

INVITED COMMENTARY

Knowledge and the Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh¹

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Abstract

The pursuit of knowledge, in addition to ascertaining facts, requires categorization, correlation and deduction. It is a process that is influenced culturally by the researcher's understanding of the world. The Bahá'í revelation presents a new and challenging situation by its principles of the unfettered search for truth and the harmony of religion and science, by the authenticity of the writings of its Founder, and by the authority of the Covenant He established. This challenge is faced particularly by those Bahá'ís who follow an academic career in religious studies, but also by the generality of the believers, and it should lead to enrichment of their understanding.

This paper considers the relationship of knowledge to the Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh. The nature of this relationship calls for a new understanding which some Bahá'í scholars have had difficulty in acquiring, for it provides a continuing source of infallible divine guidance for a religion which also "enjoins upon its followers the primary duty of an unfettered search after truth."² To some, this juxtaposition presents a contradiction, which they strive to overcome by subordinating one principle to the other. It is an especially acute problem for Bahá'ís who, in order to better equip themselves for study of the Faith, have entered academic fields such as history or oriental studies, which seemed to them to be particularly relevant to their purpose. The problem they then face is that every academic field at present requires that research and writing be conducted within certain defined frameworks and be based on what are currently considered to be scientifically established premises. Only by following such methods can an academic hope to advance his career. Yet Bahá'í academics are faced with repeated exhortations from the Universal House of Justice to reexamine the postulates of established

¹ Based on a talk given at a conference on "Knowledge and Scholarship" in the Bahá'í World Centre, Haifa, Israel, 5-6 December 1997.

² Shoghi Effendi, *The Faith of Bahá'u'lláh, a World Religion*. Statement prepared for the United Nations Special Palestine Committee, July 1947.

methodologies and widen their vision so that there is no dichotomy between what they believe as Bahá'ís and what they write as scholars.

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Beyond its relevance for Bahá'í scholars, a clear understanding of this characteristic of the Bahá'í Faith is important to all Bahá'ís, and we need to be able to explain it to enquirers. I propose, therefore, to approach the subject by commenting on the following issues:

- the importance of method in the acquisition of knowledge
- the cultural bias of existing methods of studying religions, and the Bahá'í principle of the harmony between religion and science
- the concept of paradigm shifts
- 'Abdu'l-Bahá's analysis of the avenues through which we attain knowledge, and the centrality of divine revelation to this process
- the relationship between the knowledge conveyed by revelation and that acquired by research
- some implications for the attitude and ethical standards of scholars
- the role of the Universal House of Justice in relation to the work of scholars.

Methods and cultures

There are, of course, many methodologies in use in academia. They evolve, are subject to revision, and are applied with varying rigour in different places. The Bahá'í viewpoint is critical of only certain aspects of some of them, and mainly requires Bahá'ís who employ them in their work to widen their vision beyond the limits any particular method may prescribe. Some of those convinced by their training that current academic methods are scientific and are the most reliable route to ascertaining the truth misjudge the House of Justice's exhortations as arising from a desire to obscure unpalatable facts, or as a reversion to medieval practices of subordinating research to ecclesiastical dogma. There is a temptation, therefore, to divide science and religion into complementary but mutually exclusive realms, perpetuating the division that has long ruled western thought. Bahá'í scholars need to study the implications of the principle of the harmony of religion and science, and to develop methods faithful to it. It is not likely that this is a task the Universal House of Justice will perform for them. Let us consider some of the issues which are involved.

Any pursuit of knowledge and understanding requires the seeker to group facts into categories. One could say that the inter-relationship of facts is as important and illuminating as the facts themselves. Yet one of the shortcomings displayed by many Bahá'ís in their study of the teachings is precisely the failure to perceive such relationships. Too often do they see deepening in the teachings as the study of separate subjects and isolated laws and principles, while it is only through the process of deductive reasoning that one comes to perceive how the teachings, laws and principles of the revelation dovetail into and illuminate one another, producing a pattern of extraordinary beauty and perfection.

