

A Statement on the Encouragement of Baha'i Scholarship¹

The International Teaching Centre (August 9, 1984)

A letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, dated 25 October 1984, reads: "...at the heart of all activities, the spiritual, intellectual and community life of the believers must be developed and fostered.' In pursuance of this objective, the International Teaching Centre sent a letter to all Continental Boards of Counselors on 9 August 1984, providing further information on this important subject in the hope that it would assist them to devise ways to foster development of Baha'i scholarship along lines that are in accordance with Baha'i standards and values..." This is one of the main works cited in the talk given by Mrs. Kimiko Schwerin, secretary of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of Japan at the present conference. Because of its importance and relevance to the conference theme "Spirituality and Scholarship," the ABS-Japan Executive Committee decided to include the English statement and its Japanese translation in the present Proceedings.

The Importance of Baha'i Scholarship

Over 50 years ago, the Guardian emphasised the need for development of the intellectual life of the Baha'i community, in the statement:

In these days when people are so skeptical about religion and look with so much contempt towards religious organizations and movements, there seems to be more need than ever for our young Baha'is to be well-equipped intellectually, so that they may be in a position to present the Message in a befitting way, and in a manner that would convince every unbiased observer of the effectiveness and power of the Teachings.
(From a letter dated 5 May 1934 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer)

Some years later, he described Baha'i scholarship as being an important aid to teaching the Faith to those who do not find the Baha'i principles novel in the light of modern thought:

It seems what we need now is a more profound and coordinated Baha'i scholarship in

¹ The preamble to this statement: "In the message of Naw-Ruz 1979 addressed to the Baha'i world, the Universal House of Justice stated that 'at the heart of all activities, the spiritual, intellectual and community life of the believers must be developed and fostered'. In pursuance of this objective, the International Teaching Centre sent a letter to all Continental Boards of Counsellors on 9 August 1984, providing further information on this important subject in the hope that it would assist them to devise ways to foster the development of Baha'i scholarship along lines that are in accordance with Baha'i standards and values.

"The Universal House of Justice feels that this information would also be of particular assistance to your National' Spiritual Assemblies, and has therefore instructed us to send you the enclosed excerpt from the International Teaching Centre's letter."

(From a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice dated 25 October 1984, to selected National Spiritual Assemblies)

order to attract such men as you are contacting. The world has - at least the thinking world - caught up by now with all the great and universal principles enunciated by Baha'u'llah over 70 years ago and so of course it does not sound 'new' to them. But we know that the deeper teachings, the capacity of His projected World Order to re-create society, are new and dynamic. It is these we must learn to present intelligently and enticingly to such men. (From a letter dated 3 July 1949 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer)

More recently, attention has been directed to the role to be played by Baha'i scholarship, in the statement:

The Universal House of Justice regards Baha'i scholarship as of great potential importance for the development and consolidation of the Baha'i community as it emerges from obscurity. (From a letter dated 3 January 1979 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

As the Supreme Body pointed out in the opening sentence of the Ridvan 1984 message to the Baha'is of the world, the emergence from obscurity of the Faith has been a marked feature of the past five years. This directs unprecedented public attention to the Cause of God, and also necessitates increased emphasis on the development of Baha'i scholarship, since in the same message, the House of Justice says:

Persistently greater and greater efforts must be made to acquaint the leaders of the world, in all departments of life, with the true nature of Baha'u'llah's revelation as the sole hope for the pacification and unification of the world .

The Nature of Baha'i Scholarship

A vital prerequisite to the fostering of Baha'i scholarship is the acquisition of a clearer understanding of the meaning of this term. We can do no better than to offer an illuminating passage from the writings of the Guardian, which might well be taken as a definition of the attributes toward which a Baha'i scholar should aspire:

. . . The Cause needs more Baha'i scholars, people who not only are devoted to it and believe in it and are anxious to tell others about it, but also who have a deep grasp of the Teachings and their significance, and who can correlate its beliefs with the current thoughts and problems of the people of the world.' (From a letter dated 21 October 1943 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer.)

