



philosophy was of undeniable assistance. It was called *ancilla theologiae*, the handmaiden of theology. This paper briefly describes apologetics and its role in the Bahá'í community.

The *sedes materiae* of Bahá'í apologetics is Gleanings chapter 154: "It is incumbent upon all men, each according to his ability, to refute the arguments of those that have attacked the Faith of God." There follows an exhortation to promote the cause of God through one's "pen and tongue" rather than through "recourse to sword or violence", and an assurance of divine bounties for whomsoever "ariseth to defend, in his writings, the Cause of God against its assailants." There are numerous passages in the writings of `Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi on this subject which can be epitomised in the statement, "The Cause of God must be protected from the enemies of the faith and from those who sow seeds of doubt in the hearts of the believers, and the greatest of all protection is knowledge." [3]

Apologetics, however, has a far wider scope than merely the defence of faith against attack. Critical scholarly contributions or criticism raised in public or private discussions should not necessarily be equated with hostility. These are often perfectly legitimate questions in search of an answer. In the view of Paul Tillich, apologetics is an "answering theology." [4] The answering of critical inquiries or objections should be irenic (or peace-promoting), always bearing Bahá'u'lláh's exhortations in mind "primarily to speak with words as mild as milk," with "utmost leniency and forbearance." [5] However, in cases of rude and hostile attacks, if a rebuttal is required, words "mild as milk" may be inadequate and a harsher tone may well be justified. [6] It does not befit an apologist to belong to those "watchmen" the prophet Isaiah calls "dumb dogs that cannot bark." [7]

In its essence, apologetics is a kind of confrontation, an act of revealing one's true colours, of hoisting the flag, of demonstrating essential characteristics of faith. Apologetics can stand in tension with the attitude of dialogue, which in our time has increasingly replaced the attitude of religious controversy and confrontation. However, as Hans Küng puts it, "dialogue does not mean self-denial." [8] A faith that is opportunistically streamlined, adapted to the current trends, thus concealing its real features and dissimulating any and all elements that could provoke rejection in order to be acceptable for dialogue, is in danger of losing its identity [9] and will not be taken seriously in interfaith dialogue. As Georg Christoph Lichtenberg [10] said: "It is almost impossible to carry the torch of truth through a crowd without somebody's beard getting singed." This is an inevitable consequence of following `Abdu'l-Bahá's call "to raise up the Word," "to refute what is vain and false, to establish the truth," [11] but we should nevertheless strive for a balance between apologetic and dialogical aims.

Bahá'í apologetics derives from the experience of a fundamental discrepancy between secular thought, the current trends and tendencies of the period on the one hand, and revelation on the other. Bahá'u'lláh alluded to this tension when he considered "most people [to be] feeble and far-removed from the purpose

of God." [12] This judgement has meanwhile gained a global dimension. The unbridgeable gulf between the two standards is increasingly perceivable from day to day. Critical self-reflection on the fundamentals of the Bahá'í Faith has therefore become an inevitable precondition to communication and proclamation. Religion must be able to persevere in the forum of reason. [13]

It is the purpose of Bahá'í apologetics to demonstrate the credibility and plausibility of revealed truth. It is not its purpose to prove the truth of revelation and to convince the partners in dialogue. This aim would transcend the dimension of rational and intellectual thought. As the English Cardinal Henry Newman stated: "The heart is commonly reached, not through reason, but through the imagination, by means of direct impressions, by the testimony of facts and events, by history, by descriptions. Persons influence us ... looks subdue us, deeds inflame us ... no man will be a martyr for a conclusion." [14]

