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Notes:

This compilation consists of three parts. The last of the three is a compilation on scholarship, "Issues Related to the Study of the Baha'i Faith," which was published in *Baha'i Canada*, May 1998. Copies were distributed by the Canadian NSA to a number of other NSAs. In 1999 this compilation was reprinted by the US NSA (Wilmette: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1999). It was distributed in booklet form with a cover letter from the Universal House of Justice to all National Spiritual Assemblies, dated 7 April 1999. This cover letter, scanned by Duane Troxel, was appended to the compilation already online in May, 1999, and later published in *Baha'i Canada* in June and in *The American Baha'i* in November 1999. The International Teaching Center then released a letter elaborating on the themes of the April 7 1999 letter, which follows it.

Also available as a nicely-formatted [PDF](#), prepared by Romane Takkenberg.

Classified in [BWC Compilations](#) and [UHJ Letters](#).

See also bahai-library.com/uhj_issues_study_comment.

Study of the Bahá'í Faith, Issues Related to the

by [Universal House of Justice](#)

Baha'i Publishing Trust of the United States
Baha'i Canada, May 1998

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Part one: cover letter to compilation distributed to all NSAs in April 1999

Published in *Bahá'í Canada*, June 1999

THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE
BAHA'I WORLD CENTRE

Department of the Secretariat

7 April 1999

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

Issues Related to the Study of the Bahá'í Faith

In May of 1998, Bahá'í Canada reproduced a collection of letters which the Universal House of Justice had written to various individuals on the subject of the academic study of the Bahá'í Faith. Copies of this compilation were subsequently mailed by the Canadian National Spiritual Assembly to its sister Assemblies. The reprint has now been made generally available in booklet form by the United States Bahá'í Publishing Trust. The House of Justice has asked us to forward you a copy of the latter publication with the following comments.

As a number of the friends are aware, a campaign of internal opposition to the Teachings is currently being carried on through the use of the Internet, a communications system that now reaches virtually every part of the world. Differing from attacks familiar in the past, it seeks to recast the entire Faith into a socio-political ideology alien to Bahá'u'lláh's intent. In the place of the institutional authority established by His Covenant, it promotes a kind of interpretive authority which those behind it attribute to the views of persons technically trained in Middle East studies.

Early in 1996, the deliberate nature of the plan was revealed in an accidental posting to an Internet list which Bahá'í subscribers had believed was dedicated to scholarly exploration of the Cause. Some of the people responsible resigned from the Faith when Counsellors pointed out to them the direction their activities were taking. A small number of others continue to promote the campaign within the Bahá'í community.

In the past, in situations of a somewhat similar nature, the patience and compassion shown by

'Abdu'l-Bahá and the Guardian helped various believers who had been misled by ill-intentioned persons to eventually free themselves from such entanglements. In this same spirit of forbearance the Universal House of Justice has intervened in the current situation only to the extent that has been unavoidable, trusting to the good sense and the goodwill of the believers involved to awaken to the spiritual dangers to which they are exposing themselves. Nevertheless, certain Counsellors and National Spiritual Assemblies are monitoring the problem closely, and the friends can be confident that whatever further steps are needed to protect the integrity of the Cause will be taken.

As passages in the enclosed reprint make clear, this campaign of internal opposition — while purporting to accept the legitimacy of the Guardianship and the Universal House of Justice as twin successors of Bahá'u'lláh and the Centre of His Covenant — attempts to cast doubt on the nature and scope of the authority conferred on them in the Writings. When other Bahá'ís have pointed out that such arguments contradict explicit statements of the Master, persons

To all National Spiritual Assemblies 7 April 1999 Page 2

behind the scheme have responded by calling into question the soundness of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's own judgement and perspective. Gradually, these arguments have exposed the view of those involved that Bahá'u'lláh Himself was not the voice of God to our age but merely a particularly enlightened moral philosopher, one whose primary concern was to reform existing society.

By itself, such opposition would likely stand little chance of influencing reasonably informed Bahá'ís. As one of the letters in the enclosed reprint (20 July 1997) points out, the scheme relies for effect, therefore, on exploiting the confusion created in modern thought by the reigning doctrines of materialism. Although the reality of God's continuous relationship with His creation and His intervention in human life and history are the very essence of the teachings of the Founders of the revealed religions, dogmatic materialism today insists that even the nature of religion itself can be adequately understood only through the use of an academic methodology designed to ignore the truths that make religion what it is.

In general, the strategy being pursued has been to avoid direct attacks on the Faith's Central Figures. The effort, rather, has been to sow the seeds of doubt among believers about the Faith's teachings and institutions by appealing to unexamined prejudices that Bahá'ís may have unconsciously absorbed from non-Bahá'í society. In defiance of the clear interpretation of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and the Guardian, for example, Bahá'u'lláh's limiting of membership on the Universal House of Justice to men is misrepresented as merely a "temporary measure" subject to eventual revision if sufficient pressure is brought to bear. Similarly, Shoghi Effendi's explanation of Bahá'u'lláh's vision of the future Bahá'í World Commonwealth that will unite spiritual and civil authority is dismissed in favour of the assertion that the modern political concept of "separation of church and state" is somehow one that Bahá'u'lláh intended as a basic principle of the World Order He has founded. Particularly subtle is an attempt to suggest that the Mashriqu'l-Adhkar should evolve into a seat of quasi-doctrinal authority, parallel to and essentially independent of the Local House of Justice, which would permit various interests to insinuate themselves into the direction of the life processes of the Cause.

Typically, when misrepresentations of the kind described are challenged, the reaction of those behind the campaign has been to claim that their civil rights are being threatened, an assertion that is of course meaningless in the light of the purely voluntary nature of Bahá'í membership. Much emphasis

is placed by them also on academic freedom, their view of which proves, on examination, to be merely freedom on their part to pervert scholarly discourse to the promotion of their own ideological agenda, while seeking to exclude from discussion features of the Bahá'í Faith that are central to the Writings of its Founders.

The effect of continued exposure to such insincerity about matters vital to humanity's well-being is spiritually corrosive. When we encounter minds that are closed and hearts that are darkened by evident malice, Bahá'u'lláh urges that we leave such persons to God and turn our attention to the opportunities which multiply daily for the promotion of the truths which He teaches. In words written at the direction of the Guardian, regarding a situation similar to, though much less serious than, the present one, "... the friends should be advised to just leave these people alone, for their influence can be nothing but negative and destructive...."

To all National Spiritual Assemblies 7 April 1999 Page 3

The enclosed material is being sent to your Assembly less out of concern over the immediate situation, which is being systematically addressed, than because of longer-term considerations to which it lends perspective. What we are currently seeing, in a relatively primitive form, is the emergence of a new kind of internal opposition to Bahá'u'lláh's Mission. While it will no doubt assume other features as time passes, it is a kind of opposition that takes aim directly at Bahá'u'lláh's assertion of the spiritual nature of reality and of humanity's dependence on the interventions of Divine Revelation.

Developments of the kind described will come as no surprise to friends who are familiar with the Guardian's description of the successive waves of "crisis" and "victory" that have marked the history of the Faith ever since its inception. It is precisely this cyclical process, Shoghi Effendi says, that has propelled the steady unfoldment of Bahá'u'lláh's intent, testing our commitment to His Teachings, purifying His community, and releasing a greater measure of the capacities latent in His Revelation. That resistance to Bahá'u'lláh should now be emerging in yet a new guise is itself a tribute to the gathering strength of the Cause, offering the friends everywhere new opportunities for the deepening of their faith and the energizing of their work.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,
For Department of the Secretariat

Enclosure

cc: International Teaching Centre

Part two: Letter from the International Teaching Center elaborating on the "April 7" letter

16 June 1999

Transmitted electronically

To all Continental Boards of Counsellors

Dearly loved Co-workers,

Further to our letter of 23 April 1999, we would like to draw your attention to a few themes in the letter of [7 April 1999](#) written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to all National Spiritual Assemblies on the subject of internal opposition, which may warrant added reflection as you carry out your sacred responsibility of protecting the Cause of God. The letter from the House of Justice reaffirms the important role the Continental Counsellors play in being attentive to the spiritual health of the community and provides background information necessary to clarify the current situation for the friends and deepen their loyalty to the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh and His Covenant.

The opposition campaign on the Internet, it should be noted, is being promoted by only "a small number of Bahá'ís"; many friends engaged in these discussions are, in fact, devoted believers. As the letter of [7 April](#) indicates, the approach of the House of Justice has been to show forbearance and to intervene only when it has been unavoidable. We would encourage the Counsellors to follow this example and, in the spirit of `Abdu'l-Bahá and the Guardian, to show patience and compassion when relating to Bahá'ís who may have been adversely influenced by the Internet discussions. As part of the responsibility of "diffusing the divine fragrances," you and your Auxiliary Board members and their assistants will need to make every effort to attract the friends who are troubled or disaffected back to a loving and understanding Bahá'í community life. As you are well aware, to develop an adversarial relationship with any of the friends will only create an atmosphere of suspicion and mistrust that will pose far greater problems for the general community than the activities of a few misguided individuals. It is equally important for the Counsellors and their auxiliaries to foster a spirit of tolerance in the Bahá'í communities as members grow in their understanding of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation. A spirit of free inquiry should be preserved so that the friends feel comfortable asking questions within Bahá'í gatherings, such as in deepening classes or at summer schools, without fear of disapproval or alienation.

Another significant theme that is raised in both the [7 April](#) letter and the document on "Opposition to the Cause and its use of the Internet" is the potentially harmful effect that can result from continued exposure to discussions that attack the Administrative Order. Rather than a "serious exploration of Bahá'í themes," it is reported that in certain discussion groups on the Internet one encounters derogatory and defamatory remarks against Bahá'í institutions and its members. Counsellors may wish to advise believers engaged in these discussions to ponder earnestly the counsel from the Universal House of Justice that

to continue dialogue with those who have shown a fixed antagonism to the Faith, and have demonstrated their imperviousness to any ideas other than their own, is usually fruitless and, for the Bahá'ís who take part, can be burdensome and even spiritually corrosive.

Our letter of 22 April 1998 stresses the vital role that Counsellors can play in strengthening the communities to resist internal opposition. This responsibility includes identifying promising young minds, encouraging their scholarship, and providing them with guidance in their study of the Writings. Parallel to this is the ever-present duty of the Counsellors and Board members to utilize

evidences of opposition as opportunities for the friends to deepen their faith in the nature and power of the Covenant.

We encourage all the Boards of Counsellors to study the [7 April 1999](#) letter at their upcoming plenary meetings. The degree to which the issues discussed in the letter affect different national communities will, of course, vary. With this in mind, we leave it to your discretion whether you feel it would be beneficial, subsequent to your meeting, to arrange for a consultation on the letter with the National Spiritual Assemblies you serve and with the Auxiliary Board members. In all cases, we would encourage the Counsellors to become thoroughly familiar with the publication "Issues Related to the Study of the Bahá'í Faith" and utilize it in their training of Auxiliary Board members and their assistants.

We are confident that you will recognize in the current circumstances fresh opportunities for discharging your important responsibilities of promoting and edifying the souls of the believers. May Bahá'u'lláh bless and sustain you in your high endeavors.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,
The International Teaching Centre

cc: The Hands of the Cause of God

Part three: compilation "Issues Related to the Study of the Bahá'í Faith"

Published in *Bahá'í Canada*, May 1998

[1] 10 December 1992

The House of Justice understands that there are certain Bahá'í scholars, such as yourself, who experience difficulties with the policy of review, but it finds the cause of the difficulties to lie in areas that are different from those you identify. It would point to the following as being the principal roots of the problem:

1. Too narrow and limited understanding of the Faith and its Teachings on the part of certain Bahá'í scholars. There has been a tendency to specialize in certain narrow areas and neglect the wider understanding of the Teachings which would not only enrich their souls but illuminate their perception of the specific areas of their study.
2. An attitude to the Faith and the Administrative Order which is strongly coloured by an assumption that the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh is similar to other religions and organizations, is afflicted by the attitudes which have too often characterized them, and is motivated by unethical considerations. The institutions of the Cause are regarded with the same suspicion as

the traditional "establishment". This produces a failure to understand, let alone accept, the points which the Universal House of Justice itself is striving to convey.

3. An assumption that only a person equipped with conventional academic training is capable of an unbiased attitude and of truly understanding the points at issue, leading to disdain of questions raised by "unqualified" individuals.
4. Failure to use the appeal processes of the Cause by scholars who are faced with what they regard as improper and unjustified questioning of their writings by Bahá'í reviewing committees. It is natural that, in the present stage of the development of the Cause, the members of reviewing committees will, from time to time, err in their views or be unreasonably obtuse. Such errors and attitudes should be overcome through discussion between the author and the members of the committee. If this does not lead to a satisfactory outcome, the author can appeal to the National Spiritual Assembly itself and, if even that does not solve the matter, to the Universal House of Justice.
5. The above attitudes, in turn, lead to an inability on the part of those scholars to describe the review process to their non-Bahá'í colleagues in terms that would not be unacceptable in an academic environment.

Your suggestion that an "imprimatur" system such as used by the Roman Catholic Church would be preferable to the present system of review was considered by the House of Justice, and it has asked us to explain to you the problems that this would present.

First of all, it would convey to the reader the false impression that the attitude of the Faith was similar to that of the Roman Catholic Church, summoning up visions of an "index" of prohibited reading, and all the other associations which you can undoubtedly imagine for yourself.

Secondly, it would give force to the erroneous concept that there are two kinds of Bahá'í literature: books which present the "official" view and those which are the free personal opinions of individual Bahá'ís, thus obscuring the essential Bahá'í differentiation between the Writings of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh, those of `Abdu'l-Bahá, the letters of the Guardian and the decisions of the Universal House of Justice, which are authoritative, on the one hand, and all other writings by Bahá'ís on the other, which have no authority at all apart from their own internal reasonableness. That a book has passed review in no way guarantees its correctness; it is merely an assurance by the National Spiritual Assembly concerned that, in its view, the book does not seriously distort the Faith or its Teachings.

Thirdly, it would obscure the important fact that the process of review in the Bahá'í Faith is temporary, being limited to this stage of its development when books published by Bahá'ís could seriously mislead the public if they too gravely distort its message.

Your proposal that a National Spiritual Assembly which detected major inaccuracies in an article published by a Bahá'í in an academic journal could have the Research Department "write a letter to the concerned journal pointing out and listing these inaccuracies, giving the requisite textual evidence in footnotes", that journal editors would be "quite willing to entertain such correspondence" and that

it would be found that Bahá'í scholars would be "grateful for chance to discuss such issues freely" introduces a new kind of discrimination and interference. Bahá'í institutions very seldom write to journals to correct their statements about the Faith; not only do they not wish to promote public disputes with those who write about the Cause, but the correction of such errors is seldom worth the time and effort necessary. In the coming years there will be numerous non-Bahá'ís, ranging from those who are bitter enemies of the Cause to those who are its warm advocates, publishing articles about it. There is no way in which Bahá'í institutions could write corrections of the multitudinous errors that will be published; how, then, would they be justified in writing to correct only the errors perpetrated by Bahá'í authors?

The House of Justice suggests that you consider the following steps through which the scholars of the Faith can overcome the problems which some of them perceive as presented by review of their publications.

- Let them accept unreservedly that `Abdu'l-Bahá was right in instituting the temporary system of review, and that the decisions of the Guardian and the Universal House of Justice to not yet eliminate the system are in accordance with the Divine will.
- Let them recognize the fundamental difference between errors propagated by Bahá'ís from those issuing from non-Bahá'í sources. The review system is not an attempt to prevent errors or attacks on the Faith from being published; it is an attempt to prevent Bahá'ís from promulgating them in their published writings.
- Let them strive to understand the wisdom of this policy and its true nature, and to present it in its proper light to their fellow-academics....
- Let Bahá'í scholars look upon their fellow Bahá'ís with trust and affection, not with disdain as to their qualifications and suspicion as to their motives. Let them regard them as devoted Bahá'ís striving to perform a service which the policies of the Faith require of them. And let them not hesitate to discuss openly with such reviewers the points which they raise. If it appears that a National Spiritual Assembly does not permit such open discussion, let them appeal to the Universal House of Justice for clarification of the situation. It is well understood by the Universal House of Justice that in some cases the process of review works inefficiently and with problems. These deficiencies could be overcome if the scholars themselves would collaborate with the process and openly raise questions about its functioning, rather than fostering an atmosphere of antagonism and mutual mistrust.
- If the question of review is raised by non-Bahá'í academics, let the Bahá'í academics say that in this early stage in the development of the Faith this is a species of peer review which they welcome, since it is primarily among their fellow-Bahá'ís that they would find at this time those who would have sufficiently wide and deep understanding of the Faith and its Teachings to raise issues of importance which they would want to consider before publication. Of course, to be able to say this with sincerity, the scholars must have been able to accept the other steps mentioned above.

You cite the case of Bahá'ís in other fields of expertise, such as Bahá'í physicians who, you say, "may pursue their professions as Bahá'ís with no prospect of interference by Bahá'í institutions". This is hardly the case. All Bahá'ís are subject to Bahá'í law and Bahá'í standards. It would clearly be unacceptable for a Bahá'í doctor to advocate abortion as a method of birth control and set up a clinic for that purpose, or for a Bahá'í psychiatrist to publicly advocate sexual intercourse before marriage.

Bahá'u'lláh was addressing all of us when He wrote: "Were any man to taste the sweetness of the words which the lips of the All-Merciful have willed to utter, he would, though the treasures of the earth be in his possession, renounce them one and all, that he might vindicate the truth of even one of His commandments, shining above the Dayspring of His bountiful care and loving-kindness" and "Whoso hath inhaled the sweet fragrance of the All-Merciful, and recognized the Source of this utterance, will welcome with his own eyes the shafts of the enemy, that he may establish the truth of the laws of God amongst men."

Finally, the House of Justice wishes us to say that it fully agrees with your statement that it is important for the Faith to attract intellectuals and, indeed, all people of capacity in any field. Bahá'ís who themselves are intellectuals can contribute signally to this process, but not by ignoring the basic standards of faith and conduct that apply to all believers or by depicting the Bahá'í administration as a bureaucratic hindrance to freedom of thought and expression.

[2] 5 October 1993

With regard to the current policy of advance review, all Bahá'ís, whatever their professions, are challenged to reflect on the implications of our common struggle to achieve Bahá'u'lláh's purpose for the human race, including the use of our intellectual resources to gain deeper understanding of that Revelation and to apply its principles. In pursuing this course that has been set for it so explicitly and emphatically by its Founder, the Bahá'í community acts through the institutions that He has provided.