For example, consider the relationship between husbands and wives in

marriage. One can find many references in the teachings specifically referring to marriage and the family, and many to the principle of the equality of men and women. But according to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the true station of a human being is that of servitude, that every person should be a servant to all others. Surely this applies to the relationship between husbands and wives. While there must certainly be equality, each should also see himself or herself as the servant of the other. This simple realization illuminates the other aspects of the marriage relationship.

In the academic study of religions, there is a natural tendency to try to fit the Bahá'í Faith into the categories that have been developed by Europeans and Americans in their study of Christianity and non-Christian religions. The standpoint of the researcher is, therefore, that of Christian-based western culture. Yet much of the spirit and practice of modern science developed in opposition to the church. Since scientific study was subject to ecclesiastical dogma, a reactive attempt was made to explain all phenomena without any reference to God or religion. This produced marvellous results, and so the scientific method, whereby each hypothesis is tested by experiments that anyone else can repeat, and where new theories are built on old ones, with a steady increase in knowledge, became the ideal for all researchers. There was consequently a determined effort to bring all fields of study, including history, economics, medicine, psychology and sociology within this pattern. However, human beings are not mechanistic structures responding unvaryingly to external stimuli. Humans are complex, sentient, thinking beings, and therefore any study of human beings as a class, or even of a human individual, presents such a vast array of factors that it is impossible to incorporate all the information essential for fully reliable conclusions.

Understandably, the rigid modernist view of science has been challenged by postmodern philosophers who perceive that much of what has been accepted as the objective truth is, in fact, culturally produced, including the categories into which facts are marshalled. Only when these categories are confronted by facts they cannot explain does change in the structure of scientific thought occur. Thomas Kuhn, an important writer in this field, has referred to such changes as paradigm shifts.³

One of the features of human life never satisfactorily explained by modernist science is the periodic appearance of the Manifestations of God and their enduring influence on society. The science of comparative religion explains these phenomena as the product of social influences. However, since the concepts of comparative religion were developed in a basically irreligious society, the explanations they afford are consistent with an understanding of human society that, from the outset, ignores the existence of God, and so pays scant respect to the statements of the Manifestations themselves on the

³ *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (2nd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).

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subject.

Another formidable difficulty facing students of religion arises from the long time elapsed since the birth of the religions studied and the mass of confused and conflicting material available. For example, nearly two millennia have passed since the lifetime of Jesus. Although as far as is known, He taught in Aramaic, the closest we have to His original teachings are Greek translations in the books of the New Testament. It is not surprising, therefore, that modern scholars have devoted enormous effort to trying to ascertain exactly what He taught and how much of this was faithfully retained in the doctrines of the many churches. Lack of success has brought some theologians to conclude that it does not matter; what matters, they conclude, is what His followers thought He taught, for that is what has affected the course of history. Thus, the ideas of followers of Christ became for such scholars the reality of the Christian religion.

The new circumstances of the Bahá'í Faith

With the Bahá'í Faith, however, we have a different situation. We are close enough to the lifetime of Bahá'u'lláh that, for example, many people now alive have spoken with the Hand of the Cause Taráz'u'lláh Samandarí, who, when he was a young man, was in the presence of Bahá'u'lláh. We have, moreover, voluminous writings from Bahá'u'lláh's own pen, and we have the authentic writings and utterances of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the appointed Centre of His Covenant, and thirty-six years of the authoritative guidance of Shoghi Effendi.

Further, if what Bahá'u'lláh teaches us about the function of the Manifestations of God in human history is true – and this is the fundamental belief which all Bahá'ís accept – the coming of a Manifestation of God creates in human thought a paradigm shift of incalculable dimensions. One is reminded of these words from the Báb's farewell address to his disciples:

The newly born babe of that Day excels the wisest and most venerable men of this time, and the lowliest and most unlearned of that period shall surpass in understanding the most erudite and accomplished divines of this age.⁴

In that light, one can understand the great emphasis Bahá'u'lláh places on the recognition of His mission. Someone of no education, but imbued by the new paradigm, can understand profundities beyond the conception of a mind bound by old modes of thought.

In the Bahá'í Faith, the teaching of Bahá'u'lláh is supremely important.

⁴ *The Dawn-Breakers: Nabil's Narrative of the Early Days of the Bahá'í Revelation* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1996) 95.

