

*The 32nd Hasan M. Balyuzi
Memorial Lecture*

The Evolving Role of Bahá'í Scholarship

VAHID RAFATI

It is my pleasure and privilege to come to this marvelous gathering and address the issue of the evolution of Bahá'í scholarship. I am thankful to the Association for Bahá'í Studies, and wholeheartedly hope this presentation will contribute to the study of the background, phases of progress, and future of Bahá'í scholarship. I also hope that my comments will shed light on the endeavors required of the younger generations of Bahá'í scholars, and their role in the development of such scholarship.

THE 'ULAMÁS AND THE BAHÁ'Í REVELATION

Bahá'í scholarship—like the Bahá'í teachings, Bahá'í Writings, and Bahá'í history—has a very strong root and mighty connection with Islamic scholarship and the role the 'ulamás' played

1 The Arabic word *'ulamá* is the plural of *'álim* (scholar), but following the example of Shoghi Effendi's use of the term in his own works, I am employing the term *'ulamás* in this article as the English plural form of the word, which alludes to Muslim scholars, clergy, and divines.

in Islamic civilization. In the Qur'án, the seeds of Islamic philosophy, theology, mysticism, and jurisprudence were sown, and, cultivated by the scholarly efforts of generations after generations of Muslim scholars, those same seeds were nourished and flourished into the fruit-bearing trees of the Islamic civilization.

At the same time, it is a simple truth that the Muslim scholars were, and still are, primarily responsible for misinterpretations of the Qur'án and of the *hadiths*. Bahá'u'lláh explains that this misunderstanding is what is meant by the concept of "corruption of the texts":

Nay, rather, by corruption of the text is meant that in which all Muslim divines are engaged today, that is the interpretation of God's holy Book in accordance with their idle imaginings and vain desires. And as the Jews, in the time of Muhammad, interpreted those verses of the Pentateuch, that referred to His Manifestation, after their own fancy, and refused to be satisfied with His holy utterance, the charge of "perverting" the text was therefore pronounced against them. Likewise, it is clear, how in this day, the people of the Qur'án have perverted the text of God's holy Book, concerning the signs of the expected Manifestation, and interpreted it according to their inclination and desires. (*Kitáb-i-Íqán* 86-87)

This misinterpretation or "corruption" of the texts has been conducive to sectarianism and to disunity, even enmity, within Islam and in its approach to other religions.

In a letter written on 14 March 1927, to the Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Istanbul, Shoghi Effendí's secretary, on his behalf, "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'" (Universal House of Justice, *Messages* 94).

When the Báb advanced His claim of being the *Qá'im*,² He was accepted and admired by some of the most learned 'ulamás—for example: Mullá Husayn, Siyyid Yahyáy-i-Dárábí (Vahid), and Háji Muhammad-'Alfí-i-Bárfurúshí (Quddús)—and yet also was the object of the greatest enmity from other supposedly learned 'ulamás. During the time of Bahá'u'lláh, we see the same trend. He was accepted, supported, and admired by some distinguished 'ulamás—such as Mírzá Abu'l-Faḍl and Fádíl-i-Qá'íní—while being severely attacked and opposed by others—such as Shayikh Muhammad-Báqir (who received the title of "the Wolf" from Bahá'u'lláh),

2 He who shall arise from the line of Muhammad; the return of the Twelfth Imam who would return to reform the world and bring about justice.

his son Aqa Najafí Muhammad Taqi Ibn Muhammad (known as "the Son of the Wolf" in Bahá'í literature), and Haji Mírzá Muhammad Karim Khan-i-Kermani—whose reprehensible behavior is referred to in the most Holy Book of the Bahá'í Faith, *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas* (78, ¶ 164).³ In fact, one of the greatest challenges Bahá'u'lláh faced was, on the one hand, to attract the 'ulamás, and on the other hand, to show forth their shortcomings, prejudice, and lack of credibility.

In addition to refuting the spurious claims of His adversaries among the 'ulamás and elucidating some of the most significant themes of Islamic scholarship in His major books, such as the *Kitáb-i-Íqán* (*The Book of Certitude*), Bahá'u'lláh revealed some of His most weighty tablets to the most influential cleric and divines of His time, such as His Tablet of Burhan (The Proof), Tablet of Qina (The Veil), and His Epistle to the Son of the Wolf. Indeed, it is not an exaggeration to state that during the forty years of

3 "This passage is a reference to the intrigues of a group of Azalís, followers of Mírzá Yahyá (see note 190), associated with the city of Kirmán. They include Mulla Ja'far, his son Shaykh Ahmad-i-Rúhí and Mírzá Áqá Khan-i-Kirmání (both sons-in-law of Mírzá Yahyá), as well as Mírzá Ahmád-i-Kirmání. They not only sought to undermine the Faith, but involved themselves in political intrigues which culminated in the assassination of Násiri'd-Dín Sháh" (Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas* 242, n. 177).

