

## Challenges to Bahā'ī Studies

The subject of this conference<sup>1</sup>, the promotion of Bahā'ī scholarship and an intellectual presentation and an intellectual presentation of our Faith, is a subject that I have cherished for a long time, feeling that there is an urgent need to present the Message of Bahā'u'llāh in a befitting way to a world which is daily becoming more sceptical. Everyone of us every day faces the difficulty of finding hearing ears when we proclaim the Message. People, especially Europeans, are far removed from the Divine Truth, and it is up to us to bridge this gap between the Divine Message and the consciousness of modern man.

This situation is a recurring theme in Bahā'u'llāh's *Scripture*: "... alas, there is no ear to hear, no heart to understand"<sup>2</sup>. "The peoples of the world are fast asleep... So bewildered are they in the drunkenness of their evil desires that they are powerless to recognize the Lord of all being"<sup>3</sup>. "Most people are feeble and far-removed from the purpose of God."<sup>4</sup>

Teaching the Cause of God does not, of course, depend at all on a scholarly presentation of its doctrines. However, in many fields today we desperately lacking systematic, analytical, and reflective literature. The literature at hand mainly comprises our Holy Writings, introductory books such as Esslemont's *Bahā'u'llāh and the New Era* and Hatcher and Martin's *The Bahā'ī Faith – Emerging Global Religion*, as well as many pamphlets. Non-Bahā'īs are rarely willing to read the Bahā'ī Holy Writings, which like all Sacred Writings, are not systematic. Most people would soon get tired and put them aside. The Bahā'ī Writings are revealed in the style of the late Islamic culture, a tradition which is outside the experience of most Westerners. They are, as Alessandro Bausani put it, "absolutely anti-realistic

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1 From a paper presented at the first European Conference on Bahā'ī activities in Universities held in Brno, Czechoslovakia on 2-5 January 1992.

2 *The Hidden Words*, pers. 16.

3 *Kitāb-i-Aqdas* 38.

4 quoted from *A Synopsis and Codification*, Introduction p. 4.

and of deep symbolism", and "absolutely unusual"<sup>5</sup>. For those who have never been acquainted with the pure Word of God, the Bahā'ī Writings are heavy fare. For the uninitiated, they come across as strange, odd, flowery, and typically oriental. To add to the difficulty, we should not forget that in our time, Westerners have become alienated from their own literary tradition. Language has become sober, rational, and passionless in contrast to the language of Goethe or Dickens. The Church is facing the same problem and in order to bridge the gap between religious and daily life, attempts have been made to re-translate the Bible in the styles of Tarzan, Batman or Asterix. Our own introductory brochures are simple and fragmentary, not meeting the demands of people who want a deeper impression of this new Faith; the purpose of these leaflets being only to draw people's attention to the Faith.

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

However, if we compare the development of the doctrines of our Faith, the scholarly systematization and presentation of its teachings in terms of philosophy, theology, religious studies, with that of Islam, for instance, we must admit that we are still in our infancy. The process of reflection and systematisation started earlier in Islam. In contrast our research has been mainly focused on the history of our Faith with some fine literature including the works of Balyuzi, Momen, and Peter Smith. The theological doctrines, however, which are at the very core of a religion, have not been stressed as much in our research. Apart from Juan Ricardo Cole's excellent essay on the

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5 *Originalliteratur der Bahā'ī Religion*, p. 32, quoted from a documentation, edited by the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahā'īs in Germany, 1976.

*Concept of Manifestation in the Bahā'ī Writings*<sup>6</sup> and Moojan Momen's contribution *Relativism: A Basis for Bahā'ī Metaphysics*,<sup>7</sup> very little has been written on the metaphysical and theological aspects of Bahā'u'llāh's Revelation. For instance, if we glance at the *Journal of Bahā'ī Studies*, would support this observation, we find contributions on the relationship of science and religion, agriculture, consultation, the environment, health, psychology, equality of the sexes, international language, family life, and a lot on poetry (!) – among them there are some very interesting articles, but only a few on theology and the Revelation, such as Todd Lawson's article on the *Qayyumu'l 'Asmā*<sup>8</sup> and recently Seena Fazel and Khazeh Fananapazir's contribution on the claim to exclusivity and uniqueness in Christianity<sup>9</sup>.