What His followers believe is of less significance, and can always be assumed to be in some ways at variance with the reality of the Faith itself. There is a new and significant differentiation in the Bahá'í Faith between the clear and undoubted revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, along with the authoritative statements of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the Guardian and the Universal House of Justice on the one hand, and the Bahá'í community, with its members' varied and only partially accurate understanding of the Faith, on the other.

Integration of revelation and research

How, then, are we to integrate the implications of Bahá'u'lláh's revelation and the Covenant He established into our understanding of the pursuit of knowledge and scholarship? In Chapter 83 of *Some Answered Questions*, 'Abdu'l-Bahá states: "There are only four accepted methods of comprehension - that is to say, the realities of things are understood by these four methods." He then proceeds to enumerate these methods:

The first method is by the senses - that is to say, all that the eye, the ear, the taste, the smell, the touch perceive is understood by this method....The second is the method of reason, which was that of the ancient philosophers, the pillars of wisdom; this is the method of the understanding. They proved things by reason and hold firmly to logical proofs; all their arguments are arguments of reason....The third method of understanding is by tradition - that is, through the text of the Holy Scriptures - for people say, "In the Old and New Testaments, God spoke thus."⁵

Not one of these methods, 'Abdu'l-Bahá states, can be relied upon. Our senses can deceive us; this is evident to each of us from our daily experience. Our reasoning can be faulty, either because the premises are in error or because the logic is flawed. Tradition is not a firm basis, because traditions must be understood by the use of reason, and reason, 'Abdu'l-Bahá comments, is "like a balance and the meanings contained in the Holy Books are like the thing which is weighed. If the balance is untrue, how can the weight be ascertained?"⁶ He concludes:

Know then: that which is in the hands of people, that which they believe, is liable to error. For, in proving or disproving a thing, if a proof is brought forward which is taken from the evidence of our senses, this method, as has become evident, is not perfect; if

⁵ *Some Answered Questions* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1994) 297ff.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 298-9.

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the proofs are intellectual, the same is true; or if they are traditional, such proofs also are not perfect. Therefore, there is no standard in the hands of people upon which we can rely. But the bounty of the Holy Spirit gives the true method of comprehension which is infallible and indubitable. This is through the help of the Holy Spirit which comes to man, and this is the condition in which certainty can alone be attained.

What can we understand by “the bounty of the Holy Spirit”? According to a purely Christian interpretation, we will understand it to be the divine inspiration that comes to a person when his or her heart is turned to God. While there is no doubt that this is one of its meanings, that meaning alone is inadequate to the statement of ‘Abdu'l-Bahá, because we know from our own experience, as well as from the explanations given by Shoghi Effendi, that a believer has no way of knowing for sure whether what he receives through inspiration is indeed from God or is the product of his own imagination. From a Bahá'í viewpoint, however, the “bounty of the Holy Spirit” is a term that also embraces the outpouring of guidance that we receive through the Manifestations of God. It is only by comparing our intuitive understandings with that guidance that we can be confident of their correctness.

In other words, one acquires knowledge in two ways: from acceptance of the revelation of the Manifestation of God and through study. Revelation does not constrain or contradict the search for truth, it provides the spiritual dynamic and illumination which informs the process and the fruits of our study. Without it we can go far astray, and our scholarship, instead of being a light to ourselves and others, can inflate our egos and breed disdain for those who are less learned.

This theme is expounded by Bahá'u'lláh, in another manner, in the *Kitáb-i-Íqán*. There He writes:⁷

Know verily that Knowledge is of two kinds: Divine and Satanic. The one welleteth out from the fountain of divine inspiration; the other is but a reflection of vain and obscure thoughts. The source of the former is God Himself; the motive-force of the latter the whisperings of selfish desire. The one is guided by the principle: “Fear ye God; God will teach you;” the other is but a confirmation of the truth: “Knowledge is the most grievous veil between man and his Creator.” The former bringeth forth the fruit of patience, of longing desire, of true understanding, and love; whilst the latter can yield naught but arrogance, vainglory and conceit. From the sayings of those

⁷ *The Kitáb-i-Íqán* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1983) 69.

