

Udo Schaefer

Bahā'ī apologetics?¹

Abstract

This paper presents eight theses to illuminate apologetics and its role in Bahā'ī scholarship.

Apologetics is a branch of systematic theology, not of religious studies. It has a legitimate place in the Bahā'ī Faith: in numerous passages in the scripture and in the writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahā' and Shoghi Effendi it is explained that "the Cause of God must be protected" and the arguments of its assailants refuted. However, apologetics has a wider scope than merely the defence of the Faith against attacks. In addition to this it is the purpose of Bahā'ī apologetics to discuss the teachings of the Faith and its ethics in the context of the prevailing philosophies and standards of a secular society, to answer critical inquiries by non-religious, Christian or Muslim critics or by members of the community in a rational manner and to demonstrate the credibility of the revealed truth. Critical self-reflection on the fundamentals of the Faith is an inevitable prerequisite to this function as well as to communication and proclamation: religion must be able to persevere in the forum of reason. This contention is concretised by examples.

There is a fundamental difference between religious studies and theology. The scholar of religious studies regards a religion from the outside; the core of truth is beyond the reach of his discipline. A theologian regards his religion from the inside; he is committed to the revealed truth and to the authority of the scripture. Apologetics as a branch of systematic theology is not possible without commitment to the revelation.

It is curious that Bahā'ī apologetics is not held in high esteem in the Bahā'ī community. Given the anti-intellectualism which prevails, scholarly activities are often viewed with disdain. Furthermore, Bahā'ī scholars who feel committed to a positivistic methodology shun apologetical themes, which are felt to be incompatible with academic method. Both attitudes stifle the process of self-reflection, a precondition of the development of a systematical theology and the advancement of the Bahā'ī Faith.

1 I am very much indebted to Gerald Keil and Dr. Seena Fazel for having improved the English style of my draft and to Jack McLean for the quotations from works of Paul Tillich (see footnote 2 and 5).

Apologetics is a complex concept, and the illumination of its features and a discussion of its role in Bahā'ī scholarship within the allotted time is like trying to square the circle. I will try to put forth my views in eight statements:

1. Apologetics derives from Greek *apologeisthai*, to speak in defence. Socrates' defence in Plato's *Apology* is the classical work of apology. Apologetics is a branch of Christian theology, not of religious studies. Its function is to support and justify the Christian truth in the face of objections, criticisms and attacks. The *locus classicus* is 1. Peter 3:15:

“... and be ready to give answer (apologia) to everyman that asketh you a reason of hope that is in you.”

Early Christianity was challenged by three kinds of opponents: Jews, heathen (i.e. the educated Greeks and Romans) and adherents of Gnosticism (a system of mystical religious and philosophical doctrines). Moreover, the early Church was plagued by internal controversies on dogmatic issues. Thus besieged, early Christendom had to defend the truth of revelation against multifarious objections through rational argumentation. This situation was the origin of Christian self-reflection, a prerequisite to apologetics.

Christian apologetics was the progenitor of a systematic theology by which the fundamentals of Christian Faith were clarified. Paul Tillich called the apologetic movement “the birthplace of a developed Christian theology”.² In this process of self-reflection, philosophy was of undeniable assistance. It was called *ancilla theologiae*, the handmaiden of theology.

2. The *sedes materiae* of Bahā'ī apologetics is *Gleanings* chapter 154, according to which “it is incumbent upon all men, each according to his ability, to refute the arguments of those that have attacked the Faith of God”. There follows an exhortation to promote the Cause of God through one's “pen and tongue” rather than through “recourse to sword or violence”, plus an assurance of divine bounties for him who “ariseth to defend, in his writings, the Cause of God against its assailants”. There are numerous passages in the

2 *The History of Christian Thought* (ed. C. Braaten, New York, Harper and Row, 1968) p. 24.

writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahā and Shoghi Effendi³ on this subject which are epitomised in the statement:

“The Cause of God must be protected from the enemies of the faith and from those who sow seeds of doubt in the hearts of the believers, and the greatest of all protection is knowledge.”⁴

