

CONVERSIVE RELATIONALITY IN BAHÁ'Í SCHOLARSHIP: CENTERING THE SACRED AND DECENTERING THE SELF

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As an important first step in creating a new paradigm for Bahá'í scholarship, Susan B. Brill recommends greater collaboration in research: "Perhaps Bahá'ís could begin to provide new models that cross the divide between academia and the rest of the world. Through collaborative projects between academics and nonacademics, the work of scholars would be more responsive and comprehensible . . ." (5). One can also argue that there should be more interdisciplinary scholarship as well, so that the findings of different fields inform both specific projects and the general process of theory building. However, the idea of collaborative learning is hardly new. The groundbreaking work of cognitive psychologist Jerome Bruner¹ has demonstrated that it is through communication that people help each other to develop their knowledge and understanding. This view has dominated educational pedagogy for the past two decades and has given rise to the powerful collaborative learning paradigm. Here, students work in groups to complete interactive learning tasks, thereby moving the classroom away from the traditional, linear, teacher-centered format with its unidirectional knowledge flow. In fact, the collaborative learning participation pattern is also key pedagogy underlying the Bahá'í Institute Process, where learners and facilitators negotiate meaning to obtain a deeper understanding of the Bahá'í sacred writings, the nature of spiritual development, and methods for capacity building.²

Implicit in the collaborative learning paradigm is a psycholinguistic view of knowledge as a continuing process of psychological construction rather than a fixed product. In her work, the author draws on Wittgenstein's perspective of meaning as language-games, which take place against a background of human activity, thereby deriving their significance from the context in which they are embedded (13, 15). Brill briefly mentions the work of Bakhtin (8), interpreting the dialogic process as a polarizing activity. However, Brill's considerations should be informed by one of the most influential views of the socially constructed nature of knowledge current in educational theory: the work of the Russian educational psychologist Vygotsky.³ It should also be recognized that Bakhtin's work is complementary to Brill's position, not antagonistic.

1. Jerome Bruner, *Beyond the Information Given: Studies in the Psychology of Knowing* (New York: Norton, 1973) and *Acts of Meaning* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990).

2. The Ruhi Institute, *Learning about Growth: The Story of the Ruhi Institute and Large-Scale Expansion of the Bahá'í Faith in Colombia* (Riviera Beach, Fla.: Palabra Publications, 1991).

3. L. S. Vygotsky, *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978).

Lev Vygotsky (1896–1934) was an educational psychologist who studied mental development in infants and very young children, including the handicapped. He found that for children to develop cognitively, they had to construct meaning interactively with their interlocutors. Language-based social interaction was critical in establishing the child's organization of reality. Vygotsky concluded that thought is shaped by language through interaction, and, therefore, knowledge must be constructed collaboratively. Furthermore, Vygotsky suggested that meaning remains mutable throughout life; it is not a preformed module in the cognitive system, but is actively and continually constructed at the point of interaction through discourse. Even in the adult, language continues to have two functions: communication and the interpretation of experience by organizing it into meaning.

Vygotskian analysis can be applied to many types of interaction, and it certainly enables appreciation of the sound psychological basis for Bahá'í consultation. In her article, Brill notes that "a conversive and consultative strategy emphasizes the creative force of language rather than the more negative paradigms evident in much contemporary scholarship" (7). Many of the Bahá'í writings dealing with social behavior are based on this type of collective creation of knowledge through negotiation of meaning—the spark of truth emerging from the clash of differing ideas and the Bahá'í emphasis on consultation as the major decision-making tool seem natural and necessary within a Vygotskian framework. Consultative interaction serves as a bridge between what individuals can accomplish by themselves and what they can accomplish in cooperation with others: Consultation, discussion, and feedback can create meaning for the participants and extend their own capacity for achievement. This view is completely in accord with what we are told about the consultative process by Bahá'u'lláh:

Consultation bestoweth greater awareness and transmuteth conjecture into certitude. . . . The maturity of the gift of understanding is made manifest through consultation.⁴

Vygotsky also studied "inner speech," self-directed conversations in children and adults, and this will be discussed in the section below in relation to the theory of Bakhtin.

