

## Some Footnotes to Bahā'ī Studies and its Methodology<sup>1</sup>

Frankly speaking, I hesitated when I was asked to speak on the highly complex issue of methodology in Bahā'ī studies. Numerous letters of the Universal House of Justice and quite a number of articles on Bahā'ī scholarship have been published on this subject (among them a very interesting contribution of Peter Khan in the recent issue of *The Journal of Bahā'ī Studies*<sup>2</sup>), seminars and conferences have been held, and I feel badly prepared to lead you to new shores.

The suggested topic of my presentation:

“Bahā'ī scholarship should go beyond the present materialistic approaches dominant in the academic world”

refers to formulations used in letters of the Universal House of Justice, i. e., in a letter of 20 July 1997 where it is stated that

“Problems will arise rather, if an attempt is made to impose, on the Bahā'ī community's own study of the Revelation, materialistic methodologies and attitudes antithetical to its very nature.”

The purpose of my paper cannot be the delineation of a comprehensive theory of Bahā'ī methodology. The views that I am presenting have the character of footnotes to this subject.

Let me start with three introductory remarks:

1. The topicality of this seminar and others held recently has been evoked by the ongoing internet discussions and by some publications of J. R. Cole. Unfortunately the level of my information about this discussion is

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1 This paper has been presented at a conference in Acuto/Italy in October 2000

2 “Some Aspects of Bahā'ī scholarship”.

fragmentary (and I think this is not only my own problem). I read some of Cole's publications, I read some of the discussions on the Internet, some articles on Bahā'ī scholarship and quite a number of the letters of the Universal House of Justice on this subject, which are mostly answers to enquiries. I found them very helpful for following the debate, but I think, it would undoubtedly have been easier for those who want to understand the crucial points, if at least extracts from these inquiries had been included so that one could have read the letters of the House in their context.

2. The conflict obviously resulted from unpleasant experiences with the institution of pre-publication review, which indeed caused problems in many countries. I don't want to go into details, although I could say much on this subject from my own painful experiences, but I think, provided the reviewing process is in competent hands and is not misused as an instrument for the suppression of a genre of literature which the reviewer finds unpleasant, Bahā'ī academics can live with it. The fact, that *Desinformation als Methode (Making the Crooked Straight)*, in which quite a number of crucial points have been discussed, among them the concepts of infallibility and of covenant-breaking, has been published, is sufficient evidence that the publication of academic works need not be hampered by pre-publication review.

3. The present discussion is taking place in Bahā'ī communities in which strong tendencies of anti-intellectualism can still be discerned. That they exist, was the unanimous opinion of the speakers at the recent Oxford conference. Such tendencies are also admitted by Peter Khan in the article I referred to. When I once spoke at the national Bahā'ī Centre in Oslo before a Bahā'ī audience—it was in the early 90s—and mentioned that I was elaborating a rebuttal of a monograph written by a covenant-breaker, some of the

attendants reacted in a highly emotional way and protested heatedly when I mentioned that I was analysing the numerous malicious accusations contained in that book. Later on they even sent a letter to the Universal House of Justice complaining about that heinous endeavour.

Quite a number of Bahā'īs regard rational thought with deep scepticism, they consider it irrelevant and unspiritual. They take it as an expression of a lack of faith and see in critical discourse only “idle disputation”<sup>3</sup>. This is, of course, mostly not expressed so explicitly. Often subliminal feelings become evident from attitudes and actions as, for instance, in the constant emphasis on spirituality, in public appeals to teach not by reason, but rather “from heart to heart”, in the emphatic call to “Be inflamed!” (as happened in a manifesto published by the National Teaching Committee in the German Bahā'ī News). It is not discursive, rational and systematic teaching that is called for, but rather an emotional proclamation. The “feeling” is looked for. “What are you feeling?”, asked the leader of an institute after texts of Bahā'u'llāh had been read. Such attitudes, which are common in esoteric, therapeutic or New-Age- and other circles, should not prevail in Bahā'ī communities: and they are hardly an invitation to do scholarly work.

