

Scholarship and the Baha'i Institutions, Comments on

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Robert Stockman

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My comments on the relationship between ‘scholars’ and the Institutions fall in four separate categories, rather than following a single theme.

1. Scholarship is a useful term, but scholar is not. Scholarship is a process of producing a body of knowledge about a subject, bit by bit, through research, writing, publication, and debate over the results. It is a term that is understood widely, and the process is to some extent familiar. It is something that professionals can contribute to particularly well, but others can as well, especially if they can find a specialized aspect of the process. But the word scholar unfortunately is not parallel to the word scholarship; in other words, scholar does not mean ‘someone who contributes to scholarship’. Instead, it has come to carry two different contradictory meanings in the Bahá’í community, at least in North America. From a popular point of view, scholar connotes a brain, someone with great knowledge and training; someone different from everyone else. Some of the ‘scholars’ have enjoyed the sense of specialness this has produced. On the other hand, Shoghi Effendi has defined the term this way: ‘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’. This definition by Shoghi Effendi really includes any deepened Bahá’í, and by extension can include just about all Bahá’ís. And there is a long history of abuse of this definition, using it to mean that everyone is a Bahá’í scholar. And of course, if everyone is a Bahá’í scholar, one could just as easily say that no one is a Bahá’í scholar. So I, personally, have all but abandoned the word, preferring easily definable and clear terms, such as Bahá’í researcher, Bahá’í writer, Bahá’í author, or Bahá’í academic, at least until a clear and useful definition of the word comes to be widely understood.

2. The relationship between scholarship and faith (and by extension, with the Bahá'í institutions) is analogous to the relationship between science and religion. This does not seem like particularly profound observation until one asks what the relationship between science and religion really is. The answer, I think, is that the harmony between the two is an ideal state; in other words, in the realm of ideas, we know that truth is one, and therefore scientific and religious truth cannot contradict. But we live in the real world, not the world of ideas, and in the real world contradictions between the two are often apparent. Bahá'ís can react to the hint of contradiction between science and religion in various ways. I think the predominant reaction is to pretend the contradiction does not exist and that harmony reigns. But this reaction, I would contend, is contrary to the spirit of investigation of truth; furthermore, it demonstrates lack of faith. Instead, I would argue that in the real world, belief in the harmony of science and religion is to assert faith in a process that will eventually lead to clarity of understanding of both and harmony between them. In faith, we must leap right into the contradictions, embrace them, rigorously examine them, and gradually - maybe slowly - resolve them. Bahá'í scholarship faces exactly the same challenge. There will be apparent contradictions between true scholarship and the 'proper' Bahá'í approach to things. Some will argue that the methodologies of scholarship are wrong; others, that the Bahá'í principles and values are either wrong or have been misunderstood. The process of working through the apparent contradictions will sometimes be painful and will be a test of faith. But it will not help to deny the existence of the apparent contradictions or downplay their seriousness.

3. The relationship of scholarship to the Bahá'í institutions is an extension of this process because of the Bahá'í claim that the Universal House of Justice is infallible. That makes a tendency or desire to disagree with the Universal House of Justice to be felt as a severe test of faith. But one must attain to a recognition that a process is happening, that one's own understanding is in process, that one has to have faith that one will eventually see and understand, and that one must pursue the truth bravely and actively.

One approach that I think will help smooth out the relationship between scholarship and the community (for the community and its institutions embody the Bahá'í values that seem to contradict the principles of scholarship) will be the development of a code of ethical conduct by Bahá'í researchers. Such a code would call for research to be conducted to high standards of accuracy; would outline qualities Bahá'í research should strive to achieve, such as fairness, open-mindedness, rigor, and clarity; would call for creation of a consultative atmosphere with both fellow researchers and with Bahá'í institutions; and would stress respect for the safety of persons whose lives might be endangered by the research.

4. The relationship between scholarship and the Institutions in North America. The conference organisers asked me to address this matter in my remarks, and it

is not a simple matter to discuss. The North American Bahá'í community has had an active community of Bahá'í researchers, many of them academics, for almost 25 years, and the relationship between them and the institutions - not just the National Spiritual Assembly, but the Counsellors, the International Teaching Centre, and the Universal House of Justice - has not always been the best. It is important to remember that the Universal House of Justice has been intimately involved as an actor in North America, because otherwise it is easy to blame fallible North American institutions for the problems. Rather, a process of maturation has been going on where it is probably safe to say that mistakes have been made by all parties (though it is difficult to be sure of this because so much information is, necessarily, confidential, and thus we have no access to it).

In some measurable ways, the American National Spiritual Assembly's commitment to scholarship has been steadily growing. It established World Order magazine in 1966, which exists to publish scholarly works on the Faith. It established an archives office in about 1975, now with a full-time professional staff of two, whose main task is to organize historical materials so that researchers have access to them. It began to support the Association for Bahá'í Studies in 1980, a commitment of about \$30,000 per year currently. It established the Encyclopedia project in 1986, which also has a full-time staff of two. It established the Research Office in 1989, again now with a staff of three, partly because literature review required a significant upgrade in quality and partly because scholarship needed a 'home' in the office structure in Wilmette. It established the Institute for Bahá'í Studies and Wilmette Institute in 1994 and 1995 respectively to expand its ability to collaborate with non-Bahá'í academic institutions and to educate the Bahá'í community. These commitments together involve the expenditure of some \$400,000 per year. It has also lent considerable support to the Bahá'í Chair in Peace Studies at the University of Maryland. Thus the pattern over the last 25 years has been one of expanding support for scholarship, in spite of rocky relations with some scholars at different times. Furthermore, speaking personally, I have not detected a drift toward more 'conservative' or 'reactionary' or 'fundamentalist' views in the last few years.

The Research Office has been very concerned with routinizing the relationship between the United States Bahá'í National Centre and researchers, whether Bahá'í or non-Bahá'í. A major concern has been literature review, which it has been able to improve in quality and make more consultative. It has been gradually developing a document defining the criteria of accuracy, dignity, timeliness, and respect for ethically defined standards of privacy and confidentiality; outlining appeal processes; and calling for transparency in the review process.

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