Masters of holy utterance, Who have expounded the meaning of true knowledge, the odour of these dark teachings, which have obscured the world, can in no wise be detected. The tree of such teachings can yield no result except iniquity and rebellion, and beareth no fruit but hatred and envy. Its fruit is deadly poison; its shadow a consuming fire. How well hath it been said: "Cling unto the robe of the Desire of thy heart, and put thou away all shame; bid the worldlywise be gone, however great their name."

Another passage relating directly to this theme:⁸

They should put their trust in God, and, holding fast unto Him, follow in His way. Then will they be made worthy of the effulgent glories of the sun of divine knowledge and understanding, and become the recipients of a grace that is infinite and unseen, inasmuch as man can never hope to attain unto the knowledge of the All-Glorious, can never quaff from the stream of divine knowledge and wisdom, can never enter the abode of immortality, nor partake of the cup of divine nearness and favour, unless and until he ceases to regard the words and deeds of mortal men as a standard for the true understanding and recognition of God and His Prophets.

In another passage, Bahá'u'lláh indicates how the acceptance of divine knowledge fertilizes the seeker's capacity for true research and understanding.⁹

In like manner, endeavour to comprehend the meaning of the "changing of the earth." Know thou, that upon whatever hearts the bountiful showers of mercy, raining from the "heaven" of divine Revelation, have fallen, the earth of those hearts hath verily been changed into the earth of divine knowledge and wisdom. What myrtles of unity hath the soil of their hearts produced! What blossoms of true knowledge and wisdom have their illumined bosoms yielded! Were the earth of their hearts to remain unchanged, how could such souls who have not been taught one letter, have seen no teacher, and entered no school, utter such words and display such knowledge as none can apprehend? Methinks they have been moulded from the clay of

⁸ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 46.

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infinite knowledge, and kneaded with the water of divine wisdom. Therefore, hath it been said: "Knowledge is a light which God casteth into the heart of whomsoever He willeth." It is this kind of knowledge which is and hath ever been praiseworthy, and not the limited knowledge that hath sprung forth from veiled and obscured minds. This limited knowledge they even stealthily borrow one from the other, and vainly pride themselves therein!

Would that the hearts of men could be cleansed from these man-made limitations and obscure thoughts imposed upon them! haply they may be illumined by the light of the Sun of true knowledge, and comprehend the mysteries of divine wisdom. Consider now, were the parched and barren soil of these hearts to remain unchanged, how could they ever become the Recipients of the revelation of the mysteries of God, and the Revealers of the divine Essence? Thus hath He said: "On the day when the earth shall be changed into another earth."¹⁰

These passages in no way contradict the many sacred texts stressing the importance of education; those which praise the virtues of the arts and sciences; or Bahá'u'lláh's own injunction in the *Hidden Words*:

O SON OF SPIRIT! The best beloved of all things in My sight is Justice; turn not away therefrom if thou desirest Me, and neglect it not that I may confide in thee. By its aid thou shalt see with thine own eyes and not through the eyes of others, and shalt know of thine own knowledge and not through the knowledge of thy neighbour. Ponder this in thy heart; how it behooveth thee to be. Verily justice is My gift to thee and the sign of My loving-kindness. Set it then before thine eyes.¹¹

Neither are they at variance with the Guardian's written statement that the Bahá'í Faith "enjoins upon its followers the primary duty of an unfettered search after truth."¹²

Complementary elements of the search for knowledge

The Bahá'í teachings seem to say that knowledge must be pursued

¹⁰ Qur'án 14:48.

¹¹ Arabic Hidden Words, number 2.

¹² Shoghi Effendi, *The Faith of Bahá'u'lláh, a World Religion*. Statement prepared for the United Nations Special Palestine Committee, July 1947.

simultaneously in a number of ways: through immersion in the divine revelation, through the unfettered processes of the human mind, through the inspiration of the human heart, and through the application of the teachings in our lives and actions.