This idea has also been stressed by the Universal House of Justice:

“As the Bahā’ī community continues to emerge inexorably from obscurity, it will be confronted by enemies, from both within and without, whose aim will be to malign and misrepresent its principles, so that its admirers might be disillusioned and the faith of its adherents might be shaken; Bahā’ī scholars have a vital role to play in the defense of the Faith through their contribution to anticipatory measures and their response to defamatory accusations leveled against the Faith.”⁵

3. However, apologetics has a wider scope by far than merely the defence of the faith against attack. Critical scholarly contributions or criticism raised in public or private discussions should not necessarily be equated with hostility. These are often perfectly legitimate questions in search of an answer. In the view of Paul Tillich⁶, apologetics is “answering theology”. The answering of critical inquiries or objections should be irenic, i.e. peace promoting, always bearing Bahā’u’llāh’s exhortations in mind “primarily to speak with words as mild as milk”, with “utmost leniency and forbearance”⁷. However, in certain cases of rude and hostile attacks, if a rebuttal is required, words “mild as milk” may be inadequate and a harsher tone may well be justified.⁸ It does not befit an apologist to belong to those “watchmen” the prophet calls “dumb dogs that cannot bark”⁹.

3 See *Crisis and Victory. A Compilation of Extracts from the Bahā’ī Writings*, compiled by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice, London: Bahā’ī Publishing Trust, 1988.

4 Shoghi Effendi, *The Light of Divine Guidance. The Messages from the Guardian of the Bahā’ī Faith to the Bahā’īs of Germany and Austria*; Hofheim: Bahā’ī-Verlag, 1982, vol. 1, p. 134.

5 Letter of 19th October 1993, quoted from *Issues related to the Study of the Bahā’ī Faith. Extracts from Letters written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice*, Wilmette/Ill., Bahā’ī Publishing Trust 1999, p. 15f.

6 *Systematic Theology* (3 vols. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), vol. 1, p. 6.

7 *Tablets of Bahā’u’llāh revealed after the Kitāb-i-Aqdas*. Haifa: Bahā’ī World Centre, 1978), 11:31.

8 See i. e. Udo Schaefer/Nicola Towfigh/Ulrich Gollmer, *Making the Crooked Straight. A Contribution to Bahā’ī Apologetics*, Oxford: George Ronald, 2000. Mīrzā ‘Abu’l Faḍl’s *The Brilliant Proof* (Los Angeles: Kalimāt Press, 1998) is not without polemics (see esp. pp. 1-7).

9 Isaiah 56:10.

4. In its essence, apologetics is undeniably a kind of confrontation, an act of revealing one's true colours, of hoisting the flag, of demonstrating the essential characteristics, the property (*proprium*) of the faith. Apologetics stands undoubtedly in tension with the attitude of dialogue, which in our time has increasingly replaced the attitude of religious controversy and confrontation. However, as Hans Küng puts it, "Dialogue does not mean self-denial"¹⁰. A faith that is opportunistically streamlined, adapted to the current trends, thus concealing its proper features and dissimulating any and all elements that could provoke rejection in order to be fit for dialogue, is in danger of losing its identity¹¹ and will not be taken seriously in an interfaith dialogue. This reminds me of an *aperçu* of Georg Christoph Lichtenberg¹²: "It is almost impossible to carry the torch of truth through a crowd without somebody's beard getting singed." We have to put up with this if we want to follow 'Abdu'l-Bahā's call "to raise up the word and to refute what is vain and false, to establish the truth"¹³ and to "dispel falsehood from the face of the earth"¹⁴, but we should strive for an equilibrium between the apologetical and the dialogical aims.

5. Bahā'ī apologetics derives from the experience of a fundamental discrepancy between secular thought, the current trends and tendencies of the period on the one hand, and revelation on the other. Bahā'u'llāh alluded to this hiatus when he considered "most people [to be] feeble and far-removed from the purpose of God"¹⁶. This judgement has meanwhile gained a global dimension. The unbridgeable gulf between the two standards is increasingly perceivable from day to day. Critical self-reflection on the fundamentals of the Bahā'ī Faith has therefore become an inevitable precondition to

10 *Theologie im Aufbruch* (München: Piper, 1987), p. 288.