Two outstanding projects have plainly shown our difficulty in finding Bahā'ī writers in this field. One was a series of articles written for the renowned French philosophical encyclopaedia *Encyclopédie Philosophique Universelle*, which is being published by Presses Universitaires de France, including 21 articles on the works of the Bāb, Bahā'u'llāh, 'Abdu'l-Bahā, Shoghi Effendi and on a small selection of secondary literature. The other project is *A Short Encyclopedia of the Bahā'ī Faith*, a project sponsored by the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States, which is anticipated by the end of the Holy Year. Both projects have shown clearly that the international Bahā'ī community has some difficulties in making contributions on an encyclopaedical level.

When asked to write some articles at this level, I started looking for specialised Bahā'ī literature on subjects like sin, conscience, ethics, and social teaching, and soon I realized that such material simply does not exist. Although ethical statements are scattered throughout the whole body of Bahā'ī *Scripture* and the question of right action is of central import, there has never been any study on the subject. Nobody has tried to research the basic philosophical ideas underlying this ethical system. All we have are some

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6 *Bahā'ī studies* no. 9 (Ottawa 1982).

7 in: *Studies in Bābī and Bahā'ī Religions*, vol. 5 ed. M. Momen, Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 1988.

8 *Interpretation as Revelation. The Qur'ān Commentary of the Bāb*, vol. 2 no. 4, p.17 ff.

9 "A Bahā'ī Approach to the Claim of Exclusivity and Uniqueness in Christianity", in: *The Journal of Bahā'ī Studies* vol. 3 no. 2, p. 15 ff.

compilations from the Writings – their purpose is not being analysis, but rather edification.

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

A number of new challenges facing us will undoubtedly encourage the Bahā’īs to acquire a deeper understanding of the significance of the teachings of their Faith and will, consequently, enhance the quality of and contribution made by Bahā’ī scholarship:

#### The Breakdown of Communism in Eastern Europe

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

are more inclined to a philosophical and methodical approach to truth. There are fascinating opportunities for which we should be prepared. As Shoghi Effendi put it: "The Bahā'īs should ... arm our minds with knowledge in order to better demonstrate to, especially, the educated classes, the truth enshrined in our faith."<sup>10</sup> The following example will serve to highlight this point.

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

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10 5 July 1949 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, quoted according to *Prominent People. Extracts from the Bahā'ī Writings and Letters written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi and the Universal House of Justice*, compiled by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice (September 1990) no 39.

seminar on "The Spiritual Heritage of Mankind", and a course on "Philosophy of Religion", is planned and to be conducted by Dr. Julio Savi of Italy.

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

### Teaching Prominent People

An important goal of the worldwide Bahā'ī Community is to foster friendly relations with prominent people, politicians, leaders of thought, the educated classes, intellectuals, and scholars. This objective was repeatedly emphasized by 'Abdu'l-Bahā and Shoghi Effendi as reflected in the compilation from the Bahā'ī Writings entitled *Prominent People* compiled by the Universal House of Justice. Shoghi Effendi wrote in 1949: "It seems what we need is a more profound and co-ordinated Bahā'ī scholarship in order to attract such men." We have to learn to present the deeper teachings, as Shoghi Effendi put it, "intelligently and enticingly to such men!"<sup>11</sup>

### Apologetics

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

The refutation of attacks has to be done by rational, logical and cogent arguments. An adequate response must be grounded on a solid body of knowledge of the Bahā'ī Faith, its history, the history of religions, especially of Islam, and a grasp of Christian theology. A significant advantage would also be a basic knowledge of philosophical thought. The Guardian stated: "The Cause of God must be protected from the enemies of the Faith, and from those who sow the seeds of doubt in the hearts of the believers, and the

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11 3 July 1949, written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, quoted according to *Prominent People* no. 38

greatest of all protection is knowledge"<sup>12</sup>; and as Dr. Momen has aptly put it: "Well grounded Bahā'ī scholars provide one of the strongest bulwarks of the Bahā'ī Cause in defending itself from the attacks of its enemies."<sup>13</sup>