It is the correlation of these avenues – and probably of yet others – that the Universal House of Justice intends Bahá'í scholars to work out. A valid methodology can in no way imply blind acceptance of unexamined statements, but there is a point in the search for truth at which the seeker has risen above doubts to certitude. This does not mean that his mind is no longer searching and enquiring, but that experience and study have caused him to attain that faith which 'Abdu'l-Bahá defines as “conscious knowledge.”¹³ One can see this process in operation in subjects far less exalted than religion. If one tells a tribesman that the earth is a sphere floating in space, the tribesman only has to use his eyes to see how ridiculous a claim it is. Someone who has had a thorough modern education, however, who has learned at school the evidence for this assertion, and who has seen photographs of the earth taken from space, no longer can have any doubts on the subject. He has not been brainwashed into accepting an absurd assertion; he has been enlightened by study and experience and has risen to a higher level of knowledge.

Thus it is not logical to adopt an atheistic basis for research into religions – unless, that is, one is an atheist. Accordingly, the premises on which scholars of different backgrounds base their studies are likely to differ one from another. It would be entirely reasonable for a non-Bahá'í scholar to study the life and teachings of Bahá'u'lláh as if He were merely a mid-nineteenth-century Persian man. A Bahá'í, however, knows that Bahá'u'lláh was not subject to His environment in the way a normal human being might be. On the contrary, His knowledge and understanding transcended His environment and, although He undoubtedly “tuned” His revelation to the level and nature of His hearers' understanding, and used the Arabic and Persian languages in traditionally acceptable ways, He Himself was conveying to His hearers, both current and for centuries to come, truths which they were, and are, scarcely able to apprehend.

A Bahá'í scholar thus regards the actions and words of Bahá'u'lláh with the eye of a humble pupil. How different this is from the attitude likely to be adopted by a non-Bahá'í, perhaps one who thinks himself the learned possessor of the wealth of modern civilised knowledge and regards with a tolerant but condescending gaze the actions and statements of a nineteenth-century reformer, inevitably the product of his age and surroundings no matter how revolutionary his ideas. Nevertheless, this is the difference in attitude towards Bahá'u'lláh and His Faith – which shows up as well in the resultant

¹³ *Tablets of Abdul-Baha Abbas, vol.3* (Chicago: Bahai Publishing Committee, 1930 printing) 549.

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deductions drawn from the evidence – that must distinguish a Bahá'í scholar from any other.

In the Tablet of Wisdom, Bahá'u'lláh writes: “Empedocles, who distinguished himself in philosophy, was a contemporary of David, while Pythagoras lived in the days of Solomon, son of David, and acquired Wisdom from the treasury of prophethood.”¹⁴ There are some who have adduced this passage as an argument that Bahá'u'lláh was by no means omniscient and is therefore not to be relied upon in other matters. However, as has been pointed out, Bahá'u'lláh introduces this passage with the statement that He was about to mention “some accounts of the sages”, and it can be seen by comparison with the sources that He quotes verbatim from the works of such Muslim historians as Abu'l-Fath-i-Shahristání and 'Imádu'd-Dín Abu'l-Fidá. The question facing a Bahá'í scholar who knows that western historians date Empedocles and Pythagoras some centuries away from David and Solomon is why did Bahá'u'lláh decide to quote this particular passage? Was He merely quoting an account familiar to His readers, with the primary purpose of illustrating His main argument? Was He drawing to the attention of future Bahá'í historians that they should re-examine their basis for the historical dating of these events? Or is there yet some other implication to be drawn from this passage?

A Bahá'í will also consider such a passage in light of other comments in the writings. For example, earlier in the Tablet of Wisdom, after discoursing on creation and the nature of the Word of God, Bahá'u'lláh says:

We are loath to enlarge on this subject, inasmuch as the unbelievers have inclined their ears towards Us in order to hear that which might enable them to cavil against God, the Help in Peril, the Self-Subsisting. And since they are unable to attain to mysteries of knowledge and wisdom from what hath been unravelled by the Source of divine splendour, they rise in protest and burst into clamour. But it is true to say that they object to that which they comprehend, not to the expositions given by the Expounder, nor the truths imparted by the One true God, the Knower of things unseen. Their objections, one and all, turn upon themselves, and I swear by thy life that they are devoid of understanding.¹⁵

Scholars adhering to old paradigms will tend to place the Bahá'í Faith into one or another of the categories those paradigms have created, and try to

¹⁴ *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh Revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1995) 145.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 141.

understand it in that way. But since it does not fit into any such category, such comparisons, even if true in some respects, can be highly misleading. A Bahá'í scholar who has a deep understanding of the Faith will avoid this trap.