His ministry, one of Bahá'u'lláh's central tasks was to challenge the 'ulamás and to abrogate their role as theological authorities. This served to free the Bahá'í Faith from the oppression of a clerical class, and enabled the establishment of an inviolable covenanted line of authoritative interpreters with His conferring of this station on 'Abdu'l-Bahá and 'Abdu'l-Bahá's subsequent conferring of this same authority on Shoghi Effendi.

THE ROLE OF THE 'ULAMÁS IN ISLAM

It is obvious that in Islam, particularly among the Shiites, the 'ulamás have taken it upon themselves to be in charge of the private, social, political, and religious lives of the Muslim community. Conveniently, the role of Shi'i 'ulamás was defined around 260 A.H. / 872 C.E. when, according to their belief, the son of the Eleventh Imam went into Occultation. The first period of the Occultation, which is called Minor Occultation (*Ghaybat-e Soghra*), lasted for seventy years, after which the religious leader of the time proclaimed that the Hidden Imam had gone from the Minor Occultation to the Major Occultation (*Ghaybat-e Kobra*) in 329 A.H. / 939 C.E., According to Shi'i Islam, this occultation has lasted for centuries and still continues to this day.

With the Occultation of the Twelfth Imam, the leadership in charge of the affairs of the community became a very crucial issue: Without contact with a living Imam, who would be

the authoritative interpreter of the Qur'án? To whom would be assigned the task of protecting the community? Who would issue *fatwas* (religious orders for *Jihad* or Holy War) against the infidels? Who would be in charge of the social, political, and educational affairs of the community? And who would deal with the daily tasks of overseeing the administration of holy shrines, mosques, and other religious endowments? In brief, who would now carry on the responsibilities and the duties of the Imam who had become hidden?

From this point on, 'ulamás came to play an active role in the individual, social, and political issues of the community. Gradually, they developed a multitude of positions in Shi'i and Sunni communities to carry out these duties: the *imams*, the *grand imams*, the *muftís*, the *hujjat al Islam*, the *mojtaheds*, the *ayatollahs*, and the *ayatollah ozma*. These figures, collectively referred to by the more general and popular term *mullás*, and more respectfully known as *Ruhaniyon*, claim to be the supporters of the *Shari'ah*,⁴ the spiritual leaders of the community, and even assert that they possess the authority to "legitimize" the government.

The *Velayat-e faqih*—the "mandate of the jurists" or "guardianship of the learned"—has been a controversial institution, particularly in the past

4 The compilation of Islamic law derived from the Qur'án and other sources, but abrogated by both the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh.

thirty-five years in Iran, and is the embodiment of the role of 'ulamás in the community. Regardless of rank, position, religious and social status, the hierarchy of the *Ruhaniyon* has been responsible for the protection, propagation, education, and guidance of the community.

SOME SPECIFIC CHANGES INSTITUTED BY BAHÁ'U'LLÁH

From the earliest days of His ministry, Bahá'u'lláh tried to challenge and abrogate the role and authority of 'ulamás. For example, in His Tablet of Bisharat (Glad Tidings), He says, "The first Glad-Tidings . . . is that the law of holy war [*jihad*] hath been blotted out from the Book" (*Tablets* 21). For centuries, the principle of *jihad* (holy war) has been the most important religious institution under the authority of the 'ulamás. Let us examine some of the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh that appear in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* related to the status and role of the 'ulamás.

ABOLITION OF THE PULPIT

In the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, Bahá'u'lláh prohibits His followers from ascending to the *menbar* (pulpit) while lecturing people or reciting the writings:

Ye have been prohibited from making use of pulpits. Whoso wisheth to recite unto you the verses of his Lord, let him sit on a chair placed upon a dais, that he may make mention of God, his

Lord, and the Lord of all mankind. It is pleasing to God that ye should seat yourselves on chairs and benches as a mark of honour for the love ye bear for Him and for the Manifestation of His glorious and resplendent Cause. (75, ¶ 154)

This is an important prohibition because the *menbar* has served as a principal forum from which the 'ulamás have advised, educated, agitated, led—or misled—the public in the mosques.