4. Two extreme attitudes in the world community can be observed which had already been anticipated by Shoghi Effendi when he warned of “the forces of separation and of sectarian tendencies”<sup>4</sup>: “Extreme orthodoxy on one hand, and irresponsible freedom on the other”<sup>5</sup>, which both “deviate from the Straight Path”<sup>6</sup>. Representatives of the first attitude are, as the Universal House of Justice put it,

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3 See *Kitāb-i-Aqdas* 77.

4 *Bahā'ī Administration*, p. 42.

5 *Ibid.*

6 *Ibid.*

“Bahā’īs who, imbued by what they conceive to be loyalty to Bahā’-u’llāh, cling to blind acceptance of what they understand to be a statement of the Sacred Text. This shortcoming demonstrates an equally serious failure to grasp the profundity of the Bahā’ī principles and of the harmony of faith and reason. The danger of such an attitude is that it exalts personal understanding of some parts of the revelation over the whole, leads to illogical and internally inconsistent applications of the Sacred Text, and provides fuel to those who would mistakenly characterize loyalty to the Covenant as ‘fundamentalism’.”<sup>7</sup>

Those hard-liners, tending to “intemperate criticism, inappropriate comment and unjust accusations”<sup>8</sup>, create a climate in which scholarly work cannot prosper. The Universal House of Justice assured that it “will not permit a climate of intolerance to prosper in the Bahā’ī community, no matter from what cause it arises”.<sup>9</sup>

Peter Khan, too, in his article criticises the “narrow-mindedness reflected in the erroneous view that we need only the revelation of Bahā’u’llāh”, that “philosophy is a waste of time”. He calls this “crypto-fundamentalist thinking”<sup>10</sup>, and points to the fact that because of this reason “in both Australia and in the United States, a number of very capable and sincere people ... severed their connection with the Faith”. According to Khan this line of thinking can be discerned occasionally even in the Holy Land.<sup>11</sup>

5. It is no wonder that quite a number of Bahā’īs, mostly academics, are in opposition to such an attitude that prepares the soil for superstition. However, a dialectical counterblow always bears the risk of being unbalanced and going beyond the proper limits which are defined by the Cove-

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7 Letter of 8 February 1998.

8 Universal House of Justice, letter of 20 July 1997.

9 Ibid.

10 “Some Aspects of Bahā’ī Scholarship” in *The Journal of Bahā’ī Studies*, vol. 9.4 (1999), p. 46.

11 Ibid.

nant. J. R. Cole in his cynical commentary on the letter of the Universal House of Justice dated 7 April 1999, referred to the academic methodology to which he is committed if he works on the field of comparative religious studies and of history, and which, as he holds, must also be applied in Bahā'ī studies:

“In the academic world, no one accepts an argument from authority. No proposition is true because such an historian asserts it. It is true because it can be proven to be true by text and reasoning. When it cannot in this way be upheld, the proposition is revised or rejected. The process is like that in science. Thus, academic writing is an on-going dialogue-fluid, unstable, not fixed. When an academic such as myself writes about the Bahā'ī Faith from an academic point of view, he or she is in a sense merely putting forward personal insights based on available texts and upon reasoned analysis of them. This academic writing, being a form of individual, non-authoritative interpretation subject to public debate and revision, should not be seen as forming a thread to, or an alternative to, the authoritative interpretation of 'Abdu'l-Bahā and Shoghi Effendi. Given that the Universal House of Justice has no right to interpret the Bahā'ī writings with authority, however, that body may over time find that academic writing actually is helpful to it, over the rigour of its methods.”

Cole refers to “academic freedom” and his “freedom of conscience”, which is “the freedom to expose, to seek the truth no matter where it leads”.