Particular challenges of an academic career

How can a Bahá'í academic, however, who is constrained by the current methods of his discipline, express his own proper understanding? As a Bahá'í scholar rises in eminence in his field, he will be progressively able, just as any other scholar, to break the shackles of the current paradigm. A student or young scholar, however, is compelled to follow current methods if he wishes to pass his examinations or have his writings published by academic journals. He is in the same position as a teacher of the Faith who has to simplify what he says in order not to overstrain the receptivity of his hearers. The talks of 'Abdu'l-Bahá are perfect examples of how to do this without in any way violating the teachings of the Cause.

Historical research, for example, involves the ascertainment of facts, and the drawing of conclusions which combine those facts into a reasonable pattern. Both processes require the use of judgement, and, for a Bahá'í scholar, they will be affected by his knowledge of the nature of Bahá'u'lláh and His revelation. So, even if forced by circumstances to present only evidence acceptable to the current academic methodology, he would not permit this limitation to lead him to draw conclusions that, as a Bahá'í, he would know to be false.

This quandary is, however, only a side-issue to the more fundamental question of the interplay of revelation and the fruits of scholarly investigation. I believe that there is a passage in the *Kitáb-i-Íqán* which provides the key to this larger question. It is the section which begins: "But, O my brother, when a true seeker determines to take the step of search in the path leading to the knowledge of the Ancient of Days, he must..." There are many gems of advice in this passage. A striking feature is the inclusion of requirements that would normally be understood to be related to ethics and morals rather than to research. One sentence which is particularly relevant to public discussion of the teachings by Bahá'ís is:

He [the true seeker] must never seek to exalt himself above anyone, must wash away from the tablet of his heart every trace of pride and vainglory, must cling unto patience and resignation, observe silence, and refrain from idle talk. For the tongue is a smouldering fire, and excess of speech a deadly poison. Material fire consumeth the body, whereas the fire of the tongue devoureth both heart and soul. The force of the former lasteth

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but for a time, whilst the effects of the latter endure a century.¹⁶

Not that a seeker should never speak, but rather, he should use discipline in what he says, avoiding mere combative arguing and refraining from idle talk, thinking always of the purpose of his comments.

This passage, often called “The Tablet of the True Seeker,” teaches us that our whole being, our attitude to others, our outward behaviour as well as our inward spirit, are essential elements in our search for truth. It is another reminder of the inter-relatedness of all elements of the Bahá'í revelation. As we study the many passages in the writings touching on the acquisition of knowledge, we come to see that there is not, and cannot be, any conflict between divine revelation and an unfettered search after truth. The revelation lifts us to a higher level of understanding and throws light on all we could ever want to know. I am reminded of Jesus' advice, “Seek ye first the kingdom of god and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.”¹⁷

Institutions of the Covenant and the search for knowledge

Now we must consider how the operation of the Covenant and its institutions affect the search for knowledge. Every religion of the past, in the absence of a Covenant as clear and binding as that of Bahá'u'lláh, has sunk into division and error because of the inability of its followers to remain true to the teachings of its Founder. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá explained in the passage from Chapter 83 of *Some Answered Questions*, the possession of a body of sacred scripture is no certain guide to true knowledge:

This method equally is not perfect, because the traditions are understood by the reason. As the reason itself is liable to err, how can it be said that in interpreting the meaning of the traditions it will not err, for it is possible for it to make mistakes, and certainty cannot be attained. This is the method of the religious leaders; whatever they understand and comprehend from the text of the books is that which their reason understands from the text, and not necessarily the real truth; for the reason is like a balance, and the meanings contained in the text of the Holy Books are like the thing which is weighed. If the balance is untrue, how can the weight be ascertained?¹⁸

¹⁶ *The Kitáb-i-Íqán* 193.

¹⁷ Matt. 6:33

¹⁸ *Some Answered Questions* 298.

