



that they may be in a position to present the Message in a befitting way, and in a manner that would convince every unbiased observer of the effectiveness and power of the Teachings. (quoted in International Teaching Centre, Scholarship 2)

This self-explanatory passage, taken from a letter written on behalf of the Guardian in 1934, is really the charter for effective scholarship in the Bahá'í community and indicates its central role.

#### Definition of Bahá'í Scholarship

In a letter written on behalf of the Guardian there is this very revealing definition of the types of attributes required by a true scholars of the Faith:

The Cause needs more Bahá'í scholars, people who not only are devoted to it and believe in it and are anxious to tell others about it, but also who have a deep grasp of the Teachings and their significance, and who can correlate its beliefs with the current thoughts and problems of the people of the world. (quoted in International Teaching Centre, Scholarship 3)

Two implications of particular significance can be drawn from this passage. Firstly it is apparent that this view of scholarship is sharp contradistinction to those concepts current in the non-Bahá'í world. It is not a pursuit for those living in elitist ivory towers but a practical dynamic process with clear objectives. Secondly the definition covers an extremely wide range of potential topics for study embracing virtually all aspects of individual and collective life. In other words it is not confined solely to the study of the history of the Faith and aspects of theology (as has become a widely held view). Although these traditional fields of exploration have been of tremendous importance - with the names of Mirzá Abu'l Fadl, and Hands of the Cause of God George Townshend and Hasan Balyuzi coming particularly to mind - there are many other avenues of opportunity open to budding scholars. More recent advances of special note in the "traditional" areas have been made for example by Adib Tahrezadeh, Moojan Momen, Stephen Lambden, Juan Ricardo Cole and Michael Sours.

Newer areas of enquiry have been explored by John Huddleston in *Achieving Peace* by the Year

2000, Erik Blumenthal in *The Way to Inner Freedom* which applies Bahá'í principles to the field of personal development, and Anjam Khursheed with the outstanding *Science and Religion, Towards the Restoration of an Ancient Harmony*. The latter work tackles the typical materialistic arguments propounded against religion by current influential thinkers and exposes their weaknesses in the light of historical developments and modern advances. It was awarded an international prize as a major contribution to the study of the philosophy of science and the author is now listed in the "Men of

Achievement" section of Who's Who. It can be no coincidence that these three titles mentioned are all published by Oneworld Publications, a company well-known for developing those areas of scholarship most urgently needed to answer the questions of the educated and intelligent inquirer. In the United States the Circle of series of books by Kalimát press has fulfilled a similar need as have in progressively greater measures the Associations for Bahá'í Studies on both sides of the Atlantic.

#### All Members of the Community Can Aspire to Being Scholars

Despite these examples, it would be wrong to think that only the most educated believers who are able to get into print are to be regarded as scholars. The following quotation from the International Teaching Centre demonstrates that quite the opposite is true:

It is evident that Bahá'í scholarship is an endeavour accessible to all members of the Bahá'í community, without exception. All believers can aspire to the attributes described by the Guardian and can strive to relate Bahá'í teachings to the thinking and concerns of the non-Bahá'í community around them. (International Teaching Centre, Scholarship 3)

They continue that it would be important

... to discourage any thought that Bahá'í scholarship is an activity open only to those who are highly educated or who are pursuing an academic career. (ibid)

#### Motive is Everything

As in all fields of life, motive is everything. In the case of Bahá'í scholarship, this is probably of even greater significance because learning and intellectual excellence are frequently a means of self-aggrandizement in the non-Bahá'í world. It is clear from many of the foregoing quotations that the motive for true Bahá'í scholarship should always be service to the Cause. This is another indication of the transforming power of the Faith.

In the old world order, scholars are thought of as being superior to the other members of society by virtue of their intellectual or academic attainments. In the Bahá'í New World Order, on the other hand, the merit of scholars is seen to be their greater degree of service to the community (both Bahá'í and non-Bahá'í). Thus the whole concept is turned on its head and transformed. As highlighted by the Universal House of Justice:

Transformation is the essential purpose of the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh, but it lies in the will and effort of the individual to achieve it in obedience to the Covenant. (The Universal House of Justice, in a letter to

the Bahá'ís of the World dated Ridvan 1989)

Clearly it would be the very antithesis of the Bahá'í approach if any scholar deliberately set out to cause disagreement or dissension within the community or to weaken the Faith of the believers. This would be a veritable disservice! However this is not to say that believers should not express their own individual interpretations of the Writings. The Universal House of Justice states:

... individual interpretation is considered the fruit of man's rational power and conducive to a better understanding of the teachings, provided that no disputes or arguments arise among the friends and the individual himself understands, and makes it clear that his views are merely his own. Individual interpretations continually change as one grows in comprehension of the teachings. (The Universal House of Justice, in a letter to an individual dated 27 May 1966, quoted in International Teaching Centre, Scholarship 8)

The balance alluded to in this quotation is further clarified in Individual Rights and Freedoms in the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh, a statement by the Universal House of Justice to the followers of Bahá'u'lláh in the United States of America, dated 29 December 1988 to which the interested reader is referred.

#### One of the Greatest Services

Teaching the Cause of God is, of course, one of the greatest services which an individual can render. For a scholar of the Faith the potential for excelling in this field is prodigious. As previously stated one of the major aims in this regard would be to "... correlate its beliefs with the current thoughts and problems of the people of the world" (From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual dated 21 October 1943, quoted in International Teaching Centre, Scholarship 3). The Guardian has further explained:

It seems that what we need now is a more profound and co-ordinated Bahá'í scholarship in order to attract such men as you are contacting [those who do not find the Bahá'í principles novel in the light of modern thought]. The world has - at least the thinking world - caught up by now with all the great and universal principles enunciated Bahá'u'lláh over 70 years ago [written in 1949], and so of course it does not sound 'new' to them. But we know that the deeper teachings, the capacity of His projected World Order to recreate society, are new and dynamic. It is these we must learn to present intelligently and enticingly to such men. (From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual dated 3 July 1949, quoted in International Teaching Centre, Scholarship 2)

The very acme of what is attainable by applying these principles was undoubtedly the Peace Statement of the Universal House of Justice. The Supreme Body indicated that it was "designed to open the way" (Universal House of Justice, letter 1988) to effective teaching. The same will surely be true of the superlative 'Statement on Bahá'u'lláh' recently prepared by the Bahá'í International Community Office of Public Information. One aspect highlighted by this document is that, because of the greater maturity of humanity, faith must now accord with reason: a core principle in teaching.

A humanity which has come of age no longer needs the language of parable and allegory; faith is not a matter of blind belief, but of conscious knowledge. Nor is the guidance of an ecclesiastical elite any longer required: the gift of reason confers on each individual in this new age of enlightenment and education the capacity to respond to Divine guidance. (Bahá'í International Community, Bahá'u'lláh 5)

Similarly part of the act of teaching is to help every inquirer to reach true understanding:

It is not only the heart, but the mind, which must devote itself to this process of discovery. Reason, Bahá'u'lláh asserts, is God's greatest gift to the soul, 'a sign of the revelation of the sovereign Lord'. Only by freeing itself from inherited dogma, whether religious or materialistic, can the mind take up an independent exploration of the relationship between the Word of God and the experience of humankind. (ibid 11-12)

Bahá'í scholars are in a good position to aid in loosening these fetters of preconceived ideas from people's minds – a less recognised spin off from effective scholarship.

### Teaching Prominent People

There is one area of teaching that deserves special mention, namely that of teaching prominent people. The Universal House of Justice re-emphasised its importance in the 1990 Ridvan message:

Thus far, we have achieved a marvellous diversity in the large numbers of ethnic groups represented in the Faith ... However, there is another category of diversity which must be built up and without which the Cause will not be able to meet the challenges being thrust upon it. Its membership ... needs now to embrace increasing numbers of people of capacity, including persons of accomplishment and prominence in the various fields of human endeavour. Enrolling significant numbers of such persons is an

indispensable aspect of teaching the masses, an aspect which cannot any longer be neglected and which must be consciously and deliberately incorporated into our teaching work, so as to broaden its base and accelerate the process of entry by troops.