This passage calls for distinctive qualities. The description of the kind of Baha'i scholar of which the Faith stands in such need at this time places emphasis upon belief, devotion to the Faith, a profound understanding of the Teachings and a strong desire to share them with others. A distinctive feature of such Baha'i scholarship, which is also reiterated in other passages of the writings of the Guardian, is that of relating the Baha'i teachings to the present-day concerns and thought of the people around us.

Fostering Baha'i Scholarship

The Universal House of Justice specified how the Counsellors can foster Baha'i scholarship:

In the field of Baha'i scholarship . . . the Boards of Counsellors can render valuable services in this area by encouraging budding scholars and by promoting within the Baha'i community an atmosphere of tolerance for the views of others. At the same time the fundamental core of the believers' faith should be strengthened by an increasing awareness of the cardinal truth and vital importance of the Covenant, and an ever-growing love for Baha'u'llah. (From a communication dated 10 February 1981 written by the Universal House of Justice to the International Teaching Centre)

We consider first the matter of "encouraging budding scholars".

From the passage of the Guardian's writings dealing with the attributes to which a Baha'i scholar should aspire, it is evident that Baha'i scholarship is an endeavour accessible to all members of the Baha'i community, without exception. All believers can aspire to the attributes described by the Guardian, and can strive to relate the Baha'i teachings to the thinking and concerns of the non-Baha'i population around them. You can perform a valuable service in bringing this potential role to the attention of all the believers including those who may lack formal education, and those who dwell in remote areas, villages and islands -- and to discourage any thought that Baha'i scholarship is an activity open only to those who are highly educated or who are pursuing an academic career.

As the followers of the Blessed Beauty make efforts to correlate the Baha'i teachings, which impinge upon every aspect of human life, with the thoughts and problems of the people around them, they will inevitably discover new ways of presenting the teachings convincingly and will also acquire an ever-increasing understanding of the Revelation of Baha'u'llah.

At the same time special encouragement should also be given to believers of unusual capacity, training or accomplishment to consecrate their abilities to the service of the Cause through the unique and distinctive contribution they can make to Baha'i scholarship. The Guardian repeatedly linked the work of Baha'i scholars to the expansion and consolidation of the Faith. as stated in the following:

If the Baha'is want to be really effective in teaching the Cause they need to be much better informed and able to discuss intelligently, intellectually, the present condition of the world and its problems. We need Baha'i scholars, not only people far, far more deeply aware of what our teachings really are, but also well read and well educated people, capable of correlating our teachings to the current thoughts of the leaders of society.

We Baha'is should, in other words, arm our minds with knowledge in order to better demonstrate to, especially, the educated classes the truths enshrined in our Faith. (From a letter dated 5 July 1949 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer.)

The Universal House of Justice, in responding to a Baha'i who wanted to use logical means to convey and prove spiritual principles, wrote that:

. . . the House of Justice understands that you desire to find ways of conveying spiritual truths in logical ways and demonstrating their validity through scientific proofs. There can be no objection to such an attitude. 'Abdu'l-Baha Himself used such a method. The danger Baha'i scholars must avoid is the distortion of religious truth, almost forcibly at times, to make it conform to understandings and perceptions current in the scientific world. True Baha'i scholars should guard against this. (From a letter dated 7 June 1983 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

The Supreme Body has also referred to the distinctive role to be played by Baha'is who acquire

expertise in various fields of endeavour, in affirming that:

As the Baha'i community grows it will acquire experts in numerous fields -- both by Baha'is becoming experts and by experts becoming Baha'is. As these experts bring their knowledge and skill to the service of the community and, even more, as they transform their various disciplines by bringing to bear upon them the light of the Divine Teachings, problem after problem now disrupting society will be answered. (From a letter dated 21 August 1977 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

Closely allied to this role is the call of the House of Justice for:

. . . the promotion of Baha'i scholarship, so that an increasing number of believers will be able to analyse the problems of mankind in every field and to show how the Teachings solve them. (From a letter dated 19 January 1983 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

The Counsellors and Auxiliary Board members can do much to assist in the response to this call by their stimulation and encouragement of Baha'is of distinctive capacity and promise, especially young Baha'is who are choosing their life work. Since the Baha'i Teachings relate to every dimension of human thought and activity, believers who become eminent in any legitimate field of knowledge are in an enviable position to make a significant and far-reaching contribution by presenting the Teachings in a way that demonstrates the profundity and efficacy of the Revelation of Baha'u'llah.

