

# Loyalty to the Covenant and Critical Thought

A Commentary by Udo Schaefer

translated from the German by Harry Liedtke; edited by Nancy Ackerman

At a seminar held in 1999, organized by the National Youth Committee and European Counselors for young academics in our community, it became evident that there are still uncertainties about the fundamentals of our faith, especially concerning the relationship between reason and revelation, reason and belief, and that strong sentiments come to the fore in any discourse on this subject. This was sufficient motivation for me to present a few thoughts in the pages that follow.

1. The foundation of our faith, our thoughts and intellectual endeavors, is the Covenant of God, established by Bahá'u'lláh, and embodied in his scripture, as well as the authoritative interpretations by ‘Abdu’l-Bahā and Shoghi Effendi. Firmness and loyalty to the Covenant and obedience to the holy writings and the institutions of the community form the basis for our entire religious life. Loyalty to the testimony of our faith is the prerequisite for any intellectual reflection.

2. Faith, our encounter with God’s Word and the subordination of our life to its demands, has a variety of dimensions.

a) In the first instance, faith is an affair of the heart, the emotional bond to Bahā'u'llāh, a love for God, on which our entire existence is based. This emotional dimension gives birth to our dedication to the Cause of Bahā'u'llāh, to our strength to keep the Commandments,<sup>1</sup> and to our readiness to bear witness to our faith, spread the teachings, and guide our fellowmen to the path of God. According to the Kitāb-i-Īqān<sup>2</sup>, the heart is the seat of our conscience and of reason. It is the “dwelling place” of God mentioned in the *Hidden Words*, where the heart is mentioned no fewer than forty-five times.

When recognizing spiritual mysteries, the heart is engaged,<sup>3</sup> but so is the intellect.<sup>4</sup> It is the heart that needs to be “purified”.<sup>5</sup> Purity of heart is the absolute demand of all religions.<sup>6</sup> When faith fades away, the heart becomes “lifeless”.<sup>7</sup> The heart refers to the whole person, with all its religious feelings, thoughts and actions. Without the bond of the heart a spiritual life is not possible.

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1 “Observe My commandments, for the love of My beauty” (*Kitāb-i-Aqdas*, verse 4); see also *The Hidden Words*, Arabic 38.

2 cf. para 28.

3 cf. *The Hidden Words*, Arabic 66, 68.

4 *Ibid.* 66.

5 *Ibid.*, Persian 8.

6 See Ps. 51:12; 3:1; Matt. 5:8; *Qur’ān* 35:18; 20:65; *Kitāb-i-Īqān* 2;213.

7 *The Hidden Words*, Persian 10.

b) But faith is not an affair of the heart alone, it is equally one of the intellect, reason, and critical thought:

Man . . . hath been endowed with reason . . . <sup>8</sup> to enable His creature to know and recognize God—exalted be His glory.<sup>9</sup>

‘*Aql* (reason, rationality, intellect) is the reflection of the original celestial reason (*al-‘aql al-awwal*) which is identical to the *logós*<sup>10</sup>. In the scripture human reason is called “the greatest sign of God”:<sup>11</sup>

Praise and thanksgiving be unto Providence that out of all the realities in existence He has chosen the reality of man and has honored it with intellect and wisdom, the two most luminous lights in either world.<sup>12</sup>

The rational faculty should be regarded “as a sign of the revelation of Him Who is the sovereign Lord of all”:<sup>13</sup>

First and foremost among these favors, which the Almighty hath conferred upon man, is the gift of understanding [‘*aql*].<sup>14</sup>

‘*Aql* is the gift that differentiates man from the animal and without which an ethical and responsible life is impossible, because ethics mean to subordinate our emotions, passions and inclinations to the rule of reason. The rank, which the power of reason occupies in the religious system brought by Bahā’u’llāh is made clear in the talks of ‘Abdu’l-Bahā:

God has endowed man with intelligence and reason.... If religious beliefs and opinions are found contrary to the standards of science, they are mere superstitions and imagination<sup>15</sup> . . . If religious belief and doctrine is at variance with reason, it proceeds from the limited mind of man and not from God; therefore, it is unworthy of belief and not deserving of attention . . . How can man believe that which he knows to be opposed to reason? . . . Can the heart accept that which reason denies? Reason is the first faculty of man, and the religion of God is in harmony with it.<sup>16</sup>

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8 *Kitāb-i-Aqdas*, verse 119.