*Prima facie* this sounds quite convincing. But there are questions. The crucial point is: Are Bahā'īs who are writing on their faith scholars of religious studies (*Religionswissenschaftler*), have they to follow the scientific methodology of this discipline? This is not so clear. I think, it depends:

In the field of Bahā'ī history the historical research of the facts, of the events must undoubtedly be open to scientific scrutiny. Here the academic

methodology to which Cole refers has to be applied. No historical fact can be taken as granted only because an authority said so.<sup>12</sup> There is no revealed “Bahā’ī history”. Nabīl’s *Dawn Breakers*, a historical report of a contemporary of the holy figures, is undoubtedly much more reliable than most historical traditions in other religions, but if new facts arise that are in contradiction to his report or even to the Guardian’s historical data in *God Passes By*, one has to take notice of them. They have to be taken into account and critically assessed.

Quite another point is the interpretation of such facts in the context of the revelation. The theological significance of historical events goes beyond the judgement of the historian. The Roman historian Tacitus in his book *Annales*<sup>13</sup> called the Christian faith a “pernicious superstition”. Was this judgement true simply because Tacitus was a historian, committed to objectivity, as he himself emphasized when he wrote that he reports history “*sine ira et studio*”<sup>14</sup>?

6. I would like to draw your attention on the initial part of the first chapter of *Making the Crooked Straight* where you can find some elucidations on the methodology of religious studies, and where I pointed out that religion is a subject that is only partly accessible to scientific analysis, that the mystery of a religion is beyond the reach of science. Let me quote a passage:

“There are no scientific criteria for a religion’s claim to truth; it can be neither proven nor disproven scientifically. Scholars working in the field of religious studies can investigate and describe only the historical, phenomenological, and sociological aspects of their subject. The academic discipline of religious studies is by nature de-

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12 Interior events such as Bahā’u’llāh’s mystical intimation with his prophetic office are not included.

13 15:44.

14 Ibid. 1:5 (“Without anger and zeal”).

scriptive, narrative and comparative. Where normative statements are nevertheless made and critical judgements are arrived at, these are necessarily based on certain preconditions, on subjective standard values which cannot be questioned or even on dogmatic positions, and the study ceases to be scientific in the strict sense of the word.”<sup>15</sup>

The great Jewish philosopher Martin Buber put it this way: “The mystery of the other is always within himself and cannot be perceived from outside.”<sup>16</sup>

The decisive point is that religious studies regard the religious phenomena from outside. Working in the field of science, the scholar has to work under the premise of a methodical agnosticism, as empirical research and scientific reasoning have to be committed to absolute objectivity and to refrain from personal beliefs, commitments and value judgements.

7. I think it is not the prevailing methodology in religious studies that leads to unacceptable results, it is rather the inclination of the scholars to disregard the immanent limits of their discipline and to pronounce value judgements that are not based on their methodical research, but rather on their personal presuppositions, convictions and feelings. They often ignore the fact that religious truth is beyond the reach of science and that claims to truth cannot be the object of critical research, of scholarly questioning. “In a scientific approach the question of the objective foundations of religion—i. e., the questions of God and revelation—must be respected, but left out of the critical research, as must also the doctrinal and ethical content of each respective religion. The central concepts of metaphysics such as ‘God, free-

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15 p. 15.

16 Quoted from Hans-Joachim Schoeps, *Christlich-jüdisches Religionsgespräch*, p. 154.

dom and immortality'<sup>17</sup> are, as Kant has demonstrated, beyond our rational understanding or empirical experience."<sup>18</sup>