ABOLITION OF CONGREGATIONAL PRAYER

In the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, Bahá'u'lláh prohibits congregational prayer, saying, "It hath been ordained that obligatory prayer is to be performed by each of you individually. Save in the Prayer for the Dead, the practice of congregational prayer hath been annulled. He, of a truth, is the Ordainer, the All-Wise" (23, ¶ 12). The importance of this injunction is that *salat* or *namaz-e-jumah* (Friday prayer or the prayer of assembly) is one of the most important institutions in Islamic civilization and is performed by the *imam* or the leader of prayer, usually in mosques, and is followed, in the case of the noonday prayer, by a sermon. The sermon has the role of advising, encouraging, and, at times, agitating the crowd to revolt and rise against social and political authorities.

ABOLITION OF AUTHORITATIVE
INTERPRETATION OF THE SACRED
TEXTS

Bahá'u'lláh also prohibits *ta'vil*, the interpretation of the sacred writings, with the following admonition: "Who-so interpreteth what hath been sent down from the heaven of Revelation, and altereth its evident meaning, he, verily, is of them that have perverted the Sublime Word of God, and is of the lost ones in the Lucid Book" (*Kitáb-i-Aqdas* 57, ¶105). *Ta'vil*, the interpretation of the Qur'án and the hadiths, has been throughout centuries the main cause of sectarian division and enmity, and a tool by which the individual understandings of various 'ulamás have been dictated to the public. In the Bahá'í Faith, while all believers are encouraged to study the Texts to arrive at personal understanding, authoritative interpretation has been exclusively conferred on the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and Shoghi Effendi.

DISPOSITION OF MONETARY
CONTRIBUTIONS

In the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, Bahá'u'lláh cautions,

O people! Deal not faithlessly with the Right of God (Huqúqu'lláh), nor, without His leave, make free with its disposal. Thus hath His commandment been established in the holy Tablets, and in this exalted Book. He who dealth

faithlessly with God shall in justice meet with faithlessness himself; he, however, who acteth in accordance with God's bidding shall receive a blessing from the heaven of the bounty of his Lord, the Gracious, the Bestower, the Generous, the Ancient of Days. (55, ¶ 97)

This instruction contrasts explicitly with the practices in Islam in which individual 'ulamás were in a position to receive and administer the financial contributions of the community for whatever purposes they felt appropriate. That is, they were not accountable to any higher institution, nor were they under any obligation to see that such contributions were not squandered.

AUTHORITY FOR DISPOSITION OF
CONTRIBUTIONS

In Islam, the system of *awqaf* (religious donations or endowments) constitutes the common source of income for the 'ulamás, whereas in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* Bahá'u'lláh says,

Endowments dedicated to charity revert to God, the Revealer of Signs. None hath the right to dispose of them without leave from Him Who is the Dawning-place of Revelation. After Him, this authority shall pass to the Aghsán,⁵

⁵ Literally "branches" and alluding to the family or lineal descendants of Bahá'u'lláh.

and after them to the House of Justice—should it be established in the world by then—that they may use these endowments for the benefit of the Places which have been exalted in this Cause, and for whatsoever hath been enjoined upon them by Him Who is the God of might and power. Otherwise, the endowments shall revert to the people of Bahá who speak not except by His leave and judge not save in accordance with what God hath decreed in this Tablet—lo, they are the champions of victory betwixt heaven and earth—that they may use them in the manner that hath been laid down in the Book by God, the Mighty, the Bountiful. (34–5, ¶ 42)

In note 67 to the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, we find the following elaboration about the implications of this guidance:

Bahá'u'lláh provides for the possibility that the line of Aghsán would terminate prior to the establishment of the Universal House of Justice. He designated that in such a situation “*endowments shall revert to the people of Bahá.*” The term “*people of Bahá*” is used with a number of different meanings in the Bahá'í Writings. In this instance, they are described as those “*who speak not except by His leave and judge not save in accordance with what God hath decreed in this Tablet.*” Following the passing of Shoghi

Effendi in 1957, the Hands of the Cause of God directed the affairs of the Cause until the election of the Universal House of Justice in 1963. (197)

ABOLITION OF CLERICAL AUTHORITY

It is well established that after the Major Occultation in 941 C.E., Shiites were obliged to observe *taqlid* in their religious affairs. *Taqlid* (which literally means “to follow someone” or “to imitate”) in the Islamic legal context means to follow the decisions of a religious expert (a *mujtahid* or jurist) without necessarily examining the scriptural basis or reasoning for such a decision. The practice of *taqlid* has been enforced throughout the Shi'i history, particularly since the Safavid dynasty in the sixteenth century, 'ulamás required the believers to turn to a “source to imitate/follow” or “religious reference” (*Marja'-i-Taqlid*) for guidance and as a model to be imitated.