Several examples may help to clarify this point: first, some laws of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, such as its penal provisions and sexual prohibitions, are at odds with current western European standards. To Bahá'ís, however, they are manifestations of divine justice. For reasons that will be discussed in my forthcoming book, Bahá'í Ethics, it is not possible to make the truth of these provisions cogently evident through rational argumentation. This by no means implies that a Bahá'í has to resort to blindly relying on "articles of faith." In this respect, apologetics may help to:

clarify the relevant fundamentals of faith (including the sovereign and unfathomable will of God, the doctrine of the Most Great Infallibility, the relationship between justice and mercy);

demonstrate the relativity of western standards, which are not universal, but the result of a historical and evolutionary process;

analyse the philosophy of individualism and elucidate the balance in Bahá'í ethics between the rights of individuals and those of society;

analyse and compare the different concepts of freedom;

analyse the philosophical theories on punishment;

point out that in this area the metaphysical principle of justice has been superseded by the principle of utility and pragmatism;

describe and analyse the inefficiency of modern judiciaries, and in general,

correlate the principles of the Faith "with the modern aspects of philosophy and science." [15]

Although it is not possible to convince anyone of the correctness of divine norms through rational argumentation, it is nevertheless possible to demonstrate that the ethical system underlying the revelation is internally consistent and reasonable. Here, apologetics primarily has the function of self-confirmation, i.e. of providing its own justification.

A second departure is the Bahá'í view of human nature, the image of man as

"the supreme Talisman,"[16] which is incompatible with that determinism of philosophy and natural science which reduce man to a machine, to a computer system, eliminating every notion of personal responsibility and guilt. These antagonistic positions have far-reaching consequences in ethics, law, psychology and sociology. It is the task of apologetics to elucidate the Bahá'í positions in terms of theology, philosophy and the humanities. A third example is the concept of "infallibility," which, in this "age of falsifiability,"[7] is untenable to secular thought. The concept is historically burdened, conjures up all sorts of negative connotations, and provokes fierce rejection. We cannot validate this concept through reason. The function of apologetics is the clarification of this notion in a critical discourse, so that infallibility does not appear to be some kind of magical belief in our system, but rather something that is reasonable under the premise of faith. It is of utmost significance to discuss the immanent limits of this charisma and not to impose a *sacrificium intellectus*[18] upon the believers.[19]

As to the role of apologetics in Bahá'í scholarship, we should distinguish between external and internal views. Some scholars of religious studies feel obliged to carry out their research on the basis of methodical agnosticism and positivism. They are neither affected by the object of their research nor committed to it. They investigate and describe the historical, phenomenological, sociological and political aspects of a religious system. For these scholars revelation is a claim; and since this claim cannot be investigated and proved scientifically it is not taken up as a positive challenge. Such scholars of religious studies have therefore tended to incline toward historicism and reductionism: to explain revelation from and reduce it to its historical and socio-cultural influences. I do not think that it is the task of Bahá'í scholars to work just for the sake of it (*l'art pour l'art*, so to speak). Since the core of truth, the essential mystery of a religion, is beyond the reach of the sciences, their role should instead be that of the theologian.

Theologians regard their religion from inside. They are committed to the truth of revelation and to the authority of the scripture. Although their systematic and analytical reflection is scientific in methodology, they are not scientists — theology is not counted among the exact sciences. The history of its faith, the facts and events, must undoubtedly be open to research; the theological significance of historical events, however, is a matter of theology. And theology, the *scientia fidei*, is a closed system, based on revelation, which is beyond the reach of scientific discourse. Thus, apologetics as a branch of systematic theology is not possible without a firm foothold in revelation, without commitment to revealed truth. The power to "face and withstand all in heaven and on earth" is, as Bahá'u'lláh says, given to those who stand "firm and steadfast in this ... exalted Revelation." [20]

Even so, apologetics is not generally held in high esteem by the Bahá'í community. This is all the more astonishing since Bahá'u'lláh himself

defended his revelation against the Azalis and the Shaykhis. Bahá'u'lláh's Kitáb-i-Badí and the Kitáb-i-Íqán[21] are works of apologia. Mírzá Abu'l-Fal, considered one of the foremost apologists in the history of the Bahá'í Faith, was highly praised for his work. The negative attitude towards apologetics results partly from a widespread diffuse anti-intellectualism which is heedless of the fact that religion needs "the power of reflection"[22] and which views scholarly activity with disdain, regarding it as unspiritual and thus detrimental to faith. It is equally a consequence of the research of some experts on the Bábí-Bahá'í religions so committed to a positivistic methodology that they shun the apologetical. Neither attitude promotes the development of the Bahá'í Faith.[23]

#### End Notes

I am very much indebted to Gerald Keil for helping with the English style of my draft and to Jack McLean for the quotations from works of Paul Tillich (see footnote 2 and 5). When quoting the writings of Bahá'u'lláh and `Abdu'l-Bahá, I have used section followed by paragraph number, where possible.