Scholarly endeavors are not an activity apart from this organic process, answering to standards and operating on authority outside it. The House of Justice believes that part of the difficulty that some Bahá'í academics are having with the question of prepublication review may arise from the fact that, in their scholarly work, such believers do not see themselves as full participants in this process, free to act with the spiritual autonomy they exercise in other aspects of their lives. What the Bahá'í community is engaged in bringing into visible expression is a new creation. In this, the Cause has urgent need of the unfettered and wholehearted assistance of its scholars. The House of Justice has sought to point out that, as in every other field of Bahá'í endeavor, there are certain conditions under which this assistance may be rendered, conditions implicit in the nature of the process and made explicit in the Divine Text.

These requirements are of course not reflected in the standards currently prevailing in Western academic institutions. Rather, both Bahá'í institutions and Bahá'í scholars are called on to exert a very great effort, of heart, mind, and will, in order to forge the new models of scholarly activity and guidance that Bahá'u'lláh's work requires. The House of Justice believes that you will serve the interests of the Faith best if you will direct your thoughts to this end. Merely to reiterate the conventions and requirements of systems which, whether academic, political, social, or economic,

have been shown not to have adequate answers to the anarchy now engulfing human society, or any willingness to come to grips with the implications of their impotence, is of little practical help. We do a grave disservice to both ourselves and the Faith when we simply submit to the authority of academic practices that appeal for their claim of objectivity to theories which themselves are being increasingly called into question by major thinkers. While non-Bahá'í academics may slip carelessly into regarding the institutions founded by Bahá'u'lláh as simply another form of "religious establishment" and avoid serious examination of the truths of His Revelation in this fashion, it is clearly impossible for anyone who is a Bahá'í to follow them down this empty track.

The House of Justice is aware that the continuation of the policy of review can cast a shadow on the good name of the Faith in the eyes of certain non-Bahá'í academics. In an environment where publication is vital to advancement and recognition, any requirement that delays or inhibits this activity must be a matter of grave consideration, not only by the individual scholar but by the governing institutions of the community that eagerly watch his rise and count anxiously on his effective assistance. But is that not precisely the kind of spiritual dilemma being faced by many Bahá'ís in their efforts to serve Bahá'u'lláh's purpose? On many occasions, in developing lands particularly, believers of capacity have had to forgo opportunities for promising political careers, careers whose value they could easily have justified on the basis of public service, because such a choice was not in conformity with Bahá'u'lláh's teaching and purpose. There are, likewise, many examples of believers who have had to set aside both a professional life and legitimate family concerns in order to pioneer in inhospitable regions of the globe.

It is apparent that the crisis of contemporary civilization is impelling thinkers in many lands to explore new scholarly methodologies capable of coming to grips with spiritual, moral, cultural, and social phenomena not hitherto encountered. No segment of humanity is so well equipped as the Bahá'í community to take a leading role in this effort. As a body of people who are being steadily freed by the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh from the "gravitational pull", so to speak, of the cultures in which their habits of mind have been formed, the community already has a unique approach to the exploration of reality. This approach needs to be sharply honed as an ever more effective instrument of social transformation. The devising of the new scholarly paradigm called for by this circumstance offers a priceless opportunity of service and achievement to those Bahá'ís who enjoy the dual gifts of spiritual faith and intellectual faculties trained in the best that contemporary society has to offer.

The Universal House of Justice can only invite Bahá'í scholars, as it invites all other believers, to respond to this historic challenge, in whatever way and to whatever extent each person considers possible. It is confident that, in Bahá'í scholarship as in all other areas of Bahá'í service, the essential resources will gradually be forthcoming and the required models of research and study will be refined through the process of consultation. It is this achievement, the House of Justice believes, that in the long run will best protect the reputation of the Cause from whatever immediate misunderstandings and criticisms it may encounter. Indeed it is greatly encouraged by the response that Bahá'í scholars in many fields are already making.

[3] 5 October 1993

You may be confident that the House of Justice is sympathetic to the need of Bahá'í scholars for

ever-increasing access to important Bahá'í archival sources such as the original texts of historical documents like "The Dawn-Breakers". Indeed, it is difficult to imagine how these servants of the Cause, whose contributions to its advancement and the protection of its interests are vital, will otherwise be able to discharge their role. Nor is it necessary to urge on the House of Justice the importance to the interests of the Faith of a general spirit of openness about its scriptural and historical sources.

At present, the World Centre lacks the human resources, physical space, and research facilities necessary to respond adequately to this need. All of us look forward eagerly to the day when the Centre for the Study of the Texts will have come into existence in the building on the Arc designed for it and now under construction, and will be in a position to assemble the archival and research facilities which the Cause urgently requires. We are sure that if you will respond in this perspective to inquiries about access to Bahá'í primary sources you will be able largely to relieve the kinds of doubts which you describe having encountered.

To propose, as some have done, that the best course in the meantime is simply to open the World Centre's archives to visiting Bahá'í scholars who possess appropriate credentials is not realistic. Were the Archives, the Library, and the Research Department to divert energy and attention to the reception of the many researchers who would feel a legitimate right to come, their priority tasks in vital support of the work of the House of Justice, including preservation, classification, translation, annotation, and publication, would suffer to a degree that is not acceptable at this stage in the growth of the Cause. As is so often the case in many fields of research, scholars interested in work on the Faith will have to exercise a measure of patience.

[4] 19 October 1993

The House of Justice suggests that the issues raised in your letter might best be considered in light of the statements in the Bahá'í Writings which disclose the relationship between the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh and the knowledge which is acquired as a result of scholarly endeavours. Bahá'u'lláh asserts that:

Unveiled and unconcealed, this Wronged One hath, at all times, proclaimed before the face of all the peoples of the world that which will serve as the key for unlocking the doors of sciences, of arts, of knowledge, of well-being, of prosperity and wealth....

It is evident that the Bahá'í Writings illuminate all areas of human endeavour and all academic disciplines. Those who have been privileged to recognize the station of Bahá'u'lláh have the bounty of access to a Revelation which casts light upon all aspects of thought and inquiry, and are enjoined to use the understanding which they obtain from their immersion in the Holy Writings to advance the interests of the Faith.

Those believers with the capacity and opportunity to do so have repeatedly been encouraged in their pursuit of academic studies by which they are not only equipped to render much needed services to the Faith, but are also provided with the means to acquire a profound insight into the meaning and the

implications of the Bahá'í Teachings. They discover also that the perceptions gained from a deeper understanding of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh clarify the subjects of their academic inquiry.

It is useful to review a number of statements written by Shoghi Effendi on this subject. To a believer who had completed advanced academic studies in a subject related to the Teachings the Guardian stated, in a letter written on his behalf:

It is hoped that all the Bahá'í students will follow the noble example you have set before them and will, henceforth, be led to investigate and analyse the principles of the Faith and to correlate them with the modern aspects of philosophy and science. Every intelligent and thoughtful young Bahá'í should always approach the Cause in this way, for therein lies the very essence of the principle of independent investigation of truth.

When he was informed of the enrolment of a scientist in the Faith, the response set out in the letter written on his behalf was:

We need very much the sound, sane, element of thinking which a scientifically trained mind has to offer. When such intellectual powers are linked to deep faith a tremendous teaching potential is created....

His secretary wrote, on another occasion, that:

Shoghi Effendi has for years urged the Bahá'ís (who asked his advice, and in general also) to study history, economics, sociology, etc., in order to be au courant with all the progressive movements and thoughts being put forth today, and so that they could correlate these to the Bahá'í teachings. What he wants the Bahá'ís to do is to study more, not to study less. The more general knowledge, scientific and otherwise, they possess, the better. Likewise he is constantly urging them to really study the Bahá'í teachings more deeply.

In the simultaneous endeavour to pursue their studies and to delve deeply into the Bahá'í Teachings, believers are enjoined to maintain a keen awareness that the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh is the standard of truth against which all other views and conclusions are to be measured. They are urged to be modest about their accomplishments, and to bear in mind always the statement of Bahá'u'lláh that:

The heart must needs therefore be cleansed from the idle sayings of men, and sanctified from every earthly affection, so that it may discover the hidden meaning of divine inspiration, and become the treasury of the mysteries of divine knowledge.

At this early stage in the development of the Faith, it would not be useful to propound a highly restrictive definition of the term "Bahá'í scholarship". In a letter written on behalf of the House of Justice to an Association for Bahá'í Studies recently, it is stated that:

The House of Justice advises you not to attempt to define too narrowly the form that Bahá'í scholarship should take, or the approach that scholars should adopt. Rather should

you strive to develop within your Association respect for a wide range of approaches and endeavours. No doubt there will be some Bahá'ís who will wish to work in isolation, while others will desire consultation and collaboration with those having similar interests. Your aim should be to promote an atmosphere of mutual respect and tolerance within which will be included scholars whose principal interest is in theological issues as well as those scholars whose interests lie in relating the insights provided by the Bahá'í teachings to contemporary thought in the arts and sciences.

A similar diversity should characterize the endeavours pursued by Bahá'í scholars, accommodating their interests and skills as well as the needs of the Faith. The course of world events, the development of new trends of thought and the extension of the teaching work all tend to highlight attractive and beneficial areas to which Bahá'í scholars might well direct their attention. Likewise, the expansion of the activities of the Bahá'í International Community in its relationship with United Nations agencies and other international bodies creates attractive opportunities for scholars to make a direct and highly valued contribution to the enhancement of the prestige of the Faith and to its proclamation within an influential and receptive stratum of society. As the Bahá'í 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; Bahá'í scholars have a vital role to play in the defence of the Faith through their contribution to anticipatory measures and their response to defamatory accusations levelled against the Faith.

Thus, there should be room within the scope of Bahá'í scholarship to accommodate not only those who are interested in theological issues and in the historical origins of the Faith, but also those who are interested in relating the Bahá'í Teachings to their field of academic or professional interest, as well as those believers who may lack formal academic qualifications but who have, through their perceptive study of the Teachings, acquired insights which are of interest to others.

Since you have raised the question of whether physics is more than tangentially related to Bahá'í issues, you might consider the following comments of a well-known scientific thinker, who is not a Bahá'í, about the correlation between the Bahá'í Teachings and recent developments in the physical sciences:

In our times we can only survive, and our civilization can only flower, if we reorient the conventional wisdom and achieve the new insights which have been proclaimed by the Bahá'í Faith and which are now also supported by the latest discoveries of the empirical sciences.

Bahá'ís proclaim that the most important condition that can bring about peace is unity — the unity of families, of nations, and of the great currents of thought and inquiry that we denote science and religion. Maturity, in turn, is a prerequisite for such unity. This is evolutionary thinking, and its validity is shown by the new theories which emerge from nonequilibrium thermodynamics, dynamical systems theory, cybernetics, and the related sciences of complexity. They are supported by detailed empirical investigations in such fields as physical cosmology, paleobiological macroevolutionary theory, and new trends

in historiography.

The House of Justice wishes to avoid use of the terms "Bahá'í scholarship" and "Bahá'í scholars" in an exclusive sense, which would effectively establish a demarcation between those admitted into this category and those denied entrance to it. It is clear that such terms are relative, and that what is a worthy scholarly endeavour by a Bahá'í, when compared to the activities of those with whom he is in contact, may well be regarded as of vastly lesser significance when measured against the accomplishments of the outstanding scholars which the Faith has produced. The House of Justice seeks the creation of a Bahá'í community in which the members encourage each other, where there is respect for accomplishment, and a common realization that every one is, in his or her own way, seeking to acquire a deeper understanding of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh and to contribute to the advancement of the Faith.

[5] 19 May 1995

The opportunity which electronic communication technology provides for more speedy and thorough consultation among the friends is highly significant. Without doubt, it represents another manifestation of a development eagerly anticipated by the Guardian when he foresaw the creation of "a mechanism of world intercommunication ... embracing the whole planet, freed from national hindrances and restrictions, and functioning with marvellous swiftness and perfect regularity".

As you well appreciate, the extent to which such technology advances the work of the Faith depends, of course, on the manner in which it is used. As a medium for Bahá'ís to exchange views, it imposes on participants the same requirements of moderation, candour, and courtesy as would be the case in any other discussion. Likewise, those involved should avoid belittling the views of one another. In this regard, the House of Justice has noted your understandable repugnance at an apparent temptation to use misleading and invidious labels like "traditionalists" and "liberals", which divide the Bahá'í community. To the extent that this divisive habit of mind may persist in the Bahá'í community, it is obviously a carry-over from non-Bahá'í society and a manifestation of an immature conception of life. If Bahá'ís were to persist in this mode of thinking, it would bring to naught even the most worthwhile intellectual endeavour, as has so conspicuously been the case with societies of the past.

Most important of all, as with any exploration by Bahá'ís of the beliefs and practices of their Faith, electronic discussion will serve the interests of the Cause and its members only as it is conducted within the framework of the Bahá'í Teachings and the truths they enshrine. To attempt to discuss the Cause of God apart from or with disdain for the authoritative guidance inherent in these Teachings would clearly be a logical contradiction. To take the first point mentioned in your letter, it is obvious that seeking to impose limits on the universality of the authority of God's Manifestation would lead to the frustration of serious scholarly work and generate disharmony within an effort whose success depends precisely upon a spirit of unity and mutual trust. The standard is the one made clear by Bahá'u'lláh Himself:

The essence of belief in Divine unity consisteth in regarding Him Who is the Manifestation of God and Him Who is the invisible, the inaccessible, the unknowable

Essence as one and the same. By this is meant that whatsoever pertaineth to the former, all His acts and doings, whatever He ordaineth or forbiddeth, should be considered, in all their aspects, and under all circumstances, and without any reservation, as identical with the Will of God Himself.

With regard to the harmony of science and religion, the Writings of the Central Figures and the commentaries of the Guardian make abundantly clear that the task of humanity, including the Bahá'í community that serves as the "leaven" within it, is to create a global civilization which embodies both the spiritual and material dimensions of existence. The nature and scope of such a civilization are still beyond anything the present generation can conceive. The prosecution of this vast enterprise will depend on a progressive interaction between the truths and principles of religion and the discoveries and insights of scientific inquiry. This entails living with ambiguities as a natural and inescapable feature of the process of exploring reality. It also requires us not to limit science to any particular school of thought or methodological approach postulated in the course of its development. The challenge facing Bahá'í thinkers is to provide responsible leadership in this endeavour, since it is they who have both the priceless insights of the Revelation and the advantages conferred by scientific investigation.

The ease and relative impersonality of the electronic medium require in some ways an even higher level of self-discipline than is the case in situations where a spirit of unity is reinforced by the opportunity for direct personal contact and social interaction. In the pursuit of such a spirit of unity, Bahá'ís will, without doubt, wish to assist the consultative processes by sharing and discussing relevant Bahá'í texts. This will itself have the further effect of drawing attention back to the framework of Bahá'í belief.

[6] 14 March 1996

You express disquiet that attempts being made to introduce a distinction between "Bahá'í laymen" and "Bahá'í scholars" with respect to the study of the Faith tend to generate a spirit of disunity among the friends. Your concern is fully justified. Such an approach to the study of the Cause would betray a fundamental misunderstanding of the pattern of Bahá'í society as set out in the Teachings of the Faith.

As you know, Bahá'u'lláh says that the pursuit of knowledge has been enjoined upon everyone, and knowledge itself is described by Him as "wings to man's life" and "a ladder for his ascent". Those whose high attainments in this respect make it possible for them to contribute in important ways to the advancement of civilization are deserving of society's recognition and gratitude.

In the study of the Revelation of God, an individual's proficiency in one of the physical or social sciences, in law, philology, or other fields of specialization will often throw valuable light on issues being examined, and such contributions are greatly to be appreciated. The field of Near East studies, mentioned in your letter, is one that can assist in this way. However, no one specialization among the many branches of scholarly research can confer upon its practitioners an authoritative role in the common effort of exploring the implications of so staggering and all-encompassing a body of truth.

Collateral with His summons to the pursuit of knowledge, Bahá'u'lláh has abolished entirely that feature of all past religions by which a special caste of persons such as the Christian priesthood or the Islamic `ulama came to exercise authority over the religious understanding and practice of their fellow believers. In a letter written in Persian on his behalf to the Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Istanbul, the Guardian is at some pains to underline the importance of this marked departure from past religious history:

But praise be to God that the Pen of Glory has done away with the unyielding and dictatorial views of the learned and the wise, dismissed the assertions of individuals as an authoritative criterion, even though they were recognized as the most accomplished and learned among men, and ordained that all matters be referred to authorized centres and specified assemblies.

The Bahá'í Dispensation is described in the words of its Founder as "a day that shall not be followed by night". Through His Covenant, Bahá'u'lláh has provided an unfailing source of divine guidance that will endure throughout the Dispensation. Authority to administer the affairs of the community and to ensure both the integrity of the Word of God and the promotion of the Faith's message is conferred upon the Administrative Order to which the Covenant has given birth. It is solely by the process of free election or by unsought appointment that the members of the institutions of this Order are assigned to their positions in it. There is no profession in either the teaching of the Faith or its administration for which one can train or to which a believer can properly aspire. Cautionary words of Bahá'u'lláh are particularly relevant:

Ever since the seeking of preference and distinction came into play, the world has been laid waste. It has become desolate....

Indeed, man is noble, inasmuch as each one is a repository of the sign of God. Nevertheless, to regard oneself as superior in knowledge, learning or virtue, or to exalt oneself or seek preference is a grievous transgression.

The promotion of learning of every kind among the Faith's members is an activity fundamental to the achievement of the community's wide-ranging goals. Consequently, the encouragement of individual believers to acquire knowledge, the operation of Bahá'í schools, universities, and training institutes, the organization of study groups, and the work of task forces dedicated to relating the principles of the Revelation to the challenges facing humankind all represent activities with which both the Counsellors and their auxiliaries, on the one hand, and National and Local Spiritual Assemblies, on the other, must concern themselves. In shouldering these demanding responsibilities, Bahá'í institutions everywhere find their efforts greatly enhanced by the assistance of believers whose intellectual pursuits, qualities of character, and devotion to the Cause particularly fit them to contribute their services.

