

A Virtual Toast For Dr. Udo Schaefer's 80th Birthday

Dr. Nicola Towfigh & Dr. Emanuel Vahid Towfigh

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On the occasion of the 80th birthday of Dr. Udo Schaefer, we have the privilege of congratulating and bringing out a toast on him in this esteemed forum, the Payam-i-Baha'i. As the following words will show, Dr. Schaefer is part of (not only German) Baha'i history, and he has also significantly shaped it during the last decades. It is thus just adequate to honour this great Baha'i scholar and his countless achievements on the various fields.

Most notably, Dr. Schaefer is one of the most renowned authors on Baha'i studies worldwide, and with his work has left his mark on this young field. The list of Dr. Schaefer's publications is an impressive one. When he first wrote his doctoral thesis on the foundations of the Baha'i administrative order in 1957, he himself would not have thought that writing and publishing books on different aspects of the Faith would be a continuing pattern of his life: leading to the publication of over 50 titles in at least 8 different languages, not to mention a huge number of contributions and lectures which were not published but are partly available on Dr. Schaefer's website. His publications cover a wide range of Baha'i studies, including theology, Baha'i law, the constitution of the Baha'i community, morals and ethics, or the future of mankind. Special fields of his interest are the theological foundations for interfaith dialogue, studies in Christianity and Islam, and apologetics – defending the Faith against its opponents. Among a number of other publications in the field of apologetics, a major work is his co-authorship of "Making the Crooked Straight", first published in 1995 in German, and then later in 2000 in English, and mentioned in a Ridván messages of the Universal House of Justice.

He does not spare religious fanaticism and misrepresentation on the part of Christian or Muslim clergies, as well as materialistic worldviews and anti-Baha'i conceptions with his relentless and brilliant analysis. His argumentation is pointed, convincing and at times polemic – his style is absorbing and cannot deny the author's long career as a chief public prosecutor in Heidelberg.

Most remarkable and inspiring in Dr. Schaefer's work is his deep knowledge and thorough analysis of other religions, of society and modern thought — which allows him to correlate the Baha'i teachings with them and offer solutions to current questions. We may be expecting in joyful anticipation a major work on Baha'i Ethics which will shortly be published at George Ronald's in two volumes — a yet unparalleled standard work based on the author's deep knowledge of the history of ethics and the Baha'i teachings. We can look forward to a voluminous work in which Dr. Schaefer will as usual not only give a sound and comprising overview about the issues in question, but will also use many excerpts of the Baha'i Scripture which shed light on them: in his typical way of highlighting thoughts by quoting short extracts — so to say using a magnifying-glass in order to point out a special (otherwise easily overlooked or missed) aspect.

There will also be plenty of footnotes. Some time ago, a joke was going around in the German community announcing the alleged publication of a new work of Dr. Schaefer: a collection of his footnotes. And yet even the scoffers agree: his footnotes are a mine of interesting and sometimes peculiar details the attentive reader would not wish to miss.

As one notices when reading Dr. Schaefer's books and papers, he has a special love for the German language and a correct use of metaphors, terms and expressions. Thus, it is not astonishing that another field of his activities are translations of the Holy Writings into German. During the last 35 years he was involved in the translation work of the German Baha'i Publishing Trust, including work on the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, the Kitáb-i-Iqán, Bahá'í Prayers, and Summons of the Lord of Hosts. His aforementioned love for the German language, his precise elocution, and his deep understanding and broad knowledge of the coherences of the Teachings are a guarantor for both accurate and yet beautiful translations. In connection with his translation work of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, he offered a number of seminars all over Germany for a deeper understanding and appreciation of the contents of the Most Holy Book among the Baha'i friends, including some deliberations on crime and punishment, Baha'i criminal law and the concept of freedom and its limitations.

Only few know that apart from penning best-selling books, Dr. Schaefer during the past five decades was also the legal proxy of the German Baha'i community. Not only did he draft literally hundreds of notes, actions and complaints to courts and government authorities, fighting for recognition of the Baha'i community and its Assemblies, and for

tax exemptions, he was also a key figure in preparing and finally winning a case of the Baha'i community at the Federal Constitutional Court, in 1991. Germany's highest Court ruled that the Baha'i Faith was obviously and without any doubt to be considered a religion, and its community as a religious community with a religious law that at times can overrule state law. This very verdict brought a lot of recognition and until these days is a great asset when dealing with any kind of (government) institution. As the ruling deals with a number of major constitutional questions, its contents are taught at law schools throughout the country when it comes to the right of religious freedom.

Last but not least, one of the features that make Dr. Schaefer a true scholar must not be left out here: Having always sought the discourse with the younger Baha'is he is a great mentor to many of them. In countless talks and seminars he has encouraged and fostered the youth to dedicate themselves to Baha'i studies, he has confirmed and fortified many students in their aim to relate their studies to Baha'u'llah's Teachings, and he has read, discussed and helped to polish quite a number of dissertations. The younger Baha'is love to follow his conversation and speeches – his attendance regularly leads to a full house –, many see in Dr. Schaefer their "academic father". And indeed his relationship to the younger generation is maybe best described by a statement he recently made: "Isn't it amazing and thrilling that a man my age would have so many youthful friends? Have you met a man my age who has at least equally many young dialogue partners than he has of his age?"

Dr. Schaefer is an interesting, inspiring and challenging partner in dialogue. While holding strong views and defending them, he is always open for other points of view, for reflection and reconsideration. His Baha'i and non-Baha'is friends and acquaintances from all over the world value the exchange of thoughts with him, be it in discussions or correspondence.

But Udo Schaefer would only be half without his dear wife, Sigrun. She is not only bearing with him, but is a partner in dialogue and an active and compassionate supporter of his work in all kinds of fields: from research of literature in the internet and in libraries, to type-setting, keeping track of updates and changes, and laying out all the books.

And finally, dear Udo, our toast for you: May Baha'u'llah always strengthen and assist you and your dear wife in all your dedicated endeavours to serve His Cause in the field of Baha'i scholarship, and may others follow your path.

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