Unfortunately religious studies have transgressed this border-line quite often. We can take Near Eastern studies as an example. Western orientalists have meticulously investigated Islam and brought about an incredible wealth of phenomena, of facts, features and insights, so that we know Islam quite well. But, in the final analysis, they have failed to convey a true understanding of this religion, because they tend to reduce the revelation to its historicity: everything is interpreted as a result of contingent elements and events, of historical constellations, whereas the claim to truth is ignored. This reductionism attributes everything a Muslim believes as being revealed from God to the historical conditions of its origin. The prophet is portrayed solely as a figure of history and politics. I would like to elucidate this by two examples:

a. The scholars take it for granted that Islam is an eclectic composition of religious ideas taken from pagan, Jewish and Christian sources, which the prophet considered suitable for the awakening of a truly religious spirit among his fellow men. Academic research is to a great extent focused on the issue of where Muhammad has taken the diverse elements of his teachings, laws, ordinances and rituals from. As to the law of fasting for instance, some have stressed the similarity with Jewish fasting, others have drawn attention to Babylonian or Mandaean parallels. This research is clearly done under the premise that the author of the Qur'ān was Muḥammad himself, and

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17 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, Introduction III, 7.

18 Schaefer, *Beyond the Clash of Religions*, p. 97.

not God. Thus, the scholars have become the victims of their presuppositions (*Vorverständnis*),<sup>19</sup> which are not the result of scientific research.

b. The change of the *qibla*: Western researchers take it as an established fact that the abrogation of Jerusalem as the point of adoration was due to the prophet's disenchantment with the Jewish tribes and his insight that he had failed to convert them to the new revelation. Indeed, the law of the *qibla* was revealed in the period of Medina, when the Jewish tribes had instigated a conspiracy against the prophet and were accused of having committed treason in the war between the Meccans and the Muslims. The conclusion seems to be reasonable, convincing even, but it ignores completely the reason given in the Qur'ān:

“And we did not appoint the direction thou wast facing, except that we might know who followed the Messenger from him who turned on his heels.”<sup>20</sup>

Bahā'īs know from the *Kitāb-i-Īqān* that this ordinance, which the young community experienced as a scandal, was a divine test, an expression of that principle of “separation and distinction” of which Bahā'u'llāh has declared that it “operated in each of the previous dispensations”<sup>21</sup>.

8. This demonstrates clearly the reductionistic character of alleged scientific judgements. The violation of the immanent limitations of religious studies inevitably results in a limited, excessively narrow understanding of the religious phenomena, in a distorted view of the historic religions, and I

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19 The philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer has written about this role of the subjective attitude to the object of research in his famous work *Truth and Method*.

20 2:143.

21 *Gleanings* 29:4; see also *Kitāb-i-Īqān* 56.

think this is meant when the Universal House of Justice criticises “materialistic methodology and interpretation”<sup>22</sup> and its use in Bahā’ī studies.

Truth is concrete, therefore two examples taken from Bahā’ī studies:

a. A scathing review<sup>23</sup> has been written of a book entitled *The Style of the Kitāb-i-Aqdas*. The author of that review is puzzled by the structure of the Most Holy Book “and its apparent lack of literary unity” (obviously he means that this book has no systematical order<sup>24</sup>). He criticises the monograph on the style of the Aqdas for not dealing with this issue.<sup>25</sup> The reviewer’s criticism may be legitimate, but some of his arguments are very strange. So, in attempting to explain the “lack of literary unity”, he surmises that the book’s obvious unsystematic structure “might be a deliberate imitation of the Qur’ān, in which the suras have been compiled in an arbitrary order”, or that Bahā’u’llāh might have revealed sections of the book to his secretaries “and accorded them the status of being part of the Most Holy Book, but did not himself determine the position in which every section should appear”. Such speculations do not take the book’s claim to be revelation, to be the Word of God, seriously. A God who “imitates” his own previous revelation is not imaginable. Such conjectures are only possible on the premise that the *Kitāb-i-Aqdas* is a human composition and not divine revelation.

It is undeniable that the *Kitāb-i-Aqdas* has no systematical order, and it is absolutely legitimate to ask about the reasons,<sup>26</sup> but Bahā’ī scholars should bear in mind Bahā’u’llāh’s warning:

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22 For instance in its letter of 20 July 1997.