The institution of *taqlid* and the *Marja'-i-Taqlid* have been altogether abrogated by Bahá'u'lláh in many of His writings, thereby putting an end to the religious authority of the 'ulamás in religious law. In His tablet *Asl-i-Kullu'l-Khayr* (Words of Wisdom) Bahá'u'lláh states that “the essence of all that We have revealed for thee is Justice, is for 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. Thus have We instructed thee, manifested

unto thee Words of Wisdom that thou mayest be thankful unto the Lord, thy God, and glory therein amidst all peoples" (*Tablets* 157).

JUDICIAL AUTHORITY AND DECISIONS

In many Islamic communities around the world, Muslim clerics act as judges, and they are in charge of enforcing religious laws and conducting religious ceremonies, such as those pertaining to weddings, divorce procedures, inheritance, funerals, and so on. In fact, one of the jobs of 'ulamás is interpreting and upholding *shari'ah* law in the communities where they reside. In the Bahá'í Faith, religious laws are applied by the appropriate, elected Bahá'í institutions, such as the Local Spiritual Assemblies and the National Spiritual Assemblies. Related to this important change is the fact that in the future, these institutions will be designated not as "assemblies" but as local or territorial "houses of justice." In this regard, the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* states,

The Lord hath ordained that in every city a House of Justice be established wherein shall gather counsellors to the number of Bahá [nine], and should it exceed this number it doth not matter. They should consider themselves as entering the Court of the presence of God, the Exalted, the Most High, and as beholding Him Who is the Unseen. It behoveth them to be the trusted ones of the Merciful among men and to

regard themselves as the guardians appointed of God for all that dwell on earth. It is incumbent upon them to take counsel together and to have regard for the interests of the servants of God, for His sake, even as they regard their own interests, and to choose that which is meet and seemly. Thus hath the Lord your God commanded you. Beware lest ye put away that which is clearly revealed in His Tablet. Fear God, O ye that perceive. (29, ¶ 30)

The underlying rationale regarding this guidance is that divine laws are God-given, but their interpretation, implementation, expansion, and application rely on institutions elected by a process of universal suffrage. In short, these important duties are not left to individuals perceived as authoritative but to elected institutions that arrive at their decisions through a consultation process and are endowed with the authority to pronounce legislative decisions that are binding on individuals and on the community at large. In this context, the findings and opinions of the learned—religious experts and scholars—are still essential. In the framework of Bahá'u'lláh's vision, the synthesis of spiritual principles and secular governance derives from an elected body (the Universal House of Justice), which guides the body politic by means of consulting the authoritative Bahá'í texts to arrive at its decisions.

CHANGES AT THE INSTITUTIONAL LEVEL

The Guardian, in a letter written on his behalf on 14 March 1927, makes an extremely important observation about the nature of the authority bestowed upon the elected institutions—those bodies Bahá'u'lláh refers to as the “rulers” in the Bahá'í paradigm of social and religious governance:

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 the authorized centers 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 Center, so that there would be only one Center and all the rest integrated into a single body, revolving around one expressly-designated Pivot, thus making them all proof against schism and division.” (quoted in *Messages* 94)

By considering these rules of the

Kitáb-i-Aqdas, one can, in fact, discern that Bahá'u'lláh either eliminated the legal and social status of 'ulamás or else bestowed the role of the 'ulamás on the Bahá'í administrative institutions, thereby effectively abolishing a clerical class or any individual roles of authority. Furthermore, unlike many religions of the past whose institutions were contrived by followers long after the passing of the Messenger and Founder, the elected institutions of the Bahá'í Faith, created authoritatively by Bahá'u'lláh or by His appointed successor, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, have been divinely conferred with the authority to direct the affairs of the Faith, whether at the local level, the national or territorial level, or the international or global level.

The power to act, however, resides at the level of individual initiative and collective volition. In other words, the individual believer is ultimately tasked with employing his or her free will to convert into action the guidance and decisions emanating from these divinely designed consultative bodies.