A special responsibility in the matter rests on the Counsellors because of the duty assigned to them to assist in releasing the potential of the individual believer. The members of this institution, appointed for specific terms, have been given the task of carrying forward into the future the functions of the protection and propagation of the Faith conferred in the Will and Testament of Abdu'l-Bahá on the Hands of the Cause. Thus, the Counsellors are called on to "diffuse the Divine Fragrances, to edify

the souls of men, to promote learning, to improve the character of all men and to be, at all times and under all conditions, sanctified and detached from earthly things." Like the Hands, the Counsellors have no interpretive authority, an authority conferred by the Covenant only on Abdu'l-Bahá and the Guardian of the Faith. While some Counsellors, like some of the Hands, will have pursued various academic or professional disciplines in their individual careers, their discharge of their duties is not dependent on proficiencies of this kind. All of them share fully in the vital task of encouraging believers everywhere in the acquisition of knowledge, in all its dimensions. All share, too, in the responsibility assigned to the institution of which they are members to protect the Faith against its enemies, both external and internal, a concern to which both the Master and the Guardian attached pre-eminent importance.

[7] 2 July 1996

The purpose of this letter is not to enter into a detailed examination of the activities and statements of the friends to whom you refer, or to discuss the responses they have received over the years from institutions of the Faith. Rather, the House of Justice wishes to relate this situation to certain aspects of Bahá'í belief, in the hope that thereby it may enable you to find answers to some of the questions which preoccupy your mind.

At the very core of the aims of the Faith are the establishment of justice and unity in the world, the removal of prejudice and enmity from among all people, the awakening of compassion and understanding in the hearts of all men and women, and the raising of all souls to a new level of spirituality and behavior through the vitalizing influence of divine Revelation. The course set forth by Bahá'u'lláh for the attainment of these aims is the double task of simultaneously building an ideal society and perfecting the behavior of individuals. For this dual and reciprocal transformation He has not only revealed laws, principles and truths attuned to the needs of this age, but has established the very nucleus and pattern of those institutions which are to evolve into the structure of the divinely purposed world society.

Central to your perception of the statements made by the believers about whom you are concerned are their assertions that they are entirely obedient to the spirit of the Covenant and the institutions of the Faith; that they are merely voicing their disagreement with certain decisions and policies made by these institutions; are protesting against what they perceive to be unjust or improper actions by some people who occupy prominent administrative positions; and are suggesting modifications to Bahá'í procedures to prevent such perceived abuses of authority. These assertions, however, overlook certain important Bahá'í principles which provide the methods and channels for the voicing of such grievances or disagreements, and which are designed to lead to resolution of problems while preserving the unity of the community.

Over many years, a few believers in the United States, instead of confining their protests against what they saw as abuses of authority by Bahá'í bodies to the channels and agencies which are plentifully provided for such a purpose, have been publicly and privily assailing the institutions of the Cause and generalizing specific accusations of injustice to such an extent as to accuse the entire system of corruption, not only in practice but also in form and theory. One outcome of this continuing stream of negative criticism has been the gradual conversion of unverified accusations into accepted "facts" in

the minds of some of their hearers.

Through such activities, and the mutual support that they give to one another, these friends have increasingly assumed the appearance of a dissident group of Bahá'ís who are attempting to arouse widespread disaffection in the community and thereby to bring about changes in the structure and principles of Bahá'í administration, making it accord more closely with their personal notions. Such an activity is closely analogous to the pursuit of a partisan political program, an activity which is accepted and even admired in most societies, but is entirely antithetical to the spirit of the Bahá'í Faith. It promotes an atmosphere of contention, and Bahá'u'lláh has expressly stated: "Conflict and contention are categorically forbidden in His Book."

The laws, commandments, injunctions and exhortations we have all agreed to obey and follow as Bahá'ís include a clearly defined approach to decision-making and to the implementation of decisions. You are, undoubtedly, well familiar with the various aspects of this approach, which is built on the conviction that the path of unity is the only path that can lead to the civilization envisioned by Bahá'u'lláh. So strong is the emphasis on unity that, for example, once a decision has been made by an Assembly, everyone is expected to support that decision wholeheartedly, relying confidently on `Abdu'l-Bahá's assurance that, even if the decision is wrong, "as it is in unity the truth will be revealed and the wrong made right". This principle of unity is supplemented by other, related guidelines covering such issues as how criticism can be expressed, how the wrongdoing of members of the community is to be corrected, how the principle of justice is to be applied and appeals admitted, and how the integrity of individuals, the institutions and the Cause is to be upheld.

In adhering to such teachings Bahá'ís recognize that individuals do not become wholly virtuous on accepting the Faith. It takes time for them to grow spiritually out of their personal imperfections and out of the structural and behavioral assumptions of the societies in which they have been raised, which color their view of the world. The institutions of the Cause, which the believers have been raising in obedience to the law of Bahá'u'lláh, in accordance with the pattern set forth by `Abdu'l-Bahá and the expositions of Shoghi Effendi, and under the guidance of the Universal House of Justice, are still in their embryonic stage and not infrequently fall short of the ideal for which they are striving. There is also the possibility of certain individuals' misusing the positions of authority to which they are elected or appointed within the structure of the Administrative Order. Again and again Shoghi Effendi, in his letters, called upon the Bahá'ís to be patient and forbearing, both with one another and with their Assemblies, but in serious cases of malfunctioning by either institutions or individuals, neither the Guardian nor the Universal House of Justice has hesitated to take remedial action. Bahá'í Administration has provisions to cope with such human frailties and is designed to enable the believers to build Bahá'u'lláh's new World Order in the midst of their imperfections, but without conflicts which would destroy the entire edifice.

One of the tasks of the Universal House of Justice, in addition to enacting legislation, resolving difficult problems, elucidating obscure matters, settling differences, administering the worldwide affairs of the Cause and directing the course of the implementation of the Divine Plan, is to protect the individual believers and the body of the Cause from the deleterious effects of malfunctioning institutions and unwise or malicious individuals. Most of the time these defects, whether in the behavior of individuals or institutions, are of a relatively minor nature and can be dealt with by the Local and National Assemblies or by the Counsellors with the members of the Auxiliary Boards and their assistants. However, at times the situation becomes far more grave and the World Centre is compelled to intervene.

You are most directly concerned with the situation in the United States. The letter of 19 May 1994 does, indeed, address certain aspects of the functioning of your National Spiritual Assembly — it was, after all, written in response to the National Assembly's request for guidance — but that is merely one of the issues before the American Bahá'í community. If you study that letter carefully you will see that it calls for a range of improvements in the actions of the individual believers and the entire community. Indeed it develops points touched on in the letter of 29 December 1988 which urges the believers to rethink accepted theories of the functioning of society.

Sadly, efforts made by the institutions and some of their fellow believers to explain these issues seem to have been dismissed by the friends previously referred to. A few politely acknowledged the communications of the House of Justice, but then continued on their way, ignoring the fundamental points which had been made. A few have openly opposed the House of Justice's guidance. The rhetoric has become far removed from a pure concern to uphold justice and the rights of individuals within the community; it has developed into the fomentation of contention about some of the most fundamental beliefs of the Faith and an attack on the basis of the Covenant which, alone, is the ultimate guarantee that the Faith will remain true to its divine origin throughout the centuries.

The point at issue has thus become that of whether believers should be permitted to continue indefinitely to undermine the faith of their fellow Bahá'ís, stir up agitation within the community, and publicly assail the theory as well as the practice of Bahá'u'lláh's Administrative Order.

In the *Kitab-i-Aqdas* Bahá'u'lláh states: "We approve of liberty in certain circumstances, and refuse to sanction it in others." One area in which liberty is limited in the Bahá'í community is that governing methods and channels for the expression of criticism. In this connection, we enclose a brief compilation of excerpts from letters written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to individual believers.[\[*\]](#) From this guidance, the following principles can be clearly derived:

The importance of unity as both the goal of Bahá'u'lláh's Message and the means for its establishment. Bahá'u'lláh "has not only advocated certain principles, but has also provided a mechanism whereby that ideal can be established and perpetuated", adherence to both of which by the friends is essential for "the realization of His goal of world unity".

Bahá'ís are "fully entitled to address criticisms to their Assemblies" and offer their recommendations. When Bahá'ís have addressed their criticisms, suggestions and advice to their Assemblies, including their views "about policies or individual members of elected bodies", they must "whole-heartedly accept the advice or decision of the Assembly".

There is a clear distinction between, on the one hand, the prohibition of backbiting, which would include adverse comments about individuals or institutions made to other individuals privately or publicly, and, on the other hand, the encouragement to unburden oneself of one's concerns to a Spiritual Assembly, Local or National (or now, also, to confide in a Counsellor or Auxiliary Board member). Thus, although one of the principal functions of the Nineteen Day Feast is to provide a forum for "open and constructive criticism and deliberation regarding the state of affairs within the local Bahá'í community", complaints about the actions of an individual member of an Assembly

should be made directly and confidentially to the Assembly itself, not made to other individuals or even raised at a Nineteen Day Feast.

While constructive criticism is encouraged, destructive criticism, such as the pattern of "continually challenging and criticizing the decisions" of the Assemblies, prevents the rapid growth of the Faith and repels those who are yet outside the community. Indeed "all criticisms and discussions of a negative character which may result in undermining the authority of the Assembly as a body should be strictly avoided. For otherwise the order of the Cause itself will be endangered, and confusion and discord will reign in the community." "Vicious criticism is indeed a calamity", the root of which is "lack of faith in the system of Bahá'u'lláh" and failure to follow the "Bahá'í laws in voting, in electing, in serving, and in abiding by Assembly decisions".

The questions of how criticism is expressed and acted upon in the Bahá'í community, and how the Spiritual Assemblies administer justice in regard to individual believers, are but elements of far greater concepts and should become second nature in the social discourse of Bahá'ís. The Bahá'í community is an association of individuals who have voluntarily come together, on recognizing Bahá'u'lláh's claim to be the Manifestation of God for this age, to establish certain patterns of personal and social behavior and to build the institutions that are to promote these patterns. There are numerous individuals who share the ideals of the Faith and draw inspiration from its Teachings, while disagreeing with certain of its features, but those who actually enter the Bahá'í community have accepted, by their own free will, to follow the Teachings in their entirety, understanding that, if doubts and disagreements arise in the process of translating the Teachings into practice, the final arbiter is, by the explicit authority of the Revealed Text, the Universal House of Justice.

It is the ardent prayer of the Universal House of Justice that any friends who find themselves at odds in this endeavor will have confidence in the guidance it provides for them, will renew their study of the Teachings and, for the sake of Bahá'u'lláh, strengthen their love for one another. As the beloved Guardian's secretary wrote on his behalf to an individual believer on 25 October 1949: "Without the spirit of real love for Bahá'u'lláh, for His Faith and its Institutions, and the believers for each other, the Cause can never really bring in large numbers of people. For it is not preaching and rules the world wants, but love and action." The worldwide undertakings on which the Cause of God is embarked are far too significant, the need of the peoples of the world for the Message of Bahá'u'lláh far too urgent, the perils facing mankind far too grave, the progress of events far too swift, to permit His followers to squander their time and efforts in fruitless contention. Now, if ever, is the time for love among the friends, for unity of understanding and endeavor, for self-sacrifice and service by Bahá'ís in every part of the world.

The House of Justice understands and appreciates your concern for the proper functioning of the Bahá'í community. It urges you to contemplate the issues you have raised in the light of the Teachings themselves, and not to weigh them with the standards of other philosophies or of any civil system, the fundamental assumptions of which differ in many respects from those of Bahá'u'lláh's divinely conceived Order.

[8] 3 June 1997

The questions you pose, arising out of an email conversation between yourself and one of the other contributors to the discussion group in which you participate, are of fundamental importance, and the House of Justice warmly appreciates the spirit of your enquiry.

The issues raised seem to resolve themselves into two points: the first being whether or not the Universal House of Justice has the authority to make authoritative interpretations; the second is whether anyone has the right to challenge the authority or actions of the Universal House of Justice. When these issues are approached with an understanding of the unity underlying all the Teachings, clarification results. Should the seeker, however, be influenced by a spirit of mistrust and conflict, then unending problems appear.

The above points have both been covered in three letters written by the Universal House of Justice on 9 March 1965, 27 May 1966 and 7 December 1969. Unfortunately it seems that many of the friends have not studied these letters deeply or understood their implications. Already in "The Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh" Shoghi Effendi has shown, beyond any doubt, that the function of making authoritative interpretations of the Teachings is confined solely and exclusively to the Guardian. Neither the Universal House of Justice, nor any other institution, person or group of persons can assume that function. That the Universal House of Justice will never infringe on the functions reserved to the Guardian is shown, not only by its own words and actions, but by Shoghi Effendi's statement in that same document: "Neither can, nor will ever, infringe upon the sacred and prescribed domain of the other." It is guaranteed by the fact that the Universal House of Justice as well as the Guardian are both "under the care and protection of the Abha Beauty, under the shelter and unerring guidance of His Holiness, the Exalted One".

In its letter of 9 March 1965, the House of Justice has stated: "There is a profound difference between the interpretations of the Guardian and the elucidations of the House of Justice in exercise of its function to deliberate upon all problems which have caused difference, questions that are obscure, and matters that are not expressly recorded in the Book." The friends will come to understand what this difference is by observing how the House of Justice functions and by turning to it for explanations when necessary.

As you recognize, the authority of the Universal House of Justice is unchallengeable. This is stated in numerous places in the Writings. In the same passage of the Will and Testament quoted above, `Abdu'l-Bahá goes on to say of the Guardian and the Universal House of Justice: "Whatsoever they decide is of God. Whoso obeyeth him not, neither obeyeth them, hath not obeyed God; whoso rebelleth against him and against them hath rebelled against God; whoso opposeth him hath opposed God; whoso contendeth with them hath contended with God; whoso disputeth with him hath disputed with God; whoso denieth him hath denied God; whoso disbelieveth in him hath disbelieved in God; whoso deviateth, separateth himself, and turneth aside from him hath in truth deviated, separated himself and turned aside from God."

Furthermore, at the very end of the Will and Testament, in warning against the danger of Covenant-breaking, `Abdu'l-Bahá wrote: "Beware lest anyone falsely interpret these words, and like unto them that have broken the Covenant after the Day of Ascension (of Bahá'u'lláh) advance a pretext, raise the standard of revolt, wax stubborn, and open wide the door of false interpretation." In this context, He continues: "To none is given the right to put forth his own opinion or express his particular

conviction. All must seek guidance and turn unto the Centre of the Cause and the House of Justice. And he that turneth unto whatsoever else is indeed in grievous error."

It is natural that the friends would discuss such matters among themselves, as you and your correspondent have been doing on your Internet discussion group; how otherwise are they to deepen their understanding of the Teachings? But they should recognize that the resolution of differences of opinion on such fundamental questions is not to be found by continued discussion, but in referring to the Universal House of Justice itself, as you have done. Prolonged, unresolved, public discussion of these fundamental questions can do nothing but breed confusion and dissension.

Some people have put forward the thesis that in place of the Guardian's function of authoritative interpretation, a check on the Universal House of Justice should be set up, either in the form of the general opinion of the mass of the believers, or in the form of a body of learned Bahá'ís — preferably those with academic qualifications. The former is in direct contradiction to the Guardian's statement that the members of the Universal House of Justice are not "allowed to be governed by the feelings, the general opinion, and even the convictions of the mass of the faithful, or of those who directly elect them." "They are to follow", he writes, "the dictates and promptings of their conscience. They may, indeed they must, acquaint themselves with the conditions prevailing among the community, must weigh dispassionately in their minds the merits of any case presented for their consideration, but must reserve for themselves the right of an unfettered decision. God will verily inspire them with whatsoever He willeth," is Bahá'u'lláh's incontrovertible assurance." As to the latter alternative: this would constitute usurpation of a function of the Guardian.

Scholarship has a high rank in the Cause of God, and the Universal House of Justice continually consults the views of scholars and experts in the course of its work. However, as you appreciate, scholars and experts have no authority over the Institutions of the Cause. In a letter written on behalf of the Guardian, on 14 March 1927, to the Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Istanbul, it is pointed out how, in the past, it was certain individuals who "accounted themselves as superior in knowledge and elevated in position" who caused division, and that it was those "who pretended to be the most distinguished of all" who "always proved themselves to be the source of contention." "But praise be to God" he continued, "that the Pen of Glory has done away with the unyielding and dictatorial views of the learned and the wise, dismissed the assertions of individuals as an authoritative criterion, even though they were recognized as the most accomplished and learned among men and ordained that all matters be referred to authorized centres and specified assemblies. Even so, no assembly has been invested with the absolute authority to deal with such general matters as affect the interests of nations. Nay, rather, He has brought all the assemblies together under the shadow of the one House of Justice, one divinely-appointed Centre, so that there would be only one Centre and all the rest integrated into a single body, revolving around one expressly-designated Pivot, thus making them all proof against schism and division."

Comments have been made in recent times, implying the existence of two categories of believers, designated "administrators" and "academics". The House of Justice feels that it is important to recognize the unsoundness of such a concept. In the nature of Bahá'í administration, there is no class of believers who serve as "administrators". Individual Bahá'ís are either elected or appointed to positions of administrative service; they come from every field of endeavour, including academia. There is, moreover, a natural flow of individuals into and out of administrative posts. The same applies to the occupants of those institutions of the Administrative Order which are referred to as being of the "learned" in the Faith. Clearly there are some Bahá'ís who are "academics" and some

who are not, but "academics" in no way constitute a recognized group in relation to the structure of the Cause.

There remains the question concerning the authority for the duties and responsibilities outlined for the Universal House of Justice in its constitution. These provisions are a codification of explicit statements found in the sacred texts and the writings of Shoghi Effendi.

The House of Justice assures you of its prayers in the Holy Shrines that your efforts to assist the friends to overcome misunderstandings and to clarify their vision of the Faith will be blessed with divine confirmations.

[9] 20 July 1997

The candour with which you have expressed your views is much appreciated, as is the earnestness of your desire to see the Bahá'í community overcome a situation which is unhealthy in itself and risks creating misunderstanding in segments of the academic community. The House of Justice is, of course, aware that problems have arisen in this area, and it welcomes the opportunity to acquaint you with its thinking and perspectives. Having considered these, you should feel encouraged to respond with any related suggestions you think might assist in relieving the stresses you perceive.