9 *Gleanings* 95:1.

10 Greek: word meaning “speech”. In Stoicism the word assumed a sublime meaning and became a central notion of philosophy. The Jewish-Greek philosopher Philo (born 25 BCE) applied this term to the creative word of God, revealed in the Hebrew Bible. In Christian theology and philosophy *lógos* is the word of God, synonymous with his creative power. Jesus Christ is the incarnation of this word (see John 1:1-3).

11 ‘Abdu’l-Bahā, *The Secret of Divine Civilization*, p. 1.

12 *Ibid.*

13 *Gleanings* 83:1.

14 *Ibid.* 95:1; see also *Paris Talks* 11:1,4; 23:6.

15 *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 181.

16 *Ibid.* p. 231.

3. It is dangerously reductionist—almost a dismemberment of our faith—to portray rational thought and the qualities of the heart, rationality and spirituality as opposites, and to identify critical thinking with an absence of spirituality. There is widespread skepticism—one might almost call it a profound mistrust—within the Bahā’ī community, which has been directed at critical thinking. This is a serious prejudice, harmful to the faith.

I know only too well whereof I speak. Over a period of five decades, I have had repeated, painful experiences with the anti-intellectualism in our community.<sup>17</sup> I am aware that there are others, engaged in similar cerebral activity, and who are also struggling against this tide. This attitude has taken even deeper root in the past decades under the influence of “New Age” and similar esoteric tendencies, which tend to see the human intellect as being responsible for a science and technology that are threatening our very existence.

While this attitude is not often articulated, the constant emphasis on spirituality and “having a heart that is on fire” manifests a certain aversion to intellectual engagement with our holy texts. Without saying so, there are Bahā’īs who regard the engagement in Bahā’ī studies as something more or less unspiritual. Sometimes those who do this work are told to “get down off their high horse”. This is unacceptable.

When one reads appeals in Bahā’ī news magazines for the believers to “teach from the heart, to be inflamed”—as if all one has to do is to make up one’s mind and push a button—it means in plain language that we do not want discourse and rational, systematic teaching, but rather an emotional sharing of the message that appeals to feelings alone. Strangely enough, it is called “teaching work.” “What do you feel,” an institute facilitator asked the participants of a study group, after texts of Bahā’u’llāh had been read. She seemed to be searching for “feelings,” reminiscent of some foaming jacuzzi of emotions, into which one can let oneself drop in a state of utter relaxation, instead of thinking, which can be strenuous and exhausting. In some circles, critical thinking is equated with lacking faith, with being spiritually weak. Critical discourse is misinterpreted as “idle disputation.”<sup>18</sup>

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17 This is obviously a world-wide phenomenon in Bahā’ī communities. Peter Khan writes “... I saw around me ... in both Australia and the United States, a number of very capable and sincere people who severed their connection with the Faith because of their exposure to this narrow line of thinking. Even here in the Holy Land, one does occasionally see this line of thinking appearing in disguise from time to time ... We must always be on our guard against this crypto fundamentalist thinking, which can lead us into error through a narrow approach to the writings and to the centrality of the Creative word“ (“Some Aspects of Bahā’ī Scholarship”, in *The Journal of Bahā’ī Studies* 9.4, December 1999, p. 47).

18 *Kitāb-i-Aqdas*, verses 177 and 77.

One can, of course, live one's faith in a purely contemplative manner, without rational, systematic reflection. It is up to the individual. But many of Bahā'u'llāh's writings deal with philosophical and theological issues that are as old as the world. Personally, I find it difficult to imagine how one can penetrate to the depth of a revelation which answers such philosophical questions, without engaging in such reflection and searching. What does 'Abdu'l-Bahá mean when he says that religion needs "the power of reflection"?<sup>19</sup> Theological reflection is a matter of mind:

When we read the Book of God, the faculty of comprehension by which we form conclusions, is reason. Reason is mind.<sup>20</sup>

And it is hard for me to see how the Cause of God can spread and be taken seriously, as long as one treats discursive thought<sup>21</sup> with contempt. Why would Bahā'u'llāh have given high praise to "the learned in Bahā" and have exhorted us to hold them in honor.<sup>22</sup>

The question also arises how the Faith can be defended against criticism and attacks, when rational thinking and argument are treated with contempt. Bahā'u'llāh calls upon "all men, each according to his ability, to refute the arguments of those that have attacked the faith of God."<sup>23</sup> However, arguments can only be advanced in a rational manner, and how is that possible without a systematic, analytical approach to, and exploration of the holy texts?