The work of philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin (1895–1975) has been used in literary theory for several decades as a rebuttal of the postmodern school of deconstructionism. Whereas deconstructionists argue that text has multiple meanings, many of which are contradictory, Bakhtin argues for a developmental

4. *Consultation: A Compilation*, comp. Research Dept. of the Universal House of Justice, rev. ed. (London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1990) 1.

approach to discourse, particularly for the interaction of the writer and reader.⁵ His basic idea is that the child internalizes the voices of those around her during her early years and then reexternalizes these voices for the rest of her life. In other words, when we speak, we speak with heteroglossia, the voice of our mother, our father, our teachers. True thought, he suggests, is not found in the isolated minds of the individuals, but emerges from discourse, through multiple voices. This is the dialogic of Bakhtin; it is not a polarizing force, as Brill suggests (8), but rather refers to language-based cognition—verbal thought.⁶

Vygotsky also addressed the idea of dialogia in his extensive work on private or “inner speech,” the self-directed conversations one has with oneself, either internal or externalized, while performing tasks.⁷ The developmental role of egocentric speech in child psychology is widely recognized⁸ and in the field of second-language learning, studies show that learners often use “private speech” (an adult version of inner speech) in their first language while performing tasks in the second. (For linguistic research in the Vygotskian tradition, see the 1994 theme issue of *The Modern Language Journal* 87.4.)

The idea that people speak with different voices is particularly meaningful in the field of mental health, and Bakhtinian analysis has become a therapeutic tool for the treatment of the mentally ill, particularly those with multiple personalities or schizophrenia. In the field of applied linguistics, a Bakhtinian approach has determined the frequent use of polyvocal syntax and semantics during speech acts and written discourse.⁹ Religious texts are particularly rich sources of heteroglossia. In the Bahá'í writings, Bahá'u'lláh speaks sometimes with the voice of humanity, sometimes with the Voice of the Manifestation, and sometimes with the Voice of God. The Fire Tablet¹⁰ is an example of this and would be understood more clearly through a Bakhtinian approach. Furthermore, the Bahá'í writings recommend self-appraisal through private speech or verbal thought as a critical step in determining whether spiritual goals have been achieved. Bahá'u'lláh admonishes humankind to

bring thyself to account each day ere thou art summoned to a reckoning; for death, unheralded, shall come upon thee and thou shalt be called to give account for thy deeds.¹¹

5. John Edlund, “Bakhtin and the Social Reality of Language Acquisition,” *The Writing Instructor* 7.2 (1988): 56–57.

6. William McClellan, “The Dialogic Other: Bakhtin’s Theory of Rhetoric,” *Social Discourse* 3.1–2 (1990): 234–49. See also G. Morson, ed. *Bakhtin: Essays and Dialogues on his Work* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

7. G. Appel and J. Lantolf, “Speaking as Mediation: A Study of L1 and L2 Text Recall Tasks,” *Modern Language Journal* 78.4 (1994): 437–52.

8. John Flavell et al., “The Development of Children’s Knowledge about Inner Speech,” *Child Development* 68.1 (1997): 39–47.

9. Nancy Welch, “One Student’s Many Voices: Reading, Writing, and Responding with Bakhtin,” *Journal of Advanced Composition* 13.2 (1993): 493–502.

10. Bahá'u'lláh, *The Fire Tablet* (Thornhill, Ont.: Bahá'í Canada Publications, n.d. [1980]).

11. Bahá'u'lláh, *The Hidden Words of Bahá'u'lláh* (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1939) 11.

The complementary analytical frameworks of Vygotsky and Bakhtin are in accord with the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith on both the importance of childhood education and the continued significance of consultative forms of social interaction for the creation of knowledge throughout the individual's life. The views of these two Russian researchers support the new scholarly paradigm suggested by Brill, a paradigm that is based on collaboration rather than competition.