The House of Justice believes that it will be helpful to set the problem in the context of the current intellectual and spiritual crisis afflicting society at large. Scholarly training and professional experience will have sensitized you to the implications for the study of religion of certain assumptions about human nature and the processes of civilization that a purely materialistic interpretation of reality has imposed on scholarly activity of every kind, at least in the Western world. A related paradigm for the study of religion has gradually consolidated itself in the prevailing academic culture during the course of the present century. It insists that all spiritual and moral phenomena must be understood through the application of a scholarly apparatus devised to explore existence in a way that ignores the issues of God's continuous relationship with His creation and His intervention in human life and history. Yet, from a Bahá'í point of view, it is precisely this intervention that is the central theme of the Teachings of the Founders of the revealed religions ostensibly being studied.

As a result of this insistence, opinions that should have remained matters of learned speculation have tended to assume the character of dogma. Equally regrettable is an intolerant attitude toward other perceptions of reality, which too often characterizes the expression of these opinions. In the context of historical circumstance, this development is understandable. The rigid intolerance exhibited in the past by much of organized religion, together with the domination of scholarship long exercised by theological elites, could not but arouse strong negative reactions. From a Bahá'í point of view, however, bigotry is retrograde and unacceptable in whatever form it chooses to present itself.

Such conditions would not normally be a matter for comment; they represent only a few among the host of less than encouraging circumstances in which the Cause must carry out its work. Devotion to learning has been an integral feature of Bahá'í life and belief from the beginning. It ensures that the community will not be deterred by shortcomings in any of the traditions of scholarship from

according these traditions the full respect they merit or from seeking to benefit to the utmost from such endeavours.

Problems will arise, rather, if an attempt is made to impose, on the Bahá'í community's own study of the Revelation, materialistic methodologies and attitudes antithetical to its very nature. The Faith is not the possession of any among us, but belongs to Bahá'u'lláh. Through the Covenant, which is a distinguishing feature of His Revelation, He has specified in unmistakable terms the means by which He wills to preserve the integrity of His message and to guide the implementation of His prescriptions for humankind. If one accepts the Bahá'í Teachings, one cannot, in good conscience, claim to be studying the Faith while ignoring the centrality of Bahá'u'lláh's Covenant to all aspects of the religion He has established.

It is in this context that the House of Justice believes that the concerns expressed in your letter must be addressed. There may well be Bahá'ís who, whatever their educational background, have not yet fully resolved for themselves the fundamental issues touched on in the foregoing. Where this happens, an individual risks finding himself or herself at odds not only with the institutions of the Cause, including the Universal House of Justice itself, but with the clear interpretations of the Teachings by the Master and the Guardian. In such cases, Counsellors and Spiritual Assemblies will certainly do all they can to help. Knowledgeable believers like yourself can also be of great assistance, but belief, for Bahá'ís, is a matter of personal conscience. Should a person conclude that he or she cannot persist in a commitment to the Cause, such a decision is respected by the Bahá'í community.

It is not out of a desire to take issue with the views you have expressed, but rather in an attempt to respond frankly to your concerns, that the House of Justice has asked us to convey its comments on a number of points where its perceptions differ from those you have presented. These relate chiefly to the behaviour of a very small group of Bahá'ís who, rejecting all efforts of the administrative institutions to counsel and appeal to them, have aggressively sought to promote their misconceptions of the Teachings among their fellow believers. These efforts extend back many years, harnessing to their purpose a wide range of Bahá'í activities and associations, most recently Internet lists.

Such activities have not been limited to interference with the administration of the affairs of the Bahá'í community, although they have, as you note, included such interference. A far greater problem has been the persistent effort to arouse doubts about the integrity of the Teachings, as interpreted for us by `Abdu'l-Bahá and the Guardian, to undermine the authority of the Faith's institutions, and to alter the essential nature of Bahá'u'lláh's message. Seizing on apparently unwise interventions on the part of a few Bahá'ís of rigid mind-set, this campaign has boldly sought to exclude from consideration the implications of the Covenant for the discussions taking place.

These efforts have been accompanied by a deliberate attempt to misrepresent the institutions of the Faith as repressive of learning and to introduce into a Bahá'í discourse a fevered debate on individual rights, borrowed from the political environment. You can yourself testify that not only are Bahá'ís urged to uphold the principle of unfettered search after truth, but they have also been encouraged from the time of the Faith's inception to pursue knowledge in all its forms and to excel in such attainments. If one is sincere in a concern for the Bahá'í community's intellectual advancement, one will not compromise scholarship by entangling it in private, ideological objectives which undermine its influence.

You will want also to take into careful account the fact that the individuals seeking to generate these controversies, although vociferous, are in no way representative of the opinions of the great majority of Bahá'ís with academic and other scholarly qualifications. Indeed, a sad feature of discussions on one or two Internet lists, which has been brought to the attention of the House of Justice, has been the number of academically well-qualified believers who have eventually been driven to give up an interchange of ideas that could have been extremely fruitful by what they perceived as merely the relentless pursuit of a partisan agenda.

The House of Justice urges you to reflect deeply on the reasons why those pursuing this agenda seek by every means possible to represent their actions as a disinterested search for knowledge and themselves as victims of authoritarianism. The principle which should guide our efforts to share the fruits of Bahá'í scholarship has been made clear for all of us in this passage from Bahá'u'lláh's Writings:

Thou hast written that one of the friends hath composed a treatise. This was mentioned in the Holy Presence, and this is what was revealed in response: Great care should be exercised that whatever is written in these days doth not cause dissension, and invite the objection of the people. Whatever the friends of the one true God say in these days is listened to by the people of the world. It hath been revealed in the Lawh-i-Hikmat: "The unbelievers have inclined their ears towards us in order to hear that which might enable them to cavil against God, the Help in Peril, the Self-Subsisting." Whatever is written should not transgress the bounds of tact and wisdom, and in the words used there should lie hid the property of milk, so that the children of the world may be nurtured therewith, and attain maturity. We have said in the past that one word hath the influence of spring and causeth hearts to become fresh and verdant, while another is like unto blight which causeth the blossoms and flowers to wither. God grant that authors among the friends will write in such a way as would be acceptable to fair-minded souls, and not lead to cavilling by the people. (From a Tablet translated from Persian and Arabic)

Not surprisingly, the abuse of Internet discussions on the Faith and its Teachings has had the effect of greatly distressing friends who became aware of it. That the response has included, as your letter suggests, a degree of intemperate criticism, inappropriate comment and unjust accusation is lamentable, but also not surprising, for contentiousness begets contention. You should be confident that the House of Justice will not permit a climate of intolerance to prosper in the Bahá'í community, no matter from what cause it arises. Further, the House of Justice will continue to encourage use of the greatly expanded opportunities for the discussion of Bahá'í concepts and ideals, which Internet communication so marvellously provides.

Finally, it is no doubt helpful to keep in mind that Bahá'ís who are trained in various academic disciplines do not constitute a discrete body within the community. While the Bahá'í institutions benefit on an ongoing basis from the advice of believers in many fields of specialization, there is obviously no group of academics who can claim to speak on behalf of Bahá'í scholars generally. Scholarly qualifications enable individuals to make greatly valued contributions to the work of the Cause, but do not set those possessing them apart from the general body of the believers. The House of Justice feels confident that, with patience, self-discipline, and unity of faith, Bahá'í academics will be able to contribute to a gradual forging of the more integrative paradigms of scholarship for which thoughtful minds in the international community are increasingly calling.

[10] 8 February 1998

Your email of ... covers a number of issues, the first of which relates to methods followed in researching, understanding and writing about historical events, and the elements of these methods which the House of Justice regards as being influenced by materialism. The purpose of scholarship in such fields should obviously be the ascertainment of truth, and Bahá'í scholars should, of course, observe the highest standards of honesty, integrity and truthfulness. Moreover, the House of Justice accepts that many scholarly methods have been developed which are soundly based and of enduring validity. It nevertheless questions some presumptions of certain current academic methods because it sees these producing a distorted picture of reality.

The training of some scholars in fields such as religion and history seems to have restricted their vision and blinded them to the culturally determined basis of elements of the approach they have learned. It causes them to exclude from consideration factors which, from a Bahá'í point of view, are of fundamental importance. Truth in such fields cannot be found if the evidence of Revelation is systematically excluded and if discourse is limited by a basically deterministic view of the world.

Some of the protagonists in the discussions on the Internet have implied that the only way to attain a true understanding of historical events and of the purport of the sacred and historical records of the Cause of God is through the rigid application of methods narrowly defined in a materialistic framework. They have even gone so far as to stigmatize whoever proposes a variation of these methods as wishing to obscure the truth rather than unveil it.

The House of Justice recognizes that, at the other extreme, there are Bahá'ís who, imbued by what they conceive to be loyalty to Bahá'u'lláh, 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 Bahá'í principle of the harmony of faith and reason. The danger of such an attitude is that it exalts personal understanding of some part 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".

It is not surprising that individual Bahá'ís hold and express different and sometimes defective understandings of the Teachings; this is but an evidence of the magnitude of the change that this Revelation is to effect in human consciousness. As believers with various insights into the Teachings converse — with patience, tolerance and open and unbiased minds — a deepening of comprehension should take place. The strident insistence on individual views, however, can lead to contention, which is detrimental not only to the spirit of Bahá'í association and collaboration but to the search for truth itself.

Beyond contention, moreover, is the condition in which a person is so immovably attached to one erroneous viewpoint that his insistence upon it amounts to an effort to change the essential character of the Faith. This kind of behaviour, if permitted to continue unchecked, could produce disruption in the Bahá'í community, giving birth to countless sects as it has done in previous Dispensations. The Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh prevents this. The Faith defines elements of a code of conduct, and it is

ultimately the responsibility of the Universal House of Justice, in watching over the security of the Cause and upholding the integrity of its Teachings, to require the friends to adhere to standards thus defined.

The Universal House of Justice does not see itself obliged to prescribe a new scientific methodology for Bahá'í academics who make study of the Faith, its teachings and history the subject of their professional activities. Rather has it concentrated on drawing the attention of these friends to the inadequacy of certain approaches from a Bahá'í point of view, urging them to apply to their work the concept which they accept as Bahá'ís: that the Manifestation of God is of a higher realm and has a perception far above that of any human being. He has the task of raising humankind to a new level of knowledge and behaviour. In this, His understanding transcends the traditions and concepts of the society in which He appears. As Bahá'u'lláh Himself writes in the [Hidden Words](#):

O Son of Beauty! By My spirit and by My favor! By My mercy and by My beauty! All that I have revealed unto thee with the tongue of power, and have written for thee with the pen of might, hath been in accordance with thy capacity and understanding, not with My state and the melody of My voice.

Although, in conveying His Revelation, the Manifestation uses the language and culture of the country into which He is born, He is not confined to using terminology with the same connotations as those given to it by His predecessors or contemporaries; He delivers His message in a form which His audience, both immediate and in centuries to come, is capable of grasping. It is for Bahá'í scholars to elaborate, over a period of time, methodologies which will enable them to perform their work with this understanding. This is a challenging task, but not one which should be beyond the scope of Bahá'ís who are learned in the Teachings as well as competent in their scientific disciplines.

This brings us to the specific points raised in your email of ... As you well understand, not only the right but also the responsibility of each believer to explore truth for himself or herself are fundamental to the Bahá'í teachings. This principle is an integral feature of the coming of age of humankind, inseparable from the social transformation to which Bahá'u'lláh is calling the peoples of the world. It is as relevant to specifically scholarly activity as it is to the rest of spiritual and intellectual life. Every human being is ultimately responsible to God for the use which he or she makes of these possibilities; conscience is never to be coerced, whether by other individuals or institutions.

Conscience, however, is not an unchangeable absolute. One dictionary definition, although not covering all the usages of the term, presents the common understanding of the word "conscience" as "the sense of right and wrong as regards things for which one is responsible; the faculty or principle which pronounces upon the moral quality of one's actions or motives, approving the right and condemning the wrong".

The functioning of one's conscience, then, depends upon one's understanding of right and wrong; the conscience of one person may be established upon a disinterested striving after truth and justice, while that of another may rest on an unthinking predisposition to act in accordance with that pattern of standards, principles and prohibitions which is a product of his social environment. Conscience, therefore, can serve either as a bulwark of an upright character or can represent an accumulation of prejudices learned from one's forebears or absorbed from a limited social code.

A Bahá'í recognizes that one aspect of his spiritual and intellectual growth is to foster the development of his conscience in the light of divine Revelation — a Revelation which, in addition to providing a wealth of spiritual and ethical principles, exhorts man "to free himself from idle fancy and imitation, discern with the eye of oneness His glorious handiwork, and look into all things with a searching eye". This process of development, therefore, involves a clear-sighted examination of the conditions of the world with both heart and mind. A Bahá'í will understand that an upright life is based upon observance of certain principles which stem from Divine Revelation and which he recognizes as essential for the well-being of both the individual and society. In order to uphold such principles, he knows that, in certain cases, the voluntary submission of the promptings of his own personal conscience to the decision of the majority is a conscientious requirement, as in wholeheartedly accepting the majority decision of an Assembly at the outcome of consultation.

In the discussion of wisdom in your email of ... you observe that maybe "Bahá'í academics all too often have not recognized that to a great extent failure to exercise wisdom represents a failure of love." The House of Justice agrees that the exercise of wisdom calls for a measure of love and the development of a sensitive conscience. These, in turn, involve not only devotion to a high standard of uprightness, but also consideration of the effects of one's words and actions.

A Bahá'í's duty to pursue an unfettered search after truth should lead him to understand the Teachings as an organic, logically coherent whole, should cause him to examine his own ideas and motives, and should enable him to see that adherence to the Covenant, to which he is a party, is not blind imitation but conscious choice, freely made and freely followed.

In many of His utterances, `Abdu'l-Bahá extols governments which uphold freedom of conscience for their citizens. As can be seen from the context, these statements refer to the freedom to follow the religion of one's choice. In the original of a passage to which you refer in your email of ..., He gives the following analysis of freedom.

There are three types of freedom. The first is divine freedom, which is one of the inherent attributes of the Creator for He is unconstrained in His will, and no one can force Him to change His decree in any matter whatsoever....

The second is the political freedom of Europeans, which leaves the individual free to do whatsoever he desires as long as his action does not harm his neighbour. This is natural freedom, and its greatest expression is seen in the animal world. Observe these birds and notice with what freedom they live. However much man may try, he can never be as free as an animal, because the existence of order acts as an impediment to freedom.

The third freedom is that which is born of obedience to the laws and ordinances of the Almighty. This is the freedom of the human world, where man severs his affections from all things. When he does so, he becomes immune to all hardship and sorrow. Wealth or material power will not deflect him from moderation and fairness, neither will poverty or need inhibit him from showing forth happiness and tranquillity. The more the conscience of man develops, the more will his heart be free and his soul attain unto happiness. In the religion of God, there is freedom of thought because God, alone, controls the human conscience, but this freedom should not go beyond courtesy. In the religion of God, there is no freedom of action outside the law of God. Man may not transgress this law, even

though no harm is inflicted on one's neighbour. This is because the purpose of Divine law is the education of all — others as well as oneself — and, in the sight of God, the harm done to one individual or to his neighbour is the same and is reprehensible in both cases. Hearts must possess the fear of God. Man should endeavour to avoid that which is abhorrent unto God. Therefore, the freedom that the laws of Europe offer to the individual does not exist in the law of God. Freedom of thought should not transgress the bounds of courtesy, and actions, likewise, should be governed by the fear of God and the desire to seek His good pleasure.

Education of the individual Bahá'í in the Divine law is one of the duties of Spiritual Assemblies. In a letter to a National Assembly on 1 March 1951, Shoghi Effendi wrote:

The deepening and enrichment of the spiritual life of the individual believer, his increasing comprehension of the essential verities underlying this Faith, his training in its administrative processes, his understanding of the fundamentals of the Covenants established by its Author and the authorized Interpreter of its teachings, should be made the supreme objectives of the national representatives responsible for the edification, the progress and consolidation of these communities.

Such is the duty resting on the elected institutions of the Faith for the promotion of the spiritual, moral and ethical lives of the individual believers. Parallel with this, the Bahá'í Faith upholds the freedom of conscience which permits a person to follow his chosen religion: no one may be compelled to become a Bahá'í, or to remain a Bahá'í if he conscientiously wishes to leave the Faith. As to the thoughts of the Bahá'ís themselves — that is those who have chosen to follow the religion of Bahá'u'lláh — the institutions do not busy themselves with what individual believers think unless those thoughts become expressed in actions which are inimical to the basic principles and vital interests of the Faith.

With regard to the accusation that to make such distinctions borders on restriction of the freedom of speech, one should accept that civil society has long recognized that utterance can metamorphose into behaviour, and has taken steps to protect itself and its citizens against such behaviour when it becomes socially destructive. Laws against sedition and hate-mongering are examples that come readily to mind.

It will surely be clear to you from the above comments that the categories of "issues of doctrinal heresy which must therefore be suppressed" and "the imposition of orthodoxy on the Bahá'í community", to which you refer, are concepts essentially drawn from the study of Christianity and are inapplicable to the far more complex interrelationships and principles established by the Bahá'í Faith.

It is important for all those Bahá'ís who are engaged in the academic study of the Bahá'í Faith to address the theoretical problems which undoubtedly exist, while refusing to be distracted by insidious and unscholarly attacks and calumnies which may periodically be injected into their discussions by the ill-intentioned. Discussion with those who sincerely raise problematic issues, whether they be Bahá'ís or not, and whether — if the latter — they disagree with Bahá'í teachings, can be beneficial and enlightening. However, to continue dialogue with those who have shown a fixed antagonism to

the Faith, and have demonstrated their imperviousness to any ideas other than their own, is usually fruitless and, for the Bahá'ís who take part, can be burdensome and even spiritually corrosive.

The problem which aroused the concern of the House of Justice, and has been the subject of a number of communications, was the systematic corruption of Bahá'í discourse in certain of the Internet discussion groups, a design which became increasingly apparent to many of the Bahá'í participants and whose first victim, if it were to succeed, would be Bahá'í scholarship itself. The element which exacerbated a dispute which had been simmering during the past two decades and erupted on the Internet was the participation of some persons who, while nominally Bahá'ís, cherished their own programs and designed to make use of the Bahá'í Cause for the advancement of these programs. To this end they strove to change the essential characteristics of that Cause. This behaviour has been abundantly confirmed by statements made and actions taken by certain of the involved individuals since they withdrew from the Bahá'í community. They sought to use the language, the occasions and the credibility of scholarly activity to lend a counterfeit authority to a private enterprise which was essentially ideological in nature and self-motivated in origin. Even if their original aims were idealistic in nature — no matter how ill-informed and erroneous in concept — they had evolved in practice into an assault on the Covenant which Bahá'u'lláh has created as a stronghold within which His Cause would evolve as He intends. The purpose of some of those responsible would seem to be that, by diminishing the station of Bahá'u'lláh — a disservice done to previous Manifestations by people similarly inclined —, by casting doubt on the authority conferred on `Abdu'l-Bahá, the Guardian and the Universal House of Justice, and by calling into question the integrity of Bahá'í administrative processes, they would be able to persuade a number of unwary followers that the Bahá'í Faith is in fact not a Divine Revelation but a kind of socio-political system being manipulated by ambitious individuals.