23 In *Bahā’ī Studies Review*, vol. 6 (1996), pp. 93ff.

24 I dealt with this problem in *Making the Crooked Straight*, p. 338ff.

25 I refer to *Making the Crooked Straight* chapter 3, footnote 140.

26 I have dealt with this problem in *Making the Crooked Straight*, p. 338ff.

“Weigh not the Book of God with such standards and sciences as are current amongst you, for the Book is itself the unerring Balance established amongst men ... The measure of its weight should be tested according to its own standard.”<sup>27</sup>

b. In an Encyclopaedia on the Bahā'ī Faith the author gives an account about the execution of the Bāb in Tabriz in 1850. Referring to the fact that the Bāb was found unhurt after the firing squad of 750 soldiers under the commandment of Sam Khan had fired their bullets, he conjectures that Sam Khan had given his soldiers the order not to hit the Bāb. If this were right, the whole report Shoghi Effendi has given on the circumstances and events surrounding the execution would have to be taken as untrue. The author, asked why he has given such an explanation of what Shoghi Effendi has called “the miracle associated with the Bāb’s execution”,<sup>28</sup> responded: “Well, I have difficulties with miracles.”

It was, indeed, highly improbable that not a single one of the 750 bullets hit their target, but this miraculous event does not amount to a repeal of the laws of nature—among 1 billion cases this may happen. The author’s explanation is a conjecture for which he could not give any reason. His version, which is not a result of scientific scrutiny but based on his personal feelings and convictions, is mere speculation, and itself very improbable: Had Sam Khan done as the author surmises, this would have been an act of disobedience and insubordination with the risk of being betrayed by a member of his troop and executed himself.

9. A few words on the role of Juan Ricardo Cole. He is a knowledgeable man, trained in Near Eastern studies and history. In the 80s, he published

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27 *Kitāb-i-Aqdas* 93.

28 *God Passes By*, p. 57.

some fine pieces, among them an excellent contribution on *The Concept of Manifestation in the Bahā'ī Writings*. His familiarity with Arabic and Persian gives him access to the original holy texts, which is not only a great advantage, but, indeed, a precondition for any academic research on this field. Anyone who wants to make a scholarly analysis of Bahā'ī ethics or Bahā'ī law for instance, should at least be acquainted with the basic theological and legal concepts.<sup>29</sup>

However, the knowledge of these languages, scholarly training and proficiency, important as they are, are by no means a safeguard against erroneous interpretations and misleading conclusions. In his recent articles Cole has left far behind the line of a methodological positivism when he presumes to pass judgement on teachings, laws and institutions of the Bahā'ī Faith, or when he makes uncritical use of sociological value judgements and labels that were created in a quite different context.

He unscrupulously labels Bahā'īs as “traditionalists” or “conservatives” on the one hand, and “liberals” on the other, thus dividing the Bahā'ī community into antagonistic groups. What does he mean when he speaks of “conservative Bahā'ī norms”? I can't understand this. Is it appropriate to call the Bahā'ī administration an “episcopal ecclesiastical order” and Ruhiyih Khanum a “lay bishop”?<sup>30</sup> In one of his internet chats he discusses whether the Bahā'ī community is more “church-like” or more “cult-like”. Special sectors he detects as being “cult-like” as for instance the “norm of

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29 It is extremely difficult to find appropriate terms in English for Arabic legal concepts. The Universal House of Justice alludes to this difficulty in its Introduction to the *Kitāb-i-Aqdas* when it writes: “Another major issue is the legal implication of certain Arabic terms which have a range of meaning different of those of similar terms in English” (p. 11).