The field of second- and foreign-language education is a blend of researchers and practitioners, and several professional journals offer a collaborative mentoring process to help classroom teachers author research findings with necessary academic rigor. For example, *TESOL Journal* has a mentoring program where experienced writers work with authors whose manuscripts have come back from review with suggestions for revision. Modeled after this program, a refereed applied linguistics journal in Asia also put a mentoring program in place several years ago. Two areas were identified as needing a collaborative approach: the actual reviewing of manuscripts by editorial board members and additional readers, and the revision of promising manuscripts according to the reviewers' comments. Following the procedures of another journal, the *TESOL Quarterly*, the editorial board decided to meet yearly, requesting beforehand that each reviewer comment on the same manuscript. These reviews were copied and distributed so that the readers could examine the responses of their colleagues to the same paper. Reviewers were given the option of receiving copies of the other readers' reviews of manuscripts they had also read. Awareness that one's reviews would be read by colleagues resulted in an improvement in the helpfulness of the review process.

Mentoring of manuscripts for rewriting has also been positive, with over half of mentored manuscripts accepted, compared with a lower rate for unmentored rewrites. Finally, the editor in charge of publishing book reviews also took an active role by assisting authors to reframe questionable material and to construct helpful and objective reviews. In this case, the decision on the part of the journal's editorial board to promote positive forms of scholarship and to focus strongly on the goal of assisting professional development led to greater use of collaborative resources and resulted in a superior product.

Regarding new scholarly paradigms, it is useful to consider the sciences of chaos and complexity theory, used to explain the behavior of nonlinear complex systems.¹² Such systems range from the pattern of water drops falling from a faucet to global weather, the stock market, and the operation of the human brain, and have been found to share a particular feature: They are often sensitive to very small variations in initial conditions. The classic example of such sensitivity is the "butterfly effect," in which the flapping of a butterfly's wings

12. See J. Gleick, *Chaos: Making a New Science* (New York: Penguin Books, 1987).

at one location, over many iterations, produces a thunderstorm elsewhere. Although one may assume that the results of a particular action are of minor significance—a normal assumption for events in linear systems—in a nonlinear system, the resulting effects may be quite disproportionate to the cause. Increasingly, social-science researchers are turning to chaos/complexity theory to shed light on problems that should be foregrounded, to inform construction of theories that go beyond mere cause–effect relationships, and to appreciate the importance of detail.¹³ Brill's article has identified a number of complex destructuring and restructuring trends in academia and has linked these to the coming World Order of Bahá'u'lláh. She writes: "The turbulence of our times directly reflects the extent to which lives, worlds, and words increasingly struggle with innumerable transitory centers . . ." (11), and this seems to describe a chaotic system.

Traditional views of scholarship as isolated activities characterized by linear methodology and done by the few must give way to new paradigms of interactive knowledge creation. Increasingly, this is happening through scientific collaboration, interdisciplinary research projects, and increasing acknowledgment of the validity of traditional knowledge systems. The Associations for Bahá'í Studies worldwide are in a critical position to support the development of important new forms of scholarship, for in nonlinear complex systems, small and local events are capable of producing truly astonishing outcomes. The promotion of diverse and collaborative forms of scholarship through conferences, Special Interest Group meetings, newsletters, and limited circulation publications—regardless of their small scale—can result in significant changes in the perception of what constitutes Bahá'í scholarship. The words of Shoghi Effendi effectively identify this chaotic nonlinear view of cause and results: "Though small in numbers, and circumscribed as yet in your experiences, powers, and resources, yet the Force which energizes your mission is limitless in its range and incalculable in its potency."¹⁴

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13. See Diane Larsen-Freeman, "Chaos/Complexity Science and Second Language Acquisition," *Applied Linguistics* 18.2 (1997): 141–65.

14. Shoghi Effendi, *The Advent of Divine Justice*, 4th ed. (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1984) 16.

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Dissatisfaction with current Bahá'í scholarship's fit with the needs and interests of the Bahá'í community has triggered a desire for more relevant and vital methods of scholarly Bahá'í study. Such methods could help in the development of Bahá'í communities; in bringing the powerful ideas, themes, and concepts in the Bahá'í teachings to the attention of the world's leaders of thought; and in deepening individual understanding of the Bahá'í teachings.