The degree to which some Bahā'ís regard their faith as a matter of feelings alone, regarding critical thought as a danger, was demonstrated by the reaction of a young law student, who, despite her well trained mind, broke down and cried when she learned that the recently published book *Making the Crooked Straight*,<sup>24</sup> raised the question whether the infallibility of the Universal House of Justice had immanent limits, and if so, what are those

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19 *Paris Talks* 44:15.

20 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 22.

21 Rational thought based on logic and reasoning.

22 see *Kitāb-i-Aqdas*, verse 173. The learned in Bahá': *al-'ulamá' fi'l bahá'*. The Arabic term '*ulamá'*' (from '*ilm*'=knowledge) denotes those who know, who are qualified by their knowledge. In the Bahá'í community there are no formal criteria for becoming one of the "learned", or a scholar of the Faith. The only qualification is deep knowledge of the Cause. Academic studies or exams are not required, but rather a deep knowledge of the faith and of religious history, which includes the ability to engage in and understand philosophical-theological discourse. This does not negate the fact that there are people with a deep understanding of the spiritual implications of the Faith, who teach it with passion and eloquence, who perform good deeds and are devoted, but who may have neither the background training nor the capacity of delving into an academic discourse. But one does not refer to such individuals as "scholars".

23 *Gleanings* 143:1.

24 Oxford: George Ronald 2000.

limits. She remarked afterwards that religion is a matter of feelings, and she had just reacted emotionally to the book.

It is a serious misunderstanding, one with far-reaching implications, to think that faith should be founded solely on feelings. This leaves souls open to be preyed upon by charismatic charlatans, who will confuse and lead them astray. Surely, there is a reason why the Covenant breaking followers of Mason Remey, despite their fallacious arguments, managed to win over a considerable number of people. Faith that has not been reflected upon is easily shaken. On the other hand, reflection and critical discussion of the contradictions that exist between the teachings of the Faith and the ideas of a purely secular world, will reveal to the believers irrefutable insights, which are essential when one is faced with or must stand up to attacks, whether from within or without. Faith, which is based on intuitive and rational reflection, and which perseveres in the forum of reason<sup>25</sup> is also a mighty bulwark against baseless criticism, and the tendency of many to trivialize the Bahā'ī teachings, by mixing them up with certain fashionable psychological trends, of dubious origin.

4. The high value placed upon rational thought in the Bahā'ī revelation is proven by the fact that among the key virtues of the Bahā'ī ethic is *ḥikma* which in western tradition stands for wisdom<sup>26</sup> and prudence. These so-called dianoëtic virtues are virtues of the mind, of correct thought. The prerequisite for correct action is correct thought, which, incidentally, is also one of the elements of the eight-fold noble path of the Buddha.<sup>27</sup>

5. This may be so self-evident that it does not require further clarification. However, I would like to refer the reader to the many statements by Shoghi Effendi which may be found in *Crisis and Victory* and in his instructions about teaching. Here is one such quotation:

If Bahā'īs really wish to succeed in teaching the Cause, they will have to become much better informed to enable them to discuss today's situation and world problems with intelligence and knowledge. In other words: We Bahā'īs should arm our intelligence with knowledge in order to better explain the verities of our faith, especially to the educated....God has given man a rational power to be used and not killed.<sup>28</sup>

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25 See 'Abdu'l-Bahā, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 63.

26 In Greek: *Sophia* and *phrónesis*, in Latin: *sapientia* and *prudentia*, in German *Weisheit* and *Klugheit*. In English translations of Bahā'ī scripture *ḥikma* is mostly translated by *wisdom*. Prudence is practical wisdom, applied wisdom.

27 "Buddhism is essentially a mind-culture" (H. Saddhatissa, *Buddhist Ethics. Essence of Buddhism*, London 1970, p. 28).