From the history of our Faith, we know to what extent such attacks by the enemies of the cause "fuel the unfoldment of the Faith"<sup>14</sup>. The Universal House of Justice has called upon the believers not to allow themselves "to be perturbed by any increase of opposition to the Cause" and to understand the "creative interaction between crisis and victory in the evolution of the Faith"<sup>15</sup>. The defence of the Faith from attacks is a tremendous challenge and stimulus for a deeper understanding of the Cause of God. It assists in the development of our knowledge and our ability to engage in a dialogue with those who regard us critically. Apologetics was the main impetus for the development of Christian theology. The Fathers of the Church were apologists. Attacks, no matter how unfounded and ill-informed, compel us to think more deeply about the teachings of our Faith. Reproaches like the Bahā'ī Faith does not take "sin" seriously and neglects evil, that it is "quasi-fascist movement" striving for world supremacy, are certainly distortions of our Faith but reflection is nevertheless necessary before a rebuttal can be made. Another example is the Bahā'ī law on the expulsion of Covenant-breakers from the community, which has been criticised very harshly by Churchleaders as well as by Covenant-breakers themselves. For a justification of this law, one needs to have some knowledge of Church history and Canon Law.<sup>16</sup> The rebuttal of such attacks is clearly not every person's responsibility, but we need some deepened friends in all countries who are equipped with the knowledge and the command of convincing debating skills to undertake this service.

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12 11 May 1948, quoted according to *The Light of Divine Guidance*, vol. 1 p. 134.

13 *Journal* I,1, p. 28.

14 *Crisis and Victory*, Introduction p. III.

15 *ibid.*

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

We can be sure that the publication of an English translation of the *Kitāb-i-Aqdas* in the Holy Year will provoke much discussion among the friends and prompt the attacks by enemies of the Faith. The revelation of a concrete law with binding rules of behaviour, with its demand of absolute obedience, its provisions of a law that sets absolute limits to personal freedom and that cannot be questioned and criticised, will invoke the abhorrence and repulsion of sceptical contemporaries. I am sure that some laws, especially the penal provisions of the Book, will be the target of harsh criticism, and it is quite obvious that the Bahā'īs must reach a new level of knowledge and understanding of their Faith in order to protect the Cause.

There is an abundance of encouraging statements in the Bahā'ī Scripture on the need to defend the Faith against those who "assail, in their inflammatory writings, the tenets of the Cause of God"<sup>17</sup>:

"It is incumbent upon all men, each according to his ability, to refute the arguments of those who have attacked the Faith of God. If any man were to arise to defend, in his writings, the Cause of God against its assailants, such a man, however inconsiderable his share, shall be so honoured in the world to come that the Concourse on High would envy his glory. No pen can depict the loftiness of his station neither can any tongue describe its splendour."<sup>18</sup>

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

What is the reason for the very emotional attitude which considers scholarly activities a threat that undermines the integrity of the belief system of our Faith? The following verse in the *Kitāb-i-Aqdas*: "Immerse yourselves in the ocean of My words, that ye may unravel its secrets, and discover all the pearls of wisdom that lie hid in its depth,"<sup>19</sup> provides an important insight. If one primarily understands "immerse" to mean meditation and contemplation

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17 *Gleanings* 154:1.

18 *ibid.*

19 verse 180.

on the Word of God, then certainly this meditative, contemplative approach to Scripture is indispensable. However is it the only legitimate one? There is another approach; an approach which employs rational, analytical, and methodical thought. Individuals do not only wish to understand through their hearts, but also through their minds. The European Enlightenment, which over-emphasized the "mind", resulted in a uni-dimensional way of thinking, which today is recognised and criticised. However, by overemphasizing the "heart" alone, such critics are in danger of throwing the baby out with the bath water. Undoubtedly, meditation has a unique position in the Writings. For instance, to read in the *Gleanings*, and contemplate on some verses is definitely of immense spiritual benefit: "One hour's reflection is preferable to seventy years of pious worship."<sup>20</sup> However, since human beings are essentially "rational s", they seek and needs to understand rationally. To understand a certain passage of Scripture, one must try to see it in context. One must approach it systematically – collecting and comparing all passages relating to the subject. For example, if I want to understand a passage on liberty in the *Kitāb-i-Aqdas*, I have to see it in the context of the whole body of Bahā'u'llāh's Writings, in the context of his denunciations of tyranny and oppression, his exhortations to follow justice and moderation, and so on. Otherwise, I could arrive at incorrect conclusions as the famous orientalist Ignaz Goldziher did, when he wrote about the Aqdas: "One should expect Bahā'u'llāh as far as politics are concerned, to be among the liberals, however, we are disappointed to find him among those who struggle against freedom."<sup>21</sup>

Moreover, for a deeper understanding, it is helpful to also include in one's research the broad stream of mankind's spiritual heritage, Western and Eastern philosophy, and the philosophies of past religions. In this way, one can arrive at much clearer insights than through a solely Bahā'ī-focused methodology. The idea that all the spiritual heritage of mankind has now been put on the rubbish heap of history through Bahā'u'llāh's Revelation is erroneous and in contradiction to Bahā'u'llāh's statements, which declare that "all men have been created to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization"<sup>22</sup>. In the light of this verse, culture and civilization is a *continuum*. Bahā'u'llāh

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20 *The Kitāb-i-Iqān* 2:166.