Susan B. Brill's important and provocative article "Conversive Relationality in Bahá'í Scholarship: Centering the Sacred and Decentering the Self" addresses this desire, arguing that we should reject the traditional academic methodologies of scholarship based on discourse, argument, and debate. In its place, she recommends a "conversive" model of Bahá'í scholarship that avoids "contentious and oppositional . . . debates [which preclude] the consultative notion of individuals working together to gain new insights and resolutions about a specific issue" (12). Conversive implies both "conversation and conversion—language and scholarship that is potentially transformative of ourselves and others."¹ She wishes us to avoid the pitfalls of a "scholarship" that imposes its perspectives on others rather than consultatively learning from them. Conversive scholarship, she argues, is both consonant with the insistent urgings of Bahá'u'lláh that we "center" ourselves in service to God and humanity and in keeping with recent developments in philosophy and critical theory.

A central strength of the article is its examination of the often arbitrary and prejudicial aspects of thought and research methodologies that lay claim to rationality or objectivity. Rationality and objectivity, critical thinking has shown, are often names for the programmatic pursuit of objectives not necessarily in everyone's best interest. In light of Bahá'í teachings about consultation and recent understandings of the sometimes oppressive aspects of "objective" and "rational" thought, we should consider abandoning the traditional confrontational debative, argumentative styles of discourse and move towards conversive styles that preclude an artificial distancing and scholarly elitism evoked in the name of an unobtainable objectivity. I think that many of us agree that there is a need for such a shift.

Two aspects of this argument, however, partly veil its considerable merits. One is the extent to which it parallels the acrimonious "cultural wars" raging in modern American intellectual circles. Central to these "wars"—often bitter debates concerning postmodernism, poststructuralism, cultural relativism,

1. Susan B. Brill, private communication to author.

multiculturalism, feminism, post-colonialism, and a variety of related topics—are disagreements about the role and nature of objectivity and rationalism. The highly controversial attack on rationalism at issue in these debates is here used to buttress arguments for conservative scholarship, weighing it down with one of the more divisive arguments of modern academic practice. The other aspect is the extent to which it downplays or rejects the importance of rationality and objectivity—of central importance not only for the modern natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities, but for the sciences and traditions of other cultures as well. Both aspects are at odds with the need to avoid contentious debates. Also, both might be misinterpreted to imply an anti-scientific stance. Accordingly, in this comment, I will try to show that the conservative method of scholarship is supported by—and in harmony with—the viewpoint of modern science.

The modern scientific tradition, born of Islam and brought to adolescence in Europe, has achieved its maturity on a worldwide stage. Its vision of knowledge as inseparable from experience and practice has proven almost inexhaustible as a source of new understanding and shows no sign of losing its vitality. Its successes in the material realm are unprecedented, and similar successes are expected to occur in the social sphere as well. The democratic willingness of modern science to make knowledge available to all is ending the era of élites empowered by the control of information.

Science is endorsed by the Bahá'í writings in the strongest terms. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, speaking at Stanford University in 1912, characterized it as "the illumination of the world of humanity" and the "cause of eternal honor to man."² He urged us to "put all [our] beliefs into harmony with science. . . ."³ Speaking of science at Columbia University in 1912, he said that "the philosophical conclusions of bygone centuries, the teachings of the prophets and wisdom of former sages are crystallized and reproduced in the scientific advancement of today."⁴ Shoghi Effendi described science and religion as the "two most potent forces in life."⁵

What, then, are the essential steps of the modern scientific method? Drawing from my experience as a physicist and from historical and philosophical studies of science, I suggest the following.⁶ The first step is to ask a question—to pose

2. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982) 348.

3. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks: Addresses Given by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in Paris in 1911*, 11th ed. (London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1969) 146.

4. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Foundations of World Unity* (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1979) 48.

5. Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh: Selected Letters*, rev. ed. (Wilmette Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1974) 204.