The Baha'i community can already point to the example of several believers who have become recognised widely for their scholarship, and whose intellectual pursuits were enriched by their abiding devotion to the Faith, and their compelling desire to teach the Cause. Within this company is to be found Mirza Abu'l Fadl, who was described by the Guardian as "very excellent and erudite", as well as the Hands of the Cause of God George Townshend, whose scholarship was praised by the Guardian, and Hasan Balyuzi, who was eulogised by the Universal House of Justice for "his outstanding scholarly pursuits", as well as others who are presently engaged in like service.

Promoting an Atmosphere of Tolerance

We now consider "promoting within the Baha'i community an atmosphere of tolerance for others" and strengthening "the fundamental core of the believers' faith". The Universal House of Justice has stated that :

The combination of absolute loyalty to, the Manifestation of God and His Teachings, with, the searching and intelligent study of the Teachings and history of the Faith which those Teachings themselves enjoin, is a particular strength of this Dispensation. In past Dispensations the believers have tended to divide into two mutually antagonistic groups: those who held blindly to the letter of the Revelation and those who questioned and doubted everything. Like all extremes, both these can lead into error. The beloved Guardian has written that "The Baha'i Faith . . . enjoins upon its followers the primary duty of an unfettered search after truth..." Baha'is are called upon to follow the Faith with intelligence and understanding. Inevitably believers will commit errors as they strive to rise to this degree of maturity, and this calls for forbearance and humility on the part of all concerned, so that such matters do not cause disunity or discord among the friends. (From a letter dated 7 October 1980 written on behalf of the Universal

House of Justice to an individual believer.)

The challenge to all believers is to develop the balanced combination prescribed by the House of Justice, to such an extent that they do not fall into one of the mutually antagonistic groups of which the Supreme Body warns. On the need for tolerance the Universal House of Justice wrote:

The House of Justice agrees that it is most important for the believers, and especially those who hold positions of responsibility in the Administrative Order, to react calmly and with tolerant and enquiring minds to views which differ from their own, remembering that all Baha'is are but students of the Faith, ever striving to understand the Teachings more clearly and to apply them more faithfully, and none can claim to have a perfect understanding of this Revelation. At the same time all believers, and scholars in particular, should remember the many warnings in the Writings against the fomenting of discord among the friends. It is the duty of the institutions of the Faith to guard the community against such dangers. (From a letter dated 18 July 1979 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer.)

Promotion of an atmosphere of tolerance thus requires that those holding positions of administrative authority not over react and that those setting forth their understanding of the Teachings not foster discord and dissension, deliberately or unwittingly. The warning against the fomenting of discord highlights one of the hazards facing believers who embark upon the practice of Baha'i scholarship. On one occasion the Universal House of Justice felt moved to comment that:

There have, however, been cases of believers who look upon themselves as scholars, and may even be such in an academic sense, who have considerable expertise in certain aspects of the Faith but are lamentably ignorant or misinformed about other aspects of the Cause and the Teachings. Others have expressed biting critical views with a quite unscholarly intemperance." (From a letter dated 8 October 1980 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

By striving to express themselves with, courtesy, moderation, tact and wisdom, Baha'i scholars will contribute to the maintenance within the Baha'i community of an atmosphere of tolerance which facilitates their limitless exploration of the meaning and implications of the Baha'i Revelation.

Strengthening the Core of the Believers' Faith

This need for Baha'i scholars to become thoroughly deepened in the spirit of the Cause, and well versed in its Teachings is emphasised in the following passage:

In the application of the social laws of the Faith, most of the difficulties can be seen to arise not only from outright disobedience, but also from the actions of those who, while careful to observe the letter of the law, try to go as far as it will permit them away from the spirit which lies at its heart. A similar tendency can be noted among some Baha'i scholars. The great advances in knowledge and understanding in the vital field of Baha'i scholarship will be made by those who, while well versed in their subjects and adhering to the principles of research, are also thoroughly imbued with love for the Faith and the determination to grow in the comprehension of teachings. (From a letter dated 27 March 1983 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

In the same letter the Supreme Body calls attention to the danger of intellectual pride which a Baha'i scholar must combat within him in these words:

The House of Justice feels that Baha'i scholars must beware of the temptations of intellectual pride. 'Abdu'l-Baha has warned the friends in the West that they would be subjected to intellectual tests and the Guardian reminded them of this warning. There are many aspects of western thinking which have been exalted to a status of unassailable principle in the general mind, that time may well show to have been erroneous or, at least, only partially true. Any Baha'i who rises to eminence in academic circles will be exposed to the powerful influence of such thinking.