Your own familiarity with these same persons' behaviour will have provided you with ample illustration of the violence being done by their public and private statements to Bahá'u'lláh's teachings, which they profess to honour, and to the cause of scholarship, which they profess to serve. We cannot separate method from spirit and character. In [The Secret of Divine Civilization](#), `Abdu'l-Bahá gives the standard for the "spiritually learned" whom He describes as "skilled physicians for the ailing body of the world" and "the sure antidote to the poison that has corrupted human society":

For every thing, however, God has created a sign and symbol, and established standards and tests by which it may be known. The spiritually learned must be characterized by both inward and outward perfections; they must possess a good character, an enlightened nature, a pure intent, as well as intellectual power, brilliance and discernment, intuition, discretion and foresight, temperance, reverence, and a heartfelt fear of God. For an unlit candle, however great in diameter and tall, is no better than a barren palm tree or a pile of dead wood.

[*] The compilation referred to is not provided here because the indented paragraphs which follow give the essential passages conveying the advice of the beloved Guardian.

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Scholarship, Bahá'í

by [Shoghi Effendi](#) and [Universal House of Justice](#)

compiled by [Peter Khan](#).

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1. Scholarship and Achievement

Scholarship has a high station in the Bahá'í teachings and Bahá'í scholars have a great responsibility to a growing, divinely-guided world society. The ascertainment of truth and the acquisition of a fuller understanding of the subjects of their scholarship are worthy and high endeavours.

From comments of the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice on the Bahá'í Studies Seminar on Ethics and Methodology dated 3 January 1979. [1]

Bahá'í scholarship is of great importance in the development and consolidation of the Bahá'í community.

From a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice dated 3 January 1979. [2]

The Supreme Body has informed us that it believes that both the International Teaching Centre and the Boards of Counsellors can render valuable services in the field of Bahá'í scholarship by encouraging budding scholars, and also by promoting within the Bahá'í community an atmosphere of tolerance for the views of others.

From a letter of the International Teaching Centre dated 22 March 1981. [3]

The heart of 'Abdu'l-Bahá longeth, in its love, to find that Bahá'í young people, each and all, are known throughout the world for their intellectual attainments.

From a letter of the International Teaching Centre dated 22 March 1981. [4]

It is just as important for the Bahá'í young boys and girls to become properly educated in Colleges of high standing as it is to be spiritually developed. The mental as well as the spiritual side of the youth has to be developed before he can serve the Cause efficiently.

From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi dated 28 November 1926, cited in *Education* 63. [5]

What he (Shoghi Effendi) wants the Bahá'ís to do is to study more, not to study less. The more general knowledge, scientific or otherwise, they possess, the better. Likewise he is constantly urging them to really study the Bahá'í teachings more deeply.

From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi dated 5 July 1947, cited in *Deepening* 38. [6]

The Cause needs more Bahá'í 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 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi dated 21 October 1943, cited in *Deepening* 35-36. [7]

Bahá'í scholars and writers will no doubt, gradually appear, and will, as promised by Bahá'u'lláh lend a unique support to the Faith.

From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, cited in *US Bahá'í News*, August 1936. [8]

As the Cause develops it will need more and more people who are really versed in their branch of learning and who can interpret the teachings to suit the facts.

From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, cited in *Bahá'í Youth* 16. [9]

It is not difficult to visualize the House of Justice, as Bahá'u'lláh's World Order unfolds, requiring the services of distinguished Bahá'í scientists in all fields.

See [1] above.

Bahá'u'lláh considered education to be one of the most fundamental factors of a true civilization - this education, however, in order to be adequate and fruitful should be comprehensive in nature and should take into consideration not only the physical and the intellectual side of man but also his spiritual and ethical aspects. This should be the programme of the Bahá'í youth all over the world.

From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi dated 9 July 1931, cited in *Deepening* 25. [10]

2. General Principles of Bahá'í Scholarship

The Bahá'í principle of the harmony of religion and science compels all Bahá'ís to protect themselves from prevalent diseases resulting from the divorce of faith and reason.

The sundering of science and religion is but one example of the tendency of the human mind (which is necessarily limited in its capacity) to concentrate on one virtue, one aspect of truth, one goal, to the exclusion of others. This leads, in extreme cases, to fanaticism and the distortion of truth, and in all cases to some degree of imbalance and inaccuracy.

See [1] above.

It has become customary in the West to think of science and religion as occupying two distinct - and even opposed - areas of human thought and activity. This dichotomy can be characterized in the pairs of antitheses: faith and reason; value and fact. It is a dichotomy which is foreign to Bahá'í thought and should be regarded with suspicion by Bahá'í scholars in every field.

The principle of the harmony of religion and science means not only that religious teachings should be studied in the light of reason and evidence as well as of faith and inspiration, but also that everything in creation, all aspects of human life and knowledge, should be studied in the light of revelation as well as of purely rational investigation. In other words, a Bahá'í scholar, when studying a subject, should not lock out of his mind any aspect of truth that is known to him.

See [1] above.

The believers must recognize the importance of intellectual honesty and humility. In past dispensations many errors arose because the believers in God's Revelation were over-anxious to encompass the Divine Message within the framework of their limited understanding, to define doctrines where definition was beyond their power, to explain mysteries which only the wisdom and experience of a later age would make comprehensible, to argue that something was true because it appeared desirable and necessary. Such compromises with essential truth, such intellectual pride, we must scrupulously avoid.

The Universal House of Justice, *Wellspring of Guidance* 87-88. [11]

In scientific investigation, when searching after the facts of any matter, a Bahá'í must, of course, be entirely open-minded, but in his interpretation of the facts, and his evaluation of evidence we do not see by what logic he can ignore the truth of the Bahá'í Revelation which he has already accepted; to do so would, we feel, be both hypocritical and unscholarly.

See [1] above.

As a Bahá'í, you know that what Bahá'u'lláh teaches about the purpose of human life, the nature of the human being and the proper conduct of human lives, is divinely revealed and therefore true. However, it will inevitably take time for you not only to study the Bahá'í teachings so that you clearly understand them, but also to work out how they modify your professional concepts. This is, of course, not an unusual predicament for a scientist. How often in the course of research is a factor discovered which requires a revolution in thinking over a wide field of human endeavour.

Universal House of Justice, *Messages 1968-1973* 111-112. [12]

We should be confident that there is consistency in the universe, that the Manifestation is aware of that consistency, and we must ourselves be aware that the principle of the harmony of religion and science is a dynamic one which will require new levels of understanding of true science and true religion alike.

From a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, dated 22 June 1977. [13]

3. Purpose of Bahá'í Scholarship

3.1 Refutation of Attacks on the Faith:

There is an answer in the teachings for everything; unfortunately the majority of the Bahá'ís, however intensely devoted and sincere they may be, lack for the most part the necessary scholarship and wisdom to reply to and refute the claims and attacks of people with some education and standing.

From a letter on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, dated 25 September 1942, cited in *Unfolding Destiny* 439. [14]

3.2 Deeper Understanding of the Bahá'í Faith:

In connection with the question as to whether Bahá'ís should be familiar with the different sciences and branches of study, Shoghi Effendi wishes me to inform you that both Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá have given a very high position to men of culture and knowledge and Bahá'u'lláh says in one of His Tablets that respect shown to such people is incumbent upon all Bahá'ís. Furthermore there is no doubt that familiarity with different branches of study widens one's point of view and we can then understand and realize the significance of the Bahá'í Movement and its principles much more.

From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi dated 14 December 1924. [15]

The Guardian has always advised young people to study deeply subjects as History, Economics and Sociology as they are all related to the teachings and aid in understanding the Faith.

From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, cited in *Bahá'í Youth* 15. [16]

3.3 Contributing to Scholarly Development:

History, Economics or Sociology ... are fields in which Bahá'ís not only take a great interest but also cover subjects which our teachings cast an entirely new light upon.

See [16] above.

Psychology is still a very young and inexact science, and as the years go by Bahá'í psychologists, who know from the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh the true pattern of human life, will be able to make great strides in the development of this science, and will help profoundly in the alleviation of human suffering.¹²

See [12] above.

Bahá'u'lláh has given us a few basic principles which should guide future Bahá'í economists in establishing such institutions which will adjust the economic relationships of the world.

From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, dated 26 December, 1935.

As more and more Bahá'ís enter the world of higher learning they will have the opportunity of exerting great influence in bringing about in human consciousness and outlook that harmony of religion and science which is so great a principle of their Faith.¹

The Teachings of Bahá'u'lláh throw light on so many aspects of human life and knowledge that a Bahá'í must learn, earlier than most, to weigh the information that is given to him rather than to accept it blindly. A Bahá'í has the advantage of the Divine Revelation for this age, which shines like a searchlight on so many problems that baffle modern thinkers.

The Universal House of Justice, *Wellspring of Guidance* 96.

3.4 Teaching the Faith:

The University training which you are receiving at present will be of immense help to you in your efforts to present the Message in intellectual circles. 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 Bahá'ís 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 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi dated 5 May 1934, cited in *Deepening* 31.

Shoghi Effendi's hope is that they will ... become able and devoted speakers on the Cause and subjects akin to it. To do this properly they will need a firm foundation of scientific and literary training which fortunately they are obtaining.⁵

It is very important that the movement should enter the Colleges and start to acquire the support of student bodies. No one can attempt such a task better than Bahá'í students.⁹

The Cause has the remedy for all the world's ills. The reason why more people don't accept it is because the Bahá'ís are not always capable of presenting it in a way that meets the immediate needs of their minds. Young Bahá'ís like yourself must prepare themselves to really bring the message to their generation who need it so desperately and who can understand the language it speaks so well.⁷

Shoghi Effendi has for years urged the Bahá'ís (who asked his advice, and in general also) to study history, economics, sociology, etc., in order to be au courant with all the progressive movements and thoughts being put forth today, and so that they could correlate these to the Bahá'í teachings. What he wants the Bahá'ís to do is to study more, not to study less. The more general knowledge, scientific or otherwise, they possess, the better. Likewise he is constantly urging them to really study the Bahá'í teachings more deeply.⁶

A sound knowledge of history, including religious history, and also of social and economic subjects, is of great help in teaching the Cause to intelligent people.

From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi dated 4 May 1946, cited in *Deepening* 37.

It seems what we need now is a more profound and co-ordinated Bahá'í scholarship in 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 Bahá'u'lláh 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 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi dated 3 July 1949, cited in *Deepening* 39.

If the Bahá'ís 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 Bahá'ís 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.⁽²²⁾

From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi dated 5 July 1949, cited in *Deepening* 39-40.

We need profound Bahá'í scholars in the future, both to teach and to administer the Cause, and to answer the questions of the public, and help rebuild the world. This is a great challenge to you all, and presents a wonderful opportunity for service to humanity.

From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi dated August 1943.

4. Attitudes of Bahá'í Scholars

A scholar who is imbued with an understanding of the broad teachings of the Faith will always remember that being a scholar does not exempt him from the primal duties and purposes for which all human beings are created. Not scholars alone, but all men are exhorted to seek out and uphold the truth, no matter how uncomfortable it may be. But they are also exhorted to be wise in their utterance, to be tolerant of the views of others, to be courteous in their behaviour and speech, not to sow the seeds of doubt in faithful hearts, to look at the good rather than at the bad, to avoid conflict and contention to be reverent, to be faithful to the Covenant of God, to promote His Faith and safeguard its honour, and to educate their fellow men, giving milk to babes and meat to those who are stronger.¹

The distinction desired by 'Abdu'l-Bahá for all Bahá'ís is certainly for attainment by Bahá'í scholars, who by following the exhortation of Bahá'u'lláh to moderation, kindness, tact and wisdom, may restore scholarship to that high station of dignity and admiration which it formerly had and which is confirmed by the utterances of Bahá'u'lláh.¹

If ye be aware of a certain truth, if ye possess a jewel, of which others are deprived, share it with them in a language of utmost kindness and goodwill. If it be accepted, if it fulfil its purpose, your object is attained. If any one should refuse it, leave him unto himself, and beseech God to guide him ...

Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* CXXXII.

Should any one among you be incapable of grasping a certain truth, or be striving to comprehend it, show forth, when conversing with him, a spirit of extreme kindness and good-will. Help him to see and recognize the truth, without esteeming yourself to be, in the least, superior to him, or to be possessed of greater endowments.

Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* V.

A Bahá'í must develop the ability to learn everything from those around him, showing proper humility before his teachers, but always relating what he hears to the Bahá'í teachings, for they will enable him to sort out the gold from the dross of human error.¹⁸

5. Some Specific Disciplines

Education:

The task of formulating a system of education which would be officially recognized by the Cause, and enforced as such throughout the Bahá'í world is one which the present-day generation of believers cannot obviously undertake, and which has to be gradually accomplished by Bahá'í scholars and educationalists of the future.

From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi dated 7 June 1939, cited in *Education* 70.

Philosophy:

Philosophy, as you will study it and later teach it, is certainly not one of the sciences that begins and ends in words. Fruitless excursions into metaphysical hair-splitting is meant, not a sound branch of learning like philosophy. . . he would advise you not to devote too much of your time to the abstract side of philosophy, but rather to approach it from a more historical angle. As to correlating philosophy with the Bahá'í teachings: this is a tremendous work which scholars in the future can undertake. We must remember that not only are all the teachings not yet translated into English, but they are not even all collected yet.

From a letter on behalf of Shoghi Effendi dated 15 February 1947, cited in *Unfolding Destiny* 445.

Pure Mathematics:

Bahá'u'lláh's comment ("strictures against 'such sciences as begin in mere words and end in mere words'") does not apply to the systematic study of natural phenomena in order to discover the laws of order in the physical universe, an order which mathematics seeks to explore. Pure

mathematics frequently has application in practical matters, such as in your example of group theory, and also in your own field of fundamental particles.¹³

Biology:

Your second question concerning the possible synthesis of an elementary 'life' form such as a simple virus relates to the statement made by 'Abdu'l-Bahá ... 'For example, if a man of his own mind and intelligence collects some elements and combines them, a living being will not be brought into existence, since the system is unnatural ...'

To understand the implications of this statement it is necessary to know what the Master meant by 'a living being' and what limitations He intended by the phrases 'of his own mind and intelligence' and 'since the system is unnatural.' As the science of biology develops and men acquire ever deeper insights into the nature of living things, these implications will no doubt become clearer.¹³

Psychology:

See Section 3.3 above

History, Economics, Sociology:

See Section 3.3 above

6. Some Pitfalls

Compromise:

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 principle proclaimed by God's Messenger, are in their very nature ephemeral and limited. Likewise, attempting to make the Bahá'í 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 on behalf of the Universal House of Justice dated 21 July 1968. [28]

Misunderstanding About Religion:

It has . . . become commonplace to regard religion as the product of human striving after truth, as the outcome of certain climates of thought and conditions of society. This has been taken, by many non-Bahá'í thinkers, to the extreme of denying altogether the reality or even the possibility of a specific revelation of the Will of God to mankind through a human Mouthpiece.

A Bahá'í ... knows as the result of rational investigation, confirmed by actual experience, that true religion, far from being the product solely of human striving after truth, is the fruit of the Creative Word of God which, with divine power, transforms human thought and action ...

A Bahá'í scholar ... will not make the mistake of regarding the sayings and beliefs of certain Bahá'ís at any one time as being the Bahá'í Faith ... Thus Bahá'í historians would see the overcoming of early misconceptions held by the Bahá'í community, or by parts of the Bahá'í community, not as 'developments of the Bahá'í Faith' – as a non-Bahá'í historian might well regard them - but as a growth of the community's understanding of the Bahá'í Revelation ...

Undoubtedly the fact that Bahá'í scholars of the history and teachings of the Faith believe in the Faith will be a grave flaw in the eyes of many non-Bahá'í academics, whose own dogmatic material passes without comment because it is fashionable; but this difficulty is one that Bahá'í scholars share with their fellow believers in many fields of human endeavour ...

See [1] above.

Neglect of the Covenant:

The Boards of Counsellors can render valuable services in the field of Bahá'í scholarship by encouraging budding scholars, and also by promoting within the Bahá'í community an atmosphere of tolerance for the views of others. . . At the same time, the Counsellors have a basic responsibility to strengthen the fundamental core of the faith of the believers by promoting an increasing awareness of the cardinal truth and vital importance of the Covenant, and an ever-growing love for Bahá'u'lláh.

See [3] above.

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Scholarship

EXTRACTS FROM THE WRITINGS OF BAHÁ'U'LLÁH AND ABDU'L-BAHÁ AND FROM THE LETTERS OF SHOGHI EFFENDI AND THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE ON SCHOLARSHIP

Prepared by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice
February 1995

10 February 1995

To selected National Spiritual Assemblies
Dear Bahá'í Friends,

We have been asked by the Universal House of Justice to send you the enclosed copy of a compilation on scholarship prepared recently at its request by the Research Department at the Bahá'í World Centre.

It is the hope of the House of Justice that a study of this compilation will serve as a stimulus and a guide in the further development of Bahá'í scholarship, and that the unique features of this vital aspect of Bahá'í activity will be clarified through a perusal of its contents.

The House of Justice calls upon the members of the community of the Greatest Name, young and old, men and women alike, to strive to develop and offer to humanity a new model of scholarly activity along the lines set out in this compilation, animated by the spirit of inquiry into the limitless meaning of the Divine Teachings. This scholarly endeavour should be characterized by the welcome it offers to all who wish to be involved in it, each in his or her own way, by mutual encouragement and cooperation among its participants, and by the respect accorded to distinguished accomplishment and outstanding achievement. The spirit and approach should be far removed from the arrogance, contention, and exclusiveness which have too often sullied the name of scholarship in the wider society, and which have created barriers to the sound development of this worthy pursuit.