The Guardian had previously indicated how this could be achieved:

If the Bahá'ís want to be really effective in teaching the Cause they need to be much better informed and able to discuss intelligently, intellectually, the present condition of the world and its problems. We need Bahá'í scholars, not only people far, far more deeply aware of what our teachings really are, but also well-read and well-educated people, capable of correlating our teachings to the current thoughts of the leaders of society. We Bahá'ís should, in other words, arm our minds with knowledge in order to better demonstrate to, especially the educated classes, the truths enshrined in our Faith. (From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual dated 5 July 1949, quoted in International Teaching Centre, Scholarship 4)

After publication of the Peace Statement, the Universal House of Justice extended this idea further:

With ... the rapidly growing awareness among thinking people of the need for world-wide solutions to the problems threatening humankind, the House of Justice feels that there is a need for research and writing of books and papers on subjects which are of immediate interest to leaders of thought and the generality of mankind. (From a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to the Association for Bahá'í Studies, Canada, dated 31 March 1985, quoted in Teaching Prominent People no.41)

This illustrates how fertile an area for Bahá'í scholarship this could be; also how well Oneworld Publications, for example, have responded to this need in the community.

### Transforming Disciplines

It would be a mistake, however, to think that scholars can only be of service to the community – whether Bahá'í or non-Bahá'í – by being involved in teaching, important as that is. The Supreme Body has also referred to the distinctive role to be played by Bahá'ís who acquire expertise in various fields of endeavour:

As the Bahá'í community grows it will acquire experts in numerous fields - both by Bahá'ís becoming experts and by experts becoming Bahá'ís. As these experts bring their knowledge and skill to the service of the community and, even more, as they transform their various disciplines by bringing to bear on them the light of the Divine Teachings, problem after problem now disrupting society will be answered. (From a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual dated 27 May 1966, quoted in International Teaching Centre, Scholarship 4)

It is apparent, then, that each believer should not seek to divorce the principles of the Faith from his occupation or profession but rather to try consciously to introduce them.

#### Protection of the Faith

A final important area to consider is protection of the Cause. The following quotation from Bahá'u'lláh clearly indicates the duty of the believers to refute written arguments against the Faith:

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. (Gleanings 330)

In conclusion, Bahá'í scholarship can take many and varied forms applying itself to innumerable needs and avenues of enquiry within the Faith and especially the non-Bahá'í community. The importance of this work is self-evident from many of the passages quoted above and it is to be hoped that its present development will be stimulated and accelerated.

#### Works Cited

- Bahá'í International Community Office of Public Information. Bahá'u'lláh. New York, 1991.
- Bahá'u'lláh. Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh. Trans. Shoghi Effendi. 2d. ed. Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1976.
- Blumenthal, E. The Inner Way to Personal Freedom: A Practical Guide to Personal Development. London: Oneworld Publications, 1988.
- Huddleston, J. Achieving Peace by the Year 2000. London: Oneworld Publications, 1988.
- Khursheed, A. Science and Religion: Towards the Restoration of an Ancient Harmony. London: Oneworld Publications, 1987.
- International Teaching Centre. Bahá'í Scholarship. Auckland: National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of New Zealand, 1985.
- Teaching Prominent People - A compilation of extracts from the Bahá'í Writings. London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1990.
- Universal House of Justice, The. Individual Rights and Freedoms in the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh: a statement by the Universal House of Justice to the followers of Bahá'u'lláh in the United States of America, 29 December 1988. Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1989.
- \_\_\_\_\_, Letter to the Bahá'ís of the World dated Naw-Rúz 1979
- \_\_\_\_\_, Letter to the Bahá'ís of the World dated Ridván 1988

#### METADATA

Views11076 views since posted 1998; last edit 2012;

previous at [archive.org.../parris\\_scholarship\\_bahai\\_community](http://archive.org.../parris_scholarship_bahai_community);

URLs changed in 2010, see [archive.org.../bahai-library.org](http://archive.org.../bahai-library.org)

Language

English

Permission

author and publisher

History

Formatted 1997 by Chris Manvell.

Share

Shortlink: [bahai-library.com/99](http://bahai-library.com/99)

Citation: ris/99

select Collection:

Archives

Articles

Articles-unpublished

Audio

Bibliographies

BIC

Biographies

Books

Chronologies

Compilations

Compilations-NSA

Compilations-personal

Documents

East-asia

Encyclopedia

Essays

Etc

Excerpts

Fiction

Glossaries

Guardian

Histories

Introductory

Letters

Maps

Music

Newspapers

NSA-documents

NSA-letters

Personal

Pilgrims

Poetry

Presentations

Resources

Reviews  
Scripts  
Software  
Statistics  
Study  
Talks  
Theses  
Transcripts  
Translations  
UHJ-documents  
UHJ-letters  
Video  
Visual  
Writings

home

sitemap

series

chronology

search:

author

title

date

tags

adv. search

languages

inventory

bibliography

abbreviations

links

about

contact

RSS

new