breaker in the USA in the tradition of Mason Remey, would not have found a following if the absurdity of his claims had been analysed and exposed to the Bahá'ís. It is a Bahá'í law to avoid any communication with Covenant-breakers, but no Bahá'í commandment exists prohibiting believers from analysing and rebutting their assertions. Certainly, I do not wish to make a recommendation for study of this awful kind of literature. However, I think that a few knowledgeable Bahá'ís must do so, and I cannot see why the nature of these assertions should not be discussed with the friends. If done wisely, it could really deepen them. 'Heretics', said St. Augustine, 'are a divine blessing, because they prevent Christians from falling asleep on the Scripture' and St. Paul tells us, 'For there must be also heretics among you, that they which are approved may be made manifest among you' (1 Cor. 11:19).

## Reviewing Bahá'í Literature

A problem facing every Bahá'í writer is the process of review. In the past some friends have repeatedly turned to the World Centre questioning the need for review of the manuscripts of Bahá'í authors, reflecting the fact that sometimes this process has been handled in a very rigid way.

My opinion is that this provision, which was implemented by Shoghi Effendi as a temporary measure to protect of the Cause, cannot yet be abrogated. However, this process is sometimes exercised very unwisely acting as a kind of censorship. Although its purpose is to ascertain that there are no misinterpretations of Bahá'í teachings in the manuscript, the reviewers sometimes examine literary style, and interfere with the author's personal style. In some cases, reviewers even lack the competence and expertise to review a particular work. The result is frustration and the suppression of literature so urgently needed. Indeed, on occasion, individual reviewers consider themselves to be a kind of co-author and try to impose upon the author their own view on a subject, and the structure and style of the essay. I think the administrative bodies should be aware of the detrimental effects such an abuse of this process has on the publication of secondary Bahá'í literature.

## Conclusion

To conclude, I would like to make some suggestions for those who want to contribute to the development of Bahá'í scholarship.

The prime prerequisite is, as already mentioned, a 'solid knowledge'. First, a knowledge of the Writings of Bahá'í Faith is necessary. Then, a good knowledge of the Qur'án, which is in a sense our Old Testament. A well-informed Bahá'í should also have a good knowledge of the Bible, even though there are few well-informed Christians around these days. In general, I think it is good for the reputation of the Bahá'ís if they know the Holy Writings of other religions better than their followers. Moreover, it is very important for writing any Bahá'í scholarly work to have a good knowledge of the history of religions, and the theology of the prophetic religions – Judaism, Christianity and Islam. This knowledge is not only a requirement for dialogue with the followers of these religions, but also a precondition for gaining a deeper understanding of our own Faith.

Finally, a Bahá'í should be acquainted with philosophical thought and the history of Eastern and Western philosophy. We have many academics in our community but, unfortunately, very few who have studied subjects such as philosophy, religious studies, and Islamic studies. However, I think that there should be no reason why students of, for instance, physics, medicine, or engineering could not broaden their horizons by studying these subjects which are so important for Bahá'í scholarship, a process which some outstanding Bahá'í scholars have undertaken so successfully.

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Crisis and Victory, Introduction iii.

ibid.

The Codex Iuris Canonici – the code of laws of the Catholic Church as well as the legal orders of the Protestant Churches – has legal provisions for the excommunication of members of the Church, not only in cases of apostasy, heresy and schism, but also in cases of minor significance. The law of excommunication was developed by the Church from provisions in the Gospel such as Matt. 18:15-17 and 1 Cor 5:13. Thus, it is not very convincing if Church leaders criticise legal provisions they themselves have practised for many centuries and which are very rarely applied in the Bahá'í community and as a final resort in cases of 'covenant-breaking', i.e. schismatic, partisan activities of members

attacking the Faith from inside.

Vorlesungen über den Islam (reprint Heidelberg 1963), p. 279.

Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh 147; cf. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, The Promulgation of Universal Peace 327, 348,356.

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From tawakkul; trust in God. The mutawakkilún carried tawakkul to excess – a quietist attitude that involves complete extinction of human will, putting all trust in God and desisting from action. Cf. Goldziher, op.cit., p. 151.

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