It is left to your discretion to determine the use you should make of the enclosed material.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

For Department of the Secretariat

Enclosure

cc: The Hands of the Cause of God
International Teaching Centre
Counsellors

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1. THE STATION OF SCHOLARSHIP

1.1 Importance of Knowledge and Learning

From the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh

Knowledge is one of the wondrous gifts of God. It is incumbent upon everyone to acquire it. Such arts and material means as are now manifest have been achieved by virtue of His knowledge and wisdom which have been revealed in Epistles and Tablets through His Most Exalted Pen—a Pen out of whose treasury pearls of wisdom and utterance and the arts and crafts of the world are brought to light.

("Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh Revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas" (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1988), p. 39) [1]

Knowledge is as wings to man's life, and a ladder for his ascent. Its acquisition is incumbent upon everyone. The knowledge of such sciences, however, should be acquired as can profit the peoples of the earth, and not those which begin with words and end with words. Great indeed is the claim of scientists and craftsmen on the peoples of the world.... In truth, knowledge is a veritable treasure for man, and a source of glory, of bounty, of joy, of exaltation, of cheer and gladness unto him. Thus hath the Tongue of Grandeur spoken in this Most Great Prison.

("Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh Revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas", pp. 51-52) [2]

From the Writings and Utterances of 'Abdu'l-Bahá

Make every effort to acquire the advanced knowledge of the day, and strain every nerve to carry forward the divine civilization....

Included must be promotion of the arts, the discovery of new wonders, the expansion of trade, and the development of industry. The methods of civilization and the beautification of the country must also be encouraged; and also to be inculcated is absolute obedience to the Government and total avoidance of any trace of sedition.

(From a Tablet, translated from the Persian) [3]

...I most urgently request the friends of God to make every effort, as much as lieth within their competence, along these lines. The harder they strive to widen the scope of their knowledge, the better and more gratifying will be the result. Let the loved ones of God, whether young or old, whether male or female, each according to his capabilities, bestir themselves and spare no efforts to acquire the various current branches of knowledge, both spiritual and secular, and of the arts.

(From a Tablet, translated from the Arabic) [4]

All blessings are divine in origin, but none can be compared with this power of intellectual investigation and research, which is an eternal gift producing fruits of unending delight. Man is ever partaking of these fruits. All other blessings are temporary; this is an everlasting possession. Even sovereignty has its limitations and overthrow; this is a kingship and dominion which none may usurp or destroy. Briefly, it is an eternal blessing and divine bestowal, the supreme gift of God to man. Therefore, you should put forward your most earnest efforts toward the acquisition of science and arts. The greater your attainment, the higher your standard in the divine purpose. The man of science is perceiving and endowed with vision, whereas he who is ignorant and neglectful of this development is blind. The investigating mind is attentive, alive; the callous and indifferent mind is deaf and dead. A scientific man is a true index and representative of humanity, for through processes of inductive reasoning and research he is informed of all that appertains to humanity, its status, conditions and happenings. He studies the human body politic, understands social problems and weaves the web and texture of civilization. In fact, science may be likened to a mirror wherein the infinite forms and images of existing things are revealed and reflected. It is the very foundation of all individual and national development. Without this basis of investigation, development is impossible. Therefore, seek with diligent endeavour the knowledge and attainment of all that lies within the power of this wonderful bestowal.

("The Promulgation of Universal Peace: Talks Delivered by 'Abdu'l-Bahá during His Visit to the United States and Canada in 1912" (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982), p. 50) [5]

From a Letter Written on Behalf of Shoghi Effendi

...Bahá'u'lláh considered education as one of the most fundamental factors of a true civilization. This education, however, in order to be adequate and fruitful, should be comprehensive in nature and should take into consideration not only the physical and the intellectual side of man but also his spiritual and ethical aspects.

(9 July 1931 to an individual believer) [6]

1.2 Characteristics of the "truly learned"

From the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh

Happy are ye, O ye the learned ones in Baha. By the Lord! Ye are the billows of the Most Mighty Ocean, the stars of the firmament of Glory, the standards of triumph waving betwixt earth and heaven. Ye are the manifestations of steadfastness amidst men and the daysprings of Divine Utterance to all that dwell on earth.

(The Kitáb-i-Aqdas, paragraph 173) [7]

The Great Being saith: The man of consummate learning and the sage endowed with penetrating wisdom are the two eyes to the body of mankind. God willing, the earth shall never be deprived of these two greatest gifts.

("Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh Revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas", p. 171) [8]

Know thou that he is truly learned who hath acknowledged My Revelation, and drunk from the Ocean of My knowledge, and soared in the atmosphere of My love, and cast away all else besides Me, and taken firm hold on that which hath been sent down from the Kingdom of My wondrous utterance. He, verily, is even as an eye unto mankind, and as the spirit of life unto the body of all creation. Glorified be the All-Merciful Who hath enlightened him, and caused him to arise and serve His great and mighty Cause. Verily, such a man is blessed by the Concourse on high, and by them who dwell within the Tabernacle of Grandeur, who have quaffed My sealed Wine in My name, the Omnipotent, the All-Powerful.

("Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh Revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas", pp. 207-208) [9]

Consider, how can he that faileth in the day of God's Revelation to attain unto the grace of the "Divine Presence" and to recognize His Manifestation, be justly called learned, though he may have spent aeons in the pursuit of knowledge, and acquired all the limited and material learning of men? It is surely evident that he can in no wise be regarded as possessed of true knowledge. Whereas, the most unlettered of all men, if he be honoured with this supreme distinction, he verily is accounted as one of those divinely-learned men whose knowledge is of God; for such a man hath attained the acme of knowledge, and hath reached the furthestmost summit of learning.

("The Kitáb-i-Íqán" (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1983), pp. 145-146) [10]

From the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá

...there are those famed and accomplished men of learning, possessed of praiseworthy qualities and vast erudition, who lay hold on the strong handle of the fear of God and keep to the ways of salvation. In the mirror of their minds the forms of transcendent realities are reflected, and the lamp of their inner vision derives its light from the sun of universal knowledge. They are busy by night and by day with meticulous research into such sciences as are profitable to mankind, and they devote themselves to the training of students of capacity. It is certain that to their discerning taste, the proffered treasures of kings would not compare with a single drop of the waters of knowledge, and mountains of gold and silver could not outweigh the successful solution of a difficult problem. To them, the delights that lie outside their work are only toys for children, and the cumbersome load of unnecessary possessions is only good for the ignorant and base. Content, like the birds, they give thanks for a handful of seeds, and the song of their wisdom dazzles the minds of the world's most wise....

...the happiness and greatness, the rank and station, the pleasure and peace, of an individual have never consisted in his personal wealth, but rather in his excellent character, his high resolve, the breadth of his learning, and his ability to solve difficult problems....

For every thing, however, God has created a sign and symbol, and established standards and tests by which it may be known. The spiritually learned must be characterized by both inward and outward perfections; they must possess a good character, an enlightened nature, a pure intent, as well as intellectual power, brilliance and discernment, intuition, discretion and foresight, temperance, reverence, and a heartfelt fear of God. For an unlit candle, however great in diameter and tall, is no better than a barren palm tree or a pile of dead wood....

An authoritative Tradition states: "As for him who is one of the learned:[1] he must guard himself, defend his faith, oppose his passions and obey the commandments of his Lord. It is then the duty of the people to pattern themselves after him."

("The Secret of Divine Civilization" (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1990), pp. 21-22; pp. 23-24; pp. 33-34) [11]

[1 Ulama', from the Arabic 'alima, to know, may be translated learned men, scientists, religious authorities.]

From Letters Written on Behalf of Shoghi Effendi

In connection with the question as to whether Bahá'ís should be familiar with the different sciences and branches of study, Shoghi Effendi wishes me to inform you that both Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá have given a very high position to men of culture and knowledge and Bahá'u'lláh says in one of His Tablets that respect shown to such people is incumbent upon all Bahá'ís. Furthermore there is no doubt that familiarity with different branches of study widens one's point of view and we can then understand and realize the significance of the Bahá'í Movement and its principles much more.

(14 December 1924 to an individual believer) [12]

The Cause needs more Bahá'í 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.

(21 October 1943 to an individual believer) [13]

1.3 Scope of "Bahá'í Scholarship"

From a Letter Written on Behalf of the Universal House of Justice

At this early stage in the development of the Faith, it would not be useful to propound a highly restrictive definition of the term "Bahá'í scholarship". In a letter written on behalf of the House of Justice to an Association for Bahá'í Studies recently, it is stated that:

The House of Justice advises you not to attempt to define too narrowly the form that Bahá'í scholarship should take, or the approach that scholars should adopt. Rather should you strive to develop within your Association respect for a wide range of approaches and endeavours. No doubt there will be some Bahá'ís who will wish to work in isolation, while others will desire consultation and collaboration with those having similar interests. Your aim should be to promote an atmosphere of mutual respect and tolerance within which will be included scholars whose principal interest is in theological issues as well as those scholars whose interests lie in relating the insights provided by the Bahá'í teachings to contemporary thought in the arts and sciences.

A similar diversity should characterize the endeavours pursued by Bahá'í scholars, accommodating their interests and skills as well as the needs of the Faith. The course of world events, the development of new trends of thought and the extension of the teaching work all tend to highlight attractive and beneficial areas to which Bahá'í scholars might well direct their attention. Likewise, the expansion of the activities of the Bahá'í International Community in its relationship with United Nations agencies and other international bodies creates attractive opportunities for scholars to make a direct and highly valued contribution to the enhancement of the prestige of the Faith and to its proclamation within an influential and receptive stratum of society. As the Bahá'í 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; Bahá'í scholars have a vital role to play in the defence of the Faith through their contribution to anticipatory measures and their response to defamatory accusations levelled against the Faith.

Thus, there should be room within the scope of Bahá'í scholarship to accommodate not only those who are interested in theological issues and in the historical origins of the Faith, but also those who are interested in relating the Bahá'í Teachings to their field of academic or professional interest, as well as those believers who may lack formal academic qualifications but who have, through their perceptive study of the Teachings, acquired insights which are of interest to others....

The House of Justice wishes to avoid use of the terms "Bahá'í scholarship" and "Bahá'í scholars" in an exclusive sense, which would effectively establish a demarcation between those admitted into this category and those denied entrance to it. It is clear that such terms are relative, and that what is a worthy scholarly endeavour by a Bahá'í, when compared to the activities of those with whom he is in contact, may well be regarded as of vastly lesser significance when measured against the accomplishments of the outstanding scholars which the Faith has produced. The House of Justice seeks the creation of a Bahá'í community in which the members encourage each other, where there is respect for accomplishment, and a common realization that every one is, in his or her own way, seeking to acquire a deeper understanding of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh and to contribute to the advancement of the Faith.

(19 October 1993 to an individual believer) [14]

1.4 Appreciation of Scholarship

From the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh

Respect ye the divines and learned amongst you, they whose conduct accords with their professions, who transgress not the bounds which God hath fixed, whose judgments are in conformity with His behests as revealed in His Book. Know ye that they are the lamps of guidance unto them that are in the heavens and on the earth. They who disregard and neglect the divines and learned that live amongst them —these have truly changed the favour with which God hath favoured them.

("Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh" (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1983), section LXVI) [15]

O people of God! Righteous men of learning who dedicate themselves to the guidance of others and are freed and well guarded from the promptings of a base and covetous nature are, in the sight of Him Who is the Desire of the world, stars of the heaven of true knowledge. It is essential to treat them with deference. They are indeed fountains of soft-flowing water, stars that shine resplendent, fruits of the blessed Tree, exponents of celestial power, and oceans of heavenly wisdom. Happy is he that followeth them. Verily such a soul is numbered in the Book of God, the Lord of the mighty Throne, among those with whom it shall be well.

("Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh Revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas", pp. 96-97) [16]

Beware, O My loved ones, lest ye despise the merits of My learned servants whom God hath graciously chosen to be the exponents of His Name "the Fashioner" amidst mankind. Exert your utmost endeavour that ye may develop such crafts and undertakings that everyone, whether young or old, may benefit therefrom. We are quit of those ignorant ones who fondly imagine that Wisdom is to give vent to one's idle imaginings and to repudiate God, the Lord of all men; even as We hear some of the heedless voicing such assertions today.

("Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh Revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas", pp. 150-151) [17]

From the Writings and Utterances of 'Abdu'l-Bahá

...the religion of God is the promoter of truth, the founder of science and knowledge, it is full of goodwill for learned men; it is the civilizer of mankind, the discoverer of the secrets of nature, and the enlightener of the horizons of the world. Consequently, how can it be said to oppose knowledge? God forbid! Nay, for God, knowledge is the most glorious gift of man and the most noble of human perfections. To oppose knowledge is ignorant, and he who detests knowledge and science is not a man, but rather an animal without intelligence. For knowledge is light, life, felicity, perfection, beauty and the means of approaching the Threshold of Unity. It is the honour and glory of the world of humanity, and the greatest bounty of God. Knowledge is identical with guidance, and ignorance is real error.

("Some Answered Questions" (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1984), p. 137) [18]

There are certain pillars which have been established as the unshakeable supports of the Faith of God. The mightiest of these is learning and the use of the mind, the expansion of consciousness, and insight into the realities of the universe and the hidden mysteries of Almighty God.

To promote knowledge is thus an inescapable duty imposed on every one of the friends of God. It is incumbent upon that Spiritual Assembly, that assemblage of God, to exert every effort to educate the children, so that from 7 infancy they will be trained in Bahá'í conduct and the ways of God, and will, even as young plants, thrive and flourish in the soft-flowing waters that are the counsels and admonitions of the Blessed Beauty.

("Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá" (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1982), section 97) [19]

From a Letter Written by Shoghi Effendi

The responsibilities of the members of the Spiritual Assemblies that are engaged in teaching the Cause of God in Eastern lands have been clearly laid down in the holy Texts....

They further impress upon them the virtue of trustworthiness and godliness, of purity of motive, kindness of heart, and detachment from the fetters of this material world.... They urge them to make detailed inquiry into the various branches of contemporary learning —arts and sciences alike— and to concentrate their attention on serving the general interests of the people; to deepen themselves by attentive study of the sacred Texts, and to apply the divine guidance they contain to the circumstances, needs and conditions of society today; to refrain from entering into the tangled affairs of political parties and to have neither concern for, nor involvement in, the controversies of politicians, the wranglings of theologians or any of the ailing social theories current amongst men.

They finally exhort them to be sincerely obedient, in both thought and word, to the laws duly enacted by the government of the realm, and to distance themselves from the methods, concepts and ill-grounded arguments of extreme traditionalists and modernists alike; to accord honour, veneration and respect to —and endorse the efforts of— exponents of the arts and sciences, and to esteem and revere those who are possessed of extensive knowledge and scholarly erudition; to uphold the right of freedom of conscience; and to abstain from criticizing and disparaging the manners, customs and beliefs of other individuals, peoples and nations.

(30 January 1926 to the Spiritual Assemblies in Iran, translated from the Persian) [20]

2. FUNCTIONS OF BAHÁ'Í SCHOLARSHIP

2.1 Promotion of Human Welfare

From the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh

The Great Being saith: The learned of the day must direct the people to acquire those branches of knowledge which are of use, that both the learned themselves and the generality of mankind may derive benefits therefrom. Such academic pursuits as begin and end in words alone have never been and will never be of any worth. The majority of Persia's learned doctors devote all their lives to the study of a philosophy the ultimate yield of which is nothing but words.

("Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh Revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas", p. 169) [21]

True learning is that which is conducive to the well-being of the world, not to pride and self-conceit, or to tyranny, violence and pillage.

(From a Tablet, translated from the Persian) [22]

From the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá

The primary, the most urgent requirement is the promotion of education. It is inconceivable that any nation should achieve prosperity and success unless this paramount, this fundamental concern is carried forward. The principal reason for the decline and fall of peoples is ignorance. Today the mass of the people are uninformed even as to ordinary affairs, how much less do they grasp the core of the important problems and complex needs of the time.

It is therefore urgent that beneficial articles and books be written, clearly and definitely establishing what the present-day requirements of the people are, and what will conduce to the happiness and advancement of society. These should be published and spread throughout the nation, so that at least the leaders among the people should become, to some degree, awakened, and arise to exert themselves along those lines which will lead to their abiding honour. The publication of high thoughts is the dynamic power in the arteries of life; it is the very soul of the world. Thoughts are boundless sea, and the effects and varying conditions of existence are as the separate forms and individual limits of the waves; not until the sea boils up will the waves rise and scatter their pearls of knowledge on the shore of life....

Public opinion must be directed toward whatever is worthy of this day, and this is impossible except through the use of adequate arguments and the adducing of clear, comprehensive and conclusive proofs. For the helpless masses know nothing of the world, and while there is no doubt that they seek and long for their own happiness, yet ignorance like a heavy veil shuts them away from it....

It is, furthermore, a vital necessity to establish schools.... If necessary, education should even be made compulsory. Until the nerves and arteries of the nation stir into life, every measure that is attempted will prove vain; for the people are as the human body, and determination and the will to struggle are as the soul, and a soulless body does not move.

("The Secret of Divine Civilization", pp. 109-110; pp. 111-112)[23]

From a Letter Written on Behalf of Shoghi Effendi

The news of the co-operation of the Bahá'í young men and women in Montreal, their establishment of a group for study and discussion, the sane and sober expression of their methods as expressed in the programme you had enclosed, and their thoughtful and enthusiastic outlook upon the future, all these have helped to create the liveliest hopes and the deepest satisfaction in the heart of our Guardian. It is indeed with no little pleasure that he welcomes the active co-operation of his young friends in Montreal, and he sincerely trusts that with an adequate study of the proper teachings and their spiritual significance coupled with a sufficient knowledge of the problems and perplexities that the world is beset with, you will be able to render great services to the Cause and therefore to humanity.

(20 March 1929 to an individual believer) [24]

From a Letter of the Universal House of Justice

The further emergence of the Faith from obscurity is reflected in distinctive ways. In learned circles, in reference works and in the media, the Faith is increasingly being referred to as a "principal" or "major" world religion.... The exposure of influential segments of the public to Bahá'í ideas in such areas as peace, the environment, status of women, education and literacy, has induced a response which increasingly calls upon the Bahá'ís to participate with others in a range of projects associated with governments or with non-governmental organizations.

Moreover, such exposure is creating in the public mind the realization that the Faith has answers to current problems and thus the expectation that the Bahá'í community should take a more active part in public affairs....

...Bahá'í projects of social and economic development have greatly multiplied and brought much credit to the community in the examples of the power of group initiative and voluntary consultative action that have been set in numerous places.... Some projects have been so distinguished in their achievements as to be given public notice through the citations and awards of governments and international non-governmental agencies.