28 *Principles of Bahā'ī Administration*, p. 25.

One argument that is often used in discussions about the value of reason, is that theological knowledge is really nothing but a veil that separates us from “true knowledge.” One often hears people quote the verse from the *Kitāb-i-Īqān*: that “knowledge is the most grievous veil between man and his Creator”, or refer to “idle pursuits”, or the criticism in the writings about “sciences that begin with words and end with words.”<sup>29</sup> But such arguments miss the point. This was precisely what Ficicchia, a Swiss Covenant-Breaker, did when he tried to demonstrate the alleged hostility of the Bahá’í Faith to science. I have refuted his argument at some length in the book *Making the Crooked Straight* to which I refer.<sup>30</sup>

Some people take pains to point out that knowledge, which Shoghi Effendi calls “the best armament” for any encounter with opponents of the faith, is liable to seduce us into an attitude of pride. Who can deny that this danger exists? The so-called *superbia theologorum*, the pride of theologians, is legendary. But arrogance and pride are to be condemned as cardinal sins in all situations of life, not just in the field of theological research. A critical discourse must take place in a spirit of true humility, but at the same time with complete intellectual honesty. No one should be expected to sacrifice his intellect.<sup>31</sup> Whoever harbors resentment against critical thinking, and who for this reason criticizes intellectuals for being proud, fails to recognize that there is also such a thing as spiritual pride, when those who regard themselves as living in the upper stratosphere of the spirit, feel superior to those whom they see as the dwellers in the lower realms of critical thought.

6. It would foolish, indeed, to deny that rational thinking has its dangers. Thinking has always been regarded as dangerous. For just this reason it is hated and feared by dictators. “He thinketh too much; such people are dangerous,” says Caesar, in Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*. Moreover, thinking does not guarantee truth. Despite sincere intellectual effort, one may still come to wrong conclusions, for “to err is human.” Are we not, therefore, justified in being concerned that asking critical questions might sew the seeds of doubt in the hearts of those who are not firm in their faith?

In answer to this question it must be pointed out that nothing on earth is without risk. Greater risk is perhaps attached to human thought than to anything else. But one cannot accept the alternative, which is to renounce critical inquiry. The following amazing statement has been ascribed to the great Islamic theologian Al-Ghazali:

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29 *Kitāb-i-Īqān*, *Tablets* 5:15, 11:8; *Kitāb-i-Aqdas*, verse 77.

30 See pp. 289ff.

31 An attitude which is called *sacrificium intellectus* in theology.

He who thinks about his faith and comes to the wrong conclusion, deserves a reward. He who thinks about his faith and arrives at the truth, deserves a double reward.

This quote is remarkable, because it says that the mere effort to think about faith is worth rewarding. Moreover, it implies that error is unavoidable. And are we to hold to any less a standard than that of Islam in the Middle Ages? We must not forget that we have entered the age of reason and enlightenment and that we must be able to explain our faith rationally to an unbelieving world. After all, Bahā'u'llāh revealed Himself to a humanity who had “attained the stage of maturity.”<sup>32</sup>

Whenever one thinks about, or discusses questions of faith, there will always be things expressed that are either right or wrong, and there is no harm in saying the wrong thing, because we can be certain that sooner or later the truth will emerge. Critical discourse must weigh everything in the balance, and with the help of the abundant guidance from the revelation, and the clash of differing opinions, will come the spark of truth. What ‘Abdu’l-Bahā told us about consultation, that truth emerges “only after the clash of differing opinions”, applies especially to theological discourse. I strongly recommend the study of ‘Abdu’l-Bahā’s political treatise *The Secret of Divine Civilization* to those who insist on disparaging critical thinking. It is a potent antidote against narrow-mindedness, self-righteousness and fundamentalist tendencies.

7. In critical discourse, we must follow the practice of Ulysses as he navigated through the narrows, staying well clear of the sea monster Scylla on one shore, and Charybdis on the other, both of whom threatened to devour him. We must steer a course down the middle.