Bahá'ís would be no different from the followers of other religions in this, were it not for the Covenant which provides, first in 'Abdu'l-Bahá and then in the Guardian and the Universal House of Justice, divinely protected and guided centres. To fully understand the nature and inter-connectedness of the twin institutions of the Guardianship and the Universal House of Justice is beyond our capacity at this time, but we can appreciate their essential functions and can see how, even in the absence of the Guardian, which deprives the Faith of a centre of authoritative interpretation, the Covenant is still inviolable.

Some friends have said that, in the absence of the Guardian, the Universal House of Justice will be compelled to make authoritative interpretations, but the House of Justice has ruled this out. Without quoting at length here from the letters written by the House of Justice on this theme, it is clear that there are two kinds of interpretation and divinely inspired authoritative interpretation is the sphere of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and the Guardian alone. They could say what the meaning and intention of Bahá'u'lláh was, and no one has any right to say the contrary. Thus if, to a follower of the Faith, there ever seems to be a contradiction between the Sacred Text and the authoritative interpretation, it is clearly the latter which must guide his understanding.

There is, moreover, an immense amount of guidance from 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi that not only interprets the revelation, but also, by example, shows us how we ourselves can understand the writings and draw our own conclusions where no authoritative interpretation exists. Thus, although our conclusions are prone to error, such examples should help us to avoid the more serious ones.

The Guardianship and the Universal House of Justice

Bahá'ís have a vast body of writings, both revelation and its authoritative interpretation, on which they must build their knowledge and understanding of the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh. Their own ideas and conclusions must evolve based upon the texts. What are they to do, then, if their own fallible interpretations differ from one another, as they inevitably must do? The Universal House of Justice cannot issue an authoritative interpretation, any more than an individual Bahá'í could. It does, however, have other authority which is quite adequate to protect the Covenant.

In the words of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the members of the Universal House of Justice are to “deliberate upon all problems which have caused difference, questions that are obscure and matters that are not expressly recorded in the Book.” It is, moreover, significant that this passage appears in the second part of the Will and Testament written when 'Abdu'l-Bahá was in great danger and Shoghi Effendi was still a child, and refers specifically to the elected members of the Universal House of Justice, of whom He writes, “Whatever they decide

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has the same effect as the Text itself.”¹⁹

Various questions have been raised concerning the infallibility of the Universal House of Justice in the absence of a Guardian. These questions have been addressed in letters from the Universal House of Justice. Moreover, it is only the Universal House of Justice that can give authoritative answers to such questions. Sometimes the answer becomes clear by what the House of Justice writes, and sometimes by the way it acts.

Unlike the situation in past dispensations, Bahá'u'lláh, directly and through the authority He conferred upon ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, has expressly removed from individual believers, no matter how learned, the right to make authoritative interpretations or deductions from the scriptures, and has concentrated central authority in only two institutions: the Guardian and the Universal House of Justice. He has enjoined upon all Bahá'ís the duty to investigate truth for themselves; He has called upon us to study the writings and to arrive at our own understanding of them; nevertheless at the very end of His Will and Testament, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá has written, concerning the central authority in the Cause:

Beware lest anyone falsely interpret these words, and like unto them that have broken the Covenant after the Day of Ascension (of Bahá'u'lláh) advance a pretext, raise the standard of revolt, wax stubborn and open wide the door of false interpretation. To none is given the right to put forth his own opinion or express his particular convictions. All must seek guidance and turn unto the Centre of the Cause and the House of Justice. And he that turneth unto whatsoever else is indeed in grievous error.²⁰

If we wish to understand how this strict injunction relates to the principle of the independent investigation of truth, we should study the way in which both the Guardian and the Universal House of Justice have applied it.