(From a letter dated 27 March 1983 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer.)

The provisions of the Covenant stand as our inviolable protection against distortion of the Teachings and against the subtle temptations of intellectual pride. Central to the Covenant is the authority of the Manifestation of God, and of the infallible institutions that the Holy Writings ordained. 'Abdu'l-Baha has specified that:

Unto the Most Holy Book everyone must turn and all that is not expressly recorded therein must be referred to the Universal House of Justice. That which this body, whether unanimously or by a majority doth carry, that is verily the Truth and Purpose of God Himself. (From *Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Baha*, Part Two.)

The Universal House of Justice has clarified that:

In the Baha'i Faith there are two authoritative centres appointed to which the believers must turn, for in reality the Interpreter of the Word is an extension of that centre which is the Word itself. The Book is the record of the utterance of Baha'u'llah while the divinely inspired Interpreter is the living Mouth of that Book -- it is he and he alone who can authoritatively state what the Book means. Thus one centre is the Book with its Interpreter, and the other is the Universal House of Justice guided by God to decide on whatever is not explicitly revealed in the Book. (From a letter dated 7 December 1967 written by the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer.)

and it has pointed out that:

While it may often be the part of wisdom to approach individuals or an audience from a standpoint of current knowledge, it should never be overlooked that the Revelation of the Manifestation of God is the standard for all knowledge, and scientific statements and theories, no matter how close they may come to the eternal principles proclaimed by God's Messenger, are in their very nature ephemeral and limited. Likewise, attempting to make the Baha'i Faith relevant to modern society is to incur the grave risk of compromising the fundamental verities of our Faith in an effort to make it conform to current theories and practices. (From a letter dated 21 July 1968 written by the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly.)

A vital element of Baha'i scholarship is humility in recognising the limitations of the human mind in its attempts to encompass the Divine Message. Baha'u'llah addresses the Creator in a prayer, using these terms:

Exalted, immeasurably exalted art Thou, O my Beloved, above the strivings of any of Thy creatures, however learned, to know Thee; exalted, immensely exalted art Thou above every human attempt, no matter how searching, to describe Thee! For the highest thought of men, however deep their contemplation, can never hope to outsoar the limitations imposed upon Thy creation, nor ascend beyond the state of the contingent world, nor break the bounds irrevocably set for it by Thee. (From *Prayers and Meditations by Baha'u'llah*, No. CLXXXIV)

Another vital provision of the Covenant is that concerning interpretation. The Universal House of Justice states:

. . . individual interpretation is considered the fruit of man's rational power and conducive to a better understanding of the teachings, provided that no disputes or arguments arise among the friends and the individual himself understands and makes it clear that his views are merely his own. Individual interpretations continually change as one grows in comprehension of the Teachings.

. . . although individual insights can be enlightening and helpful, they can also be misleading. The friends must therefore learn to listen to the views of others without being overawed or allowing their faith to be shaken, and to express their own views without pressing them on their fellow Baha'is. (From a letter dated 27 May 1966 written by the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer.)

The Covenant of Baha'u'llah gives rise to a Baha'i community which will increasingly become known for its fostering of creative development and for its encouragement, of individual expression. The Covenant also provides guiding principles by which a Baha'i scholar can exemplify that harmony of faith and reason which is a hallmark of the Baha'i Dispensation.

With the Seven Year Plan calling for the fostering of the intellectual life of the Baha'i community, and with the closely-associated development of Baha'i scholarship, the world-wide community of the followers of the Greatest Name embarks upon an exciting phase in its development, which will widen the range of people attracted to its truths, greatly enhance its prestige and influence, and broaden the foundation of the world civilization to which the Revelation of Baha'u'llah will ultimately give rise.