30 “Race, Immorality and Money in the American Bahā'ī Community: Impeaching the Los Angeles Spiritual Assembly”, in *Religion* (2000), 30, p. 109-125. By the way, it is quite astonishing that such a defamatory article without any scientific value could appear in a reputed scientific journal.

shunning covenant-breakers”.<sup>31</sup> As I have pointed out elsewhere<sup>32</sup> it is not only terminologically inaccurate to apply the term “church” to organized non-Christian religious communities, although this is becoming more and more usual in religious sociology, but also on material grounds wrong, because “one of the two constituent structural elements of all ecclesiastical institutions (the administration of the sacraments) is absent”<sup>33</sup>

According to Cole’s arbitrary categorization “conservative” Bahā’īs are those who “support the NSA’s right to act as it pleases”<sup>34</sup>, who advocate pre-publication review, who believe in the infallibility of the Universal House of Justice, who believe “that women should not be allowed to serve in the Universal House of Justice”, that “civil government will eventually be supplanted by the Bahā’ī institutions”, who follow “the shunning of heterodox Bahā’īs”. Conservative Bahā’īs are “fiercely anti-intellectual and often consider independent thinking as a sign of ‘covenant-breaking’, they are scriptural literalists”<sup>35</sup>.

Liberal Bahā’īs, however, as Cole calls himself, believe “the authority of the Universal House of Justice to be limited to legislation and admit the possibility that women will eventually serve in that body”. They are “uncomfortable with the practice of shunning”, they “generally reject a literalist approach to scriptures”. “Liberal Bahā’īs”<sup>36</sup> are obviously those who accept

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31 If that be true, Bahā’u’llāh would have been the founder of a “cult”, rather than of a religion.

32 *The Bahā’ī Faith: Sect or Religion?* (Ottawa, 1988, p. 4).

33 *Making the Crooked Straight*, p. 161.

34 *Ibid.*, p. 143.

35 *Ibid.*

36 It is noteworthy that in the 1920s a group of German covenant-breakers around the American Ruth White who accused Shoghi Effendi of having forged ‘Abdu’l-Bahās Will and Testament in order to seize power, and later on around Hermann Zimmer, called themselves ‘liberal Bahā’ī’. They rebelled against the administrative order and the institutions, which they denounced as inauthentic and usurpatory (*ibid.*, p. 147. On this subject see *Making the Crooked Straight*. p. 147ff., 674ff.).

only such parts of the divine message which “accord with their inclinations and interests”, and who reject those verses “which are contrary to their selfish desires”.<sup>37</sup> Such people are already mentioned in the Qur’ān:

“Believe ye then part of the Book, and deny part?”<sup>38</sup>

I cannot discover a clear methodical structure in such unscholarly generalisations and in such an arbitrary use of purely sociological jargon. By calling the Bahā’ī community and its order an “episcopal ecclesiastical order” and a Hand of the Cause a “lay bishop” Cole clearly reveals his ignorance of church law from which these terms are taken.

There are hard-liners in our community who in their anti-intellectualistic, over-vigilant and over-protective attitude generally tend to a literalist approach to scripture, who want to escape the legitimate discussion of critical issues through the intimidating warning: “*This has covenantal implications!*”. Cole puts these people altogether into the same “conservative” pot with those believers who stand firm in the Covenant, who recognize the norms given by Bahā’u’llāh, who cling to the infallible interpretations of ‘Abdu’l-Bahā and Shoghi Effendi and who know that “shunning” is not a later invention of those in power, as the uninformed reader of Cole’s articles might suppose, but an integral part of the legal prescriptions of the revelation, with other words: who are true Bahā’īs.

When Cole does not accept the unequivocal interpretations of ‘Abdu’l-Bahā and Shoghi Effendi, according to which women are excluded from the membership in the Universal House of Justice, or when he denies that ‘Abdu’l-Bahā was endowed with infallibility, it becomes evident that he, who

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37 *Kitāb-i-Īqān* 181.

38 2:79.

calls himself a “liberal Bahā’ī”, stands clearly outside the Faith. I do hope that someone competent will write a comprehensive analysis of his methodology. This is the only promising method to cope with this situation, which cannot be overcome by mere administrative measures.