6. William S. Hatcher describes the scientific method as "the systematic, organized, directed, and conscious use of our various mental faculties in an effort to arrive at a coherent model of whatever phenomenon is being investigated" "Science and the Bahá'í Faith," *Bahá'í Studies* 2 (1977): 32. Julio Savi, analyzing the Bahá'í writings, suggests that they describe a scientific research method that "is a deliberate, conscious, repeated, organized and systematic use of the cognitive powers" wherein "certain standards of inner integrity of thought and behaviour are observed" *The Eternal Quest for God* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1989) 8.

a problem. Next is to search systematically for answers. Three basic steps are typically used in the search and may be repeated many times in any order. These steps are: (1) gathering information (evidence, data), (2) speculating (theorizing), and (3) testing the validity of speculations by comparing hypotheses and their implications with available information. Information is gathered from experience, reliable reports, discussions and interviews, or more exactly from specifically designed experiments. Speculation (theory) includes trying to find cause and effect relationships, attempting to draw out general rules from available information (induction), and trying to find specifics from general principles (deduction). One "loops" through the whole process until answers are obtained. This should not be thought of as a dry formal procedure: it often involves an intensely spiritual sense of quest for understanding along with a deep involvement in and interest about the subject of study.

The above description is not fully adequate unless we take into account the role of both community and diversity. First of all, science is a community endeavor that requires both shared effort in the establishment of new truths and the use of previously obtained findings. Scientific "truths" are only those that have been examined by and met the acceptance of the relevant scientific community. In a similar vein, what counts as evidence and information about the world is only reliable, shared, and *public* data. Private experience, subjective impressions, and unrepeatable one-time events are ruled out.

Diversity plays several roles. On one hand, it serves the need for a wide variety of different types of expertise, i.e., specializations. Physics, for example, broadly classifies researchers as either theorists or experimentalists, but it has many other subdivisions as well. On the other hand, different skills, insights, and temperaments are needed if a full and sufficiently varied picture is to emerge. A variety of differing possible explanations increases the probability of obtaining the sound fit of a scientific model to data. Physics, for example, places a premium on the role of young, unprejudiced thinkers unfamiliar with and dissatisfied about accepted ways of seeing things.

Using this abbreviated description of how modern science works, we can outline some of its implications for scholarship and compare them with the author's recommendations. First of all, overcoming the limitations of a self-centered point of view is of central importance, in agreement with her suggestions. This is done by striving for an objectivity that eliminates personal or cultural biases, by testing suppositions and hypotheses against public events, by maintaining a critical stance, and by continually probing and testing even well-accepted hypotheses. Modern science consciously distances itself from discourse traditions that ascribe authority to canonical texts and authoritative personalities. Similarly, it avoids abstruse metaphysical systems not amenable to testing. Unexamined and uncontested ideas, say, ideas inherited from the past

or simply from society at large, are not considered to have authority. The need for objectivity directly leads to the need for diversity and community effort, and requires that participants must be willing to learn from each other. These implications are strongly supportive of the author's recommendations.

The social sciences directly study such topics as communities, peoples, cultures, habits of thought, and social institutions. Social science methodologies must have many of the qualities that the author recommends to us. It is true that in comparison to the natural sciences, the social sciences are new and sometimes see through the distorted lens of ethnocentric cultural biases.⁷ But it is also true that many of its leading practitioners have been at the forefront of efforts to eradicate such cultural biases or to confront them, bring them into the open, and examine their effects. In fact, many of the concepts that the author recommends as important for Bahá'í modes of study come from sociology, anthropology, or ethnology. To be objective in the study of societies, peoples, cultures, or ways of thinking, not only must we interact intersubjectively with others to find out how they think, act, and believe, we must also become aware of our own prejudices and preconceptions. As social scientists have made clear, such interactions require mutual respect, consultative communication, and a recognition of the role of intersubjectivity.⁸

Of course, the impact of science is not always positive. Its prestige and nearly universal acceptance has created problems. A serious problem is scientism, or what I call the *imitation of science*. I define this as the tendency, quite widespread, to adopt the colorations of a scientific objectivity and rationality without employing science's methodologies, traditions, or procedures of rigorous justification. I believe that imitation of science, science poorly done, or science in its initial stages of development are the causes of much of the criticism leveled against science by responsible critics. An egregious example of the imitation of science is the assumption of modern Western thinking that it enjoys a superiority on the basis of its scientific, rational, and objective character. Modern secularism, especially in the academic world, firmly holds to this prejudice. One is tempted to say that the self-image of much of technically advanced society is predicated on its vision of itself as practicing a scientific, and therefore culturally superior, mode of being. Modern criticism eagerly attacks this self-image.