One danger is that an ultra-conservative attitude, mistrustful of any critical thought, makes unjust claims to interpretative authority and strives to maintain everything the way it is, by disallowing critical questions and by ‘keeping the lid on.’ Such a fundamentalist stance attempts to disallow critical questions from being asked, and holds back the development of the Cause of Bahā'u'llāh in a sectarian manner. Not only does it prevent its natural unfoldment, but is partly responsible when intellectuals feel repressed, begin to rebel, and end up throwing the baby out with the bath water, as can be witnessed in certain Internet discussion groups. On the other hand, there is the danger of a mentality that does not take God’s revelation seriously, but which is oriented to what is currently in vogue and by a positivistic methodology, seeing everything as relative and open to question.

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32 *Gleanings* 33:2; see also Kitāb-i-Aqdas 149.

While we have to be scientific in our methods, it must be clear that the revelation of Bahā'u'llāh remains our point of reference. When we systematically explore this revelation, we are not scientists but theologians.<sup>33</sup> A theologian is not merely a student of religion; he is committed to his faith. He who pursues religious studies just for their own sake, as *l'art pour l'art* (art for art's sake), so to speak, and sacrifices his spiritual ties and commitment to the revelation on the altar of studies, offers no benefits, but only causes damage.

8. Truth—and statements claimed to be true—must be made evident, and justified by logic, as in the following examples:

a) The view has been voiced that 'Abdu'l-Bahā was not infallible because he never declared that he was infallible, is erroneous in view of the station conferred on him in both the Kitāb-i-Aqdas and the Kitāb-i-'Ahd. A teaching authority only makes sense when it is infallible, when truth is fixed in a binding manner. Otherwise there would be no authority at all and everyone could be his own "Pope". However, it is permissible to ask what is the scope of 'Abdu'l-Bahā's infallibility, how far it extends and when it began. There are believers who are distressed and raise their eyebrows when such a question is asked. But consider the following: in the Kitāb-i-Aqdas<sup>34</sup> and the Tablet of Ishrāqāt<sup>35</sup>, Bahā'u'llāh reserves "essential infallibility" for the Manifestations of God alone. Since 'Abdu'l-Bahā was not a Manifestation of God, he can only have a conferred infallibility. God can confer infallibility on any one he chooses.<sup>36</sup> When did this happen? Was it at the time of Abdu'l-Baha's birth, or at the time he was designated Center of the Covenant, or at the time of the passing of Bahā'u'llāh? If the latter was the case, it would have far reaching implications for 'Abdu'l-Bahā's writings prior to that event. His lofty rank as *Sirrullāh*, the "Perfect Exemplar of His Teachings"<sup>37</sup> weighs heavily in the balance when addressing this question. In any event, these are legitimate questions that require reflection and for which an answer must be found, not just because we ourselves want to have an answer, but for purposes of apologetics<sup>38</sup>, when people in the future will have to be given answers to these obvious questions. Apologetics are the rational safeguard of faith. The faith should be explained to others as rationally as necessary and possible. Certain objections should be anticipated and answers prepared well in

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33 I refer to my article "Bahā'ī Apologetics?", in: *Bahā'ī Studies Review*, vol. 10 (2001/2002), pp. 88f.

34 Verse 47.

35 Cf. *Tablets* 8:17-19.

36 See *Tablets* 8:17; *Some Answered Questions* 45:3.

37 Shoghi Effendi, *World Order*, p. 134.

38 The field of reasoned defence or vindication.

advance. Considerable thought must be employed to find the answers for a wide variety of open questions.

b) The support by so-called liberal Bahā'īs of homosexual groups in which Bahā'īs cultivate their homosexual identities, as has occurred in the United States, is extreme. It is a source of amazement to me how any Bahā'ī can allow himself to so flagrantly violate the unambiguous instructions in the scripture,<sup>39</sup> such as that in an unpublished Tablet of Bahā'u'llāh, in which he unequivocally condemns homosexual acts.<sup>40</sup>

Such individuals seem to be guided more by the *zeitgeist*<sup>41</sup> than the teachings of the Faith, as they disregard Bahā'u'llāh's explicit warning:

Weigh not the Book of God with such standards and sciences as are current amongst you, for the Book itself is the unerring Balance established amongst men. In this most perfect Balance whatsoever the peoples and kindreds of the earth possess must be weighed, while the measure of its weight should be tested according to its own standard, did ye but know it.<sup>42</sup>

This example shows how necessary it is to think clearly in order to be able to translate the imperatives of our Baha'i ethic into action.

c) The question about the immanent limits of the infallibility conferred on the Universal House of Justice<sup>43</sup> is entirely legitimate, and must be discussed without questioning the fundamental loyalty of the person who raises it. The discussion of this question is an act of practical wisdom, of prudence, and it is imperative that we think about it seriously, before outsiders pick up this theme and begin to ask probing questions.

