

THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE

DEPARTMENT OF THE SECRETARIAT

3 January 1979

To the Participants in the Bahá'í Studies Seminar held in Cambridge on 30 September and 1 October 1978

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

The Universal House of Justice has read with great interest the report of your seminar. It regards Bahá'í scholarship as of great potential importance for the development and consolidation of the Bahá'í community as it emerges from obscurity. It noted that there are a number of problems with which you have been grappling, and while it feels that it should, in general, leave the working out of solutions to Bahá'í scholars themselves, the House of Justice has the impression that it would be helpful to provide you, at this relatively early stage of the development of Bahá'í scholarship, with a few thoughts on matters raised during your seminar. Reports of your seminar were therefore referred to the Research Department, and the Universal House of Justice commends to your study the enclosed memorandum which that Department has prepared.

The House of Justice also urges you not to feel constrained in any way in consulting it about problems, whether theoretical or practical, that you meet in your work. It has noted, for example, the difficulties presented by the current temporary requirement for the review of publications, and in this connection it asks us to inform you that it has already established the policy that doctoral theses do not have to be reviewed unless there is a proposal to publish them in larger quantities than is required by the examining body.

You are still in the early stages of a very challenging and promising development in the life of the Bahá'í community, and the Universal House of Justice is eager to foster and assist your work in whatever ways it can. We are to assure you of its prayers in the Sacred Shrines on behalf of you all and of the progress of Bahá'í scholarship.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

The Bahá'í Studies Seminar on Ethics and Methodology
Held in Cambridge on 30 September and 1 October 1978
Comments by the Research Department at the World Center

This seminar seems to have provided a very valuable forum for the discussion of a number of aspects of Bahá'í scholarship, and the airing of certain problems which have been worrying some of the friends in relationship to their work and to their fellow believers. We believe that many of the problems arise from an attempt by some Bahá'í scholars to make use of methodologies devised by non-Bahá'ís without thinking through the implications of such a course and without working out a methodology which would be in consonance with the spirit of the Faith. The seminar itself may well prove to be an initial step in such a working out. The following remarks are intended merely to draw attention to certain aspects which we believe can help to advance this process.

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, we feel, be regarded with suspicion by Bahá'í scholars in every field. The principle of the harmony of science and religion means not only that religious teachings should be studied with the light of reason and evidence as well as of faith and inspiration, but also that everything in this creation, all aspects of human life and knowledge, should be studied in the light of revelation as well as in that 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.

It has, for example, 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 who has studied the Teachings of Bahá'u'lláh, who has accepted His claim to be the Manifestation of God for this Age, and who has seen His Teachings at work in his daily life, 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, through this faith in, this “conscious knowledge” of, the reality of divine Revelation, can distinguish, for instance, between Christianity, which is the divine message given by Jesus of Nazareth, and the development of Christendom, which is the history of what men did with that message in subsequent centuries, a distinction which has become blurred if not entirely obscured in current Christian theology. A Bahá'í scholar conscious of this distinction 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. The Bahá'í Faith is the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh: His Own Words as interpreted by 'Abdu'l-Bahá and the Guardian. It is a revelation of such staggering magnitude that no Bahá'í at this early stage in Bahá'í history can rightly claim to have more than a partial and imperfect understanding of it. 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 growth of that community's understanding of the Bahá'í Revelation.

It has been suggested that the words of Bahá'u'lláh that a true seeker should “so cleanse his heart that no remnant of either love or hate may linger therein, lest that love blindly incline him to error, or that hate repel him away from the truth,” support the viewpoint of methodological agnosticism. But we believe that on deeper reflection it will be recognized that love and hate are emotional attachments or repulsions that can irrationally influence the seeker; they are not aspects of the truth itself. Moreover, the whole passage concerns taking “the step of search in the path leading to the knowledge of the Ancient of Days” and is summarized by Bahá'u'lláh in the words: “Our purpose in revealing these convincing and weighty utterances is to impress upon the seeker that he should regard all else beside God as transient, and count all things save Him, Who is the Object of all adoration, as utter nothingness.” It is in this context that He says, near the beginning of the passage, that the seeker must, “before all else, cleanse and purify his heart ... from the obscuring dust of all acquired knowledge, and the allusions of the embodiments of satanic fancy.” It is similar, we think, to Bahá'u'lláh's injunction to look upon the Manifestation with His Own eyes. 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.

Undoubtedly the fact that Bahá'í scholars of the history and teachings of the Faith believe in the Faith that they are studying will be a grave flaw in the eyes of many non-Bahá'í academics, whose own dogmatic materialism 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 endeavor.

If Bahá'í scholars will try to avoid this snare of allowing a divorce between their faith and their reason, we are sure that they will also avoid many of the occasions for tension arising between themselves and their fellow believers.

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 utter distortion of truth, and in all cases to some degree of imbalance and inaccuracy. 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. All men, not scholars alone, 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 behavior 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 honor, and to educate their fellowmen, giving milk to babes and meat to those who are stronger.

Scholarship has a high station in the Bahá'í teachings, and Bahá'í scholars have a great responsibility. We believe that they would do well to concentrate upon the ascertainment of truth—of a fuller understanding of the subject of their scholarship, whatever its field—not upon exposing and attacking the errors of others, whether they be of non-Bahá'í or of their fellow believers. Inevitably the demonstration of truth exposes the falsity of error, but the emphasis and motive are important. We refer to these words of Bahá'u'lláh:

Consort with all men, O people of Bahá, in a spirit of friendliness and fellowship. 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 fulfill its purpose, your object is attained. If any one should refuse it, leave him unto himself, and beseech God to guide him. Beware lest ye deal unkindly with him. A kindly tongue is the lodestone of the hearts of men. It is the bread of the spirit, it clotheth the words with meaning, it is the fountain of the light of wisdom and understanding....

(Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh CXXXII)

and again:

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 goodwill. 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 V)

In our view there are two particular dangers to which Bahá'í scholars are exposed, and which they share with those believers who rise to eminent positions in the administration of the Cause. One danger is faced by only a few: those whose work requires them to read the writings of Covenant-breakers. They have to remember that they are by no means immune to the spiritual poison that such works distill, and that they must approach this aspect of their work with great caution, alert to the danger that it presents. The second danger, which may well be as insidious, is that of spiritual pride and arrogance. Bahá'í scholars, especially those who are scholars in the teachings and history of the Faith itself, would be well advised to remember that scholars have often been most wrong when they have been most certain that they were right. The virtues of moderation, humility and humor in regard to one's own work and ideas are a potent protection against this danger.

We feel that by following such avenues of approach as those described in this memorandum Bahá'í scholars will find that many of the "fears, doubts and anxieties" which were aired at the seminar will be dispelled.