(Ridvan 1992 to the Bahá'ís of the World) [25]

2.2 Defence of the Faith

From the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh

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. For whosoever standeth firm and steadfast in this holy, this glorious, and exalted Revelation, such power shall be given him as to enable him to face and withstand all that is in heaven and on earth. Of this God is Himself a witness.

("Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh", section CLIV) [26]

From the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá

The second of these spiritual standards which apply to the possessor of knowledge is that he should be the defender of his faith. It is obvious that these holy words do not refer exclusively to searching out the implications of the Law, observing the forms of worship, avoiding greater and lesser sins, practicing the religious ordinances, and by all these methods, protecting the Faith. They mean rather that the whole population should be protected in every way; that every effort should be exerted to adopt a combination of all possible measures to raise up the Word of God, increase the number of believers, promote the Faith of God and exalt it and make it victorious over other religions.

("The Secret of Divine Civilization", p. 41) [27]

From Letters Written on Behalf of Shoghi Effendi

Shoghi Effendi was delighted to hear of your conversation with Sir How much he hopes to have such scholars obtain a true understanding of the spirit and teaching of the Cause and arise to dissipate that veil of misconceptions that is prejudicing the mind of the scholars in the western world. The Cause is in great need for such competent and spiritually minded men who after a thorough study of the Movement would share with the world the fruit of their labours.

(11 March 1929 to an individual believer) [28]

There is an answer in the teachings for everything; unfortunately the majority of the Bahá'ís, however intensely devoted and sincere they may be, lack for the most part the necessary scholarship and wisdom to reply to and refute the claims and attacks of people with some education and standing.

(25 September 1942 to an individual believer) [29]

2.3 Expansion and Consolidation of the Bahá'í Community

From the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá

Pure souls, such as Mirza Abu'l-Fadl, upon him be the Glory of God, spend their nights and days in demonstrating the truth of the Revelation, by adducing conclusive and brilliant proofs and expanding the verities of the Faith, by lifting the veils, promoting the religion of God and spreading His fragrances.

(From a Tablet, translated from the Persian) [30]

From Letters Written on Behalf of Shoghi Effendi

We had heard through various channels the wonderful way your children had grown to speak about the Cause in public. Shoghi Effendi's hope is that they will, the three of them, become able and devoted speakers on the Cause and subjects akin to it. To do this properly they will need a firm foundation of scientific and literary training which fortunately they are obtaining. It is just as important for the Bahá'í young boys and girls to become properly educated in colleges of high standing as it is to be spiritually developed. The mental as well as the spiritual side of the youth has to be developed before he can serve the Cause efficiently.

(28 November 1926 to an individual believer) [31]

The university training which you are receiving at present will be of immense help to you in your efforts to present the Message in intellectual circles. In these days when people are so sceptical about religion and look with so much contempt towards religious organizations and movements, there seems to be more need than ever for our young Bahá'ís 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.

(5 May 1934 to an individual believer) [32]

Young men and women in the Faith must be deep and thoughtful scholars of its teachings, so that they can teach in a way that will convince people that all the problems facing them have a remedy. They must grasp the Administration, so that they can wisely and efficiently administer the ever-growing affairs of the Cause; and they must exemplify the Bahá'í way of living. All this is not easy—but the Guardian is always encouraged to see the spirit animating such young believers as yourself. He has high hopes of what your generation will accomplish.

(12 May 1944 to an individual believer) [33]

If the Bahá'ís 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 Bahá'í 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 Bahá'ís 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.

(5 July 1949 to an individual believer) [34]

From a Letter Written on Behalf of the Universal House of Justice

The Universal House of Justice ... regards Bahá'í scholarship as of great potential importance for the development and consolidation of the Bahá'í community as it emerges from obscurity....

(3 January 1979 to participants in an academic seminar) [35]

2.4 Contribution to Scholarly Development

From Letters Written on Behalf of Shoghi Effendi

He was very happy to hear from you, and to see with what keen appreciation and interest you are studying the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh. One could truly say that the longer one studies them, the more one finds in them. They are the very essence from which thinkers and scientists and humanitarians of the future will derive inspiration and guidance for their work.

(10 December 1942 to a Bahá'í summer school) [36]

Regarding the advice you requested from him concerning what studies you should specialize in with a view to teaching in the future: He would suggest either History, Economics or Sociology, as these are not only fields in which Bahá'ís take a great interest but also cover subjects which our teachings cast an entirely new light upon. Your knowledge would be of use to the Cause in teaching it in the future, and you could also perhaps introduce the Bahá'í ideas into your lectures as an educator.

(13 March 1944 to an individual believer) [37]

From Letters Written by or on Behalf of the Universal House of Justice

You are already a qualified practitioner in your field, and no doubt you give advice on the basis of what you have learned from study and experience—a whole fabric of concepts about the human mind, its growth, development and proper functioning, which you have learned and evolved without reference to the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh. Now, as a Bahá'í, you

know that what Bahá'u'lláh teaches about the purpose of human life, the nature of the human being and the proper conduct of human lives, is divinely revealed and therefore true. However, it will inevitably take time for you not only to study the Bahá'í teachings so that you clearly understand them, but also to work out how they modify your professional concepts. This is, of course, not an unusual predicament for a scientist. How often in the course of research is a factor discovered which requires a revolution in thinking over a wide field of human endeavour. You must be guided in each case by your own professional knowledge and judgement as illuminated by your growing knowledge of the Bahá'í teachings; undoubtedly you will find that your own understanding of the human problems dealt with in your work will change and develop and you will see new and improved ways of helping the people who come to you. Psychology is still a very young and inexact science, and as the years go by Bahá'í psychologists, who know from the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh the true pattern of human life, will be able to make great strides in the development of this science, and will help profoundly in the alleviation of human suffering.

(6 February 1973, published in "Messages from the Universal House of Justice, 1968-1973" (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1976), pp. 111-112) [38]

As the Bahá'í community grows it will acquire experts in numerous fields —both by Bahá'ís becoming experts and by experts becoming Bahá'ís. 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....

Paralleling this process, Bahá'í institutional life will also be developing, and as it does so the Assemblies will draw increasingly upon scientific and expert knowledge —whether of Bahá'ís or of non-Bahá'ís— to assist in solving the problems of their communities.

In time great Bahá'í institutions of learning, great international and national projects for the betterment of human life will be inaugurated and flourish.

(21 August 1977 on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer) [39]

Indeed, let them [the Bahá'í youth] welcome with confidence the challenges awaiting them. Imbued with this excellence and a corresponding humility, with tenacity and a loving servitude, today's youth must move towards the front ranks of the professions, trades, arts and crafts which are necessary to the further progress of humankind —this to ensure that the spirit of the Cause will cast its illumination on all these important areas of human endeavour. Moreover, while aiming at mastering the unifying concepts and swiftly advancing technologies of this era of communications, they can, indeed they must, also guarantee the transmittal to the future of those skills which will preserve the marvelous, indispensable achievements of the past. The transformation which is to occur in the functioning of society will certainly depend to a great extent on the effectiveness of the preparations the youth make for the world they will inherit.

(8 May 1985 from the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'í Youth of the World) [40]

The House of Justice recognizes that the questions you raise, concerning the offer of newly enrolled professionals to share their views with the Bahá'í community, are of vital and timely importance, especially as the Faith emerges from obscurity and increasing numbers of professionals from all walks of life are attracted to its Teachings. The process of integrating these experts into Bahá'í communities as well-grounded believers and tapping their potential as promoters and supporters of the Cause will require patient and loving guidance by Bahá'í institutions. A great challenge will be to avoid undue disruption of this process of integration by abandoning such persons to the insensitive attitudes still present in communities not yet broadly diverse or accustomed to dealing with all ranks of society.

Scholars and professionals are well accustomed to encountering new facts in the course of their research which require them to adjust previous thinking on various aspects of their discipline. In the case of their deepening in the Teachings of the Faith it naturally takes time for them to study and absorb so many new concepts. They must be assisted to acquire, as quickly as possible, profound knowledge of the Teachings. Gradually this knowledge will shed new light on their previous views. At the same time, Bahá'í communities will need to develop greater tolerance toward ideas that may not coincide with their current understanding, and remain open to new insights....

Newly enrolled professionals and other experts provide a great resource for the development of Bahá'í scholarship. It is hoped that, as they attain a deeper grasp of the Teachings and their significance, they will be able to assist Bahá'í communities in correlating the beliefs of the Faith with the current thoughts and problems of the world. In some instances Bahá'ís of a particular profession have come together in special conferences or organized themselves into an association for this purpose. This also allows them to support one another as Bahá'ís and to take advantage of their professional status to promote the interests of the Faith. Current examples of professional associations of this type are the Bahá'í Justice Society

and the Bahá'í Medical Association, both in the United States. Special encouragement should therefore be given to believers of unusual capacity to consecrate their abilities to the service of the Cause through the unique contribution they can make to this rapidly developing field of Bahá'í endeavour.

(18 April 1989 on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly) [41]

3. GENERAL PRINCIPLES AND GUIDELINES

3.1 Spiritual Foundation

From the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh

Therefore, hath it been said: "Knowledge is a light which God casteth into the heart of whomsoever He willeth." It is this kind of knowledge which is and hath ever been praiseworthy, and not the limited knowledge that hath sprung forth from veiled and obscured minds. This limited knowledge they even stealthily borrow one from the other, and vainly pride themselves therein!

("The Kitáb-i-Íqán", p. 46) [42]

We have decreed, O people, that the highest and last end of all learning be the recognition of Him Who is the Object of all knowledge; and yet, behold how ye have allowed your learning to shut you out, as by a veil, from Him Who is the Dayspring of this Light, through Whom every hidden thing hath been revealed.

(The Kitáb-i-Aqdas, paragraph 102) [43]

From the Writings and Utterances of 'Abdu'l-Bahá

Although to acquire the sciences and arts is the greatest glory of mankind, this is so only on condition that man's river floweth into the mighty Sea, and draweth from God's ancient source His inspiration. When this cometh to pass, then every teacher is as a shoreless ocean, every pupil a prodigal fountain of knowledge. If, then, the pursuit of knowledge leadeth to the beauty of Him Who is the object of all knowledge, how excellent that goal; but if not, a mere drop will perhaps shut a man off from flooding grace, for with learning cometh arrogance and pride, and it bringeth on error and indifference to God.

The sciences of today are bridges to reality; if then they lead not to reality, naught remains but fruitless illusion. By the one true God! If learning be not a means of access to Him, the Most Manifest, it is nothing but evident loss.

("Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá", section 72) [44]

And every branch of learning, conjoined with the love of God, is approved and worthy of praise; but bereft of His love, learning is barren —indeed, it bringeth on madness. Every kind of knowledge, every science, is as a tree: if the fruit of it be the love of God, then is it a blessed tree, but if not, that tree is but dried-up wood, and shall only feed the fire.

("Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá", section 154) [45]

Scientific knowledge is the highest attainment upon the human plane, for science is the discoverer of realities. It is of two kinds: material and spiritual. Material science is the investigation of natural phenomena; divine science is the discovery and realization of spiritual verities. The world of humanity must acquire both. A bird has two wings; it cannot fly with one. Material and spiritual science are the two wings of human uplift and attainment. Both are necessary —one the natural, the other supernatural; one material, the other divine. By the divine we mean the discovery of the mysteries of God, the comprehension of spiritual realities, the wisdom of God, inner significances of the heavenly religions and foundation of the law.

("The Promulgation of Universal Peace", p. 138) [46]

From a Letter Written on Behalf of Shoghi Effendi

Between the truth which comes from God through His Prophets, and the glimmerings, often misunderstood and misinterpreted, of truth which come from the philosophers and thinkers, there is an immense difference. We must never, under any circumstances, confuse the two.

Bahá'u'lláh has said that learning can be the veil between the soul of man and the eternal truth; in other words, between man and the knowledge of God. We have seen that many people who become very advanced in the study of modern physical sciences are led to deny God, and to deny His Prophets. That does not mean that God and the Prophets have not existed and do not exist. It only means that knowledge has become a veil between their hearts and the light of God.

(22 April 1954 to an individual believer) [47]

From Letters Written on Behalf of the Universal House of Justice

Just as there is a fundamental difference between divine Revelation itself and the understanding that believers have of it, so also there is a basic distinction between scientific fact and reasoning on the one hand and the conclusions or theories of scientists on the other. There is, and can be, no conflict between true religion and true science: true religion is revealed by God, while it is through true science that the mind of man "discovers the realities of things and becomes cognizant of their peculiarities and effects, and of the qualities and properties of beings" and "comprehendeth the abstract by the aid of the concrete". However, whenever a statement is made through the lens of human understanding it is thereby limited, for human understanding is limited; and where there is limitation there is the possibility of error; and where there is error, conflicts can arise. For example, at the present time many people are convinced that it is unscientific to believe in God, but, as human enlightenment progresses, the scientists and philosophers of the future will not be, in the words of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, "deniers of the Prophets, ignorant of spiritual susceptibilities, deprived of the heavenly bounties and without belief in the supernatural".

(26 December 1975 to an individual believer) [48]

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 Bahá'í Faith ... enjoins upon its followers the primary duty of an unfettered search after truth..." Bahá'ís 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.

(7 October 1980 to an individual believer) [49]

The House of Justice suggests that the issues raised in your letter might best be considered in light of the statements in the Bahá'í Writings which disclose the relationship between the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh and the knowledge which is acquired as a result of scholarly endeavours. Bahá'u'lláh asserts that:

Unveiled and unconcealed, this Wronged One hath, at all times, proclaimed before the face of all the peoples of the world that which will serve as the key for unlocking the doors of sciences, of arts, of knowledge, of well-being, of prosperity and wealth...

It is evident that the Bahá'í Writings illuminate all areas of human endeavour and all academic disciplines. Those who have been privileged to recognize the station of Bahá'u'lláh have the bounty of access to a Revelation which casts light upon all aspects of thought and inquiry, and are enjoined to use the understanding which they obtain from their immersion in the Holy Writings to advance the interests of the Faith.

Those believers with the capacity and opportunity to do so have repeatedly been encouraged in their pursuit of academic studies by which they are not only equipped to render much needed services to the Faith, but are also provided with the means to acquire a profound insight into the meaning and the implications of the Bahá'í Teachings. They discover also that the perceptions gained from a deeper understanding of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh clarify the subjects of their academic inquiry.

It is useful to review a number of statements written by Shoghi Effendi on this subject. To a believer who had completed advanced academic studies in a subject related to the Teachings the Guardian stated, in a letter written on his behalf:

It is hoped that all the Bahá'í students will follow the noble example you have set before them and will, henceforth, be led to investigate and analyse the principles of the Faith and to correlate them with the modern aspects of philosophy and science. Every intelligent and thoughtful young Bahá'í should always approach the Cause in this way, for therein lies the very essence of the principle of independent investigation of truth.

When he was informed of the enrolment of a scientist in the Faith, the response set out in the letter written on his behalf was:

We need very much the sound, sane, element of thinking which a scientifically trained mind has to offer. When such intellectual powers are linked to deep faith a tremendous teaching potential is created....

His secretary wrote, on another occasion, that:

Shoghi Effendi has for years urged the Bahá'ís (who asked his advice, and in general also) to study history, economics, sociology, etc., in order to be au courant with all the progressive movements and thoughts being put forth today, and so that they could correlate these to the Bahá'í teachings. What he wants the Bahá'ís to do is to study more, not to study less. The more general knowledge, scientific and otherwise, they possess, the better. Likewise he is constantly urging them to really study the Bahá'í teachings more deeply.

In the simultaneous endeavour to pursue their studies and to delve deeply into the Bahá'í Teachings, believers are enjoined to maintain a keen awareness that the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh is the standard of truth against which all other views and conclusions are to be measured. They are urged to be modest about their accomplishments, and to bear in mind always the statement of Bahá'u'lláh that:

The heart must needs therefore be cleansed from the idle sayings of men, and sanctified from every earthly affection, so that it may discover the hidden meaning of divine inspiration, and become the treasury of the mysteries of divine knowledge.

(19 October 1993 to an individual believer) [50]

3.2 "Useful" Sciences

From the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh

It is permissible to study sciences and arts, but such sciences as are useful and would redound to the progress and advancement of the people. Thus hath it been decreed by Him Who is the Ordainer, the All-Wise.

("Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh Revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas", p. 26) [51]

From the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá

The individual should, prior to engaging in the study of any subject, ask himself what its uses are and what fruit and result will derive from it. If it is a useful branch of knowledge, that is, if society will gain important benefits from it, then he should certainly pursue it with all his heart. If not, if it consists in empty, profitless debates and in a vain concatenation of imaginings that lead to no result except acrimony, why devote one's life to such useless hairsplittings and disputes.

("The Secret of Divine Civilization", p. 106) [52]

From Letters Written on Behalf of Shoghi Effendi

The choice you have made for your course of study is surely most interesting and will be of inestimable service in your work for the Cause. Even though every branch of study will have some interest for a Bahá'í who is looking how the spirit of the Cause and of the new age is awakening the minds, yet a study of the condition of society will better show us the needs of the world, hence the part that the Teachings can play in satisfying them.

(5 January 1930 to an individual believer) [53]

Philosophy, as you will study it and later teach it, is certainly not one of the sciences that begins and ends in words. Fruitless excursions into metaphysical hair-splittings is meant, not a sound branch of learning like philosophy....

As regards your own studies: he would advise you not to devote too much of your time to the abstract side of philosophy, but rather to approach it from a more historical angle. As to correlating philosophy with the Bahá'í teachings: this is a tremendous work which scholars in the future can undertake. We must remember that not only are all the teachings not yet translated into English, but they are not even all collected yet. Many important Tablets may still come to light which are at present owned privately.

(15 February 1947 to an individual believer) [54]

From a Letter Written on Behalf of the Universal House of Justice

In response to your letter of ... in which you seek guidance on the question of chosen professions vis-a-vis the statement of Bahá'u'lláh concerning sciences which begin in words and end in mere words and the pursuit of study in pure mathematics and the classics, the Universal House of Justice has instructed us to share with you an excerpt from a letter to an individual believer written in 1947 on behalf of the beloved Guardian: Philosophy, as you will study it and later teach it,

is certainly not one of the sciences that begins and ends in words. Fruitless excursions into metaphysical hair- splittings is meant, not a sound branch of learning like philosophy.