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39 See *Kitāb-i-Aqdas* 107, Note 134.

40 “Ye are forbidden to commit adultery [*zinā*’], sodomy [*liwāt*] and lechery [*khīyānah*]. Avoid them, o concourse of the faithful. By the righteousness of God! Ye have been called into being to purge the world from the defilement of evil passions. This is what the Lord of all mankind has enjoined upon you, could ye but perceive it. He who relateth himself to the All-Merciful and committeth satanic deeds, verily, he is not of me. Unto this beareth witness every atom, pebble, tree and fruit, and beyond them this ever-proclaiming, truthful and trustworthy Tongue” (quoted from a letter of the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahā'īs of the United States, dated 11 September 1995). Even though this text has not yet been published before, it was generally known among Bahā'īs that homosexual relations are not in harmony with Bahā'ī morals. Shoghi Effendi has instructed the community in his letters about this point, and in the *Synopsis and Codification of the Kitāb-i-Aqdas*, published in 1973, “homosexuality” is enumerated among the prohibitions (see D, 1y, XVIII).

41 “The spirit of times”.

42 *Kitāb-i-Aqdas* 99.

43 I refer to my article “Infallible Institutions?”, in: *Bahā'ī Studies Review*, London, vol. 9 (1999/2000), pp. 22-45.

d) Another issue which has caused irritation concerns the issue of whether the Guardian's translations of Bahā'ī texts are open to re-translation. Even if the answer to this question were to be negative, it is still legitimate to raise it.

Any concerns about competing translations probably stem from the fact that Shoghi Effendi occupied a position of doctrinal authority. He was the authoritative interpreter of the holy texts. To fulfill this function the gift of infallibility was conferred upon him. To translate something means in effect to make an interpretation, since one has first to decide the meaning of a particular text before one can find an adequate equivalent in another language. From this it could be deduced that Shoghi Effendi's existing translations are perfect and cannot be improved.

However, considering the fact that Shoghi Effendi discussed translations with competent linguists (especially with George Townshend), and occasionally revised texts which he had already published in English, such translations cannot be considered to be fully and in every aspect the outpouring of "authoritative interpretation". The Guardian's English syntax is not binding and is not covered by the charisma of infallibility. Neither is the choice of each word from a wide spectrum of acceptable alternatives. When Baha'u'llah says, in the *Kitāb-i-Īqān*, that every word has seventy meanings,<sup>44</sup> one cannot reduce any word and fix it to a single meaning once and for all, simply because Shoghi Effendi chose to translate it in one particular way in a particular context. This does not, of course, negate the fact that the Guardian's use of certain recurring key words, which he consistently translated in the same way, will probably always be accepted, just as all his translations from the original texts will have a critical function forever.

If the entire primary literature translated by Shoghi Effendi were the emanation of his infallible station, it would be "perfect", in that it would be identical to the original texts, without the slightest deviation. This is hard to imagine, since any translation, even the very best, is purchased at the cost of some of the original meaning. This is why the Muslim world never encouraged translations of the Qur'an and why they called such translations not "translations", but "explanation" or "commentary".

Shoghi Effendi never claimed perfection for his translations. Moreover, his preface to the English edition of the *Kitāb-i-Īqān* would seem to indicate that other translations may follow:

This is one more attempt to introduce to the West, in language however inadequate, the book of unsurpassed pre-eminence among the writings of the Author of the Bahā'ī Revelation. The hope is that

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44 para 283.

it may assist others in their efforts to approach what must always be regarded as the unattainable goal – a befitting rendering of Bahā’-u’llāh’s matchless utterance.