10. By the way, it should be seen that denotations such as “conservative”, “traditionalist” or “liberal” have been coined in the context of long historical and cultural developments. It makes no sense if these terms are applied to a young religion and to a religious community which just has taken on its legal structures. How little informative value such labels have, may be seen from the following considerations:

Basic doctrines, principles and norms of the Bahā’ī Faith such as

the concept of the unity of religions, the abolition of priesthood and monasticism, the prohibition of confession of sins, the condemnation of religious hatred and fanaticism, the abrogation of barriers between the religions and the peoples, the commandment to “consort with all religions with amity and concord”<sup>39</sup>, the abrogation of the concept of the holy war, the abrogation of the concept of “uncleanness” of semen and of peoples, the equality of the sexes, the unity of mankind, the idea of global governance and of universal world peace

may appear in the traditional categories as “progressive”, “liberal”, whereas

capital punishment, the stigmatization of the thief, the penalisation of pre- and extra-marital sexual intercourse, the prohibition of homosexual relations, the infallibility of institutions, the exclusion of women

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39 *Kitāb-i-Aqdas* 144.

from membership of the Universal House of Justice and many other laws of the Aqdas

appear to the sceptical at best as “traditional”, “conservative”, often as “fundamentalist” or even mediaeval. Our attitude to our scripture which we consider word for word as the revealed Word of God is “fundamentalistic” in the original sense of this term. What, then, is the Bahā’ī Faith, “conservative” or “liberal”?

I could not believe it, when I learned from a letter of the Universal House of Justice to the American Bahā’ī community that Bahā’ī gay groups, considering themselves as “liberals”, had established themselves in the United States with the purpose of fostering a “gay Bahā’ī identity” and a “gay Bahā’ī life” (!), although Bahā’u’llāh has forbidden explicitly acts of homosexuality and damned them as “satanic deeds”. Shoghi Effendi has stated in unmistakable terms:

“Allegiance to the Cause cannot be partial and half-hearted. Either we should accept the Cause without any qualification whatever or cease calling us Bahā’īs.”<sup>40</sup>

What is demanded from a true believer is “unreserved acceptance of and submission to, whatsoever had been revealed by their Pen”.<sup>41</sup> A Roman Catholic or a Muslim would not see that differently.

11. Let us come back to the question raised earlier, which is still unanswered, as to whether Bahā’īs who analyse and systematise their scripture, who write scholarly articles on theological, ethical, or legal issues, who defend the revelation against criticism and attack from within and outside, are

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40 Quoted from *Bahā’ī Procedure*, p. 18.

41 Ibid.

scholars of religious studies. I have the impression that quite a number of our scholars think so. This might be the reason why Bahā'ī apologetics has more or less been neglected in Western Bahā'ī literature and been regarded as being incompatible with academic method. Indeed, one cannot defend a religion without being committed to it, without identifying oneself with it. This seems to be in contradiction to the required absolute objectivity to which the scholar has to be committed. Those who think so seem to be condemned to schizophrenia: As soon as they do scholarly work, they slip off the garment of faith and take on that of scholarship.

I think this is a fundamental error about the role of a Bahā'ī *'ālim*.<sup>42</sup> Undoubtedly he has to be methodical and rational in his work, but another prerequisite is loyalty to the scripture which is the indispensable frame of reference for all his activities. Without this strict adherence to the scripture and its authentic interpretation by the bearers of the teaching authority, 'Abdu'l-Bahā and Shoghi Effendi, Bahā'ī doctrine would be at the mercy of human arbitrariness,<sup>43</sup> at the mercy of people who, insisting on their "freedom of conscience", interpret scripture according to their own inclinations and desires. This is not allowed in any religion. I would like to refer to my paper on "Bahā'ī Apologetics" and quote from it the passage relevant to my topic:

“. . . Religious studies incline toward historicism and reductionism: they tend to explain revelation from and reduce it to its historical and socio-cultural influences. I don't think that it is the task of Bahā'ī scholars to work just for the sake of it (*l'art pour l'art*, so to speak). Since the core of truth, the essential mystery of a religion is beyond the reach of sciences<sup>44</sup>, their role should instead be that of

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42 *Kitāb-i-Aqdas* 173.