In these words the Guardian has enunciated the general principle. Turning to the specific instance of the science of pure mathematics, the reference in the Eleventh Glad Tidings (Bahá'í World Faith, p. 195) regarding such sciences as are profitable, which lead and conduce to the elevation of man-kind,[2] must be placed in the context of the meaning of sciences as employed by the Manifestation. Bahá'u'lláh's comment about sciences which begin and end in mere words does not apply to the systematic study of natural phenomena in order to discover the laws of order in the physical universe, an order which mathematics seeks to explore. Pure mathematics frequently has application in practical matters, such as, for example, group theory or the study of fundamental particles.

As for classical studies, we are to share with you the following excerpt from a letter dated 30 November 1932 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual who had asked a question about the skills of story writing and whether such occupation would be classed as those sciences that begin and end in words".

What Bahá'u'lláh meant primarily with "sciences that begin and end in words" are those theological treatises and commentaries that encumber the human mind rather than help it to attain the truth. The students would devote their life to their study but still attain no where.

Bahá'u'lláh surely never meant to include story-writing under such a category; and shorthand and typewriting are both most useful talents, very necessary in our present social and economic life.

What you could do, and should do, is to use your stories to become a source of inspiration and guidance for those who read them. With such a means at your disposal you can spread the spirit and teachings of the Cause; you can show the evils that exist in society, as well as the way they can be remedied. If you possess a real talent in writing you should consider it as given by God and exert your efforts to use it for the betterment of society.

The House of Justice hopes that you will be able to satisfy your friends on these matters and encourage them to prepare for their Bahá'í service and be able to contribute to the welfare of humanity.

(24 May 1988 to an individual believer) [55]

3.3 Attitudes of the Scholar

From the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh

Amongst the people is he whose learning hath made him proud, and who hath been debarred thereby from recognizing My Name, the Self-Subsisting; who, when he heareth the tread of sandals following behind him, waxeth greater in his own esteem than Nimrod. Say: O rejected one! Where now is his abode? By God, it is the nethermost fire. Say: O concourse of divines! Hear ye not the shrill voice of My Most Exalted Pen? See ye not this Sun that shineth in refulgent splendour above the All-Glorious Horizon? For how long will ye worship the idols of your evil passions? Forsake your vain imaginings, and turn yourselves unto God, your Everlasting Lord.

(The Kitáb-i-Aqdas, paragraph 41) [56]

Show forbearance and benevolence and love to one another. Should any one among you be incapable of grasping a certain truth, or be striving to comprehend it, show forth, when conversing with him, a spirit of extreme kindness and good-will. Help him to see and recognize the truth, without esteeming yourself to be, in the least, superior to him, or to be possessed of greater endowments.

("Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh", section V) [57]

Beware lest ye contend with any one, nay, strive to make him aware of the truth with kindly manner and most convincing exhortation. If your hearer respond, he will have responded to his own behoof, and if not, turn ye away from him, and set your faces towards God's sacred Court, the seat of resplendent holiness.

Dispute not with any one concerning the things of this world and its affairs, for God hath abandoned them to such as have set their affection upon them.

("Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh", section CXXXVIII)[58]

[2 Cf. "Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh Revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas", p. 26.]

Warn, O Salman, the beloved of the one true God, not to view with too critical an eye the sayings and writings of men. Let them rather approach such sayings and writings in a spirit of open-mindedness and loving sympathy. Those men, however, who, in this Day, have been led to assail, in their inflammatory writings, the tenets of the Cause of God, are to be treated differently. It is incumbent upon all men, each according to his ability, to refute the arguments of those that have attacked the Faith of God. Thus hath it been decreed by Him Who is the All-Powerful, the Almighty.

("Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh", section CLIV) [59]

From the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá

Good behaviour and high moral character must come first, for unless the character be trained, acquiring knowledge will only prove injurious. Knowledge is praiseworthy when it is coupled with ethical conduct and virtuous character; otherwise it is a deadly poison, a frightful danger. A physician of evil character, and who betrayeth his trust, can bring on death, and become the source of numerous infirmities and diseases.

(From a Tablet, translated from the Persian) [60]

From Letters Written by or on Behalf of the Universal House of Justice

...the believers must recognize the importance of intellectual honesty and humility. In past dispensations many errors arose because the believers in God's Revelation were over-anxious to encompass the Divine Message within the framework of their limited understanding, to define doctrines where definition was beyond their power, to explain mysteries which only the wisdom and experience of a later age would make comprehensible, to argue that something was true because it appeared desirable and necessary. Such compromises with essential truth, such intellectual pride, we must scrupulously avoid.

(27 May 1966, published in "Wellspring of Guidance: Messages 1963-1968" (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1976), pp. 87-88) [61]

When studying at school or university Bahá'í youth will often find themselves in the unusual and slightly embarrassing position of having a more profound insight into a subject than their instructors. The Teachings of Bahá'u'lláh throw light on so many aspects of human life and knowledge that a Bahá'í must learn, earlier than most, to weigh the information that is given to him rather than to accept it blindly. A Bahá'í has the advantage of the divine Revelation for this Age, which shines like a searchlight on so many problems that baffle modern thinkers; he must therefore develop the ability to learn everything from those around him, showing proper humility before his teachers, but always relating what he hears to the Bahá'í teachings, for they will enable him to sort out the gold from the dross of human error.

(10 June 1966 to Bahá'í Youth in every Land, published in "Wellspring of Guidance: Messages 1963-1968", pp. 95-96) [62]

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 Bahá'ís 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.... [I]t cannot be denied that some of the statements that have been made recently in the name of Bahá'í scholarship by certain individuals have betrayed an intemperance, and a lack of appreciation of many of the fundamental teachings of the Faith, that would understandably arouse alarm in the breasts of the most tolerant of believers.

(18 July 1979 on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer) [63]

The House of Justice feels that Bahá'í scholars must beware of the temptations of intellectual pride. 'Abdu'l-Bahá 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 Bahá'í who rises to eminence in academic circles will be exposed to the powerful influence of such thinking. One of the problems of modern times is the degree to which the different disciplines have become specialized and isolated from one another. Thinkers are now faced with a challenge to achieve a synthesis, or at least a coherent correlation, of the vast amount of knowledge that has been acquired during the past century. The Bahá'ís must be aware of this factor and of the moderation and all-embracing nature of this Revelation....

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 Bahá'í scholars. The

great advances in knowledge and understanding in the vital field of Bahá'í 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 its teachings.

(23 March 1983 on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer) [64]

3.4 Methodological Issues

Weigh not the Book of God with such standards and sciences as are current amongst you, for the Book itself is the unerring Balance established amongst men. In this most perfect Balance whatsoever the peoples and kindreds of the earth possess must be weighed, while the measure of its weight should be tested according to its own standard, did ye but know it.

(The Kitáb-i-Aqdas, paragraph 99) [65]

When the eyes of the people of the East were captivated by the arts and wonders of the West, they roved distraught in the wilderness of material causes, oblivious of the One Who is the Causer of Causes, and the Sustainer thereof, while such men as were the source and the wellspring of Wisdom never denied the moving Impulse behind these causes, nor the Creator or the Origin thereof. Thy Lord knoweth, yet most of the people know not.

(“Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh Revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas”, p. 144) [66]

From the Utterances of 'Abdu'l-Bahá

There are only four accepted methods of comprehension—that is to say, the realities of things are understood by these four methods.

The first method is by the senses—that is to say, all that the eye, the ear, the taste, the smell, the touch perceive is understood by this method. Today this method is considered the most perfect by all the European philosophers: they say that the principal method of gaining knowledge is through the senses; they consider it supreme, although it is imperfect, for it commits errors. For example, the greatest of the senses is the power of sight.... The sight believes the earth to be motionless and sees the sun in motion, and in many similar cases it makes mistakes. Therefore, we cannot trust it.

The second is the method of reason, which was that of the ancient philosophers, the pillars of wisdom; this is the method of the understanding. They proved things by reason and hold firmly to logical proofs; all their arguments are arguments of reason. Notwithstanding this, they differed greatly, and their opinions were contradictory. They even changed their views—that is to say, during twenty years they would prove the existence of a thing by logical arguments, and afterward they would deny it by logical arguments—so much so that Plato at first logically proved the immobility of the earth and the movement of the sun; later by logical arguments he proved that the sun was the stationary center, and that the earth was moving.... Therefore, it is evident that the method of reason is not perfect, for the differences of the ancient philosophers, the want of stability and the variations of their opinions, prove this. For if it were perfect, all ought to be united in their ideas and agreed in their opinions.

The third method of understanding is by tradition—that is, through the text of the Holy Scriptures—for people say, "In the Old and New Testaments, God spoke thus." This method equally is not perfect, because the traditions are understood by the reason. As the reason itself is liable to err, how can it be said that in interpreting the meaning of the traditions it will not err, for it is possible for it to make mistakes, and certainty cannot be attained. This is the method of the religious leaders; whatever they understand and comprehend from the text of the books is that which their reason understands from the text, and not necessarily the real truth; for the reason is like a balance, and the meanings contained in the text of the Holy Books are like the thing which is weighed. If the balance is untrue, how can the weight be ascertained?

Know then: that which is in the hands of people, that which they believe, is liable to error. For, in proving or disproving a thing, if a proof is brought forward which is taken from the evidence of our senses, this method, as has become evident, is not perfect; if the proofs are intellectual, the same is true; or if they are traditional, such proofs also are not perfect. Therefore, there is no standard in the hands of people upon which we can rely.

But the bounty of the Holy Spirit gives the true method of comprehension which is infallible and indubitable. This is through the help of the Holy Spirit which comes to man, and this is the condition in which certainty can alone be attained.

(“Some Answered Questions”, pp. 297-299) [67]

From Letters Written on Behalf of the Universal House of Justice

The concern was expressed that many of the friends, holding that there is only one "correct" view of the history and teachings of the Faith, react critically to unfamiliar views. This has already been covered in statements made by the Universal House of Justice itself, for example that on pages 88-89 of "Wellspring of Guidance". As you point out in your letter, divine Revelation is infallible and proceeds from an all-encompassing knowledge of the Truth, but when individual Bahá'ís attempt to apply Sacred Texts to any specific problem or situation they do so using their own minds which are of limited understanding. Thus, just as people can differ from one another in their use of reason in making deductions from available evidence, so they can also differ in their understanding and application of a passage of divine Revelation. The Bahá'í principle of the harmony between science and religion requires, as you say, that a Bahá'í scholar must use his intelligence to arrive at a solution of a specific problem if there is an apparent conflict between a Sacred Text and other evidence; and also he must accept the fact that some problems may defy his comprehension....

By conveying the comments of the Research Department on the ... Seminar [3] the House of Justice did not intend to imply that there was only one valid methodology for Bahá'í historians to follow. It merely wished to alert Bahá'í scholars to the dangers that are inherent in the paths that some of them are following at the present time. Historical research is largely a matter of evaluating evidence and deducing probabilities. Historical evidence, moreover, is always fragmentary, and may also be accidentally erroneous or even intentionally fabricated. The House of Justice realizes that you are fully aware of this, but it stresses the point because it does not see how a Bahá'í historian can in all honesty claim to be a faithful believer on the one hand and, on the other, challenge in his writings the veracity and honour of the Central Figures of the Faith or of its Guardian.

The fact that the Faith, as the Guardian states, "enjoins upon its followers the primary duty of an unfettered search after truth", should reassure any aspiring Bahá'í historian that there can be no question of any requirement to distort history in the so-called "interests" of the Faith. On the contrary, the combination of profound faith and freedom of thought is one of the great strengths of the Bahá'í religion. It does, however, place a great responsibility upon Bahá'í historians to put forward their views and conclusions with moderation and due humility. In this connection one of the Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh states:

Thou hast written that one of the friends hath composed a treatise. This was mentioned in the Holy Presence, and this is what was revealed in response: Great care should be exercised that whatever is written in these days doth not cause dissension, and invite the objection of the people. Whatever the friends of the one true God say in these days is listened to by the people of the world. It hath been revealed in the Lawh-i-Hikmat: "The unbelievers have inclined their ears towards Us in order to hear that which might enable them to cavil against God, the Help in Peril, the Self-Subsisting." Whatever is written should not transgress the bounds of tact and wisdom, and in the words used there should lie hid the property of milk, so that the children of the world may be nurtured therewith, and attain maturity. We have said in the past that one word hath the influence of spring and causeth hearts to become fresh and verdant, while another is like unto blight which causeth the blossoms and flowers to wither. God grant that authors among the friends will write in such a way as would be acceptable to fair-minded souls, and not lead to cavilling by the people.

(18 July 1979 to an individual believer) [68]

The House of Justice had hoped that the publication of the statement [4] would stimulate discussion among Bahá'í scholars and encourage them to examine more profoundly all aspects of their work, and the effect it has upon both Bahá'í and non-Bahá'í audiences. The aim was not to instruct scholars to abandon any specific methodology but to warn them of the dangers of taking for granted the a priori assumptions of modern non-Bahá'í scholars and of allowing their thinking and their understanding of the Faith to be limited by criteria which they themselves, as Bahá'ís, would know to be in error. It was also the hope of the House of Justice that Bahá'í scholars would realize the significance of the manner in which they express themselves, and that they would guard against use of the proud and scornful language with which some had been publicly referring to their fellow believers who, nevertheless, were devotedly trying to serve the Faith of God.

(8 October 1980 to an individual believer) [69]

[3 "The Challenge and Promise of Bahá'í Scholarship", prepared by the Research Department. As published in "The Bahá'í World" (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1981), vol. XVII, pp. 195-196, this statement was inadvertently attributed to the Universal House of Justice.]

[4 Ibid.]

From your letter 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-Bahá Himself used such a method. The danger Bahá'í 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 Bahá'í scholars should guard against this. In a letter to a National Spiritual Assembly dated 21 July 1968, the House of Justice wrote:

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 Bahá'í 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.

(7 June 1983 to an individual believer) [70]

The principal concern of the House of Justice is over a methodological bias and discordant tone which seem to inform the work of certain of the authors. The impression given is that, in attempting to achieve what they understand to be academic objectivity, they have inadvertently cast the Faith into a mould which is essentially foreign to its nature, taking no account of the spiritual forces which Bahá'ís see as its foundation. Presumably the justification offered for this approach would be that most scholars of comparative religion are essentially concerned with discernable phenomena, observable events and practical affairs and are used to treating their subject from a western, if not a Christian, viewpoint. This approach, although understandable, is quite impossible for a Bahá'í, for it ignores the fact that our world-view includes the spiritual dimension as an indispensable component for consistency and coherence, and it does not beseem a Bahá'í to write ... about his Faith as if he looked upon it from the norm of humanism or materialism.

In other words, we are presented in such articles with the spectacle of Bahá'ís trying to write as if they were non-Bahá'ís. This leads to these authors' drawing conclusions and making implications which are in conflict with Bahá'í teachings and with the reality of the Faith. A good Bahá'í author, when writing for such a publication, should be fully capable of adopting a calmly neutral and expository tone, without falling into the trap of distorting the picture by adopting what is, in essence, a materialistic and localized stance.

(4 October 1994 to a National Spiritual Assembly) [71]

3.5 The Covenant

From Letters Written by or on Behalf of Shoghi Effendi

Concerning the course of study you may follow:.... The Cause is such that we can serve it no matter what our profession may be. The only necessity is that we be spiritually minded and not be guided by purely material considerations. We should also not let our studies detain us from deepening our knowledge of the literature of the Cause.

(9 November 1931 on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer) [72]

In their efforts to achieve this purpose they must study for themselves, conscientiously and painstakingly, the literature of their Faith, delve into its teachings, assimilate its laws and principles, ponder its admonitions, tenets and purposes, commit to memory certain of its exhortations and prayers, master the essentials of its administration, and keep abreast of its current affairs and latest developments. They must strive to obtain, from sources that are authoritative and unbiased, a sound knowledge of the history and tenets of Islam—the source and background of their Faith—and approach reverently and with a mind purged from preconceived ideas the study of the Qur'án which, apart from the sacred scriptures of the Bábí and Bahá'í Revelations, constitutes the only Book which can be regarded as an absolutely authenticated Repository of the Word of God. They must devote special attention to the investigation of those institutions and circumstances that are directly connected with the origin and birth of their Faith, with the station claimed by its Forerunner, and with the laws revealed by its Author.

(25 December 1938 by Shoghi Effendi to the Bahá'ís of the West, published in "The Advent of Divine Justice" (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1990), p. 49) [73]

The Guardian feels that a sound knowledge of history, including religious history, and also of social and economic subjects, is of great help in teaching the Cause to intelligent people; as to what subjects within the Faith you should concentrate on he feels that the young Bahá'ís should gain a mastery of such books as the "Gleanings", "The Dawn-Breakers", "God Passes By", the "Íqán", "Some Answered Questions" and the more important Tablets. All aspects of the Faith should be deeply studied—and ... they need to know more about the Administration.

(4 May 1946 on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer) [74]

It seems what we need now is a more profound and coordinated Bahá'í scholarship in 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 Bahá'u'lláh 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!

(3 July 1949 on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer) [75]

He was very pleased to hear you do a lot of lecturing for the Cause; this is a very important field of service and one you should devote as much time to as possible. The public must hear of the Faith, and new ways and means must be devised to bring it to their attention. He also urges you to study the teachings themselves more deeply. Bahá'í scholarship is needed really more than worldly scholarship, for one is spiritual, the other more or less transient. There is a real lack in the Cause of people who know the teachings thoroughly, especially their deeper truths, and who can consequently teach the souls properly and lay a permanent foundation, one that tests and trials will not shake down.

(27 August 1951 on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer) [76]

From Communications of the Universal House of Justice

In the field of Bahá'í scholarship we feel that it is most important not to stifle the development of Bahá'í scholars by an attitude of censorship or undue criticism. We believe that both the International Teaching Centre and the Boards of Counsellors can render valuable services in this area by encouraging budding scholars and by promoting within the Bahá'í 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 Bahá'u'lláh.

(10 February 1981 memorandum from the Universal House of Justice to the International Teaching Centre) [77]

There can be no doubt that the progress of the Cause from this time onward will be characterized by an ever-increasing relationship to the agencies, activities, institutions and leading individuals of the non-Bahá'í world. We shall acquire greater stature at the United Nations, become better known in the deliberations of governments, a familiar figure to the media, a subject of interest to academics, and inevitably the envy of failing establishments. Our preparation for and response to this situation must be a continual deepening of our faith, an unwavering adherence to its principles of abstention from partisan politics and freedom from prejudices, and above all an increasing understanding of its fundamental verities and relevance to the modern world.

(Ridvan 1984 to the Bahá'ís of the World) [78]