The announcement of the first English edition of the Kitāb-i-Iqān makes this even clearer, when it says of the Guardian:

He hopes that this new rendering will be an improvement of the previous one, but he fully admits that it is far from perfect, far from the original itself.<sup>45</sup>

e) It is equally legitimate to ask questions about our electoral system. Apart from the rules governing the election of the Universal House of Justice which have been set down in the Will and Testament of ‘Abdu’l-Bahā, the entire *modus operandi* was introduced by Shoghi Effendi, at a time when our law giver, the Universal House of Justice, did not yet exist. Shoghi Effendi, who himself had no legislative power, has expressly referred these rules and regulations to the future House of Justice.<sup>46</sup> The system allows and requires further development. It seems evident that our current system cannot be the final word, when one imagines a time when a country has hundreds of thousands, even millions of believers.

9. Finally, it should be pointed out that unity in the teachings and unity of the community does not mean uniformity in explaining the revealed word. A variety of opinion is not only permitted but, according to the Universal House of Justice, desirable.<sup>47</sup> When Bahā’u’llāh says that the word of God has seventy meanings, we must be careful not to insist that our personal interpretation is binding on everyone else.

10. What we urgently need is an atmosphere of tolerance, an ability to listen to other opinions. Bahā’u’llāh cautions us:

Be forbearing one with another<sup>48</sup> . . . It behoveth, likewise, the loved ones of God to be forbearing towards their fellow-men,<sup>49</sup>

and further,

... the beloved of the one true God, [should] not ... view with too critical an eye the sayings and writings of men. Let them rather

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45 Letter of 28 June 1930 to a National Spiritual Assembly. For this source I am indebted to Christopher Buck, *Symbol & Secret*, p. 36.

46 cf. *Bahā’ī Administration*, pp. 41; 136.

47 Letters of the Universal House of Justice of 20 October 1977 and 28 May 1991. See also *Making the Crooked Straight*, pp. 206f.

48 *The Hidden Words*, Persian 48.

49 *Gleanings* 115:4.

approach such sayings and writings in a spirit of open-mindedness and loving sympathy.<sup>50</sup>

This spirit of open-mindedness and loving sympathy cannot be reconciled with an attitude which immediately cuts down any critical thought with the accusation of Covenant breaking. It is entirely unacceptable that statements or questions—no matter how wrong they may be—are beaten to death with the ominous remark “this has Covenantal implications.” We must be careful not to introduce a principle of Islamic *sharī‘a* law in an effort to exclude dissident believers, by declaring them to be *takfir*.<sup>51</sup> The label *takfir* was used as a club to silence those, who did not follow the traditional interpretation of the ‘Ulamā’. A Muslim scholar, Jahiz, living in the eleventh century, wrote:

The piety of the ‘Ulamā’ consists in blackening as infidels those who hold another opinion.<sup>52</sup>

There is a growing tendency in the Bahā’ī community to allude to “covenantal implications”, when issues are raised, which have not yet been openly discussed, or if an opinion is voiced that deviates from the common understanding in the community.

One thing we must guard against like the plague and that is the attitude, which once drove early Christians to brand anyone a heretic as soon as he voiced a different opinion, and then to excommunicate and persecute him. This terrible practice corroded the spirit of Christian faith and paved the way for the Inquisition. Bahā’u’llāh condemned nothing so much as religious fanaticism, which He called “a world-devouring fire”, a “desolating affliction”<sup>53</sup>. We must beware of thinking that fanaticism is something which is only practiced by others. On the contrary, it is a universal human frailty, namely the high virtue of steadfastness taken to an extreme, an evil from which even we, who call ourselves Bahā’īs, are not immune.

## II.

It is every person’s duty to gain knowledge, for it is “a treasure to man” and “the cause for human progress.”<sup>54</sup> Ignorance, according to ‘Abdu’l-Bahā, is “the root of wrong-doing”<sup>55</sup> and “the principle reason for the decline and fall

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50 ibid. 154:1. In the Qur’ān the believers are exhorted as follows: “...and do not say to him who offers you a greeting ‘Thou art no believer’” (4:95).

51 To declare someone an infidel.

52 Quoted from Nawid Kermani, Introduction to Nasr Hamid Abu Zaid’s book *Islam und Politik. Kritik des religiösen Diskurses*, Frankfurt/M. 1996, p. 18 (Arabic title *Naqd al-Khitab ad-Dini*).

53 *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*, para 18 = *Gleanings* 132:2.