The Bahá'í writings offer a powerful corrective to this self-elevating tendency. Consider the broad definition of science that Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá employ. Bahá'u'lláh describes Socrates as having a "profound knowledge of such sciences as were current amongst men" and speaks of the

7. See, for example, Jack Goody, *The East in the West* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

8. See, for example, Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984).

people of Persia as having once been "unrivalled in sciences and arts."⁹ Clearly, the sciences referred to here cannot be the modern ones. 'Abdu'l-Bahá further describes science as being the result of "the power of intellectual investigation. . . . characteristic of man."¹⁰ How can this mean other than that science is universal and can be found wherever humankind applies its "power of intellectual investigation"? From the principle of the oneness of humanity, we can conclude that the endowment responsible for science is (and has been) possessed by all peoples in all nations. Therefore, we should not think that only the sciences of the modern West merit attention and praise. Rather, if we are to be true to the universal spirit of the Bahá'í Faith, we should be respectful of the science and knowledge traditions of all the peoples of the world.

The paragraph above, so preliminary as it is, is certainly inadequate as a basis for speculation. Nevertheless, it encourages several lines of thought. If we accept that most (or all) people have sciences independently of whether they have written them down in a fashion we think appropriate, then we could greatly increase our understanding by learning of them. Of course, two veils immediately present themselves: one is the great prestige of Western thought, coupled with its tendency to overshadow and displace other modes of thinking (which sometimes leads to the elimination of entire knowledge traditions). The other veil is that, like Western thought, the world's science traditions (in the general sense that we are using the term) are riddled with chauvinism, ethnocentrism, superstition, and myth. These veils can impede progress, but they need not derail it. If my supposition is correct that the Bahá'í Faith encourages a respect for all the "science" traditions of humankind, then it gives us a glimpse of the great potential of Bahá'í scholarship: it can provide the framework for a world "intellectualism" that embraces the thought of all peoples, be it oral or written. The Bahá'í Faith unites both science and religion, so such a world intellectualism would not denigrate religious thinking as do the currently predominant Western modes of thought.

Summarizing, the intent of my argument is as follows: I believe Susan Brill's arguments for a better, conversive Bahá'í scholarship to be a kind of "wake-up call." We should, I think, more seriously consider Bahá'í scholarship as a vital endeavor that should be responsive both to the needs of our diverse Bahá'í communities and our responsibilities as servants to Bahá'u'lláh. If we are to realize the potential of Bahá'í scholarship, then we must respond to the distinctive concerns of Bahá'í teachings in a way that allows them to guide our efforts. At the same time, we must be wary of embracing methods that conflict with Bahá'í standards.

9. Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh Revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, 2d ed. (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1988) 85, 146-47.

10. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Foundations of World Unity* 48.

What I have tried to show in this comment is that the insights that the author has brought to bear are strongly valid from the standpoint of modern science. Science, because of the great importance given to it in the Bahá'í writings and in the world at large, provides a good model for how scholarship can be effectively conducted. Central to that model is a concern with rationality and objectivity that strives to overcome personal and cultural prejudices and to see with unbiased eyes. The modern sciences, I argue, are consultative and "conversive" in their methods, building their successes on a diversity of perspectives and specializations. But, I argue, the Bahá'í writings speak also of science in a more general sense: as the fruit of humankind's rational facilities. If we are true to this broader perspective on science, we can gain entrance to a much fuller and broader vision of reality than modern Western scholarship has to offer. In doing so, and in giving free rein to a "conversive" scholarship, I believe that we would be taking an important intellectual step towards the Bahá'í goal of a unified humanity.