43 On this subject see *Making the Crooked Straight*, p. 204 ff.

44 *Making the Crooked Straight*, p. 15.

the theologian. A theologian regards his religion from inside. He is committed to the truth of revelation and to the authority of the scripture. Although his systematical and analytical reflection is scientific in methodology, he is not a scientist—theology does not count among the exact sciences. The history of the Faith, the facts and events, must undoubtedly be open to research; the theological significance of historical events, however, is a matter of theology. And theology, the *scientia fidei*, is a closed system, based on revelation, which is beyond the reach of scientific discourse. Thus, apologetics as a branch of systematic theology is not possible without a firm foothold in revelation, without commitment to revealed truth. The power to "face and withstand all in heaven and on earth" is, as Bahā'u'llāh says, given to those who stand "firm and steadfast in this ... exalted Revelation."<sup>45</sup>

12. To conclude my presentation, I would like to express my firm conviction that the present confusion and agitation and the heated debate, caused by dissident groups, will gradually pass when the role of Bahā'ī studies is more clearly understood as *scientia fidei*. The unpleasant debate should be taken as a thought-provoking opportunity for developing clear views of an adequate Bahā'ī methodology.

The central purpose of Bahā'ī studies should be the analysis of the holy texts; the analytical and systematic development of, and the philosophical reflection on, the doctrines and principles enshrined in the revelation of Bahā'u'llāh; the clarification of the fundamentals of the Faith, the correlation of Bahā'ī teachings with aspects of philosophy and science and of social and political issues, and, last but not least, the development of Bahā'ī apologetics, which has to demonstrate the credibility and plausibility of the revealed truth, to defend the Faith against the assaults of those "who sow seeds of doubt in the hearts of the believers",<sup>46</sup> and to respond to defama-

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45 *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahā'u'llāh* (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahā'ī Publishing Trust, rev. edn. 1978), 154:1.

46 Shoghi Effendi, *The Light of Divine Guidance*, vol. 1, p. 134.

tory accusations, levelled against the Faith. In other words: the fundamental purpose of Bahā'ī studies is the development of a comprehensive Bahā'ī theology.<sup>47</sup>

What is required from the scholars besides knowledge, competence and proficiency, are the virtues of patience, self-discipline, moderation, candour and courtesy. By the same token, the community and its institutions need to create an atmosphere of mutual respect, tolerance and forbearance, in order to overcome that spirit of distrust, suspicion and rigid intolerance that have impeded Bahā'ī studies for so long and which, in the final analysis, are responsible for the present situation.

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47 The use of this term, if it is understood as “the study of religion” or “the study of the nature of God and his relationship to His creation” is legitimate, as the Universal House of Justice stated in a letter of 8 February 1981. I, for my part, used the term “Bahā'ī theology” in the sense of a systematic reflection upon a revealed belief system as early as 1957, in my doctoral thesis. I would like to draw attention to Jack McLean’s highly instructive articles “Prolegomena to a Bahā'ī Theology” in *The Journal of Bahā'ī Studies*, vol. 5.1 (1992), p. 25-67 and “Thoughts on the Emerging Bahā'ī Theology” in McLean (ed.), *Revisioning the Sacred. New Perspectives on a Bahā'ī Theology. Studies in the Babi and Baha'i Religions*, vol. 8, Los Angeles: Kalimāt Press, 1997 (p. 189-207). On the use of the phrase “Bahā'ī theology” see “Prolegomena”, p. 49ff.