The History of Christian Thought (ed. C. Braaten. New York: Harper and Row, 1968) 24.

Shoghi Effendi, The Light of Divine Guidance (Hofheim: Bahá'í Verlag, 1982) 1:134. See also Crisis and Victory. A Compilation of Extracts from the Bahá'í Writings, compiled by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice (London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1988).

Systematic Theology (3 vols. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967) 1:6.

Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1978) 11:31.

See, for example, Udo Schaefer/Nicola Towfigh/Ulrich Gollmer, Making the Crooked Straight. A Contribution to Bahá'í Apologetics (Oxford: George Ronald, 2000). Mírzá `Abu'l Fal's The Brilliant Proof (Los Angeles: Kalimát Press, 1998) is not without polemics (see esp. 1-7).

Isaiah 56:10.

Theologie im Aufbruch (München 1987), S. 288.

The early Christians, who were in a situation similar to that of the Bahá'ís today, were exhorted by St Paul to resist temptation to conformity: "And be not conformed to this world" (Rom. 12:2), "But speak thou the things which become sound doctrine" (Titus 2:1).

An 18th century professor of physics at the University of Göttingen who became famous for his aphorisms.

Bahá'í Prayers (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1984) 174.

Quoted in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1992)

"Introduction," 6.

See `Abdu'l-Bahá, Paris Talks (London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1969) 11:1-4; 22:4-5; 36:10; 44:3-4, 24-25; Promulgation of Universal Peace (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982) 63.

An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent (1870).

Letter of the Universal House of Justice dated 19 October 1993 to an individual.

Tablets 11:3.

Cf. Karl Popper, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (New York, 1968) 78ff.

The imposition of a sacrificium rationis in the name of religion would be tantamount to blindness and fanaticism — nothing short of a complete denial of one's own critical faculties, in overt contradiction to the exalted rank conferred to `aql (reason, intellect) in the writings of Bahá'u'lláh (cf. Gleanings 83:1; 95:1) and `Abdu'l-Bahá (cf. *The Secret of Divine Civilisation* [Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1970] 1 [paragraphs 1 and 2]; see also Paris Talks [London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1995] 44:3, 13, 24; Promulgation of Universal Peace [Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982] 63ff., 128, 175ff., 231, 287, 298, 316, 372ff., 394, 434).

See my article in the Bahá'í Studies Review 9 (1999/2000): 17-45 for preliminary observations on infallibility in a Bahá'í context.

Gleanings 154:1.

"Defence of the mission of the Báb — with all its abrogatory implications — is the ostensible, indeed, the stated purpose of the Book of Certitude" (Christopher Buck, *Symbol & Secret. Qur'án Commentary in Bahá'u'lláh's Kitáb-i-Íqán* [Los Angeles: Kalimát Press, 1995] 233).

Paris Talks 44:14.

I, for my part, have considered myself a defensor fidei since the beginning of my Bahá'í life in 1948. Most of my publications are apologetic. However, when defending the Faith, I have often found it necessary to defend myself against the distrust of ultra-conservative, overprotective keepers of the Holy Grail. For ten years, until I found a Bahá'í publisher in another European country, I had no opportunity to publish, and the authors of *Desinformation als Methode: Die Bahá'ismus-Monographie des F. Ficicchia* (Hildesheim: Olms Verlag, 1995) were free to start this project only on the intervention of the Universal House of Justice, which declared a rebuttal a matter of urgency, and which moreover suggested the publication of an English edition. I am aware that my experience is not unusual; I mention it to illustrate a problem which needs to be resolved for the sake of the Bahá'í Faith.

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