LEARNING AND THE LEARNED

Despite the fact that individual Bahá'ís have no role to play comparable to that of the 'ulamás among the Shi'i, the Bahá'ís are, nevertheless, encouraged to independently study the Writings, whether individually or collectively in carefully designed courses. Indeed, Bahá'u'lláh clearly designates daily individual study as a duty incumbent upon every individual, though such

study is to be carried out in privacy and independently of the oversight of any religious authority. For example, Bahá'u'lláh in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* commands the believers,

Recite ye the verses of God every morn and eventide. Whoso faileth to recite them hath not been faithful to the Covenant of God and His Testament, and whoso turneth away from these holy verses in this Day is of those who throughout eternity have turned away from God. Fear ye God, O My servants, one and all. Pride not yourselves on much reading of the verses or on a multitude of pious acts by night and day; for were a man to read a single verse with joy and radiance it would be better for him than to read with lassitude all the Holy Books of God, the Help in Peril, the Self-Subsisting. Read ye the sacred verses in such measure that ye be not overcome by languor and despondency. Lay not upon your souls that which will weary them and weigh them down, but rather what will lighten and uplift them, so that they may soar on the wings of the Divine verses towards the Dawning-place of His manifest signs; this will draw you nearer to God, did ye but comprehend. (74, ¶ 149)

In this regard the individual believer "draws upon his love for Bahá'u'lláh, the power of the Covenant, the

dynamics of prayer, the inspiration and education derived from regular study of the Holy Texts, and the transformative forces that operate upon his soul as he strives to behave in accordance with the divine laws and principles" (Universal House of Justice, Ridván 1996, ¶21). In light of this charge, no individual believer can afford ignorance if he or she is to translate effectively the Writings into action. The responsibility to study the Writings, the responsibility to be inspired by them, the responsibility to translate them into action—all of these fall on the shoulders of every individual believer.

In the Bahá'í Writings it is abundantly clear that the human intellect and the ability to acquire knowledge, to conduct scientific research, and to pursue academic study of the Faith are all highly admired and encouraged as vital resources for the ongoing advancement of human civilization. It is also clear that in the Bahá'í Faith learned individuals have a very important role to play in the education and consolidation of the community, in the enrichment of the intellectual life of the community, and in the protection of the community against intellectual and religious attacks, provided that these same learned ones do not presume to govern others, to impose their understanding upon the community, or to strive among themselves for power and leadership.

According to the Bahá'í Writings and the messages of the Universal House of Justice, there exists no

conflict between true science and true religion, even though human understanding of both scientific and religious phenomena will always be limited. Thus, while Bahá'ís are not supposed to accept blindly the materialistic theories of modern thinking, they accept as a foundational axiom that underlying the study of all aspects of reality is the harmony and unity of material reality with the divine purpose of the Divine Plan of God in educating humankind.

We often read in the Writings of the Faith that scholars have the responsibility to act tactfully by fully utilizing their wisdom, moderation, and humility. Unlike the 'ulamás in Islam, learned Bahá'ís, like all other believers, are expected to adhere to the principles of Bahá'í ethics. In other words, scholarly or learned Bahá'ís are exhorted to be humble, steadfast in the Covenant, warriors against their own egos, just in their relations with others, generators of knowledge in the community, and the embodiment of Bahá'í virtues.

In this regard, we call to mind the greatest affliction that plagued the learned of past dispensations—a virulent egoism that effectively spiritually poisoned them. This very same illness can endanger Bahá'í scholars today and is one of their most pernicious and inveterate enemies. So it is that the Bahá'í scholar should avoid the temptation to strive for self-aggrandizement. Instead, Bahá'í scholars are exhorted to write apologetic works setting forth the verities of the Bahá'í Faith

and convincingly defending its lofty principles.

Regarding this issue, Bahá'u'lláh in His Tablet of Qina, states, "Ere long certain learned souls will appear who will arise to render assistance unto God, who will answer every objection with conclusive and convincing proofs, for their hearts will be inspired by the divine breaths of the Spirit . . ." (provisional translation). He also says in the Tablet of Salman that "it is absolutely incumbent on all persons to write whatever they can in rebuttal of those who have sought to refute God. . . . Should anyone pen a single word in rebuttal of a polemic against God, a station would be bestowed upon him such as would be the envy of the concourse on high . . ." (provisional translation).

THE MISSION OF BAHÁ'Í SCHOLARSHIP

The authoritative texts of the Bahá'í Faith leave no doubt that Bahá'í scholars are responsible for protecting and propagating the Faith. They are to be in the forefront in spreading and fostering Bahá'í education, in collaborating with other learned ones of the world for the betterment of the human condition, in joining forces with one another within the Bahá'í community to qualitatively enrich its social fabric and to increase the influence of the Faith globally.