54 ‘Abdu’l-Bahā, *The Secret of Divine Civilization*, pp. 22, 23.

55 *Selections* 111:1.

of the peoples”<sup>56</sup>. Shoghi Effendi said that knowledge is the best armament for the defense of the Faith. The question arises, what kind of knowledge did he mean?

1. First, we can assume that this must include an intimate knowledge of the Writings of the Bāb, Bahā’u’llāh, ‘Abdu’l-Bahā and the clarifications and the writings and explanations of Shoghi Effendi. There is also a need for a deep knowledge and profound understanding of Islam, for the Qur’ān is, so to speak, our Old Testament.

2. Beyond this depth in our own sacred Writings and guidance, it is of great advantage for a Bahā’ī to have a good knowledge of religious history. As long as there is still discourse with outsiders about matters of faith and belief, Christianity is of prime importance in the Western world. Especially when one is called upon to talk with Church ministers and theologians, a solid grounding in the Bible, and in Christian theology and history is extremely helpful. Knowledge of other religions is today especially urgent, since the new interfaith dialogue now allows us to present the Faith to a much broader audience. One must know the others when one wishes to enter into dialogue with them, if for no other reason than to be able to understand their questions. Our own understanding of the message of Bahā’u’llāh is deepened by an encounter with other religious faiths. The idea that we can’t profit from others, because Bahā’u’llāh has already said everything there is to say, is erroneous. First we have to understand what he has said. A dialogue with other religious faiths can be very helpful in gaining this understanding.

3. One important discipline that helps our dialogue with academics is philosophy. One encounters repeatedly the misunderstanding that Bahā’u’llāh has called philosophy a science that “begins with words and ends with words”.<sup>57</sup> This is absolutely wrong, as Shoghi Effendi has encouraged us to study philosophy,<sup>58</sup> which is defined as “the use of reason and argument in seeking truth and knowledge of reality, especially of the causes and nature of things and of the principles governing existence, the material universe, the perception of physical phenomena, and human behaviour.”<sup>59</sup>

4. And finally, knowledge of history, especially modern history and current events, is a must. When we wish to “be anxiously concerned with the needs of the age ye live in, and center your deliberations on its exigencies and requirements,”<sup>60</sup> we must be informed about what is happening in the world.

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56 *The Secret of Divine Civilization*, p. 109.

57 Cf. *Tablets* 5:15; 11:8; *Kitāb-i-Aqdas* 77.

58 *Unfolding Destiny*, p. 445.

59 *The Oxford Dictionary and Thesaurus*, Oxford University Press, 1996.

60 *Gleanings* 106:1.

Even a cursory reading of the Guardian's letters in World Order of Baha'u'llah is sufficient to have an example of his concern with and insight into current events and their relationship to the truths of the Faith. Unfortunately, some Bahā'īs reject the reading of newspapers or keeping up with the news of the day as a waste of time. We must be equally as well-informed about present socio-political questions as about world politics. We cannot explain the concept of the "Lesser Peace" to others when we have no knowledge of current problem areas and of the attempts being made by many to solve them.

5. We cannot attain deeper knowledge solely by reading the scripture. There must also be reflection and discourse. One can learn much by preparing talks and essays that are initially shared with a few and eventually with the general public, a practice it is important to start early in life. Those who think there is not enough time to do this during their early years of study, will be saddened, indeed, to find that later, when they are laboring to make a living, that there will be even less time, and that the skills are more difficult to learn.

'Abdu'l-Bahā exhorted the believers to "think of ways of imparting the message to prominent people, for once such persons have given their allegiance to the Faith, they will cause the people to be led, troop after troop, to the wellspring of unfailing guidance."<sup>61</sup> One cannot teach the educated, unless one has an education oneself. Those, for whom this is possible have an obligation to gain a wide education and to expand their horizons far beyond the confines of a particular professional expertise.

I would like to stress, in conclusion, that no amount of education and knowledge will bring success, unless it is combined with humility, when the learned "pride not themselves on their attainments"<sup>62</sup>, and unless the teacher "be kindled with the fire of His love".<sup>63</sup>

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61 Quoted from the compilation *Teaching Prominent People* (London 1990), p. 1.

62 *Gleanings* 145.

63 *ibid.* 157:3.