11 The early Christians, who were in a situation similar to that of the Bahā'īs today, were exhorted by St Paul to resist temptation to conformity: "And be not conformed to this world" (Rom. 12:2), "But speak thou the things which become sound doctrine" (Titus 2:1).

12 An 18th century professor of physics at the University of Goettingen and famous for his aphorisms.

13 *Bahā'ī Prayers* (Wilmette: Bahā'ī Publishing Trust, 1982), p. 174.

14 *Tablets* 9:6. See also *Qur'ān* 21:18.

15 *Tablets* 9:6.

16 quoted from Bahā'u'llāh, *The Kitāb-i-Aqdas. The Most Holy Book* (Haifa: Bahā'ī World Centre, 1992) Introduction, p. 6.

communication and proclamation. Religion must be able to persevere in the forum of reason.¹⁷

It is the purpose of Bahā'ī apologetics to demonstrate the credibility and plausibility of revealed truth. It is not its purpose to prove the truth of revelation and to convince the partners in dialogue. This aim would transcend the dimension of rational and intellectual thought. As the British Cardinal Henry Newman formulated: "The heart is commonly reached, not through reason, but through the imagination, by means of direct impressions, by the testimony of facts and events, by history, by descriptions. Persons influence us ... looks subdue us, deeds inflame us ... no man will be a martyr for a conclusion."¹⁸

6. To make clear what I mean, here are three examples:

a. Some laws of the *Kitāb-i-Aqdas*, such as capital punishment for murder, the burning of the arsonist, the prohibition of *zinā'* (that is, any sexual intercourse outside marriage, including homosexual practices) or the stigmatisation of the thief, are in absolute contradiction to Western standards. Today these provisions are considered to be indicative of mediaeval barbarism. To Bahā'īs, however, they are manifestations of divine justice. For reasons that will be discussed in my forthcoming Bahā'ī Ethics, reason is not capable of making the truth of these provisions cogently evident through rational argumentation.

This by no means implies that a Bahā'ī has to resort to the "articles of Faith" and forsake rationality and argumentation. In this respect it is the task of apologetics

to clarify the relevant fundamentals of the Faith (here the sovereign and unfathomable Will of God, the doctrine of the "Most Great Infallibility", the relationship between justice and mercy);

to demonstrate the relativity of Western standards, which are not universal constants, but the result of a historical and evolutionary process;

17 See *Paris Talks. Addresses given by 'Abdu'l-Bahā in 1911, first published 1912 as Talks by 'Abdu'l-Bahā given in Paris*, 12th edn, London: Bahā'ī Publishing Trust 1995), 11:1-4; 22:4-5; 36:10; 44:3-4, 24-25; *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahā'ī Publishing Trust, 2nd edn 1982), p. 63.

18 *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, 1870.

to analyse the philosophy of individualism and to elucidate the equilibrium in Bahā'ī ethics between the rights of individuals and those of society;

to analyse and compare the different concepts of freedom;

to analyse the philosophical theories on punishment;

to point out that on this field the metaphysical principle of justice has been superseded by the principle of utility and pragmatism;

to describe and analyse the inefficiency of modern judiciaries, and in general,

to correlate the principles of the Faith "with the modern aspects of philosophy and science"¹⁹.

Although it is not possible to convince anyone of the correctness of the divine norms through rational argumentation, it is nevertheless possible to demonstrate that the ethical system underlying the revelation is self-consistent and reasonable. Here, apologetics primarily has the function of self-confirmation, i.e. of providing its own justification.

b. Bahā'ī anthropology in the sense of human nature (the image of man as "the supreme Talisman"²⁰) is incompatible with that determinism of philosophy and natural science which reduces man to a machine, to a computer system, thus eliminating every notion of personal responsibility and guilt. These antagonistic positions have far-reaching consequences in ethics, law, psychology and sociology. It is the task of apologetics to elucidate the Bahā'ī positions in terms of theology, philosophy and the humanities.

c. In the "age of falsifiability"²¹, the concept of "infallibility" conferred to human institutions has become untenable to secular thought. The concept is historically burdened, it conjures up all sorts of negative connotations and thus provokes fierce rejection. We cannot validate this concept through reason. The function of apologetics is the clarification of this notion in a critical discourse, so that infallibility does not appear to be some kind of magic element in our system, but rather something that is reasonable under the premise of faith. It is of utmost significance to discuss the immanent limits

19 The Universal House of Justice in a letter of 19 October 1993 to an individual believer.

20 *Tablets* 11:3.