STEPHEN R. FRIBERG

AUTHOR'S RESPONSE TO COMMENTARY ON "CONSERVATIVE RELATIONALITY IN BAHÁ'Í SCHOLARSHIP: CENTERING THE SACRED AND DECENTERING THE SELF"

Commentators: Sandra S. Fotos, Stephen R. Friberg

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I want to thank Drs. Sandra S. Fotos and Stephen R. Friberg for their thoughts on my essay "Conservative Relativity in Bahá'í Scholarship: Centering the Sacred and Decentering the Self." In their presentations, they discuss the ways in which their views of Bahá'í scholarship converge with and diverge from mine. As Bahá'ís, we understand the value of diverse opinions, for it is only through the processes of sifting and winnowing that we are better able to differentiate between those ideas and insights that hold the greatest meaning and value for us in any given situation. And such determinations will vary, as they ought, from person to person and situation to situation.

Dr. Fotos provides, in her commentary, a defense of Vygotskian analysis and Bakhtinian dialogism, along with her support of journal mentoring programs; and Dr. Friberg offers his defense of modern science whose model is centered in "a concern with rationality and objectivity that strives to overcome personal and cultural prejudices and to see with unbiased eyes".¹ I found Fotos's presentation and advocacy of journal mentoring programs quite compelling, and I certainly agree with Friberg's concerns about the problems that accrue when "personal and cultural" distinctions take the form of prejudices. When aspects of ourselves and our worlds cloud our views and understandings, it is indeed important that we learn to see more clearly. However, in contrast to Fotos's and Friberg's positions, I feel that this can best be achieved through investigations that are conversively informed, intersubjectively relational, mutually transformative, and inherently spiritual.

Rather than starting out with the methods and theories of contemporary scholarship and science, my essay serves as an initial exploration into the ways in which Bahá'í-informed scholarship might take on new forms and move in new directions beyond the boundaries of scholarship as it is predominantly practiced today. The commentaries by Fotos and Friberg help me to see that my introduction to a conservative method in Bahá'í scholarship needs some additional explanation to describe more clearly what such a method is and how it works. While the space of a brief response is inadequate to provide a detailed description of this process, I hope that this response, conjoined with the original essay, will be sufficient to give readers a clearer view of the possibilities within a conversively informed scholarship.

Perhaps the most essential and distinguishing aspect of conservative scholarship is that the scholar knows something by being in relationship with it and that at the center of such a relationship is love. Bahá'u'lláh writes, "We fain would

1. Stephen R. Friberg, "Commentary on 'Conservative Relativity and Bahá'í Scholarship: Centering the Sacred and Decentering the Self,'" *Journal of Bahá'í Studies* 8.3 (1998): 91.

hope that the people of Bahá may be guided by the blessed words: ‘Say: all things are of God’.”² Bahá’u’lláh continues, explaining that “by this single utterance contending peoples and kindreds will attain the light of true unity.”³ Here it is important to note that Bahá’u’lláh says that “all *things* are of God” (my emphasis). He is not only saying that all peoples are of God, but that everything in creation comes from God. Therefore, any of our interactions with any element of creation must needs be informed by the profound awareness of its sacred place in creation. And, as I see it, this must also inform our scholarly perceptions and activities, for when we perceive through the lens of the sacred, recognizing the intricately interwoven strands of creation, we perceive and understand by means of the attractive powers of love and unity whatever it is that we seek to know.

This can easily be seen in regard to our fellow human persons in the world. When we look at someone with a spiritualized love, our understanding of that person is deepened beyond the more superficial and limited comprehension of mind. Here, I would like to refer readers back to the example, discussed in my original essay, of the photographer John Pack and his work in Navajo country.⁴ As Bahá’u’lláh tells his reader-listeners, “‘Knowledge is a light which God sheddeth into the heart of whomsoever He willeth’ . . .”⁵ It is important to note that a recognition and valuation of the role of the heart in the process of knowing in no wise devalues the powers of human intellection. In fact, the role of mind is thereby ennobled through its interrelationship with the powers of the heart. The mind is a precious gift from God, but I see it as a means towards the sort of knowing that occurs in our hearts. Our minds serve as our transmitters and organizers of information, but when that information is brought to the deeper levels of the heart, then our perceptions are deepened and purified through love. And such perceptions bring us closer to whatever we know with our hearts. This is knowing that is conducive of greater unity in the world rather than the sort of “knowledge” steeped in the vested hierarchies of institutionalized academic power that all too often pulls the world and its diverse persons apart.