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

22 *Gleanings* 109:2.

built on the whole spiritual heritage of mankind in His Writings, as His many references, allusions and quotations from the Bible, the *Qur'ān*, the *hadīth*, and Arabic-Persian poetry show. How great is His praise of the Greek philosophers such as Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle in the *Lawḥ-i-Hikmat*<sup>23</sup>, philosophers who had a tremendous impact on Christian and Islamic thought. The oft-repeated opinion by zealous Bahā'īs that Bahā'u'llāh has said everything and we don't need any other philosophers in order to know what is truth, is narrow-minded, completely unfounded and can generate sectarian attitudes within the Bahā'ī community. Bahā'u'llāh has answered many questions which have been discussed for centuries by philosophers, and many passages of His Writings can therefore be understood in the light of these discussions.

The "arrogance of the intellectuals" – a real danger which has been described by Moojan Momen in his fine article on Bahā'ī scholarship<sup>24</sup> – has been superseded by this anti-intellectualism, the "arrogance" of those who rely only on the spirit, who regard rational thought to be an inconsequential, unspiritual, and contrary to the spirit of the Faith. One cannot but wonder how this attitude could become so strong in the communities when we consider Bahā'u'llāh's statements on the mind, which He calls "the first and foremost" among the favours "which the Almighty has conferred upon man"<sup>25</sup>: "This gift giveth man the power to discern the truth in all things, leadeth him to what is right, and helpeth him to discover the secrets of creation."<sup>26</sup> The "rational faculty" has been called a "sign" of the "sovereign Lord"<sup>27</sup>.

The attitude that simply ignores the attacks of the enemies, and refrains from all rebuttal, putting all confidence in divine assistance – an attitude of the *mutawakkilūn*<sup>28</sup> – has already resulted in severe damages. For example, in 1981, an agency of the Protestant Church in Germany published a monograph on the Bahā'ī Faith of 480 pages, written by a Swiss Covenant-breaker. The

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23 *Tablets of Bahā'u'llāh revealed after the Kitāb-i-Aqdas* 9:29; cf. 'Abdu'l-Bahā, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 327, 348, 356.

24 "Scholarship and the Bahā'ī Community", in: *The Journal of Bahā'ī Studies*, vol. 1 no. 1 p. 25 ff.

25 *Gleanings* 95:1.

26 *ibid.*

27 *Gleanings* 83:1

28 from *tawakkul*, trust in God: The *mutawakkilūn* carried *tawakkul* to excess; a quietistic attitude that involves complete extinction of human will, putting all trust in God and desisting from action. Cf. Goldziher, op. cit., p. 151

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

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

Furthermore, in my opinion, a clear distinction between the attacks from within and without the Faith is not possible. It is my strong conviction that the machinations of the Covenant-breakers would have been less successful if the Bahā'īs had reacted and analysed their absurd propositions instead of tabooing them. For example, Dr. Jensen, a Covenant-breaker in the USA in the tradition of Mason Remey, would not have found a following if the absurdity of his claims had been analysed and exposed to the Bahā'īs. It is a Bahā'ī law to avoid any communication with Covenant-breakers, but no Bahā'ī

commandment exists prohibiting believers from analysing and rebutting their assertions. Certainly, I do not wish to make a general recommendation for study of this awful kind of literature. However, I think that a few knowledgeable Bahā'īs must do so, and I cannot see why the nature of these assertions should not be discussed with the friends. If done wisely, it could really deepen them. "Heretics", said St. Augustine, "are a divine blessing, because they prevent Christians from falling asleep on the Scripture", and St. Paul tells us: "For there must be also heretics among you, that they which are approved may be made manifest among you."<sup>29</sup>

### Reviewing Bahā'ī Literature

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

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

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29 1 Cor. 11:19.







## Conclusion

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

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

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

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