

From the Editor's Desk

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SCHOLARSHIP AND THE BAHÁ'Í FAITH

In a letter dated 19 October 1993, the Universal House of Justice observes that it would be inappropriate and erroneous to employ the terms “Bahá'í scholar” or “Bahá'í scholarship” in any exclusive sense. In the years since that observation was made, the Universal House of Justice, the international governing body of the Bahá'í Faith, has initiated in successive five-year plans, a process for collective learning that transcends any restrictive sense of “scholarship” as being solely the province of Bahá'í academics. Indeed, the Ruhi curriculum now being utilized worldwide as part of a global framework for building local communities, establishes a methodology for collective and consultative study where facilitators, or “tutors,” guide participants through a series of courses. In this communal environment, learning is expressed in specific courses of action that can involve various levels of discourse about topics as essential as theology, ontology, normative discourse, Bahá'í history, and a variety of other themes. These gatherings for community learning, called “study circles,” encourage, enable, and celebrate learning at every level of attainment—from those who have

had relatively little formal education to those who have achieved advanced degrees—and result in successive levels of action among members of the community, as well as between the local participants and the community at large.

At the same time, this emphasis on learning at the local or community level is in no way intended to supplant or disparage the pursuit of graduate study and research into discrete fields of scholarship. Indeed, in various letters the Universal House of Justice emphasizes the reciprocal relationship between Bahá'ís involved in academic pursuits and the community at large: “The House of Justice seeks the creation of a Bahá'í community in which the members encourage each other, where there is respect for accomplishment, and a common realization that every one is, in his or her own way, seeking to acquire a deeper understanding of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh and to contribute to the advancement of the Faith” (19 October 1993 to an individual believer, quoted in *Scholarship* 1.3).

Thus, while emphasizing how this global framework for action can include individuals from every walk of life, from every cultural background, from every degree of education, and from every religious orientation, the Universal House of Justice in its letter of 24 July 2013, to the Canadian National Spiritual Assembly concerning its guidance regarding the future goals of the Association for Bahá'í Studies, observes the following about

those “involved in various disciplines,” stressing that it is they who can help lead the way in fostering the Bahá'í belief that the unity of science and religion derives from the fact that each field of study is examining a single reality, unified in its purpose and integrated in its function:

At the heart of most disciplines of human knowledge is a degree of consensus about methodology—an understanding of methods and how to use them appropriately to systematically investigate reality to achieve reliable results and sound conclusions. Bahá'ís who are involved in various disciplines—economics, education, history, social science, philosophy, and many others—are obviously conversant and fully engaged with the methods employed in their fields. It is they who have the responsibility to earnestly strive to reflect on the implications that the truths found in the Revelation may hold for their work.

It concludes this observation by noting, “The principle of the harmony of science and religion, faithfully upheld, will ensure that religious belief does not succumb to superstition and that scientific findings are not appropriated by materialism.”

These two concepts—that education can be usefully approached as a community endeavor, and that even with advanced education in discrete fields of learning there can be a

reciprocal discourse between religious belief and scientific fields—effectively establish one of the foundational perspectives of *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies*. Learning is to be considered a goal of the entire community, and “those who seek to excel in scholarly activity”—whether academics or in another profession or walk of life—are encouraged to discern and pursue the integration of the view of reality they derive from their study of, practice in, and contribution to their particular fields, with their equally in-depth examination of the information about reality they derive from the authoritative Bahá'í texts.

Stated more succinctly, it is the Bahá'í view that education and scholarly pursuit should be a goal for every individual at whatever level he or she aspires to attain. Such is especially the case regarding one's study of the sacred texts of the Bahá'í Revelation, as Bahá'u'lláh notes when He says, “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” (*The Kitáb-i-Íqán* 210).

In light of these statements about learning and scholarship in relation to “Bahá'í Studies”—which we can conclude might range from community discussions regarding the nature of human reality and the concept of morality, to graduate studies in fields of science, history, and philosophy, all of which are related to and informed by

the Bahá'í texts in one way or another—this particular issue is intentionally diverse, providing some examples of the reciprocal relationship between the Bahá'í teachings and every field of scholarly endeavor. This diversity is possible because, from a Bahá'í perspective, every branch of scholarly endeavor at every level of discourse, is examining a dimension of a single reality—diverse in its constituent components, coherent in its structure, and purposeful in its design.

THE ARTICLES FOR THIS ISSUE

We thus begin this volume appropriately enough with “The Evolving Role of Bahá'í Scholarship” Vahid Rafati's Hasan M. Balyuzi Lecture delivered in 2014 at the ABS Conference in Toronto. A PhD in Islamic Studies from UCLA, Dr. Rafati has served at the Research Department of the Bahá'í World Centre since 1980 and thus is able to share a valuable overview of how Bahá'í scholarship has emerged and what its continuing role will be in the future.

The second article, by Dr. Michael Penn, Clinical Psychologist and Professor of Psychology at Franklin & Marshall College, is “Human Nature and Mental Health: A Bahá'í-Inspired Perspective.” This discourse ventures to show skillfully and forthrightly how the reciprocity between science and religion can bring about felicitous and informative results in the study of the function and health of the human mind. In particular, this paper

examines how the Bahá'í concept of the mind and its relationship to the nature of human reality can inform the treatment of mental illness and advance the understanding of mental health in general.

The third article is a scholarly perspective on the various lenses through which one can approach the study of religion and religious history, “Seven Narratives of Religion: A Framework for Engaging Contemporary Research” by PhD candidate and former Fulbright fellow, Benjamin Schewel. Here too we experience how the study of a specific field can be informed by the Bahá'í perspective, exploring, as Schewel states, “how the contemporary academic discourse on religion is, on the whole, beginning to resonate with the broader vision of religion provided by the Bahá'í Writings.”

The final article, “A Postsecular Look at the Reading Motif in Bahiyyih Nakhjavani's *The Woman Who Read Too Much*”, is a fascinating and informative study by Dr. Mary Sobhani, examining Nakhjavani's novel from the perspective of literary analysis and, in particular, attempting to demonstrate “a link between the secular and the sacred through the act of reading.” Here we find well demonstrated the relationship between the Bahá'í perspective and the discourse in the field of literary critical analysis.

BOOK REVIEW AND POEMS

With this issue we include a book review that has been a long time

coming because it was difficult to find someone willing and able to undertake the difficult task of assessing the massive two-volume work by noted Bahá'í scholar Udo Schaefer, *Bahá'í Ethics in Light of Scripture*. Fortunately, Ian Kluge has done a marvelous job in conveying a sense of what will surely be a valuable reference work for some time to come, and we feel certain that every reader will benefit from his assessment of Schaefer's monumental opus. Finally, we include two poems, "Apple Harvest" by Barbara Daniels and "Absence" by Heather Cardin.