The past twenty-five hundred years of Western scholarship have privileged mind, reason, logic, and objective distance between the knower and what is known. And over the years, a number of scholars and thinkers have raised concerns about the absence of feelings, emotions, imagination, and personal subjectivity in this process—most notably in the work of the nineteenth-century Romantics and contemporary advocates of subjective scholarship. In contrast to such academic debates arguing the precedence of mind versus heart, a conversive approach emphasizes the primacy of both mind and heart, noting that a truly deepened knowledge that is centered in the sacred comes through the

2. Bahá’u’lláh, *Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh Revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, comp. Research Dept. of the Universal House of Justice, trans. H. Taherzadeh et al, 2d ed (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1988) 222.

3. Bahá’u’lláh, *Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh* 222.

4. Susan B. Brill, “Conversive Relationality in Bahá’í Scholarship: Centering the Sacred and Decentering the Self,” *Journal of Bahá’í Studies* 7.2 (1995): 3–4.

5. Bahá’u’lláh, *Kitáb-i-Aqdas: The Most Holy Book* (Haifa: Bahá’í World Centre, 1992) 184.

working together of mind and heart in a process that is inherently transformative and that brings all more closely together with each other and with God.

Conversive scholarship involves a scholar stepping within and co-creating an intersubjective relationship with whatever it is s/he seeks to know. At the center is love and affection (human embodiments of the attractive force of the sacred), and the process is mutually transforming for all involved, with the inevitable result being a coming together in unity of all the diverse elements (human persons, animals, plants, planets and stars, etc.) that are involved in the endeavor. Such a process informs not only how we perceive and behave towards that which we seek to know but also our determinations about what constitutes meaningful and valuable knowledge. This means that fixity within a spiritualized scholarship lies in each scholar's centering her or his work within the sacred. Fixity does not lie in the "sacrosanct truths" of the Western tradition—be those in the work of specific theorists or in the rationality and objectivity of scientific method. Ludwig Wittgenstein stresses this very point throughout his *Philosophical Investigations*, "Here it is *difficult* to see that what is at issue is the fixing of concepts. A *concept* forces itself on one. (This is what you must not forget.)" (his emphasis).⁶ His final parenthetical comment underscores the importance he gives to our recognizing the problems that result when we rigidly fix our views in any concept (e.g., theory, idea, belief). What with the multiplicity of scholarly approaches and tools currently available, each scholar must determine for herself or himself whether or not different theories or methods prove useful for a specific endeavor. And through a conversive approach, such a decision would be informed by the intended aims of mutual transformation, realized unity and love, and closeness to God.

I appreciate the time that Fotos and Friberg have taken to share their thoughts on this matter, and it is quite clear that they join me in a sincere concern regarding the development of contemporary and future Bahá'í scholarship. Their commentaries and their own scholarly and professional work demonstrate this. I am also thankful that they have provided me with the opportunity to clarify my views further. Alas, the constraints of a short response necessitate the brevity that prevents a greater exploration of this topic. I am currently working on a much longer paper that may assist my fellow scholars in considering and visualizing radically new directions for Bahá'í scholarship into the future. For now, let me simply conclude with the words of the American Indian poet and storyteller Simon J. Ortiz (Acoma), as he questions the directions, intentions, and effects of much contemporary science and scholarship, "It is foolish to believe we have the power to lock process into a crystal or cube. For when we believe it is our will, we do not see icicles forming and we will never be enough awed."⁷

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6. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, ed. G. E. M. Anscombe and R. Rhees, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, 3d ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1968) 204e.

7. Simon J. Ortiz, *After and Before the Lightning* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1994) 26.