21 cf. Karl Popper, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), pp. 78ff.

of this charisma and not to impose a *sacrificium intellectus*²² upon the believers.

7. As to the role of apologetics in Bahā'ī scholarship, we should distinguish between the external and the internal view. Scholars of religious studies feel obliged to carry out their research on the basis of methodical agnosticism and positivism. They are neither affected by the object of their research nor committed to it. They investigate and describe the historical, phenomenological, sociological and political aspects of a religious system. For these scholars revelation is a claim; and since this claim cannot be investigated and proved scientifically it is not taken up as a positive challenge. 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 sciences²³, their role should instead be that of 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."²⁴

22 The imposition of a *sacrificium rationis* in the name of religion would be tantamount to blindness and fanaticism — nothing short of a complete denial of one's own critical faculties, in overt contradiction to the exalted rank conferred to 'aql (reason, intellect) in the writings of Bahā'u'llāh (cf. 83:1; 95:1) and 'Abdu'l-Bahā (cf. *The Secret of Divine Civilization* (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahā'ī Publishing Trust, 2nd edn 1970), p. 1 (para 1 and 2); see also *Paris Talks* 44:3, 13, 24; *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, pp. 63ff., 128, 175ff., 231, 287, 298, 316, 372ff., 394, 434).

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

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

8. Apologetics is not held in high esteem by the Bahā'ī community. This is all the more astonishing since Bahā'u'llāh himself defended his revelation against the onslaughts of the Azalīs and the Shaykhis— his voluminous Kitāb-i-Badī' and the Kitāb-i-Īqān²⁵ are works of *apologia*; and Mīrzā Abu'l-Faḍl, who is considered to have been the foremost apologists in the history of the Faith, is highly praised for his work. The negative attitude towards apologetics results not only from a widespread diffuse anti-intellectualism which is heedless of the fact that religion needs "the power of reflection"²⁶ and which views scholarly activity with disdain, regarding it as unspiritual and thus detrimental to the Faith. It is equally a consequence of the activities of Bahā'ī scholars who feel themselves committed to an extreme positivistic methodology and who shun the apologetical as the devil the holy water, as it seems them incompatible with the academic. Both attitudes stifle the development and the progress of the Bahā'ī Faith.

I, for my part, have considered myself a *defensor fidei* since the beginning of my Bahā'ī life in 1948. Most of my publications are apologetical in character. However, when defending the Faith I have often found it necessary to defend myself against the distrust of ultra-conservative, overprotective keepers of the Holy Grail. Ten years long, until I found a Bahā'ī publisher in another European country, I had no chance to publish, and the authors of *Desinformation als Methode*²⁷ were free to start this project only upon the intervention of the Universal House of Justice, which declared a rebuttal as a matter of urgency, and which moreover suggested the publication of an English edition. I know all too well that my experience is no rare exception, and I bring it to your attention in order to illustrate a problem which needs to be resolved for the sake of the advancement of the Cause.

25 "Defence of the mission of the Bāb—with all its abrogatory implications—is the ostensible, indeed, the stated purpose of the Book of Certitude" (Christopher Buck, *Symbol & Secret. Qur'ān Commentary in Bahā'u'llāh's Kitāb-i-Īqān* (Los Angeles: Kalimāt Press, 1995), p. 233).

26 *Paris Talks* 44:14.

27 Subtitle: *Die Bahā'ismus-Monographie des F. Ficicchia*; Hildesheim: Olms Verlag, 1995.