Another way of considering the mission of Bahá'í scholarship concerns the abiding purpose of the revelation of Bahá'u'lláh. Regarding this very subject, the House of Justice

in its Ridván 1967 Message indicates that "this is the theme we must pursue in our efforts to deepen in the Cause. What is Bahá'u'lláh's purpose for the human race? For what ends did He submit to the appalling cruelties and indignities heaped upon Him? What does He mean by a 'new race of man'? What are the profound changes which He will bring about?" The House of Justice goes on to state,

The answers are to be found in the Sacred Writings of our Faith and in their interpretation by 'Abdu'l-Bahá and our beloved Guardian. Let the friends immerse themselves in this ocean, let them organize regular study classes for its constant consideration, and as reinforcement to their effort, let them remember conscientiously the requirements of daily prayers and reading of the Word of God enjoined upon all Bahá'ís by Bahá'u'lláh. (*Messages* 108)

This, then, is another charge that has been given to Bahá'í scholars—to distinguish between good and evil, and to show forth the ways that evil or injustice can be defeated. It is the solemn duty of Bahá'í scholarship to do research on the substantial needs of the world, to define the solutions to such global problems as illiteracy, poverty, the need for disarmament, gender inequality, and social injustice in all its forms. In other words, an analytical approach to current issues of social, political, and particularly educational

concerns from the Bahá'í perspective is one of the most urgent contributions that Bahá'í scholarship can make in our time. Indeed, it was in this context that the Universal House of Justice, in a message to the world's religious leaders in April 2003, brought to their attention the urgent need for religious leadership to address the problem of religious prejudice, a problem that is steadily becoming a more serious danger to human well-being (Ridván 2003).

Other responsibilities of Bahá'í scholarship could take the form of helping to build and expand human capacity; bringing about awareness of the necessity for moderation and justice to the communities of human race; working on social development at the local, regional, and international levels; uplifting human knowledge regarding the purpose and the goal of life; and doing research on the various aspects of change in the system of human values, whether at the individual or at the community level. In sum, the ethical question of human transformation—to become an enemy of evil and a contributor to the well-being of humankind—certainly comes to mind as a most vital role and responsibility of the Bahá'í scholar.

THE HISTORICAL LEGACY OF BAHÁ'Í SCHOLARS

In this gathering of the 38th Annual Conference of the Association for Bahá'í Studies, which is devoted to Scholarship and the Life of Society,

one cannot forget the great contributions, in various fields, of Bahá'í scholars of the past, those giants on whose shoulders we stand, figures such as Mírzá Abu'l-Faḍl, Fázel Mázandaráni, and Eshraq Khavari.

Mírzá Abu'l-Faḍl (1844–1914) was a great scholar who devoted his entire scholarly efforts to the spiritual awakening of his countrymen, to defending Bahá'í principles, and to proving the legitimacy the Bahá'í Faith in accordance with the sacred books of the previous revealed religions. He devoted all his time to educating, uplifting, and encouraging the Bahá'ís and helping them develop their communities. He was responsible for explaining to the non-Bahá'í religious scholars of his time the meaning of “a new Day,” a “new dispensation,” and the necessity for new approaches to the meaningful practice of religion. He was a champion in defending the Covenant and defeating the claims of the Covenant-breakers. He left behind dozens of books and treatises during his almost forty years of solid scholarship about the historical, doctrinal, and prophetic proofs regarding both the Bábí and Bahá'í Faiths.

Fázel Mázandaráni (1881–1957) came into the Faith from a learned family and devoted his entire life—whether in the East or in his travels to the West—collecting historical documents, studying, comprehending, and describing the nature of the Bábí and Bahá'í histories. In the same vein as historians and chroniclers such as Nabíl-i-Zarandí, he produced his

Kitáb-i-Zuhúr'l-Haqq, the most extensive historical study of the Bábí and Bahá'í Faiths, which comprises nine volumes of several thousand pages. He categorized the Writings of the central figures of the Faith under hundreds of titles in four volumes of his *Amr va Khalq*. He wrote the history of religion from a Bahá'í perspective and left behind his magnificent encyclopedic work with hundreds of entries in five volumes of more than 1,600 pages. In addition, he also served on Bahá'í administrative institutions and was commissioned by 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi to carry out several important missions teaching and protecting the Faith.