Qualifications of a true believer

Related to this question is the observance of those limits to the actions a person performs, and the ideas he promulgates, that permit him to be regarded as a Bahá'í. For a long time there was no clear distinction between those regarded as Bahá'ís and those understood to be sympathisers. But as the Bahá'í community began to take form with the upbuilding of the administrative order in obedience to the injunctions in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* and the Will and Testament of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, it became necessary for the Bahá'í

¹⁹ *Will and Testament of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1971) Part 2, paragraph 8.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, Part 3, penultimate paragraph.

institutions to make a distinction between those who had accepted the Faith, and could take part in its administrative functions and come under the jurisdiction of Bahá'í law, on the one hand, and those, on the other, who although sympathetic to the Faith's teachings, did not really accept Bahá'u'lláh as a Manifestation of God and did not consider themselves as having an obligation to obey Bahá'í law. Previous religions have tried to solve this problem in various ways. In Christendom the church attempted to solve it by the formulation of creeds. The Bahá'í solution is quite different, as can be seen from the advice Shoghi Effendi gave in a letter to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States and Canada, in a letter written on 24 October 1925:

Regarding the very delicate and complex question of ascertaining the qualifications of a true believer, I cannot in this connection emphasize too strongly the supreme necessity for the exercise of the utmost discretion, caution and tact, whether it be in deciding for ourselves as to who may be regarded a true believer or in disclosing to the outside world such considerations as may serve as a basis for such a decision. I would only venture to state very briefly and as adequately as present circumstances permit the principal factors that must be taken into consideration before deciding whether a person may be regarded a true believer or not. Full recognition of the station of the Forerunner, the Author, and the True Exemplar of the Bahá'í Cause, as set forth in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Testament; unreserved acceptance of, and submission to, whatsoever has been revealed by their Pen; loyal and steadfast adherence to every clause of our Beloved's sacred Will; and close association with the spirit as well as the form of the present day Bahá'í administration throughout the world - these I conceive to be the fundamental and primary considerations that must be fairly, discreetly and thoughtfully ascertained before reaching such a vital decision. Any attempt at further analysis and elucidation will, I fear, land us in barren discussions and even grave controversies that would prove not only futile but even detrimental to the best interests of a growing Cause. I would therefore strongly urge those who are called upon to make such a decision to approach this highly involved and ever-recurring problem with the spirit of humble prayer, and earnest consultation, and to refrain from drawing rigidly the line of demarcation except on such occasions when the interests of the Cause absolutely demand it.²¹

²¹ *Bahá'í Administration: Selected Messages 1922-1932* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust 1995) 89.

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This passage establishes the very restrained manner in which Bahá'í institutions are authorised to approach the delicate matter of deciding when a person should be admitted to membership of the Bahá'í community or excluded from such membership. In matters of behaviour, for example, assemblies do not pry into the lives of individuals. Only if a Bahá'í's behaviour constitutes a flagrant breach of Bahá'í law or a blatant offence against Bahá'í moral standards, bringing disgrace upon the name of the Faith, does an Assembly intervene, try to get the believer to correct his ways and ultimately, if he does not heed the advice and warnings, deprive him of his administrative rights. In the area of belief, while the institutions have the task of educating the believers in the teachings, they do not concern themselves otherwise in the beliefs of individual friends, accepting that we are all but infants in our strivings to understand this infinitely glorious revelation. If, however, believers persistently give voice to views which are in conflict with the clear teachings, the institutions would have the duty of explaining to them the folly of such behaviour. And if by the active promulgation of such ideas they are seen to be attempting to undermine the authority of the Covenant itself, this would, naturally, be a far more serious situation, and would call into question their membership in the Bahá'í community.

So acceptance and understanding of the ancient Covenant, that is, the concept of divine revelation as elucidated in the revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, raises our understanding of knowledge – and of scholarship, which is the pursuit of knowledge – to a more inclusive level. Whether a human being accepts this revelation is a question of his or her own free choice, but once accepted, it cannot but affect one's approach to knowledge. The Bahá'í teachings not only promote the concept of the independent search after truth, and stress the great importance of education, but also foster a community in which there is a tolerant and undogmatic spirit and in which the Lesser Covenant and its central institutions safeguard the unity of the whole – with all its diversity of views and expression – by providing an authoritative point of reference for the resolution of disputes and problems.

What is more, no matter how exalted a station the Faith upholds for the learned, or how urgent the call to excel in scholarship, every Bahá'í should always hold before his eyes these words of Bahá'u'lláh in the *Kitáb-i-Íqán*:

The understanding of His words and the comprehension of the utterances of the Birds of Heaven are in no wise dependent upon human learning. They depend solely upon purity of heart, chastity of soul, and freedom of spirit.²²

²² *The Kitáb-i-Íqán* 211.