From 1926 to 1972 Eshraq Khavari (1902–72) enriched the quality and quantity of Bahá'í scholarship by writing historical works and apologetic treatises; by working on Bahá'í jurisprudence; by writing commentaries on the leading works of Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and the Guardian; and by the classification and publication of the Writings of the Faith in more than a dozen volumes containing hundreds of tablets by Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá and letters from the Guardian. He traveled extensively, promoted the Faith energetically, and uplifted the spirit of the Bahá'í communities he visited. He was a devoted, selfless, and energetic teacher and scholar for about half a century, writing in the Persian language regarding various fields of Bahá'í scholarship.

There is not enough time to even touch upon the contributions of Sadru's-Sudur, Muhammad-Alí Faizi, Azizullah Suleymani, Hasan M. Balyuzi, and so many others who enriched the historical study of the Bahá'í Faith in the last century. And certainly the continuation and the augmentation of the scholarly heritage of these scholars is another important responsibility of present and future generations of Bahá'í scholars.

The development of Bahá'í scholarship in the East—which lasted for decades until the early 1970s when Eshraq Khavari passed away—faced waves of opposition and persecution in Iran. Since the late 1970s—for more than three decades—Bahá'í scholarship has slowed down considerably in Iran, but Bahá'í scholarship in the West has been very active, thanks to its veterans and to an emerging new generation of Bahá'í scholars. This advancement is particularly true in the areas of historical research, where academic papers have been published on a variety of issues, in addition to critical commentaries that have been produced regarding the Sacred Texts of the Faith.

THE ROLE OF BAHÁ'Í SCHOLARSHIP IN THE FUTURE

In discussing the evolving role of Bahá'í scholarship, we should certainly concern ourselves with at least a brief look at what will be the future roles and responsibilities of the Bahá'í scholar, as envisioned in the Writings of the central figures of the Faith

and in the messages of the Universal House of Justice. One of the characteristics of today's human race as referred to by the House of Justice in its Ridván Message of 1998 is the hunger for meaning and yearning of the soul: "Spiritual hunger is characterized by restlessness and dissatisfaction with the moral state of society. It is also evident in the upsurge of fundamentalism among various religious sects. Hunger is also responsible for the creation of new movements, posing as religions or aspiring to take the place of religion" (¶ 9).

Is there some way, then, that Bahá'í scholarship can usefully respond to such seemingly ineffable human needs? In answering such a question, we would do well to refer to a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi on 21 October 1943, stating, "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" (*Compilation of Compilations* 225).

In another letter written on the Guardian's behalf on 5 July 1949, we find the following advice to Bahá'í scholars:

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. (*Compilation of Compilations* 230)

In order to fulfill the recommendations and the wishes of the beloved Guardian, the Universal House of Justice wrote the following in its 1984 Ridván Message:

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 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. (*Messages* 624)

The themes of this message have since been greatly elaborated with explanations and elucidations in numerous messages from the Universal House of Justice since the 1980s and up to the present time. Many of these messages, particularly since the mid-1990s, call for fostering a culture of learning with consultation and action aimed at the ultimate goal of constructing a global civilization. To achieve these goals, we are told that an openness of the Bahá'í communities to the wider society and its experience, together with the spiritual and secular knowledge of learned Bahá'ís, are needed to contribute to the process of integration of the human society in its struggle toward reaching its ultimate destiny—a global commonwealth that the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh will, in time, establish.

It is important to note that this same integration requires a two-fold process of both integration and *disintegration*, forces that Shoghi Effendi describes in detail in *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*. He observes that while Bahá'í individuals, communities, and institutions have a constructive role to play in the process of the integration, "[t]he destructive forces that characterize [the disintegration] should be identified with a civilization that has

refused to answer to the expectation of a new age, and is consequently falling into chaos and decline" (170).

THE PRESENT CHALLENGE TO THOSE
WHO WOULD BE BAHÁ'Í SCHOLARS

It would seem to be an imperative to look more closely into the requirements and prerequisites for those Bahá'ís who would like to contribute to the scholarly works of the Faith. It is clear that a deep knowledge of the Bahá'í Writings, the works of Shoghi Effendi, and the messages of the Universal House of Justice must constitute the foundation for Bahá'í scholarship. In addition, it is also necessary for the serious Bahá'í scholar to have thorough knowledge and sound understanding of the history of the Bábí and Bahá'í Faiths; the challenges they faced; and the developments, spirit, and energy that were generated by the unfolding of these revelations.

Such study requires ample familiarity with the historical sources, the nature, and the chronology of the events associated with this period. Likewise, one must become thoroughly acquainted with the achievements, the changes, the expansion, and the persecution, together with the development of the role of Bahá'í women in Bahá'í institutions. And these are but a few areas of research required for the Bahá'í scholars who are intent on studying this rich history.

Furthermore, in order to be working effectively in the field of Bahá'í scholarship, it is absolutely essential

for one to consider all that Shoghi Effendi has to impart on these issues. When he was asked about his advice and recommendations regarding Bahá'í scholarship, he replied that one should study history, economics, and sociology in order to become familiar with the progressive movements and thoughts being put forth today so as to correlate the information derived from these fields to the Bahá'í teachings.⁶

In addition to these specific fields that Shoghi Effendi recommends, an extra dimension can be added to one's scholarship by acquiring special skills and expertise in the languages of revelation—Arabic and Persian—as well as a sound knowledge of the history of religions, particularly about Islam and the Qur'anic sciences in which the Bábí and Bahá'í Faiths are rooted. Of course, understanding the methodology of research and critical scholarly work is also essential.

Finally, it is worth looking into a few other factors that can assist in fostering and developing Bahá'í scholarship. In a memorandum from the Universal House of Justice to the International Teaching Center, the supreme institution states that it believes "that both the International Teaching Centre and the Board of Counsellors can render valuable services in this area by encouraging budding scholars and by promoting within the Bahá'í

6 See the letter dated 12 March 1944, written on Shoghi Effendi's behalf to an individual believer and quoted in *Compilation of Compilations*, vol. II, 431.

community an atmosphere of tolerance for the views of others" (quoted in *Scholarship* 28).

In addition to the duty of these institutions to inspire and support individual scholarship, it is vital that research centers, funds, and scholarships for Bahá'ís and non-Bahá'ís who are interested in Bahá'í scholarship be established—to facilitate and finance their research projects.

There are a few other important considerations that I believe should be taken into account. That is, I feel it is the role of Bahá'í scholarship to explain and demonstrate the following characteristics:

- How scholarship can assist in the further development and growth of the Bahá'í Faith.
- How to nourish Bahá'í scholarship and how to bring forth the new generation of Bahá'í scholars.
- How, in light of new technology and web science, new tools and skills can become available to the Bahá'í scholar.
- How the intellectual creativity, and innovative, critical thinking of Bahá'ís can be encouraged and supported and receive necessary attention.
- How the contribution of the collective attitude of the Bahá'ís can create an environment that will be conducive to a larger and deeper area of scholarly activities.
- How scholarly efforts of the Bahá'ís can be more harmonized to attract more people to the Faith,

particularly by focusing on areas that are of concern to non-Bahá'í intellectuals

In conclusion, then, I would like to end this presentation by again thanking the Association for Bahá'í Studies for giving me this opportunity to address the issue of the evolution of Bahá'í scholarship. I also think it appropriate to conclude by quoting from Shoghi Effendi the following excerpt from a letter that was written on his behalf in August 1943, in which he states, "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" (*Compilation*, vol. 1, #678, p. 305).

And to all those who will be the rebuilders of the world and the major contributors to its spiritual awakening, I offer this statement from the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*—the charter of the future world civilization—in which Bahá'u'lláh proclaims,

Happy are ye, O ye the learned ones in Bahá. 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. Well is it with him that
turneth unto you, and woe betide
the froward. This day, it behoveth
whoso hath quaffed the Mystic
Wine of everlasting life from the
Hands of the loving-kindness of
the Lord his God, the Merciful, to
pulsate even as the throbbing ar-
tery in the body of mankind, that
through him may be quickened
the world and every crumbling
bone. (82, ¶ 173)

WORKS CITED

- "Bahá'í Scholarship: Statements by Shoghi Effendi and the Universal House of Justice Compiled by Peter Khan." *Bahá'í Studies Review* 3.2 (1993). Print.
- Bahá'u'lláh. *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh Revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas*. Comp. Research Dept. of the Universal House of Justice. 2nd ed. Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1988. Print.
- _____. *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas: The Most Holy Book*. Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1993. Print.
- The Compilation of Compilations*. Vols. 1 and 2. Maryborough, Australia: Bahá'í Publications Australia, 1991. Print.
- Shoghi Effendi. *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh: Selected Letters*. Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1991. Print.
- 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*. Maryborough, Australia: Bahá'í Publications Australia, 1995. Print.
- The Universal House of Justice. Letter to the Bahá'ís of the World. Ridván 1996.
- _____. Letter to the Bahá'ís of the World. Ridván 2003.
- _____. *Messages from the Universal House of Justice 1963-1986*. Comp. Geoffrey W. Marks. Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1986. Print.